Research Article

Decolonizing Character Representation: A Postcolonial Analysis of Race-Swapping in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* Movie (2023)

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"All a person's ways seem pure to them,
but motives are weighed by the Lord."
— Proverbs 16:2 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the implications of race-swapping character representation in the 2023 live-action adaptation of Disney's *"The Little Mermaid,"* focusing on the casting of Halle Bailey, a Black actress, as Ariel. Utilizing *postcolonial* criticism frameworks, particularly Robert J.C. Young's theories, this study explores the historical and cultural significance of this casting decision. The findings suggest that the movie's approach to race-swapping serves as a means to challenge and redefine traditional racial narratives within popular media. The research identifies three primary outcomes: **1)** Reimagining racial roles is exemplified in the movie by the casting of a Black actress in a traditionally white role disrupts conventional racial representations, prompting viewers to reconsider the historical association of race with specific characters and roles. **2)** The race-swapping encourages viewers a re-evaluation of historical narratives in the story, deepening the audience's understanding and allowing for a more inclusive perspective of the past of different racial groups. **3)** Upon promoting racial inclusivity and diversity, the movie strives to prioritize the significance of acknowledging the historical experiences of the marginalized societies in an effort not to be forgotten or eliminated. The movie approach leads to dual perspectives and biases: promoting inclusivity while also at the same time reimagining historical issues related to race. Consequently, this study highlights the importance of critically engaging with media representations to foster a more inclusive and representative cultural landscape by examining its historical biases. The movie's innovative approach to character representation encourages the need for ongoing dialogue about the intersections of race, history, and societal roles in contemporary media

Keyword: *Race-swapping, Decolonization, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Little Mermaid*

INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding the substitution of a character's race with an alternative racial identity in cinematic works is an intricate and delicate matter that has incited considerable debate and analysis within the field of movie criticism. This occurrence, commonly termed race-swapping or race-bending, has provoked both criticism and support, with dialogues focusing on issues of representation, authenticity, and narrative significance. Supporters maintain that such actions enhance representation and authenticity, whereas opponents raise concerns regarding their effects on narrative coherence and the integrity of character evolution. *"Racebending as the practice of changing the race of a canonical character, in this case from white to Black Minority Ethnic, to reimagine their place in literary culture" (Ann, McClellan., 2021)* It is crucial for

moviemakers to navigate this complex terrain thoughtfully, considering the broader implications of their creative decisions. Examining the implications of such casting decisions involves considering the historical context of racial representation in media, the importance of diversity and inclusion, as well as the potential effects on audience perception and reception. This topic raises important questions about the power of representation in the movie and the responsibilities of moviemakers in portraying diverse and authentic characters on screen.

The release of *"The Little Mermaid" (2023)* has generated significant buzz among audiences worldwide. Directed by Rob Marshall, this live-action adaptation of the beloved animated classic promises to bring a fresh perspective to the timeless tale. With an extraordinarily talented cast and innovative visual effects, the cinematic feature is set to engage both passionate fans and first-time viewers alike. As the newest segment in the Disney live-action series, *"The Little Mermaid"* (2023) is prepared to engage audiences in a visually captivating marine world while examining themes of affection, personal identity, and the quest for one's dreams.

The narrative of *"The Little Mermaid"* (2023) can be correlated to the matter discussed in the preceding paragraph through the motif of representation and authenticity. In light of the ongoing discourse regarding race-swapping or race-bending within the movie, the casting choices for *"The Little Mermaid"* (2023) may be perceived as a prominent illustration. The movie's plot, which centers around themes of love, identity, and the pursuit of dreams, warrants examination in relation to the significance of authentic representation within the media. The portrayal of varied characters within the movie, especially the leading role of Ariel, offers a chance to analyze the nuances and duties of moviemakers in genuinely representing different races and cultures on screen. This link emphasizes the importance of the subject within the movie industry and its effects on storytelling and audience engagement. The live-action *"Little Mermaid"* (2023) incited discourse due to the fact that Ariel, historically represented as Caucasian, is portrayed by the Black actress Halle Bailey. While the narrative remains unchanged, the casting decision draws focus to representation and diversity in the media. Certain individuals exhibit discontent with the modification, while others praise it as a progressive evolution. Ultimately, the movie contributes to the ongoing dialogue regarding race-swapping in Hollywood.

Former critics have participated in comprehensive debates and discussions concerning the practice of race-swapping or race-bending within the movie industry. The predominant arguments articulated by past critics center around issues of representation, authenticity, and their effect on narrative construction. While critics articulate apprehensions regarding its influence on storytelling and character integrity, Ann McClellan (2012) critiqued the historical backdrop of racial representation in media, along with the potential repercussions on audience perception and reception in *"A Black Sherlock Holmes (1918): A Case Study in Racebending."* Conversely, this research not only addresses the historical context but also examines the underlying motivations behind the casting choice for *"The Little Mermaid"* (2023), featuring a Black actress portraying the traditionally white character of Ariel.

Hence, the application of colonial and postcolonial criticism by Robert J.C. Through an investigative lens, Young contributes to the discourse on race swapping in *'The Little Mermaid'* (2023) by assessing the historical constructs of racial representation within media, in addition to exposing the obscured motivations influencing the race-swapped character. Postcolonial criticism accentuates the ramifications of colonialism on cultural identity and representation. Young's theoretical framework further clarifies the lasting impact of colonialism and its consequences on cultural norms and representations, thereby illustrating the ongoing effects of colonial history on the representation of race in media. The choice to appoint a Black actress in the central role provokes essential discussions regarding the historical legacy of colonialism and its consequences for the representation of diverse races and cultural narratives within the movie. This discourse highlights the necessity of recognizing the historical and cultural dimensions of race swapping in the previously mentioned cinematic work, alongside the potential of such decisions to cultivate a more inclusive and representative media landscape.

Binary Opposition

HISTORICAL ACCURACY	CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE
"To rewrite the history of black experience as if it were just the same as that of white experience is to deny the historical contexts that gave rise to that experience." (Young, 1995, p. 112) The decision to cast Halle Bailey, an black actress to be the little mermaid which originally is portrayed as white. This side argues that altering a character's race undermines the historical context and erases the lived experiences of the original person.	*"Race swapping allows us to interrogate the normative assumptions about race, ethnicity, and identity that underlie any text, fictional or nonfictional, and opens up an aesthetic space for exploring the significance of race in all its multiple and intersecting forms." (Young, 1995, p. 127)* Race swapping creates a fresh picture regarding a historical narrative, making it more relevant to modern audiences that triggers critical discussions about race and questioning the representation of the character in the movie.

METHOD

Upon analyzing the data taken from the movie, a qualitative method was used to explain the explicit and implicit messages. Besides, it described symbolisms, cinematography: camerawork, lighting, background, visual storytelling and sound effects of the movie. *"Qualitative research methods allow us to delve deep into the complexities of human behavior and traits, providing rich and nuanced insights that quantitative methods may not capture." (Smith, J., 2019)* Several critical issues found in the movie were taken as the data, then they were analyzed along with the cinematography, including the relevant dialogues as the evidence. In this research, the theory of *postcolonial* criticism by Robert J.C. Young: *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (1995) was applied to support the analysis. Meanwhile, the discussion was limited to discussing *Hybrid Identity* by deconstructing racial stereotypes, exploring cultural fusion, and delving into new possibilities. *"Hybridity...forces a reconsideration of the historical narratives through which colonial power has been legitimated..." (Young, 1996, p. 4)* Historical narratives can be re-evaluated by examining the hybridity issue.

Race swapping in fiction can prompt readers to question traditional historical perspectives and consider the experiences of those who may have been marginalized.

DISCUSSION

The movie begins with the day of the ceremony in which King Triton and his mermaid daughters are together in his palace; however, the main character, Ariel, goes missing. Ariel is infatuated with the human world and decides to go exploring the shipwreck. In this scene, the camera takes a medium wide shot to capture the

three mermaids in different colors to challenge stereotypes as in traditional western media, all mermaids are depicted as caucasians that can potentially reinforce ideas of beauty standards and limited representation for people of color in fantasy. Robert J.C. Young (1996) argued that western art and media often depict white features as beauty becomes the standard, influencing local perceptions. This movie creates another perspective towards the beauty standard stereotyped to caucasian race. It argues that any race can fit the beauty standard based on their own color. The movie also adds the ambience of underwater effects and the calming sound of underwater to immerse the audience in the scene while the mermaids are questioning where Ariel is.

In this part of the scene, Ariel is reprimanded to return to the ceremony by King Triton's crab servant. In the encounter between Ariel and her dad, the camera tries to show the color contrast between their skin color, giving the idea of the existence of hybridity in the family. *"The experience of hybridity… can be particularly problematic for those who are marginalized or excluded from dominant cultural formations" (Young, 1996, p. 44).* This type of depiction challenges the audience's perception about the past when a dominant race held power and looked down on other races. Meanwhile, in the scene, it is shown that Ariel, a black mermaid, is in a royal family. The king is an overprotective type of father who does not give much freedom to his daughters. Ariel says, *"You won't even let us go to the surface"*

(00:15:13). This conduct in the narrative also links to the era of colonization of which the dominant race oppressed the marginalized. *"Hybrid cultural forms can be a means for dominant groups to assert their cultural authority by reinterpreting or domesticating the cultural elements of marginalized groups" (Young, 1996, p. 147).* The scene gives a sense of *"taming"* or *"domesticating"* the other culture by diminishing the *"foreignness"* or *"otherness"* of the opposite marginalized race. It can be seen when King Triton tries to contain Ariel and force

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her to abide by his rules, portraying him as authoritarian. In addition, it hints a dominant race has the power to reimagine their negative image due to the historical occurrences, to something positive. The representation of mermaids in different colors can potentially reinforce existing stereotypes or biases due to the historical context during colonization.

In another scene, Ariel saves a drowning man at sea and brings him safely to shore. She then sings her mermaid song which awakens him. The movie takes the setting at night where a glimpse of lights shining on the characters while the camera is taking a *mise-en-scene* of the singing. In the background, strings accompany Ariel's humming in a symphony, creating a peaceful and calming atmosphere; upon doing this, it also alerts humans in the village. In order not to be seen, Ariel swiftly swims back into the ocean and meets her father, the King of all mermaids. Noticing Ariel's fascination with the human world, he argues, *"Humans?"* (00:46:37), *"You're a mermaid!" "He's a human"* (00:47:47). King Pluton has strictly prohibited any mermaids, including
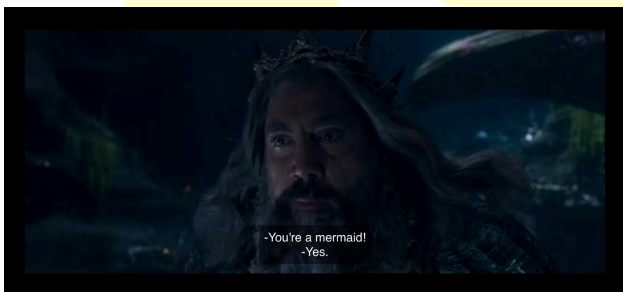
his daughters, to trespass the boundary between the two separate worlds showcasing the potential danger of being hunted by humans. Although the people of both worlds are open minded with diverse cultures, each side has their own stigma about the other race. The human race view mermaids as anomaly creatures, meanwhile the mermaids view humans as predators. It can be seen from the movie how the two races conflict with each other. The relationship between the territories of humans and mermaids in the movie illuminates the crucial misjudgments and apprehensions that both sides cling to about one another, consequently sustaining an ongoing cycle of misperception and tension. Robert J.C. Young (1995), The statement points out the common human nature to regard those who are different as 'other,' which unfortunately creates significant misconceptions, fears, and tensions among various ethnicities or social groups. In the context of the movie, the depiction of the confrontation between humans and mermaids, this quote powerfully illustrates the misunderstandings and biases implicitly that fuel the persistent conflict between these two worlds and races: human race and mermaid.

After the discussion with her father, the scene begins with Ariel, singing an upbeat music that indicates the feel of Ariel's longing to live on the other side. In this part, the camera goes along the singing to shoot in a medium shot first then swifts to a long shot, showing an island Ariel is looking from her back. The effect of this camera works is to draw attention to the boundary between

the two worlds. While singing, the lyric says, *"I want to be part of your world,"* (00:30:35) as she looks into an
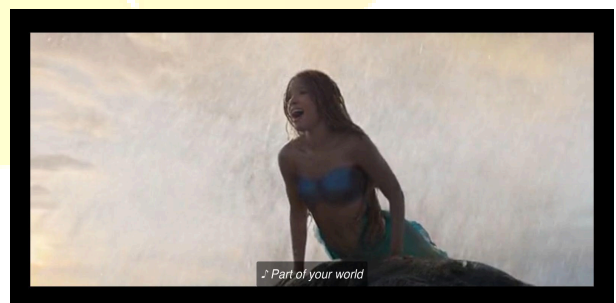
island. It signifies two implicit meanings; first, she longs to live on land, and second, she misses the man she saves. *"The dream of the colonized is to become fully human, to enter history, the history from which he has been forcibly excluded."* (Young, 1995, p. 3) This is inline with the concept of hybridity in colonial desire that explores implicitly the voices, longing for inclusion and recognition within the races.

On land, the prince is excitedly trying to look for the girl who saves his life, Ariel. All he can remember is the tone of her voice; however he forgets what she looks like. The cinematography focuses on the queen (the
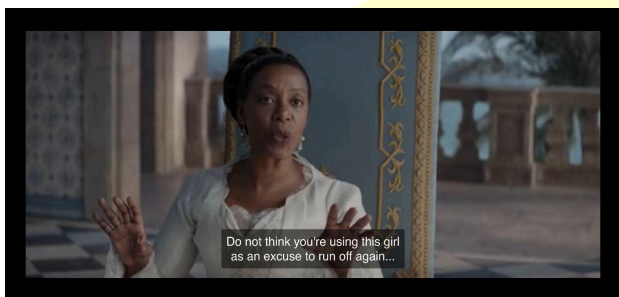
prince's mother) in the center, using soft lighting and a blurred background to highlight her expression while having a conversation with the prince. The colors are calm and elegant, and the fancy set design adds to the importance of the scene. The camera stays still, keeping the viewer's attention on the character and her serious words expressing disapproval as the prince insists on

deploying soldiers to search for Ariel. Similarly like Ariel's parents, the prince's parents are interracially married. *"The stereotype is not only a product of ignorance, fear, and racism; it is also a process of cultural translation that institutes a hierarchical difference between self and other." (p. 66)* This shows that the movie attempts to showcase diverse cultures to make it look more inclusive; nevertheless, it challenges the historical depiction and events of how the colored races were marginalized and had little to have high status. *"Hybridity makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the difference no longer simply different"* (Young, R. J. C., 1995, p. 26) It undermines the colonial power structure by mixing ethnic differences, languages, traditions to blur the paradigm of colonial history. In addition, *"Interracial marriage challenges the perceived naturalness of racial boundaries and exposes the constructed nature of race itself"* (Young, R. J. C., 1995, p. 10) This practice aims to create *'hybrid identity'*, shaping new perspectives and reimagining history by obscuring prejudice between the two sides.

Back in the sea, Ariel makes a deal with her aunt, Ursula that in exchange for Ariel's voice, she will be able to walk and breathe on land with a condition that she must get a true love kiss within three days. Failure to this will result in losing her voice for eternity. However, after the deal is made, Ursula wipes Ariel's memory of the true love kiss. The scene where Ariel sings *"Poor Unfortunate Souls"*
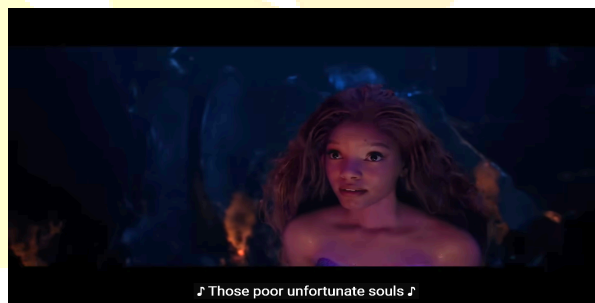
(00:54:46) masterfully combines cinematography and visual effects to enhance the narrative. As Ariel contemplates Ursula's tempting offer, the central framing and soft, warm lighting draw focus to her conflicted expression, underscoring the emotional gravity of her decision. The dark, muted color palette and subtle

highlights create a mysterious underwater ambiance that reflects the ominous nature of Ursula's proposition. Advanced CGI brings the underwater world to life, with fluid hair movements and natural light interactions heightening the realism. This blend of visual elements amplifies the tension and immerses the audience in Ariel's pivotal moment of choice, making the scene both captivating and emotionally resonant. On the other hand, when the camera focuses on Ursula, it employs dramatic cinematography and visual effects to emphasize her power and menace. Central framing and eerie lighting highlight Ursula, casting shadows that enhance her intimidating presence. The dark, rich blues and purples create a foreboding atmosphere, while the luminescent glow of her tentacles signifies her supernatural abilities. The swirling, dark waters and glowing elements add to the mystical and dangerous aura. This convergence of visual elements portrays Ursula's dominance and Ariel's vulnerability, intensifying the emotional impact and power dynamics of the scene. This is parallel with the era setting of the movie when, *"Colonialism involved a major transformation of the cultural, social, and political structures of the colonized, as well as the imposition of the white man's superiority and dominance"* (Young, 2001, p. 23). In the movie, even though Ariel is a princess, Ursula manages to take advantage of her naivety, showing her dominance over Ariel, even exploiting her precious voice for her own use. Whether or not it is accidental, Ursula is portrayed as white and Ariel's character is race-swapped. It potentially raises a conflicting issue that mirrors the past when unfair treatment, manipulative tactics over the colonized with hidden agenda while giving a utopian hope remain in people's mind. During the singing scene, the song lyric *"Poor Unfortunate Souls"* (00:54:46) straightforwardly suggests the poor souls to wish for help at a price that they have to give. Additionally, the positioning of Ariel at the bottom while Ursula sits on her throne at the top, singing *"I admit that in the past I've been a nasty"* (00:54:09) evidently aligns with the analysis.

As soon as Ariel acquires her legs and lungs, she quickly swims upwards to the surface of the sea. Fortunately, she gets caught in the net of a fisherman who later takes her to the castle to search for further help and hospitality. The cinematography uses soft, warm lighting and close-up shots to emphasize Ariel's vulnerability and isolation after losing her voice to Ursula. The visual focus on Ariel's expressive eyes and gestures stresses her inability to communicate verbally. The presence of white maids serving Ariel, a Black mermaid, adds a layer of social and historical reversal, challenging traditional narratives and prompting reflections on race and historical events. *"The history of slavery is a history of violence*

and resistance, in which the resistance of the slaves is always contained within the context of their continued subjugation" (Young, 2001, p. 72). The casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel, amid the race-swapping controversy, brings additional depth to this dynamic, highlighting themes of racial representation and shifting power dynamics, thereby enhancing the scene's emotional and social impact. This can serve as a mechanism for redefining the image and reputation of white individual representation in the characters. As evidence, Ariel is treated almost like a royalty even though they do not know her background particularly in this scene. In this case, previously Ursula contains Ariel's voice to show her power dominance. *"Within the discourse of colonial production, the subaltern has no voice." (p. 271)* In contrast, the maids give Ariel a luxurious bath, stunning new clothes, and delicious meals; all for free at the cost of nothing, depicting the purity and the kind heart of the Caucasian maids, meanwhile Ariel is casted mute or better be silenced.

On another occasion, the prince tells the queen (his mother) that he finds the girl who saves him from drowning and that he wants to marry her. Unbeknownst to him, the girl is Ursula under disguise as she tricks him using Ariel's voice. At this scene, she tries to seduce him. while the camera shoots both characters in medium shots. The cinematography in this scene utilizes natural lighting, a warm color palette, and shallow depth of field to create an intimate and emotionally charged atmosphere. The medium close-up framing and eye-level angle emphasize the characters' expressions and dialogue, highlighting the woman's confident demeanor and the man's contemplative state. The serene outdoor setting provides a picturesque backdrop, enhancing the moment's
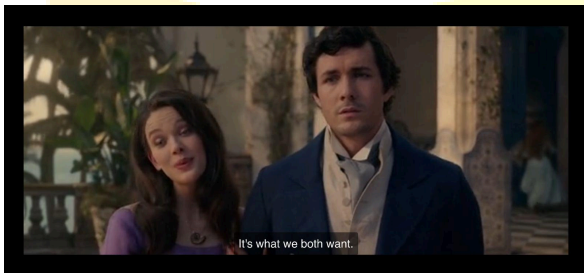
significance as the characters discuss a mutual decision, highlighted by the subtitle *"It's what we both want,"* (01:39:06) indicating her deceiving act This approach effectively draws the audience into the characters' emotional dynamics and the narrative's pivotal moment. In the scene, Ursula is depicted as Caucasian actress whether or not it is a coincidence, the portrayal shows a race dominance, making light of the interracial true lovers. *"Domination is not a failed totality; it is a successful production of a set of ruling ideas, a hegemony, that becomes for a great many people the accepted wisdom."* (Said, 1993) The depiction of the disguised Ursula in line with how the dominance of a higher hierarchy race shows hegemony in the movie's timeline to legitimate their power. In the context of colonialism and post-colonialism, Young argued how interracial relationships are often seen through the lens of *"hybridity,"* a concept that highlights *"the blending and merging of different cultures and races when the relationships can challenge and disrupt traditional notions of racial purity and cultural identity."* (Young, 1995) This often becomes the symbol of resistance against colonial ideologies of segregation and superiority. When the prince prefers Ursula to Ariel, the characters' portrayal projects against the notion of hybridity or resistance. Additionally, Ursula takes Ariel's precious voice and manipulates it and disrupts the relationship that has been built.

Shortly, watching from a far in jealousy, Ariel snatches the necklace in which her voice is being kept from Ursula. In an instant, their identities are revealed. The spectators react in shock and disgust and moreover when the queen says, *"Oh my God, It's a sea creature,"* (01:46:23) mirrors the act of racial dispute in the past when black africans were not seen as human. *"Colonialism's use of race to produce its own form of social and political order depended on the categorical differentiation and hierarchization of humanity"* (Young, 2001). He examines how colonial powers systematically dehumanized Black Africans to justify their exploitation and maintain control. In this context, the treatment of the mermaid recalls clearly the memory of the past. *"Settler colonialism depends on a logic of elimination, where removal is not simply a consequence but a constitutive element of the logic itself." (p. 388)* The mimicry of the historical racial issue arises when the race of a black mermaid is frowned upon and alienated from the so-called ordinary. In a fit of anger, Ursula dives into the sea, transforming into a giant octopus to take revenge. In order to save everybody, Ariel dives in to stop her. Unlike everybody else, the prince is shocked at first, but then realizes that his true savior is Ariel and quickly dives to save her too. This depiction suggests that he is the only savior of her life, signifying dependency. *"The patriarchal system thrives on the subjugation of women, positioning them as dependent entities under the control of men."* (Smith, 1995, p. 72). The prince is trying to help Ariel as soon as the identity gets revealed, showcasing a heroic action of the Caucasian man. The quote supports the setting of the movie in the medieval era when the ideology of patriarchy was still dominant; similarly, in the colonial era. It reveals the power dominance of both race and gender.

In the end of the story, the two defeat Ursula and get the blessing of parents from both sides. Setting on a sunny beach with a wedding-like ceremony, the camera employs a shallow depth of field to draw the viewer's attention to the three main characters, particularly the one facing away from the camera. This technique, along with the natural daylight, emphasizes the significance of their interaction and the emotional weight of the moment, which is highlighted by the statement *"Your marriage marks a new beginning for us,"* (02:01:40) signifying the beginning of a hybrid era. The visual storytelling here is intimate and poignant, reflecting themes of new beginnings and personal journeys, inviting the audience to engage deeply with the characters' experiences during this transformative event. Ariel decides to live on land, while her father grants her human feet and the interracial marriage happens. Mermaids and humans now hold no prejudice against each other and live harmoniously.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the movie shows different races living together harmoniously, promoting the idea of an inclusive society. However, the movie also engages in a deeper dialogue about race and history by recontextualizing racial roles, particularly reflecting the historical treatment of Black Africans. By inserting a character of a different race into historical scenarios traditionally dominated by another race, the narrative disrupts conventional expectations and compels viewers to reconsider the intrinsic link between race and specific historical roles. This approach encourages a more complex understanding of the past and the varied experiences of racial groups.

The practice of race swapping in the movie serves a dual purpose: it not only reimagines the dominant racial hierarchy reminiscent of the colonial era but also subtly influences the audience's biases regarding historical and future interpretations. While this method can be a potent instrument for challenging and reshaping perceptions, it necessitates a careful equilibrium with historical authenticity. The movie is expected not to erase the historical experiences of marginalized groups but to foster a re-evaluation of historical narratives that honors the complexities and contributions of all racial groups. Thus, the movie ultimately invites viewers to engage in a critical reflection on the intersections of race, history, and societal roles, promoting a more accurate understanding of the past. Therefore, the race swapping in the movie not only can be a powerful tool to promote racial inclusivity, but also to eradicate the historical issue of particular marginalized groups.

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