

# Misnaming Africa: Dehumanising Images of Africa in *Twelve Years a Slave* and *The Good Lie*

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## Abstract

Since the advent of slavery and colonial rule, Africa has been portrayed as a dark continent, hence slavery and colonialism were said to be on a civilising mission. Colonial administrators were responsible for disseminating ideas that dehumanise Africa. Since the acquiring of freedom of Africans, including those in the diaspora, the media have been used to maintain dichotomies that existed prior to the liberation of Africa. Against this background, the total emancipation of the mind and spirit of Black people on the continent and in the diaspora becomes urgent and inevitable. Deploying Afrocentricity, this paper explores the portrayal of Black people in the movies, *Twelve Years a Slave* (2003) and *The Good Lie* (2014). It revolves around interrogating the various images of Black people in the two selected movies. The implications and agenda of such images are discussed. The paper establishes that the way in which Africans are portrayed in the movies is dehumanising. The images border on stultifying representations that seek to subjugate and subvert African humanity and agency. The representation of Africans in the movies is informed by the ideology of Eurocentrism, which maps Europeans as the superior race and Africans and other oppressed peoples of the world as a peripheral race. The movies aim to disempower and induce a sense of self-hatred in people of African descent. The paper concludes that movies can be agents of the miseducation of African people and may inadvertently valorise European people.

**Keywords:** Africa; misnaming; dehumanising images; *Twelve Years a Slave*; *The Good Lie*

## Introduction

Prior to colonialism, Africans had their own self-constituted philosophy of life and a culture that was life-affirming and life-furthering. The encroachment of the Europeans altered the history of Africans. The historical event of slavery is one of the acts of oppression that were instrumental in changing the face of Africa. According to Nunn (2008), between 1400 and 1900 the African continent experienced four simultaneous slave trades; the largest and most well-known being the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which began in the 15th century. During slavery, colonisers started to expand their territories as they were looking for labour to work in their plantations. This expansion led to the genesis of slavery, where they shipped slaves from Africa to European colonies. According to Eltis and Engerman (2000), Africans were transported to colonies in North and South America and forced to work on plantations. Slavery is regarded by Tembo (2012) as an act of barbarity, since it uprooted the Black man from Mother Africa to America. Slavery was accompanied by many atrocities towards its victims, which were largely dehumanising. It was characterised by oppression and brutality, and it promoted the inferiority of Africans. To this, Afigbo (1984, 4) says that “in the era of slave trade and colonialism the Europeans had the desire to denigrate the continent and justify exploitation, domination and colonialism.” They used various ways to ensure the psychological destruction of the enslaved. Muhammad and Patricia (2003, 46) aver that “millions of African lives were subjected to forced labour, displacement, rape, brutal treatment and general torture by those who purchased and sold them.” Africans were reduced to property. The treatment that they were exposed to was largely inhumane. They were subjugated in all aspects of life; politically, socially, economically and culturally; they became beggars, and objects to be controlled by the settlers. Ani (1994) condemns slavery and considers it and other forms of domination of Africans as the vilest act ever. Ani (1994) describes the act as the most brutal and destructive act ever to be perpetuated by one racial group upon another racial group. The Black people in Africa and in the diaspora were robbed of their beliefs, self-definition and humanity by Europeans and the order of the day was replaced with cowardice, docility and self-denial. There was total distortion of African values, thus Settles (1996) says that the African way of life was significantly changed by the Atlantic slave trade. The whole of the slave trade demoted African existence to that of an inanimate object, subjugated to the whims, desires and control of “mostly European individuals and monarchs” (Muhammad and Patricia 2003, 46). On the whole, the act of slavery largely dehumanised the Africans.

Settles (1996) states that the demise of the slave trade began in 1807, when the British government made it illegal for British subjects to engage in slave trade. Even as slavery was banned and as Africans gained their freedom from colonialism, their denigration has continued to be spread through the media. The European agenda of denigrating Africa is continuously being perpetuated through the movie industry. Harth (2009) asserts that the USA and Europe know of a single negative story of Africa where Africa is represented as a place of danger, darkness, violence, poverty, and hopelessness. He

laments that the single negative story of Africa is being propagated using the media. This suggests that the trumpets of jubilee by Africans for their freedom in the diaspora and the raising of flags in the continent did not translate into freedom. This buttresses what Nyerere (quoted in Langan 2020) terms “flag independence.” Europeans devised new ways of enslaving, manipulating and subjugating the Blacks and new ways of glorifying their own humanity and at the same time distorting other races. Biney (1997) notes that while from the 16th to the 19th century colonial administrators were responsible for disseminating ideas about Africa, today information is disseminated through various forms of media that include newspapers, television, radio and the internet. The media has been manipulated to push the dehumanisation agenda of Europeans towards the African in independent African states. This paper discusses the image of Africa in the movies *Twelve Years a Slave* (2003) and *The Good Lie* (2014). The study focuses on the presentation of the African continent in the movie industry. The two movies were selected because the period in which they were produced, is within the early twenty-first century when a significant number of Africans migrated to the Americas and Europe in search of greener pastures and as refugees.

In contemporary African communities, there has been an increase of the Black African population that loathes and shuns the African race; who have gone to the extent of hating the African existential philosophy and have indulged in imitating the Europeans’ modus vivendi and aesthetic. The imitation is manifesting in different ways that include the use of bleaching creams to lighten the complexion, plastic surgeries, use of hair extensions, to mention but a few—just to be more like the White race. As shown in this paper, the movies *Twelve Years a Slave* and *The Good Lie* demonstrate the agenda of the Europeans using the movie industry as an apparatus to dehumanise, dislocate and distort the African race. The movies are also used because they treat various aspects that have to do with the image of Africa. The selected movies are, therefore, going to be used as a rallying point to represent all other movies that deal with the same subject. The study established that the image of Africa that is projected in the studied movies dehumanises the African. Africans are presented as imitators, objects—barbaric and uncivilised. Therefore, the paper advances the argument that movie producers should desist from making movies that degrade and dehumanise the African race.

## Methodological Path and Theoretical Framework

The study that directed this article used a qualitative approach, which is humanistic and descriptive in nature. Cresswell (2009) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding (based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry), which explores a social, human problem. Marshall (1996) is of the view that qualitative research studies aim to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering human problems. This study explored the experiences of the people of the African race, varying from slavery and colonisation and other forms of domination as portrayed in *Twelve Years a Slave* and *The Good Lie*. A

qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for the research, since it explores and discusses how the movies portray people of African descent.

The study employed the theory of Afrocentricity, as presented by Molefi Kete Asante. It is a theory that places African principles at the core of any enquiry that encompasses African culture, belief and behaviour. Afrocentricity seeks to harmonise and humanise the dehumanised African population of the continent. The theory removes the people of African descent from the periphery and brings them to the centre. The theory aims to develop Africans to be subjects and agents of phenomena, acting in their own cultural perception and human capacity, and not objects to be manipulated and subjugated by other people. The theory also emphasises that people of African descent should revisit their past experiences and bring them to the present, so that they move forward. Afrocentricity is relevant to the study since it interrogates the portrayal of Black people in the movies. It is prudent to take into consideration the relationships and history that exist and have existed between the people of African descent and the Europeans, and to restore their humanity that has and is being stripped away from Africans by European self-aggrandisement. Furthermore, the theory seeks to investigate the past, which was the goal of the study, to unfold the past and bring it to the present and to use the past so that Africans understand the situation and are able to be agents in a positive way.

### Scholarly Views on Eurocentrism

The ideology of Eurocentrism was introduced as Europeans started their mission to conquer the world, and as they started to extend their power to rule other parts of the world. Jaugum (2005) articulates that the term began in 1493 but was first used during Constantine's rule. Hannah (2012) avers that Eurocentrism is a concept which upholds power structures that legitimise the devaluation of ways of living and the oppression of people who do not conform to European norms and ideals. The ideology of Eurocentrism maintains the relation of domination and subjugation. Hoskins (1992) says that Eurocentrism promulgated the myth of Africans as savages, inferior, uncivilised, backward, devoid of knowledge and culture and possessing evil traits and desires. Since its origin to date, Eurocentrism has continued to propagate the fallacy that the African race is a race of daft people who are incapable of thinking and governing themselves. Its agenda is to make people of the African race assimilate European cultures and ideologies and at the same time marginalising and rubbishing their African identities. Thus, Onyeaghalaji (2015, 87) recognises that "it made Africans think less of themselves and their position in the scheme of things and thereby look towards the external world for self-actualisation and sustainable development." This simulation by people of African descent is fuelling racial segregation in the Motherland and in the diaspora.

According to Shohat and Stam (1994), Eurocentrism is the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigm perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning and as the world's centre of gravity. The scholars see Eurocentrism as a paradigm that was ruthlessly imposed on other cultures to dominate

them, thereby creating a homogenous world culture. Thus, Fanon (1968) asserts that White supremacy discounts how we see ourselves and instead instructs us and the world to see ourselves in their terms. The European thought dismissed the African religion and viewed African religion as pagan and heathen; their pride and views then separated the Africans from their energy source and their cosmos. This means that Eurocentrism tends to ignore the fact that the twenty-first century is characterised by Polycentrism; that there is the existence of more than one culture in a particular given geographical space, and that the world is multicultural.

Ani (1994) explains Eurocentric thinking as the overbearing of pride possessed by Europeans and labels it “Yurugu.” The European’s Yurugu places them at the centre of civilisation, aesthetics, and everything good; they then labelled themselves as “White” while the African continent and its descendants were marginalised, placed at the periphery of humankind, labelled as savages, uncivilised, barbaric, heathens, and their continent described as the “heart of darkness.” It regarded people of colour (Blacks) as inferior, and Brown people, Yellow people and Whites as superior. Eurocentrism highlighted the demeanour of Europeans; how much they value themselves above others and how they segregate themselves from other races by considering themselves as chauvinistic people. Ani (1994) argues that this chauvinistic character of the Europeans has made them use damaging terms to objectify their victims, who are, to them, inferior.

Ephraim (2003) defines Eurocentrism as the poisoning of the mind and pathology that has affected the European psyche. He explains it as the White passion for self-aggrandisement, which necessitated the myth of Black inferiority and White supremacy. It has been the greatest obstacle to Black liberation and any meaningful Black progress. The strong will of Europeans to dominate the African is now a malaise to the Europeans’ psyche and the victims of the domination (Africans). Karenga (1993, 40) eludes:

... the illness which has plagued Black people, which has caused them so much grief and pain in a White dominated world is not racism as such, but resentment, a uniquely European pathology.

Africans are suffering, for they are being suppressed by the sense of inferiority and falsehoods which affect them psychologically.

Eurocentrism abstracts African people from their history and also erases its errors in the past and present—at the same time condescending other cultures. Hoskins (1992, 247) states: “Eurocentrism had to and still continues to falsify, misrepresent, and distort human/world history as His-story, His-Eurocentric story in order to maintain European global dominance.” It buries the facts of history and makes up its own history that protects and maintains its objectives of dominance and superiority.

After political independence in African states, Eurocentric thinking remained in place. Europeans still enjoy the privilege to continuously dominate and manipulate Africans in all facets of life. Eurocentric thinking is still shaping the psychology and the

existential philosophy of the people of African descent in all facets of life, such that the Africans are disadvantaged and are forced to loathe and shun their identity as descendants of Africa. These are the images of Africans represented in the two movies discussed in the paper, as shown in the section below.

### Misrepresentation of African People in *Twelve Years a Slave*

*Twelve Years a Slave* is a movie that was directed by Solomon Northup. The general thrust of the movie is the brutal experiences faced by the Black man at the hands of the White men during the slave trade. The movie is about a Black man who is kidnapped and robbed of his freedom, rights and identity. He is taken away from his home and promised a job he is never given. Instead, he is sold off to some slave traders. Solomon and other victims are given new names by the shipping crew and are forced to respond to them. While on board they are abused physically, while Black women are abused sexually in front of men and children. Black men who try to rescue their sisters are killed in cold blood. As they land at the port they are sold off to their new masters. Families are broken and again new masters rename their labourers. Solomon is bought by Ford, who is a good master but the overseer of the plantation, Tibeats is arrogant and uses all forms of violence when dealing with Blacks. Solomon is nearly killed by Tibeats, and this forces him (Ford) to sell him to a new master, Epps, who is also abusive. The title of the movie itself tells about the viciousness of slavery. 12 years is a long time for someone to endure as a slave. The overarching idea is that the movie revolves around dehumanisation. Freire (1996, 26) contends:

Dehumanisation, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also those who have stolen it is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human.

As a process it produces objects, and it is all about a people who have been moved from their centre. Freire (1996, 44) also recognises that dehumanisation is a result of “an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors which in turn dehumanises the oppressed.” In the movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Africans are treated in a way that strips them of all humanness. They are subjected to all forms of violence. Africans are presented in the movie as imitators, barbaric, uncivilised, and so forth. Holistically, the movie talks about the dehumanisation that comes with slavery.

### Dehumanisation of African People in *Twelve Years a Slave*

In the movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*, African people are portrayed as objects that can only function with the intervention of the White man. The way they are portrayed strips them of all human qualities. An object is something that has no feelings or brains and for it to change positively or negatively, some force must be applied. This is portrayed in the movie where the Black man is regarded as property. This is revealed in the movie when Clemens is regarded as Mister John’s property.

Mr Jonus Ray: “Who’s in charge here? I am Mr Jonus; my solicitor has got some documentation here, to find a Negro called Clemens as my property. You are ordered to return that property immediately or you will be charged ...”

The term “property” is so derogatory because it reduces a human being to an asset that can be paid for, to own it and with which the European can do whatever he wants. The term property removes a sense of resistance from an individual. By regarding the African as property, the European means that they can do whatever they want with the African. The term property again means that one can be sold to other persons without seeking one’s consent. The people of African descent are depicted as the raw material of the White men and as beasts to work for the development of the White man. In the movie, the African is regarded as an object that is at the mercy of the European, where the European takes the subject position. The African race is taken as an appendage of the European, who can do whatever he wants with the African. Since Europeans regard Africans as their property, they do not regard them as people who can feel but as something that they can use to achieve their own goals. At the end of the day, they are made to act under the instructions of the European, who owns them; hence Africans are regarded as people without a heart and soul for themselves.

The objectifying of African people by slavery and colonialism has reduced the people of African descent to mere objects at the mercy of Europeans. It has disempowered Africans psychologically, culturally, politically, economically and socially. This exercise has highly honoured and rewarded the European to the extent that when they see a Black man, they see an object waiting to be used. Africans are used by the Whites, day in and day out, producing for the master; and what they earn are poverty, insults and segregation. In the film, Africans are treated like animals, thus Ephraim (2003, xiv) explains the situation well when he says: “Black people have been perceived as diminutive, insignificant creatures—indeed, as three-fifths of persons, to be more precise.” Gobineau (quoted by Ani 1994, 282) says: “The Negroid variety is the lowest and stands at the foot of the ladder, animal character is stamped on the Negro from birth and foreshadows his destiny.” The way the African is portrayed in the film is dehumanising and perpetuates the European image of the African.



**Figure 1:** A White overseer riding a horse with a whip supervising Africans who are working in the fields

The film shows that Africans are taken as beasts with two legs and hands that can talk only to serve the master; an animal that needs to be controlled by a whip and must work under orders. This is revealed in the movie when Africans are working in the fields and an overseer is on the back of a horse with a whip, as portrayed in figure 1 above.

Europeans created inhuman circumstances for the people of African descent and made them inferior objects to be rapped, working under the order of the whip and insults. The way Africans are managed when working shows that they are regarded as a people who cannot understand any other language than torture. The European uses violence to control the African. They exert physical violence on the Africans who are forced to work like animals. According to Freire (1970, 37), “violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognise others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognised.” It is done to inflict pain and consequently maim people so that they do whatever they are instructed to do without arguing. People who work under violence do not exercise agency because they work under someone else’s will. Violence suppresses one’s agency and it is limiting by nature. Ani (1994, 279) argues that the “European image of others is a composite of all things that represent lack of value i.e., ‘negative’ human characteristics ...” The White men perceive themselves as the highest people and Africans as a God-forsaken race to be exploited until all humanity is squeezed out of them. Botha’s speech in 1985 is loud and clear on that. He contemptuously states that it is their strong belief that the Black man is the raw-material for the White man. The statement by Botha is heavily pregnant with arrogance. The White man takes Africans as a means of production; the Whites feast as the Africans sweat and feed on the leftovers from their tables. The Europeans use whatever they have at their disposal to make sure that the African is as productive as possible, and whatever they produce is to the benefit of the White man.

In the movie there is name-calling and misnaming. Africans are called “nigger”; “baboon”; “black bastard”; “dog” to remove all their humanity and to remove all their value of being. The words that the Europeans use when referring to Africans are destructive to the African psyche. Europeans deliberately make use of such terms in order to diminish the African. It is because of Europeans’ self-aggrandisement that they call Africans by names that cause the destruction of human agency; names that can induce a sense of resentment and that can cripple a human mind. This is depicted in the movie when Solomon and other slaves are taken to a sugarcane plantation where they are welcomed by Uncle Abram:

Uncle Abram: "... Hey you fresh Negroes you will be in the cutting gang ... very simple, I want you to take a knife, make it sing ... rush it Boy—rush it ..."

The terms "Negro" and "Boy" are so derogatory; they lack respect and are used as racist slurs. The term Negro simply means "person of colour" and it was used in America during the slave trade. According to Moore (1960), the word Negro is stereotypical, filthy and polluted—it should be done away with. The calling of Africans by mean names is also evident in the movie when Solomon is called a "dog" by Tibeats.

Tibeats: "So, you call me a liar 'boy,' you are a dog (he barks) who's better at not ... following an instruction."

Derogatory names are used to remove human agency from the Africans so that they are exploited to the benefit of the master. Freire (1970, 39) recognises that for the oppressors, "human beings" refer only to themselves; other people are "things." The names that were used to address Africans were meant to reduce them to the level of non-human. These names were used to dehumanise and denigrate Africans and they tell the story of the European. This gives Europeans high status and places them at the centre, and at the same time places African people at the periphery. In the movie, Blacks are being called Negroes, dogs, black baboons, my property, and bastards, so that they become passive and follow the instructions of the master without complaining. According to Moore (1960, 339), "dogs and slaves are named by their masters; free men name themselves." This shows that the renaming and misnaming of the Africans is a condition that can only be found in an oppressed people.

It is important to note that the name of the character, Solomon, is not his original name. It is a name that he was given on the ship. The name signifies Christianity. Christianity was used to pave the way for slavery. Ani (1994, 162) recognises the damage that was facilitated by Christians on the African. She says "there is a direct relationship between the European church and European imperialism. It is a relationship between brothers. Ironically it is the subtle aspects of this relationship that have proven to be much more devastating in the long run to indigenous forms wherever the expansionist west has sought to exercise its control." She continues to say that Christianity was meant to destruct the self-image and value system of Africans. The psychological impact of renaming and misnaming of the African was meant to reduce Africans to the level of a stereotype of non-human. This has made Europeans to perceive Africans as one more machine to satisfy their glorification, for they introduced social patterns that denied the validity of African humanity. Ani (1997) states that Europeans wanted to make Africans simply one more machine in the service of Europeans. Their ideology dictated that they create "inferior objects" in order for their self-concepts to function positively within the context of their value system. The objectification of Africans by Europeans was only a tactic that aimed to domesticate African people for their benefit; failure to please the master meant punishment in the form of death or whips.

In the movie, African people are also portrayed as mere imitators of Europe. The African race has been conditioned to love whiteness to the extent that people of the African race imitate their oppressor. Stoddard's views, as quoted by Ani (1994, 283–284), show how Europeans see the African. He states: "The Negro is a facile, even eager imitator, but there he stops, he adopts but does not adapt, assimilate and give creatively again." Stoddard takes the Africans as a people who are lazy to think and a people who only wait for the Europeans to bring up an idea while they wait to reproduce what the European has come up with. The views bring false ideas where Africans are being taken as a people who mimic whatever the White man does. That kind of behaviour has been



referred to by Freire (1996, 29), who purports: "The behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor." For the oppressed, the oppressor is the point of reference and they tend to live according to the dictates of the oppressor. The picture from the movie (in figure 2 below) supports the idea which is being put forward by Stoddard in Ani (1994).

**Figure 2:** Mrs Shaw, an African, leading a lifestyle of the European

The eating habits that are exhibited in the picture are not typically African. Mrs Shaw, who is an African, is leading a lifestyle of the European. She is in control and living like a queen. She states:

Mrs Shaw to Patsey: "I was a servant once, now I have servants of my own, this is nice."

Africans have been maimed in their mind to the levels of internalising the image of the White man as their icon. They have pride in exploiting one's own brother. Mrs Shaw

resembles what has been referred to by Fanon (1968) as “black skin white masks.” Africans were taught to celebrate the suffering of the people of their own kind, to exploit fellow Africans. They were conditioned to hate themselves and life turned out to be concerned with escape from oneself. For that reason, Mrs Shaw is living a life she has been forced to envy unconsciously. Asante (1987, 331) says:

The present day confused outlook of the African people is the result of centuries of Caucasian acculturation, a quite natural process where one people come under economic, political and social domination of another people. The ideologies and value system of the oppressors quite unconsciously become those of the oppressed, even when the result is demonstratively against themselves.

What this means is that Africans were deliberately uprooted from their life line and at the end of the day they are also ashamed of themselves. This tendency seems to linger in the minds of the Africans, as evidenced by how they portray what is theirs. Contrary to this, Fanon (1968, 311) says:

Let us decide not to imitate Europe, let us combine our muscles and brains in a new direction, let us try to create the whole man ... Comrades, have we not other work to do than to create a third Europe?

Africans were contaminated with the European malaise. Africans were conditioned to desire the White man to the extent of creating a space that incorporates that of the oppressor. They force the Africans to speak like them, walk like them, dance like them, they are the ones who taught and continues to teach the Africans to hate their philosophy and cause the African people to be divorced from their culture.

Europeans tend to ignore the facts of history and they simply decide to brush them away. History tells how much Africans suffered during the time of slavery and colonialism and how it largely affected the African people’s development on the continent and in the diaspora. Africans were mentally raped by the Europeans and were forced to consume a culture that was alien to them. They forget that slavery and colonialism were defined by the whip and the lashes, and these have made Africans assimilate the European definition of living.

The European self-aggrandisement degrades Africans and their culture; their demeanour has shown the highest levels of disrespect towards people of the African race. They take Africans as a race of juveniles, a race that lacks maturity. This image that the Europeans have is well explained by the picture in figure 3 below:



**Figure 3:** African men and women bathing together while Europeans are spectators

Figure 3 shows African men and women bathing together naked in an open space while the Whites are spectators. This is a taboo among Africans and it shows that the White man has no respect and disregards the culture of the Africans. For African people this is not cultural, and it is unacceptable, hence this is a way that was used by the European to dehumanise the African. The act reduces the African's self-esteem. Stripping people is an act of dehumanising and dismembering Africans. As a result, this movie is only paying tribute to the Europeans and simultaneously demeaning and hampering Black people. The White men are inspecting Africans while bathing; a clear way of communicating that they are a people that cannot do anything without the guidance of the European. To this, Barnes (in Ani 1994) asserts that Blacks are a race of children that requires guidance. Europeans view themselves as the big brother, who is capable of taking care, but they forget that they are the ones who had manipulated, raped, impoverished, and imposed inferiority on African people. To regard Africans as a race of children simply means that Africans can only think of minor things, things that are not so important; they lack maturity and cannot do anything on their own.

In the film, Africans are viewed as an uncivilised race. This has origins in the falsehoods that Europeans spread about themselves as being on a mission to civilise the Africans. In the movie, Tibcats flamboyantly asks Solomon if he is an engineer or a nigger.

Tibcats to Solomon: "Are you an engineer or a nigger, I'm asking—are you an engineer or a nigger?"

Tibeats is suggesting that someone cannot be a nigger and an engineer at the same time. Europeans perceive Africans as a backward and uncivilised people. They ignore the facts of history that Africa was the cradle of civilisation. They present themselves as the mother of civilisation, yet history tells us that civilisation originated in Africa. Europeans regard themselves as a more civilised people and think that they have the obligation to diffuse civilisation to other races. They forget that the race they deem as a race of children, their mother Africa, is the mother of civilisation. Art, writing, architecture, mathematics, calendar, commerce and agriculture, to mention but a few, are features of African civilisation, which have been stolen by the Europeans who labelled it as theirs. It is also noteworthy that Karenga (1993, 220) acknowledges Egypt's contribution to Western religions and indeed to Western civilisation. He says that "given the deeply religious character of Egyptian society, all activities whether science, government or art were informed and inspired by its religion." He is of the idea that world civilisation has its origins in Egypt and not in Greece, as some Western scholars would argue. To him, Africans always had a religion, and they are the fathers of world civilisation. However, these Africans were uprooted from their religious heritage by colonisation and slavery. This was done to remove self-esteem and confidence in the Africans; to cripple the psyche of the Africans and condition them to perceive themselves as a helpless people. They want to see Africans as a vulnerable people who need to be taken care of, yet they are the very people who exploit and suppress the Africans.

### Misrepresentation of African people in *The Good Lie*

*The Good Lie* is a 2014 American movie inspired by true events that took place in Southern Sudan. The screenplay was written by Margaret Nagle and the film was directed by Philippe Falardeau. It tells a story about Sudanese refugees after their village is destroyed and their parents are killed by the Northern militia during the civil war, which started in 1983. Sudanese victims and orphans Theo, his siblings Mamere and Abital, together with other survivors, make a difficult journey to a refugee camp in Kenya. The group of victims are led by Theo, who by virtue of being the eldest son of the chief, takes over as chief. On their way they meet other children who include Jeremiah, who is a religious man at the age of thirteen, and also Paul. Thirteen years later, the group gets the chance to settle in the USA, where they meet Carrie Davies in Kansas who helps them to get jobs and to adjust to American life. It is not an easy task living in America, because they are introduced to so many new things and they have to adjust to a new and different culture.

The title of the movie is paradoxical. Europeans would tell their lies and package them in an attractive way. The movie represents Africa as a continent that is a threat to human survival; a poverty stricken and uncivilised continent. The issues that are presented in the movie are a result of European propaganda. According to Jowett and O'Donnell (2012, 1), "propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intend of the propagandist." They go on to say that the words

lie, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing and palaver are frequently used as synonyms of propaganda. The movie, *The Good Lie*, peddles the lies that were created by Europeans against Africans as a way of painting a pathetic picture of Africa. It is used to disseminate and promote European ideas about Africa.

### Propaganda in *The Good Lie*

In the movie, Africa is seen as a chaotic and barbaric continent. It is taken as an unsafe place to be and a threat to human life. Africa is seen as hell on earth; the home of suffering; wars and mayhem; it is a jungle where human life is vulnerable. In the movie, James says to Mamere, “It’s good you left this hell of a place.” James regards Africa as a place that is not fit for human survival. He equates Africa to hell, which is a place of continuous suffering. This entails that there is nothing good that is expected to come out of Africa. The picture that is portrayed, regards Africa as synonymous with hell, a place of hopelessness and despair. Such presentations of Africa “break the spirit and undermine people’s ability to make positive change or attract goodness into their life” (Atime 2008, 9). Africa is regarded as the “heart of darkness” and a breeding ground of confusion and infertility. Achebe (1988) unveils the Western thought and antipathy towards the Africans and in doing so, he exposes the work of Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*:

We were wonderers on the prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession on an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil.

The image of Africa that is presented in the movie, *The Good Lie*, concurs with Conrad’s ideas about Africa. The above quote reveals that Europeans perceive Africa as a world that is primitive and doomed at the same time. It is being placed at the margin by Conrad, for it is regarded as a place that is unknown. Blaut (1993, 1) states: “Eurocentrism created and defined the world’s centre and its periphery.” In the film, *The Good Lie*, Africa is placed at the periphery while Europe is given centre stage. It is regarded as an achievement to have left the African continent and joined the European continent. This is done to nail the idea that Europe is a better place, as compared to Africa. The ideology which is being put forward by James’s words is influenced by Eurocentrism. The dialogue between Jeremiah and Jack also depicts Africa as an evil place:

Jack: “So what brings you to America?”

Jeremiah: “My parents were killed in a civil war in Sudan and my sisters were taken as slaves.”

European ideology, as always, carries a negative picture of others—especially African people. Europeans and the Americans continue to spread distorted truths about Africa to maintain the dichotomies they have created in Africa through their European religion.

Ani (1994) states: “We are concerned with the relationship between Europe and the description of others and their description of self.” Eurocentrism views Africa as a continent that is characterised by extremely unpredictable disorder and as a continent that lacks harmony. Fighting, civil wars and mayhem are taken as the order of the day in Africa. Ani (1994) vehemently articulates that Africa is characterised as being disordered, uncontrolled and immoral. European societies supposedly symbolise the movement away from this into order, morality and responsibility—where an individual can feel safe. Africa is taken as a jungle where human life is always at risk. The film teaches people that Africa is a threat to human survival and the fact that Africa is the cradle of humanity is totally ignored. Europeans need to face reality, as Achebe (1988, 18) has said:

... the West must derive from Africa once it rids its mind of old prejudices and began to look at Africa not through a haze of distortions and cheap mystification but quite simply as a continent of people—not angels ...

Europeans should not forget who has imposed the inhuman circumstances making Africa to be a “hell” of a place. The speech of Botha to his beloved fellow comrades in 1985 is packed with gross arrogance. He states: “Give them guns and they will kill each other. They are good in nothing else but making noise ...” The speech by Botha speaks volumes against the African people, the statement clearly spells out that African people resolve their problems with a fight, for they are ruled by a brain that is saturated with emotions. This is evident in the movie, *The Good Lie*, where Mamere and Paul fight after Paul has been arrested for vandalism.

Mamere: “What do you have to say?”

Paul: “Nothing.”

Mamere: “You bring shame upon us, and you say nothing, you have been given a chance of life that has been taken away from your brothers in Africa and you say nothing.”

The two start to fight and Kerry Davis, a White lady, helps in stopping the fight. The statement by Mamere shows (incorrectly) that Africans did not have a life before their encounter with the European. This supports the falsehood that Africa is an appendage of Europe. This is done in a bid to show that the African is barbaric. The film presents the life of the African as defined by fighting, and Africans are regarded as people who cannot solve their problems rationally. What is of importance is the idea that Africans are fighting among themselves. Their psyche was conditioned to hate each other to find favour from the master. However, it should be noted that Africans were divided by the Europeans; the African idea of oneness was distorted, and a seed of care, love and sharing was killed. The fact that it is a White lady who stops the fight gives credit to the Europeans who view themselves as peace-makers and a civilised people, yet they are what Shakespeare calls “the enemies of peace.” The scene upholds and celebrates Eurocentrism; it maintains European self-glorification which is full of falsehoods, of being the masters of order and peace, yet they are the sponsors of the fighting and

misunderstanding transpiring in Africa today. Europeans ignite a fire in Africa so that they gain glorification for putting out the fire they have started.

Wars that are taking place between the African people today are because of the divisions that were created by Europeans in the early years of conquering Africa. The coming of the Europeans with their Christian religion to the African continent, has divorced Africans from their religion and beliefs, and this was the first division to be created among the Africans. The divergence of Africans from their belief of communalism to individualism conditioned Africans to view each other as enemies. The civil war in Sudan in 1983 was triggered by religion and resources, and again the war that emerged recently in Sudan is a result of religion. The issue of religion has caused psychosis, a severe disorder of the psyche to African people to the extent that the Africans have been highly distorted.

Africans are viewed as people who are lost in the heart of darkness, as Conrad puts it in his novel *Heart of Darkness*, which degrades African humanity to nothing. Africans are taken as a race of people who need to be found so that they can be civilised. Barbarism is regarded as the order of the day. This notion is clear in this movie, *The Good Lie*, where there is a banner in the background on which is clearly written: “Happy Birthday Lost Boys.”



**Figure 4:** Birthday celebrations for Africans

Africans are viewed as a people who have been saved from being an uncivilised race, yet Africans are the senior brothers of civilisation. The Europeans perceive Africa as a continent full of dull people, that is, full of the most primitive and uncivilised people. Africans whose birthdays are celebrated are referred to as “lost boys.” These are lies

that were peddled by the European to present Africans as a people who do not know their identity. Europeans created these falsehoods so that they can appear as actors who define the realities of Africans. The fact that these people are referred to as “lost” implies that they have lost guiding indices, hence they are at the mercy of the European. When someone is lost, he needs help and guidance. This means that Africans are a people who need the guidance of Europeans. This European thought is put forward by Lothrop Stoddard’s views as quoted by Ani (1994), who says that Europeans have contributed greatly to the civilisation of the world and have profoundly influenced human progress. The Negro, on the contrary, has contributed virtually nothing. The Black race has never shown real constructive power. It has never built a native civilisation. The ideology that is carried in this movie is driven by non-African people who are unrepentantly European.

In the movie, the dates of birth of Africans are taken as unknown. The US Official says, referring to Mamere: “Date of birth is unknown?”

Mamere: “Yes.”

It is ironic that Europeans would celebrate the birthday of Africans, but they say that their birthdays are unknown. This is a refusal by the European to recognise the identity of the African. Tracing back the African history, which is being distorted by the West, one learns that Africa is the mother of civilisation. Ephraim (2003, 40) states: “It was the robbing of the Africans’ history that has made Black people so hugely disadvantaged in the race of life.” It is being made worse by the European ideology, which aims to disempower the African people by persisting to miseducate the world. Africans are being fed with European lies and they give thanks to those lies; in the movie, *The Good Lie*, Mamere, Jeremiah and Paul praise and worship the European food “pizza.”

Jeremiah: “Let us pray, dear God, let us give thanks to this miracle food called pizza ...”

Pizza is an Italian dish. Italy is representing Europe. The prayer is celebrating imperialism; Africans see the domination of Europeans as a wonderful thing. Rodney (1992) says people of Africa and other parts of the colonised world have gone through a cultural and psychological crisis and have accepted, at least partially, the European version of things. He laments that Africans have to an extent accepted the falsehoods that they are continuously being fed by the Europeans. They are celebrating pizza. The pizza represents the consuming by Africans of the oppressor’s ideology. Africans need to reject the unhealthy food which is causing a malady to their health. The contamination is now causing a pathology, which Ephraim (2003) calls “resentment.” It is high time Africans wake up and define who they are and what their space is; high time to celebrate Africa and being African, and repossess what belongs to them. Fanon (1968, 311) states: “We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged and leave it behind. The new day, which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent and resolute.” Agency is being called for, for the Africans to be able to serve themselves from the evil deeds

of the White man, who hides and distorts the naked truth about Africans. There is a need for an African communal bath which has been called for by Chinweizu (1987, xviii):

In our efforts to wash from our consciousness the harmful pollutants deposited there by our colonial miseducation, we are apt to act like the child who rubs his belly endlessly with soap and water ... Clearly, we need something like a communal mental bath, one in which we shall scrub the crab off one another's backs, and especially from those corners which our own hands cannot thoroughly scour.

Africans need to relocate themselves from where they are being placed by the Europeans and the Americans. Demystification of European thought needs to be done so that the Africans are not perceived with lenses that are hazed with lies which consider them uncivilised.

In the film, *The Good Lie*, Africa is depicted as a poverty-stricken continent. The Europeans and Americans take Africa as a God-forsaken world that is a symbol of poverty. Botha (1985) articulates: "Let us all accept that the Black man is the symbol of poverty, mental inferiority, laziness ...". In the movie this is well presented in figure 5 below:



**Figure 5:** Africans on a long journey to a refugee camp

The above picture depicts a suffering people walking long distances. Africans are regarded as a suffering people who have to strive from childhood to adulthood. The Europeans forget the facts of history; they throw away the facts of history to maintain

the distorted truth they have been teaching in Africa and the whole world. They also tend to forget that they have been instrumental and at the forefront of the plantation of poverty in Africa. Gray (2001, ix) says: “Simultaneously, it must be remembered and recounted that near the end of the 1800s, Africans were being invaded and disrupted by Europeans; Europeans who had given themselves the mission and goal of conquering and colonising the people of Africa and extracting and exploiting the natural resources of the continent of Africa.” This presupposes the idea that the state of Africa is not a natural one, but it is a result of the Europeans who have been on a mission to plunder African resources for their own benefit. It is, therefore, the aim of the film, *The Good Lie*, to present a distorted image of Africa. Chinweizu (1987) explains this as the miseducation of the Africans. Africa’s poverty is a result of a European villainous act of slavery and colonialism upon her. Africa is being raped maliciously every day, her resources are exploited directly and indirectly, and her people are mutilated psychologically. The poverty in Africa is a result of imperialism; the European Yurugu continues to take advantage of the Africans.

In Africa, people are eating the crusts of the wounds, while the Europeans and the Americans are throwing food into the bins and the shelves are packed with dog food. In the movie, *The Good Lie*, Jenny shows Mamere and Jeremiah where the dog food is packed, and the manager instructs them to throw away old food:

Jenny: “So, this is the dog food section.”

Mamere: (surprised) “Food for dogs!”

Manager: “Jeremiah—Mamere, come here I want you to throw away this food; this is where you throw away old food so you can repack the shelves with new food.”

Mamere: “Old food!”

Manager: “Old food is expired food, it’s not safe to eat and it will cause problems ...”

Jeremiah: “Isn’t there someone who might need this food?”

Europeans and the Americans enjoy life because they are milking the resources and riches of the Africans, yet the Africans suffer. Chinweizu (1987, xx) vehemently states:

America’s pets, cats and dogs now consume \$2 billion worthy of resources, annually, and eat much better than most of humanity, dining elegantly on shrimp cocktails and liver pate at such places as the Animal restaurant in New York City. Thus, in its most dramatic and obscene form, the question is whether the labour and resources of the third world nations should continue to contribute more to the opulence of America’s dogs and cats than to the elementary good health of the third world humans.

The assertion by Chinweizu clearly shows that African people are poor not by choice, but it is the White people who continue to loot resources from Africa, leaving the Africans with nothing but poverty and hunger. European aggression has blind-folded Africans. To them the African people are nothing but a steppingstone to their success; dogs to them are better than the people they label “Black” and inferior, a human race

they continue to degrade and dehumanise. Europeans' exhilaration is fuelled by the suffering and pain of the African race.

## Conclusion

The negative depiction of African people in the two movies promotes and maintains the dichotomies that exist between the Africans and the Europeans. The Europeans and Americans are fighting, in this day and time, to continue dominating the Africans and want to maintain falsehoods and myths about the African people. Africans are being forced to perceive the world with hazed lenses, being provided by the Europeans and the Americans directly or indirectly. The movies *Twelve Years a Slave* and *The Good Lie* are used to show that the movie industry is being employed by the Europeans and Americans to dehumanise, dislocate, lampoon and maim the African race. The ontology of supremacy that has been created by the Europeans to the people they label "people of colour" is being maintained in this day and time and is haunting the African people at large. The images of Black people in *Twelve Years a Slave* and *The Good Lie* make it crystal clear that Eurocentrism is still heavily pregnant with racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism, and is still playing a pivotal role to maintain the subjugation of the African people in the twenty-first century. It is pertinent for filmmakers to also consider producing films that humanise Africans.

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