



Magical Hero and Systemic Racism: An Investigation of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the most important screenplays, *Django Unchained* (2012), by the famous Hollywood auteur Quentin Tarantino. The story revolves around the life of a slave family, and Django is the central protagonist, a runaway slave, who had suffered at the hands of the slave owners. The methodology used for the investigation of the portrayal of Django is the textual analysis, given the qualitative nature of the research. The theoretical base of the investigation is the Critical Race Theory, which upholds the pervading and continuous presence of racism against African-Americans, and most specifically, in its institutionalized manifestation. The paper finds that though there are elements of melodrama and surrealism, the representation of Django takes the proto-form of the magical hero. The hero overcomes dire circumstances with the help of Dr. Schultz. The research finds that despite the apparent mainstream representation of the African-Americans, Tarantino did succeed in not only highlights but also contemporariness the racism, discrimination and marginality of the African-Americans.

Keywords: Django Unchained, Quentin Tarantino, CRT, cultural studies, African-Americans, race

Introduction

Quentin Tarantino is a Hollywood writer-director, famed for his realistic portrayal and dialogues in a number of motion picture films. *Django Unchained* (2012), one of Quentin Tarantino's most significant screenplays, focuses not only on the most problematic issue of slavery in the US socio-political history, but also on the big question of othering in the postcolonial context. The movie brings to the audience scenes of oppressions and abuses of the black men and women and, more pertinently, on the protagonists Django and Broomhilda. The story is a typical Western genre of film, full of sound and fury, bravado, and showmanship, but deep down it highlights the exploitation of millions of African-American in the Southern states, or the 'slave states' of the Antebellum US.

The film's name alludes to the prospect of freedom and of unchaining of the shackles of slavery. One understanding of the title is that of achieving freedom and living life as Django wished it. Another is of potential—potential that until the start of the film was unrealized. Django has the potential to take life by the reins, and only needed a sliver of a chance to do just that. It can be looked as not only Django's own yearning but the yearning of every man, woman, and child under the yoke of slavery. This sentiment of activity rather than passivity has been echoed in these following words: "Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper" (King Jr., 2013, p. 13). The unchaining of Django is in essence the voice of rage that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of in the above passage.



Research Objective

This research paper explores the representation of African-Americans in cinema with the focus being on the film *Django Unchained* (2012) by the writer and director Quentin Tarantino. It investigates the portrayal of African-Americans during the United States' tumultuous history, laserizing in on the lives of people leading up to the American Civil War. The horrific concept of slavery can be observed in the film and the screenplay. The exploitative nature of it is at the heart of this research, and the way Tarantino almost rewrote history, giving the titular character a chance at something so many people at the time wished for, revenge.

Framework

This study focuses the concept of slavery as understood by the US law at the time of slavery. As such, the theoretical framework proposed in the Critical Race Theory have been applied to this particular body of work. The main perspective for the analysis of the screenplay is the Critical Race Theory, founded by Derrick Bell, whose view on the institutionalized form of racism has been one of the key theoretical frameworks of modern era. Though the theory is US-specific, and mostly focuses on the lives of the African-Americans, but over time it went on to include other minorities like Asians and Latin-Americans, which is dominated by the white class.

Literature Review

As the research is centered around the concept of systemic racism and critical race theory, the works of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic are of particular import. Their co-authored book by the title *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (2013) explore the basic premise of the critical race theory, "our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct with it words, stories and silence. However, we need not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided. By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better, fairer world" (p. 3). Essentially, scholars of CRT seek to find tangible, real-world issues related to systemic racism.

Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, Second Edition (Critical America) (2017) is another such text authored by both Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, which in a straightforward manner explores salient aspects of CRT, its origins, principal themes, leading voices as well as new directions of this movement. The second edition also introduces readers to important new issues, which included education and psychology and greatly expands on issues, which have already been discussed in the previous editions.

Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement (2010) is written and compiled by leading theorists and scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, and Kendall Thomas. The introductory chapter of the book explores CRT in general as a way to, "examine the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the viewpoint of law's role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination" (p. 3).

Discussion and Analysis

Django Unchained (2012) is about liberty and freedoms, not of the whole slave population in the Deep South of America where slavery was fully backed by the law and supported by the church, though not as aggressively as the plantation owners delightfully practiced. The commodification of the African-American, then called the Negroes, is the ultimate stigma of the otherwise free, human, and fair American political and social order. Given the four centuries of exploitation and



oppressions, ruthlessly executed by all denominations of plantation owners, the anguish of *Django* could not be understood in one linear narrative. However, it does present the issue in an empathetic way but to the extent about one family, *Django* and *Broomhilda*, who always wanted to break the chains. The liberty as an idealistic desire of self-fulfillment is missing when the themes of the *Django Unchained* (2012) could be fathomed. It is a human desire to be free, and these unfortunate characters are no exception, which Tarantino authenticates by referring to the several attempts that they made to run away. It is, in fact, one man's quest for freedom, for himself and his wife *Broomhilda* and in their desire for freedom could be symbolically understood in the letter 'R' stamped on their bodies which defined their destiny,

One of the seven slaves is our hero DJANGO.... he's fourth in the leg iron line. We may or may not notice a tiny small "r" burned into his cheek ("r" for runaway), but we can't help but notice his back which has been SLASHED TO RIBBONS by Bull Whip Beatings. (Tarantino, 2012, p. 1)

The film's tagline of "life, liberty and the pursuit of vengeance", in essence its subtitle, is a bastardization of a basic tenet of the US identity of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', changing the word 'happiness' to that of 'vengeance' (Tarantino, 2012). Revenge is a powerful form of motivation for *Django*. It is because of this that *Django*, after getting his freedom, has the courage to go to *Candyland*, the most dangerous white plantation, symbolizing the face of slavery in its ugliest form. One of the questions that is pertinent to this subtitle is whether this pursuit of revenge is in fact *his* revenge, motivated by his own suffering, or a communal suffering of all the slaves that have been embodied in the form of *Django*. These views are explicitly there in the works of *Angela Davis* (2016). To quote her, "In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist". Interestingly, there have always been two distinct features of the struggle of the African-American from the slavery era to the 20th century: one was the nonviolent resistance of *Martin Luther King Jr.* and others, who appealed to the humanity of the majority class, invoking Christian beliefs, as opposed to the struggle of *Malcolm X*, which is generally viewed as proactive and even militant, and was once quoted as saying, "A man who stands for nothing will fall for anything" (X, 2022). However, both wanted to integrate in the system, and remain visible and empowered like the majority group. In the latter group, so far as academicians and writers are concerned, the anger that *James Baldwin* expressed in his desire for authenticity, is also in the context of this research, relevant to the anguish against the oppressing white majority. In his words, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Baldwin, 1962)

Regarding the desire of the African-Americans for real freedom, much has been said by not only black leaders and intellectuals, but white statesmen as well. In this respect, the discourse of *Abraham Lincoln* (1989) in the text *Speeches and Writing 1832-1858* epitomizes the very idea of liberty, irrespective of race, class, and gender. He is particularly harsh on the persistence of slavery and believes wholeheartedly in the spirit of freedom, emancipation, and liberty.

When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read, 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to *Russia*, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy. (p. 223)



One of the recurring cinematic stereotypes for black people is the so-called Magical Hero who does things in an almost surreal and with supernatural strength. The question before this research is to find out whether the portrayal of African-American in Tarantino's cinema is realistic or racialized like the mainstream Hollywood production. In *Django Unchained* (2012), the central character is a slave who has been freed by Doctor King Schultz, a German bounty hunter who is there with respect to his profession, holding the legal documents to bring dead or alive his potential bounties of the Speck brothers. It is understood in the context of the narrative and plotline that without his active help we would have not known this black person who is later transformed into what we normally consider to be the magical hero and whosoever sees this transformation in action, wonders "who is this nigger? (Tarantino, 2012, p. 141)".

The representation of Django and his wife Broomhilda, in the screenplay *Django Unchained* (2012), could be assessed and analyzed from the theoretical framework of this paper. As a representative trope, the black people in cinema are not presented as fully empowered, for the obvious reasons that the struggle for emancipation in the real sense goes on to this day (Bernardi, 1996). However, in the very opening scene, the slaves are shown somewhere in Texas and that includes Django under the strict supervision of the white slaver and his white underlings who, based on the superiority of their skin, are not only guaranteed protection by the slaver, but the law is also on their side. These are ordinary slaves that we would see later in the play, and we could have a glimpse of the oppression they undergo in a society which is denying their existence as humans. In order to ensure this animal-like existence, the runaways are branded with 'r' on their bodies. It is through the device of Spaghetti Western, a specific genre of films pertaining to life in the American West, that Quentin Tarantino brings to us the plight of these African-Americans (Henley, 2015).

Though not strictly falling into this category, but the deeper analysis reveals that Django with little training from his patron rises to the level of the plantation owner, Calvin Candy with respect to his confidence, skills, courage, and power. As an assistant bounty hunter, to Doctor Schultz he knows how to kill white criminals, with an obvious weird pleasure because the very idea of killing whites and being paid for it is quite inspiring to him. This may be the anguish and revenge tendency in Django, who does his job as bounty hunter. The surprising aspect of this character which, though, has been realistically drawn, is the way in which he adapts to the new life as a free man. His talent to be as good as the white man in this profession is due to the training by Doctor Schultz that reinforces his abilities. His adjustment to the new realities, in the wake of a lot of resistance by the whites including the lawmen, Sheriff Marshal and of course, Calvin Candie.

Riding alongside Doctor Schultz, on his horse which he had been provided, Django is an aberration and while the white people look at him with annoyance, the black people with wonder and amazement. "They never seen a nigger on a horse before" (Tarantino, 2012, p. 12) proclaims Django on first coming across this phenomenon. On another occasion when Django and the Doctor go in search of their bounties to the Bennett Manor, another plantation, they are riding on their horses to which Bennett seriously objects and resists because, "It is against the law for Nigger to ride a horse in this territory" (Tarantino, 2012, p. 24).

As the two professional bounty hunters appear, this mixed reaction speaks for the cultural milieu of the south. They accept Django as a free man though with a lot of negative feeling but could not compromise to the point that a black man would be riding a horse which was against the traditional legal system on the plantation. To this reaction, Doctor Schultz responds by saying that



“my assistant is not supposed to walk while I’m on the horse, searching for bounties.” However, Django knows that these are quite abnormal things for a slave who is no more than a beast at the disposal of the plantation owner, which makes him understandably nervous. “I can’t be walking in no salon in public” (Tarantino, 2012).

The newly empowered slave is, however, determined to find out his wife who had been sold to some unknown white man, and it is his mission to get her free. “Find my wife and buy her freedom” (Tarantino, 2012, p. 21) is his plea to the doctor. For Doctor Schultz this is a new piece of information and his hatred for slavery and love for freedom is one thing which he cannot disregard, and he tells Django that he would be with him in this particular job. As a seasoned bounty hunter, working for four years, he knows a lot about the power structure and the legal system of the south, about which Django had no knowledge. He tells Django that it is not the proper time to go to Granville because it is dangerous, not only for black people, but for the whites as well. It is the place where slaves are sold, and the prices are haggled, the circumstances of which may lead to any number of dangerous consequences, due to the tension, firstly because there is a transition going on, and the unexpressed fear of the white people that the black people could rebel. He advises Django that they will go to Granville “When you get more dangerous” (Tarantino, 2012, p. 23), implying that then he would be able to walk tall and be an equal.

As a guardian, mentor and savior, Doctor Schultz trained him in the most appropriate way and tells him that he is not to break his character as an assistant bounty hunter and later as a slaver who wants to buy Mandingos. In order to rescue Broomhilda, they must go to Candyland, and they decide to disguise themselves as slavers because Candyland is the notorious place for the Mandingo fights.

The Magical Hero has the mission to find his wife and get her free from the chains of slavery, but it is not an easy job and both Doctor Schultz and Django, are aware of that. For Django to take his revenge, both lay down a strategy to get each of the perpetrators one by one. This not only includes all the white people who oppressed them, but also the black servants who help the whites to oppress not only Django and Broomhilda, but the likes of many others. Some of them laugh at him, the way he is dressed. Others despise him for being a slaver, which according to Django, is the meanest of the jobs in the South, because the black people consider such person as despicable. This negative image of Django is also cemented by his guise as a Mandingo expert, or the so-called One-Eyed Charlie, but he must go through this in order to execute his plan. Interestingly, Django is more skilled by not breaking his character while his mentor is about to break his, when he is invited to watch a Mandingo fight that ends in the death of the weaker one, and he is extremely hurt watching one man killing another for the pleasure of a white man. Django tries to tell him that as a slaver he is not breaking the character while he does, after the fight, and he feels that this is not going to help him and his wife. This aspect of Django’s character in a way portrays him as the magical hero who fits in well in any guise and is smart enough to be alert and focused on the dangerous environment at Candyland (Jordan, 2020). But all this did not go well when one of the slave servants, Stephen, sees through these two personas. Stephen brings an element of suspense and danger to what had been planned by Django and Schultz. He obviously knows that they are not who they say they are and as an obedient and self-serving servant to Calvin Candie, he advises him to be wary of the two guests. One interpretation of this character is that Tarantino, with this portrayal, brings in another clichéd character trope of the so-called uncle Tom, who symbolizes the subservience of black people to whites.



Stephen, the black butler of Candyland, hates Django and repeatedly refers to him as 'nigger' and cannot reconcile to the idea that Django is a free man (Tarantino, 2012). The reason as can be understood is that Django, while being a runaway slave, has more freedom afforded to him, and has the agency to realize his dreams and desires. Stephen, on the other hand, does not, being servile to a white slaver. Stephen is someone who has given up on his own people, becoming a self-serving lackey of Candie. Django justifiably hates Stephen and the likes of him, who are more loyal to their enslavers. In the given cultural environment, slave servants like Stephen and Django the slaver are by-and-large hated by the slaves there. In their role as slaver and submissive servant, both are not respected by the slaves over there. When Django and Stephen confront each other, the hatred comes to the surface. Neither the cunning Stephen nor the smart Django accept each other when Calvin Candy intervenes.

Since Stephen is the most confident of his slave servants, Candie is all ears when Stephen talks about the reason for the two strangers visiting Candyland about buying slaves. Given the trust he has towards the shrewd slave, Candie listens and almost agrees with the conspiracy theory Stephen paints in that particular circumstance. He almost interrogates Calvin Candy, his master, by repeatedly asking "Who's that Nigger up that nag" And he repeats when Candy tries to avoid that question, 'Who is this Nigger' (Tarantino, 2012, p. 141). Interestingly, it is Django who responds to this, "If you wanna know...you ask me" (2012, p. 92), fully embracing his guise as an independent and free man, unafraid of confrontation regarding his legal status.

As a cinematic racial stereotype, Django is more or less a magical hero, who suddenly appears from nowhere and is visible everywhere from Granville to Stephen Manor, and ultimately to Candyland, the final theater for the actual revenge melodrama (Jordan, 2020). Django is a slave, like countless others in the South during that time. He, like them, is the economic lifeline of the southern economy. The slaves are not only the workforce who work on plantations mainly of cotton, sugar, rice but the slave system in place is a tragic aspect of socio-legal and political order as they are sold and purchased as commodities. Out of this mire, it is next to impossible for a slave man or woman to challenge the system and bring meaningful structural changes that this particular screenplay did not intend. However, empowering an individual in this case, the coming of the white savior and emancipating Django, is a cinematic mainstream trope and had its market value as a cultural product.

In an interesting dialogue between Ace Woody, Candie's servant who is a ruthless slaver, the magical hero is not completely destroyed but temporarily defeated. Woody tells him that "I know there was something fishy about you all. That line of work" (Tarantino, 2012, p. 133).

In such circumstances, Django as a slave could not have any chance to realize his dream of finding Broomhilda, his wife, and getting her free. However, the magical hero conquered all these obstacles by not only killing the workers of the mining company to which he was sold, but also got the other Mandingos free.

Our hero Django provides one surprise after another to the caged Mandingos, and they cannot reconcile a slave being capable of doing whatever Django did to his enemies. One of them asks in surprise, "Who is this Nigger" (Tarantino, 2012, p. 141). This wondering from the slave's perspective is a reflection of the element of the supernatural or superhuman aspect of the main protagonist in the screenplay. He not only takes revenge and gets himself free from the white servants, but also opens the cage to emancipate the caged Mandingos along the way, on which they exclaim once more, "Who was that nigger?" (Tarantino, 2012, p. 141).



Conclusion

The preceding discussion reveals one man's revenge and its far-reaching consequences, which, though is quite dramatic and almost surreal, but did stir the minds of the audience seeing the seething anguish of the slaves and thereby, problematizing slavery and segregation and othering. The big question, however, is of race relationship and racism and racialization that is still alive.

Django Unchained (2012) not only realistically represents slavery and its ugly face, drawing, of course, from the historical point of view, but at the same time rewrites the slave story from the contemporary perspective, wherein the audience, revisits their understanding of the recent race tensions manifested in such slogans as Black Lives Matter, are still faced with denial.

As a cultural product, *Django Unchained* (2012) is indeed a credible work, which, among other things, has started debate on the issue of race, even at the cost of controversy and contestation. The plot is well-knitted and the action, given its classic rising and falling stages, impacts the viewers. The use of spectacle, for Quentin Tarantino, is rightly acknowledged and characterization, too, is not below par.



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