

## **Gender, Racial, and Social Discrimination in *Straw* (2025): Portraying the Struggles and Mental Health Challenges of Black Women**

**Michael Olamide Okekunle**

*Department of Languages and Literary Studies,  
Babcock University,  
Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State.  
Email: okekunle0805@pg.babcock.edu.ng,*

*and*

**Yvonne Ikpemhinoghena Ewedemi**

*Department of Languages and Literary Studies,  
Babcock University,  
Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State.  
Email: ewedemi0120@pg.babcock.edu.ng*

### **Abstract**

*This study examines the portrayal of gender and race in Tyler Perry's *Straw*, primarily through a feminist film theory lens, drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality and Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory, with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory and Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory providing a secondary interpretive layer. The paper explores how *Straw* powerfully critiques workplace discrimination, housing instability, and law enforcement bias, and how these systemic injustices devastate Janiyah's mental health and agency. It considers how Taraji Penda Henson's raw performance both challenges and risks reinforcing the "strong Black woman" stereotype, as the film's reliance on sensationalist plot elements occasionally undermines narrative authenticity.*

*The study highlights *Straw*'s contribution to mental health discourse and calls for more nuanced storytelling, community collaboration, and policy reforms to amplify Black women's voices and address systemic inequities.*

**Keywords:** *Black women, Feminist film theory, Intersectionality, Mental health, Psychoanalytic theory, Social cognitive theory.*

### **Introduction**

Gender and race are interwoven axes of identity that significantly shape the lived experiences of Black women, particularly in contexts marked by systemic inequality, cultural marginalisation, and socio-political exclusion. Contemporary cinema has increasingly emerged as a critical medium for exploring and representing the complexities of Black womanhood, often shedding light on the intersectional struggles faced by Black women in a racially stratified society.

The intersection of gender and race in contemporary cinema provides a vital lens for examining the intricate dynamics of identity, systemic inequity, and resilience in modern society. Also,

the portrayal of Black women in film serves as a powerful medium to explore their unique lived experiences, shaped by the confluence of systemic racism, sexism, and socio-economic challenges. These narratives illuminate the multifaceted struggles Black women endure, including workplace discrimination, gendered violence, stereotype perpetuation, and the constant negotiation of societal expectations while striving for self-definition, agency, and empowerment (Collins 67). Contemporary cinema, through its evolving storytelling techniques, acts as both a mirror reflecting the realities of Black women's lives and a critique of the structural forces that shape their experiences, offering audiences a deeper understanding of the complexities of their identities.

Furthermore, the psychological and emotional toll of systemic inequities on Black women is a recurring theme in modern films. Research highlights that Black women are disproportionately impacted by intersecting forms of oppression, such as racialised gender discrimination and limited access to economic and social resources, which contribute to heightened stress, mental health challenges, and a pervasive sense of marginalisation within dominant cultural narratives (Crenshaw 140). These experiences often manifest in feelings of invisibility or hypervisibility, where Black women are either overlooked or stereotyped in ways that diminish their humanity (Harris-Perry 29). As it stands, cinematic representations of these struggles provide a platform to confront such injustices, employing visual and emotional storytelling to foster empathy and challenge audience perceptions. By centring Black women's voices and experiences, films disrupt traditional narratives, offering nuanced portrayals that highlight both their vulnerabilities and their resilience in navigating oppressive systems (Hooks 115).

Moreover, the depiction of Black women in contemporary cinema reflects broader societal issues, including the enduring legacy of historical oppression, economic disparities, and the ongoing struggle for racial and gender equity. Social cognitive theory posits that media representations significantly influence audience attitudes and behaviours, underscoring the importance of authentic and multidimensional portrayals of Black women (Bandura 45). Films that focus on Black women's stories, whether through fictional narratives, biographical accounts, or documentaries, shed light on their strength, creativity, and resistance while critiquing the systems of power that seek to constrain them. For instance, portrayals of Black women in films often explore themes of community, sisterhood, and self-determination, illustrating how they navigate and challenge oppressive structures to carve out spaces of agency and joy (Davis 88). These cinematic works also engage with the historical context of Black women's marginalisation, from the era of slavery to modern-day systemic inequities, providing a continuum that connects past injustices to present-day struggles.

The power of cinema lies in its ability to transcend mere documentation, catalysing dialogue and social change. Scholars argue that visual storytelling in films creates a visceral emotional connection with audiences, making it a potent tool for raising awareness about the intersectional challenges Black women face (Williams 256). By presenting authentic narratives that avoid reductive stereotypes, such as the “strong Black woman” trope, contemporary films challenge viewers to reconsider preconceived notions and engage with the complexities of Black women’s lived experiences. Moreover, these films often propose pathways toward empowerment, advocating for systemic change through narratives that emphasise resilience, solidarity, and the pursuit of justice. Through their compelling storytelling, contemporary movies not only illuminate the struggles of Black women but also call for transformative societal shifts, urging audiences to confront issues of race, gender, and power in meaningful ways.

Although existing scholarship has examined the representation of black women in film, there is limited concentration on how modern cinema engages with mental health struggles as it intersects with race and gender, especially through the lens of psychoanalytic and feminist film theories. This study aptly addresses this gap through the analysis of *Straw* in illuminating how movies can complicate and simultaneously challenge strong narratives about mental health, black womanhood and systemic oppression, thus adding to ongoing discourses about gender, race and social justice.

### **Synopsis of the Movie**

*Straw* (2025) is a psychological crime drama directed by Tyler Perry, starring Taraji Penda Henson as Janiyah Wiltkinson, a single mother facing overwhelming challenges. Living in a run-down apartment with her frequently ill daughter, Aria, Janiyah struggles to make ends meet. Her day spirals into chaos as she faces a series of unfortunate events: a threatening landlord, a demeaning boss, a distant school administrator, and a road-raging off-duty police officer. After stopping a robbery at the grocery store where she works, Janiyah becomes entangled in a bloody crime scene. In a desperate attempt to cash a paycheck, she accidentally triggers a bank standoff, making her a suspect in a crime she did not intend to commit. The film builds to a shocking twist, revealing the depths of Janiyah’s emotional and mental strain. Exploring themes of systemic oppression, mental health, and desperation, the movie showcases Henson’s powerful performance alongside a cast including Sherri Shepherd, Teyana Taylor, Sinbad, and Glynn Turman. Released on Netflix on June 6, 2025, *Straw* is a tense, emotionally charged thriller about a woman pushed to her breaking point by an indifferent society.

## **Related Literature**

Several contemporary studies explore the intersectional realities of Black womanhood, emphasising the combined effects of gendered and racialised oppressions on Black women's psychological, social, and emotional experiences. These studies resonate with the themes in *Straw* (2025), a film that portrays the emotional and structural challenges Black women face while navigating trauma, marginalisation, and identity in an inequitable society.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work reaffirms the importance of intersectionality in understanding the compounded impacts of racism and sexism on Black women. She argues that traditional social justice frameworks often overlook the unique experiences of Black women, whose identities are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw 134). Although Crenshaw's theory is critical in one's understanding of intersectional oppression, most of the existing literature has yet to completely explore how these dynamics are articulated both in visuals and narration of contemporary cinema. This is a gap that this study aims to address through *Straw*.

In a media-focused analysis, Hutchinson and Jackson examine how mainstream media often reduces Black women to stereotypes such as the "strong Black woman" or the "angry Black woman." Their study underscores how these tropes obscure the emotional vulnerability and psychological complexity of Black female characters (Hutchinson and Jackson 45). But their work majorly addresses earlier media portrayals and actually lacks consideration of the latest shifts that are being influenced by modern social movements and the changing expectations of audiences. *Straw* diverges from this tradition by presenting a nuanced portrayal of its central characters, emphasising their trauma, inner conflict, and resistance to dehumanising societal narratives. Hutchinson and Jackson's findings support the film's effort to humanise Black women beyond conventional cinematic stereotypes.

Also, Berry (2021) explores how modern media, particularly post-2020, continues in its struggle with the trope of the "strong black woman", heavily critiquing how these narratives erase mental health struggles as well as vulnerability. In this study, the conversation is extended as the researchers have examined how *Straw* resists such tropes through characterisation and its focus on mental complexity.

Recent psychological research also contributes to this discourse by exploring the impact of systemic trauma on Black women's mental health. Carter et al. investigate the psychological toll of structural racism and intimate partner violence, concluding that Black women often experience compounded trauma that is underdiagnosed and undertreated (Carter et al. 78). Though their work showcases vital clinical concerns, there is restricted research on how these

psychological realities are transformed into narratives in films. This study responds to this gap as it analyzes *Straw*'s portrayal of mental health struggles and bridges cinematic representation with psychological theory.

More so, Johnson and Osei (2022) opine that the response of recent films to universal social movements has tried to visualise Black trauma not as mere spectacle but as a way of fostering advocacy and empathy. *Straw* is in vivid alignment with this recent trend as it uses visual storytelling in engaging the emotions of audiences while simultaneously critiquing systemic failures.

In terms of cinematic representation, Smith and DuVernay advocate for the transformative potential of Black feminist filmmaking in challenging dominant narratives and offering counter-hegemonic portrayals of Black women's lives. Their research emphasises how Black women directors and storytellers redefine visual storytelling by focusing on themes of survival, community, and intergenerational trauma (Smith and DuVernay 112). Although directed by a male filmmaker, *Straw* adopts a Black feminist visual aesthetic and narrative approach, using camera work, fragmented storytelling, and symbolism to centre lived realities and inner voices of Black women. Note that the nuanced appropriation of Black feminist aesthetics is a representation of the vital contribution that broadens the reach of feminist film discourse.

Additionally, Okafor and Mensah explore how urban environments characterised by poverty, surveillance, and systemic neglect serve as backdrops for racial and gender-based violence. They argue that media representations in such settings should not only depict suffering but also offer pathways for empowerment (Okafor and Mensah 203). In the movie, the protagonist's turn to activism and storytelling serves as a means of reclaiming agency amid structural violence, aligning with Okafor and Mensah's call for socially responsible storytelling that acknowledges trauma while envisioning resistance. Though their work provides a crucial framework for a good understanding of spatial narratives, little attention has been placed on how films like *Straw* utilise both storytelling and activism as modes to reclaim agency. This paper aims to advance the discourse by showcasing these strategies within the narrative of the film.

While these studies provide a robust foundation for understanding Black women's struggles in visual narratives, there remains a need to further examine how race and gender intersect in post-2020 cinema, particularly in the context of global social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. Most people depend on pre-2020 sources as they do not completely interact with the essential cultural shifts that have been spurred by the latest global movements, such as the ones mentioned above. However, there is a more pressing need

to examine how post-2020 cinema engages with gender and race-based trauma, mental health and systematic injustice in ways that serve as a reflection of the developing discourses.

This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by analysing how *Straw* (2025) engages with contemporary discourse on racial and gender-based trauma and employs visual storytelling to challenge reductive portrayals of Black women, asserting their humanity and voice in an increasingly polarised world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

It must be noted that this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach in examining the film's portrayal of race, systemic oppression and gender. Primarily, feminist film theory offers a principal lens for the interrogation of the narrative and visual strategies used in the movie. It is duly complemented by intersectionality theory, which basically foregrounds how social identities that overlap bring about other discriminatory forms.

More so, other perspectives are drawn from psychoanalytical theory and social cognitive theory as they help in the illumination of character psychology and the mechanisms through which societal biases and norms are first internalised, then reproduced. All these theoretical frameworks guide the paper's analysis of how *Straw* not only builds up but also challenges the representation of black women.

### **Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory**

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, introduced in 1989, provides a framework for understanding how multiple forms of oppression, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, converge to shape unique experiences of discrimination, particularly for marginalised individuals. Rather than viewing inequalities in isolation, Crenshaw argues that these identities intersect, creating compounded disadvantages that single-axis analyses overlook. For instance, a Black woman may face challenges distinct from those of a white woman or a Black man due to the interplay of racism and sexism. This theory critiques simplistic approaches to social justice and calls for inclusive policies that address overlapping systems of power. Widely applied in sociology, law, and cultural studies, intersectionality helps unpack systemic inequities and informs efforts to create equitable solutions.

### **Laura Mulvey's Feminist Film Theory**

Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory, articulated in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, examines how cinema reinforces patriarchal ideologies through the concept of the "male gaze." Mulvey argues that mainstream films often position women as passive objects of male desire, viewed through a heterosexual male perspective that caters to male audiences. This gaze reduces women to visual spectacles while men assume active roles as

protagonists or viewers. Rooted in psychoanalytic and feminist thought, the theory highlights how such portrayals perpetuate gender inequality in media. It has influenced film studies by inspiring critiques of gender representation, encouraging feminist filmmaking, and prompting broader discussions about how visual media shapes societal perceptions of gender roles.

### **Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory**

The paper draws on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory (Freud, 1900), which was articulated in "The Interpretation of Dreams" and lays emphasis on how the unconscious shapes emotional responses and behaviours. Note that this theory is used in exploring the psychological aspects of Janiyah's trauma, especially in how her desires are repressed and her internalised conflict.

This theory was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explores how the unconscious mind drives behaviour, emotions, and personality. Freud posited that the mind comprises the id (instinctual desires), ego (rational mediator), and superego (moral conscience), with conflicts among them shaping psychological development. Unresolved issues, often from childhood experiences like the Oedipus complex, manifest in dreams, neuroses, or slips of the tongue. Techniques such as free association and dream analysis aim to uncover these hidden drives. Though criticised for lacking empirical support, psychoanalytic theory remains influential in psychology, literature, and cultural studies, offering insights into unconscious motivations and symbolic expressions in art and behaviour.

### **Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, formulated in the 1960s, explains how people acquire behaviours, skills, and attitudes through observation, modelling, and environmental interactions. Originally called social learning theory, it emphasises the dynamic interplay of personal factors, behaviour, and environment. A key concept is observational learning, demonstrated in Bandura's Bobo doll experiment, where children mimicked aggressive actions after watching adults. The theory also highlights self-efficacy, or one's belief in their ability to succeed, as a driver of motivation. Applied in education, psychology, and media studies, social cognitive theory informs strategies for behavioural change, such as reducing violence, and analyses the influence of role models and media on individual actions.

### **Discussion and Findings**

This study employs a qualitative approach in analysing the *Straw* through close observations of key scenes, informed by intersectionality, feminist film, psychoanalytic, and social cognitive theories.

Race is a central lens through which the movie examines Janiyah's experiences, portraying her as a Black woman navigating a world structured by systemic racism. The film underscores how Janiyah's racial identity shapes her interactions across multiple domains: workplace, housing, and law enforcement. As a Black single mother, Janiyah embodies Crenshaw's description of the "intersectional" nature of oppression, where race intertwines with gender and class to amplify marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, Janiyah's job at a grocery store exposes her to racial microaggressions, such as a customer throwing a bottle at her after a dispute over a WIC card, an incident that reflects the dehumanisation Black women often face in service roles. This scene highlights how race informs the hostility directed at Janiyah and shows how Black women are disproportionately employed in low-wage, high-stress jobs where they encounter racialised aggression.

Moreover, the film critiques racial bias in law enforcement, particularly through Janiyah's encounter with an off-duty police officer and the impounding of her car over minor documentation issues. These interactions reflect a broader pattern of systemic racism, where Black individuals face disproportionate scrutiny and punishment, often described as a "no investigation, all conclusion" approach. The protest scene outside the bank, with a supporter holding a sign reading "Nevertheless she persisted," connects Janiyah's struggle to collective racial justice movements, emphasising race as a structural rather than individual issue.

However, the film's use of a sensationalist plot device, a toy mistaken for a bomb, risks diluting its racial critique. Tyler Perry effectively uses race to frame Janiyah's struggles, highlighting how systemic racism permeates her life and drives her to a breaking point.

Additionally, discrimination in *Straw* is depicted as a multifaceted force, targeting Janiyah's intersecting identities as a Black woman and single mother. Intersectionality theory illuminates how discrimination operates not as isolated incidents but as webs of oppression shaped by race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). In the workplace, Janiyah faces overt discrimination from her boss, Richard (Glynn Turman), who dismisses her concerns (her ill daughter) and fails to support her against hostile customers. Another critical aspect is the issue of housing discrimination as Janiyah faces eviction from her dilapidated apartment due to unpaid rent, a threat exacerbated by her landlady's lack of empathy. This scenario mirrors real-world data showing Black women, particularly single mothers, face higher eviction rates due to economic disparities rooted in discriminatory housing policies. Desmond posits that eviction is not simply a consequence of poverty; rather, it is a cause, stating that single black women are most likely to get an eviction notice (Desmond, 2016). The film's portrayal of Janiyah's desperate attempts

to maintain a home for her daughter, Aria, underscores how discrimination compounds economic precarity, limiting her options and agency.

Law enforcement discrimination further intensifies Janiyah's plight. The impounding of her car and the aggressive response from an off-duty officer illustrate how Black women are often criminalised for minor infractions, reflecting systemic bias in policing. Bandura's social cognitive theory explains how societal stereotypes—such as the “angry Black woman”—shape these interactions, as officers' preconceptions escalate minor situations into crises (Bandura, 1977).

Social injustice in *Straw* is portrayed as a systemic force that permeates Janiyah's life, pushing her toward a mental health crisis and a dramatic standoff. The film critiques structural inequities across employment, housing, and law enforcement, framing them as interconnected systems that disproportionately harm Black women. For instance, Janiyah's low-wage job and inability to afford rent reflect economic injustices rooted in racial and gender disparities, as Black women earn significantly less than their white counterparts and face higher poverty rates (Collins, 2000). The eviction threat she faces is not merely a personal failure but a microcosm of broader housing inequities, where Black families are more likely to face unstable housing due to discriminatory lending and rental practices.

The film also addresses social injustice through its depiction of law enforcement bias, which escalates Janiyah's situation into a public crisis. The “no investigation, all conclusion” mentality of the police, as described by reviewers, reflects a justice system that often fails Black individuals, particularly women, by assuming guilt rather than investigating context. The protest movement outside the bank, coupled with social media reactions praising the film's resonance with real-world issues, underscores its commentary on social injustice as a collective struggle.

*Straw* further critiques the societal expectation of resilience embodied in the “strong Black woman” stereotype, which dismisses Black women's vulnerability and mental health needs. Janiyah's breakdown challenges this trope, highlighting the injustice of expecting Black women to endure systemic oppression without support. However, the film's sensationalist plot—particularly the toy-bomb misunderstanding—risks reducing these injustices to cinematic exaggeration, as critics argue it prioritises drama over systemic critique. Despite this, the film explores sisterhood and communal empathy, as seen in the performances of Sherri Shepherd and Teyana Taylor, and offers a vision of resistance against social injustice

Mental health is a central theme in *Straw*, depicted through Janiyah Wiltkinson's (Taraji Penda Henson) psychological unravelling under the weight of systemic pressures. The film portrays

Janiyah's mental health crisis marked by hallucinations, emotional outbursts, and a descent into a standoff with law enforcement as a direct consequence of her compounded struggles with workplace discrimination, housing instability, and police bias. Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a lens to understand this, as Janiyah's hallucinations and "ugly cry, silent rage, and numbness" reflect repressed trauma surfacing under extreme stress (Freud, 1917). Her breakdown humanises the often-ignored mental health struggles of Black women, who face disproportionate barriers to care due to systemic racism, sexism, and economic precarity.

The film's focus on mental health highlights Taraji Penda Henson's raw and commanding performance as a powerful depiction of mental health challenges, emphasising the need for awareness in marginalised communities. In Tyler Perry's *Straw*, an enigmatic plot twist shocks viewers as he addresses dissociation. Throughout the film, viewers see Janiyah begin her day with Aria, running her bath, preparing her for school, and even dropping her off. However, the devastating plot twist revealed that Aria had been dead all along. This twist certainly exposes a more significant mental health crisis, as Janiyah's inability to process her grief led to dissociation. She mentally preserves Aria's presence as a means of surviving the trauma.

The plot thickens when Nicole, the bank manager, appears to support Janiyah's delusion. She agrees to take Aria in when Janiyah is sent to prison for her boss's murder. Nonetheless, it is revealed much later that Nicole had been told all along that Aria was dead. This revelation underscores how sometimes people enable dissociation. It can be out of fear, compassion, or even helplessness, thus adding complexity to the portrayal of mental illness in the movie.

Furthermore, the sensationalist plot device of a toy mistaken for a bomb risks trivialising Janiyah's mental health crisis by framing it within a melodramatic hostage scenario, potentially reinforcing stereotypes about Black women's instability. Despite this, *Straw* contributes significantly to mental health discourse by highlighting the psychological toll of systemic oppression and advocating for resources and empathy.

*Straw* actively challenges the "strong Black woman" stereotype, which expects Black women to endure hardship without complaint, often at the expense of their mental and emotional well-being. Janiyah's character subverts this trope by openly displaying vulnerability—her mental breakdown, emotional outbursts, and desperate actions reveal the unsustainable burden of resilience imposed on Black women. Intersectionality theory underscores how this stereotype is rooted in the intersecting oppressions of race and gender, as Black women are socially conditioned to suppress their pain to navigate systemic inequities (Crenshaw, 1989). The film's depiction of Janiyah's unravelling, described as "gut-wrenching" by viewers, challenges this expectation, presenting her not as unbreakable but as humanly fragile under relentless pressure.

Henson's performance is pivotal in dismantling this stereotype, with critics noting her ability to convey "silent rage" and "numbness" that defy the stoic archetype. Social media reactions echo this, with posts emphasising how Janiyah's story reflects the real-life struggles of Black women forced to "hold it together" despite systemic barriers. However, the film's melodramatic climax, where Janiyah's breakdown culminates in a hostage crisis, risks undermining this critique by sensationalising her vulnerability, potentially aligning with stereotypes of Black women as erratic under pressure. A more restrained narrative could have strengthened the film's challenge to this harmful trope.

Agency and resistance are prominent themes in *Straw*, as Janiyah's actions, though extreme, reflect a form of rebellion against systemic oppression. Despite her victimisation, Janiyah exercises agency by taking a stand—literally and figuratively—in the bank standoff, demanding recognition of her humanity and the injustices she faces. Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory (1975) is relevant here, as Janiyah subverts the traditional "male gaze" by positioning herself as an active subject rather than a passive object; her defiance challenges the systemic forces that seek to silence her. The protest outside the bank, with a supporter's sign reading "Nevertheless she persisted," symbolises collective resistance, aligning Janiyah's struggle with broader movements for racial and gender justice.

However, the film's portrayal of agency is complicated by its sensationalist elements. The toy-mistaken-for-a-bomb plot device transforms Janiyah's resistance into a spectacle, which critics argue risks reducing her agency to a plot-driven caricature rather than a grounded act of defiance. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977) suggests that Janiyah's resistance is shaped by her environment, where societal cues of powerlessness push her to extreme measures as a last resort. Social media reactions praise the film's depiction of Janiyah's defiance, with viewers noting its resonance with Black women's fight against marginalisation. Yet, a more nuanced portrayal of agency, focusing on everyday acts of resilience rather than cinematic escalations, could enhance the film's authenticity.

Sisterhood and community support emerge as vital themes in *Straw*, offering a counterpoint to Janiyah's isolation and systemic oppression. The performances of Sherri Shepherd (as a compassionate coworker) and Teyana Taylor (as a supportive figure) highlight the importance of communal bonds in mitigating the effects of systemic inequities. These relationships provide Janiyah with moments of empathy and understanding, contrasting with the hostility she faces from her boss, landlady, and police. The film's emphasis on sisterhood aligns with intersectionality theory, which recognises the role of community in empowering Black women to navigate interlocking oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989).

The protest movement outside the bank further underscores community support, framing Janiyah's struggle as part of a collective fight for justice. Social media posts highlight the emotional impact of these communal moments, with viewers praising the film's message of "togetherness" as a source of hope. Reviewers also note the film's collaboration with The Smartan House, a real-world initiative supporting underprivileged communities, as evidence of its commitment to community-driven solutions. However, the film's melodramatic tendencies occasionally overshadow these moments of connection, as the focus on the hostage crisis diverts attention from the quieter, more authentic portrayals of sisterhood. A stronger emphasis on these communal bonds could have reinforced the film's hopeful vision for addressing systemic challenges.

### **Conclusion**

The film's compelling critique of systemic injustices faced by Black women uses Janiyah's story to highlight workplace discrimination, housing instability, law enforcement bias, and mental health challenges. Through the lenses of intersectionality and feminist film theory, the study reveals the compounded oppressions shaping Janiyah's life, while psychoanalytic and social cognitive theories illuminate the psychological toll of her experiences. Taraji P. Henson's powerful performance challenges the "strong Black woman" stereotype, contributing to mental health discourse in marginalised communities. However, the film's reliance on melodramatic tropes, such as implausible plot devices and exaggerated pacing, risks undermining its authenticity and perpetuating stereotypes.

Despite these limitations, the movie's focus on sisterhood, empathy, and communal support gives a hopeful vision for addressing systemic inequities. By projecting Black women's voices, *Straw* contributes to a growing cinematic discourse on race, gender, and mental health, but its impact could be strengthened through more subtle and refined storytelling.

### **Recommendations**

1. Filmmakers should commit to realistic portrayals of Black women's experiences, steering clear of sensationalist plot devices that risk reinforcing stereotypes or reducing characters to caricatures. Collaborating with Black women writers, directors, and producers is crucial for crafting narratives that resonate with the nuances of lived realities.
2. Partnering with Black community organisations and mental health advocates can foster the development of films that not only raise awareness but also offer tangible resources and support. These collaborations ensure cultural competence and community-centred storytelling.

3. Films can be a powerful platform to advocate for policy changes addressing systemic issues such as workplace discrimination, housing insecurity, and law enforcement bias. Promoting affordable housing, equitable healthcare access, and mandatory anti-bias training for the police are essential steps toward dismantling the systemic pressures depicted onscreen.
4. It is vital to amplify mental health initiatives tailored to Black women, especially those that confront stigma, cultural mistrust, and barriers to access. Storytelling can play a transformative role in normalising mental health care and encouraging the utilisation of supportive services.

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