

Racial Discrimination in Charmaine Wilkerson's *Black Cake*

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses forms of racial discrimination and their impact on the identities and social relationships of characters in Charmaine Wilkerson's novel Black Cake. The novel depicts the lives of a Caribbean diaspora family facing various forms of oppression in the context of modern racism. The research focused on answering two questions: identifying the types of racial discrimination experienced by the characters and explaining how discrimination shapes the formation of their identities and social relationships. This study uses Fred L. Pincus' theory of racial discrimination, which divides discrimination into three main forms: individual, institutional, and structural discrimination. The approach used is a sociological approach to literature with a qualitative descriptive method. Data in the form of relevant quotations from the novel are analyzed to reveal representations of discrimination and its influence on the psychological and social dynamics of the characters. The results of the study show that three forms of discrimination appear consistently in the novel. Individual discrimination is evident through demeaning actions directed at characters based on race. Institutional discrimination is seen in the career and economic barriers experienced by minority characters. Meanwhile, structural discrimination is reflected in the social system, colonial legacy, and cultural conditions that shape the characters' life experiences. The impact of discrimination on identity includes trauma, identity confusion, and pressure to assimilate. The impact on social relationships is evident in strained family relationships, sibling conflicts, and closed communication dynamics due to experiences of racism that are not openly discussed.

Keywords: Caribbean diaspora, character identity, literary sociology, racial discrimination, qualitative method.

1. INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination is one of the most persistent social problems that continues to shape social relations, identity formation, and life opportunities in contemporary societies. Discrimination occurs when individuals or groups are treated unfairly or unequally based on race, ethnicity, or cultural background. According to Fredrickson (2002, p. 5), discrimination is not merely an individual act of prejudice but a systemic and institutionalized mechanism that reinforces social inequality and hierarchy. Racial discrimination operates through both overt actions, such as verbal abuse and exclusion, and subtle practices embedded in social norms, institutional policies, and cultural expectations.

Despite global progress in human rights discourse and anti-discrimination laws, racial discrimination remains deeply embedded in many aspects of social life. Inequalities in education, employment, economic access, and social recognition continue to affect racial minorities. These inequalities not only limit material opportunities but also influence how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. As a result, racial discrimination plays a significant role in shaping identity, social relationships, and a sense of belonging, particularly for minority communities and migrant populations.

Racial discrimination does not operate solely at the individual level. It is also maintained through institutions and social structures that appear neutral but systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. Educational systems, workplaces, legal institutions, and economic structures often reproduce inequality by limiting access to power and resources for racial minorities. Therefore, understanding racial discrimination requires an examination of its multiple dimensions, including individual prejudice, institutional practices, and structural conditions.

Literary works provide an important medium for examining social realities such as racial discrimination. Literature not only reflects social conditions but also critiques and questions them. Through narrative, characterization, and conflict, literary texts portray how discrimination operates in everyday life and how it affects individuals emotionally, psychologically, and socially (Altun, 2023, p. 383). Literature allows readers to engage with the lived experiences of marginalized groups and to understand the complexities of social inequality beyond statistical data.

One literary work that critically reflects racial discrimination is Charmaine Wilkerson's *Black Cake*. The novel tells the story of a Caribbean diaspora family whose lives are shaped by migration, colonial history, and racial hierarchy. Through multiple generations, *Black Cake* portrays how racial discrimination affects personal identity, family relationships, and social positioning. The characters experience various forms of discrimination, including personal prejudice, institutional barriers, and structural inequality rooted in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

The novel highlights how racial discrimination influences the formation of identity and the dynamics of social relationships. Characters struggle with identity conflict, emotional trauma, and a sense of displacement as they navigate societies that marginalize them based on race and origin. *Black Cake* also shows how discrimination is transmitted across generations, shaping family narratives, silences, and unresolved tensions. In this way, the novel presents racial discrimination as a multidimensional social phenomenon rather than isolated incidents.

Previous studies on racial discrimination in literature have largely focused on American contexts, historical slavery, or contemporary racial violence. Rananda et al. (2020, p. 27) examined social discrimination in the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, focusing on how discrimination experienced by the main character, caused by a genetic disorder, then contributes to the formation of his social identity, with family serving as a key support system. Meanwhile, Mendy (2023, p. 73) explored discrimination as a global paradigm, arguing that the democratic principle of equality before the law is increasingly threatened by autocracy and unconstitutional governance, with discrimination producing destructive effects on social inequality. Building on these perspectives, the present study extends the conversation by examining racial discrimination specifically within the context of valuable insights, fewer studies examine racial discrimination within Caribbean diaspora narratives that intersect race, migration, and family history. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on *Black Cake*, a novel that presents a multicultural and postcolonial perspective on racial discrimination.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze racial discrimination as depicted in Charmaine Wilkerson's *Black Cake*. The research focuses on two main objectives: (1) to identify the types of racial discrimination experienced by the characters, and (2) to examine the impacts of racial discrimination on identity formation and social relationships. By applying a sociological approach to literature and using Fred L. Pincus's theory of racial discrimination, this study seeks to reveal how racial discrimination operates at individual, institutional, and structural levels within the novel and how it shapes the lives of the characters.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study applies sociological literary theory to analyze racial discrimination in Charmaine Wilkerson's *Black Cake*. The theoretical framework consists of the sociology of literature, discrimination, racism, and racial discrimination, which are explained briefly to support the analysis.

2.1 Sociology of Literature

The sociology of literature views literary works as social documents that reflect social realities and structures within society. According to Wellek and Warren (1962, p. 99), literature can be analyzed through its relationship with society because literary works often represent social conditions, values, and conflicts. Laurenson and Swingewood (1972, p. 25) state that literary texts mirror social life and historical circumstances, making literature an effective medium for examining social problems such as discrimination. Therefore, *Black Cake* can be understood as a reflection of racial and social realities experienced by Caribbean diaspora communities.

2.2 Discrimination

Discrimination refers to unfair treatment toward individuals or groups based on social characteristics such as race or ethnicity. Sigelman et al. (1997, p. 779) define discrimination as accepting or rejecting individuals based on group membership rather than personal qualities. Allport (1954, p. 52) explains that discrimination is a behavioral expression of prejudice that results in exclusion and unequal treatment. In literary works, discrimination is often depicted through character interactions that reveal social inequality. Asangaeneng et al. (2023, p. 103) further argue that Black literature has consistently questioned racial hierarchies, highlighting how slavery and racial discrimination result in the loss of selfhood as one of its central themes. Similarly, racial discrimination against Black individuals is not merely a historical phenomenon but persists in contemporary contexts, continuing to shape socioeconomic and political inequalities (Ellingworth et al., 2023, p. 4). These perspectives suggest that discrimination cannot be understood in isolation from historical and structural forces, which is precisely what *Black Cake* illustrates through its characters' lived experiences.

2.3 Racism

Racism is a form of discrimination based on the belief that racial differences determine social value and status. Fredrickson (2002, p. 3–5) states that racism is an ideology that assigns unequal rights and power based on racial classification. Racism does not only appear in individual actions but also operates through social institutions and cultural norms. This concept is relevant to *Black Cake*, as the novel portrays racism as a social system that influences identity and life opportunities.

2.4 Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination refers specifically to unequal treatment based on race or ethnicity. Reskin (2002, p. 2–3) explains that racial discrimination occurs through differential treatment and differential effects. Pincus (1996, p. 186–191) categorizes racial discrimination into three forms: individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination. This classification is used to analyze how racial discrimination is represented in *Black Cake*.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive research design. The research applies a sociological approach to literature because the novel *Black Cake* reflects social realities related to racial discrimination. According to Creswell (2014, p. 31), qualitative research focuses on understanding meanings and social phenomena through non-numerical data. The primary data source is Charmaine Wilkerson's novel *Black Cake* (2022). The data consist of words, sentences, and dialogues that represent racial discrimination. Secondary data are taken from books and journals related to

discrimination, racism, and the sociology of literature. The researcher serves as the main research instrument. Data are collected through close reading and documentation. All excerpts referring to racial discrimination were identified through close reading and then classified under Pincus's three categories of individual, institutional, and structural discrimination (Pincus, 1996, p. 186–191). The selected quotations were then analyzed to reveal representations of discrimination and their influence on the characters' psychological and social dynamics. The data analysis follows three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 31). This process allows systematic interpretation of racial discrimination as represented in the novel.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the type of racial discrimination in *Black Cake*, such as individual racism, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination, by applying Pincus's theory and the impact of racial discrimination.

Table 4. Type of Racial Discrimination

No	Type of Discrimination	Example	Description
1	Individual	"He should have known it would come to this. He should have known the day that Hak Gwai's wife ran away from home. Should have known the day he saw his daughter swimming in the bay as a storm bore down on her. Should have known when his parents dragged him to this island and changed their names." (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 12)	The term "hak gwai," or known as "black ghost" is used by Lin's Chinese family as a racial insult toward his Black Caribbean wife. This personal racial rejection within the family undermines Covey's sense of identity, ultimately driving her to erase her past by changing her name.
2	Institutional	"He's damn good at it, too, even if he's been passed over for the director's position at the institute.... Chances are... he will hear the same old reasoning from the founders. That the center needs Byron out there as its ambassador, that Byron has brought unprecedented attention to the institute's work..." (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 35)	Byron is repeatedly denied the director's position despite his achievements, with the institution claiming he is more valuable as an ambassador. This reveals how the institution exploits his identity as a Black scientist to enhance its public image while blocking his access to leadership, reflecting implicit racial bias in

3	Structural	“Please forgive me for not telling you any of this before. Things were different when I was your age. Things were different for women, especially if you were from	The statement reflects a layered social structure rooted in colonial legacy, where geographical origin, race, and gender collectively limit a Black
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4.1 Type of Racial Discrimination

4.1.1 Individual Discrimination

Pincus (1996, p. 187) stated that individual discrimination happens when one person or a small number of people act against another person or persons from a different group based on their race, ethnicity, or gender. Discrimination not only occurs in public spaces, but also develops in domestic relationships, which should be safe spaces for individuals. This event involves the relationship between a Chinese family and a Caribbean black woman, which shows how racial prejudice works personally and verbally in the characters' immediate environment. Below is an excerpt from the narrative:

“He should have known it would come to this. He should have known the day that Hak Gwai's wife ran away from home. Should have known the day he saw his daughter swimming in the bay as a storm bore down on her. Should have known when his parents dragged him to this island and changed their names.” (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 12)

Based on the above lines, the Cantonese term “hak gwai” literally means “black ghost” and is used as an insult against black people. The term was used by Lin's family, who are of Chinese ethnicity, to refer to Lin's wife, who is a black Caribbean woman, namely Covey's mother. The relationship between the characters in this event is a family relationship through marriage, but it was never built on equal acceptance. The setting of the event is a Chinese immigrant family in the Caribbean, which still strongly adheres to racial and hereditary hierarchies. This not only shows personal hatred, but also creates an emotional distance between the Chinese and the Caribbean black woman in the family. For Covey, the fact that her mother was not respected by her father's family undermined her sense of security and identity as a child of “mixed blood.” She grew up in an environment where her mother's blood was implicitly considered “inferior.” This explains why Covey later continued to negotiate her identity and, ultimately, chose to erase her past by changing her name to Eleanor Douglas.

4.1.2 Institutional Discrimination

Pincus (1996, p. 190) stated that institutional discrimination is a form of discrimination that occurs through policies, rules, or practices carried out by social institutions, such as workplaces, educational institutions, legal systems, and economic institutions. Institutional discrimination occurs in professional work environments. Discrimination does not appear in the form of direct insults, but through structural decisions that limit access to positions of power. Below is an excerpt from the narrative:

“He’s damn good at it, too, even if he’s been passed over for the director’s position at the institute.... Chances are... he will hear the same old reasoning from the founders. That the center needs Byron out there as its ambassador, that Byron has brought unprecedented attention to the institute’s work...” (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 35)“...another chance for a black man to be at the table with the decision makers, instead of ... standing outside yet another closed door.” (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 36)

This excerpt describes Byron's experience as a black man working at a marine research institute in America. The relationship between the characters in this story is a professional one between Byron and the head of the institution where he works. The setting is an academic work environment that is supposed to uphold meritocracy. The research institution where Byron worked officially recognized his achievements but refused to give him the position of director. The reason given was that Byron was more useful as an ambassador. This shows that the institution exploited Byron's identity as a black scientist to enhance their image, such as in publications, the media, and funding, but did not give him access to policy-making positions. From Pincus' perspective, this is an example of institutional discrimination: the institution's decision (not to choose Byron as director) was based on the implicit logic that black people should only be placed in representative positions, not structural ones.

4.1.3 Structural Discrimination

Pincus (1996, p. 191) stated that structural discrimination is a form of discrimination that operates through social systems, history, ideology, and cultural patterns that are deeply rooted in society. This discrimination is not always carried out directly by specific individuals, but is embedded in the way society functions, placing minority groups in a position of inequality that is passed down from generation to generation, and shapes the way society regulates the social position of a racial group.

Structural discrimination can be seen in how colonial social systems established racial and gender hierarchies that persisted into the postcolonial era. Black women from the colonies were placed in a position of systemic inequality. Below is an excerpt from the narrative:

“Please forgive me for not telling you any of this before. Things were different when I was your age. Things were different for women, especially if you were from the islands...it wasn't always about him being a black woman. Though, mostly, it was.” (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 34)

The narrative shows the continuity of the postcolonial social structure that placed Caribbean women in a lower social stratum. The colonial system formed a race- and gender-based hierarchy that regulated the social roles of black women as a subordinate group. The statement that “things were different... especially if you were from the islands” marks the existence of a layered social structure, where geographical origin, racial status, and gender determine a person's access to social opportunities. Thus, this quote illustrates structural discrimination that operates through colonial norms that are still embedded in modern society.

4.2 The Impact of Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination not only manifests itself in direct actions but also leaves a long-term impact on the personal identities and social relationships of the characters in the story. In *Black Cake*, the characters' experiences of racism shape the way they view themselves, affect relationships within the family, and create trauma that continues to have an impact beyond a single generation. One key finding regarding the impact of racial discrimination in the novel is that discrimination does not only take the form of derogatory remarks or attitudes but can also escalate into actual physical violence.

The impact of racial discrimination is not only evident in unfair treatment, but also manifests itself in physical violence, psychological pressure, and feelings of alienation in social environments. Individuals who are in a minority position are often the targets of aggression triggered by rigid social structures and racial boundaries. The following excerpt describes that moment:

“In college, Benny was cornered in the dorms her third year at by two girls who had seen Benny getting flirty with one of the guys from the African American fraternity. They called her a traitor. One of them pushed her into her room, and when Benny caught her foot on the metal leg of her bed and fell, she kicked Benny in the face.” (Wilkerson, 2022, p. 91)

The quote clearly illustrates that racial discrimination is not only manifested in the form of derogatory remarks or attitudes but can also escalate into actual physical violence. The incident in which Benny was cornered, insulted as a “traitor,” pushed, and kicked in the face shows that the racial discrimination he experienced had reached an extreme level. This violence reflects how racial prejudice can trigger aggressive actions that directly threaten the safety of the victim.

Psychologically, this incident had a profound traumatic impact on Benny. The fear, shock, and insecurity that arose after experiencing physical violence will remain etched in his memory. Discrimination accompanied by violence like this not only injures the body but also damages mental security. Benny can no longer view social spaces such as campus dormitories as safe places, but rather as spaces full of threats. This shows that racial discrimination can change the way a person perceives public spaces and social relations.

Socially, this incident shows the policing of racial boundaries by individuals within a particular racial group. Benny was attacked not because of a criminal act, but because she was considered to have violated social boundaries by interacting closely with men from another racial group. In this context, discrimination does not only come from the majority group towards minorities but can also take the form of pressure from fellow racial groups to maintain rigid identity boundaries. This shows that racism can work horizontally through relationships between individuals.

Furthermore, this incident had an impact on Benny's sense of belonging in her social environment. As a student who should have been in an open learning environment, Benny instead experienced exclusion and violence because of her racial identity and her choice of friends. This situation reinforced her feelings of alienation, rejection, and lack of a truly safe space to express herself freely.

The broader impact of this incident is also seen in the formation of Benny's identity. Experiences of racially-based violence can cause individuals to become more closed off, wary, and cautious in forming social relationships. Self-identity is no longer constructed freely, but rather shaped by fear of rejection and the threat of violence. Thus, racial discrimination in this excerpt not only has a physical impact but also shapes psychological conditions, social boundaries, and the way characters understand their position in society. Overall, this excerpt shows that the impact of racial discrimination in the novel *Black Cake* can manifest in the form of direct violence that injures the body, followed by psychological trauma, social alienation, and a crisis of belonging.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that racial discrimination in Charmaine Wilkerson's *Black Cake* is represented through three main forms: individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination. Individual discrimination appears in direct interactions through verbal insults, stereotyping, and unequal treatment based on race. Institutional discrimination is reflected in professional, educational, and social systems that limit opportunities for racial minorities despite their abilities. Structural discrimination operates through social systems, historical legacies, and cultural norms that perpetuate inequality across generations.

These forms of racial discrimination have significant impacts on the characters' identities and social relationships. The characters experience emotional pressure, identity conflict, and feelings of insecurity as a result of discriminatory treatment. Racial discrimination also affects family

relationships, creating tension, silence, and unresolved trauma within the family structure. The novel shows that discrimination does not only affect individuals personally but also influences social interactions and intergenerational relationships.

Furthermore, *Black Cake* portrays racial discrimination as a systemic and multidimensional phenomenon rather than isolated incidents. The characters' experiences demonstrate that discrimination is embedded in everyday life and reinforced by institutions and social structures. Through its narrative, the novel highlights how racial discrimination shapes identity, belonging, and life choices within a multicultural society.

This study contributes to literary studies by showing how literature can reflect and critique social inequality, particularly racial discrimination. The findings are expected to provide insight for readers and researchers into the ways racial discrimination operates within literary narratives and real social contexts. Future research may explore similar themes through a comparative reading of *Black Cake* with another Caribbean diaspora novel, such as Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*, to examine how different authors represent the diasporic experience of racial discrimination. Additionally, further studies may focus on the intersection of race and gender within *Black Cake* itself, particularly in examining how Black Caribbean women navigate overlapping systems of oppression across generations.

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