



Virtus Significat: Exploring Cultural Hegemony and Unraveling the Distortion of Race Representation and Gender Roles in Contemporary Media Narratives

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Abstract : *Modern movies often reflect dominant cultural narratives, favoring certain ideologies and sidelining alternative voices, leading to a singular viewpoint in storytelling, especially regarding gender and race. This results in complex yet often stereotypical portrayals that reinforce harmful narratives. Practices like race-swapping and gender-swapping can appear inclusive but often create shallow characters. For instance, the 2016 female-led "Ghostbusters" and Tilda Swinton's casting in "Doctor Strange" faced criticism for lacking authenticity. Critical examination of these practices is essential for genuine representation. Thoughtful inclusivity can challenge dominant narratives and highlight marginalized voices, fostering a diverse media landscape.*

Keywords: *Cultural Hegemony, Gender Politics, Race Representation, Movies, Film, Cinema.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

In the expansive media landscape, portrayals of gender and race reflect dominant cultural values, beliefs, and power structures. These narratives not only mirror cultural hegemony but also shape and distort societal perceptions. Our research explores "Virtus Significat," Latin for virtue signaling, and its role in reinforcing cultural hegemony and negatively impacting race and gender representations in modern cinema. This study examines the historical and cultural significance of media portrayals and their effects on perpetuating prejudices and supporting hegemonic systems.

Modern media, with its pervasive platforms, significantly influences societal conceptions of race and gender. Visual storytelling in movies, television series, and commercials shapes our worldview. These seemingly benign depictions often mask power dynamics rooted in historical and cultural control.

Central to this investigation is "Virtus Significat," which denotes the display of moral superiority through external gestures. This phenomenon intertwines with media portrayals of race and gender, aligning with cultural ideologies. Media content emphasizing ethics and virtue often engages in virtue signaling, appealing to specific audiences or reinforcing power structures, inadvertently causing societal harm.

Understanding this dynamic requires examining the historical and cultural contexts of media representations. Marginalized groups, such as people of color and women, have long faced stereotyping and discrimination, resulting in entrenched power imbalances. Media representations perpetuate these stereotypes, reinforcing mainstream narratives and unhealthy societal attitudes.



Consequently, the media contributes to the homogenization of diversity and inclusion, blurring the line between effective representation and superficial tokenism. In an era where diversity is a marketable brand, superficial inclusivity often conceals deep-rooted inequalities. Stereotypical and tokenized portrayals of marginalized identities reveal an unconscious complicity in maintaining societal inequities.

Complex power relationships are evident in virtue signaling, cultural hegemony, and media representation. A thoughtful analysis of race and gender portrayals in contemporary media reveals the persistence of stereotypes and stable power structures. This lens can help set an agenda for a more inclusive and egalitarian media landscape that resonates with diverse audiences.

2. Objectives :

1. To Understand How Movies Shape Society
2. To Push for More Fairness and Diversity
3. To Check if Movies Stay True to Real Life
4. To Find Out Who Holds the Power in Movies
5. To Close the Gaps in Our Understanding

3. Review of Literature :

Recent years have seen increasing criticism of gender representation in films, with experts examining how Hollywood and other cinematic landscapes perpetuate prejudices and marginalize diverse identities. This scholarship highlights the intricate relationship between media portrayal, societal attitudes, and the need for more inclusive narratives.

Films can serve as powerful socialization tools, creating cultural norms and shaping viewers' perceptions of themselves and their surroundings. Media depictions can normalize specific gender norms and expectations, potentially perpetuating existing disparities. For instance, films that consistently portray women in conventional domestic or subordinate roles might lead to women underestimating their abilities and limiting their career aspirations. Conversely, films featuring diverse female characters who defy traditional gender norms can challenge stereotypes and promote a more equitable society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 2019; Pryor, 2018).

One area of research focuses on the persistence of gender stereotypes, especially in films aimed at younger audiences. Studies examining Disney films reveal a troubling link between exposure to these films and children's internalization of traditional gender standards and sexist views. Disney films, with their enduring popularity and formulaic plotlines, can significantly influence how children perceive gender roles and expectations. For example, Disney has faced criticism for depicting female characters as passive damsels in distress and male characters as heroic and proactive, reinforcing traditional gender norms and potentially limiting children's understanding of gender flexibility (Yang, 2023).

Yang's study is not the first to highlight the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes in children's films. Exposure to gender-stereotyped media can lead to children developing narrow beliefs about what boys and girls can and should do. Children exposed to gender-stereotyped cartoons are more likely to believe that boys excel in math and science more than girls. These findings underscore the need for more diverse children's films that challenge traditional gender norms and present a broader range of characters and themes, encouraging children to defy stereotypes and reach their full potential (Lindsey et al., 2016; Cahill, 2010).

Research also explores the potential for films to challenge prevailing narratives and empower women. Studies on female representation in superhero films suggest that these movies can be powerful tools for challenging gender stereotypes and promoting female agency and strength. Traditionally a male-dominated genre, recent superhero films featuring strong, multidimensional female protagonists have been particularly empowering for young girls. Films like "Wonder Woman" (2017) and "Black Panther" (2018) showcase strong female characters who break traditional gender norms and inspire young audiences (Hu, Liu, and Qian, 2023).

Beyond gender, scholars examine the intersection of racial and gender discrimination in the film industry. Erigha's research uses critical race and feminist theories to investigate how media platforms uphold or challenge existing power structures, emphasizing the need for more equitable and inclusive representations (Erigha, 2015). Studies also delve into how viewers of different racial backgrounds perceive on-screen depictions, highlighting the limitations of singular



narratives like the white savior trope and advocating for a broader range of stories that reflect the real experiences of people of color (King et al., 2021).

Finding a more impartial framework for assessing women's portrayals in films is another critical area of study. Researchers propose a paradigm that goes beyond the Bechdel Test to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender bias in commercial films. Their research, using image analysis techniques, reveals a consistent trend of underrepresentation and shallow characterization of female characters (Jang et al., 2023).

Critical assessments emphasize the media's role in creating and sustaining oversimplified representations of gender and race. They argue that these categories are social constructs heavily influenced by media depictions and stress the importance of critically approaching media narratives to subvert stereotypes and promote a nuanced understanding of identity (Brooks & Hébert, 2012).

Finally, examining big-budget Hollywood films' treatment of sexuality, gender, and race reveals how these films can address social justice issues and identity politics. Films like "Malcolm X" and "Forrest Gump" demonstrate the potential for cinema to challenge prevailing cultural narratives and elevate underrepresented voices (Davies & Smith, 2003).

Overall, research on gender representation in films highlights the enduring biases and stereotypes in Hollywood and other cinematic landscapes. Scholars use various theoretical frameworks and empirical methods to study gender, race, and sexuality in cinema. Their findings show that media portrayal significantly influences societal perceptions and attitudes, necessitating more diverse and empowering representations to challenge existing norms and stereotypes.

4. Methodology :

The research methodology employed here follows the qualitative approach with the use of content analysis and review of existing literature. Content analysis, specifically analysis of 10 movies, spread out across genres and years of their release respectively.

The list of the movies is as follows:

- Crash (2004)
- Bros (2022)
- Apocalypto (2006)
- Suicide Squad (2016)
- The Last Airbender (2010)
- Slumdog Millionaire (2009)
- The White Tiger (2021)
- Cloud Atlas (2012)
- Ex Machina (2014)
- Ghost in the Shell (2017)

4.1. Research Questions:

1. Representation of Race and Gender in Character Roles

- What is the frequency of racially diverse characters in positions of power or influence?
- How are the arcs of characters from different racial and gender backgrounds developed throughout the movies?

2. Stereotypes and Cultural Representation

- What stereotypes, if any, are associated with certain races and genders in these movies?
- How do these representations align with or diverge from real-world demographics and cultural contexts?

3. Historical Context and Authenticity

- Are there any anachronisms or inaccuracies in portraying different races and genders within historical contexts?

4. Social Systems and Power Dynamics

- Are there patterns in how characters of different races and genders navigate power dynamics?



4.2. Sample Selection

Following an extensive review of three studies on race and gender misrepresentation in cinema, we selected ten movies for analysis. Each film offers diverse perspectives on the themes under study. Selection criteria included popularity, significance, critical reception, and the ability to connect race and gender in filmmaking, ensuring a balanced mix of genres, periods, and cultural contexts.

The studies referenced are:

- 1. UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report 2024:** This annual report analyzes diversity in the entertainment industry, focusing on film and television, providing data on gender, race, and ethnicity representation.
- 2. Inequality in 1,600 Popular Films (2007-2022):** Produced by USC's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, this report examines diversity and inclusion in the film industry, focusing on gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+, and disability representation.
- 3. The ReFrame Film Report 2023:** A collaboration between the Sundance Institute and Women in Film Los Angeles, this report emphasizes gender parity, inclusion, and balanced hiring practices in film.

4.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates several key theories to analyze race and gender misrepresentation in cinema. Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests gender roles and stereotypes are acquired through correspondence bias, where observed behaviors lead to firm beliefs about inherent traits. Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) posits that societal categorization based on biological sex reinforces stereotypes across generations. Feminist Film Theory (Mulvey, 1975) challenges socially constructed gender roles in media, advocating for transforming existing biases. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) explores how intersecting social identities impact power dynamics. Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) examines systemic racism embedded in societal structures. Lastly, the Bechdel Test (Bechdel, 1985) evaluates female representation in films, requiring at least two named women to converse about topics other than men, underscoring the need for diverse portrayals. These theories collectively provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing biased representations in modern cinema.

5. Analysis & Findings

5.1. Race and gender representation in character roles

The frequency of powerful characters who are diverse in race: The reception of a movie is affected when it has people of different races in significant roles. For example, the 2004 film "Crash" has individuals from different ethnic origins, but stereotypes African Americans as criminals. This has an impact on the variety of character depictions.

5.2. Character Arc Development: Character arcs take different forms in different movies. The primary character Bobby in "Bros" (2022) presents the gay community in a bad light, underscoring the significance of accurate depiction and nuanced character development.

5.3. Preconceptions and Cultural Representation-Associated Stereotypes: Movies such as 2009's "Slumdog Millionaire" reinforce prejudices by emphasizing poverty and crime and thereby promoting preconceptions about India. Cultural appropriation and whitewashing of characters in "Avatar: The Last Airbender" (2010) depart from accurate portrayal.

5.4. Actual Alignment: Movie stereotypes could reflect real-world demographics or deviate from them. For instance, the 2021 film "The White Tiger" perpetuates prejudice against Muslims and presents an unfavorable image of Indian males.

5.5. The Authenticity and Historical Context Anachronisms and Inaccuracies: Movies such as "Apocalypto" (2006) have come under fire for allegedly homogenizing native Americans and falsifying historical accounts. The movie's whitewashing of colonial crimes distorts the nuanced historical settings.

5.6. Power Relations and Social Systems Navigating Power Dynamics: Characters are trivialized and stereotyped in films such as "Suicide Squad" (2016), which affects power dynamics. The film's race-swapping and sexualization of female characters serve to perpetuate social preconceptions.

Samples from Motion Pictures:

1. Crash (2004): While "Crash" is often praised for its portrayal of racial diversity, it has been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes. The film frequently depicts African Americans as criminals, which negatively impacts the portrayal of black



individuals in prominent positions. This reinforces harmful stereotypes and overlooks the complexity and diversity within African-American communities.

2. *Bros* (2022): In "Bros," Bobby, the main character, is used to represent the LGBT community. However, the portrayal is often seen as negative and lacking depth, highlighting the need for genuine representation and nuanced character development. This underscores the importance of creating characters that authentically reflect the experiences and identities of LGBT individuals.

3. *Apocalypto* (2006): "Apocalypto" has been criticized for its inaccurate depiction of indigenous civilizations. The film tends to homogenize diverse Indigenous cultures and distorts historical facts, which can mislead audiences about the richness and variety of these societies. This simplification contributes to a skewed understanding of Indigenous history and culture.

4. *Suicide Squad* (2016): In "Suicide Squad," the sexualization of female characters and the trivialization and stereotyping of other characters perpetuate existing power dynamics and cultural preconceptions. Female characters are often depicted in a manner that emphasizes their sexuality over their abilities, reinforcing outdated gender roles and stereotypes. Additionally, other characters are reduced to clichés, which diminishes the potential for more nuanced and respectful representations.

6. CONCLUSION :

Examining race and gender in Hollywood films reveals a long history of spreading false impressions and assumptions. Popular movies often show patterns of racial insensitivity, objectification, and whitewashing. These portrayals fail to represent our diverse society fairly, distorting reality and fueling biases.

6.1. Racial Misrepresentations: Films like "Apocalypto," "Crash," and "Avatar: The Last Airbender" highlight widespread racial misrepresentations in Hollywood. These movies show a lack of accurate representation and a tendency to standardize multiple cultures, ranging from whitewashing to racial stereotyping. "Apocalypto" portrays Native Americans as uncivilized and ferocious, while "Avatar: The Last Airbender" whitewashes characters, reflecting the industry's reluctance to acknowledge and fairly represent diverse backgrounds.

6.2. Gender Misrepresentations: Movies such as "Suicide Squad," "Ghost in the Shell," and "Ex Machina" reveal gender biases in Hollywood. Female characters are often sexualized, objectified, and stripped of agency, catering primarily to a male audience and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. "Ex Machina" portrays the submissive Asian woman cliché with the character Kyoko, while "Ghost in the Shell" reduces Scarlett Johansson's character to a simplistic portrayal.

6.3. Economic Impact: The portrayal of race and gender in Hollywood has sparked numerous complaints and had significant economic impacts. Despite controversies, many films with prejudiced depictions perform well at the box office. For instance, "Suicide Squad" grossed \$749.2 million on a \$175 million budget, "The Last Airbender" made \$319.7 million on a \$150 million budget, and "Ghost in the Shell" earned \$169.8 million on a \$110 million budget despite facing allegations of racism. These films' commercial success shows that problematic representations can still attract large audiences and generate substantial revenue, raising ethical concerns about the industry's practices.

6.4. Implications and Recommendations: Hollywood's portrayal of race and gender shapes public perceptions and reinforces harmful biases. To address these issues, the industry should prioritize inclusiveness, diversity, and authentic representation in storytelling. By casting actors of various genders and races, avoiding racial prejudice, and presenting nuanced characters, Hollywood can create a more diverse and inclusive cinematic experience. Adopting these principles will help shape a fairer cultural narrative for all. This study highlights the prevalent misrepresentations of race and gender in Hollywood. The industry's tendency to objectify women, whitewash characters, and adhere to stereotypes underscores the need for a shift toward more authentic and inclusive narratives. Hollywood can play a crucial role in fostering a more just cultural narrative by addressing these misrepresentations and striving for greater diversity and representation. Producers, consumers, and filmmakers must work together to inspire change, challenge outdated norms, and create a cinematic environment that celebrates the richness and complexity of human experiences.

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