

Architectural Imagery and Ethnic Narratives: Representations of Physical, Psychological, and Verbal Oppression in the Films 12 Years a Slave and Hidden Figures

Muhammad Arif Firmansyah¹, Suyatno², Heny Subandiyah³

Abstract

Background. The representation of racial oppression in film is constructed not only through narrative and dialogue, but also through the construction of space and architectural imagery. Space and buildings serve as visual media that reflect power relations, segregation, and social control within specific historical contexts. *Aim.* This study aims to analyze the role of architectural imagery in shaping ethnic narratives that represent physical, psychological, and verbal oppression in the films 12 Years a Slave and Hidden Figures. *Methods.* The study uses an ethnonarrative approach by analyzing space, buildings, and visual design as narrative elements. The analysis focuses on the relationship between spatial representation and the characters' ethnic experiences within the film's narrative structure. *Results.* The results indicate that 12 Years a Slave represents the spaces of slavery—plantations, barracks, and work areas—as closed and repressive architectures of domination, directly controlling the bodies and movements of slaves and legitimizing physical and psychological violence. In contrast, Hidden Figures depicts modern institutional spaces—offices, laboratories, and public facilities—as seemingly neutral, yet symbolically embodying practices of segregation and restricted access. *Conclusions.* This research confirms that architectural imagery plays an active role in constructing ethnic narratives and represents a historical shift in forms of oppression from overt violence to more subtle, systemic control.

Keywords: *ethnic narratives, spatial representation, racial oppression, segregation, power relations.*

Introduction

Oppression is a social phenomenon that remains a global issue and a hot topic of discussion in various parts of the world. History records that the practice of oppression has long been present in the form of colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation, the impacts of which are still felt in modern times. Various contemporary conflicts and humanitarian crises, such as the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, the oppression of the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar, and discrimination against Uighur Muslims in the People's Republic of China, demonstrate that oppression is not only historical but continues to recur in different forms and contexts. This issue has even become an important agenda in international forums such as the United Nations (UN) as a collective effort to end global injustice.

In essence, oppression is a manifestation of the hegemony of a dominant group over a group perceived as weak or a minority. Oppression is often institutionalized through social, cultural, and institutional structures, making it seem normal and difficult to avoid in everyday life. Oppression can be based on race, gender, social class, age, and other identities (Dominelli, 2002; Mattsson, 2013), discrimination is often maintained through negative stereotypes and unequal power relations (Payne, 2014). Counter-oppression practices are not only concerned with interpersonal relations, but also with broader social structures, including the institutions and social spaces in which power is exercised (Burke & Harrison, 2004).

A structured and engaging expression of life's realities is literature. Literary works utilize language as a medium, a context constructed through experience and knowledge in various forms of life. In literary works, the terms "imagination," "fiction," and "expression" are used. These three terms suggest the process of human consciousness in creating literary works (Suhariyadi, 2014). In essence, literature

¹Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

²Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia. suyatno-b@unesa.ac.id (corresponding author).

³Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

is art created through an intensive, selective, and subjective process, using language as the medium. The creation of a literary work begins with the author's inner experiences, combined with imagination, resulting in a work that is not only entertaining but also has educational value. Literary works are a form and result of artistic work whose objects are humans and their lives, using language as its medium (Wicaksono, 2017). Literary works are divided into two types: ancient and modern. One type of modern literature is film. Film is a literary work in the form of moving images containing scenes that depict a storyline. Film is an audio-visual communication medium used to convey a message to a group of people gathered in a specific location (Effendy, 1986).

In the context of cultural representation, literary works and films are important media for reflecting the reality of oppression. Literary works function not only as entertainment but also as a means of social criticism that records human experiences in various dimensions of life. Film, as part of modern literature and audio-visual media, has the advantage of presenting social reality through a combination of narrative, visuals, and space. Through the depiction of space, buildings, and visual design, films are able to represent power relations symbolically and ideologically, so that oppression is not only conveyed through dialogue or storyline, but also through the construction of space and architectural imagery.

Steve McQueen's 2013 film *12 Years a Slave* is a powerful depiction of racial oppression against Black people in the United States in the 19th century. The film tells the story of Solomon Northup, a free Black man forced into slavery for twelve years. The oppression Solomon experienced was not only physical through violence and torture, but also psychological and verbal through humiliation, exclusion, and the erasure of identity. Interestingly, these practices of oppression took place in specific architectural spaces, such as plantations, master's homes, and slave barracks, which visually represent systems of control, surveillance, and racial domination. Meanwhile, the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) raises the reality of oppression experienced by African-American women in the context of modern American institutions during the era of racial segregation. Through the stories of Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Katherine Johnson at NASA, the film depicts racial and gender-based discrimination institutionalized through rules, policies, and spatial divisions. Segregation practices such as segregated workplaces, black-only restrooms, and restricted access to certain professional spaces demonstrate that architecture and spatial planning play a significant role in maintaining structural inequities. The verbal and psychological oppression experienced by the characters is also reinforced by spatial boundaries that symbolically define who has the right to be in a particular space and who does not.

The interesting aspect of these two films as research subjects is that they highlight the reality of the oppression that occurs against the Black race in the United States. Their status as immigrants and low-wage earners for hundreds of years has led to Black people being looked down upon (Ryder, Ian G. , Hansen Valerie W.-Y. , Jackson Andrew, 2018). White society felt that black people were not part of their group, so various struggles emerged in the name of black people's emancipation to fight against the discriminatory system in society (Castells, 2011). Simply put, to escape the stigma, Black people must develop their potential to be on par with White people. Interestingly, not all opportunities are equally granted to Black people due to the prevailing social privilege of white people, as if there are limitations on Black people's ability to develop their potential, particularly in the economic sphere.

In depth, the book "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa" explains that ultimately many countries on the African continent struggle to develop their economic capabilities due to the enormous pressure of the United States and Europe, as well as social class that places Black people at a disadvantage. This aligns with the political economic analysis previously explained by the author as a form of the United States and Europe's success in cornering Africa and Black people economically, socially, and politically (Shenton & Rodney, 1975).

Both films represent the ethnic experiences of African-Americans in the context of oppression, but through different temporal and spatial settings. *12 Years a Slave* depicts oppression within a traditional slavery system, while *Hidden Figures* depicts oppression within a modern institution that appears rational and scientific. However, both show a similar pattern, namely how space and architecture are used as instruments of power to limit, control, and discipline the bodies and identities of certain ethnic groups. Based on this description, this research is important because it not only examines oppression as a social or narrative phenomenon, but also positions architectural imagery as a key element in the formation of ethnic narratives. Using an ethnonarrative approach, this research seeks to uncover how the representation of space, buildings, and visual design in the films *12 Years a Slave* and *Hidden Figures* contribute to constructing the meaning of physical, psychological, and verbal oppression, while also reflecting the power relations and segregation experienced by ethnic minority groups.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with the ethnonarratology method, which combines ethnography and narratology to examine the representation of ethnic experiences constructed through the narrative structure and visual imagery of films. This research uses a qualitative approach. This qualitative approach is used to explain and analyze individual or group phenomena, events, social dynamics, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Subandi, 2011). Therefore, the qualitative research approach process begins with the development of basic assumptions (Czarniawska, 2004). This is then linked to the principles of thought used in the research. The collected data is then interpreted. Qualitative research in literature has an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary perspective, which can be understood as literature not being bound to monodisciplinary studies, but is accompanied by collaboration with current studies, so that the area of study in literature is much more dynamic and can be adapted to existing scientific developments (Ahmadi, 2019).

Ethnonarratology is used to understand how cultural phenomena and power relations are represented narratively and mediated through space, buildings, and visual arrangements (architectural imagery). The goal of applying the ethnonarratology method is to provide descriptive results that can answer a series of phenomena in depth and rich with information contained in a literary work. Literary research tends to be more qualitative. In literature, metaphors can be examined using qualitative studies and combined with related theories. If the theory used is irrelevant, the research will become a fallacy (Creswell, 2016).

In the context of this research, ethnonarratology was applied to analyze the films *12 Years a Slave* and *Hidden Figures*, focusing on three main aspects: narrative flow, visual-architectural representation, and story interpretation. This approach reveals the relationship between spatial structure and the characters' ethnic experiences in representing physical, psychological, and verbal oppression.

This method is based on ethnographic principles that place human experience at the center of analysis, and narratology, which is used to identify narrative patterns and structures. Thus, ethnonarratology is considered relevant to examining films as cultural texts that not only convey stories but also reproduce social meanings through architectural imagery.

Data collection was conducted by repeatedly watching the films *12 Years a Slave* and *Hidden Figures*, followed by transcription of dialogue and recording scenes that highlight the representation of space, buildings, and visual design. The next stage involved identifying characters and the context of the ethnic narrative, as well as coding data on physical, psychological, and verbal oppression manifested through the characters' interactions with the space and architectural environment. The data obtained was then classified into three main categories: physical oppression represented through bodily violence within a specific space; psychological oppression manifested in the form of intimidation, exclusion, and symbolic control through spatial boundaries; and verbal oppression manifested through demeaning speech reinforced by the social context of the space. All categories were analyzed based on the narrative sequence and visual-architectural representations in the film. Data analysis was conducted by identifying scenes containing forms of oppression, followed by an examination of the narrative structure and architectural imagery using an ethnonarrative approach. Then, interpretation of the meaning of power relations, segregation, and control represented through space was conducted, and conclusions were drawn regarding the role of architectural imagery in shaping ethnic narratives.

The validity of the data was tested through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Techniques used included repeated observation of the film text, theoretical triangulation, peer discussion, negative case analysis, reference testing, and cross-checking with other research members. These steps were taken to ensure consistency of interpretation and validity of the research findings.

Results

Oppression in *12 Years a Slave*

In *12 Years a Slave*, oppression of Black people is depicted as an institutional and structural practice of injustice, as argued by Egidius and Young. Oppression arises not only through individual actions but is legitimized by a social system that positions Black people as inferior based on race and class. This condition limits the characters' ability to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Visually and spatially, the film depicts the architectural depictions of slave spaces—plantations, fields, barracks, master's houses, and work areas—as enclosed, hierarchical, and repressive spaces

of domination. These spaces serve not simply as a setting for the story but as instruments of power that control the bodies, movements, and voices of slaves. The plantation architecture represents the absolute power relationship between master and slave and legitimizes the violent practices that occur within it.

a. Physical oppression

Physical oppression in 12 Years a Slave is represented through bodily violence that occurs in the plantation's work and living spaces. Scenes of beatings, slaps, torture, and sexual abuse of slaves—especially Patsey—are presented in a spatial context that isolates and denies protection to the victims. The plantation space functions as an arena of legal violence, where the slave's body is positioned as an object that can be controlled and punished without consequences for the perpetrator.

b. Psychological oppression

Psychological oppression is demonstrated through the characters' constant experiences of trauma, fear, and humiliation. The image of confined, open spaces without protection, and constant surveillance exacerbate the slaves' mental distress. Even in public spaces outside the plantation, the discriminatory gazes and treatment of Solomon Northup emphasize that social space also serves as a medium for racial exclusion.

c. Verbal oppression

Verbal oppression in this film emerges through abusive language, insults, and racial slurs, occurring in both public and private spaces. This verbal language is reinforced by the spatial context that positions Black characters as subordinates, so that the derogatory language serves as a tool to reinforce social and racial hierarchies.

Oppression in the Film Hidden Figures

Unlike 12 Years a Slave, Hidden Figures depicts oppression through modern institutional spaces such as NASA offices, laboratories, schools, and public facilities. Oppression in this film is no longer physically brutal, but rather occurs through seemingly legal and normal mechanisms of spatial segregation and access restrictions. The architectural imagery of the workplace in Hidden Figures depicts the segregation of facilities, bureaucratic rules, and spatial arrangements that symbolically limit the mobility and professional recognition of Black women. The seemingly neutral modern space actually functions as a systemic tool of social control.

a. Physical oppression

Physical oppression in Hidden Figures is relatively minimal and not dominant. However, small, demeaning physical acts—such as aggressive gestures or mild intimidation—still emerge as markers of resistance to the presence of Black women in professional workplaces.

b. Psychological oppression

Psychological oppression is a dominant feature in this film. Segregated workplaces, limited access to education, and demeaning treatment within institutional settings create ongoing mental stress. The architectural space serves as a tool for creating a sense of alienation, as well as a symbol of the social boundaries the main character must overcome.

c. Verbal oppression

Verbal oppression is represented through discriminatory statements, racial stereotypes, and utterances that belittle the intellectual capacity of characters. These utterances are embedded in the context of institutional space, so that language becomes part of a system of oppression legitimized by organizational structures and work culture.

Both films demonstrate that architectural and spatial imagery plays an active role in shaping narratives of ethnic oppression. 12 Years a Slave portrays space as a brutal and coercive instrument of power, while Hidden Figures represents space as a more subtle yet systemic mechanism of social control. This distinction reflects the historical transformation of racial oppression from overt physical violence to symbolic, spatially based segregation.

Discussion

Oppression in 12 Years a Slave and Hidden Figures: Representation of Space as an Instrument of Power

Both films represent the oppression of Black people through the construction of different spaces and architectural images according to their historical context. 12 Years a Slave presents the spaces of slavery—plantations, barracks, and work areas—as closed, repressive spaces of domination that directly control the bodies and movements of slaves (Wirianto & Girsang, 2016). The architecture in this film functions as a tool of power that openly legitimizes physical and psychological violence. In contrast, Hidden Figures presents modern institutional spaces like NASA offices, laboratories, and public facilities as seemingly neutral, yet symbolically harboring practices of segregation and restricted access (Sulistyo et al., 2025). This difference indicates a shift in the function of space from a brutal instrument of oppression to a more subtle and systemic mechanism of control (Wijaya et al., 2018).

Ethnonarratology and Analysis of Architectural Images in Film Narratives

An ethnonarrative approach allows for the analysis of oppression not only through plot and character, but also through the representation of space as part of the narrative structure. In 12 Years a Slave, Solomon Northup's narrative journey is framed by a shift in space—from a space of freedom to a space of slavery—which reflects the loss of agency and ethnic identity (Nugroho, 2015). Meanwhile, Hidden Figures depicts segregated workspaces as a symbol of the social and cultural limitations placed on black women (Salsabila et al., 2025). Through ethnonarrative, space is understood as an active narrative element that shapes the characters' ethnic experiences and emphasizes power relations in the story structure.

Implications of Oppressive Spaces for Individuals and Society

The representation of oppressive spaces in both films demonstrates that architecture and spatial planning have a direct impact on individuals' psychological and social experiences. Enclosed, segregated, and hierarchical spaces contribute to trauma, feelings of alienation, and the internalization of inferiority in oppressed individuals. At the societal level, these spatial constructions perpetuate structural injustice and reinforce social segregation. Thus, the films not only document the history of oppression but also critique how space and architecture play a role in reproducing or challenging practices of ethnic inequality (Purasih, 2023).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that architectural imagery plays an active role in shaping ethnic narratives and representing practices of physical, psychological, and verbal oppression in the films 12 Years a Slave and Hidden Figures. Spaces and buildings serve not merely as visual backdrops, but as symbolic mediums that construct power relations, racial segregation, and mechanisms of control over Black characters. 12 Years a Slave represents the architecture of slavery as a closed and repressive space of domination, directly regulating the bodies, movements, and traumatic experiences of slaves. In contrast, Hidden Figures presents a modern institutional space that appears rational and neutral, yet harbors practices of segregation and symbolic restrictions on access for black women. These differences in representation indicate a historical shift in forms of oppression from overt violence to more subtle systemic control. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of an ethnonarrative approach in understanding the role of architecture as a narrative element that shapes ethnic experiences and the meaning of oppression in film.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to the promoter who always guided in completing this article, and friends who helped with language editing and grammar correction.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Ahmad, A. (2019). Metode Penelitian Sastra: Perspektif Monodisipliner dan Interdisipliner. Graniti.

Burke, B., & Harrison, P. (2004). Antioppressive practice. In M. Robb, B. Sheila, C. Komaromy, & A. Rogers, Communication, relationships and care. Routledge.

Castells, M. (2011). 'The Power of Identity', in The Information Society and the Welfare State.

Creswell, J. W. (2016). Research design pendekatan kualitatif, kuantitatif dan campuran. Pustaka Belajar.

Czarniawska, B. (2004). Narratives in Social Science Research Introducing Qualitative Methods. Sage Publication Inc.

Dominelli, L. (2002). Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice. Macmillan Publishing Company.

Effendy, O. U. (1986). Dimensi Dimensi Komunikasi.

Mattsson, T. (2013). Intersectionality as a useful tool: Anti-oppressive social work and critical reflection. *Afilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913510659>

Nugroho, A. A. (2015). Representasi Whiteness dalam Film 12 Years A Slave.

Payne, M. (2014). Modern Social Work Theory (4th Ed). Palgrave Macmillan.

Purasih, J. M. (2023). Racial Discrimination In Hidden Figures (2016). *LITERA KULTURA: Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 11(3), 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.26740/lk.v11i3.58734>

Ryder, Ian G. , Hansen Valerie W.-Y. , Jackson Andrew, R. (2018). Religion and oppression: cross-national and experimental investigations. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 22(4), 527–550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2017.1358208>

Salsabila, D., Priyoto, & Susiyati. (2025). The Aspiration of Black Mathematicians Women in Gaining Equality towards Male Domination in the Movie "Hidden Figures" (2016). *JELL (Journal of English Language and Literature)*, 10(2), 345–352. <https://doi.org/10.37110/jell.v9i1.297>

Shenton, R., & Rodney, W. (1975). How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Etudes Africaines*.

Subandi. (2011). Deskripsi Kualitatif Sebagai Satu Metode Dalam Penelitian Pertunjukan. *Harmonia*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.15294/harmonia.v11i2.2210>

Suhariyadi. (2014). Pengantar Ilmu Sastra, Orientasi Penelitian Sastra. Pustaka Ilalang Group.

Sulistyo, J. A., Murtiningrum, A., Muna, N., & Nurhamidah, I. (2025). Women and Discrimination in Engineering: A Study of The Hidden Figures Movie. *Elitation English Literature and Education*, 1(1), 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.30659/elitation.1.1.24-32>

Wicaksono, A. (2017). Pengkajian Frosa Fiksi. Garudhawaca.

Wijaya, E., Irawan Aritonang, A., Wahjudianata, M., Ilmu Komunikasi, P., & Kristen Petra Surabaya, U. (2018). Representasi kekerasan simbolik dalam film Hidden Figures. *Jurnal E-Komunikasi*, 6(2), 1–11.

Wirianto, R., & Girsang, L. R. (2016). Representasi Rasisme pada Film "12 Years a Slave" (Analisis Semiotika Roland Barthes). *Semiotika Jurnal Komunikasi*, 10(1), 180–206. <https://doi.org/10.30813/sjk.v10i1.31>