

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Racism has been a controversial issue in terms of politics and social economics for many years. In America, racism is also considered as a “spoken” word, which means that people who belong to non-white race will be blamed by the white American society. In March 1968, the US Commission on Civil Rights published “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders” emphasizing the significance of racism in American life. According to this report, the white society has never fully understood that white society is deeply implicated in *ghetto* (which means a group of society whose members are minorities due to social, legal, and economic pressure) (3-5). This implies that the central paradox and the first standard in America is race. Thus, in the surface Americans seem to have already accepted the existence of African Americans, yet implicitly African Americans can still feel some kind of denial to their existence. From the beginning, America’s politics is based on the principals of white supremacy (Wynter 3). White supremacy is the belief that the whites are more superior than any other races and they dominate the non-whites politically, economically and socially.

Since 1753, the acceptance of African American descendant as an American citizen has become a debatable case because it is against white superiority (Jorgensen 233). White superiority has long believed against the

existence of any other races except for the white Americans until now. Current news in workers.org shows that black workers have been held at bay with the least pay; whether urban North or rural South, black workers are still exploited to the highest degree. Even though black people have already made an effort to be racially equal with the white and all other people in the world, they would have to wait and survive up to five decades from 1950s to 2000s to reach their real equality (Bracey 41-43). However, the problem of racial discrimination has to be faced and solved.

Black people in America or known as African Americans are stated so because they have the blood of African from their parents, so their genetic is also African but they are living in American land which is not their homeland (Tyndall 57-61). Meanwhile, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the United States Census Bureau 2010 defined African American as a person who has the origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes respondents who are reported entries such as African American; Sub Saharan African entries, such as Kenyan and Nigerian; and Afro- Caribbean entries, such as Haitian and Jamaican (2). Thus, it can be concluded that African Americans refer to the people of African descent who live in America and hold American citizenship.

Nowadays, in America, there have been a large number of African Americans in the middle class society. Based on the data from the United States Census Bureau 2010, the number of African Americans who live in United States reaches 12.6 percents of the total population (4). It has grown about 12.3 percents, which results in African American being the biggest “other race” in the United

States of America. As a part of American population, African Americans have given a substantial contribution to the American culture, especially in arts and literature. The evidence of their contribution is the existence of African American artists, actors, singers, and authors that include Will Smith, Ruby Dee, Paul Winfield, Rihanna, Toni Morrison and many more. Nevertheless, public recognition toward these African American figures does not mean that racism has totally been disappeared in America. In fact, it just goes “underground” since racial inequality in America still becomes a major and pressing problem (Tyson 359-367).

Nowadays there are many African Americans who succeeded in the world of entertainment or even politics, yet it is not that easy to be the common society of African Americans because they are not accepted easily in American society although they have the same way of acting, speaking, and thinking like other Americans. According to Chima and Wharton, for decades, African Americans have been excluded from participating in most of desirable jobs and institution. The major problem which African Americans face includes employment process biases, channeling into “minority” positions, lack of access to network and mentors, and etc. (1). Not only in the living practices, the discriminatory practices towards African Americans also occur in the work of art and literature, such as novel, drama, and film. In many Hollywood films, the villains were mostly given to African American actors, for example in the film *Bad Boys* and *Blood Diamond*. The African American characters were often the ones who act against the white protagonist characters. However, in some other

films we may see African American actors starring as protagonists in films such as *Men in Black* and *I am Legend*. Thus, there are various ways in which American films represent African American characters. In the past, African American actors mostly played only in black films and acted as the antagonists, but now we can also see many African Americans become the protagonists in major Hollywood films. Therefore, the variety in the depiction of African Americans in films becomes an interesting subject to analyze in this study that will reveal the representation of African Americans in Hollywood films.

For this purpose, the writer is going to focus the research on two apocalyptic Hollywood films that represent African American characters. Remembering a hot issue in 2012 that there would be the end of the world, not many people know that there have been many scholars discussing the issue of apocalypse. As the Mayan predicted about the apocalypse to occur in 2012, scholars from many disciplines find themselves engaged in prediction about the end (AJSP 3). It means many scholars have brought up a discourse about apocalypse and started to predict how the apocalypse will happen in the world. Rev. 1:1 offers a meaning of apocalyptic, which is taken from the Greek word *apokalypsis* meaning “uncovering” or “revelation” (Morris 20). Thus, many people think that apocalypse is the day when there will be a very big disaster in the world that can cause the death of all mankind and signify the end of the world.

As apocalypse has recently become a heated issue in the society, the writer decides to analyze two apocalyptic films; *I am Legend* and *World War Z*. The film *I am Legend* was produced in 2007 by Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

and directed by Francis Lawrence. The film starring Will Smith is set in 2012, which reflects how the issue of the end of the world in film as predicted by the Mayan has inspired the filmmaking. This film portrays a very smart scientist named Robert Neville (an African American), who cannot be contaminated by an unstoppable and incurable man-made virus. Neville is the last human survivor in what is left of New York City and maybe around the world. He is just accompanied by his dog, Samantha. Neville can be the only survivor because he cannot be affected by the virus. He is desperate to find any other survivor who might be out there until there is a woman named Anna and her son, Ethan, who heard Neville on the radio and suggests him to follow them to the safe colony. After the *Darkseeker* (people change into zombie after being infected by the man-made virus) found Neville's house and destroy it, Neville brings Anna the blood of the cured *infected* and ask her to bring it to the colony without anyone knowing how he struggles to find the vaccine.

Unlike the previous film, *World War Z*, an apocalyptic film starring Brad Pitt, was directed by Marc Forster produced in 2013 by Paramount Pictures, a production company which was established since 2002 by Brad Pitt. The film is about a former UN investigator in Philadelphia, Gerry Lane and his wife, Karin with their two daughters, Rachel and Cony, who are trapped in the attack of a mass of zombies. This circumstance forces Gerry to travel to several countries in order to find the vaccine.

The writer decides to choose *I am Legend* and *World War Z* because the writer is interested with the issue of apocalypse which caused by zombie.

Moreover, in *World War Z*, there is an African American zombie caught as an experiment. Remembering that the history of the word “zombie” was coming from the land of Africa. A zombie is a reanimated human corpse that feeds on living human flesh. Stories about zombies originated in the Afro-Caribbean spiritual belief system of Vodou (anglicised voodoo) (Munz, Hudea and Imad 134). Moreover, the writer want to reveal who is going to be the Messiah (survivor of the Western culture) or the survivor in both films. Those can be the writer’s interest to analyze *I am Legend* and *World War Z*.

Even though both films have apocalyptic theme, the focus of this study is not the event of apocalypse. Instead, the writer would like to analyze the representation of African Americans in apocalyptic films since interestingly the image of African Americans are portrayed differently in both films. In *I am Legend*, the African American is depicted as the main character, the only main character, while in *World War Z*, African Americans are not the main character. There are some African Americans appear as the supporting characters. This makes the writer interested in analyzing the different portrayal of African Americans in these two films. Besides the choosing of apocalyptic film is still rare for academic papers, the writer wants to analyze how African Americans are played in the non-action film which directed by the white director.

As a matter of fact, apocalyptic theme as depicted in these films is not a new subject in academic discussion. There have been many scholarly writing discussing the apocalypse such as Carl Becker’s *The New World of The Post-Apocalyptic Imagination* and Alar Laat’s *Christian Apocalyptic Extremism: A*

Study of Two Cases. In chapter two of his thesis, with the subtitle “The New World Narrative of *I Am Legend*,” Becker shows how consumerism is depicted through the post-modern time in the film. Neville, in fulfillment of the post-apocalyptic consumer fantasy, spends much of his time in other recreational pursuits. He is privileged with access to a newly purified earth with all of its riches. Meanwhile, in his article, Laat discusses about the movement of Russian Old Believers that started in the second half of the 17th century and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom establishment in China in the middle of the 19th century (163).

Even though the films used in this study both have apocalyptic theme, the writer will focus more on the representation of African Americans, and not on the issue apocalypse, in the films. In this study, the writer would like to examine the different portrayal of African Americans in both films, African American as the main character in *I am Legend*, while in *World War Z* only as supporting characters. In *World War Z*, the main character is a white American, thus, it is interesting to compare the main characters in both films in order to reveal any discriminatory practices against African Americans. The writer will apply the theory of Representation proposed by Stuart Hall for analysis. Representation is a process of production and changing meaning between members of culture. Hall explains about how we recognize all the things around us, of how we give meaning of things through languages, and communicate them in ways people are capable to understand (1). The writer applies the theory of Representation because

the writer believes it to be the most suitable theory to reveal the representation of African Americans in these films.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

After watching the films and deciding on the topic as explained earlier, the writer formulates the following statement of the problem to be analyzed in this study:

- How African-American characters represented in Francis Lawrence's *I am Legend* and Marx Forster's *World War Z* films?

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objective of the study aims to answer the statement of the problem mentioned above. Thus, the objective of the study is:

- To reveal the representation of African American characters in the films *I am Legend* as compared to *World War Z*.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research is expected to give a contribution to the study of literature and cultural studies in general, and particularly in the study of African Americans in films of apocalyptic theme. Hopefully, this study will be beneficial not only for the writer, but the academic society, especially English Department students majoring in literature and cultural studies. For the writer, this research is hoped to give knowledge on how films portray the representation of African Americans as they struggle for their life in facing the coming of the end of the world. For the society, this research is expected to provide information about the existing racial discrimination toward African Americans in the United States of America. This

research will also show that the issue of racial discrimination can appear in apocalyptic films. Since research on apocalyptic films has not been available yet in Airlangga University, this study will be helpful for English Department students who would like to conduct further research in related issue.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

There are some important terms used in this study and they are explained below in order to ease readers understanding the analysis.

Representation : The using of language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people (Hall 15)

African American : Person who has the blood of African from the parents, but they are living in America which is not their homeland (Tyndall 57)

Stereotyping : Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential character which are represented. It is the maintenance of social and symbolic order (Hall 247)

Racial Discrimination : Unequal treatment of persons or groups on the basis of their race or ethnicity (Pager and Shapered 182)