

Analysis of Green Book from the Perspective of Postcolonial Criticism

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Abstract

The movie *Green Book* was released in China on March 1, 2019. The film is based on a true story in which a black pianist, Shirley, hired Tony, a bodyguard, as the driver to go on tour in the south where racial discrimination was serious. On the way to south, Shirley and Tony, two distinctive people were always in conflict with each other, nevertheless, they would go through all difficulties together. The film mainly depicts the establishment process of friendship between Shirley and Tony, which exceeds race and class. The analysis of the film from the perspective of postcolonial criticism aims to provide readers with a better understanding of the film and strengthen their cognition of the film.

Keywords

Green Book; Racial discrimination; Postcolonial criticism theory.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial criticism emerged as a distinct category only in the 1990s. It is not mentioned, for instance, in the first edition of Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985) or Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1992). It gained currency through the influence of such books as: *In Other Worlds* (Gayatri Spivak, 1987); *The Empire Writes Back* (Bill Ashcroft, 1989); *Nation and Narration* (Homi Bhabha, 1990) and *Culture and Imperialism* (Edward Said, 1993) (Peter Barry, 2009).

One significant effect of postcolonial criticism is to further undermined the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics (Peter Barry, 2009). The universalism is rejected by postcolonial criticism; whenever a universal signification is claimed for a work, then, white, Eurocentric norms and practices are being promoted by a sleight of hand to this elevated status, and all others correspondingly relegated to subsidiary, marginalised roles (Peter Barry, 2009). The movie *Green Book* mainly tells the story of Tony, a white Italian, and Shirley, a black musician, who established a deep friendship step by step. The film involves issues such as hybrid identity, racial discrimination and cultural hegemony, which are related to postcolonial criticism theory, therefore, analyzing the film from the perspective of postcolonial criticism can enable readers to understand the profound connotation behind the film.

2. Postcolonial Criticism

The ancestry of postcolonial criticism can be traced to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French in 1961, and voicing what might be called 'cultural resistance' to France's African empire (Peter Barry, 2009). Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, can be said to inaugurate postcolonial criticism, which is a specific expose of the Eurocentric universalism which takes for granted both the superiority of what is European or Western, and the inferiority of what is not (Peter Barry, 2009). Postcolonialism refers to a new colonialist policy imposed on non-Western countries and peoples by Western powers after the disappearance of colonialism, which is also known as cultural colonialism or cultural invasion.

In order to distinguish it from the political, military and economic invasion of precolonialism, it is called postcolonialism, while postcolonial criticism is an anti-postcolonialism theory (Yi Xiaobin, 2004).

Postcolonial criticism theory is “an interdisciplinary critical theory that focuses on the interaction between white and non-white people, and between suzerains and colonies” (Cai Shengqin, 2008).

Postcolonial criticism arose after World War II in the context of the political independence of some of the colonies of former imperialist countries. The main representatives of postcolonial criticism are Fanon, Said, Spivak and Baba, who pointed out that the essence of postcolonialism is cultural colonization. Fanon insists that in fact the so-called racial division is in a social rather than a biological category, which reflects the “wishful thinking” of one group of people towards another. Racism deprived the self-awareness of colonial people, who blindly identified with white people, and submitted to universal standards of white people, which caused serious distortions in the psyche of black people (Xu Hongqian, 2021).

3. Specific Analysis

“Other”, “identity”, “discourse power” and “cultural hegemony” are the main contents of postcolonial criticism theory (Ai Na, 2021). The film will be analyzed from the following aspects.

3.1. "Other"

“Other” is the pronoun of the inferior colonial people in postcolonial criticism theory (Ai Na, 2021). Said identifies a European cultural tradition of ‘Orientalism’, which is a particular and long-standing way of identifying the East as ‘Other’ and inferior to the West. The Orient, he says, features in the Western mind ‘as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’. This means, in effect, that the East becomes the repository or projection of those aspects of themselves which Westerners do not choose to acknowledge (cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and so on) (Peter Barry, 2009).

In the film, Mr. Los Cudo asked a lady to reserve his hat and protect it with her life, because it is a gift from his mother, but Tony bribed the lady with money and took the hat away. Mr. Los Cudo was very angry when he knew that his hat was missing, and yelled at the staff “Tell Jules Podel, if I can't find the hat, I'll burn the place all over, are you clear? really, tell the Jew, if I can't find the hat, I'll burn the place.” Discrimination and persecution of Jews is common in Europe, and from the words “tell the Jew”, said by Mr. Los Cudo, we can see that Jews are regarded as “the other” by Mr. Los Cudo. The Jews is the pronoun of “other.” In the writings of some scholars, the East is “other” image of the West, and Mr. Los Cudo in the film represents Westerners, while Jules Podel represents Easterners. “Eastern society is accompanied by stereotypes such as barbarism, backwardness, autocracy, and corruption, and Orientals are irrational and uncivilized, which highlighting the authority of Western civilization and the positive image of Westerners” (Zhang Zhongzai, 2002). East is seen as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive. It also tends to be seen as homogenous, the people there being anonymous masses rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions. Their emotions and reactions are always determined by racial considerations (they are like this because they are asiatics or blacks or orientals) rather than by aspects of individual status or circumstances (for instance, because they happen to be a sister, or an uncle, or a collector of antique pottery) (Peter Barry, 2009). It seems that Mr. Los Cudo was annoyed with the loss of his hat, but at a deeper level, he distinguished himself from “other”, which reflected discrimination and inequality.

3.2. "Identity"

In postcolonial criticism theory, “identity” is established on the basis of “other.”

There is a conversation between Tony and Johnson in the film. Tony asked Johnson and the others why they were in his home, Johnson replied: "We are here to be companions for Doloris (Tony's wife)", and then Tony's father-in-law said: "Tony, don't be sleeping when my daughter is here alone with these sacks of coal, do you understand what I'm saying?" Tony replied, "I didn't know who they were going to send, I didn't know they were going to send eggplants," and Tony's father-in-law said, "It's an Italian's job! Disgraceful!" From this dialogue, we can see Tony and his father-in-law's attitude towards black people, full of discrimination, disgust, and vigilance. They regarded black people as "other", and they distinguished their identities from black people by calling them "coal" and "eggplants". After the conversation, Tony even threw away the glasses which black people had used. While after lunch, Tony's wife found Tony throwing the glasses which black people had used into the trash, and after a while, she picked them up and put them into the sink. There is a great difference between Tony's behavior and his wife's behavior, which vividly shows Tony's deep discrimination against black people. There is another conversation between Tony and his wife in the movie. Tony returned home after the interview for Shirley's driver, and his wife asked him if Shirley is a black man? Tony replied yes, then his wife said "you couldn't even stand it for a week!", while Tony replied "I can do it as long as the money is in place.", which demonstrates that Doloris knew Tony's serious discrimination and revulsion against black people. On the way to south, Tony even ate the sandwich prepared for Shirley by his wife. From the perspective of postcolonialism, these clips vividly show how Tony and his father-in-law established their dominant position as colonizers through "other".

3.3. Hybrid identity

Postcolonial criticism emphasizes the duality and hybridity of identity.

3.3.1. The duality of Tony's identity

In the film, as a white Italian, Tony discriminated black people seriously in the first place, but in order to make money, Tony decided to put up with Shirley, serving as Shirley's driver. In fact, Tony's wife was unconvinced that he can stand Shirley even for a week. However, compared with Shirley, a black pianist, Tony is more like a black man, who took away the stone which belongs to the store without paying, gambling with black people, assaulted on the police, ate fried chicken while driving and threw away bones and bottles from the car window. There's also a conversation between Tony and Shirley in the film. Tony said "Just because I'm not a black man, can't I be angry when he (the policeman) talked about me like that? God, I'm more like a black man than you, you don't know about your fellow citizens, what they eat, how they speak, how they live, you don't even know who little Richard is". When talking about Shirley, Tony once said to Oleg, "if those guys ask me to go out to the bathroom, I'll just deal with it in their living room". From the above plots, it is not difficult to see that although Tony is a white Italian, he is more like a black man, which reflects the duality of Tony's identity.

3.3.2. The duality of Shirley's identity

In the film, Shirley is a famous black musician, who is not like a black man at all. On the contrary, he has refined taste and good upbringing which are thought to be exclusive good qualities of white people from the perspective of white people. There is a clip in the film where Tony said to Shirley "Don't you black people like fried chicken and barbecue?" Shirley replied, "Just because other black people like some types of music, do I have to like eating the same food with them?" which indicates that Shirley didn't think he and other black people are birds of a feather. When Shirley stayed in the hotel where black people lived, he couldn't accept the invitation from local black people to play with them, and was finally questioned by his own fellow citizens: "Do you think you're noble?", which indicates that other black people thought Shirley was a member of them. There is another a clip in the movie, when Tony and Shirley encountered a car problem on the road, Shirley got out of the car and saw people with the same skin color as himself doing farm work in the field, at the same time, the people working in the field also

stopped their work to look at Shirley, which displays the great distinction between Shirley and other black people. Shirley and other black people have same skin color, nevertheless, Shirley's good upbringing, profound knowledge and great talent distinguishes him for other black people. Shirley can employ a white Italian to drive him to south for performance, while other black people can only do hard work in the field. From this plot, we can see that although Shirley has black skin, he has many good qualities, which belong to white people from colonizers' perspective. When Shirley was prevented from having a meal in the dinning hall and required to go to the storeroom to have a meal. Shirley replied "No, I would never go to the storeroom to have a meal." in the right and self-confident tone. Then Tony tried to comfort Shirley with a few words, but Shirley replied "Either I'll eat here or I'll not be on stage tonight." There is another clip in the film. When Shirley was deported to the toilet in the woods to go to the toilet, he replied "No, I won't go to the woods to go to the toilet, only animals would do it.", then Shirley asked Tony to spend one hour driving him to the hotel where he lived in to go to the toilet and then they came back to perform. Both these two plots demonstrate that Shirley didn't accept inequality resulted from his black identity, and he behaved more like a white man rather than a black man.

When Tony provided fried chicken for Shirley, Shirley said that he had never eaten fried chicken, didn't want to spatter oil on the blanket, cannot pick up fried chicken with his hands and he needed plates or cutlery, but under Tony's persuasion, Shirley did it and said "It doesn't look very hygienic.", which indicates that Shirley has good eating habits. Finally, Shirley threw away bones from the car window like Tony because bones can be decomposed in the wild. From the above plots, we can see that Shirley is not like a black man at all or "other" in the eyes of colonizers. In other words, Shirley can be described as a white man, except his black identity, which reflects the duality of Shirley's identity.

3.3.3. The hybridity of Shirley's identification with his black identity

In the film, Tony got the Green Book when he was going to be Shirley's driver, which listed hotels which black people could stay. Tony also told his wife that black people had to find some justification to travel, which demonstrates serious discrimination against black people. Besides, Shirley was forbidden to use the toilet in the upscale place when he was waiting to perform, then he asked Tony to spend dozens of minutes driving him to his residence to go to the toilet, and then they came back to perform. There was another clip where Shirley said to Tony "I have to endure that (inequality) almost every day for so many years, at least one night you should have endured it", which demonstrates that Shirley had accepted the fact that he is a black man and he acquiesced to all discrimination. Moreover, if he didn't identify with his black identity, why did he give up triple pay and choose to perform in the south where racial discrimination was serious?

However, Shirley's refined taste and good upbringing make it difficult for him to be involved in other black people. Shirley once said to Tony "Rich white people asked me to play the piano for them because it made them feel elegant, but when I walked off that stage, I became a black man again for them, and I suffered alone because I am not accepted by my fellow citizens for I am not like them." Although Shirley possessed the qualities that only white people would have in the eyes of white people, such as refined taste and good upbringing, because of his skin color, no matter how good he was and how many good qualities he had, he can not escape the curse of discrimination against black people. But in Shirley's mind, he didn't think he is like other black people, and in fact he is not like them at all. There is a clip where Shirley saw Tony lying on the ground to play with a group of black people after he finished his performance and he said to Tony "Next time you need extra money, you just ask me." But Tony replied "Yeah sorry. The guys were having a little game." While Shirley asked "So stooping down in the gravel pitching dice for pocket change makes you a winner?" Tony was confused and said "Everybody was doing it." But Shirley replied "They didn't have a choice whether to be inside or out. You

did.”, which indicates that Shirley distinguished himself from other black people and he didn't identify with his black identity. After Tony was put into the jail because he assaulted on the police, Shirley asked that “Why should I be locked up in prison?” while the police said contemptuously, “Just because of your nasty skin color”. Besides, Shirley was refused by the salesman for his black identity when he was going to try on the cloth in the clothing store. These two plots vividly demonstrates that Shirley didn't realize that his black identity had exerted such negative impact on him, in other words, Shirley didn't identify with his black identity. When Shirley was preparing for his last performance in the south, he was prevented from having a meal in the dinning hall and required to go to the storeroom to have a meal. But Shirley said “No, I would never go to the storeroom to eat.” in the right and self-confident tone. Then Tony tried to comfort Shirley with a few words, but Shirley replied “Either I'll eat here or I'll not be on stage tonight.” Finally, Shirley canceled his performance and went to the Orange Bird Bar with Tony. There is another clip in the film. When Shirley was deported to the woods outside the upscale place to go to the toilet, he replied “No, I won't go to the woods to go to the toilet, only animals would do it.”, then Shirley asked Tony to spend one hour driving him to the hotel where he lived in to go to the toilet and then they came back to perform. Although Tony had persuaded Shirley to go to the toilet in the woods because it would take a long time to go back to the hotel, Shirley still insisted on going back to the hotel, which demonstrates that Shirley held the view that he is different from the black people in the eyes of white people, thus, he won't do what black people do from the perspective of white people. In other words, he didn't identify with his black identity.

Although he was a black man, he did not identify himself as “black people” in the eyes of white people. In the film, when Tony and Shirley got out of the jail and argued with each other because Tony beat up the police, Shirley shouted out “So if I'm not black enough, not white enough, then tell me, Tony, who am I?”, which shows that Shirley's puzzlement about his identity because he was not accepted by his fellow citizens, and also discriminated by white people. Finally, Shirley canceled his last performance and went to the Orange Bird Bar with Tony, Shirley played the piano in the bar, welcomed by the people there, and there were some black people accompanying him, they had a wonderful time together, but at ordinary times Shirley only played the Steinway piano, and also paid great attention to his words and deeds. From this clip, we can see that Shirley identified with his black identity and integrated himself into his fellow citizens, which shows the hybridity of Shirley's identification with his black identity.

3.3.4. The hybridity of Tony's identification with Shirley's black identity

Tony discriminated black people at first, and the reason why he served as the driver for Shirley was that he lost his job. Because of the urgent need for money, Tony had to put up with Shirley, a black man. Therefore, Tony didn't get on well with Shirley in the first place and he ate the sandwich which was prepared for Shirley by Doloris. Tony once said to Shirley “Don't you black people like fried chicken and barbecue?” Shirley replied, “Just because other black people like some types of music, do I have to like eating the same food with them?”, which indicates that Tony had thought that Shirley and other black people were birds of a feather.

However, Tony's letter to his wife Doloris said: “Tonight, I saw Dr. Shirley playing the piano, he didn't look like a black man at all, but like Lady Liberty, or even better, I think he is a genius, whenever I look at him in the rear view mirror, I find that he often thinks silently alone, I think geniuses are like this.”, which indicates that Tony had begun to change his thought on Shirley. Afterwards Tony knew about how to write letters to Doloris with the help of Shirley and Shirley helped Tony wrote many letters to Doloris, and Tony wrote the last letter by himself and expressed his gratitude to Shirley by saying “Doctor, thank you for helping me write those letters, you are really good at writing letters.”, which demonstrates that Tony had abandon his prejudice against Shirley's black identity. There is a clip in the film where Shirley thought Tony was going to change job, then he took the initiative to find Tony and said to Tony that he would

like to pay a higher salary to employ Tony as his driver, but Tony said that he didn't think about changing job, which indicates that instead of discriminating against Shirley for his black identity, Tony had begun to regard Shirley as his friend. Moreover, Tony once said to Shirley "People love your performance, anyone can play the music of Beethoven or Chopin or those guys, but your music, your playing, only you can do it", and Shirley replied "Thank you, Tony.", which displays good relationship between them and indicates that Tony had changed his attitude towards Shirley and even begun to praise Shirley's performance and admire his talent and unique from the bottom of his heart.

When Tony and Shirley passed through the town of Sunset, it was raining heavily, and the police asked Tony "why you had a black man in your car?" and Tony replied "he is my boss", and then the police asked Shirley to get out of the car to check his ID, but Tony said, "Please, it is raining hard, sir, I ask him to hand it to me from the window, is that OK?" nevertheless, the police still insisted that Shirley should get out of the car. Finally, Tony said to Shirley "I dislike the way that he treated you, making you be exposed to the rain.", which demonstrates that Tony had actually treated Shirley as his boss and stick up for Shirley. Finally, Shirley drove Tony home because of Tony's tiredness to celebrate Christmas with families. After Tony got home, one of Tony's friend said to Tony "How about him? that old black man, who made you annoying." But Tony replied "Don't call him like that." At the end of the film, Shirley came to Tony's home to celebrate Christmas and he was welcomed by Tony's families. Afterwards Tony and Shirley had been good friends. From these plots, it is not difficult to see that Tony had eliminated his discrimination against Shirley. Tony disliked Shirley because of Shirley's black identity in the first place, but he gradually abandoned his stereotypes on black people, which indicates the hybridity of Tony's identification with Shirley's black identity.

3.4. Discourse power

Language is a key area which postcolonialism concerns. Foucault's theory of power discourse states: "Power represents a relationship of power, embodied in the form of discourse, while discourse can also become a tool for power control, which is closely related to power (Foucault Michel, 1972). There is a clip in the film where Tony and Shirley drove through the town of Sunset (where black people are not allowed to get in or out at night) when they were checked by the policeman, who check Tony's driver license and identity document. The policeman asked, "How do you pronounce this last name?" Tony replied, "VilleLange." The policeman said, "What the hell is that name?" Tony replied, "That's Italian." The policeman said, "No wonder, that's why you picked him up, you are a half black man.", which indicates the policeman's discrimination against other people except his own fellow citizens. From their conversation, we can see the close relationship between language and power, and the white policeman discriminated against Tony because his name was in Italian and called him a half black man. In the eyes of the colonizers, language is a symbol of power, status, while Italians, blacks are inferior, therefore, their language are in a subordinate position in the discourse power.

3.5. Cultural hegemony

Said pointed out in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Culture is not only a spiritual practice of human development, but also a historical accumulation of social progress. Imperialism carries out colonial activities not only in the seizure of territories, but also in cultural colonization through ideological control" (Said, Edward, 1993). In the film, Shirley said to Tony: "When I walked off that stage, I became a black man again for them, because this is their real culture.", which reflects the deep-seated discrimination against blacks contained in white culture. Because Shirley is a black man, no matter how outstanding he is or how elegant his manners are, he is not accepted by white people, and if any, it would only be limited to the time he performs on the stage.

From the perspective of postcolonial criticism, everything that the colonizers have is fine and noble, whether it is the external skin color, behavior or internal culture, all cultures except white culture are unacceptable. Under the cultural colonization, gradually, black people accepted all the bad remarks they had to endure as blacks, the low-level jobs they had to do, all the unfair treatment they had to face, they could only live in black hotels, they could only enter black restaurants, they couldn't even try on clothes in clothing stores. Finally, they became "other".

There is a conversation in the movie where Tony said to Oleg, "I don't understand how he (Shirley) did it smiling at those people, and if those guys want me to go out to the bathroom, I'll just deal with it in their living room." Oleg said: "Dr. Shirley could have stayed north at a party on Park Avenue with three times the amount of the show and is sought after, but he chose to come here." Tony asked, "Why?" In the later plots, Oleg answered Tony's question by saying, "Talent alone is not enough, it takes a lot of courage to change people's minds." From this clip, we can see that cultural hegemony largely influenced people's thinking. Colonizers believe that their culture is superior to any other culture, and they subtly colonize the people of other regions through cultural colonization. Moreover, this seemingly innate sense of superiority is deeply rooted in the concept of colonizers. Therefore, Shirley decided to go south to perform in order to fight for equality and dignity for black people, but it turned out that it was very difficult for him to change the concept of white people, from which we can see that the impact of cultural colonization is dramatic, and it requires a lot of courage and effort to change this status quo.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the film from different perspectives of "other", "hybrid identity", "identity", "discourse power" and "cultural hegemony", it is not difficult for us to see that postcolonialism has affected all aspects of people's lives. In the film, the most obvious manifestation is the discrimination against black people. There is serious racial discrimination in American south, and Tony, the Italian in the film, also has a very strong feeling of discrimination against black people at the beginning, and his disgust with black people can be seen from his throwing away the cup used by black people, and his call for black people "eggplant". However, when Tony was interviewing for the position of Shirley's driver, Shirley asked him "Have you ever wondered what's wrong with working for black people", while Tony replied "No, no, no, just two days ago, my wife invited two colored people to come over for a drink." It is evident that Tony had lied in order to get the job. In fact, Tony had serious discrimination against black people. Nevertheless, in order to earn money, Tony decided to serve as the driver for Shirley, a black man. On the way to south, the two people established a deep friendship gradually, although there were conflicts and differences. In the end, Tony's discrimination and prejudice against black people had also been eliminated, it turns out that whites and blacks can live in harmony and differences in skin color and race will not be obstacles to the establishment of good relationships.

Colonial racial discrimination exerted a great impact on the lives of black people. Their economic life was pretty miserable, they were discriminated against everywhere, they could not stay in some hotels, they could not enter restaurants, and their accesses to certain places were restricted, such as the town of Sunset in the film, where black people were not allowed to get in or out at night, they were even forbidden to use the bathroom. For Shirley, who has outstanding talent, fame and wealth in the movie, he is also persecuted by racial discrimination everywhere, and we can imagine what circumstances those ordinary black people will encounter.

In today's world, the relationship between different countries and different peoples is getting closer and closer, which are devoted to build a community with a shared future. All countries and peoples are interconnected and interdependent, especially in the current world where

countries and peoples are facing some difficulties and challenges, such as poverty eradication, social and economic development and opposition of various forms of terrorism. Moreover, it is imperative for them to tackle various natural disasters and cope with the sudden epidemic COVID-19. The elimination of racial discrimination is therefore all the more necessary, but it requires a concerted effort by all. First and foremost, the oppressed and colonized peoples need to unite and fight together for equality and happiness.

Just like Shirley's last performance in the movie, he was not allowed to eat in the restaurant because he was treated unfairly. Shirley said that he would either go into the restaurant to eat or cancel the evening performance, finally Shirley and Tony left, and Shirley did not finish his last performance. Shirley and Tony went to the Orange Bird Bar, and Tony said to Shirley, "I applaud your actions today, you have maintained your dignity, just like your friend the president said, don't ask what your country can do for you, ask what you have done for yourself." It can be seen from this paragraph that to solve the problem of racial discrimination, individual efforts are of great significance, only by bravely striving for equality and safeguarding their dignity can they effectively defend their rights and realize the independence of the entire nation. If individuals look down on the culture of their own nation, do not identify with their own identity, and think that their nation is inferior, backward, and worthless, then will such individuals, such a nation, be respected by others?

Shirley in the movie has such courage to fight for equality and dignity. He interpreted the dignity of a black man with his actual actions, because he knew the importance of dignity, as he once said to Tony: "Fists can't help you win, Tony, only dignity can help you win, dignity always prevails." Moreover, in order to eliminate the racial discrimination, it is necessary for the countries with racial discrimination to make efforts to fight against discrimination and pursue equality. Only peace can promote development, exploitation, oppression, and discrimination cannot have a place.

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