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SYSTEMIC RACISM: THE PORTRAYAL OF RACIAL INJUSTICE SEEN IN 'AMERICAN SON' (2019)

Abstrak

Masalah penelitian yang dibahas dalam esai ini adalah penggambaran rasisme sistemik dan ketidakadilan rasial dalam film tahun 2019 'American Son.' Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana film tersebut menggambarkan isu-isu ini, khususnya melalui lensa Critical Race Theory (CRT) yang diperkenalkan oleh Richard Delgado dan Jean Stefancic. Metodologi yang digunakan melibatkan analisis sastra mendetail dari adegan-adegan kunci, latar, dan tindakan karakter. Pendekatan ini memungkinkan meneliti mendalam terhadap struktur naratif dan dinamika karakter dalam film, menyoroti dampak konstan stereotip rasial dan bias institusional. Penelitian ini menggarisbawahi tekanan emosional dan psikologis dari rasisme sistemik yang digambarkan dalam film, menggambarkan sifat meresap dari prasangka rasial dan perlawanan terhadap ketidakadilan rasial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa 'American Son' secara efektif menampilkan bias-bias yang tertanam, mendorong penonton untuk merefleksikan sistem sosial dan hukum yang mempertahankan ketidaksetaraan rasial di Amerika Serikat. Film ini dipresentasikan sebagai teks budaya yang kuat yang tidak hanya menggambarkan perjuangan individu tetapi juga mencerminkan masalah sistemik yang lebih luas, memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap dialog berkelanjutan tentang ras dan keadilan dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Rasisme Sistemik, Ketidakadilan Rasial, Teori Ras Kritis, American Son

Abstract

The research problem addressed in this essay is the depiction of systemic racism and racial injustice in the 2019 film 'American Son.' The study aims to analyze how the film portrays these issues, particularly through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as introduced by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. The methodology involves a detailed literary analysis of key scenes, settings, and character actions. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of the film's narrative structure and character dynamics, highlighting the constant impact of racial stereotypes and institutional bias. The research underscores the emotional and psychological toll of systemic racism depicted in the film, illustrating the pervasive nature of racial prejudices and the resistance to racial injustice. Results indicate that 'American Son' effectively showcases these ingrained biases, urging viewers to reflect on the social and legal systems that perpetuate racial inequality in the United States. The film is presented as a powerful cultural text that not only portrays individual struggles but also reflects broader systemic issues, contributing significantly to the ongoing dialogue about race and justice in contemporary society.

Keywords: Systemic Racism, Racial Injustice, Critical Race Theory, American Son

INTRODUCTION

Background to systemic racism

The phrase 'systemic racism' has been used over the years to depict how racism is maintained through institutional power (Feagin, 2006). Besides personal attitudes or actions, systemic racism penetrates the systems and institutions making up our society. It is a concealed type of racism, not always plainly obvious, but somehow more destructive and harder to get rid of. Although the problem has been partly solved, its traces are still very much there in our daily

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lives, especially in the case of socially and economically poor people. Systemic racism can be observed in many parts of life, for instance, in the education system which gives different opportunities to different people, in the work world where the salaries of different races vary, and in the criminal justice system which judges individuals from a particular racial background on the heavier scale. We can observe even in our daily life how stereotypes about race and prejudices affect the way people communicate with each other.

Systemic racism towards Black people in America is entrenched in the country's history and still prevails in different fields of life. This type of racism is visible in the criminal justice system, where Black people are more likely to be arrested, targeted, and get harsher sentences compared to white people. Massey (2020), stated that the current racial segregation in housing hinders the chances of Black people to move and find a job which means that racial inequalities are still in the society and the Black people are in a harder position than the white people. Educational inequities are also widespread, with mostly Black schools often getting less funding, hence the lower quality of education and the limited options (Massey & Tannen, 2016). The healthcare system in the United States is plagued with disparities in access to care, quality of treatment, and health outcomes for Black Americans, which in turn results in a higher rate of chronic conditions and lower life expectancy. These systemic obstacles are intensified by the continuous discrimination in employment and financial services, thus, making the socioeconomic gaps even bigger.

To understand the background of systemic racism, it's important to explore its roots, its development throughout history, and its impact on contemporary society:

1) Historical Roots of Systemic Racism

Systemic racism has been closely linked to the history of the USA since colonial times (Higginbotham, 1998), and it was later included in the Constitution of the early independence period when slavery was quietly added (Waldstreicher, 2009). Practices such as transatlantic slavery and European colonization have formed the basis for racial superiority thinking that legitimizes oppression and discrimination against certain groups, especially those considered "racial minorities". In the United States, systemic racism has been embedded in institutions such as law, education, and the criminal justice system since colonial times, and the remnants of these structures are still felt today.

2) The Development of Systemic Racism in the Modern Context

Although the civil rights movement has brought significant changes in some aspects of life in many countries, systemic racism remains a relevant reality in contemporary society. The post-civil rights movement period has seen the emergence of new forms of systemic racism, including in the form of disparities in criminal justice systems, access to housing and employment, and education. We have noticed that White people usually think of Black Americans are associated with crime and incompetence. These views are the two main components of the stereotype in intergroup perception (Fiske, 2018). For example, the over-incarceration and harsh sentencing of black individuals in the US are concrete examples of systemic racism that still exists in the criminal justice system.

3) The Impact of Systemic Racism on Contemporary Society

The impact of systemic racism can be widely felt in various aspects of life. One of them is the psychological impact experienced by individuals who are victims of racism. Racial discrimination can cause chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as damage one's self-esteem and identity (William, Neighbors, and Jackson, 2003). In addition, systemic racism also results in structural inequalities in terms of access to resources and opportunities. For example, the income gap between racialized groups is still a significant problem in many countries.

4) The Fight Against Systemic Racism

Although systemic racism is a complex and intractable problem, there are many efforts to fight it. The power of social movement groups and their organizers is used to turn individual grievances and emotions into collective demands, thus, creating conditions for collective action (Van Troost, 2013). Social movements such as Black Lives Matter in the United States have been an important force in raising awareness about racial injustice and encouraging changes in public policy. In addition, education about systemic racism and appreciation of diversity has been an important focus in efforts to combat racial discrimination.

In this context, it's important to remember that systemic racism is not just a problem of certain individuals or groups, but an issue that concerns everyone in society. It relates to the systems that make up our social fabric, and to address it, we need to deeply evaluate existing structures and policies, and commit to substantial change.

A. Overview of the movie 'American Son' (2019)

The movie 'American Son' (2019) is a work of art that attempts to depict the complexities of systemic racism in the context of everyday life. Directed by Kenny Leon and based on a successful Broadway play, the movie highlights the conflicts and tensions that occur in a police district in Florida. Focusing on the experiences of a mother, Kendra, trying to locate her black son, the film illustrates how racism can profoundly affect the lives and relationships of individuals. The presence of a white police officer who comes to assist in the search for Kendra's son exposes the inequality in the treatment of individuals based on their racial background. Through the interactions between the main characters, the audience is exposed to the complex reality of Afro-American life in the United States, where fear, anger, and frustration lurk behind every corner.

B. Critical Race Theory (CRT)

The Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework will analyze the film 'American Son'. CRT is the tool that helps to analyze the film matrix, race, power relations, and existing injustices. The analysis concentrates on the story structure, character interactions, and dialogues to find the hidden racial themes and social messages in the film. There will be several scenes that will show racial tensions and conflicts, and these scenes will be chosen for a detailed analysis. These scenes will be the ones that are of the main character, Kendra Ellis-Connor, and the ones that will reflect the key interactions with this character. The scenes that talk about race, identity, and systemic injustice will be examined to learn how the film delivers its message on race relations in modern America. This way, the film's views on race will be identified and interpreted, and the effects of the commentary for the viewers will be revealed. To explore these themes in greater depth, the following problem formulation questions are proposed:

1. How does the film 'American Son' portray the concept of systemic racism through its characters and plot?
2. What ways do racial stereotypes affect the interpersonal relationships depicted in 'American Son'?
3. How can Critical Race Theory (CRT) be applied to analyze the major themes of racial injustice and resistance in 'American Son'?

In this essay, the researcher will analyze the depiction of racial injustice portrayed in the movie 'American Son' as a reflection of systemic racism that still exists in contemporary society. Through an in-depth analysis of the characters, plot, and themes revealed in the film, it will be shown how systemic racism creates an environment where black individuals continue to face significant obstacles in their struggle for equality and justice. By paying attention to the social, political, and cultural contexts that shape the film's narrative, it will be understood how the story of 'American Son' sheds important light on the harsh reality of systemic racism that remains rampant in the United States and around the world. It is hoped that a deeper understanding of the struggles and injustices experienced by black individuals in contemporary society can be found. Thus, steps towards real change and true equality can be taken.

METHOD

This study adopts qualitative research to explore how systemic racism and racial injustice are depicted in the film 'American Son' (2019). Qualitative research is chosen because it allows for a detailed exploration of individuals' experiences and perceptions, providing a nuanced understanding of complex social issues like systemic racism. Data collection involves closely analyzing the film's storyline, character interactions, and dialogue, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a guiding framework. The film serves as the primary source of data, with scenes selected based on their relevance to themes of race, identity, and systemic injustice portrayed in the story. These scenes are carefully studied to identify both obvious and subtle references to racial stereotypes, unequal treatment, and efforts to challenge racial discrimination.

To ensure thorough data collection, an analytical framework based on CRT principles is developed. This framework focuses on how power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and social injustices are represented and reinforced within the film's narrative structure. The analysis also examines the characters' motivations, interactions, and the broader societal context in which the film is set. This approach allows for a rigorous examination of how 'American Son' portrays systemic racism, providing insights into its widespread effects on individuals and societal institutions.

Data analysis techniques involve identifying recurring themes and patterns through systematic reading and discussion of the film's content. Themes related to racial discrimination, identity formation, and biases within institutions are identified through careful examination of scenes and characters. This qualitative analysis aims to uncover deeper meanings, contradictions, and social critiques embedded within the film's portrayal of racial dynamics. By examining multiple scenes and character perspectives, this study aims to construct a coherent narrative that sheds light on the multifaceted nature of systemic racism and the ways it is addressed within contemporary American society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Portrayal of Racial Injustice in 'American Son'

1) Examination of Character Dynamics and Interactions

In 'American Son,' the character dynamics are meticulously crafted to shed light on the pervasive racial injustices within American society. The film centers on Kendra Ellis-Connor, an African American mother, and her interactions with various characters, notably Officer Larkin and her estranged husband, Scott Connor. Kendra's interactions with Officer Larkin reveal a stark power imbalance and highlight the systemic prejudice that African Americans face daily. Officer Larkin's condescending attitude and implicit biases become apparent as he questions Kendra, often undermining her concerns and treating her with a lack of respect that hints at racial stereotypes.

Kendra's relationship with Scott, a white FBI agent, adds another layer of complexity. Their interactions reveal the strain that racial and cultural differences can place on an interracial relationship. Scott's initial disbelief in the severity of the situation contrasts sharply with Kendra's acute awareness of the dangers their son faces due to his race. The dynamic underscores the differing perceptions and lived realities between white and black Americans, even within the same family unit. The film uses these personal relationships to reflect broader societal tensions, illustrating how deeply ingrained racial biases can affect both public and private spheres.

2) Analysis of Racial Profiling and Police Brutality Depicted in the Film

'American Son' tackles the critical issues of racial profiling and police brutality head-on, presenting these themes as central to its narrative. Jamal's disappearance serves as a poignant catalyst for exploring these issues. Through Kendra's frantic attempts to uncover the truth about her son's whereabouts, the film exposes the routine nature of racial profiling and the resultant police brutality that African Americans often endure.

The film's story has a lot of events that show the racial biases in law enforcement systemically. Kendra's telling of Jamal's earlier meetings with the police where he was unfairly treated and questioned for no reason other than his race shows the dangerous path that young black men have to walk. The police officers' disregarding and sometimes hostile attitude towards Kendra further accentuates the absence of accountability and the prevalence of a culture that values black lives. The fact that Kendra feels the palpable fear and anxiety that she experiences is the symbol of the societal issue that the terror that is faced by African American parents in real life. This analysis not only emphasizes the immediate effects of racial profiling and police brutality but also shows the long-term psychological damage to black communities.

3) Exploration of Institutional Racism within the Criminal Justice System

The film extends its critique to the broader criminal justice system, exposing the deep-seated institutional racism that hinders justice for African Americans. The indifferent and often hostile treatment Kendra receives at the police station is a stark representation of how systemic biases manifest in institutional practices. From the outset, Kendra's legitimate concerns are met

with skepticism and condescension, illustrating a profound lack of empathy and understanding within the system.

The procedural obstacles Kendra faces and the dismissive attitudes of the police officers serve to highlight the systemic barriers that African Americans encounter. The film suggests that these are not isolated incidents but are indicative of a deeply flawed system that perpetuates racial inequalities. The portrayal of the police officers, who are quick to jump to conclusions and slow to act with compassion, reflects a broader institutional failure to protect and serve all citizens equally. This depiction calls for an urgent need to address and reform the systemic structures that enable such discrimination, advocating for a justice system that truly serves all communities without bias.

4) Consideration of How Race Intersects with Gender and Class in the Film's Portrayal of Injustice

'American Son' provides a nuanced exploration of intersectionality, examining how race intersects with gender and class to shape the experiences of injustice. Kendra Ellis-Connor, as an African American woman, navigates a complex web of discrimination that is compounded by her gender and socioeconomic status. Her portrayal highlights the unique challenges faced by black women, who often encounter both racial and gender biases.

Kendra's interactions with the police reveal the dual discrimination she faces and her concerns are not only dismissed because of her race but also because she is a woman. This dual layer of bias reflects the broader societal tendency to marginalize the voices of black women, who are often seen as less credible or authoritative. Additionally, the film touches upon class issues, particularly through the depiction of Kendra and Scott's differing socioeconomic backgrounds. Scott's higher socioeconomic status and his position as an FBI agent contrasts with Kendra's more vulnerable position, highlighting how class differences can further complicate and exacerbate issues of racial injustice.

5) Impact of Media Representation on Public Perception of Racial Injustice

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of racial injustice, and 'American Son' contributes significantly to this discourse. Films and television shows that accurately portray the struggles and systemic barriers faced by African Americans can foster greater awareness and empathy among audiences. 'American Son' leverages its narrative to highlight the emotional and psychological toll of racial discrimination, making the abstract concepts of systemic racism more tangible and relatable to viewers.

Such representations can influence public opinion and potentially drive social change. By depicting the harsh realities of racial profiling and police brutality, the film encourages viewers to critically examine their own biases and the societal structures that perpetuate injustice. This kind of media exposure can galvanize support for movements like Black Lives Matter and drive public demand for legislative and institutional reforms. Additionally, it can spark important conversations about race and justice, prompting individuals to become more informed and engaged in the fight against racial inequality.

6) Critical Reception and Discourse Surrounding 'American Son'

The 'American Son' has received various responses from critics and audiences, which proves its complicated and challenging treatment of racial issues. Numerous critics have acclaimed the film for its uncensored and strong representation of racial injustice, remarking on its capability to depict the emotional intensity and urgency of the problem. The performances, in particular, that of Kerry Washington as Kendra, have been praised for their realness and depth, thus, making the difficult experiences of the characters come to life.

Nevertheless, the film has been criticized too. Some reviewers have mentioned the serious attitude and the sometimes-instructional nature of its dialogue, which they said is not subtle at all but rather it is dogmatic. Some others have criticized the film for its dependence on commonly used tropes and its somewhat restricted analysis of the problems it raises. Although these criticisms exist, the film has led to important discussions on race, policing, and justice which are still ongoing in society and hence have reflected the divided nature of the public opinion on these important issues.

B. Detailed Analysis

1) Dialogue and Scripts

Key dialogues throughout the film reflect both racial prejudices and acts of resistance. For instance, Kendra's pointed questions and emotional appeals challenge the officers' biases and highlight the systemic nature of racism. These dialogues serve as a form of storytelling, a critical element in CRT, which emphasizes the power of narrative in revealing and combating racial injustices. By articulating her personal experiences and emotions, Kendra provides a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, exposing the fallacies and harms of racial stereotypes.

2) Character Actions and Reactions

The actions and reactions of the main characters, particularly Kendra and Scott, are deeply influenced by their racial identities and experiences. Kendra's persistent efforts to find her son despite systemic obstacles illustrate the resilience and strength often required of marginalized individuals. Scott's initially dismissive attitude and eventual confrontation with his own biases reflect the internal conflicts faced by those complicit in upholding systemic racism. CRT emphasizes the role of individual actions in perpetuating or challenging racial hierarchies, and these character dynamics underscore the personal and societal impacts of racism.

3) Setting and Symbolism

The confined setting of the police station serves as a microcosm of societal racism, symbolizing the broader structures of oppression that African Americans face. The sterile, controlled environment of the interrogation room symbolizes the cold, impersonal nature of institutional racism. The police station, as a setting, reinforces the narrative of racial injustice by highlighting the power imbalances and systemic barriers that Kendra must navigate. Symbolic elements, such as the stark lighting and confined spaces, enhance the film's commentary on racial dynamics, illustrating how physical and symbolic spaces are used to maintain racial hierarchies.

C. Key Scenes Analysis

1) Scene 1: Opening Interrogation

In the opening scene, Kendra Ellis-Connor's interaction with Officer Larkin is rife with racial biases and power dynamics. The setting, a stark and intimidating interrogation room, immediately establishes a power imbalance. Officer Larkin's body language and tone are authoritative and dismissive, subtly reflecting societal prejudices against African American individuals. According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's Critical Race Theory (CRT), this scene exemplifies the concept of interest convergence, where the benefits of upholding racial hierarchies align with the interests of those in power. Officer Larkin's conduct underscores the systemic nature of racial bias, wherein the institution protects its interests by maintaining the status quo of racial dominance.

2) Scene 2: Confrontation with Lieutenant John Stokes

The confrontation between Kendra and Lieutenant John Stokes highlights the systemic barriers that Kendra faces. Throughout their interaction, Stokes' body language and dialogue are indicative of deep-seated racial biases. Stokes' condescending tone and dismissive attitude towards Kendra's concerns reflect the social construction of race, a key tenet of CRT. This theory posits that race is a socially constructed concept used to perpetuate inequality and privilege. Stokes' behavior exemplifies how systemic racism is maintained through institutional practices that devalue and marginalize African American voices, further entrenching societal inequities.

3) Scene 3: Revelation of Jamal's Profile

The revelation of Jamal's profile through the conversation between Kendra and Scott starkly portrays racial profiling and stereotyping. Scott's remarks about Jamal reflect ingrained stereotypes about African American youth being predisposed to criminal behavior. This scene serves as a poignant example of the social construction of race and its implications. Scott's assumptions about Jamal are not based on his actions but rather on societal stereotypes about black masculinity and criminality. This reinforces CRT's assertion that race is a social construct used to justify unequal treatment and maintain existing power structures.

4) Scene 4: The Climactic Ending

The film's conclusion underscores the tragic consequences of systemic racism and its emotional toll on the characters. The climax, which reveals the ultimate fate of Jamal, forces the audience to confront the harsh realities of racial injustice. This scene vividly illustrates the concept of interest convergence, showing how societal systems prioritize the interests of the dominant group at the expense of marginalized communities. The emotional impact on Kendra and her family underscores the devastating personal effects of institutional racism, aligning with CRT's emphasis on the pervasive and deeply ingrained nature of racial inequalities.

CONCLUSION

'American Son' successfully shows systemic racism through the combination of narrative and cinematic techniques, thus creating a very immersive and compelling experience that brings to the fore the racial tensions and prejudices that are part of the social fabric in America. The film's real-time setting at a police station generates an intense atmosphere that highlights the instant and the overall character of racial profiling and discrimination. The film through the terrifying experiences of the protagonists Kendra Ellis-Connor and her estranged husband Scott, vividly portrays the fear, frustration, and helplessness that the African American families face when they are dealing with the biases of the criminal justice system.

Through the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in 'American Son,' we can see the deeper meanings of these images. The CRT focuses on the social constructions of race and the deep-rooted nature of racism within the legal and societal systems which is in line with the movie's portrayal of systemic injustice. The analysis shows how the characters' interaction with the police, which is expressed by the officers' condescension and suspicion towards Kendra and her son, is a reflection of the general societal patterns of racial inequality and bias. This view points out the film's function in the depiction of the life situations of the minority groups and the roadblocks they encounter in their day-to-day life. The story, dialogue, and character interactions are all based on the themes of racial tension and prejudice. Thus, 'American Son' is a poignant treatment of systemic racism. Implications for the comprehension of racial injustice were considered.

The presentation of systemic racism in 'American Son' shows the essential role of the media in educating the audience about racial injustice. Films like this are good at raising awareness, making people think, and creating empathy among the audience. Through the drama of the various and sometimes painful experiences of racial minorities, the media can be the catalyst of the breakdown of the apathy and ignorance, thus, making the viewers face the uncomfortable truths about the society. The movie's unfiltered and brutal portrayal of the difficulties that African Americans have to face while dealing with law enforcement makes the viewers doubt their perceptions and biases.

Moreover, the capability of films like 'American Son' to prompt discussion and transformation is great. Through exposure to the problems of racial discrimination, these stories can trigger major discussions about race and equity, individual reflection, and social conversations. The emotional effect of cinema can be the reason why the viewers will be encouraged to go for the policy changes and the movements that fight against systemic racism. The physical feelings generated by these films can make individuals more involved in the problems of racial justice and do something in their communities.

The consequences go beyond the level of individual awareness to the change of society. The films that reveal systemic racism can affect public opinion and, in the end, policy. They can contribute to the change of society's norms and help to create an atmosphere where racial equality is in focus. In this, media can make marginalized voices and experiences heard, thus, becoming a vehicle of cultural change in the direction of fairness and justice.

Recommendations

Further study and criticism of racial injustice in the various forms of media are necessary. Since society is still tackling racial issues, it is crucial to continue the dialogue that has been started by films such as 'American Son.' Media creators, critics, and audiences should be aware of the representations of race and racism in entertainment and work on it. It is by this constant monitoring and involvement that we can achieve the transformation we wish to see.

The Critical Race Theory is a useful tool for the analysis and solution of systemic racism. Through the lens of CRT, the media analysts and the activists can discover the hidden levels of meaning and impact, which in turn, will lead to a more complete picture of the racial dynamics. This technique not only improves the criticism of media portrayals but also gives society the means to fight racial injustice effectively. The acceptance of CRT in the academic and public spheres is the key to the advancement of the achievement of a more equal and just society.

In summary, 'American Son' is strong proof that systemic racism is still a major issue in today's America. Its touching story and strong characters are a reflection of the racial injustices that are found everywhere in our society. The application of Critical Race Theory to its analysis makes our understanding of the issues better and makes us realize the importance of media in the fight against racial injustice. As we keep on interacting and analyzing the media that shows race, we should also dedicate ourselves to using these findings to motivate action and to start the transformation. The struggle against systemic racism is still ongoing, and it is only by consistent and knowledge-based efforts that we can dream of having racial equality.

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