

From Green Book to The Upside: The Identity Contradictions of the Colonizing Subjects

Muzhi Yang*

Photography Department, Haikou University of Economics, Haikou, Hainan, 571127, China
*y2864357791@163.com

ABSTRACT

The Green Book and the American version of The Upside both tell the story of a pair of sincere friendships between two individuals from different classes and races. The development of the two friendships and the conflicts that arise in this process reveal the inner contradictions of the colonizing subjects. This paper will use Homi Bhabha's theory of binary opposition, the other and mimicry and Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to analyze the two protagonists as the colonizing subjects in the two films, their cognitive and attitudinal changes that occurred after their first met the highly mimetic colonized, and their transformation into the "other" within the "other" as the plot develops and with the help of the two "magical blacks" companions. At the same time, their self-contradictory discourse and the confusion of their own identity recognition make the power relationship between the two pairs of protagonists change and the boundary between superior and subordinate becomes blurred, which ultimately breaks the employment relationship and forms their close friendships.

KEYWORDS

Green Book; The American Version of The Upside; Binary Opposition; The Other; Mimicry; Disciplinary Power; Identity.

1. THE MAIN CONTENT AND BACKGROUND OF THE MOVIE

Winner of the Best Picture and the Best Original Screenplay at the 91st Academy Awards in the United States, Green Book tells a true story. In 1960s America, Tony, a white Italian descent, is desperate for a job to support his family when the nightclub he used to work in was closed for renovations. Through a friend's recommendation, Tony needs to attend an interview organized by a black African descent music doctor, Shirley, is about to go to the South for a national music tour. Tony needs money to support his family and Dr. Shirley needs a driver who can mediate conflicts in the racially segregated South. So they embark on this journey to get what they need. Along the way, Tony eventually stops racial discrimination and Shirley finally gives up trying to prove himself to mainstream society and returns to African descent culture.

The American version of The Upside is adapted from the French film Intouchables and also tells a true story. In the modern era, Philip, a wealthy white man, loses his wife in a paragliding accident and becomes paralyzed from the neck down. After that, Philip gradually becomes hopeless in life. Dell, a black hooligan who has just been released from prison, desperately needs a job to support his family and fulfill his parole conditions. By mistake, Dell becomes Philip's caregiver. During the probation period, the two men influence each other. Dell's straightforward, cheerful personality and energetic lifestyle gradually give Philip the motivation to live, while Philip's elegant demeanor and financial support allow Dell to stop his vulgar thoughts and take on the responsibility of supporting

his family. In the end, Dell lets his wife and son live a better life and Philip regains his confidence in life and comes out of the psychic trauma of losing his wife and physical disability. The film downplays the racial relations and emphasizes more on the story between the two with wide class disparity.

Both films explore the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized as well as the colonized people's inevitable mimicry of the behaviors, culture, and lifestyle of colonization under the cultural boundaries and power disciplines of mixed races and classes. When the colonizing subjects confront the colonized subjects who are highly mimetic or even surpassing themselves, they will change their original perceptions and attitudes and fall into contradictory identities. This paper will use Homi Bhabha's theory of binary opposition, the other and mimicry as well as Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power to explore the colonizing subjects' contradictory inner world and identity recognition as the plots of the two films develop.

2. HOMI BHABHA'S POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND MICHEL FOUCAULT'S DISCIPLINARY POWER

2.1. The Strategy of Mimicry

Homi Bhabha is a prominent contemporary postcolonial theorist, who, along with Said and Spivak, is known as the "Holy Trinity" of postcolonial theory. When it comes to Homi Bhabha, one of his most important theories is hybridity. This includes the strategy of mimicry, which refers to the fundamental concept that the colonized mimic the language, dress, politics and cultural attitudes of the colonizer. In fact, the act of mimicry is a way of protecting and threatening the colonizer. [1] Homi Bhabha points out the complexity of mimicry through the analysis of practical cases such as the spread of Christianity in India. It serves as a means for the colonizers to advance the operation of colonial power and for the colonized to resist colonial power. For both the colonizers and the colonized, it affects their identities to varying degrees and causes cultural collisions and, to some extent, mutual influence and understanding.

2.2. The Other

In postcolonial theory, the "self" generally refers to the Western world, the colonizers, who are dominant with the power of discourse. The "other" refers to the non-Western world, the colonized, who are subordinate and lack the power of discourse. It is a Western-centered ideology. Homi Bhabha argues that the "other" is not a simple and fixed concept, but that it further divides the "self" and the "other" within the "other" according to different forms of social differences and discrimination, leading to prejudice within the prejudice. Therefore, it not only exists in the non-Western world but also in the Western world.

2.3. Disciplinary Power

Michel Foucault's theory of power explores the way power operates in modern society. He argues that power is always in struggle and that it is strengthened, changed and subverted in the continuous struggle. He divides power into two main levels, micro and macro. At the micro level, disciplinary power, as a key part of his analysis of the mechanisms of power in modern society, takes the individual as an object and fosters the individual to enhance his productivity, capabilities and skills. However, these enhancements are not allowed to threaten the upper class. Hence, Foucault refers to the standardized surveillance of modern prisons, where a group of inmates work in a yard, supervised by administrators from a high watchtower. The prisoners who work hard are rewarded, while those who work negatively are punished. Over time, the inmates become fearful of those on the high tower,

even though there is no supervision from the tower. This compels the prisoners to be objectified to achieve control over both body and soul and to develop capable and obedient subjects.

3. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE COLONIZING SUBJECT IN GREEN BOOK AND THE AMERICAN VERSION THE UPSIDE

3.1. When Colonizing Subjects Encounter Highly Mimetic Colonized Subjects, Their Established Perceptions and Attitudes Will Change.

At the beginning of the story *Green Book*, the colonizer Tony is a rude racist who does not hesitate to express his disgust for the black people who come to clean his home by throwing the glasses used by the black people into the trash can. However, when Tony goes to the colonized Dr. Shirley's address for an interview, Tony is first shocked by the luxurious decorations of the house. After that, Dr. Shirley walks out to interact with Tony. Tony changes his stereotypes and attitudes towards black people by shaking Shirley's hand. In this interview, the two do not reach an agreement. Shirley's mimic of the white elite class, Tony's change in attitude and the interaction between the two reveal the impact of racial discrimination on individual identity and social relations. In the development of the story, Tony's attitude also softens. The two men's different identity backgrounds bring them many conflicts and contradictions. In the end, Tony eliminates the discrimination against black people and helps Dr. Shirley construct his own subjectivity and find his "self".

In the American version of *The Upside*, Dell, as a colonized black man, is a stereotypical image of black people in today's society. He has a criminal record and is vulgar. However, Philip, as the colonizer, hires him to take care of him. Dell inevitably learns and mimics the work of a caregiver. In addition, he must cater to Philip's entertainment preferences. They go to art exhibitions and theaters, so Dell begins to mimic the leisure activities of the upper class. However, his crude imitation is met with criticism and verbal abuse from others of that class. Philip always accepts Dell's behavior with a smile, at most asking him to tone it down. This collision of classes highlights the impact of different social positions and backgrounds on the construction of subjectivity. Dell gradually constructs his own unique subjectivity in a class to which he does not belong, while Philip, who belongs to this class, supports Dell, which is unique within that class.

Both Tony and Philip, as the colonizing side and the side of the "self," are driven by the social environment to more or less reject the colonized side. When some of the colonizing subjects see the colonized subjects who have become their reflections, they will form an ambiguous state of intermingled guilt and superiority on the moral level. This will lead them to change their views and attitudes towards them. [2] However, when an "other" surpasses them in one aspect, the original stereotypes are rewritten and cultural conflicts and integration begin at this moment. Their attitudes change accordingly, which allows emotional collisions and integration to redefine their own identities.

3.2. When the Colonizing Subjects Encounter the Highly Mimetic Colonized, the Colonizing Subjects may Become the "Other" within the "Others."

In both films, the two protagonists as colonizers deviate from the mainstream society, while the two protagonists as the colonized are closer to mainstream society to some extent.

In *Green Book*, Tony is out of work at home, rude and fond of violence, which runs counter to the culture the colonizers claim to be advanced in. During the journey, Tony wants to write a letter to his wife at home and Dr. Shirley notices the disorganized letter. He instructs Tony to write the letter and Tony, like an apprentice, follows the instructions to complete the letter. Along the way, Dr. Shirley is more like a teacher to Tony by correcting Tony's radical behavior and teaching Tony to be delicate with his emotions. Tony meets the job requirements to ensure Shirley's safety during his performance.

Compared to Tony, Shirley is closer to mainstream society and possesses the knowledge, talent and status that Tony lacks. All Tony owns is his white skin.

In the American version of *The Upside*, Philip, as a disabled person, is the “other” in society. Dell, also an “other”, after knowing about the upper class and taking on the role of Philip’s caregiver, has led Philip’s actions with reasonable arrangements. Dell becomes more and more self-centered from Dell needing Philip’s reminder at the beginning to Philip needing Dell’s help. This sows the seeds for the later part when Dell irritates Philip. But at this moment, Dell is closer to mainstream society, with his intact limbs, optimistic attitude toward life, a salary to support his wife and children and Philip who needs his help.

3.3. When the Colonizing Subjects Encounter the Highly Mimetic Colonized, the Employment Relationship between the Colonizing and Colonized Subjects Changes.

In both films, the relationship between the two pairs of protagonists begins with an employment relationship. Tony serves as Dr. Shirley’s driver and Dell as Philip’s caregiver. Their power relationships are not equal but are still under the disciplinary power. Tony is sloppy during the journey. Dr. Shirley corrects Tony to have the right attitude toward work and comply with the rules he sets. Dell seeks personal gain at work. He sneaks the use of Philip’s limousine and almost loses his job. Philip does not blame Dell but uses responsibility to drive Dell to follow the rules.

As the plot develops, the degree of the colonized mimicry deepens, their sense of self grows stronger and the mismatch between the employer’s power position and the servant’s construction of the subject ultimately drastically changes the employment relationship between the two. Tony eliminates discrimination and Dr. Shirley finds his self. Their relationship becomes harmonious. At the end of the movie, Dr. Shirley drives to their destination and Tony rests in the back seat. Their employment relationship is exalted by their friendship. By contrast, Dell oversteps his boundaries by meddling in Philip’s relationship with his pen pal. As a result, they end their employment relationships after quarreling. The highly mimetic colonized leads to a change in the colonizer’s attitude, but the relationship built on this basis is fragile. The friendship between the two is sturdier under the employment relationship. Their relationship would be more solid under an employment relationship. At the end of the story, they forgive each other and continue to help each other.

4. PROJECTION INTO THE REAL WORLD

In the realm of film, taking the Academy Award for Best Picture as an example, from the 86th to the 95th ceremonies, the winners were *12 Years a Slave*, *Birdman*, *Spotlight*, *Moonlight*, *The Shape of Water*, *Green Book*, *Parasite*, *Nomadland*, *CODA*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Eight of these movies are about the “other,” including people of African descent, Asian descent and even non-human beings. Disney film and television productions have also incorporated actors from minority ethnic groups, as well as members from the lower strata of society and LGBTQ communities. The *Little Mermaid* casts an African descent actress in the lead role to promote the idea that minorities can also be princesses and thereby show respect for minority ethnic groups. *Frozen* also challenges traditional gender concepts by telling a story of sisters’ self-growth to demonstrate women’s independence and strength. The analysis, research, discussion, summaries and theoretical construction of a series of issues such as colonial discourse, colonial subjects, colonial power relations, and decolonization. This points to the political and cultural realities of colonialism. [3] It is true that changes are taking place at the societal level. The attitude toward the colonized, women, the “other” and the marginalized figures in society are becoming more lenient. However, in the political arena, there has been and remains only one African descent president, while incidents of police shootings of black individuals continue to occur frequently.

5. CONCLUSION

In *Green Book*, Tony helps Dr. Shirley to return to the African descent community but does not change the biases of the rich white man. Dr. Shirley does not “change human nature with courage” as expected, nor does he win by retaining his dignity. And Dr. Shirley is the only one Tony respects. In the American version *The Upside*, the stereotypes of black people in the film remain serious with portrayals of gangs, poverty and theft. When a conflict arises between the two, Philip directly fires Dell, which proves that the relationship between them remains hierarchical relationship. Thus, when the colonizing subjects are confronted with a highly mimetic colonized person, they may be afraid, sympathetic, angry, jealous and will feel a variety of emotions, but at the end of the relationship, the colonizing subjects’ perception will return to the original state.

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