Woman's resistance against discrimination in Stacey Lee's *The Downstairs Girl*

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Abstract

This research focuses on the main character's resistance to discrimination in the novel *The Downstairs Girl* by Stacey Lee. The study aims to highlight the gender and racial discrimination experienced by the main character and her resistance to this discrimination. This study utilized a descriptive analysis method, incorporating intrinsic elements such as character, characterization, conflict, setting, and symbols, and extrinsic elements including discrimination and resistance theory. This study utilized library research techniques, specifically examining, and researching literature in novels. The findings revealed that resistance to discrimination can be manifested through both overt and subtle actions, whether openly or discreetly. In summary, the protagonist, Jo Kuan, faced gender discrimination in the form of violations of women's rights, as well as racial discrimination through restrictions and exclusion. These challenges prompted the main character to demonstrate bravery and resilience in resisting oppression.

Keywords: *Discrimination; Resistance; Gender; Racial*

Introduction

In the 19th century, the United States grappled with significant issues of discrimination, particularly in terms of gender and race. Gender discrimination is a social injustice defined by differential treatment and attitudes toward individuals based on their gender (Unsriana, 2014). Gender discrimination was prevalent in the lives of women in America (England, Levine, & Mishel, 2020; Traynor-Nilsen, 2020; Adeniyi et al., 2020). This was largely due to American society's belief in the inferiority of women's roles and status compared to men. Women were often denied the right to make decisions, even regarding their own lives. Simultaneously, racial discrimination was also widespread in America (Rivaldy et al., 2020; Pertiwi et al., 2024). According to Khong (2024), American society was marked by a pattern of racism that upheld white supremacy while marginalizing people of color. The dominant white population, primarily of English and other European descent, belonged to the Caucasian race, while people of color included Native Americans,

African or Asian immigrants, and others who were categorized as part of the Negroid race with darker skin or the Mongoloid race with yellowish skin.

The gender and racial discrimination that existed in 19th-century America resulted in women of color facing a double burden of discrimination. One group that experienced this was Chinese women (Chen & Xie, 2024; Long et al., 2024; Geloso & Peng, 2024; and Zhang, 2022). According to Wijayanti and Sudarman (2023), individuals of Chinese ancestry have been in America for over 150 years. This migration began in the early 1850s, driven by various factors such as prolonged drought, crop failures leading to famine, government corruption, poverty, and war. In contrast, America was viewed as a land of opportunity, offering immigrants the chance for a better life. Wijayanti and Sudarman (2023) also explained that initially, Chinese immigrants were warmly welcomed and regarded as hard workers and productive members of American society. Like many immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants settled in a specific area of the city, which was first

known as Little China or Little Canton. Eventually, this area became known as Chinatown.

According to Teitelbaum and Asher (as cited in Wijayanti and Sudarman, 2023), at the end of the 19th century, Chinatowns emerged in various American cities where Chinese immigrants became successful traders. Some opened Chinese restaurants, while others worked as farmers or laborers. The Chinese immigrant population in America increased significantly, tripling to 10,000 people between 1860 and 1880. However, during the economic depression of the 1870s, many Chinese immigrants became scattered workers willing to accept longer hours for lower wages. This led to rising fear and anger among American workers, the business community, and society, particularly among racist and nativist Americans. They accused Chinese immigrants of taking jobs away from native American laborers, which sparked a wave of racial discrimination against Chinese individuals in American society. According to Sowell (as cited in Chen and Xie, 2024), this sentiment fueled the anti-Chinese movement in American society, which viewed the Chinese as an inferior race coming to America to take jobs, money, and the American way of life. As a result, the Chinese became targets of insults, anger, violence, and even murder.

According to Khong (2024), in response to the widespread anti-Chinese sentiment and actions by the American public at that time, the government took action through a Congressional decision on May 6, 1882, by issuing an immigration law that prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States for ten years. This law became known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. Under this act, any Chinese immigrants who were not laborers had to have clear identification and purpose for their arrival, and they were not allowed to become U.S. citizens. American society assumes that people of Asian descent are foreigners who cannot be assimilated and will ultimately defeat the white population and superiority (Cho, 2021; Li & Nicholson, 2021; Liu, 2022; Wu, 2023; Bu & Borgida, 2020).

The issues of gender and racial discrimination in 19th-century America eventually sparked resistance, particularly from women of Chinese descent. This resistance was not always expressed through bold statements or demonstrations but also through words, attitudes, and small actions aimed at defending their basic human rights, which they felt were being oppressed (Susilowati, 2018; Pradini et al., 2024).

Methods

The research is qualitative and will be analyzed using descriptive analysis methods with written data sources obtained from the novel "The Downstairs Girl" by Stacey Lee. The research technique used is library research, involving the study and analysis of literature in the novel. This research explores the connections between intrinsic elements such as characters, characterization, conflict, setting, and symbols, as well as extrinsic elements including discrimination and resistance theory by James C. Scott (2000).

Scott's theory offers a framework for understanding how marginalized individuals and groups resist dominant power structures, which can be applied to the dynamics in *The Downstairs Girl*. By examining the ways in which characters in the novel engage with societal oppression and resistance, the study seeks to highlight how these themes are represented in the narrative. The combination of intrinsic and extrinsic analyses provides a comprehensive understanding of the novel's exploration of social justice, identity, and resistance within a historical context.

Result and discussion

The analysis will focus on the main character in the novel *The Downstairs Girl* by Stacey Lee, Jo Kuan. Jo is a Chinese woman living in Atlanta, Georgia. The novel is set in 1890, at the end of the 19th century. Physiologically, Jo is depicted as a 17-year-old girl. She is described as having the physical traits of an Asian woman of Chinese descent, with straight black hair and slanted eyes. These physical characteristics are one of the reasons Jo faces racial discrimination from the racist white society in Atlanta. This racial discrimination, driven by her physical appearance, includes intimidating stares that occur when Jo wears Western-style clothing alongside her

distinctly Eastern features as a Chinese woman. In these situations, Jo is not passive; she engages in covert resistance through internal monologues, defending herself solely to avoid discomfort. Jo's form of resistance aligns with the theory of covert resistance, characterized by individual actions aimed at personal gain, focusing solely on individual interests.

In addition to facing racial discrimination, Jo's physiological traits as a woman also lead to gender discrimination, reflecting the issues of gender discrimination against women in 19th-century America, consistent with the setting of *The Downstairs Girl* by Stacey Lee. As a result, Jo resists discrimination on both fronts—gender and race—due to her identity as a woman of Chinese descent.

Furthermore, Jo has several sociological characteristics in the story. As a Chinese person, Jo has secretly lived in the basement of the Bell family's newspaper office since infancy, alongside her adoptive parent, Old Gin. This situation arose because, during that time, Chinese people were not allowed to own land or rent decent housing due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882-1892. This treatment represents racial discrimination through segregation, an effort to separate or exclude one group from another. This is reflected in the novel's title, *The Downstairs Girl*. It symbolizes Jo Kuan's lower social status, highlighted by her place of residence.

Another sociological aspect of Jo is that she was dismissed from her job at a hat shop for being considered rude after giving her opinions on which hats suited customers, even though, at that time, Chinese people like Jo had no right to voice their opinions. After that, Jo found it very difficult to find new employment. She faced real limitations in job options as a woman, especially as a Chinese woman, at the end of the 19th century.

Jo was confronted with societal expectations about women's work during her time, reflecting narrow views and stereotypes that limited job options to traditional domestic roles. As a Chinese woman, Jo faced a double barrier involving both gender and race. The limitation of job options was very real for her and working as a maid for the Payne family seemed like one of the few available

choices. Despite being forced into domestic work, her intelligence and spirit remained unbroken. She recognized that this situation was a result of deep-seated inequalities within her society.

Moving on to the psychological dimension, Jo Kuan is portrayed as a captivating and complex character, reflecting intelligence, resilience, and a spirit of resistance as she navigates the intricate landscape of American society at the end of the 19th century. Her character becomes a poignant representation of the struggles faced by women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds during a time marked by rigid social norms, discrimination, and limited opportunities.

Jo's character is carefully crafted, revealing layers of depth and strong nuances. Her intelligence is a defining trait that she conceals behind her role as a maid. This dichotomy is reflected in her character's portrayal, as she consistently demonstrates a deep understanding of various matters. Jo's intelligence is highlighted throughout the story by her active role as the anonymous writer, Miss Sweetie, where she offers advice to readers through the Bell family's newspaper column, 'Focus'.

Jo uses her anonymous writings as a tool to resist gender and racial discrimination by voicing the injustices she experiences, given the limitations on speaking out due to her identity as a woman and Chinese descent.

As a woman, Jo is actively engaged with the women's movement campaigning for more rights and societal involvement. However, she faces conflict when she is barred from participating in feminist protests because she is not considered a citizen and, therefore, cannot join the women's movement in Atlanta. Despite this, Jo does not give up on advocating for women's rights. She implicitly expresses her views through her writings as Miss Sweetie. Although her resistance is limited to anonymous writing, it represents Jo's effort to combat oppression, aligning with the theory of covert resistance, which suggests that such resistance is often individual and lacks visible manifestation.

In the narrative framework of Stacey Lee's *The Downstairs Girl*, the main character, Jo, faces a series of gender and racial discriminations that

reflect the social realities of the late 19th century. The gender discrimination Jo encounters includes limitations on women's rights, social norms that restrict gender roles, stereotypes attached to female identity, and even harassment. Thus, Jo Kuan represents the collective efforts and struggles of women to change the social paradigms of that era. With her intelligence and agility, she challenges the status quo and explores marginalized voices within society. Jo becomes a symbol of resistance against gender discrimination, crafted by the author to illustrate how a woman can raise societal awareness about the inequalities underlying their social structure.

Additionally, another clear form of gender discrimination is seen in the unequal perceptions and evaluations of her capacity and contributions as a woman. As an anonymous writer under the pen name Miss Sweetie, Jo faces significant challenges in being recognized and respected for her sharp insights on social issues.

Jo not only voices her personal views but also represents the voices of marginalized women. Although Miss Sweetie displays intelligence and sensitivity that are striking, the skepticism from society towards her cannot be avoided. This inequality in evaluation arises from the established gender stereotypes of the time, which deemed women incapable of offering valuable insights into intellectual realms. Nevertheless, despite all the discrimination she faces, Jo, as the main character, continues to show extraordinary self-resistance throughout the story by combining her courage and sharpness in exploring and exposing gender and racial inequalities.

Furthermore, Jo's resistance to gender discrimination is also demonstrated when she confidently decides to become a jockey in a horse race, an activity typically reserved for men. This decision not only reflects Jo's determination to challenge gender stereotypes but also provides a tangible representation of the struggle for equality faced by women of that era. This act showcases her bravery and resolve to pursue justice and equality in opportunities usually reserved for men. At this level, Jo's resistance can be categorized as open resistance because her defiance is visible directly to the public. Another example of open resistance by

Jo is seen in the scene where Billy Rigs harasses and almost assaults her. Jo responds by fighting back, attacking Billy's legs with her heels, and throwing a vase.

Besides gender discrimination, *The Downstairs Girl* also features numerous instances where Jo, as the main character, encounters racial discrimination. This issue is prevalent in the story given its setting in the 19th century, a time when Asian immigrants, particularly Chinese, were highly disliked.

In *The Downstairs Girl*, one form of racial discrimination depicted is segregation. Segregation reflects the actions of racist white Americans who sought to separate or even eliminate people of color, especially Chinese individuals. Apart from government policies prohibiting Chinese people from owning land or renting decent housing, there were also physical forms of segregation, such as electric trolley cars with seats segregated by race— white people sitting in the front and people of color relegated to the back. In these instances, Jo's resistance may be more passive or covert, reflecting the political and social realities of her time.

The strong character of Jo in *The Downstairs Girl* serves as a reminder of the importance of resisting discrimination in any form. As a Chinese woman in that era, Jo faced various forms of gender and racial discrimination and courageously challenged the norms that restricted her basic rights. By combining intellectual resistance through her anonymous writings with physical action in horse racing and rebelling against sexual harassment, Jo creates an inspiring narrative of determination, bravery, and the desire to change societal perspectives on women and inequality. Her story brings a crucial message about equality from the past into the present.

Conclusions

In *The Downstairs Girl*, Stacey Lee presents a unique perspective on the social conditions of the late 19th century, focusing on the gender and racial discrimination faced by Jo Kuan, the novel's Chinese-American protagonist. Jo experiences both racial prejudice as a Chinese woman and gender-based discrimination in a society dominated by white men. Throughout the story, she demonstrates

resistance to these oppressive forces, both openly and discreetly. Jo uses her intelligence and voice through her anonymous writings as Miss Sweetie, challenging societal norms, while also taking physical action by participating in horse racing and resisting sexual harassment. Her actions illustrate that resistance to discrimination can take many forms, from direct confrontation to more subtle acts like raising awareness and engaging in dialogue, showing that even in the face of inequality, individuals can find ways to push back against oppressive systems.

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