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## The Portrayal of Black Feminism in Gary Gray's *Set It Off* through Critical Race Theory

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### ABSTRACT

Stories in films are based on social realities in people's lives, embedding messages behind them. Each film is packed with unique characters, events and issues reflecting aspects of life from a particular perspective. One of which is the principles of black feminism in the main characters and to analyze how economic and racial factors influence the character's decision to confront existing injustices depicted in Gary Grey's *Set It Off* (1996). The method used is a qualitative research method. Data collection is conducted to sort and understand the research topic by using data from scenes, dialogues, words, and phrases obtained from the film. The main theories used in this research are the Critical Race theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Feminist Economics theory by Marilyn Waring. The findings reveal that the film encompasses principles of black feminism such as racial discrimination, sexism and social class which are portrayed by each main character in the film. This article also depicts the influence of economic and racial factors on the character's decisions in confronting existing injustices. Analyzing this film aims to trigger and enrich the analysis of how films depict the struggle of black women with various problems, especially racial and economic issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

Films serve as a medium for conveying messages to the audience and a source of entertainment, social commentary, or even education. According to Danesi (2011), as a mass medium, films possess aesthetic power due to their ability to present dialogue, music, scenery, and actions simultaneously in a visual and narrative manner. The stories in films, whether explicit or implicit, often draw from the social realities of people's lives and incorporate ideological elements, presented in an engaging way to offer new insights to the viewers (Mudjiono, 2011). Within various social segments, films can shape perspectives, behavior, and understanding of the world around us. They continuously capture evolving social realities and project them onto the screen (Sobur, 2004). This blend of social reality and reconstructed reality presented in film is referred to as representation.

Representation in film refers to how a specific topic, concept, or reality is depicted and presented, including how characters, events, places, or specific concepts are shown to the audience through the visual, narrative, and artistic

elements in the medium of film. Turner (2018) suggests that when film acts as a representation of society's reality, it does not only transfer reality to the screen but also actively shapes and reimagines that reality with the codes, conventions, and ideologies within its culture. The United States is one of the countries with significant influence in the film industry, often referred to as Hollywood (Silver, 2007).

Hollywood films do not only provide entertainment but also disseminate American cultural values, leading to the globalization of tastes and preferences. The film industry in the United States has embraced technological advancements such as CGI and recognized the importance of representation. A number of American films currently emphasize inclusivity, adapt stories from other media like books, video games, or comics, and explore various themes, including social issues. One social issue that has been a focus in American filmmaking is black feminism.

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement advocating for gender equality and women's rights in various aspects of life,

including voting rights, workplace equality, and the elimination of gender discrimination (Ilaa, 2021). Meanwhile, black feminism is a specific branch of the feminist movement that emphasizes the intersectionality of race and gender, focusing on black women.

Black women face challenges and struggles that cannot be fully explained by a general feminist perspective. This movement strives to address gender inequality and confront the racism experienced by Black women while attempting to understand how gender and race discrimination intersect in their experiences. In America, many movies are made to show the struggles of certain groups against injustice and inequality. Black feminism in American cinema raises unique issues faced by black women and voicing their aspirations without disregarding the differences in the diverse American society (Collins, 2022). One of the producers and directors who often portray black people in his films is Felix Gary Gray. He has produced many films that not only represent the social circumstances experienced by black people but also provide implicit and explicit messages to the audience, one of which is the film *Set It Off* (1996).

*Set It Off* is a 1996 American heist crime action film that narrates the story of four African American women—Stony, Frankie, Cleo, and T.T.—who turn to a life of crime by robbing a bank as a last-ditch effort in response to economic hardship and social injustice. *Set It Off* addresses several issues related to gender, race, and the lives of Black women in the United States. The film portrays the experiences of economically disadvantaged black women in urban environments and explores social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and violence.

*Set It Off* gives a different twist from other black feminism-themed films. The film combines action, drama, friendship, and rebellion to face the injustice and inequality experienced by black women. Combining these elements creates a unique picture, making *Set It Off* different from other films of the same era.

In African American cinema in the 1990s, black people wrote, directed, and starred in many films. These films tended to explore life in urban environments, issues of racism, hip-hop culture, and the struggle against injustice, either through explicit or implicit messages. However,

most of these films focus on the experiences and lives of black men, leaving the experiences of black women often marginalized.

*Set It Off* presents a different narrative, focusing on the experiences of black women who face dual discrimination - both based on race and gender. The pressure of these injustices pushes the characters to rebel to survive and fight against the system that oppresses them.

The film provides a clear depiction of how Black women experience double discrimination within society. This issue significantly motivates them to challenge discrimination, giving rise to the Black feminist movement. This paper aims to exemplify the principles of Black feminism in the main characters and analyze how economic and racial factors influence their decisions in confronting existing injustices portrayed in *Set It Off*. In this paper, the authors focus on the experiences and struggles of the main character in facing discrimination that reflect the principles of Black feminism, and how these factors of inequality shape their experiences and motivate them to make extreme decisions to fight against an unjust system.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative method is used in conducting this research to explore and understand the meanings attributed by a group of individuals or a community related to social or human issues (Creswell, 2016) in the form of written or spoken words regarding the behavior of observable individuals. The data in this paper consists of film scripts and captures containing representations of black feminism in the film *Set It Off*. In collecting data, the authors employed observations, document review, and audio-visual analysis. To fully represent black feminism in the film, the data collection was conducted based on the theme's relevance, which combines issues such as gender inequality, racial injustice, and economic exploitation. The film reflects each character's struggle to deal with these issues. Meanwhile, the data analysis consists of identifying the representations and meaning of Black feminism taken from the scripts. Identifying examples of black feminism was conducted using two main theories, namely intersectionality from Critical Race Theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and Feminist Economic Theory by

Marilyn Waring (1990). Using these two theories, data was collected by analyzing the forms of representation in each film scene. Black feminism's tenets—such as racial injustice, gender inequity, and economic exploitation—were used to identify the representations and meanings of the movement in the movie scenes and scripts to conduct a more thorough study.

**DISCUSSION**

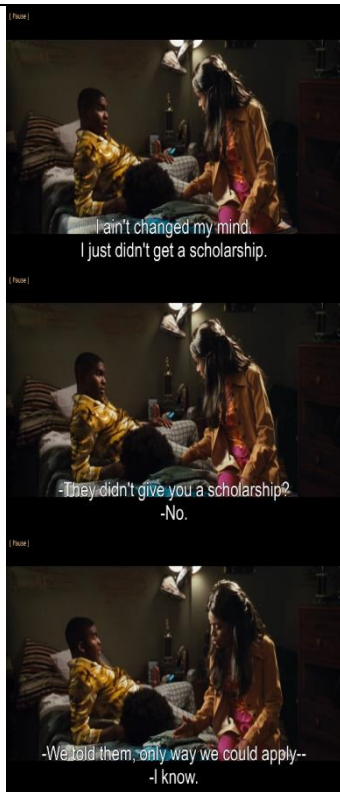
The authors present the results of the data analysis using two leading theories: Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) Critical Race Theory and Marilyn Waring's (1990) Feminist Economics Theory. The analysis is divided into two parts, following the study's objectives: examining the principles of black feminism in the main character and how economic and racial factors influence the character's decisions in confronting existing injustices.

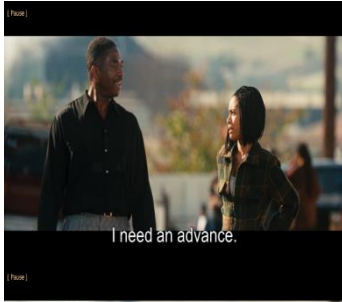
**Principles of Black Feminism among the Main Characters**

In this analysis, the authors employ Critical Race Theory with the concept of intersectionality (Putri, Adhitya & Kristiawan, 2024, p. 40) to analyze how the main character in the film *Set It*

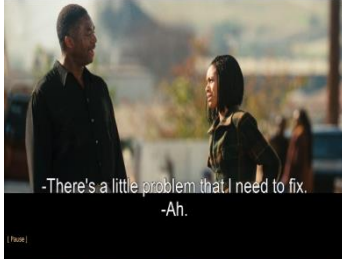
*Off* reflects the principles of black feminism. Intersectionality is a concept that highlights how different aspects such as gender, race, and class interact and influence individual experiences. In this film, two out of the four main characters (Stony, Frankie, Cleo, and T.T) show how their identities as black women influence their experiences. The following is an analysis of each main character in the context of the principles of black feminism.

Table 1. Lida "Stony" Newson

Scenes	Settings
	<p>Stony receives news that Stevie fails to secure the scholarship. She remains calm and starts looking for alternative ways to fund Stevie's education.</p>
<p>Stony did not get a scholarship (00:09:28)</p>	



Stony is forced to do whatever it takes and sacrifice her pride to secure money for her brother's education.



Stony's Desperation  
 (00:16:17)



After her younger brother becomes a shooting victim. Stony walks through the police line and sees Stevie (her younger brother) lying stiff. She runs and sobs, cradling her brother's lifeless body.



Stony's brother's tragic death  
 (00:28:53)

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*Lida 'Stony' Newton*

Stony is a female character who lives with her younger brother and has been the breadwinner of the family since her parents passed away. The various injustices experienced by Stony are depicted in various scenes, reflecting how society treats black women like her. Stony's character appears at the beginning of the film when she is having a party at her house and then a conversation occurs between her, Cleo and her younger brother Stevie. They talk about Stevie, who will soon advance to college-level education. Stevie shows a comfortable demeanor by sighing and looking at his sister, Stony, with a weary expression. Sensing that something is amiss, Stony engages in a conversation with Stevie, who reveals that he did not receive a scholarship to continue his education.

Stony : "Stevie, what's the problem?"

Stevie : "I'm not going. I ain't going to college."

Stony : "What? All right, look, don't start tripping. Okay, you cannot change your mind. We got into UCLA, that's where we're going."

Stevie : "I ain't changed my mind. I just didn't get a scholarship."

Stony : "They didn't give you a scholarship?"

Stevie : "No."  
Stony : "We told them, only  
way we could  
apply..."  
Stevie : "I know."  
Stony : "All right, well  
don't worry about  
it. I'll take care  
of it."

Stony : "Nate, before I  
come work for  
you..."  
Nate : "Yeah?"  
Stony : "I need an  
advance. There's a  
little problem  
that I need to  
fix."  
Nate : "Ah. Oh, I can do  
that. Oh, yeah,  
yeah, I can do  
that. But, I  
mean... Stony  
Newsom's gotta  
give me a reason  
to do that. You  
know what I mean?"  
Stony : "And what would  
that be?"  
Nate : "Oh, come on, now,  
you know."

The dialogue illustrates the overlap of the forms of discrimination they face, not only due to their race but also because of their socio-economic backgrounds and existing policies. Black students often struggle to access quality education, especially if they come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, which affects their prospects. An opportunity for advancing their education is through scholarships. Stevie's story reveals that his failure to obtain a scholarship was not due to a lack of effort but rather because the system failed to provide access or support for Black students. Stony tries to reassure his younger sibling that there is no need to worry, as she promises to find a way to fund Stevie's college education. Stony is under significant pressure to find employment despite having numerous financial responsibilities. She explores various ways to quickly earn money, including taking on risky and unstable jobs. Amidst her chaotic thoughts and the dead-end search for immediate funds, Stony encounters Nate Andrews, leading to a conversation between them.

Stony asks for help to solve her problems by returning to work for Nate. Nate agrees to the matter, but under conditions that are unethical and demeaning to women. Stony faces a huge moral dilemma because she feels pressured and stressed by her difficult financial situation to support her brother's education. This dilemma is then utilized by Nate to get what he wants, which is to exploit Stony. The scenes depict how women in urgent situations must make difficult decisions that impact their lives and often sacrifice their own happiness for the sake of their loved ones.

As much injustice as Stony had to endure to support her brother's education, she still had to experience the severe injustice of losing her



brother due to the reckless actions of the police. Her brother became a victim of wrongful arrest because he had the same tattoo as the perpetrator of the robbery.

Low-key lighting is used in the tragic death of Stony's brother to add emotional depth to the situation. This type of lighting often creates an atmosphere of sadness, fear, anxiety, and tension (Huang, 2018; Shafiee & Bidin, 2016; Zettl, 2011). In the context of this scene, low-key lighting not only emphasizes the atmosphere of grief but also highlights Stony's crying, reflecting the devastation and loss she feels at the sight of her lifeless brother. As such, this lighting further reinforces the narrative of racial injustice, showing that this tragedy is not only about personal loss but also about a system that fails to protect innocent individuals.

Detective : "What do you  
Strode

Detective : "Stevie  
Waller Newsom, no  
priors, good  
student,  
headed for  
college. I  
hear both  
parents killed  
in a car  
accident four  
years ago."

Detective : "Goddamn it.  
Strode Goddamn."

The film portrays how the law enforcement system still has many unjust policies that need to be changed. It emphasizes the necessity for a more cautious approach to prevent incidents that result in the loss of innocent civilian lives.

Detective : "If you need to  
Strode talk, if you  
have any  
questions...

you won't  
hesitate to  
call. There'll  
be a full  
investigation."

Stony : "Fuck you! Fuck  
your  
investigation!  
You fucking go  
to hell! You  
son of a  
bitch!"

The police did not handle the case properly. After their careless actions, they did not introspect and make the necessary changes. Instead, they engaged in unethical actions by interrogating the victim in further investigation. These actions not only exacerbated the situation but also tarnished the reputation of the police within the community. Stony fights against double discrimination, not only as a woman but also as a black person. The aforementioned events illustrate Stony's experiences that reflect Black feminism, where her identity as a Black woman and her lower economic background face compounded oppression, leading




to a unique form of individual resistance.

*Cleopatra "Cleo" Sims*

Cleo is a character who possesses a distinct personality compared to the other three main female characters. She is the most courageous and unafraid to face any challenge. Her appearance and sexual orientation differ from others, which often leads to her receiving unfair treatment.

Table 2. Cleopatra 'Cleo' Sims

Scenes	Settings
 <p>Regarded suspiciously by law enforcement (01:25:16)</p>	<p>Detective Strode, suddenly confronts Cleo and suspects her as the one among her friends who killed Luther due to her previous criminal record.</p>

Detective Strode suddenly appears and suspects her of being the murderer of Luther, as she is the only one among her friends with a criminal record.

Detective Strode : "Which one of you girls smoked Luther, huh? I'm

thinking it was you Cleo, you're the only one with any priors."

Cleo : "Don't know what you talking."

Detective Strode : "I'll tell you what I'm talking. We're gonna take a ride."




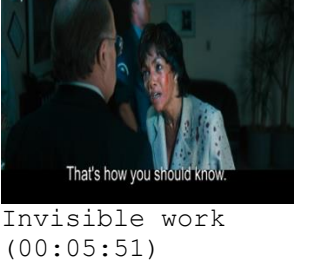
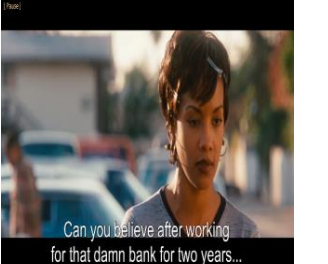
Cleo "Man, I ain't do shit. You ain't got probable cause."

Detective Strode "All you're doing is a lineup. And for the record, having a witness is a lot better than probable cause. Get in the car."

The dialogue above shows how Black women often face intersecting discrimination based on both race and gender. Detective Strode suspects Cleo of being the killer of Luther, the manager of the cleaning company where she and her friends work. As a representation of the legal system, he acts arbitrarily, pressuring and intimidating Cleo to participate in the interrogation process. Cleo is targeted as a suspect not only because she is a woman but also because she is a black woman with a criminal record. This scene shows how institutions like the police have unequal power dynamics in society and frequently discriminate based on prejudice and stereotypes.

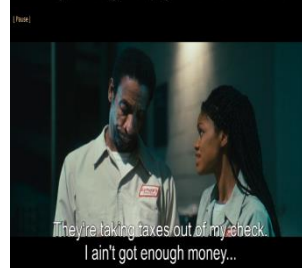
**Influence of Economic and Racial Factors on Character's Decisions in Confronting Existing Injustices**

Table 3. Francesca 'Frankie' Sutton

Scenes	Settings
 <p>Let me tell you something. I am here at 8:20 sharp every morning.</p>	<p>Frankie's work is unappreciated, and she is even suspected because she knows the bank robbery perpetrator.</p>
 <p>I work my ass off until quitting time.</p>	
 <p>Yesterday I counted \$240,000 by hand for you.</p>	
 <p>That's how you should know.</p>	
 <p>Can you believe after working for that damn bank for two years...</p>	



Difficulty in finding a job (00:14:28)



Docking pay (00:10:55)

T.T works as a janitor; her wages are cut for being deemed inadequate at work. She feels increasingly burdened if her salary is reduced due to many responsibilities as a mother.

Waring's feminist economic theory illustrates how economic systems often overlook the work and contributions of women. Waring argues that unpaid and invisible labor performed by women represents a form of discrimination that perpetuates male dominance within the economic system (Waring, 1990). As shown in Table 2.1 above, numerous economic and racial factors influence the decisions and

responses of characters in confronting injustice. In the film, four African-American women find themselves trapped in economic hardship and social injustice. The character Frankie experiences inequity in her role as a bank teller.

Mr. Zachery : "How do we know you're not in collusion?"  
Frankie : "Collusion? Let me tell you something. I am here at 8. I work my ass off until quitting time. Yesterday I counted \$240,000 by hand for you. That's how you should know. I mean, come on, this is just not right. I nearly got blown away in your tired-ass fucking bank! And you're gonna fire me?"

The dialogue illustrates that prejudice always leads to negative consequences. The bank decided to dismiss Frankie solely because she knew the perpetrator of the robbery that occurred at his workplace. Despite not being involved and being a victim in the incident, the bank felt it could no longer trust her. Being unjustly terminated made Frankie feel wronged. She felt that his years of service were undervalued.

The depiction of Frankie's situation is made clear by using a close-up camera angle to emphasize the character's

emotions at close range. This angle gives depth to the feelings and injustice Frankie is experiencing. Close-ups create intimacy with the situation, where Frankie's helplessness and frustration reinforce her moment of injustice when Mr. Zachery considers her involvement in the robbery simply because of her race. This shows Frankie's emotional turmoil and emphasizes the inequality and injustice she faces as a black woman.

This is in accordance with Waring's statement, which discusses how women often work unpaid and are undervalued and unrecognized in the economic system (Waring, 1999). This shows how Frankie, a black woman, is often marginalized and unappreciated in the economic system because she is not only a woman but also a black person.

Furthermore, after being dismissed, Frankie struggled to find new employment despite having adequate experience and skills.

Frankie : "Can you believe after working for that damn bank for two years. I can't even get a recommendation for another job?"

Frankie's anxiety about securing a new job highlights the reality that Black women often face discrimination and challenges in job hunting.

Waring argues that economic marginalization limits the potential and contribution of women, especially women of color, who often face barriers to achieving economic stability. Black women often experience various forms of discrimination in the economic system even though they have the same or higher skills and qualifications than men and non-black women. Furthermore, they are often less valued and respected and face higher unemployment rates than white women. These deep-rooted injustices affect Black women's employment, income, and social environment.

In this scene, background music also helps emphasize the character's cultural identity. The R&B and hip-hop background music featured in the film accompanies each scene and showcases the reality of black women. Historically, hip-hop has been a highly representative genre of music for black culture that serves to convey, highlight, and address issues of race, gender, and social injustice they experience (Bercasio, 2012). With this background music, Frankie and the other character's experiences are connected to their struggles as a narrative device to express culture, emphasizing the narrative of black feminism and the characters' resistance against injustice.

According to feminist economic principles, what is needed is a workplace that humanizes individuals. In this

context, women should not merely be compensated for their work but should have their contributions recognized and valued. In the scene where T.T. experiences arbitrary salary deductions due to a single mistake.

Luther : "Who had 104?"

T.T : "I did."

Luther : "You didn't empty the cans in 104. I'm docking your pay."

Cleo : "That ain't right."

Luther : "Who are you supposed to be? Goddamn Mighty Morphing fucking Power Ranger? What you gonna do? I'm docking her pay."

T.T : "Speaking of pay, I thought you said that you was gonna pay me under the table. They're taking taxes out of my check. I ain't got enough money to pay for my babysitter."

How women strive to meet economic needs gets complicated as they also need to fulfil family responsibilities.

Luther treats T.T. harshly and arbitrarily reduces her wages. Luther does not even listen to T.T.'s reasons or the opinions of other Black female workers. This demonstrates how men still dominate the economic system over women. The scene also reflects the reality of how Black women are often treated unfairly and have their

opinions disregarded. Waring states that the gender bias inherent in traditional economic systems tends to be designed around the experiences and roles of men, thus showing neglect and underestimation of women's contributions to the economic system (Waring, 1999). The gender bias in the economic system experienced by Black women is a very complex issue, reflecting the overlap of multiple discrimination (based on gender and race).

T.T. juggles dual roles as both a breadwinner and a homemaker. This portrayal aligns with Waring's argument that women's work, whether paid or unpaid, is frequently undervalued and inadequately recognized within the economic system. As Waring (1999) states, black women are often paid low, unstable wages and do not have adequate education and training to improve their career prospects, resulting in a widening economic gap. This scene highlights T.T.'s efforts as a single mother, struggling to support and care for her child while maintaining her low-wage job. This scene highlights that women's economic contributions are often invisible and undervalued.

This unjust economic system serves as the primary catalyst for characters to undertake and decide on extreme actions. The numerous events that transpire lead them to despair over their own future. Confronted with extremely

limited choices, they eventually resort to extreme measures, such as robbing banks. They perceive that the system has failed them, thus justifying their actions of robbing banks as a form of resistance. This illustrates how the pervasive injustice they experience drives them into a desperate and perilous situation as a final effort to confront the inequity.

The movie provides a broader picture of US economic conditions in the 1990s. Economic development at that time was increasing in certain areas, but the distribution was not good enough, especially regarding wage growth among women (Boushey & Cherry, 2003). In addition, black women in this era were also often marginalized from higher-paying jobs and promotion opportunities. This can be seen in the scene when Frankie feels that her work as a bank teller for two years is unappreciated and unvalued. Therefore, the act of robbing a bank shown in the film is a response and critique of injustice, where black women are often victims not only of racial and gender discrimination but also of unfair economic structures.

## CONCLUSION

There are principles of black feminism in this film. It is caused by intersectionality depicted through the main Black female characters as social identity,

such as race, gender, and class interact and create unique forms of discrimination. They face racism, unjust treatment by law enforcement, workplace discrimination, and societal inequalities. Additionally, they encounter gender-based discrimination, including child-rearing challenges and sexual harassment. Regarding the influence of economic and racial factors on a character's decisions in confronting existing injustices, economic and racial factors have a great influence on a character's decision-making. The economic difficulties and injustices experienced by the four main characters, such as unilateral dismissal and salary cuts, make them feel desperate and forced to make extreme decisions. The racial factor in this film is evidenced by the racial discrimination, such as dismissal, based on racial assumptions, and a system that treats them unfairly because of their racial background. These factors illustrate how existing injustice pushes them into criminal acts as a form of resistance against the system that has exploited them and shows the complexity of the interplay between economic, racial, and gender issues.

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