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Art 101

19 November 2018

Representation vs. Reality

Amistad is an American historical drama film directed by Steven Spielberg in 1997. It is based on true events happened in 1839 abroad the slave ship La Amistad. Mende tribesman kidnapped for the slave trade managed to gain control of their captor’s ship off the coast of Cuba. In the movie, the leader of the Africans leads a mutiny and takes over the ship. The movie is based on suffering and survival. In contrast, Notes on the State of Virginia is a book written by Thomas Jefferson. The book is based on laws of Virginia and it also discusses some differences between blacks and whites. Amistad in comparison to the book Notes on the State of Virginia is based on how African struggle to gain their freedom from slavery while Notes on the State of Virginia has some elements of racism against blacks.

The film accompanies the events that occurred after the revolt by enslaved Africans on board the slave ship Amistad. The film represents the suffering and the survival of African people. The film has an accurate aspect as similar to the book Notes on the State of Virginia. The film shows how black people suffer in the hands of white people. They are captured as slaves. Even the ship Amistad is known as slave ship especially made for slaves to move them from one place to another. Thomas Jefferson in his book explains the reality of white and black people. He says, “Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained(Jefferson).” He depicts the cruelty that happens against blacks but he becomes prejudice. He mentions the difference in colour among whites and blacks. He uses the word “Greater less share of beauty(Jefferson)” to ensure that beauty belongs to white color and for that reason blacks face prejudice. The movie, in contrast, shows another picture where beauty does not count but bravery. Blacks are not considered to be beautiful because of their color but Steven Spielberg in the movie shows how African in spite of their color, struggle and fight against injustice.

The movie unfavorably shows a story of white hero worship. Although it is the movie of how African try to gain their freedom the movie gives less time to show how African leader Cinque leads a mutiny. Most of the movie is devoted to the U.S justice system, where white lawyers defend the poor Africans. The complex historic figures of white are presented as noblemen. The movie shows that White men are interested in the betterment of black people. Their racist and evil side does not reveal in the movie. The movie fails to show how much price African had to pay for their freedom in the hands of whites. Similarly, Jefferson could see no solution but to remove all blacks from America. The policy was widely accepted even in 19 century. He gives unacceptable and racists remarks to black people. On the other hand, he also writes a proposal in which he states that slavery should be prohibited forever. The reference to the extent to which England white missionaries worked to take away the names, customs, religious beliefs, and language is also removed from the movie. Jefferson gives controversial statements about religious freedom. He is in the favor of separate state and church just like English missionaries who take away the rights of black. Joadson (Black character) sits in courtroom with the white characters but in reality, the black man was not allowed to sit in the courtroom even as a defendant or witness in 1840s. The historical events are unfavorably presented in the movie. The film shows many scenes and events that never take place. Especially when the movie shows Sengbe and Joadson visit at John Quincy home. Most black people were declared to be the legal property of white men, the fact that is removed in the movie. Many events are twisted and removed in the movie thus creating a misconception among the viewers. There are some areas in the movie where the director has exaggerated and removed the real events.

However, the film succeeded by depicting themes of suffering and survival. The opening scene of the film shows the strong image of African fighting for their freedom. The film shows brutality, death, mutilation, sickness, and the blood scenes as there occurred in the past. The African who strikes against those who imprisoned them was expressed forcefully. The leader of African, Sengbe is shown strong and highly intelligent in the movie. The movie favorably shows the complexities and diversity of African culture are also highlighted, with the tribal divisions between those who were captured shown by differences between language, culture and beliefs. Steven Spielberg shows the communication gap between African and American as a difference in culture. Similarly, Jefferson in his book Notes on the State of Virginia talks about the slavery of blacks. He favorably depicts the reality of white people that how they behave with black. He at the start of his book mentions the truth about white people that they are prejudice against black people. He is against the slavery of black people. He wants to remove the act of slavery from the country.

The film was produced in 1997. It was the time when African Americans were attracted to politics. Regardless of their color black were welcomed in politics. However, the film deals with the case of whether to free black slaves or not. It is favorably matched with the events going on in the country. As black was allowed to be the part of politics which was the first step towards their freedom and goals, similarly in the film blacks who were imprisoned and slaves gain freedom in the end by the impassioned plea for their release by John Quincy Adams. However, the book also depicts the favorable matched situation that was going on in the country at that time. The writer has talked about racism and slavery in his book which was also happening in the country at that time.

**Reference**

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Wells and Lilly, 1829.