

Racism Against Korean-American Adoptee in *Blue Bayou* Movie (2021)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine Blue Bayou (2021), an American drama film written and directed by Justin Chon. The issues that need to be addressed are (1) how racism against Korean-American adoptees is portrayed in the movie, and (2) how society's response to racial differences is shown in Blue Bayou (2021). The purpose of this research study is to assess the film Blue Bayou (2021) through the use of a descriptive qualitative method. The study method's data collection steps include reading and watching, recognizing, categorizing, and choosing. using data collecting, data reduction, data display, and conclusion to analyze the research method's data. Data analysis techniques used by the researcher include exhibiting, explaining, and interpreting. The study's findings were as follows: (1) Racism can take many different forms, such as individual, systemic, and colorism. (2) The way that society responds to people of different races includes pity, empathy, ignorance, and punishing those who practice racism.

Keywords: Racism, Blue Bayou, Korean-American

Introduction

There are so many phenomena that occur in this world. One phenomenon that contributes to the disruption of peace in society is racism. As it is known in people's social life, there are many different races and cultures. Because of the phenomenon of racism, these diversities have no longer become beautiful aspects in life, instead it becomes endless divisions. Majority of people claim that they feel better than minorities, this makes minorities seem unworthy of anything good in this world. Furthermore, there are various countries in the world, which of course with various cultures and costs of living. Sometimes some people choose to move to other countries because the culture and cost of living is better than their own place. Racism causes bad experiences for minorities such as ridicule, belittlement and injustice. They are underestimated just because they are different from the majority.

Because of the problem of racism, people who are not originally born in the country where they live in or those who migrate must face a challenge when

living in other countries. Socializing is one of attempt most people do to blend in their new place and people help each other to stay alive, but because of racism towards minority a normal and peaceful life is hard to achieve. In the end, being ostracized and underestimated seem like a part of life they cannot avoid. On the other hand, socializing leads most people to live in groups, need each other and exchange ideas with each other. This can bring about many consequences, positively or negatively. They can also influence each other on matters of perspective.

Blue Bayou a movie produced in 2021 written and directed by Justin Chon, shows similar situation related to discrimination and racism. The main character in this movie experiences injustice in the form of racism from people where he lives. Due to an identity crisis and the absence of a birth certificate from the country, the main character receives discrimination from local residents. Working and living properly are very difficult for the main character.

The movie tells the story of Antonio, a Korean-American adoptee, who because of his criminal record is unable to get a good job. He then decided to work as a tattoo artist. Antonio struggled to live, until he one day faced a threat of deportation from his country of residence because his adoptive parents never naturalized him in accordance with the Child Citizenship Act. Researcher is interested in analyzing *Blue Bayou* (2021) because the fact that there is discrimination based on racial differences is real in this world. On the basis of this unrest, the researcher tries to explore in more depth how the movie exposes phenomena of racism toward Korean-American person.

Literary Review

Sociology of Literature

In the book *The Sociology of Literature* it is stated that the definition of sociology is how humans adapt to society, how humans can work and survive and about humans accepting their respective roles in the social structure (Swingewood, 1972: 11).

Moving on to literature, literature is usually related to writing, jurnal, even literary works such as novels, etc. Novels have various types of stories and also genres, furthermore novels often tell about humans and their surroundings, such as how they socialize and how they live. As stated in the book *The Sociology of*

Literature, "In the purely documentary sense, one can see novel as dealing with much the same social, economic and political texture as sociology" (Laurenson and Swingewood, 1972: 12), which means that even novels or other literary works will not be far from the human experience, or something related to human life itself.

Racism

Racism, from stereotypes and insults about skin color and physical appearance to systemic discrimination, is a significant societal problem.

1. Definition of Racism

According to Shiao & Woody in "The Meaning of Racism," racism is a social construct created by humans to distinguish between people, leading to acts of discrimination (Shiao & Woody, 1998: 3). The elements that build racism include attitudes, cultural schemas, preexisting consequential inequalities, and processes that create or maintain racial dominance (Shiao & Woody, 1998: 13). Michael Banton defines racism as an ideology based on discrimination against a person or group due to their race, impacting political, economic, and cultural aspects (Banton, 1987: 1). Nelson Mandela describes racism as causing disadvantages in employment, education, legal status, and social welfare (Mandela, 1994: 213). Marden and Mayer argue that racism involves the belief in the superiority of one race over others (Mayer, 1962: 65).

2. The Form of Racism

Racism manifests in various forms :

- a. Historical and Cultural Narratives : Societal histories and cultural beliefs may perpetuate negative stereotypes and prejudices.
- b. Institutional Structures : Government, education, and law enforcement systems may inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate racism.
- c. Media and Popular Culture : Media can reinforce racist ideas and stereotypes through negative portrayals and limited representation.
- d. Socialization and Interpersonal Interactions : Individuals learn about race and racism from their surroundings, which can either reinforce or challenge racist attitudes.

- e. Individual Beliefs and Attitudes : Personal beliefs about race influence behavior and actions that contribute to or counteract racism (Shiao & Woody, 1998: 3).

3. The Form of Racism According to Ibram X. Kendi

Ibram X. Kendi identifies several forms of racism :

- a. Individual Racism : Personal expressions of prejudice and discrimination.
- b. Institutional Racism : Organizations' policies and practices that perpetuate racism.
- c. Structural Racism : Systematic inequalities that disadvantage certain racial or ethnic groups.
- d. Cultural Racism : Dominant cultural attitudes and practices that marginalize other cultures.
- e. Internalized Racism : Marginalized group members adopting negative beliefs about their own race.
- f. Colorism : Prejudice favoring individuals with lighter skin tones.
- g. Intersectional Racism : Discrimination based on intersecting identities such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Kendi, 2019: 11).

4. Racism Toward Asian-Americans in the U.S.A: A History of Anti-Asian Racism

Neil G. Ruiz, Khadijah Edwarda, and Mark Hugo Lopez document widespread discrimination against Asian adults before the pandemic, with 73% reporting personal experiences of discrimination in 2021. During the pandemic, 32% feared physical attacks, and 81% believed violence against them was increasing, compared to 56% of all U.S. adults.

Li Zhou records incidents of violence and discrimination against Asian-Americans, such as attacks on individuals and vandalism of businesses. Historically, laws like the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers due to xenophobia. Japanese internment during WWII and post-9/11 Islamophobia against South Asian Americans also illustrate racism's impact. Jennifer Lee notes ongoing violence, such as the 2022 shooting at a Korean-owned hair salon in Dallas, highlighting the surge in anti-Asian violence and racism since the Atlanta massacre in 2021.

Research Methodology

The research use descriptive qualitative research method. Which qualitative analysis method used as “A research strategy designed to explore and describe the meaning people give to their experiences and perception” (Guba, 1985: 182). After exploring and describing the meaning then, qualitative analysis methods can also said to be “a systematic approach for discovering theory from qualitative data.” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 2).

The objects in this research are the American movie entitled *Blue Bayou*. *Blue Bayou* is a 2021 American drama film written and directed by Justin Chon. *Blue Bayou* had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on July 13, 2021 and was released in the United States on September 17, 2021, by Focus Features. The researcher focused on the English subtitle of the movie, *Blue Bayou* Which will be pegged to HBO with the duration of the movie 1 hour 57 minute. The data collected is studied to solve the problem and produce answers from this research. Creswell (1994) stated that there are three parts in analyzing data, namely: Displaying, Explaining, Interpreting.

Finding and Discussion

In this chapter, the researcher explores issues of racism with a focus on racism against Asians as depicted in the movie *Blue Bayou* (2021), directed by Justin Chon. The analysis aims to address the problem statements presented in the first chapter: to uncover how racism is portrayed in the movie and to identify the forms of racism it depicts.

1. Racism Based on *Blue Bayou* (2021)

Blue Bayou portrays racism through various scenarios, such as threats of deportation for individuals lacking citizenship papers and instances of colorism. The film highlights the struggles faced by people who are different in terms of race, ethnicity, and skin color, and who are consequently underestimated and marginalized.

a. Forms of Racism

a) Colorism

Colorism is a form of prejudice favoring individuals with lighter skin tones. This is evident in the film's unequal treatment and societal privileges based on skin color.

Example 1: In the opening scene, Antonio, the protagonist, is questioned about his origins :

Man: "Where you from?"

Antonio: "I'm from about an hour north of Baton Rouge. You know, small town called St. Francisville."

Man: "And where you from? Like, born?"

Antonio: "I see what you mean. Uh, I was born in Korea."

Here, the "Man" emphasizes Antonio's birthplace rather than where he lives, indicating a bias based on Antonio's appearance and origin.

Example 2: In a hospital scene, Jessie, Antonio's daughter, says to Parker, a woman who helps her :

Jessie: "You look like my daddy."

Parker: "Uh, yes, I do."

Antonio: "That ain't polite to say."

Antonio's response suggests that comments on racial appearance are sensitive and can be considered impolite or offensive.

Example 3: In a lawyer's office discussing Antonio's deportation:

Kathy: "I just don't understand. How they can deport him."

Barry Boucher: "He was adopted. When'd you come to this country?"

Antonio: "1988."

Barry Boucher: "Well, there was a bill passed in 2000 that grants citizenship to adoptees, but it only protects kids who were adopted after 2000. Looks like maybe your parents..."

Antonio: "They're not my parents."

Barry Boucher: "Well, whoever had custody of you, looks like they didn't follow the proper procedure to change your status."

Kathy: "How's that his fault?"

Barry Boucher: "I'm not saying it's his fault. It's a loophole DHS is using to deport people."

The lawyer explains that Antonio's adoptive parents failed to secure his citizenship, leaving him vulnerable to deportation despite being in the country for over 30 years. This situation highlights systemic issues affecting minorities.

Example 4: Continuing the discussion about deportation:

Kathy: "He's American."

Barry Boucher: "It doesn't matter what he looks like."

Barry acknowledges that racial appearance can impact one's treatment, reflecting underlying societal racism.

b) Structural Racism

Structural racism refers to systemic inequalities within societal institutions that disproportionately disadvantage certain racial or ethnic groups. This is depicted in the film through law enforcement and immigration practices.

Example 1: In a confrontation involving a police officer, Denny:

Denny: "Hey, look, you don't walk away from an officer of the law. Put your arms behind your back. Stop!"

Kathy: "Let him go!"

Jessie: "Don't hurt him!"

Denny: "Do not resist!"

Denny's unnecessary aggression towards Antonio, motivated by his minority status, exemplifies abuse of power.

Example 2: Discussing Antonio's criminal record and its impact on his deportation case :

Barry Boucher: "Well, whoever had custody of you, looks like they didn't follow the proper procedure to change your status."

Kathy: "How's that his fault?"

Barry Boucher: "I'm not saying it's his fault. It's a loophole DHS is using to deport people. You also have a criminal record."

Kathy: "They dropped the charges. No charges were filed."

Barry Boucher: "No, from before. He has a past record. ICE is targeting people like you, adopted or not."

Barry points out that despite the lack of current charges, Antonio's past record and minority status make him a target for deportation by ICE, illustrating systemic bias in immigration enforcement.

c) Individual Racism

Individual racism is the most overt form of racism, where individuals express prejudice and discrimination based on race or ethnicity. This includes verbal abuse, harassment, or physical violence. In *Blue Bayou* (2021), several scenes depict individual racism.

Example 1: In one scene, Denny, a police officer, confronts Antonio:

Denny: "Hey, look, you don't walk away from an officer of the law. Put your arms behind your back. Stop!"

Kathy: "Let him go!"

Jessie: "Don't hurt him!"

Denny: "Do not resist!"

While shopping with his family, Antonio has a minor argument with his wife Kathy. Ace, Kathy's ex-husband, arrives, hoping to see his daughter, Jessie. Denny, Ace's friend and a policeman, intervenes and starts trouble with Antonio over a trivial matter, eventually hitting Antonio and causing his arrest. This incident reflects Denny's individual racism, as he targets Antonio because of his non-American background.

***Example 2:** Another scene involves Denny kidnapping and assaulting Antonio :*

***Denny:** "You didn't think I was gonna pay you back, did you?!"*

After leaving a coffee shop, Antonio is kidnapped by Denny and taken to the woods, where he is brutally beaten. Denny, holding a grudge from a previous altercation, expresses his anger and prejudice through this violent act.

***Example 3:** Denny admits his crime to Ace :*

***Denny:** "You're welcome, by the way."*

***Ace:** "What you mean?"*

***Denny:** "I took care of him."*

***Ace:** "Took care of... what you mean? What you talking about?"*

***Denny:** "I told you. I told you I'd take care of him. Me and a few friends, we found him at a diner. So we picked him up, took him out to the woods, beat the shit out of him. I thought we killed him. You should've seen him. He kept going, like, uh... 'No, no, please stop it. I have to go to court. Please, please. Let me go to court.' Actually, it's kind of funny when you think about it, because... We're always trying to put 'em in court, huh?"*

2. Society's Reaction Toward Racial Differences in *Blue Bayou* (2021)

In *Blue Bayou* (2021), various reactions of society to racial differences are portrayed through interactions among characters, illustrating empathy, care, ignorance, and punishment towards racism.

a. Empathy

Empathy involves understanding and sharing another person's feelings. In *Blue Bayou*, empathy is shown through multiple scenes:

a. Kathy and Antonio (00:19:08)

Kathy: *"Hey. Don't worry. It'll come. Okay? You stay right, and... Things will work out. Okay? I promise."*

Kathy supports Antonio, who is struggling to find a job due to racial differences and a criminal record, by reassuring him and offering emotional support.

b. Ace and Denny (00:34:44)

Ace: *"I didn't ask for your help. I don't solve my problems like you, Denny. Okay That's our difference."*

Ace shows a subtle form of empathy towards Antonio by rejecting Denny's aggressive actions against him, indicating a moral stance against such behavior.

c. Kathy's Support (00:45:33)

Kathy: *"You know I'd go to the moon with you, right? I ain't scared."*

Kathy reassures Antonio of her unwavering support, regardless of the difficulties they face, providing him with emotional strength.

d. Court Scene (01:31:42)

Ace: *"If Antonio stays, Jessie stays."*

Ace's presence in court as a supportive witness for Antonio reflects his empathy, even though it is primarily driven by his concern for his daughter, Jessie.

e. Airport Scene (01:45:42)

Kathy: *"We're going with you."*

Kathy's determination to stay with Antonio, despite the consequences, showcases her deep empathy and commitment.

f. Ace's Farewell (01:46:53)

Ace: "I just want to say goodbye to my daughter."

Ace's sincere goodbye to his daughter at the airport, despite knowing he might not see her again, reveals his empathetic side.

g. Jessie's Plea (01:51:31)

Jessie: "Please, don't go, daddy! Don't! Please don't take my daddy!"

Jessie's heartfelt plea for Antonio to stay demonstrates her deep emotional connection and empathy for him.

b. Care

Caring is demonstrated through actions that support others during difficult times:

a) Antonio and His Friend (00:41:33)

Antonio's friend: "Hey, come on. We gonna figure something out, bro."

Despite their criminal past, Antonio's friend expresses care by offering to help Antonio find money for a lawyer, showing concern for his predicament.

b) Merk's Support (01:43:06)

Merk: "If you run... I won't catch you."

Merk, a police officer and Antonio's friend, demonstrates his care by offering to let Antonio escape, prioritizing their friendship over his duty.

c. Ignorance

Ignorance is portrayed as a lack of concern or unwillingness to support someone :

a) Kathy's Mother (00:31:33)

Kathy's Mother: "Kathy, you're not responsible for him."

Kathy's mother exhibits ignorance towards Antonio's situation, focusing solely on her daughter's well-being and neglecting the emotional and practical implications for Antonio.

d. Punish the Perpetrators of Racism

Punishment is shown as a response to overt acts of racism:

a) Ace Confronting Denny (01:39:12)

Ace: "You're going to fucking jail."

Ace reacts angrily towards Denny for his racist actions against Antonio, demonstrating a commitment to justice.

b) Kathy Confronting Denny (01:39:48)

Kathy: "You know what the hell you did to us?!"

Kathy's outburst and physical confrontation with Denny reflect her anger and desire to hold him accountable for his actions against Antonio.

Blue Bayou effectively showcases the varied societal reactions to racial differences, highlighting the complexities of human emotions and behaviors in the face of racism.

Conclusion

After analyzing the film *Blue Bayou* 2021 directed by Justin Chon, the researcher concluded that racism exists in the film. Racism is in the form of deportation of foreigners and how the attitude of natives towards foreigners in their country. The main racism shown and the main topic in this film is the deportation of foreigners who settled due to adoption. The movie tells the main character's struggle in facing the threat of deportation to stay in that country.

Racism such as discrimination against foreigners is evident in this movie. Some of the racism that occurs is skin color racism, structural racism, and individual racism. Colorism racism that occurs in the film includes when the child of the main character says something very innocent, such as "*You look like my daddy*", at such an early age she must have a certain intention when saying it, but when viewed in terms of racism, the sentence contains a deep meaning.

The second is structural racism, the most visible racism that demeans minorities. In this racism is related to the state apparatus and even the government, an example found in the movie *Blue Bayou* is where police officers misuse their power to discriminate against the main character. The last is individual racism, where someone holds a grudge or is indeed a racist, so someone tends to make fun of or even hurt victims of racism. This is exemplified in the movie where the main character gets a beating that he does not even know the cause of it.

The researcher also discusses how people react to racism that occurs around them. In this study, there are 4 attitudes revealed when the characters deal with, namely empathy, care, ignorance, and punishing the perpetrators of racism. They seem to be able to also feel the feelings experienced by victims of racism and choose to avenge the victim of racism.

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