

Social Inequality through Character Representation: Elphaba in the Wicked Movie (2024)

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Abstract. *Wicked* (2024), directed by Jon M. Chu is an adaptation of the novel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* by Gregory Maguire (1995), which explores the untold perspective of Elphaba, a green-skinned witch who has long been labeled as a villain. This research aims to examine the representation of inequality experienced by the character Elphaba due to her different skin color. The problem studied is how the inequality is shown in the movie through this character and its impact on the character's social relationship with the surrounding environment. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach by combining Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social inequality and colorism from Deborah Gabriel. The primary data is visual and verbal data from the movie *Wicked* 2024, while the secondary data is from literature relevant to the topic. The results show that the character Elphaba is a victim of social inequality and social alienation due to her physical differences. This research concludes that the film *Wicked* in the character of Elphaba reflects the social reality that shows how the denial of recognition of different individuals and causes deep marginalization.

Keywords: *Wicked*, Social inequality, colorism, racism

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Social inequality and discrimination are phenomena that still frequently occur in real life. There are many forms of discrimination in reality, one of which is racial discrimination experienced by the black community. In other words, colorism is different from racism, although there is a connection between the two. Differences in skin color can occur regardless of a specific race, meaning it can happen within the same race or between different races. While racism is typically directed at specific races, colorism tends to privilege individuals with lighter skin, even within the same racial group. Cases of colorism are common in multicultural countries like the United States. In that country, various issues of racial discrimination against black citizens have been recorded, highlighting how race-based discrimination is systemic and deeply ingrained in American society. For instance, a Mexican American individual with light skin may still be subject to racial discrimination, despite the apparent physical attribute of light skin. Similarly, a Mexican American individual with dark skin may encounter both racism and colorism (Hunter, 2007, pp. 237-254).

The cases like George Floyd's highlight racial discrimination that views white skin as superior and black skin as inferior, a mindset that has existed for centuries. Floyd, an African-American man, died during an arrest by white police officers, sparking widespread protests supporting the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the United States and around the world. This action not only protested police violence but also the failure of the state to guarantee the human rights of black citizens (Banda, 2020, pp. 120-133). Racial discrimination is also experienced by significant figures in government, such as Michelle Obama, the 44th First Lady of the United States and wife of President Barack Obama. Despite holding a high

position, Michelle still had to face the negative stereotype of being "an angry black woman." This illustrates that racism in the United States does not

consider social status. In the film *Becoming* by Nadia Hallgren, Michelle Obama reveals that her racial background greatly influenced her life journey. Although the film does not explicitly address the issue of racism, the narrative portrays the challenges of being a black woman in America, even after becoming First Lady, where she continued to receive racial comments.

Discriminatory behavior is also depicted in films and literary works. These works are created as social critiques or satire against systems that still practice discrimination based on skin color differences. In films, moral values are often portrayed, which can be used as evidence that people with dark skin are not inherently bad. They also have the power to become reliable individuals. One literary work that highlights racial discrimination against black skin is *Hidden Figures*. This film highlights how three intelligent women were not considered ordinary people, meaning they were treated unjustly. Although they played a crucial role in the success of NASA's space missions, the system still regarded them as different. Their story becomes a central issue, showing how an unequal system can limit a person's ability to express their true identity (Eliyana, 2021, p. 240)

Wicked 2024 presents a different approach in showcasing inequality, through the symbolic use of green skin in a fantasy world. The character who experiences discrimination is Elphaba, a green-skinned witch who is inherently good. From birth, she faced discrimination, even from her own father, who rejected her because of her skin color. Elphaba was considered abnormal due to having skin that was different from other humans. The fact that she has a younger sister with "normal" skin color is proof that she received unequal treatment from her father. They are both biological children, yet her sister always received preferential treatment from their father. Once Elphaba enters the school at Wizard Oz, she is regarded as odd by Glinda, a white character. This dynamic demonstrates that Elphaba and Glinda are mirrors of discrimination based on physical appearance and alignment with the social system. *Wicked* also portrays the truth, even when standing alone. The film voices that there should be no distinctions in rights, as both characters are women.

This research is significant because it raises the issue of discrimination or inequality, which is still often practiced today, as represented in the fantasy film *Wicked* 2024. *Wicked* portrays societal stereotypes or prejudices that can shape negative perceptions of individuals who are different. The author chose this film to highlight the issue of inequality and to show the social disparities depicted within it. With its compelling narrative, the film delivers a resistance against a system that practices discrimination. This form of discrimination also impacts individuals in their social relationships, as seen when society makes negative assumptions about individuals who possess characteristics different from the common standard. *Wicked* also encourages viewers not to judge someone by labels or appearances alone, but by their goodness and sincerity. Therefore, this research is not only relevant to academics but also instills social values for today's generation to respect differences.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on (Gita, M. S.; Febrian, 2025, pp. 176-187) explores social criticism using a semiotic approach. Their paper, titled "*Social Criticism in the Film Wicked: A Semiotic Analysis Approach*," examines how the character Elphaba is represented as a symbol of resistance against negative stereotypes and social discrimination. However, the study remains limited due to the lack of in-depth analysis on how marginalized characters are portrayed with the complexity of social critique through semiotic signs. Unlike the 2017 film *Get Out*, which has been extensively examined, *Wicked* despite addressing similar themes has not yet received equivalent academic attention, likely due to its recent release. Although the film *Wicked* (2024) has garnered widespread attention and has been widely

discussed in popular articles, media reviews, and online discussion forums, there is still a lack of scholarly journal articles that specifically address the issue of colorism in the film. This indicates a research gap worth exploring. The film raises issues that are highly relevant to current societal conditions, yet few studies have focused on how these issues are represented through the film's narrative and visual elements.

RESEARCH METHOD

The authors of the study analyzed the data using a qualitative descriptive method. A study technique known as qualitative description creates descriptive data from people's written or spoken words as well as from observable behaviors. (Moleong, 2005) defines a qualitative descriptive technique as one in which the information gathered is expressed through words and images rather than numerical data. Information obtained from <https://universalpicturesawards.com/wicked/screenplay/Wicked.pdf> through closely viewing the film, noting character interactions, and translating dialogue using the official subtitles

This study employs the approach of literary sociology. Literary sociology views literary works in relation to reality, insofar as literature reflects social reality (Damono, Sosiologi Sastra Sebuah Pengantar Ringkas, 1989). In this context, the researcher's task is to connect the experiences of the characters in *Wicked* with the socio-historical conditions that underpin them (Damono, 2002, pp. 8- 10). The analysis integrates Pierre Bourdieu's theories on habitus, social-cultural-economic capital, and symbolic violence to understand how social structures shape Elphaba's position and identity within the society of Oz. Additionally, Deborah Gabriel's theory of colorism is used to examine how skin color-based discrimination influences Elphaba's social relationships.

The primary data source is the film *Wicked* (2024), directed by Jon M. Chu. Data collection was conducted through observation of key scenes, dialogues, and the representation of Elphaba's character throughout the film. As Swingewood (1972) asserts, sociological analysis of literary works must be carried out with caution, given that literature does not reflect society directly or purely, but rather through the consciousness, intentions, and aesthetic devices employed by the author in the creative process.

Therefore, the literary sociology approach pays close attention to the documentary aspect of literature, based on the view that literature serves as a depiction or portrait of real social phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of this study is an analysis of the representation of perceptions and stereotypes of characters in the film *Wicked*. The researcher integrates Pierre Bourdieu's theories on habitus, social-cultural-economic capital, and symbolic violence with Deborah Gabriel's theory of colorism. Through character analysis, the film illustrates that these characters serve as a depiction or reflection of real social phenomena.

Discussion

1. Forms of Discrimination Experienced by the Character Elphaba

Habitus

Social status explains how socialization and interaction with one's social environment can shape a person's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (Prayitno, 2019). This is illustrated in the dialogue between 22:05 and 22:19

Excerpt 1

MISS CODDLE : There you are [giggling]

Miss Nessarose, Isn't it?

NESSAROSE : Yes.

MISS CODDLE : The Governor's daughter?

NESSAROSE : Hmmm, emm.

MISS CODDLE : Oh, how tragically beautifull you are

It is such an honor to.....

In Excerpt 1, it is evident that Nessarose (Elphaba's younger sister) possesses an upper-class habitus, reflected in her high social position as the daughter of the Governor of Munchkinland. She is greeted with respect and admiration by Miss Coddle. Nessarose is praised physically, being considered worthy of belonging to the elite environment of Shiz University. This demonstrates that Nessarose is socially recognized because she meets the dominant value standards, both in terms of family status and physical appearance (fair skin).

Excerpt 2

ELPHABA : I'm the other daughter,

I'm beautifully tragic.

MISS CODDLE : The other daughter?

Well, I wasn't made aware

ELPHABA : I know, I was just.....

MISS CODDLE : Not to fret... just a slight gulch.

We'll find someplace to hide you.

In Excerpt 2, Miss Coddle is unaware of Elphaba's existence, which signifies symbolic neglect of her status. Although Elphaba is the daughter of the same Governor, she is not socially recognized due to her different skin color. The phrase "find someplace to hide you" subtly reflects social rejection of

Elphaba solely because her green skin is deemed inappropriate.

From this dialogue, it can be concluded that Nessarose's habitus is accepted, respected, and admired, whereas Elphaba's habitus is rejected, hidden, and considered unworthy. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus serves as the foundation to examine how social injustice impacts the formation of Elphaba's habitus, which in this context parallels the phenomenon resulting from limited access in life.

.b. Field

A social arena where individuals struggle to gain power or recognition, governed by specific rules and forms of capital.

Excerpt 3

MADAM MORRIBLE : This is your chance to make good of course, you're going to

have to prove yourself first ELPHABA : Prove myself?

MADAM MORRIBLE : Prove yourself worthy.

In Excerpt 3, Elphaba attempts to enter the field of power and the influence of the Oz governmental system. According to field theory, society consists of various social spaces—such as education, politics, and aesthetics—where individuals strive to attain dominant positions. Each field has its own rules for being recognized and deemed worthy by the dominant system. Shiz University represents the field of education and power, a space that promises equality but contains implicit rules that support the dominance of certain groups. Madam Morrible, representing the dominant authority, sets a condition that Elphaba must "prove" herself worthy. This reflects how each field is governed by dominant values. While Elphaba possesses cultural capital (her magical talent), she lacks sufficient symbolic capital (her green skin is deemed unworthy) and social capital (she is unpopular and lacks strong social connections with other students). Therefore, from this theoretical perspective, a hierarchical power structure is evident—one that forces Elphaba to prove herself in order to be accepted and recognized by the society of Oz.

a. Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence is a subtle and invisible form of domination that imposes ways of thinking and behaving that are in line with the interests of the dominant class on the oppressed class. The concept of symbolic violence derives from the idea that there is a class structure in social formations, which is a set of networks that are structurally tied to each other and determine the distribution of culture, habits, and economic models, according to Pierre Bourdieu (Jenkins, 2014) from (Cahyaning. S., 2023, p. 128).

Excerpt 4

In the dialogue between 15:35 and 15:52, everyone is shocked and finds Elphaba's arrival strange; however, Elphaba herself does not perceive that she is being viewed negatively.

ELPHABA : What? What are you staring at? /Do I have something in my teeth?

GALINDA : No, it's just...You're green.

ELPHABA : I'm...

The dialogue can be linked to the song at minute 37:40–37:49, as the lyrics position Elphaba as something repulsive. This connection reinforces how the character is framed through both verbal and musical elements as an outsider, highlighting the internalized and socially constructed nature of prejudice against her.

Excerpt 5

“Poor Galinda, forced to reside with someone so disgustified. We just want to tell you, we're all on your side.”

In Excerpt 4 and 5, The phrase “disgustified” associated with Elphaba is a subtle form of stigmatization. Symbolic violence operates through language that shames the character without physical force. The other students do not insult Elphaba directly, but instead create a sense of solidarity with Galinda and treat the idea of rooming with Elphaba as a form of suffering. This illustrates how negative symbols are collectively accepted within society, reinforcing exclusion through normalized, shared perceptions.

a. Colorism

Colorism is a system of privilege and discrimination based on skin color. This means that the lightness of an individual's skin pigmentation can grant certain privileges. According to Deborah Gabriel, colorism is a form of internalized racism that “involves prejudice, stereotypes, and perceptions of beauty among members of the same racial group, where lighter skin is typically more highly valued than darker skin” (Gabriel, 2007, p. 11). Gabriel explains colorism as a form of discrimination rooted in skin tone, in which individuals with darker skin are often regarded as inferior compared to those with lighter skin—even within the same racial or ethnic group.

Excerpt 6

GALINDA : No, it's just...You're green.

ELPHABA : I'm...

In Excerpt 6, This can be linked to Deborah Gabriel's theory, as Elphaba experiences prejudice and negative stereotypes within the society of Oz, particularly among the students at Shiz University. She does nothing wrong, yet she is still subjected to social stigma simply because of her different skin color. Her green skin becomes the basis for social rejection not her personality or actions. This dialogue serves as a clear example of colourism through the lens of Deborah Gabriel's theory. Skin color functions as a social marker used to marginalize individuals. For instance, in the film, Galinda with a conventional skin tone—is respected, while Elphaba, with her green skin, is seen as strange. Colorism is not merely about skin tone; it is about who is deemed worthy of respect and recognition within a social system. It represents a form of discrimination embedded in culture and serves as a tool of power—one that is often unconscious or normalized.

2. The impact of inequality experienced by the character.

Excerpt 7

The impact experienced by the character is reflected in her song titled "*The Wizard and I*," where she expresses the belief that "if her skin were normal, she would be valued." "And since folks here, to an absurd degree /seem fixated on your verdigris /Would

it be alright b you, If I de-greenify you?"

In Excerpt 7, The song's lyrics reveal that Elphaba experiences complex structural and psychological marginalization. Her skin color is the primary reason she is excluded, doubted, and oppressed, leading her to fantasize about change. This issue goes beyond physical appearance; it reflects systemic discrimination (colorism), ideological domination (symbolic violence), the internalization of oppressive social values (habitus), and social barriers in the struggle for power (field). Elphaba becomes a symbol of how individuals who are different whether in skin color, background, or mindset are often forced to conform to dominant norms.

Presents the results of the analysis.

Table 1		Result of Disssussion
The data	Number	%
Habitus	2	28,57%
Field	1	14,29%
Symbolic Violence	2	28,57%
Colorism	1	14,29%

Impact	1	14,29%
Total	7	100%

The analysis results show that *Habitus* and *Symbolic Violence* are the most prominent themes, each accounting for **28.57%** of the data. *Field*, *Colorism*, and *Impact* each contribute **14.29%**, indicating that while all aspects are present in the narrative, some particularly symbolic structures and internalized social roles are more dominant in the character representation and storyline.

CONCLUSION

The movie *Wicked* (2024) presents a strong portrayal of social inequality and colorism through the character Elphaba. Despite being the daughter of a governor, Elphaba faces marginalization and symbolic rejection due to her green skin. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, field, and symbolic violence, as well as Deborah Gabriel's theory of colorism, this research shows that Elphaba's experience reflects the real-world impact of discrimination based on appearance. The study concludes that *Wicked* is not only a fantasy story but also a social critique that highlights how difference is treated with prejudice, and emphasizes the importance of empathy, recognition, and equality in society.

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