

## “They look at you and see difference”: Institutionalized Oppression in Jesmyn Ward’s Novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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### Abstract

*Racial oppression has denied and subjugated minorities including African Americans in the United States for so long. Yet, this oppression continues to happen up to the present in a form of institutionalized oppression, which allows government and other institutions to favor a certain group of people based on the group identity. Since all major institutions in the United States are controlled by the whites, African Americans are looked at and treated differently that eventually result in discriminatory practices in various aspects of their life. Accordingly, this paper aims at addressing the issue of institutionalized oppression towards African Americans in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which narrates the life of African Americans in legal segregation and contemporary era. The novel analysis is focused on four African American characters, namely River, Richie, Given, and Jojo who are oppressed and physically tortured by white Americans. Employing qualitative descriptive method, this study applies three out of six key features of Feagin's Systemic Racism. The finding reveals that institutionalized oppression as portrayed in the novel still occurs in the present days due to power inequality between African Americans and white Americans. Even though oppression may come in different forms in different era, as long as the whites dominantly rule major institutions in American society, African Americans still have to endure continuous suffering both physically and mentally. Only through constant struggle, African Americans can challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy and stand for equality of rights.*

*Keywords:* African American; discrimination; institutionalized oppression; racial inequality; systemic racism

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination has been formally banned in the United States since the mid twentieth century; however, the legacies of slavery and racial segregation continue to affect the life of African Americans. As the second largest minority group in the United States, today African Americans still have to endure racial oppression that denies their civil rights and asserts their inferior status. The racial oppression against African Americans mostly occurs in the form of institutionalized oppression, which allows government and other institutions to favor a certain group of people based on their group identity (Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol 2016, 20-21). This oppression happened because all major institutions in the United States are controlled by the white (Feagin, Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression 2006, 262). Moreover, institutionalized oppression is systemic; thus, it can form an invisible barrier which can be seen only by those experiencing it.

The institutionalized oppression experienced by African American cannot be separated from the history of legal segregation era. In the aftermath of slavery, the white did not willingly recognize the newly-freed slaves as U.S. citizens that eventually resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1866 as the first federal law enacting that all U.S. citizens are equal and protected by the law (White 2012, 391). Later on, during the Reconstruction era the whites had successfully done some violence towards African Americans and brought up the idea of mandating a separation of races by law known as legal segregation. The segregation era started in the 1880s and ended in the late 1960s. During this era, African Americans, especially those who were imprisoned in Parchman Farm, were tortured by a near-slavery system that made them experience institutionalized oppression (Feagin and McKinney 2014, 21).

Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP) known as Parchman Farm is the biggest prison farm located in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. Based on the plan of governor John M. Stone in 1896, Parchman Farm era officially began when James K. Vardaman became governor and the state purchased a field of more than twenty acres to construct an all-black prison farm (Cook 2017, 1). For Vardaman, a prison farm was “an efficient place to make young blacks socialize, teach them discipline, and build up respect to authority of white” (Oshinky 1997, 87). In this prison, African American worked on the cotton fields for the advantage of whites' economy and were tortured in forms of whipping, beating, killing, and lynching (117-122).

Although the near-slavery system has ended long ago, African Americans today still need to deal with institutionalized oppression. It is due to the fact that white-on-black oppression is imbedded in all institutions in the United States (Feagin 2006, 2). As a result, this racial oppression remains as a nightmare for African Americans from all kinds of backgrounds (Feagin 2006, 7). African Americans are still treated differently and not provided with equal opportunities in many aspects of their lives (Tourse, Hamilton-Mason and Wewiorski 2018, 3). As institutionalized oppression is systemic in all major institutions in the United States, negative stereotypes are still attributed to African Americans who are seen as unintelligent, lazy, criminal, and any other age-old stereotypes by most whites (Feagin 2006, 105). In literature, institutionalized oppression has also become one of the themes for literary works focusing on racial issues. Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is a novel that successfully portrays institutionalized oppression against African Americans set in the Deep South. This novel won the 2017 National Book Award making Ward the first woman and author of color to win two National Book Awards for fiction. This novel also received Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for its portrayal of racism and promotion of human diversity (Jefferson 2018).

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* tells a story of Jojo, a thirteen-year-old African American boy who can see dead inmates of Parchman Farm. He lives with his family in Mississippi. His grandfather, River, was an inmate of Parchman Farm in the 1940s, along with a younger fellow named Richie. On Jojo's way to pick up his father, Jojo meets Richie's ghost. Richie informs Jojo that he and River used to obey every command from the white sergeant in the prison. River was also asked to help a white inmate to take care of dogs and track inmates who tried to escape. However, he did not have the authority to do much help for his inmate fellows, especially Richie. At that time Richie was still twelve years old, and he was whipped and beaten every single time just because the sergeant did not like him being weak. The novel also portrays unfair treatments that Given and Jojo experience in the present days. Given is shot to death by a white fellow due to jealousy, meanwhile Jojo is stopped by a police officer during his trip back to home.

A previous study on the novel entitled "The Haunted Black South and the Alternative Oceanic Space in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*" by Sodam Choi (2018) has examined black masculinity through the character of Jojo and the concept of "home" for blacks. Applying socio-political approach, Choi's study reveals that Jojo's black masculinity is showed by his ability to connect the past and present as well as the living and the dead. Choi also states that the concept of "home" for black characters in the novel is an oceanic space which recalls black history and is useful in resisting white rationality. Unlike Choi's study, this study aims at revealing the portrayal of institutionalized oppression as experienced by the African American characters, namely River, Richie, Given, and Jojo during two different eras, the legal segregation and contemporary eras. In addition, this study also examines the way these African American characters' deal with the institutionalized oppression. In order to do so, this study applies Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism (2006) that includes a wide range of racial problems in society and racist institutions that has existed for centuries.

Systemic racism is a term used to address oppression experienced by African Americans in institutions since the 1600s. This theory emerges under African American Criticism dealing with black marginalization, racial oppression, black in black art, and slavery (Bressler 2007, 246). Proposed by Joe R. Feagin (2006) in his book entitled *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, this theory focuses on the emerging racial problems in United States. Feagin argues that oppression is systemic due to the position of white Americans on the top of the racial hierarchy and the practice of oppression that has been passed down for generations. White American has also been taking control of the U.S. institutions resulting in African Americans to experience institutionalized oppression. Moreover, Feagin (2006, 19) states that African Americans are merely seen by the whites as "profit-making property" for the United States economy.

According to Feagin (2006, 17), there are six dimensions of oppression, namely: (1) the white racial frame and racist ideology, (2) alienated social relation, (3) constant struggle and resistance: by all means available, (4) related racial domination: discrimination in many aspects, (5) whites' unjust enrichment, and (6) racial hierarchy with divergent group interest. All of these dimensions are inter-related, yet this study only focuses on three of these six dimensions, namely the first dimension, white racial frame and racist ideology; the third, constant struggle and resistance; and the fourth, related racial discrimination: discrimination in many aspects. The first dimension, white racial frame refers to a set of ideas,

stereotypes, and emotions which are sorted to discriminate a group of people (Feagin 2006, 25). The next dimension, related racial discriminations deal with the power inequality between black and white Americans are real and spread to all major institutions of the U.S. African American experiences racial discrimination in other aspects of life such as policing, education, politics, and housing (Feagin 2006, 24). At last, constant struggle and resistance is the way African Americans deal with oppression (Feagin 2006, 144).

A line of research has been devoted to literature which portrays institutionalized racism and oppression. Kiziltas (2016) conducted a study on novels by South African writer, Nadine Gordimer. Additionally, Rodriguez (2018) analyzes a novel entitled *Junita Fights the School Board* by Gloria Velasquez. Even though both literary studies deal with institutionalized racism and oppression, their discussions focus only on the oppression in educational institution and do not delve into African Americans' experience. However, further research is still required to study the portrayal of institutionalized oppression in literature that can happen to people of color of all age and in different institutions, such as criminal justice system and family as a social institution. Hence, this study attempts to contribute to the discussion of institutionalized racism, particularly towards African Americans in the United States as portrayed through literature.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

Descriptive qualitative method was employed in this study to analyze the primary data, which is Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). Data from the novel were collected by conducting close reading to examine the formal elements of the novel, such as characterization, plot, and symbols that relate to the issue of institutionalized oppression. Secondary data were obtained mostly from books and scholarly articles, both printed and electronic, which focused on the issue of institutionalized oppression, especially related to African Americans. The data were sorted into categories based on the dimensions of systemic racism.

To conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis, this study focuses on four African American characters in the novel, namely River, Richie, Given, and Jojo because they are the ones who experience institutionalized oppression and most of them are narrator in the novel. To examine the institutionalized oppression and its impact on the African American characters in the novel, this study applies three out of six dimensions of Systemic Racism theory proposed by Joe R. Feagin. In order to do so, this study examined institutionalized oppression experienced by River, Richie, Given, and Jojo through the narratives and dialogues that showed the way they are treated unfairly by the whites.

First, by identifying the white racial frame and its imbedded racist ideology by focusing on the white characters in their interactions with the African American characters. Next, by analyzing related racial domination in various institutions that shows discrimination in other aspects of life of the African American characters. At last, by examining the way the African American character's deal with institutionalized oppression through constant struggle and resistance.

## 3.0 DISCUSSION

### 3.1 White Racial Frame and Its Imbedded Racist Ideology

Parchman Farm is the largest state prison in American South, and as an institution comprises almost 90 percent of African American inmates, this place "controlled the vast majority of Black people in the South" (Vesely-Flad 2018, 31). In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the story of a black inmates in this prison reflects white racial frame, which is racialized stereotypes, emotions, and ideas which leads to discrimination (Feagin 2006, 25). This dimension of oppression was experienced by the African American characters, River, a black inmate, who was imprisoned at the age of fifteen because he was accused of harboring a fugitive; and Richie, another black inmate aged twelve. During the legal segregation era (1900-1940s), it was well-known among the inmates of Parchman Farm to compete for the job as Dog Trusty whose tasks were to train dogs and keep them keen. A Dog Trusty was also in charge to track escapee of Parchman Farm. River was good in training and keeping the dogs keen, but he was not given the Dog Trusty position due to his being black. Instead, the position was given to Hogjaw, a white inmate, who actually had committed much worse crime than River, as narrated in the novel: Hogjaw did a lot of murdering, but when he came back the warden put him over the dogs, over Riv. The warden said: "It ain't natural for a

colored man to master dogs. A colored man doesn't know how to master, because it ain't in him to master." He said: "The only thing a nigger knows how to do is slave." (Ward 2017, 139). From this passage, the fact that the warden chose Hogjaw shows that white racial frame and its racist ideology exists in the prison as an institution within the criminal justice system since there was an act of favoring a certain group, namely the white, over the other. The warden did not allow River to work as a Dog Trusty even though the dogs liked River. It was because so far the Dog Trusty had always been white inmates.

Furthermore, when the warden said that black Americans only know how to be slaves, it clearly shows that the warden had negative stereotype towards African Americans, believing them as less intelligent than white; thus, they cannot be Dog Trusty. It is common that whites were depicted as people who were responsible and smart, meanwhile non-whites were portrayed as people who were stupid (Haenen 2016, 21). According to Feagin (2006, 231), this racist stereotyping has prevailed in the United States because white Americans teach such stereotypes to their generations. In another part of the novel, the white racial frame and racist ideology is also clearly portrayed in the story of Richie, who was wrongly accused on baseball Sunday in Parchman Farm because he happened to witness a white woman being raped by Blue, another black inmate. Richie was trying to help the woman once he saw what happened. However, he ended up becoming the suspect like Blue. As result, both Richie and Blue were hounded by white folks to be punished. Recounting the incident, River said, "...They couldn't stop. And I knew that when it came to the two of them, when it came to Blue and Richie, they weren't going to tell no difference. They were going to see two niggers, two beasts, who had touched a White woman." (Ward 2017, 253).

The word "nigger" is used by River to address his two fellow inmates, Richie and Blue. However, the word "nigger" is known as racial slur for African Americans as it is "inseparable from a history of black-on-white oppression" (Embrick and Henricks 2013, 201). Moreover, this word is used by racist whites to point out black figures that they think have animalistic tendencies and lack in intelligence (Asim 2007, 224). The fact that the word "nigger" is followed by the word "beast" which is usually applied for animals, also denotes River's attempt to show black stereotype commonly given by the whites. Additionally, the use of the word "nigger" in this passage is to emphasize that white Americans only saw Richie and Blue from their skin color. In fact, this white racial frame as portrayed in this novel is also true in real life as a recent study shows that white Americans think people with dark skin were responsible for wrong doings (Alter, et al. 2016, 1661).

Richie's story also indicates white racial frame asserting that all African American men were dangerous and criminals, and there was possibility that they could be sexual predators of white Americans (Rodini 2018, 61). Thus, the whites immediately initiated to execute both Blue and Richie without even bother to do further investigation. In fact, this stereotype about African Americans and other people of color are dangerous has been implanted in the white minds until today (Feagin 2006, 234). Anderson (2015, 14) also reveals that white Americans perceive that black males do look suspicious, and thus, they also are seen as dangerous. Furthermore, white Americans often associate African Americans and other people of color with criminality (Ghandnoosh 2014, 3).

Meanwhile, in the contemporary era, white racial frame and racist ideology is reflected in the story of Jojo as a mixed-race boy aged thirteen. His mom, Leonie, is black, meanwhile his dad, Michael, is white. When he and his family are on their way home from Parchman, his dad takes the initiative to visit his white grandparents. In fact, Jojo never met them because his white grandfather, Big Joseph, never approves the relationship between Michael and Leonie due to their racial differences. Rejecting his own grandchildren, Big Joseph cursed, "Hell, they half of her. Part of that boy Riv, too. All bad blood. Fuck the skin." (Ward 2017, 207). This passage shows that Big Joseph believes in one-drop rule, a social rule that categorizes mixed-race people into two kinds: black and not black (Jordan 2014, 99). In this case, Big Joseph believes that Jojo as well as her sister, Michaela, were black because they were River's grandchildren. As the descendants of a black man, they are treated as blacks. The way Big Joseph use rude words shows that he chooses to hate Jojo and not to accept him as his grandchild. This portrayal of white racial frame constructed in Big Joseph's mind corresponds with a study showing that a person who has mixed race is often executed and discriminated by certain family members (Franco, et al. 2018, 8). Hence, in this case, family can also become an institution ruled by the whites to oppress African Americans.

## 2.2 Related Racial Domination: Discrimination in Many Aspects

In the United States, power inequality between African Americans and white Americans exists in all major institutions because of the existence of racial hierarchy. This racial hierarchy creates racial domination in the society where African Americans as well as other people of color are put on the lower part of the hierarchy. As a result, these minorities receive various racial discriminations in many aspects of life, such as policing, education, housing, and politics (Feagin 2006, 24). Racial discriminations in various aspects of life is portrayed in the novel through the story of Given, River's son who is known as a social person. Given never differentiates people based on their race, so he also has white teammates who often hang out with him. One day when he goes hunting in the woods with them, he wins the bet and it makes his white teammates mad. Unable to face the fact, one of his white teammates who is also a cousin of Michael, Jojo's dad, shoots him dead. This clearly shows that the white still sees African Americans as people who do not deserve to win. In other words, Given's teammates still believe that African Americans cannot achieve things more than white Americans. Furthermore, African Americans should never surpass white Americans in any aspects. It is seen from the statement of the white shooter when he is asked the reason for his action, "He was supposed to lose, Pa" (Ward 2017, 50). Clearly, this statement shows that white Americans still do not acknowledge African American skills and efforts in life. For the whites, African Americans are still inferior compared to them and thus, white Americans feels they are the superior ones (Feagin 2006, 21). In other words, white Americans feel that they are the ones who deserve to achieve things, which in this case is winning the bet.

Racial discrimination also occurs when Given's death is brought to court. Michael's cousin says to court that Given's death is "Hunting accident" (Ward 2017, 50). He says this because he is told by Big Joseph to do so. Big Joseph is also the one who refuses to call the police when Michael's cousin tells him he just shoots an African American. It is because Big Joseph most likely believes that he has power to handle this matter since he used to work as sheriff. Weaver (2019, 3) states that when it comes to violence, there are powerful local actors who have power to access into institutions because they are part of it and these actors may influence how the violence is legitimized. In this story, as a former law enforcement officer, Big Joseph is a part of the criminal justice system. Hence, he must be known and respected by state officers who also work in the same field. This fact shows that he is the powerful local actor in this case. Thus, he has enough power to narrate the situation to help Michael's cousin in court. The "hunting accident" which he suggests and is said by Michael's cousin confers that the facts about this case has been determined and organized to be a story. In fact, this organized story can help a suspect during a trial in the court to attain lighter sentence (Weaver 2019, 3). Furthermore, the way he easily suggests Michael's cousin to say it as a hunting accident shows that killing someone is not wrong, particularly when the person is African American. As a matter of fact, violence may be done to show status of the doer over the victim (Fiske and Rai 2015, 18-19). Therefore, it can be concluded that the novel portrays white superiority through the shooting incident involving an African American and reckoning that it is only a hunting accident.

This story shows that discrimination also happens in the criminal justice system as it becomes one of the American institutions that oppresses African Americans since the state officers do not pay full attention on Given's case. It is all because he is African American and henceforth, the state officers only want to hear about the incident from the white version. In addition, the state officers do not bother to investigate this case which is fortunate for Michael's cousin. He is only sentenced for three years in prison and two-year probation. This punishment is considered lighter than those given to African Americans. In fact, Whites would get less harsh punishment compared to Blacks (Dukes and Gaither 2017, 801) and they most likely to be put in probation (Hartney and Vuong 2009, 3). Significantly, it appears that African Americans and other people of color are the ones who often receive unfair treatment in institutions, such as criminal justice system.

## 2.3 Constant Struggle and Resistance: By All Means Available

The depiction of African Americans resisting oppression in legal segregation era can be seen from the story of Richie's attempt to escape from the white mobs. Richie was accused of raping a white woman on baseball day in Parchman Farm, while another black inmate named Blue was actually the real rapist.



However, Richie became a suspect because he happened to be in the crime scene at that time. The white Americans were mad about this and searched both Blue and Richie who ran away to the woods.

"That's when I followed the dogs, making them quiet, across that sky turning from blue to black, across them fields, to another stand of trees..." "...They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing, and then they were going to string him up from a tree." ...Soothed him. Said: We gone get you out of this. We gone get you away from here. Touched his arm: he was burning up. I'm going home, Riv?... Yes, Richie. I'm a take you home, I said..." (Ward 2017, 254-255)

This passage shows that River did not want Richie to be punished like Blue. River did not want his friend to be murdered in the middle of white crowds. However, instead of helping Richie to escape from the lynching, River killed him with his shank. He did that to his own friend because he thought that it was his only choice to help Richie. He knew he could not go out of Parchman Farm as the sergeant guarded outside. This story is similar with a story of an African American slave named Margaret Garner in 1856. Having no option when her shack was surrounded by white officers, Garner slit her children's necks because she did not want the white officers to bring them back to Kentucky and make them slaves again (Taylor 2016, 14-15).

Moreover, it appears that River thought that dying as a black man instead of a lynched black man was better for a thirteen-year-old boy. Clearly, River just could not see his friend being mutilated and skinned by white officers. Similarly, Choi (2018, 444) also states that River did not want Richie to be killed by white officers who kill animals better. Moreover, it appears that River could not let Richie be a show for white crowds which already wanted to take mementos from the lynching. In fact, a study shows that many whites Americans took photographs in the middle of witnessing many black bodies were hung, burned, and mutilated, as if they were having an outdoor picnic (Harding 2017, 5).

Additionally, the word 'home' is associated with death for African Americans (Sutherland 2017, 34). In fact, the word 'home' which has connotation with death is repeated many times in the novel. Mostly, it is stated whenever the black inmates and the ghost of black inmates feel trapped and have no choice in life. Importantly, it appears that the word 'home' in this story indicates a place which is considered better than the world for black inmates as this world keeps torturing them. Thus, this 'home' can help them achieving something that they have never achieved in life, such as justice and peace; hence, it can put them at ease. Correspondingly, the word 'home' as River stated in this story denotes "the world of justice, equality, and liberty" (Choi 2018, 445). By killing his own friend, River hopes Richie can reach that kind of world as he does not end up being murdered and mutilated by white mobs. Thus, River's act of murder is the only means available for him at the time being to struggle against the white oppression in order to keep his friend's dignity as a black man.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

Institutionalized oppression portrayed in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* indicates that white Americans still dominate major institutions in the United States. The power inequality between African Americans and white Americans becomes the major cause of institutionalized oppression that is still happening in the present day.

Furthermore, white racist ideology that has been deeply embedded in the white's minds and passed down for generations also helps to perpetuate the oppression. As African Americans continue to suffer, they have to struggle and resist the oppression by any means available. As institutionalized oppression portrayed in the novel happened not only in the past but still prevails in the present, there is no other way for African Americans but to challenge the existing racial hierarchy through constant struggle and resistance. Hence, African Americans no longer experience someone telling them that "they look at you and see difference."

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