

Racism and classism in the film *Emancipation* (2022): A socio-political analysis

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Abstract

Slavery was an integral part of the history of the founding of the United States. This phenomenon gave rise to views of racism and classism that disregarded the essence and dignity of human beings who were not considered human. This study aims to uncover the practices of racism and classism depicted in the film *Emancipation* (2022). This article employs a descriptive qualitative method with a behavioral approach within a socio-political framework. Data collection techniques were conducted by watching and analyzing the film *Emancipation* (2022). The data obtained consisted of facts, descriptions, and information about the issues depicted in the film *Emancipation* (2022). The results of this study indicate that racism and classism during the era of slavery were complex phenomena that were interrelated. The physical violence and dehumanization depicted in the film align with the definition of slavery, which emphasizes the use of power and violence to maintain control and exploitation.

Keywords: *Racism; Classism; Slavery; Socio-Politics*

Introduction

Slavery is an act that is ingrained in human history. It occurs because of the classification of certain classes in social interactions. This phenomenon fosters the ideology of racism by disregarding the essence and dignity of humans who are not considered human. According to Bales, slavery is the control of one person (slave) by another (slave owner). This control transfers rights, freedom of movement, access to the body, labor, and the products and benefits thereof to the slave owner. This exploitation is supported and carried out through violence and threats. The primary purpose of this control is economic exploitation, but it may also include sexual use or psychological benefits (Rota, 2020).

Historically, slavery has existed since the Mesopotamian and Sumerian civilizations located in the Iraq/Iran region between 6000-2000 BC. In the Code of Hammurabi from 1754 BC, translated by L.W. King, it states,

“if someone takes a male or female slave from palace, or a male or female slave from a freed

person, outside the city gates, they shall be put to death” (Vincent, 2007).

Furthermore, slavery was also present in Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilizations, where their economies depended on slavery. Moving into the Modern era, slavery underwent an evolution due to a decrease in the number of contract slave workers, necessitating the discovery of new labor sources. This change gave rise to the slave trade in Africa, where the Portuguese engaged in the buying and selling of slaves. At that time, the slave trade involving the indigenous peoples of Africa was still relatively small in scale. Eventually, during the 14th to 17th centuries, Spain and Portugal pioneered and dominated the African slave trade (The History Press, 2018).

Racism is the belief or ideology that all members of each racial group have characteristics or abilities specific to that race, particularly to distinguish them as superior or inferior to other groups (Nurhadi & Assidiqi, 2019). This action is also related to what is known as classism. Classism itself is discrimination based on an individual's identified social class position (Parker-Barnes et al.,

2023). Both issues can be found in the film *Emancipation* (2022). The film tells the story of a black man who was enslaved to work on a railroad construction project in the United States. The plot of the film is set in 1863. Slavery in the United States first entered through European traditions, specifically the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Before employing African slaves in America, Europeans used Native Americans as slaves on plantations and in mines (Mutawally, 2021). In this case, England played a significant role in the arrival of African slaves in the United States. There, British colonies brought African slaves to Virginia in 1619 (Jones et al., 2023).

In an effort to explain the phenomena of racism and classism in the film *Emancipation* (2022), the study adopts a behavioral approach within a socio-political context. This is because racism is embedded in American society, informing institutions and social structures and how Black people live their daily lives. On the other hand, this approach is also related to power and domination. Groups in power tend to define race and uphold norms that benefit them, often dominating certain groups. In this film, the perpetrators of racism are not only white people, but also black people who participate in power and domination.

Another study relevant to racism and classism against Africans in America in films, for example, Fatikha and Atina (2022) analyzed the film “Till” (2022), in which racial discrimination often occurs in the daily lives of Africans in America. Such discrimination leaves deep wounds, such as trauma. However, on the other hand, it encourages people to stand up against racism (Fatikha & Atinia, 2022). In addition, Ganggai (2022) analyzes racism against black people depicted in the film “Hidden Figures” (2022) (Ganggai, 2022). These studies reveal the deeper meaning of a film. Thus, there has been no previous study discussing racism in the film “*Emancipation*” (2022).

Therefore, the author proposes the title “Racism and Classism in the Film ‘*Emancipation*’ (2022)” from a socio-political perspective by examining and analyzing forms of discrimination based on the phenomena of racism and classism in the lives of Black people in America. This study aims

to reveal acts of racism in the film “*Emancipation*” (2022) and its relationship with socio-politics.

Methods

This article uses qualitative descriptive research methods to analyze acts of racism related to slavery in the film *Emancipation* (2022). According to Yuliani, qualitative descriptive research is generally used in social phenomenology. It focuses on answering questions such as who, what, where, and how an event or experience occurred, and ultimately examines it in depth to find patterns that emerge from the event (Kim et al., 2017). In summary, qualitative descriptive research is a research method that uses a simple qualitative approach with an inductive process. This means that qualitative descriptive research begins with an explanatory process or event, which ultimately leads to a generalization that is the essence of that process or event (Yuliani, 2017).

The data obtained consists of facts, descriptions, and information about the issues depicted in the film *Emancipation* (2022). This data is useful for answering the research questions posed in this article. The data sources for this study consist of statements in the film related to the issues, books, and scientific articles related to the issues. Data collection techniques were carried out by watching and carefully observing the film *Emancipation* (2022) to identify the issues presented in the film, particularly those related to racism. After being recorded, the data was analyzed through data presentation, data reduction, and drawing conclusions. This study will only focus on analyzing racism and classism in films without conducting direct interviews with the filmmakers. Thus, this limitation means that the analysis will rely on visual and textual content, supported by existing literature to understand the deeper meaning of the films and the broader social context.

Findings and discussion

After analyzing the data based on the methods used, the researchers conclude that there are various forms of racism and classism in the film *Emancipation* (2022) based on socio-political

analysis, such as dehumanization, power hierarchy, and symbolic environment.

Dehumanization and Physical Violence as Forms of Racism

Dehumanization is a way of viewing a person or group as lacking human value in various ways. Haslam (2006) divides dehumanization into two forms: animalistic and mechanistic. Animalistic dehumanization refers more to the perception that humans are less evolved, dangerous, and lack self-control, intelligence, and rationality. Mechanistic dehumanization, on the other hand, leans more toward the specifications that distinguish living beings from inanimate objects or machines (Haslam, 2006). Therefore, this perspective leads to moral disengagement or a lack of moral consideration toward the targets of dehumanization, which can increase the potential for harm or provide justification for harm after the fact.

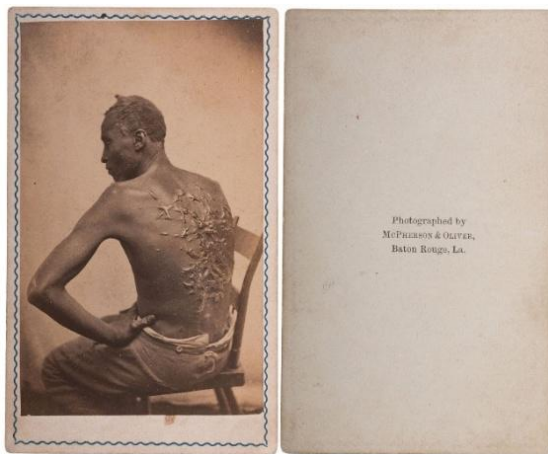


Figure 1. Peter or The Scourged Back of “Peter” an escaped slave from Louisiana April 2, 1863
(Source: <https://artblart.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/mcpherson-oliver-peter-the-scourged-back.jpg>)

This film clearly depicts racism through the brutal treatment and dehumanization of slave characters. Physical violence is the main tool used to assert racial dominance. The most prominent example is the scene where Peter is savagely whipped by the plantation overseer. The horrific scars on his back, which later became the iconic image of “Whipped Peter,” are a visual symbol of

systematic inhumane treatment, in which slaves' bodies were treated as objects that could be tortured and controlled.

The dialogue spoken by the slave hunter character, Fassel, further reinforces the view that black people are considered inferior beings,

“I don't believe in God. I believe in money. And I believe in you. You are my property.”

The dialogue above refers to a form of animalistic dehumanization that positions black people “Peter” not as human being, but as animals that can be exploited as economic assets. Perillo (2023) states that this dehumanization is indeed related to greater justification for physical violence or the use of force against black individuals (Perillo et al., 2023).

Classism and Power Hierarchy in Oppressed Groups

Classism is complex and multifaceted, as people from all economic levels are affected by ideas about social class (Cavallieri et al., 2023). Social classes are formed within a hierarchical structure based on a person's wealth, income, level of education, and type of work (Ali & Sunra, 2023). Ultimately, this perspective involves changes to laws, policies, or regulations. For example, a person with a college degree working in a white-collar profession may be perceived as belonging to a higher class than someone employed in manual labor, regardless of actual income. These classifications carry implicit social value, often determining how individuals are treated in various settings such as schools, workplaces, healthcare systems, and the legal system.

Furthermore, the perpetuation of classism is reinforced by institutional structures and cultural narratives that normalize inequality. Media representations, political discourse, and educational curricula frequently uphold classist assumptions by portraying poverty as a result of personal failure while glorifying wealth as a sign of merit or superiority. To effectively address classism, it is essential to move beyond individual attitudes and consider the broader societal systems that reinforce

class-based disparities. This includes advocating for structural changes to laws, policies, and regulations that contribute to or sustain inequality. For instance, reforming tax laws, increasing access to quality education and healthcare, and implementing stronger labor protections are critical steps in promoting equity across class lines. Ultimately, addressing classism requires a comprehensive understanding of how social class is constructed and maintained, as well as a commitment to creating a more just and inclusive society.

In addition to racism perpetrated by white people, the film also shows classism among black people. Slavery created an internal hierarchy that divided the slave community. Some slaves were given “higher” positions or became overseers, which they then used to oppress other slaves in the name of power. Their collaboration with white slave owners demonstrates that the slavery system not only separated races but also pitted fellow victims against each other with the promise of power. The scene where a Black slave overseer reports Peter to Fassel shows how domination can manifest in a social system created by greater power, where other Black individuals are used as tools to oppress their own kind. This phenomenon is a form of lateral classism, where those who are considered to be in similar groups feel the same pressure and are willing to do anything for their own interest.

This internal hierarchy allowed slave owners to manipulate enslaved individuals into becoming instruments of their own oppression. By rewarding loyalty and obedience with minor privileges, slaveholders effectively pitted slaves against one another, eroding solidarity and instilling distrust. The scene in the film where a Black slave overseer reports Peter to Fassel is a chilling example of this dynamic in action. Rather than identifying with Peter's suffering, the overseer seeks personal advantage by aligning himself with white authority. This act reflects how domination can permeate through a social system, compelling individuals to betray their peers in order to gain or maintain power within a fundamentally oppressive structure.

This phenomenon is an example of lateral classism where individuals within the same oppressed group turn on one another due to internalized hierarchy and the pressure to survive or

succeed. Those in slightly elevated positions may adopt the values of the dominant group, distancing themselves from their peers in pursuit of self-interest. This dynamic illustrates how deeply systemic oppression can fracture communities, highlighting the psychological and social consequences of class and racial hierarchies that persist long after slavery itself has ended.

Environmental Symbolism as a Representation of Exploitation

Progress requires continuous effort for human civilization over time, determined by desired goals. These major changes disrupt ecosystems, resulting in environmental crises (Ruiz Serrano et al., 2025). The film's setting also serves as a symbol of racism and economic exploitation. The scenes in which slaves are forced to build railroad tracks in harsh and dangerous conditions show that the main purpose of slavery was the exploitation of labor for economic gain. The lengthy scenes showing Peter and other slaves working tirelessly under the scorching sun, wearing ragged clothes and without adequate protection, are not merely background. The railroad tracks, as a symbol of economic progress, were built on suffering and forced labor.

Discussions from the film *Emancipation* (2022) confirm that racism and classism during the era of slavery were complex and interrelated phenomena. The physical violence and dehumanization depicted in this film are consistent with the definition of slavery, which emphasizes the use of power and violence to maintain control and exploitation. As explained by Inikori (2020), slavery in the Atlantic world not only created a system of forced labor, but also became the structural foundation for the formation of the global capitalist economy (Inikori, 2020). This phenomenon is a concrete manifestation of the process of racist dehumanization, which is an ideological mechanism that systematically diminishes the humanity of certain groups in order to facilitate their economic and social exploitation (Jardina & Piston, 2023). This perspective is also in line with the concept of necrostratification, which is the formation of a hierarchy of human life based on its economic and social utility value, introduced by Regilme (2023) as

one of the strategies of power in dealing with global crises. Thus, slavery is not merely a matter of historical morality, but part of the dynamics of world economic development that is supported by structural inequality and systematic dehumanization processes (Regilme, 2023).

Racism is institutional, not just interpersonal. Wright (2022) shows that US state and economic institutions are structured in such a way as to perpetuate white supremacy through legal systems and economic policies that exclude black people from access to education, capital, and technology (Wright, 2022). Regilme (2023) research adds that in the context of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the state tends to use coercive policies to reinforce social hierarchies and expand surveillance of marginalized groups (Regilme, 2023). This proves that racism does not only occur in individual actions, but is institutionalized through state apparatus and the reproduction of exploitative social structures. In this context, the character of Fassel in the film is not merely a representation of a cruel individual, but a personification of a structured power system legitimized by the state. This analysis also resonates with the concept of dehumanization in Nazi ideology, where state propaganda objectifies certain groups as threats to the social order and manipulates narratives to justify systemic violence (Steizinger, 2018).

In addition, findings regarding classism among fellow black slaves demonstrate the complexity of the structure of slavery and confirm that the colonial power system not only oppressed vertically (from white to black), but also created horizontal fragmentation through internal hierarchies within oppressed groups. Lavell (2014) and Millard (2017) reveal that class experiences that are not explicitly acknowledged in social institutions and therapy actually perpetuate exclusion and generate distrust of the system (Lavell, 2014), (Millard, 2017). Dehumanization as a social strategy is not only carried out by dominant actors, but can also be reproduced within subordinate groups as a form of adaptation to the system of inequality. In line with this, Kumar (2018) highlights how the marginalization of ethnic minorities such as the Hazara in the novel *The Kite Runner* shows that hegemonic power can divide communities internally

to maintain the structure of domination (Kumar, 2018).

Conclusion

A socio-political analysis of the film *Emancipation* (2022) highlights that racism and classism are complex and interrelated phenomena. The physical violence and dehumanization depicted in this film are consistent with the definition of slavery, which emphasizes the use of power and violence to maintain control and exploitation. The racism depicted in this film is represented through the brutal treatment and dehumanization of slave characters. Physical violence becomes the main tool for asserting racial dominance. Meanwhile, classism in this film is shown through the differences in status among black people. This is because slavery created an internal hierarchy to divide the slave community. Some slaves were given “higher” positions or supervisory roles, allowing them to use their positions to oppress other slaves in the name of authority. Their compromise with white slave owners showed that the slavery system not only separated races, but also pitted victims against each other in exchange for power.

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