
Barriers to Civil Rights: Analyzing the Racial Discrimination Portrayed in Ava DuVernay's *Selma*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author wants to examine the racial discrimination experienced by Black people in the *Selma* movie and analyze the struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. against the inequality of African American rights. In this research, the author used a qualitative method through library research. The *Selma* movie's pictures and conversation are used as the study's primary source of data for analysis, and this research also relies on secondary data by examining academic articles, books, internet sources, and other readings related to the research topic. The author applied a post-nationalist perspective, Talcott Parsons' structure of functionalism and race discrimination theory. The result of this research is that four types of racial discrimination were identified: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimization, all perpetrated by the white race against the black race. Furthermore, Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle can be understood through Parsons's four structures of functionalism: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance.

Keywords: *martin luther king jr; movie; racial discrimination; selma; struggle*

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INTRODUCTION

According to Wackerman (1990), the term "race" was

used to differentiate populations in various regions based on physical traits that had evolved, such as skin

color, facial features, and other traits. This indicates that the term "race" is used to distinguish individuals in a distinct location according to traits that are commonly formed, such as skin color, physical appearance, and beyond. When someone perceives or identifies as African-American or another racial group, regardless of their physical attributes or other traits, such classification creates a social reality that may have tangible and long-lasting effects. Therefore, it may be said that racial classification might lead to presumptions and beliefs about the individuals in the category. Consequently, regardless of physical or distinguishing features, individuals will identify as African American, Chinese, or Latino (Citro et al., 2007, p. 27).

Globally, social disparity is already becoming an issue. Therefore, locations with social and cultural diversity may also have societal disparities. One of the reasons for the socioeconomic disparities that exist is racism, which has long been a pressing issue. Similar to the United States, this topic has occurred globally. Racial racism primarily occurred between whites and Blacks in

the United States. Racism is defined as "the action, practice, or belief that human beings are divided according to their races" by Smedley & Audrey (2024). Additionally, there is a causal relationship between mental qualities and inherited physical characteristics that led to some races being treated differently due to their superiority complex. Racism between whites and Blacks is primarily caused by white people's superiority complex toward African American Blacks. Stereotyping, bigotry, and discrimination against Black people are fueled by white people's sense of superiority (Rahmatillah et al., 2020; Smedley & Audrey, 2024).

Around 1619, slavery in the American colonies marked the beginning of racial discrimination in the US. Slavery expanded throughout the American colonies after a Dutch ship landed 20 Africans ashore at the English outpost of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. According to some historians, between 6 and 7 million slaves were transported to the New World in the 18th century alone. After the American Revolution, many Americans began to compare the oppression of Africans held in slavery to their mistreatment by the British. North Americans

finally condemned slavery. Consequently, from 1861 to 1865, a civil war broke out between the United States and the 11 Southern states that broke away from the Union to become the Confederate States of America, which claimed countless lives (Weber et al., 2025).

When it comes to voting rights in the US, some people indeed find it difficult or impossible to exercise their right to vote. Just 6% of the Black population in the northern states of Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont could exercise their right to vote before freedom. White people were exempt from the \$250 owning property and ballot payment requirement in New York. African Americans worked as slaves in the South, and white people restricted their ability to vote (Salvatore et al., 2007, p. 4). Although Johnson refused to be convinced, a Democrat from Tennessee who opposed slavery did not lack moral consideration for African Americans; rather, he had a very vague and racist opinion about the citizenship skills of African Americans on the lands where poor whites were presumed to be subjugated by elite farmers. Giving up the permit to Black people would have a

"great impact on the white as well as the colored man", he told Douglass. As "illogical and prejudicial", he rejected the chief executive's opinion (Salvatore et al., 2007, p. 5).

Beginning in the middle of the 1950s, civil rights activist and Baptist clergyman Martin Luther King Jr. had a profound effect on racial relations in the US. King had a younger brother named Alfred Daniel Williams King and an older sister named Willie Christine. The King's children were raised in a loving and safe home. Martin Sr. was more of a disciplinarian, but his wife's kindness readily counterbalanced his father's severe methods. King met Coretta Scott, a budding singer and musician at Boston's New England Conservatory School, where he was pursuing his PhD. After getting married in June 1953, they had four kids: Bernice, Dexter Scott, Martin Luther King III, and Yolanda. King led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), among other endeavors. In addition to helping to create the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he was instrumental in ending the legal segregation of African American people in the US through his advocacy and motivational speeches. Among many other accolades, King was

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. One of the most significant and inspirational African-American leaders in history, he is still remembered today (Biography.com Editors, 2025; Nimitz, 2016; Ward & Badger, 1996).

The movies also touch on issues of race and discrimination that occur in social settings. *Selma* is one of them. The film covers the story of Martin Luther King, a well-known African American activist who was successful in eradicating racism, discrimination, and segregation and denying Black people the opportunity to vote. In Alabama, the story starts in Selma. During that tenure, they experienced racial discrimination when casting their ballots. Martin Luther King was requested to assist them in obtaining the right to vote. There were a lot of issues in the past that were related to skin color; Black men were constantly subjected to prejudice, expulsion, and discrimination by society just because of their dark skin. In the Selma Administration Office, Annie Lee Cooper, a Black woman, attempts to register but is rejected by the white registration clerk. On the day of March, Jimmie Lee Jackson stood up for his grandfather after he was kicked

by Sheriff Clark. Sheriff Clark was also beaten by Bonnyton, and like the other protesters, she was later imprisoned. Martin traveled to the White House after so many victims and requested President Johnson to grant them the right to vote, but he continued to postpone it with Governor George Wallace. Black Americans were then granted the right to vote by President Johnson. Until his assassination in 1968, Martin Luther King led the American Civil Rights movement for 13 years with the nonviolent protest theory and practice (Arney, 2017; Henton, 2022).

In this study, the author reviews several other studies related to this research. Reviewing the existing literature, the author aims to highlight the gaps and limitations in current knowledge. This aims to avoid plagiarism and to prove that no one has ever taken this topic. First, Kurniawan and Puspitasari (2022), their paper intends to describe and explain racial discrimination and the anti-racial discrimination movement against black people in the film *Selma* (2014) by Ava Duvernay. The approach used in their paper is Roland Barthes' semiotics with audio and visual sign analysis units.

Second, Rahmatillah et al. (2020), the purpose of their

research is to find the level of racism that happened to African Americans as seen in *Selma*. Further, the other purpose is to give the reflection on the effect of racism toward African-American people as depicted in the movie. Their research focused on examining racism by using Jones' and Day's theory about the level of racism and how the effect of racism itself. Further, they used the qualitative-descriptive method and Mikos' data analysis for the movie.

Third, Ruata et al. (2021), the purpose of their research is to find out about the kinds of racism and the way Afro-American people struggle against racism in *Selma* using racism theory. Furthermore, the data were generated from the script, dialogues, and the scenes in the movie. Fourth, Asrita et al. (2023), the purpose of their study is to answer how signifier and signified are displayed in the movie *Till* and what are the representations of racism contained in the movie. The data studied is in the form of pieces of images, sounds, text, or sounds contained in the movie. Their study is using Saussure's semiotics. It will help analyze media texts with a set of signs that have various meanings. Fifth, Nurhadi and

Assidiqi (2019), the method used in their research is the sociology of literature because it is appropriate to analyze literary work focusing on the racist attitude in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* movie script. The grand theory for the topic is taken from *Racism: A Short History* by George M. Fredrickson and *Stereotype as Explanations* by Craig McGarty.

Based on the previous research above, the author decided that this research aims to examine the racial discrimination experienced by Black people in the *Selma* movie and analyze the struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. against the inequality of African American rights. Because no one has discussed this yet. So, the author will use it in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis is conducted through the lens of a post-nationalist perspective, which reinterprets American identity by highlighting the voices of minority and marginalized groups. According to Rowe (2000), American identity must be reconsidered in a global context, incorporating the experiences of ethnic minorities, African Americans, women, and other marginalized communities. This approach challenges dominant narratives

that center on white American norms and instead foregrounds alternative perspectives in understanding national identity and social struggle.

To analyze the social dynamics and King's activism within the movie, the study employs Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism. Parsons' theory views society as an interdependent system that must fulfill four functional imperatives to maintain stability:

1. Adaptation: how a system adapts to its environment.
2. Goal Attainment: the capacity to define and achieve collective goals.
3. Integration: the coordination of the system's various components.
4. Latent Pattern Maintenance: the reinforcement of cultural values and norms.

By applying this theory, the author interprets Martin Luther King Jr.'s role as a stabilizing agent within a society undergoing racial and political turmoil, focusing on how his actions addressed systemic imbalances and led to social transformation.

In addition, the study uses race discrimination theory, which examines how racial bias and structural inequalities are embedded within institutions

and social behavior. This theory is essential for identifying the different forms of racial discrimination depicted in the movie, including direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimization, and understanding their socio-political roots and consequences.

DISCUSSION

In this section, the author describes the purpose of the objectives of the study. This research consists of two objectives: the first is to determine what types of racial discrimination Black people experience in the *Selma* movie and the struggle of Martin Luther King Jr. against the inequality of African American rights.

The Types of Racial Discrimination Experienced by Black People in *Selma*

Novels, music, and dramas are all examples of popular culture, and so are movies, which affect viewers emotionally, are grounded, well-liked, and may help highlight crucial themes like the importance of inclusivity and diversity, being an opportunity to discuss how the movie depicts different racial groupings (Bozdech, 2023). Therefore, the author

emphasizes discussing Ava DuVernay's *Selma*, which depicts how white people discriminate against black people.

Racism stems from "an ideology of racial domination" (Wilson, 1999, p. 14), in which one or more racial groups define or justify the inferior treatment or social positions of other ethnic groups by claiming biological or cultural superiority. 25 ways of differentiating between groups of people based on patterns of perception of physical distinctions, such as skin color or eye shape, are classified as "racial" due to racial discrimination (see section Racism as a Social Process). Racialization becomes racism when racial groups are evaluated in a hierarchical and socially significant way (Clair & Denis, 2015, p. 857).

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) established broad and specific definitions of "racial discrimination" in 1965. "Any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, ethnicity, or nationality" is one definition of racial discrimination. To undermine or hinder the enjoyment or exercise of equality in human rights and fundamental freedoms

in any area of public life, whether it be political, economic, social, cultural, or otherwise (Bradley, 2019, p. 18).

Racial inequality in social outcomes can be attributed to both simple acts of racial discrimination and the intricate web of social ties. Beneficial direct and indirect discrimination have been separated by social scientists; the former happens where disparities emerge and is frequently deliberate. When decisions are influenced by the unequal results of direct discrimination, the indirect model emerges. It prolongs the initial injury and keeps it going (Pettigrew & Taylor, 2015, pp. 1-2). Many people believe that racial prejudice is a psychological issue rather than a systemic one. It held that racial injustice will be purposefully caused by prejudiced members of the dominant race. However, the prevalent racial prejudice in society is reflected in the fact that white American workers nominated their white friends for positions (Pettigrew & Taylor, 2015, p. 5). Racism has a terrible, morally repugnant, and inhuman aspect. Racism is a worldwide instrument of subjugation. Dehumanizing a community is how it operates. It functions based

on a kind of artificial race intended to divide individuals into a hierarchy intended to permanently elevate some and subjugate millions, in addition to rejecting their innate equality and dignity (Bradley, 2019, pp. 7-8).

Direct Discrimination



Figure 1. Annie Lee Cooper is denied voter registration and mocked by a white clerk (06:55)

Receptionist : "How many judges are there in the city of Alabama?"

Annie : "(BREATHES DEEPLY) 67."

Receptionist : "Name them!"

When Annie Lee Cooper (a black woman) goes to submit her file to register to vote, she gets treated badly and given questions that do not make sense by a white receptionist and he also does not allow Annie Lee Cooper register to vote. With the pictures and dialogue above, the author can categorize it as direct discrimination.

When "one person is treated less favorably than another is, has been, or would be treated in a comparable scenario",

direct discrimination is taking place. Article 1 of Act 67/2006 on Discrimination Against Disabled People in Fields Outside of Employment provides an identical term (Cachón, 2013, p. 26). Feagin (1986) directly determines institutional discrimination as "actions defined by a given organization or community that have a deliberate and negative impact on members of the subordinate group" (p. 30). The Australian Human Rights Commission defines direct discrimination as when someone treats another person less favorably because of their race, color, ancestry, national origin, ethnicity, or immigration status (Racial Discrimination, n.d.).

Indirect discrimination



Figure 2. A building in the city of Selma, Alabama that only serves white people since 1855 (14:39)

Where a hotel in the city of Selma, Alabama has a rule that only serves white people, the rule, of course, had a negative impact on black people and causes injustice and is detrimental to black people. The author can relate it to indirect discrimination

Those who suffer from indirect discrimination accept the notion that white people are superior to black people. Indirect discrimination occurs when "a seemingly neutral regulation, criterion, practice, act, contract, or behavior would place persons [followed by a mention of the specific grounds] at a special disadvantage relative to other persons" (Cachón, 2013, p. 28). Based on Feagin (1986), indirect institutional discrimination is defined as "practices with negative effects and differences that occur to minorities and women, even if the norms or regulations set by the organizations or communities defined by the communities or the rules that guide those actions are established and performed" (p. 31). Under the Australian Human Rights Commission, indirect discrimination may not be as evident. Indirect discrimination may occur when employers or service providers create policies, procedures, or guidelines that seem to treat everyone equally but favor some people over others because of their race, color, ancestry, country or ethnicity, or immigration status. Indirect discrimination may also occur if the terms are unreasonable in light of the circumstances of the case (Racial

Discrimination, n.d.). Based on the City of Toronto, Human Rights Office. A toxic work environment based on race is an indirect form of racial harassment or discrimination. Insulting or inappropriate jokes aimed at racist individuals were found to be toxic to the work environment for employees (Toronto, 2024).

Harassment



Figure 3. Sheriff Clark aggressively pushes elderly Cager Lee, escalating tensions during a peaceful protest (35:20)

Clark : "Sit down, God damn it! (PUSHING THE OLD MAN)"

Jimmie: "Hey, hey! Pa? Pa?"

Viola : "Don't do it."

Clark : "Do you have a problem, boy?"

Jimmie: "I'm sick of this! I just told you"

Clark : "What'd you think, boy? (HIT JIMMIE LEE JACKSON WITH A STICK)"

Image three and the dialogue above, where a white sheriff (Clark) degrades the young black man (Jimmie Lee Jackson) and beats him with a stick. With the attitude or treatment carried out by Sheriff Clark, who is white, towards Jimmie Lee Jackson who is black, the

author can categorize it as harassment. It shows how the example of skin that occurs in society black people is considered lower than white people. Therefore, white people behave arbitrarily towards black people.

Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, a specific meaning of harassment is behavior that is known or should be known to be unpleasant. Racial harassment occurs when unwanted behavior is related to racial grounds under the Code. Racial harassment means someone is bothered, threatened, or treated unfairly because of their perceived race, color, ancestry, origin, ethnic origin, belief, or nationality. It may also depend on the combination of these attributes. Racial harassment can be attributed to specifics, such as clothing that relates to the background, speaking with an accent, or practicing a certain religion (Racial Harassment, n.d.). The first formal definition of harassment in Italian law is found in the Decrees implementing the 2000 Directives, which states that the undesired behavior must "create an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive atmosphere." Had the phrase "humiliating and insulting environment" until it was

addressed in 2008. (Cachón, 2013, p. 31).

Victimization

According to the Equality Act of 2010, victimization occurs when someone is harmed or killed. Supporting someone who has filed a complaint of racial discrimination may potentially result in it (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.).



Figure 4. Jimmie Lee Jackson is fatally shot by white police officers during a peaceful demonstration (49:11)

Lingo : "Find a reason to send us in there. Let's scare some real sense into them black bastards."

(Later, officers storm into a restaurant and shoot Jimmie in the stomach.)

Viola : "Stop! Leave him be!"

Jimmie : "It's all right... It's gonna be all right."

The victimization was carried out by the white police and planned by the white government, Colonel Al Lingo, and Governor George Corley Wallace, who killed a black young man, Jimmie Lee Jackson. With the pictures and dialogue

above, the author can categorize it as victimization. This form is a system of hierarchy and injustice, mainly characterized by white supremacy where they have preferential treatment, privilege, and power for white people and tend to sacrifice black people.

The victim's open position, their social incapacity and low self-esteem, and their exaggerated use of and confusion with group norms all appear to be groupings and mechanisms that define victims in the development of bullying. According to a poll conducted in Norway (Einarsen et al., 1994), many victims feel they lack resources for living with and accepting themselves, such as low self-esteem, shyness, and a lack of dispute resolution abilities (Zapf et al., 2010, p. 187). According to interviews with American bullies, Brodsky (1976) asserts that many of the victims lack humor. When they encounter well-known teasers, they could feel victimized and bullied, which makes them the target of practical jokes, parodies, or exaggerations that make them the laughingstock of the department. (Zapf et al., 2011, p. 190).

The Struggles of Martin Luther King Jr against the Inequality of African American Rights as Seen in the Movie *Selma*

The author places *Selma*, Alabama, as a system and inequality of African American rights as a social problem. The struggle of Martin Luther King Jr. against the inequality of African American rights will be analyzed to see how a social system can integrate into this social problem that can make social change. The struggles of Martin Luther King Jr. are reflected in several actions. In addition, the author obtained the data from Ava DuVernay's *Selma* and various media to be analyzed later to see how his struggles were successful.

Adaptation

The author obtained the data from *Selma* that have scenes and dialogues that can explain adaptation on Structural functionalism. Scene and dialogues when Martin Luther King Jr. meets President Lyndon Baines Johnson are below:



Figure 5. Martin Luther King Jr. meets with President Lyndon B. Johnson to demand voting rights legislation (11:09)

King : "We both know in the South black voters are kept off the rolls... by systematic intimidation and fear... We want Federal legislation"

Johnson: "This voting thing is just gonna have to wait."

King : "It can't wait, Mr. President."

When Martin Luther King Jr. demanded federal legislation guaranteeing the equality of black people to President Lyndon Baines Johnson. He struggled to get equality. Image five and the dialogue above, explain that Martin Luther King Jr. carried out the adaptation process when his demands were rejected by President Lyndon Baines Johnson and went straight to Selma, Alabama. He adjusts the inequality rights that African-American experiences which makes a system unbalanced. As stated by Parson on Ritzer (2008), a system performs an adaptation function by adjusting and changing the environment (Ritzer, 2008, p. 121).

Goal Attainment

The purpose of Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts taken on the adaptation function is to achieve equality in the inequality of African American rights.



Figure 6. King urges President Johnson to propose new legislation ensuring voting rights for African Americans (58:54)

King : "Then propose new legislation, sir."

Johnson: "I can't do that this year."

King : "We deserve your help as citizens of this country."

Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts on demand federal legislation also reflected the goal function in the endeavor to achieve goals. Where Martin Luther King Jr.'s goal in demanding federal legislation is to get equality on inequality of African American rights. The function of goals in structural functionalism, requires which society as a system must have a goal. Kalu (2011, p. 130) also requires people to struggle to move towards this goal.

Integration

The author also found the integration function in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle.



Figure 7. President Johnson announces the Voting Rights Act of 1965 in a national address (01:49:00)

Johnson: "There is no Negro problem. There is only an American problem... This Wednesday, I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate these illegal barriers."

Martin Luther King Jr.'s pursuit of equal rights for African Americans was finally approved by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. This reflects the integration function in structural-functionalism. Where integration function according to Kalu (2011), is holding the various actors and agency units in line, creating and maintaining solidarity, and devising a fair procedure for sharing the spoils of cooperation. Because it draws its emphasis from both the personality and social subsystems, culture is an essential element in the integration process. It contains basic taken-for-granted assumptions and behavioral norms that people and societies can draw upon as initial and unifying building blocks critical in the early

and later phases of institutional and state reconstruction (Kalu, 2011, p. 131).

Latent Pattern Maintenance

After obtaining those three data, the author found data that reflected Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle against the inequality of African American rights as seen in *Selma*. Which were included in the latent pattern maintenance function of structural functionalism theory.



Figure 8. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers a victory speech at the Alabama State Capitol following the Selma march (01:56:40)

King : "We heard them say we'd never make it here... But today we stand as Americans... Our freedom will soon be upon us."

The above figure and the dialogue prove Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle to maintain a pattern after the law that close the inequality of African American rights. He is responsible for the laws that have been made on his demand. So, Martin Luther King Jr made a speech and told people that

they would be free soon and very soon. This is a form of pattern Maintenance performed by Martin Luther King Jr. As stated by Wagiyo (2016), a system must be able to maintain balance and continuity in accordance with applicable regulations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, four types of racial discrimination were identified: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimization, all perpetrated by the white race against the black race. Furthermore, Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts to combat racial inequality are analyzed using Talcott Parsons's Structural Functionalism theory, which views society as an interconnected system. Racial inequality disrupts this system, and King's struggle can be understood through Parsons's four structure of functionalism: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latent pattern maintenance. Through activism, policy advocacy, and legal reforms, King contributed to restoring balance and promoting justice in American society. His leadership and the broader Civil Rights Movement played a crucial role in dismantling systemic discrimination and fostering a more equitable

society. This study highlights the persistence of racial discrimination and the necessity of collective action to challenge social injustices, emphasizing the enduring impact of King's struggle in shaping civil rights advancements.

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