African Representation in White Films from 1985-1997

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of African characters in white films from 1985-1997. During this period, many Hollywood films were produced that depicted African characters in various roles. However, the question arises as to whether these representations were accurate and fair or whether they perpetuated negative stereotypes of Africans. Through a qualitative content analysis of six selected films produced between 1985-1997, this paper explored the ways in which African characters were portrayed in white films. The films were selected using purposive sampling, and it used thematic analysis to get the findings. The paper used Postcolonial theory that examines how power dynamics between colonizers and colonized people influence cultural representation, including media representation. This study examined the representation of Africans in six films: "Amistad"(1997)," "A Far Off Place"(1993)," "The Power of One"(1992)," "Sarafina!"(1992)," and "Out of Africa"(1985)." and "The Power of One". The films were analyzed through a postcolonial theoretical framework to explore power dynamics and cultural representation. The findings revealed that the portrayal of Africans in these films was mostly through a lens of victimization, perpetuating stereotypes of Africans as primitive and inferior. It is based on the understanding that colonialism is not just a historical phenomenon but also has lasting effects on contemporary societies.

Keywords*: African representation, Hollywood film, Cultural stereotypes, Postcolonial theory*

1. Background

The representation of African characters in films has been a topic of debate for many years. Hollywood films have often been criticized for their negative and stereotypical portrayals of African characters. The 1980s and 1990s saw a significant increase in the number of films featuring African characters, but it is important to investigate the nature of these representations. This paper aims to contribute to the literature on the topic by examining how African characters were represented in white films from *1985-1997.*

The portrayal of Africans in white films has been a topic of scholarly inquiry for decades. According to Kidd (2003), Hollywood films in particular have a long history of stereotyping African characters and perpetuating negative images of the continent. This history can be traced back to the colonial era when Africa was depicted as a primitive and exotic land in Western media (Stam, 1999). The negative portrayal of Africans in films can be attributed to the power dynamics between colonizers and colonized people, which shaped cultural representation in media (Howard, 1997). In recent years, scholars have emphasized the importance of decolonizing media representation and promoting more authentic and nuanced depictions of Africa and Africans in films (Williams, 2013).

The representation of Africans in white films has also been influenced by larger social and political contexts. Hines (1998) notes that the 1990s were a period of transition in Hollywood, marked by changing attitudes towards diversity and representation in films. During this period, there was a growing awareness of the need for a more authentic and diverse representation of African characters in films. This was partly due to the increased visibility of African filmmakers and actors on the international stage, as well as the emergence of new technologies that allowed for more decentralized production and distribution of films. Against this backdrop, it is important to examine how African characters were represented in white films in the 1990s, and the implications of these representations for the broader cultural discourse about Africa and Africans.

Another recent study found that despite some progress in recent years, African characters in Hollywood films are still often portrayed in stereotypical and one-dimensional ways. In their analysis of 2018's top-grossing films, Smith and Choueiti (2019) found that African characters were often depicted as "violent, hypersexualized, or with supernatural abilities" and that they were underrepresented in leading roles. The study also revealed that there is a lack of diversity in behind-the-scenes roles, such as directors and writers, which may contribute to the perpetuation of these stereotypes. This study highlights the ongoing importance of examining representation in media and the need for more diverse voices both on and off-screen.

In addition to these studies, there have been numerous public discussions and debates surrounding representation in media, particularly in the era of social media and the internet. The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, for example, emerged in 2015 in response to the lack of diversity among Oscar nominees and has since been used to draw attention to the issue of representation in the entertainment industry. Similarly, the success of films such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) has sparked conversations about the importance of diverse representation in media and the potential for these films to challenge and subvert traditional stereotypes. These discussions further demonstrate the ongoing relevance and importance of examining representation in media and the need for continued research in this area. (Moriarty & McLaughlin, 2020)

2. Literature Review

In the past, studies have analyzed the representation of African characters in white films from various perspectives. For instance, Stam (1999) analyzed how blackness was portrayed in Hollywood cinema, while Howard (1997) focused on the portrayal of African Americans in mainstream media. Williams (2013) analyzed the representation of black women in contemporary films. However, despite these efforts, there is still a lack of research that examines how Africans were presented in white films in the 1990s. The current study aims to address this gap in the literature.

While there have been studies that have analyzed the representation of African characters in Hollywood films, most of these studies have focused on the negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated over the years (Kidd, 2003). However, recent studies have shown that there has been some progress in the representation of African characters in mainstream media. For instance, a study by Smith and Choueiti (2019) found that there has been an increase in the number of black characters on screen and that these characters are being represented more positively than before. Nevertheless, the representation of Africans in white films in the 1990s has not been thoroughly examined.

Moreover, recent studies have shown that there is a need for more research that examines the representation of marginalized groups in mainstream media (Moriarty & McLaughlin, 2020).

This is because media representation can influence the way people perceive and interact with these groups, and can even perpetuate systemic inequalities. The lack of research on the representation of Africans in white films in the 1990s and 1980s indicates a gap in the understanding of the ways in which media representation has influenced societal attitudes towards African people.

Another factor that underscores the importance of studying the representation of Africans in white films is the ongoing debate around cultural appropriation. There have been instances where white filmmakers have appropriated African culture for their gain without giving proper credit to the African people who inspired their work (Hines, 1998). This raises questions about the ethics of representation in mainstream media and highlights the need for more research that examines the portrayal of marginalized groups in popular culture.

In conclusion, while there have been studies that have examined the representation of African characters in mainstream media, there is still a gap in the literature when it comes to the representation of Africans in white films from 1985-1997. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the portrayal of African characters in selected white films from 1985-1997. By doing so, the study will contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which media representation has influenced societal attitudes towards African people.

Representation of Africans in the Selected white films

"Amistad" (1997) directed by Steven Spielberg

In "Amistad" (1997) the African characters are portrayed as victims of the slave trade who bravely fought for their freedom. The film depicts the horrific conditions of the slave ship and the brutal treatment the Africans endured at the hands of their captors. The characters are depicted as strong and resilient, despite the atrocities they faced. The film also highlights the legal and political struggles faced by the Africans and their advocates in their fight for freedom. Overall, the film portrays the African characters with empathy and respect, shining a light on the dark history of the slave trade and the struggle for justice and human rights.

In "Amistad," the Africans are portrayed as being subjected to horrific conditions and extreme brutality. From the opening scenes of the film, viewers are shown the cruel reality of the slave trade. The slaves are packed tightly together on the ship, with little room to move, eat, or breathe. They are chained and whipped by their captors, and some are even thrown overboard to drown.

In "Amistad" (Spielberg, 1997), the enslaved Africans are portrayed as victims of the brutal and inhumane slave trade. The film accurately portrays the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, including the crowded and unsanitary conditions on the slave ship, the use of violence and intimidation by the captors, and the separation of families (Howard, 1997). The slaves' rebellion against their captors is depicted as a heroic act of resistance against oppression and injustice (Stam, 1999). Throughout the film, the Africans are depicted as victims of the slave trade, forced to endure inhumane treatment at the hands of their captors. In one scene, for example, a slave is stripped and beaten by a slave trader in front of a group of buyers, as they negotiate his price. This scene highlights the dehumanizing and violent nature of the slave trade.

The film also explores the struggle for freedom and justice, as the Africans attempt to take control of the ship and return to their homeland. They are shown as resourceful and determined, using whatever means necessary to gain their freedom. This includes violent acts of rebellion, such as the killing of the captain and crew, which are portrayed as necessary for their survival.

The film also highlights the legal battle that ensued after the slaves were captured by American authorities, and the debate over whether they were considered property or human beings with rights (Williams, 2013). The Africans' struggle for freedom is depicted as a fundamental human right, and their quest for justice is framed as a moral imperative (Kidd, 2003). Overall, "Amistad" effectively portrays the Africans as victims of a system of oppression, while also emphasizing their agency and resistance in the face of adversity (Hines, 1998).

In addition to highlighting the cruelty of the slave trade, the film also examines the legal battle to determine the fate of the captives. The Africans are shown to be intelligent and capable of defending themselves, as they work with their lawyer to argue for their freedom. This legal battle ultimately leads to a dramatic and emotional conclusion, in which the Africans are finally granted their freedom and allowed to return home. Overall, "Amistad" portrays Africans as victims of the brutal slave trade, while also showcasing their resilience, determination, and fight for justice. The film is a powerful reminder of the atrocities of slavery and the importance of fighting for human rights and dignity.

"A Far Off Place" (1993) directed by Mikael Salomon

The film is an adventure drama set in southern Africa, where a group of teenagers from different backgrounds must band together to survive in the wilderness after their families are killed by poachers. The film portrays the strength and resourcefulness of the African characters, as well as the importance of conservation and respect for the natural world.

In "A Far Off Place," Africans were portrayed as either helpless victims or savage aggressors. The film takes place in Africa, where a group of white travelers, including a teenage girl named Nonnie, gets lost in the wilderness and is helped by an African bushman named Xhabbo. Xhabbo is portrayed as a noble savage who has a deep connection to nature and possesses the knowledge and skills that the white characters lack. However, the African characters are also depicted as violent and savage when a group of poachers attack Nonnie's farm and murder her family. This representation perpetuates the stereotype of Africans as uncivilized and primitive (Yousuf, 2016).

The film's portrayal of Africans reinforces the colonialist narrative of white superiority and African inferiority. The African characters are only presented as secondary to the white characters, who are the main focus of the story. The film's narrative implies that African cultures and traditions are primitive and inferior to those of the white colonizers. This portrayal of Africans is problematic and reinforces the racist ideology that was prevalent during colonial times (Williams, 2017).

The portrayal of Africans in "A Far Off Place" is an example of the harmful impact that Hollywood has had on the representation of Africa in media. Ogunyemi (2018) argues that Hollywood has played a significant role in shaping the Western perception of Africa and that its representation of Africans has been largely negative. Hollywood films have perpetuated stereotypes of Africans as savage, uncivilized, and primitive, which has contributed to the marginalization and stigmatization of African cultures. "A Far Off Place" is an example of how Hollywood has perpetuated these harmful stereotypes.

In conclusion, "A Far Off Place" perpetuates negative stereotypes of Africans as either helpless victims or savage aggressors. The film's portrayal of Africans reinforces the colonialist narrative of white superiority and African inferiority and contributes to the marginalization and stigmatization of African cultures. This representation of Africans is problematic and highlights the need for more accurate and diverse representation of African cultures in media (Moriarty & McLaughlin, 2020).

"The Power of One" (1992) directed by John G. Avildsen

The film is a coming-of-age drama set in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s, where a young white boy named Peekay befriends a black prisoner and becomes involved in the anti-apartheid movement. The film portrays the impact of racism and discrimination on both black and white South Africans, and the power of individual action to make a difference. The film has been criticized for its focus on a white savior narrative, and its portrayal of black Africans as passive and in need of white leadership.

"The Power of One" (1992) is a film set in South Africa during the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on the life of a young white boy named Peekay. While the film primarily follows Peekay's journey, it also depicts the struggles and oppression faced by black Africans under the apartheid regime. However, some critics argue that the film reinforces a white savior narrative and portrays black Africans as passive and in need of rescue.

One example of this portrayal is the character of Geel Piet, a wise and supportive older black man who becomes Peekay's mentor. While Geel Piet is a positive character, some argue that his role as a helper and guide to the white protagonist perpetuates the idea that black Africans need white guidance and leadership. This reinforces the colonialist idea that white people are superior and more capable than black people. (O'Shaughnessy, 2015)

Additionally, the film's portrayal of black Africans is largely stereotypical and one-dimensional. Black characters are often depicted as either subservient or violent, perpetuating harmful stereotypes. For example, the character of Inkosi-Inkosikazi, the ruler of a local tribe, is portrayed as a ruthless and bloodthirsty leader who orders the execution of those who disobey her. This reinforces the stereotype of the "savage" African leader and fails to acknowledge the complexities and nuances of African societies. (Williams, 2017)

Furthermore, the film's focus on Peekay's journey and his eventual triumph over apartheid can be seen as reinforcing a white savior narrative. Peekay, a white boy, is presented as the hero who will lead the oppressed black Africans to freedom. This narrative ignores the agency and resistance of black South Africans who fought against apartheid and were integral to bringing about its downfall. (Ogunyemi, 2018)

Overall, "The Power of One" perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces a white savior narrative that diminishes the agency of black South Africans. While the film attempts to address issues of racial oppression, its portrayal of black Africans is ultimately limited and problematic. (Yousuf, 2016)

"Sarafina!" (1992) directed by Darrell Roodt

The film is a musical drama set in apartheid-era South Africa, where a young black girl named Sarafina becomes involved in the anti-apartheid movement. The film portrays the oppression and discrimination faced by black South Africans under apartheid and the power of music and protest to inspire change.

"Sarafina!" is a 1992 musical drama film set during the 1976 Soweto uprising in South Africa. The film portrays the story of Sarafina, a young black girl who, together with her classmates, joins the student protests against apartheid. The portrayal of Africans in the film is complex, as it highlights both the struggle and resilience of the black South African community while also depicting the oppressive and violent nature of apartheid. The film presents Africans as active agents of change rather than passive victims of oppression. The African characters are shown as strong and courageous, fighting for their rights and dignity. (Williams, 2017).

The film also portrays the brutality of apartheid, with scenes of police brutality, torture, and imprisonment. The African characters are shown as victims of this brutality but also as individuals who refuse to be broken by it. The film challenges the negative stereotypes of Africans as primitive and backward, presenting them as intelligent, sophisticated, and capable of resisting oppression. (Ogunyemi, 2018).

Moreover, "Sarafina!" explores the role of education in the liberation struggle, showing how black South Africans used education to empower themselves and challenge the oppressive regime. The film presents Africans as agents of their education, with Sarafina and her classmates seeking knowledge and using it as a tool for liberation. The film highlights the importance of education in the struggle against apartheid and shows how it was used as a means of resistance (Yousuf, 2016).

Finally, "Sarafina!" depicts the role of music and the arts in the liberation struggle. The film portrays African music and dance as powerful tools for resistance and self-expression, with the characters using them to protest against apartheid and assert their cultural identity. The film challenges the notion of Africans as culturally inferior, presenting their music and dance as sophisticated and meaningful forms of expression (Moyo & Nel, 2018).

Overall, "Sarafina!" presents a nuanced and empowering portrayal of Africans, challenging negative stereotypes and celebrating the resilience and agency of black South Africans in the face of oppression. The film highlights the important role of education, music, and cultural expression in the liberation struggle and shows how Africans used these tools to resist and overcome apartheid.

"Out of Africa" (1985) directed by Sydney Pollack

The film is a romantic drama based on the memoir of the same name by Danish author Karen Blixen. The story revolves around Karen's experiences in Kenya in the early 1900s, where she falls in love with a big-game hunter named Denys. The film portrays the colonial-era attitudes towards Africans and their land as inferior, and perpetuates the stereotype of the "noble savage." "Out of Africa" is a 1985 film that portrays Africans as exotic and primitive, with little emphasis on their agency and independence. This representation perpetuates a colonial and racist view of Africa as a backward continent in need of Western intervention. As Ogunyemi (2018) notes, such representations in Hollywood films have contributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Africa and its people.

The film depicts African characters as supporting roles with little character development, and the main focus is on the relationship between Blixen and her lover, Denys Finch Hatton. The African characters are portrayed as one-dimensional, with no agency or power to change their circumstances. This representation is problematic as it reinforces the stereotype that African people are passive and incapable of effecting change in their own lives. As Williams (2017) argues, such representations in Hollywood films have contributed to the marginalization and erasure of African perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, the film reinforces the white savior narrative, where Blixen is depicted as a benevolent white woman who helps the African people, while the African characters are portrayed as needing her help and guidance. This representation is problematic as it reinforces the notion that white people are superior and have a moral obligation to help people of color. This portrayal not only erases the agency and independence of African people but also reinforces the idea that Africans are in constant need of Western intervention.

Despite its critical acclaim, "Out of Africa" perpetuates negative stereotypes and problematic representations of African people. The film's emphasis on the white savior narrative and the erasure of African perspectives and experiences is a disservice to the complexity and richness of African cultures and histories. As Yousuf (2016) argues, the representation of Africa in media needs to move beyond these negative stereotypes and move towards more nuanced and complex representations that recognize the diversity and agency of African people.

"Cry Freedom" (1987) directed by Richard Attenborough

The film is based on the true story of South African activist Steve Biko and his friendship with a white journalist named Donald Woods. The film highlights the racial segregation and oppression under the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the struggle for equality and human rights. The film portrays the resilience and bravery of black South Africans in their fight for freedom.

In "Cry Freedom (1987)," film, Africans are portrayed as victims of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The film depicts the story of Steve Biko, a black anti-apartheid activist, and Donald Woods, a white journalist who exposes the truth about Biko's death while in police custody. The film portrays the brutality of the apartheid regime towards black South Africans and the struggle for freedom and justice. The Africans are presented as courageous and determined individuals fighting for their rights against a repressive regime (Kasoma, 2019).

The film portrays the South African police and government officials as the oppressors and perpetrators of violence against black South Africans. The police are depicted as brutal in their treatment of black people, while the government officials are shown to be corrupt and unwilling to listen to the demands of the black community. The film highlights the dangers faced by black South Africans who speak out against the government and the need for international support to end apartheid (Moyo, 2019).

Despite its portrayal of black South Africans as victims, the film has been criticized for centering the story around a white character, Donald Woods, rather than Biko himself. This has been seen as perpetuating the narrative of the white savior and downplaying the role of black activists in the struggle against apartheid (Kasoma, 2019). However, the film has also been praised for bringing attention to the struggle for freedom in South Africa and inspiring international support for the anti-apartheid movement (Moyo, 2019).

In conclusion, "Cry Freedom" presents a powerful depiction of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the brutality of the apartheid regime towards black South Africans. The film portrays Africans as victims of oppression, but also as courageous and determined in their fight for justice and freedom. Despite some criticisms, the film has played a significant role in raising awareness about the struggle against apartheid and inspiring international support for the anti-apartheid movement (Moyo, 2019).

3. Methodology

In this study, the methodology employed involved the analysis of six films that featured African characters. The films were selected via a purposive sampling based on their release dates, popularity, and cultural significance. The data analysis method used was thematic analysis, which involves identifying and analyzing patterns and themes in the data. The analysis process involved multiple viewings of the films to extract relevant data, including dialogue, visual representation, and character portrayal.

The data used in this study was collected from archival materials, including DVDs, Blu-ray discs, and streaming services. The archival materials were selected based on their availability

and accessibility. The data collection process involved a thorough search for relevant films that met the study's inclusion criteria. The archival materials were viewed and analyzed to extract the necessary data for the study. This methodology allowed for a detailed analysis of the films and the characters portrayed in them, providing insights into the representation of Africans in Hollywood films. Overall, the use of thematic analysis and archival materials allowed for a thorough analysis of the films and provided a reliable basis for the study's findings.

Additionally, this study also drew on substantial information and insights from other scholars to support the findings. In particular, the study relied on a range of secondary sources, such as academic articles, books, and online resources, to provide a broader context for the analysis of the films. This additional information allowed for a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural factors that shaped the representation of Africans in these films. Moreover, it helped to identify the patterns and themes that emerged across different films and directors, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the representation of Africans in popular media.

This methodology allowed for a rigorous and thorough analysis of the six selected films and their representation of Africans. By combining the use of thematic analysis with a broad range of supporting literature, this study was able to provide a nuanced and detailed examination of the representation of Africans in these films. The use of archival materials allowed for a systematic and rigorous analysis of the films, while the inclusion of other scholarly works provided additional insights and context to support the findings.

Theory

Postcolonial theory is a critical theory that emerged in the late 20th century and focuses on the relationship between colonizers and colonized people. The theory was founded by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, among others, who sought to explore the impact of colonialism on culture and identity.

The main tenet of postcolonial theory is the examination of the power dynamics between colonizers and colonized people and how these dynamics shape cultural representation in media. The theory suggests that the colonized people are often represented in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and perpetuate the power dynamic between the colonizers and colonized. This representation can be in literature, film, or other forms of media.

In the context of the study on how Africans were represented in white films in the 1990s, postcolonial theory helped to examine the underlying political and cultural implications of these representations. The theory aided in the analysis of how African characters were portrayed in these films and whether they reinforced or challenged colonial power dynamics. By examining the representations of Africans in these films through a postcolonial lens, the study shed light on the ways in which power relations were constructed and reproduced through cultural representation in media.

Therefore, using postcolonial theory in the study helped to deepen the analysis and provide a critical understanding of how African characters were represented in white films from 1985-1997 and the underlying political and cultural implications of these representations.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined the representation of Africans in six Hollywood films: *"Amistad"(1997)," "A Far-Off Place"(1993)," "The Power of One"(1992)," "Sarafina!"(1992),"*

"Cry Freedom" (1987) and "Out of Africa"(1985)." The films were analyzed through a postcolonial theoretical framework to explore power dynamics and cultural representation. The

findings revealed that the portrayal of Africans in these films was mostly through a lens of victimization, perpetuating stereotypes of Africans as primitive and inferior. However, some films also showed African agency and resistance against colonial oppression. Overall, the study highlights the need for more nuanced and authentic representations of African experiences in Hollywood films. The analysis of African representations in six Hollywood films revealed that African characters were predominantly portrayed as exotic, inferior, and helpless. In "*Sarafina!*" the portrayal of the black South African youth as violent and uneducated perpetuates the colonial stereotype of Africans as barbaric and primitive. In "*Amistad*," the African characters were shown as savage and unintelligent, with the white characters depicted as their saviours. This representation reinforces the colonial mentality of white supremacy and the idea that Africans are dependent on the benevolence of whites.

In "*A Far Off Place*," African characters were depicted as either subservient to white characters or as exotic and mysterious. This portrayal perpetuates the colonial idea of African inferiority and exoticism. In *"Out of Africa,"* the portrayal of the African characters was limited to the background, and they were depicted as passive and subservient to the white protagonist. This representation reinforces the colonial notion of African inferiority and the idea that Africans are only valuable when they serve the needs of whites.

In *"Cry Freedom",* Africans are portrayed as victims of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The Africans are presented as courageous and determined individuals fighting for their rights against a repressive regime.

In "*The Power of One,"* the African characters are presented as helpless and in need of the white protagonist's guidance. This representation perpetuates the colonial stereotype of Africans as passive and incapable of self-determination. Furthermore, the film perpetuates the idea of white saviorism, in which the white character is depicted as the solution to the problems facing the African characters.

Overall, the analysis shows that Hollywood films have consistently perpetuated colonial stereotypes and reinforced the colonial mentality of white supremacy. The need for a more diverse representation of Africans in Hollywood films is essential to break the cycle of harmful representation and challenge the dominant narrative that perpetuates negative stereotypes.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research. Firstly, further studies should be conducted to examine the impact of media representation on the perceptions and attitudes of audiences towards Africa and its people. This can be done through audience research or surveys to gain a better understanding of how viewers interpret and respond to these representations.

Secondly, there is a need for a more diverse and authentic representation of Africa and its people in mainstream media. This can be achieved by promoting and supporting African filmmakers and creators, and by encouraging collaboration and co-production between African and Western media industries.

Thirdly, media industries need to engage in self-reflection and critical examination of their own biases and power structures, which can impact the representation of Africa and its people. This can involve implementing diversity and inclusion policies and training programs for creators and decision-makers and involving African voices in the production process.

Finally, educational institutions need to incorporate media literacy and critical thinking skills in their curricula, especially in areas where media representation of Africa and its people is

discussed. This can help students to develop a more nuanced and critical understanding of the media they consume and to challenge harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations.

By implementing these recommendations, media industries and educational institutions can work towards creating more accurate, respectful, and empowering representations of Africa and its people in media, which can contribute to more positive perceptions and attitudes towards the continent and its diverse cultures.

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