

Critical Analysis of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*

The *Star Wars* franchise has embodied the Hollywood blockbuster for years, which generally has catered towards white, male audiences, but the first installment of the sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), has flipped this narrative by making the main characters of the film a woman, an African-American man, and a Latino man. Often times, the race or gender of minority characters is used to tokenize them or play a vital role in their characterization, but the protagonists in this movie are simply part of minority communities, which only works to create more diversity in the *Star Wars* galaxy and does not have any bearing on their ability. *The Force Awakens* reimagines the classic hero's journey through the lens of intersectionality by focusing on diversity of race and gender without making them the defining characteristics of the protagonists.

While the main characters from the original *Star Wars* trilogy have supporting roles throughout the film, the new cast is the primary focus, which allows for this franchise to gain a newfound audience that does not only consist of middle-aged, white males. Two out of the three main protagonists are men of color, Finn (John Boyega) and Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac), this added diversity of the galaxy not only makes *Star Wars* more relatable to younger fans of all races, but is rarely charted territory in that the main characters of a giant franchise are being portrayed by minorities and their race never plays into any part of their story. Even though some of

the heroes' ethnic backgrounds never come into play during the film there are still important levels of symbolism that apply to the conflict between Kylo Ren's (Adam Driver) First Order and the Resistance, who opposes their tyranny. "Kylo Ren, has sided with a nascent, totalitarian organization in a manner that evokes contemporary fears over the radicalization of Western youth by various fundamentalisms" which allows for the classic hero's journey to become even more applicable to modern protagonists of color, because it represents the fear and institutionalism real minorities are forced to clash or battle with every day (Orpana, *Interpellation by the Force: Biopolitical Cultural Apparatuses in The Force Awakens*). Race is never focused on in the diegesis of *The Force Awakens*, but that does not prevent it from being symbolically reconstructed through the central elements of the film in the same way the original trilogy makes use of real social issues. George Lucas' original *Star Wars* (1977) focuses on the clash of the Empire and the Rebel Alliance, which could be viewed as any group of freedom fighters opposing an oppressive, fascist state. The difference between *Star Wars* and *The Force Awakens* is that while Lucas uses an all-white main cast, J.J. Abrams uses a predominately minority driven team of protagonists, which allows for diverse audiences to see people of color rise up and overthrow their oppressor. Some might argue that since *The Force Awakens* mirrors the struggle of people of color in real-life that it does directly address the race of the protagonists and makes it a key part of their characterization. While this argument

appears to have merit, it assumes that the characters of the story themselves ever address their ethnic identity, which they do not, and it would also imply that the protagonists of the film are aware of non-diegetic elements of the real world outside of the fictional galaxy they are a part of, which also never takes place, due to the lack of fourth-wall-breaking. This film parallels deeper elements of sociopolitical issues even though it is a space opera. The characters' concerns are on the force and preventing the galaxy from being overthrown again, which is why diversity is important because even though the film is not directly trying to address the issues of racism and fascism across the world, showcasing characters that look like those, who's rights are often trampled on, fight back against Space Nazis can create a positive image of resistance in the seats of the audience.

Kylo Ren represents the dark side, a fascist leader of the First Order, who seeks to finish what Darth Vader started, which was utter annihilation of those who opposed him and complete control over the galaxy. The comparison can be made between Kylo and Adolf Hitler, given his desire for rule over the galaxy, even though the more accurate comparison would be Hitler's grandson, due to Kylo's lineage to Darth Vader, but Hitler's grandson was not a fascist leader. The First Order is the heir apparent to the Galactic Empire and historically this faction has discriminated against alien species by enslaving them and keeping their leaders made up of entirely human crews. Racism of skin color does not exist in the *Star Wars* universe, but discrimination

against non-humans, as well as against the proletariat is an important aspect of the galaxy and acts as a parallel to all forms of discrimination in the real world. Finn, a runaway Stormtrooper and representation of the light side of the force, can be interpreted as someone who refuses to be part of the fascist state or someone who is escaping his own forced oppression, both are applicable due to the portrayal of the character and the fact that he is played by an African-American man. Finn was taken from his home planet as a baby and trained to become a soldier for the First Order and help facilitate their reign of terror across the known galaxy; his identity allows him multiple historical parallels based on his race or his opposition to totalitarianism. The runaway Stormtrooper narrative can easily draw a comparison to the runaway slave, because even though the First Order is forcing its oppression on the galaxy they are also institutionalizing children to become their pawns and enforcers of galactic conquest, which is a form of oppression in and of itself. Finn accomplishes his escape from his own enslavement, but since he also picks up the fight against the First Order he can not only be compared to the runaway slave, but also the revolutionary who overthrows the repressive state apparatus. Finn's story is not a tragedy like that of Nat Turner, but of the freedom fighters and Allies who ended the dictatorial rule of Hitler. An argument can be made that comparing *Star Wars* to the conflicts between fascist rulers and their oppressed communities is looking too deep into the implications of a movie about space, but art often imitates life, which is why even in fantastical

stories elements of real social issues often creep into the diegesis through symbolic elements of film. Incorporating the race or gender of characters into a film or even making it an important part of their characterization is not always a negative thing, but when it is made to be the only memorable part of the character's development this is where the issues arise, because then they are not an important part of the story, they are merely the token black or woman and their entire arc revolves around what the main, white protagonists think of them. Finn gives life to Stormtroopers, who have always been seen as the helmeted pawns of the Empire, but he allows their feelings to be considered and then becomes one of the leaders of the Resistance, while developing from being a coward who wants to run and hide from the First Order to fighting Kylo Ren one on one with a lightsaber, and also, he just happens to have black skin. All of these elements of his character take precedence over his race, because he's a fully fleshed out character and is treated with the same respect that the average white protagonist is given in every film.

Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) is the heroine of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, but she is not the main protagonist, Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) is, because it his journey to become a Jedi Master and restore balance to the force by defeating the Empire. Rey (Daisy Ridley) is the new heroine in *The Force Awakens* and she faces a similar path to Master Luke in that she grows up as a nobody on a desert planet, Jakku, and ends up on a galaxy-saving adventure. Rey is the first main, female

protagonist in a *Star Wars* film, but she is never treated as though that is the only vital part about her character, even at times she is referred to as "the girl" it never becomes the only aspect of her character worth mentioning. Her journey is similar, yet very different than Skywalker's given that "the contemporary heroine must be a self-sufficient individual because the path to transform oneself and society, once laid out for heroes by the myths and symbolic traditions of society is now lost" (Doctor, *The Force Awakens: The Individualistic and Contemporary Heroine*). As *The Force Awakens* time period has come, the galaxy is moving away from acknowledgement of the force and the Jedi altogether, because the last Jedi is Luke Skywalker and no one knows where he is. This situation parallels the real-world due to the fact that as time has progressed all the way from 1977, when the original *Star Wars* film premiered, the world's needs in what their heroes look like and think like have changed. Luke Skywalker, a hero from the 70s and early 80s, is needed because is a rebel and he overthrows the establishment, but he is a white male in a time when very few protagonists were people of color or women. Rey is the hero for a new age, because she is a woman in a time when the rights of women are being threatened by world leaders; although she is a white woman she is still able to reflect the struggles of femininity, which is universal for women of all colors. Rey is able to defeat Kylo Ren and help destroy Starkiller Base with little training, which has led some to argue that Rey is a Mary Sue, a character that does everything perfectly and never does

anything wrong. It is fair to question how Rey became so powerful in such a short amount of time, but the Mary Sue argument can be somewhat refuted by the title of the film, *The Force Awakens*, the force awakens in Rey to counteract the growing reign of the dark side. As the dark side grows in power so does the light and the force must choose another, since Luke Skywalker is not there to oppose the tyranny of the First Order. Rey is a scavenger who was forced to learn to live on her own after she was abandoned on Jakku, which is similar to the journey of many women throughout society, because at every turn they are forced to face sexism and other dangers from all around without assistance. This new heroine is able to represent strong women without being forced into the role of the tokenized or objectified woman.

The Force Awakens shows that a film can be diverse in both race and gender without making these elements the only important characterization of the main protagonists. The film focuses on universal issues of tyranny and discrimination through symbolism and the use of actors who are a part of oppressed communities evokes feelings of revolution, as well. Rey and Finn, a woman and an African American man, are the protagonists for the modern-age that is growing more and more diverse every day and they fill the need for what the world needs in their leaders. Rey, the future of the Jedi, and Finn, a leader of the Resistance, are part of underrepresented or misrepresented communities in film, yet *The Force Awakens* does

not have to solely focus on the fact that they are not white males to sell the image of resistance. Allowing marginalized communities to witness minorities defeat the First Order, the embodiment of fascism, allows for an important spark to be lit in the minds of the audience. The Galactic Empire was brought down by a group of rebels before; the First Order represents a resurgence of hate that can be defeated not only by the Resistance in the film, but in the theater seats.

Works Cited

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