

## AFRICAN STEREOTYPES IN AMERICAN TEEN MOVIE *MEAN GIRLS*

Fiza Asri Fauziah Habibah\*  
Program Studi Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta  
08979555658  
fiza.ffz@bsi.ac.id

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### ABSTRACT

Movie has emerged to be a powerful device in shaping perspectives of culture, society and history. The power of visual stimulation can be manifested and exploited politically, socially and economically. The movie *Mean Girls*, which premiered in the United States in 2004 actualized the racial stereotypes lobbed at Africans, but with a soft ignorance. The present study aims to observe African stereotypes in American teen movie Mean Girl. This study employed qualitative descriptive method, which is a method of research that attempt to describe and interpret the objects in accordance with reality. The data of this study were collected from scenes and excerpts which contained African stereotypes based on its scripts. The study draws on Doh's (2009) Stereotyping Africa: surprising answers to surprising questions and February (2019) Mind your colour: The "coloured" stereotype in South African literature. Findings have shown that the African stereotypes are black-skin coloured, wild and savage, financially poor, doing voodoo, and having impolite attitude. These stereotypes indicate the movie Mean Girls tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Africans more than the positive ones.

**Keywords:** African stereotype; American teen movie; *Mean Girls'* movie

### ABSTRAK

*Film telah muncul sebagai perangkat yang kuat dalam membentuk perspektif budaya, masyarakat dan sejarah. Kekuatan rangsangan visual dapat dimanifestasikan dan dieksploitasi secara politik, sosial dan ekonomi. Film Mean Girls, yang tayang perdana di Amerika Serikat pada tahun 2004 mengaktualisasikan stereotip rasial yang dilontarkan pada orang Afrika.. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengamati stereotip Afrika dalam film remaja Amerika Mean Girl. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif, yaitu suatu metode penelitian yang berusaha mendeskripsikan dan menginterpretasikan objek-objek sesuai dengan kenyataan. Data penelitian ini dikumpulkan dari adegan dan kutipan yang mengandung stereotip Afrika berdasarkan naskahnya. Studi ini mengacu pada teori stereotip Afrika (2009) karya Doh dan Februari (2019). Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa stereotip Afrika itu adalah berkulit hitam, liar, buas, miskin secara finansial, melakukan guna-guna, dan memiliki sikap tidak sopan. Stereotip ini menunjukkan film Mean Girls cenderung mengabadikan stereotip negatif tentang orang Afrika daripada menunjukkan sisi positifnya.*

**Kata kunci:** stereotip Afrika; film remaja Amerika; film *Mean Girls*

## INTRODUCTION

Africa is an ordinary race that have been filmed by foreigner cinematographers repeatedly, intensively, and sometimes have had their privacy violated more often. This could be happened because of the inhabitant of this giant continent were gazed as the most effective object for making fun. The

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\* Corresponding Author

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American film makers caricatured Africa as a dark continent whose inhabitants were nothing but savage or docile primitives doing humorous matters within the jungles to amuse white thrill seekers.

The dehumanization of Africa and African human beings blatantly creating a mockery of a substantially diverse African tradition, stereotyping the complete continent through a one-dimensional, mostly western perspective disseminating popular myths of the wild Africa are all racist overtones glorified, celebrated, and vastly quoted from the conventional, all-time pop culture mega-hit movie *Mean Girls*.

A 2004 American teenager comedy film directed by Mark Waters and written by Tina Fey, *Mean Girls* had a stellar forged of Lindsay Lohan, Rachel McAdams, Amanda Seyfried, and Lacey Chabert in the leading roles. It traces its root in “Queen Bees and Wannabes”, a nonfiction book by Rosalind Wiseman. The movie centered around Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan) who was raised and home-schooled in Africa before she was moved to a public school in America.

As cinema shapes and reflects the societal structure of its time, it becomes essential to filter and be critical of the media we devour. *Mean Girls* has aged to be a terrible classic. In all its glitter, fashion and high-school glory, *Mean Girls* actualized the racial stereotypes lobbed at Africans, but with a soft ignorance that counterbalanced the awry.

Previous studies were done to analyze this famous American teen movie *Mean Girls*. (Ratu & Utami, 2017) analyzed it in terms of dynamics of female bullies using Bourdieu’s concept of social capital to show how the clique achieves and maintains its power. Another study was done by (Anna Kaplan, 2019) with “Stop trying to make fetch happen”: The disempowerment of women’s voices in the film *mean Girls*. This study explored the different types of *Mean Girls* presented in the film and how they each use specific voices to obtain their goals. Thus, this study is going to focus in exploring the African stereotype.

### **Research Problem**

The research problem is formulated to what are the African stereotypes in American teen movie *Mean Girls*.

### **Research aim**

This study aims to observe African stereotypes in American teen movie *Mean Girls*.

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## **Literature Review**

### **Stereotypes**

In social psychology, a stereotype is a fixed, over generalized belief about a particular group or class of people. By stereotyping we infer that a person has a whole range of characteristics and abilities that we assume all members of that group have. One advantage of a stereotype is that it enables us to respond rapidly to situations because we may have had a similar experience before. One disadvantage is that it makes us ignore differences between individuals; therefore we think things about people that might not be true. The use of stereotypes is a major way in which we simplify our social world; since they reduce the amount of processing. Stereotypes lead to social categorization, which is one of the reasons for prejudiced attitudes which leads to in-groups and out-groups.

Researchers have found that stereotypes exist of different races, cultures or ethnic groups. Although the terms race, culture and ethnic groups have different meanings, we shall take them to mean roughly the same thing at the moment. The most famous study of racial stereotyping was published by Katz and Braly in 1933 when they reported the results of a questionnaire completed by students at Princeton University in the USA. They found that students held clear, negative stereotypes – few students expressed any difficulty in responding to the questionnaire. Most students at that time would have been white Americans and the pictures of other ethnic groups included Jews as shrewd and mercenary, Japanese as shrewd and sly, Negroes as lazy and happy-go-lucky and Americans as industrious and intelligent. Later studies conducted in 1951 and 1967 found changes in the stereotypes and the extent to which they are held. In general, stereotypes in the later study tended to be more positive but the belief that particular ethnic groups held particular characteristics still existed.

Not surprisingly, racial stereotypes always seem to favor the race of the holder and belittle other races. It is probably true to say that every ethnic group has racial stereotypes of other groups (McLeod, 2015).

### **Mean Girls Movie's About**

*Mean Girls* is a high school teen comedy released in 2004 by Paramount Pictures, starring Lindsay Lohan and Rachel McAdams. Mark Waters directed the script written by Tina Fey, adapted from the self-help book *Queen Bees and Wannabes* by Rosalind Wiseman, which examines the inner workings of female cliques in high school and the detrimental effects they can have on developing young women. As well as penning the screenplay, Fey stars in the movie as Ms. Norbury, a math teacher. Produced by

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Lorne Michaels, best known as the longtime show-runner of *Saturday Night Live*, the film assembles a core team of veteran *SNL* performers like Fey herself, Amy Poehler, Tim Meadows, and Ana Gasteyer.

Cady Haron has been homeschooled while living in Africa with her zoologist parents for 12 years. Now in Evanston, Illinois, she is entering public high school for the first time. On her first day, she meets fellow students Janis and Damian, who give her a brief "rundown" of the school's cliques, pointing out the students sitting at each of the different cafeteria tables at lunch. After a fellow student named Jason tries using innuendo to flirt with Cady, Regina George (the most popular girl in school) embarrasses him into retreating. Regina and her sidekicks Karen Smith and Gretchen Weiners, known as The Plastics, admire Cady for her innocence and good looks. They invite her to have lunch with them under a long list of conditions: no wearing a ponytail more than once a week, only wearing pink on Wednesdays, etc. Janis, who considers Regina her sworn mortal enemy, devises a plan for Cady to infiltrate The Plastics and exact revenge.

### **The Africa and African image in American Movie**

Africa has long been a subject of colonial subjugation from media, literature, popular discourses, academia, to cinema. Bourne, an independent of producer and director in both film and video over decades, in his article wrote that the images of American cinema are highly influenced by the political conditions of the times. Thus, the images of African Americans have served a specific purpose through the film industry's history. Moreover, the creation of those images has not been and still are not under the control of black producers. The images themselves were created to serve the physic purposes of those who control them. Because the purpose of the Africans brought here by Europeans as slaves was to provide service and nothing more. The art and media images of these slaves were also created and used to rationalize and reinforce their place in society. Thus, racial stereotypes came to symbolize the mental restructuring of the African present in America (Bourne, 1990).

The image of Africa and Africans remains negative. In the Polish consciousness, Africa exists as a symbol of low level life, famine, ethnic conflicts, violence and diseases. These clichés have been perpetuated through existence in decades of writings, mass culture and mass media. Fear, ignorance, and language stereotypes filled the rest of the image. Just the word "Africa" carries a few stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the Polish consciousness. Africa is synonymous with poverty, a place where people of another skin color live in extreme misery, where you can encounter wild animals roaming free (Ndiayea & Ndiayea, 2014).

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## **METHOD**

This study employed qualitative descriptive method, which was considered appropriate since the study deals with rich descriptions in the analysis. A descriptive method is particularly suitable for exploring the notion of ‘being African’, as meanings need to be constructed from the given representations in a descriptive manner (Mack et al., 2005). The data of this study were collected from scenes and excerpts which contained African stereotypes based on its scripts. The data analysis in this present study were beginning with collecting the data. In this stage, the researcher watched the *Mean Girls*’ full movie several times with subtitle to be understood easily, taking the screenshots and notes regarding African stereotypes in the screen, describing the data using framework of film theory , and analyzing the data by using the framework of the theory about Africa of Doh (2009) and February (2019) using the descriptions to reveal how the movie stereotyping Africa, and relating the representations to the literature that has been reviewed in theoretical frameworks section.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

*Mean Girls* addresses many stereotypes with a lot of observant detail, which seems surprisingly well-informed. This movie actualized the racial stereotypes lobbed at Africans, but with a soft ignorance.

### **Black-skin coloured is a must for African**

A couple scenes indicate African is black. The first scene is when the principal, Mr. Duval, introduces Cady to the teacher and students as a new student. The teacher, Ms. Norbury, mistaken by welcoming the black girl. She presumes it to be one of the black students in her class. On being called, the student said, “I am from Michigan.” It is ironic that Ms. Norbury did not know about a student from her own class. The repeated trope in the movie that all black people are from Africa, and all Africans are black was uninformed at best and repugnant at worst. Another scene is when the Plastics asked Cady to join in the table. One of the Plastics named Karen asked directly with “If you’re from Africa, why are you white?”. Karen Smith appears as a playable character in the game, labelled as the most dumbest. On one scene, it was told that she can’t even spell the word ‘orange’. This indicates that even the most dumbest person knows if African people is black. The last scene is an excerpt of Janice’s utterance, when she tries to explain the groups of the lunch table, with her phenomenal term “unfriendly black hotties” to refer to a group of African girls.

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Many preferences are found to address the African. There is a survey conducted in Johannesburg by The Referend, Allan Hendrickse, in the book *Mind Your Colour* (February, 2019). Alan states

“The term Coloured is not of our thinking, and if we look at the circumstances of the South African situation then you must ask why. We have no peculiar colour, we have no peculiar language and if other people see these peculiarities they see them not because they see them but because they want other people to see them .... I do not want to be labelled Coloured .. all I want to be known as is South African.”

Hendrickse, then conducted a survey related to name preference of Coloureds. The results show 2% who are not objected being called as Black, 24% are prefer being called as Coloured, and 53% are willing to be called as South African. The rest 21% are prefer being called as malay, Coloured South African, Cape coloured, and Bruinnmens.

The terms black used in this movie seems as an attempt to expose the horrible stereotyping ‘coloureds’ to show the rejection of white stereotypes among the ‘coloureds’. As Botha’s write in (February, 2019) “that the colour of a person’s skin would merge as the criterion for classification was due to the vast difference in the level of civilization between the whites and the coloureds ...”.

### **African is definitely wild and savage**

This theme is carried in two scenes of the movie. “Cady, will you please tell him his hair looks sexy pushed back.” requested Regina. In this iconic scene, Regina George taunts Cady with her crush in the cafeteria at lunch. In reaction to this, Cady’s first thought at a resolution is the way it would have been solved in the “animal world”, which is Cady’s way of regarding her time in Africa. Then, the scene suddenly cuts to a depiction of all the high college students inside the lunchroom breaking out into a savage fight with background monkey and jungle noises. In this scene, the direct association between Africa and animals paints the continent’s thousands of cultures and dynamics as a one-dimensional image. And while the argument can be made that Africa is home to a diverse range of animals and animal habitats and thus the “animal world” scene can be justified, the fact that Cady’s character only shows a single, stereotypical side to the continent is where the problem lies.

Another scene is where Cady being in the watering pool, Cady felt in Africa and imagined so many animals surround the pool. Cady equated being in a mall to “being home in Africa...”, reinforces the Eurocentric prototype that unlike the native “savages”, only westerners are capable of being civilized. In Cady’s imagination, all people in that mall were primitive and animalistic. In essence, *Mean*

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*Girls* debased an entire continent to the level of bestiality. It relegated Africa to the classical imagination of White men – wild, uncultured, uneducated, grotesque.

### **African is financially poor**

Another thing to point out from the movie is Cady mentioned about her time in Africa was that her mom frequently fed Kälteen bars, Swedish-made nutrition bars, to African children to assist them gain weight. Definitely this is one of the only experiences Cady recalls about her twelve years in Africa, calls for some inspection. By giving up that piece of statistics about the Swedish bars, the already misrepresented picture of Africa is painted with even more fake information.

The truth is not all countries and regions in Africa are ridden with poverty and hunger, and it is far essential that we completely keep in mind that with the intention to disregard such extensive and generalizing statements together with Cady's. no longer all of Africans are suffering against poverty. (Doh, 2009) believes that "one can state almost categorically that there is no community on Earth in which everyone is poor, as that would have to be a particularly unfortunate group of people; poverty is a relative concept".

Doh (2009) also believes that the same things applied in Africa. Africa, just like any other places on Earth, has the poor and the wealthy, the haves and the have-nots. However, there is a negative stereotype about Africa that is acknowledges by the majority of people in the world: poverty. states that not everybody is poor in Africa. African societies are established economically like elsewhere, with the poor, the center elegance, and the rich. In some of African societies, however, the middle class is sort of disappearing. therefore, via considering those factors regarding poverty in Africa.

### **African is doing kind of voodoo**

Related to this theme, there is a scene when Regina warns Aaron that Cady plans to do some kind of African voodoo on a used Kleenex of his to make him like her. In fact, many African traditions and cultures are under threat from modern life, but there is one which is holding its own - voodoo. However, African voodoo is far from the mindset of evil and dark side of the supernatural, such as dolls stuck with pins, witchcraft, and evil hexes. In voodoo, the python is a symbol of strength - the

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devotees explain they are relying on Dagbe, the spirit whose temple this is, to give them the power to change, and to make that change happen, blood must be spilled. The first offering is a chicken - some of the blood is spread across the tiles of the temple and the rest is mixed into a communal bowl of millet - which the devotees eat as it is passed around. Voodoo is rooted in the worship of nature and ancestors - and the belief that the living and the dead exist side by side - a dual world that can be accessed through various deities. Its followers believe in striving to live in peace and to always do good - that bad intentions will not go unpunished, a similar concept to Christians striving for "righteousness" and not "sinning". Voodoo is a way of life. Voodoo is dignity, it's a celebration.

Reed in (Emmanuel Fru Doh, 2009a) drawn from Voodoo specifically from its New World version, also known as hoodoo or conjure—because, as a cultural practice transported by enslaved Africans across the Middle Passage, Voodoo maintains an unwritten record of slavery and the diaspora. Etymologically in the language of the African Fons, Voodoo means introspection (vo) into the unknown (dou or du); culturally, it is a form of ancestor worship in which the souls of the dead—known as loa or mystères—are evoked and made manifest through ritual.<sup>4</sup> In the New World, especially in Haiti, Voodoo rituals recall and restage the history of cultural dislocation and enslavement. Reed recognizes that Voodoo has served as an unwritten text through which various communities in the New World, including the American South, have kept alive collective memories of dispossession and survival. Steering clear of nostalgia or essentialism, Reed draws on Voodoo's social and political history to incorporate its metaphysical, epistemological, and aesthetic visions.<sup>5</sup> For Voodoo practitioners, history is functional, experiential, nontextual, and nonlogocentric. What would it mean, Reed asks, to transfigure Voodoo's terminology into a critical memory of slavery.

### **African has impolite-attitude**

The terms of "the unfriendly black hotties" was introduced by Janice, Cady's friend, when she tries to explain the groups of the lunch table. It begins with the cafeteria scene where Cady tries to sit with a group of African girls by greeting them with an enthusiastic "Jambo!" The use of "Jambo" which is Swahili for "Hello" was another instance of demarcating African people in mass. Assuming that they would not know how to speak English, and then assuming that all black people speak Swahili was reflecting White people's dismissal of the multiplicity of African languages. However, the larger part of the casual racist attitude, nonchalantly projected by Cady rests on her assumption that all black people

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must be from Africa. For someone who was home-schooled in Africa, such a significant omission of African-American history was hardly believable, lest intended.

On being ignored, she ends up eating her lunch in the washroom. The use of “unfriendly” for black people is rooted in the conventional white stereotyping of them as aggressive and uncouth. It is a colonial rendition of the unregulated rage and furiousness of natives towards benevolent White men with their “civilization mission”, who were merely disseminating the gift of development to *savage* lands. The segregation and labelling of the high-school cliques in line with their ethnicity was in itself a rather unappetizing racist incident in the movie. This stereotype perpetuates that ideal that African American girls are angry and not polite to anyone who is not also African American.

According to Power in (Doh, 2009)

“Africans are usually the most courteous, hospitable, forgiving and cheerful of all people I have met on God’s Earth.” Stereotyping African as having bad-manners is actually a discriminatory practice since not all Africans are bad-mannered. Even though some might have bad mannered, this phenomenon does not only happen in Africa, but in all of the continents in the world. There are always bad-mannered people even in the so-called most advanced continent in the world”.

## CONCLUSION

The complexity of the social world forces people to tend to make a generalization towards something. This generalization is used to help people in simplifying their social world. In relation to the diversity among ethnic groups, the generalization often brings false perception toward a certain ethnic group. This overgeneralization is widely known as stereotype. This study has come to the finding of several stereotypes of African. Those are black-skin coloured, wild and savage, financially poor, doing voodoo, and having impolite attitude. These stereotypes indicate the movie *Mean Girls* tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Africans more than the positive ones. Furthermore, it is also found that whether positive or negative, stereotypes are regarded as a destructive power, in terms that they ignore the probability of individual differences among the stereotyped group. That is why, many people struggle to fight the existence of these stereotypes.

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