

Looking through cinema: Representation of racial identity development in Amma Asante's *Belle* movie

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Abstract

This research studied the concept of racial identity development of the main character in Amma Asante's movie *Belle*. This research also describes the social relations between the main character's identity development and women's agency. The analysis is founded on the theory of racial identity development and the sociology of literature. The results showed that, in *Belle* movie, the main character experiences all the rounds of racial identity development which challenges her agency to make the social change she wanted. Thus, these two subtopics correlated with each other that also represented how the racial identity development and the women's agency influence the socio-cultural life of the main character in understanding her existence among other beings.

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INTRODUCTION

Films with the main topic of race has been at the forefront productions which internationally recognized, since those films set in multicultural space, narrated through social realist frameworks, and stand out as a success story in the world of cinema. Moreover, in this current situation where pandemic makes people spend their time individually which relatedly makes film be the most common escape to feel less lonely.

In some kinds of films, racism is a kind of oppression for Black women as well as sexism that happened to mostly women—that is a kind of inferiority thing (Torrey, 1979). The core of both racism and sexism (and the other forms of prejudice) is a belief that people exist on a hierarchy. A white male's position is in the top most superiority, then comes the White women, and people of color is in the bottom. Because of

these belief systems share a common ideology which some people are better than others based on certain unchangeable characteristics. Blacks of both genders and women of all races experience more oppression than White males do (Dohrenwend, 1973). Also, it is not surprising that, mostly, people who are sexist are also racist and vice versa. While racism and sexism can cause various forms of prejudice and discrimination in the daily lives of Black women, this can have an impact on social phenomena. Smith (1985, p. 567) hypothesized that minor groups with strong racial identities identity will have better ability to cope with pressure than comparable groups with low racial identities.

In working on this study, the writers are inspired by the word of women. In significant ways, it provides limitless knowledge about gendered practices, norms, and discourses. Women's agency, in particular, provides a

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systematic analysis of the meaning of sex and gender in past and present societies, understanding how women in male-dominated societies can live in ways that reflect their genuine needs and concerns, as well as mount active resistance. Thus, the writers use Amma Asante's film entitled 'Belle' which does more than just provide entertainment, but also explores the life of a multiracial women who occupied an ambiguous social position. Even this kind of situation does not happen in today's society, but the impact still appears in the form of discrimination, racism, and so on. So that current and future generation can learn the lesson why and how to face and/or avoid the drawbacks of human diversity. The cinematic depiction of a real figure from the 1800s represents a moment when the ivory tower and popular culture collide to produce a film that, despite flaws, has the potential to change the way we read, understand, and imagine the period. There is no particular reason for the 19th century film to be studied because racial identity and women's agency can be found in many film production through time, though the writers chose to study nineteenth-century British literature in order to comprehend the ideologies that lie behind and beneath canonical information and think about how racial identity development influences women's agency, focuses on the main character of the movie who is a half-black woman.

This is a literary study that employs a psychological theory, specifically racial identity development, to break the issues of the movie. Theoretically, Janet Helms defines racial identity development theory (1990). It is a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that one shares a common uniqueness of racial heritage with a specific racial group. It is concerned with the psychological implications of racial group membership, which is unsurprising given that this developmental process will unfold in a variety of ways. tion through hopes and terrors

This paper have the similar concept with a previous study which aimed to examine the process of identity construction through hopes and terrors (Octavia, 2021), whereas the current research focuses on revealing the representation of the racial identity development that occurs on the

main character of Amma Asante's Belle movie. Moreover, it is related to the term "racial identity" consists of characteristics that considered as important when defining who we are and others, both as individuals and as part of a larger group, as what Imelda stated (Wene & Ena, 2020). Therefore, this study is significant because it is expected to give a contribution to future researchers, especially, those who are interested in Amma Asante's works and/or applying racial identity development theory to analyze a particular movie, film, or series. This research paper addressed about, how does the movie depict the main character's racial identity development? and what is the impact of racial identity development on the main character's agency?

In terms of research delimitation: the current research is delimited to the racial identity development of the main character of the movie which has impacts on her agency, for instance, bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance.

Theoretically, this study define that people of color throughout the media have been implicated in historical and contemporary racial projects. This type of project employs stereoscopic imagery to influence resource distribution in ways that benefit dominant groups. Such projects, however, are frequently characterized by a dominant tension between control and its opposition. When Black audiences disagree with what they see and hear, the subject of racial identity becomes prominent, and consider it as harmful, unpleasant, or distasteful media representations. Nevertheless, to counter this kind of issue, in this study, the writers will present the relation between the racial identity development and agency represented in a particular movie to show how it influences the social phenomenon. According to theoretical literature, Black racial identification should be tied with one's agency for Blacks, implying that racial identification views may be connected to women's agency. We deemed the research exploratory due to a dearth of empirical literature on the issue of the study.

Some previous literary studies are employed to make clear of authors' arguments, such as

Cross's developmental model of racial identification which is the most widely used. According to Cross (1971), the process is divided into five stages: Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment. When a person has a Euro-American worldview in the first stage, Preencounter, and "Blackness" is discounted. The second stage, Encounter, is characterized by a major occurrence that challenges the person's existing worldview and related personal identity. The individual then starts looking for a new identity. The third stage, Immersion-Emersion, is distinguished by immersion in Black experiences and culture. At this point, "Whiteness" is denigrated, while "Blackness" is idolized. Positive views toward being Black, on the other hand, have not yet been internalized. Internalization is the fourth step, in which the person integrates a positive sense of Blackness that differs from the preceding stage, protective idealization. The person has a Euro-American worldview in the first stage, Preencounter, and "Blackness" is discounted. The second stage, Encounter, is characterized by a major occurrence that challenges the person's existing worldview and related personal identity. The individual then starts looking for a new identity. The third stage, Immersion-Emersion, is distinguished by immersion in Black experiences and culture. Later empirical and theoretical work based on the model has primarily focused on the first four stages proposed by Cross and has omitted the fifth stage. (e.g. Helms, 1984; Parham & Helms, 1981).

By building upon Cross's theory, many researchers undertook the task of studying the phenomenon. However, their attempts were not specifically directed to the case of the relation between identity development and agency. Previous studies and academics say that biracial is a new social phenomena that is regarded as one of the most pressing racial challenges of the twenty-first century (Rockquemore, 2002). Existing research has shown that multiracial persons make a variety of decisions concerning their racial identification. Some select a border identity that combines their parents' races into a new and

distinct category of self-understanding, while others choose to identify with only one of their parents' races (Fields, 1996; Gibbs, 1997; Herring, 1995).

Another research found that gender and racial identity formation are complicated, cyclical, and contemporaneous occurrences for Black youth, reflecting the interaction of these experiences (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). Furthermore, because the majority of Black people still retain beliefs that define the lowest end of the racial identification process, they are more likely to have a negative psychological adjustment (Pyant & Yanico, 1991).

The research work did not stop there, Herbert (2018) hypnotized that the films of the Black collectives invoked problems like as racism, migration, and national identity, as well as homosexuality and feminism in a storyline or storyline that was justified by Sankofa, a member of Martina Attille, who remarked that "sometimes, one can't afford to keep anything back for another moment, another conversation, or another film." (Mercer, 1988).

Few empirical researches have been conducted to investigate the potential link between women and agency. According to one early research, feminist women are more independent and self-accepting than non-feminists (Cherniss, 1972). Several subsequent research discovered feminist women to be more autonomous (McClain, 1978) and to have higher self-esteem (DeMan, A. F. & Benoit, 1982) than non-feminist women. Black women, who were nontraditional, reported less guilt about expressing hostility than traditional Black women (Slane & Morrow, 1981).

METHODS

The current research was conducted based on a literary study approach since it also explores some socio-cultural aspects within the movie. To collect the primary data, the researchers employed close reading and in-depth content analysis of Amma Asante's *Belle* movie, especially to put it in the form of dialogues and quotes from *Belle* movie– which are expressed in words and some of screenshots of

the scene that identify an interesting and unexplored dilemma, and then present it in a concise form.

Secondary data was derived through an extensive reading of related journal articles and online sources, such as e-book and articles that contain the information about racial identity development and women's agency. The main object observed in this study is Dido and her narrative in the movie as a Black woman who lives among the Whites.

This study involves the process of representation, comparison, and interpretation; therefore the outcome of this study is rather interpretive but fully established. To support the findings, Janet Helms and Cross' theory was applied as a means of explaining the concept of Racial Identity Development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this segment, the analysis of data has been carried out based on stages development of the black racial identity occurs on the main character of *Belle* movie, then, the impact on the social phenomenon influenced by the main character's identity development.

Racial Identity Development of The Main Character

Preencounter

During the first stage of Preencounter, the 'Black' individuals assimilated many of the dominant White culture's ideas and values, including the stereotype that "*White is right*" and "*Black is wrong*." Even if negative Black stereotypes are unconsciously spread, the person possesses to assimilate and be accepted by Whites, and passively or actively distances herself from other Blacks. In accordance with previous study about identity that minority individuals are unable to effectively negotiate or define a particular identity (Farah, 2018). In the movie, this stage is depicted in the early scene where the main character—Dido—happens to be separated from her racial society then moves to the White society.



Figure 1. Preencounter

It is at (00:01:36) of the movie, When Captain Sir John Lindsay says "*Do not be afraid sweet thing. I am to take you to a good life. The life you were born to.*" This dialogue is said to Dido, as a child, to be taken to the outside world that is completely different from her current situation. She finds that people strangely look at her to walk side by side with a white man holding her hand. Until she has arrived at Kenwood's house that also debates about her being black in White society. This Preencounter stage brings a fresh problem in Dido's mind, perhaps with a little confusion, because before she met the Whites, she lives in slumps with only Blacks live there and the condition of her environment is not as proper and luxurious as her new surroundings.

Encounter

The move into the Encounter phase is generally precipitated by an incident or set of circumstances that pushes the individual to recognize the effects of racism in one's life. When she realizes she can't fully be White, the main character is compelled to focus on finding her identity as a member of a group that faces discrimination, specifically, racism.

This is the continuation of the Preencounter stage when Dido arrives at Kenwood's house and she witnesses the White family right before her eyes debates about her existence to be lived there as a family member among the Whites. This stage runs until Dido grows as a Lady and she questioned her position in the family to Lord Mansfield after several events hit her expectation, such as she finds every painting with Black people is depicted in a slave-master relationship and she

cannot join the dinner with white family guests. This stage is strongly appears in a conversation between Dido and Lord Mansfield where Dido says “*Papa...how...how may I be too high in rank to dine with the servants and too low to dine with my family?*” in (00:12:32) seconds of the movie.



Figure 2. Encounter

Immersion/Emersion

The Immersion/Emersion stage is distinguished by the urge to continually surround oneself with outward signals of a specific racial identity while purposefully avoiding emblems of Whiteness. For instance, Dido is a proud black aristocrat despite resist her condition, she has to immerse to her society being an aristocrat among the Whites and identify herself as a Lady. According to Thomas Parham, at this point, everything in life must be Black or connected to Blackness. This stage is also distinguished by a proclivity to denigrate White people while concurrently extolling Black people (1989, p. 190).

As a person progresses through the Immersion stage, they seek for opportunities to actively examine parts of their history and culture with the help of peers from their ethnic origin. This research yields security in a newly defined and validated sense of self identity. This stage is depicted through a scene where Dido asks about a case of Zong ship which is one of the symbols of enslavement and racism in the movie. The Zong case is also the key point that makes the story interconnected.

The initial conflict appears when Dido meet Mr. Davinier and have a small talk after a few time encounters, she says “*Mr. Davinier, what...what is the importance of the Zong... why is the case before Papa's*

court, the supreme court...?” that happened at (00:24:37) of the movie.

Furthermore, in another part of the movie, this stage is also depicted in the scene where Dido feels self-hatred and hates the color she had. The scenario in which Dido enters the room, expressionless. She rests on the chaise longue, her eyes drawn to her mirror. Something dreadful echoes through her - some dreadful notion or sensation that takes her breath away with emotion. And then her fingers reach the flesh on her chest, and she starts pinching and pulling with self-hatred, raking the heel of her palm over her cheek, her forehead, while her face crumples and she starts crying (Sagay, 2012, p. 29).



Figure 3. Immersion/Emersion

Another symbol within this stage is the paintings. Every painting that shows in the movie is a white man—as the master—and the black man—as the slave. This is why Dido agree to be painted besides her cousin to save her dignity as an aristocrat though she is reluctant.

Internalization

The emergence of the birth of this stage signifies the start of Internalization, in which someone feels confident in a specific sense of racial identity. In the Immersion stage, there is less need to express the "Blacker than you" mentality (Parham, 1989). In general, pro-Black sentiments grow more broader and open, while remaining less defensive (Cross, 1971, p. 24). Whilst keeping links with Black peers, someone in the internalization stage is open to establishing outside ties with Whites while remaining respectful of his or her self-definition.

The peak confrontation of the conflict is when Dido faces Ashford family to cancel her

engagement because the family looks down on her status as *mullato*. She defends her dignity by saying that what is unfortunate is not her circumstances (as *mullato*), but to marry into a family who look her as a shame and cannot respect her. She believe that there is no crime to be born negro and she was the evidence.

In the movie, this self-definition is more sarcastic and brave to declare as a Black woman in a white aristocrat family. Nevertheless, the main character can define herself and, eventually, can accept who she is without caring about colors and races. Still, this stage happens through a conflict to be achieved. It is when all members of Kenwood House having breakfast and Dido starts to question a matter about slave.

In other ways, the development of Dido's racial identity is completely built here. She can define herself within the situation she faces and then execute her idea of identity through declaring a sarcastic question and opinion about her being. As the example is this scene at (00:49:48) where Dido have breakfast with all the family member and ask a harsh question:



Figure 4. Internalization

Dido, (facetious) *“Is Mabel a slave?”*
 Lord Mansfield, *“I beg your pardon?”*
 Dido, *“Is-Mabel-a-slave!”*
 Lord Mansfield, *“She is free and under our protection.”*
 Dido, (twice as facetious) *“O! Like me!”*

The Main Character's Agency Reflected through Racial Identity Development

Initially, according to Cross, there are little psychological changes between the fourth stage (Internalization) and the fifth stage (Internalization-Commitment). However, the majority of people in the fifth stage have discovered

means to turn their 'personal feeling of Blackness into a plan of action' or a broad sense of commitment to the issues of Blacks as a group that has been sustained through time (Cross, Parham, T. A., & Helms, 1991, p. 220).

Relational mechanisms are employed to provide attributes, identification, and possession (Nugraha & Mahdi, 2020, p. 41). The stages represented in the movie is the example of that relational process which have an impact on the social phenomenon that becomes the key point of the storyline. This impact is in the form of series of events in the movie that pinpoint the final act of the main character to make social changes. The first event occurs when Dido decided to sneak out of her house to inform John about the Zong case's evidence.

Then this event continues with a conversation where Dido and John rethink and question gender and race problems that contradicts Dido's mindset. Basically, she thinks that social standard is not absolutely right and full of contradiction. The very strong statement that Dido hurled spontaneously to Mr. Davinier reveals that she take action to her agency in the form of subversion and resistance after experiencing identity development up to this point at (01:01:34) of the movie.



Figure 5. The Main Character's Agency

She said *“Gentlemen's. We, women, are but the property of gentlemen. That is the way it is, in law and life, is it not? And it came into my head that I have been blessed with freedom twice over? As a Negro and as a woman? Or have I? (Her mind ticks over). Must not a lady marry, even if she is financially secure? For who is she, without a husband of consequence? (She ponders) It seems silly - like a free Negro who begs for a master!”*

It continues with a massive conflict that Dido has to break her engagement with Ashford

because of her own choice to break free from norms and voice her rights. Right after she breaks her engagement, she takes her agency to support her Papa (Lord Mansfield) to make a better decision to make social changes through the Zong case where enslavement must be abolished. This moment is one of the precise examples that reflects well the idea of woman's agency. It shows Dido's choice to voice her rights to support her fellow Blacks race through Lord Mansfield to make new legal regulation about enslavement. That in real-life history, this event called the slave trade act.

At last, but not least, the movie presents women's agency through the movie's resolution stated: THE ZONG CASE BECAME A SEMINAL STEP TOWARDS THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY at its (01:38:04) seconds.



Figure 6. The Movie's Resolution

Internalization, whether in the fourth or fifth level, permits the individual to be grounded in a good sense of racial identity. Both to notice and transcend race proactively. Even if someone misidentifies Blackness as the issue, it becomes the starting point for exploring the universe of ideas, civilizations, and experiences beyond the word of Black (Cross et al., 1991, p. 330).

In accordance, the term women's agency and racial identity development occurs in this literary work in which correlate each other like cause and effect relationship. The agency emerges because the racial identity development of the main character (Dido) has completely developed and built a strong identity that also she achieve the initiation to make social changes.

CONCLUSION

According to the analysis, in terms of representation, it is found that this film succeeds to represent the idea of racial identity development. It is showed from the whole development stages, starts from Encounter, Preencounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment which breaks down the issue of women's agency the main character experienced. Moreover, this racial identity development also influences the main character's agency to make a socio-culture change in the movie. Amma Asante's Belle film, through representing Black femininity, challenges stereotyped current images of Black women and creates visibility, while also asserting that Black women's lives are worthy, depicts how the development of the Half-black character's racial identity grows and influences social phenomenon.

Finally, this research is a collective effort that claims no absolute truth in terms of the findings. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the future studies need to be conducted. The researchers hope that this study article will pave the way for future study in the subject of racial identity development and women's agency in the other literary works.

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