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RACISM, ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION AND THE ROLE OF FILM IN NIGERIA: AN ANALYSIS OF RICK FAMUYIWA'S OUR FAMILY WEDDING

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ABSTRACT

The Maelstrom of events confronting the human condition in the guise of Racism and Ethnic discrimination is one that has continued to pose clear and present danger to human existence. Indeed, veritable howbeit lone voices have continued to cry out for a reassessment, repositioning and re-direction of the human specie towards the course of Global peace and cohabitation. Film as one of such voices, presents as a veritable tool in the fight against social injustice occasioned by random and unbridled acts of racist and ethnic discrimination within and outside Nigeria. This paper finds that discussions in this area should be intensified more than ever before as global trends have continued to find new ways of muffling the voices of the large populace greatly affected by Race related crimes and recommends that well scripted and directed stories as presented through films possess great potential as far reaching agents in quelling some of these agitations. The paper recommends that films such as Rick Famuyiwa's Our Family Wedding should be given broader spectra to flourish and thus keep the discussion alive in the hope that our children will live in a better and safer world. The researcher employed the qualitative research method. This is further expressed though the analysis of texts, online journals, handbooks and films for proper and objective content review, analysis and appreciation.

Introduction

Racist related themes have continued to provide robust working material in the 'make believe' world from pre-mordial times through the colonial and post-colonial eras. From the revolutionary guerilla performances of Ronnie G. Davis, founder of the San Francisco mime Theatre troupe in 1962, whose productions portrayed a brazen affront against the government of the day's effort to stifle free speech, civil rights, freedom of the Arts and other such movements, to the Apartheid-driven stories of South Africa which replicated the very harsh conditions of the indigenous black people in their struggle against segregation. With the rising appeal of film and cinema in the 21st century, film makers have also not wavered in tapping into racist themes in a bid to throw light on this throbbing global issue. The use of film, thus as series of events and a set of moving images woven together and recorded by camera, comes to the fore as an important channel through which issues such as Racism and Ethnic discrimination are projected to the outside world.

Racism as a singular term has been given various definitions to suit general and particular assumptions. However, in its most liberal connotation, it would seem that a major trait of this term describes deliberate acts of bias from one group to subdue and achieve a sense of inferiority from smaller groups. It could also be referred to as the systemic acts of a racial group due to the idea that some groups are inherently inferior to others. Scholars have also dissected this term into forms and types for broader understanding. Nadra K. Nittle observes that

> Racial bias and discrimination come in a variety of forms. Racism for example may refer to internalized racism, reverse racism, subtle racism and more. Racial profiling targets certain groups based on the notion that some groups are more likely to commit crimes than others. Racial stereotypes are generalizations about members of racial groups prejudiced people often use to justify excluding minority groups from housing educational and employment opportunities (2).

The above assertion seems to give credence to the fact that racist and ethnic discrimination is an offshoot of societal institutions and human structures in a bid

to tilt the balance of equality for and against groups that have been perceived to be different and should be treated as such. On the history of the prejudice against people of colour for instance, Ronald E. Hall opines that

> For people of colour e.g. African, Asian, Latino and Native American descent in western countries, the most important attributes of their social system are the ideals which they internalize. Those ideals that reach the level of institutionalization become and affect standards of personal consequence. In conjunction, internalized ideals and societal institutions are the principal vehicles in the manifestation of racism in the 21st century. Racism caused by internalized ideals and social institutions can be essentially one and the same in the absence of equal distribution of power, which the people of colour do not have. (25)

It appears that there lies a thriving parasitic relationship between racial prejudice and racial stereotypes. Individuals who engage in acts of racial prejudice and bias feed off generalizations made about other groups or individuals and thus allows for these acts of racial stereotypes to lead into Institutionalized Racism.

Cultural Imperialism and the Film Medium

The dominance of one country or society over another in a bid to impress upon it, it's political, cultural, educational and socio-economic values is not a new phenomenon in global discussions. Indeed, as it relates to the theory of cultural imperialism and as Okhakhu and Ate put it, "The aim and conduct of most western nations' business with those of the third world is predicated on this kind of relationship" (12). The role thus, of the media in the scheme of things especially as it concerns throbbing global issues cannot be over emphasized. Some scholars have even proposed that the Cultural Imperialist Theory is actually a Media Imperialist Theory due to the efficacy and indeed the unique quality which the media possesses in galvanizing social awareness and responses on given issues as they affect the society. Marcel Okhakhu and Ate Asan Andrew further assert that

> Cultural imperialism is no doubt given accentuation by the media. Manufactured and pressured values are often disseminated through the

> media and given their ability to arrest attention, efficacy is usually high (13).

The media through its various genres and outlets has continued to play a pivotal role in societal perception and behaviour. Indeed, with each breakthrough in technological advancement, product presentation and advertisement appeal, the average individual appears to lose more confidence in his own opinions and decisions and inadvertently trusts the media on a wide range of issues especially as it concerns his cultural, societal and even religious beliefs. As the theory of Media Imperialism advocates, this show of dominance by one country or society over another may be presented through a systemic and deliberate attempt to infuse not just concepts or products of that country but to also infuse along with them, the cultural history behind these products in the societies they supposedly have advantage over.

The Media thus presents as a readily available option for consumers who yearn to keep up with new ways of doing things. We learn how people in other parts of the world speak, dress, eat, marry and even worship because of the window created for us by media outlets. In Africa, the notion is not different. The role of the media in accelerating change in lifestyle especially among the youth is quite unprecedented. Babafemi Jacobs avers that:

> The role of the media in changing the lifestyle of Africans from their ethnic lifestyle to a western lifestyle cannot be over emphasized. Many Africans due to their access and exposure to a growing number of media and technological equipments have gradually changed from a pure African culture to that of a mixed culture that leans towards the western culture (25).

Film Language and the Question of Social Redirection

The film media possesses unique qualities in the vanguard against anti-social vices such as Racism and Ethnic discrimination. As a re-enactment of possible true life situations and events; artistically woven from story to script, embodied by characters and seen through the lens of a camera, each frame consciously or unconsciously is geared towards creating the needed impulse, appealing to the human sensibility and probably changing hitherto held perceptions.

One of the distinct features of the film medium is that of language or style. Language in this context describes the style of writing, the use of certain registers and the overhanging mood which the filmmaker engages in driving home certain aspects of his own take or view on an issue or a range of issues and consequently getting the desired response from his audience. Thomas Caldwell opines that:

> Understanding a film's style is an essential part of film analysis. As cinema is a visual art form, we must be able to understand why filmmakers choose to have their films look a particular way. Just as a writer or a poet uses certain words or styles of writing to move us emotionally or challenge us to think in a specific way, filmmakers use visual elements to evoke ideas or to elicit an emotional response from the audience (7).

A film's language or style is a powerful tool in filmmaking as it lends certain level of credence to the genre-choice adapted by the film Director. It is quite unlikely therefore that a fast paced Science-fiction film project would have the same language as a Romantic comedy or Drama; the psychological attachment as well as the viewing involvement required from the target audience would probably be different. It further implies that there must also be a well laid attempt to understand the political, social and in some cases, the religious makeup of the intended audience. The Director must skillfully fuse in the Thematic, Artistic and Technological aspects of the film project in order to truly engage his audience on the discourse of the moment. Aniukwuet'al, viewing this more as a professional imperative, state that

> A good movie should be able to leave an indelible mark in one's memory and this can only be achieved or made possible with different artistic embellishment inherent in the movie. Professionals must put all the aspects of movie productions into cognizance (171).

RiekFamuyiwa's Our Family Wedding.

The film is a Comedy drama that tells of two young people who fall in love and hope to get married. However, the fear of what their parents would think of this union because of their different racial persuasions, keep them on edge for the better part of the film. Marcus, a young

African-American Medical graduate falls in love with Lucia, a Mexican American teaching assistant. They think the world of each other but are downcast at the possibility of their parent's disapproval of the inter-racial union.

Brad and Miguel, Marcus' and Lucia's fathers expectedly display utter disapproval for the union, each trying to sway their children off the idea of a possible marriage. However, after a roller coaster ride of family feuds, religious debates and episodes of self-reflection, love conquers all and both families unite and give their support to what eventually becomes a super wedding.

Rick Famuyiwa extensively explores the issue of racial discrimination in his film. He makes an attempt to blend the comic genre into the very serious theme of Racism quite successfully. As an African American himself from Nigerian descent, Famuyiwa tells the story of how Race still plays a part in human co-existence of the 21st century. He does this through a good understanding of generalized perceptions of racial groups and their application in modern relationships. He also makes use of underlining meanings in the choice of the dialogue of his characters to drive home salient points. For example, having been introduced to his would-be son-in-law, Miguel strives unsuccessfully to subdue his displeasure. While excusing himself to go to the restroom. He cynically says

"I would be right black!" instead of "I would be right back!".

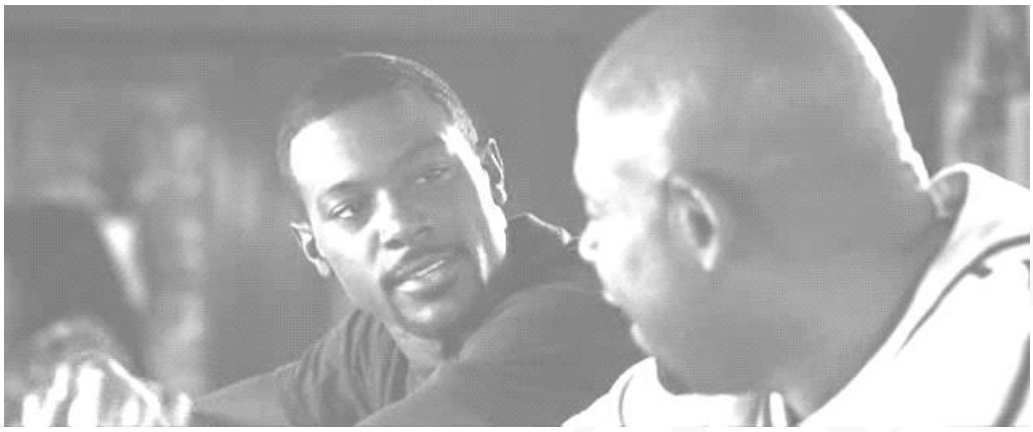
On the other side of the divide, while having a father and son moment, the following dialogue ensues between Brad and Marcus.

Brad: You don't really know what she is like. You saw her dad. You saw her family!

Marcus: Are you just troubled because she is not black?

Brad: All am saying is that you don't know the deal until you say I do. And that ring on your finger, that's about the realness. I want to make sure you're doing it at the right time and not rushing things.

Marcus: love can't tell time. I gotta go.

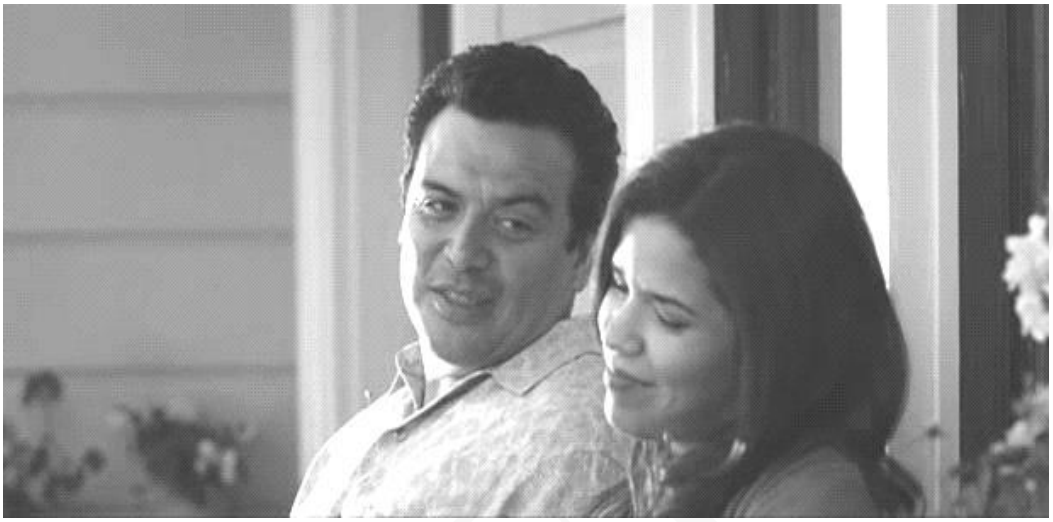


Famuyiwa also explores the theme of human frailty through the characters of his film. He does this by a systemic infusion of episodes of weakness and insecurity as exhibited even by the seemingly strongest and most upright of individuals in the film. The character of Marcus' dad, Brad is brought to question a lot of times. As a habitual womanizer and divorcee, Brad single handedly raises Marcus but lacks the moral grounds to mentor his son as it concerns relationship with women. Miguel on the other hand exhibits high level of detachment from intimate family life; always focused on his job and this saddens his wife, Sonia.

With this artistic approach, Famuyiwa addresses the issue of racial superiority or dominance. In his view every race has their flaws and weaknesses and should not discriminate other groups based on generalized perceptions of colour, religion and so on. Famuyiwa tries to weave these issues within almost every dialogue in the film. In a father and daughter discussion between Miguel and Lucia, the following ensues:

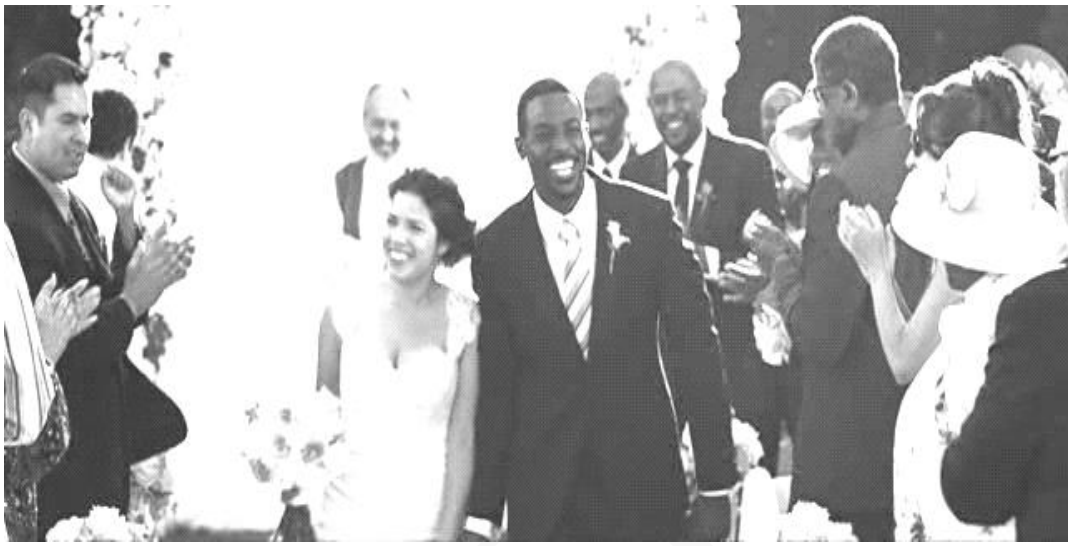
Miguel: You know when you were a little girl, I would rock you to sleep, I would dream about the day you would get married. What it would be like, what he would be like. This is not just how I dreamt it would be.

Lucia: Well it's not your dream anymore dad. It's mine and when I look at Marcus, I don't see brown or black or white, isn't that how you raised me?



As the film progresses, we observe that marriages. Lucia and Marcus almost the pressure being mounted by both succumb to the pressure as seen in the families begin to take hold on the couple. film and this leads to a temporary Famuyiwa thus, explores how loyalty to suspension of the wedding plans. family as well as our traditional and However true love proves too strong and cultural bonds could play a crucial role in eventually conquers all.
interracial relationships and even





True love conquers all

Conclusion

Film is a veritable tool and has the potential of evoking social responses on issues that affect mankind. It's unique quality perhaps lies in not just the medium and consequent far reach but also in its ability to simulate a present sense of reality and thus evoke needed responses on throbbing issues. Racism and Discrimination falls under a category that is in dire need of global attention and action. The film art must thus come into play to forestall a possible breakdown of global order and disdain for the respect of the dignity of mankind. Many may argue that Racism in its true form may not be particularly traced to African climes such as Nigeria. It is however deducible that such behavioral pattern is very capable of inducing social unrest and even promoting National instability. Sunny Ikhioya asserts that

> Racism and Ethnicism serve the same purpose; that of bias in favour of their kind. The only difference is that racism is more associated with colour i.e. white, black and so on; ethnicism deals with ethnic and cultural roots. Ideally one would not be writing about racism in Nigeria but a personal experience a few years back in Port Harcourt makes this imperative (1).

The researcher thus recommends that more attention should be given to this area as the trend of world politics appears to be heavily bedeviled with racist issues. Filmmakers must make their voices heard through cinematic depictions that should evoke reactions and keep the discussions alive. There is also need for proper analysis of thematic content as this would ensure accuracy of story material as well as promote believability and awaken the need for communal action. Professionalism should be at its peak especially in the exploration of films with racist themes. Technical and Artistic elements must be brought together through convincing acting and directing to qualitative post filming embellishments to ensure that the filmmaker's work stands the test of time.

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