

Racial Harassment Representation in "12 Years a Slave" Film

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Abstract: This study examines the representation of racial harassment in the film "12 Years a Slave." The research aims to: (1) describe the forms of racial harassment experienced in the film, and (2) analyze the reasons behind these experiences. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method, the study draws on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data includes the film's script and the film itself, while secondary sources comprise journal articles, books, and previous research. Data collection was conducted through note-taking, focusing on instances of racial harassment depicted in the film. The analysis employs the theoretical framework of Chen & Kleiner (1999). The findings reveal three distinct forms of racial harassment from a total of 13 instances identified: physical attacks, verbal abuse, and intimidation based on race or color. Furthermore, the research identifies that the historical context of racism in America and the legal requirement for Black individuals to possess documentation proving their freedom contribute to these experiences of racial harassment. The study concludes by discussing the implications of these findings in understanding racial harassment as portrayed in "12 Years a Slave," highlighting the significance of the Chen & Kleiner framework in analyzing such representations.

Keywords: Chen & Kleiner Theory, Film Analysis, 12 Years A Slave, Racial Harassment, Verbal Abuse

INTRODUCTION

Racial harassment remains a pervasive issue in contemporary society, manifesting in various forms across different cultures and contexts. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (*Hate Crimes | Facts and Statistics*, 2024), hate crimes motivated by race or ethnicity have seen a significant increase, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive studies on this topic. The film "12 Years a Slave," directed by Steve McQueen, serves as a poignant representation of the historical and ongoing struggles against racial discrimination. This film not only depicts the brutal realities of slavery but also reflects the systemic racism that persists today (Mueller & Issa, 2016). Understanding these representations is crucial for addressing the broader implications of racial harassment in modern society.

Within the context of "12 Years a Slave," the film illustrates various forms of racial harassment experienced by the protagonist, Solomon Northup. This research aims to explore the specific manifestations of racial harassment depicted in the film, including physical attacks, verbal abuse, and intimidation based on race (Nabila, 2023; Taufik & Hasniar, 2016). By analyzing these forms, we can gain insights into the psychological and social impacts of such harassment on individuals and communities.

Previous studies have examined the representation of race in film, noting that visual media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of racial issues. For instance, the portrayal of African American experiences in historical films, emphasizing the importance



of accurate representation in combating stereotypes (Young, 2006). These findings underscore the necessity of examining "12 Years a Slave" as a critical text that contributes to the discourse on racial harassment.

Additional research on the emotional and psychological effects of racial harassment as has been depicted in cinematic narratives (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). This study found that films like "12 Years a Slave" not only serve as historical accounts but also evoke empathy and awareness among viewers regarding the realities of racial discrimination. Such insights are vital for understanding the broader societal implications of racial harassment.

Moreover, the intersection of race and trauma in film states that narratives of racial harassment can facilitate discussions about healing and justice (Chioneso et al., 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant to "12 Years a Slave," as it provides a framework for analyzing the film's impact on contemporary discussions about race and justice.

Collectively, these studies highlight the critical need for further exploration of racial harassment in film, particularly in the context of historical narratives. Despite the existing literature, there remains a gap in understanding the specific forms and reasons for racial harassment as depicted in "12 Years a Slave." This research seeks to address this gap by formulating the following research questions: What forms of racial harassment are represented in "12 Years a Slave"? What underlying reasons contribute to these experiences of racial harassment?

This research makes significant contributions to the understanding of racial harassment as depicted in film, particularly through the lens of "12 Years a Slave." By systematically analyzing the various forms of racial harassment experienced by Solomon Northup, the study not only highlights the historical context of these experiences but also connects them to contemporary discussions about race and discrimination. The findings underscore the importance of accurate representation in visual media, demonstrating how films can evoke empathy and raise awareness about systemic issues. Additionally, this research fills a critical gap in the existing literature by providing a nuanced examination of the specific manifestations and underlying reasons for racial harassment, thereby enriching the discourse on racial justice. Ultimately, the study advocates for the role of cinematic narratives in fostering meaningful conversations about race, justice, and healing, emphasizing their potential to influence public perception and promote social change.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the representation of racial harassment in the film "12 Years a Slave." The research focuses on both primary and

secondary data sources. The research design is based on a descriptive qualitative approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the film's content, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the various forms of racial harassment depicted. The primary data source consists of the film "12 Years a Slave" and its script, which provide direct insights into the narrative and character experiences. Secondary data sources include journal articles, books, and previous research that contextualize the findings within broader discussions of racial harassment.

The analysis is conducted in a qualitative research setting, focusing on the film's content as a historical representation of racial issues in America. The research utilizes purposive sampling to select specific scenes and dialogues that exemplify racial harassment, ensuring a comprehensive examination of the film's portrayal of this issue. The primary instrument for data collection is note-taking, which involves documenting instances of racial harassment as they appear in the film. This method allows for a systematic analysis of the film's content. Data is collected through repeated viewings of the film, followed by thematic analysis using the theoretical framework established by Chen and Kleiner (1999). This framework aids in categorizing the forms of racial harassment and understanding their implications within the narrative.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of racial harassment as depicted in the film "12 Years a Slave." The research focused on identifying the forms of racial harassment experienced by characters in the film and understanding the historical context that contributes to these experiences. The results are organized into two main categories: the forms of racial harassment and the reasons behind these experiences.

The analysis identified three primary forms of racial harassment based on 13 data points from the film, which included 7 conversations and 5 narrations. The framework provided by Chen & Kleiner was utilized to categorize these forms. The following table summarizes the identified forms of racial harassment along with specific examples from the film:

Table. 1. Form of Racial Harassment

Forms	Description	Frequency
Physical Attacks	Instances of violence or physical harm inflicted on individuals based on their race.	5
Verbal Abuse	Use of derogatory language, slurs, or insults directed at individuals due to their race.	4
Intimidation	Actions or threats intended to instill fear or coerce individuals based on their race or color.	4

Reasons for Racial Harassment in "12 Years a Slave"

The second research question explores the underlying reasons for the racial harassment depicted in the film. The historical context of racism in America, which dates back to the 16th century, plays a crucial role. The enslavement of black citizens necessitated that they possess legal documentation proving their freedom to avoid being enslaved again. This historical backdrop is supported by Fuchs (2006), who discusses the systemic nature of racism in American society.

The film's narrative illustrates the severe impact of racial harassment on the lives of slaves, who faced constant torture and dehumanization. Historical statistics indicate a significant increase in the number of slavery victims from 1800 to 1900, particularly in the southern United States, where the demand for labor was high (*Slavery in the United States – EH.Net*, n.d.).

The following points summarize the reasons for racial harassment as depicted in the film: *Systemic Racism*: The film portrays a society where racism is institutionalized, and black individuals are viewed as property rather than human beings. This systemic racism is evident in the legal and social structures that support slavery. *Economic Exploitation*: The economic motivations behind slavery are highlighted throughout the film. The characters who perpetrate racial harassment do so to maintain control over their labor force and maximize profits. *Cultural Dehumanization*: The film illustrates how cultural narratives dehumanize black individuals, portraying them as inferior and justifying their mistreatment. This cultural context fosters an environment where racial harassment is normalized. *Fear and Control*: The use of violence and intimidation serves to instill fear among the enslaved population, ensuring compliance and obedience. The film effectively demonstrates how fear is used as a tool of control.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this research align with existing literature on racial harassment and discrimination, reinforcing the notion that such behaviors are deeply rooted in historical and societal contexts. The results indicate that the forms of racial harassment identified in

"12 Years a Slave" are not only reflective of the film's narrative but also resonate with contemporary issues of racism.

The forms of racial harassment identified in this study correlate with previous research which discusses the pervasive nature of racism and its manifestations in various forms (Bowling, 1993). The alignment of these findings with established theories underscores the relevance of historical context in understanding racial dynamics. The historical analysis provided in the results section highlights the long-standing nature of racism in America. This context is crucial for understanding the motivations behind the racial harassment depicted in the film. The systemic oppression faced by black individuals, as illustrated in the film, is a reflection of broader societal issues that persist today.

The application of Chen & Kleiner's theory to analyze the forms of racial harassment offers a structured approach to understanding these behaviors. This theoretical framework not only aids in categorizing the harassment but also provides insights into the psychological and social implications of such actions. The findings effectively address the research questions posed at the outset. The identification of specific forms of racial harassment and the exploration of their historical roots provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

In summary, the analysis reveals that racial harassment, as depicted in "12 Years a Slave," is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical oppression. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social ramifications of such harassment. Contemporary Relevance: The themes of racial harassment depicted in the film remain relevant today, as issues of systemic racism and discrimination continue to affect marginalized communities. The film serves as a powerful reminder of the need for ongoing dialogue and action to address these issues. The film employs various cinematic techniques to convey the brutality of racial harassment, including close-up shots of characters' expressions during moments of violence and the use of sound to amplify the emotional impact of scenes. These techniques enhance the viewer's understanding of the characters' experiences and the pervasive nature of racial harassment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlights the significant forms of racial harassment depicted in "12 Years a Slave" and the historical context that informs these experiences. The study confirms that racial harassment manifests in various forms, including physical attacks, verbal abuse, and intimidation, all of which have detrimental effects on individuals and communities.

The findings address the research questions by illustrating how the historical legacy of racism in America contributes to the experiences of racial harassment portrayed in the film. The analysis underscores the importance of understanding these issues within their historical context to fully grasp their implications. However, this research is not without limitations. The focus on a single film may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand on this study by exploring additional films or media representations of racial harassment to provide a broader perspective. In light of these findings, further research is recommended to investigate the ongoing impact of racial harassment in contemporary society and to explore effective strategies for addressing and mitigating these issues. The insights gained from this study can inform discussions on racial justice and contribute to efforts aimed at fostering a more equitable society. Future studies could compare the representation of racial harassment in "12 Years a Slave" with other films or media that address similar themes, providing a broader understanding of how racial harassment is portrayed across different contexts.

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