

# **The Representation of African American Women in Hollywood Films**

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## ABSTRACT

The study ‘The Representation of African American Women in Hollywood Films’ was conducted to examine the portrayal of African American women in Hollywood films from 2005 to 2015 from a feminist and black feminist stand point. The depiction of African American women in various stereotypical ways have become a serious issue, as it has been concluded in the mind of viewers that African American women are exactly the way they are been portrayed in the mainstream.

Using the qualitative methodology of research, critical analysis was used to collect primary data to understand the content and better explain the messages contained in the three movies (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise) used for this research. The secondary data was collected from online journals, books, e-books, websites and motion pictures. The secondary data was used to support this study and also find related literature to this study.

The findings of this study showed that aggression, over possession, stubbornness, annoyance, sex objectification, intervention patriarchy, sexism and self-discrimination with copious examples revealed in the selected films shows the true definition of how African American women are represented. Based on the analysis, African American women in the three movies were portrayed multiple times in the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire historical stereotype.

**Keywords:** Hollywood, feminist, stereotypes, critical analysis, representation, patriarchy, sex symbols

## ÖZ

Mevcut çalışma, “Afro- Amerikan Kadınların Hollywood Sinemasında Temsili” dir, Hollywood sinemasında 2005-2015 yılları arasında Afro-Amerikan kadınların nasıl tasvir edildiğini (betimlendiğini) feminist ve siyah feminist perspektifinden incelemektedir. Özellikle ana akım medyada Afro-Amerikan kadınların tasvir edilme biçimi, izleyicilerin zihninde bir algı oluşturmuş ve bu nedenle Afro-Amerikan kadınların çeşitli stereotiplerle (önyargısal) tasvir edilme biçimi önemli bir sorun haline gelmiştir.

Kalitatif (niteliksel) metodolojinin kullanıldığı çalışmada, metin analizi yöntemi ile birincil veri toplanmış ve seçilen 3 filmin (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise) analizi bu doğrultuda yapılmıştır. Online dergi, kitap, elektronik kitap, web siteleri ve hareketli görüntülerden ikincil veri toplamak için yararlanılmıştır. İkincil veriler hem mevcut çalışmayı desteklemek hem de bu çalışma ile ilgili alanyazından (literatürden) faydalanmak için kullanılmıştır.

Saldırganlık, inatçılık, sıkıntı, seks nesnesi haline gelme, cinsiyetçilik, ataerkillik ve kendi kendine ayrımcılık Afro-Amerikan kadınların seçilen filmlerde çeşitli örnekler üzerinden temsil edilme –tanımlanma biçimleridir. Yapılan analizler ışığında, Afro-Amerikan kadınlar seçilen üç filmde birçok kez dadı (mammy), Jezebel (ahlaksız kadın) ve sapphire stereotipleri üzerinden tasvir edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hollywood, feminist, stereotip-önyargısal, metinsel analiz, temsiliyet, ataerkillik, seks sembolleri

## **DEDICATION**

This research work is dedicated to my entire family for their support, both morally and financially during this programme.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

Let us assume that what the defining characteristics of the African American women we see in the movies we watch are not predetermined by what is seen, heard or experienced based on everything else the mainstream media feeds us with, will our perception of these individuals be different? This chapter contains information on the background of Hollywood, male gaze and African American women in Hollywood films. This chapter looks at the motivation, aims, research questions and the limitation of the study.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Over the years, Hollywood has been a leading film industry and has been the theme of a lot of studies. The distribution of Hollywood films spreads around the world (Gomery, 2000). The multi-billion dollar industry is a renowned force to reckon with when we discuss global movie distribution. Hollywood has established itself and, so far no industry has been able to outshine (Gomery, 2000, p. 19).

The visual representation in Hollywood films triggers a whole lot of effects in the mind of viewers, such as emotional, behavioural, attitudinal and psychological effects. To be able to decode the messages been transmitted in these films, one has to have a knowledge of the language used for transmission. Hall (1997) accedes that, 'language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture' (Hall, 1997, p. 1). It must therefore be recognized that the

media (films) represent with the use of language, and the mass decodes this language based on the knowledge of one's culture.

The media play a crucial part in building, representing and propagating gender doctrines. Existing researches have shown the representation of African American women to be surrounded around factors like poverty, crime, drugs, unemployment, lack of education, frustration, etc. Also one of the major interests of the black feminist thought is how African American women perceive their selves and fight for their rights. Hollywood films intentionally reveal an area of behaviours associated with both lifestyle and life struggles of women (Ahmadvostakolae, 2012). Smelik (1999) argues that the crucial theoretical shift here is from perceiving cinema as reflecting reality, to a view of cinema as building a particular ideology of reality (Smelik, 1999).

It is unjustifiable to mention female gender depiction without referring to theorist Laura Mulvey's approach to film studies via psychoanalytic and feminist film theory (Dutt, 2014). Laura Mulvey utilizes psychoanalysis to grasp the fascination of Hollywood cinema. This fascination can be described through the notion of scopophilia, which is the desire to see (Smelik, 1999, p. 491). Hollywood films sexually objectify African American women, presenting them weak and a victim of male gaze.

Male gaze is when a male character looks at a female character with sexiness and power in a rather seductive manner. This however, portrays the female character weak and helpless;

The narrative structure of traditional cinema establishes the male character as active and powerful: he is the agent around whom the dramatic action unfolds and the look gets organized. The female character is passive and powerless: she is the object of desire for the male character(s) (Smelik, 1999, p. 491)

In the present world we live in, African American women are already cornered into a space of double minority, not only are they 'women', they are also 'black'. The various representations of black women in Hollywood films portray African American women's struggle and way of life as a minority in the society. This status has already set black women up for disappointments. This is where the feminist theory comes in. The feminist standpoint theory review existing power relations and the inequality they produce in the lives of women (Mayo, 2010).

Hollywood films however try to shape our views of African American women, both consciously and unconsciously. When women are finally given the opportunity in film text, the help comes from a man who serves as the hero.

For this research, 17 films produced between years 2005 to 2015 have been recognized. This research works with films within this year range because; the first appearance of Tyler Perry's movie 'Diary of a mad black woman' was in the year 2005. Tyler Perry is an American actor, producer, director, screenwriter, playwright and songwriter. He is popular for the representation of black women in the historical stereotypical manner; *The Mammy*, *Jezebel* and *Sapphire*. Out of the 17 films, three films (*The Help*, *I can do bad all by myself* and *Joyful noise*) will be precisely selected for critical analysis. The remaining fourteen films will however be used to support my argument in the research. The selected movies will be viewed by two other participants, a male and a female.

The Help (2011), a film directed by Tate Taylor is a movie that represents African American women during slavery and civil rights era, where African American women work as ‘nannies’ in white families. The film shows the struggle of African American women during society segregation. A criticism of the movie states that it doesn’t show the real picture of the savagery and cruelty of the segregated south, and this shouldn’t be over looked. The movie I can do bad all by myself (2009), is an example of ‘Sapphire’. The main character ‘April’ is portrayed as a black woman who sleeps around with men for money. She is also portrayed as angry and aggressive. The third film, Joyful noise (2012) is a film about a woman that has two teens, and she struggles to keep her home together as her husband is in the army; likewise she leads her choir to the National Joyful noise competition.

## **1.2 Motivation of the Study**

The researcher is motivated for this study due to the increase of stereotyped representation of African American women in Hollywood motion pictures. Over the years, Hollywood has been leading all the movie industries and are being patronized by a lot of countries outside America. In a research by Silver (2007), he stated that Hollywood has been dominating the industry for almost a century (Silver, 2007). We can as well say a reasonable amount of people in the world watch Hollywood films. Since 2005 there has been an increase in the representation of African American women in the industry.

As much as film is a medium to convey messages and entertain a heterogeneous audience, it has a high rate of cognitive effect. People tend to believe what they see and slot into their daily lives. This however motivated me to investigate how Hollywood portray African American women in their films, because whatever is

been portrayed develops to peoples ideology in most cases. And as stated in the introduction of this research, what if we haven't seen or heard anything in Hollywood films or any mainstream; will our perception of African American women be different?

To see how African American women are being represented and to also support the researcher's argument, three movies would be scrutinized using critical analysis. The movies *The Help* (2011), *I can do bad all by myself* (2009) and *Joyful noise* (2012) are Hollywood movies that show, display and represent black women in various ways including the historical stereotypes of 'mammy', 'jezebel' and 'sapphire'. This study will also see how African American women are sexually objectified in the selected movies.

It is a crucial for us to be able to read between the lines in the various movies we watch, not just get indulged in the entertainment and comfort it gives us. As a black woman it is also a motivation for me to find out how the black female characters in the movies are showcased, not leaving or ignoring each movement or sound effects. All these and other issues are the reasons for the researcher's motivations for this study.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

The self-perception African American women have on their selves and other black women is been influenced by the images they see in Hollywood films. If Hollywood keeps depicting black women in various negative or stereotypical ways, it will affect the way black women sees their selves and also the way they create their identity.



In (Berry & Duke, 2011), various black women and young black girls opened up to how they feel about this representations. The documentary explored the deep-rooted preconception and attitudes about skin colour, particularly dark skinned women, outside of and within the Black American culture. It is disheartening black women feel depressed and cowardly about their selves, this is why this study has to clear the air by looking deep into the ways African American women are perceived in Hollywood films.

Hollywood should stop portraying African American women as ‘coloured’ women and instigating internalized racist ideas. Black people from the same community discriminate among each other, over skin colours. African American women feel insecure and always want to find a way to feel better about their selves. However, different African American women handle this situation in different ways. Some African American women purchase bleaching cream while others take the frustration out by putting other women down.

If Hollywood doesn’t frequently show African American women the way they do, will people see them that way? Hence, this study is focused on how Hollywood represent African American women in their films, and also revealing the hiding messages or symbols that African American women are been represented with.

#### **1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The main aim of this research is to examine the representation of African American women in Hollywood films from 2005 to 2015, paying close attention to three movies out of the selected seventeen films.

This study will inquire into the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the ways African American women are portrayed in Hollywood films.
- 2) To find out how often African American women are portrayed in the historical stereotypes of 'the mammy', 'jezebel' and 'sapphire' in Hollywood films.
- 3) To find out how African American women are sexually objectified in the Hollywood films.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

This study raises the following research questions:

- 1) How are African American women portrayed in Hollywood films?
- 2) How often are African American women portrayed in the historical stereotypes on 'the mammy', 'jezebel' and 'sapphire' in Hollywood films?
- 3) In what way are African American women sexually objectified in the Hollywood films?

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

The representation of African American women is increasing in various Hollywood films, which makes it very important and necessary to have a study in this area. The topic put forward here is therefore meant to provide knowledge of the ways African American women are being portrayed.

This study will empower people to read between the lines when watching movies, and not just watch movies for the enjoyment it gives. This study sheds more light into how African American women are viewed in our society. The films we watch influences our perception of African American women, therefore it is very important to state out the ways Hollywood films portray African American women.

This study will benefit students in the fields of critical study, moving image and media students in general. The study will be of advantage to academics and the general mass. Few researches have been done on the representation of African American women in films, but this is the first to work on the three specific Hollywood films used for this study. The study will scrutinize the messages from the films in a way to better understand how the messages shape our perception of African American women.

For future researchers, this study will pave way to study other areas of this research. It will bring up proposition on topics this research couldn't cover.

### **1.7 Limitations of Study**

This study is limited to the representation of African American women in Hollywood films within 2005-2015. Owing to the period of time dedicated for this research, the study is limited to 17 movies, paying close focus to three films (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise). This study would have been more enhanced and wider if more movies were analysed. It was a little bit strenuous during the process of the films selection, because it's necessary to pick a movie that best shows how African American women are being represented.

### **1.8 Operational Definitions of Terms**

The following terms are defined as it is used in this context:

**Hollywood:** This refers to the film industry where American films are being produced.

**Feminism:** This is a concept that supports gender equality. It states that men and women should have the same rights and not one placed over the other.

**Stereotypes:** Stereotypes in this text refer to the general belief and idea people have of black women.

**Feminist Film Theory:** This means analysing films critically from a feminist views.

**Critical analysis:** This is the breaking down and evaluation of the visual and audio characteristics as represented in the films.

**Representation:** Representation in this content refers to the depiction of black women in the eyes of the society.

**Patriarchy:** This refers to a society or system male are more recognized and have upper hand over their female counterparts.

**Black feminism:** in this context black feminism refers to the idea that gender equality and racism go hand in hand.

**Sex symbols:** this is someone that portrays quality of sexual desire.

## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter reviews relevant literatures to the present study. This chapter It systematically discusses Hollywood films and black Hollywood, history of the code ‘race’ in relation to Hollywood, historical stereotypes of black women, images of black women in films, repercussion of black women’s representation in films and the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is however divided into two; feminist film theory and black feminist thought.

#### **2.1 Hollywood Movies**

Hollywood is the largest motion picture production company in the world, Los Angeles in United States happens to be the home of the film industry. Over the years, Hollywood movies have transformed with the progressions in sophisticated technologies and production equipment’s. And, to focus on my major argument, there has been an increase over the years in the production of Hollywood films that portray African American women. This area of discourse is subdivided into two categories; Hollywood movie industry and Black Hollywood.

##### **2.1.1 Hollywood Movie Industry**

The Hollywood movie industry has committed millions of viewers all around the world. The industry has formed a general culture and a voice in the movie making industry globally.

For a backstory into the movie industry, Hollywood reached full maturity in 1930s and entered its legendary Golden Age (Schatz, 2007). The 1940s wasn't a good period for the industry due to war-related social and economic conditions which evolved to a decline in the industry's hegemony (Schatz, 2007). In 1946, this was the studios best year ever in terms of profit and avenue, unfortunately the war boom peaked, but by 1947 to 1948 the movie industry was in a 'veritable free-fall' as a result of a series of disastrous blows (Schatz, 2007, p. 16).

The arrival of television changed the American culture of going to see movies, in spite of the development the movie industry also changed its way of film production and distribution to fit into the latest development. The industry adopted the UA model and focused on financing and distribution rather than production (Schatz, 2007). This was how the industry responded to the entrance of television and also survived the new development.

Disney became a big name in the movie industry market in the 1980s, which made companies like MGM and UA to depreciate in the industry due to them not been able to adapt to the changing industry conditions (Schatz, 2007). MGM and UA ended up merging up to form MGM/UA which was later attained by the Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) in 1985, and Turner immediately dismantled the firm (Schatz, 2007). The surviving major studios including the mini-majors TriStar, Disney and Orion released 15 to 20 movies in a year in the 1980s (Schatz, 2007).

However, from 1990 to 1995, the new Hollywood swiftly changed into Conglomerate Hollywood, with new media giants taking charge of the US films and became dominant in power (Schatz, 2007). Hollywood movie industry has

dominated for nearly a century (Silver, 2007). Box statistics have shown how independent movies have been successful, and how there have been challengers from national film industries; however, none has been a serious threat to the majors in Hollywood (Silver, 2007). Independent films made outside Hollywood do not have enough financial backup to compete with the majors (Silver, 2007).

The industry is controlled by the so-called Big Eight studios, and these studios serve as the central film making factories in Hollywood who feed their nationwide distribution operation (Schatz, 2007). Among these studios, the most powerful firms are the Big Five studios- MGM, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Paramount, and RKO (Schatz, 2007). These five firms did not only produce and distributed films; they also had their own theatre chains (Schatz, 2007). Concurrently, the remaining three studios consisting of Universal, Columbia, and United Artists (UA) also distributed and produced top feature films, but didn't have their own theatre chains at that time (Schatz, 2007).

### **2.1.2 Black Hollywood**

In early 1905, majority of the black people shown in Hollywood films were white people wearing a blackface. In Hollywood, African Americans had few opportunities for good roles, this led to black Hollywood; films that are acted by black people and directed towards black audience (Goodykoontz, 2015). Despite the fact that Black Hollywood films are played by black people; the films were typically written and directed by white men. The movies also existed outside the Hollywood studios, which made black Hollywood films fall under one of the first independent films (Goodykoontz, 2015).

In other words Black Hollywood is focused on African American cinematic productions that are directed towards storylines from African American perspective (Johnson, 2012). In the era of Blaxploitation films, stories about African Americans were more of empowered African Americans with portrayal of sexually aggressive men and hard headed women who want to fight their enemies (whites) (Johnson, 2012).

The first black female to win an Oscar was Hattie McDaniel for her nanny role in 'Gone with the wind' in 1939. The first black male to win an Oscar in 1964 for 'Lilies of the Field' was Sidney Poitier. Sidney became the closest to end the colour barrier (Goodykoontz, 2015). Sidney Poitier played good uptight roles like that of a doctor in 'Guess who is coming to dinner' which made him a respected icon and a notable one to white audience.

Continuously, things changed as Hollywood started acknowledging black actors like Denzel Washington, Micheal Ealy, Morris Chestnut, Taraji P Henson, Terrence Howard, Regina Hall, Kevin Hart, Chris Rock and so many more. Unlike before, black Hollywood now has independent and well known directors and producers such as Tyler Perry, Spike Lee, Lee Daniels, F Gary Gary, Tim Story and a lot more who are doing a great job in the movie industry.

The roles African Americans are given is more like the same old repeated stereotypical roles. Blacks will one way or the other be given roles in mainstream but probably roles of a criminal, nanny, domestic worker or lowlife (Goodykoontz, 2015). African American women are not given enough roles in Hollywood. In black Hollywood, African American women are doing pretty well for themselves. African



Americans are not well recognized compared to whites in Hollywood, and so, African Americans turn on to black Hollywood.

Spike Lee stated that in films, blacks are portrayed to have an angel's touch of guiding and helping their white characters in movies, but the blacks can't help themselves (Glenn & Cunningham, 2006). A good example of this is the movie, 'The Help' (2011). In this movie, the main character Aibileen is able to teach the white kid she nannies things she couldn't teach her own child. Black nannies cater for white families perfectly, but abandon their own households.

Black women and African American women have now embraced new digital technologies for making independent films (Missouri, 2014). An example of this development is African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement (AFFRM), which is an independent black film distribution company established by Ava DuVernay (Missouri, 2014). Ava DuVernay is an award winning black female director, and she was the director of the movie, *Selma* (Missouri, 2014).

It is important to however note that social media is not responsible for the growth of black independent film; rather it is the working together and participation of black women in discussions via social media in aiding films by and about black women (Missouri, 2014).

Another thing that differentiated the new group of black independent filmmakers, both male and female, was what Nelson George referred to as the 'new black wave' (Missouri, 2014). The new black wave didn't pour its attention on black celebrity directors who have made name in Hollywood, instead, it gave opportunity to as many

black filmmakers telling diverse quality stories as possible (Missouri, 2014). A major studio in Hollywood released a lot of films by and about black people in 2013 than it has ever been seen in Hollywood (Missouri, 2014). This is a great opportunity for black film directors to omit and ignore systematic racism and make their own independent movies which will still reach their targeted audience.

## **2.2 History of the Code 'Race' In Relation To Hollywood**

Race refers to a categorized group of people who share either the same belief, look the same way, from the same nationalities, and speak the same language or all of the above. Race is a concept classified and developed by us human beings, not something we are born with. Race classifies us into blacks, whites, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic and so on.

Mental slavery has positioned blacks under the minorities in the society. Blacks live an interwoven, perplexed and puzzled life in a society where they are being represented and re-represented in the media as a result of their past.

Whiteness and Blackness were coined as antipodes within the context of English and later American slavery. More than any other institution, slavery would dictate the career of American racism: Blackness became associated with bondage, inferiority, and social death; Whiteness with freedom, superiority, and life (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009).

The idea of blacks as a menial race is disconsolate as it is now a fixed image to all black races. Hollywood filmmakers have not made this image easy to nullify, rather there is an increase in the stereotypical representation of blacks as inferior to whites.

However, becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival. Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination (Harris, 1993).

The sphere of representation of blacks remains a scar in the minds of blacks. Hollywood films is however not letting go of the struggle of the blacks through the fight for freedom, as more movies been produced represent blacks in one way or the other related to the past.

America is a big society with heterogeneous consumers, and it is a place where images from films can be widely sniffed from all angles. Visual images, particularly in films, are capable of burning into the human mind like a flash light (Mauldin, 2014). Films have the power to bring back past events by making them feel closer and more objective. Hence, when an image in a film is been consumed, one can never take it back or undo the image (Mauldin, 2014).

There are various cases of black people wanting to act less black to be accepted in an American society. Unfortunately, even when blacks act this way or develop behaviour of being white, their skin colour totally disagrees with their thoughts or ideas. An example of this is the American animation series 'Boondocks' by Aaron McGruder. In this animation a character named 'Uncle Ruckus' happens to be a black man who resents being black and acts like a white man in the society. Despite all his action and work to be accepted as a white man, he was still classified as a black because of his skin colour.

According to Desmond & Emirbayer, 'one may create, reproduce, accept, or actively resist imposed systems of racial classification; one may choose to accentuate one's ethnicity or racial identity. But in many cases, one's choices, one's racial or ethnic performances, will have little impact on how one is labelled by others' (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009, p. 340).

The power of image dominates our mind even more than we know, and continuous exposure to the media as they represent blacks in a stereotypical way can affect the way blacks are viewed. From the inceptive days of the transatlantic slave trade, African people have had to circuitously exist inside and in aversion to racist and stereotypical representations of themselves (George, 2004).

The recent manner America use in conveying messages of racial beliefs through the media has affected and influenced the society's belief and culture (Mauldin, 2014). In the late 1800s, pictures were first used as pictorial proof of documentation of scientific analysis. This made the viewer's develop trust when they see the image, creating the ideology of 'I'll believe it when I see it' (Mauldin, 2014).

Today this documentation of past and present happenings can be viewed through movies in our various homes. According to Mauldin, these movies were made for historical educational purposes or to answer to the society's anxiety in their daily life (Mauldin, 2014). However, the problem today is that some of these movies now play the role of racial propaganda (Mauldin, 2014).

Movies have become a dominant element in our everyday live and culture, likewise the portrayal of African American women in Hollywood. The issue of images, how

they are constructed and the meaning they portray in relation to race are always deemed to mean something in racially stratified societies (Young, 2006). Furthermore, Lipsitz accedes that racism is not just as a result of slavery and segregation, rather it also has a lot to do with what we are been presented by the media in our day to day lives. Racism is never stagnant as it changes over time, in different forms and different social purposes in different eras (Lipsitz, 1995).

### **2.3 Historical Stereotypes of African American Women**

The moment there is an imbalance of power, stereotypes develops ( Fontaine, 2011). There is a lot of power in how popular cultures shape consumers view of social reality due to media's such as music, television and movies. As a result to this the leaders in charge of these media should be more careful of what they share with consumers (McKoy, 2012). Stereotyping is used to strike a line between what is socially acceptable and what is not. This impression is what causes displacement of member of the society who doesn't meet the society's standard (McKoy, 2012).

The way black slaves were imprisoned physically and mentally still affect blacks till this day, and this image of blacks plays a big role in shaping black women's identity. The mammy stereotype showcases African American women as been vulnerable nannies who sacrifice their own life for white families. The mammy stereotype also portrays anger, masculinity and ugliness. A study by Jackson (2013) states that the mammy image was created to erase the fact that slavery in the United States was brutal and wicked towards the incarcerated blacks and that domestic occupations were culturally attributed (Jackson, 2013).

This stereotype of African American women came into picture during the time of slavery and the civil war period. It expected that in the present world we live in, such images would have been eradicated and uncommon compared to years back. Unfortunately, the mammy stereotype is all over the place especially in films. In Hollywood, African American women are not recognized for roles that are not partaking to the repeated stereotypes attached to blacks. Hattie McDaniel was the first African American woman to win an academy award for playing the role of a mammy in 'Gone with the wind' in 1939. This same mammy role was played by Octavia Spencer as 'Minny' in 'The Help' in 2011. The gap between Hattie McDaniel and Octavia Spencer award is 72 years, that is, even after 72 years this indispensable image of African American women is still here to stay.

The jezebel stereotype is another historical stereotype of African American women which keeps reoccurring in Hollywood films. Jezebel stereotype has historically been categorized as a figure with sexual features that trick men to get what she wants (Fontaine, 2011). The jezebel character is created to justify white slave owner's intimidation of Black women to be sexually attracted to them (Jackson, 2013). The jezebel character is portrayed in movies as someone who uses sex to get men for their money (McKoy, 2012).

Halle Berry won an academic award for her role in 'Monster Ball' in 2001. Halle played a role of a struggling mother and widow who is emotionally unstable. At first the viewers might feel sentimental towards her life and her struggles. In the middle of the movie, she lost her son and then decided to satisfy her emotions sexually with a racist man played by Billy Bob Thornton. This is yet another woman been recognized for the jezebel stereotype. In Hollywood, African American women

struggle to get good spot in movies, and are never recognized for them. The image of an African American woman being an educated woman who has her life well sorted out is scarce in Hollywood films.

Another historical stereotype is the sapphire. The sapphire stereotype or character is always sassy, abusive aggressive and angry. The sapphire character focuses her anger mostly on men ( Fontaine, 2011). A lot of movies portray African American women in the sapphire way, leaving the ideology that black women are always angry and full of attitude. The tone in the words of a sapphire character ridicules black men and others who have stepped in her way.

The sapphire character was invented from the Amos 'n' Andy show on radio from 1928 to the 1940s and on television in the 1950s (Morgan & Bennett, 2006). The Amos 'n' Andy show is usually focused on black masculinity and how black women nag the black men that are unfortunate to get a job, which in turn portrays black men as lazy and jobless (Morgan & Bennett, 2006). The fact and ideology the show brings is that, the 'angry black woman' and the 'no-good black man' are both stereotypes that work hand in hand (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

Stereotypes are strong ideologies devised to keep and maintain social culture, also it can be seen as a way of trapping and silencing targets in the society. Stereotype does not just tell us how a culture perceive a group of people, but also how it controls that group of people and force them to submit to the representation that haunt them (Morgan & Bennett, 2006). All these stereotypes are not mere representations because it's the representation that sticks with the audience and overtime, they shape their social reality.

Interracial relationship is another important discourse in respect to stereotypes. Overtime, this type of stereotype has been labelled with African American Women. They are said to be angry, rude, and sassy, and therefore can't be loved by a black man or white man. In the process black men leave black women for white women. This stereotype has increased over time in Hollywood films. Example of films with this stereotype which is in the sample of this study is *Power* (2014) and *Diary of a mad black woman* (2005). This stereotype in a study by Morgan & Bennett (2006) is referred to as 'The-Angry-and-Therefore-Unlovable Black Woman' (Morgan & Bennett, 2006, p. 491).

When an African American woman is labelled as an 'angry black woman' it affects every aspect of their lives. This stereotype is one that has been in existence for a long time and is always reappearing. Black men are portrayed mostly to be attracted to white women because of their beauty. Likewise, white women are attracted to black men because of their sexual power, which leaves black women as the unattractive and angry one (Morgan & Bennett, 2006). Whenever a black woman is not submissive to this representation of themselves, they are tagged as 'mannish, unattractive and undesirable' (Morgan & Bennett, 2006).

All these historical stereotypes have lived with African American women for decades. These images however become a part of black women's life. Viewers of Hollywood films where African American women are being portrayed in various stereotypical ways influence their view of African American women, and it also makes them accept that African American women are truly the way they are being portrayed. Not everyone has come in contact with African American women, so it is easy to accept whatever is been presented in films.



## **2.4 Images of African American Women in Films**

The images of African American women in films date back to the era of slavery and how black women were over sexualized. During the time of slavery, black women were molested by their white owners for reproduction and for fun. The black women served as a means of excitement and play for their white owners and other white guest. There are various images of African American women in Hollywood films since after slavery. It is very important to also look into the Blaxploitation films to see how black women were portrayed in them as well as their body.

West posits that; one of the most common and inescapable image of black women is the mammy image which commenced in the South after slavery (West, 2004). The mammy figure was put up to eradicate the truth about slavery and how women suffered in the hands of their white masters (West, 2004). The mammy image represents strong black women who sacrifice their life and time in serving white families and catering for their every need. Black women during slavery were maltreated, molested and subjugated which led to some black women running away or helping other slaves escape too. So as to change the reality, historians and writers created the mammy image to make the pain and struggle of black women seem not that hard (West, 2004).

Consecutively, the body image of the mammy is very similar to Sarah Baartman. Sarah Baartman has long been a distinguished example of African American women representation. The way Sarah Baartman body is been displayed in different caricature and plays has a huge connotation in the allegorical representation of black women (Jackson, 2013). The Sarah Baartman is similar to mammy image in the

sense that they both have a big bosom and large curvy buttocks as shown in the figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Image of Sarah Baartman (Retrieved from <http://www.jozilife.co.za/film/sarah-baartman/>)

Over the years in Hollywood movies, the representation of this black women body has been increasing. Tyler Perry is one of the black writers in the industry that has made name, and he is popular for his 'Madea' character. The Madea character is a rough thick black woman with a sharp tongue who has no respect for her family or the police. The Madea role was played by Tyler Perry himself, which is not the first. In 2000 popular comedian Martin Lawrence played the role of an FBI agent who had to go undercover in a woman's form. The character he portrayed was that of a tough fat black woman named Hattie Mae Pierce. Another example of the Sarah Baartman image is the comedy film 'Norbit' (2007) which is also very similar to Madea and

big momma. It was played by yet another male comedian in the industry, Eddie Murphy. Below is a compilation of the three characters images in the three movies.



Figure 2: Norbit Image (Retrieved from <http://www.empireonline.com/movies/norbit/review/>)



Figure 3: Madea Image (Retrieved from <http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/648747-tyler-perry-will-return-in-boo-a-madea-halloween>)



Figure 4: Big Momma Image (Retrieved from <https://www.thesun.co.uk/>)

As seen in fig 2, 3 and 4 this characters one way or the other tail the mammy image and people are bound to want to expect such masculine and carefree behaviour from an average African American woman. The issue of the representation of African American women in this image is affecting African American women in the real world, but unfortunately this movies use humour to water it down. Madea's attitude according to Mckoy is not improper as a male or as a female, rather it just a perfect showcase of what a stereotyped is, which is a belief composed to drift away from the truth (McKoy, 2012).

Blaxploitation films have played a big role in showcasing the African American women's experience and the hardship black women underwent. In Blaxploitation films African American women are over sexualized which are due to what they actually suffered during the times of slavery. In present Blaxploitation movies like Django Unchained and 12 years a slave, black woman's body were exposed and battered which is a depiction of the sufferings of black women during slavery. The audiences that view these films however don't just download these images of African

American women in their head and let it go. It sticks to their memory and can cause a great shift in how African American women are been perceived in the society.

Some of the images we see on screen are derived from literatures. Over the years movies have been produced based on books and literatures. Example of such films include; *The Color Purple*, *The Help*, *Root*, *Think like a man*, etc. All this films are derived from American literatures that tell a particular story about the past. According to Costa, a large extent of the way black women were portrayed in American literature was influenced by the images of slave narratives (Costa, 1999). In traditional literature, white women are perceived as the princess while black women are the seductress (Costa, 1999).

These depictions restrict African American women roles in the society as the audience most times concludes from what they have seen in the films. It is general knowledge that women are fragile and soft compared to men, but when the audience see all the things black women go through in films, it pushes them away from being a normal woman (Costa, 1999). Because the slave narratives in films and stories showcase black women's survival in defiance of distress, misery, and sexual exploitation, it triggered a bad opinion towards African American women (Costa, 1999).

There are certain standards set down for women, Costa mentioned that; 'women should be sensitive and sentimental, truly subservient and faithful to their husbands whatever the circumstances', also they should care and keep their family united (Costa, 1999, p. 68). Furthermore, Costa accedes that looking at such principle, an African American woman whom her family were been sold in her presence and who

could withstand life being sexually abused did not warrant to be called a mother or wife (Costa, 1999).

Hierarchy of beauty and social status within the society is another problem reoccurring in films. Overtime, black women have been depicted as ugly women who are sexually abused (West, 2004). Rape and race mixing were frequent incidents in the pre-civil war south, which brought about different skin colours and hair textures among African Americans. These physical features were however used to conceive hierarchy of beauty and social status in the oppressed community (West, 2004).

African American women with kinky hair were considered unattractive. Black women that were light skinned who are offspring's of the white slave owners were given little education and slight physical work to do (West, 2004). These privileges continued and were even extended to the early 1900's persistent with the colour discrimination which was enforced in larger communities. During this period before black were not allowed to attend schools, churches and social organizations, they had to pass the skin colour criteria of being lighter than a paper bag (West, 2004).

## **2.5 Repercussion of African American Women's Representation in Hollywood Films**

Looking at the repercussion of the stereotypes that African American women face, it is important to state that slavery played a big role in how these women are being represented. Slave trade cannot be reversed nor revoked. During the slave trade, millions of Africans were conveyed and incarcerated. Slaves sourced for means to escape from the hands of their harsh masters, and for this reason are called rebels

(Johnson, 2012). The stereotype of African women and blacks in general started centuries back during slavery, and today it affects African American women in a lot of ways. It affects all Africans, but for the sake of this research, the researcher will be focusing on its effect on African American women.

Since the birth of motion pictures ‘African-American women and men (with few exceptions) are negatively portrayed as idiotic, classless, child-like, unsophisticated, ignorant, violent, sexually aggressive, depraved and morally destitute characters’ (Johnson, 2012). These stereotypes are widely accepted to the extent that it defines all African Americans and blacks around the world.

Actor and comedian, Michael Colyar stated that just as we wear white to weddings and black to funeral, and the day is bright and the night is evil, so do people view and justify African Americans (Berry & Duke, 2011). If African American women are still portrayed and stigmatized over and over again in these same bad images, it only increases the negative image of them, not change it or make it better.

The negative and stereotypical representation of African American women has so much affected African American women’s self-esteem. A recent dove story found that 7 in 10 girls between the age of 8-17 feel that they are not good enough or do not measure up in their appearance (Berry & Duke, 2011). Also 75% of girls with low self-esteem report engaging in negative activities such as eating disorders, cutting, drug use, and self-loathing (Berry & Duke, 2011).

In the media there is often films, news and stories that relates to African American women, and the viewers who are of the same race finds it easy to relate to what is

been shown on the screen. Most of the time an African American woman is shown in the media, she either a sass mouth full with hate and attitude, or an over sexualized woman with man issues. If African American women consume such images on a daily basis, they will definitely infuse it into their lives.

In the 'Dark Girls', a documentary exploring the deep-seated biases and attitudes about skin colour, a female interviewee said;

I wish I could wake up one day lighter or I should wash my face and it should be lighter. I thought it was dirt and I try to clean it off. I took my colour after my father and I use to hate him for it (Berry & Duke, 2011).

This is a negative effect of what African American women perceive their selves to be. In a world where being white is associated with beauty and special treatment, and being black is associated with ugliness and bad characters, women of colours lose their self-esteem to the world perception of them.

The mammy image is one of the most popular and historical stereotype of the African American woman. It however has its own negative effect. As the mammy image might seem humble, loving and caring, so does the mammy image generates eating disorder. The mammy image is a woman with oversized body image who is not sexually attractive. For young girls, this is a position they never want to see themselves and so they go on diet so as not to fit into that image.

Internalized racism is globalized to the extent that African American women want to change their skin colour. The President National Association of Black Psychologists, Dr.Cheryl Grills stated that;



This is not just about the US. Go to Ghana today, go to Gambia today, go to Senegal, go to South Africa, you will see big billboards promoting skin bleaching cream even in the face of knowing that it causes cancer (Berry & Duke, 2011).

African American women's perception of their skin colour is negative, when all they see in magazines and on the television is glorified light skin with straight hair. Matthew Shenoda, Assistant Provost for Equality and Diversity, Cal Arts mentioned that one of the most popular products in the third world is skin whitening cream (Berry & Duke, 2011). Skin whitening products sales grew from \$40 to \$43 billion in 2008 worldwide (Berry & Duke, 2011). African American women endanger their lives just to fit in and exclude their selves from the stereotype their lives have been built around.

Another bad effect of stereotypes of African American women is not just how they see themselves, but also how they see other African American women. It is funny how few white people compliment dark skin colour, but black people make fellow blacks question their colour. Timothy Foley (LMFT Psychotherapist) stated that 'when they feel inferior and insecure, they want to find a way to feel better about their selves by putting somebody else down' (Berry & Duke, 2011). The idea of racism and internalized racial beliefs is whites against black, and black against white. Unfortunately, African American women and black women in general tend to devalue each other. These African American women know they are being stereotyped and yet they let it consume them and pass the aggression on other women.

The relationship African American women have with African American men is implausible. Black men are been affected by slavery ideology. The advice the aunt of a 5years old boy gave him on his way to school was to go to school and find a light skinned girlfriend, who has a long hair and clean underwear. If at this very tender age of the boy, all he gets is a short-sighted racial advice, what kind of man will the boy grow up to be? He will probably grow to be the type of man that sees nothing more to a dark skinned woman than an ugly black woman (Berry & Duke, 2011).

Berry and Duke further states that African American men see dark skinned women as nothing. Black men judge these women based on the existing stigma. Among the first things that come to a black man's mind when he sees an African American woman is that she is probably from Compton, and she has attitude. Black men go through these sometimes, even unconsciously.

However, 41.9% of black women in America have never been married, while only 20.7% of white women have never been married. African American women are the list coupled groups in the United States. African American men are so cruel to African American women that the women wish they could be a shade lighter, so they could be loved the way black men love white women.

African American women are heavily sexualized in movies, and this has its backlash too. 'Black men see me as beautiful, exotic and attractive behind closed doors, but when it comes to dating and been seen with each other in public, they vanish' (Berry & Duke, 2011). These were the words of an African American woman when she was asked how she relates with other African American men. Black women are stigmatized to be massively curvy and sexually thirsty, which results to more of a

sexual approach from men, rather than a relationship or love approach. There is more to a black woman than her sexuality (Johnson, 2012).

The representations of African American women affect how these women see their selves. Every woman has her own unique purpose and function, and so African American women shouldn't devalue their selves. Instead African American women should start to acknowledge their selves. It is important also for African American parents to let their children understand life and not be consumed in racial stigmas. The earlier these racial ideas are curbed, the better.

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study is to analyse how African American women are represented in Hollywood films. However, the study is based on feminist film theory and black feminist thought. These theories will help expatiate on feminist contentions such as stereotypes, patriarchy, struggle, sexual objectification, gender and race.

### **2.6.1 Feminist Film Theory**

The introduction of feminist films theory in 1970 has brought about a great evolution in film studies. Feminist film theory almost became the doctrine of film theory; such was its impact in the field (Chaudhuri, 2006). 'The radical potential of gender for feminist theory is not that it reduces all women to identical subjects but that it explodes subjectivity across a series of fields, each differentiated from the other, each multipliciously developing in dialogue across radically heterogeneous spaces' (Rabinowitz, 2008, p. 154). This is the vow of feminist work in films.

The feminist film theory was swayed by the second wave feminism and the developing interest of women's study in the field (Gürkan & Ozan, 2015). After this period feminist scholars started using the feminist film theory in analysing films (Gürkan & Ozan, 2015). Feminists perceive cinema as a cultural practice which portrays fabrications about women and femininity, as well as men and masculinity (Smelik, 1999). Feminist film theory mostly focuses on issues of spectatorship and representation (Smelik, 1999).

Feminism is a means to end patriarchy, which is a system that favours men over women. Various people understand and execute feminism in different ways. Feminism is the fight for female independence and equality against male counterparts. Feminism has had a large influence on film theory and criticism (Smelik, 1999). African American women are underrepresented in the world, and this representation is mostly negative.

It is impossible to talk about feminist film theory without plunging into male gaze. Major theorist Laura Mulvey who worked intensely on films and feminism argues that the portrayal of 'Woman' as an exhibition to be looked at penetrates visual culture. In such portrayal, 'Woman' is described entirely in terms of sexuality, as an object of desire, in relation to, or as a foil for, 'Man' (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 2) .

According to Mulvey (2001) on unmasking the gaze;

Over the years, feminist film theory has used psychoanalytic theory to underline these points, emphasizing not only that looking is central to cinematic pleasure but that the pleasure of looking absorbs pre-existing biological or literal masculinity and femininity. It is gendered and the spectator loses his, and equally her, identity in the erotic dynamic of the film's way of seeing. However valuable, this approach leaves the cinema isolated and cut off from its surrounding society and culture. Ways of seeing do not exist in a vacuum. The "gaze", as many critics and theorists have argued convincingly, is a key element in the construction of modern

subjectivity, filtering ways of understanding and ordering the surrounding world (Mulvey, 2001, p. 5).

In the patriarchal world we live in, hardly will you view Hollywood films without coming across two or more scenes that portrays male gaze. It is however not the focus of this study to review male gaze in all Hollywood movies, but instead Hollywood films that represent African American women.

African American women body parts are singled out from their personality. A woman in films serves as the main point of sexual contention. Hollywood films have made this an undying tradition as in movies women are used as bait for men. However, the image of black female body as object of look and attraction sexually objectify African American women in the presence of their male counterparts, in other words, leaving the female empty, weak and vulnerable. The issue of rape gives an insight to the repercussion of sexually gazing at women. For example, in the case of 'For coloured girls' (2010) by Tyler Perry, the movie shows the hardship of nine black women and their various life complications. Among the nine women is Yasmine played by Anika Noni Rose who was ruthlessly raped by a male friend after a series of lustful gaze.

The white men raped black women and the history of interracial rape describes much of the penance of sexual looking by the black men, who was literally emasculated by the white men (Smelik, Feminist film theory, 1993). During the time of slavery, white men raped black women inhumanly, and till date this image of black women still exist in Hollywood films.

Claire Johnston, a feminist film theoretician stated that women's cinema could be seen as 'counter cinema' ( Gürkan & Ozan, 2015). The counter cinema entails a group of individuals, institutions and movie makers who come together to fight the subjective domination of Hollywood cinema. Johnston contended that counter cinema has the right and power to consider an alternative to Hollywood films both in refusing and dismissing the content and means of production ( Gürkan & Ozan, 2015).

Hollywood movies portray men most times as the heroes, and even when a woman happens to be credited, a man is behind it. The counter cinema which can also be seen as women cinema stands strongly against such ideologies. In a reasonable number of Hollywood films, when a woman finally happens to be the hero, her happiness is not complete without a man. These movies somehow find a way to narrow the victory down to a male character.

Women want to be giving same roles as men in the industry. Women want equal rights and respect. Women are heavily sexualized in movies compared to their male counterparts. These are all feminist ideas in films, and what feminist film theory stands for.

### **2.6.2 Black Feminist Thought**

As the title entails, black feminist thought is the combination of feminism and ideas from black women's point of view. Black feminist thought describes how black women are self-reliant and confident in fighting gender, race and class oppression. Black feminist thought also exhibit black peoples arriving power as agents of knowledge. Interpreting black women's background and ideas lies at the heart of black feminist thought (Collins, 2000).

Initially, a lot of African American women were moved to the U.S to work as slaves under a state of oppression. Oppression refers to a state where a group of people who are the African American women in this situation, are deprived access to society resources. The major elements that created oppression in the United States include race, sexuality, age, gender, class, nation and ethnicity.

The oppression of African American women has three extensions which include the political dimension, economic dimension and the ideological dimension of African American women. The political dimension involves not given African American women the right to vote and be literates as they often drop out of school before being full literates. The economic dimension refers to the way black women laboured as slaves and the poverty of free wage labour in the rural south. Lastly the ideological dimension which is very relevant to this study because it involves the slavery stereotypes of black women which are still in existence till date. These stereotypes include, mammies, jezebel, sapphire and lots more. In the U.S. culture, stereotypes like these are normalized and accepted which end up justifying the ideologies affixed to African American women. Hence, the combination of these three dimensions is enough to keep African American women silenced and in a minor and subordinate place.

Maria Stewart, who was the first black woman to lecture in public on political issues defied African American women to refuse the negative images of black womanhood that is common in her times, stating that gender, race and class oppression are the main causes of black women's poverty. The strength of self-definition was very important to Stewart as black women's survival was on the line.

Stewart was among the first strong black feminist in the United States who fought for the voice of black women to be heard and respected. We hardly hear voices like Stewarts own anymore in the present world, and most African American women are silenced. Just like Maria Stewart, other women such as Barbara Smith, Toni Morrison, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and lots of others have continuously strived to make themselves heard.

The involvement of black women in Hollywood films has increased over time, but the amount of black female directors and executive positions in the industry continues to be a burden (Missouri, 2014). Notwithstanding, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has its first African American woman president, Cheryl Boone Isaacs. Also of recent African American women like Taraji P Henson, Lupita Nyong'o and Viola Davis have been recognized in the academy awards and Oscars. This is a huge development for African American women and black women in general.

African American women have formed independent knowledge on how to redevelop all the dimensions of oppression by developing black feminist understanding and tradition. The idea of recovering lost knowledge meant a lot to the African American women. Recovering black women's ideas however entails reinterpreting, identifying, and in a lot of ways analysing the works of black women thinkers individually, who were able to preserve their idea. Black women intellectuals helped out in the development of black feminist theories. However, being a black intellectual doesn't mean being educated or an academia, rather it entails fighting and struggling on behalf of black women.



African American women face related challenges in a society where history and racism have devalued and disregarded African women. However, despite these challenges every individual African American woman does not have the same experience; neither do they interpret their experiences the same way. If one African American woman with low self-esteem and another African American woman with confidence should walk through a hall where white women call them ugly, the way they will both respond to this challenge will be very different (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist thought is responsible for improving black women's experience. The black feminist thought holds the knowledge that assist black women to survive and resist inferiority. African American women often find their selves misrepresented either as a result of slave history or negative ideology. The black feminist thought however empowered African American women and triggered contention.

Black women and the media now have an interconnection that has a lot to do with sex and race. The media black women are often represented the most is film. Film is a socio-cultural body that has a vast effect on how black women are viewed and how black women see their selves (Missouri, 2014). For over a century, black women have been attacked with different stereotypes like the jezebel and mammies, but the present generation of black women are able to fight these images with the black feminist thought (Missouri, 2014).

The negative images of black women in films are intended to make racism, poverty, sexism and other injustice a normal and natural occurrence in everyday life (Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 2000). Whether Hollywood pays attention to black women

or not, black women tell their story with the distinction that speaks to the intricacy of their experience.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter focuses on the methodology of this research. Discussed under this chapter are the data collection method, population sample, reliability and validity will be elucidated in this chapter.

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

This study employs the qualitative methodology. Like, Anderson 2010 accedes; the qualitative methodology enables the researcher to obtain necessary information from the sample in order to describe the situation as they exist. Data's gathered based on human experience and representation obtained in qualitative method is more powerful and sometimes more fascinating than quantitative data (Anderson, 2010).

This research focuses on how African American women are represented in Hollywood films looking at the stereotypical representation of black women. In order to find out how African American women are being represented, the researcher picked 17 Hollywood films produced between years 2005-2015. To focus more on the topic, three films were specifically singled out to be the cynosure of the study.

These three films (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise) alongside the remaining fourteen films were chosen because they whirl around stereotypical representation of African American women. Each film portrays different stories surrounding African American women.

The three films were specifically chosen because each portrays different representation of the historical stereotype of ‘mammy’, ‘jezebel’ and ‘sapphire’. The films will be analysed accordingly with a feminist and black feminist thought approach. Most importantly, the researcher also chose these three films to connect–the–dots of the representation of African American Women at underlying and sometimes hidden level in the text.

### **3.2 Data Collection Method**

Critical analysis will be used in collecting data for this study. As the name implies, critical analysis refers to the process of evaluating text critically which in this context is film. Critical analysis is the style communication researchers use to break down and clarify the attribute of a text.

The text of the visual representation in the selected movies will be appropriately analysed and broken down with critical analysis. Critical analysis is appropriate for this study because it will help understand the film texts and how they are used in representing African American women.

Films in place of texts are sets of relation that takes place in a signifying arrangement and meaning. They are mediated texts that give meaning to representation of women’s body. In films signifying system works to create particular meaning by establishing representation (Ahmadvostakolae, 2012, p. 22)

The research uses critical analysis to study the different text used in the selected films. The three movies *The Help*, *I can do bad all by myself* and *Joyful noise* focused on are seen to be portraying historical stereotypes of African American women. Critical analysis as a qualitative method will however be treated to make the analysis of these films clear and more understandable.

Aside the researcher viewing the three films five times to carefully scrutinize them, two other participants watched the three selected movies carefully. In the research the two participants will be referred to as participant one and participant two. The two participants were choosing randomly without any specific qualification to choose them. The participant one is a female and participant two a male. Participants from both sexes were chosen to see and compare views from different perspective on African American women representations.

The purpose of this study was well expatiated on to the participants and they were both briefed on what was expected of them while watching the movies. The participants watched the movies over three times carefully and took notes on what they feel about the films representation of African American women from their own point of view.

Articles, journals, electronic sources, e-books and websites were applied as secondary data for this research. All this will enable the researcher see previous studies done on related topics to this research. The secondary data also serves as a back bone for the literature review and background of the study for the research.

The remaining 14 films will help support the research argument when analysing. Also the remaining 14 films will be analysed as well and themes will be brought up on how black women are been represented in them.

### **3.3 Population and Sampling**

All research questions address issues that are of great relevance to important groups of individuals known as a research population. A research population is generally a

large collection of individuals or objects that is the main focus of scientific query. It could either be target population or accessible population.

In this study non-random sampling is effective as the researcher selected 17 films out of Hollywood films that represent African American women. The films chosen were from the year 2005-2015 and during this period a lot of films that represent African American women were been produced. The researcher selected 17 out of these films because they adequately represent the argument of the study. Some of the movies have white directors and it is important to the researcher to choose stories that are told through the eyes of a white director.

To have a manageable sample and to avoid a crowded data that may mar the analysis thereby rendering the discussion and conclusion problematic, the study will be analysing broadly on three films. The selection of the main films (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise) for this study was inspired by the characters and recognition of different stereotypes in this films.

The present study delve into the various effigy of African American women in Hollywood films, hence, the films will serve as the main text. Below are the films that would be studied for this research work, starting with the three focused films;

Table 1: List of 17 Hollywood films that represent black women from 2005-2015

<b>FILM TITLE</b>	<b>YEAR</b>	<b>DIRECTOR</b>	<b>GENRE</b>
<b>The Help</b>	2011	Tate Taylor	Period drama

<b>I Can Do Bad All By Myself</b>	2009	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
<b>Joyful Noise</b>	2012	Todd Graff	Comedy-drama
Madea Witness Protection	2012	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
The Family That Preys	2008	Tyler Perry	Drama
Madea Family Reunion	2006	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
Precious	2009	Lee Daniels	Drama
For Colored Girls	2010	Tyler Perry	Drama
12 Years a Slave	2013	Steve McQueen	Period drama
Why Did I Get Married Too?	2010	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
Daddy's Little Girl	2007	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
Empire	2015	Lee Daniels  Danny Strong	Musical drama  soap opera

Power	2014	Courtney Kemp	Drama
Single Moms Club	2014	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
Temptation Confession	2013	Tyler Perry	Romance-drama
Madea Goes to Jail	2009	Tyler Perry	Comedy-drama
Diary of a Mad Black Woman	2005	Tyler Perry	Romantic  comedy-drama

Table 1 list out the Hollywood films that will be assessed in this research. The researcher watched all these movies thoroughly before deciding the main three to analyse closely. In the table, it is seen that majority of the films are directed by Tyler Perry, and Tyler Perry also produces most movies he directs. Tyler Perry’s movies are known to showcase a black community and to have special interest in the portrayal of African American women in the society. Oprah Winfrey told an interviewer once that Tyler Perry must have been raised by strong black women resulting to his Madea character. Tyler Perry has had a lot of controversies regarding his films and how he portrays African American women. This study will look into his movies as one of the three movies that will be analysed is produced and directed by Tyler Perry himself.



### **3.4 Reliability of the Research**

Reliability of the study has to do with the flexibility and organization of the research work. The whole analysis and effort put into the work should correlate and reflect in the result. This research uses critical analysis to analyse the three selected movies (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise), in other words the films serve as text in this research.

Triangulation of the sources is used to confirm the veracity of the data in this research. Aside using critical analysis to scrutinize the selected films, two participants would also watch the film judiciously and data will be collected on their response to the films. These data will be used in the analysis to support the researcher's argument. The main three movies selected were watched by the researcher and participants five times, this is to create a better understanding in the mind of the researcher and participants.

## **Chapter 4**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

In this chapter the selected films (The Help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise) are scrutinized in respect to the representation of African American women in Hollywood films. Each movie will answer the three research questions for this study. This chapter will give a broader presentation of the subject matter using the selected films. The selected films will be closely analysed with point from the two participants selected for this study to buttress the arguments by the researcher. This research is concerned with how African- American women are been portrayed and how the roles assigned to African- American women play into the historical stereotype of the mammy, jezebel and sapphire. The research questions highlighted at the first chapter will be answered in this chapter through critical analysis. The analysis will have subheadings under all three research questions to show which movie answers which question.

#### **4.1 African- American Women Portrayal in the Help, I Can Do Bad All by Myself and Joyful Noise**

This particular analysis answers the first research question of how African- American women are been portrayed in the selected Hollywood films. The analysis with the use of critical analysis will bring up various themes on how African- American women are presented.

#### **4.1.1 The Analysis of the Film the Help (2011)**

The Help is a 2011 period drama directed by Tate Taylor with two African-American main female characters Aibileen (Viola Davis) and Minny (Octavia Spencer). The movie was adapted from Kathryn Stockett's novel 'The Help'. The movie centres on how African-American women were employed as slaves for white families during the civil rights movement and they were attributed as 'the help'. The black servants work hard and are paid peanuts at the end of the month, and they are also segregated from using the toilet inside the house. Racial segregation was a way of putting African Americans in a lower position to keep them from having equal opportunities of education transportation and other facilities (Armstrong, 2012).

The film reveals downplay of the social equality of African-American women both at the dominant and at the underlying level. It takes place in Jackson Mississippi, where white women who stuck their noses in the air with nothing else to do than throw parties dehumanized the women of colour who served them as maids. To these white women the maids were not important, they were just there to clean their houses, wash their clothes, cook for their husbands and raise their children. They are so blinded by the difference in skin pigmentation that they are convinced sharing toilet with them is deadly.

An open spirited journalist Miss Skeeter (Emma Stone) sees it all differently as she has remained grateful to the maid who raised her. She is a college graduate who returns to Mississippi and noticed how the black maids were treated badly, she then chooses to get their stories to write a book. She does not want these suffering second hand African American women to be silent anymore; she wants them to voice their pain. Aibileen and Minny concur to share their stories of the struggle and hardship

they face in the hands of the white family they work for. During this process, Skeeter faced a lot of rejection from her white friends and family.

If the above paragraph is anything to go by it will be expected that for once we hear raw and uncut, just what it is this long suffering women have bottled up and can no longer hold in. We assume they will get to tell their story, so it becomes a cause for raised eye brows when we see in less than sixteen seconds into the movie (first shot), the hand of a white woman is seen penning down the words 'The Help'. Let's bear in mind that she has all her life been privileged to have everything done for her by a maid. She has had no experiences of having to be called a thief for no reason, made to work all week with no weekends off nor has she had to run into the night after being asked to get off a bus because she was black, but now she gets to tell their story. The story of a life she never has or will never have to live.

The film 'the help' shows that African- American women cannot escape from their past and been slaves to white masters or mistresses is a stigma that is not leaving anytime soon. As if it is not enough that this is the documentation of history, a word that is already so emasculated because she doesn't have a say, now it has to be told by a total stranger. It is only after we have seen a white ladies hand writing (sort of a stamp of approval that the story is worth listening to), that we hear the voice of Aibileen whose story of been a maid in that era in Jackson Mississippi is been told.

In the dialogue that follows we learn to configure our minds to not pity but understand Aibileen's situation, because if she confirms that she always knew that a maid is all she will turn out to be. Well aren't that just the case, yet another maid down the lineage of born maids without question. The next set of questions that

follow lets us understand that she has dreamt of becoming something else, but even the smile that accompanies that tells us she herself doesn't see such possibility. This is where I begin to question, is this supposed to mirror the fact that as an African American woman, her dreams, hopes, desires etc. are subjects to generational circumstances without hope of remedy.

We are not as viewers supposed to be bothered by the fact that she is seen as a game, rather than an active player, so much so that she trains someone else's child and leaves her own. She has raised seventeen white babies. Watching this film for the soul purpose of critical analysis I am only two minutes in and I am ready to question if this is what the world should think, that that is all an African American woman can be good for.

Aibileen who in the present progression of this story takes care of the two year old daughter of Mr and Mrs Leefolt named Mae Mobley. Aibileen has a saying she teaches to Mae, 'you is kind, you is smart, you is important' (Taylor, 2011). This is something I am sad to conclude upon that she herself doesn't believe in, at least not for herself. On the other hand, we have Miss Skeeter who Aibileen allows to tell her story. She is in her twenties obviously less than half of Aibileen's age and has already done so much, she just got a job and isn't afraid to talk on subjects everyone shies away from.

A reasonable amount of mainstream Hollywood dramas that focus on slavery, civil rights era and racism have been suspected of presenting the argument from a white central character and commending African- Americans to secondary character (Evans, 2012). According to participant two the dehumanization of African-

American played out throughout this film and it is ultimately significant to assert that nothing is coincidental in this film; every scene was well deliberative on before the completion of the film. The main white character in the film, Skeeter, is giving the credit of helping the black maids in the community. The black maids however are portrayed helpless and dependent.

Participant one weighed the situation stating that ‘African American women are portrayed as horses worth the race but not worth the price. Skeeter goes to get a job at Jackson Journal writing a column on housekeeping, something she clearly knows nothing of. She will get answer from the maid and have her name graced below the page taking the spot for credit. Aibileen does not mind, it is just another job she ought to do.’

Another main African American character we get to see is Minny Jackson; Minny is a maid who happens to be Aibileen’s best friend. Now unlike Aibileen, Minny is portrayed as a very strong assertive woman who can’t take no for an answer and would rather lose her job to make her point than obey without question. This character is who you might think of as a role model in this case, in a time where being black means having sealed lips. She rebels and has a lot to say regarding everyone and everything. As a woman who has such reputation, it will be expected that the last place she will have no control over is in her own home, and typical to bring her character down back to earth the one thing she has no control over is exactly what she should.

African- American women are showcased to be disgusting and graced with different types of diseases. A scene at Elizabeth (Ahna O’Reilly) house, Aibileen’s boss,

shows this clearly. A group of charismatic women including Hilly (Bryce Dallas), who happens to be Minny's boss and Skeeter, gather round the table for lunch. Hilly was pressed during the women's discussion and Elizabeth told her to use the toilet. Hilly refused because her (Elizabeth) maid uses the quest toilet. Hilly argued further by stating that;

Wouldn't you rather them take their business outside? It's just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do. That's why I've drafted The Home Health Sanitation Initiative, a disease preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. It's been endorsed by the White Citizen's Council (Taylor, 2011).

This is a plain misrepresentation of African American women especially looking at the fact that humans are all equal. The colour of our skins doesn't determine how immune to disease we turn out to be. Hilly plays the role of a heartless 24-year old woman who was the first to have a baby among her peers. She takes the toilet segregation so seriously to the extent she used a pencil to put dots on the tissues in the toilet to be sure her maid Minny doesn't use her toilet. When Skeeter cracks a joke about the toilet segregation, Hilly snapped at her telling her not to joke about the 'coloured situation'.

Aibileen is portrayed patient and calm, while Minny is portrayed insolent and daring. Minny works for Hilly and Hilly's mother. Unfortunately she was fired by Hilly because she refused to use the toilet outside when it was raining heavily; rather she used a toilet in the house. Hilly threw her out under the rain which introduces the strong black Minny. According to participant two, 'the scene reveals the relegation of African American women as classless and powerless. Now, moving towards the underlying level reading of this film, for a film of two hours, it only rained when Minny Jackson was fired and was going home. The rain re-strengthen the discourse

because as aforementioned, nothing is coincidental, everything is well planned. The big question here is; what if it didn't rain in that scene, will anything really change about the movie?'

Jackson community being a small place, it was easy for Hilly to get the news out to other white families to not employ Minny. In the process Minny had to go to the only person Hilly haven't brain washed with her story, Celia (Jessica Chastain). The angry woman image was well pronounced with Minny's character when Minny made a pie for Hilly to apologize. Unfortunately, the apology turned out to be a payback time when after eating two slices of the pie; Minny told Hilly she just ate her shit.



Figure 5: Minny serves Hilly pie with her feces in it

Minny is in a relationship where her husband beats and inflicts injury on her at the slightest provocation and she still stays married to him in the same house where her young daughters can see. How can a woman bold enough to give her white employer a pie containing her feces as punishment not be able to stand up to a man who lays



his hand on her. Participant one mentioned that it is not surprising that a courageous character like Minny is brought to humility by her man, Leroi. In the conversation she had with Aibileen after she had done the terrible awful, Minny said, ‘She got what she deserved Aibileen, now Leroi gon kill me’ (Taylor, 2011).

It is not also coincidental, that the woman who helps her in the end make up her mind to leave her abusive husband is a clueless white lady Celia. Celia in her late twenties can barely keep her home clean or cook for her own husband, she is a social outcast looked upon as a slut. She can’t keep any friends and has had three miscarriages, and yet she is the only character that is able to snap Minny out of her abusive marriage. Here we see or are unconsciously made to reckon with the ideal that an African American woman might have enough courage and it won’t still be enough to keep her blinded from her own foolishness.

According to participant one, the women who serve as help follow a cycle which includes housekeeping all week, going back on Sunday to church where they hear that love is the ultimate and they should submit regardless. They barely have time for their own families and so they raise daughters just like them who have to be told when not to ‘sass mouth’.

The issue of African-American women having fear at the sight of the whites gives the feeling that whites are superior and are like a ‘god’ to the black servants. Aibileen was having a discussion with another maid at the front of the bus, when Skeeter walks towards them. Fear was written over the face of Aibileen and the maid beside her. The maid instantly set foot into the bus before Skeeter moved closer.

Aibileen lamented over her fear of telling her story, stating that the whites burnt her cousin's car and if she tells her story, they might as well burn down her house too.

The representation of African-American women as mean, strict and no-nonsense mothers is not a new image in Hollywood films. During a church service in this movie, Minny is seen scolding her children from the choir section with a mean and disciplined expression on her face. Without having to talk to them or move closer, Minny was able to caution her playful children with a stern and disciplined look.

African-American women for so long has been seen as uneducated bunch of women. The first opportunity Aibileen had to tell her story to Skeeter, she said 'It was 1925, and I'd just turned fourteen. I dropped out of school to help Momma with the bills' (Taylor, 2011). At a tender age like that Aibileen dropped out, and this was not the only scenario in the movie. After Minny was fired from Hilly's house, her daughter, Sugar (Kelsey Scott) had to drop out of school to be a maid.

The African-American women were portrayed has not being educationally proficient as the whites. The African-American women have been stereotyped in the direction of them been acceptable only in the kitchen. The exit of Minny from Hilly's house brought about Yule May (Aunjanue Ellis). Yule May asked Hilly and her husband for \$75 to pay for her twin sons' college tuition fee. Hilly's husband escaped the question by leaving for work, while Hilly refused to lend her the money. Yule May resorts to selling a stolen ring to raise \$75 after being denied a loan by her employers and isn't smart enough to know that she will be a suspect when she tries to sell it. This portrays African American women as criminals. The criminal/drug stereotype is not strange in Hollywood films either.

Constantine, a more elderly woman who dedicated 20 years of her life to raising Skeeter dies of a broken heart when she is sent away by her white employers who don't see her has anything but help. According to Charlotte (Skeeter's mother), 'they only care about the money' (Taylor, 2011). Constantine's daughter Rachael whom we get to see just once, is showcased as a hot head whose refusal to follow instructions from Mrs Charlotte results in her mother been dismissed as a maid. Every other African American woman we see in the movie is in a similar situation. Feeling helpless, having stories to tell but not bold enough voices. They don't even think their stories are worth telling till Skeeter tells them so and she hasn't even lived long enough and well enough to see half the things that they have seen.

Minnie as usual, who would have been the one to question her audacity 'and just what makes you think coloured people need your help' (Taylor, 2011), to which Skeeter replies, 'I just want to show your perspective, so people might understand what it is like from your side' (Taylor, 2011) and of course by the end of the dialogue, Minny gives in. African American women teach their daughters what they know, to not look at their employers, use their bathrooms, plates or any form of contact. They however have words of encouragement and love to give to the white babies they take care of. If only they had the revelation to look within themselves every once in a while and say 'you is kind, you is smart, you is important', just maybe things could have changed sooner than they did.

Claire Schmidt a professor at the University of Missouri who studies race and folklore said fried chicken for a long time has been a part of southern diet, but they had utility for slaves (Demby, 2013). The fried chickens were not expensive, easy to eat and a good source of meat (Demby, 2013). Minny is seen in the movie glorifying

her love for fried chicken. She told Celia frying chicken makes her feel good about life. In Minny's words, 'I love me some fried chicken' (Taylor, 2011).

African-American women struggle is well pronounced in the movie. African-American women despite all the hardship and loss they still remain strong. The movies show that African-American women can withstand anything thrown at them, which is very unfair as African-American women also have a heart and feelings too as white women. Aibileen and a black man were thrown out of a bus in the middle of danger, while the whites on board continued their ride to their various destinations. The idea this movie provide is that, African-American women don't need special attention or care like the whites do, and a African-American women can pick herself up when she falls, which is so not true in the real world. Everybody in spite of gender or race needs one person or the other to pick them up when they fall.

The segregation and discrimination was very overpowering in the movie as it even extends to a taxi that reads 'whites only'. Also the movie theatre has a different entrance for blacks situated up a fire escape stairway with a sign that reads 'coloured entrance' (Taylor, 2011). The representation of African-Americans and churches is repeatedly shown in Hollywood films. Tyler Perry is known for glorifying this image in his movies e.g. *Madea Witness Protection*, *the Family that Preys*, *Madea Family Reunion* etc. it is becoming a pattern and a stereotype of African Americans generally in Hollywood films.

#### **4.1.2 The Analysis of the Film *I Can Do Bad All by Myself* (2009)**

The movie 'I can do bad all by myself' is a 2009 comedy-drama directed by Tyler Perry, with April (Taraji P Henson) as the main character. The African American woman, who is a lead character in this film, has succumbed to any stereotype

possibly associated with black American women. April a night club singer who does nothing but sing at the club, get drunk and go home to a boyfriend whose wife is pregnant, and nieces and nephews who can't stay out of trouble finds herself in a peculiar situation. As expected of a character like this she is so far down the lonesome and gloomy part of obstinate self-destruction, that she is convinced she needs no help destroying herself hence the very clever title 'I can do bad all by myself'.

The movie is about three children who seek out their night crawling Aunty April for shelter. The three children broke into Madea (Tyler Perry) house to smuggle out few goods. Madea feeds the children and takes them to their auntie's house. In return for stealing from Madea's house, April agrees to drop them off to labour at Madea's house to pay off for the damage. April is an alcoholic singer who is very selfish and cares about no one except herself.

April is so selfish and self-involved that she is comfortable with sleeping around with a married man who has a child on the way, because she doesn't care to have kids of her own. There is no question of conscience or moral judgment as should be expected of a woman, self-satisfaction is all she craves. It is funny that in the last couple of sentences the words I have used to describe April carry within the word 'self'. Apart from the perspective of psychoanalysis where we are taught to break down the 'self' because it in its own right isn't coherent, we would assume that this character will put herself first, but no she doesn't. Her action all boil down to the fact that she has a void that she feels with a relationship that requires no commitment. So while we might be quick to judge her on the surface, we see that she does what she does to keep her sanity (her boyfriend Randy), 'I can't keep you guys, my man

doesn't like children' (Perry, 2009). April has no empathy and that character trait isn't accidental, at least it makes for good viewing.

Jennifer (Hope Olaidè Wilson) is one of the leading actors in the film; she is 16years old and she portrays elements of brat. Jennifer the 16years old niece of April is a lot wiser than her age as she has have to take care of her two brothers Manny (Kwesi Boakye) and Byron (Freddy Siglar). She is so bitter about the thought that she is still in her teen, and has had a hard life. Early in her life she has already fit into the mould of the mad black woman, angry at the world for no reason, 'I am only sixteen when will my life start' (Perry, 2009).

The director of this movie could have gone in any direction with this character, but he chooses an angry little girl with a fast mouth, eye balls ready to roll at any time and a face that never smiles. The dominant meaning in the film will not be changed if another person acted in the place of the Jennifer. It is hard for viewers watching to feel any reasonable form of pity for her if she has chosen to have a permanent negative outlook on the world.

Madea is a caricature played by Tyler Perry as a big strict black woman, who lives with her brother Joe, who is also played by Tyler Perry. In an African American background, the title 'Madea' refers to an elderly woman in the community ( Fontaine, 2011, p. 2). Madea is a made up character created by Tyler Perry. Madea the old woman is strict and always ready to correct. Her sense of humour is subtle enough to ensure that other characters do not lose their dramatic essence. It was in her house we first got to meet Jennifer, Manny and Byron. They broke into her house to steal a VCR to feed their selves. She however did not do as we expected, she gives

them something to eat instead. This could simply be a Christian practice, to repay evil with kindness and at all times let forgiveness reign.

For a woman who has a lot of lessons to teach and to a viewer with a preconceived notion on how African American women behave, this could be read as her condoning their evil deeds, at least that's how I see it from the standpoint of a critical analyst. The African American woman is supposed to be determined, assertive, affectionate and selfless; so far so good none of these characters possess that. Despite the bad behavior showcased by the children, Madea fed them and asked where they lived and who they stay with. It turns out they stay with their grandmother who haven't been seen for four days.

However, this film reveals April to be an irresponsible woman who doesn't care for her family and no one around her aside herself. She is often drunk and wasted after performing at the club six nights in a week. April is in a relationship with Randy (Brian White) who is married with kids and dislike kids around. Randy stays at April's place and he pays the bills.

Jennifer showed Madea her aunt's house after going to few wrong places. April denied knowing her niece and nephews at first before been exposed by little Manny. Despite all Madea said to April, she was still reluctant to accept her own blood, but she later let them into her house. Pastor Brian (Marvin Winans) from the community church however sends a Colombian immigrant Sandino (Adam Rodríguez) to April for work and shelter. April showed little or no respect to the pastor. She was always hurrying up or showing how tired and boring her conversation with the pastor is getting. Sandino stayed at April's basement and she gave him a lot of limitations.



Figure 6: Madea and the kids at the front of April's house

April is portrayed as a lonely frustrated woman who takes her frustration out on the people around her and ends up pushing them away. She showed no care towards Manny's asthma when Jennifer told her not to smoke, instead she replied saying it's her house and she will do what she wants. She made it very obvious she wasn't interested in the children's welfare. Sandino who took interest in the kids kept been obstructed by April. April yelled at him and scolded him for making noise in the process of repairing an abandoned room which he was making for the kids.

April from the onset of the movie is seen as someone who doesn't care about any member of her family showed her soft side when she was told her mother had died on a bus. She cried bitterly as she tries to get comfort from Randy but was shunned away as he continued his sleep. April later opened up to Sandino on her relationship with her mother and her late sister too who happen to be the children's mother.



April's sister who wasn't shown throughout the movie is described by April as a drug addict who sold her daughter Jennifer for narcotics when she was 9 years old. April stated that her sister put Byron in the oven one time and burnt Manny with her crack pipe. She also said Manny has asthma as a result of her sister taking illegal drugs when she was pregnant for him. The only image of April's sister painted in this film is a useless, lowlife drug addict who didn't care about her life or her children's life. Every now and then April reminds Jennifer about her mother and how she failed in her life.

April's elder sister like has been earlier stated, ended how everybody who was black and not privileged ended, on narcotics. Again another selfish character even though we don't actually get to see her, we know she cared for no one but herself. Stealing from her mother to fuel her addiction and doing drugs while pregnant with Manny, resulting in bouts of conditions he can't run away from including asthma and diabetes. This woman is so selfish that even the growing life inside of her is not reason enough to stay away from narcotics.

Their mother grandma Rose who died in the progression of the film has no spine I will assume to correct, because according to April she let her sister do whatever she pleased with the kids. Grandma Rose who took care of them should have at least gotten a pass for that, but even she can't get a break because apparently nothing good will come out of the situation at hand. She died alone on the bus on her way to work after suffering a brain aneurism; I guess she could never catch a break.

Tonya, April's friend is just a character there to look out for her not necessarily accomplish anything for herself.

The lead character April needs to fall in love before she can see the value in family. She constantly doubts herself and what she is capable of, but another character Mrs Whelma is there to sing her back to sanity. From the stand point of a black feminist, the demeaning of each and every character to the director is not just a random plot, it is a mat woven together by the warp and weft of reality showing us that in fact this actual characters exist in our society. They exist in helpless cycles waiting for love or death of a dear one before they can learn their lesson or stand on their own. Hollywood is a place where dreams come true for everyone else, but where African American women can't escape the nightmare of having to relive the unquestioned reality and ridiculous status quo.

April here is a black woman represented in a dark light, but this doesn't mean if a white woman played this role, she wouldn't be represented in the same light. This simply means it is not just about being a black; it's about being a woman.

Let me give a quick rundown of all the female African American characters in the film and try as much as possible to interpret each character with just one word. April is selfish, Jennifer is feisty, Tonya is concerned, Mrs Whelma is overly concerned and Madea the old woman with just the right life lessons to correct the erring children is all knowing.

#### **4.1.3 The Analysis of the Film Joyful Noise (2012)**

The 'Joyful noise' is a 2012 musical comedy drama directed by Todd Graff with main character Vi Rose Hill (Queen Latifah). Vi Rose is a strict woman and mother of two teens. She has a beautiful daughter Olivia (Keke Palmer) and a son Walter (Dexter Darden), who has Asperger syndrome. The dominant reading of the film basically reveals the struggle of two women; G.G. Sparrow (Dolly Parton) and Vi

Rose over the general course and direction of their church choir in the face of a national competition. Another story running side by side with the aforesaid is the love story of Olivia and Randy (Jeremy Jordan).

The women of colour in the film 'Joyful noise' are women on the surface with a collective goal of winning a choir competition for their church. The over lying theme is the importance of team work and determination. After losing year after year to another church, they never gave up. They are still learning and willing to go against their competition and eventually come out victorious. A wonderful idea doesn't it seem?

Well at first glance that's all we see, empowerment and drive and zeal to win, but after continuous and repetitive viewing for the purpose of this paper, I see it differently. The subtext I see is a woman who tries to busy herself with everything to take her mind off her marriage that has fallen apart. A marriage she still holds out hope for even though she hasn't heard from her husband in two years after he left for the army. She distracts herself with her work as a nurse. Vi Rose is burdened with how to control her children especially her daughter Olivia.

Olivia in her own corner of the plot is trying hard to please her mother and at the same time to be cool. She wants to do things like other teenagers in her area, things like hanging out and having a boyfriend. The other two African American women worth the mention Earla (Angela Grovey) and Devonne (Dequina Moore), both are concerned with hearing and giving their opinion on everyone and everything, and struggling to find a man. Earla's self-discriminated herself. She was all about how the church institution and society will view her after Mr Hsu's death.

Discussing the aggressive, over possessive but clueless, stubborn and annoying nature of African American Women, the movie shows all of these running from the beginning of the film to the end. Vi Rose is of course in the centre of these labels. She was so possessive that even Olivia, her only daughter complained all along. The interesting thing here is that this discourse seems slippery because some viewers might say in Vi Rose defence that she is only doing the right thing. She is teaching her kids in the right way like it is said in the Christian teachings; ‘when you teach up a child in the way they should grow, they won’t depart from it’.

Participant two states that one can agree that Vi Rose is doing the right thing to an extent but it is justifiable to an extent. Reason being that at the rear of the film, G.G handed Olivia a makeup brush and when her mum saw her she said she didn’t know Olivia was that grown. This assertion buttressed and shows that Vi Rose was being over possessive but still clueless. It is very ironical that she watched all moves of her kids with so much keenness but she couldn’t even tell if they were growing up.



Figure 7: Vi Rose argues with her daughter Olivia

Participant one mentioned that Vi Rose off the bat seems like an angry woman who always has something to argue about. The choir director Bernard Sparrow who has passed away from a heart attack is to be replaced; she is picked and doesn't mind the feelings of the widow G.G getting hurt. G.G had expected that she will naturally take over seeing that her she and her husband wrote most of the songs and the arrangement.

Compared to Vi Rose in the movie, G.G was given special treatment by the church pastor because of the money she contributes to the church. The movie portrays G.G as the wealthy woman who can get anything at the tip of her finger, while Vi Rose is portrayed as a woman who struggles with multiple jobs to put feed her two children.

Vi Rose having her holier than thou attitude makes you expect that a woman of her status would be more sensitive about handling the already infuriated G.G who feel overlooked. Vi Rose response that it is not her fault 'the church chose me over you, get over it' (Graff, 2012) she said to G.G. Bearing in mind that it is still the day of

Bernard's funeral, a little more compassion would have been appreciated, but once again the character isn't built for that, she is angry about everything.

These two characters Vi Rose and G.G evidently have unresolved issues and it automatically spills into the decision they make at church with regards to the choir. The film also portrayed Vi Rose as a woman who was against change. At the rear of the movie, she said to G.G that she was sorry and that change is something that takes her time to cope with. Vi Rose gets into argument with her daughter Olivia. All through the film her mood and annoyance for no particular reason is permanent. She only feels contentment with happy smiles on her face when they win the competition and her husband comes home to her.

The other two women in the choir, who should be role models as well, have between them a loud mouth that repeats what everyone says as if the rest of the world is somehow deaf. While another is concerned with getting a man, and when she finally does she is stigmatized for killing him after they had sex. This representation again tells us that the African American woman is not content in herself but craves approval from everyone else and the love of a man. This a feminist will argue is not the only part to a black woman that can be portrayed, once again this characters could have been played any other way and would still have made for a compelling story.

According to participant two, 'the film is dominantly about women but as we know patriarchy is a system where males are in control and every other person is viewed as a weakling and this might take any way, shape and form to manifest in movies'. In this film, all narratives seem to be less about men but from a feminist theoretical

standpoint, the film is more about men than women. Think of the intervention of patriarch heroes (Marcus Hill and Earla's husband). This reveals that the joy will only come complete when the man intervenes.

Discrimination against African American women played out in few parts of film. One of the few was the dismissal of Vi Rose. She was obviously unprofessional on her part but the big question here is will this be the case with a man too? This can be linked to glass ceiling. 'Opportunities for promotion often favor men due to developmental prospects, such as mentoring and networks' (Lockwood, 2004).

## **4.2 Historical Stereotype of the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire.**

African-American women have been depicted in various stereotypical ways over-time. Among the depiction is the historical stereotype of the mammy, jezebel and sapphire. This section answers research question two and will look into how the roles assigned to African- American women play into the historical stereotype of the mammy, jezebel and sapphire.

### **4.2.1 The Analysis of the Film the Help (2011)**

Aibileen stated that she has raised seventeen white children and she is still working for Elizabeth helping her to raise her little daughter. The mammy image is a character that is elderly, big, caring and always cooking and cleaning. Since Aibileen dropped out of school 14years old, she has been cleaning and taking care of white families for years. Another characteristic of the mammy image is a big black woman with an apron wrapped around her waist. Throughout the film Aibileen is seen with an apron wrapped around her waist except when she is in her personal home.



Figure 8: Aibileen nurturing Mae Mobley

The mammy image is well easily noticeable in the movie *Gone with the wind* in 1939 played by Hattie McDaniel as mammy. Since then the mammy image has been reoccurring in different Hollywood films.

Minnie is a good cook, and she is one of the best cook in Jackson. She plays the role of a mother to Celia, who she later worked for. She helped Celia clean up her home and taught her how to cook and take care of herself. Minny is also seen talking to her daughter Sugar on what and what not to do when she starts working with the white families. She has a very powerful control over her kids and looks out for them. This shows Minny also has a mammy touch in her.

At the beginning of the film when Aibileen was narrating her story to an anonymous writer, she mentioned that white babies love fat and they love big fat laps too. This is a description of mammy as mentioned earlier. Another mammy stereotype in the film is that of Skeeter's nanny, Constantine (Cicely Tyson). Constantine is an old woman



who loved and nurtured Skeeter when she was little. She guided her and taught her literarily what a mother should teach her child. Constantine was later disposed by Skeeter's mother to protect her own image as she has just been appointed by the daughters of America as state regent. The mammy image can be translated to a mother's love, as big black nannies were assigned to white families to take care of white babies.

Constantine dedicated 20 years to a single family raising Skeeter like her own child, giving up her own child for adoption. She was Skeeter's friend and advisor. The placement and articulation of these characters I will say is not an accident as the next character I will right on only solidifies this point. The Minny character on the other spectrum of this stereotype once pointed out in the movie 'and how they love us when they are young, but turn out to be just like their mama's'. The mammy figure cares endlessly for these families, often neglecting their very own and yet it is not appreciated, that does not however stop her from going back to work the very next day after she has been accused of stealing or denied the privilege to use the toilet in the house.

Aibileen's role is that of a gentle soul who finds it hard to express herself as she has kept a lot of happenings and pain to herself. Despite losing her son to the struggle and leaving in a community where they are not treated as humans, Aibileen still has a heart of gold. She loves her boss daughter Mae like her own. Her relationship with Mae is like that of a mother and child, as Mae's real mother Elizabeth hardly even looks at her.

‘I don’t raise seventeen children in my life, looking after white babies, that’s what I do’ (Taylor, 2011). The character of Aibileen is crafted to fit into the cup hold of the mammy stereotype. The above quote is from Aibileen right after she is asked how she feels taking care of another woman’s babies (white children), and hers is at home unattended to. The ever sacrificing characteristic of the black American woman that puts her in the category of the mammy is evident. She knows how to get them out of bed, how to make them use the toilet, something even their mothers can’t do. Aibileen helped Mae develop her toilet manners and she was so passionate about Mae’s positive response towards it.

The mammy figure is characterized by the woman’s lack of sex appeal and an overweight frame. This is not lacking in Aibileen’s character as she herself tells us ‘babies like fat, they like big fat legs too’ (Taylor, 2011). Ever loving and sacrificing for everyone else but herself, walking tirelessly for a little sum of money and once again see it has a duty. She knows how to make everyone feel better and even remembers that Hilly does not like paprika in her devil eggs.

The white children considered the helps as their African- American mothers. Aibileen also told Skeeter during one of her story time narrations that a boy who she looked after once asked her why she his mother (that’s what he thought) was darker than the rest of them. Aibileen’s reply is not that she is a slave or not one of them, but that she drinks too much coffee.

Mr Leefolt does not acknowledge Aibileen when he comes into the house, but has the nerve to ask her to fix him a sandwich without as much as a glance in her

direction as if to say that's all she is goof for, catering to their every need to which they owe no gratitude.

The portrayal of the sapphire certainly is not left out of the character placement. Minny plays into this stereotype, she is a complete contrast from the virtues that Aibileen possesses. Minny has a quick tongue and won't hesitate to 'sass mouth' anyone who she thinks deserves it. She seems so angry about everything and always has a snare beneath every comment she makes. Her word has to be the last and final and even her white employers are not save from her. She has the courage we assume to go and use Hilly's (her boss) bathroom during a rain storm even after she has been told not to. Is she generally being a loud mouth and hot head at this point or is it not only logical that she uses the inside bathroom since it looks like it is raining cat and dog outside. Is her character just blameless and trying to stand for herself or is she doing a little too much to provoke the people and situations around her.

To balance out this particular character that talks with her hands on her hips or across her chest, there is an African-American man (her husband) whom she fights with and is often left with bruises to tend to. She is disobedient and has to be out in her place. Other articles tell us that those other characteristics like her loud mouth are only an avenue for the justification of the ill treatment from the employers and a well-deserved beating from an angry husband.

This character unlike Aibileen's selfless character is selfish, 'you all started this but am gon finish it' (Taylor, 2011). She is seen as one to go looking for trouble in all the dangerous places, she alone could pull off the terrible awful (giving Hilly a pie of

feces), and after she tells the rest the story insists that they include it in the book or have her part pulled out all together.

Aibileen and Constantine the two main motherly figures when placed beside Minny the fireball makes it feel like the African-American woman is in contradiction to herself. Aibileen the mammy representation on one hand is satisfied with been a slave and taking care of white children, while on the other hand you have her complaining. It is not until the end when she stopped caring for others and decided to speak her mind was when she realized it feels good to open up. According to Aibileen, nobody ever asked her how she felt.

Minny the sapphire character finally let go of her abusive relationship and only then did the world erected around her fall to reveal a more submissive woman who loves her white employers and is concerned about the children at home.

#### **4.2.2 The Analysis of the Film I Can Do Bad All by Myself (2009)**

It is important to mention from the beginning of this analysis that some of the characters have a cross within the stereotype of the African American woman which includes the mammy, sapphire and jezebel. Knowing from the angle of black feminist study that race, gender, religion or any other social status stands alone. I realize that all the character are either a breed, highbred or cross breed of all three. They are put in these situations with combining factors of race, sex and everything else.

Oddly, I will start off with the character that jumps at me most as the bearer of the mammy stereotype and that is the character of Jennifer. She might only be 16 years in the film, but definitely she is my first pick in the category of the mammy. She

herself is young but has selflessly dedicated her time to taking care of her younger brothers Manny and Byron.



Figure 7: Jennifer watching over her brother Manny

The mammy figure as described in 4.2.1 is characterized by just that. Selfless service, sacrifice for others especially non biological children and lack of sex appeal are a requisite (as in the case of a teenager who doesn't think she is beautiful). She cares to the extent of going to steal a syringe from a local shop so Manny could have his insulin shots.

Her main focus is that her brothers are as comfortable as they can be while she watches her best years float away heavily layered with gloom and disappointment. She can't let them down despite she will at some point have to live her own life 'am all they've got' (Perry, 2009) she says to April. She has spent so much time worrying for them both and expects that April will do the same. And when that does not happen she vows that she too can't wait to be like her one day. To not care about

anyone else but herself. She teaches her little brothers just what she knows, which is never to set their hopes too high because it never ends on a happy note. Jennifer will rather have them suffer slight discomfort (as in the case of sleeping on the couch instead of the room made for them by Sandino), than see her brothers get their hearts broken when it's time to be shipped off to a foster home.

The second character up for the slot in the mammy stereotype category is Grandma Rose. Grandma Rose when introduced is currently missing for the past four days. Let's skip to the part where she died on the bus from her attack. She has had to raise her daughters, and after that raise her daughter's children too because apparently once a mother always a mother. When we finally got to see Grandma Rose which was once, she is in her 50's, a full frame and in not so sexually appealing clothes. From the first glance, we understood that she is clearly unbothered about her appearance, as she is getting home to tend to her grandchildren. The description of the children of when they last saw their grandma is that 'she went to work like she always does'. She had dedicated her prime to raising children and now her aging years to raise her children's children, so all her life she is looking after everyone else.

This kind of points in the direction of the path Jennifer's life is heading into. She dies on the bus because she rode in it all day after her attack and people thought she was asleep. I wonder if the on the bus passenger thought to themselves that she was just an elderly tired woman taking a nap as expected, or if anyone would have woken someone else in that same situation after two bus stops were it to be an individual of a different race or sex. The very self-indulged April had to admit that her mother didn't deserve to die like that after dedicating her own life after taking care of everyone else.

It will be impossible to continue without the character of Madea, who cares more about correction than punishment even after she has been stolen from. She is loud and funny and just want to teach the children that stealing is bad and that they could get things by simply just asking. Jennifer, Manny and Byron are not her children, grandchildren or even under her care. Her overweight frame, lack of any form of sex appeal and natural motherly instinct makes her a perfect mammy. She teaches Jennifer of the bible and how to pray to the best of her ability. It might have been wrong but at least she taught her something. Ironically she is always ready to punch or shank a trespasser with a stern look on her face, but tells Jennifer to smile more often.

Not far from 'The Help' it seems to be a consistency that the African American women in this films say and teach things to others, things they themselves have no believe in. Is this pattern random or is it a representation of how these women in reality are to be perceived? Are they to be perceived as people who can teach and yet for so long learn no lessons. Is that what women are about or it is just peculiar to the African American kind.

April who doesn't start off on the note of a typical mammy character towards the end gradually warms up to the idea that she too is capable of caring for other people. Mrs. Whelma is also a figure of mammy who cares to no end. Despite the fact that being a leader in the church requires that she should not be seen in places such as the club, she still goes in there to talk to April and see if she is doing okay. Despite the tease from the club host to come on the stage and 'bless' them with a song, it still doesn't annoy her. She sings, at least she might be sending a message to someone and if that's what it will take, she will do it.

Sharp tongued, angry, opposing to a male partner or superior African American male. The following previously listed are qualities of the sapphire and the next characters check off every single box. As earlier stated, the characters have traits that criss-cross along the part of more than one stereotype. April in this case, the queen sapphire, is a club singer who is almost always drunk, sleeping or cursing someone out. She has a sharp answer for every question including that from her pastor, the minister who should ordinarily be revered. She wastes no time telling people she isn't playing games.

Sandino another character asks her if she is crazy, she said she is 'loco'. As expected she goes back and forth with her niece Jennifer, Sandino a man who has taken a liking to her and her boyfriend Randy. She knows what to say to tell everyone of except her boyfriend for whom she gets weak in the knee for. He is married and that hasn't stopped her from dating him, she just wants everything to go her way. She sleeps to her heart content, smokes and puffs in her nephews face even after been told he has asthma, and how selfish is she you ask?

It can't be stressed enough her deadly self-indulgence and blind disregard for everyone else's existence. Her abusive boyfriend is the only one who can somehow get her under his control despite the fact that she can do without him. He tells her when to live, who to accommodate, what to wear and how to run the house her father left to her simply because he claims to pay the bills. With her sharp tongue and quick speech, she didn't realize her lack of power until he took it just far enough to have her say enough is enough.



Another pattern I discovered is that no matter how different the situation seems to be, these women wait until the damage is done before they react. Isn't it fascinating that this happens every single time? She of course also finds a way to push off the guy who likes her.

The school of thought that a woman incurs whatever comes upon her by her actions, might be why at first we might not think to feel sincere pity for Jennifer because she, just like her aunt is a sapphire. The rolling of her eyes, hissing, and crossed arms make her feel hostile. She is so angry at the world, she just want to argue to make her point and storms off when she is not heard. This characteristic of hers is what makes her a quick target for April's perverted boyfriend. Her shout and fight saves her from a permanent scar.

The sapphire is characterized as a sassy woman labelled as a 'bitch' and she can be violent at any time ( Fontaine, 2011). Madea in the scene she returned the children to April's house acted violent towards Jennifer, grabbing her neck because she was insolent. Another sample of Madea showcasing the sapphire was when April dropped the children off at Madea's place to commence their work. In this scene she threatened Jennifer by saying 'I will hit you so hard that your cranium and your skull and urethra tube will be all tied up together inside of each other you won't be about to do nothing but pee and run' (Perry, 2009).



Figure 8: Madea jacks up Jennifer

The sapphire stereotype is also related to the angry woman stereotype. That is a woman who is always angry and bitter. Joe in this movie who happens to be Madea's brother called her a 'Bitter Old Woman' when he was warning Jennifer to respect Madea.

The third group in the stereotype catalogue is the jezebel. This is the woman of colour out to get anything by using her body, and April fits right into the puzzle. Her job at the club where she sings is not just based on her silky voice but also on the fact that she is an attractive woman who is not afraid to show off some skin to get attention. Her claws ever open to pull the men of the night in.

She is in a relationship with a new father to be with a wife at home who he neglects. She obviously does not care as long as it does not interfere with their relationship. She wants him for sex and money for bills. It is therefore not an empathic sight when

he fails to hold her or wipe her tears when she loses her mother, that's all she wanted him for well that's all she will get.

In the movie 'I can do bad all by myself' the main character April is shown as a selfish, drunk, irresponsible woman who is in a relationship with a married man because of his money not for love. This is a characteristic of the jezebel stereotype. The jezebel stereotype has stigmatized black women as oversexed and lax because of the sexual atrocities black women faced during slavery (West, 2004). Black women couldn't be rape victims either because the jezebel image makes the impression that black women desire sex (West, 2004). In the movie, Jennifer was almost raped by Randy and he denied saying, Jennifer begged him to have sex with him for money.

April's mother could not have been a far off example, because the same sequence of events happened when April was young and her mother's lover abused her. It is apparent that African American women do not learn their lessons in these stories, not from her experience or that of others in her life, present and those who are long gone.

In a scene where Sandino asked April if she loved Randy, she replied by saying 'well he helps me out' (Perry, 2009). This statement means Randy is just a source of wealth to her not a partner. She sleeps with Randy because she gets something out of it which is the payment of her house rent.

#### **4.2.3 The Analysis of the Film Joyful Noise (2012)**

The mammy and sapphire are the prominent stereotypes cast in this film. Vi Rose the choir leader is out to bother herself with everybody's business. She has multiple jobs to make sure her kids are taking care of. Again I will point out that this character lacks any form of sex appeal and even her daughter Olivia notices, 'you hate me

because you don't feel pretty' (Graff, 2012), Olivia says to her mother. In contrast to another character G.G who is significantly older than her and is the grand mother to her daughter's boyfriend, she has a lot to do.

Vi Rose wears outfits that don't attract any form of attention while G.G will do anything to look good including alter her choir robe. Vi Rose works as a nurse where she takes care of sick people, feeding, bathing and even having to clean up their urine. She does so without complaining to them and even has the time to smile and dance (we see this when she is trying to practice a dance move while on duty). We also see that her sacrifices don't stop there; she also works as a waitress in a restaurant, 'I work my butt off so I can out food on the table and cloth on y'all back' (Graff, 2012). She is constantly on the lookout for Olivia to make sure she turns out right, and that her son Walter is happy. Even though her husband had worked out on their marriage, her sacrifices never stop. She dedicatedly writes letters ever so often to Olivia and Walter on behalf of their absent father, just so their memory of him isn't tilted by his supposed cowardice.

She also looks out for the choir members trying to make sure that they are all on track. She is so selfless and involved with others that her daughter tells her she is jealous of her being pretty. As selfless as she is she also comes to a resolution towards the end that she made sacrifices to feel up the gap for their father and in the process taking the blame, 'people who are never around make the least mistakes' (Graff, 2012), Vi Rose tells Olivia. Her effort to reprimand Olivia her daughter from dating Randy results in an exchange to which she reveals that she within herself hasn't lost her beauty but for the sake of conformity has bent over to fit the rules. 'I cover myself because I will never disrespect my husband the way you just

disrespected your mother' (Graff, 2012), Vi Rose says this to Olivia. The love and care she has for everyone else, if only she could infuse into herself might make her a happier person.

Vi Rose did not escape the sapphire imagery even in her set Christian ways she had a response to give to her daughter or to G.G when the need arises. I can spot out two prominent times it was clear this characters loud mouth had put her in a corner. First her argument with G.G at the restaurant which ended with dinner rolls being thrown and hair was pulled. Vi Rose just had to react to the thought provoking G.G. she wasn't having G.G's mess and told her off that she didn't approve of her dressing, surgery use, lavish spending etc. 'everybody thinks G.G is larger than life, well it pisses me off' (Graff, 2012).



Figure 9: Vi Rose and G.G arguing at the restaurant

The second occasion was in the conversation with Olivia on the drive back on the drive back, after she had gone to see her father. The statement made by Olivia to Vi Rose seemed like her mind had already been made up on what a horrible attitude her mother had and how she never wanted to turn out like her. In Olivia's reply to Vi

Rose saying her father didn't want to come back, Olivia says 'personally that will be music to my ears, I don't know who would want to be with you' (Graff, 2012). Vi Rose takes a swift stop to sternly warn her to never speak to her in that tone.

Another sapphire moment that also gives Olivia the stamp into the sapphire group is the exchange at the hotel lobby between herself and her mother. Olivia who was fed up with her mother and didn't want any more of her snoring walked out of the room. Accompanied with rolling her eyes, rocking and tossing her neck and hair to prove her point and sucking her teeth she made it clear to her mother that she was grown and would not be quiet anymore. It was very selfish of her not to appreciate her mother's effort for her and her brother to stay comfortable. 'This is not about Randy it is about me' (Graff, 2012) she says to her mother. This character has a little more to learn on appreciation. I figured that it is only convenient that for Vi Rose's character, her husband be made her weak point, and for Olivia her feelings for the teenage Randy bring her to a point of argument with her mother.

### **4.3 Sexual Objectification of African American Women**

Sexual objectification is nothing new to the women in Hollywood films, it is more of a title to aspire to earn. This section will pay attention to the presence of sexual objectification of African American women in the movies 'I can do bad all by myself' and 'Joyful noise'. The third movie 'The Help will not be analysed in this section because it has no justification of pertaining to this section.

#### **4.3.1 The Analysis of the Film I Can Do Bad All by Myself (2009)**

The characters played by this women who know in the real scheme of things, thinking of ourselves as sexy is one thing but putting it up for display is something

entirely different as you could be attracting the wrong audience. The African American women in this film are not strangers to that.

April in Tyler Perry's 'I can do bad all by myself', knows that she much like the title is not doing a good job at keeping herself or her life together. She would rather much have her life destroyed at the mercy of her own hands. We learn that this character was looked on and objectified quite early in life as she recalls that her mother's boyfriend raped her and what is more saddening is that no one believed her side of the story. This drove a hollow to be created which she filled with attention from men much like the one who scarred her. Randy makes no attempt to return or evoke any other emotion other than the one they already share which is physical attraction. She made it clear that's all she needed him for and that's all Randy was willing to invest in anyways.

Jennifer, who almost got sucked into that vacuum along with her aunty, got a taste of the medicine Randy had to offer. She being only 16years didn't stop him from making the most disgusting advances at her, 'you think you are grown, well I have got something for little girls who think they are grown' (Perry, 2009) Randy tells Jennifer. Her being rude doesn't mean she is asking to be raped, or does he think it is some sort of invitation. Taraji P Henson the character who played April won her first Emmy award in 2016 for her role played in a TV drama empire. In her speech she gave her toast to the character she played who got her the recognition 'Cookie'. The character Cookie is a ghetto, promiscuous, drug dealing, ex-convict who finally got Taraji her recognition after trying out other characters during her over twenty years career of acting.

### **4.3.2 The Analysis of the Film Joyful Noise (2012)**

The women of colour from a black feminist standpoint I will point out again should be more than just people who seek male attention and validation. The trend of this however, in the Hollywood system does not seem to be ending anytime soon. Olivia is a young teenager, but now feels the need to be able to do anything including sneak to the club with a boy. The town rascal Manny also sees her as a game to be chase.

Olivia in the climax of the movie is made to appeal to her distress boyfriend Randy with her physical features. Under the tutelage of G.G, she learns that to get Randy's attention she has to revamp her make-up, hair, and show some cleavage to make him realize she is grown up. What happened to just leaving her as a teenager? She just had to grow up by the end of the film to validate Randy's renewed affection or interest in her.

Mr Hsu died in the bed of Earla, indulging in sexual activity (what the church will ordinarily call adultery) and does not even feel concerned about her reputation of sleeping around but that the news of her been capable of killing a man will spread. Surely she should have more remorse than crying loudly at his funeral and when asked can only reply 'what man will want to be with me again' (Graff, 2012). The sex is not all she thinks about but it is certainly what she is more concerned with at this point, how convenient for the director.





Figure 10: Earla's body structure as a sex symbol

Again, this is not dominant reading and not even the usual representation of African American women as exotic sex objects in films. However, this is almost to the left and of course even more extreme if you take a good look at the case of Earla and Mr Hsu. Participant two states that Earla looks like the true definition of exaggerated heavily curvy African American women who are labelled as a sex symbol. She has a big lips, buttocks and breasts. This description brings us back to Sarah Baartman. Sarah Baartman 'has become the landscape upon which multiple narratives of exploitation and suffering within black womanhood have been enacted' (Chipembere, 2011). Earla relations with Mr Hsu further strengthen the stereotypes of African American women as sex objects because who dies after sex?

#### **4.4 Discussion and Findings**

After having to watch these films five times for the aim of critical analysis, the researcher has come to a conclusion on the representation of African American women in Hollywood films. Why it happens and how are all answered in the analysis that precedes this concluding piece. The three movies in this research which are the

help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise adequately help us prove that the African American women in Hollywood films are not represented in the best light possible.

From the researcher's approach to the analysis which is a feminist and black feminist thought, I discovered that there is in fact a coherence between sex, race, religion and socio economic status. All these elements are the basic means of an individual's assessment into categories consciously or unconsciously for a smooth working machine we call society. These elements though they seem to be independent, are irredeemably co-dependent on how one or the other is responded to.

If you are of the female sex it sets up rule for you different from the male. If you are a black female it further narrows your buffet of choices, from having to choose among that of the female down to a category of choices available to an African American female. The same goes for the application of another societal element, religion. At this point it is only logical we realize the choices and opportunity opened to the group under study is near none existence, and even if it isn't I highly doubt the presence of valuable variety.

In the movies, our characters face challenges mostly stemming from some sort of combination of faith, undefeatable demons and slight inferiority complex. These women are shown as helpless, narrow-minded, shallow and content with being at the bottom. A character like Aibileen in the movie *The Help*, doesn't at first struggle with what she does for a living as she rightly said, becoming a maid was her life destiny.

April in the movie 'I can do all bad by myself' allowed without a fight, her past to control and dictate the care free life she lived. Madea in this film unlike the overly violent Madea seen in other Tyler Perry's films showed her humorous side. In movies like Madea goes to jail and Madea family reunion, Madea would have done worse to the children who broke into her house. But in this film she fed them and nurtured them

In the movie Joyful noise, we have a character Vi Rose who didn't know when to let others take control of their actions. These women's characters are put at the mercy of a man to be their redeemer. In all three sample movies the happy ending had to involve a man creating stability in the chaos of the mind of the African American woman.

Some factors I found out helped greatly, firstly economic status. In 'The help' where there were maids and in I can do bad all by myself where poverty led to crime and some level of prostitution, we can see that they were further pushed into being option less by the fact that they didn't have a means to stand on their own.

The second effective element used to portray the African American woman's predictability is religion. Religion we can say is a wheel on the running machine of the society, the characters one way or another are directly influenced by their religion, in this case Christianity. I noticed that each time they did wrong, thought wrong or spoke wrong, ever so timely a Christian choir was there to render a sound track to their erring ways. Likewise each time they finally came to their senses or acted right, the choir was also there to sing congratulatory soulful songs as a reminder that the church was proud of them. The women take their worship seriously

and don't hesitate to do what the spiritual leader says. This I can say further pushed the stories towards the intended directions of their directors.

Aibileen in 'The Help' went home after a sermon in church with a determination to do the right thing by saying her side of the story to save the rest of the maids from further discrimination. April in 'I can do bad all by myself' sang along in her time of despair 'help me lord, I want you to help me. Help me on my journey, help me on way' (Perry, 2009). In 'Joyful noise' Olivia and her mother Vi Rose were always moved to change after singing. Prayer was less of a communication to God and more of an explanation to the viewer's why they feel the need to be vindicated.

The stereotypes of African American women, the mammy, the sapphire and jezebel were in full effect. Like a picture blown up in a photographers work room they are impossible to ignore, and to an extent nauseating to think that every woman of colour is simply one and the same. Continuously caring for the world and self-neglect with no hope of reward for her service, the mammy translates to an unwritten rule for the African American woman to care without question or reward. Never thinking before speaking and landing herself in trouble, the African American woman is to herself a demon. She is blessed with a tongue as sharp as a sword, with answers to everything except how to grant herself freedom.

The African American woman should be seen as much more than that. The jezebel will sell herself because that is all she can offer, that, and her own inner selfishness. In a world that as given her little to work with, she might as well make a business of her body to get what she can.

April in 'I can do bad all by myself' is a woman of colour and already having a bad reputation, we can still see that she is better off in compared to her late elder sister, the mother of her niece and nephews. Her elder sister who lived her life dedicated to needles and drugs, for April is the ultimate destruction. She does not think her case is as detrimental as we the audience perceives it to be because being a crack head like her sister is the worse of the worse. The portrayal of black women in this case study is therefore no surprise as it is evident that the same formula is what appeals to the audience, and so even black film producers like the producer of this film Tyler Perry are sticking to it.

Based on the film 'Joyful noise' participant two states that the film reveals the struggle of African American women in a society where everyone has something to say about their every move. Aggression, over- possession, stubbornness, annoyance, sex objects, intervention patriarchy, sexism and self-discrimination with copious examples revealed in this film shows the true definition of how African American women are represented.

None of the characters panned out to review a woman who is self-sufficient. She always had a reason not to do it for herself. She either lets a white woman bail her out as in the case of Aibileen and Skeeter in 'The Help' or have a man slap a smile across her face like April in 'I can do bad all by myself'. The African American woman always had to be rescued because a male character developed physical attraction or in the least, gave her relevance through that.

Of the three movies, two were by white directors and the third was by an African American male director. So these doesn't just end with race, it spills over into gender

interpretation and representation. The media has found its pattern and it's running along with it as far as it can go. If the African American woman wants to be portrayed as relevant in reality, in the world of Hollywood, they should first be portrayed as such.

In summary, I will say that these women who play these characters aren't delusional to the fact that only certain roles are created and open to them in Hollywood. Viola Davis the actress who played the character of Aibileen in 'The help' acknowledges this. In her speech after been called up as the winner in the category of the lead actress in a TV drama during the Emmy Awards of 2016 she said, 'in my mind, I see a line and over that line I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their hands stretched out to me, but I can't seem to get there no how. I can't seem to get over that line. That was Harriet Tubman in the late 1800, and let me tell you something. The only thing that separate women of colour from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there'.

Results of this study are consistent with Briana McKoy 2012, a study on Tyler Perry and The Weight of Misrepresentation; the results show that African American women are stereotyped in multiple ways in the mammy, jezebel and sapphire. The sapphire image was mostly found to a degree in most characters, whether they were deemed 'Mammy', 'Sapphire' or 'Jezebel'. African American women's threatening body language is very common throughout this study's sample, noted 169 times. Images like this is an example of what shapes the way people view African American women.

## **Chapter 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the present study is summarized, concluded and suggestions for further studies is provided. This research paid attention to the portrayal of African American women in three selected Hollywood films; the help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise. This chapter will focus on answering the research questions illustrated in the first chapter of this research. The research questions are answered from the data analysis derived from this research. After conclusions have been drawn from data analysis to answer the research questions, recommendations for further studies are given.

#### **5.1 Summary of Study**

This research's main focus is the representation of African American women in Hollywood films. Three movies were particularly selected for analysis. Among the three movies (The help, I can do bad all by myself and Joyful noise), two were directed by a white and one from a black director. The researcher selected Hollywood films produced between years 2005-2015 for the research sample using non-random sampling. Aside the representation of African American women in Hollywood films, the research also looked into the historical stereotypes found in the selected films.

The researcher made use of critical analysis to understand and make visible the representation of African American women in the three selected films. However,

based on the analysis presented from this research, African American women are not represented in the best way possible. The approach of analysis was a feminist and black feminist approach, which shed light into issues of race, sex and patriarchy. These elements may seem separate, but this researched as shown that they all work hand in hand together.

In the America society we live in where being a black dehumanizes, and being a female reduces one to the minority, the combination of being a 'black female' reduces African American women totally to a diminishing level. In every film in this research sample, the main African American characters are always in one way or the other in a state of limbo. For the characters in these films, it is nearly impossible that they are seen as specimen of perfection. From physical brutality to the torture of the mind, soul and intelligence, what this character live and breathe is virtual reality.

The representation of African American women in Hollywood can be changed by adaptation of more authentic stories, fiction and non-fiction leaving out the over used stereotypes. African American women are not just a product of slavery; they are way more than that. Presently all over the world, there are African American women leading and setting good examples for the young ones. Hollywood hardly shows this side of African American women. It is however necessary for viewers to be media literates so they will not just consume messages in films ignorantly.

In the effort to analyse each movie, the three research questions were answered accordingly. In other to get appropriate facts and analysis for this research, two participants also contributed to make the argument stronger. The two participants watched the movies more than three times to carefully dig into the portrayal of



African American women. Books, online journals, e-books, articles, website and films from other people were used for secondary data, which also served as the guide for the research literature review.

## **5.2 Conclusion Drawn from Study**

The focus of this study is the portrayal of African American women in Hollywood films, in which three Hollywood films were selected. Aside the African American women representation, the study focused on how African American women are portrayed in the historical stereotype of mammy, jezebel and sapphire. The conclusion of this research is drawn from the data analysis from the three selected films. In the first chapter, three research questions were outlined from the research objectives which serve as a lead for the study. The concluded answers for the research questions are outlined below.

**RQ1. )** How are African American women portrayed in Hollywood films?

Based on the data analysis of this research, African American women are often more portrayed negatively than positively. They are portrayed as pathetic humans rather than cheerful. They are always coping and striving over one thing or another. African American women are portrayed as people who are contented with being at the bottom. They are always willing to better other people's life, but not theirs.

The movie 'The Help' send the message that African American women are defenceless, weak and helpless, like the character of Aibileen. Aibileen is a woman who despite in pain still feels she deserves to be where she is, as a maid. Her mind has been made up from the onset since her mother was a maid and a grandma, a nanny. Aibileen is a woman with a soft and loving heart that teaches a small white

girl often saying, 'you is kind, you is smart, you is important' (Taylor, 2011). Despite the suffering she might have undergone from her white mistress, she didn't for once pass her aggression on the little girl.

Minnie on the other hand is a woman filled with anger and she is always ready to snap back at anybody. She was so angry at boss to the extent of taken an inhuman step to revenge. There is hardly anything positive in Minny character as portrayed in the movie. As expected, the person who helped Aibileen and Minny out of their miserable life and telling their story along with other black maids happens to be a white young educated woman. She took the place of the hero in the movie. Another white saves the day, isn't it just a cliché? It is however expected that with Minny's fierce character she would be able to handle anything that comes her way. Unfortunately, she could handle every other thing with her sharp mouth but not her violent husband, which further proves a man power over a woman.

African American women portrayals in movies continue to reduce them to criminals, bitches, sassy-mouths and maids. April in the movie 'I can do all bad by myself' is depicted as a selfish woman who doesn't care about anything or anyone except herself. She has no conscience whatsoever and she is unrepentant. Even to her own blood, she shows no affection or emotion. Despite all this dreadful characteristics of April, she is also portrayed as a woman who as no dignity for her body. She engages in a relationship with a married man in exchange for money to pay her rents.

In the movie 'Joyful noise' an insight to how parental device in an African American family is being presented. An unsettled home with a single mother working multiple jobs to put food on the table for her two teenagers, isn't this just the image we see

often of African American families? Vi Rose is pictured as a strong headed strict mother, who struggles to keep her home in place and at the same time works on leading the church choir group to the Joyful Noise Championship.

An unending portrayal of African American women is religion. For years African American women are portrayed in movies as good Christians who rely on their community churches to support each other. In the three movies, all the African American characters were influenced by their community churches. The church in an African American community serves as a place where people turn to for solidarity from people who experience the same predicament.

It will be a safe bet to say that whenever an African American character crosses our screen regardless of whether she hold the major role or not, we the viewers will be let down by her lack of intelligence, self-control, desire for achievement and in general, void of any human worth. In the three movies in this study, each African American woman we came across always found a way to disappoint us the viewers. I have earlier on established that these characters diligently picked, are crafted and moulded with precise consciousness to always let us down.

Their portrayal as slaves or bosses don't stop them from being African Americans, and that factor over riding everything else, makes them worth nothing. As we have seen, how African American women are portrayed is primarily based on skin pigmentation, and with careful scrutiny the darker your skin pigmentation, the worse your circumstance. Even age plays by coloured rules, as being too old or too young doesn't save African American women from being categorized under stereotypes.

**RQ2.** ) How often are African American women portrayed in the historical stereotypes on ‘the mammy’, ‘jezebel’ and ‘sapphire’ in Hollywood films?

The representation of African American women in the mammy, jezebel and sapphire stereotype is well pronounced in the three movies. The analysis derived from this research shows that every African American woman has either one or all of these stereotypes. In the three movies, each African American character showcases one or more out of the historical stereotypes.

However, it’s important to know that these stereotypes are dated back to the time of slavery. The mammy image was derived from the time of the civil war when women slaves serve as nanny in white homes. The mammy character is understood to be a nurturer, guider and a disciplinarian. In the first movie ‘The Help’, Aibileen, Constantine and even the hard headed Minny play the role of a Mammy. In the second movie ‘I can do bad all by myself’, Madea and Jennifer bear the mammy role. As stated earlier, age also plays by coloured rules, as Jennifer is sixteen years and Madea is an old woman. April towards the end of the movie also gives in into the mammy stereotype. In the third movie ‘Joyful Noise’, Vi Rose plays the perfect role of a mammy as she caters for her kids and she is not concerned about her looks. The mammy character is sexless and doesn’t care about her look.

The jezebel just like the mammy stereotype is dated back to the time of slavery when white men sleep with their black slaves. This image has labelled African American women as sexual animals who are more sexually active than a normal woman should. It also places African American women in a position where by they cannot be rape victims, because it is understood that they craze sex a lot and cannot be raped. The three movies especially in the movie ‘I can do bad all by myself’, African

American women are portrayed as having nothing else to offer than their body. African American women are depicted as people who use their body to get what they want from men, like in the case of April in 'I can do bad all by myself'.

The sapphire characteristics describe African American women and black women in general as loud, abusive, insolent, sass mouthed women. This stereotype is further understood as 'The Angry Black Woman'. Sapphire uses her mouth to degrade the men in her life, she is hot headed and she is always ready to snap back. Minny plays this role perfectly in 'The Help', as she is filled with attitude and anger towards everyone and everything. April in 'I can do bad all by myself' is a victim of the sapphire stereotype as she uses her mouth to chase the man that loves her away. April is also hot tempered, always angry, yelling and she is consumed in her own bad attitude. Jennifer is not left out in this portrayal too, as she has a really sharp tongue and always ready to fire back at anything thrown at her. She is a young girl who has a really bad and nonchalant behaviour.

The sapphire character is known to be violent too, and we could see how violent Madea got when Jennifer disrespected her. April also went wild when she realized her man tried raping Jennifer. In the movie 'Joyful Noise', Vi Rose was violent when she got into a fight with G.G at the restaurant. Vi Rose is portrayed as a strong woman who also has a sharp tongue, and despite her religious status, she also has a sharp tongue and gets angry easily. Vi Rose daughter Olivia is a young girl who is also tart-tongued.

All this representation of African American women cannot be coincidental as it keeps reoccurring. African American women are being portrayed with the historical

stereotype very often, as every time we turn our television set and see one trait or the other that links to the historical stereotypes. The analysis of this study shows that African American women are repeatedly portrayed in the historical stereotypes, and this is not ending anytime soon.

**RQ3.** ) How are African American women sexually objectified in the selected movies?

Each character in the three selected movies are very much aware of the roles they play when it comes to sexual objectification. However, because of the way black women were sexually objectified during the time of the slavery, images of black women as sex mongers keeps reoccurring in Hollywood films. African American women are often sexually objectified and glorified. The body of an African American woman is always used for sexual exploitation during slavery. During this period black slaves are most times half naked and her heavily sexually molested by their white masters who are not held to any consequences for their actions.

April in 'I can do bad all by myself' is a character that allows her past to consume her. April during her younger age was sexually molested by her step-father. April's mother blamed the incident on April, not believing that her man truly raped her daughter. It is really disheartening that no one believed April's story. April's boyfriend Randy almost repeated the same with April's niece Jennifer. While Randy was caught in the action, he stated that Jennifer wanted to have sex with him for money. How typical for an African American or black woman to not be a victim or rape, instead mastermind of sexual intercourse. April is sexually objectified as she throws herself at Randy who is a married man, all for money. April is portrayed as a woman who uses her body to get what she wants.

In the movie 'Joyful Noise', the message passed across to young girls is that, if they do not put on make-up and skimpy clothes, they won't be able to get boys attention. At the beginning of the movie, Olivia is presented as a God fearing teenager with an over bearing mother. All of a sudden she is being seen as a game by her supposed boyfriend and the town rascal, Manny. Olivia went all the way out to make herself up and wear a revealing cloth just to get the attention of the boy she loves. The idea is that, if African American women do not objectify their selves, they will not be noticed.

Another character in 'Joyful Noise' that was sexually objectified is Earla. Earla is portrayed as a character that cares about nothing really except sex. Even after Mr Hsu dies in bed with her, she is more concerned about the man that will want to sleep with her again after such incident. Earla flirts at any opportunity she gets with most men in the film. Another element of sexual objectification is Earla's body. She has a curvy big bottom and bosom just like Sarah Baartman. Earla's composure and relation with Mr Hsu further reproduce African American stereotype.

African American women need to be portrayed in more good light and decent images, rather than sex symbols which send a wrong message to the viewers.

### **5.3 Suggestions for Further Study**

Since this study focuses on three Hollywood that highlights the representation of African American women in Hollywood films at the underlying level. First of all, future studies might consider other Hollywood movies, and other studies should look at other movies representation of African American women.

Also, further studies might be done on the changes in the representation of African American women in Hollywood over the years. This study worked with movies within 2005-2015, which is a ten years range. Meanwhile, other studies can be done on how the representation of African American women in Hollywood has changed from ten years before this study, and compare the changes. The study can also talk on what to expect in another ten years.

This research topic is a wide one that has different angles to it. This research worked with Hollywood films. What about Bollywood, Nollywood, Dollywood and other movie industries? I propose a related research should be conducted, but in another movie industry. The research can be on another group of black women, depending on the movie industry. The research can also be on Hollywood, but a depiction of Asia women or pure African women,

Another suggested area of research is self-objectification of African American women and the effects. This study focused more on the sexual objectification of African American women. It will be important for another study to look into self-objectification, as this is also an important area of discussion for African American women.



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## **APPENDIX**

## **Appendix A: Filmography**

The Help, Tate Taylor, 2011

I Can Do Bad All By Myself, Tyler Perry, 2009

Joyful Noise, Todd Graff, 2012

Madea Witness Protection, Tyler Perry, 2012

The Family That Preys, Tyler Perry, 2008

Madea Family Reunion, Tyler Perry, 2006

Precious, Lee Daniels, 2009

For Coloured Girls, Tyler Perry, 2010

12 Years a Slave, Steve McQueen, 2013

Why Did I Get Married Too? Tyler Perry, 2010

Daddy's Little Girl, Tyler Perry, 2007

Empire, Lee Daniels & Danny Strong, 2015

Power, Courtney Kemp, 2014

Single Moms Club, Tyler Perry, 2014

Temptation Confession, Tyler Perry, 2013

Madea Goes to Jail, Tyler Perry, 2009

Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Tyler Perry, 2005