Hegemony and Representation of Black Actresses in The Little Mermaid (2023)

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Abstract

This article reviews the debate and impact of Halle Bailey's selection as Ariel in the live-action film "The Little Mermaid" (2023) on racial representation and inclusivity in the Hollywood film industry. Motivated by the growing attention to the representation of minority groups in mass media, this analysis explores the hegemony of white culture and the way racial representation is manifested in film production. Based on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and the concept of representation, this study explores the public response to Bailey's casting, as well as its impact on traditional narratives and attempts to deconstruct existing power structures. Through an approach to cultural studies and racial-critical theory, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power and representation in mass media and highlight steps towards a more inclusive and equitable film industry. In conclusion, the selection of Halle Bailey as Ariel not only marks an important step in stimulating discussion about diversity in popular culture, but also a concrete step towards a more inclusive and representative film industry.

Keywords: Movie; The Little Mermaid; Cultural Hegemony; Black Actresses.

PENDAHULUAN

In recent decades, the representation of minority groups in mass media, especially in films, has become an issue that academics, critics, and the general public are increasingly concerned about (Laurensky, 2022). The debate over representation covers a wide range of aspects, from the choice of actors to how minority characters are portrayed and developed in the story. One of the films that took center stage in this discussion was "The Little Mermaid" (2023), a remake of the classic Disney animated film released in 1989. The film reaped widespread controversy and debate due to Disney's decision to cast Halle Bailey, a black actress, as the lead actress Ariel (Rocha et al., 2023). This choice not only opens up a discussion about inclusivity and diversity in the Hollywood film industry, but also highlights how hegemony and racial representation are reproduced and contested in popular mediums such as film.

Hegemony, in this context, refers to the cultural domination exercised by the majority group, which often influences aesthetic and narrative norms in film production (Ibad, 2010; Ishimora & Resnanto, 2011; Maiwan, 2016; Pramasara, 2022; Pratama, 2021). This concept was introduced by Antonio Gramsci and refers to the leadership or domination of one social group over another through consensus and cultural imposition (Galvin et al., 2018; Griffin et al., 2019; Lemke, 2019; Pramasara, 2022). In the film industry, hegemony can be seen from the dominance of white characters in the main roles, narratives that highlight the culture of the majority, and the lack of representation of minority groups. This creates standards that affect the audience's expectations and acceptance of characters and stories that are different from the norm.

Meanwhile, representation refers to the ways in which characters and stories are displayed on screen, which can reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes and prejudices (Ayudia Putri et al., 2024; Fathoni & Fadillah, 2021; Khairunnisa et al., 2021; Surakarta, 2019; Tamsil, 2020). Minority representation in films is often influenced by deep-rooted stereotypes, which can limit and distort the audience's perception of the group. As such, inclusive and diverse representation is essential for creating a fairer and more accurate narrative of various social groups.
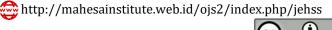
This article aims to analyze how the hegemony and representation of black actresses is manifested in the film "The Little Mermaid" (2023). Through critical analysis, this article will explore the impact of Halle Bailey's casting on public perception, as well as how the film contributes to the broader discourse on racial inclusivity in Hollywood. In addition, this article will review how Ariel's representation as a black character influenced traditional narratives and whether this succeeded in deconstructing or reinforcing existing power structures.

The decision to cast Halle Bailey as Ariel is a significant step in efforts to increase inclusivity in Hollywood. This move can be seen as an attempt to break down the boundaries that have hindered more diverse representation in films. However, this decision also invited various reactions from the public, both for and against. Proponents see it as an important step forward in creating a more inclusive and representative film industry, while opponents criticize it as a form of "political correctness" that is excessive or inconsistent with the traditional portrayal of Ariel's character.

In analyzing the impact of this casting, it is important to consider the historical and social context of racial representation in films. For years, the Hollywood film industry has been dominated by actors and narratives that focus on the white experience. Minority representation is often limited to stereotypical or peripheral roles that lack depth or complexity. As such, the casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel can be seen as a challenge to these norms and as an attempt to create a more inclusive and diverse representation.

This article will use the perspectives of cultural studies and racial critical theory to analyze Halle Bailey's representation as Ariel in "The Little Mermaid" (2023). This approach allows to explore how racial representation in film can reflect and influence power dynamics in society. Content analysis and media reception will be used to assess how this casting is received by the public and how the film's narrative contributes to the discourse on racial inclusivity in Hollywood.

Through this research, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of power dynamics and representation in mass media can be found. The study also aims to identify steps that can be taken

to create a more inclusive and equitable film industry. By analyzing the case of "The Little Mermaid" (2023), this article hopes to make a meaningful contribution to the discussion about racial representation in film and how the industry can move towards a more inclusive and diverse future.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical research type. This approach was chosen to explore in depth how the representation of black actresses, specifically Halle Bailey as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), shapes the discourse on cultural hegemony and racial representation in the Hollywood film industry. Using Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory and the concept of representation, this study aims to identify and analyze the construction of meaning that appears in the film. The data in this study was collected through documentation studies and text analysis. The documentation study was conducted by collecting data from various secondary sources such as scientific articles, news, film reviews, social media publications, and other related documents that addressed racial representation and public response to Halle Bailey's election as Ariel. Meanwhile, text analysis was used to identify visual, narrative, and symbolic elements in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), including key scenes, dialogue, and the use of relevant colors and symbols to understand cultural hegemonic representations and racial identity constructions.

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis to understand how film texts and public discourse contribute to the formation of cultural hegemony. The analysis process begins with data reduction to identify relevant information and filter out data that is not related to the focus of the research. Furthermore, the reduced data are presented in thematic categories related to racial representation, cultural hegemony, and public response. From these categories, conclusions are drawn to analyze the patterns of representation and power relations that appear in the film and compare them with the developing public discourse.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses the source triangulation technique, namely by comparing data from various sources to get a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, the researcher also conducted *peer review* with academics in the field of cultural and communication studies to ensure objective data interpretation. This research was conducted in the period from July 2023 to December 2024, with data collection carried out online through various social media platforms, academic databases, and screenings of *The Little Mermaid* (2023). The entire analysis process was conducted at the Mahesa Research Center, Indonesia, as part of the research on popular culture and media representation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Halle Bailey's selection as Ariel's character

In recent decades, the representation of minority groups in mass media, particularly in film, has become an issue of increasing concern by academics, critics, and the general public. The debate over representation covers a wide range of aspects, from the choice of actors to how minority characters are portrayed and developed in the story. One of the films that took center stage in this discussion was "The Little Mermaid" (2023), a remake of the classic Disney animated film released in 1989. The film drew widespread controversy and debate due to Disney's decision to cast Halle Bailey, a black actress, as the lead actress Ariel. This choice not only opens up a discussion about inclusivity and diversity in the Hollywood film industry, but also highlights how hegemony and racial representation are reproduced and contested in popular mediums such as film.

The decision to cast Halle Bailey as Ariel challenged the norms of white cultural hegemony in the Hollywood film industry. As a film that has historically been identified with white characters, this remake presents a significant change in terms of racial representation. Based on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, we can explore how this film plays a role in creating or undermining existing cultural consensus (Griffin et al., 2019; Hasan, 2015).

The casting of Halle Bailey as Ariel's character in the live-action film "The Little Mermaid" (2023) has reaped various negative responses, reflecting the dynamics of power and representation in the film industry. One of the main criticisms is related to race and ethnicity. Some people criticized Bailey's election because he was black, while Ariel in the original animated film was portrayed as a white character. This criticism is often based on racism and a lack of understanding of the importance of diversity and representation in the media. Critics argue that Disney has "transformed" iconic characters and "destroyed their childhoods," which shows their inability to accept a more inclusive interpretation of classic characters.

In addition, there are concerns about the accuracy of the story. Some people are worried that the selection of Halle Bailey will change the essence of the classic story "The Little Mermaid". They feared that the film would not be faithful to the original material and would disappoint fans. However, these concerns are generally unfounded, as the film essentially follows the same storyline as the original animated film, albeit with more inclusive adaptations. The rejection of these changes shows resistance to adaptations and reinterpretations of widely known stories.

Another rejection came from those who generally disliked the idea of remaking the animated film "The Little Mermaid". They prefer to watch the original animated version rather than the live-action version, rejecting any form of change. This attitude can be understood as nostalgia for the original work, but it is important to remain open to new interpretations of classic stories. These new interpretations, including Bailey's selection, have the potential to enrich the narrative by adding a dimension of diversity and inclusivity that is more relevant to today's audience.

Through the analysis of cultural studies, this controversy can be understood as part of the dynamics of power and representation in society. The election of Halle Bailey as Ariel challenges the white cultural hegemony that has long dominated Hollywood film narratives and opens the door for more inclusive and diverse representation. As such, this decision is not only significant in the context of the film itself, but also in a broader effort to create a more equitable and representative film industry.

Breaking White Hegemony

The selection of Halle Bailey as the character of Ariel in the live-action film "The Little Mermaid" (2023) aims to break white hegemony in the Hollywood film industry. One of the main reasons is to increase more diverse representation. For many years, the Hollywood film industry was dominated by white actors, which led to a lack of representation of characters from other races and ethnicities. This negatively affects children who do not see themselves on the screen. By choosing Halle Bailey as Ariel, Disney took an important step to show children of all races and ethnicities that they can be Disney heroes and princesses, thus strengthening the diversity in the film.

In addition, this election is a fight against racism and discrimination which is still a big problem in society, including in the Hollywood film industry. By choosing Halle Bailey, Hollywood showed that they are beginning to open up to actors of different races and ethnicities and are committed to creating films that are more inclusive and representative. It also provides a positive message to children about the importance of diversity and inclusivity, teaching them that everyone, regardless of their race or ethnicity, can achieve their dreams.

The selection of Halle Bailey is expected to drive change in the Hollywood film industry, paving the way for more actors of different races and ethnicities to get lead roles in major films. However, it is important to remember that the selection of Halle Bailey is not just about racial representation. She is a talented actress with a beautiful voice and amazing acting skills, and she was chosen because she was the right person to play Ariel.

Overall, the selection of Halle Bailey as Ariel is an important step towards making the Hollywood film industry more inclusive and representative. This shows that Hollywood is starting to open its doors to actors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and is committed to creating better movies for everyone.

The success of The Little Mermaid starring Hall Bailey

The success of the film "The Little Mermaid" (2023) starring Halle Bailey can be seen from a variety of indicators, including increased popularity on social media, critics' appreciation, and audience acceptance. One of the indicators of the success of Halle Bailey's representation as Ariel is a significant increase in the number of followers on social media. Before the movie was released, Halle Bailey had 1.7 million followers on Instagram. After the film's release, this number increased to 2.7 million followers, indicating an increase of 1 million followers or about 58.8%. On Twitter, the increase in followers is also significant, from 700 thousand to 1.2 million, with an increase of 500 thousand followers or around 71.4% (IMDb, 2023). This data shows that Halle Bailey's representation as Ariel is not only well received, but also significantly increases her visibility and popularity.

In addition to quantitative data from social media, the success of Halle Bailey's representation can also be seen from critics' appreciation of her performance. Many critics praised Halle Bailey's acting, calling her charming, charismatic, and able to portray Ariel's character in a fresh and engaging way. His praise is not only limited to acting, but also to his musical abilities, which is considered to add a new dimension to Ariel's character. This appreciation shows that the selection of Halle Bailey as Ariel is not just a symbolic decision to increase diversity, but also based on her talents and abilities.

Another positive impact can be seen in the film's ratings and reception. The film "The Little Mermaid" (2023) received a rating of 7.2/10 on IMDb, an achievement that shows that the film was well received by the audience as a whole. This rating reflects a positive reception of the film, despite the initial controversy surrounding Halle Bailey's casting decision. This positive reception shows that the audience is able to accept the changes in the representation of the characters that are different from the original version and can appreciate the overall quality of the film.

CONCLUSION

"The Little Mermaid" (2023) marks an important milestone in the debate about racial representation and inclusivity in the Hollywood film industry. This decision reflects an attempt to break white hegemony in the mass media and pave the way for more diverse representation. Despite the criticism and concerns, the election was an important step in stimulating discussions about diversity in popular culture. The film's success, both in critical reception and audience, shows that the change in character representation is acceptable and appreciated by the audience. Thus, the election of Halle Bailey as Ariel is not only a symbolic decision, but also a concrete step towards a more inclusive and representative film industry.

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