

Green Book's Utopian Mirage--A Tamed Narrative Under the White Savior Aura

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of racial segregation in the United States during the 1960s, the film *Green Book* depicts the social contradictions and identity crises arising from racial discrimination through the story of black pianist Shirley and white driver Tony's southern tour. From a postcolonialism perspective, this paper analyzed the underlying power relations and white-savior narrative in the film, revealing how its utopian ending conceals the structural racial inequality. The study finds that the film's portrayal of racial reconciliation at the end is a romanticized fantasy. Shirley's participation in Tony's family Christmas reunion comes at the cost of sacrificing his black identity. Furthermore, Shirley's elite status cannot represent the true circumstances of the broader Black community, and his personal success actually weakens the critics of systemic oppression to colored people. Though *Green Book* is themed around anti-racism, it is constrained by Hollywood narrative conventions and fails to confront the complexity of racial issues. True anti-discrimination works must transcend the framework of individual friendship, bring the essence of power relations to light and inspire audiences to reflect on real-world issues. Eliminating racism requires sustained global efforts, not merely the illusory reconciliation portrayed in the movies.

Keywords

Green Book; post-colonialism; identity crisis; racial discrimination

1. Introduction

Capitalist modernization has expanded the traditional concept of identity and has given rise to a broader concept—hybrid identity. This identity emphasizes the intellectual turmoil and spiritual torment individuals experience when choosing between dominant and subordinate cultures, including both anxiety and hope, pain and joy (Tao, 2004). As globalization continues to advance, the hybrid nature of identity has become a trend. The two main characters in the film *Green Book* have exemplified this phenomenon. The era in which Shirley and Tony lived was the 1960s, a time when the Black civil rights movement was gaining momentum. Many

educated Black individuals were traveling across states to advocate for their fellows to achieve equal rights with white people. During this period, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous speech *I Have a Dream* in Washington, D.C., bringing the issue of African American civil rights to a climax. In his highly inspiring speech, he articulated the tragic fate of African Americans who had long suffered from racial discrimination and class division, with concepts such as “equal under God” and “freedom and beauty” resonating across the United States. This marked the beginning of a civil rights movement striving for freedom and equality (Liang, 2023). One hundred years before this speech, during the American Civil War, the North, which advocated for the establishment of free states in the West, and the South, which pushed for the nationwide implementation of slavery, were locked in a stalemate politically, economically, and culturally. While enlightened Northern capitalists were building one dazzling factory after another in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Southern slaveholders clung stubbornly to their vast, endless plantations; while Black citizens in the North enjoyed playing jazz in taverns, Black slaves in the South toiled endlessly in the fields for their owners. This contrast represents an irreconcilable racial segregation and barrier between the North and South of the United States (Niu, 2023). The film *Green Book* is inspired by a true story from that period. In 1962, Dr. Shirley, a black pianist, planned to embark on a tour from New York to the South America. In an era when racial segregation had not yet ended, especially in the South where racial discrimination was particularly severe, a black man traveling alone would inevitably encounter numerous difficulties. To ensure his safety and the smooth performances, Dr. Shirley hired a white driver named Tony to drive him and protect him. Before the journey began, Tony obtained a booklet called the negro motorist green book, which was first published in 1936 and discarded in 1966 (Gu, 2023). The booklet detailed how Black people could “appropriately” choose their accommodations and places to stay during their travels, which played a crucial role in their journey to south, as the hotels Dr. Shirley stayed in and the bars he entered were all selected based on the Green Book. In the history, the Green Book was a real handbook, a travel guide specifically created for African Americans in the 1960s. At the time when racial discrimination was severe in southern U.S. cities, Green Book marked hotels, restaurants, and other establishments that allowed African Americans to enter, ensuring their personal safety. From the moment Tony receives the Green Book, it serves as a constant reminder to the audience that Dr. Shirley’s journey south is destined to be a journey filled with prejudice. The two main characters encounter numerous difficulties during their southern tour, but through their daily interactions, they overcome their biases, influence each other, and ultimately transcend racial barriers, developing an extraordinary friendship against such a special historical period.

2. Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism, also known as postcolonial criticism, has emerged after India's independence in 1947. It primarily studies the cultural power relations between former colonial countries and their former colonies after the colonial period. Its essence is to oppose Eurocentrism and the cultural hegemony imposed by Western developed capitalist countries on developing nations (Green, 1946). Post-colonialism emerged in the late 1970s to early 1980s and flourished in the 1990s. It is marked by Edward Wadie Said's *Orientalism* as the theoretical birth of the movement. Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* is considered the theoretical milestone marking the maturity of postcolonial cultural criticism. A key feature of postcolonialism is that it is not a rigid and unchanging theory. From its birth, it has constantly evolved to adapt to different historical moments, geographical regions, cultural identities, political contexts, subordinate relationships, and reading practices. Postcolonial cultural theory incorporates modernity, the nation-state, knowledge production, and Western cultural hegemony into its critical framework, thereby opening up a new era in cultural studies.

3. Black Pianist Shirley: Identity Crisis Brought by Hybridity

Etymologically, hybridity refers to both biological or species-level mixing, particularly racial mixing, and linguistic mixing, especially between different language families, languages, or dialects. Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha was the first to bring the concept of hybridity to postcolonial theory's study of the relationship between colonizers and the colonized. In postcolonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha argues that the relationship between colonizers and colonized people is characterized by an intertwined and complex dynamic. Colonizers penetrate and assimilate the cultures of colonized people through colonial discourse, but even after fully assimilating them, they continue to hold discrimination toward them (Zhai, 2018). In addition to Bhabha, Bill Ashcoft et al. offer more specific interpretations of hybridity. He defines hybridity as “a cross-cultural form arising from the contact zone between two cultures brought about by colonial actions.” In post-colonial discourse, hybrid phenomena do not fully belong to either the colonizers or the colonized.

The black pianist Don Shirley in the film *Green Book* embodies hybridity. Shirley completely breaks the stereotype of blacks with refined manners and excellent character. He received a high-level education from white aristocrats from a very young age and, due to his outstanding musical talent, he had the opportunity to study at the Leningrad Conservatory. He was the first Black man to study there, where he systematically learned classical music. As a black pianist, Shirley made conscious efforts to learn white culture, striving to integrate into the white world, deliberately avoiding fried chicken (a favorite among Black people) and listening to Black music. However, despite holding three doctoral degrees, being wealthy and famous, living in a luxurious penthouse at Carnegie Hall, and having his home adorned with expensive rare artifacts, he still could not be fully accepted by the white society. Wealthy whites paid Dr. Shirley to play the piano, but once he stepped off the stage, he was immediately seen as just a black man in their eyes. The

applause from white audiences toward Shirley was rooted in a “colonial gaze”—the white group enjoys the “civilization” of the colonized while refusing to grant them equal position. Shirley could not use the luxurious restrooms in the concert hall and had to use a makeshift outhouse in the wilderness; he could not use the spacious dressing room like his two white partners, but had to change clothes in a storage room near the kitchen; he could not have dinner with everyone else in the restaurant because of some “long-standing rule” but had to go to a nearby restaurant specifically for blacks; he loved one suit from the store window, but was deprived to have the right to try it on for free because he was black; he could only stay at the hotels marked in Green Book as exclusively for blacks... Black characters are common in Hollywood films, often serving as “the other one” (Sun, 2018). Shirley's “other” identity prevents him from living with freedom in a society dominated by whites. However, Dr. Shirley's polite demeanor and proud self-respect also prevent him from naturally communicating with his black peers. He cannot accept eating fried chicken with his hands; at the hotel where he stays, when black brothers invite him to play games with them, he feels awkward and can only leave them dispiritedly; When the car suddenly broke down by the roadside, Dr. Shirley dressed in a suit standing before the vehicle can only exchange a deafening silent stare with the Black farmer across the road—they both knew they were Americans, but neither knew who they truly were. The scene of Dr. Shirley breaking down and screaming in the downpouring rain pushes the film to its climax. Different from his usual restraint and elegance, Dr. Shirley shouts in the rain: “I suffer that slight alone, because I am not accepted by my own people, because I am not like them either! So if I am not black enough, if I am not white enough, and if I am not man enough, then tell me, Tony, who I am!” “Who I am?” is an old philosophical question, reflecting Dr. Shirley's divided and tormented psychological state at that moment—he was an outsider in both the white world and the black world. His unique sexual preference and the dichotomy between his white ideology and black skin have long plagued Dr. Shirley, leaving him without any sense of belonging and turning him into a paradox. As a black man, Dr. Shirley exhibits a pursuit of white cultural values, which is often referred to as “mimicry” in postcolonial criticism. While colonial discourse encourages the colonized to adopt the colonizer's cultural customs, assumptions, institutions, and values to “mimic” the colonizer, the result is never a simple reproduction of those characteristics but often a “blurred copy” of the colonizer (Sheng, 2004). The characteristic of mimicry being “almost the same yet not entirely the same” aligns with concepts such as contradiction and hybridity in Bhabha's theory.

4. The Observer and White Savior Tony: The Covert Resurgence of Colonialism

First of all, Tony is an observer, and Shirley is observed. The dynamic of “observing” and “being observed” is in Tony and Shirley's daily interactions. Around the 30th-minute of the film, the director uses a subjective camera angle to capture Tony standing on an open-air balcony, observing Shirley, who is sitting alone on another open-air balcony. It

can be said that Tony's gaze at this moment is “laden with the operation of power or entangled desires” (Zhao, 2006). Additionally, the relationship between Tony and Shirley in this scene is also worth mentioning: Tony is in a relatively higher position, while Shirley is in a relatively lower position. This spatial advantage not only facilitates Tony's observation but also subtly reveals the ubiquitous yet often overlooked power of Tony as a white man.

Second, Tony's image as a white savior is particularly evident in the film. After watching the whole film, it becomes clear that due to his white skin, Tony navigates both the “white world” and the “black world” with ease. He can get along well with others of the same skin color, forming friendships, and he can also engage in activities like gambling with colored people. In contrast, no matter how polite and cautious Shirley is, with his black skin he is still not accepted by white people. That is to say, despite Tony's bad habits, such as being a cheapskate and gambling, he remains Shirley's tour bodyguard—a highly educated man with three PhDs—and helps Shirley find himself. Whenever Shirley's life or property is threatened, Tony always manages to help him avoid the impending harm or loss. For example, Shirley goes to a bar alone to drink, but the innocent Shirley is attacked by a group of thugs in the bar. Facing their provocation, Shirley appears to be helpless and fearful, but fortunately, Tony arrives in time, and helped Shirley escape danger. After being rescued, Tony told Shirley something like “From now on, you must take me with you wherever you go, no matter where.” In this conversation, Tony's words here not only disregard Shirley's basic human rights but also carried a hint of a power relations. Another instance occurred at the Orange Bird Bar in Birmingham. At the Orange Bird Bar, two black men nearby noticed that Shirley was carrying a large amount of cash and decided to rob him. When Shirley and Tony went out from the Orange Bird Bar, the vigilant Tony shot his gun to the sky and scared off the two Black men hiding by the car, who had been preparing to rob them. Outside the Orange Bird Bar, Tony once again helped Shirley, preventing him from suffering property loss. Despite being inferior to Shirley in many aspects, Tony consistently took on the task of saving him.

Shirley not only needs Tony's protection for his life and property, but also relied on Tony in spirit. Under Tony's guidance and help, Shirley not only ate fried chicken, which he had never eaten before, and went to a bar full of African Americans, but also directly defied the white people's wishes and refused to perform for them. Tony's “help” in teaching Shirley to eat fried chicken actually reinforces the underlying message that “Blacks need to be taught by Whites.” All these events shape Tony's image as Shirley's protector. In these plots, Tony, with his “dominant skin color” (Storey, 2019) is the dominant one in their relationship. The “savior” narrative in *Green Book*, where a white driver acts as a bodyguard for a black musician, is essentially a replay of colonial-era power relations. As a guide for black action, the *Green Book* itself is a product of the racial segregation system.

5. Utopian Ending: Structural Power Inequality Under the Guise of Romantic Narration

Based on the hybrid identity of Dr. Shirley and the white savior Tony in the film, the author believes that colonizers often promote the continuous civilizing of the colonized people on the one hand, while resisting this trend with ontological inferiority on the other hand. Regardless of how much Shirley imitates white cultural values, the white community, which adheres to the principle of “racial purity”(Cen, 2023), will still exclude him from the white group from a perspective of ontology. The colonial discourse of colonizers is self-contradictory: they desire to assimilate the colonized while fearing their complete assimilation. That’s because once the colonized are fully assimilated, the colonizers’ superiority would disappear. To maintain their superiority, white society must keep the binary opposition between the dominant group and the subordinate group in order to confine the colonized within their essentialist framework.

At the end of the film, Shirley drives the exhausted Tony back to his home and spends Christmas with Tony’s family. Behind the emotional comfort provided by the warm ending, it is easy to overlook the fact that Tony’s family is not essentially white. Just as the security guard in the film said, Italian-Americans are merely “half a nigger.” The film uses the first 14 minutes at the beginning to introduce Tony’s background. Tony lives in the poorest neighborhood of New York, in a dilapidated apartment, struggling to make ends meet. After the nightclub closed, Tony had to find another job to support himself. At first, he mistakenly believed that Dr. Shirley’s title meant “doctor” and also Tony was unable to write fluent English letters, indicating that he had not received a proper higher education and could only engage in physically demanding work. As an Italian-American, Tony is not an England white person and does not possess many of the stereotypical characteristics associated with white people. His social interactions are largely limited to his own ethnic group and relatives. In summary, Tony does not fit the essentialist notion of white people. Furthermore, Shirley’s action of bringing red wine to Tony’s family celebration itself was achieved at the expense of Shirley’s own subjectivity as a Black character. The film repeatedly mentions that Shirley has a black brother with whom he has lost contact and frequently shows Shirley’s black chamberlain. And earlier scenes also mention places like the “Orange Bird Bar” where black people gather to celebrate the festival. That is to say, Shirley had multiple reasonable options for where to go on Christmas Eve and to join his group, but the film still ends with Shirley joining a white family as a seemingly “racial reconciliation” warm result.

Another contradiction lies in the film’s portrayal of the two main characters—Shirley, who embodies bourgeois codes, and Tony, who embodies proletarian codes—which already bridges the gap between the black and white worlds. A black pianist cannot fully represent the true circumstances of black people in American society at that time. The noble black Shirley and the black labors on the farm are not the same group of black people. The differences between them are as great as the differences between blacks and whites. Shirley’s methods of resistance against racism are based on the complexity of his own identity. It is his musical talent and aristocratic education that have brought him to his current social status, enabling him to hire the white driver Tony, have a tour to the

South, and advocate for his social status. However, the real circumstances of Black people at the time were even worse. If Shirley were merely a peasant, a “purely Black person,” how could he possibly speak out his own voice? Shirley was fortunate. His musical talent helped him free from oppression and working in the fields for meager wages, giving him the financial ability to hire Tony, who was capable to accompany him on his southern tour and help him through those troubles. However, the true historical humiliation of the Black community cannot be obscured by friendship or the healing of Shirley's personal psychological trauma. Even if Shirley eventually reunites joyfully with his Black community at the Orange Bird Bar, the issue of racial discrimination cannot be shifted to an internal identity crisis within the Black community.

In summary, the utopian reunion depicted in the film is merely the director and actors' idealistic vision, which does not align with reality and offers no practical solutions to the urgent social problem. It does not provide any feasible methods for addressing racial discrimination. Set at a background color as green, which symbolizes “hope” and “openness”, the film uses the construction of beautiful friendships and a perfectly Christmas reunion ending to gloss over the structural inequalities between racial groups in real society. The long-standing issue of racism in American is deeply rooted, and a warm and romantic ending cannot simplify the violent conflicts and structural inequalities of power relations between racial groups in real society into personal reconciliation between two characters. During the following decades after the release of *Green Book*, the social issues sparked by the identity crisis of the Black community have not ended. In our real society in late May 2020, 46-year-old Black man died in Minneapolis after being kneeled on the neck by a white police officer for over nine minutes. He begged desperately “I can't breathe” but in vain. In early March 2023, a Black man with mental illness was also killed by some police officers while being transported to the hospital for treatment. According to his lawyer, his hands and feet were restrained, yet he was kneeled on by seven police officers. Even after the black man stopped breathing, the police did not immediately perform medical assistance. The two cases are strikingly similar, and the tragic outcomes reveal the harsh reality that the Black community still remains unaccepted.

6. Conclusion

The release of the film *Green Book* has opened a window for us to further understand the history of oppression faced by Black people, though it does not directly depict the cruelty but instead reveals the discrimination faced by Dr. Shirley, a Black musician, through the flowing details of daily life. However, this anti-racism film falls far short in its impact, and the warm and harmonious ending is merely a one-sided fantasy of the Hollywood movies. If a film is merely the unilateral imagination of the production team, it is doomed to fail in the long run. An influential and excellent film requires multiple features, but the most crucial one is its ability to provoke deep reflection among audiences and prompt them to reconsider reality. This needs sincerity and courage from the filmmakers. While colonialism may have ended, its power dynamics

and cultural hierarchies remain deeply embedded in the global order. The struggle against racial discrimination has never ceased. Prejudices in people's hearts are like a mountain; when faced with terms like "racial discriminators," one should not only think of the United States as the most representative example. Discrimination exists in many modern nations with a constantly evolving ethnic composition. The entire world should strive to sow the seeds of equality in the hearts of its people. At the same time, people must recognize that eliminating racial discrimination is not an overnight process; it does not yield results in one night. However, as long as we continue to move toward this dream, we can believe that such a day without racial discrimination will come. Through communication and understanding, human beings can set aside the prejudices that exist in our hearts, achieve equality for all, and live in harmony.

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