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Representations of Africa in US Media: A Semiotic Analysis of

Ebola: The Doctor's Story and Body Team 12

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Abstract

The Western media has often been criticized for biased coverage of happenings in and around

Africa. The 2014 Ebola outbreak created a lot of media attention for West Africa, and by

extension, the entire continent. This study examined to what extent postcolonial discourses were

infused in two films from the HBO Trilogy: *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) and *Body Team

12* (2015). To analyze these texts, I took a semiotic approach by identifying, describing and

interpreting the signs in both films, to discuss the postcolonial discourses in three broad themes.

Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015) was analyzed in the following themes: foreign versus local

intervention efforts, biohazard, relational signs while the themes in *Body Team 12* (2015) were

local intervention efforts, gender and biohazard. This study expands on existing research on the

postcolonial representation of Africa in Western media, especially in the area of film.

Key words: Postcolonial theory, semiotic analysis, Ebola outbreak, binary, hegemony,

stereotype, documentary, biohazard, humanitarian intervention, gender, US media, *HBO Trilogy*.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to those who fought to eradicate Ebola from West Africa between 2014 and 2016, including those who lost their lives in the process.

To Dr. Stella Ameyo Adadevo, thank you for paying the ultimate sacrifice with your life, saving Nigeria from Ebola – a situation we may never have recovered from as a nation.

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I am proud to have been a part of my graduate cohort. We were a unique lot and I am sure everything we learned and unlearned together will someday impact the world. Lastly, I like to appreciate the support I have enjoyed so far from my family and close friends (Owura, Aisha, Buki, Tolu and Dolapo); thank you all for always believing in me. I especially thank my husband Ademola, for the push and relentless encouragement. You all are amazing!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The longest and deadliest Ebola outbreak in history started in the West African country of Guinea; it spread across 10 countries, claimed over 28,000 lives, and lasted from 2013 to 2016 (WHO, 2016). The outbreak received enormous attention from international humanitarian, health and media organizations. One of the notable media artifacts generated about the Ebola outbreak is the Home Box Office (HBO) documentary trio, known as *Ebola Trilogy*, which comprises *Body Team 12 (2015), Ebola: The Doctors' Story (2015) and Orphans of Ebola (2015)*. HBO is a premium mainstream subscription-based cable service known for its high-quality content and public-service-oriented programming in the United States. HBO is reputed for its significant efforts in tackling misconceptions about AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s through its productions (Pepper, 2014). The Ebola Trilogy films, produced and directed by Americans, are focused on three sets of players directly involved in the Ebola outbreak; the (foreign) doctors, Liberian Red Cross workers and lastly, Orphans. This study is focused on the longest of the three films - *Ebola: The Doctors' Story (2015),* a 47-minute-long documentary and *Body Team 12 (2015)*, which had the most international attention. These two were selected mainly because of the contrast in the presentation of stories. This study combines semiotic and postcolonial theory to investigate the representation of Africa and, by extension, Africans in the films.

The controversies around media images and themes depicting the 'developing' world in the Western world have been going on since at least the mid-1970s (Cohen, 2001, in Manzo, 2006). African countries are often presented in Western media through the stereotypical lens, and along ideological binaries of neocolonialism between the "West and the rest" (Manzo, 2006). Westerners, who largely experience Africa through the media, thereby have their views premised

on such imbalanced and stereotypical representations (Monson, 2017). Over the years, the homogenization of Africa as a continent pervaded by diseases and death was exploited by US news media, which resulted in Americans' fear and conceptualization of Ebola as "other," "scary," and "African" (Monson, 2017). This conceptualization became more apparent in the reactions and attitudes of Americans in the Fall of 2014 when two Americans who had contracted Ebola at the Ebola frontlines in West Africa, arrived in the United States. As a result of this, Johnson (2016) found that 50% of Americans were somewhat or very concerned that there will be a large outbreak of Ebola inside the United States within the next 12 months after the first cases were confirmed. In the same vein, a study by Monson (2017) examining how American mainstream news and social media coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak reproduced and reinforced the "Ebola-is-African" discourse, found that such fears were fueled by the media's exploitative use of negative tropes about Africa in their coverage of Ebola (among other things). These fears resulted in the stigmatization and discrimination of Africans living in America, and those returning from Africa (Africans and non-Africans alike) (Monson, 2017).

Stigmatization and discrimination are some of the effects of media representations or portrayals of Africa that rely on otherness, homogenization, and binaries among other postcolonial concepts. My research, like Monson's (2017), reveals the importance of furthering the discussion on media representations, especially Western media. This study, as a continuation of the conversation on the representations of Africa in Western media, will investigate postcolonial notions and narratives in the HBO documentaries *Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015)* and *Body Team 12 (2015).* Based on 2017 statistics, 54 million Americans make up one-third of HBO's subscribers globally (Watson, 2018). Given that Americans like other Westerners experience Africa through the media, it is important to examine how the continent and its people

are presented to HBO's vital audience. The aim is to analyze signs and signifiers that reveal the extent to which the postcolonial discourses were engrained in the documentary. It will also probe the conscious and unconscious ways in which the audience is invited to view Africa, specifically in the light of humanitarian relief participation, gender, biohazard containment and relational abilities.

Postcolonial theory is under the critical tradition of communication theory and cultural studies. According to Craig (1999), theories under the critical tradition are based on the thought that the "problem of communication" in society arises from material and ideological forces that preclude or distort discursive reflection. Craig (1999) further explains that communication conceived in this way explains how social injustice is perpetuated by ideological distortions and how justice can potentially be restored through communicative practices that enable critical reflection or consciousness-raising to unmask those distortions and thereby enable political action to liberate the participants from them (Craig 1999). The theoretical framework for this study is postcolonial theory. The foregoing captures the essence of this study and justifies the use of postcolonial theory.

Literature Review

This section presents a review of existing literature and research on postcolonial theory, representation in media and Third World media. These concepts are pivotal for the semiotic analysis of the *Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015)* and *Body Team 12 (2015)* through the lens of Postcolonialism.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is often introduced with strong reference to one of its major proponents, Edward Said. Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978), is considered the foundation on which postcolonial theory was developed. *Orientalism* raised pertinent questions about the artificial or stereotypical boundaries that have been drawn between the east and the west in the Middle East. The book portrayed the "us-other" mentality of the colonialists, which several studies, such as Sunha (2017), Trčková, (2015) and Rao (2003) reviewed. These studies examined generalizations, misconceptions and miscommunications in Third World countries, such as India, Africa, Latin America and other parts of Asia vis-à-vis the dominant power of the west.

Said (1978) examined a plethora of scholarly texts, traveling writings, cultural artifacts and moral commentaries, to show how orientalism acts as a discourse and a pattern of thought that depends on the binary relation between the Orient and Occident. Orgad (2012), commenting on *Orientalism* pointed out that it had a major impact on debates about the representation of difference and the other, which is pertinent to understanding contemporary media representations in the context of Postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism emerged as a result of colonialism. It refers to the discourse which deals with "the effects of colonization on culture and societies" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin., 2007). Postcolonial theory "engages questions about how cultures create identities after colonization, about the subjugation of colonized peoples' knowledge and histories, about the use and misuse of knowledge about colonized peoples by Westerners, and about the creative ways in which colonized, and formerly colonized peoples respond to their oppression" (Karma, 2009: p. 768). Postcolonial theory examines connections between colonial hegemony and issues of power,

economics, politics, religion, and culture (Tyson, 2006). It, therefore, questions this idea of the superiority of the colonizer.

According to Shome and Hegde (2002), postcolonial studies, mostly situated within critical scholarship, focus on issues of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality, within the context of geopolitical arrangements and relations of nations and their international histories. According to Craig (1999), theories under the critical tradition are based on the thought that the "problem of communication" in society arises from material and ideological forces that preclude or distort discursive reflection. Craig (1999) further explains that communication conceived in this way explains how social injustice is perpetuated by ideological distortions and how justice can potentially be restored through communicative practices that enable critical reflection or consciousness-raising to unmask those distortions and thereby enable political action to liberate the participants from them (Craig 1999).

Some key terms that are central to postcolonial theory and this study will be defined. Some of these terms will be used in subsequent parts of the study, which include agency, binarism, hegemony and othering. These concepts are important for understanding the postcolonial discourses in the documentary.

Agency

Agency is a particularly important concept in postcolonial theory because it refers to the ability of postcolonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting colonial power (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin., 2007). According to Littlejohn & Foss (2009) agency is "a concept that is generally understood as a capacity to act or cause change" (p.27). Agency is closely related to the concept of power as well as an individual's self-awareness of autonomy, control and free choice. (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Binarism

Binarism stands for duality or a combination of two things. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007) thoughts on binarism were first established by the French linguist and semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure, who suggested that signs derive their meaning by their opposition to other signs rather than a simple reference to actual objects. Common examples of binaries include man/woman, sun/moon and birth/death. Al-Saidi (2014) describes binary opposition as the formulaic approach for understanding how meanings are shaped, created and reinforced in texts, which is based on the principle of contrast between mutually exclusive terms. In postcolonial studies, binary oppositions demonstrate the unequal power relations between the colonizer and colonized (Al-Saidi, 2014). These binary systems not only suppress the ambiguous spaces in between the opposed categories but also hold meanings that work to maintain and reinforce dominant ideologies (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Al-Saidi, 2014). Some examples of such binaries are black/white, colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World, West/Rest, superior/inferior, civilized/savage (Kehinde, 2006).

Hegemony

Hegemony as a general term means domination by consent (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007). This definition was propagated by renowned Marxist, Antonio Gramsci who studied the methods the ruling class used in successfully promoting their interests over others. Gramsci found that the ruling class dominated the other classes without the use of force or overt persuasion but by subtle systemic devices such as education and media (Ashcroft et al., 2007). According to Ashcroft et al., (2007), it is important to understand hegemony because it describes how colonialists successfully colonized people whose self-determination has been suppressed by a hegemonic but seemingly noble cause, often touted as advancement or social stability. Eurocentrism is a product

of such systems where the colonized world perceives itself as peripheral, less valuable or deviant to European cultures.

Othering

The term othering was coined by renowned feminist critic and postcolonial intellectual, Gayatri Spivak as the process through which colonial discourse produces the "other." While Spivak defined othering, Frantz Fanon, another influential voice in postcolonial studies, developed the idea of the "other," which to him simply meant one who is different from "self" (Al-Saidi, 2014). In a colonial context, the colonizer dominates and maintains control over the colonized by capitalizing on difference. "The Other" by definition, lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense he can be described as the foreign: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorized, inappropriate, and the improper" (Al-Saidi, 2014, p.96). According to Said (1978) orientalism (a pivotal concept of postcolonialism, coined by the author) is a product of the construction of the people of non-western cultures as an insignificant Other. This was achieved through discourse that stemmed from the "other" being a constant object of study and interest by the first world.

Third World Cinema

There are different schools of thought on what constitutes Third World cinema. Armes (1978) for instance, refers to Third World cinema as the ensemble of films produced by Third World countries. Shohat & Stam (2014) identify the Third World cinema as the "collectively vast cinema production in Asia, Africa and Latin America…" (p.27). Willemen (1989) simply describes it as an ideological project, that is, as a body of films adhering to a certain political and esthetic program, whether or not they are produced by Third World peoples themselves. Shohat

& Stam, (2014) define Third World cinema also known as "Third Cinema," in four classificatory

terms:

1. Films produced by and for Third World peoples (no matter where those people happen to

   be) and adhering to the principles of Third Cinema

2. Cinematic productions of Third World peoples whether or not the films adhere to the

   principles of Third Cinema and irrespective of the period of their making

3. Films made by First or Second World people in support of Third World peoples and

   adhering to the principles of Third Cinema

4. Diasporic hybrid films which both build on and interrogate the conventions of "Third

   Cinema"

The HBO documentaries fall under the third category as they were produced by an American

premium cable and satellite television network Home Box Office (HBO). *Ebola: The Doctor's

Story (2015)* was directed by Steven Grandison, an American, while *Body Team 12 (2015)* was

produced by David Darg and Bryn Mooser, also Americans. Shohat & Stam (2014) pointed out

that eurocentrism, also known as Hollywoodcentrism in film studies, is a key factor that

influences the production, narrative and impact of the Third World cinema on its audience.

Shohat & Stam (2014) established that eurocentrism and colonialism are inseparable because it is

a residue of colonialism. Eurocentrism deals with the hegemonic power structure that exists

between Europe and the rest of the world; this power structure positions Europe as the source

and determinant of all positive or progressive aspects of life.

Irrespective of what school of thought one describes Third World films, Ponzanesi (2017)

points out that a key aspect of the politics of such films is that they seek to "empower the

underprivileged masses and contest the hegemony of Hollywood entertainment and escapism"

(p. 27). Based on the foregoing, the main texts for analysis in this study will be examined as a Third World film.

Representation in the Media

Representation, the process of producing meanings through the creation of symbolic forms and contents, has been studied as a route to understanding the power of media texts, particularly insofar as such representations reproduce ideologies and create knowledge and "truth" (Foucault, 1980, p.15). In her book, *Media Representation and the Global Imagination* Orgad (2012) examines the symbolic "work" of media representations from the point of view of global imagination. The arguments presented in the book are premised on the "belief in the power of representations, and specifically, media representations, to shape our ways of seeing and understanding the world, as well as our emotional engagements with it" (Orgad, 2012, p. 3).

According to Orgad (2012), representation is "a site of power because at its heart is the symbolic production of difference and the symbolic marking of frontiers" (p. 56). The two important aspects of representation include binary oppositions and stereotyping. Binary oppositions refer to how a concept is defined in relation to its opposite (such as east/west, primitive/civilized, good/bad, etc.) and stereotyping refers using limited or few characteristics of a phenomenon to represent it as a whole in such a way that reduces other aspects.

Orgad (2012) points out that "in critiques of media representations, difference is often negative: studies consistently show how representations invest differences in people, places and cultures with negative meaning" (p.58). The foregoing provides the basis for this study as the findings would reveal how the producers reinforced stereotypes about Africa as well as the binaries that exist between the West and the developing world.

Golan (2008) carried out a study showing that the majority of stories covering Africa on US television in the period between 2002 and 2004 were concerned with negative topics. However, in a study by Scott (2009) an analysis of representations of Africa in UK newspapers reveals that the numbers of negative and positive topics are nearly equal and that most of the negative frames stereotypically associated with Africa are absent. Similarly, Nothia (2014) examined the image of Africa in British, French, and US news magazines; the research revealed a shift towards a positive and optimistic discursive portrayal of Africa. In contrast to studies on the increasingly positive representation of Africa in Western media, Trčková (2015) analyzed metaphorical conceptualizations of the 2014 Ebola outbreak and its victims in two liberal newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The New York Daily News.* The study revealed that the newspapers' relied predominantly on a single conceptual metaphor of Ebola as war, assigning the role of the culprit to the Ebola virus while Africans were portrayed as the voiceless and agentless victims.

These existing studies are broadly focused on news media content across the United States and Europe, however, mine will be focused on the signs and signifiers of Postcolonialism in a US-produced documentary film about a globally and historically significant health crisis.

Postcolonial Theory and Representation of Africa in Western Media

According to Ponzanesi (2017), as postcolonial studies developed, it resulted in the reconsideration of established or normalized tropes and stereotypes about cultural difference as well as the gendering and racialization of otherness. This has had a strong impact on the methodological interrogations of the representations of the Other.

Several critical studies demonstrate how postcolonial theory has been used in research related to media representation of the Third World and communication centered issues. In a study titled "Agency Beyond Agents: Aid Campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa and Collective Representations of Agency", Hanchey (2016) analyzed the content of three popular viral video campaigns to discuss the representation African agency in international aid rhetoric. The author argues that although representations of agency (independence) in the campaigns differ, they all reinforce Western assumptions about Africa to varying degrees and entrench imperialistic power relations by portraying African agency in Western-centric ways (p. 11).

The most prominent of the videos, KONY 2012, was created as part of a Public Relations campaign by an international aid group, Invisible Children, to stop child abduction, military use of children, and sex slavery by a guerilla group in Uganda. In reference to postcolonial theory, Hanchey (2016) did a content analysis to demonstrate the split between the West and Uganda, mirroring blacks and Africa. Uganda was depicted as the victim and the aid group (representing the US and by extension, the West) as the agent (p.17). According to Hanchey (2016) "The film employs three binaries: Black and White, knowing and not knowing, action and the inability to act. Together, these polar positions produce a dichotomy between the U.S. agent and the Ugandan victim" (p. 17).

Still in the vein of studies that engage postcolonial theory to study media representation of Africa, Muspratt & Steeves (2012) research on how the U.S. reality television show, *The Amazing Race (TAR)* counters postcolonial critiques of Africa's media image and shows that Western media sometimes can get it almost right. Postcolonial study is therefore the framework of this study, using the identification process of neocolonialism, which include erasure, agency and hybridity, as outlined by Shome & Hedge (2002, p. 265).

Muspratt & Steeves (2012) argue that (cultural) erasure is the most significant of the three identification processes and that inequities via the other processes, such as agency and hybridity, further contribute to and reinforce Africa's cultural erasure (p. 535). Bhabha (1995) defines hybridity as the ways in which oppressed peoples make use of the oppressors' cultural artifacts in new and unfamiliar ways. Gunn (2009) defines agency as a "concept that is generally understood as a capacity to act or cause change. The person who - or thing which - acts or causes change is termed an agent. In communication theory, agency is most commonly associated with people, as opposed to animals or things. Hawk (1992) states that the Western media is most frequently critiqued for presenting a sparse image of African countries and as a continent. In the same vein, Muspratt & Steeves (2012) noted that homogenization is a means through which erasure is achieved. Homogenization implies neglecting the African context and diversity in favor of familiar and often negative images such as images of poverty, death and disease.

This study by Muspratt & Steeves (2012) analyzed three key episodes of *The Amazing Race* that aired in Ghana in October 2010 to investigate how *The Amazing Race's* representations support or resist postcolonial notions of Africa via erasure and the related concepts of agency and hybridity (p. 536). According to Muspratt & Steeves (2012), the analysis revealed that *The Amazing Race* in Ghana pushed the boundaries of conventional representations and revealed an Africa seldom seen in mainstream globalized media. The episodes were silent on the often-emphasized poverty; its engagement with ordinary people throughout – avoiding iconic and de-peopled African landscapes or unusual traditions selected for shock value – effectively speak to these episodes' rejection of the "single story" usually centralized in media (p. 539).

Muspratt & Steeves (2012), however mentioned that elements of stereotypes "disappointedly" resurfaced in the final scene as "*The Amazing Race* ends its Ghana visit with a

reversion to a dominant trope; contestants spend a morning working on school renovations" (p. 538). Participants made remarks portraying the project as "doing something for them'' or as "A gift from Amazing Race!" This is problematic as it reflects the "white savior in distant land" discourse, which Shome (1996) noted has pervaded the mainstream media's representation of whiteness in the Third World. Muspratt & Steeves (2012) stated that *The Amazing Race* erased specificity by "returning to a homogenizing theme of Africa-as-charity-project, denied agency by bringing the expert Western hero to the fore and shunting African children to a reticent background – all in one hybrid encounter that we argue amounts to a brief foil for the vast majority of the episodes' depictions" (pp. 538-539).

The study concludes that the reality television episodes constituted better journalism than most Western journalism, as well as better entertainment representations, offering important lessons and, relatively, more balanced views for both sides of the divide (Muspratt & Steeves 2012). The study is related to mine in the sense that it considers the role visual/media homogenization plays in erasure. The documentaries in my study will be analyzed to expose how and to what extent Africa was portrayed by the US media as mirrored by the HBO films. The premise of my study is that the stereotypes about the African continent and Africans still exist in and I will be critiquing how and to what extent, however, Muspratt & Steeves (2012) have provided a different voice in the discourse on stereotypes about Africa in Western media; they argue that *The Amazing Race* projected a balanced view of the continent.

These concepts and supporting literature will guide in answering the main question of this study, which is: **How are postcolonial discourses represented in *Ebola: The Doctors' Story* and *Body Team 12?*** This question will guide the analysis of the signs that portray postcolonial tropes in both documentaries. The analysis will reveal how binaries and stereotypes, for instance, are

infused into the films. Studies on Postcolonialism, such as Shome (1996), have shown the pervasiveness of the "white-savior of the Third World" discourse in Western media. The answer to this question will highlight how Western efforts are portrayed in contrast to local (Sierra Leonean/African) effort. It will reveal the power relations between the locals and the foreigners, as well as reflect how various aspects of the text reinforce (or otherwise) the hegemonic discourse of Western superiority over Africa (the Third World).

Research Method

This section describes the research method for this study. Using a thematic analysis approach, this study investigated how *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* and *Body Team 12* reflected postcolonial ideologies and in what ways were postcolonial discourses embedded in the documentary. Given the differing perspectives of both films, a comparison of both films provided more insight in answering the research question. The study sought to answer the research question: How are postcolonial discourses represented in *Ebola: The Doctors' Story* and *Body Team 12?* This chapter essentially explicates the meaning and process of semiotic analysis as the research method used in this study.

Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics is often referred to as the science of signs (McQuail, 1994). Ferdinand de Saussure, whose works significantly developed the study of signs, defined sign as a form that consists of a physical entity, termed as the signifier, and the image or concept the signifier refers to, called the signified (Sebeok, 2001). The connection between the signifier and the signified is known as signification. As a semiotic analysis, this study identifies, describes and interprets the meanings behind signs in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) and *Body Team 12* (2015).

Semiotic analysis as a research method is an effective data gathering method for visual content (Mick, 1988). According to Manning & Cullum-Swan (1994), semiotics provides a set of assumptions and concepts that permit the systematic analysis of symbolic systems. Mick (1988) points out that "no discipline concerns itself with representation as strictly as semiotics does" (p. 20). Semiotic analysis, as a method of research, foregrounds and problematizes the process of representation; this applies directly to the subject of my research (Mick, 1988). According to McQuail (1994), semiotic analysis opens the possibility of decoding hidden agendas, myths, ideologies and underlying meaning of various types of texts including visual images and sounds.

In a study of the presentation of the girl figure in the film *Juno*, Willis (2008) conducted a semiotic analysis of girlhood. Willis (2008) found that the main character, Juno portrayed the transgressive sexual agency of young girls without substantially disrupting longstanding discourses of femininity, especially within popular Western culture in the early 21st century. The author expatiated the connections between the signs and their meanings in seven themes relating to Juno's femininity and sexuality.

My study, using the same approach analyzed the signs in a US-produced film about a Third World country with the aim of unraveling the underlying postcolonial discourses. I analyzed this documentary in three broad themes under which various signs and their connotations are broken down. The signs were grouped into the three most outstanding themes in each film that would thoroughly, but not exhaustively deconstruct the embedded postcolonial discourses in the films.

In my analysis, there is a set of recurring themes in both films, however since the films have varying perspectives and subjects, one of three themes in each film differs. In *Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015)*, the themes are Foreign Versus Local Intervention Efforts, Biohazards,

and Relational Signs. The themes in *Body Team 12* (2015) include Local Intervention Efforts,

Gender, and Biohazard. The theme about intervention efforts in both films is based on the

framing of foreign and/or local aid workers in relation to agency, dominance, power, erasure,

binarism, and other forms of postcolonial discourse. The biohazard theme discusses how a key

element of the stories in each film - the virus (and its effects) - shaped the representation of

Africa and African in the film. The relational signs theme in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015)*

contains an analysis of how the interpersonal relations among various players along different

power dynamics shaped the depiction of Africans (and other players). Lastly, the gender theme

in Body Team 12 (2015) covered a wide range of signifiers relating to the main character,

Garmai Sumo's positionality as an African woman and how they contribute to the postcolonial

representation of Africans this Western produced films.

Chapter Two: Thematic Analysis

Ebola: The Doctor's Story

Ebola: The Doctor's Story (2015), produced and directed by an American premium

television network, HBO and Steven Grandison respectively, was scripted through the camera

lens of Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim, an emergency response doctor. In the documentary

Abdelmoneim, a British doctor of Middle Eastern origin, provided a unique eye view of inside

the "hot zone" of a Doctors Without Borders (DWB) Ebola treatment center in Kailahun, Sierra

Leone as the epidemic reached its peak in 2014 (HBO, 2016). DWB is a Europe-based aid

organization that provides medical assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters,

or exclusion from healthcare globally (Medicin Sans Frontieres, n.d.). The documentary captures

the realities of battling the unprecedented outbreak, which involved a collaborative effort of the

DWB doctors and local staff to fight for the survival of patients, help families reunite, or cope

with the overwhelming loss (HBO, 2016).

The title of the documentary and the narrator emphasized the fact that the film essentially

comprised footage from Javid Abdelmoneim's miniature camera. This aspect of the film

demonstrated the producer's deliberate effort to confer the documentary with what Pozanesi

(2017) refers to as "the immediacy and truthfulness of the documentary style of cinema verite´ or

direct cinema" (p.27). Direct cinema is a documentary filmmaking technique that creates a kind

of cinematic truth through the recording of events in which the subject and audience are unaware

of the camera's presence (Nichols, 2001). This technique appeared as an attempt by the producer

to solicit the audience to believe the realism attached to the "doctor's unique eye view," which

invariably distances the text from nuances, tropes, and binaries that may be present in the film.

To adequately depict the severity and cruelty of the Ebola virus and the challenges of fighting against it, viewers are introduced to the story of the Koroma Family. This family of five was tragically decimated to three and the survivors were all minors, including Warah, a 10-month-old infant who would face the bleak and uncertain future of being Ebola orphans. Sullay and Warah, his infant daughter, contracted the disease from his deceased wife, who was said to have attended the funeral of a suspected Ebola victim. Both parents died in quick succession, leaving Warah helpless. Miraculously and with the help of Dr. Abdelmoneim and other DWB personnel, Warah survived the disease, however, she and her brothers' will now have to live with the stigma of being Ebola orphans.

This chapter will provide a semiotic analysis of the documentary in three broad themes, to answer the question of how postcolonial discourses are represented in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015). The semiotic analysis will reveal the intended or unintended signifiers and signs of postcolonial discourses embedded in the text as Western audiences (who constitute the main targets of HBO) are invited to view and make meanings of them. In the context of this analysis, Javid Abdelmoneim, Jay Achar, and Axelle Vandoornick, who are the dominant players in this documentary are representative of the Western world, although they are not racially identifiable as white. Their positionality as envoys of the West, through Doctors Without Borders (DWB), is pivotal to the analysis of the film through a postcolonial lens.

Foreign versus Local Intervention Efforts

Shome (1996) presented a critique of the "white savior" discourse embedded in *City of Joy* (1992). This connotation of the White man as the savior in distant lands, usually in the Third World, is often used as a tool of appeal for Western audiences (Shome, 1996). Such films have formulaic themes that re-enact the colonialist narrative of the "White Man's Burden"- the

imperialist idea that "three-quarters of humanity are incapable of governing themselves"
(Balibar, 1991, as cited in Shome, 1996). In *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015), this theme is
subliminally expressed and such signs that establish international aid as a necessity to curb the
spread of Ebola to other parts of the world (in the absence of a government or social system
capable of dealing with Ebola in Sierra Leone), will be analyzed.

Despite the spike in the number of deaths resulting from the outbreak, the Sierra Leonean
government or society appeared to be incapable of dealing with the crisis. This inference was
made as there was no reference to any intervention or relief efforts independent of international
organizations. In fact, the only reference to the Sierra Leonean government in the documentary
lent a voice to the government's cluelessness in handling the Ebola outbreak. Javid
Abdelmoneim referred to the Vice President's statement that their (the Sierra Leonean
government's) records of infections, deaths, or survival are horribly underestimated because "we
(DWB) are and they are not counting the number of people that die outside of health facilities."
He mentioned his concern about the uncertainty of the fates of those who cannot make it down to
DWB treatment centers, which affects the accuracy of the statistics on the outbreak generally.
Abdelmoneim made the observations while pointing out the increasing pressure on the DWB
facility due to the influx of new or suspect Ebola cases directed to them from "wherever in the
country" and as a result, they couldn't admit new cases. This was also the point at which they
recorded a one percent increase in mortality due to DWB's efforts.

In the bid to demonstrate how overwhelmed the center was, the role of Doctors Without
Borders (DWB) was played up so much that other efforts were indirectly diminished. Dr. Jay
Achar, in one of his comments to the camera, said that dealing with the disaster "was beyond the
scope of one organization to… cover this". It was unclear whether Achar was calling for more

international support or if he was implying that DWB was the only organization at the forefront of the crisis, especially since the spike in the number of cases mounted a lot of pressure on the organization's resources. Achar's comments were supported by the scene where the center had to turn down new cases brought in by an ambulance.

Several cinematic elements also reinforced the notion that Sierra Leone needed the presence of the foreign savior to combat the Ebola crisis. The establishing and long-distance shots for Javid Abdelmoneim's arrival to the treatment center, as well as other shots visually defined Kailahun, Sierra Leone as remote, capturing little to no signs of development and modernity. The parts of Sierra Leone outside of the treatment center shown extensively in the documentary captured, forests, fields, dirt roads, and semi-organized market/town squares. Such portrayals of the country align with some of the images of the Third World that dominate the Western media, which creates a "noble" premise for the Western world to intervene in a disaster-torn country. This effectively demonstrated how Africa is portrayed and articulated through the narrative of regression, primitiveness, and lack of civilization. According to Poncian (2015), this portrayal of Africa as inferior to the West stemmed from the 19th and 20th centuries when European colonial powers disseminated negative images of Africa to justify their domination of the continent.

Over the years, former colonies in West Africa have remained under the indirect but strong influence of Great Britain and France (the main colonizers of the region). Miller, Deeter, Trelstad, Hawk, Ingram, & Ramirez (2013) argue that flawed colonial policies, international political, and economic marginalization among other factors, have contributed to the weakening and failing of states in West Africa. As a result of this, these countries have remained dependent on former colonizers and other foreign powers for support in finances, conflict resolution,

peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention among other needs (Miller et al., 2013). This power

dynamic has remained over the years and although some African countries have been working

gradually towards postcolonial independence in the real sense, the narrative that pervades the

media still centers on Africa's dependency on the West. The images captured in the film are

undoubtedly images from Sierra Leone, however, they are not fully representative of the country.

Such images provide a skewed view of the country, Africa by extension, and its efforts in

fighting the outbreak.

The foregoing therefore explains the power dynamic between foreign and local aid

workers as seen in the film. In the documentary, DWB staff are shown in more dominant

positions of power relative to the local aid workers. There were a few instances in which local

agents appeared to give directives or take initiatives, such as when Joshua Salia, a Hygienist, was

shown coordinating a team of local agents on safely preparing a corpse for safe burial. Also,

some local staff were seen taking patient history, updating the treatment center's statistics board,

among other tasks, all under the purview of a foreign aid worker. Javid Abdelmoneim, Jay

Achar, Axelle Vandoornick and other foreigners are shown in supervisory positions, relative to

the local aid workers. They made decisions on how to manage new intakes, convalescents, or on

how corpses should be handled. The local staff, all natives, were shown in more passive

positions; taking, rather than giving major directives. Generally, the local staff were shown

helping the doctors with putting on the personal protection equipment (PPE), spraying,

sweeping, and handling, transporting, and burying dead bodies. These local aid workers were

shown or introduced to have support, menial, and in some cases, abject roles, which only they

occupied. A few local personnel such as the psychosocial support counselors, Fatmata Sawrray

and Idrissa Fefegula held key roles and had relatively more time speaking to the camera.

Because of this power structure, the foreign aid workers were more prominent in explaining, commenting, and providing insights about the patients or the crisis in general, to the camera. Almost all the foreign aid workers, except for a few local agents who worked closely with the emergency response doctors, spoke to the camera and provided detailed and superior information (such as using statistics). Javid Abdelmoneim had the most camera time, given that the documentary was produced from his "unique eye view", giving in-depth information, updates, and the implication for the various events and decisions made at the treatment center. Also, other agents such as Jay Achar, Axelle Vandoornick as well as an unnamed foreign agent provided contextual and expert information. The few times local agents spoke, they were corroborating what the narrator, or a foreign agent had said.

In relation to the white savior narrative, the foreign agents are portrayed and described in more heroic terms than the local staff even though all aid workers had reasonably similar levels of exposure to the hazard of the virus. Axelle, who appeared physically strained by the situation at the treatment center, described the Ebola situation as more demanding than war, refugee or natural disaster emergency contexts. She however continued to work passionately in her capacity as field coordinator. The narrator emphasized Javid Abdelmoneim's age, 35, and the fact that he arrived Sierra Leone at the time the first DWB international staff member contracts Ebola. This is significant because this portrayed the doctor as noble and heroic by arriving the scene in his prime (at the age of 35) despite the record high fatality and individual risk especially when his colleague had gotten infected in the same frontline he was stepping into. Prior to the first time he would go into the high-risk zone, Javid Abdelmoneim had trained and practiced putting on the protective equipment; however, he announced that at the entrance of the zone that "it sort of hit home that [he] was going in." This further accentuated the level of risk he was willing to take in

quelling the epidemic. Lastly, the working conditions of the doctors in the high-risk zone were repeated multiple times in the documentary with emphasis on the unbearably high temperatures (up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit) that the doctors endured while wearing the mandatory personal protection equipment (PPE).

It is important to note that in one instance, a local staff was portrayed in a distinctively heroic light. The hygienist, Joshua Salia, described how risky it was to prepare the dead bodies because of the high virus content in corpses. He was happy to take the risk of carrying out this abject and high-risk job as a patriot, stating "if no one does it, then who will do it." There are no other clear instances in which a local staff was depicted in the heroic light. However, other instances such as Abdelmoneim's desire to connect with patients despite the seemingly unavoidable distance between patients and doctors; the doctors' display of concern and emotions at the death or recovery of patients he connected with, among other instances, put foreign aid workers in relatively more heroic light than the Sierra Leonean agents.

Overall, the presence of the "white" savior in this intense health crisis in a developing country, which seemed incapable of managing its affairs, was established and proven necessary through the various signs discussed in previous paragraphs. This was done mainly by representing the Sierra Leoneans in a lesser position of power and having little to no agency.

Biohazards

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), biohazard or biological hazard refers to threats to public health, which could be in the form of infectious disease outbreaks, contaminated water or food. Humans, animals or anything that carries such threat becomes a biohazard and is or should be treated with biological containment procedures. Ebola patients or

people suspected to have the disease, in the words of Dr. Jay Achar, become biohazards because of how contagious the virus is. Achar said this while describing how vicious Ebola is in separating families, saying that when patients show up at the treatment center, they are given case numbers to track their progress and once the virus is detected, they are immediately set apart in the high-risk zone irrespective of their age, level of dependency or state of health. The notion of biohazard had been introduced right from the beginning of the film by the narrator who mentioned that the doctors were given a 2-day biohazard training before they can go into the high-risk zone.

Based on the biohazardous conditions at the treatment center, the delicacy of the situation at the treatment center was emphasized throughout the film. The virus was so vicious that it gave no warnings before taking Sullay Koroma's life. In Javid's words, "what kind of disease drops a man strong enough to walk to the shower alone and not strong enough to look for help?" This was the rate at which people could die from Ebola. Axelle Vandoornick described the hopelessness of the situation by stating that nothing could have prepared anyone for an outbreak of this magnitude. In her words, "it's so new here; you can't basically use your experience that you had in a war context or in a refugee camp, whatever emergencies, natural disasters, it's so different." Based on this statement, Ebola was clearly to be taken more seriously than any natural disasters and wars that may have claimed many lives; it was an existential threat. Jay Achar reinforced Vandoornick's point by saying that the whole situation was "too much" despite their level of experience and the resources available. More importantly he warned that three whole countries were clearly in potential danger and there is the possibility of the outbreak going to other countries.

The crucial question is in what ways does this film invite viewers to see Africans as biohazards? The Western media have often been criticized of portraying African countries as hopeless or a dark continent using tropes of poverty, war, and disease in the Western media (Trčková, (2015). Also, Hunter-Gault (2006) argued for the need to see Africa beyond what he called the four Ds – death, disease, disaster, and despair. According to Shome (1996), the racialized body of the "other" has been a focus of much attention in colonial discourse. Deployed through fixed tropes, the racialized body, has functioned as the most potent and visible marker of the "other"'s difference (Shome, 1996). In the documentary, the precautious use of distance from the Ebola patients by the aid workers (though necessitated by the hazardous situation) and the camera surveillance of sick, dying, or dead bodies symbolically align with familiar tropes of Africa as a diseased continent.

The level of risk in the treatment center required the aid workers to take cautious biohazard containment measures including distance. Javid Abdelmoneim and Jay Achar attested to the rigor of putting on and taking off the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and the unthinkable level of discomfort of working in the high-risk zone (in temperatures as high as 100 degrees Fahrenheit). And as shown in the film, the PPE had to be immediately replaced at the slightest slip, irrespective of what the personnel was doing. Also, the doctors emphasized the fact that the PPE was not 100% protective from the virus as there was still the chance for accidents and mishaps because there are "restrictions to your sight with the goggles, there are sharp edges on wood, there are metal posts, you can trip and fall, there are restrictions to your movement with everything you are wearing (PPE)."

There are various scenes in which distance is used to symbolically present the African body as a biohazard. From the beginning of the documentary, the viewer sees the orange

barricade demarcating healthy people from infected people, protective body suits, chlorine sprays, face masks, multiple layers of chemical resistant gloves, numerous white boots, and so forth. It is also important to note that the first scene after the narrator's introduction to the documentary shows Jay Achar giving orders about the newly arrived cases in the ambulance. Standing at a distance from the ambulance, he gave an estimated number of deaths on arrival in the ambulance and stated that he "can't get in to confirm because it is too dangerous." This is because, as Achar mentioned and as confirmed numerous times in the film by the hygienist and the narrator "… dead bodies have very high levels of the virus, it is a risky place to be to acquire Ebola."

Another scene that depicts this symbolic distance from biohazardous bodies is when Javid and the team of agents and interpreters were taking patients' medical histories over the orange barricades. When the patients arrived the center, they were received at the admission tent by a doctor who would give directives on where they should be taken based on their conditions on arrival. The suspect or early-stage cases were made to stay the suspect area while critical cases or deaths on arrival were taken to the hot zone or handled by the Body team. The doctors and their support personnel, in Javid's words were "screaming across the barrier... in two languages" to properly register and document the patients' medical histories. Javid lamented the lack of privacy and confidentiality in this process, which is a sharp contrast to a typical or ideal healthcare provider and patient situation. In such ideal situations, doctors have the avenue to relate closely with their patients, whereas at the Ebola frontline, they are required to maintain a safe physical and consequently, relational and emotional distance from the patients.

While describing the uncertainty of Warah's condition as her fever lingered on even though she seemed to be recovering from the Ebola virus, Javid Abdelmoneim explained that she

was been monitored for other diseases such as Malaria, malnutrition and Lassa fever. He

particularly emphasized the fact that "this is an endemic area for Lassa fever; there is always

background levels of Lassa fever in this part of the world." Lassa fever is another type of viral

hemorrhagic illness that is transmittable to humans through food contaminated with rodent

excreta (WHO, 2017). The WHO (2017), confirms Abdelmoneim's assertion that Lassa fever is

an illness that occurs mostly in West Africa. However, such assertions only reinforce the

lopsided representation of Africa as the diseased continent in the media, and invariably creating

strong associations of the African body and biohazards. According to Rothmyer (2011) while it

is true that parts of the continent are plagued with many of the problems, such as disease

outbreaks, as reported in Western media, the issue is that such media reports do not present a

complete picture of the real situation.

Whether in Hollywood films or in international television news, one of the rhetorical

strategies the Western media have effectively used in reinforcing the dominance over the

"Other" is surveillance (Shome, 1996). Surveillance or, as Shome (1996) puts it, the organizing

or commanding gaze of white eyes surveying the "other worlds" of seemingly permanent chaos

and disorder, was used in the film to reinforce the dominant power position of the West over

"Third World" countries. In relation to surveillance as an expression of power, Kaplan (1997)

posits that "looking is power" (p. 4). While capturing the "unique eye view", Javid

Abdelmoneim's miniature camera gazed at different sick, dying, and dead bodies. When he got

inside the high-risk zone, his miniature camera captured several high-angle shots gazing over

sick and dying patients. As he moved through the high-risk zone, he introduced himself to

patients, and expressed concern or shock about their conditions. "It's really quite nasty… this

woman is sleeping on the mud; she is breathing" Javid exclaimed as the camera scanned over

beds and the dirt floor.

Javid's camera focused on Warah, Alpha, and other patients' sick bodies. Images of

Warah and Alpha's earth-soiled diapers, malnourished look, and brownish hair were consistent

with the images seen in the media for humanitarian fundraising campaigns, which have been

criticized for exploiting and promoting the one-sided view of Africa for seemingly altruistic

causes (Dolinar & Sitar, 2013). The states of these bodies and the comments about them

reflected the disease and death tropes through which African bodies have been represented in

Western media. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007) a focus on the "postcolonial

body" has become a prime means of developing and reinforcing prejudices against specific

groups.

Relational Signs

According to Stewart (2000), interpersonal communication is an integral part of health care and

clinical practice, which produces a therapeutic effect on patients. The interactions in such

settings essentially involve information-sharing about diagnosis and treatment, however, most

medical personnel will recognize that these encounters also involve the patient's search for

psychosocial healing or what Suchman & Matthews (1988) refer to as connexion. This section

compares the interpersonal communication skills of foreign and local aid workers to determine

how they reflect postcolonial tropes or binaries about Africans.

Due to the hazardous conditions of working in the treatment center, there was an obvious

physical and invariably relational distance between aid workers and the patients. Personal

connection between patients and health care professionals is proven to be effective in alleviating

patients' health situations. A study by Meyer, Sellers, Browning, McGuffie, Solomon & Truog

(2009) shows that patients respond positively to physicians who connect with them and reveal their own humanity. In the film, there were restrictions to close interactions with patients, however, convalescing patients went through psychosocial counseling where the counselors got to know them more personally. Javid Abdelmoneim commented on how the hazardous environment compelled them to be distant citing the fact that there is no privacy while taking patients' history. The doctors, their support staff, and in some cases, interpreters stood behind the barricades and openly exchanged questions and responses with the patients. Because of this relational distance, most patients were mainly identified by and related to on number identity basis. Commenting on the sudden death of an unnamed young boy, Javid Abdelmoneim said "I didn't even get to know his age… these patients are not John Smith, 37, they are just 616 and that doesn't help you get close to them emotionally."

Despite the restraints, Javid was willing and eventually able to overlook the risks of connecting and showing personal interest in the lives of some patients. While there were others who expressed personal interest or concern for patients, Javid's disposition stood out the most. Javid Abdelmoneim made the most comments on the need for personal connection and acted accordingly. He celebrated the improvement in survival rate, was visibly burdened by, and later relieved and excited about Warah's recovery. He also seemed the most devastated by deaths, especially Alpha and Sullay Koroma's. The white savior narrative is known to appeal to Western audiences and it is again seen in play in this aspect of the documentary. Javid and his team of foreign aid workers were seen expressing what Shome (1996) refers to as the "White Man's Burden" for saving the developing world from their miserable condition. This discursive formula usually goes hand-in-hand with presenting those whom the White Man is there to save as dependent, unstable, and hopeless (Shome, 1996). Javid, though of Middle Eastern descent,

represents the West or developed world amid the crisis, given that he is British by nationality and spoke with a distinctive British accent. Also, even though he is not ethnically identified as white, Javid's position as the white savior is still intact because as Hughey (2014) suggests, the white savior trope has extended to nonwhite cultures especially when a light-skinned person is involved.

In the same vein, there was a sharp contrast in the way the interpersonal skills of foreign aid workers, especially Javid Abdelmoneim, and local aid workers were portrayed. The local aid workers seemed to have more access to patients because they were able to communicate in the language most patients were more conversant with. Their language skills were most valuable when they had to mediate the foreign aid workers and patients. Other than the psychosocial counselors assigned to connect with patients on a more personal level, the local aid workers did not seem to make deliberate efforts to leverage this avenue for personal connections with the patients, as did the foreign aid workers. It could also be that such scenes were not captured in Javid Abdelmoneim's camera or were not included in the eventual production. However, when Kadiya, Warah Koroma, and some other unnamed children and adults were confirmed cured, the local aid workers joined Javid and his team to celebrate their discharge from the treatment center. Within two weeks of his deployment to the treatment center, Javid Abdelmoneim connected with Alpha and the Koroma family, especially Warah, whose recovery became pivotal to the resolution of the film's plot. In his effort to connect with the patients, he addressed some of the children (Warah and Alpha) with expressions of endearment such as "sorry my boy," "hey baby," "here you go baby." He also demonstrated a distinct level of compassion for the patients even when there was no hope for survival. In Alpha's final moments, Javid explained that he administered more pain-relief medications to Alpha as his condition worsened to ensure that he

wasn't in pain as he passed away. Javid also made efforts to check case contacts files to see if he

had any family members to whom the center could report Alpha's death – there was none left.

While these are gestures expected from any health professional in any given context, they align

strongly to the white savior narrative when pitched against the backdrop of local aid workers

who seemed incapable of or were not shown doing the same. Javid's disposition and gestures

were in fact laudable, however, the filmic portrayal seemed to indicate that other Africans felt

nothing.

The foreign aid workers were shown to express the more "appropriate"

emotions/reactions to situations at the treatment center, such as deaths and recoveries. During his

commentaries, Javid singled out the only time he thought he had seen what he called a "normal"

reaction. As seen towards the end of the documentary, Kadiya a survivor while waiting on her

sister to also recover, volunteered to take care of Warah Koroma who had now been orphaned. A

few days after she took on this laudable role, Kadiya lost her sister and Javid Abdelmoneim,

conflicted, broke the news to her. Seeing her expression of shock and profuse sorrow, Javid

remarked that "that was a normal reaction as opposed to the absence of reactions as I'm seeing a

lot here. I think it is a healthy reaction, to be honest."

It was unclear to Javid if the lack of a normal reaction to death among the Sierra

Leoneans was due to the trauma of losing so many loved ones in such quick succession. Javid's

reaction to Sullay Koroma, Alpha, and other unnamed patients' death was to be considered as

normal. In fact, at Alpha's graveside, Javid was barely able to speak to the camera as he was

overwhelmed with grief and cried amid his tribute to Alpha. Even in response to positive

outcomes such as recovery or being discharged from the center, the Sierra Leoneans did not

seem to act "normal." To buttress the point that there was a higher chance of survival (30 to

45%) at the treatment center, groups of new survivors and local aid workers were shown

celebrating the news in a comical, almost hysterical way. They were dancing, singing, clapping,

and screaming at the top of their voices "we are negative for now and we will go and tell them

that Ebola is real!" For Javid in the same situation his "normal" reaction was to "give them a

high-five, a hug and a handshake and so for him that's pretty cool."

Javid's delineation of whose behavior or reaction to circumstances is "normal" and

whose is not, constitutes Othering. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2007), "The

existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the

world" (p.154). Establishing his behavior as the ideal or standard invariably produces binary

opposition of the African as less-than Western or the ideal Western "self" versus the savage

Third World "other." The audience is thus invited to view the Africans generally as out of touch

or incapable of displaying appropriate human emotions, which is consistent with the subhuman

narrative often associated with people of the developing world by Western media. Lofland

(1985) in a study of the social shaping of emotion identified that knowledge of emotions,

including grief, in the media, and in empirical research is mostly based on British and (White)

American subjects, excluding other cultures and nationalities. The implication of this is that the

expression of grief is mostly understood based on this long-studied group of people, while other

expressions of grief or other emotions risk being ignored or misconstrued. Lofland (1985)

cautioned that although grief may be a universal phenomenon, the character of grief - expression,

texture, and length – is not quite variable.

Chapter Three

Body Team 12

     Body Team 12 (2015) stood out among the Ebola Trilogy in that it focused on the efforts of a team of Liberians on the battle line of Ebola rather than the usual narrative of Africans. Of the three films in the HBO Trilogy on Ebola, this film resonated so strongly in the film industry that it won the award for Best Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2015 and was nominated for an Academy Award in the same category (HBO, 2016). *Body Team 12 (*2015*)* highlighted the heroic role played by Garmai Sumo, the only female in the team of 12 Red Cross workers tasked with collecting corpses of Ebola victims from homes and villages as part of the efforts to stop the spread of the disease (HBO, 2016). The film was made with improvised portable cameras that were convenient to carry around and easy to handle in protective gear through highly hazardous spaces (CCTV, 2016). Using a generous amount of tracking shots and eye-level shots, the film attempts to present a neutral record of the events to the audience, which is effective in providing a sense of objectivity (Metz, 1975).

     The story from Sumo's perspective shows Liberians in more dominant positions of power than is usually seen in the media and more specifically, in the coverage of the Ebola outbreak. She is portrayed as a hero possessing a strong sense of patriotism, agency leadership as she fights to save her country from the Ebola outbreak. In this chapter, I will analyze *Body Team 12* (2015) by drawing out the postcolonial elements in the film in three broad themes, that is, local intervention effort, gender, and biohazard. I will then make some comparison between this film and *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015), especially since both films are the focus of this study and they present two relatively contrasting views of the players.

Local Intervention Efforts

In this film, focus is placed on a group of 12 health agents who work for the Red Cross in Liberia. Although they work for Red Cross, an international humanitarian organization, the film emphasizes the efforts of the team and minimal reference is made to the Red Cross. Key among the twelve member-team is Garmai Sumo whose role reflects the Liberian Red Cross team's strength, passion, heroism, and commitment to combatting the Ebola outbreak. This section will expatiate on the signs that convey the heroism of the Body Team 12, especially through Garmai.

To begin, this team is charged with the responsibility of going around parts of Liberia to collect and safely dispose of corpses of people who have died. A rather abject and dangerous job they carry out a deep sense of passion and pride in an effort to eradicate Ebola from Liberia. According to Prescott, Bushmaker, Fischer, Miazgowicz, Judson & Munster (2015), dead bodies have a dangerously high content of the Ebola virus, thus exposing people who come in contact with them to a higher risk of contracting the disease. This is why the team members had to always seen wearing protective equipment. The players are thus introduced to the audience in a heroic light as the risk related to the role of the team is established right from the beginning of the film with the tracking shot of the team carrying a corpse covered in a body bag on a stretcher through the interiors of a slum and past a distinct wailing voice.

These positive depictions of the team are not the usual way Africans are represented in Western media, especially in the light of a humanitarian crisis. In a study of the coverage of Africa by Us media Golan (2008) found that Western media's coverage of Africa during a disaster often is usually negative. There is usually an expected lack of agency on the path of the Africans involved in combatting health or environmental crisis, which reflects in how Western

media tells stories about Africa and Africans. In such discourse, Africans also tend to be participating in, rather than initiating or dominating the efforts to quell or control a crisis.

Apart from Garmai, a few other team members spoke to the camera, for example, Darlington Joe, who expressed plainly that he was involved with the Liberian National Red Cross "sacrificing for Liberia my beloved country to make sure that Ebola will be eradicated." He also acknowledged that working as part of the team meant putting his life on the line, in his words, "for the country to succeed." Though Darlington's voice was heard, his voice his face was not fully seen as it was covered by the personal protective equipment (PPE). Another member whose face was not shown mentioned that they (members of Body Team 12) represented the collective sense of commitment the youths in the country had towards efforts to eradicate Ebola in Liberia. He said this as the team evacuated the body of a lady whom he identified to be a well-trained nurse from an uncompleted building.

The notion of the team's sacrifice was further conveyed by the fact that they worked unbelievably long hours every day. According to Garmai, they would leave their homes at 5:30 am and would not return until 11 or 12 am. Also, they had to carry out their tasks enduring high temperatures under the PPEs, which they were required to wear. The PPEs were so hot that when Garmai took hers off, after collecting the body of the 18-month-old, she was visibly sweating. Sweat trickled down her face as she spoke to the camera empathizing with the grieving mother. Similarly, after successfully retrieving the corpse from the family that aggressively refused to release the body for safe burial, Garmai was so exhausted from the altercation and the PPE that she said, "I am thirsty; I am thirsty!" These signs of passion, heroism, and dominance of the central players in this film are more perceivable to the audience, especially in the absence of a

foreign or white intervention, which is a departure from how Africans are typically portrayed and invariably perceived by Western audiences.

Garmai's personal story most strongly connoted the notion of heroism and sacrifice. A mother of one, whose son (Jeremiah Moba) celebrated her heroism by calling her "Ebola giant… Ebola hero," Garmai worked tirelessly and unfazed by the challenges that presented in the course of working with her team. She continued to carry out her duties despite having to watch other parents (like herself), spouses, children, and relatives mourn their loved ones whose corpse the Body Team had to evacuate. She also had to deal with angry and agitated relatives who threatened to attack her and her team as they insisted on burying their dead according to their traditions, thus refusing to release the bodies to the Body Team. Apart from being exposed to danger by angry communities, Garmai was faced with rejection from all her friends who distanced themselves from her when they learned that she was part of the Body Team 12. She empathized with those who mourned, did not blame those who attacked her team or those who abandoned her, rather she stayed focused on working towards a safer and Ebola-free country. According to Garmai, her commitment to fighting Ebola was driven by her desire to restore safety in the country where her son can live trouble-free.

As the disease continued to spread and Body Team 12 continued to work, the local media in Liberia also was shown imploring people to stay home (where they know best), avoid congregating in public places to reduce the spread of Ebola. Although the source of this information was not filmed, one could tell it was delivered by a radio presenter. Red Cross ambulances were shown driving through the town to collect an infant's body while the announcement was being played. The crackle in the audio suggests that the announcement was broadcast to the public via radio, which is an effective way to reach locales in a city like

Monrovia. According to Marshall (2016) Liberians adopted safety practices and precautions after

receiving messages through the radio. Also, in a survey during the Ebola outbreak, radio talk

show hosts were among the most trusted individuals in the society (Marshall, 2016). Creating

awareness about how to prevent the spread of the virus through the media, one could argue

demonstrated efforts by Liberians to fight against the epidemic. Not only was the Body Team 12

working to safely bury dead (infected) bodies to prevent further spread, the media also served as

a means to spread information on ways the public could avoid contracting the virus.

In terms of intervention efforts, *Body Team 12* (2015) significantly portrayed Liberian

efforts in a positive, assertive, and dominant light, although the fight against the virus was a

concerted effort of both local and international organizations. As mentioned throughout this

theme, Garmai's story was the vehicle that carried many of these positive images. Towards the

end of the film, she affirmed that she would remain undeterred, despite all the team's challenges,

until Ebola no longer exists in Liberia. This level of commitment and agency in addition to

Garmai and the team's leadership and patriotism constitute aspects of the African continent and

people that are yet to dominate Western media.

Body Team 12 (2015) was clearly intended to provide a perspective of African or Black

characters in crisis – as the hero. Garmai was a dominant character who exhibited leadership,

discretion, initiative and agency in conjunction with her team of patriotic Liberians. In the

general sense, it was a refreshing, though not perfect, representation of Africans and women that

should become more dominant in media, especially Western media. The preexisting

misrepresentation of Africans as Other, lacking agency or inferior that pervades the Western

media should be replaced with more positive and empowering images of African especially

because Westerners largely experience Africa through the media (Monson, 2017). *Body Team 12*

(2015) is quite a contrast to *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) as it harped on the presence and role of the 'White' savior in the crisis. The Sierra Leonean players in the film represented in the stereotypical subservient way Africans are often portrayed in Western media, as they seemed to take no initiative or dominant role in turning around the fate of their country as it was being ravaged by Ebola. The directive and dominant roles were taken up by foreigners like Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim, Dr. Jay Achar (British), and Axelle Vandoornick (Dutch) while the Sierra Leoneans acted as menial support staff to the foreign aid workers.

Gender

The Body Team comprised eleven men and one woman, whose story is the focus of the short film. Garmai stood out as the only female member of the group, which made the story a stronger sell for the producers as the film portrays a woman. According to Seymour (2016), women were at the fore of combatting the Ebola outbreak as household and community caregivers and healthcare workers such as nurses, birth attendants, cleaners, and were closely involved in the funeral and burial preparations. Garmai's role and persona strongly depicted salient aspects of the African woman that are not often represented in the media, especially the Western media. Nassanga (2009) clearly summarized the situation of African women in the media in the following manner; "the majority of women in Africa are 'media disadvantaged', not just locally, but nationally and internationally, as well as being generally accorded a lower status than men" (p.57).

Garmai's voice is the most dominant throughout the film. The film opened with her voice and philosophy of life and the afterlife. Garmai was a leader within Body Team 12, a confident and eloquent woman and mother who exuded dedication, empathy, and patriotism. The film's

depiction of Garmai is a departure from the voiceless, subjected, dependent, or secondary

position that women, especially African women are viewed within the media. Apart from the

men she worked with on the Body Team, Garmai is portrayed as independent and self-sufficient.

She stood out as the only female but was neither othered nor objectified. Garmai was introduced

to the audience as a patriot, hardworking professional, a mother, and a concerned member of her

community, all of which are roles she plays outside of any direct influence or direction of a man.

Often in the media, women tend to be defined or profiled by the presence or otherwise of men in

their lives (Nassanga, 2009).

Garmai demonstrated agency and inner strength in a way that this not often seen in the

media. Clearly driven by her dedication to defeat Ebola in Liberia, she was able to stay focused

on her cause despite having to witness people, especially other mothers like herself, mourn the

deaths of their loved ones. A particular instance stood out where a woman had lost her 18-

month-old infant to the disease. This woman hysterically lamented the death of her child and the

fact she had to release her dead child to the Body Team, loudly repeating as the team took the

body that "My baby that died, Ebola people carried my baby." Through this difficult moment

Garmai, though visibly moved by the flare of emotions, continued her work. "The tape, the tape,

scotch tape!" she ordered, as if to get her team members back to focus as she put on her Personal

Protective Equipment (PPE). Understanding the delicacy of her task, she chose to stay on her

mission and thereafter took some time to express her sympathy for the grieving mother.

At every opportunity given, she would reflect on life and the afterlife. She freely

expressed her thoughts especially on the afterlife, as if convinced there was no other way to

construe it. When she got the chance to speak to the camera after collecting the body of the 18-

month-old that had died, she expressed a unique sense of sympathy for both the mother and

deceased child. In her words, "she (the mother) can't accept that her baby has died; the baby was very innocent, one year and six months… that baby did not know anything about this life; she did not know about this world." In line with her previous thoughts on the pandemic, Ebola was such a confusing phenomenon that was ravaging her country so much that it would take the life of an innocent child.

Garmai's description of a woman's role in society and in fighting the epidemic illuminates the often-overlooked positive portrayal of the African women in Western media. She harped on the importance of her position as the only female in the Body Team. According to her it is important to have females on the team to strengthen men who get downhearted or scared of dead bodies. As a woman, Garmai took advantage of her multiple facets as a mother, sister, and "soft person," to fearlessly face horrid tasks like swabbing bloody corpses or negotiating with an angry mob. A scene that succinctly illustrated the different aspects to a woman in line with Garmai's thoughts was when Garmai was shown preparing to evacuate the body of the 18-month-old child. She remained focused on correctly putting on her PPE while the camera cut to the scene to the scene behind here where the grieving mother was being comforted by other women. Garmai's focus and courage, the display of emotions by a mother who had lost her infant and the support and sympathy shown by other women, are the relatable images of women that should become more visible and normalized in the media.

Explaining the importance of remaining fearless on her job, she asserted, "without me, the body team cannot enter (into places the dead bodies were found); I am the first person to enter… It is important to have us (women) on the team [because] without us, [there is] no way…" Her team members attested to the importance of her role on the team by saying "Garmai is a strong person!" She was deemed strong for leading the team to go inspect corpses, taking

swabs, and even negotiating with families. Garmai believed and embodied the standard of women in leadership. She understood and acknowledge the importance of her role and leadership in the group and the potential impact they could have on the efforts to restore normalcy to Liberia.

Outside of work, Garmai talked about the impact of her job on her personal life. The mise-en-scene elements, especially lighting, décor, and setting, of Garmai's life outside work, were distinct from when she was at work. When shown talking about her life as a mother and talking to her son, the lighting was brighter, the walls bright and painted, Garmai had colorful clothes and wore a radiant smile. This suggests what her life looked like before Ebola. It could also be representative of a glimpse of what Liberia would return to or become when the virus is eradicated from the country. While on her job, which involved coming in contact with dead bodies, taking them to the crematorium, seeing families and friends grieve, the lighting was more somber. At the scene where she started talking about her son, she was shown in a medium close up shot, sitting in a vehicle as it rained. The cloudy exterior and the dark tone lighting aligned with the grimness and darkness of death, loss, and grief brought about by Ebola. The issue with Africa being associated with darkness and death in the Western media plays out here, however, Garmai's life outside of her job reflects the promising and hopeful aspect on the continent.

Garmai's musings on the epidemic started on a note of confusion about the disease and ended on a note of hope that the Ebola will be eradicated from her country. Given the nature of her job, she thought often about death, life, and the afterlife. At the beginning of the film, she reflected on "what happens to a person when they die?" She gave a biblical explanation that "the righteous will resurrect on the day the trumpet; everyone will remain in your graves for now, you will resurrect when he comes that day." She also referred to the Bible describing what happens to

the souls of the dead who return to heaven where (undoubtedly to her) we all came from.

Garmai's views appeared to be well influenced by Christian beliefs, which is not unusual to find

in Africa, especially West Africa. Religion (in this case Christianity) was a major import of

colonialism into Africa especially during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century

(Nunn, 2010).

Although Liberia is often referred to as a republic outside of the colonial system, it was a

former trading post for Portuguese, Dutch and British traders and "colony" of the United States

of America through the American Colonization Society (ACS) (Whyte, 2016). The relocation

and settling of freed former black slaves from the United States to what is today known as

Liberia was largely run and funded by Christian organizations and leaders (Parson, 1938). The

evangelization or Christianization of native Africa was a key item on the agenda of the

colonization society, which had a strong and lasting influence on the beliefs of Liberians (Nunn,

2010). It is therefore not surprising to see Garmai express her views on life and death through the

lens of Christianity.

Firmly convinced of her beliefs, she asked rhetorically, "if heaven doesn't exist, then who

are we and where did we come from?" She claimed that due to her "faith" in the fact that we all

came from heaven, she believed Ebola will not destroy her country. This she said in a stern voice

as the scene cuts to a wide shot of bats, a known host, and source of the Ebola virus, flying en

masse out of a forest. This scene emphasized Garmai's desire to see the virus completely

eradicated from her country. Garmai's religious worldview is not a rarity on a country like

Liberia, however, it is important to note as Dreyer (2007) pointed out in a paper on the

challenges and opportunities of religion and state in postcolonial Africa, that religious beliefs (in

addition to race, gender, class, and other boundaries) in postcolonial Africa have been used as grounds to exploit people for political gains.

It is rather interesting to observe the difference in how Garmai Sumo's heroism in *Body Team 12* (2015) is presented in comparison to Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015). Garmai's heroism is framed through some gendered and racial trope as the audience is presented with humanizing pretext of her as a mother and with a recognizable (not bizarre or unstable) worldview. In *Body Team 12* (2015), a significant amount of time was allotted to justifying the conferral of hero status on Garmai through her personal life. Lang (2015) pointed out, female characters in films are still disproportionately defined by the roles they assume in their personal lives, such as wives and mothers. Her portrayal as a mother with a high-risk job and potentially exposing her only child to the Ebola virus are some of the ways that the film support Garmai's heroism. Garmai is not the usual type of hero seen in the media especially as pertains to a crisis situation in an often othered land like (West) Africa. Javid, on the other hand, a representative of the West, had no mention of his personal life beyond his age and education (which all invariably valorize him). His representation in the film as the normative figure of heroism especially during a humanitarian crisis in addition to being light-skinned, British and a male, speaks to Tyree& Jacob's (2014) observation that the western media has for a long time reproduced and contributed to the acceptance of heroes as white and often male.

Biohazards

Given that this is a film based on the efforts of the team in charge of evacuating and safely burying dead bodies of Ebola victims, it is not surprising for the audience to come across various signifiers of biohazards. In most scenes throughout the film, there was at least one person

shown in personal protective equipment, which is has been established as a signifier of

biohazards. Infected people, people suspected to be infected, and dead bodies of infected people

are biohazards as they carry the virus and become contagious. Members of the team always put

on PPEs because of how contagious infected dead bodies are, which explains why they were

shown several times putting on and off the protective equipment as they picked up each body.

There was always someone shown spraying down each member with some disinfectant chemical

while preparing bodies and while painstakingly removing PPEs. The multiple shots showing

PPEs, body bags, disinfectant sprays, rubber shoes, multiple layers of latex gloves, goggles,

swabs, corpses, among others are examples of signs that conveyed the level of biohazard the

team was operating in.

The corpses of Ebola victims were particularly grim to imagine or view as Garmai

described that on the corpses, "you see blood everywhere, you see blood coming out of the eyes,

the nose, the mouth." According to the CDC (2019), the later symptoms of the disease are

unexplainable hemorrhaging and bleeding, which explains why corpses are found with blood as

Garmai described. According to her, these blood-covered corpses were found everywhere (in

Liberia). Even though saying that there were dead bodies "everywhere" in Liberia was a

hyperbole, the exaggeration gave the idea that there was an alarming number of corpses outside

the health centers that the team had to collect for safe burial. As the camera panned over one

dead body to the other, and as the camera focused on spectators, it calls to mind Shome's (1996)

idea of the surveillance of white eyes. The producers, white American men, capturing the Body

Team's activities with their camera(s) would constitute white surveillance or gaze. The images of

decomposing dead bodies, crying women and children, unkempt adults and children in

underdeveloped areas, and unsanitary spaces, among others, are consistent with the one-

dimensional way that media and humanitarian organizations have framed Africa to non-African audiences. (Dolinar & Sitar, 2013). These images are ways in which Africa continues to be portrayed as the inferior Other.

There are implications of how the audience may connect the setting (environment) of the film and the people with biohazards, especially given the tendency of Western media and audiences to associate Africa to death, disease, disaster, and despair (Hunter-Gault, 2006). The team was shown in different shots collecting bodies from congested, shanty towns and villages, carrying bodies out and past rusty shacks, algae-covered walls, and dirt roads or paths. Many of the spaces where the corpses were found appeared unsanitary, clustered, and in some cases, inhabitable, however, they were places where people lived and worked. According to Hasan, Ahmad, Masood, & Saeed (2019), a lot of Ebola cases were found in areas with poor hygiene conditions. Although the Body Team may only have gone to areas where they were requested or assigned, the image of Monrovia (as displayed on) presented to the audience is limited to these underdeveloped, unsanitary areas.

It was interesting to see that the Body Team's process of evacuating corpses attracted a gathering of people including spectators, sympathizers, family members, and so on. These gatherings, though physically distant from the corpses (biohazards), are antithetical to the efforts of the body team to curb the spread of Ebola. Generally, public gatherings were discouraged as part of measures to reduce the spread of the virus. For instance, the radio host speaking through the Red Cross Ambulance radio announced to the public to "stay home… lock the doors… and stop congregating in places that will cause us trouble tomorrow." The contrasting view of the Body Team 12 carrying out their duties while surrounded by crowds of people may suggest to the audience how and why the virus continued to spread. The number of cases rose from about 200

cases to over 14,000 within three months, as displayed on the screen.

The representation of all these other groups outside the Body Team connoted the underlying notion that Garmai and her team's heroism was an exception. The spectators who were present at locations where bodies were being collected, mourning family and friends, the resistant family members, and other passive groups were depicted in the usual imagery of Africans that pervades the media. These images act as a counterbalance to Garmai's heroism. Some of these typical images include being passive, spectating, clueless, lacking agency, voiceless, and in specific cases, insistent on their (often illogical) traditions or beliefs. On the other hand, Garmai and her team, whose heroism is express on the platform of a Western organization, Red Cross, are a clear contrast and exception to other Liberians. These depictions invite HBO's audience to see the possibility of a positive story from Africa but they may conceive of it as untypical since the often-used tropes were still presented.

In the scene where an unidentified/unidentifiable man who had died for over a day was found lying in a shed-like structure, a crowd gathered at a distance to watch the team remove his body. Also, the actions of the family of the deceased who refused to release the dead body to Body Team 12 defied any logic of public health and safety. It took a male member of the team admonishing them to release the corpse so that "those who are alive can stay alive." Although Garmai understood that the people preferred to bury their dead in accordance with their traditions than to let Red Cross take their dead relative, based on the exchange with this family, it appeared as if they were ready to keep the corpse in their home until they had their way with the burial rites, which is a threat to their health and the general public's. The gatherings and the defiance (possibly unwittingly) of public health guidelines, the sense of ubiquity of dead bodies, the unsanitary environments among other factors, may present as justification for the existence and spread of

Ebola in Liberia in the minds of the audiences.

The representation of Africa as a place of disease and death in both *Ebola; The Doctor's Story* (2015) and *Body Team 12* (2015) is consistent with the tropes that pervade the media about the continent. Both films presented a lopsided view of the countries their stories are situated - Sierra Leone and Liberia, as the audience would only see images of underdeveloped, uncivilized and unsanitary towns and villages. *Body Team 12* (2015) was shot in Monrovia, the Liberia's capital, however the audience was only presented with a view of the shanty, crowded, unsanitary vicinities with no sign of urbanization. *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) was also shot at Kailahun, a less urbanized part of Sierra Leone. Also, the images of sick, dying and dead bodies in these kinds of locations all combine to setup the African countries as needing white savior.

As established earlier in this research, one-third of HBO subscribers are Americans, making them a crucial audience, thus it was important to investigate how these films framed Africa and Africans, and consequently, the audience's perceptions. Given that Americans essentially rely on the media to experience Africa, this type of analysis is important to expose how the discourse in these documentaries shape or reinforce negative perceptions of African. The semiotic analysis revealed the underlying postcolonial discourses in both films. Various signs revealed the use of othering, binaries and the reinforcement of Western hegemony and the lack of African agency in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015). *Body Team 12* (2015) portrayed more on Africans with agency and had fewer signifiers of Western hegemony or the West/rest binary. While these films may have been intended to capture the important roles and efforts of various players at the Ebola frontline, they inadequately and in some cases incorrectly represented Africa and Africans in the media, especially when viewed through a postcolonial lens.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

To answer the research question, the study found that whether consciously or unconsciously, postcolonial discourses were engrained in the representation of Africa and Africans in *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) and *Body Team 12 (2015)*. In *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015), the Sierra Leonean players at the Ebola frontline were not portrayed to have agency and self-sufficiency, determination or ability to fight an epidemic, which positioned the continent and people as an existential threat to the world. On the other hand, the team of 12 Liberians in *Body Team 12 (*2015) was portrayed in a more positive and dominant light, however signs like, a strong religious leaning by the main character reflected the postcolonial residue. Even though that *Body Team 12* (2015) was more positive in portraying members of the Body Team in their efforts to combat the outbreak, it was shorter in length than *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015). In fact, it was the shortest of the three films in the *Ebola Trilogy*.

Binary oppositions were more in play in the *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) than in *Body Team 12 (*2015). In the film about the Doctor's story, binaries such as West/Rest, inferior/superior, human/subhuman, ideal self/other we identified through various signs. Most importantly, the presence of the West to intervene in the affairs of a stereotypically chaotic African country was justified using different symbolic strategies. The signifiers that point to such colonial discourses were consistent with predominant narratives about the Third World in the Western media. These discourses influence the perception and disposition of the developed world towards the "other" world. As Javid Abdelmoneim noted (towards the end of the film), that although the Ebola death toll had reached 4000, the developed world only "woke up to it when a few white people got infected." *Body Team 12 (*2015) also employed cinematic elements

that presented Liberia as the underdeveloped other, which is consistent with how other countries and the whole continent is framed in the Western media.

In both films, the two countries were stereotyped as places of disease and death. The stereotypical and negative portrayal of African countries and the entire continent by Western media has been a longstanding problem, according to Manzo (2006). As the cameras lingered over various African bodies (dead, diseased, or alive) in both films, the audience was invited to view these bodies through the stereotype of Africa as a continent of death, disease, disaster, and despair. Since US audiences like other Western audiences mostly experience Africa and the Third World through the media, both films provide them with a significant number of signifiers that promote the association of Africa and Africans with death and disease.

In relation to gender, *Body Team 12 (*2015) presented the central character, a woman, in a relatively positive and dominant power position. She had agency, strength, passion, and was a leader, all of which are perspectives African women are not often presented in, in the media. This image of Garmai not only humanized and dignified African women but introduced the audience to aspects of the African woman that are not often seen in the media. The need to depict women through their life-related roles as opposed to their work-related roles in films, however, remains a longstanding debate (Lang, 2015). In terms of humanizing the players, *Ebola: The Doctor's Story* (2015) represented Sierra Leoneans in the film as subhuman who appeared almost incapable of demonstrated "normal" human response to death, sorrow or distress while the foreign aid workers demonstrated "normal" or the expected human response in the same situations.

The representation of Africa in the Western media is still largely through the postcolonial lens. Films like *Body Team 12 (*2015) that present positive aspects of the continent are needed to

reinforce Africa's struggle to reinvent and build itself up post-independence and in spite of strong influences from former colonialists (and other developed countries). The intention is not to promote Africa as a trouble-free continent or to represent it in the media in an all-positive light. The suggestion is, instead, for the media to identify and acknowledge postcolonial biases so as to present more balanced images and messages about Africa since audiences experience distant lands through the media.

Limitations

This study provides a unique analysis of the postcolonial representations of Africa in US-produced films on Ebola, which extends research on media representations of Africa. One of the limitations of the study is that it only examined two out of three films in the trilogy. Although these two films were on the same subject, they have sufficiently contrasting perspectives, which help answer the guiding question of the research. Also, it is important to state that the various signs identified and thematically analyzed for each film are not exhaustive or all-encompassing.

Suggestions for Future Study

The scope of this study can be expanded by identifying and analyzing other themes and signs that were not analyzed in this study. Further research should also be done on gender representation in media coverage of Ebola-related or any humanitarian crisis in Africa or any other part of the world. More research can be done to investigate how women and/or men are portrayed as players in crisis situations. Research should be done to expand the discussion of how gender bias, stereotypes, sexuality, race, nationality, class, and other factors influence gender portrayal in First or Third-word media.

It would also be interesting to conduct research by comparing the media representations of any African country and any Western country in similar epidemics or humanitarian crises. The differences in the framing of both sides and the subliminal agenda or influences in the minds of the producers may reinforce existing arguments on postcolonial discourse. This research may point out the changes that may have occurred over time in the media's representation of Africa or the West.

Lastly, postcolonial theory needs to be applied to more social issues and media contents or film genres. Further research should be done to examine how the media framing of social issues and societies reflect postcolonial discourses. Researchers can ask questions such as how is colonial hegemony of superiority over postcolonial societies promoted through various types or a specific type of media content? What elements of such contents promote such narratives and how are they conveyed? Such studies may also proffer strategies for changing the representation of postcolonial societies through the creative and empowering use of the knowledge and histories of these societies.

Final Thoughts

I hope that this study has provided action-provoking thoughts on the importance of representation in the media. I hope it demonstrated how obvious and subliminal or sometimes unintended elements of a text have implications in reinforcing or dismantling oppressive ideologies. Western media have a remarkable level of influence on how various parts of the world interact with one another and this position of influence should be held with a stronger sense of social responsibility. My hope is that more Western-produced documentaries, news, images, books, films, and other content will not project the strengths of postcolonial societies but

also address their weaknesses with some regard for their potential to improve and to self-

actualize. The onus for more positive and empowering representations also lies on local media

platforms in Africa and other postcolonial societies as they can initiate and stir narratives about

their societies in positive directions.

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