

SUBALTERNITY ISSUES IN STEVE MCQUEEN'S MOVIE 12-YEARS A SLAVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show the form of subalternity which occurs in the movie *12 Years a Slave* (2013), a biopic of a slave and his life in the times of racism and slaves in America in the year 1841. Being a black person during that time was extremely difficult as they were treated as slaves and were sold freely and legally. This movie depicts the life of Solomon Northup, a kidnapped black freeman who was then sold as a slave to pick cotton. With slavery as its background, this movie shows a lot of graphic torture scenes which depict the cruelty with which white people tortured black people. To find the subalternity experienced by Solomon, the author will analyze the movie's narrative and cinematography. Furthermore, this research will be based on Gayatri Spivak's (1985) theory which discusses the voiceless and oppressed groups. The result of this research shows that in the movie *12 Years a Slave*, subalternity is constantly found in Solomon's life. Subalternity is reflected through Solomon's experience as a part of the oppressed group whose lives are controlled by white people (the oppressor), whose voices are absent and who could only fight with hope and thoughts.

Keywords: black people, racism, slavery, subalternity

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menunjukkan bentuk dari subalternitas yang terjadi di dalam film *12-Years A Slave* (2013), sebuah film drama biografi yang menggambarkan kisah perbudakan dan rasialisme di Amerika Serikat yang berlatarkan tahun 1841. Menjadi orang kulit hitam yang tinggal di Amerika Serikat pada masa tersebut sangatlah berat, mereka diperlakukan sebagai budak dan diperjualbelikan oleh orang kulit putih. Film ini menggambarkan kisah kehidupan Solomon Northup, pria kulit hitam yang diculik dan dipaksa menjadi budak bagi kulit putih. Dengan latar belakang perbudakan, film ini menampilkan banyak adegan penyiksaan yang menggambarkan perlakuan kejam kulit putih terhadap kulit hitam pada masa itu. Untuk menemukan bentuk subalternitas yang dialami Solomon, penulis akan melakukan analisis melalui aspek naratif dan sinematografi yang dituangkan dalam film. Selain itu, analisis ini juga akan didukung oleh teori Gayatri Spivak (1985) tentang subalternitas yang membahas mengenai kelompok tertindas yang dinyatakan 'tidak dapat berbicara'. Hasil dari penelitian ini adalah ditemukannya bentuk-bentuk subalternitas di dalam film *12-Years A Slave* yang ditunjukkan secara konsisten melalui penggambaran kehidupan tokoh Solomon. Subalternitas tersebut direfleksikan melalui pengalaman Solomon sebagai kelompok tertindas yang kehidupannya dikendalikan oleh kulit putih, tidak mampu bersuara dan hanya dapat melakukan perlawanan dalam bentuk pemikiran dan harapan.

Kata kunci: kulit hitam, perbudakan, rasisme, subalternitas

INTRODUCTION

12 Years a Slave is a slavery-themed film based on Solomon Northup's novel of the same title. The film tells the story of Solomon Northrup (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a black man who was originally not a slave (freeman) from New York who was later kidnapped and forced to be a slave for twelve years.

Being a black person in 1841 in New York City, the United States was very heavy. At that time, the majority of black people were treated as slaves and could be bought and sold by white people. These slaves were usually harshly employed and often got tortured when they refused or worked under the standards set by their employer. However, not all black people were slaves. Some black people got complete freedom and education, one of whom was Solomon Northup in the film.

Initially, Solomon lived happily and prosperously with his wife and two children. From his violin playing skills, his name became more famous and farther away from the world of slavery. But all of that suddenly changed in an instant when he met two people who claimed to work as circus businessmen. Both of them want to use Solomon's services in the music section and promise a very large fee.

But in reality, Solomon was deceived and he was kidnapped then sold into a slave in the New Orleans area. There Solomon's identity was changed, his name was changed to Platt from Georgia. He had to accept the new name so he would not be tortured by his owners. At first, Solomon wanted to hold fast to his position to be free, but he abandoned his efforts because he was afraid to die and wanted to live so he could return to his wife and two children.

Against the background of slavery, the film shows many scenes of torture that certainly make the audience feel compassionate seeing what black people felt at that time. In some scenes, we can feel pain and sadness from Solomon and other black friends experienced.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several related studies about the movie have been found. A scientific paper entitled *Slavery in Steve McQueen's Movie "12 Years A Slave"* (Hidayatullah, 2015) analyzes this movie using a sociological approach that emphasizes forms of slavery and ideological representations supported by Patterson's theory of slavery. Through his analysis of this movie, Hidayatullah discovered three forms of slavery experienced by blacks, namely chattel slavery, forced slavery, and forced marriage. Hidayatullah also found that there are some capitalist ideologies shown through Solomon Northup's character. Solomon Northup is always given harsh punishment even though he has done well. Hidayatullah explained that this happened because of the concept of superiority, whites had full authority to control their slaves, in this case, the black group. Besides, another scientific paper discussing this movie is "Racism

Discourse in The 12 Years A Slave Film Script" (Wulandari, 2017). This scientific writing tries to trace the most dominant acts of racism in films. By using a qualitative descriptive research strategy, Wuladari found seven acts of racism, namely segregation, redlining, genocide, prejudice, expression, stereotyping, and violence. From the previous studies on this movie, the present writer has not found any analyses that discuss the issue of subalternity. Therefore, to complete the void of subalternity issues in the film 12-Years A Slave, this paper will discuss the subalternity issues experienced by black groups in the movie.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The term subaltern was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci, usually used to refer to inferior groups. The inferior groups mean groups in society that are the object of the hegemony of the ruling classes. Gramsci affirmed that these groups experienced oppression and did not have access to elite groups. In the 12-Years A Slave movie, it was found that black people became the group that was "dominated" by whites.

According to Gayatri Spivak in her article entitled *Can The Subaltern Speak*, the voices of the oppressed or subaltern will not be sought because the oppressed cannot speak. Spivak indicates that subaltern talk does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance. There is no transaction between speaker and listener (Kilburn, 1996). Therefore, Spivak said that intellectuals must be present as a companion or person representing these oppressed groups (Spivak, 1985).

In a closed room and a little dark with brick walls, three men are communicating. Two white men wearing dull white and brown vests looked at a black man whose hands were chained. From the shooting techniques used in this scene, it can be seen that in this scene filmmakers want to reinforce the object that there is white domination of black people. This can be seen from the way of shooting only half of a part of Solomon's body.

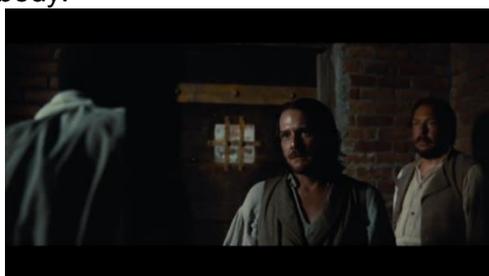


Figure 1



Figure 2

Solomon : I am Solomon Northup. I am a free man; a resident of Saratoga, New York. The residence also of my wife and children who are equally free. I have papers. You have no right whatsoever to detain me—

Burch : Yah ain't a free man. Yah nuthin' but a Georgia runaway.
Burch : Are you slave?
Solomon : No...

From the dialogue above (Picture one), it appears that Solomon wants to tell his true identity. But the slave overseers did not care and did not want to know about Solomon's true identity. When Solomon continued to insist that he was a free man and refused the identity of the slave given to him, he was whipped so severely (Picture two). From the pictures and conversations between Salomon and the slave watchdog above, we can see that black people are forbidden to reveal their true identities. At that time in New York, all blacks were considered slaves by whites without exception and their backgrounds didn't matter.



Figure 3



Figure 4

In the picture above, three black men are communicating in a dark room.

Clemens Ray : If you want to survive, do and say as little as possible. Tell no one who you really are and tell no one that you can read and write.
Nigger II : I want us to fight!

From the dialogue above Clemens shows that black people must be silent. They may not reveal their true identities and must conceal that they can read and write (for those who were able). They also have to do all orders from their employers if they still want to live. From the whole film, there are several dialogues which show discussion between black people to fight, but the thought of the rebellion does not produce anything because there is no concrete action they take. The form of resistance that is seen is just chatter or thought. From the fourth picture, the author saw concern in Clement's face about the resistance they were planning. It was clear that he was afraid to take risks if he made a fight that would make white people angry. So that in the end they still choose to be quiet so that they may still live.



Figure 5



Figure 6

The pictures above are set in a port. Seen a white man is calling a list of names of slaves. But when white people mention Platt's name, there are no slaves who stand up.

Theophilus: Do you understand the explanation given? Why don't you answer when called?

Solomon: My name is not Platt.

The scene above is a form of resistance to the new identity given to them. But this resistance only resulted in another form of violence received by Solomon (sixth picture). Solomon was slapped by Theopillus because of his resistance which was considered contrary to his status as a slave. And in the end, Solomon still had to accept his identity changed to Platt from Georgia. From Solomon's expression in the sixth picture, we can see that he could not do anything about his changed identity. He looked down before Theopillus, from the look on his face the author assumed that he was thinking of a way out so he could be freed from slavery. From this point, the researcher presents that the whole life of black slaves at that time was controlled by whites. Even whites can change the identity of blacks easily.



Figure 7



Figure 8

The scenes above are in a room which is the auction place where black people are gathered to be sold as slaves. In 1849 it was noted that there were more than 50 slave auction sites in New Orleans. The focus in this

scene was a black mother named Eliza who embraced her two young children. The mother will be bought by a white employer, and she tries to refuse to be separated from her two children (seventh picture).

Eliza : Please, sir! don't separate my family. Don't take me without my children.

Theopillus : Eliza, quiet!

Eliza : You will have the most loyal slave. The most loyal slave who ever lived. But please don't separate us.

From the conversation above, it appears that Eliza accepted her fate, which was to be a slave He is willing to be the most loyal slave so that he is not separated from his two children. But Eliza was kicked by Theopillus. Eliza was bought and taken from the auction site without her two children. There was very deep sadness on Eliza's face (eighth picture). She could only cry all day without being able to do anything. Here researchers see white skin as very inhuman. They trade black people easily, they separate mothers from young children. Blacks cannot do much for their lives, their whole lives are controlled by whites.

In the morning when Solomon worked, Tibeats came to Solomon and criticized his work. Tibeats looked for some errors in Solomon's work. Because he felt Solomon was not working properly, Tibeats took a whip and asked Solomon to take off his clothes. But Solomon disobeyed Tibeats's orders because Solomon felt that the work he had done was by following what Tibeats had ordered. Because Solomon did not obey Tibeats's order to undress, Tibeats strangled Salomon's neck. Solomon fought back and beat Tibeats with Tibeats's whip (ninth picture).



Figure 9



Figure 10

The resistance carried out by Solomon led him to a big problem. Tibeats is angered and committed revenge by hanging Solomon in the trees from daylight to dark (tenth picture). Many black people were around the place where Solomon was hanged, but no one dared to help him. Everyone continued to carry out their respective activities disregarding Solomon who was hanged and needed help. Here the researcher saw that blacks did not dare to take action without orders from whites. They seem afraid

of taking the risk of being punished if helping Solomon.

In the work area, Mr. Ford, Mr. Tibeats, and Salomon are communicating. Salomon conveyed his idea to make transportation through the waterway from the workplace to the estuary (eleventh picture).



Figure 11

Solomon : The river is deep enough to cross. Especially with a boat full of cargo. The distance from the workplace to the estuary is several miles closer from the water than the ground. I think the transportation costs will be more cheap than by land.

Mr.Tibeats : More efficient? Are you an engineer or negro?

The conversation above shows that white people considered blacks to those having no knowledge. White people thought black people are only intended to work, not to achieve academic feats or have knowledge. Even Tibeats, whose position was only a slave overseer, felt Solomon's idea was unreasonable and convinced that the idea would not work.



Figure 13



Figure 12

Mr.Epps not only likes to torture his slaves but he also likes to vent his sexual desires to his female slaves. Epps, the owner of a cotton plantation, forced his slaves to pick cotton at least 200 pounds a day. If it is not achieved, they will be punished severely. Patsey, a young slave girl,

always surpasses the target. However, instead of getting an award, Epps repaid Patsey's hard work with rape almost every day (twelfth picture).

Because she was unable to deal with all the torture she had gotten, Patsey was desperate and thought about ending his life. When all slaves are sleeping, Patsey comes to Solomon and asks Solomon to kill her. In return to kill her, Patsey gives Solomon his ring but Solomon refused. She begs him, but Solomon won't do what Patsey requested (thirteenth picture).

Patsey : End my life.. take my body to the edge of the swamp.. cut my neck...sink me into the water. until I die. Bury me in a quiet place.

Patsey's words above show how tormented their lives were until he was willing to give a gift to Solomon if Solomon wanted to kill him. This shows that the violence experienced by slaves at that time was like physical oppression, caning and sexual violence caused slaves to experience mental stress.



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

On Sabbath, Patsey went to Shaw's neighboring plantation. When he returned, Epps was furious and accused Patsey of sleeping with Shaw. When Mr. Epps snapped at her, Patsey showed a bar of soap which was the reason for going to a neighboring plantation (fourteenth picture). Patsey said that she needed soap to clean herself. Epps thought Patsey was lying, shown by the fact that he ordered his subordinates to strip Patsey and tie her to a pole and ordered Solomon to whip her. Solomon initially hesitated to whip Patsey. But Epps threatened him, if Solomon did not whip Patsey until her flesh was torn and her blood flowed, Epps would kill all the slaves on his plantation (fifteenth picture). From the look on Solomon's face, it's clear that there is a very deep hatred of Epps and he wanted to fight, but he could not do anything because if Solomon did not carry out Epps's orders, friends of other slaves who would become victims.

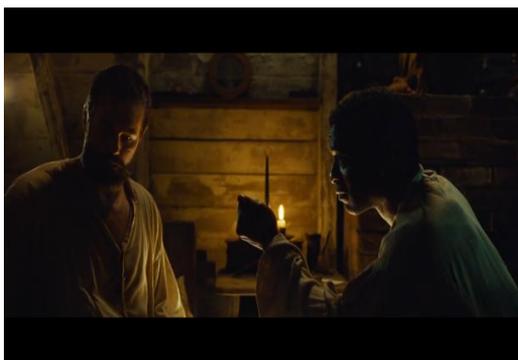


Figure 17



Figure 18

Two pictures above (picture seventeenth and eighteenth picture) are scenes where Solomon asks the help of white people to send a letter to a friend in New York who is white too. He chose to send a letter because that was the only way he could be freed from slavery. From here the researcher found that white figures were described as superior races while blacks were weak and helpless without white help. The results of the study found that this film places race whites as regulators of social life. This film illustrates that if there are no white people, the lives of black people will not experience change and will remain in a downturn.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing subaltern issues in 12-years a slave movie, it can be concluded that this movie is full of telling the reality of the slaves (blacks) with terrible experiences, where they were tortured physically and mentally. The whole life of black people is controlled by whites, but blacks people cannot do anything for their lives. Black people must be silent.

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