

Watchmen (2019): Is it an African-American superhero narrative or another traditional way to present racism?

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ABSTRACT

*There have been many studies on race relations between African-American and White-American or Asian-American and White-American. However, there are few studies regarding the portrayal of these three races in media, such as film. The purpose of this study is to expose the *Watchmen* (2019) television series' African-American superhero narrative and its racial relationship between white Americans, African Americans, and Vietnamese Americans (Asian Americans). In the United States, recent race relation is considered better than in the past, as proved by Obama serving the country for two terms, but the media still preserves each race's labels. This study argues that this series is proof of racist behavior in media. This qualitative study uses narrative and non-narrative to analyze the data gained from the series. This television series, uncommonly, shows the White-American as the villain while the African American as the hero, which makes this series worth analyzing. The series finally attained a complex racial relationship when a Vietnamese-American character was introduced. Racial stereotypes are frequently depicted in popular culture, including movies and television shows. Consequently, it is interesting to investigate its intricacy in light of white supremacy. This series presents several shots and events indicating a racist community, even from the very beginning of the series. Thus, this study argues that the series does not portray White-American as a villain but perpetuates the stereotypes of African-Americans and Asian-American.*

Keywords: Racism, African-American Hero, Vietnamese-American, White supremacy

Article History: Received 12 Dec 2022 , Final revision 20 Feb 2023, Published 21 Feb 2023

Introduction

The new HBO's Television Series *Watchmen* (Jon Osterman 2019) aired its first episode on October 20th, 2019, and wrapped up on December 15th, 2019, with a total of 9 episodes. This TV series is originated from the 1986-1987 DC Comic (Dockterman, 2019). The narrative centers around Tulsa, Oklahoma, 98 years after the 1921 Race Massacre Commission. The official name changes of the 1921 Race Riot Commission to the 1921 Race Massacre Commission "The fact that it was called a riot was one of the reasons given for turning down insurance claims and has been offensive to many in the affected area for 97 years. After being made aware of the significance of the term, the Commission has decided to officially change its name to the 1921 Race Massacre Commission," said Sen. Kevin Matthews at the news conference at the Greenwood Cultural

Center in 2018 (2 News Oklahoma, 2021). Furthermore, they could not even claim insurance for their assets because the insurance companies cited the word "race riots" which makes them free from granting the claims (Messer, Shriver, & Adams, 2018).

In this movie, Angela Abar, an African-American woman who is currently living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, surrounded by the threat of a white supremacist group called the *Seventh Cavalry*. Police in Tulsa always wears a yellow mask to cover their identity, which is meant to protect them. Four detectives in the police department wear a mask. The first one is Angela Abar, who dresses up like a nun with a black robe known as Sister Night and becomes a bakery owner to cover up her identity and detective works. The second is Wade Tilman, as looking glass who wears a silver mirror-like

mask, the third is Red Scare, who wears a red mask and red tracksuit, and the last one is Jenny Pirate, who wears a mask that looks like a net. The Vietnamese in this narrative is Lady Trieu, a trillionaire who is building a Millennium Clock that we do not know the purpose until later, it will be revealed. The White American Police Chief, Judd Crawford, whose death on the first episode will lead to uncovering the race relations of the three races in the *Watchmen* world, which are White Americans, African Americans, and Vietnamese American. This series also has an astonishing way of telling its narrative. Employing shifting-perspective method, the series invites the audience to comprehend the narrative of the series from each character's perspective because that is how the series tells the audience about each character's past and their motives in doing what they are doing (James, 2019).

In this world, there are numerous ways to classify people. The basis for categorizing people is based in part on their race. The concept of race arose in the 17th century, using humans as the standard (Billah, 2018). The race relation in this film cannot be explained alone only with racism showing in several scenes of

the film. Thus, the segregation and the treatment received by African American and Vietnamese American in this film must be seen through the light of white supremacy (Cell, 1982).

Numerous research on the interactions between African Americans and White Americans or Asian Americans and White Americans have been conducted. A former study discussed how Marvel as the extension of Hollywood is perpetuating the racial Asian stereotype narrative in its productions. Marvel continues to reinforce the prejudices by designating Asians as aliens, model minorities, or foreigners (Shek & Kongerslev, 2022). A similar study addressed Asian American representation in various American films. However, these studies merely discuss one race, yet still lack of talking the relationship between these three races' representation collectively in media, like movies or series from two giant publishers, DC and Marvel. This study aims to reveal how the African-American superhero narrative and the racial dynamics between white Americans, African Americans, and Vietnamese Americans is presented in the *Watchmen* (2019) television series.

Research Method

Observing the research's objects, issues, and goals is necessary to determine the research approach. A movie that falls within the audio-visual text category serves as this study's subject. Generally, there are two basic ways to conduct research: a qualitative approach and a quantitative method. The topic of this study is examined in relation to the study's object using a qualitative analysis.

Narrative

The first approach used in this study is narrative analysis. This approach will be employed in analyzing the movie. In narrative analysis, according to Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White there are some elements that will be used in analyzing the movie, i.e., stories and plot, and character (Corrigan & White, 2012).

Non-Narrative

In non-narrative analysis, the writer will analyze the movie from the elements of Cinematography which are point of view and four attributes of shots (framing, aspect ratio,

depth of field, contrast, and color). In cinematographic terms, point of view refers to the position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen (or filmed). We will see the action from the viewpoint of an impersonal character. In this attribute of shot, there are four things which are:

- a. Framing: The framing of a shot contains, limits, and directs the point of view within the borders of the rectangular frame
- b. Aspect Ratio: The relation of width to height of the film frame as it appears on a movie screen or television monitor.
- c. Depth of Field (Focus): indicates what is significant in the image
- d. Contrast and Color: Color profoundly affects our experience and understanding of a film shot; even black-and-white films use contrast and gradations to create atmosphere or emphasize certain motifs (Corrigan & White, 2012).

Results & Discussion

The first episode entitled *It's Summer and We're Running Out of Ice* opens with the scene of a black and white silent film about Bass Reeves, the U.S. Marshal Deputy who captures a thief in front of the church. The white Americans cheer up for him. The next scene is an African-American boy who is sitting in a theater watching that black and white silent film while his mother is playing piano near the screen and sobbing. Later we know, in the outside of the building, there is a massacre happen to the wealthy African-American in Tulsa 1921 by the Ku Klux Klan. That little boy is Will Reeves that later becomes one of the survivals from that tragedy. The movie starts giving the knowledge of what happened to Tulsa in 1921. Tulsa, in 2019, starts with the murder of African-American police by the Seventh Cavalry. He throws lettuce as the sign of his doing to the dead body. Furthermore, the dark scenes of murder turn into a bright scene of Angela Abar, giving a lesson about making a cake in her adopted son's class. Everything goes well until one of the students raises his hand and asks, "*Did Redfordations pay for it?*" (00:20:16). Topher, Angela's son, hits him. Redfordations is a term used in the series. It is considered a racist term that is usually spoken by racists white people (Stuever, 2019). "*It's a lifetime tax exemption for victims of, and the direct descendants of, designated areas of racial injustice throughout America's history, the most important of which, as it relates to our show, is the Tulsa massacre of 1921.*" (Romano, 2019)

Those scenes are quite helpful in giving audiences the ideas of Tulsa in 1921 and Tulsa in 2019.



Figure 1. Angela's cooking class at her adopted son (ep.1)

During the cooking class scene, there is a hint of what is happening from separating the white egg and the yolks. Angela said

"Egg whites are made of protein. When we whip them, we get bubbles, and it's the proteins that form the walls of those bubbles. If we don't have walls, it all comes tumbling down. Now, those walls are strong, but they won't stay that way if just even a little bit of yolk gets mixed in with the whites. So that's why we gotta separate them."

This dialogue somehow introduces the audience about the narrative of "white supremacy" in the film. Colored people (African-Americans or Asian-Americans) are portrayed as the yolk and White-Americans is the white egg. It can be inferred from Angela's dialogue which says that this mixed situation between races cannot stay long, and they need to be separated. The way this series captured the egg with a medium close and an overhead shot including Angela's hand which is obviously not the hand of any white-Americans due to its color. In addition, the overhead shot depicts power and control over the subject below it which can also show that Angela has no power towards anything.

Another act of racism showed in this series is the Minstrel show, in the first episode.



Figure 2. Minstrel show (ep. 1)

The appearance of this performance also reveals the initiation of Racism practices toward African Americans. The scene of the Minstrel show is also employed to introduce Judd and his wife, which indicates his position later in this series. Minstrel shows played a crucial role in preserving and reestablishing white dominance. This immense popular minstrel

show exploited the racial prejudices of the enslaved African American (Wellmann, 2016). A racist minstrel song depicts African Americans as inferior for the safety of white America (Yearwood, 2018). From this captured scene, the background of the show is plantation which most likely owned by the whites who will enslave the African American to takes care of the plantation.

African Americans: Angela Abar

The relationship between African Americans and White Americans in this series is well represented by the significant characters' relationship in this series. The relationship is shown by Angela Abar as the African American Detective or Sister Night with the white American Judd Crawford, regardless of his brief screen time only in the first episode. However, Judd's short appearance in the show will lead to an enormous secret of who he is. The discussion of these two races relations will be started with the first episode.

In the first episode, everything seems fine except the racist student until the video of the Kavalry about killing more people or polices who stand on their way in achieving their missions, which we have not had any knowledge about it. Later, we know how this Kavalry thought by going to the next scene of Looking Glass interviewing a man suspected as a member of the Seventh Kavalry. What proves his identity is his "yes" answer to the question, "Should all Americans pay taxes?" (00:32:45) which relates to the "Redfordations" as the benefit for the African Americans in Tulsa. Angela, on her attack, finds a poster of National Bank advertisement with the hero of America smiling while capturing African American. This poster appears in the slightly canted frame with a deep focus creating an unbalance appearance. This shot also helps creating an intense uneasy feeling for the audience and will be more invested to the future of African-American characters in the series. The ratio of the poster also takes more space, more than half of the screen, which can also indicate the relationship between the whites and African-Americans in the series.

There is also a statement in the poster "Our banks are clean and safe and family-oriented and we keep the riff-raff out!" (00:39:24). By seeing the poster in the Kavalry house, we can infer that one of their missions is cleaning African

Americans as it is said, "*we keep the riff-raff out!*" which *riff-raff* means people with a bad reputation or of low social class (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). It shows that African American people are undesirable by the community of white people. The white community falsely accused African American community as being prone to crime and typically welfare recipient (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997).

This contrasts with the relationship between Angela and Judd Crawford. They even have a very light and nice dinner together at Angela's house after their successful attack on the Kavalry. Angela, who is an orphan, finds a father figure in Judd. This is also supported with the statement from Jan, who stated that African Americans are represented absentee fathers (Jan, 2017).

Thus, she loves him and feels attached as she does not have the father figure. However, the first episode ends with the death of Judd, strung up on the tree. Surprisingly, the one who claims to kill Judd is Will Reeves, that later finds out that he is her grandfather.



Figure 3. An advertisement poster of National Bank (00:39:24)

Will Reeves, in episode two, implicitly says that Judd is a racist, and there is something hidden in Judd's closet by saying, "He had skeletons in his closet...there is a vast and insidious conspiracy at play here in Tulsa" (00:09:08-00:09:14). Later, when Angela comes to Judd's house to pay respect and visit Jane (Judd's wife), she faints and is brought to Judd's bedroom to have a rest. While everyone is away and busy outside, she sneaks into Judd's closet with special glasses to see behind the closet and finds a Ku Klux Klan robe. In the 7th episode, Agent Blake, who oversees investigation of

Judd's death, finds out that Judd, Jane, and Joe Keene are the crucial members of the Seventh Kavalry.

In killing Judd Crawford, Will Reeves has a deal with Lady Trieu. Lady Trieu is a Vietnamese woman who is building a Millennium Clock and claims that she will save humanity with it. Lady Trieu claims that she is the smartest woman in the world. She is later known to be Adrian Veidt's daughter, from his sperm sample number 2346. Her mother is used to be a cleaning woman in Adrian Veidt's place, and she steals the sperm sample and shoots herself with it. Lady Trieu, with all her power and resources, wants to capture Dr. Manhattan. Dr. Manhattan is a scientist who turns himself to be a superpower human with a blue color. His name is Jon Osterman. In the watchmen, he demolished the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communist) by turning himself to be a 100-foot-tall giant and shooting laser from his hand and destroying everything. This makes Vietnamese hate Dr. Manhattan without exception Lady Trieu. Later, we find out that Dr. Manhattan is pretending to be a human, and he is Angela's husband (Calvin). Lady Trieu says that she will destroy him and transfer his power to her so that she can save humanity. She claims that she will be able to fix the world, including disappearing all the nuclear and everything he should have done. Will Reeves asks Lady Trieu to seek justice for him and other people of color and, of course, stop the Seventh Kavalry, and in exchange Lady Trieu will get Dr. Manhattan.

Dr. Manhattan or Calvin, Angela's husband, has planned this with Will, before Angela and he got married. They have been plotting this to stop the Seventh Kavalry. Here we can see the relationship between the African American and the Vietnamese, how actually Will Reeves and also Dr. Manhattan use Lady Trieu and all her resources for their benefits. However, later Dr. Manhattan died because of Lady Trieu's Millennium Clock, absorbing his power and destroying him.

Vietnamese-American (Asian-American): Lady Trieu

The relationship between the Americans and the Vietnamese in this case is Adrian Veidt and Lady Trieu. Back in 2008, Lady Trieu came to Adrian Veidt in Antarctica. She told him

everything, her projects, her plan to fix humanity, including her plan to destroy Dr. Manhattan. To support her plan, she purposed to Adrian Veidt to invest \$42 billion to run her project and told him that she is his daughter. As it is previously mentioned that Lady Trieu's mother is used to be a cleaning woman in Adrian Veidt's place, and she stole the sperm sample and shot herself with it. This narrative captures and portrays Asian women, through Lady Trieu's mother as an aggressive or opportunistic sexual beings or predatory gold digger (Hofstede, 1996). Asian Americans are considered as a model minority, good law-abiding, productive, higher socioeconomic status, these labels are never taken seriously because people consider it as a good stereotype (Treon, 2022).

Adrian Veidt said that he would never call her daughter and will never give her that money as he also started his works from nothing. However, Adrian Veidt uses Lady Trieu's longing for a father figure to escape Europa. Other than that, Adrian Veidt is smart to know Lady Trieu's ambitions to show all her works start from nothing after his rejection to give her money and call her daughter. He uses those things to save his own life. Lady Trieu's ambition is also one of the Asian labels. They are labelled as being academic overachievers who are intelligent but socially inept either lacking social skills or being asocial, socially damaging, nerds, and the fact that she was born from a stolen American man's sperm is showing the asocial part of Asian (Zhang, 2010).



Figure 2. Adrian Veidt's arranging all the dead bodies of his cloned servants to write that so Lady Trieu's galaxy camera will capture it and save him at the end (Episode 9, 00:19:08)

In the final episode, the Seventh Kavalry members gather to capture Dr. Manhattan. Senator Joe Keene, who is having a dream to

become the next president, wants to turn himself to be blue by absorbing Dr. Manhattan's power. The reason behind his action in getting the power of Dr. Manhattan was because in the White Night, Dr. Manhattan ruining his plan.

Keene: *But then, three years ago, the White Night. We sent out a bunch of our guys to get the war rolling, and it goes exactly as planned, until my phone rings. It's Mike over there, and he's all fucked up. He tells me he's calling from a payphone in Gila Flats, New Mexico."*

Keene: *"He got teleported, Now, there's only one fella who can zap people wherever he wants..."* (While presenting Dr. Manhattan in a specially made cage to teleport him).

Before executing his plan, he also does a small speech on how President Redford made White people in America apologize for what happened in Tulsa and for their skin color, how they are not allowed to use guns, and how hard it is being white in America. Remarkably, he also mentions how Judd Crawford took part in this mission.

Keene: *"Judd, Jane Crawford got close to the family, while we spent the next three years trying to figure out how to catch little boy blue"* (00:32:49)

It explicitly shows that for all this time, Judd Crawford was not sincere towards Angela and her family.

Nonetheless, at the end of Keene's attempt to absorb Dr. Manhattan's power, his machine is mal-used as he does not know the science and how that energy works. It blows him, and he died because of his mad science. These short descriptions show their

relationship is merely taking advantage of each other for their own agenda.

This TV series uses the superhero narrative on Angela Abar and Will Reeves as they share the same characteristic to be an orphan hero. We can relate this with the previous well-known hero stories such as Superman, Batman, and Spiderman that are orphan (Edlins & Professor, 2015). The next characteristics are being oppressed and wearing a mask to cover their identity (Gibson, Huxley, & Ormrod, 2016) (Gavaler, 2017). However, there is an exciting difference between Angela and Will, Angela colors her skin around eyes with black as if showing her true identity, but Will paints his with white to hide his identity and never revealed. It might be affected by the tolerance level of the teammate and how people address them as they lived in different eras (Orquiola, 2019).

In Will's eras, white people with mask are hero, but black people with a mask is scary. Thus, he still needs to cover himself. In contrast to Angela's generation, she is under the police department and called detective rather than a hero. However, talking about mask, the Seventh Cavalry members also wear masks. These two kinds of masks present good and evil. The racism that happened in this series is as we can see how Dr. Manhattan, who is in the form of Black is presented frontally nude in front of people (Diawara, 2012). This TV series show that no matter in what year African American in, they will still encounter both direct and latent threat of racism, as in this story direct from the society and latent threat from the close family-like colleague, e.g., Judd and Jane Crawford.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this TV series uses the superhero narrative presented in this series is merely a cover for another racism and will still show racism and white people feeling threatened by the African American people who can have a good life because of the redfordations or the tax exemption or simply financial compensation, Moreover, this series also portrays Lady Trieu as the villain whilst, she has a good intention in fixing the world even though there is a small part of revenge on what Dr. Manhattan did to Vietnam, but the

series does not seem to put White American as the villain. There is no superhero in this series, as even Angela cannot do anything to stop the Seventh Cavalry and Lady Trieu from doing what they want to do. In the end, it is Adrian Veidt who stops Lady Trieu and her Millennium Clock with the frozen squids' rain. To conclude, each of group experiences racism in a different way, as what they experience daily with the Asian American as the model minorities group and think that this is a good stereotype, while African American still

captured as the villain or criminals and overwhelmingly poor.

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