

**AGAINST HUMAN TRADE IN STEVEN SPIELBERG'S *AMISTAD*
MOVIE (1997):
A MARXIST CRITICISM**



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A MARXIST CRITISM**

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ABSTRACT

The major problem of this study is how social relation and stratification is reflected in Steven Spielberg's Amistad based on Marxist perspective. This study aims to describe the internal structure of the film script and knows the social relation and stratification in Steven Spielberg's Amistad Film Script based on Marxist Perspective.

The benefits of this study are to give in the application of Marxist Perspective in literary study and to fulfill the requirement for getting Bachelor Degree in English Department. The type of this research is descriptive qualitative research. The primary data is taken from the film script, itself, while the secondary data is taken from information needed. The method of data collection is library research. The technique of data collection is descriptive.

The outcome of the study shows that there is a close relationship between the film scripts and the social reality of America in late twentieth century, racism and classes that raise the gap between them. It is why Steven Spielberg criticizes that condition. This film script represents one of Spielberg's concerns in social humanity.

Keyword: Human trade, Marxist, Twentieth century, Racism, Social Humanity

INTRODUCTION

Amistad is the true story of 1839 mutiny aboard a slave ship that is traveling towards the northeastern coast of America. Much of the story involves a court-room drama about the free man who led the revolt. This movie was based on the true story of a slave mutiny that took place aboard a ship of the same name in 1839, and the legal battle that followed. Amistad (1997) movie is directed by Steven Spielberg, he is undoubtedly one of the most influential film personalities in the history of film, Steven Spielberg is perhaps Hollywood's best known director and one of the wealthiest filmmakers in the world. Spielberg has countless big-grossing, critically acclaimed credits to his name, as producer, director and writer. He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1946. He went to California State

University Long Beach, but dropped out to pursue his entertainment career. He directed 127 movies such as Transformers (2011), Transformers: Dark of the Moon (2011), The Legend of Zorro (2005) and many others.

The film begins in the depths of the schooner *Amistad* at 1839, a slave-ship carrying captured West Africans into slavery. The film's protagonist, "Cinqué" (Spanish name) painstakingly picks a nail out of the ship's structure and uses it to pick the lock on his shackles. Freeing a number of his companions, Cinqué initiates a rebellion on board the storm-tossed vessel. In the ensuing fighting, several Africans and most of the ship's Spanish crew are killed, but Cinqué saves two of the ship's officers, Ruiz and Montez, who is believed can sail them back to Africa. After six weeks have passed, the ship is running out of food and fresh water. Unsure of their location, a group of African men takes one of the ship's boats to shore to fetch fresh water. They are captured by the American Navy, and taken to a Connecticut Jail.

In the House of Representatives introduces John Quincy Adams, the elderly former President and politician. While strolling in the gardens, Adams is introduced to two of the country's leading abolitionists, the elderly freed slave Theodore Joadson and Christian activist Lewis Tappan. The two have heard of the plight of the *Amistad* Africans and attempted to enlist Adams to help their cause. Adams, apparently verging on senility, refuses to help. He claims that he neither condemns nor condones slavery. News of the *Amistad* incident also reaches current President of the United States, Martin Van Buren , who is bombarded with demands for compensation from the juvenile Spanish Head of State, Queen Isabella II of Spain . At a preliminary hearing in a district court, the Africans are charged with "insurrection on the high seas", and the case rapidly dissolves into conflicting claims of property ownership from the Kingdom of Spain, the United States, the surviving officers of *La Amistad*, and the officers of the naval vessel responsible for re-capturing the slave-ship. Aware that they cannot fight the case on moral grounds, the two abolitionists enlist the help of a young attorney specializing in property law Roger Sherman Baldwin.

At the jail, Baldwin and the abolitionists, along with Josiah Willard Gibbs, Sr., a nervous Professor of Linguistics, attempt to talk to the Amistad Africans. Unable to communicate, they decide that their priority must be to find a way to communicate with the Africans. They eventually happen upon a black sailor in the Royal Navy, James Covey. At the Supreme Court, John Quincy Adams gives a long and passionate speech in defense of the Africans. He concludes by arguing that, if a verdict in his favor should hasten a civil war, the war will simply be the final battle of the American Revolution. His case made, the United States awaits the Supreme Court's ruling. On the Day of Judgment, Justice Joseph Story announces the Supreme Court's decision on the case. Believing that the Amistad Africans were illegally kidnapped from their homes in Africa, United States laws on slave ownership do not apply. The Supreme Court authorizes the release of the Africans and their conveyance back to Africa

This movie has good acceptance from many people, for example Jeff Derecki from New York, United States (December 10, 1998) in his reviewing "A film unfairly compared to box office winners that should have received far more recognition". The main point of his reviewing is many elements from this movie are the best, including cinematography, actors, story and also costumes. The second good acceptance is Emanuel Levy in EmanuelLevy.com at February 13, 2006. "Aiming to instruct and entertain, and often struggling to reconcile these goals, Amistad lacks the subtlety of tone and simplicity of form that made Schindler's List one of Spielberg's very best; here, however, every idea and image are too explicit".

Besides the good responses, Amistad also got some negative response. Edward Guthmann, San Francisco Chronicle, June 18, 2002, "an admirable but disappointing effort...[Spielberg] veers between stoic political correctness and mushy Hollywood platitudes". And James Kendrick, Q Network Film Desk, February 27, 2001, "Spielberg's considerable talent is not quite enough to unearth it".

It is written by David Franzoni and started by Djimon Hounsou, Matthew McConaughey and Anthony Hopkins. The languages in this movie are English, Mende and Spanish. The release date of this movie is 10 December 1997 in America. The setting of this film took place on several sites on location in United States of America, there are Boston, Massachusetts, Coast, San Pedro, Los Angeles, and many other place. The distributor of this movie is DreamWorks Distribution L.L.C. The movie runtime is 180 minutes and nominated for 4 Oscars, another 6 wins and 22 nominations. The Budget of this movie is \$36,000,000 (estimated), this movie has \$22,236,673 (USA) (1 January 1998) (726 Screens), the gross in opening weekend is \$44,229,441 (USA) (14 May 1998). The best rank of this movie is in the second weeks, it is in fourth rank in Box office.

Amistad is an interesting movie, there are five aspects that make this movie really interesting. The first is real story of African slaves in long time ago. They are kidnapped by their family or other people then they are sold in rich people to become slave. They think that slaves are like an animal, and they do anything to the slave. They don't give clothes, foods, and bad place. One day, there are many slaves thrown in the sea like a trash by crew of Amistad's ship.

The second is the character of Cinque. Djimon Hounsou as Cinque is an African's slave. He is a great man in his land (Africa) but when he is captured and becomes slave for European people, everyone looks him like an animal. Then he moved to Cuba with La Amistad ship. In the ship, he fights to get a freedom for himself and many other slaves. He is cooperation man, we can look when he has communication with Baldwin and how they communicate without speaking. In the district court, he shouts "give us, us free" powerfully.

The third aspect is setting of this movie. This movie set in many location such as Boston, Massachusetts, Coast, San Pedro, Los Angeles and many other place. The movie uses society in America in eighteen century as setting. This movie shows how the condition, tradition, and the way of people's habit at the time. So, the audience can know the life of society in America at eighteen century.

The fourth is Plot. The plots in this movie use traditional plot, it is including the Exposition, Complication, Climax, and Resolution. Every part has some entertaining points. Because of it, the audience becomes interested to follow the story until finish.

The last is the oppression against of the African's slave to get a freedom is one of appealing aspect to be studied. Steven Spielberg, the director, wants the audience to underline that the oppression the African's slave to get a freedom in the America that happened in 18s. In the eighteen century, the people think that human being can be sold and bought.

From the description of the background above, the problems formulated in this research is how the oppression against human trade to get a freedom in *Amistad (1997)* is viewed by Marxist perspective.

Based on the formulation of the problem above, the objectives of the research are:

1. To analyze the film based on its Structural Elements.
2. To analyze the film based on Marxist Perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to know the oppression against of the slavery to get a freedom in *Amistad* movie, the writer uses Marxist theory. This approach is appropriate because it is closely related to the differences class society that causes the oppression..

Marxism or scientific socialism is the name of ideas first worked out by Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895). Marxism is theory that is developed by Karl Marx to propagandize and criticize the social condition, such as political, economic, judicial, ethical aspects, even the social rule that deals with the lower class life. For Karl Marx, and those closest to his way of thinking, all those modes of thought, including literary creativity, are ideological and are products of social and economic existences. Basically Man's social being determines his consciousness and the material interests of the dominant social class determine how all classes perceive their existence. All forms of culture, therefore, do not exist in an ideal, abstract form but are inseparable from the historical

determining social conditions. They exist, in other words, as a superstructure to the basic economic structure of a society (Carter, 2006: 55).

Marxism is an ideology including the relations between economic, social, and political concept to get the freedom and peace in this world for everyone. The term of 'Marxism' itself formally becomes an ideology because of the simplicity process of Marx's concepts which is commonly difficult to catch the main point for the ideology of labor's struggle.

There are five major principles of Marxist. They are: Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism, Class Struggle, Alienation and Revolution. The first is Dialectical Materialism.

Dialectical Materialism explains the development of the world is dialectics. Dialectical materialism assumes certain dynamism and describes the development process from low step to higher step. The principle in dialectical materialism can change the social problem. Marx and Engels use it in the social development, they are sure that "materialism movement between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will go to the down of capitalism and resulted social development".

The Second is Historical Materialism. Historical Materialism is the application of Marxist science to historical development. The fundamental proposition of historical materialism can be summed up in a sentence: "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Marx, 1887: 13)

The third is Alienation. Alienation is the transformation of people's own labour into a power which rules them as if by a kind of natural or supra-human law. Alienation refers to a relationship between two or more people or parts of oneself in which one cut off from a stranger to the other people and the process whereby people become foreign to the world they are living in. Alienation is meant something more specific. In capitalism, he argues that individuals become cut off from - out of tune with - themselves, their families and friends, and their works. They are not and cannot be whole, fully developed human beings in a capitalist

society (Sargent, 1984:110). The main aspect of alienation is the separation of work or labour from the worker, and separation of the products of labour from the worker. Both end up being taken by employers and controlled by them, dominating the worker.

The next is Class struggle. Class struggle is a fundamental theory and as a central part of Marxism. It is a hypothesis used by Marx to explain a movement. Class struggle is the result of the contradiction between production method and productive relationship that happened through the classes in the society (Sargent, 1984: 86-87).

Class struggle is focuses on the struggle of the oppressed class against to the oppressor. One basic reason of it is economic. In capitalist society the bourgeoisie is connected with the proletariat. Lenin (1983:188) argues that “Bourgeois thoughts always considers the capitalist means of production as historically unchangeable, permanent and existing everywhere that men exist”.

The last is Revolution. Revolution is the violent and historically necessary transition from one system of production in a society to the next, as from feudalism to capitalism. Marx and Engels (1848:9) state that “A new revolution is possible only in the wake of crisis, however, just as certain as this crisis”. Revolution is the way to reach the equal prosperity in society and through this way the oppressed or proletariat can a change in order to get better condition. Revolution also ever occurred in Belgium and Switzerland were tragicomic caricaturist genre pictures in great historic tableau; the one the model state of the bourgeois monarchy, while the model states of the bourgeois republic. Both of them, states that falter to be just as free form the class struggle as form the European revolution. Revolution is the way for proletariat to sweep class stratification, stop the exploitation and to make a new society, which in Marxist called a class society.

Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery. It involves controlling a person through force, fraud, or coercion to exploit the victim for forced labor, sexual exploitation, or both. Human trafficking strips victims of their freedom and

violates our nation's promise that every person in the United States is guaranteed basic human rights. It is also a crime. (Hart, 2009: 4-5)

Human trafficking is an imprecise and highly contested term. There are multiple, sometimes oppositional, and shifting understandings of trafficking. As different 'claims makers' construct raw events into information, make empirical and moral claims, some forms of exploitation may become more obscure, be deemed less politically significant, or less morally offensive than others in the trafficking debate. Definitional struggles about human trafficking tend to be dominated by state officials and other powerful groups, generally with very little input from trafficked victims themselves. (Lee: 2011:16)

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The researcher uses the Marxist theory of literature to analyze social relation and stratification in Steven Spielberg's Amistad film script. To make it easier to apply Marxist theory in this study, the researcher takes these following steps:

1. Identifying the structural element of Amistad Film Script
2. Finding a special characteristic in the story, this is appropriate with social relation and stratification.
3. Determining the characters in the story into oppressor and oppressed based on their characteristic.
4. Searching the representation of dialectical materialism, historical materialism, class struggle and alienation in this script, which are strengthened by the historical data
5. Formulating all the obtained data in the story in a form of Marxist analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To analyze this movie consist of two analyze, there are Structural analyze and Marxist analyze.

A. Structural Analyze

The analysis of the movie consists of narrative elements and technical elements. The narrative elements include: character and characterization, setting, plot, style, and theme.

However, in relation to the movie, there are some differences with the written literary work, as movie in the form of moving picture, it is about technical elements. The technical elements consist of: mise-en-scene, cinematography, sound, duration, and editing.

1. Narrative element

a. Character and Characterization

1). Major character

- a). Cinque or Sengbe Pieh
- b). Roger Sherman Baldwin
- c). Theodore Joadson
- d). John Quincy Adams

2). Minor Character

- a). Lewis Tappan
- b). James Covey or Kai Nyagua
- c). Holabird
- d). President Van Buren
- e). John Forsyth
- f). John C. Calhoun
- g). Judge Cogle Northam

b. Setting

1). Setting of Time

This movie is based on a true story, which took place in 1839. President Martin Van Buren is in the leadership under 1837 until 1841, it shows the Martin Van Buren becoming the eighth president of United State.

The setting of this movie is between 1839 until 1864. It can be concluded that the setting of time is around the late of nineteenth century.

2). Setting of Place

- a). La Amistad Ship
- b). Connecticut Jail
- c). District Court
- d). New York Harbor
- e). Tecora Ship
- f). John Quincy Adam's House
- g). Court

c. Plot

- 1). Exposition
- 2). The Middle (Complication and Climax)
- 3). The End

d. Style

- 1). Grammatical Structure
- 2). Sentences Construction
- 3). Diction
- 4). Figurative Language

e. Theme

Theme can be defined as the main idea of the story. Kennedy stated that theme of a story is whatever general idea or insight the entire stories reveal the literary fiction (Kennedy, 1993:161).

The theme of Amistad is "Human trade must be abolished in human society".

2. Technical element

In making a film, the filmmakers need some elements which are very important in the process of production.

a. Mise – en – scene

- 1). Costume and Make-Up
- 2). Set Dressing and Properties
- 3). Lighting
 - a). Quality
 - b). Direction
 - c). Source
 - d). Color
- 4). Figure Expression and Movement

b. Cinematography

- 1). Photographical Qualities of Shot
- 2). The Framing of Shot
 - a). Camera Angle
 - b). Camera Distance
 - c). The Duration of Shot
- 3). Sound
- 4). Editing

B. Marxist Analyze

To analyze this movie, the writer employs Karl Marx's conception. Those are Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism, Class Struggle, and Revolution.

1. Dialectical Materialism

In dialectical materialism, the history of society consists of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Thesis is the first argument deals the problem, antithesis is oppression of thesis. Synthesis is the solution of the contradiction between thesis and antithesis. Dialectical Materialism is divided into two parts, the textual and contextual. First is textual part. The Amistad movie expresses the process of dialectical materialism. The struggle of Cinque and his friends get freedom to change their life and it can be seen by this process. Thesis comes when the condition in this time, human trade is legal. Antithesis of this movie, slavery is

illegal. It is represented by the argument of Roger Baldwin according the notebook from Amistad ship. Based on the explanation above, the researcher gets a synthesis of this movie, slavery is illegal, it must be abolished to give the freedom to everyone.

Second is contextual part. The society of reality in 1997 of America consists of racism, human traffics, and discrimination. Actually, it becomes the other thesis.

People who scored highest on test of social dominance orientation identified the sorts of elements as the biggest social problems that preserved their belief in maintenance of existing social hierarchies. Crime, for example, was identified by participants scoring high on social dominance orientation as the biggest social problem in America. The problem of crime was discussed along side issues of bad parenting, lack of respect for authority, and leniency of courts. This line of argumentation takes the focus away from social inequality issues like poverty, education, and racism that play a big role in rise of crime in the first place (Gamson, 1995). (<http://www.examiner.com/article/what-is-america-s-biggest-social-problem>).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates 2.4 million people were victims of human trafficking from 1995-2005. This estimate uses the UN Protocol definition of human trafficking, and includes both transnational and internal data. (<http://abolitionmedia.org/about-us/modern-slavery-statistics>)

To against the society condition of United State in 1997, antithesis happens when Steven Spielberg releases the Amistad movie. The struggle of slave gets back their freedom to get a better future in their life. The theme of this movie is human trade must be abolished in human society. This movie tells the story of slavery in America at eighteen century. Slavery brings an America to big war in the past time, the civil war.

The synthesis is the message in Amistad movie, Steven Spielberg wants to try to abolish the racism, discrimination, and slavery, especially in America. To get the purpose, everyone must be having the equality perspective. Equality is the

state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities. (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/equality>)

2. Historical Materialism

The definition of historical materialism can be reflected in the story of Amistad movie. It is reflected in the form of character and characterization, setting and style. The character is divided into two groups, they are the oppressor and the oppressed. The oppressor here is a people who try to keep the freedom of oppressed. They have power and authority to exploit the oppressed. While, the oppressed is under pressured, they struggle to get back their freedom, the oppressed here is divided into two groups, they are the lawyer and the client.

The conflict between the characters in Amistad movie expresses in historical materialism. Each people have the material purpose. The First is the oppressor, in this movie there are two oppressors, they are John Colhoun and President Martin Van Buren. They have different purpose to exploit the oppressed. John Colhoun exploits the oppressed to increase the economical of South. The purpose of President Martin Van Buren is to exploit the slaves to avoid the civil war in America. So he can follow the election again in the next.

The historical materialism happens when each of character perform their role. President Van Buren and his colleague are the oppressor, because they try to keep the freedom of Amistad slaves. They do it to avoid the civil war.

The second is the lawyer side or Baldwin. He takes this case not only the humanity but also to get the money and actually to increase his existence of lawyer world.

The last is the victim or client or Cinque side. He struggles to get the freedom and get a better future in his life. If he still becomes a slave, they never get the salary. So he has to struggle his aim to get a freeman status.

3. Class Struggle

The last is the victim or client or Cinque side. He struggles to get the freedom and get a better future in his life. If he still becomes a slave, they never get the salary. So he has to struggle his aim to get a freeman status. The second part is

in the Supreme Court, it is the high law institution of America. To help the Cinque and his friends, Baldwin sends a letter to John Quincy Adams to help them in Supreme Court.

4. Revolution

Revolution is the result of class struggle. It is the way to reach the equal prosperity in society and through this way the oppressed or proletariat can a change in order to get better condition.

Revolution of this movie occurs after the Supreme Court. The struggle of proletariat against the bourgeoisie and it becomes one step forward to reach the revolution. The decision of judges in Supreme Court changes the social condition.

Finally, Amistad African gets back their freedom and gets back to their home land. The other revolution is civil war, it happened in 1864, with the Confederation Army's defeat the Atlanta.

Revolution changes possibly to go to the classless society, so there is a new structure social class arrangement in society.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

After analyzing Steven Spielberg's Amistad in Element structure of this movie and using Marxist analysis, the writer comes to the following conclusions:

First based on the structural analysis, it shows that in this movie the director wants to deliver a message that human trade must be abolished in human society. The movie is as entertainment, Amistad has visual wonder. Janusz Kaminski sets the film in a dark, somber mood when appropriate, and a visual setting when, it is appropriate as well. At times, the movie is very slow, and very methodical. Spielberg's finest work in the movie, the opening scene, a scene of Cinque's family, and the brutal voyage of the slaves to America, is altogether stunning. It is emotional force that carries the movie. McConaughey is superb as the lawyer defending the Africans, Hopkins is sensational as the old Adams, Freeman is outstanding and the rest of the cast is stellar. The movie belongs to Hounsou. His emotional intensity is brilliant. Spielberg manages the movie to make even the slowest scenes sparkle with focus on Hounsou, and the movie's

extraordinary power is simply captivating. The movie is flawed, for the most of the supporting characters are merely cardboard. However, that doesn't matter. The story is a gripping one, and one of extreme importance. Spielberg finds it excellently, the right men for the job, and lets the audience to listen to the words of Cinque. Structural elements of the movie are interrelated together in building the story and they support each other.

Second based on the Marxist analysis, Amistad has a close relationship with the social reality of America society in the late twentieth century. In this movie, Steven Spielberg gives responds, opinions, and sympathies to the social condition at that time. The Amistad describes the struggle of the slave and government. The slave as the lower class makes the struggle for freedom in their life, which began by several conflicts to reach their goal. On the contrary, the government is as the high classes who have power, authority and control of the lower class. The bourgeoisie is a symbol of oppressor, and the proletariat is a symbol of oppressed, named slave. As the oppressed they want to change their condition into a better life. Spielberg expresses this phenomenon by classifying the characters into oppressor and oppressed. Steven Spielberg shows the purpose of the struggle from them. Steven Spielberg tries to give the secret message in this movie. According to the theme of this movie "Human trade must be abolished in human society", Steven Spielberg solves the conflict between slave and government with revolution. The government brings the case to the Supreme Court, it is one step closer to reach the freedom in their life. The other government disagrees with the slavery, he helps the slave to realize it in order to get the freedom in their life and abolish the slavery.

After analyzing Steven Spielberg's Amistad, The researcher realizes this research paper is far from being perfect because of the limitation of the researcher's knowledge and ability. Then, considering of the Amistad's complexity, and the problems given by director in this movie. It is an interesting story consisting of the quick action of the strike, demonstration, and debate. The method of analysis is Marxist perspective because the story of Amistad contains the major principles of

Marxism. Another way, this movie can be analyzed by using Individual Psychological approach, with issue interpersonal relationship between Cinque and Baldwin in Steven Spielberg's Amistad movie. The researcher hopes this research paper will be very useful to the reader and helpful to other researchers.

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