

PREJUDICE TOWARDS SKIN COLOR IN FILM *FRUITVALE STATION* BY RYAN COOGLER

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Abstract

*This research examines the prejudice based on skin color depicted in the film *Fruitvale Station* (2013) by Ryan Coogler. Utilizing qualitative methods and integrating the intrinsic elements of fiction approach with Nelson Todd and Michael Olson's prejudice theory. The study focuses on Oscar's characterization as a young African-American man burdened by societal biases, culminating in his unjust death. By not excluding other elements in the intrinsic structure, it is impossible to do so because each element has a close relationship in forming a unified literary work. The research highlights the impact of racial prejudice on Oscar Grant, the main character, who faces systemic injustice and stereotypes despite his efforts to improve his life. The prejudice theory reveals how cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of prejudice contribute to stereotypes and structural inequality. The findings underscore the destructive consequences of racial prejudice on individuals and society. This research confirms that skin colour prejudice in America, as experienced by Oscar Grant, is still a real danger that significantly impacts people's lives. This theme is not only relevant in the context of Oscar Grant, but also highlights the need for deeper social awareness to eliminate prejudice and discrimination*

Keywords: Prejudice, Injustice, *Fruitvale Station* Film

INTRODUCTION

Prejudice is the term used to describe predetermined, unsubstantiated assumptions about others based on perceived categorization disparities (Fish & Syed, 2020). Prejudice obviously exists in every individual. Prejudice has always been the first thing that crosses in people's mind. However, it affects people in various levels. This often leads to negative directions that cause many problems for the perpetrators and victims of these unfounded prejudices.

Prejudice according to Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* is described as an avoidant or hostile attitude towards someone who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to the group, and is therefore considered to have unpleasant traits like those of the group (Syamsudin et al., 2023). It is a complex social phenomenon that often has negative impacts both individually and socially. Racism and discrimination in America have not really disappeared from society, especially injustice against the black community. This issue is important to study because it still exists.

Issues of prejudice and discrimination against black people are often encountered in American film productions because this phenomenon has not really disappeared from American social life. Films like *Green Book* (2018) *Blackkklansman*

(2018) *When They See Us* (2019) *Just Mercy* (2019) *Till* (2022). The number of American films with the theme of racism and discrimination that are raised into films shows that American social life is still struggling with this issue. As in the film *Fruitvale Station* directed by Ryan Coogler, it raises a similar theme of discrimination against black people which leads to acts of police brutality and injustice.

This research examines *Fruitvale Station* in order to understand more about the way that prejudice against black people is portrayed in the movie. In this study, the elements of fiction will be examined using the literary criticism approach, specifically the intrinsic structural analysis approach. The researcher plans to examine each element more thoroughly, considering their relationships with one another, in order to reveal deeper levels of significance. Intrinsic structural analysis focuses on examining the text itself rather than irrelevant factors like the author's purpose or the historical context.

METHOD

The qualitative research approach will be employed during the research procedure. According to Flick, qualitative research collects non-standardized data and analyzes texts and images rather than numbers and statistics in order to analyze the subjective meaning of the social creation of issues, events, or practices (Syamsudin et al., 2023).

The main data sources in this research are films and original scripts from Ryan Coogler's film *Fruitvale Station* (2013). The film was produced by Forest Whitaker and Nina Bongiovi through Forest Whitaker's production company, Significant Production.

The research process will involve repeatedly and meticulously watching the film "*Fruitvale Station*" while also reading its original script. This dual approach ensures a thorough understanding of the material, allowing for a detailed analysis. Notes were taken on specific scenes, dialogues, and narrative elements that illustrate these traits and representations of prejudice. Finally, the collected data will be classified and organized systematically for further analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The process of prejudice experienced by Oscar Grant

The prejudice experienced by Oscar Grant, the main character of this film, is significant to explore as he is portrayed as someone striving for self-improvement but is thwarted by systemic injustice. *Fruitvale Station* vividly depicts the injustices Oscar endures, from his unwarranted arrest to his tragic shooting and the inequitable legal process that follows.

Oscar's personal suffering highlights the deep-seated impact of racial prejudice in American society. His journey marked by unjust treatment and violence illustrates the harsh realities faced by many from minority backgrounds. These injustices not only shaped his life but also left a lasting impact on his family and community.

Cognitive Prejudice: Stereotypes of Black Men

In Fruitvale Station, cognitive prejudice against Black men, particularly Oscar Grant, significantly influences his fate. According to Nelson and Olson's theory, cognitive prejudice involves beliefs or assumptions that attribute negative traits to an out-group, such as the Black community, regardless of their accuracy or applicability to individuals. In the film, these negative stereotypes about Black men in America intensify Oscar's struggles with the justice system and law enforcement, as illustrated in the following scene:

CARUSO You. Get off the train.

OSCAR What are you talking about? What did I do?

Caruso pulls out his taser and points it at Oscar's neck.

CARUSO Come on. Let's go.

Oscar immediately puts his hands up.

OSCAR Alright, alright, Fuck.

Oscar walks towards Caruso, who quickly grabs him by the back of the shirt and walks him out of the train car.

(Fruitvale Station Original Screenplay, 2013, P. 92)

The scene depicts Oscar Grant's arrest, highlighting how negative prejudice based on skin color can influence authorities' decisions without requiring concrete evidence. Oscar was apprehended at the Fruitvale BART station while returning from a New Year's Eve celebration in San Francisco with his girlfriend and friends. The altercation began when a white man, a former inmate from the same prison as Oscar, provoked Oscar and his group, ultimately striking him and triggering an unavoidable conflict.

The injustice of this arrest is evident in the police's immediate focus on Oscar and his Black friends, disregarding the white man's role in instigating the fight. Law enforcement appeared to rely on stereotypes about African-Americans rather than conducting an impartial investigation. This underscores how racial bias can shape authority figures' decisions, leading to actions that are both disproportionate and unjust



Oscar and his friends were treated harshly by the police

(*Fruitvale Station*, 2013)

In this scene, the police's actions are shaped by the stereotype that Black men pose a threat. This cognitive prejudice leads them to assume Oscar, as a Black man, is engaged in criminal behavior despite the lack of evidence to support such a conclusion.

Oscar Grant, as a member of the Black community, is perceived as a threat simply due to his skin color. Negative stereotypes associating Black people with violence, crime, or an inability to change fuel this perception. In the film, law enforcement officers view Oscar, despite his efforts to reform, as embodying the prejudice that Black men are inherently dangerous or unreliable. This reflects cognitive prejudice, where assumptions about an out-group, in this case, Black individuals, are based on false generalizations, perpetuating hostility and discrimination.

Affective Prejudice: Emotions of anger, fear and suspicion towards black men

Affective prejudice plays a significant role in highlighting the racial tensions that culminate in Oscar Grant's tragic shooting. Affective prejudice involves negative emotions such as fear, hatred, or suspicion directed at certain individuals or groups, often without a rational foundation. These feelings are rooted in societal stereotypes and long-standing prejudices.

OSCAR Are you in charge man? Look...

CARUSO SIT THE FUCK BACK DOWN!!

Caruso rushes Oscar, pushes him into a seated position, and knees him in the right side of his face.

OSCAR What the fuck, bruh?

Caruso holds Oscar by his shirt.

CARUSO Are you gonna fucking comply? Are you gonna comply?

OSCAR I'm complying, just take your fucking hands off of me! I'm fucking complying. Caruso backs up off of Oscar.

(*Fruitvale Station* Original Screenplay, 2013, P. 98-99)

This scene highlights the tension between Oscar, a Black man, and a white police officer, underscoring a power dynamic driven by prejudice. The officer's abrupt physical aggression pushing Oscar into a sitting position, kneeling him in the face, and yanking his shirt is a clear example of what Nelson and Olson describe as affective prejudice. This form of prejudice stems from negative emotions like anger, fear, and suspicion, rooted in stereotypes against Black men.

The police officer's excessive anger lacked justification. His harsh words and disproportionate physical violence were not responses to Oscar's behavior but rather products of ingrained prejudice that stereotypes Black men as aggressive and defiant. When these emotions combine with the authority held by law enforcement, they result

in violent actions motivated by a need to assert dominance over individuals perceived as inferior or threatening.

Behavioural Prejudice: Discrimination and Violence

Nelson and Olson highlight that prejudice often extends beyond cognitive and affective levels, manifesting as discriminatory or violent behaviors. Such prejudice underpins actions that harm individuals or groups, particularly minorities, through systemic discrimination or misuse of power. This dynamic is evident in Fruitvale Station, where the prejudice held by police officers against Oscar Grant and his friends escalates into a series of unjust and excessive actions, as illustrated in the following scene:

OSCAR Bruh I got a daughter at home, I'm trying to get to. I'm not trying to go to jail.

CARUSO You should have thought about that before you decided to be a piece of shit.

OSCAR Man you a bitch ass nigga, foreal.

Caruso walks closer to Oscar.

CARUSO I'm the bitch ass nigga huh? OSCAR What? What the fuck?

CARUSO Bitch ass nigga huh?! Oscar stiffens up.

OSCAR Don't call me a nigga bruh!

CARUSO BITCH ASS NIGGA RIGHT?

Oscar lifts up to his knees.

OSCAR MAN FUCK YOU!!!

(Fruitvale Station Original Screenplay, 2013, P. 100)

The scene portrays a tense confrontation between Oscar, a Black man, and Caruso, a white police officer, where Caruso's repeated use of the racial slur "nigga" becomes the focal point of the conflict. This moment demonstrates how racial prejudice manifests as verbal violence while exposing the dynamics of power and humiliation rooted in systemic racism. The use of this word transcends mere language; it is a symbolic act laden with historical significance, reflecting centuries of oppression and dehumanization of Black individuals. Caruso employs it to degrade and humiliate Oscar, leveraging its historical association with slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination to assert his authority and racial dominance.

The scene also highlights how verbal violence serves as a tool of institutionalized racism. By weaponizing this slur to demean Oscar, Caruso perpetuates the historical trauma endured by Black communities and reinforces harmful stereotypes. This verbal assault extends beyond an individual act of hostility; it is part of a systemic pattern where Black individuals are subjected to humiliation and disrespect, even in situations where no serious wrongdoing has occurred.

The climax of this discrimination and violence was the police shooting of Oscar, which is an extreme example of how prejudice can develop into fatal actions.

OSCAR ..you shot me... you shot me. i got a daughter...

Brandon, Carlos, Tim stare at Oscar is disbelief.
CATO They shot Osc! They fuckin shot Osc bruh!
(Fruitvale Station Original Screenplay, 2013, P. 102)

This act of unnecessary and extreme violence exemplifies the brutality often faced by the Black community in interactions with law enforcement. The scene vividly depicts Oscar, lying defenseless on the ground, being treated as a threat despite the absence of any real danger. This underscores the pervasive issue of racial bias within the law enforcement system. As a Black man, Oscar endured excessive suspicion and prejudice a recurring reality for many in the Black community when dealing with the police. His treatment reflects the implicit stereotypes and systemic biases deeply embedded in the American criminal justice system.

Through its portrayal of police violence against Oscar, Fruitvale Station demonstrates how prejudice not only shapes perceptions of others but also drives discriminatory actions. The violence Oscar suffers serves as a tragic reminder of the devastating consequences of unchecked prejudice, both for individuals and society at large. The film critiques the social structures that perpetuate discrimination and violence, urging a shift toward greater justice and humanity.

Injustice in court proceedings

The injustice faced by Oscar Grant did not end with his shooting but continued through the trial of the officer responsible, further highlighting the inequalities within the justice system. The officer who killed Oscar was only charged with involuntary manslaughter, despite his actions directly leading to the death of an unarmed, restrained man.

The court's controversial decision ultimately sentenced the officer to just two years in prison, justifying the shooting as an "accidental" mistake, claiming he confused his gun with a taser. With a reduced sentence, the officer served only about eleven months, which is far from a just punishment for taking another person's life without cause.

DISCUSSION

Nelson & Olson (2024), in *The Psychology of Prejudice*, define prejudice through three approaches: negative affect, attitude, and social emotion. These concepts are evident in Oscar Grant's experiences in Fruitvale Station, where prejudice based on skin color leads to injustice and tragedy.

Prejudice as negative affect involves strong emotions fueled by stereotypes (Nelson & Olson, 2024). Oscar's efforts for self-improvement are overshadowed by racial bias, culminating in his fatal shooting despite being unarmed and non-threatening. His death not only highlights racial prejudice but also devastates his family and community, perpetuating systemic inequality and suffering.

Prejudice as an attitude stems from emotional, cognitive, and behavioral biases, leading to exclusion and discrimination (Nelson & Olson, 2024). Oscar's struggles reflect a broader reality where Black individuals, despite their aspirations, face systemic barriers that hinder progress. The persistence of racial stereotypes fosters widespread discrimination, creating a cycle of fear, rejection, and hopelessness.

Prejudice as a social emotion extends beyond individuals, shaping societal norms and institutions (Nelson & Olson, 2024). Oscar's experiences—from being misjudged for helping a white woman to his unjust death—demonstrate how racial bias influences law enforcement and societal treatment of Black individuals. Systemic prejudice devalues Black lives, fueling distrust and injustice on a larger scale. Addressing this requires dismantling ingrained biases and promoting inclusivity.

Oscar Grant's story in *Fruitvale Station* exemplifies the destructive impact of prejudice. Whether through emotion, attitude, or systemic bias, prejudice fuels discrimination and injustice against marginalized communities. To prevent further tragedies, society must confront racial bias, advocate for equity, and strive for justice for all.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that skin color prejudice profoundly impacts Oscar Grant's life, leading to injustices that should never have occurred. *Fruitvale Station* (2013) vividly portrays how racial prejudice destroys Oscar's life and affects his community. The film highlights that prejudice, rooted in society, leads to discriminatory actions fueled by stereotypes. Oscar's unjust arrest, shooting, and unfair trial illustrate how such prejudice threatens human rights, especially for minorities.

This analysis shows that skin color prejudice extends beyond emotions or perceptions, functioning as a systemic issue that undermines opportunities, rights, and futures. According to Nelson and Olson, prejudice involves social emotions, attitudes, and negative affect, all of which caused significant harm to Oscar and his grieving family. This prejudice does not only destroy one life but perpetuates a cycle of systemic violence that requires urgent action to break.

In conclusion, racial prejudice in America, as shown through Oscar Grant's experiences, remains a serious threat. *Fruitvale Station* serves as more than a film; it is a call to address prejudice and work toward social justice and equality for all, regardless of race.

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