

## **Winning Spelling Bee Competition: The Representation of Black Girl in *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006) Movie]**

**Fiska Nur Hananto**

*Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia*

fiska.hananto25@gmail.com

---

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### **Article history:**

Received September 9, 2020

Revised November 8, 2020

Accepted March 24, 2021

Published June 30, 2021

#### **Keywords:**

African-American; African American  
Vernacular English (AAVE); Stereotype;  
Spelling Bee



*This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.  
Copyright © 2023 by Author. Published by Universitas  
Sebelas Maret.*

### **ABSTRACT**

This research examines the representations of African-American stereotype and the struggle of Black American girl in National Spelling Bee contest in Hollywood movie entitled *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006). The use of African-American English (AAVE) is one of the stereotype often depicted in Hollywood movie. Race theories are used to examine the relationship between race, racism and power. Meanwhile, Roland Barthes's theory and semiotic film theory are used to examine the meaning portrayed in the movie. Findings show that the representation of *Akeelah* as a successful participant in the spelling bee competition challenges the stereotype of African American as academic underclass, and as associated with crime, failure and frustration. *Akeelah* is represented as a successful African American girl as she assimilates (adopts) American values of change/mobility, time and its importance, action and work orientation. The assimilation is achieved through a mentoring process and support from African American community.

---

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The United States is known to many as the dreamland where a lot of people come and settle. This means America is home to many people with different races and ethnicity who come to get a better life. Speaking of race and ethnicity, they cannot be separated from the discrimination and stereotype that develop among the United States society. Each race and ethnic group has its-own characteristics that are linked to existing social conditions so that people tend to label certain races and ethnicities that are recognized as stereotypes. Stereotyping is a very strong individual attitude conditioned by collective contact so that it becomes highly standardized and united within the group (Lippman, 1922).

African-Americans are one of the United States racial groups that historically have experienced discrimination from the whites. For that reason, they suffer injustice and unequal treatment. They suffered racial discrimination because of the slavery system, in which developed into the pattern of exclusion and separation, both officially and unofficially, in the form of court decisions and laws that have historically supported the practice of racial discrimination openly. At the beginning of the 17th century until 1865, Whites considered slaves as their-own property based on the point of view that the Blacks were inferior and naturally unequal race due to their skin tone and ability.

The media plays an important role in shaping stereotypes that continue to develop in a certain society. Popular culture constructs a narrative by raising an event that is easily accepted by the audience. Film producers and directors create certain characters and stories into a mindset that continues to develop in the community. Stefanovici (2014) has explained that in American popular culture, the blacks are often portrayed as broken families living in poor neighborhoods. They are also portrayed with such characteristics including the use of informal speech (using native slang), stubbornness, and believe in excessive self. Furthermore, the media predominantly as news broadcast, portray African-Americans as less intelligent people than the Whites. They are showing that African-Americans live in the slum areas and commit crimes. In some movies, African-Americans are shown as an inferior class society who use vulgar obscenities most of the time – they are portrayed as physically cruel who are always against the law.

History shows that Barack Obama as the first black person to become the president of the United States has brought many impacts to the American people, especially African-Americans. Wise (2009) explained that many assume the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America is a proof that the

United States has transcended the bias bad legacy of racism. In the historic event of the country's first African-American presidential election, "post-racism" rhetoric has produced two major achievements for the United States, particularly for African-Americans. Wise has also explained that in general, Americans only see the colors of the past and judge African-Americans based on their ability, even though African-Americans can achieve their dreams - this is proven by the intelligence that African-Americans have. Other than that, they also have hard-work ethic and leadership ability.

*Akeelah and The Bee* Movie (2006) is one of the Hollywood films that addresses some of language-related racial issues in the United States. The film addresses the issue of language and Whites prejudice related to problems in most societies, which are often accompanied by discrimination and racism. *Akeelah and the Bee* tells the story of an ordinary girl with incredible talent in spelling. Even though she has faced problems and difficulties coming from the society, she wins through the spelling bee championship. Such case is a very rare moment happening in America due to the existence of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). The winner of this championship usually comes from the white people or non-African-American. This film depicts Akeelah as the first black student who wins the national spelling bee competition. In this movie, Akeelah is shown to face difficulties in establishing a relationship with her peers. The conflict begins to grow when Akeelah advances to the spelling bee championship representing her district. Her brother says that Akeelah will only get the laugh of a white man and be ashamed of it. This shows that some of them still think that white people will mock blacks. Blacks also often get racist treatment that mocks their skin color. Just like in this movie, there is a Korean boy whose father is berating him personally about coming so close to being defeated at Scrabble game by Akeelah: "If you can hardly defeat a little black girl ...". indicating that Akeelah has been treated less favorably because Dylan's father used the word "Black girl" - especially Dylan's father would not want if his son is defeated by a black girl because he came from a fairer race skin.

There have been researches observing the representation of African-Americans in movies to reveal the stereotype of African-Americans in society. Paramuswari et al. (2017) have researched the image of African-Americans in the *Ghostbuster* movie using a descriptive qualitative research method by John Fiske. They have found that the character of African Americans in *Ghostbusters* (2016) movie is still described as being under the white social class both economically and intelligently. Moreover, *Ghostbusters* (2016) use African American stereotype characteristics as their comical content. Besides, the African-American character in *Ghostbusters* (2016) is only as white sidekicks.

Although this research takes similar film as the object of study and still analyze the racism representation, this study broadens the elements of analysis by not only focusing on the narrative and the main character, it also analyzes the minor characters to find out whether this movie brings about the new element in portraying Black person as the character of the movie, since many movies portraying the success of the Black person often provide the savior who support their success. This study also investigates the existence of the savior in the movie. It is an attempt to argue whether the success of the black girl in the movie is caused by the Black personal effort or the needs of help from white people.

## 2. METHOD

This research is designed as a descriptive qualitative research. This research tries to find the meaning of signs in a movie regarding the issue of African-American English dialect. To find and understand the signs represented in a movie is a form of "critical evaluation of text"; thus, this research uses qualitative method (Strokes, 2003, p. 3). This research also considers as textual analysis, since this research provides an understanding of the meaning of a text, which is in the form of a movie. The primary data source of this research is taken from a Hollywood movie entitled *Akeelah and The Bee*, written and directed by Doug Atchison and released in America on April 28, 2006, by Lionsgate Film. The data are taken from the aspect of 1) Mise-en-scene (lighting, costume, setting, make-up, figure, and behavior); 2) Sounds (including a transcript of conversations or dialogues); and 3) Cinematography (Camera angle, camera distance, framing, and camera focus). The primary data are in the form of screenshots of certain scenes related to the issue of stereotypes and prejudice of African Americans.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This movie clearly shows a stereotype of African-American youth, who live in an impoverished African-American neighborhood, surrounded by failures, lack in education, experiencing frustration, joining gangsters' lives, having a single parent, and speaking the ghetto language. Stereotype becomes the main point of the main character that has to be dealt with. As the main character, Akeelah can control herself in facing society that may negatively influence her behavior and ways of thinking.

The representation of African-American society as an academic underclass is the first element of the stereotype in this discussion. The use of ghetto talks or vernacular English is one of the characteristics African-American as an academic underclass. The conversation below represents this stereotype

Dialogue 1:

Akeelah's brother: *What you looking at?*  
 Akeelah : *Spelling bee*  
 Akeelah's brother: *oh yeah, i heard about that. **You going up** againts a bucnh of rich white kids. **They gonna tear your black ass up***

One of the characteristics that African-American shows as an academic underclass is the use of ghetto slang words (vernacular English). The conversation between Akeelah and her brother above shows that Akeelah's brother uses slang words when he talks about spelling bee competition with Akeelah. It shows that they use nonstandard English even in their family. Thus, it drives the audiences to see the use of Vernacular English in the African-American society, especially in the family. It signifies that Akeelah's family is categorized as an academic underclass in this movie. Moreover, African-American society uses ghetto slang words (vernacular English) with their peers and society.

Regarding the stereotype of the use of Vernacular English, it could be traced back to the history of African-American people that slavery happened from the 17th - 19th centuries. According to Rickford (2000), African Vernacular English is a variety of languages that is used by African-American who live in the United States who immigrated from Africa from 17th to the 19th century to work as slaves. From this, we can see that Vernacular English has already developed in African-American society since many years ago. They used nonstandard English among their society as the medium of communication when they were in a period of slavery.

The next stereotype is the image of African American society, which is always correlated to crime and violence. This racial stereotype gives more evidence that African-Americans are often portrayed as bad people who often commit crimes and violence in a movie. This racial stereotype is based on the assumption that: (1) African-Americans society is lazy and they tend to use the shortcuts, (2) African-American Society is less intelligent, lack of academic skill, and prefer to use violence to protect themselves. The following images illustrate this stereotype.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figures 1 and 2 show scenes set in the evening and take place in front of Akeelah's house. These scenes show that there are Akeelah's mom and brother. Figure 1 shows a dialogue between them.

Akeelah's mom says, *"No drugs, no gangbangin' why you stressing me?"*. In denotative meaning, this statement reflects giving a question to Akeelah's brother; thus, in connotative meaning, it indicates an expression of a mother's attention. One of the stereotypes toward African women in family life was the term "Single parent or single mom." The term single mom gives a positive stereotype toward African women who are strong and sturdy. These scenes show the police officers return Akeelah's brother to his mother and give him to his mother. In this screenshot shows Akeelah's mother gives an explanation to Terrence about the crimes that he had committed. These scenes use medium-long shots because the shot is taken at a proper distance. It indicates that there is a relation between the object. The relation is that Akeelah's mom is the mother, and Terrence is the child to be cared for. In figure 2, Akeelah's mom asks Terrence to take off the expensive gold watch from his wrist. These scenes give obvious meaning about Terrence's activities or the reasons why the police officer has returned him to his mom. The director tries to encourage the audience to assume that Terrence has already made mistakes and stole an expensive gold watch. Regarding the stereotype of violence and gangster, these scenes give a perception to the audiences that Terrence has been addicted to drug and joined the gangster activity. This racial stereotype proves that African-American boys are lazy and tend to use the shortcut to gain money.

The next stereotype of African-Americans is that they are dealing with failures and frustrations. The

JBSSA



stereotype is presented through the following images.

Figure 3

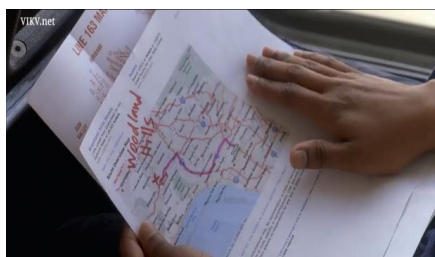
Figure 4

Figures 3 and 4 are in the middle of this movie. It shows that Akeelah's mother comes to Akeelah. Akeelah's mother looks very sad when she hears that Akeelah does not want to continue the National Spelling Bee Competition due to Dr. Larabee stop coaching her. In order to calm her down, Akeelah's mom tells her past academic experience. She said that when she graduated from high school, she got scholarships, and she was going to be a doctor. However, she thought that she could not fit in with the school, and she felt uncomfortable – she thought she would fail at the end of the day, so before finished it, she dropped out. She does not want Akeelah to do the same thing as she did in the past. She wants Akeelah to continue to participate in the National spelling Bee Competition. These scenes use a medium shot as a technique of capturing the scene that clearly shows the Face of Akeelah and her mom. The audience can see Akeelah's mother's facial expressions that describe a person who recalls the sadness that she faced in the past, which is very difficult to tell back to the others. According to Suler (2011), the use of a medium shot in capturing the scene constructs the audience's impression of observing the image rather than participating in it. The director purposely focuses on the upper part of their body to expose the movie characters' facial expressions.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that Akeelah and the Bee movie depicts three stereotypical elements of African-American people, they are: a) African-American society as an academic underclass, b) African-Americans society as associated with crime and violence, and c) African-Americans as dealing with failure and frustration. It gives evidence that African-Americans are often portrayed negatively in Hollywood movies.

**3.1. Akeelah's National Spelling Bee Achievement: Breaking the Stereotype Assimilating American Value**

The first American value represented in this movie is change/mobility. The following images show the presence of Akeelah within the American value cultural settings. In addition to her effort to win the competition,



it actually shows that she moves from her neighborhood to learn about the lives outside her community.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figures 5 and 6 show that Akeelah is on her way to Woodland Hills School. She is reading the map while she hops in the bus. She tries to meet Javier, her new friend whom she met in the Spelling Bee competition. Akeelah intends to meet because she wants to learn Spelling Bee together with Javier and his club. These scenes represent that Akeelah is doing a trip or mobility to make a change in her life, she is trying to improve her spelling skill by learning together with Javier's spelling club in Woodland Hills School. The close-up shot in figure 7 shows



Akeelah's face clearly while she is looking for Javier, her friend. Figure 8 shows that Akeelah and Javier's



spelling club learn to spell the words together in the basketball field. The use of a long shot as a technique in capturing the shot in this scene makes the audience focus on Akeelah and her surroundings. Furthermore, these scenes also reveal the meaning of individualism and independence – it can be seen when Akeelah goes out of her community in order to look for a new experience.

Regarding the American value of change/mobility, these scenes represent positivity and a good impact. It means that mobility is related to progress, improvement, and growth. In the American mind, change is seen as a good condition – together with the American belief that hard work has a responsibility to do the best. It leads to the one who is doing change/mobility to achieve their goals (Kohls, 1984).

The next American value depicted in this movie is about time and its importance. The following images depict the presentation of the character Dr. Larabee that emphasizes the importance of using time wisely. This



Figure 9



Figure 10

affects the success of Akeelah to achieve her goal of winning the spelling be competition.

These scenes depict that Dr. Larabee is a person who believes that time is essential; he is a little bit mad to Akeelah because she is coming late. This shot usually gives a chance to the audience to interpret the whole object by their perspective. Besides, these scenes use the eye-level camera angle, which is the single view and shows the main subject as what people have expected in real life. Thus the audience is expected to see these scenes as real life.

These scenes are used to mark the message about the importance of time in American society – it means that time is valuable, the productive use of time affects someone in achieving their goals.

According to Kohls (1984), by considering that time is essential, one can accomplish more works instead of wasting time. This has allowed American society to be very productive – and the product itself, which is valued in the United States. American society maintains the value of using time wisely, setting the plan, and working hard towards specific purposes.

The next American Value portrayed in this movie is about action and work orientation. The following images depict the presentation of the Akeelah’s character reading the lists of words which she writes – it shows that

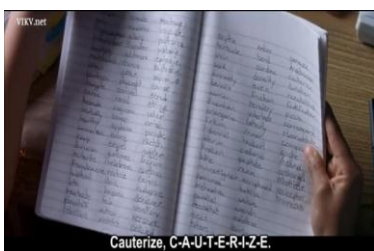


Figure 11



Figure 12

Akeelah has the orientation of American Value oriented by working hard in preparing the competition.



Figure 13

The theme of these scenes is a study, and the setting of the place is in Akeelah's desk. In figure 11, it is portrayed as a book with lists of words that is Akeelah used to memorize all the words that she has written and learned. It emphasizes that Akeelah is really diligent and working hard by writing all the words. Figures 12 and 13 show that Akeelah is reading that book and spelling the words that she has already written. We can know that Akeelah is serious in doing this by looking at what she does on her desk: memorizing all the words and spelling those words. The atmosphere of these scenes is serious and entirely due to Akeelah's action in figure 13. The shot that is used is the middle shot that is focusing on Akeelah and her book. Moreover, the book that is continuously opening and sliding adds to the seriousness of Akeelah. It is depicted that Akeelah takes action and works so hard to prepare the spelling bee competition.

Based on several aspects that made up the scenes, these scenes signify that the character Akeelah in the movie is constructed as being American value-oriented, as she is shown to be a diligent and hard worker. These scenes also signify that Akeelah has a big desire towards this competition, as seen in the facial expression and the gesture if she memorized and spelled the words. Based on Kohls (1984), American society believes that work is morally right – their attitude toward life is the emphasis on “doing” rather than “being.”

### 3.2. Mentoring

In Hollywood movies, African-Americans are portrayed as people who need other people to help them succeed. The people who help them is called a savior – the savior always comes from the white people. This is because white people are always represented as a group of superior and more intelligent people. The term savior here is the same as a mentor; they are responsible for helping the mentees achieve their success and save them in a better life. This kind of formula can be found in every African-American movie.

*Akeelah and the Bee* movie is different from the typical African-American movie. The savior that saves Akeelah is coming from the Black community – this kind of depiction is quite rare in African-American movies. The representation of the Black savior is an odd occurrence in a movie – Blacks people tend to be saved rather than to be a savior. As Akeelah's mentor who is responsible for helping her in preparing the spelling bee competition, Dr. Larabee is portrayed as her savior in this movie.

Dr. Larabee, as Akeelah's mentor, symbolically represents Akeelah's savior from non-standard English. The depiction of the savior here is different from the African-American movie in stock, the savior itself comes from a black person, which means this movie tries to show that a black person can become a savior. This positive portrayal of the black character contains positive racial messages.

Moreover, this kind of representation signifies that a black person is depicted as extraordinary and capable of saving other people. In other words, positive portrayals of African-Americans significantly show that African-Americans can exceed their racial stereotype.

The white savior narrative's central theme is the relationship between white characters who save the black characters that need to be "saved." In contrast, Dr. Larabee's representation as Akeelah's savior breaks the narrative of white savior formula in African-American movies. In this movie, as a black hero, he has to save Akeelah from the use of Vernacular English and African-American way of thinking. As Akeelah's mentor or "savior" in this movie, Dr. Larabee is portrayed as kind, generous, smart, and knowledgeable.

### 3.3. The Contribution of African American Community

The African-American community's contribution in the preparation of the spelling bee competition is illustrated at the end of the story. Akeelah brings whole her communities to help her prepare the National Bee competition. African-American communities are constructed positively in these scenes; it underestimates the severity that is prevalent in communities, whether the economy, race, or gangs. Moreover, this implies that to be

successful is not only by assimilating to American values, but the support of community members also has a significant impact.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The discussion analyzes how Akeelah breaks the stereotypes and achieves her success in winning the spelling bee competition. There are three stereotypes of African-Americans, which are depicted in this movie: 1) African-American society as an academic underclass, 2) African-Americans society are dealing with crime and violence, and 3) African-Americans are dealing with failure and frustration.

In delivering Akeelah's achievement in National Spelling Bee Competition to the audiences, the director represents Akeelah as a tough African-American girl character in this movie – she breaks the stereotypes that develop in her society and wins the National Spelling Bee Competition. There are three ways portraying how Akeelah breaks the stereotypes and achieves her goals; they are: 1) assimilating the American value, 2) mentoring, and 3) the contribution of the African-Americans community.

#### REFERENCES

- Barlow, K. K. (2011, November 10). How Media portray African-Americans males. Retrieved from University of Pittsburgh University Times: <https://www.utimes.pitt.edu/archives/?p=18764>
- Barthes, R. (1991). *Mythologies*. Paris: The Noonday Press.
- Baugh, J. (1999). *Out of the mouth of slaves: African-American language and educational malpractice*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Anggreeni, D.I., Arifin, M.B., Setyowati, R. (2018). African American vernacular English in Shrek movie. *Ilmu Budaya*, 115-128.
- Sobur, A. (2015). Analisis teks media: Suatu pengantar untuk analisis wacana, analisis Semiotik, dan analisis "framing". Bandung: PT. Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Dyer, R. (2002). The matter of whiteness. In P. S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential readings on the other side of racism* (pp. 9-14). New York: Worth Publisher.
- Filmer, A. A. (2003). African-American vernacular English: Ethics, ideology, and pedagogy in the conflict between identity and power. *World Englishness*, 253-270.
- Fishman, J. (1999). *Handbook of language and ethnic identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Hoberman, J. M. (1997). *Darwin's athletes: How sport has damaged Black America and preserved the myth of race*. Boston: Mariner Books.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- McArthur, R. (2011). *Out of many, one: Spelling bees and the United States national spelling bee*. 11.
- Monaghan, E. J., & Barry, A. L. (1999). *Writing the past: Teaching reading in colonial America and the United States, 1640-1940*. Retrieved from The Catalogue: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED437637.pdf>
- Rahayu, J. S. (2009). *Spelling bee game in teaching narrative text*. FPBS UPI.
- Reyes, A. (2010). *Sociolinguistics and education*. Retrieved from *Language and Ethnicity*. In Hornberger & McKay (Eds.): [http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/english/angelareyes/repository/files/reyes\\_cv\\_old.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/english/angelareyes/repository/files/reyes_cv_old.pdf)
- Rickford, J. R. (2000). *Spoken soul: The story of Black English*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons; Inc.
- Schneider, J. D. (2004). *The psychology of stereotyping*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Stefanovici, S. (2014). Black stereotypes in American movies. *Diacronia.ro*, 1-6.
- Trudgill, P. (2002). *Sociolinguistics*. London : Penguin.
- Villarejo, A. (2009). *Film studies the basic*. New York: Routledge.
- Williams, E. (2008). *The challenge of spelling bee in English*. Retrieved from [http://southafrica.usembassy.gov/root/pdfs/relo\\_forum\\_article.pdf](http://southafrica.usembassy.gov/root/pdfs/relo_forum_article.pdf)
- Wise, T. (2009). *Between Barack and hard place: Racism and the White denial in the age of Obama*. San

Francisco: City Lights Books.

Wood, P. (2006). *Successful writing for qualitative researchers* (second edition). London: Routledge.

---

---