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**When African American Cinema is Activism:
Black Lives Matter in *Just Mercy* 2019**

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Dedication

I dedicate this work

to the soul of my dear grandmother and aunt

My precious parents NEDJAI LAAREM and DEKKICHE DOUADI for their support, love,
and understanding

Particularly my mother the origin of my success and my biggest supporter! THANK YOU
MOM for always believing in me.

To my brother MOUMEN my idol and my beloved sister KENZA may God bless them

To my dear sister-in-law RASHA and my little nephew SIMOU.

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My special thanks go to my FAMILY members for their motivation and guidance during this long journey of 18 years of studies

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Abstract

The American bigoted perspectives about African Americans have been translated into racial stereotypical representations in American films, leading to the rise of revolutionary Black cinema. This dissertation attempts to study the challenging uplift of black film in the face of those stereotypes, to become more mainstream and synonymous with the Black experience and identity. In particular, the study takes *Just Mercy* 2019 film as an example of a contemporary Black film that explores the ongoing struggle of Black Americans against police brutality, structural/ systematic racism, and discrimination, which depicts Black Lives Matter activism, the primary representative of this current Black endeavor. To attain the study objective, the analysis is based on a combination of analytical approaches and a close reading of different academic documents and scholarly criticisms about the long history of African American cinema and black activism. The findings reveal that black film has overcome many challenges since its inception to achieve its current state and wide influence through its vivid representations of the black persistent struggle, the case of *Just Mercy* film that depicts Black Lives Matter's activism, as well as the celebration of the black identity.

Key Words: *Just Mercy*, Black cinema, stereotypes, racism, African American filmmaking, Black empowerment

Table of Contents

Dedication	I
Acknowledgment.....	II
Abstract	III
Table of Contents	III
Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations.....	VI
General Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER I: Overview of African American Cinema.....	6
1 African Americans as Stereotypes from Classic Silent Films to “Talkies”	7
1.1 The silent era (1900s – 1920s)	7
1.2 Talkies “The Age of the Negro Servant” in Hollywood and WWII (1920s-1940s)	9
2 Race Film Revolution and the First Black Wave (1915-1950).....	12
3 The Civil Rights Era and The Black Hollywood (1950s-1960s).....	14
3.1 Blaxploitation and the L.A. Movement (1970s-1980s).....	16
3.1 The L.A. Rebellion Movement and the New Black Cinema (1970s-1980s)	18
4. The Contemporary Afro-American Cinema (1980s-Present Day)	19
4.1 The Black New Wave and the 90s Black Cinema Golden Age (1980s-2000s)	
4.2 The Contemporary Black Cinema from the Teens to the Present Day	22
CHAPTER II: <i>Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption</i> 2014 book and <i>Just Mercy</i> 2019 Film Adaptation description	25
1 Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption 2014.....	25
1.1 Braynan Stevenson Biography	26
1.2 Book General Background	27
1.3 Book Description: Plot, characters, and Themes.....	28
1.4 Reviews and Critics.....	31
2. Destin D. Cretton's Film Adaptation <i>Just Mercy</i> 2019.....	32
2.1 Just Mercy Cast and Production	32
2.2 <i>Just Mercy</i> Technical/Financial Background and the Film Performance	34
CHAPTER III: <i>Just Mercy</i> 2019 Film Analysis	36
1 Black Lives Matter.....	36

2 *Just Mercy* Depiction of Black Lives Matter Activism43

 2.1 Police Brutality: 42

 2.2 Systematic/Structural Racism: 45

 2.3 The Representation of Discrimination and Segregation in *Just Mercy* 2019..... 50

3. *Just Mercy* 2019 from the Representation of Racism to the Black Empowerment 52

General Conclusion59

Works Cited.....62

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

Hollywood: the major center of the American film industry and home to many major films studios, production companies, and other entertainment-related businesses

Black Cinema: represents films made by, for and about African Americans or feature Black actors, directors, and producers

NAACP: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

BLM: Black Lives Matter Movement

EJI: Equal Justice Initiative

General Introduction

African-American history in the United States is a long and complex one. Black people were subjected to centuries of oppression and racism, from slavery to the Jim Crow laws era to police brutality. This racism against African Americans has been reflected in different fields, including the entertainment industry or in other terms, the film industry. The various ways in which Blacks' images and historical experiences are stereotypically depicted in films, and the one-dimensional stereotypical black roles, alongside the lack of diversity in Hollywood, demonstrate that race is one of the politically and morally controversial longstanding issues in the social consciousness of the United States.

The representation of black people in American film became synonymous with stereotypes, and Black filmmakers have always been marginalized and shown as minor characters, since the inception of cinema in the USA. As Mc Garty et al. explain in their book *Stereotypes as Explanations*, "African-Americans have been the victim of false historical and cultural ideology, whose best propaganda is film and its by-product, television" (36). As well as, William Greaves says: "Hollywood was reflecting a lot of social norms, the values, the whole mindset of white Americans about people of color and in particular black Americans so that the Hollywood films invariably attacked, vilified denigrated people of color" (Thought Damage Productions 0:34).

Furthermore, the dehumanizing portrayals promoted in early American films led to the rise of revolutionary Black cinema during the 1910s, which marked the birth of Black filmmaking in America. It aimed to challenge the common stereotypes of Black Americans and offer a more nuanced representation by making different films about and for black people based on an Afrocentric point of view, related to the African American experience and celebration of the Black cultural identity. The same objective is carried out now by the Black

contemporary cinema which offers a guide to elucidate the challenging topic of racism and stimulates debate about its devastating outcomes upon the black individual and his community.

This research seeks to investigate the emergence of Black film, challenging the early negative portrayals provided by American mainstream productions (Hollywood). To become an effective tool that offers a vivid representation of the Black ongoing struggle against racism in a 'white supremacist society' where they face all forms of oppression, discrimination, and racial bias. Thus, the study goes deeper and becomes more specific by opting for a black film that defines contemporary Black cinema and its aims. As well as, the study will analyze the Black ongoing struggle against police brutality, and structural/systematic racism by taking Black Lives Matter activism as the primary representative of this endeavor.

Therefore, the study focuses on one of the controversial Black films, Destin Daniel Cretton's *Just Mercy* 2019 film adaptation of Bryan Stevenson's memoir, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014 as the main corpus of the current investigation. Due to its general subject matter, which explores the experiences of African Americans facing different forms of racism related to their race, including, structural/systematic racism in law enforcement and criminal justice, police violence, and discrimination which are the main issues exposed by BLM. As well as it serves as the best example that conveys the sense of Black empowerment that refutes the BLM's sense of Black victimization.

A set of objectives are determined in this dissertation. It seeks to provide the reader with a general overview of African American Cinema in the USA, from its inception in the 20th century to modern times. It also provides different cultural, social, and political factors and contexts that influenced the transformation of Black filmmaking. In addition to that, it explains the way African American cinema retained its position reflecting the issue of racial

inequality in America, after a long time of prejudice and marginalization. Moreover, the study aims to analyze one of the Black films that broadcast the Black outcry for social justice and expose different forms of racism against black people.

The current dissertation takes *Just Mercy* as an example that represents contemporary Black films, which means it takes the part to represent the whole. While, the Black Lives Matter Movement is taken as a sample of the ongoing black struggle specifically against police brutality, and structural/ systematic racism to be more specified in the depiction of the Black persistent endeavor. Therefore, it analyzes the depiction of discrimination embodied in law enforcement, moving to investigate the sense of Black empowerment in the film that opposes the sense of Black victimization in BLM. All in all, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- How does the modern African American film represent the contemporary persistent Black struggle against racism in the United States?
- How does *Just Mercy* 2019 raise the Black Lives Matter Movement's activism against police brutality, and systematic/structural racism?
- What is the significance of the sense of Black empowerment provided in *Just Mercy*?

The significance of this dissertation lies in the crucial provided knowledge regarding African American cinema and its long history, based on reliable scholarly sources. The study provides a wide range of academic frameworks about different historical backgrounds, and contemporary socio-political contexts, which serve the requirements of readers and researchers. Furthermore, it includes several far-reaching pieces of information, critics, and reviews concerning the world of African American filmmaking in particular and American cinema in general.

Various literary and academic works express their insights about the long-standing history of Black filmmaking in the United States; however, the film *Just Mercy* is newly released and to the best of the study findings, there is a lack of scholarly criticisms of the film except some reviews. To attain the research objective, the study collects several previous works and research dealing with the topic of the current investigation.

Firstly, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* book penned by the American film historian Donald Bogle, and published in 2001. This book has been taken as the starting point to conduct this dissertation. It explores the evolution of the stereotypical representation of African Americans in American cinema from its inception to very recent times. In addition, it examines how archetypes have been used to shape the public's perception of Black Americans. The work is an adequate resource guide that provides a historical explanation of different representations of African Americans in film in different eras. However, some of Bogle's subjective interpretations seem unnecessary because it is too narrowly focused on the negative portrayal of Black Americans, and may not address other aspects of African American filmmaking.

Secondly, *Framing Blackness: the African American Image in Film*, by Ed Guerrero, was published in 1993, another work that provides an insightful framework for the portrayals of Blacks in American cinema. While, it shows the various ways African Americans resist Hollywood's negative images, by creating their independent cinema that led to more uplifting black images. The work guided the dissertation toward a more comprehensive explanation of the role of Hollywood's stereotypes in the creation of revolutionary Black filmmaking. Nevertheless, Guerrero by some means exaggerated in his interpretation of some 'unbiased' Hollywood production as exclusively racist, while he focuses on the explanation of mainstream Hollywood films more than the work of independent Black filmmakers.

Thirdly, *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*, written by Mark Reid. The book discusses both African American films (directed, written, and produced by black filmmakers) and Black-oriented films (its directors or screenwriters are non-black) as he says, when both are “taken together, constitute black film” (Reid 01). Mark Reid explains the way some films dramatize the contemporary state of Black people, as it considers them as socially and politically disparate group. This dissertation takes Reid’s work as a reference to distinguish between an effective real depiction of African Americans and the ‘dramatized’ portrayals. However, the book failed to provide concrete examples and explanations of the dramatization of black experiences or characters.

These works besides other scholarly previous research have assisted in the accomplishment of this dissertation. Therefore, it is still necessary to provide a study area with a deeper explanation of the subject matter.

This current research is divided into three main chapters. Each chapter has an introductory part that explains its structures and main objectives, to give the reader a general idea of what is coming. The first chapter is devoted to writing a general overview of African American cinema history, subdivided chronologically into four sections from the silent era to the present times. It explains the rise of Black cinema and its main characteristics.

The second chapter will describe the literary work *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014, and its cinematic adaptation, *Just Mercy* 2019, providing various overviews and historical backgrounds of both works, after moving to the film analysis.

Hence, chapter three is the film analysis part; the chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part provides a brief overview of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The second part is the analysis of how *Just Mercy* depicted BLM’s activism. Then the investigation of the film’s Black empowerment sense.

CHAPTER I: Overview of African American Cinema

The history of African American Cinema in the United States stretches back to the early years of the 20th century and kept changing pragmatically due to several cultural, social, and political factors until it reached its contemporary state. Therefore, the conception of 'Black cinema' must be assimilated regarding the climate and context in which it was originally introduced. Accordingly, this chapter will offer a guide to overview the most important progressions of Black filmmaking from its inception to the modern day.

The chapter will be divided chronologically into four sections from the 1900s to the present day. Firstly, the analysis will examine African Americans: as stereotyped caricatures in classical American silent films and Hollywood's mainstream sound films (1900-1950) when racial segregation was still legal in the United States. Secondly, the chapter will explore the revolution of Black race film (1915-1950), and the rise of the first Black wave of filmmakers and production companies. The Civil Rights Era's influence on the American film industry leading to 'Black Hollywood', thus it will assess the Blaxploitation films and the L.A. Rebellion movement as two turning points defining Black filmmaking in the 70s and 80s. Finally, the chapter will examine contemporary Afro-American cinema from 1980 to the Present day, exploring the 80's independent Black new wave, the 90's Black cinema golden Age (1980s-2000s), and will move to Black filmmaking from the teens to the present.

The provided knowledge in this chapter will draw on a wide range of historical, cultural, and social frameworks about the world of Black cinematography in the United States since the early 20th century. Furthermore, it will depend on the film historians' and scholars' findings and recommendations about the Black film as cultural output arising from the integrated and strained relationship between Blacks and whites and between independent production and Hollywood.

1 African Americans as Stereotypes from Classic Silent Films to “Talkies”

1.1 The silent era (1900s– 1920s)

The film industry got its start in America in the early 1900s, during the silent era when many American silent films were produced without sound or dialogue only motion pictures. The Black characters in these films were ‘unreal’; they appeared as white actors performing in Blackface. This latter created the first derogatory representation of Blacks in the world of entertainment, it originates from the early 19th century’s racist theatrical minstrel shows, performed by white stage actors with Black-tainted faces, exaggerated large lips, battered costumes, humiliating acrobatic performances, mimicking Black Americans for the sake of entertaining the white audience.

Thus, the Blackface stereotype extended into films by the early 20th century. Those ‘unreal’ Black characters in the motion picture were “bearing fanciful names of the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, the brutal black buck” (Bogle 13) and the Tom, signifying the demeaning anti-blackness images in the early classical American films, as Henry Giroux stands for, that since their inception, “American movies have been obsessed with race and images of Blackness” (qtd.in. Bloomquist 15).

Uncle Tom’s Cabin 1903 marked the first Black character ever to appear on the screen: Uncle Tom. An enslaved Black man who was ironically played by a nameless white actor in Blackface. The Tom caricature portrayed the Black man as a dark-skinned obedient and hardfield worker, physically weak, and psychologically reliant on white people's praise. Although the 1914 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* film version starred Sam Lucas the first actual black actor, playing the title role of Tom, the rest of the Black characters were played in Blackface. Instead, Tom was portrayed in other silent shorts, like *Confederate Spy* 1910 and *For Massa Sake* 1911. Furthermore, in 1915 D. W. Griffith’s anti-Black imagery film *The Birth of a*

Nation was released with its idealized portrayals of 'old south' white supremacy, slavery, and the Ku Klux Klan. In Griffith's film, all Black characters were played by white actors in blackface and portrayed as either "faithful souls": the Mammy, the Coon, the Tom, or "the savages and brutes": Tragic Mulatto/Mulatta, the Brutal Black Buck, and the Pickaninny. (Bogle 20).

Firstly, The Mammy caricature was similar to Tom, a Black faithful, docile, slave servant, depicted in *The Birth* as she rejects the notion of freedom, and acts as a devoted mother to her white family. Secondly, the Coons, one of the dominant stereotypes of Blacks represented in the film as "unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing" (Bogle 17). The racialists took the coon caricature as a defense for their racist ideology claiming that Blacks were 'coons' or foolish, worthless of emancipation, and must be under white control.

The third stereotype was the Clown slave whose dancing, singing, and clowning acts propagated "the myth of salve contentment." (Bogle 20). Creating ambivalence in the actual meaning of slavery as it liberates Black people from their brutal instincts. Moving to the Pickaninny stereotype that depicted Black children as uncontrolled, poor, and hungry with oversized mouths filled with huge pieces of stolen chicken and watermelon slices. The picknannies in *The Birth* were ironically shown nude or partly naked wearing tattered clothes; the nudity symbolized the inferiority of Blacks to whites and portrayed the Black parents as primitive and careless about their children.

Afterward, the 'brutes' stereotype including, the Brutal Black Bucks represented as "big, bad nigger, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh" (Bogle 18-21). *The Birth's* Black Buck was a white man in Blackface who caused damage because of his sexual repression and deserved lynching. Therefore, the Tragic Mulatto

stereotype appeared earlier in *The Debt* 1912 film as a mixed-race child of a Black slave woman and a white master, who ended up sold into slavery. In *The Birth*, the Mulatto was a Black violent leading lady, who sympathizes with Blacks, hates whites, and refuses the notion of inferiority. While, the Mullato male characters were represented as a rapist and killers.

Ultimately, besides *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 1903 and *The Birth of Nation* films, there were many other silent films with the same anti-Blackness themes such as *Free and Equal* 1915, *Broken Chains* 1916, and D. Griffith's *Intolerance* 1916. All the previous characters played in Blackface aimed to entertain the white audience by stressing "Negro inferiority." (Bogle 13). As well as to shape a common prejudice that place Blacks exactly where American white racialists particularly felt they belonged, under white supremacy and in the eternal service of white society. Yet, all these earlier fanciful characters and the Blackface stereotype marked the birth of the disparaging portrayals of Black Americans in the world of American cinema and solidified the connection between racism and entertainment.

1.2 Talkies "The Age of the Negro Servant" in Hollywood and WWII (1920s-1940s)

The introduction of synchronized sound technology by the late 1920s marked the end of the silent era and laid the groundwork for the gradual transition from the silent filmmaking epoch into the sound film-producing era that took place between the 1920s and 1940s. Films became featured with audible dialogues, sound effects, and music. As technology advanced and sound films raised, Hollywood's film studios emerged and quickly adapted to the new technology, they began to make a wide range of talkies that made a significant shift in the representation of Blacks. Many Black actors were able to move beyond the limitations of Blackface and play real characters but despite the progress made, they were relegated to more stereotypical roles and were not given the same opportunities as white actors.

Donald Bogle the American film historian has called the 30s and 40s “the age of the negro servant” (37). as Hollywood offered African American actors few roles beyond servile as submissive servants, butlers, porters, docile maids, and other marginalized roles that they found themselves limited to. Alongside these new under-representative roles given to Black actors, the sound film romanticized several “Old South” stereotypes, starting with Warner Brothers’ *The Jazz Singer* 1927 film that marked the birth of a talkie film in America with its major white actor Al Jolson, playing in Blackface and singing the Mammy song.

Gone with the Wind 1939, one of the sound films that served as a whitewashing engine of historical facts about slavery and the idealization of the prejudiced treatment of Black people by the American Southerners. (Cripps 4-5). It has brought to life the Mammy and the Pickaninny caricatures by Hattie McDaniel playing the role of Ruth “Mammy” an enslaved devoted Black maid. The role that offered her an Oscar in 1940 to become the first African American woman to win the Academy Award, and sadly seated separately and not permitted to join the big white table on the night of the awards ceremony, while Butterfly McQueen functionally revived the old Pickaninny, playing Prissy a teenage awkward slave servant. Certainly, even the Black male actors in the film occupied the role of submissive servants, such as Oscar Polk, the house slave servant, and Everett Brown the loyal butler Big Sam.

Aside from *Gone with the Wind*, several other talkies portrayed African Americans in the same limited roles, as faithful Tom servants, awkward Coon servants, and docile Mammy maids. For instance, *The Littlest Rebel* 1935 film that starred the performance of Bill Robinson as the Tom butler, Uncle Billy, and Willie Best as the awkward coon Black servant James Henry. In addition to the devoted Mammy character played by Louise Beavers in *The Imitation of Life* 1934, and *The Show Boat* 1936 in which William Warfield was the only Black actor in the film, playing the foolish cheerful servant Joe.

Moreover, during the 1940s, the World War II streams affected Hollywood's cinematic productions and its portrayals of Blacks as well. (Simpson 24). During this era, the U.S. government desired to convince the Afro-American population to join the war by using film as propaganda. Thus, Hollywood sought to set the old Southern stereotypes aside, and represent "the Negro as a normal member of society." (Cripps 53). While it pursued more Black vivid presence and diversity on the screen to attain its objective, for instance, it produced *The Stormy Weather* 1943 full Black cast featured film, made to idealize the African American crucial incorporation in the field of the American entertainment industry during WWI. However, it promoted several unrealistic portrayals as Cripps noted that the film depicted America from the Black lens as "a happy place with happy problems," (85).

Thus, in 1944 the propagandistic documentary *The Negro Soldier* was released aiming to promote African American patriotism and encourage enlistment in the military, through the 'hypocritical' depiction of the heroic contribution made by its Black-cast characters in the battles' victories. The film portrayed African Americans as being integrated into white American society on an equal basis, which was not a realistic case. The same propaganda was established in other various films including *The Negro in Defense* 1942, *Home Front* 1943, and *Tuskegee Airmen* 1955 highlighting the involvement of African Americans in the war efforts and portraying them as capable and skilled soldiers, most of these films were produced by the U.S. War Department and U.S. Army Air Forces.

Consequently, the representation of African Americans in early American films (silent and talkies) became synonymous with stereotypes, either portrayed in Blackface or played by actual Black actors; they have always been marginalized and shown as background and minor characters. Many film historians and scholars such as Donald Bogle, Thomas Cripps, and Ed Guerrero, asserts that these direct or indirect stereotypes were prejudicial and became more damaging to Blacks throughout time, as they reinforced negative beliefs about

them and promoted the ideas of Black inferiority, while it opened new horizons for more demeaning Black images in films. As Bogle sums it up, with the Griffith project, the audience witnessed the “first of the guises, the brutes, the bucks, and the tragic mulattoes all wore the guise of villains. Afterward, during the 1920s, audiences saw their toms and coons dressed in the guise of plantation jesters. In the 1930s, all the types were dressed in servants' uniforms.” (Bogle 24), in the late 1940s and 1950s were depicted as troubled people, and as furious rebels in the 1960s (24). Thus, the guises kept changing and served on new plates.

2 Race Film Revolution and the First Black Wave (1915-1950)

The Birth of a Nation's overt bigotry against ‘Blackness’, and the deep segregation in the American film industry against African Americans, including the large exclusion and marginalization from mainstream Hollywood films, led to a furious artistic Black protest raised during the silent era by a group of independent Black filmmakers and talents, such as William Foster, Oscar Micheaux, George (Noble) Johnson, and Spencer Williams. Fostered by the Harlem Renaissance and Booker T Washington’s Uplift Movement. They formed the first independent wave of Black filmmakers and created a Black cinema based on Race Films in which Blacks “were cast, as actors in their own right, as independent filmmakers, and as directors and producers”. (Ukpokodu 82).

These filmmakers sought to feature their productions to offer the Black audience a more realistic portrayal of themselves and depict them in non-stereotypical roles as they routinely used to be depicted, with an emphasis on black self-improvement and black middle-class life values.

Moreover, the film industry was completely “white-run” up until the rise of this group of independent black filmmakers alongside black independent production companies in the late 1910s and 1920s. (Heyde 08). In 1910, the first black filmmaker William D. Foster created

the first African American film Production Company, The Foster Photoplay Company which produced several race films depicting black middle-class citizens from a new lens. Thus, in 1916 the Johnson brothers created The Lincoln Motion Picture Company of Los Angeles, which averaged more than one production per year. Its movies addressed a wide range of realistic presentations of middle-class black life. Yet, in the 1920s, many other African American film companies emerged The Afro-American Company, Lone Star, Renaissance Film Company, Photoplay Corporation ,and Micheaux's Company, which was "the pacesetter".(Ukpokodu83)

In 1919, the father of African American cinema,Oscar Micheaux, andthe most successful African American filmmaker in the first half of the 20th centurystarted to put his mark and upliftblack filmmaking.Most of his productionsserved as a refuting direct response to *The Birth of Nation* 1915's racist stereotypes. He positively portrayed the urban new negro and encouraged the black race.

During the talkies in the 1930s and 1940s, only some white producers and small companies that were independentof the major Hollywood studios financed the black film. (Reid 08-09). Despite the race film revolution, African Americans were still struggling with Hollywood's subverted harmful stereotypes. (Heyde 11). Those negativeportrayals of Blacks on the Hollywood screen and the racial propaganda released by the major commercial studios led to another Black separatist cinema movement that created a steady of race films presenting a larger outlook on Black life. Yet, Hollywood studios financed only the "Black-oriented musical films." (Reid 08). As well as the films that were free of any socio-political representations, to tinker with the depiction of Blacks and please the racist white audiences.

The race film during the talkie era breathed life into the granddaddies of the black film such asSpencer Williams who made successful films in different genres from fictional

melodramas, comedies, and religious films, to short documentaries. William targeted his films toward the non-urban black audience and sought to foster positive portrayals of black people. His most known works are *The Blood of Jesus* 1941 the first film enlisted in the Congressional National Film Register, beside his documentary series *By Line Newsreels*, the first African American newsreel, produced during the 1940s showed black achievers from real walks making history, and brave black soldiers contributing to the WWII. Based on the sense of honor and dignity of the black community, which was one of the ultimate objectives of black filmmaking and race films at that time.

In this way, *The Birth of a Nation*'s one-dimensional caricatures and the misrepresentation of black Americans in white mainstream films contributed to creating the imperative conditions to establish a black cinema. From 1915 to the end of the 1950s independent African American filmmakers made more than 500 race films without any significant support from the commercial studios. Furthermore, this first wave of independent black filmmakers succeeded in establishing a featured Black cinema that provided an alternative to the negative stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood. By the end of the 1930s, The Great Depression in America and WWII streams adversely affected the black race film growth. (Ukpokodu 83) and the interest in race films faded among black audiences, while the integration of independent black filmmakers within Hollywood by the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s lead to the decline of independent black cinema and mark its end by the 1950s.

3 The Civil Rights Era and the Black Hollywood (1950s-1960s)

After WWII, a decade of social impartiality occurred, and Black Americans became more assertive in their appeal for social equality in the United States. Led by the nonviolent reform Civil Right Movement that struggled against the explicit, state-authorized racial

discriminatory systems that called for the segregated separation of government services and public facilities into “colored” and “white” areas, moreover, the Civil Right Movement’s Black empowerment and the high pressure put by the NAACP organization on Hollywood played a significant role in pushing for reform in the American film industry, and the obvious positive shifts in the black representations and imagery on the screen. It created a more receptive climate to explore themes of social justice, racial inequality, and black identity.

During this era, Hollywood finds itself under the Civil Rights Movement pressure, and the black people, who were also a large audience, consumers, and market shares. Therefore, it began to take action and gave more opportunities to African Americans, which led to a more visible black integration. However, this progress was frequently at the expense of the earlier oppressions and not in the way that the Afro-American activists expect. Hollywood productions stayed distant from the depiction of the Civil Rights Movement’s struggle for racial dignity, and liberty from white oppression. The sweeping protests in the streets, the mass arrests, the assassination of several CRM political leaders, the unfairness of the criminal justice system, and the police brutality against the Protestants, were absent on Hollywood’s big screen.

Nevertheless, as African Americans become more integrated into the film industry, their perspectives were reflected on screen. Especially with the 1960s popular race-based film known as ‘message film’, which exploited the ‘white guilt’ and offered a glimpse into the life of the “virtuous Negro” facing racial discrimination imposed by a racist society. (Cripps 220). The message film sought to reach the intended message of interracial peaceful coexistence possibility, such as *The Defiant Ones* 1958, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* 1967, and *In the*

Heat of The Night 1967 about racial and gender inequalities, Starring the godfather of black Hollywood and the first black male to win an Oscar Sidney Poitier in the major roles.

Although Hollywood may produce these films on purpose to mirror reality and shed light on the harsh conditions faced by Blacks in American society. They did so by confining themselves to the radical supremacist white ideology, as Ralph Ellison said: “Obviously these films are not about Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about Negroes.” (277). Therefore, it is not about forcing one race to accept the other; the two of them must be eager to consolidate in this endeavor. Despite African American, integration was almost non-existent on the Hollywood screen in the pre-Civil Right and post-WWII; they experienced successful advancement throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s due to the Civil Rights movement's positive influence and their incorporation with Hollywood. Yet, the message of a segregated black community has evolved to discard the early African American stereotypes for a moment on the screen.

3.1 The Blaxploitation Films (1970s-1980s)

While the 1960s brought a visible presence of black Americans in the American public sphere due to the Civil Right Movement, the 1970s brought another black visible representation of blacks in cinema through the rise of Blaxploitation films. Hollywood's experiment of the most severe financial and artistic crisis during the 70s and The black “desire for an African American hero soon led to the production of unrealistic films referred to as “Blaxploitation”.(Ukopodu 83). Targeting the black ghetto audience and setting forth blacks as icons and heroes for the first time on the big screen, but at the expense of exploiting the black image to create stereotypical images of black males and females as hyper-masculine drug dealers, hypersexual, violent criminals. These low-budget films were usually produced by whites to turn profits for Hollywood and maintain it financially.

Blaxploitation's adult content, sexuality, nudity, and the ghetto middle-class depiction became popular in the United States, and hundreds of low-budget Blaxploitation films were made during the five years that traced the Blaxploitation era. Marked by the 1971 premiere of Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss* the first film that introduced the "badass black man" archetype and its masculinity, hypersexuality, and violent features. Then, *Shaft* 1971 and *Super Fly* 1972 established a more complex representation of the bad black man "through a series of drug deals and violent encounters with stereotypical ghetto junkies, crap shooters, and corrupt white, top-level police officials." (Guerrero 95).

Moving, to the mid-1970s, Jack Hill's *Coffy* 1973 and *Foxy Brown* 1974 other two controversial Blaxploitation films that explored black female "masculinity." and hypersexuality, black women were represented as they always go into a dangerous battle of life by exposing themselves as prostitutes. Therefore, "Blacks in these new films are no more than thematic templates reworked with black casts and updated stereotypes that reconfirm white expectations of blacks and serve to repress and delay the awakening of any real political consciousness" (Guerrero 93).

Finally, although the Blaxploitation films are important because they shed light on the Black community, and shift the Black actor to the big screen as heroes, they fostered many stereotyped images about male and female 'masculinity' that maintained unrealistic imagery of blackness and promoted white supremacist patriarchy. Blaxploitation's collapse occurred as a result of the intense black critical feedback on its increasingly dehumanizing themes combined with Hollywood's recovery from one of its worst financial crises, so it became no longer economically reliant on the short-term profit of such low-budget productions. Therefore, the Blaxploitation genre quickly faded and Hollywood produced more of the so-

called crossover films that emphasized the careers of a few black celebrities who conformed to the white-dominated star system to maintain its wide black audience.

3.1 The L.A. Rebellion Movement and the New Black Cinema (1970s-1980s)

The L.A. Rebellion Movement or the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers is another turning point of black cinema during the 1970s. The L.A. Rebellion is an artistic revolutionary movement created by a group of black American filmmakers and artists, who graduated from the UCLA School of Film against the classical Hollywood cinema and the Blaxploitation films' dehumanized imagery: "The L.A. Rebellion filmmakers sought to create an alternative to the lucrative "Blaxploitation". (Field et.al 03).

The L.A. Rebellion Movement sought to reconstruct a separate black cinema from the commercial studios' standards, support or finance, and distribution deals, creating their own production companies to distribute their films that were financed by the black community organizations merely. "The L.A. Rebellion was rebelling for a black-oriented cinema more firmly grounded in black aesthetic traditions and less dependent on white models" (Field et.al 04). Billy Woodberry, JamaaFanaka, Haile Gerima, and Julie Dash, gave birth to an independent new art form based on authentic representative stories of the African-American urban life and experience, told from a black perspective to emancipate the black image using a unique neorealism narrative style and subjective expressions.

The L.A. Rebellion alternative films were experimental in nature and incorporated elements of documentary. They tackled the concerns of the black community and embodied them in their films' sensitive themes. Including, unemployment and underemployment, drugs, incarceration, joblessness, injustice, and police brutality, the racist law enforcement and justice system, class exploitation, gender, and sexual violence, family, class, urban poverty, and welfare.

The L.A. Rebellion movement was criticized for its intensity on the Black community's dark side and negative portrayal of blacks as powerless, criminals, and abusers, considered an exaggerated and radical representation that came out of a rebelled movement. However, it has made significant shifts as it created an independent new Black cinema "concerned with the lives and the struggles, individuals and systematic of their working-class black subjects" (Field et.al 19-20). The Movement has exposed the world to a different side of a community that had long been neglected by Hollywood and gave voice to other minorities' by helping to capture their struggle against different types of racism. Equally importantly, their films were different from those of the 1970s and 1980s, which featured a lot of harmful content: sexuality, nudity, taboos, and foul language. The movement faded by the late 1980s due to the lack of strong infrastructure support.

Ultimately, Civil Rights' intensified appeal for social equality, and the Black Movement liberation struggle profoundly contributed to the reformation of Black cinema and the upgrade of the Black presence in front and behind the camera. Therefore, the efforts made toward better integration became more visible with the Black perspective being reflected on the screen. While the desire for another authentic independent Black cinema was realized with the L.A. Rebellion new generation of African-American filmmakers that shed light on the oppressed black community for the first time since Oscar Micheaux's epoch. Even though some Blaxploitation and L.A. Rebellion filmmakers carried on making projects, the era when they made history would have gone and faded out and remained recognized as a 'Black progress' that paved the way for exceptional Black cinema in the following years.

4. The Contemporary Afro-American Cinema (1980s-Present Day)

The 1980s Context: During the 1980s under Donald Reagan's conservatism Presidency, African Americans found themselves in a challenge with "recuperation" of the former inequalities despite the previous gains that the civil rights movement and the black liberation

struggle achieved. (Ed Guerrero 113). They faced an economic and social status decrease, white prejudice, reverse discrimination, institutional/systematic racism, political corruption, police brutality, and social exclusion in integrated areas. Thus, violence on every level was happening against black Americans, embodied in several series of black murders by white racialsists, police officers, and the KKK members, and usually, those crimes' victims were ignored by the justice system, an issue that led to widespread black riots all over the United States throughout the 1980s.

Therefore, this prejudice extended even into cinema, with the emergence of a new white conservative wave of films, "rife with "backlash sentiment" known as the "cinema of recuperation".(Ed Guerrero 113). In which the stereotyped Black characters were "refashioned and resurfaced" (113) in a new blockbuster Blaxploitation film. Onthe other side, Black actors found themselves sidekicks playing minor roles that bears non-threatening comfort for the white audience. Hollywood did not accept the integration ofthe Afro-American culture anymore in its projects dueto the wide variety of its blockbuster and countercultural films, produced to invigorate the nation with alternative ideologies and for more big-budget productions that could not be devoted to the reformation of the black image.

4.1 The Black New Wave and the 90s Black Cinema Golden Age (1980s-2000s)

The 1980s was a paradoxical decade for American Cinema (Ed Guerrero 113). Hollywood's 'cinema of recuperation', and the racial relations tensions gave birth to another new generation of Black filmmakers called the 'Black New Wave' which was inspired by the 1970s' independent black cinema. This new wave including Spike Lee, John Singleton, Robert Townsend, and Charles Burnett, took a stand against Hollywood's and Blaxploitation's demeaning representation of blacks by adapting new aesthetics and filmmaking philosophy in telling the stories of their generation through their own productionsand opened up discourses on race.

This new wave era opened up with Spike Lee and Robert Townsend's blockbuster films. They provided a steady stream of many Black-oriented, written, starred, and directed Blockbuster/Cult classics with a new aesthetic, style, and realistic thematic exploration of the African American life, opening new horizons to an exceptional decade of black cinema.

African Americans became freer and more integrated as the 90s came. They broke new ground in many different fields despite the other side of setbacks of brutalities and injustices. Young Black men and women have started to pursue careers in the entertainment industry as job opportunities have emerged. Thus, in the 1990s, to some extent "Hollywood began to show signs of opening up to black creativity and energy again. Gradually, all aspects of black filmmaking and filmic representation began to gain momentum." (Ed Guerrero 157). As well as, the rise of other new independent black filmmakers that accompanied the 80s' Black New Wave leading to the 90s' Black cinema progress.

The 90s was a prolific turning point of black cinema that delivered a steady stream of films directed by African Americans or starring black actors on the commercial screen. In the 90s, a host of black superstars emerged: the Black matinee idol Denzel Washington, who won an Oscar in 1990 as the best actor for his role-play in *Glory* 1998. Whoopi Goldberg Oscar won in 1991 for her role in Hollywood's feature hit *Ghost* 1990, and many others.

Thus as the end of the millennium approaches, this younger generation of African American film stars and filmmakers started another trip in the pursuit of excellence's continuity towards the beginning of the aught. African-American representation in Hollywood improved during the 2000s leading to the conceptualization of 'Black Hollywood', filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton carried on producing more black Blockbuster films. Featured blacks as talented athletes, brilliant entertainers, successful Hip-hop dancers/rappers, impressive heroes, and as black historical iconic figures.

The 80s new generation of Black filmmakers sought a more independent cinema from the white cycle and made more visual choices for their releases, through the challenging and authentic depiction of African American experiences on the big screen. In the 80s and 90s, Black cinema succeeded in depicting black characters as heroes, political activists, iconic figures, and powerful and noble warriors in different film genres from drama to comedy, action to thriller, and romance to horror. In addition, the success of the black blockbuster films in the 2000s. Finally, the racial definition of inferiority and superiority as well as good and evil were artistically examined tracing an enlightened ideology through cinema that 'blackness' is no more evil than 'whiteness' is good.

4.2 The Contemporary Black Cinema from the Teen to the Present Day

The American author Tommy L. Lott in his book *A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema*, in 1991 said: "When film scholars are asked to decide which are best among a body of films they identify as "black". (Lott 01). While, in July 1991, *New York Times Magazine* published the "They've Gotta Have Us" article wondering whether Hollywood would learn film marketing from Black filmmakers. (*The New York Times Magazine*). Two decades later, these 'scholarly' testimonies have been promoted by the achievements of the contemporary black cinematic renaissance that comes about in 2010 and runs to the present time.

The Afro-American cinema found the missed parts of the classic Hollywood and even of the classic black cinema. Most of its major productions are independent, widely profitable, Academy Awards-winning, and captivate the attention of audience worldwide. Affected by many contemporary movements and ideologies alongside the influx of digital platforms, social media, and cable networks, that paved the way for a more visible black presence in front and behind the camera.

Thus, this modern cinema becomes synonymous with the Black identity and a celebration of ‘Blackness’ as it depicts the Black experience from the slavery era, to the civil war and emancipation, then Black Americans in the two world wars, to Civil Right Movement, moving to the Black Lives Matter Movement. These representations laid the groundwork for Hollywood’s recent interest in the Black revolutionary iconography and the broadcast of the black revolution that has finally streamed on television and in theaters. On the other side, the current black film tackles new realistic themes that set forth more fresh visions and voices, relying on the contemporary state of African Americans in the United States. Equally importantly, it leads to the evolution of ‘The New Black Film Rebellion’ which addresses Black radical politics and activism for the first time in the history of cinema. The modern Black filmmakers are carrying the torch of their ancestors in defending the Black image on the silver screen, yet, reflexing the modern complex issues using an artistic vision. Moreover, modern Black cinema focuses more on the inadequacy of the criminal justice system, police brutality, and the murder of Blacks by racist white people based on true stories as a reflection of reality.

Despite the marginalization of contemporary black American filmmakers, especially after the #OscarSoWhite social media campaign in 2015 criticizing Hollywood racial discrimination and the academy nomination of twenty actors, none were Blacks or people of color. Modern cinema has succeeded to restore the image of Black Americans and bring up new voices and visions by highlighting contemporary issues and celebrating “Blackness’ and the black identity. Eventually, the long history of African American cinema in the United States led to the conceptualization of African American entertainment as a “counter-hegemonic cultural production” (Hooks 351). Tracing the long-term black cultural and cinematic resistance in the face of oppression and marginalization, and the subvert of the

dominant racist white power structures as well as the preservation of the Black cultural heritage and identity.

CHAPTER II: The Description of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014 book and *Just Mercy* 2019 Film Adaptation

One of the African American films that broadcasted the black outcry for social justice and exposed racism in the U.S. justice system, police delinquency, and systematic inequality is Destin Daniel Cretton's *Just Mercy* 2019 adopted from Bryan Stevenson's memoir: *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014. Thus, this chapter will describe both productions to provide a general overview and background of the literary work and its cinematic adaptation before moving to the film analysis in the third chapter.

The discussion in this current chapter will begin with an overview of the literary work *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* book, giving a short biography of the author, presenting the contextual factors that influenced Stevenson's literary output and shaped his writings in the book's general background section. Moving to the description of the book's content, its most important literary elements include the main stories and events, themes, setting, and characters, with a brief account of the author's intentions, and the book's critics and reviews. Hence, the chapter will move to offer a general introduction to the film *Just Mercy* 2019, presenting its featured cast, director, the technical and financial background of the work, and the film's performance.

1 *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption is a nonfiction memoir and a bestseller book written by the black American lawyer Bryan Stevenson, published in 2014. It follows his long-standing personal experience as a non-white attorney seeking social equality and defending the underprivileged poor African Americans and other minorities who have been wrongly condemned and cruelly punished by the U.S. criminal justice system mostly due to their race and color. However, Bryan Stevenson's recent sociopolitical legal work is more

than a memoir that deals with the depiction of some parts of his life while struggling against injustice; it also explains the way the American structural/systematic racism and the U.S. criminal justice is based on a racial bias. It also provides a detailed overview of the long history of discrimination and inequality against African Americans in the USA.

1.1 Brayan Stevenson Biography

Brayan Stevenson was a black American lawyer, social activist, and law professor, born in Milton, Delaware. He was raised in a poor rural racially segregated community where he deepened his understanding of the unequal social division between underprivileged poor people of color and a wealthy white-associated population. Upon his graduation, he served as an intern staff attorney at the Southern Center for Human Rights in Georgia. Then as executive director of the Alabama Capital Representation Resource Center from 1989 to 1995. (“Bryan Stevenson”).

In 1989, Stevenson founded the Equal Justice Initiative nonprofit organization in Montgomery, Alabama, which has long been working on U.S. criminal justice reform, to establish social equality for wrongly convicted people on death row without parole. Stevenson and EJI legally overcame many challenges in releasing “over 135 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row and won relief for hundreds of others wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced.” (“Bryan Stevenson”). Thus, in 2002, Stevenson achieved full recognition and national acclaim after being granted many national and international honors and awards for his anti-racism challenging efforts.

The EJI organization’s anti-racism work and Bryan Stevenson’s deeper attentiveness in documenting the history of slavery, segregation, and lynching in the United States inspired his creation of the two cultural sites: the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in 2018 in Montgomery, Alabama, where he erected many memorials,

sculptures, and artistic designs of slaves' lynching and mass incarceration to contextualize the racial terror and the cruelty of slavery. Furthermore, he penned several books including *4 Days 4 Nights 4 Ladies 4 Guys* in 2019, *A Perilous Path: Talking Race, Inequality, and the Law* in 2018, and several analytical essays, literary works, and media reports about laws, systematic injustices, community activism, and economic injustice in the United States.

Overall, Bryan Stevenson devoted his life and career questing for racial equality and social justice, by representing the wrongly condemned poor people of color in the deep American South, and for the reconstruction of the U.S. criminal justice system through the abolishment of the structural system's sustainment of discrimination against African Americans and other minorities.

1.2 Book General Background

Between the 1970s and 2014 when Stevenson's *Just Mercy* was published, The International Classification of Crime and Criminal Justice for Statistical Purposes (ICCS) stated that the U.S. prison population increased from 300,000 to 2,300,000, as the highest incarceration rate in the world, among them sixty-eight percent identify as African Americans. As well as the policing policies of The War on Drugs global campaign that is based on the increase of severe penalties for drug offenders unjustifiably put African Americans under more police surveillance than non-black people. Due to the long history of racism, that portrays blacks as inherently dangerous criminals (Alexander 05).

Equally importantly, the book was released one year after the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement and its struggle against police brutality and the killings of innocent black people without any offenses, and its resistance to the racial inequality in the U.S.'s different systems. While, officially published during the movement 2014' non-violent street demonstrations after the premeditated murder of two black men Eric Garner, and Michael

Brown by police officers. Therefore, Stevenson brings these ‘tormenting’ statistics together with a set of cases from his long years spent practicing criminal defense during the 80s and 90s.

1.3 Book Description: Plot, characters, and Themes

From the book’s first chapter: “Mockingbird Players” to the sixtieth and the last: “The Stone catcher’s Song of Sorrow”, Stevenson alternates between recounting several stories, convictions, and trials that trace his personal experience exposing illegal mechanisms that perpetuate racism against African Americans and other minorities in the U.S. penal and criminal systems, tracing its consequences on the individuals and the community.

Walter McMillian’s Story as the Backbone of the Narrative

By the start of the first chapter, “Mockingbird Players” the narrative turns to “the most moving story in Stevenson’s book is the description of his representation of Walter McMillan.” (Berry 335). Here it is 1988, Bryan Stevenson graduated and becomes a member of the Bar Association of Lawyers in Georgia and Alabama where he spends a lot of time working as a public defender and started creating his ENJI association. During this time, Bryan is given Walter McMillian’s case, a black man who was falsely charged with murdering a white woman and sentenced to death row.

McMillan was a black man who lived in Monroeville, Alabama; he owned a successful small private lumber business that earned him economic independence and respect among the white community in his hometown. In 1986, the black middle-aged man Walter had a ‘discreditable’ affair with a young married white woman Karen Kelly, which made him a disrepute person in his home town due to the long-standing Southern law prohibiting interracial relationships. Later, Walter breaks up with Karen, as she starts abusing

drugs with Ralph Myers, a psychologically troubled white man and ex-criminal. A few weeks later, Karen and Ralph Myers were accused of killing two white women Ronda Morrison and Vickie Pittman. When police interrogated Ralph, he claims that he killed Ronda Morrison with the help of Karen and her ex-Walter who subsequently killed Vickie Pittman. The police and The Alabama Bureau of Investigation (ABI) accepted Ralph's claims even though Ralph has never met Walter and there was no evidence to support his testimonies against Walter McMillian. McMillian's story is articulated in detail, as it is the backbone of Stevenson's memoir, constructing a narrative between 1987 and 1993. In the third chapter "Trials and Tribulations" Stevenson deals with Walter's arrestment on false testimonies in 1987 after being accused by Ralph Mayer of sexual assault, and the two crimes, with the help of Sheriff Tom Tate and other white police officers. McMillian was held in preventive detention on death row before conviction, after a biased trial that convicted Walter of capital murder and unfairly judged him guilty.

Thus, in chapter five "Of the Coming of John" and chapter seven "Justice Denied" Bryan recounts his visit to Walter's large and poor family describing it as an "entire community hidden away in the woods." (Stevenson 105) portraying the marginalization of the black community in Alabama. In these parts of the narrative, Stevenson alludes to countless Police misconducts and paid testimonies against Walter, and his encounters with racist southern judges and attorneys who stand for a racially biased legal system that created a huge gap between justice and The U.S. criminal system.

Therefore, Stevenson continues to provide more details about McMillian trials and his efforts guided by the ENJ in defending his innocence. In chapter, nine "I'm here" Bryan recounts the three days of Ralph Myers's new testimony in McMillan's rule 32, and the supreme court trial after that, confirming McMillan's guiltlessness. In the eleventh chapter

“I’ll fly away’ Walter is finally and officially released in 1993 following the state involvement with Stevenson arguing Walter’s innocence, after along journey of struggling against all kinds of discrimination and racism and many unsuccessful appeals from 1990 to 1993.

Other Narratives:

In between the narratives, that trace McMillian's tragic story in prison and outside it, Stevenson articulates many stories of other prejudiced penal system’ condemned victims and marginalized people that the EJI has represented. He even recounts his personal experience facing police brutality and racial abuse in chapter two “The Stand”, as being wrongly searched, attacked, and questioned by police due to being a ‘black’ and a justice seeker, giving a close view to bigotry against African Americans, and a clearer definition of racism through his perspective and struggle with the criminal justice.

Chapter four, “The Old Rugged Cross” opens in 1989 in Montgomery, Alabama. Stevenson took over Herbert Richardson’s case, the 43-year-old Herbert Richardson an African American ex-Vietnam War veteran, who suffers post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental issues after experiencing terrifying events in Vietnam. Herbert is convicted of bombing his ex-girlfriend’s porch after she breaks up with him intending to protect her from the explosion, but instead, the 11-year-old was killed. Richardson has spent eleven years on death row prison, and when Stevenson takes over his case, his execution date was in a few days. Thus, neither his military service effective background nor his mental disability caused by the service have been considered by the court, and have not excluded the capital punishment that put an end to his life. By the end, Stevenson describes the last hours of Herbert Richardson’s life including final goodbyes and his given personal moment with the inmate a few minutes before his execution.

Moreover, Bryan Stevenson in his *Just Mercy* memoir conveys to the reader many other stories of the successful and unsuccessful cases of underprivileged minorities, the EJI has represented in different American states than Alabama. Including poor women of color and children severely punished and seen as prey for rape by male prison guards, and other mental disorder convicts whose disabilities are illegally disregarded. As well as, the impact of those distressing incarcerations, capital punishments, or frightening executions on the inmates' families and community, causing emotional and psychological trauma.

Bryan Stevenson's eulogy at Walter Mc Millian's funeral on September 11, 2013, serves as the memoir's end. Stevenson explicates the importance of taking over Walter McMillian's case that inspired and taught him about the worth of hope, and how to make fear courage in fighting injustice and racism.

1.4 Reviews and Critics:

Just Mercy has received several negative critiques and reviews. Some critics have argued that the book is an output of 'over' portrayals, including the excessive emotional and manipulative depiction of the personages' tragic stories and their overstated struggle, and the exaggerated depiction of the U.S. criminal justice system as more corrupt and inequitable than it truly is. Yet, they have stated that the book offers an overly unrealistic portrayal of the prospective reform within the U.S. systems, through its oversimplified assumed solutions to the issues that it underlines. Another critique is that the book seems repetitive as it concentrate more on the experience of Walter Mc Millian and Stevenson as the center of the narrative, alternatively, it could have benefited from more varied storytelling.

Eventually, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* raised awareness about racism and injustice in America and the necessity of reform within the U.S. structural and criminal justice systems. It constructs its narrative upon crucial themes in telling the stories of

the wrongly condemned or executed and racially abused people, including oppression, dehumanizing, and systematic racism versus mercy, compassion and humanization, and black lives versus white lives. Altogether, Stevenson's narrative intended to confront the American nation with its deep-rooted history of racial bias against African Americans and other minorities, which still shapes the contemporary American systems.

2 Destin D. Cretton's Film Adaptation *Just Mercy* 2019

In 2019, Bryan Stevenson's memoir was adapted into the legal drama of the same name: *Just Mercy* exhibited for the first time at the Toronto International Film Festival, in Canada on September 2019, subsequently released in select theatres in the United States, thus in January 2020, it was internationally broadcasted. As Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy* was an admirable bestseller book in 2014 for its deeply conveyed messages, the film adaptation also has been well-reviewed by the silver screen community and audiences. It helped to increase consciousness of the issues addressed in the book as a quiet earnest look at African Americans being racially abused.

2.1 Just MercyCast and Production

Just Mercy was directed by the American filmmaker and screenwriter, Destin Daniel Cretton. He is born in 1978 in Hawaii, to a father of European descent, and a Japanese mother. As a mixed-race director, Destin is well known for his films that reflect themes of race, class, and identity, tracing his social activeness toward more diversity within Hollywood. He has often spoken about the influence of his own experiences with racism in his work, the condition that desired him to use his platform as a filmmaker to address issues of social justice and to spark conversations about topics that are often overlooked in mainstream media.

Daniel argued in several interviews and media reports that he was lured by Stevenson's *Just Mercy* story because of its potent anti-racism proclamation, and the sense of

hope it promotes, Cretton stated, for *Los Angeles Times*, “By the end of this book, where you’re confronted with so many harsh truths, you expect to be depressed. But I somehow felt hopeful and inspired,” And added, “It captures everything that I strive to be,” (Jen). He also stated that Stevenson's work as a civil rights lawyer and his commitment to social justice inspired him, saying: “to be able to see what he sees daily and go into these places that most of us want to just pretend are not there and to somehow do that and still have the grace and hope and inspiring spirit that he has, is mind-boggling to me.” (Jen).

Just Mercy starred the two leading actors, Jamie Foxx in the role of Walter McMillian and Michael B Jordan as Bryan Stevenson. In addition to Brie Larson as Eva Ansley, Rob Morgan as Herbert Richardson, Tim Blake Nelson in the role of Ralph Myers, Michael Harding as Sheriff Tate, and Rafe Spall in the role of Tommy Chapman, the southern racist key witness in the case of McMillian, that played a crucial role in Walter’s wrongful conviction.

Just Mercy’s major actor Michael B. Jordan is a black American actor, born in 1987, in California. He premiered his career in cinema in 2006., he played different roles, in several modern cinematic works that establish him as a rising star in Hollywood and set the stage for his later success in films like *Black Panther* 2018..Jordan Launched the #ChangeHollywood initiative, which confronts Hollywood’s exclusion of black talent and the confining of Black characters to supporting roles and stereotypes.

The film’s second major actor is Jamie Foxx, a Black American Academy Award-winning, born in 1967, in Texas, who started his career in entertainment as a stand-up comedian. He then featured in several dramatic works including the two-academy awards-winning movie *Django Unchained*. Some film critics stated that his personal experiences

facing racism, injustice, and growing up in the South helped him to connect with the character of McMillian, to offer a perfect fit for the role.

2.2 *Just Mercy* Technical/Financial Background and the Film Performance

Just Mercy featured diverse technical staff and background, including the film's cinematography by Brett Pawlak, who used a combination of handheld cameras and static shots to create different senses in each scene throughout the film. The screenwriting by the co-writer Andrew Lanham, and the film's original score composed by Joel P. West a singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, used a combination of orchestral and electronic instruments to create various soundtracks that perfectly capture the gothic film's themes and tone. In addition to the number of carefully chosen songs.

Furthermore, *Just Mercy*'s budget reached \$25 million, which is regarded as a moderate budget for a Hollywood production distributed by Warner Bros. However, the film was prosperous at the box office to a certain degree, grossing over \$50.4 million worldwide, (InternetMovieDatabase.com, 2020). But it did not perform well as some had hoped. Firstly, it might be due to Hollywood's lack of diversity issue, as the film features a predominantly black cast and deals with too heavy and sensitive issues of racial injustice, which can be a turn-off for some audiences that have limited its appeal. In addition, the film has been released in 2019, a year that was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the traditional theatrical release model and may have affected the film's box office performance, marketing, and overall reception.

Moreover, *Just Mercy* 2019 was completely neglected by The Academy Awards of 2020, after its appraised premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, The only non-white actor who has been nominated was Cynthia Erivo for her role as a slavery abolitionist in *Harriet* 2019. Thus, neither Michael B. Jordan's influential sharp-suited real-life role, nor

Jamie Foxx magnificent performance, or the film's great story and excellent acting, and impressive cinematography earned the work any Academy Award, the matter that fuels accusations against #OscarsSoWhite controversy again. *Just Mercy* received several other awards for its actors' performances, direction, and message, including the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Motion Picture, Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture - Drama (Michael B. Jordan), and the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance.

Eventually, despite the previous critics, reviews, and challenges faced by both works, Bryan Stevenson's literary output *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* 2014, and Destin Daniel Cretton's book cinematic adaptation production *Just Mercy* 2019 remain two crucial and timely works that have resonated with audiences and critics and shed light on important social matters, and explore broader issues of racism and injustice in the criminal justice system, highlighting the importance of fighting for justice and equality for all people.

CHAPTER III: *Just Mercy* 2019 Film Analysis

The cinematographic adaptation of *Just Mercy* ensures the themes, and notions of the book, it focuses on Stevenson's efforts to defend Walter McMillian and depicts the challenges that he faces in his work, including resistance from the legal system, the community, and personal threats and dangers. However, it explores the same themes of hope and struggles for justice in the face of racism and adversity. As well as it shows the impact, that Stevenson's work has on the lives of his clients and the broader community.

This chapter will be subdivided into two main parts, the first part will offer a brief overview of the Black Lives Matter Movement, as the study will take it as the main representative of the ongoing black endeavor against police brutality, and systematic/structural racism. Then it will move to provide a brief explanation of those concepts according to BLM. Then, the second part will be dedicated to the film analysis, this section will include three main parts, the first one will be the analysis of *Just Mercy's* depiction and portrayal of Black Lives Matter's activism. Then, the last part is set to analyze the conveyed sense of Black empowerment by *Just Mercy*.

1. #BlackLivesMatter

#BlackLivesMatter, or BLM, is a social activist movement that emerged in the United States in response to the high-profile incidents of "police brutality and daily police killings of unarmed African Americans." (Taylor 02). BLM started as a social media hashtag on Twitter, in 2013 Launched by three female Black social activists: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who killed a 17-year-old African-American, Trayvon Martin in 2012. ("About Black Lives Matter"). The hashtag provided a large platform on social media; it allowed Black people to share their experiences with police brutality, racism, and other forms of systematic oppression. In addition, it

connected people, to organize different forms of activism that ended up with BLM moving to the action stage by arranging different national nonviolent demonstrations and pacific marches. BLM officially put its social media activism into action in 2014; following the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, by white police. Mass protests erupted across the country, which “brought the world's attention to the crisis of racist policing practices in the United States.” (Taylor 02). Since then, the movement started to gain momentum, as the rates of black victims of police brutality increased, particularly after the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by a Minneapolis police officer.

BLM works to expose several types of racism against African Americans, including police brutality, systemic racism, inequality, and economic injustice. As Christopher Lebron says in his book *The Making of Black Lives Matter*, “#BlackLivesMatter is akin to a social movement brand that can be picked up and deployed by any interested group of activists inclined to speak out and act against racial injustice.” (xxiv). As well as it, aims to promote social and political change and economic empowerment, by making more efforts to reform the criminal justice system, end mass incarceration, and promote civic engagement.

BLM collects the movement's funds through many donations from individuals (including celebrities and public figures), organizations, and corporations, which are passionate about fighting racism and promoting social justice. Many donations are made online, through the Black Lives Matter website, or other crowd funding platforms. The movement uses the funds to support a wide range of its civil activities and to advocate various civil policies, initiatives, and programs that provide marginalized black communities with more resources and opportunities. BLM states on its official website, “Over \$25 million reinvested into the Black community: Over \$10 million in grants to Black-led frontline organizations, over \$13 million in grants to BLM Chapters. Nearly \$3 million in grants to Impacted Family Foundations.” (“About Black Lives Matter”).

However, recently the movement has faced a national backlash and many negative accusations for its lack of transparency in the use of those financial donations, and its misled financial management. BLM's activists, leaders, and even the co-founders are accused of misusing the movement's funds, the critics claim that the local black chapters had not seen any of that money, or benefited from it, instead the BLM activists used it to achieve their interests.

One of the widely circulated videos that raise more backlash against the movement, was taken from the documentary of the black female conservative and anti-BLM activist Candace Owens about the dismissed mission of BLM. She visits the BLM founder Patrisse Cullors's mansion in Los Angeles, and then she says, "I can't see how this purchase helped Blacks anywhere in America. I can't even find a Black life on the property. The dog is not even Black." (Fox News 1:16). In her interview with Fox, she declares, that people who donate to the movement they are just invested in the emotional side of Black Lives Matter, and no one asked where that donated money has gone. Then, she adds that, instead of fulfilling the needs of the black community, they prefer to invest the bigger part of those funds in supporting trans-gender Black people. (2:32).

Nevertheless, all those accusations are acclaimed with no 'concrete evidence'; BLM has responded to these critics by creating a special section on its official website, named, "BLM Transparency Center", in which it provides regular updates and reports on its activities and spending to ensure that its funds are being used effectively and transparently. In addition, it releases financial statements and other documentation of its financial management, providing accountability and oversight of the Movement's finances.

Police brutality is the core of BLM activism. The movement argues that, police violence came as a result of deeply ingrained biases and discriminatory practices within law enforcement, and that it is perpetuated by a lack of accountability for officers who engage in

misconduct, protected by the qualified immunity laws. (“About Black Lives Matter”). According to BLM’s general definition, qualified immunity is a legal doctrine that protects police officers, from being held personally liable for actions taken in the course of their official duties, unless they violate the constitutional statutory rights. The doctrine has been criticized by BLM as a barrier to accountability for police officers. (“About Black Lives Matter”). One of the BLM activist says, “Qualified immunity is a legal doctrine that essentially shields police from persecution or legal retribution, police officers are protected by Union contracts which make it very difficult for them to be fired. Police officers have all too cozy relationships with district attorneys. All these taken together create a culture where officers are licensed to kill and almost always get away with it” (Channel 4 News 7:55).

Additionally, Black Lives Matter’s activism centered on defining the specific incidents of police brutality as evidence of the need for reform; these incidents include countless cases in which unarmed Black individuals have been killed, attacked, and beaten, by police officers, often without consequences or legal punishments. BLM argues that these incidents are not isolated events, but rather part of a large pattern of violence and discrimination against Black people. The co-founder of BLM, Patrice Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, have been vocal about their views on police brutality. (Channel 4 News 4:12). They argued it is an ‘inherently’ systematic issue, perpetuated by many political systems and official organizations, and this represents a manifestation of deep-seated biases and discriminatory practices within law enforcement. Alicia Garza says, “Police brutality is not just about individual officers, it’s about a system that is designed to devalue Black Lives.” (“About Black Lives Matter”). Patrice Cullors adds, “We can’t just reform the police, we need to transform the entire system of policing and criminal justice.” (“About Black Lives Matter”). Therefore, we can clearly understand that BLM links police brutality to the government’s perpetuation of such oppressive acts, representing it as ‘state-sponsored violence’, which fails

to hold police officers accountable for their actions; it instead protected them from consequences. BLM points out those police officers are often protected from prosecution by qualified immunity laws, which make it difficult for African Americans to seek justice. For instance, the laws make it hard to fire or discipline officers who engage in misconduct. Moreover, the movement activist has emphasized the role of political leaders in perpetuating police violence through making various 'racially based' policies, such as the war on drugs and mass incarceration.

Black Lives Matter exposes this brutality and violence in a range of ways, based on its activism through social media campaigns, and public demonstrations. The movement used its platforms to highlight cases of violence and draw attention to how police brutality is connected to the broader system of oppression and inequality, as Lebron says, "Today #BlackLivesMatter has become a force demanding change in America. Eschewing traditional hierarchical leadership models" (xxxiii). BLM's call for change and reform has made observable shifts, police officers now are obliged to wear body cameras and they are investigated for their misconduct through the establishment of independent oversight boards. Although these efforts and made progress, many police violence incidents against Black people still occur and still, define Black lives in America.

According to BLM, police brutality and violence, as mentioned before are linked to the systematic and structural racism embodied in the American justice system, legal laws making, law enforcement, and institutional inequality. Therefore, BLM depicts structural and systematic racism by highlighting how racism is embedded in the policies of society. BLM's co-founder and activists have argued in different interviews and social media online talks that racism in America is not just an individual output, but a systematic issue that affects every aspect of life from housing and education to healthcare and employment. Moreover, they claim that racism is perpetuated through a range of political policies and practices, traced by

the issue of mass incarceration and false accusations of Blacks for crimes they did not commit, or the excessive punishments for minor offenses. However, BLM fights back against this oppressive systematic and structural racism, by advocating for change to policies, practices, and institutions that perpetuate the intuitional inequality and oppression. As the co-founders of the movement state, they have called for a range of policy changes to address these issues, including changes to laws that protect officers from accountability, the reallocation of resources from law enforcement to social services and community-based programs, and the implementation of policies that address the root causes of crime and violence. (“About Black Lives Matter”).

Although Black Lives Matter’s number of positive results include, rising awareness about issues related to systematic racism and police brutality, and promoting international conversation about these issues, BLM accompanies the culture of victimhood and perpetuated the sense of ‘victimization’. This contradicts the Black empowerment’s principles of making the Black individual strong and thirst for reform and change, and taking control of his own life. Critics argue that Black Lives Matter depicts Blacks as victims, seeking out opportunities to be offended or oppressed, blaming white police officers and officials for their actions as they make them feel miserable. Conservative political critics in the United States assert that the movement focuses too much on the experiences of Black people as victims, and this focus on victimhood can be harmful, as it can foster a sense of entitlement, discourage personal responsibility, and be disempowering. African Americans believe they are the only ones being targeted for mistreatment, racism, and police brutality, neglecting the facts that even other minorities, and white people, are mistreated, shot, and killed by police officers. In addition, they share the same environment, and the same institutions, living under the same political laws. Moreover, some other critics maintain that BLM focuses only on negative events and disregards the positive side of the Black community, its rich cultural heritage, sense of

community and resilience, and Black history. The movement exaggerates in the dramatization of the Black lives, holding a 'life against me' philosophy, which leads to low self-esteem and being easily agitated and moisturized. Recently, this sense of victimization is maintained by the exaggerated focus on the microaggressions that represent the unintentional and subtle acts or insensitive comments, and assumptions of discrimination toward African Americans.

However, other critics argue that the focus on victimhood or a sense of victimization is a necessary response to the systemic oppression experienced by Black people and that it is an important tool for raising awareness about issues related to social justice and equity. Overall, the relationship between victimization and the Black Lives Matter movement is a complex issue that depends on different perspective and experiences.

Nevertheless, BLM has been the subject of controversy and criticism; accused of promoting violence and causing civil disobedience, and blamed for its focus on police violence while neglecting the other forms of racism and oppression. "Many people have been shifting the focus of this movement by saying that it's not just Black lives that matter, all lives matter and all lives are important."(Tanika 05). However, BLM has fostered awareness about police brutality and systemic racism and has incited calls for change and reform. While much work remains to be done, the movement has played a significant role in promoting the statement that black lives matter and generates a debate about black people's oppression.

2 *Just Mercy* Depiction of Black Lives Matter Activism

2.1 Police Brutality:

With the "Based on a true story." caption, followed by a calm atmosphere in the forest, created by the sound of leaves in the wind, *Just Mercy* opens up. Thus, "1987, Monroe County, Alabama"(*Just Mercy* 00:34) appears across the screen, and a middle-aged Black man, Walter McMillian known as Johnny D, starts tying the long 'lynching trees' with rough ropes, and

chops some, of the trees that symbolizes the legacy of racial violence and slavery terror in the American South. While the tropes represent the trauma and pain that black Americans have experienced throughout history.

Thus, an intense scene follows, related to the representation of police violence and brutality against unarmed, innocent African Americans. A roadblock by police cars comes to stop Walter. White officers stand behind their vehicles, pointing their guns at Walter's truck; Then, the officer Sheriff Tate approaches, thus with a close-up shot Walter slowly raises his shaking hands on the wheel of his truck. Sheriff Tate speaks to Walter, "cause after what you have done, I'm looking for any excuse to get this over with right here, right now." (*Just Mercy* 3:14). The other police officers start to move closer toward Walter's truck aiming their guns at his face. With a serene voice, Walter answers, "Sir I ain't did nothing, and I think y'all got the wrong person here. Y'all got me confused with somebody. And I think..." (*Just Mercy* 3:22). Before he finishes his words Tate violently pulls him out of his truck and Walter keeps saying "I don't have a thing to do with this" and "I ain't did nothing wrong" (*Just Mercy* 3:32). Walter is arrested, and a reporter is heard narrating, "Rhonda Morrison was found dead at Jackson Cleaners. Morrison had been strangled and shot by Walter McMillian, Known locally as Johnny D." (3:50), stating that McMillian is sentenced to death, and justice has finally been served.

This scene refers to the countless police brutality cases against innocent African Americans, violence, murders, and shoots in the United States, most of them were captured on videos and widely circulated on social media. Including, Michael Brown, uttering his last words "Hands Up, don't shoot" a while ago before being shot by a police officer in 2012. Followed by Oscar Grant's police murder incident in 2013, captured on many cameras and disseminated to media, where watched by millions, delivering his last phrase "You shot me! You shot me!" Then the incident of Philando Castile who was shot by a white officer in front of his wife and

little child. Thus, the “I can’t breathe” last words uttered by Eric Garner in 2014, and George Floyd in 2021 who was restrained by an officer seen on the video kneeling on Floyd’s throat for over nine minutes. The asphyxiated to his death. These crimes are the core of Black Lives Matter’s struggle for justice, and most of the victims’ last uttered words were used as slogans in its mass protests against police brutality. While, became highly depicted in Black films, such as *Just Mercy*, which creates a homogenous relationship between the movement and the film.

After the introductory part of McMillian, the imagery of police violence and racism is conveyed once again when we are introduced to Bryan Stevenson. In a low-lighting shot, Bryan stands behind metal bars, the camera close to his confused face. Thus, it tracks back to give the viewers a medium shot, unveiling a young, well-dressed, Black, law student who visits Henry, his first death row inmate, for the first time in Jackson prison. This introduction alludes to the limits of Bryan’s freedom as a Black man, regardless of his education and status.

With the sound of shackles, Henry, a young black man brought up by a police guard with his hands and ankles handcuffed, He and Bryan, spend three hours talking and sharing life stories. Thus, the guard enters and alerts for exceeding the time limit, he pushes up Henry violently towards the wall and tightly handcuffs him, Stevenson is appalled, and he asks the guard to stop, “Sir, calm down! He didn’t do anything!”(7:52). the police guard disrespectfully shouts in Bryan’s face, “You need to shut your mouth!”(7:53). Henry tells Stevenson not to worry and starts singing a soulful church hymn, “Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”(8:03) intertwined with the sound of shackles again. This scene deepened Bryan’s understanding of Racism and police brutality against blacks in general and black prisoners in particular and seems to be ‘the incentive’ of starting his journey towards justice. The same ‘incentives’ that raised the Black Lives Matter Movement’s activism in the United States.

Through this representation, *Just Mercy* brings out the issue of police violence against African Americans in prisons to a wider audience, one of the issues that define BLM’s current

advocacy for social justice in the United States. “There are more than a million African Americans in prison because Black people are incarcerated at a rate six times that of whites.” (Taylor 3). Most of them are exposed to police violence more than three times per day, and the conflating of race, risk, and criminality is used to legitimize such racial acts.

Another imagery that depicts police violence, and the use of white authority for racial abuse, is when Bryan Stevenson drives back home at night, two police officers stop him without any reason and aggressively pulled him out of his car, just as the previous officers did with Walter. One officer threatens Bryan by pointing his gun at his head, Bryan is afraid, telling the officer, “You don’t have to have a gun pointed at me. I’m not a threat” (*Just Mercy* 58:00). Thus when they are about to leave, with tears in his eyes Bryan pulls himself together and asks them why did they stop him and one of them reply, “ We’re letting you go. You should be happy” (*Just Mercy* 58:00). Through this scene, we can realize that regardless of their social position in society, Blacks are always seen as suspicious ‘Nigger danger’ as Taylor said in his book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, “Their deaths, and the killings of so many others like them, prove that sometimes simply being Black can make you a suspect or get you killed. Especially when the police are involved, looking Black is more likely to get you killed than any other factor.”(13). The issue that elicited Black Lives Matter and its ongoing mass protests.

2.2 Systematic/Structural Racism:

Bryan Stevenson’s journey to attain justice represents the Black Lives Matter struggle for justice and the quest for equality. Throughout the film, we see how Stevenson embarks on a journey of reforming the U.S criminal justice, by taking over Walter McMillan’s case and he works to create a better future for his community by using his social status and education as a tool. The same as BLM which seeks to raise awareness about how black people are

disproportionately impacted by different forms of racism, and the same as Stevenson it creates a powerful message about the need for change and has inspired many people to get involved in the fight for justice and equality.

However, neither Bryan's important position as an attorney in the film, nor the BLM activism, lessen the intensity of the structural racism embedded in the racial policies and practices of institutions. *Just Mercy's* film centers on the theme of the structural racism shown in the U.S. criminal justice miscarriage, through McMillian's case. Bryan Stevenson arrives in Alabama, where he created his non-profit organization the EJI. In one of the film's earliest scenes, when Bryan visits his first death row inmates including McMillian and Herbert Richardson, the correctional officer, asks Bryan, "You really a lawyer?" (*Just Mercy* 15:52), then he requests to search him, Bryan states that lawyers are not searched for legal visits, but the officer insisted to do so, and he deprives him of all his clothing. Bryan is powerless and unable to say anything for fear of allegations. This behavior relates to his black identity and the racial assumptions about Black people, and it conveys the meaning of white authority of the officer, who is less qualified than Bryan, but based on his race and whiteness he feels superior. Here, *just Mercy* depicts the reality in America, as the white Americans don't see those blacks who have important positions in society as educated people, or just normal individuals like them, but rather they judge them by the color of their skin, which is always related to 'criminality'. As Walter tells Bryan in their first meeting when Stevenson is talking to him about laws and justice, "You think all of the fancy words gonna get you somewhere around here in Alabama" (*Just Mercy* 21:11). And adds "You coming around here with the fancy suits, talking to all white, the only suit they wanna see a nigga in is the suit I got on" (*Just Mercy* 21:23). Here, we can notice how the film is assisting to depict BLM's activism, through its representations that rise more awareness about these forms of structural racism, which are the backbone of the movement.

Moreover, the theme of structural and systematic racism against African Americans in the United States is represented through the articulation of Walter McMillian's case, Walter's character symbolizes the many innocent people who have been wrongly accused and convicted of crimes. Based on a false testimony of the ex-criminal Ralph Myers, Walter is sentenced to death, without any prior legal court. Sheriff Tate, a corrupt law enforcement officer the first character who represents the structural racism against African Americans in America, coerced Ralph into giving false testimony against Walter in exchange for a reduced sentence for his criminal charges. Here, we can notice that the law enforcement can be influenced by systematic corruption and institutional inequality that can result in the wrongful conviction and punishment of innocent black people. (McMillian).

From the beginning, Walter is seen as a brutal killer, the same as the innocent black people are seen in reality. Stevenson's meetings with different racist lawyers, juries, officers, and even the common 'white' people from the beginning of his investigation, make it a clear indication that Walter's life is worthless like those of countless other African Americans. Therefore, we can visibly see that the weight of the black battle against a racist and injustice system is heavy.

Stevenson's visit to Walter for the first time on death row is depicted as a tense emotional meeting. Walter was initially hesitant to trust Bryan, as he had lost faith in the justice system, he speaks to Bryan about racism against their race, saying, "All they gonna do is eat you alive and spit you out just like every other man they do when he stepped outta line" (*Just Mercy* 21:16). Adding, that in Alabama (which symbolizes America), "When you're guilty from the moment you born. And you can buddy up with these white folks, and make them laugh, and try to make them like you, and you say "yes, sir", "no, ma'am", but when it's your turn they ain't gotta have no fingerprints, no evidence, and the only witness they got made the whole thing up." (*Just Mercy* 21:48).

These deep words, explain more the bitter experience of African Americans in America and the miscarriage of structural systems embodied in the U.S. criminal justice that led to the black persistent endeavor nowadays, while it shows how the lives of innocent people of color are restricted to a made-up testimony' by a racist white. Thus, Walter ends the discussion, asking Bryan in a strained voice, "You know how many people been freed from Alabama death row?" then, he answers, "None." (*Just Mercy* 22:32). Furthermore, before this moving scene, Stevenson meets a group of death row inmates who have been wrongfully convicted and prevented to set up a defense, and if they did they were almost unheard and disallowed to take a stand to give their victim impact statements, and immediately judged guilty. These marginalized characters besides Walter and their stories highlight how the American criminal justice system is plagued by bias against Black individuals, and demonstrate how the American systems in America often work to maintain the status quo, even when it means perpetuating injustice. Furthermore, it brings to light the contemporary crisis of high incarceration rates of black people that is deeply related to the anti-Black stereotypes, as dangerous criminals, insensitive, carefree, and unworthy of compassion, and solidarity, which allows the wrong accusations of Black people.

Another narrative that depicts the structural/systematic racism, one of BLM struggle core concerns embodied in the excessive punishments of several black people for minor offenses. Including Herbert Richardson and his fellow Anthony Hilton, Herb is a Vietnam veteran, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, and witnessed several attacks and mental declines throughout his imprisonment. When Bryan represents him, he finds that his PTSD legal documents were not represented in legal courts and all his trials were misconducted. Once Hilton tells him, "Now you fought for this country and they threw you up in the bag, like a trash, that war made you sick in your head, man. You supposed to be in a hospital. Not here." (*Just Mercy* 45:46). This illustrates that when it comes to blacks who have fought for their

country, the American society is more eager to punish them and not to rehabilitate them. This 'dishonor' of black veterans like Herb and other people of color, highlights the true meaning of injustice and the systematic unequal decisions.

Stevenson is granted a court hearing to submit proofs and to petition the Supreme Court for a post ponement because Herbert's case legally is not a death row case, but the judge refutes it only a few hours before the execution of Herbert on August 18, 1989, at 12:14 A.M. Before the 'white' authorities take him from his cell and put to death, Herbert asks the guard if he can say goodbye to his friends Hilton and McMillian, where the camera is focusing on the faces of two black men. The only thing that separates them is the metal bars, the bars here are the 'injustice' it is the only barrier that separates McMillian from his execution, and even Herbert is outside it he is not free.

In the scene when Herbert is brought to his execution, he starts imagining calm swaying trees in the wind and breathes deeply, this signifies the only moment of freedom which he had never experienced before in his life. As any other Black man who has grown up in a racist society, thus he was taken into the war where he experienced harsh treatment that made him intellectually disabled, then sentenced to life imprisonment, thereafter executed, the brief story that summarizes the tragic stories of countless African Americans in the United States. As Herbert is put to death, the other prisoner starts crying and singing his best song, to calm him one last time. Here we can see the depiction of sympathy and friendship among the inmates who have often been portrayed as dangerous criminals and aggressive, especially the black ones.

Just Mercy's theme of structural/systematic racism and injustice is highlighted by another story of another black man who is wrongly convicted and held on death row for twenty-eight years, Anthony Hilton. Once Anthony recounts to Walter and Bryan his story

when he was arrested, “When I told the cops I was innocent, do you know what they said? One of you niggers done it and if it weren’t you then you’re taking one for your homies” (*Just Mercy*46:04). This shows how the systematic racism in law enforcement, could devastate people of color’s life, unjustly convict an entire race, and obliterate the black identity. Moreover, the death penalty in *Just Mercy* symbolizes the morals and the ethical dilemmas that emerge in the pursuit of legal justice. Throughout *Just Mercy*, we see how the death penalty is used to perpetuate injustice and inequality, as it represents an excessive punishment for minor offenses committed by blacks.

2.3 The Representation of Discrimination and Segregation in Just Mercy 2019

The imagery of black discrimination and segregation in *Just Mercy* 2019 is delivered by the representation of the three days of Walter McMillian’s Rule 32 hearing trial courses when Ralph Myers is convinced by Bryan Stevenson to represent his new testimony and admit Walter’s innocence.

The director gives us a deep focus shot of the courtroom, which symbolizes America and its legal system, a place of power and privilege, where judges and prosecutors hold sway over the lives of black people. In the courtroom, we can visibly see all the white people sitting separately from blacks, the imagery that transports the ‘social division’ of America between the black marginalized community and the superior white society. Besides that, all the juries, the state attorneys, the guards, and the police officers, were whites, the only blacks are Bryan, Walter, and his family. Based on the gaze we can understand the way *Just Mercy* is presenting the act of discrimination and its relation with the power dynamics or the white authority.

Bryan starts speaking, “The state’s case against Walter McMillian turned entirely on the testimony of Ralph Myers. There was no other evidence to establish Mr. McMillian’s guilt. No physical evidence linking him to the crime. No motive. No witnesses. Only the word of one man.”(*Just Mercy* 1:30:00). Thus, Ralph Myers and other witnesses are called to the stand and

admit that Walter is guiltless. However, the given testimonies are refused once again by the court. The imagery of discrimination is delivered once Again, after three months Stevenson gains another new trial, in the Supreme Court. On the day of the trial when Stevenson arrives at the courthouse, he finds all the Black people, including Walter's family standing outside the courtroom, apparently barred by the guard police from entering by order of Sheriff Tate. After Stevenson angrily insists that people should be let into the courtroom as it is a public institution and a public hearing, thus the guard begins letting them in.

The courtroom is already filled with whites, and there are no seats for the black supporters. Here, the segregation of allowing in white people and blocking the blacks illustrates the efforts made to dehumanize blacks and confirms that the court is intentionally discriminated against based on race. Then, the deep focus of the courtroom this time gives us an image of all white people having seats in the front and all the black people standing behind them, thus it moves to give us a rack focus shot that brings the background into focus, where all blacks are there in the back of the courtroom. When Stevenson starts giving his close argument to the judge, he stands at ease, looking at those people in the back, as he is not able to change the situation, thus the camera pan and get closer to their faces while Stevenson is delivering very powerful words about racism, racial bias, and justice miscarriage. This representation gives the real meaning of segregation and discrimination against African Americans in the United States that they still face. Thus, Stevenson summarizes everything, saying:

It is easy to see this case as one man trying to prove his innocence. But when you take a Black man and put him on death row a year before his trial, and exclude Black people from serving on his jury. When you base your conviction on a coerced testimony of a white felon and ignore the testimonies of two dozen law-abiding Black

witnesses when any evidence proving his innocence is suppressed and anyone who tries to tell the truth is threatened. This case becomes more than a trial of just one single defendant. It becomes a test of whether we're going to be governed by fear and anger or by the rule of justice. (*Just Mercy* 1:59:17)

Based on these moving words, we understand that Bryan's fight for Walter's justice is not only an aim of releasing a wrongfully convicted black man but a wrongfully convicted Black man, from a deeply racist society with racially biased systems that keep persecuting innocent African Americans for the color of their skin. While through the representations of segregation and discrimination, *Just Mercy* conveys to its viewers the real meaning of racial bias, and racism faced by people of color, which is embodied in several other contemporary forms nowadays including, educational inequality, voter suppression, microaggressions, employment discrimination, and racial profiling among many other forms.

3 *Just Mercy* 2019 from the Representation of Racism to the Black Empowerment

Just Mercy is a film that uplifts and promotes a positive message of hope, and resilience, and it empowers black people by telling the story of a real-life black lawyer and his achievements in overturning the wrongful conviction of a Black man, the imagery that challenges the previous negative stereotypes of Blacks. Moreover, the film is a predominantly Black cast and highlights the experience and struggles of Blacks who have been unfairly treated by the legal systems and the racist American society and authority, which helps to raise more awareness about systematic/structural racism and injustice and encourage people to take action to address them. While it provides Black people a platform to tell their stories and inspire others to fight for justice and equality.

This Black empowerment in *Just Mercy* is built upon the sense of community, black allyship, solidarity, hope, and resilience. At the very beginning of the film, Bryan is speaking with his mother before he moves to Alabama, and she insists that he should not go, as she knows the danger of what he is doing and he might be killed there. Thus, Stevenson tells her, “The first time I visited death row I wasn’t to meet somebody the same age as me, grew up in upon the same music, from a neighborhood just like ours. It could’ve been my Mama!” (*Just Mercy* 9:57). Here we can feel Bryan’s faith and his connection to his community that pushes him towards sacrificing his life for the sake of saving his people. As they are from the same community, sharing the same experiences, and oppressions, which can make Stevenson able to feel those who are wrongly convicted and marginalized.

Another scene that highlights the sense of community is the visit of Bryan to Walter’s family, Walter’s wife Minnie hugs Bryan and thanks him for driving all that long way to meet them, as all the previous lawyers barely make time to call. All of Walter’s family, friends, and neighbors come to see Bryan and tell him that on the day of the crime, Walter was there with them the whole day. His wife Minnie says, “Staying out of trouble, where you can be in your own house, minding your own business, surrounded by your entire family, and they still going to put some murder on you” (*Just Mercy* 37:02). Thus, Walter’s daughter adds, “it’s not just dad, we feel like they put us all on death row, too” (*Just Mercy* 37:14).

This visit shows the emotional impact of Walter’s wrongful conviction on his family and his entire community. Bryan listens to all the testimonies of the community’s members and shows genuine compassion for their situation, the testimonies help to humanize Walter and his family and show that they are more than just statistics or case files. Thus, the visit highlights the importance of community support and solidarity, by visiting Walter’s family Bryan establishes a friendship with them, and he shows that he is not just a lawyer, but also a member of the community. Bryan promised Walter’s family saying, “I’m not gonna stop until

I've done that" (*Just Mercy* 37:56). The words build up trust towards Bryan and foster his relationship with them. Therefore, Visiting Walter's family fosters Bryan's action.

Then Bryan visits Walter McMillan in the prison, where Walter asks him, "Why you doing this? Why are you a lawyer here in Alabama, taking all these cases that ain't nobody gonna pay for?" (*Just Mercy* 32:34). Bryan takes a moment before responding, "My grandfather was murdered over a black and white TV. We kept waiting for someone to show up to help. They never did. And that's when I realized that outside my community, nobody cared, 'cause to them it was just another Black man killed in the projects." (*Just Mercy* 43:10). Then, he goes on to say, "I know what it's like to live in the shadows, that's why I'm doing this" (*Just Mercy* 43:40). This deep verbal connection promotes the sense of community and solidarity. It shows that the issues faced by African Americans are not just individual problems but are part of larger systems of oppression and inequality that affect many people of color and all the black communities, and black people experience the same racism no matter their status or positions within the society. Therefore, through Stevenson's words, *Just Mercy* seek to transform the message that all people with the same 'wounds' should be brought together and create a sense of shared purpose, and take action to change and reform the oppressed society or systems, the same way as Stevenson did. Stevenson expresses that progress is possible, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

This conversation between Walter and Bryan solidifies their race and creates a bridge that connects the two characters. This Bridge serves as a reminder of the importance of empathy, compassion, and understanding people's aim behind the pursuit of justice. For instance, in the scene where Stevenson visits Walter after Ralph changes his testimony and his trial is dismissed, Walter tells Bryan, "That's the first time I feel like myself since I've been locked up . . . But if they take me to that chair tonight. I'm going out smiling 'cause I got my truth back. You gave that to me. To me and my family" (*Just Mercy* 1:49:46). This

summarizes Bryan's empowerment for McMillian, which conveys a meaning of hope and a sense of black empowerment for the black people as well.

In *Just Mercy*, black empowerment is also conveyed by highlighting the activism of Bryan and his colleagues who work to exonerate Walter McMillian, by gathering evidence, interviewing witnesses, and building a case that challenges the state's false narrative. This shows that activism is not just about protesting or making noise or just keeping some notions of freedom and justice in people's minds but also about doing the hard work of building a case (struggle) and challenging the status quo. As Bryan Stevenson says, "I came out of law school with grand ideas in my mind about how to change the world. But Mr. McMillian made me realize we can't change the world with only ideas in our minds. We need conviction in our hearts." (*Just Mercy* 2:05:45). This representation of activism maintains the importance of advocating for oneself and pursuing justice, even in the face of insurmountable odds, Black people can find strength through the sense of self-worth (the black identity) and the connection to their community.

Just Mercy emphasizes the importance of hope for the African American people, and achieving justice, for instance, Walter, even though he is facing immense trauma and suffering, can find hope and resilience through his connections to his family, community, and the support from Bryan Stevenson. However, even Walter captured the actual meaning of hope, as Bryan says, "This man taught me how to stay hopeful. Because I now know that hopelessness is the enemy of justice" (*Just Mercy* 2:06:17), he adds, "Hope Allows us to push forward even when the truth is distorted by the people of power, it allows us to stand up when they tell us to sit down and to speak when they say be quiet" (*Just Mercy* 2:06:21). Therefore, even when someone is facing the direst circumstances, they can still find support and care from others who are willing to listen and understand. Moreover, *Just Mercy* portrays another important imagery of the white and black Allyship through the representation of the

accompaniment of Bryan Stevenson and his white assistant Eva Ansley, she helps Stevenson throughout all his trip toward justice. Depiction demonstrates how people from different backgrounds, races, and communities, can work together to fight against systemic racism and injustice.

Finally, the scene of *The People v. McMillian* finale case and Walter's final release from prison after years of wrongful incarceration conveys a powerful sense of empowerment. Stevenson is giving his closing argument in the court delivering powerful words about Racism, racial bias, miscarriage of justice, and law enforcement. When the judge delivers the verdict of Walter's acquittal, he and Bryan break down into tears, and joy and a sense of triumph are spreading throughout the courtroom. Walter is finally exonerated after spending years on death row for a crime he did not commit. This scene celebrates the black struggle against racism. McMillian keeps saying, "I have my family back" (*Just Mercy* 2:04:00). This means that Bryan does not only achieved justice for McMillian, but he saves his whole family, and it shows that the crucial thing that relates a black man to life is family and his relation with his community, so the sense of community, hope, and resistance are interconnected conveying the sense of black empowerment in *Just Mercy* 2019.

At the end of the film, we see Bryan Stevenson speaking about justice and race in front of several white professionals in the Supreme Court. Thus at the discredits, *Just Mercy* exhibits some historical real footage and photographs followed by screen captions to create a sense of context and to underscore the real-life events that inspired the story. Including images of Bryan Stevenson and his attorneys at the EJI who have won release for over 140 death row prisoners, Herbert Richardson, Ralph Myers, Sheriff Tate, and Walter McMillian with Stevenson. Writing, "His years on death row weighed heavily on him until the end" (*Just Mercy* 2:09:13). Thus, they show the real Anthony Ray Hinton, who "was convicted of a double homicide, based almost entirely on a faulty ballistics report. The prosecutor said he

could tell Ray was guilty just by looking at him” (*Just Mercy* 2:09:27). Thus, Stevenson took over his case and won in 2015, after serving more than thirty years on death row for a crime he did not commit. Then the director displays a real video of Ray, as an old man leaving the prison, and Stevenson by his side, where his entire family waiting there for him.

This sense of empowerment contradicts the ‘victimhood culture’ and the sense of victimization in BLM. The Black empowerment in *Just Mercy* refers to the idea that Black people can create positive change in their lives and communities and that they should be empowered to do so. While victimization is disempowering, seen as a way of perpetuating powerless and hopelessness among black people. As it focused on the negative aspects of the black experience rather than the strength and resilience of Black empowerment. Furthermore, victimhood is based on the idea that black people are inherently disadvantaged and oppressed, while *Just Mercy* Black empowerment helps Blacks to recognize their agency and power as normal American citizens that can be privileged in society if only they work harder for change and reform.

Eventually, *Just Mercy’s* vivid focus on bringing attention to the injustices and inequalities issues and working toward positive change helps to bring these issues to a wider audience. The film has received several negative critiques and reviews. Some of them have focused on the film’s pacing, arguing that it can be slow at times. Others have criticized the work for being too formulaic or predictable, with some viewers feeling that is overly sentimental and manipulative in its depiction of the characters’ stories. Generally, *Just Mercy’s* cinematic adaptation has almost received the same reviews and critics as the literary work. However, the film is widely praised for its ability to bring attention to crucial social justice issues and inequalities in the United States, and for its inspiring message of hope and perseverance.

General Conclusion

For almost 125 years, of prejudice and marginalization, the African American cinema retained its position in challenging the oppression of black people and reflecting the issue of racism and racial inequality in America, despite the insurmountable obstacles and the revolutionary changes in the media and cinema industries. However, contemporary Afro-American cinema begins to explain the complexity of 'Black America' by making evocative

films with audacious persistence in tackling issues of race, the black identity, and the continuity of the 'subaltern' of African Americans, based usually on true stories. As confirmed by Will Smith "We are talking about race in this country more clearly and openly than we have almost ever in the history of this country, it's on the table" (The Late Show with Stephen Colbert 5:50).

According to the finding of the study, the modern African American film represents the contemporary persistent black struggle against racism in the United States by offering vivid representation and depiction of how racism can limit opportunities and create barriers for African Americans. And help the viewers understand how the current systems of oppression and inequality have been shaped by past injustice and policies. *Just Mercy* tackles racial issues and raises the Black Lives Matter Movement's activism against police brutality, and systematic/structural racism, firstly, by referring to the countless crimes against African Americans committed by police. The filmmaker shares with the viewer different realistic scenes of police brutality against unarmed, innocent African Americans that are the same as those that occur in the American streets in real life, captured by various lives videos and widely circulated on social media. Moreover, the film depicts the disproportionate impact of police brutality on Black individuals and communities.

Then, concerning systematic/structural racism and discrimination, *just Mercy* connects to the experiences of African Americans in America that are disproportionately defined by systemic racism and injustice, particularly in the criminal justice system and law enforcement, as the analysis of the film provided earlier. Thus, it raises the voice of Black Lives Matter to oppose different inequalities against Blacks, by using its representations as a tool to raise awareness among blacks and pushes them for making changes, which is the same aim of BLM which seeks to dismantle these systems of oppression and create a more just and equitable society. Therefore, this creates a homogenous relationship between the two. While,

Just Mercy's sense of Black empowerment seeks to increase the hope and resilience of Black people in the face of adversity, and encourage them to work toward a better future even when the odds seem stacked against them.

Although, the challenging beginning of the controversial issue of race in films, the improvement toward more equitable portrayals has emerged to become noticeable. Hollywood has become more politically and socially aware of racial diversity. As Warner Bros' involvement in the production and distribution of *Just Mercy* with its heavy themes is considered somewhat surprising, and controversial, and causes great amazement, regarding the company's history of producing racially sensitive or stereotypical content in its previous productions (*The Jazz Singer*, *Gone with the Wind*). However, the rise of the Contemporary Black Wave of Filmmakers and independent Black production companies has had made an impact on shifting Hollywood's narratives and its major studios' productions, as it guide them to produce more films that showcase a diverse range of prospective and experiences.

This may have included initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion both on and off-screen, as well as a commitment to telling stories that reflect the experiences of people from different backgrounds and perspectives. But it has not attained the degree of diversity and equity desired by African American filmmakers and audiences.

In conclusion, one keeps asking, does this progress made by the African American, cinema, the vivid depiction of the persistent black endeavor against racism, besides the provided sense of Black empowerment, are making changes in the real-life experiences of black people, leading to more changes?

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Resumé:

Les perspectives sectaires américaines sur les Afro-Américains ont été traduites en représentations stéréotypées raciales dans les films américains, menant à la montée du cinéma noir révolutionnaire. Cette thèse tente d'étudier l'élévation difficile du film noir face à ces stéréotypes, devenir plus courant et synonyme de l'expérience et de l'identité des Noirs. En particulier, l'étude prend le film *Just Mercy* 2019 comme exemple d'un film noir contemporain qui explore la lutte continue des Noirs américains contre la brutalité policière, le racisme structurel /systématique et la discrimination, qui dépeint l'activisme de Black LivesMatter mouvement, le principal représentant de cette lutte noire actuelle. Pour atteindre l'objectif de l'étude, l'analyse est basé sur une combinaison d'approches analytiques et une lecture attentive de différents documents académiques et critiques savantes sur la longue histoire du cinéma afro-américain et de l'activisme noir. Les résultats révèlent que le film noir a surmonté de nombreux défis depuis sa création pour atteindre son état actuel et sa large influence à travers ses représentations vivantes de la lutte persistante noire, le cas du film *Just Mercy* qui dépeint l'activisme de Black LivesMatter, ainsi que la célébration de l'identité noire.

Mots clés : *Just Mercy*, cinéma noir, les stéréotypes, racisme, le cinéma Afro-Américain, l'autonomisation des noirs

المخلص

تُرجمت وجهات النظر الأمريكية المتعصبة تجاه الأمريكيين الأفارقة إلى تمثيلات عرقية نمطية في الأفلام الأمريكية ، مما أدى إلى قيام سينما سوداء ثورية. تحاول هذه الأطروحة التحقيق في مدى الصعوبة التي واجهها الفيلم لأسود في تخطي هذه الصور كمثل لفيلم اسود 2019 Just Mercy النمطية ، ليصبح الممثل الأساسي للتجربة والهوية السوداء. تأخذ الدراسة فيلم معاصر يستكشف الكفاح المستمر للأمريكيين السود ضد وحشية الشرطة والعنصرية الهيكلية / النظامية والتمييز ، والذي ،السينما السوداء ، الصور النمطية ، العنصرية ، السينما الأفريقية الأمريكية ، تمكين Just Mercy يُصور نشاط الممثل السود الرئيسي هذا الصراع الأسود الحالي "حياة السود مهمة". لتحقيق هدف الدراسة ، يعتمد التحليل على مجموعة من الأساليب التحليلية والقراءة المتأنية لمصادر أكاديمية مختلفة والمراجعات العلمية حول التاريخ الطويل للسينما الأمريكية الأفريقية والنشاط الأسود. تكشف النتائج الاسود قد تغلب على العديد من التحديات منذ بدايته ليصل الى ما هو عليه الآن الذي يصور نشاط حركة Just Just Mercy بتأثيره الواسع من خلال تصويره الحي للنضال الأسود المستمر ، حالة حياة السود مهمة بالإضافة إلى الاعتزاز بالهوية الافروأمريكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السينما السوداء ، الصور النمطية ، العنصرية ، السينما الأفريقية الأمريكية ، القومية

Just Mercy الافروأمريكية

