

**FILMIC REPRESENTATION IN
POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE:
A Study of Selected Film Texts**

Emeka Dibia Emelobe

Department of Media Studies and Mass Communication
Western Delta University
Oghara, Delta State, Nigeria.

Introduction

Representation is presently a much debated topic not only in postcolonial studies and academia, but in the larger cultural milieu. Representation can be material reproductions, performance and simulations. It can be seen as the act of stating facts in order to influence the action of others. Similarly, the word has political undertones. Politicians are thought to represent a constituency. By implication, they stand in for others. So above all, the term representation has a semiotic meaning in that something is standing for something else. These various, yet related, definitions are implicated in the public debate about representation.

Representations come in various forms: films, television, photograph, painting, adverts, and other forms of popular culture. Written literature such as academic texts, novels and other journalistic pieces are also important forms of representation. However, representation can never really be natural depiction of the represented as rightly observed by Augusto Boal (22), instead, they are constructed images which need to be interrogated for their accuracy.

Over the years, representation of an under-represented group is often over-charged with allegorical significance. The western world's view of Africa is often marginalised and subjective.

According to Bohannan:

Africa has, for many generations now, been viewed

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through a web of myth so glib that understanding it becomes a twofold task: The task of clarifying the myth and the separate task of examining whatever reality has been hidden behind it. (3)

Bohannan goes on to say that until precision and thoroughness are integrated into research on any African issue, the true identity of Africa will remain a myth. It goes without saying that since representations of Africa (or the colonised) are limited, the few available are thought to be representative of all marginalised people. Also, the few images are thought to be typical, thus it is assumed that a dark complexioned man can stand in for a whole continent of dark complexioned men.

Bahannan's assertion seems appropriate to describe on the one hand, the tremendous speed with which the western media misrepresents Africa, and secondly, how thorough examination and re-orientation are vital weapons towards the re-invigoration of Africa's identity. Representation affects the ways in which actual individuals are perceived. They are meant to relay messages, influence opinions and actions. Representation or images formed in the mind have vast implications for real people in real context. The works of postcolonial writers and artists attest to the continual attempts to counter all colonial subversions.

In *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Soyinka elaborates clearly that Africa is a cultural entity, a world of itself with its history, its social neurosis, and its value system. He goes on to say that literature and all works of art inspired by an African world perspective can approach, in contemporary relevance and significance, European and Arabic literatures which have been forged on Biblical, Islamic and classical European foundation.

The preceding assertion underscores the need to project Africa's identity through literary criticism. Similarly, Achebe as quoted in Killam (8) rightly observes that;

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans... they had poetry and above all, they had dignity... the (postcolonial) writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, when they lost.

It is obvious that representations are much more than plain likeness. They are in a sense ideological tools that can serve to re-inforce systems of inequality and subordination. They can help sustain colonialist or neo-colonialist projects. For instance, Hollywood's representations of Africa are largely misguided. Their movies and literature place Africa at a one-dimensional stereotype based on their preconceived notions. These notions, as we have pointed out, are mostly negative, primordial, biased and unbalanced. It is true that some nations in Africa are experiencing instability, hunger and other existential problems, but this is not the total picture. Africa may not be technologically advanced, yet some areas of its existence; family sociology and communal decency, are first rate superior and highly sophisticated.

Therefore, it is the attempt to project a true image, to rediscover lost or submerged identities and cultures that mark the signpost of combative cultural representation by many postcolonial writers. On the African continent, postcolonial resistance through writing has been on course from inception with the writings of Tutuola, Achebe, Soyinka, Nwapa, Sutherland, Osofisan, Sembene, and many others. These writers have been involved in the Herculean task of demystifying the myth wrapping Africa's true image. This quest has led writers and artists into romance with different ideologies and literary and performance movements. For instance, in order to counter the superiority of Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus and other western deities in classical literature, African writers advanced out and appropriated the essences of Ogun, Amadioha,

Sango as well as legendary figures like Amina, Kurumi, and Shaka. These deific essences as well as other diversified festivals formed the facade for indigenous representation.

Literature, cinema and other forms of representation can function as significant medium of change and development. They function as tools of cultural exchange, which brings about value modification. As Okome rightly points out:

So perverse was the influence of American gangster films on the local (African) people that names, modes of dress, and general physical comportment approximate to the heroic styles of these (foreign) movies. (33)

Therefore, motion pictures (film, television, etc) are more than technological construct. They are symbols of power, which can be utilised to condition the minds of the audience.

Thus, it is the attempt to project a true image that brings about the issue of resistance. Over the years, textual resistance to colonialist misrepresentation has taken many forms: from the revolt era led by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), to a contemporary practice of counter-colonial discourse initiated by Bill Ashcroft and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (1989). Fanon's views dwell chiefly on 'revolt' as suitable and ultimate weaponry in the process of decolonisation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon identifies the rate at which the coloniser transforms (amidst trampling on) the native colonised values and social ethos, and advocates for;

... a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonist (whereby the colonized should)... use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence. (28)

Such violent form of resistance is exemplified in the various pre-independence resistance and unrests across Africa. The Mau Mau movement in Kenya still remains one of the most effective anti-colonialist movements in Africa (Ngugi 1986). Though its success was short-lived, its assertiveness in combating oppressive influences was quite commendable.

In contemporary times, however, such physical combat may be termed barbaric and uncivilised, especially with the on-going globalisation agenda of world powers. Thus, the need to project indigenous identities has taken many alternative patterns. For instance, Helen Tiffin develops a strategy which involves;

A mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and expressing of its underlying assumptions and the dismantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'. (98)

From the densely populated 'Dark continent' and indeed the entire colonised nations, writers have continued to engage themselves with issues concerning identity. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) demonstrates a futile native resistance to British Imperialism. Okonkwo, the protagonist, symbolises the many voices of natives who challenged the colonial status quo even till their defeat. Similarly in her analysis of Credo Mutwa's *Unosilimela* (1973), Yao-kun Lui (60) opines that the play's thematic preoccupation extensively

...enhance the glory of African culture and pride in African heritage, seeks to discover and re-establish African civilization and promotes African dignity, self-assertion and consciousness.

One of the major thrusts of postcolonial criticism is the clash of cultures. The wide scale of problems resulting from such clashes

can be regarded as a major theme in postcolonial works. For centuries, the colonialists forced their values on their hosts. Thus decolonisation is a process of change. In other words, it is an attempt (or series of attempts) to regain what Fanon labeled "*a veritable creation of new men*" (28). As generations had lived under the oppression of imperialism they had more or less adopted western foreign values. The challenge therefore is to find indigenous ways of inscribing their different identities.

The preceding motion underscores the fact that postcolonial criticism is a process of utilising the power of language (and other non-combatant media of representation) more than the use of military violence. Language and the media are intellectual means by which postcolonial communication and reflection take place. This is essentially important as most colonial powers tend to integrate their language and other media in indigenous societies. In more specific terms, a lot of African books and works of art that can be attached to the era of postcolonialism, for instance, are done in English or French. Thus, the cross-border exchange of thought and technology from both the colonised and the coloniser is supported by the use of a shared medium of communication.

To give an explicit conclusion, one might say that postcolonial criticism is a vivid discussion about what happened with the colonial thinking at the end of the colonial era. What legacy arose from this era? What economic and socio-cultural consequences could be seen, and are still visible in the present dispensation? In their contexts, one examines alternative experiences of representation, suppression and resistance. While doing so, both the colonising and the colonised cultures are taken into consideration and related to each other. The main target of postcolonial criticism is to review and to deconstruct one-sided, worn-out western attitudes in a lively discussion of the viability of Africa films, literature, etc, in putting up combat with the western subjugation theories.

(Mis-)Representation: The Hollywood Paradigm

In order to study the politics of misrepresentation of Africa in Hollywood films, one has to understand the socio-historical context of the arrival of the moving image in Africa. Film, is itself a very recent concept. The Lumiere brothers invented Cinema in an era when the western world was consolidating its colonial expansion (Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (ed) 2004). Thus, Cinema emerged in the context of a lasting Eurocentric philosophical discourse that viewed non-whites especially Africans and their lands, as animals and empty spaces to be conquered. According to Stam and Spencer,

Since the beginning of Cinema coincided with the height of European imperialism, it is hardly surprising that European Cinema portray(ed) the colonized in an unflattering light. (817)

In other words, it is obvious that such filmic representation is much more than plain or mere art. It is, in a sense, an ideological tool that can serve to enforce systems of inequality and subordination. Also, since the power of film lies in its ability to either improve or destroy perception, the 'African' produced by 'Hollywood cameras' is exactly the kind of 'African' invented and crafted by a racist rhetoric and philosophical tradition. The effects of such representation are highly abysmal. As Olusola (171) opines:

Foreign indoctrinated film language burrows itself into the sub-conscious of the black African, and he sees his own development in terms of that of a foreign culture.

It is worthy of note here that the problem of Hollywood representation of Africa in films is not really that of the legitimacy of the representation, but the discourse behind it. The continent and people represented are in fact imagined and invented.

Furthermore, early images of Africa on screen were not only those of misrepresentation or appropriation of African identity, but early films shot and shown in Africa were part of the colonial endeavor, contributing to the implementation and solidification of colonial policies in general. As Nwachukwu Ukadike rightly puts it:

Cinema came to Africa as a potent organ of colonialism... Films proved to be a powerful tool for indoctrinating Africans into foreign cultures, including their ideals and aesthetics. (8)

Let us also state that as far as Eurocentric motivated films about Africa are concerned, there is no other starting point than the fabrication of Western explorers and their literary associates, whose exotic tales of savage Africans and the burden carried by Europe in her civilisation mission became subject of such films. If Griffith, through cinematic representations, justified slavery and oppression unleashed on Black Americans, his British Counterparts scattered throughout Africa justified colonial rule in Africa. Also, recent Hollywood productions about Africa have continued to misrepresent Africa. A film like *Wild Geese* (A 1978 Hollywood War epic directed by Andrews Mclaglen) inherits the conventions of anti-Indian Western and extends them to Africa. According to Stam and Louise:

This glorification of the role of the white mercenaries in Africa makes the mercenaries... the central focus of our sympathy... killing Africans en masse... (And) white Europe's right to determine Africa's political destiny ...is simply assumed throughout the film. (885)

In *Wild Geese*, Europeans stand at the apex, while Africans are treated as comically dispensable and relegated to the periphery. Even when Africans are elevated to influential positions, the

European is always present to guide their actions. This is equally the case with *Tears of the Sun*, a Hollywood version of Nigeria/Biafra war in Nigeria.

It is within this context of monolithic misrepresentations of Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular that Antoine Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun* shall be evaluated.

In the action- adventure Hollywood film, Lt. A.K. Waters (Bruce Willis), the leader of a United States' Navy SEAL, and his unit are assigned to rescue Dr Lina Kendricks (Monica Bellucci) and her medical team from an Igbo-speaking part of Nigeria due to an inter- tribal violence in the country.

However, Lena foils the heroic rescue attempt by refusing to leave without a group of seventy African (Igbo) refugees. Rather, she implores Waters to escort them on a dangerous trek through the dense jungle to the nearby border of Cameroon. During the journey, Waters discovers that among his refugees is the future leader of a democratic Nigeria, and that he is being pursued by a relentless platoon commanded by Col. Idris Sadique (Malick Bowens). This further endangers the troop's already hazardous mission. However, Waters' resolves to ignore military orders, and coupled with his growing feelings for Lena, he is propelled lead the helpless Africans to safety.

Basically, *Tears of the Sun* presents us with a typical Hollywood filmic representation of events in Africa. In the first instance, it is the peculiar story of America's valor and self- sacrifice in Africa, West Indies and Asian nations. Secondly, the film seems so far removed from the real world – though the plot is rooted in history – that it amounts to a sort of opium dream of heroism, a collective fantasy which blurs the audience's understanding of the events portrayed.

The film begins in a historical premise, with actual footage of a civilian being shot many times by a Nigerian army officer at close range during the early stage of the conflict. However, subsequent

scenes do not permit the viewer to identity with the remote causes of the violence. Clearly, the given circumstance (the clashes between the Eastern region and the rest of the country) is explicitly shown, but its development leaves much to be desired.

In fact, not only that *Tears of the sun* misinterprets history, it equally suffers huge technical problems. The plot seems so weak and highly illogical to the extent that the entire spectacle appears fabulous. For instance, it takes Fuqua almost forty minutes to move the refugees from their hide out to safety. We get shot after shot of people contemplating their navels, rainforests, waterfalls, more contemplation, lizards that look like Gila monsters, rain, more contemplation- it is almost unending.

The rest of the film is Waters and his squad trying to get everyone to safety, fighting-off the marauding hordes, and there appears to be thousands. All the while Waters' squad never runs out of ammunition, despite firing thousands of rounds at their pursuers. But then, *Tears of the sun* is a Hollywood venture about Africa. And only in a Hollywood war could a seven man squad elude thousands of pursuers who known exactly where they are!

(Re-)Presenting Indigeneous Experiences

Jeta Amata's *The Amazing Grace* fictionally captures the earliest contact between Europe and Africa in a riverine community, south-south region of Nigeria. The film revolves around the imperial activities of Captain John Newton, a British slave- merchant, and his crew in an Efik-speaking area of Cross River State, Nigeria. Aided by a resolute suspended Captain, Oliver (Scott Clererdon), and a handful of Africans, Newton raided villages and clans, taking captives and killing those who refuse to comply.

Despite all oppositions mounted and sustained by the natives (especially Etim), John Newton leaves the Nigerian coast with a ship load of slaves. However, not long into the journey, a violent storm brings Newton to the point of death and causes him to re-

evaluate his life. He finally renounces slave trading, and most importantly, turned a native hymn into the popular English hymn; *"The Amazing Grace"*.

As the film opens we hear the voice of the narrator, Maria Davies (Joke Silva), from whose perspective we are supposed to see the film. She describes the state of affairs in her community before the entrance of the Europeans in these lines;

We were a free people, people who make their choices, where to be and how to be. Though we had no mirrors, no gunpowder, no tobacco, no gin, no fancy western clothes. But we were satisfied. Up until the day the ship (European slave traders) arrived.

The voice of Maria Davies with its high-eloquence suspends our expectations of a fictionalised historical narrative and we immediately accept the way in which we are invited to see the film. This perspective becomes a standpoint upon which the issue of imperialism is discussed.

In the course of the film, one discovers that the slave traders' presence in Calabar (Nigeria) brought catastrophe in all the sectors of the community. According to the narrator:

There were talks of people disappearing, mothers weeping over the loss of their child, Fathers pondering over the funeral of a son whose body could not be found.

This relationship, not only boosted Europe and developed America, also, Africa was plunged into a state of underdevelopment (Rodney 1973). The impression of all European characters about Africans in the film is that of mere savages. Though some characters (Simons and Oliver) tend to view some positive aspects of the natives, yet they do not hesitate to re-affirm their superiority over Africans. For instance, despite Simon's offer to assist a sick slave,

his initial description of a young slave girl was nothing but a *"filthy witch"*. In a similar situation, though Newton eventually realises that the African (A slave girl known as Ansa) is *"one of God's holy children"* like him; he had earlier classified them as *"common savages"*. In fact, the following dialogue between Captain John Newton and Oliver summarises Europe's impression of Africans, in a most explicit way:

John: That is what they are, "Not made in God's image"

Oliver: And you sir?

John: I am human, and an Englishman, as are you sir.

Oliver: Don't try to protect your morality by thinking these 'poor fools' as less than you are.

John: I beg your pardon?

Oliver: Do they breathe a different air than you breathe?

John: Animals breathe the same air.

Oliver: Do they talk'

John: "Parrots talk"

Oliver: Do animals hide their nakedness, do animals betray each other for bottles of gin; do they capture their innocence simply because they can.

John: I pray that you are wrong sir, for why would God permit such, were it not that "our actions will take these unblessed creatures closer to salvation".

From the above dialogue, we discover a pre-conceived negative perception that characterised the relationship between native Africans and their colonial masters- a relationship which places Africa at the periphery, while Europe progressed towards development. In fact, even after the West withdrew its physical and overt domination; it put back even more deadly means of binding Africa to itself.

Europe has continued to champion theories of development and concepts of social organisation with itself as the center of

reference. Globalisation, global village, homogenisation, etc. are examples. The attendant problems and contradictions in these theories, such as ethnic identities, gender conflicts and class consciousness, which results in series of Conflicts (as in Hutu-Tutsi conflict), are meant to frustrate the collective efforts of Africans towards their own development. They leave Africa with no choice than to turn to the west, first for weapons of war against each other and next, for conflict resolution in the event of an impasse.

Certainly, the continued reliance of Africa on the West for peace plans and development packages create the 'dependency syndrome', which contradicts the very notion of her independence and results in underdevelopment in African countries. This does not, in any way rule out the necessity of partnership with the West in development. *The Amazing Grace* showcases this fact in the voluntary labour strategy reached by Etim and Newton. Through this process, the natives reserve the right to offer their services to Europe, or decline from doing so. This position implies that Africans still retain their independence to decide and control the direction of development they want to take.

Conclusion

The process of decolonisation, at the very least, enables one to appreciate better the fundamental and long-term nature of Africa's development crisis. According to Ade Ajayi

Failure to decolonize meant, in fact, failure to confront the past, make amends, and make repairs. It implies a carry-over of the disabilities from the slave trade era to the colonial period, and from the colonial period into the period of independence.
(307)

To decolonize therefore, involves the process or ways of confronting Africa's past more realistically, and the process of

rejuvenation through education, orientation, production of works of art and critical theses, as well as cultivation of self-esteem.

The first step towards this process is a realistic appraisal and documentation of the underlying causes of underdevelopment in Africa. No doubt, commendable efforts are springing up from scholars across the continent, who publish well researched documents on Africa's history which most often negate the large deposit of distorted and one - dimensional materials made available by western Historians and Anthropologists. African filmmakers are not left out in this cultural rejuvenation process. Thus, the likes of Late Ousmane Sembene, Ola Balogun, and more recently, Jeta Amata and Tunde Kelani are in the fore front initiating change..

Jeta Amata's *The Amazing Grace* presents the points of view of African individuals, the exploitation of the native population, and the privileged life and prejudices of the colonisers. It equally showcases the use of force and scholarly knowledge by the colonisers to get control of the land they want to conquer. The collaboration of some native (quasi-) elites with the merchants is made evident. Also different forms of resistance on the part of the native population are explicitly shown.

Let us re-emphasise the fact that the art of Cinema (filmmaking) is a western invention, fundamentally alien to Africa, and as such, certain conditions that lead to the application of filmic techniques in *The Amazing Grace*, may be considered laughable and out of place. However, the film demonstrates a commendable attempt by an indigenous filmmaker to interrogate Africa's colonial past, especially the slave trade, with a view of confronting the causes of underdevelopment in various sectors of African communities. Though *The Amazing Grace* does not purport to be a documentary or truthful rendering of Africa's past, nevertheless, it presents fascinating images, projecting to the western spectators the effect of European imperialism in Africa. These films provide concrete examples of what colonisation meant, that is, the importation of

western traditions through force, as well as dismantling of native/indigenous traditions through the institutionalisation of the western-based value system.

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