

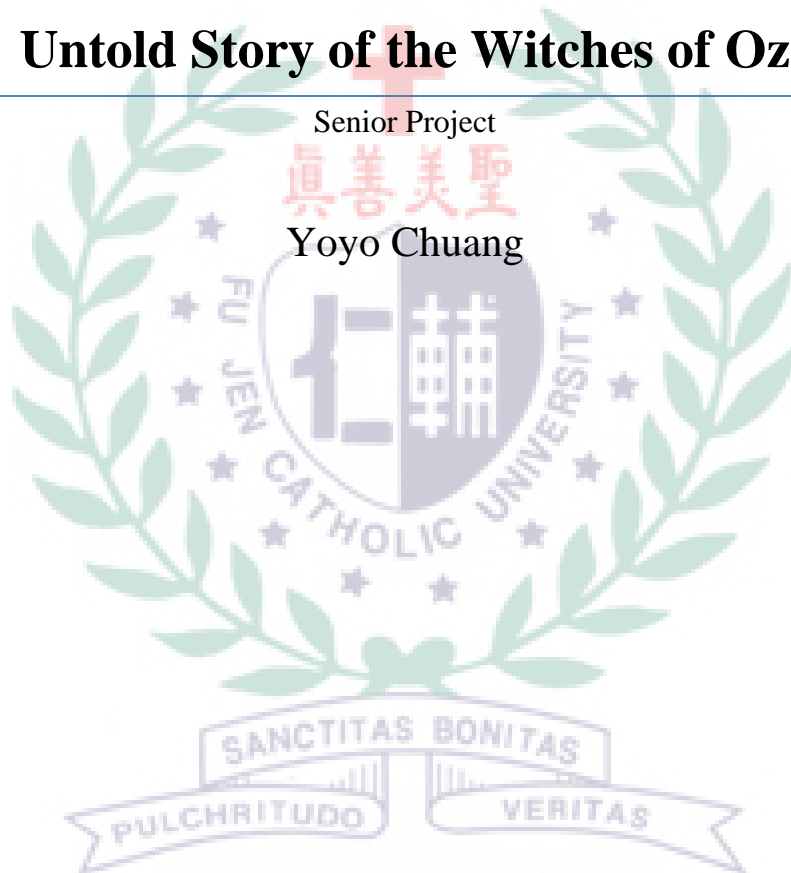
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The Subaltern Status of Elphaba in Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz

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Abstract

In *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*, often abbreviated as *Wicked the Musical*, the protagonist, Elphaba is portrayed as a green-skinned witch. The Greenified skin with the oppressed Animals in the musical, suggest close connections of the musical and race. This paper would discuss the issues of race in the musical and analyze the protagonist and her experiences as a woman of color. In *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* Glinda narrates Elphaba's story, demonstrating Elphaba's subaltern status, where she is marginalized in a society to the point that she is not allowed to represent herself. In addition to Spivak's concept of the subaltern, using both Harris's "White Women as all women" and Crenshaw's intersectionality, this paper argues that by seeing Elphaba as women of color, the musical illustrates how a society fails to provide access for women of color to speak for themselves; therefore, what the society learns about them are from the perspective of the dominant female groups.

Key Words

Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz, subaltern, Elphaba, intersectionality, "White Women as All Women"

Outline

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ELPHABA:

Blithe smile, lithe limb
 she who's winsome,
 she wins him,
 gold hair with a gentle curl,
 that's the girl he chose
 and heaven knows,
 I'm not that girl

—Stephen Schwartz, *Wicked*

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (hereafter referred to as *The Wizard of Oz*) is one of the most beloved children's books. *The Wizard of Oz*, written by L. Frank Baum and illustrated by W. W. Denslow, was published in 1900. Since then, this classical children's novel has been adapted into numerous stage and screen performances, including the renowned MGM film adaptation in 1939, in which the Wicked Witch appeared with green skin for the very first time. In 1995, Gregory Maguire took a revisionist look at Baum's tale and wrote the prequel *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, which was later adapted into the musical *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* (hereafter referred to as *Wicked the Musical*). Since its premiere in 2003, the musical has broken box office records around the world, and the protagonist Elphaba has become idolized among the audience (Boyd).

The Wicked Witch, Elphaba, in Maguire's work and the musical portrays the Wicked Witch with green skin, which originates from the film adaptation. The reason that the authors chose to use the Wicked Witch's skin color from the movie instead of simply following Baum's original novel is debated. While some believe that "green" codes the witch as a

racialized other (Burger), other researchers suggest that “[b]y positioning Elphaba as [the Animal’s] defender but not a member ... the musical certifies that her color is not a race” (Wolf).

Although several musical reviews critics mentions that *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* is addressing racism in the society, there are seldom further discussions on this observation. There are several research papers on the musical discussing feminism in the musical and the queer relationship between Elphaba and Glinda. Yet, only a few research articles on the musical mention race- related issues, and even fewer focus on the representation of race in the musical. This paper will demonstrate how the greenified witch and the Animals are closely related to race issues; furthermore, focus on discussing and analyzing the protagonist and her experiences as a woman of color and as a subaltern. In *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* Glinda narrates Elphaba’s story, demonstrating Elphaba’s subaltern status, where she is marginalized in a society to the point that she is not allowed to represent herself. In addition to Spivak’s concept of the subaltern, using both Harris’s “White Women as all women” and Crenshaw’s intersectionality, this paper argues that by seeing Elphaba as women of color, the musical illustrates how a society fails to provide access for women of color to speak for themselves; therefore, what the society learns about them are from the perspective of the dominant female groups.

The Story and its Relation to Race

Wicked the musical on the surface is a story of friendship, love, and accepting one’s own identity. *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz* begins when people of Oz are celebrating the death of the Wicked Witch. Glinda the Good Witch appears and joins the celebration, reassuring Ozians that goodness has prevailed over evil. Then, a citizen asks if Glinda was once the Wicked Witch’s friend. Glinda admits she was, and starts reminiscing about the past, while the story of the Wicked Witch’s life begins on stage.

Elphaba, who later would become the Wicked Witch of the West, is born green. Due to

her skin color, people around her, including her parents, dislike her. When Elphaba enters Shiz University, she becomes roommates with Glinda, a popular pretty girl. They loathe each other, and all the other students in Shiz side with Glinda. However, later Elphaba and Glinda become closer and eventually become good friends. At the same time strange things are happening to the Animals, a group with animal features; yet can speak and act human. Many members of the group suddenly lose the ability to speak. Elphaba's favorite professor at Shiz, Dr. Dillamond, who is a Goat warns Elphaba of this serious problem. Elphaba decides to seek help from the Wizard and work with him to solve the problem; however, she finds out that the Wizard is the one behind all the schemes. In order to prevent Elphaba from harming his reputation, the Wizard and his assistant spread rumors that Elphaba is a Wicked Witch; therefore, people try to kill her. At the end of the story Ozians think that they have successfully killed the Wicked Witch and the scene returns to the start where everyone is celebrating the death of the Wicked Witch.

One of the major race-related elements in the story is Elphaba's green skin. The reason of using the color "green" is debatable. No matter what the reason is, the color choice codes the witch as a racialized other (Burger). While some researchers suggest that "[b]y positioning Elphaba as [the Animal's] defender but not a member ... the musical certifies that her color is not a race" (Wolf), I believe that Elphaba's green skin links this character to being a person of color for several reasons. First, according to "A Cross-cultural Analysis of Symbolic Meaning of Color," "green" is the color that many creatures possess to adapt to their environments (Yu 61). However, ironically the greenness of Elphaba's skin makes her different from the crowd and fails to camouflage her, which suggests that she does not belong and does not fit in this environment. The playwright Schwartz explains, "[a]nyone who is of an ethnic minority, who is black or Jewish or gay, or a woman feeling she grew up in a man's world ... will identify with Elphaba" (Burger). Elphaba's greenness marks her as "other," more precisely her different skin color directly links her to being the racial other.

Furthermore, green has been associated with jealousy, such as the phrase “green-eyed monster” (Yu 62). Since skin color is the reason that people treat her badly, she feels jealous of Glinda, who is beautiful and white. Elphaba’s shows her jealousy towards Glinda several times in the story. For instance, in “I’m Not That Girl,” she sings to herself, “Don’t lose sight of who you are/ .../ I wasn’t born for the rose and pearl/ There’s a girl I know/ He loves her so” (Schwartz 154). She reminds herself not to “lose sight of” what she looks like, as well as the fact that she can never be the girl chosen by the male lead, due to her appearance. In “For Good,” she sings to Glinda “Just look at me/ I’m limited/ Just look at you/ You can do all I couldn’t do, Glinda” (Schwartz). This suggests that because Glinda is beautiful and white, she can do everything that Elphaba cannot do. Oppositely, Elphaba is limited, due to her appearance, even though she possesses more talent. The lyrics show that she is aware of society looking down on her because of her appearance; furthermore, she accepts it. Therefore, her greenified skin represents her jealousy towards Glinda and the majority group in the society that she lives in. Her green skin is also the factor that stops her from truly fitting in the society.

The other major element that is race-related is the issue of oppressed Animals, which are taken away the rights and abilities to speak. The actor, William Youmans, who performed Doctor Dillamond on Broadway, states “that ‘it’s pretty clear that Dr. Dillamond represents the Jews in World War II: You know, being forced from his profession first, and then gradually marginalized, and then finally imprisoned and abused’” (Bowen). The Animals and the way they are silenced and taken away the rights and abilities to speak, as well as the society, including the students of Shiz passively supporting the movement, the process of “excluding them as viable citizens of Oz” (Burger) is presenting a system of discrimination against a group of people.

These two major race-related elements and their storylines, with other minor ones create strong connections of the work and the theme of race.

The Subaltern Status of Elphaba

In *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*, Elphaba can be seen as the subaltern. The way Glinda narrates Elphaba's story, demonstrates Elphaba's subaltern status, where she is marginalized in a society to the point that she is not allowed to represent herself. In addition to Spivak's concept of the subaltern, using both Harris's "White Women as all women" and Crenshaw's intersectionality, this paper argues that by seeing Elphaba as women of color, the musical illustrates how a society fails to provide access for women of color to speak for themselves; therefore, what the society learns about them are from the perspective of the dominant female groups.

The concepts of the "subaltern" in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" will be used as the main supports for the analyses. The subaltern "refers to the populations that are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland" (Wikipedia). They are a group of people that are marginalized and oppressed. In Spivak's essay, she states that studies of the third world often fail to include the voices of the subalterns. Intellectuals and theorists that claim to speak for the subaltern cannot be neutral or unbiased. Therefore, other people cannot represent the subalterns. However, "[t]he subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak). They do not have the access to be heard. Especially, women in the subaltern group are voiceless, since they are under the oppression of both patriarchal and colonial society. Spivak's idea will be used as support for the analyses of Elphaba's subaltern status.

Besides, Spivak's concepts, in Crenshaw's "intersectionality" and Harris's "White Women as All Women" will also be used as supports for the claims. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" coined the word "intersectionality," which means the status when one experiences multiple oppressions, which

is used to talk about the situation of black women. She argues that what Black women faces cannot be merely count as racism or only sexism but a combination of both racism and sexism. However, the society does not provide Black women the access to speak, since there are only the confrontation of “sexism” by the white women, and the confrontation of racism, by the black men, leaving black women who are in between no legal resources (Crenshaw). Later, in 1990, Angela P. Harris “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory” argues as well that people are born with “selves” instead of “self”. Harris uses the phrase “multiple consciousness” to express her ideas, claiming that not only in legal discourse but also in literature, we can see the idea of “multiple consciousness”. The author further explains that consciousness “is not a final outcome or a biological given, but a process, a constant contradictory state of becoming” (Harris). Harris especially draws black women to the spotlight, stating that their voices are often “silenced by the mainstream legal voice” (Harris 585). She states that in racist societies “storytellers are usually white and so women turns out to be ‘white women’” (Harris 589). The concept of “White Women as All Women” can be applied to *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*. The musical shows a black-women-oppressed society by putting Elphaba as the protagonist of the story, in order to reveal more about the society from a black woman’s perspective.

In *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*, Elphaba is presented as a woman of color, who contrasted with another major character Glinda, a white woman. While in Broadway, the actresses that have played Elphaba have always been painted green, the actresses that have played Glinda have always been white and blonde on stage. As a woman of color, her “multiple consciousness” leads to her status of subaltern. As a notorious witch, Elphaba contrasted with the admired Wizard, a white male. The song “The Wizard and I,” reveals the possibility that the Wizard can save her from her oppressed status by degreenifying her. However, after Elphaba realizes the Wizard’s schemes, the wizard accused her of false crime, since Elphaba refuses to work under his rules for him. As a woman of

color, Elphaba is discriminated by the citizens at school. At the same time, Elphaba also lives under the oppression of the Wizard's rules. What Elphaba is experiencing is what Crenshaw suggests, "Intersectionality."

As a marginalized figure, Elphaba is many times deprived of her power to voice. In *Wicked* the musical, Elphaba is the protagonist and the plot is undoubtedly a story of her life; however, this story begins in Glinda's memory. The story presented to the audience begins when Glinda starts thinking of the past memories:

OZIAN: Glinda, why does wickedness happen?

GLINDA: That's a good question; one that many people find confusing: Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them? After all, she had a childhood. She had a father... who just happened to be the governor of Munchkinland...

After Glinda finishes this line, scenes from the past start to be performed on the stage, which suggests the beginning of Elphaba's story. Later, although the story is presented in third person narrative, at the end of the musical, the scene of the people celebrating the Wicked Witch's death with Glinda standing in the middle of the crowd reminds the audience of the opening scene and the fact that what are presented are from Glinda's memories. In this case, though the protagonist is Elphaba, Glinda somehow serves as the story-teller. Even as the protagonist of the story, Elphaba is not in charge, a white woman takes away her position to tell her story. This fact in the musical echoes Harris's concept of "White Women as All Women," which states that the society often allows white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and middle-class feminists assume that their position is the position of all women, and further represent all kinds of women. While the dominant female group thinks they have speak for all women, what the woman that are left out really want to say still cannot be heard. In another part of the plot, Elphaba says to Glinda, "[p]romise me, promise me, you won't try to clear my name... promise." This shows that Elphaba is forced by the society to give up her voice.

Even if she wants to clear her name, she can only do that through Glinda, since the society would not listen to her. She does not have to access to communicate with the society.

Moreover, since Glinda is the story-teller, the audience cannot verify whether Elphaba really refuses to clear her name. There is also possibility that Glinda wants to present herself as good and innocent. The evidence above echoes the statement that “storytellers are usually white,” here in the musical the story teller is the white woman, Glinda, addressing the story of the woman of color, Elphaba.

Next, Elphaba often shows the sense of low self-esteem due to her appearance, when she is faced with Glinda. As suggested in “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” black women’s frustration “at being unable to look like an ‘All-American’ woman is in this way just a more dramatic example of all (white) women’s frustration and oppression” (Harris 596). She is “vulnerable” and wants to be pretty, popular and not green (Wolf 12). In “The Wizard and I” she reveals her wish to become de-greenified by the Wizard, so that people can see her talent and good-heart. “Shouldn’t a girl who’s so good inside/ have a matching exterior” (Schwartz 144), by stating this she reveals her low self-esteem caused by her appearance. Moreover, as mentioned before, in “For Good,” she sings to Glinda “Just look at me/ I’m limited/ Just look at you/ You can do all I couldn’t do...” and in “I’m Not That Girl,” she addresses her jealousy toward Glinda’s appearance. These evidences suggest that due to the ideology of beauty “concerns not only gender but race” (Harris 596), Elphaba suffers from “mingling of racial and gender hatred from without, self- hatred from within” (Harris 598). Elphaba’s sense of inferiority corresponds with black women’s feelings even in the modern society. In the 2011 documentary film *Dark Girls*, presents the bias among the society and even the dark skinned races towards dark-skinned women. In the film some women accuse that media do not often relate black women to beauty; yet, the term “black ugly nigger” is often used in the society. Black girls do not accept their skin color and think that darker means dumber. In a case in the film, a teenage dark-skinned girl states that her

male cousin posted on a social media platform saying that he loves white girls, and his friend agrees and approved that “[w]hite skin look better on female.” Moreover, not only light-skinned women are seen as privileged among them, features including straight hair is also something black women are pursuing. Their situations are similar to Elphaba’s, who is stuck in the feelings of being inferior due to self-discrimination, who is too used to people looking down on her appearance, and crave to be beautified, which at the same time means getting the features that white women have.

Moreover, there are several scenes in the musical that people on the stage seem to only hear Glinda’s voice, when both Elphaba and Glinda are singing. For example, in a scene at school, students stand by Glinda’s side to mock Elphaba. In “What is this Feeling”, the song starts with Glinda and Elphaba singing to each other, presenting how they dislike one another. However, at about half of the song, other students in Shiz start to join Glinda’s side, singing “loathing” to Elphaba and describe her as a terror. On the stage it creates a scene with all against one, by isolating Elphaba on one side of the stage and others all on the other side. What the crowd hears and follows are the lyrics from Glinda. They praised Glinda that she could put up with Elphaba, and continue to sing “We don’t mean to show a bias” (Schwartz 146), which is ironically showing their prejudice. That part creates an imbalanced stage. At the same time, Glinda and the crowd’s voices take charge, and Elphaba is left speechless on the stage for quite a while before she continued singing. Another example is towards the end, when Elphaba is singing a duet at two side of the stage, people at Glinda’s side of the stage starts to sing “No one Mourns the Wicked” suggesting that Elphaba’s story has ended and the scene returns to the celebration of the Witch’s death. The crowds’ voices gradually covers the Witches’ duet and later Elphaba’s voice fades. In these scenes, the crowd, majority, or the society all sides with the white women’s voice, which leave Elphaba’s voice ignored.

The ending of *Wicked* the musical, the playwright does not give Elphaba the chance to redress. She is left notorious as the Wicked Witch. The voice of justice is never announced to

the citizens. Glinda tells Elphaba's story to the audience. However, Elphaba who is actually still alive is forced to hide in the society, never able to speak for herself.

The power of the musical is that, as a part of the popular culture, it is able to affect many people by the theme and ideas that it delivers. By digging into the plot, as this research suggests, the musical conveys strong relationships with racial issues. The musical illustrates how a society fails to provide access for women of color to speak for themselves; therefore, what the society learns about them are from the perspective of the dominant female groups. The musical spreads the idea the society should provide women of color accesses to speak for themselves.

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