

# Racism and discrimination of black people in motion pictures



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Racism and discrimination have been present in almost every era throughout history. Unfortunately, it still exists in our population in ways which remind us of the hardships that people of colour had to go through, mainly in the United States. Even though the world has progressed greatly in the last couple of decades, racism, hatred and discrimination still exist today, deeply implanted in narrow-minded traditions and values. The official definition of racism is “ the prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior.” Through the analysis of the four films that are connected by the theme of racism and discrimination, we are able to see; Where was the source of racism coming from in the films? How were main characters affected by racism? How did the characters overcome racism? The films I have chosen are *The Help* by Tate Taylor, *12 Years a Slave* by Steve McQueen, *Selma* by Ava Duvernay and *The Color Purple* by Steven Spielberg. Through these films, we are able to learn that racism is a serious issue that we are still facing in this day and age.

#### Connection one: Racism and Slavery is a Form of Dehumanization and Dissociation

A significant aspect that *The Help*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Selma* and *The Color Purple* share in common is that the main characters were dehumanized and dissociated by the law. This has made society inflicted by the discrimination caused by white people. They did not have protection over their own lives due to the white supremacy which is the belief and theory that white people are inherently superior to people from all other racial groups, especially black people, and are therefore, rightfully the dominant group in any society.

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The Help conveys ways of racism was perceived in the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. Black females 'helped' white women to become more aware and enlightened on the movement of their people, gaining simple rights and entitlements. Slavery is "a system under which people are treated as property to be bought and sold, and are forced to work" which is exactly, what the film 12 Years a Slave is about; the life of Solomon Northup. He was born in the free State of New York but then is poisoned, kidnapped and forced into slavery for a lengthy 12 years. Northup was kidnapped from the north to the south where slavery was the norm, with disturbing laws that violated many of our human rights today. I believe that the dehumanisation slaves in 12 Years a Slave is the most severe out of all of the films I have chosen. Slaves were forced to work for white men on plantations and were given little or no food, clothes, and/or shelter to live in. These slaves also never had the chance to learn to read, write, or anything to that degree. Inside, humans possess the power to feel or to have emotions. Certain things in life strike emotions and cause sadness, anger, or any other feelings a human may have. Another quality humans possess is to sense the feelings in others. The film Selma directed by Ava Duvernay focuses on the battles Martin Luther King Jr. fought during the Civil Rights movement, particularly for voting rights for African-Americans. The police violence in the film reminds us that many black people view police violence through the experience of history. Some do not understand why many black people respond to the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as reminders; a history filled with lynchings and violence instead of just as other events.

In my opinion, these films exposes some of America's deepest racial, gender, and class wounds as individuals and social groups that still exists to this day. Although it has gotten better, there are still major issues in America that persist because of the mindset and mentality of the 19th century. The connection of dehumanization and dissociation to society is mainly sourcing from white supremacy, where dehumanization takes part to make black people feel less human by taking away their individuality, their sense of compassion and sensitivity towards others, essentially making the objects. This has caused physical trauma for black people. By the end of the eighteenth century, branding, amputation, and other extreme brutal forms of punishment became rare as means of controlling slaves. But beating continued, causing slaves' most catastrophic physical and psychological trauma. In the film Selma, the main character Celie endures rape, sexism, the loss of her children at birth, domestic violence, the loss of her sister, and the demoralization of her friend (Sofia), who loses her freedom to the law. It is prevalent throughout all films that black people are always treated less than everyone else. Evidence from The Help shows us that black people are dissociated from society " A disease-preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the coloured help. It's been endorsed by the White Citizens Council" this displays how white people have isolated black people from their ' white society', where they become objectified by the law.

The Color Purple and The Help links. The main characters in both films play the role of the maid, in which again disassociated from the ' white society'. They both are verbally and physically abused by their employers, creating an

unhealthy mental mindset. As a black American woman, Sofia from the film *The Color Purple* is strong, fierce, and daring to a fault. In fact, it is her refusal to lessen or belittle herself that almost leads to her destruction. Brought up in the south in the 1930s, she refuses to follow the systematic oppression that suppresses the position of black women. In that system, a black person had to remain subservient to whites, economically and socially. Blacks worked for whites, who paid them very little. In addition, a black woman came under the rule of her husband. A black woman was a practically prisoner in the system. White men controlled the state, and black men controlled the black households. Sofia had no chance in such a setting. This can be true for the main characters from the film *The Help*, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson as they were also in the 'system', where blacks worked for whites, who paid them a very little amount. A black person had to remain subservient and loyal to their white owners, otherwise the consequences may ruin their lives completely, as shown in this film where one of the maids has their reputation ruined by their white employers, which essentially destroyed her life.

By stripping black people of their human qualities, white people are dehumanizing the black society. Being a human means to have emotions and to have control over how you feel and what you feel about it. In these films, we were shown that dehumanisation in slavery and racism plays a big factor in our society and though it has improved, it still exists to this day.

Connection Two: The Pursuit for Justice

Justice and equality is a significant issue in almost all societies around the world but is most prominent in the US. Justice involves important issues like human rights and social policies. Race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and other factors that “categorize” individuals in a certain community are all factors that contribute towards justice. The civil rights movement was a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for blacks to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Civil War had officially ended slavery, but it didn't end the discrimination against blacks - they continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South. In my opinion, the Selma protest delivers a very strong idea of how severe the racism was back then. Focusing on one protest instead of his entire life was a good way to ensure that the purpose of the film was shown. Underlining the protests creates character development throughout the film as it shows that the main character progressively acquires more empowering perceptions in order to gain their legal justice. Similar to the other films, we are able to identify that by the end of the film we are able to perceive the hardships that these characters have gone through. This has helped the main characters to take pride in their race and become a stronger human being. “Our lives are not fully lived if we're not willing to die for those we love, for what we believe” - Martin Luther King Jr. This strengthens my understanding of what blacks had to go through for their freedom was greatly increased by all of these films. This connects to the freedom in the film *The Help* where Aibileen finally feels free at the end of the film because she faced the truth, “God says we need to love our enemies. It's hard to do. But it can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked me what it feels like to be me. Once I told the truth about that, I felt

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free.” This shows us that the truth is brutal, dark and ugly, but there’s nothing much they can do about except for fight for their freedom and that’s exactly what the main characters in both films conquered in their own ways. Although we did not see Martin Luther King Jr.’s entire life we saw a very significant and important part of it that revolutionized and helped their society to overcome some of the racism in a more progressive manner.

Overall, these films have taught us that justice is something everyone deserves, but it isn’t always what they get. Characters are mainly used as the primary form of racism. Across the films I have covered, racism primarily takes on the form of a character within the texts’ overarching story.

### Connection Three: Racism in the Past and Racism Today

Throughout these films, it is evident that progress has been made since 12 Years a Slave. Set in the 1850s, this film shows us a representation of how slavery in the United States was in the Pre-Civil War. Basic facts about the time, the places, the people, and the brutality are incorporated, sometimes in excessive detail. Slaves were degraded, made to suffer awful agonies, and cruelly whites took possession of their physical, emotional, and spiritual being. White people who engage in slavery is morally degraded and emotionally desensitized, this serves as a timeless preview of what human slavery was like in the 1800s. Their suffering provides a moral lesson to all generations from themselves. Evidently, we then see a very slow progression in the 1930s and 1960s, where the films The Help, Selma and The Colour Purple took place. Their situation was not as completely horrible. As long as they worked, they ate; they had their own very modest homes, and so forth.

In these time periods, their rights were completely ignored and dismissed, they earned a miniscule salary and black women were under systematic oppression that suppresses their position. A black woman had to remain subservient to whites and their husband. The position of black women in society was demeaned and disregarded, as black men controlled the households and white men controlled everything else. As seen in the film, *The Colour Purple*, black women experience rape, sexism, domestic violence, humiliation and demoralization on a daily basis. Although they weren't being worked to death as slaves were in the 1800s, they were still mortified and dehumanized, taking their basic rights away. Slavery has faded slowly into history, however black people were still mistreated and discriminated against white people during that time.

For many years, I believe that racism always existed, that this was something that was deeply embedded in the caricature of Americans, but in reality, race theory and racism is relatively recent in the development of our society. If one were to go back and read some of the ancient Greek philosophy, what we find in the ancient world is cultural patriotism. The Greeks felt that they had the best civilization going. The Romans felt likewise. For that reason, people became accustomed to prejudice and patriotism. People fought each other because of it, making it the main source of conflict, creating the problems they had in their society, infecting ours today. But in their society, it was unquestionably not based on skin colour. In fact, there is insufficient evidence that it is on the basis of skin colour. As among the Greeks, there were leading African people, and among the Romans, there were leading African persons, some of whom, became Roman



emperors. As emperors, they thought they were better than everyone else, including other black people who were non-Roman. The discrimination and the kind of conflicts between groups were certainly not about race or colour. It was more about their culture. It was more about a sense of cultural superiority and patriotism.

So how do we put an end to this? The reality is that, during this age, we aren't able to. Everyone is different. It's in our nature to respond negatively to things or people we aren't used to. Scientists believe there is the tendency in all animals to selectively preserve their own kind even at the cost of a different animal type, which can play a factor in the sourcing of racism, not to mention prejudice in general.

As our generations progresses, the way that we think becomes more complex, as does the world around us. Our old values aren't forgotten, but replaced with new values as our tiresome ways hide in the back of our minds. I believe that racism should be stopped. Racism has occurred for many centuries, but there is still a chance to improve it. There is hope for mankind to end racism. I believe that embracing and accepting unconditional love, as Dr. King explains why; " Now, we gotta get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love."