

Identity Politics in Wicked: Analysing Marginalisation, Empowerment, and
Propaganda in a retelling of ‘The Wizard of Oz’

Project Report

Submitted by

Natasha Ann Abraham (SB22CE018)

Under the guidance of

(SHAHANAZ M H)

In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree

Of Bachelor of Arts

St. Teresa’s College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with ‘A++’

Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

Kottayam-686560

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Declaration

I do affirm that the project "Identity Politics in Wicked: Analysing marginalisation, Empowerment, and Propaganda in a retelling of 'The Wizard of Oz'" submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Natasha Ann Abraham

20 March 2025

SB22CE018

B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Identity Politics in Wicked: Analysing marginalisation, Empowerment, and Propaganda in a retelling of 'The Wizard of Oz'" by (NATASHA ANN ABRAHAM) is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



Ernakulam

Shahanaz MH

20 March 2025

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Acknowledgement

I would want to take this opportunity to thank God Almighty for His blessings and grace in helping me finish this job.

I express my sincere gratitude to Rev. Sr. Nilima CSST, Provincial Superior and Manager of St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, for her cooperative efforts. I also express my appreciation to Rev. Sr. Tessa, CSST, Director of St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, and Prof. Dr. Alphonsa Vijaya Joseph, Principal of St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam, for their unwavering support and encouragement throughout my academic career.

I am extremely grateful to Mrs. Allu Alfred, Head of the Department of Communicative English, St. Teresa's College (Autonomous). Her unwavering support and assistance in seeing this project through to its final conclusion are greatly appreciated.

I am incredibly grateful to my supervising guide, Mrs. Shahanaz MH, for her advice and to all the teachers of the department for their invaluable assistance in making this project a success.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family and friends for their support and love.

Natasha Ann Abraham

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to Catherine R. Stimpson, identity politics is a contemporary definition for a group's assertion that it is a meaningful group; that it differs significantly from other groups; that its members share a history of injustice and grievance; and that its psychological and political mission is to explore, act out, act on and act up its group identity.

Wicked is a 2003 Broadway musical, composed by Stephen Schwartz and written by Winnie Holzman, adapted from a 1995 novel by Gregory Maguire. It reimagines the story of *The Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of Elphaba, the "Wicked Witch of the West" and proves to be a brilliant text to study this subject. Rather than presenting her as a one-dimensional villain, *Wicked* reconstructs Elphaba as a misunderstood character shaped by oppression, propaganda and a fight for resistance. Through this reimagining, the musical engages with identity politics and how marginalised identities are created and reclaimed in the face of hegemonic power structures. By shifting the narrative focus to Elphaba as the main character, the musical critiques the ideological structure set up by the original story of *Wicked* credited to L. Frank Baum and highlights the reimagined story with a seamless blend of dialogue, storytelling, music, and emotions.

Set in the Land of Oz, before and in the middle of the events of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Wicked* follows the journey of Elphaba from Munchkinland, a young woman born with green skin and magical witch-like powers. The story starts at Shiz University, where Elphaba is unexpectedly paired as roommates with the popular and privileged Galinda of the Upper Uplands (later known to the audience as Glinda). The two develop a complex friendship despite their initial antipathy, which is tested by their different core values and positions in society.

Elphaba's magical abilities attract the attention of the Wizard of Oz, whom she initially admires. However, she soon realises the harsh reality, which is rooted deep in deception and systemic oppression of the talking animals, who are being stripped of their ability to talk. When Elphaba attempts to expose the truth, she is branded as a dangerous threat to Oz by the Wizard's regime and deepens her ideological divide with Glinda, who chooses to conform to and support the Wizard's rule.

Other characters include Prince Fiyero, who undergoes a transformation by rejecting his privilege to stand by Elphaba as he falls in love with her. Nessarose, Elphaba's sister, becomes the Wicked Witch of the East due to her own misuse of power. And finally, the Wizard himself is revealed to be a fraud and relies heavily on manipulation and propaganda to maintain control. The climax of the musical sees Elphaba's rebellion intensify, which leads to a final confrontation where she fakes her own death to escape persecution. The story ultimately reveals that history is rewritten by those in power, leaving Elphaba forever remembered as a villain rather than the revolutionary she was.

This project examines *Wicked* through an interdisciplinary lens employing various methodologies to analyse identity politics. This paper aims to examine the musical's lyrics, dialogues, and character arcs drawing from feminist, intersectional, and postcolonial theories. Exploring themes of marginalisation, empowerment, and propaganda, *Wicked* critiques dominant narratives (especially comparing itself to *The Wizard of Oz*), particularly in its portrayal in manipulation of media and historical revisionism.

By highlighting shifts in narratives and integrating these methodologies, *Wicked* poses as a critical text to analyse power structures and offer counter-narratives to established histories. By studying identity politics through this project, we assess

the credibility of historical accounts and how class, power, and media play a role in public perception.

Chapter 2: Reimagined Narrative Perspectives

The infamous “Wicked Witch of the West” has a story like no other. While the original *The Wizard of Oz* focuses on Dorothy and her search for belonging, *Wicked* recasts Elphaba as a misunderstood individual. Born with jaded green skin, Elphaba is the outcast of her town. Her unexplainable powers alienate her from society, causing her to be bullied and mistreated. This ostracisation shapes her identity as the anti-hero of the plot.

By highlighting the mistreatment of marginalised characters, *Wicked* creates a rich space for exploring the experiences of those who have been “othered.” The hegemony of traditional storytelling is critiqued by centring these “othered” characters. The reinterpretation of this narrative viewpoint makes it different from *The Wizard of Oz*, marking the essence of *Wicked*.

Elphaba’s actions, from the very beginning, challenge the binary moralities presented in the original *The Wizard of Oz*. She is no longer just an archetype of evil but a complex character whose actions stem from years of resentment and alienation. Her story deeply underscores the intersectionality of identity politics. Elphaba is not only a green-skinned woman navigating a patriarchal society but also a reformist within a corrupt political system. Thus, the “Wicked Witch” transforms from a misunderstood child into a fierce advocate for social justice, her development mirroring the struggles of those who resist oppressive systems. This reimagined narrative perspective allows the audience to empathise with a character that was typically dismissed as a villain.

Apart from the perspective shift from “evil” to “complicated,” there are multiple narrative shifts that bring forth the identity politics in *Wicked*. These are not

just changes in perspectives but completely restructures and reframes the sociopolitical dynamics in Oz. One of the most important is Elphaba as an agent for social advocacy. Elphaba's role to push back against the authoritarian figures (the Wizard) highlights her courage and moral complexity, qualities that were dismissed in the original plot.

The friendship between Elphaba and Glinda offers a nuanced look at female solidarity and moral conflict. Beginning as polar opposites, this dynamic (Glinda for her popularity and Elphaba for her outcast nature) offers a view into how privilege and marginalisation play out within relationships and friendships. Their budding friendship through their time at Shiz University later falls into an ideological divergence and a struggle to choose "good" or "bad." However, their differences also empower each other. Elphaba urges Glinda to act with courage, while Glinda teaches the importance of personal connection.

Finally, the villainisation of the wizard, who diminishes Elphaba, is a prime example of a propaganda ultimatum. The wizard manipulates public opinion and rallies citizens of Oz to choose loyalty to the regime or align with a perceived enemy. This tactic, or propaganda, dehumanises Elphaba, reducing her to a symbol of fear and chaos rather than acknowledging her humanity or her motivations.

The theme of marginalisation is very prevalent as the Wizard exploits societal fears to consolidate his authority. By presenting Elphaba's side of the story, *Wicked* flips the narrative, inviting the audience to question the reliability of "official" records and history and the motivations of those in power. This reflects real-world parallels, where propaganda is used to control narratives and gain power over marginalised groups.

Wicked not only reclaims Elphaba's story but also reveals the ways in which history demonises people who oppose power and changes the viewpoint from the existing narrative to that of the marginalised. The audience is urged to reconsider who is in charge of the story and whose opinions have been ignored as a result of the recounting. By doing this, *Wicked* challenges us to reevaluate the narratives we take for granted and the ways in which perception is influenced by power.

However, rewriting Elphaba's narrative is just the beginning of understanding her experience. Being "othered" has repercussions that extend beyond deception; they include social marginalisation and structural injustice. As an example of how marginalised identities are pushed to the periphery of society, Elphaba is the focus of prejudice because of her green complexion, her refusal to conform, and her contempt of authority. This lays the framework for a more in-depth investigation of how marginalisation operates in *Wicked*—not just as a plot device but also as a reflection of real-world concerns.

Chapter 3: Marginalisation

Race is a social construct, but skin tone is a biological fact with socially constructed meanings, one of which is race itself. (Webb)

Elphaba embodies the profound themes of social and political exclusion, as her distinctive green skin sets her apart, making her a target of discrimination and prejudice throughout her life in Oz. This difference serves as a powerful metaphor for real-world experiences of marginalised communities, particularly in the context of racial discrimination and systemic oppression.

This rejection stems from her own family. Her father, Frexspar, shows obvious partiality to her sister, Nessarose. This familial bias mirrors those socially excluded people from many real-world situations due to their physical appearances or characteristics. Such dynamics are most prevalent in various cultures; lighter skin tones are often associated with beauty and poise, and the lack thereof leads to ostracism.

Furthermore, Elphaba's rejection by Ozian society demonstrates the repercussions of breaking social standards. She becomes the object of systematic oppression when she doesn't fit in. This is consistent with both historical and modern instances of oppressed people being persecuted for defying authority. Because they opposed social injustice, leaders like Malala Yousafzai, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr. were all branded as dangers by the establishment. Likewise, Elphaba is not a hero but a political foe because she rejects the Wizard's authority.

Sarah L. Webb says: 'Interracial colorism perpetuated by European colonialists against indigenous people on other continents was a strategy to reinforce the notion of their own superiority in constructing the concept of whiteness.' (Webb).

Colonial powers imposed rigid racial hierarchies in regions such as Africa, Asia, and the Americas, associating lighter skin with power, intelligence, and desirability while devaluing darker-skinned indigenous populations. This constructed racial ideology justified the oppression of colonised peoples and upheld European dominance, paralleling exactly the dynamics in the land of Oz. The Wizard of Oz is a figure who arrives from another land and seizes power, resembling European colonists in his efforts to control Oz and reshape its social order. By labelling Elphaba as "wicked," he enforces an exclusionary system that mirrors how colonialists used racial constructs to delegitimise and oppress indigenous groups.

Additionally, just like European colonialists created divisions on colour within societies, favouring lighter-skinned people over darker-skinned ones, the Ozian society uplifts fair-skinned figures like Glinda while shunning Elphaba. This reflects how colonial powers established colourism within oppressed populations, causing internalised bias and social stratification. *Wicked*, through Elphaba's experiences, critiques how physical difference is used as a tool of exclusion, echoing the historical realities of colonial racial hierarchies and the social constructs that continue to shape perceptions of identity and power.

It is actually the struggle against marginalisation in Elphaba that emphasises the inevitable choice she has to make between individual identity and social normativity. Not conforming to Ozian standards, she turns into the scapegoat. Yet, because of her alienation that separates her, she is offered a singular point of view: the capacity to see injustice where others simply overlook it. In this very sense, *Wicked* forces its audience to reconsider who is 'acceptable' in society and why anything different must be associated with danger.

However, marginalisation can also be a driving force for empowerment rather than just a means of oppression. Because of society's rejection of her, Elphaba is forced to follow her own path and eventually embraces who she is rather than fitting in with what others think she should be. Resistance and agency, which will be discussed in the following chapter, are possible by this shift from rejection to self-acceptance. *Wicked* challenges the very structures that strive to repress those who are marginalised by redefining her "wickedness" as an act of rebellion rather than villainy.

Chapter 4: Empowerment

It's time to trust my instincts, close my eyes, and leap (Schwartz, 2003)

Originally marginalised as previously indicated, Elphaba's symbolism as an othered figure represents the actual experiences of those who don't fit in with society's expectations.

However, her transformation to a revolutionary leader mirrors feminist and intersectional theories, where oppression fuels defiance (hooks). hooks also reiterates that empowerment in feminism arises from being able to make a choice; one cannot be anti-choice and feminist (hooks). Elphaba, as a feminist pioneer of the plot, rises to make the bold decision to set herself apart and break free from the Wizard's regime. This also aligns well with intersectional theories on empowerment—Elphaba, being a green-skinned woman, defies conformity to societal norms. The song *Defying Gravity* at the end of Act 1 particularly serves as a metaphor for self-liberation and the act of defiance by Elphaba as she embarks on a journey of empowerment despite societal rejection. By 'Defying Gravity', Elphaba declares she will no longer be a slave to the laws of physics, let alone the Wizard.

However, it is important to recognise that the empowerment showcased by Elphaba is not an achievement truly on her own but also deeply influenced by relationships. This theory of 'relational autonomy' emphasises that autonomy cannot be fully understood as mere independence, instead connected to interpersonal relationships and systemic influences (Mackenzie & Stoljar).

The power of solidarity in confronting patriarchal and oppressive structures (Ahmed) is highlighted in Glinda and Elphaba's friendship in *Wicked*. Their relationship was characterised at first by rivalry and misunderstanding but developed

into a friendship that openly opposed societal norms and structures of power. Solidarity in this context, then, is not about sameness but about a commitment to justice (Ahmed). Similarly, Glinda and Elphaba do not always agree, yet their bond helps each of them recognise their own capabilities. Elphaba encourages Glinda to question her own passive complicity in the system, and Glinda's relationship with Elphaba challenges her to face hard ethical dilemmas that ultimately empower her to make change.

The relationship between Elphaba and Fiyero is also a strong statement of personal agency against unmerited authority. Elphaba's true journey is marked by her defiance towards a world with oppressive systems and societal norms. But just like Elphaba, Fiyero undergoes an equally significant transformation—his willingness to abandon his position and class privileges, along with questioning regarding the legitimacy of the Wizard's rule, is his own way of empowerment. His decision to side with Elphaba, even at great personal risk, supports the idea that true strength lies not solely in individual rebellion but also in conscious rejection of social expectations to support what is right. Fiyero's transformation in *Wicked* reinforces the idea that empowerment involves not just fighting for oneself but also the choice of solidarity over conformity, demonstrating that the strongest form of resistance is rooted in both conviction and love.

Elphaba doesn't cause commotions; she is one (Holzman and Schwartz). Elphaba now sees herself not as a victim but as an agent capable of disturbing the status quo. Therefore, Elphaba's capacity to defy institutional authority is closely linked to the idea of empowerment in *Wicked*. Her journey suggests how historically oppressed communities seize power through opposition, solidarity, and personal acceptance.

Wicked, regarding empowerment, does not deal only with personal development but is in many ways a discussion of social resistance and social change. The case of Elphaba from alienation to self-determination, empowerment from relationships, and the central theme of resistance all form part of the very detailed identity politics of *Wicked*. Grounded in feminist, intersectional, and resistance theory, this chapter presents empowerment as an individual and collective process that is defined against oppressive systems rather than simply the surmounting of personal challenges. Additionally, the Wizard's propaganda against Elphaba draws comparisons to current debates on media manipulation and public opinion, as well as practical methods to undermine those who criticise.

Chapter 5: Propaganda

Are people born wicked, or do they have wickedness thrust upon them? (Holman and Schwartz)

Seemingly enough, one of *Wicked*'s most prominent themes is the use of propaganda by the Wizard's regime to maintain power and control over the land of Oz. We must trace back our understanding of the character of the Wizard, a complex and morally ambiguous character, to study this theme of propaganda. The Wizard's regime thrives on deceit and political control and, though not overtly evil, prioritises his own power and position at the cost of harming others. The talking animals of Oz, once capable of speech and independent thought, are used as scapegoats to consolidate power, contributing to oppression. They are reduced to mere beasts who are unable to communicate. The Wizard initially wins over Elphaba with his kindness and charm but turns against her when she discovers his corruption and brands her as the "Wicked Witch of the West." Elphaba, who is deeply concerned about the plight of these animals, becomes a strong advocate for their rights.

The Wizard's dictatorship is based on disinformation and inciting fear, which is consistent with past examples of political propaganda, in which autocratic rulers sway public opinion in order to maintain control. Similar topics are examined in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, which shows how propaganda and language can be weaponised to uphold a government. Similarly, the Wizard uses deceit, censorship, and manipulation to keep complete control over information. This is in accordance with the ideas presented by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent*, which assert that propaganda and the media are employed to sway public opinion and uphold authoritarian governance (Herman and Chomsky). An important scene that highlights this theme is when Madame Morrible, the Wizard's press agent, delivers a speech

declaring Elphaba as the public enemy. This strategic use of fear tactics creates a spectacle, ensuring that the people of Oz accept this narrative without much question, and can be compared to Nazi Germany's propaganda campaigns against Jews, as analysed by historian Ian Kershaw. Thus, propaganda functions best when the public passively accepts state-sanctioned facts (Chomsky).

Additionally, the Wizard's ability to manipulate public perception lies in his charm and performative prowess. His use of flashy theatricality—curtains, grand speeches, and exuberant fireworks displays—creates spectacles that distract and pacify the masses. Emerald City, adorned in green because it is the Wizard's favourite colour, demonstrates the extreme lengths he has gone to in order to develop a loyal community of drones who accept all that is spoon-fed to them.

The various portrayals of Elphaba in *Wicked* and *The Wizard of Oz* highlight the politics in storytelling and historical revisionism. The first, *The Wizard of Oz* film in 1939 presents the Wizard as a gentle leader of the Ozians, while Elphaba is the irredeemable villain. However, truth is not an objective reality but rather a construct shaped by power relations (Foucault). *Wicked* takes apart Elphaba's narrative and reclaims that the “truth” of history is fabricated by those in power. Thus, *Wicked* reveals that the Wizard's version of the events that transpired is fabricated to protect his rule. As Glinda reveals in the aforementioned quote from the musical, Elphaba's defiance comes not from inherent wickedness but from her resistance to injustice and oppression, reiterating the fact that villainy is often a matter of perception rather than objective fact.

Furthermore, we see that the very idea of “wickedness” that Elphaba is subjected to is manipulated to serve the interests of the authoritarian regime. Much like radical political activists, who are framed as threats to social order, whose voices

are silenced or villainised to maintain dominant narratives, Elphaba is considered malevolent. In contrast, *Wicked* challenges viewers to question these oversimplified divisions, much like revisionist historians do with prevailing historical myths. *Wicked* offers a counter-narrative that exposes how stories about individuals and groups are shaped by political agendas and power dynamics, much like the West's creation of the Orient in *Orientalism*.

Said states that, historically, the West has viewed the East as a primitive, exotic "Other" in opposition to the logical, civilised West (Said). The Wizard exploits the fabricated story of Elphaba's evil to keep control over Oz, strengthening the notion that individuals in positions of authority make narratives to defend their own dominance, much like Western imperialism does. *Wicked* challenges these manufactured narratives, challenges the good versus evil dichotomy, and reveals how those in positions of power use the labels of "wickedness" and "otherness" to further their own agendas, much like Said did when he criticised Western imperialism.

Additionally, *Wicked*'s metanarrative structure makes viewers think about how easily they can be influenced by propaganda. As they see Elphaba's story unfold, the musical's audience—who grew up with *The Wizard of Oz*—must confront their own prejudices. Viewers are prompted by *Wicked* to reevaluate traditional thinking and acknowledge the subjectivity of truth. The way that *Wicked* depicts the politics of storytelling draws attention to the broader effects of propaganda, historical revisionism, and the malleability of truth in both fiction and reality.

Propaganda is not just an authoritarian government tactic; it is an integral part of the social narrative. By pointing out that every prevailing narrative has a purpose, it challenges viewers to become critical consumers of information. Today, in a time of

political deception and media overload, *Wicked* is relevant as ever, challenging viewers to consider who controls the narratives they believe to be true.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The 1995 novel by Gregory Maguire and its following musical adaptation present a complex story that challenges dominant powers and storytelling politics. The narrative questions notions of marginalisation and propaganda and glorifies self-empowerment. This retelling provides a critical lens through the intersection of identity and power, revealing how society shapes perceptions of villainy and resistance.

The discrimination of Elphaba due to her green skin is central to the narrative and is a clear metaphor for racial and social otherness. This reflects historical and contemporary forms of exclusion and marginalisation. Her detachment and refusal to conform to societal norms position her as a threat. These systemic forces in Oz, the Wizard's army, enforce conformity and punish those who deviate from the rules already set. Their aim is to strengthen existing conventions and institutions, subjugating minorities to oppression.

The Wizard's authoritarian regime is an ideal example of the role that propaganda has in shaping public perception. By manipulating information and using fearmongering tactics, Elphaba is branded as the villain, much like real-world dictatorship-like governments that repeatedly suppress those who revolt. The fight against ideological dominance and historical revisionism is highlighted by the rebranding of Elphaba's origin narrative. *Wicked* encourages its audience to question this power-driven narrative, challenging them to grapple with existing sources that shape their understanding of history in society.

Beyond her status as a marginalised individual, Elphaba's journey from her defiance against the Wizard's rule to assertion of selfhood aligns with feminist and intersectional theories of agencies. Elphaba embodies her opposition to hegemonic

societal institutions by reclaiming her identity on her own terms. This empowerment is achieved, not entirely on her own, but through her relationships and solidarity in resistance built with Glinda and Fiyero, highlighting the importance of empowerment as a collective process.

Ultimately, *Wicked*, is more than just another retelling. It is a cultural text and underscores the importance of representation, power play, and resistance. Through its exploration in identity politics, *Wicked* dismantles the moral binalities—the mindset of good versus evil—and illustrates how villainy is often a social construct shaped by the elite. It challenges viewers to think outside of preconceived notions and complicity in systemic injustices. It calls for a re-examination of the truth as one perceives it. By focusing on the voice of a marginalised character, the musical remains a text that fosters discourse around those who inspire defiance against oppressive institutions. *Wicked*, therefore, highlights a huge transformative power in storytelling in reshaping both historical narratives and contemporary social consciousness.

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