

Mikelle Antoine**“No Condition is Permanent:” Nigerian Depiction of Hope for the Oppressed, Reconciliation and the Renaissance in the film *2 Rats***

Nigerian movies are noted for their fervent emphasis on hope, reconciliation and change. These themes are continuously present and run throughout their movies. Such emphases help keep the films number one on the African market and in constant demand. From the super Christian focus to more secular topics, Nigerian films unite in their expressions of hope and articulation of a better tomorrow. In many of the films, the victimized is eventually vindicated and the oppressor reaps what he sowed. Such themes go beyond Nigeria's borders and are understood in a wider universal, but particularly African context. The movies transcend the local and in the process echo a general African need for reconciliation and a better future. This symbolic model resonates to the larger trials and tribulations of the African people and the needs of humanity as a whole. By doing this, the movies both entertain and educate. The lesson is that “no condition is permanent.” This sends hope while at the same time teaching valuable lessons about the human condition. Indeed, the prominent idea is that Africa/Africans are in a temporary condition that will only change when Africans force change and when those who have wronged Africa/Africans are exposed and forced to speak their evils and ask for reconciliation. This emphasis on change and self-assurance is equally important because they show that Africa's present situation is not static and speak to the need of a revitalized African self-esteem or renaissance. Moreover, the lessons continue to be that people in general can overcome their obstacles by having faith and that even the “smallest rats” can bring down the biggest of all giants. This paper will theorize notions of hope and reconciliation as they are expressed in the Nigerian film, *2 Rats*. This article argues that the Nigerian films are all the more important during this period in African history because they express a profound need for change. Secondly, these films echo what is very much a general universal phenomenon, the oppression of the weak and their eventual overthrow of the yoke of violence, cruelty and dehumanization. This theme reaches peoples from all over the world; fastened to the belief that good eventually overcomes bad, and that God is after all there.

Unlike American movies, Nigerian movies are not always easy to understand, particularly if the (foreign) viewer concentrates on what is foreign to his/her own culture or what can be termed “Hollywood effects,” expressing the bizarre, the unknown and the unseen in a visual manner that escapes most viewers to the producer's manipulation of societal fears. This superficial viewing may lead the viewer down the wrong path and indeed may result in the perpetuation of stereotypes and myths about Africans, particularly women. The

viewer is given many messages at once that unless intuitive, may lose the story's major theme and plot. Furthermore, Nigerian movies express (local/African) stereotypes which can misguide the viewer about the movies' theme and contribution. It is these stereotypes which make the movies all the more difficult to understand, as the viewer may tend to pay more attention to the superficial, rather than the concrete morals and critiques that the movie is putting across. These particular complexes make it imperative to watch some of the films at least twice, before getting a complete picture of their contribution and worth to the human condition. This particular film under review was watched four times.

Contrary to the popular belief that endings are influenced by our search for happy conclusions to make us feel better about our unfulfilled lives, this emphasis in Nigerian films is much more complex than wanting to please the viewer. Unlike American movies that tend to stress sex and violence, (which can be argued is not representative of the general populace), the hope entrenched in the Nigerian films represent a willingness to believe in a better tomorrow by the general public. There is that belief that change will come and come for the better. This emphasis on hope is partly due to the socio-economic conditions of the country and the cultural values upheld in the society where the films are produced. Hope is the weapon of the oppressed, the wronged and generally to the citizens of a country whose wealth is still not properly and equally reallocated. What makes these movies number one on the African market, particularly in English speaking countries, is the fact that the messages and the lessons are universal.

The African renaissance in these films is not necessarily evidenced by the expressions of this hope or the wealth or materialism such as the huge mansions, the elaborate homes and the cars that many people in the wealthiest nations may never own. In these films, the African renaissance manifests itself in the idea that the individual can bring change to his/her condition. This notion that "no condition is permanent" is key to our understanding of this renaissance. The argument is made over and over again that a better tomorrow, a better future will only come from having self-consciousness and a willingness to force change. The use of the term African renaissance and its manifestations in hope does not mean that the continent and its people never had hope. Quite the contrary, what these films do is to accentuate that hope and how if they are acted upon, the impossible can be overcome. Indeed, one can argue it is because of hope in a better tomorrow that blatant political colonization was brought to an end.

In no other movie are these concepts prominent than in the 2003 smash hit, *2 Rats* starring Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita Ireme. One of the reasons why these actors have become the latest craze in Nigerian movies is because they

physically represent an under privileged group of people in society. Their physical appearance characterizes them as victimized individuals. Outside of character, the “boys” are actually young men, but they are all the more able to play such roles because their physical appearance connotes the difficulties small people experience in the society. Their height further allows the audience to sympathize with their condition. However, it is their ability to act beyond the limits of their height, to do the unthinkable, that gains them respect from the audience, who find hope in their roles. For these reasons they became the epitome of the underdog in Nigerian movies as they battle prejudice, injustice and greed.

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss this movie as another attempt to misrepresent Nigerians as juju eager, jealous, and quick tempered. However, this movie is not about that. Similar to the other movies, the movie is about just the opposite, how people persevere, despite the superficial and superhuman odds. These movies are basically chronicling how people in Africa and elsewhere already live their lives and how they are already overcoming in the face of all sorts of challenges. In many of these movies women are unjustly portrayed and in the process men are also misrepresented as simple and “mummu” when it comes to their dealing with those of the female sex, young and old. Men are often categorized as abusers (physically and emotionally) and puppet-like; that is they respond to sex and food. Women are many times either victims or malicious agents of evil, however, there are other movies that explore the complexities of human nature and go beyond the superficial stereotypes.

The difference between American and Nigerian movies is that American movies have a tendency to operate as “opium” for their viewers. They are mostly “feel good” movies, but divided along two different genres. The first sector includes those movies that represent a rosy/glossy life that the viewer takes as a possible reality. These films echo romance/finding the perfect mate and others of that nature. The individuals leave the movies hoping to achieve such aims which are fabricated by movie producers and have no connection with reality. The second sector are movies that showcase a fascination with aliens, the new and different; movies that celebrate the greatness of America/white people, its customs and traditions under threat from an alien race coming to destroy that freedom. Hardly are American films used to criticize American culture and society. Nigerian films on the contrary, advocate for societal change. They focus on practices which they deem unsuitable for the national good and in the process articulate what the people’s needs are in the present for a better future.

The movie begins by showing how the two young boys come to fall on misery. Initially, they were living well with their parents and enjoying a good life style in the city. However, due to a misunderstanding between their father and

their uncle, the father ends up dead at the hands of his own brother, the boys' uncle. Upon the death of his brother, the uncle accuses the boys' mother of murdering her husband. To steer the blame and suspicion from him, he makes the argument that the brother's wealth and children should come to him until the wife proves she did not murder his brother, her husband. As per custom in this particular area, the boys' mother is sent back to her village where she will stay for a year. If the end of the year finds her alive, she would have been vindicated. The boys' uncle at this time is at pains to do all possible to make sure that the end of the year does not find them in Nigeria.

Apprehensive about what other family members may think about his role in the murder, the uncle is adamant that the children stay with him in his brother's house in the city. He promises to raise them as his own and take up the brother's role by caring and providing for the boys. However, this was a ploy to get at the brother's wealth and house. When in the city, the boys are mistreated and turned into houseboys. They are not sent to school and not properly cared for. They are abused by their uncle, auntie and their two twin girls, who are empowered to make their cousins' feel like their servants. Things turned from bad to worse when they were told to wash their female cousins' under wears. In many societies, this is considered the ultimate disrespect of the boys' maleness and social status. This act made it obvious that the boys had indeed been demoted to houseboys. Things turned even worse as the boys are forced to sell ice water as a way to compensate the family for their upkeep, such as food and living space. Although the auntie is adamant that they sell the ice water, the boys are not fed and schemed to use the ice water money to feed themselves and change their conditions and that of their oppressors.

In a symbolic reflective moment which reveals the boys' heightened consciousness and their awareness of their conditions, Aboy (played by Osita Iheme) question "is this how we will suffer every day and at the end of the day go and hand them over the money?" This question is important because the boys realize that they are being economically exploited, without any form of compensation. Aboy continues and ask "is God not at work or has He gone to sleep?" This line is one of the most profound ones in the movie; where is God in the midst of all of these injustices? Indeed, God could not possibly be seeing this or changes would have come already. However, the immediate line following it was "this is called suffering and smiling." This realization that they are being wronged and abused in such an absurd manner forces them to take action to save themselves and eventually their mother. The situation is absurd because the uncle is living well off the wealth of their father, and yet is determined to continue exploiting them. The line is all the more significant because it highlights the fact that the boys are empowered by realizing that they are partly

to blame for letting this exploitation go on uncontested. Their convictions are strengthened when they realize that they can their condition.

The boys embarked on ways to change their situation when they realized that they could no longer tolerate the abuses, but only after the family proved over and over again that they were not the least bit willing to accommodate them or meet them half way. Even as houseboys, cleaning, washing and selling ice water, they did their best to show that they were willing participants, hoping that the family would one day change their minds and treat them as members. They were willing to do chores, as normal, but as long as they were treated equally and fairly. It is when the family proved to be their enemies over and over again that the boys embarked on ways to change their condition.

They were empowered by the fact that they knew that once they had “shown those people [their] true colors” that they could indeed change their situation. They were empowered by the common fact that God helps those who help themselves. It is interesting to note that the boys had the chance to explain the entire situation and their condition to a cousin and later an uncle; however, they chose not to fully bring in other family members into their situation but tackled it on their own. As they stated, they were “smiling and suffering” and once they said ‘no more’ to the suffering, it would end, and indeed it did.

The boys embarked on a strategic plan to divide and conquer to create suspicion among the family. Their first target was their twin cousins. To get the girls into trouble with their parents, the boys exposed the girls’ activities with boys around the town. They accentuated certain actualities, impressing on their parents that the girls were “exposed” and “knew” boys. The fact that they had boys coming to look for them meant that they were now “feeling funky” and were exposed to one of the “evils” of city life. The boys used such stories, allowing the parents to see another side of their daughters, and at least temporarily get some satisfaction out of their condition. If only temporarily, they were able to feel empowered by their efforts, but eventually, they would come out on top, as the ones who not only changed their conditions, but that of their oppressors as well.

Their next target was the auntie. Similar to many women in Nigerian movies, she is portrayed as materialistic, envious, and selfish. She is the one who manipulates her husband’s mind to kill his brother. She is the one who announces that the boys are not welcome in the house and should be treated as house boys. She decided that they should sell ice water. She is the one who decides that their clothes brought for them by an uncle from the village should be sold and eventually burnt by her daughters. And finally she reminds the husband that he must “do something” about the boys’ mother in the village. That is, he must try to kill her or they will in turn be blamed for the murder of his

brother, the boys' father. But above all the auntie is portrayed money hungry and the boys' use this fact to bring her downfall.

The boys realized that one of the ways to vindicate against the auntie was through money. Instead of bringing the profits from selling the ice water, the boys created all sorts of stories to explain why they had no money to bring to her. They first were allegedly held up "at gun point" by armed robbers, then they were imprisoned and had to pay for their release and a hawkers' permit "which would come in two months time." They were successful at driving the auntie temporarily crazy, even in denying her the few Nairas from the ice water endeavor. She proclaimed, "they are trying to drive me crazy like their mother," and it worked. The viewer is forced to ask, why is she over reacting over such a small amount of money, if not to represent the materialistic nature of women?

The most interesting technique used by the boys to get back at their auntie was through their uncle. The boys cooked up a phony letter from the auntie's made-up boyfriend promising to marry her once her husband dies. In addition, he asks her to sneak out as she usually did to see him and bring her husband's money for him to enjoy. This sent the uncle to shock and eventually went to confront the wife's lover. As the boys were the ones who allegedly received the letter, they lead the uncle to the lover's supposed home. After a big thrashing from the alleged lover, also known as the "area fada" who took a liking to the boys and gave them advice, he returns to reclaim his manhood on his wife. The "area fada" actually schemed with the boys to get an opportunity to vindicate them against their uncle. He knew of how the boys' were mistreated and that they were not sent to school. One of the ways this ally helped the boys' was through his physical might. The uncle returns home to show the wife how much she 'costs,' by displaying how he was beaten by her alleged lover and beats her in return; his manhood resuscitated. During this brief period, the boys are momentarily vindicated by the uncle's thrashing and his consequent revenge on his wife.

To get at the entire family, the boys, hearing that the family had planned a trip to the United States with \$50,000 of their father's money, planned not only to take that money but to start a new life with their mother. On a telephone conversation, the uncle is not afraid to speak out the entire details while the boys listened on by pretending to be cleaning the living room. He does this because he took the boys' intelligence and courage for granted. Indeed, starting over is very important in these movies. Not only are the boys positive that they will be able to start over, they also realized that this money can save their situation. In this case, the money has vindicated their lost and allows them to begin anew. What makes this money all the more important is that capturing it and returning to the village for their mother also proves that she did not murder her husband and that the brother had in fact did.

How can such small boys overcome such big obstacles? This is the beauty of the movie. It could have been easy to keep the boys as oppressed and victims, but that is not the nature of the human spirit. The human spirit is always pushing for improvement to better their condition. The fact is these movies seek not necessarily happy endings, but to portray a real depiction of how people respond to their various situations. People do not simply remain victims, as they do not simply overcome them. Reality is a combination of both, of struggle, failed attempts but determination. The boys also represent the average person, confronted with the worse possible situations that seem too big to handle, but yet are overcome by trusting themselves, having confidence and knowing that they are on the side of justice and that God is always there.

Put within a historical perspective, the death of the boys' father symbolized the slave trade. He epitomized the able body capable of protecting and providing for his family. His death resulted in putting the family in a very dangerous and vulnerable position. Similar to the slave trade, the death of the boys' father signals the beginning of their downfall. His absence results in the boys being taken as houseboys to serve someone who did not represent their interests. Their conditions as houseboys in their father's own home mirrors Africa's colonization. They are left alone in the hands of an uncle who was envious of the brother's wealth and only interested in exploiting their situation. And finally, similar to the African independence movements, the boys are able to free themselves by their own actions. However, unlike that of the African independence movements, the boys are architects of change that actually revolutionizes their condition and that of their oppressors. Thus a real revolution takes place in this case, proving that "no condition is [indeed ever] permanent."