

DEPICTION OF BLACK FEMINISM IN *SET IT OFF* FILM (1996)

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ABSTRACT

Stories in films are often based on social realities in people's lives, embedding messages behind them. Each film is packed with unique characters, events and issues that reflect various aspects of life from a particular perspective. This study aims to identify examples of the principles of black feminism in the main characters and also to analyze how economic and racial factors influence the character's decision in confronting existing injustices depicted in the film "Set It Off" (1996).

The method used by the researcher is a qualitative research method. Data collection is conducted to sort and understand the research topic by using data from scenes, dialogues, words, and phrases obtained from the film. The main theories used in this research are Critical Race theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Feminist Economics theory by Marilyn Waring.

The findings of this study reveal that the film "Set It Off" encompasses principles of black feminism such as racial discrimination, sexism and social class which are portrayed by each main character in the film. This study also depicts the influence of economic and racial factors on the character's decisions in confronting existing injustices.

Keywords: *Black Feminism, CRT, Feminist Economic, "Set It Off"*

I. INTRODUCTION

Film is one of the most popular forms of art and communication media in today's society. It serves as a medium for conveying messages to the audience and

a source of entertainment, social commentary, or even education. According to Danesi (2011), as a mass medium, the film possesses aesthetic power due to its ability to present dialogue, music, scenery, and actions simultaneously in a visual and narrative manner. The stories in films, whether explicit or implicit, often draw from the social realities of people's lives and incorporate ideological elements, presented in an engaging way to offer new insights to the viewers (Mudjiono, 2011). Films can influence society by delivering hidden messages. Within various social segments, films can shape perspectives, behavior, and understanding of the world around us. They continuously capture evolving social realities and project them onto the screen (Sobur, 2004). This blend of social reality and reconstructed reality presented in film is referred to as representation.

Representation in film refers to how a specific topic, concept, or reality is depicted and presented, including how characters, events, places, or specific concepts are shown to the audience through the visual, narrative, and artistic elements in the medium of film. In this regard, Turner (2018) suggests that when film acts as a representation of society's reality, it not only transfers reality to the screen but also actively shapes and reimagines that reality with the codes, conventions, and ideologies within its culture. Representation can significantly influence how we view, understand, and perceive various aspects of life from a particular perspective.

The United States is one of the countries with significant influence in the film industry, often referred to as Hollywood (Silver, 2007). Hollywood is an area in Los Angeles, California, widely recognized as the epicenter of the entertainment

industry, particularly in film production. Hollywood films not only provide entertainment but also disseminate American cultural values, leading to the globalization of tastes and preferences. The film industry in the United States has continuously evolved with changing trends over time. It has embraced technological advancements such as CGI and recognized the importance of representation. There has also been a significant shift with the rise of streaming platforms. Many American films now emphasize inclusivity, adapt stories from other media like books, video games, or comics, and explore various themes, including social issues. One social issue that has been a focus in American filmmaking is black feminism.

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement advocating for gender equality and women's rights in various aspects of life, including voting rights, workplace equality, and the elimination of gender discrimination (Ilaa, 2021). Meanwhile, black feminism is a specific branch of the feminist movement that emphasizes the intersectionality of race and gender, focusing on Black women. Black women face challenges and struggles that cannot be fully explained by a general feminist perspective. This movement strives to address gender inequality and confront the racism experienced by Black women while attempting to understand how gender and race discrimination intersect in their experiences.

Black feminism emerged as a response to the lack of understanding and attention within the general feminist movement, which often ignored racialised issues. According to Hooks, black women see black feminism as a logical political effort to combat the same oppression experienced by all women of colour (Hooks,

2015). In her book, “Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism” (2015), Hooks questioned the preferential treatment of white women compared to women of colour. This, in turn, led to various resistance for black women's justice such as the formation of the National Black Feminist Organisation (NBFO). This organisation was formed to provide a voice for black women and fight for equality and the elimination of racial and gender discrimination that they face in various fields of life.

Black feminism in America today has been steadily growing over the years. Today, the black women's social justice movement is one of the most impactful movements for marginalized communities such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. Fighting for justice in today's modern world can be presented in various forms of media. In America, many movies are made to show the struggles of certain groups against injustice and inequality. Black feminism in American cinema raises unique issues faced by black women and voicing their aspirations without disregarding the differences in the diverse American society (Collins, 2022). One of the producers and directors who often portray black people in his films is Felix Gary Gray. He has produced many films that not only represent the social circumstances experienced by black people but also provide implicit and explicit messages to the audience, one of which is the film “Set It Off” (1996).

The film “*Set It Off*” is a 1996 American heist crime action film that narrates the story of four African-American women—Stony, Frankie, Cleo, and T.T.—who turn to a life of crime by robbing a bank as a last-ditch effort in response to economic hardship and social injustice. “*Set It Off*” addresses several issues related

to gender, race, and the lives of Black women in the United States. The film portrays the experiences of economically disadvantaged Black women in urban environments and explores social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and violence.

In the film industry, awards are a form of recognition for achievements in filmmaking. "*Set It Off*" received nominations and awards at various ceremonies. It won several awards at the Acapulco Black Film Festival, including Best Actress for Queen Latifah and Best Director for F. Gary Gray. Additionally, the film won the Best Soundtrack award (Deseret News, 1997). While it may not have received major awards like the Oscars or Golden Globe, "*Set It Off*" is still recognized in awards that focus on films with representation and influence in the black community.

The film provides a clear depiction of how Black women experience double discrimination within society. This issue significantly motivates them to challenge discrimination, giving rise to the Black feminist movement. This study aims to identify the principles of Black feminism in the main characters and analyze how economic and racial factors influence their decisions in confronting existing injustices portrayed in "*Set It Off*". In this study, the researcher focuses on the experiences and struggles of the main character in facing discrimination that reflect the principles of Black feminism, and how these factors of inequality shape their experiences and motivate them to make extreme decisions to fight against an unjust system.

II. METHOD

The researcher employs a qualitative method to understand and explore the meanings associated with social phenomena, emphasizing descriptive data in written or spoken form for each observed variable. This research uses the 1996 film *Set It Off*, directed by F. Gary Gray, as the primary data source. The film depicts the struggle of four African-American women facing discrimination and ultimately deciding to rob a bank to overcome their financial difficulties. The research employs data collection techniques involving observation, note-taking, and audio-visual analysis of the film. The researcher carefully observes the film, paying close attention to the dialogue, audio, and scenes, multiple times, utilizing the selected theoretical frameworks. After collecting the data, the researcher analyzes it by reading and identifying the entire script and scenes, as well as analyzing the meanings related to the research topic. The research was conducted using theoretical tools from critical race theory and feminist economics theory, and concluded by systematically answering the research questions and drawing conclusions.

Critical Race Theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is used by the researcher to examine and analyze the representations that reflect the principles of Black feminism, which create unique experiences of oppression for Black women. Crenshaw analyzes how race, gender, and citizenship shape violence against women, illustrating how the construction of intersectionality plays into the activism of African-American women's social movements (Crenshaw, 1991). In her book *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995),

Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes the central role of intersectional feminism in Critical Race Theory (CRT). This concept highlights the critical understanding that social identities, particularly race and gender, are not mutually exclusive but are interrelated and mutually shaping, influencing each individual's unique experience of oppression.

Feminist Economics Theory by Marilyn Waring (1990) is employed by the researcher to understand the influence of economic and racial factors on the characters' decision-making, as well as how the characters respond to and interact with existing inequalities. This theory offers a critical perspective on how traditional economics neglects women's contributions and its effects on gender injustice. In her work *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (1988), Waring reveals how economic policies and national statistics often ignore or minimize women's economic roles.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Principles of Black Feminism in the Main Character

The main characters in the film *Set It Off*, four African-American women, demonstrate the principles of Black feminism. They face multiple layers of discrimination due to their race and gender. They struggle against an oppressive economic system shaped not only by racism but also by sexism, which limits their opportunities. Their identities as Black women influence every aspect of their lives, from employment to interactions with law enforcement. Additionally, their solidarity as Black women in facing these pressures reflects the essence of Black

feminism. This demonstrates that the main characters exhibit strength in resisting injustice and the oppressive systems that marginalize them while affirming their identities as Black women.

B. How Economic and Racial Factors Influence the Character's Decisions in Confronting Existing Injustices

In the film, four African-American women find themselves trapped in economic hardship and social injustice. The character Frankie experiences inequity in her role as a bank teller when she is unjustly terminated solely because she knew the perpetrators involved in a robbery at her workplace. Despite not being involved and even becoming a victim during the incident, the bank deemed her untrustworthy. This unfair dismissal leaves Frankie feeling deeply wronged, as she perceives that her years of service have been disregarded. Furthermore, this abrupt termination makes it difficult for Frankie to find another job. Additionally, the character T.T. experiences arbitrary salary deductions due to a single mistake. This reflects the harsh reality that Black women often face unjust treatment and have their voices ignored. In the film, T.T. juggles the dual roles of breadwinner and homemaker, a portrayal that aligns with Waring's argument that women's work, whether paid or unpaid, is frequently undervalued and inadequately recognized within the economic system.

Racial discrimination and unjust economic system serve as the primary catalyst for characters to undertake and decide on extreme actions. The numerous events that transpire lead them to despair over their own future. Confronted with

extremely limited choices, they eventually resort to extreme measures, such as robbing banks. They perceive that the system has failed them, thus justifying their actions of robbing banks as a form of resistance. This illustrates how the pervasive injustice they experience drives them into a desperate and perilous situation as a final effort to confront the inequity.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this research, film *Set It Off* explores and analyzes data to address two research questions: the principles of Black feminism in the main characters and how economic and racial factors influence the character's decisions in confronting existing injustices. Through the data obtained using Critical Race Theory by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), the four main Black female characters as various forms of social identity, such as race, gender, and class, interact and create unique forms of discrimination. They face various forms of racism, unjust treatment by law enforcement, workplace discrimination, and societal inequalities. Additionally, they encounter gender-based discrimination, including child-rearing challenges and sexual harassment. Based on Feminist Economic Theory by Marilyn Waring (1990), it can be stated that economic and racial factors have a great influence on character decision-making. The economic difficulties and injustices experienced by the four main characters in this film, such as unilateral dismissal and salary cuts, make them feel desperate and forced to make extreme decisions. The racial factor in this film is evidenced by the racial discrimination experienced by the four main characters such as dismissal based on racial assumptions and a system that treats them unfairly because of their racial background. These factors show how the

existing injustice pushes them into criminal acts as a form of resistance against the system that has exploited them and shows the complexity of the interplay between economic, racial, and gender issues in their lives.

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