

## **Racial Injustice and Stigma in American Legal Discourse: A Goffmanian Analysis of *Just Mercy* (2019)**

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### *Abstract*

*This study examines the representation of racial stigma in the film Just Mercy (2019), directed by Destin Daniel Cretton. Focusing on the lived experiences of African American communities, particularly through the real-life story of Bryan Stevenson and his legal defense of Walter McMillian, the film illustrates the entrenched racial biases embedded within the United States judicial system. The research aims to explore how racial stigma is portrayed, how it affects the characters' identities and social standing, and how individuals respond to such systemic discrimination. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the analysis draws from key film scenes, character dialogues, and cinematographic elements. The study applies Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, particularly the notion of tribal stigma, to uncover how Black individuals are subject to inherited and persistent marginalization based on racial identity. Findings reveal that the characters encounter various forms of racial stigma, including stereotyping, institutional bias, dehumanization, and social exclusion. These stigmas are met with diverse responses—ranging from internalized oppression to acts of resistance and legal advocacy. Ultimately, the film underscores the psychological, social, and institutional consequences of racial stigma, while highlighting the importance of justice, dignity, and resilience in the face of systemic racism. This research contributes to the broader discourse on race, identity, and justice in contemporary literary and media studies.*

**Keywords:** black community, stigma action, stigma response

### **A. Introduction**

Human interaction is rooted in communication—a fundamental aspect of social life that fosters relationships, promotes understanding, and sustains communal bonds. Yet, in many contexts, the very language that enables connection becomes a vehicle for marginalization. One such manifestation is stigma, a powerful social phenomenon that discredits individuals and entire communities. According to Chaplin (2006), stigma diminishes a person's integrity and social worth, reducing them to stereotypes and denying their individuality. As Ahmedani (2011) points out, stigma creates hierarchical divisions between the stigmatized and those who are socially privileged, reinforcing inequality and exclusion. Among the most damaging forms

of stigma is racial stigma, a subset of what Goffman (1963) categorizes as "tribal stigma"—prejudices based on race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage.

Racial stigma persists as a deeply embedded social construct, especially in societies with long histories of racial hierarchies, such as the United States. Systemic racism, historical injustices, and institutionalized bias have perpetuated the marginalization of African American communities for centuries. From the legacy of slavery to the enforcement of segregation under Jim Crow laws, and continuing through modern-day policing and judicial disparities, racial stigma continues to shape the lived experiences of Black Americans (Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen, 2018). These entrenched narratives of inferiority and exclusion are not merely historical—they are lived realities, often sustained and disseminated through cultural mediums, including literature and film.

Literature, particularly in its visual and narrative forms like film, provides a critical lens through which societal issues such as racial stigma can be analyzed and deconstructed. *Just Mercy* (2019), directed by Destin Daniel Cretton and based on the memoir of civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson, serves as a powerful narrative that interrogates the U.S. justice system's complicity in racial oppression. The film follows Stevenson's legal defense of Walter McMillian, a Black man wrongly accused of murder, illuminating how the judicial process is influenced by racial bias. Through its character portrayals, plot structure, and emotional depth, *Just Mercy* humanizes the victims of systemic racism and challenges viewers to confront the societal norms that enable such injustice.

Numerous studies have examined stigma in literature. Zorc-Maver (2020) explored how stigmatization operates in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, emphasizing how marginalized women resist intersecting oppressions. Similarly, Altay and Erbas (2021) analyzed internal and external stigma in the film *Wonder*, using Corrigan's (2005) framework to reveal how social rejection affects self-perception. Qur'aini et al. (2022) further contributed to stigma studies through their analysis of *Second Eye*, highlighting how literary representations of disability reveal mechanisms of social exclusion. While these studies affirm the value of analyzing stigma in narrative texts, they often focus on bodily or gender-based stigmas. There remains a significant gap in addressing racial stigma in contemporary films through Goffman's sociological lens.

This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how racial stigma is represented in *Just Mercy* through the structural and narrative elements of film. Unlike prior research focused on novels or visual impairment, this study centers on the lived reality of racial injustice and how filmic techniques amplify its emotional and societal impact. By using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, the analysis identifies how racial stereotypes are embedded in legal and social institutions, and how individuals respond to or resist these stigmatizations.

The study contributes to discourse analysis and sociolinguistics by demonstrating how film, as a multimodal narrative form, communicates and critiques racial ideologies. The integration of dialogue, setting, characterization, and point of view in *Just Mercy* reveals not just the presence of racial stigma but also its devastating effects on identity, justice, and humanity. The research highlights how narrative discourse in cinema can function as both a mirror and a critique of society's treatment of marginalized groups.

Ultimately, this study provides a meaningful contribution to the broader conversations on race, media, and discourse, demonstrating the enduring relevance of literary analysis in understanding social inequalities. It encourages future researchers to explore how visual narratives—particularly those grounded in real events—serve as cultural texts that challenge dominant ideologies and advocate for social change. Through an interdisciplinary approach that blends discourse analysis, film studies, and sociological theory, the research offers fresh insights into how racial stigma is not only represented but resisted in contemporary visual literature.

## B. Method

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the representation of racial stigma in the film *Just Mercy* (2019). As noted by Cropley (2023), qualitative research is instrumental in uncovering patterns and thematic meanings within data, especially when exploring human experiences as expressed through narrative forms. In the context of this study, qualitative analysis allows for a deeper interpretation of the film's narrative, character development, dialogue, and visual elements, which together construct a powerful critique of racial injustice in the United States. Given the film's thematic complexity and real-life basis, this approach is well-suited to revealing how racial stigma operates within both the story and its broader social context. The primary data source is the film *Just Mercy*, directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, which dramatizes the wrongful conviction of Walter McMillian, a Black man falsely accused of murder, and his defense by civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson. The writer conducted a detailed viewing of the film, focusing on narrative and cinematographic elements such as plot, setting, dialogue, characterization, and mise-en-scène. Key scenes were selected based on their relevance to racial stigma and injustice. Data analysis involved identifying and interpreting moments that illustrate systemic bias and discriminatory practices. These instances were then examined using Erving Goffman's (1963) stigma theory, particularly his concepts of "spoiled identity" and societal labeling. Through this theoretical lens, the study interprets the film's depiction of stigma dynamics, institutional racism, and resistance. Ultimately, this methodology provides a nuanced exploration of how racial stigma is both represented and challenged in contemporary visual literature, contributing to critical discussions on race, justice, and media.

## C. Findings and discussion

*Just Mercy* (2019) is a legal drama film adapted from the true story of lawyer Bryan Stevenson and his struggle to uphold justice for individuals who are victims of injustice in the legal system. The film introduces Bryan Stevenson, a young lawyer who graduated from Harvard University and decided to move to Alabama to build the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). This organization aims to help individuals who are financially disadvantaged and are often victims of racial prejudice in the legal system, especially those who have been sentenced to death without a fair trial. There, Stevenson meets Walter McMillian, an African-American man who was sentenced to death for a murder case he did not commit. Police and prosecutors conveniently ignored proving his innocence and instead relied on false testimony to convict him. The rising action shows Stevenson's struggle in investigating the McMillian case and uncovering various irregularities in the judicial process. He found that McMillian was convicted based on false testimony given under duress, while evidence that would have proven his innocence was ignored. Throughout his journey, Stevenson faced threats, pressure from authorities, and various forms of discrimination.

The climax occurs when Stevenson succeeds in taking McMillian's case to the appeals court with new evidence showing that he was slandered. Before the trial began, Stevenson faced significant pressure from various parties who wanted to maintain the existing system. Prosecutors and authorities in Monroeville continued to try to defend McMillian's conviction, not because there was substantial evidence against him, but because admitting it was a mistake meant they had to accept that the legal system had acted unfairly. During the trial, Stevenson firmly presented new evidence that proved McMillian's innocence. One of the most powerful moments occurs when the key testimony used to convict McMillian is finally withdrawn. Ralph

Myers, the main witness who previously gave false testimony, stands in court and admits that authorities coerced him into lying.

In the falling action, McMillian is freed after serving years of punishment for a crime he did not commit. McMillian family wept joyfully, and Stevenson felt satisfied that his efforts had finally paid off. However, despite his freedom, the effects of racial stigma are still felt. McMillian lost his productive years and had to deal with the trauma of the injustice he experienced. Stevenson and his team, despite winning the case, realize that their fight is far from over, as there are still many similar cases that occur due to racial prejudice rooted in the justice system. The film's resolution shows how Bryan Stevenson continues his work in defending those trapped in a discriminatory legal system, emphasizing the message that the fight against racial stigma and injustice must continue. He closed with the message that justice is not just about winning one case but changing the system so that the same mistakes are not repeated.

## Stigma Action

The presence of stigma action also known as stigmatization, in society is often linked with ignorance and suspicion towards particular groups of individuals. Individuals who are stigmatized, particularly those who identify as Black, often face the challenge of managing how they are perceived and how they interact with others in a society that may not view them favourably. It shows how prejudice and bias can affect how individuals are treated. This challenge is strengthened by various harmful behaviours, including prejudice, stereotype, discrimination, and isolation.

### 1. Prejudice

Prejudice involves holding negative views and beliefs about other based on their memberships in a particular group. A significant aspect of racial stigma is the conception that individuals belonging to certain racial or social groups are considered “abnormal” or inferior due to group-based perception. Prejudice influences social interactions between stigmatized individuals and those perceived as “normal”, often leading to offensive attitudes and avoidance or discriminatory actions. These prejudiced views further entrench the negative connotations associated with racial identity. The protagonist, Walter McMillian, also known as Johnny D, experiences prejudice when he is accused and becomes a suspect in the murder of Ronda Morrison, a white woman. The process of his arrest shows how this prejudice works.



From *Just Mercy* [00:02:57], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

McMillian is driving home from work then he stopped by police, under the command of Sheriff Tate. McMillian is confused and asks Sheriff Tate, “Good evening, Sir. Do you need to see my license?”, and Tate answers “No, that won’t be necessary.” (Cretton, 2019, 00:02:12-00:02:18). Sheriff Tate makes a small talk to McMillian before he says an assumption about McMillian, saying “I heard that ain’t stopped you before, ain’t that right Johnny D?” (Cretton,

2019, 00:02:55-00:03:01). McMillian is surrounded by police officers who aim guns at him, creating an intimidating situation. The dialogue shows Sheriff Tate's unfounded and unfortunate assumptions about McMillian. This suggests that McMillian has a bad reputation or has been involved in illegal activities in the past, although there is no concrete evidence. According to Goffman (1963), a person's social identity can be judged or assumed simply based on who they associate with or are around. Prejudice arises when someone is immediately assumed to have certain qualities simply because they belong to a particular group. This case demonstrates not only Sheriff Tate's personal prejudice, but also how this racial stigma has become embedded in institutions such as law enforcement. The scene uses low angle shots to capture Sheriff Tate's face, giving him a sense of dominance and authority. This shot creates him in a position where he has power over things. Johnny D is seen through his back and is vague, giving the idea about his vulnerability and the impression that he is being disadvantaged or being victimized. The lighting used is low-key lighting with the contrast between the bright and the dark. The bright lighting on Sheriff Tate's face draws attention to Sheriff Tate's smirking expression which implies arrogance and disrespect towards Johnny D. To reflect the tension in the scene, the dark contrast seems to convey that McMillian is in a difficult and uncertain situation. The colour tones are dominated by dark colours and shadows to create a serious, tense, and frightening atmosphere.

## 2. Stereotype

Goffman (1963) explained that stigma is closely related to stereotypes because both are rooted in social expectations and norms that are not always realized. He highlighted how stereotype can lead to a mistaken perception of individuals, treating them more as members of a group rather than as distinct individuals with unique characteristics. People of particular race are often judged according to societal norms and expectations, leading to widespread misconceptions about their behaviour, abilities, and morals. As a result, those deemed not to fit these expectations can experience stigma and be treated differently. In *Just Mercy*, another black convict, Anthony Hinton, who was arrested and convicted of murder, is subjected to racial stigma in the form of stereotypes. In this case, the evidence against Hinton is inconclusive as no fingerprints were found at the scene, no witnesses to prove his innocence, and only one person's statement. Nevertheless, Hinton is found guilty and sentenced to death.



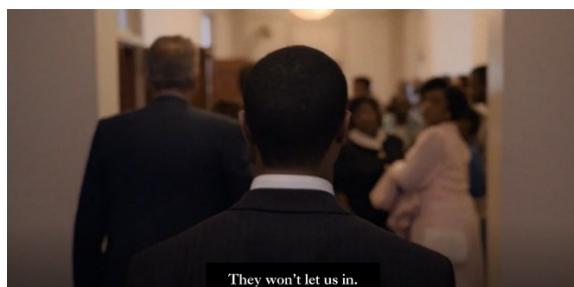
From *Just Mercy* [00:46:12], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

Hinton is talking to McMillian and Herbert in their separate but adjoining cells. Hinton says, "When I told the cops that stopped me, I was innocent. Do you know what they said? One of your niggas did it, if it weren't you, you can just take this one for your homie." To them who experienced injustice and the death penalty as well (00:46:03-00:46:19, Cretton, 2019). This shows how unfair and harmful stereotypes are to those who did not engage in it. These negative stereotypes about the black community demonstrate how everyone in the group is regarded as possibly criminal in the absence of clear evidence. Goffman (1963, p. 134) pointed out that

black people are not only stigmatized due to their skin color, but they are also forced to live up to stereotyped roles. Where the dominating group has complete influence over how the minority group behaves even in everyday interactions. The line, “If it weren’t you, you could just take this one for your homie” points out the police’s lack of concern for the identity of the true criminal. They are only trying to blame someone from a certain community for representing that category of people. Black people are not just considered as individuals, but as representatives of their community as a whole, so they carry the burden of responsibility, even for actions they did not do. Close up shot is used in this scene to focus on Hinton’s emotions, such as anger and despair, as an innocent prisoner experiencing intense pressure and injustice. Close up at eye level with the camera angled from the left display Hinton engaging in conversation with persons around him but also expresses his isolated situation, feeling trapped both physically and emotionally. The lighting is dim, creating a dark atmosphere with shades of gray that are meant to create a cold and uncertain atmosphere.

### 3. Discrimination

Stigmatized people are often considered less valuable than other people, so they are more likely to experience discrimination. Goffman (1963) notes that while some forms of discrimination are overt-such as rejecting a job applicant based on ethnicity-others are more subtle, such as small-scale assaults or unconscious biases affecting daily interactions. They can be excluded, belittled, or treated unfairly (Goffman, 1963). This encourages the formation of negative prejudices, which further strengthen inequality in society. Stigma in the form of stereotypes can lead to racial discrimination against black people as a minority, especially in the United States. In *Just Mercy*, stigmatization in the form of discrimination occurs when Stevenson is still a law student, following an internship program, and is assigned to meet Henry Davis, a death row convict who the prison guard mistreats.



From *Just Mercy* [01:57:47], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

Discrimination is exposed when the black community is denied entry into the courtroom to support McMillian. Minnie said to Stevenson, “They won’t let us in”, “That boy made us wait out here for an hour” another family member added. Stevenson is mad and immediately confronts the guard on duty, “This is a public hearing and these people need to be let in right now.” (Cretton, 2019, 01:57:47-01:57:59). This demonstrates how the legal system purposefully separates the black community from a process that is supposed to involve all parties, leaving them feeling helpless and excluded. They are divided as if their voices are unimportant or unworthy of being heard in the struggle for justice. Despite being treated unfairly, their presence outside the courtroom demonstrated their commitment to continuing to support McMillian and seek justice. This determines that a strong and connected community, in addition to people like Stevenson, are involved in the fight for justice. This scene combines an over-the-shoulder angle with a medium shot, focusing on Stevenson’s point of view on the injustices suffered by the black community. Stevenson’s point of view illustrates the issues of

discrimination, his sense of duty as McMillian's lawyer, as well as his and the black community's obstacles. Stevenson is in the primary focus, with more precise details, while the crowd in the background appears unclear indicating that he has a significant moral responsibility. Indirect social pressure is depicted by the blurry background with a vague impression of the black community.

#### 4. Isolation

Group-based prejudice and discrimination can lead to social isolation, which may intensify the stigma. Goffman (1963) explained social exclusion is a common experience for stigmatized individuals because their identity is seen as having little worth. Limited connection with members of the stigmatized groups can reinforce negative stereotypes, as people are more likely to develop prejudices in the absence of diverse perspectives. Stigma creates a wall of separation between stigmatized groups and the general public. As a result, in *Just Mercy*, many people are socially and emotionally distant from black communities. They frequently avoid social situations, refuse to become involved in their issues, or simply show no concern. This circumstance occurs when Stevenson asks people on the witness list to become witnesses at McMillian's trial.



From *Just Mercy* [00:50:20], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

Stevenson approaches an old man who is listed as a witness in the Ronda Morrison case. Stevenson says, "You were on the witness list for Ronda Morrison's trial several years," and the old man replies, "I'm sorry, can't help you." (Cretton, 2019, 00:50:20-00:50:24). The locals are hesitant to help or testify as a witness. Despite knowing the truth or having relevant information to help McMillian prove his innocence, the old man chooses to remain silent. Many in the surrounding area have determined his "guilt" based on this prejudice because he was a black man who is accused of killing a white woman. Goffman (1963) argued that stigma theories or ideologies are developed by societies to explain why stigmatized individuals are viewed as less worthy or inferior. Because of this, stigmatized individuals are frequently isolated from the dominant society. They are avoided, and some even perceive them as dangerous. As a result, he feels no need to help because the belief that McMillian is guilty is correlated with the dominant viewpoint of the black community. The refusal of witnesses to testify makes the legal process unequal and makes it difficult for innocent people to show the truth. Without unbiased witnesses, decisions are often based on stereotypes and assumptions. This scene uses a medium shot that focuses on the upper half of the old man's body, from the waist up. The old man is depicted in this medium shot standing at the front door, avoiding Stevenson. It helps to pay attention to his rejecting facial expression, which portrays a sense of uncertainty or discomfort, showing that he would rather keep his boundaries than get involved in a harmful situation. The lighting used is warm and comes from inside the house, which provides comfort to the old man who refuses to help, in contrast to the gloomier ambiance outside the house. This lighting difference represents how the light creates the feeling that the

house is a safe space where he is secure from the burdens of the outside world. The darker lighting outside symbolizes ambiguity, difficulties, and rejection.

## Stigma Response

Responses to stigma may vary depending on the individual or group experiencing it. These responses reflect how a person reacts to the adverse treatment, prejudice, or discrimination that results from stigma. The response of an individual to stigma manifests in various forms, including alienation, rejecting stigma, and advocacy. In an attempt to fit in or escape stigma, individuals conform to societal norms by adjusting aspects of their identity. Conversely, some resist stigma and strive to preserve their self-perception.

### 1. Alienation

According to Sartre (1956), people view us in the manner they want to be looked at, alienating us from them. Sartre argues that alienation stems from the impression that others have of us and not from the real us. Additionally, Sartre believes that negation—the loss of the objectivity towards the presence of others—is the origin of alienation, with people negating their own identities in the eyes of others. These individuals feel constrained by cultural norms and judgements, limiting their capacity to assert their originality or earn acceptance. Over time, this condition causes people to feel alienated or disconnected to their surroundings because they believe they do not belong there. In *Just Mercy*, the stigma against the black race causes McMillian, his family, and the black community to feel alienated from the justice system and society.



From *Just Mercy* [00:36:39], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

When Stevenson comes to McMillian's house, Uncle Leo, one of the family members, responds to Minnie's conversation by explaining the injustice that McMillian received, "They can call it what they want, it's just another way of judging black people." (Cretton, 2019, 00:36:39-00:36:43). This shows how they often experience unfair treatment, such as being imprisoned or sentenced to death even though they are innocent, simply because of their race. The black community has long experienced injustice when the phrase "the other way" is used. Instead of seeking concrete evidence or witnesses who can tell the truth, they are punished inhumanely by receiving "lynching" or death sentence without trial. As a result, individuals have a sense of alienation, believing that they are not receiving the protection that society and the law should provide. According to Goffman (1963, p. 138) alienation is not just a personal feeling, but is also greatly influenced by social and cultural factors. Social norms and values can lead to alienation for some groups, and those who do not conform to common standards feel excluded from society. The scene uses medium shots with an eye angle to highlight the family and black community in the frame, with Uncle Leo with a serious and full of meaning facial expression, his eyes staring blankly ahead to Stevenson as if expressing lack of hope and long-held anger. McMillian's daughter who is sitting next to him, her eyes are filled with

confusion and worry. This alienation, where the group acknowledges the injustice but lacks the power to fight back. Additionally, the black community in the back, which appears darker, supports the perception that they are socially alienated because of stigma. Low-key lighting is used to create a dramatic effect, with dim light implying a dark atmosphere and the emotional burden felt by the black community. The cool tone color dominated by blue shows a sense of melancholy and their despair.

## 2. Rejecting Stigma

Goffman (1963) explained that fighting stigma is about enduring adverse treatment and actively opposing and rejecting views that demean them. By rejecting stigma, they want to prove that the unfair views toward them are wrong. Therefore, resistance to stigma becomes a way for affected individuals to regain control of their identity and dignity. Rejecting stigma appears in *Just Mercy* as a way to fight the prejudice, stereotypes, or unfair judgements they encounter.



There's no reason to point your gun at me. I am not a threat to you.

From *Just Mercy* [00:57:59], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

When Stevenson is stopped and forced to exit his car without a lawful search warrant, he faces discrimination and threats from the legal system. Police officers also threaten him with a gunpoint. Stevenson speaks to the police, “There’s no reason to point your gun at me. I am not a threat to you.”, and they respond to his words by saying, “Hi brother, you have to be careful with your words when you get a gun to your head.” Stevenson is shown to have no authority by the police’s extremely prejudiced words and actions (Cretton, 2019, 00:57:59-00:58:11). “I am not a threat to you” is Stevenson’s form of resistance that is regarded to be dangerous or threatening. Stevenson’s statements express his desire to be treated equally and not be evaluated only on prejudice. His statement is both a form of resistance and a reminder to the legal system that he has the right to be treated properly and humanely. The scene uses a close-up shot of Stevenson, with a police officer in the background pointing a gun on Stevenson, which is depicted as a blur. This shot emphasizes Stevenson’s face expression as he confronts discrimination while trying to reject the stigma. Stevenson’s eager look symbolizes his rejection of the cruel treatment he receives, demonstrating his courage despite his unfavorable situation. The lighting is low-key, with police car lights behind creating shadows over Stevenson’s face. The gloomy mood created by the low lighting highlights the feeling of injustice and danger. The shadows on his face represent the pressure and burden of discrimination he endures.

## 3. Advocacy

Stigma response advocacy happens when a person chooses to challenge and change society’s perspective through advocacy efforts rather than merely accepting the label or discrimination attributed to them. Tilly (1997) believed that social action and social determinism function both inside and outside of restrictions. Shared information and narratives are required for social interactions to occur, although these interactions take various forms.

Through advocacy, individuals become powerful agents of change by resisting the prevailing social narratives, advancing alternative viewpoints, and increased public acceptance, encouraging wider societal acceptance of their stigmatized identities. Stevenson performs this in *Just Mercy* as a lawyer dealing with unfair trial situations.



From *Just Mercy* [00:54:21], by Destin Daniel Cretton (director), 2019.

Stevenson meets Sheriff Tate, who is accompanied by Tom Chapman, after Sheriff Tate forces and arrests one of the witnesses Stevenson for McMillian. Stevenson questions them over the procedure for arresting his witness. Sheriff Tate says, "If people make false statements concerning this case, they are going to be held accountable." And Stevenson replies, "You can't arrest someone for perjury without evidence that a false statement has been made." (Cretton, 2019, 00:54:21-00:54:32). This portrays Stevenson as a lawyer who fiercely defends his clients against bias or unjust treatment stemming from the legal system's stigma. Stevenson expresses a rejection of harsh treatment, which is often experienced by black people. He defends the freedom of individuals to be treated fairly and free from racial discrimination. Goffman (1963, p. 36) states that stigmatized communities frequently come together and create support networks to combat injustice, either through representatives, organizations, or agents. Stevenson is present as a bridge between the black community and the biased legal system. This scene uses a high angle, emphasizing the dominance and superiority of Tate and Chapman in this scene. Stevenson is not entirely focused; instead, only his dominant silhouette strengthens the impression that he is not welcome in the room. The main focus is on Tate, who smiles casually, reflecting his indifference to Stevenson's whereabouts or the case brought by the lawyer. This creates an imbalance of power, as if Stevenson has to ask for permission or approval from them, even if he is a lawyer who comes with professional intentions. Stevenson is in a darker area; this symbolically shows how he is considered "invisible". The light around Tate and Chapman is brighter and more natural, which could symbolize their power and privilege.

#### D. Conclusion

This study has explored how *Just Mercy* (2019) powerfully represents racial stigma experienced by African American communities in the United States. Through a close analysis of key scenes, characters, and dialogues, the film exposes how entrenched societal stereotypes and systemic injustice shape the perception and treatment of Black individuals. Rather than being viewed as autonomous human beings, they are often reduced to group-based identities shaped by negative assumptions. The film reveals that racial stigma extends beyond everyday interpersonal interactions into institutionalized spaces, particularly the legal system, where bias and discrimination further marginalize the Black community.

Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, the study identifies multiple forms of stigma action portrayed in the film—including stereotyping, dehumanization, and

social exclusion. The findings also highlight a range of stigma responses, from internalized oppression to resistance and collective advocacy. While some individuals are psychologically burdened by stigma and retreat from public life, others actively reject these imposed identities, resist societal expectations, and fight for justice. These acts of resistance underscore the human capacity for agency and the will to reclaim dignity in the face of dehumanization.

The film ultimately illustrates that racial stigma operates not only at the level of individual bias but also within broader cultural and institutional frameworks. It reinforces the need to challenge structural inequality and recognize how stigma perpetuates social exclusion and psychological harm. Although *Just Mercy* portrays events rooted in a specific historical and cultural context, its message remains deeply relevant to contemporary struggles for racial justice. Despite its insights, this study is limited to a single film and one theoretical lens. Future research could expand the scope by analyzing multiple films or literary works across diverse contexts, and by incorporating intersectional perspectives or alternative stigma theories. Such inquiries may deepen our understanding of how racial stigma is represented, resisted, and potentially dismantled across media. In sum, *Just Mercy* offers more than a narrative of injustice—it serves as a compelling call to action. It invites viewers and scholars alike to confront prejudice, question dominant narratives, and advocate for a more just and humane society.

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