

## **Race, Gender and Class Diversity in Media: A Study of Rejection of Stereotypes in *The Help*, *The Great Debaters* and *A Raisin in the Sun***

### **ABSTRACT**

*Media plays a significant role in the representation of social and cultural scenarios, highlighting discrimination based on ethnicity, social status, and sex. These media representations play an influential role in maintaining social constructs of binary identities, such as black or white, male or female, and middle or lower class. This study tends to explore the diversification of social and racial hierarchies portrayed in films with a focus on people categorized as 'other'. In contrast to the set pattern, the films examined in this study display multiple perspectives about images of the black people and white women and do not put them in stereotypical categories. The selected films have subverted the so-called established ideas about African-Americans being uncivilized, uneducated, and unworthy and show that all individuals regardless of the established stereotypes can achieve their dreams. Moreover, media has a link with social realities and the rampant racist scenario.*

**Keywords:** *Race, Gender, class, hierarchies, multiplicity, subverted, established ideas, diverse portrayals.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Media demonstrates diverse views about race, gender, and class to its audiences through images, symbols, and stories. According to Brooks and Hébert (2006), individuals' identities and their positions are affected by representations and the "racial categories we use to differentiate human differences have been created and changed to meet the dynamic, social, political and economic needs of our society" (p. 297). They argue that there are two responses; acceptance, and rejection, to the gendered and racial social constructions, which are outcomes of media representations. They further claim that audiences understand social roles through such constructions and that hierarchies

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of ethnicity, class and gender in US society affect the daily experiences of black and white Americans. Therefore, the media's role is complex and critical in developing a racialized culture. The individual's relation to society and culture defines their identity and some may adapt their gender, race and class identities which are socially constructed and represent a person's current state and context. An individual, in the struggle of her/his self, undergoes conflict with social systems that define and ascribe her/him a self. Cultural categories and values significantly influence the way individuals and society interprets racial and gendered identity. The fluidity of identity is detectable in different contexts from home to school (Frable, 1997).

### **Analytical Framework**

This study looks at race, gender and class diversity in films by black and white directors as they have represented African-Americans and women declining the prevailing stereotypes. It also explores the social constructs portrayed in the films to consider if they represent black men and women differently than the norm. As dismantling stereotypical binaries that shape social values and institutions expose various biases prevalent in media content and demonstrate how diverse productions that subvert existing viewpoints create space for new ideas. To this end, the tenets of Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) (Martin, 2004) have been employed. Martin claims that people's understanding of how amelioration happens across a range of sites is defective without Positive PDA. It "describes what texts 'do well' and 'get right in our eyes' (Macgilchrist, 2007, p. 74). It approves a discourse rather than criticizing it. As the present study aims at analyzing successful counter-discourse to the established stereotypes, PDA's five discursive strategies logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing have been employed:

1. Logical inversion tends to counter the established discourse.
2. Parody is a sophisticated strategy used to subvert the prevalent views or ideals.
3. Complexification establishes consensus over the issue and circulates it in the mainstream.
4. Partial reframing is a process of "shifting an issue away from its conventional location" (Macgilchrist, 2007, p. 81), i.e. a different interpretation or meaning is assigned to an issue in a new setting.
5. Radical reframing is used to develop a consensus and turn around the reporting. This involves dialogue with other frames as well as an inversion of the conventional view of the issue.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In media research, social inequity is an important area of study. Gray (2016) claims that the media portrays inequalities based on race, gender, and class identification. Gray has also explored how diversity works, how it is exhibited and what purposes it

determines. While addressing the issues, the media highlights “practical life and effects” (p. 242). Gray, further, claims that the myth of the American dream suggests prosperity to all but media research exhibits disbelief when it reveals discrimination in the US.

Black feminist perspectives bring to the forefront, especially, the images of black females and their portrayal, and tend to expose gender inequality. Their stereotypical portrayal as matriarchal, fat, ugly and ill-mannered are criticized by critics and theorists like bell hooks (1994) who states that black females’ images determine their blackness and the way other people behave with them. Such representations influence black women’s viewpoints about themselves as well. Under white supremacist thinking, even black men cannot challenge stereotypical portrayals. Burks avers that the white male heterosexual hegemony dominates black independent cinema and “... has succeeded at one point or another in colonizing us all” (1996, p. 26). It has led white filmmakers to construct images of the black people in whatever way they liked. While discussing males, Burks challenges many stereotypes but in the case of females, he conforms to the same representations. In terms of beauty, the white color, straight hair, slim figure and high status are prominent features. Hooks (1994) states:

“light skin and long, straight hair continue to be traits that define a female as beautiful and desirable” (p. 179).

Dines (2003) argues that black men are considered deviants and a threat to the white community. They are excluded from the category of 'Men' being incapable of protecting their women. Dines (2003) focuses on black man’s image of a threat to white women's sexuality. Dominant racist depictions exhibit them with sturdy bodies without intelligence. Dines argues that masculinity, femininity, race, class, personal and collective personalities are not biologically decided; rather, they are the product of power discourse. Media narratives “are seen as intimately connected with a broader social relation of domination and subordination” (p. 309). Gramsci (1996) contends that power and hegemony are the outcomes of the ideological control that the subclasses grant to the elite. Different categories are created through various representations and images. The received and reflected messages, sometimes, impinge upon the minds of the people, and the people from the lower classes and races, consequently, choose a lower existence.

Scholars focusing on the audience have noticed that black people try to drive positive out of negative portrayals. Bobo (1995) discovers that black females navigate meaning to achieve power through negotiated readings. This indicates that they are not much affected and do not consider themselves subordinate. The audiences receive images and awareness about social inequity through films exploring racism, injustice and the harsh attitude of whites. She also examines the idea of identity formation and explores

the link between racism and media, specifically how women perceive their images in terms of beauty and identity.

Richardson-Stovall found diverse points of resistance and acceptance in her interviews with women. She also found that black women's voices about media images are not heard and argues that "defining certain women as beautiful and others as not is a form of socio-political control that empowers some and disempowers others" (p. 74). Richardson-Stovall also notes that the stereotypical rendering of a particular picture of beauty indicates the oppression women have to face. They "experience extreme psychological and sociological pain in response to media images of white beauty" (p. 77). The women she interviewed talked about different phases of their lives, connections to race, history and social experiences which forced them to reconstruct themselves positively. Some people accepted the propaganda behind the stereotyping as it was internalized through different means. Most of the participants had the view that their images of beauty presented in the media were harmful.

Racial and gender discrimination prevail because "minority" women occupy less space and fewer opportunities for leadership positions. The methods of production, exhibition and distribution are unfair and under the control of the dominant society (Grindstaff, 2008). Several studies find Hollywood as a chiefly male and white sphere where representations of women and minorities are below their population ratio. The roles of women and Black people are restricted. Even directors and producers have limited chances as "Industry decision-makers may only circumscribe them to limited scales of production or provide them with sparingly few resources for the execution of a project" (Erigha, 2017, p. 79). Maryann Erigha also states that, in the areas of direction and acting, women and black men have limited space and minorities generally are offered supporting roles instead of main roles.

William T. Bielby and Denise Bielby state that minority groups work with smaller companions (Bielby & Bielby, 1999). Talent agencies are the source of reputation, authentication and income unavailable to minor production sources. Thus the directors and producers working with these agencies are more successful as compared to those working independently. This clearly exposes the inequality the marginalized have to face in Hollywood. White audiences and critics judge everything according to their mindset. Leblanc has discussed the issue of production through the responses of audiences and claims that film reviewers and critics use the prevailing social ideals to make comparisons which reflect "... their narrowness and to some extent racist attitude" (2017, pp. 309-310). Moreover, every ethnic group has its own perception because if a person is black; whatever they do has to be a black version. "It makes one wonder about the strength-of-the-blood held for many years in the south. One drop of the black blood makes you black" (p. 314) According to Leblanc, black writers, producers and directors are usually more concerned about aspects of racism and are

more interested in its demonstration than whites. In other words, white people explore black history with discriminatory images while black people have a professional approach.

## RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Although in the US film industry, prejudices continue to prevail, African-American directors are striving to challenge the stereotypes, and subvert the overgeneralized facts. They present a varied picture with multiple perspectives and give females and African-Americans central positions. The selected films: Leon's *A Raisin in the Sun* (2008), Taylor's *The Help* (2011) and Washington's *The Great Debaters* (2007) constituting the sample for data analysis, have been directed by both white and African-American directors who represent social reality with multiple perspectives, and give black females central positions.

Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), was received in many theaters since she raised her voice and brought the diversity of race, gender and class from off-screen to the forefront (Wilkerson, 1986). Kenny Leon adapted the play into a classic Telefilm in 2008 retaining all the original ideas. The setting of the movie reflects racial discrimination and legal upheavals at a time when social movements were trying to turn the tables. The story is the realistic portrayal of an African-American family, the Youngers, living in a racist society. They are laborers, fighting for survival and hoping for a better future. Their hopes are set on a check of \$10,000 which Lena, the mother, is going to receive and which is thought to be the fulfillment of their dreams. Lee, Lena's son, is frustrated, sick of his job as a chauffeur and wants to invest money in a private business. It creates a disturbance in the family but Mama buys a house in Clybourne Park, a white neighborhood, and this disappoints Lee. His sister Beneatha wants to be a doctor and the mother is saving money for her education as well. Lee, loses the money in a dubious deal and completely disillusioned, faces his family in an emotional crisis. He gets a chance to recover the money when the white neighborhood association offers to buy the family's new house at a profit to stop them from moving to a white neighborhood. Later Lee realizes that his family's pride is more important and dismisses the proposal.

The film shows the effort of the family as it fights for progress. Upward economic mobility seems insignificant to them. Their struggle "for a spiritual and economic future poses fundamental questions about the American dream of success" (p. 445). For a minority group, achieving material success is very difficult. On one hand, there is Lee's desire for acquisition, status and money and on the other is Mama's struggle for integrity, freedom and pride. Leon in rendering racial segregation and class differences in showing the attitude of Linder, a representative of the white community, exhibits the racist thinking of Linder, since he wants to block African-Americans' admission to the white locality. He poses to be a part of a betterment association but

his mind is full of prejudice. He says, “he is the chairman of welcome committee who welcomes the new neighbors and we sort of giving lowdown on how we do things in Clybourne Park” (Leon, *A Raisin in the Sun*). On behalf of the committee, he deals with special community problems and, by special, he means African-Americans. He warns them about violent incidents to make them aware of the danger of moving to a new place; “I feel, what we have, is a unique organization in American life where we are trying to do something about it”. He tries to hide his racist thinking and states that he is there to work things out in a friendly way and that his motive is to make them dismiss the idea of the new house. White people, he says, feel that “for the happiness of all concerned, our Negro families are better off, they’re happier, living in their own communities”. This exposes how the white community never allows African-Americans to mingle with them.

White people's gazes are totally unwelcoming when the Younger family visits the house. The Younger family is portrayed as caring and well-mannered although Lee is angry and frustrated. There is no negative description of African-Americans and the Youngers are shown as one unit, connected to values and roots. Female characters are strong and can keep the family united. For example, Lena never gives up and does all that she can for the Youngers. Ruth, Lena’s daughter-in-law, wishes for the betterment of her family and is equally worried about her husband. Lena’s daughter, Beneatha loves to be connected to African roots; wears traditional dress and likes Yoruba dance. She also wants to be a doctor and to progress in a society where there are few opportunities for African-American females. Being bold, she asks Mr. Linder direct questions when he beats about the bush. The portrayal of women here, occupies more space and is more positive than that for males. They are shown as reasonable and wise rather than emotional and the stereotypical image of women as weak and sexual objects, is challenged. Lee, despite being aggressive, is shown as a committed man who saves his family's pride.

Mr. Asagai, who is in love with Beneatha, is a young man from Nigeria who is struggling to achieve a better place in American culture and is never ashamed of his heritage and background. He gives moral support to Beneatha when she is depressed at learning that the money for her education has been lost. Beneatha loses faith in humankind and finds human beings foul and selfish. Asagai wants Beneatha to have faith and never give up. She questions Asagai about his commitment to his people and their freedom. He shouts, “I live the answer”. His very existence is proof of his commitment and belief in the power of his people which cannot be taken away by money or material things. His faith is his power and he will continue fighting for liberation.

Confrontation with racism is seen in the family’s rejection of the proposal to sell the new house and stay out of the white community and an affirmation of the family’s

values. While they sacrifice the profit they could make from selling the home, the Youngers are committed to upward mobility and economic success. Racial segregation is resisted and a united family is able to overcome it. Beneatha's decision to become a doctor is the point of resistance in a society where African-American females get fewer chances for professional-oriented education. Thus, the family accepts the challenge of being in a white community and is ready to resist the discrimination. Lena's decision is a challenge to the restrictions put on African-Americans. Asagai represents the rise of Africans and their awareness of freedom. Beneatha's acceptance of African traditions and dress code is the renewal of faith and pride of Africans and African-Americans in their heritage.

The movie was received well by both African-Americans and whites with the African-Americans feeling proud of the characters and the whites identifying with the characters at the same time that they see the harm that racism and segregation causes. Lena is a strong character with whom many can relate since she is shown as a determined and caring mother who keeps the family together. The sacrificing nature of Ruth and the strong belief of Beneatha keeps the audience captivated. Wilkerson (1986, p. 444) argues that

“For blacks, Walter was a welcome affirmation of the urgency and potency of the black struggle, while his sister represented its intellectual potential. Each character was molded with skill and humor. The human qualities of Hansberry's characters came through without negating their racial integrity” (1986, p. 444).

In the film, Leon reveals the mindset of the racist white people whereas the African-Americans found a voice and a way to move forward through non-stereotypical representation.

Female characters are the real power in the play, and that is one of the reasons that the play and, later, the first film adaptation made history. Leon's version premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. The good reception it garnered there is due to its representation of the family factor and because the things they have to deal with are so relevant. It highlights the fallacies embedded in the myth of the American dream and enables the audience to identify with the ways that racism excludes some people from achieving the dream while also pointing out the problems with defining success as attaining wealth. Leon's version of the play reclaimed the national spotlight “making the story and its critique of the US dominant culture accessible to a new generation of viewers” (Colbert, 2011, p. 20). The goal is to bring the dominant culture of America to the forefront. Leon in an interview with the Washington informer states that (“... his performance attracts a new generation of theatre-goers translating a deficit into a gain”) (p. 22). The success it achieved is very complicated and difficult for black directors;