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The Nigerian Cinema

Reading Nigerian Motion Pictures

Editor

Muhammed O. Bhadmus

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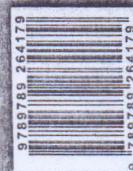


The term 'Cinema' is used in contradistinction to cinematography to delineate the art and the artist from the technology and the artisans and also as an all encompassing descriptive term of the field in preference to other terms such as bioscope, film, video film and movie. It is equally a term with the required aesthetic allusion that will hopefully capture the epistemology of Nigerian Cinema in the ontology of knowledge and power relation that is consequently the ultimate goal of all progressive and committed art. Similarly, the term motion picture is also preferred, to avoid the limitations in terms like film, home video and video film. *The Nigerian Cinema* is, therefore, an attempt to critically read and examine the Nigerian Motion Pictures by scholars from the field of English Studies, Theatre and Performing Arts, Mass Communication, Linguistics and Cultural Studies, History and Law.

ABOUT THE EDITOR



Muhammed O. Bhadmus is a professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University, Kano. He teaches Literature with special interest in drama and theatre, film studies and reading classics against the grain and has widely published and edited works in these areas. He presently heads the Department of Theatre and Performing Arts in Bayero University, Kano, where he is pioneering the critical study of Nigerian motion pictures.



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SINGING IN DIFFERENT TUNES

NOLLYWOOD'S REFLECTION ON GENDERED CULTURE

Oludolapo Ojadiran

Introduction

This chapter aims to explore gender in relation to language. It recognises gender as a social construct which has incorporated the problem of language, of identity and of autonomy that tend to make women voiceless in the society. While the chapter shares the concerns of Alice Walker (1984) womanist theory in women's characterisation as portrayed in selected Nollywood films, *Heart of a Fighter* (and its sequel) *The Royal Fight*, it also examines the socio-cultural and historio-political functions of women seen through the prism of their language. With reference to the selected films, we therefore examine the interrelations of gender and Nigerian female characters, gender and language which are presented in various ways by Nollywood home videos. Thus, this chapter analyses the effect of gendered culture in the identification of gender in Nollywood presentations that while trying to portray the female gender in a positive way, Nollywood ironically creates a web that makes these female characters victims of their own words and actions.

Nollywood's reflection on gender, language and culture gives rise to the tension between oral culture (that has been commonly recognised as a woman's domain) versus written culture (commonly recognised as a man's domain); and emphasises the hierarchical nature of power; indeed, the characters' position in society is viewed through the ways they communicate with the world. The chapter aims to explore the notions of power and hierarchy in dramatic language as it relates to the female gender in the society as portrayed in different Nollywood films.

As the chapter takes for its starting point an assumption that there are linguistic features that can be explained only in relation to gender, language has been seen as an avenue through which the self is formed and an individual's world is shaped. At first glance, this seems to place women in a relatively powerless position as the language she uses is in alignment to a particular set of cultural values that are man-made and reflect man's experience of the world. Developing Weatherall's (2002) argument that "women's

speech style seeks to establish connection and affiliation while men's speech style reflects their concerns with status, Nollywood's use of language mirrors Weatherall's view of both genders". This chapter uses the feminist sociolinguist view of language to support the aesthetic of assertiveness, which identifies how gender is determined by the socio-cultural expectations of females or males. The assumption that men and women speak differently is always a point of reference in most of Nollywood's films which allows them to characterise women as powerless and men as powerful.

Creating such differences enable Nollywood to question the socio-cultural fabric what it means to be black and female through their various themes; they examine the relationship between language, gender and culture. Through their portrayal of these interdependent social influences, they recognise that gender as a social construct has incorporated the problem of language, identity and autonomy. In Nollywood, the use of language is analysed as an expression of an individual's identity and not just the vehicle to communicate an idea. Also, language is presented as a means of destroying the male gender if not carefully used; and the moral, aesthetic culture that is meant to govern 'self', is also scrutinised. Most of Nollywood writers look to their cultural history, often developed from a male point of view to re-evaluate female situations like women's lifestyles, masculinity, motherhood, gender, poverty and connections between their body, sexuality and representation. Miller and Swift (1976) consider this position as they notice that when "women in the movement review history, their purpose is to emphasise that women's lives, deeds and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued".

Walker's definition of womanism sees black women as people (women) wanting to know more, people who are always in pursuit of knowledge despite their deprivation in a male dominated society, she questions the epistemological exclusion they endure in intellectual life in general and in feminist scholarship in particular. The construction of Walker's womanism and the several definitions she used is an attempt not only to situate the black woman in history and culture, but also any group of marginalised women in a male dominated society.

Nollywood has taken a conscious approach to unravel women's collective imagination in a multi-faceted psychic replay of myth and history in relation to modern times which gives many writers the opportunity to either reconstruct or articulate their views on female discourse. As Nollywood problematises the positioning of female characters in socio-cultural hierarchy through the prism of language, the socio-cultural ideology affects the creation of female characters and the problem they encounter. This is because some Nollywood screen writers create female characters that provide important insight into women's experiences and the study of history that can empower women and also

help viewers to appreciate their works better from the historical, political, social, cultural and linguistic perspectives.

The analysis of the selected films, will therefore focus on the formal/informal, active/passive, rigid/flexible and public/domestic linguistic dichotomies, embedded in the construction of female characters in these films. The film makes the audience question what and who Nollywood has taken the female gender to be. This demonstrates the benefits and the dangers of either acquiring or rejecting 'masculine' forms of language as Lakoff (1998, p.243) suggests:

... a girl is damned if she does, damned if she does not. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices which have to be less than a woman or less than a person- (sic) are highly painful.

Lakoff refers to the humiliation women experience in the society if they either learn or refuse to learn the so-called 'public' language as a prerequisite for the cultural acceptability. This idea is explored through the analysis of the films which show the extent at which African women face the consequences if they choose either way. While these include those characters who take on male attributes with unforeseen consequences and those who remain within cultural guide about their sexual and traditional female roles, Nollywood's depiction of femininity is a way of exposing the gendered lives. Women who take on the 'assumed' masculine gendered position are seen by Walker (1984, p.xii) as the evidence of "women's cultural capability and assertiveness in the society that has rendered them powerless through their language use". These films present audiences with a crippled life of female loneliness, back-breaking labour, childlessness and the desperate search for a voice either as a child or an adult female. Some of the female characters in the films are crushed by their use of language whereby they are physically and mentally presented as societal imbalanced, emotionally battered and linguistically victimised through the oppressive sexist language and social system that calls for silent women.

The selected films may not have readdressed female issues in line with the view of social stratification, but the films refuse to see the use of male language as the norm in the society. Rather, females' use of language and action are examined from a positive avenue. The films engage in a form of social mobility whereby some of their female characters deal with linguistic aesthetic changes to help with their deviated socio-cultural position. By doing this, they depart from the traditional media and masculine representations of femininity, creating female characters that are not totally dependent

or subservient. This mirrors Horvat's (1999, p.6) observation this:

Woman's position in society shows how these authors identify and subvert the concept of separate spheres. These separate spheres divide the social world into 'public and private, economic and domestic, labour and leisure' and a priori puts men into a dominant position in a public domain, while concurrently banishing woman to a marginal domestic domain.

Horvat argues that women can no longer be seen as the decorative objects or owned property by men, but as individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to the economic, social and political sphere of the society. This reveals that women have changed from being the listeners to the listened to, by entering into the public sphere. Wood (1998) noted that as women become more assertive and active in public life than their foremothers, many men are changing their roles from being dictators and commanders as assigned by the culture. The women in question, according to Wood (1998), are real women.

To a large extent, Nollywood appreciates and defends women's right in their flexibility and strength. Motherhood is always seen as an issue that is often analysed from several perspectives. This makes us see motherhood in relation to the psychoanalytical and socio-linguistic theories that limit the females to gender conditioning. Although the films' main character, Dubem's language use is distinctively different; contradicting Rich's (1980) assertion that "woman's language cannot manage to mean what they say, much less achieve success in meaning more, the screen writer makes Dubem's womanist nature reduce along the way". Despite some of these female characters acting in line with Rich's assertion at the beginning of the films, with some out-growing their inhibition even when their egos are destroyed within the process to become targets of patriarchy. Considering the films from the feminist's perspective, they may be interpreted as re-creation of female stereotypes which often limits the female gender to the domestic domain in relation to their reproductive abilities as mothers and wives. This highlights the historical displacement of women, the differences between the public and private, sexual and creative roles of women within the societies.

Perhaps, viewers sympathise with the heroine, albeit in an ironic way, and envision the new female gender full of zeal and determination in contradiction to the existing female stereotypes. The film shows a young village girl, Dubem, with many masculine features. Her life turns around the moment she challenges the village prince, Ikenna, to a fight. The fight between Dubem and Ikenna leads to her partial loss of one eye; this makes the king decree a marriage between the two as no man will ever want to marry Dubem due to this disability. Initially, Ikenna sees her as rude, arrogant, and insulting, he later acknowledges her to be a strong-willed woman whose assertive language and

actions question the female dented identity. Despite the king's decree, Dubem shows her determination and zeal to reject the marriage, her ability to use language and defiant actions as a form of independence is overcome with a 'kiss' from Ikenna who is afraid of losing his dignity if he is banished.

While Ikenna encourages Dubem to make their marriage work for the fear of being banned from the village, Dubem enjoys true companionship based on love and commitment, but her childlessness creates a vacuum she needs to fill. At this point, the relationship between the couple shows a level of hierarchy supported by heterosexual imperatives both in the private and public spheres. Ikenna's words emphasise the life of mystery the barren woman faces as they try to sort out their problems:

Ikenna: Give me a child... what more do I ask from you?

Dubem: That is not my fault.

Ikenna: Do I look like I care to you? I have fulfilled my obligation as a husband, you fulfil yours.

The conversation between the couple exposes a form of relationship that hinders the male gender from accepting his guilt and weaknesses, rather, it makes the woman feel guilty, and questioning what she has done wrong and what she can do to improve the situation in her home. These films, like most Nollywood's films have the desire to develop a new type of domestic and psychological drama that can emphasise the socio-political, socio-familial and historio-cultural development within a patriarchal society. This is a situation where male dominance in heterosexual relationship is reflected in different ways, which Wood (2003) observes to include division of labour, pattern of influence and decision making, the violence between partners, amongst others.

This is also identified by the womanist theory that shows female engagement with language as an avenue to expose and redress their second class position. This helps women to be able to celebrate their physical, mental, emotional, and intellectual capabilities. However, one notices Ande-Yacim's (2013, p. 51) view of marriage in the films that:

the marriage institution is an institution that is pivoted to establishing gender differences.... it establishes the cultural symbols in many societies and how they are designed to reinforce the active dominant roles of men and the passive grateful roles of women. The relationship between marriage and patriarchy is one that stands at the peak of Nigerian societal belief and norm.

Marriage, in the film, is seen as an avenue to curtail Dubem's excess and womanist nature. Although there are other females such as Queen Mother, Chika, Amara and Kate

in the film, their roles are passive. Chika is seen as an arrogant princess who is later subdued when she got married to another town's king, Amara is seen as a gossip, and Kate, the second wife is assumed to lend a hand of sisterhood to Dubem's childless situation. The idea that womanism helps in the redefinition of the female gender and use of language corresponds to Wood's (2003, p.115) assertion that "language expresses cultural views of gender, as well as reproduces them". Yet, language is not static. Instead, one continuously changes language to reflect one's changing understanding of oneself and one's world. The power of language use strikes the culture that has striven so hard to make itself the teacher and trainer of women's language. As a result, they focus on gender as a social construct in relation to language, and how individuals' biology imposes different expectations from both male and female that develop into physiological and psychological constraints.

Synopsis of *Heart of a Fighter* and *Royal Fight*

Royal Fight (1 and 2) is a continuation of *Heart of a Fighter* (1 and 2) produced by Onyeachukwu Afube and directed by Ifeanyi Ogbonna in 2012. The films present a young, wilful and strong lady, Dubem played by Mercy Johnson, who, inspite of socio-cultural expectation on womanhood, deviates from what is expected of her. Her masculine nature leads her into a fight with Prince Ikenna unknowingly, who is a temperamental and beats her mercilessly, leading to Dubem's partial loss of sight. The king, therefore, decries that Prince Ikenna must marry Dubem which he concedes to grudgingly. Despite the King's pronouncement, they keep quarrelling, but all changes the day Prince Ikenna discovers Dubem is a virgin. The films deal with the theme of childlessness, nature of a woman, lack of sisterhood amongst women, cultural expectations of a man and many other. At the end, Dubem is able to change the arrogant, hot-tempered and uncaring nature of Prince Ikenna.

Womanist Actions and Frustrations in the Selected Films

As the community expects Dubem to be womanly, cultured and domesticated as opposed to what the writer characterises her to be at the beginning of the film, her marriage to the Prince changed the whole story of a young, wilful, 'masculine' and assertive lady. In adopting a new outlook to female characterisation, the screen writer employs language to create a new perception of femininity whereby superiority and inferiority is neglected. He not only dramatises Dubem's plight, but exposes the fear and marginalisation of women who try to enter the public sphere to assert themselves either as leaders, career driven in a patriarchal society. The screen writer's creation of Dubem's strong character

from the beginning is a way of reducing the female stereotypes in male's work and society where there are dictated expectations for women. Dubem, however, has the ability to reject these subjugating cultural positions that make women victims, thus, she asserts herself as someone who is capable until she begins to struggle with childlessness and its stigma.

Dubem represents women loneliness, and the treatment and societal perception of a barren woman in Africa. This creates a sense of sisterhood when the Prince brings home a second wife. Directly and physically, the second wife, Kate, empathises with Dubem; she feels her pain, gives her solace with her words of encouragement and insists on orthodox antenatal. The sisterly-bond between the women provides a contradictory position to the societal stigmatisation of childless woman. The prejudicial undertone in the description of women and motherhood reinforces the cultural view of women as victims whose identity hinges on their ability to be reproductive objects which Williams (2006) observes as the aspects of womanism that are vitally important – "the mothering and nurturing nature of a woman". She views these two aspects as being interwoven in the emancipation and liberation from struggle.

In the films, the screen writer explores formal and ideological limitations through Dubem to show a behavioural expectation which corresponds with Holland and Eisenhart (1990) that "young women learn to judge themselves in terms of their conformity to culture and to differentiate between their romantic and friendship relationships". The young women's failure to do this is always considered a rebellious act which starts with the 'self' knowledge and determination becomes an important tool for her socialisation, articulation and assertion.

The issue of women's self knowledge, zeal and fulfilment are often neglected in Nollywood's films. While many expect the female to behave in certain ways that depict them as a cultural representation of married women, they inadvertently create women as stereotypes even as they present them with assertive languages. Nollywood has the tendency of creating career-driven women, but always portray them arrogant, unyielding and unwilling to take corrections even at the point of failure. This creates loopholes in their depiction of the female which is always the opposite of the male who is often characterised as bold, loving, career driven and humble. Nollywood female stereotypes include, gullible wives and mothers, concubines and whores who tend to agree with whatever the gendered society ascribes to them.

The same view is expressed by Deutscher (2002, p.11) in her comments on Luce Irigaray's works. She identifies that Irigaray suggests "women have served as negative mirrors sustaining masculine identity". Cultural and historical understandings of the masculine identity have contrasted it to traditional representations of femininity, with

femininity understood as an atrophy or lack of masculine qualities. This shows women as the 'other' which suggest them as being weak and the opposite of men in all aspects regarding language and culture. These women's identities are thus fashioned to suit the patriarchal system to the extent that in their true nature, they are seen as unacceptable and morally shameful.

As the selected films continue to interrogate the issue of gender in the context of the societal female marginality which is important in the investigation of African's history, it equally shows the mark of social acceptability in presenting the male gender and some selected women as people willing to make positive changes to female situations. The very idea of a woman in authority is a difficult concept to comprehend for most, especially in the light of the traditional, social, cultural, historical and religious forces which are seen in Nollywood films such as *God of the Poor*, *Caro the Iron Bender* and *Spirit of a Dancer*. Such views of women's inferiority, and double standard when in a position of authority, exposes the implication of his utterances which although characterise women as emotional, at the same time disproves the belief of men as intellectual, cerebral and logical in their own words.

Being born female or male endows an individual with an unalterable biological make up, but the definition of what constitutes being female and male is determined by culture which helps most Nollywood films to conflate femininity with domesticity, female virtue and feminine ignorance. The concept of capability in Dubem's characterisation correlates to what Hudson-Weems (1993, p.66) describes as a "woman's long tradition of psychological as well as physical strength which comes from witnessing and understanding her male counterpart's powerlessness and his inability to fulfil the traditional role of man as protector, resulting in his emasculation; this allows a woman to protect such vulnerability". Dubem's way of thinking, acting and talking represents her as different from other characters in the films which allows her to create a new identity and representation which helps her to become a social subject in the society. This shows identity as an important aspect of human lives which gives women the idea of who they are and how they relate to others in the world they live.

Dubem's attitudes correspond with Crawford (1995, p.83) assertion that "women respond to stress by becoming overwhelmed and emotionally involved, men by becoming focused and withdrawn". To all other characters in the film, Dubem's action of being strong willed and assertive shows her as an abnormal female who trespasses on the societal expectations of womanhood. While the screen writer characterises Dubem in a credible manner that challenges the tradition of female silence, other female characters progressively develop a sense of maturity within their male dominated societies outside their domestic spheres. For example, Princess Chika's pride diminishes after speaking

with Dubem about her love for King Afam.

Considering this perspective from the analysed Nollywood films, Dubem and Ikenna are dependent on each other at some point when Dubem seeks divorce after Ikenna's marriage to the second wife. Ikenna affirms this by conceding that Dubem is the only woman who makes him feel 'original' and a man. Dubem does not only challenge the men in the films, she also challenges the traditional male domination of the public sphere through her independent nature. Prince Ikenna's opinion about women, with the zeal of his wife, shows that women are no longer the silent, passive, decorative and owned property of men in the society which mirrors Walker's womanist view that women and men are social beings and their working together can bring about a structural reformation needed for the female gender to become socio-culturally emancipated.

Prince Ikenna acknowledges that women have become autonomous as there is a trend of change that has evolved in the new generation of women who have become the subject of their own story instead of the depressed and unfulfilled stereotypes. Despite the credibility the screen writer gives to Dubem in her choice of words, Dubem can be seen as one of the females in the patriarchal society suffering from feminine madness, that is, the deviance from culturally identified feminine roles as noticed at the beginning of the film.

Although the screen writer portrays Dubem with the courage and understanding to speak against the culture hindering women's freedom of action, she still feels lonely due to her childlessness. Her autonomy hinges on core idea of personal autonomy to become the subject of one's story. At some point in the films, the screen writer presents Dubem's autonomy as a commitment that has to do with self-personal perceptions while remaining free from the control and interference of others. This later changes as we are faced with Dubem's love for Ekenne whom she love on before her encounter with Ikenna. Despite her love for Ekenne, Ekenne is in love with another girl who mocks Dubem as a boyfriend snatcher in the presence of other girls:

Girl: The Almighty Dubem wants my boyfriend!

While all these take place, Dubem ignored her as she hurts. The fight between the girl and Dubem leads Ikenna to beat her up at the beginning of the film. This summarises the societal view of learning to talk outside a socio-cultural norm that is not always permitted especially for the female gender who is to be corrected. Learning to speak like a boy is a way of breaking the female traditional role as constructed by men and fighting the limitations established by an overtly masculine society. In line with Dubem, these masculine actions make her the victim in a patriarchal society that does not allow such

female autonomy. Although the screen writer presents Dubem as a self determined and self assertive female who is firm and courageous at the beginning of the film, she loses her zeal as she succumbs to culture.

Conclusion

To achieve further positive representation of women in terms of gender and language, Nollywood screen writers need to show a better understanding of women, femininity, feminism, womanism. For now, people are yet to see changes in the ways both genders are represented rather, Nollywood follows the psychoanalytic theory religiously as the only way of exploring representation of society.

Reducing Nollywood's psychoanalytic view will help them to create female characters who are able to assert themselves in societies that is male dominated with no or little repercussion. Such understanding will not only see both genders as people that are liable to change, it will equally show that not all career-driven and assertive women are unyielding, proud and do end up badly. This will invariably expose and reduce stereotypes of women in Nollywood's films that see gendered roles in societies as the only way forward in films.

To a large extent, Nollywood's recent works reject the notions of female relegation and male supremacy. Rather, they engage in creating more positive and assertive female characters that differ from the portrayal of passive dependent female characters often displayed by earlier male and female screen writers. This creates the sense of women's selfhood and self-identity that are presented in the films through female characters. Such exploration portrays the female gender with elements of self-determination, self-affirmation and self-actualisation that helps to remove silence, voicelessness and patriarchal conditioning as associated with womanhood.

In using mother figure, communities of women, historical women characters and modern women to explore their view of femininity, the films also demonstrates the re-writing the male perspective of histories to female perspectives. They have employed perspectives on women's position in the patriarchal society, female sexuality, issues of identity, women's expression in the private and public sphere to explore historical and contemporary themes. While these films portray some of the female characters willingness and others unwillingness to change the status-quo in the public domain, thereby allowing us to engage with the selected films from the feminist perspective.

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