



Christian Film as Veritable Instrument for Morality Building in Africa: A Focus on *Knocking on Heaven's Door* by Desmond Eliot

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Abstract. Christian films are usually showcased to educate the society on the need for good conduct and morality which enhances a better way of life and Godly living. Morality is a good conduct out-lived by individuals in any community and society for purposes of good neighbourliness. Obviously, morality is what every society especially Africans crave for as any act tantamount to this is seen as a taboo and affront on the lay down laws that governs the land, hence some retributive measures will be allotted to offenders. In the spirit of the research, focus is placed on the meaning of film, morality as a concept in Africa, biblical and Christian morality in Africa and a textual analysis of moral issues in Desmond Eliot's *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (2014). This research made use of analytical method and the utilization of books, journals and internet sources. This research recommends amongst others that streaming Christian movies/films should be encouraged in every family as it is a very fast way of teaching morality in our African society.

Keywords: Christian, Film, Morality, Building, Africa

1. Introduction

Since the late 19th century when scholars discovered the powers of film in replicating human activities in society, it has become one of the most sought forms of art used in making critical commentaries on social issues. It is in substantiation of the fact that films do not appear in a vacuum but are reflections of social realities around it that (Nwafor and Edum 2013, 118) posit that "...the Nigerian film industry is a creation of the people's communal, fiscal, political and cultural experiences"

In view of the above, much insights have been drawn about various aspects of the human society through the inestimable powers of the film medium. According to (Iloima 2023, 109), the story of neglect,

impoverishment and general underdevelopment of the Niger Delta people as major causes of the oil crisis in the area. He reveals how the film: *Black November* by Jeta Amata revolves around violent resistance to environmental pollution, degradation and exploitation arising from crude oil exploration and the agitation for improved living condition of host communities in the hands of government and multinational oil companies that operate in their land. It showcases that the insecurity within the region later escalated from focusing on just agitations to different forms of criminality and hostilities against common citizens in the region. Suffice to state it that the film narrative above is a replica of the true-life situation in the area.

The question is, is it morally right to oppress and marginalize the poor, weak and helpless by the strong dues to their precarious situations? Morality encourages one to embrace social justice in any situation. This research is anchored on Christian morality drawn from a Christian film: *knocking on Heaven's Door* (2014) by Desmond Eliot which teaches good morals in our society and gives positive wisdom to handle difficult situation for the benefit of all without hurt. Although, film expresses unlimited number of issues in society, this study focuses on its immeasurable roles in morality building in Africa. It is predicated on the rise of immorality in African society and the need to put it on check.

1.1 Film and its Meaning

Film, or cinema, basically means moving images – images of time, space, sound and story, which has enjoyed tremendous popularity ever since its first appearance in Europe and America in the last part of nineteenth century. The film industry has grown rapidly due to people's interest in making and especially, watching films. Although most people watch films for entertainment, many become more interested in discussing what makes a film good or bad. Some film producers will probably not be

satisfied by watching how the story goes, but they might be disturbed by what ideas underlying the story and why the story goes in certain way. It is for the purpose of analyzing films critically –both its forms and context- that film studies emerged, (Nia 2024, 1). A movie is one of the visual aids that can be used in a writing class. It makes lessons more fun and can also be used to create situation for writing in classes more clearly, that the students have big enthusiasm in teaching learning process. Bordwell and Thompson (cited in Retno Ayu 2024, 21-22) defined the types of movie of film as follows. 1. Documentary Film: A documentary film supports to present factual information about the world outside the film. As a type of film, documentary present themselves as factually trustworthy. According to Bardwell and Thompson there are two types of documentary films, they are: a). Compilation films; produced by assembling images from archival sources. b). Direct cinema; recording an ongoing event, as it happens with minimal interference by the filmmaker 2. Fictional Film: A fictional film presents imaginary beings, places or events. Yet, if a film is fictional, that does not mean that it is completely unrelated in actuality. For one thing, not everything shown or implied by the fiction films needs to be imaginary, a typical fictional film stages its events; they are designed, planned, rehearsed, filmed and re-filmed. In a fictional film the agents are portrayed or depicted by an intermediate, not photographed directly in documentary. 3. Animated Film: Animated films are distinguished from live-action ones by the unusual kinds of work that are done at production stage. Animation films do not do continuously filming outdoor action in the real time, but they create a series of images by shooting one frame at a time.

The study of film is a way of understanding more strongly about a movie or even its directors or producers. Some schools and colleges are teaching them at the start of the modern century, at the era of the motion picture. The technical quality of the film may seem confusing, film studies exist to help clear the confusion and helps us understand the art of the film. The modernization of film at the end of the nineteenth century gave birth to a whole array of film producers and directors and the educational abstract generations followed after that. Earlier schools of film concentrated on the production and theoretical evaluation of the cinema instead of skillful quality, systematic narrative of past events and the principles of explanation and prediction used in schools of higher learning, Ronmie 2020, 1)

According to (Tickton 1970, 218) “film is a motion pictures taken in rapid succession usually 8 mm or 16

mm film stock which when projected through a motion picture, projector gives the viewer an illusion of motion”.

1.2 Morality as a Concept in Africa

Morality has to do with some sort of standard that can guide human action. In Africa, we can understand morality simply as synthesis of social values, norms, mores, and their authenticity in community from which they arise. African ethics is the conceptualization, appropriation, contextualization and analysis of African values within the African cultural experience, Aden and Olira 2017, 58). African traditional morality is “quintessentially social”, (Wiredu 1998, 33). The moral beliefs and principles of the African people are derived from their religion and that religion provides the necessary justification for moral values and beliefs. Moral concepts, such as good, bad, right and wrong, are defined in terms of religious prescriptions or commands, (Kikongo 2002, 77).

The present situation contrasts sharply with the previous as elderly people lament daily that they are meeting behaviour that shocks them: sexual immorality, dishonesty, corruption, crime, violence and many other things which hasten the old to their graves. Middle-aged people lament about how children fail to imbibe good moral behaviors in Africa. The youth complain of a lack of example from the older members due to lifestyle that are inimical to the ideals in the society, (Mugambi 1992, 44). Morality deals with the right and wrong of human behaviour and conduct. That is the question of what constitutes the right or wrong, good or bad in a person’s action? What theories are right or wrong in evaluating human action? This establishes the relationship between ethics and epistemology, (Thiroux 1998, 55). African morality would, therefore, refer to African ethics as the salient features or ideas of the African moral life and thought generally as reflected in, or generated by, African moral language and social structure and life, Kanu 2018, 6).

2. Biblical and Christian Morality in Africa

Morality can be seen as the rightness or wrongness of something as judged by accepted moral standards. The ultimate standard of morality is God. Good philosophical principles are all realisations of the dignity that God has reposed in man as His image. The Decalogue says in Exodus 20:13 that we should not kill, (Sibani and Haruna 2021, 71).

The norm that transcends humanity is God's commandment of love: "Love your neighbour as yourself". However, (Nthamburi 1992, 112-113) agrees: "The basic principle of Christian moral life is love to the neighbour ... Love takes the first place among all other values." In the words of (Eitel 1986, 98-99), "Love ... is one of the most powerful motivators in Christian living. It serves as the major, controlling factor in the moral life of a disciple. God's love for man draws out man's love for God which, in turn, spawns love for others".

In the study of the similarities between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, in terms of documents, scholars have observed the presence of eight of the 42 negative confessions of ancient Egypt in the Ten Commandments of Moses, and they were believed to be included in the Ten Commandments by Moses who was born in Egypt, (Kwame 2009, 9). These 42 negative confessions, a daily way of life and being in Africa, were discovered and they include:

1. I have not done iniquity. 2. I have not robbed with violence. 3. I have not stolen. 4. I have done no murder, I have done no harm. 5. I have not defrauded offerings. 6. I have not diminished obligations. 7. I have not plundered the Netcher. 8. I have not spoken lies. 9. I have not snatched away food. 10. I have not caused pain. 11. I have not committed fornication. 12. I have not caused shedding of tears. 13. I have not dealt deceitfully. 14. I have not transgressed. 15. I have not acted guilefully. 16. I have not laid wasted the ploughed land. 17. I have not been an eavesdropper. 18. I have not set my lips in motion (against any man). 19. I have not been angry and wrathful except for a just cause. 20. I have not defiled the wife of any man. 21. I have not defiled the wife of any man. (repeated twice) 22. I have not polluted myself. 23. I have not caused terror. 24. I have not transgressed. (repeated twice) 25. I have not burned with rage, (Obiefuna 2020, 178-179).

African morality is characterized by three main features: 1. Prohibitions, which include general prescriptions, such as (i) Do not take the life of a member of the community; (ii) Do not steal, especially yams, the staple food of the people; (iii) Do not commit incest; (iv) Do not defraud strangers. The Ten Commandments and basic scriptural teachings of the Christian scripture relates with the already existing African traditional morality. Beyond the conventional pattern of argument which tries to show that Africa also has what others have, it indicates that the seed of the Christian faith was already in Africans long before the advent of Christianity; and in fact, Christian morality is African morality.

3. A Textual Analysis of Moral Issues in Desmond Eliot's *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (2014)

Desmond Eliot's (*Knocking on Heaven's gate* 2014) tells the story of Debby (Adesua Etomi Olubankole), a woman with good character disposition, a paragon of virtue, justice and responsibility who suffers all forms of abusive and violent attacks in her marriage. Her husband, Moses (Blossom Chukwuejekwu), a very jealous, impatient, irrational and grossly temperamental character would always debase and brutalize her to life threatening points over trivial issues. Debby is well-known and endeared to many around the country for her excellence in musical exploits. Her songs are extremely captivating and are all based on Christian themes. Debby's choice to serve God with dexterity in all her life was borne out of the desires of a helpless wife in desperate search for divine intervention into her failing home. She desires a change in her husband's attitude towards her, she desires the sanctity and dignity of her human essence to be respected and valued by her unrepentant, toxic and abusive husband. At last, when Debby discovers that the change she is seeking for in her husband could not be found and that the violence against her had been worsened, she fears that she might lose her life one day while struggling in vain to manage an unmanageable violent marriage, thus, she yields to accepting new relationship from Thomas where she finds real love.

3.1 Refusing to Retaliate: A Moral Lesson:

As the film opens, Debby is shown leading out in a powerful and highly spirited Christian song in the church. This song which extols the power in the name of Jesus to "break every chain" and yoke reveals the depth of Debby's broken heartedness in her depressed situation and her unwavering hope in God's intervention. Debby, a victim of domestic violence in the hands of her husband, Moses finds deep expression in her praises to God. The songs she sing are expressions of her deepest thoughts, prayers and expectations. The intercutting of this church scene with a scene at Moses house where Moses is seen perpetuating violence against his wife, Debby points to a serious morality concern. In this scene, Debby suffers serious physical assault by her husband, Moses for mistakenly having some splashes of tea spill on him from a cup after missing her steps while trying to serve him tea for breakfast. Despite Debby's apologetic disposition for an unintentional accidental occurrence, Moses cruelly takes a presumably hot cup of tea from the tray in her hands and empties it on her head and face thereby leaving her humiliated,

assaulted and low self-esteemed. This incident is visually represented in figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Moses is assaulting his wife Debby by violently emptying A cup of hot tea on her head and face

Retaliation is a mark of unforgiveness. A former Head of State, (Gen. Yakubu Gowon 2018, 3) said that Nigeria's problems would be resolved through unrelenting prayers by the church, rather than resorting to violence, retaliation and unforgiveness. The church must provide a moral compass for the nation to make the people imbibe the fear of God and to follow righteousness. God's solutions to the problems of this country is not in guns, retaliation or physical weapons but in prevailing prayers of the church. Refusing to retaliate is a Christian virtue which reflects ones act of tolerance and peace-seeking. The New Testament teaching emanating from Christ philosophy states thus:

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regards for good things in the sight of men. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone. Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: it is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord. (Romans 12:17-19).

Obviously, an eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind, a tooth for a tooth will leave the mouth of humans toothless. Relying on God's strength and ability to respond does not show weakness and foolishness but maturity and letting the law enforcement agent act appropriately.



Figure 2 reveals Debby in a state of coma following the momentous slap that she received from her husband, Moses.

3.2 A Look at Domestic Violence and Moral Virtue

Furthermore, moral issues as revealed in the film are raised in another soul touching scene where violent attack is perpetuated on Debby by her husband, Moses at the sequence when argument ensues between them concerning Moses' demand for more babies in the marriage. Moses had placed this demand at a time when Debby is seated on the staircase in a deep sober reflection over her tragic ordeals in the marriage. She reflects on how Moses had violently aborted three children from her womb through his habitual violent beatings on her. In her response to Moses demand, she reveals her past encounter: "That's what you said the first time you punched Miracle out of my womb, the same thing you said in the second and the third and now, the same old Moses, the same something". Trouble therefore ensues at the point when Debby finally expresses her resolve not to take in again as demanded. "I don't want to do this anymore", At this point, she is battered to a state of unconsciousness in such a way that it takes a miraculous intervention of Wummi, a family friend and medical Doctor who rushes to her saving. Figure 2 below contains a graphic representation of this incident.

Whereas morality concerns revolve around ethical, virtuous and publicly sanctioned behaviours, the actions of Moses as displayed in these sequences are rather provocative, unethical condemnable and infringing. A morally just husband must imbibe the virtues of love, cares, forgiveness and tolerance. Moses' character disposition in this sequence is devoid of any of these qualities.

Domestic violence has been a common phenomenon affecting Nigeria and has displayed an increment in prevalence over the decades; domestic violence is a major public health problem that affects millions of people and often results in physical and emotional injuries and deaths. Nations around the world have risen to this challenge by putting in place legislation to champion the fight against domestic violence which includes policy formulations, planning, awareness, justice for victims, and prosecution of persecutors. The issue of domestic violence in Nigeria, the law governing it, loopholes in the laws and steps aimed at dealing with these loopholes has been a major focus of discussion at major fora over the years, indeed, domestic violence is a norm in Nigeria and hardly a week goes by without a report of abuse, Yejide 2023, 2).



Figure 3 revealing a scene where Debby is confronting Thomas for smoking cigarette within the church premises.

3.3 The Need for Help in Precarious Situations

Another incident where moral question is raised in the film is shown in the instance which plays out between Debby and Thomas in the church sequence. Thomas, a stranger to the church who is later revealed in the film to be an internationally celebrated music producer is seated at a corner at the exterior of the church taking cigarette while active church service is going on at the interior. As Debby tries to walk into the church, her attention is drawn to Thomas, who is busy smoking cigarette and blowing the smoke into the air as shown in figure 3 below. She confronts him with the view of drawing his attention to the moral implication of smoking within the church premises. "This is a church... or don't you have any respect for God?" she yells out in utter shock and disbelief. Debby's action is motivated by the need to protect the sanctity, spirituality and holiness of the church which is a symbol of God's abode on earth. The church is recognized as the holy temple of the Most High God, a house deserving of honour and reverence. A place where people who seek the presence of God in their lives go to. It is therefore an act of utter disrespect for God and humanity to have the church desecrated with such behavior that negates moral principles, hence, the reaction of Debby.

Despite the immoral demonstration of Thomas by smoking cigarette in a church premises during a worship section, this scene is very significant to the narrative development of the film. Just as the ensuing dialogue develops, Thomas explains that he is addicted to cigarette smoking, prompting Debby to conclude that he needs help. In a twist of event, Thomas tells Debby that she also needs help. He tells her how she sang incredibly in the church and how she is talented and creative in the art of music but however discovers that she was relatively tensed while singing. He suspects that the tension exhibited by Debby is either caused by her being nervous or unsatisfied, it is worthy of note to state that this discovery can only be made by an expert in musical productions. Suffice it to state that Thomas is globally reputed in the art of musical productions. A celebrity and expert who combined his vast knowledge in musicology with his deep experience in human psychology to identify Debby's strength and then, the traumatic condition that currently hinders her full potentials. At this point, Debby is perplexed as she reminiscences the various levels of domestic violence that she suffers in the hands of her husband. She realizes that she would have excelled better in her musical career if her happy emotions are not always accosted with disheartening violent attacks and battering by her spouse. From this point, Thomas decides in his mind to offer help to her.

We should have compassion on the addicted ones who really want to be free from drugs addiction, pornographic and masturbation, etc. They need help and a renewing of their minds. Behavioral therapies help people in drug addiction treatment, modify their attitudes and behaviors related to drug use. As a result, patients are able to handle stressful situations and various triggers that might cause another relapse. Behavioral therapies can also enhance the effectiveness of medications and help people remain in treatment longer. The following as stated by (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2020, 5) are some remedies needed:

Cognitive-behavioral therapy seeks to help patients recognize, avoid, and cope with the situations in which they're most likely to use drugs.

Contingency management uses positive reinforcement such as providing rewards or privileges for remaining drug free, for attending and participating in counseling sessions, or for taking treatment medications as prescribed. Motivational enhancement therapy uses strategies to make the most of people's readiness to change their behavior and enter treatment.

Family therapy helps people (especially young people) with drug use problems, as well as their families, address influences on drug use patterns and improve overall family functioning.

4. Breaking the Yoke of Domestic Violence and Embrace of New Found Love

Thomas' drive to offer help to Debby through series of international business deals with huge financial implication are always turned down by Debby due to her consideration of her husband's concern. "My husband doesn't want me to talk to strangers, especially men", she tells inquisitive Thomas who at this point is struggling his best to gain her attention. Moses is a very jealous, possessive, domineering and selfish husband who restrains his wife from big deals that would change her financial fortunes. His quest to have a continued total control over his wife Debby restrains him from allowing her to excel. Despite Debby's efforts at protecting her marriage with Moses especially by turning down numerous advances from Thomas who had expressed real love for her and had valued her ingenious personality, Moses still accuses her of every unimaginable thing and at last pushes her out of his car in the middle of nowhere and drives away into the tin air. Debby becomes frustrated and vulnerable to marauding criminals and cultists around that turbulent and strange environment. She realizes at this moment of fear, horror and abandonment that she truly needs help. In a dramatic twist and coincidental occurrence, Thomas drives in and offers to pick her, although hesitant at first, but when she realizes that she is in the midst of danger, she sees Thomas' offer as a saving grace and decides to join him in the car. Thomas tells her how much he loves her and how much he genuinely desires her. After several moments of consistent persuasions at various intervals, Debby breaks free from the pangs and paroxysms of her abusive marriage with Moses as she enters into a healthier and happier one with Thomas.



Figure 4. A snatch of happy moment between Thomas and Debby

5. Recommendations

The following are recommendations as emanating from this research:

- Perpetrators of domestic violence should be sternly punished as they constitute nuisance to the human society.
- Love should be manifest in every family and discrimination against the human person

especially the weak (women) should be abolished.

- Encouragement should be given to those who possess talents as they will eventually become blessing to the society.
- If domestic violence can no longer be tolerated, the brutalized or psychologically abused should walkout of that marriage before he/she is killed.

6. Conclusion

The moral lessons derived from the film *knocking on Heaven's Door* by Desmond Eliot has much to offer to homes enmeshed with domestic violence, hostility and envy. So many families are trapped with the fear that divorce is not allowed in a Christian marriage, hence, the more powerful spouse keeps battering and abusing the weaker until in most cases, death becomes the resultant effect. This movie has given encouragement to men and women in precarious situations to depend on God and as well never to wait until they are deformed before they search for a new found love by way of marriage and remarrying. The question is, why do the morally good and upright always end up with those with questionable character and immoral?

It is a moral virtue not to envy your spouse's progress or feel intimidated by his/her talent. It takes a morally sound person to encourage and project those around him/her to be better or rise to the top. Christian morality builds the individual, family and society for a peaceful, harmonious living, trust and dependability. Everyone needs help from secret and open addictions which entangles one's life. Counseling from professionals and pastors is a nitty-gritty when one is in the state of dilemma. We need to be on the watch as we enter into relationship with people because it can either make or mar you.

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