

Gendered Nollywood: Interrogating Femininity in Contemporary Nigerian Films

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Abstract

Studies on the construction of women in Nollywood films have majorly focused on the subjugation of women by the phallogocentric African men and the need for socio-economic liberation. Most of these films perceive women as a socially constituted homogenous group on the basis of shared oppression. However, this study intends to interrogate gender relations in terms of the way cultural and development policies are currently regulating the balance of power between men and women in a rapidly mutating African society. Through a reading of select Nigerian films, the paper examines how Nollywood films construct the heterogeneous roles performed by men and women in Modern Nigeria. The paper submits that the dynamics of modernity is changing the depiction of perception of the female gender in contemporary Nigerian cinema.

Key words: Gender, Femininity, Representation, Nigerian film

Introduction

The notion that Nollywood is gendered has been well established by scholars who described most Nigerian films of the video-film era as employing thematic concerns that bother on domestic matters in which gender issues are fixated on stereotypic portrayal of men and women. Such scholars saw Nollywood as a victim of male chauvinism in which women are construed from traditional perspective that is not far from “domestic slavery”; a condition of servitude in which women are portrayed as wives, mothers, nannies, domestic servants, subordinates as well as witches. On the contrary, these films portray men as breadwinners, benefactors, bosses and masters. According to Ukata (2010) the portrayal of gender roles has not transcended the domains of traditional roles and images of women that is steeped in the “dominant social value of patriarchy”. Citing Okunna (2000), Doghudje (2020, p. 84) avers that Nigerian films often represent women as wayward and of low moral standards, materialistic, lazy, subservient to and dependent on men and fit for domestic rather than professional careers and roles”. Hence, it is believed that these stereotypes have defined societal view of women from mere domestic sensibilities and are therefore confined to this stereotypic limitation. In the same vein, Onyenankeya et al (2019, p. 75) are of the opinion that “while Nollywood films tend to portray male characters as evolving and keeping trends with social trends, the role portrayal of women appears stuck in the past, invariably amplifying negative gender stereotypes”. In the view of Oyebade (2018), therefore:

It is really worrisome that despite the position women occupy in Nigerian history, culture and tradition, Nollywood video films are still dominated by a stereotyped portrayal of gender relations and negative portrayal of women. For instance, Patience Ozokwo is now famously known and even considered as a wicked mother-in-law in reality because she is made to represent negative gender traits in Nollywood video films which over time have become associated with her person (p. 343).

One can easily argue that since a film is an artistic reflection of the socio-cultural environment it evolves from, the above condition cannot be far from the realities of the Nigerian society. As Cloete (2017, p. 2) enthuses, film is a “powerful medium that conveys the values and beliefs of contemporary society”. Therefore, exploring the socio-cultural milieu of Nigerian films can lead us into the social worldview of Nigerians to issues of gender relations. As opined by Ukuma (2012, p. 193), “the unarguable fact that Nigeria nay Africa is a patriarchal society is reflected in every facet of life”.

To Olalusi (2017, p. 28) the familiar allusion that an African woman is supposed to be heard and not seen and that the place of a woman is in the kitchen are part of cultural affirmations of the relegation of women in a typical African society. According to Okafor (2017, p. 278), most Nigerian men view “women as inferior, derogatable opposites, prostitutes, sex slaves, confusionists, unreliable and schemers”. Ododoand Labiran (2012, p. 402) thus sum it up graphically by submitting that:

The African society is essentially defined by its patriarchal structure with social values and traditional contents. These also help to shape their religious and cultural belief system. It is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to dominate women. It encourages social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females. In a study on proverbs comparing women to animals and inanimate objects, Yusuf (1998, p. 78-79) concludes that in comparing women to non-human, all of the proverbs examined de-personify and dehumanize women. He notes further, citing Shuggart (1994, p. 12) that “that which constitutes the female has suffered quite possibly the worst universal ideological abuse ever to be perpetuated on an abstract category”. This opinion may therefore regulate how Nollywood reconstructs female gender in films. Okafor notes further that through the eye of the camera, the woman is projected in such a manner that is criminal to her person and character. Examining the concept of the heroine in Arab literature, Nawal (1980, p. 522) painfully submits that:

Among the male authors I have read, both in the west and in the Arab world irrespective of the language in which they have written or the region from which they have come, not one of them has been able to free himself from the age-old image of the women handed over to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defense of human rights, human issues and justice, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form. Tolstoy with his towering literary talent and his denunciation of the evil of feudal bourgeois Russian society, when speaking of women found nothing better to say than ‘woman is the instrument of the devil. In most of her state, she is stupid. But Satan lends her his head when she acts under his orders (qtd in Ognleye & Babatope 2018, pp. 288-289).

The point here is that literature and, by extension, film cannot but reflect the societies that produce them. Every filmmaker or writer is inalienably linked to the socio-cultural realities of the environmental conditions pervading in human societies. That is why B.H. Bantok submits that: “All novels and plays and a fair amount of dramatic or narrative poetry may not be understood without their enviroing context” (qtd in Bamidele, 2000 p. 2).

However, we shall argue in this essay that while early Nollywood films may be guilty of female subjugation in its portraiture of the female gender as inferior and subservient to the male species, contemporary Nollywood films are changing this oppressive narrative in the way they position women in relation to men. The battle for equality of sexes in contemporary Nigerian movies is ascending the planes of balance as more women assume prominent roles as producers and directors, thereby reshaping the stereotypic construction of women and the girl child in their movies. Even among male producers and directors, the construction of the female gender is fast changing. As Momsen (2010, p. 2) enthuses, “Gender relations (the socially constructed form of relation between women and men) have been interrogated in terms of the way development policies change the balance of power between women and men”. This obviously affects the nature of gender roles, that is, the household tasks and employment functions assigned to male and female, which “are not fixed and globally consistent and indeed becoming more flexible with the changes brought about by economic development”(p.2) and invariably social reconstruction. For instance, as more women climb up socio-economic ladder, the social perception of women as weaklings wanes. In the same way, as more women wear the garb of leadership in contemporary Nollywood, they possess the power to construct women in positive lights; even sometimes to the denigration of the other gender.

This essay, therefore, interrogates the crisis of femininity at the intersection of culture, social development and gender relations within an African society that is fast reconfiguring the dynamics of social interaction. It explores how contemporary Nigerian cinema has successfully captured this emerging interaction in its attempt to reflect and refract modern society. The essay reflects on how Nigerian cinema configured and is reconfiguring the notion of femininity within the changing social dynamics as the world re-assesses the evolution of sex and gender relations.

Gender, Sexuality and Femininity in Africa

The issue of sex/gender relation remains a problematic knot to untie as it is difficult to differentiate gender from sex. That explains why these terms are oftentimes used interchangeably.

According to Momsen(2010), “Gender (the socially acquired notion of masculinity and femininity by which women and men are identified) is a widely used and often misunderstood term. It is sometimes mistakenly conflated with sex or used to refer only to women. Gender identities, because they are socially acquired are flexible and not simple binary constructions” (p. 2). More so, in modern contemplation, the conception of gender has transgressed mere simple binary construction of male and female. We now have multiple sexualities and transgendered individuals whose physiological formations and complications defy simple delineations. So, while one may argue in the words of Okereke (1998, p. 133) that the term gender is “the biological given of sexuality – male and female”, it is imperative to know that even “in some African societies, gender transcends the boundaries of sexualities”.

Nonetheless, issues of sexuality, masculinity and femininity have remained at the front burner of gender discourse in Africa. In fact, Olowonmi (2011) exploring the image of women in contemporary Africa had pulsated that sexuality is at the nerve centre of humanity, noting that to be human is to be sexual. Izugbara (2005, p. 13) asserts that discussion on sexualities “encompasses sex, gender, identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction, and is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices and relationships”. Thus, African societies from times immemorial have explored the interactivities among gender groups to create individual and communal roles and functionalities that regulate their sociocultural ethos. As a result, there exist traditional professions that are peculiar to male and females. Whereas Momsen (2010, p. 3) contends that the roles of men and women in most places show variations, most African societies are believed to have relegated women to supportive, domestic, menial and mothering roles which majorly keep them perpetually at home; these socially constructed roles of mothers and wives have reduced most women to mere domestic servants. Also, in many communities, women are not allowed to give their opinions openly, especially in gatherings where men are deliberating on socio-communal issues, that may eventually affect them negatively.

However, some scholars have argued creditably that women are never submerged in the management of both domestic and communal lives in Africa. This dissenting opinion argues that women have always remained relevant, performing varying degrees of leadership functionalities in the community. Savouring the nectars of mythology as custodian of African traditional belief system, Opefeyitimi (1998, p. 45) argues that in Yoruba society, “there are women who, by virtue of their beings and dispositions are believed to possess celestial, terrestrial, sophisticated and unrivalled powers transcending those of men. These women are often regarded as Iya-aye (women of the world) or Obinrin-kunrin (Women-men)”. These women possess extra-ordinary powers that confer on them leadership superiority. It is noteworthy that Prof. WandeAbimbola has published seminal research works on the leadership potentialities of the “Aje” whom Opefeyitimi regards as Iya-aye in his work. Establishing the political prominence of women in Africa, Olowonmi (2011, p. 182) also opines that Nigerian space has ample records of women who have held leadership positions. He argues that “a female dynasty existed in Daura in the Northern Nigeria. The succession of the queen was called 'Magajiya”, although the invasion of the Arabs truncated this tradition. So, one can submit that African traditional society was not hostile to female leadership, as often postulated by some feminist scholars, but receptive to anyone that demonstrated acts of chivalry and had inherent leadership possibilities. As a matter of fact, presently, there are a number of females who are regents or rulers of their communities.

Nollywood and Gender Stereotypes: Re-imaging the Daughters of Eve

The drift of the argument above is that it is not in all cases that women are repudiated or subjugated by patriarchal order in African society. Women are sometimes accorded more visibility and reputation above their male counterparts in issues of welfare and communal interaction. One is therefore poised to ask: why are women stereotyped in most Nigerian films? If it is true that film is expected to be a representation of communal perception, attitude and interactivity, why is Nollywood populated by a fleet of movies that have negatively constructed the female species as inferior, dependent and sometimes evil? Pulsating with venom against this artistic misdemeanor, Ukata surmises that “the representations of women by men in Nollywood videos is a

misconception of women, that is not in tandem with what pertains to the real world” (qtd in Oyebade 2018, p. 343), arguing that this skewed representation of women as thieves, murderers, prostitutes, wicked mother-in-laws and house servants make them to be perceived in real life as such.

Aligning with the above, Kordand Krimmer (2005) submit that: “films show us what we are, what we were, and what we could, should or (do not) want to be. When at their best they give birth to new vision of female strength and freedom. At their worst, they ridicule, denigrate and deny what real women have long achieved, and replaced it with spectres from the past” (qtd in Ibbi 2017, p. 59). In a sense, the issue of stereotype in Nollywood is predicated on the selective opinion and perception of the filmmaker and not necessarily societal view of women. According to Stewart and Kowaltzke (2007), every form of representation is based on certain assumption of who you are, which may be different from who you really are. For instance, the idea of ‘the place of a woman is in the kitchen’ may be predicated on certain popular but not general belief by some men that women are to play second fiddles in society in order to soothe their ego. When this view is presented repeatedly, it becomes a norm that appears to be culturally validated. This is because a stereotype is an over-simplified, clichéd representation that is repeated severally so much that it becomes a socially constructed opinion.

From the foregoing, one is tempted to deduce that it is because most of these films are made by men that is shaping the negative representation of women in Nigerian film. Certainly, Nollywood is notoriously dominated by men. Majority of those who hold the ace and the power to hire and fire are men. They determine, not only the choice of stories and thematic concerns of the movies but also control all production elements. While we may argue that the industry is densely populated by a lot of females, it is ubiquitous that most of these females play supportive roles as cast or crew members in most films that are notoriously strewn around male characters. For instance, until recently, almost all directors, production managers, cinematographers and screen writers were men who would certainly construct the movies from their patriarchal perspective. Even when women are producers, majority of the production decisions are left in the care of their trusted male friends. It is therefore not surprising that Nollywood sees the world through the binoculars of these men who decide to subjugate and repress stories that may project female heroism.

The position of this author is simply that until women begin to write their own stories, it will be almost impossible to see a gender balanced representation in Nigerian cinema. The best men can do is to be sympathetic with the cause of women as they recreate their phallogocentric world that sees man as a colossus bestriding the human entities. For instance, writing about women’s position in literary drama, Olaniyan and Bade-Afuye (2018, p. 311) explain that at the early stage of Nigerian dramatic literature which was dominated by male writers, female characters were portrayed as witches, housewives, fearful and effeminate, who “are often juxtaposed along these titanic heroes as just plain wives at the beck and call of their husbands. These early playwrights objectified women as weak, choiceless, invisible or incestuous”. But as women negotiated their way into the writing scene, the tide shifted to a feminine perspective of the world, creating a viable landscape for a more gender balanced narratology.

In the same vein, when Hollywood was colonized by male directors, films were not just made about women but also deployed to tell their stories, merely using females as instruments for advancing that narrative perspective. Even when some male directors, “perhaps most notably Martin Scorsese in *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) – attempted to portray women freeing themselves from intolerable domestic situations. But, as in *Alice*, most of these films decided that their women characters had only to find a “better” man, thereby re-creating the traditional narrative closure of heterosexual union” (Kolker 2006, p. 159). However, with the advent of women auteur filmmakers, women’s narratives became prominently popular. For instance, Susan Seidelman’s film, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *Making Mr. Right* (1987) which suggested that the perfect man is not available anywhere but must be constructed like a robot, introduced female’s perspective to women’s issues. Donna Deitch’s *Desert Heart* explored the theme of lesbianism while Barbra Streisand in *Yentl* (1983) and *The Prince of Tides* (1991) “used melodrama to present images of strong women” (Kolker, 2006, p. 159).

Certainly, women need to take the bull by the horn in recreating their battered image in Nigerian movies. They need to create new heroism in female characters who will epitomize the true and authentic image of the contemporary woman that enjoys all the freedom of gender equality provided by the modern age.

Beyond Nollywood Stereotypes: Gender Balance and Contemporary Cinema

However, contemporary cinema in Nigeria has showcased a few women producers and directors who are gradually but efficiently changing the narration of women stories in Nigeria. Prominent among these women producers and/or directors are Genevieve Nnaji who debuted with *Lionheart*, Jadesola Osiberu who produced and directed *Isoken*, Kemi Adetiba also directed *King of Boys* and *Wedding Party*. Others include Bolanle Austen-Peters, Funke Akindele and Mo Abudu. Some of these films deserve critical examination as they chart a new order in female and gender representation.

Lionheart is the amazing story of the feminine chivalry of Adaeze Obiagu (Genevieve Nnaji) who wants to replace her father as the new director because he can no longer run his company due to health issues. But being a female, her father finds it difficult to fully entrust her with full control. He therefore asks his younger brother Godswill (NkemOwoh) to take over but must work alongside with Adaeze. Nonetheless, Adaeze singlehandedly, though not without much hostility and confrontations from his uncle, rescues the company from imminent bankruptcy, secures merger with a northern transport company and ensures a more virile and productive business. Issues that confront Adaeze are primarily related with general African conception of women as weaker vessels and second fiddle to men. Tony Kan, in an extensive review describes *Lionheart* as “that rare and brave thing, a stereotype-defying movie...” (www.thelagosreview.ng). Hence, it is a strong effort at decentering men in an industry with a male-centered audience, script and directors.

Jadesola Osiberu's *Isoken* navigates the virgin terrain of women liberation in the midst of gagged socio-cultural order with the story of the eponymous character, *Isoken* (Dakore Akande), whose inability to get married is employed by her family members to traumatize her. She is made to believe that without a husband, a woman's success in life is vanity; a husband is the crowning glory of a woman, without which she is like a walking corpse. Surprisingly, female characters like her mother and cousin are in the vanguard of this repressive social conservatism. To *Isoken*'s mother, at her age, she is expected to have settled down with her husband and bear children, instead of engaging in unnecessary career and educational advancement. On the side of *Isoken* is her cluster of feminist friends who, though believe in getting married but will certainly not be pushed by societal expectations. *Isoken*'s story is counterbalanced by the story of Osaze, who refused to get entangled with women until he was extremely successful in his chosen business and career paths. Having attained an enviable financial and social status, therefore, he decides to look for a promising young lady, in person of *Isoken*, to marry. *Isoken*'s uncle also remains unmarried at 45 without any serious family or peer pressure. Incidentally, providence brings *Isoken* in contact with Kelvin, an American journalist on career assignment in Nigeria and they both fall in love. This introduces a dramatic twist to the story; *Isoken* realizes that she is more bonded with Kelvin (Marc Rhys) and may not enjoy deeper love relationship with Osaze (Joseph Benjamin), who is always a victim of his mother's control. She eventually abandons Osaze to whom she is already engaged in favor of her newly found love. The film, no doubt, explores the pains and anguish of women of marriageable age against their male counterparts. While the woman is always pressured by society into unwanted marriages, the men, who may be ridiculously older, are free of such tension and may leisurely consider the choice of either marrying or remaining single. Significantly, the film is a ferocious attempt by women to narrate their own stories from a less phallogocentric perspective.

Admittedly, Kemi Adetiba's *King of Boys* is a more ferocious feminine artistic vituperation. Conjuring the image of a strong, violent but charismatic woman, the film forcefully narrates the enigmatic story of a dynamic and industrious single mother, Eniola, who becomes the “king of street boys” in modern Lagos, Nigeria. In Faniyi's (2019) opinion, the movie presents a tale of female power and not female empowerment. He noted further that why most stories portray “a woman empowered by some mentor without whom she would not exist, ... Eniola Salami, the titular King of Boys, singularly took and embodied power, going on to create an enabling environment for her daughter's own embodiment of power” (www.republic.com.ng). The search for power eventually brings her at logger heads with two prominent individuals: first is Makanaki (Remilekun Safaru), who having acquired some ill-gotten wealth decides to wrestle power from Eniola to become the new King of Boys. Second is Aare Akinwande (Akin Lewis), the political godfather, he refuses to recommend her for a ministerial appointment because of her dark personality. The complication arising from the ensuing occurrences leads her through the process of self-discovery.

Although the film suffers significantly from inability to decide either a feminist or moral cause, making the personality of the eponymous King of Boys less flattering, it is nonetheless a vibrant expression of female struggle for power in a jungle of male lords. Apart from female directors, some male directors have also become more sympathetic with female cause in their movies. Thematising their stories around female characters, they examine biting social issues that bother on gender relation and inclusion. Such male directors include Tunde Kelani (*Maami* 2011), NijiAkaani (*Aramotu* 2010), Kunle Afolayan (*Citation* 2020) and BiyiBande (*Fifty*).

Building on the portrayal of the importance of women in maintaining cultural and religious order in a typical Yoruba community as expressed in *Arugba*, Tunde Kelani's movie, *Maami*, based on a novel of the same title written by Femi Osofisan, pungently explores the intricacies of motherhood, especially within the ocean of excruciating poverty. It is a story of a single parent, *Maami* (meaning my mother), played by Funke Akindele, who struggles through thick and thin to raise her only son, *Kashimawo* (WoleOjo). It is an opulent display of maternal love, unwavering determination, enterprising spirit and bravery in the midst of daunting deprivation. This is conflated with the uncanny and brutal attitude of *Kashimawo's* estranged father (Olumide Bakare) who despite his affluence allows mother and child to suffer economic dehumanization.

While Kelani's *Maami* favours domestic concerns, a previous movie by NijiAkaani, *Aramotu* (2010), illuminates issues surrounding women in politics. It tells the enthralling story of *Aramotu* (IdiatShobande), wealthy Yoruba trader in a male-dominated Yoruba community who employs the congenial qualities of Gelede cult to purse women rights and establish a government that tilts towards the ideas of communalism and inclusiveness. *Aramotu* is one of the frontline Nigerian movies directed by a male that first considered female heroism. Apart from winning several national and international awards and accolades, the film also featured at various film festivals across the globe, including Samsung Women's International Film Festival Chennai, India (2012).

Dwelling on the success of the preceding gender-related films, KunleAfolayan's film, *Citation* punctuates the mythical façade of sex-for-marks syndrome that has percolated most universities. This was coming at the eve of several allegations of sexual harassment of female students by male lecturers in some universities in Nigeria and Ghana. In the movie, the theme of sexual harassment pulsates in the story of *Moremi Oluwa* (TemiOtedola) who finds herself notched between academic mentorship and sexual perversion in the hands of Prof. N'dyare (Jimmy Jean-Louis) who deploys his privileged position towards his evil intention of satisfying inordinate sexual passion. Both the machineries of the law and institutional procedures are cuddled to rescue her from being inhumanly and unjustly treated as a case of rape is one of the most difficult to prove. *Citation* is no doubt a humanistic voice against rape, sexual harassment and any form of female intimidation in African post-secondary institutions.

Conclusion

The shifting socio-economic dynamics of the Nigerian society is no doubt changing the perception and representation of sex relation in Nigerian movies. Issues that typically reflect the position of women and their relationship with male gender are being interrogated in contemporary Nigerian movies. Certainly, the Nigerian society, which Nollywood tries to reflect or refract, is gradually moving away from a monolithic phallogocentric conception of the society, making greater space for amore gender sensitive interactivity. In politics, health, education, economy and other spheres of life, more women are assuming critical leadership positions and, thus, redefining the traditional perception of women as weak, inferior or merely domestic. In recent times, women like Dr. NgoziOkonjoIweala, Dr. Obi Ezekwesili, Prof. Dora Akunyili and a host of others have bestriden our socio-political landscape, achieving notable feats for the advancement of the Nigerian state. This is also being reflected in the way contemporary indigenous films represent women. In the same way, as more women take up leadership positions in the growing Nigerian film industry, the face and stories of Nollywood begin to shift from being male driven to a more balanced gender representation. Filmmakers like AmakaIgwe, GenevieveNnaji, Mo Abudu and JadesolaOsiberu, to mention a few, are changing the narration of gender, which was previously in favour of men. So, as more women wear the director's hat, the industry is expected to experience less gender-insensitive narratives. It is now common to see films from feminist, gay and liberal perspectives where multi-gender orientations are freely expressed. In the final analysis, one is prone to submit that contemporary Nigerian cinema is becoming more intellectually stimulating as it interrogates biting social issues relating to gender, culture and politics.

It does not only improve its production quality but has transcended the elemental burgeoning issues that made critics of its early days to describe it as a pedantic art form that lacked the luster and glamour of true cinema.

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