

Negative Depictions of Women in Contemporary Nollywood Films: A Critical Analysis of Shanty Town Film

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Abstract

The negative representation of women, as opposed to their male counterparts, as revealed in Nollywood films has attracted attention from many from all walks of life. This has pushed feminist scholars into criticising and clamouring for a change of narratives and review of the way and manner at which women are depicted in films, considering the power of films (ability to reach many, influence behaviours and opinions) and the extent of damage such portrayals/projections can cause to women and their place in the society, globally and internationally. Consequently, this study reviewed some of these negative portrayals as evident in already existing literature and compared them to the portrayals of men in Nollywood films as well. Thus, revealing the gender biases and negative cum stereotypical portrayals between men and women. To further shed deeper light to the issues of stereotype and gender inequality in films (highly contentious), the study painstakingly reviewed the newly- released movie shanty town and summarised the negative portrayals of women evident in the film theme by theme. Some of the identified themes include portrayals of women as: thieves; objects for collateral; whores; inferior and subjective/dependent to men; weak and useless; objects and tools for men's sexual gratifications; money-making ventures; and lastly, brain-washed individuals who lack confidence in themselves. The study found that these stereotypical depictions, although highly contentious over several years, are still prevalent in films and are unaddressed; as such, recommended certain strategies and ways needed to address the situation as well as provide a new beginning for women in the entertainment industry.

Keywords: Representaion1; Negative Portrayals of Women2; NollywoodFilms3; Gender Stereotypes4

INTRODUCTION

The visual advantage of film which aids in the easy comprehension, retention, opinion, and behaviour shaping and reshaping, behaviour change of individuals, and ultimately in education and entertainment, has positioned the film above other forms of mass communication, especially as regards the promotion of a people's culture, tradition, language, norms, and values, to mention but a few. Several scholars have penned down the various functions and characteristics of films/movies in contemporary society. According to Ibrahim (2013), the film is a powerful

medium through which important ideas, norms, and values are relayed to people across the globe. Furthermore, scholars agree that film can be used for the teaching, indoctrination, formation of ideas, behaviour, and representation of religion, cultures, and ideologies (Perkins, 2000; Ibrahim, 2013; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). However, women are represented in these films in negative ways that undermine their roles in the society and constantly places them at the mercies of their male counterparts.

The entertainment industry with specific emphasis on film production industries like Hollywood- relatable to Americans, Bollywood- relatable to Indians, and Nollywood- relatable to Nigerians, have advanced and conventionalised forms representing ideas, individuals, images, objects, scenarios, topics, which appeal and/or interest the filmmaker. In other words, the power of representation lies in the hands of the story conceiver, writer, and in general filmmaker. Representation in the context of this study is defined as the process of producing meaning; and it is a social practice (Ekwenchi, 2015).

Scholars agree that there are various ways meaning is made and there exists three several ways of explaining the origin of meaning. First, the reflective or mimetic approach- which contends that language or cinema acts as a mirror by reflecting, imitating, or mirroring the truth pre-existing. secondly, the purposeful approach maintains that the originator otherwise called the content creator, or the filmmaker is ultimately the brain behind the meaning (as this is the crux of this study). In other words, what is produced as films, showcased, viewed by audiences, and perceived by audiences, is solely the imposed viewpoints, ideas, feelings, understandings, and ideologies of the filmmaker through his art. Thirdly, the constructionist or constructivist approach, maintains that meaning is created by the use of signals and concepts discovered in the material world rather than it being determined by the things of the world or by the author (Hall, 2003; Ekwenchi, 2015).

Furthermore, in trying to theorise language and meaning, de Saussure as cited in Hall (2003) maintained that meaning is relational. What the above statement means in the context of this study is that we can only determine the visual portrayal and discourse (portrayal of women in Nollywood movies) when we x-ray the portrayal of men too in Nollywood movies as this would provide a more robust picture and a solid basis for this article. The above argument is evidenced in the words of Hall (2003, p.235) who maintained that 'meaning depends on the differences between opposites'. In other words, we cannot successfully drive home this point (current portrayal of women in Nollywood films) if we do not compare the portrayal of the opposite sex in the same Nollywood films. Thus, the next paragraph will be used to x-ray the general beliefs about men and women presently; present the different roles and identities that have been conferred on women in most Nigerian movies with special emphasis on the negative portrayals of women (which this study is predicated upon), and the impact of these negative, degrading, and absurd film portrayals (Nollywood) on women, their existence, and generally, their place in the society as evidenced by scholars.

An overview of the contending issues of gender stereotypes and representation of Men and Women in Nigeria and in some Nollywood Films

Gender stereotypes and biases have been a highly contentious topical issue among scholars over the years, as some group of individuals who belong to a particular school of thought believe that men are in all ramifications stronger and more competent than women; useful; dependable; resourceful; more intelligent; superior to mention but a few, while on the one hand, other individuals from

the other school of thought believe that although women are opposite to men and are believed to be the better half of the man as biblically evidenced, find such thoughts by those in the first-mentioned school of thought as offensive, degrading, negative representation of women's potential, under-representation of women and most importantly, unhealthy and detrimental to the existence of women in the society at large. Acts which many have found and argued to be against women's fundamental human rights. Considering the above statement, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission (OHCHR) describes gender stereotype as a collective view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are supposed to be possessed by men and women, or the several roles that ought to be carried out by members of a particular social group (OHCHR, 2014). In the context of this study, gender stereotypes can be summarised as all the negative and positive attributes ascribed to women today that have in one way or the other, projected through films (as we stay a bit longer with the negative attributes). Furthermore, as revealed by OHCHR (2014), a gender stereotype is, at its peak, a general belief that has the potential of causing its holder (viewers in the context of this study) to make assumptions about members of the subject group (women for the purpose of this study). Unfortunately, when these assumptions are deemed harmful and unhealthy to the members of that group, it becomes human rights concerns (OHCHR, 2014).

Unarguably, the mass media (film in the study context), although described as a powerful institution of social orientation and transformation (Doghudje, 2019), is accused by many as being used to perpetrate this gender bias/ stereotypes against women, and has triggered lots of concerns from many especially women from all walks of life, given its potential and power of shaping, influencing, and determining how women in Nigeria are perceived globally, and how the society behaves towards them. More so, it has been argued by scholars that despite the alarming rate of gender biases portrayed by the media and the concerns that have over the years been raised by concerned individuals, no genuine attempt has been made by filmmakers and cinema in the Nollywood industry to address and project the position of women in a positive and more dignifying manner (Onyenanke et al. 2019), rather, filmmakers and cinema have tremendously encouraged the negative portrayal of women, especially in today's contemporary society.

Evidencing the above statements, Adewoye et al., (2014) citing Okunna (2000; 1996) maintained that Nigerian cinema often represents women as wayward, materialistic, lazy, subservient, materialistic, of low standard, dependent on men, and considered fit for only domestic chores especially in the bedroom (the other room) as well as the kitchen, rather than professional careers.

Contradicting the images and statutes often portrayed of women and conferred on women in most of the Nollywood movies are the opposite pictures of men conceived, narrated, written, and depicted in these movies. Most of these Nollywood movies portray men as "Demi-gods; responsible; brave; superior and hardworking in all ramifications to women (even when it is glaring that the man has nothing or next to offer in his home and the woman does bears all the physical burdens including financial); decent to mention but a

few... According to Gill (2007), the Cinema/ Movie industry depicts men as dominant and strong, while women are seen as weak vessels, objectified as victims of circumstances. Corroborating the above assertion, Agbogu and Igbokwe (2015), maintain that the role and characteristics assigned to women in the Nigerian Nollywood industry is due to the male chauvinism which is prevalent in the Nigerian culture- where men are seen and classified as superior to women. As a result of this, Nigerian men still conveniently perceive and treat the women in their lives and/or families as their property, objects bought and maintained, and objects to be conquered and controlled, and regrettably, as mere tools considered adequate for the celebration of patriarchal power (Okuyade, 2011).

Scholars argue that the objectification of women, stereotyping, and underrepresentation in the entertainment industry has lingered for so long and cuts across all forms of media communication, including print journalism, music, advertising, video games, cartoons, and films. As these have given women images of appealing sex objects (see Ruto et al., 2020; Mitchell 2011; Abiola, 2013). But the Film and filmmakers have been said to be the chief perpetrators of these acts.

Additionally, several studies have concentrated on the stereotypical portrayal of women, especially in the Nollywood industries (see Duru, 2008; Abiola 2013; Prinsloo 2011; Aromona, 2016). In a study conducted by Aromona (2016), the conventional representations of women over the past five years have not improved neither has there been any positive changes in that regard. While Nollywood portrayal of men seems to have positively evolved, keeping pace with social trends, the portrayal of women has remained the same, a situation Aromona (2016) described as “stuck in the past”. Sadly, this opinionated representation of women as portrayed in Nigerian films affects the progress and achievement of women in the past and contributes to the continual pressure experienced by women almost on daily basis, because of sexism and gender biases from the patriarchal environment (Onyenankeya et al. 2019). Also, Abiola (2013) attributes this negative portrayal of women and biases in the Nollywood movies to the African culture.

Among the many forms of stereotypical representation of women in the Nollywood films is objectification. This means the representation of women as images of appealing sex tools and/or objects in the media. Sadly, this act is committed by men (perpetrators) against women (victims). This has been recurring in most current films- degrading women; misrepresenting women; tarnishing the images of women globally; and rendering womanhood incompetent, and misfits to their society at large. As such, requiring urgent attention and re-representation in the entertainment industry by all concerned.

Although the crux of this paper is not to question the place of men in the society as most African countries are highly patriarchal (for sake of clarity and benefits of doubts), but to push for the need to utilise the media (Nollywood movies) to address the present issue and to change the narratives about portraying women as objects of sex gratification to men, as this would aid tremendously in

remedying the already lost, decaying image of women as portrayed in movies, as well as, aid in balancing the gender depictions in movies.

Thus, in other to justify the need for this study and its importance, and to x-ray the present situation regarding the negative portrayal of women given the length of time this issue has become contentious among scholars, especially women, this study critically examines the newly released Nollywood movie- Shanty Town. This analysis would help in ascertaining what the present situation is regarding this stereotypical representation, and to also guide in the study recommendations.

Reviewing the Movie ‘Shanty Town’ (General Synopsis)

Written by Xavier Ighorodje; Shirley Ann Ede; and Ayomikun Pasada, Produced in the year 2022 by Chinenye Chini Nworah, and directed by Dimeji Ajibola, Shanty Town is the story of courtesans attempting to flee from the dangerous and vindictive grasp of a notorious kingpin Scar (played by Chidi Mokeme) and his politician Godfather, Chief Fernandez (played by Richard Mofe Damijo) who owns and sponsors the cartel in a town (Shanty Town) and using his thugs Scar (played by Chidi Mokeme), Colorado (played by Zubby Michael) and so many others to engage in, and perpetrate all manners of illegal activities ranging from-drug peddling, killings, organ harvesting, rituals, using women as collateral, using women as sex toys/ objects to different politicians and in turn, getting paid. In this movie, men were portrayed as way superior to women, and women were portrayed as objects of collateral for debts owed by their fathers; as sex tools for men’s gratifications; and portrayed as constantly subjected to men begging for their freedom even when they are, by right, due to be free.

In this movie, Scar played by Chidi Mokeme was constantly seen oppressing women and denying them their freedom.

In episode 4 (14:14), Jackie (played by Mercy Eke), walked into Scar’s office to demand her freedom given that she had served him and paid her dues in Shantytown; Scar stood up to her and began to mishandle all parts of her body (breasts, buttocks) like objects in a baby’s hands. In the words of Scar “Ike eji amatu” which means buttocks used for illustration.

In the same episode, Shalewa (played by Nancy Isime) had gone in with the sum of 500,000,00 naira to pay for what her father owed Scar that made them use as a collateral by Scar. Scar did not only tell her that her whole body belonged to him, but also made her understand that she needed to buy her freedom with the sum of 15,000,000,00 naira after calculating all the expenses made on her head. Thus, making this freedom an impossible task.

Buttressing the above-mentioned point that men are always portrayed as constantly wanting to subdue women and make them appear worthless, is the portrayal of Jackie in shanty town (episode 2; 28:14) after she gained her freedom. Scar still trailed her on her way to another town to start a new life, and brutally murdered her, telling her that as long as he lived, she would never be free from him. Scar, even after murdering Jackie and decapitating her, was still shown caressing her lifeless body and at the same time,

satisfying his urges. Surprisingly, a woman, Ene, came after Jackie has been murdered to harvest her organs for money. This shows how some women have accepted the norm and do not find it offensive; hence, their interpretations of such stories into play.

In Episode 1 (29:25), Scar needed to shower and asked Collorado to run his bath, after that, Scar was portrayed comfortably lying in the bath all covered in bubbles and relaxed, while the women were half naked caressing him just for relaxation.

In episode 3 (12:47), Shalewa had finished satisfying Chief Fernandez's son Femi (played by Paul Okoye) and was on her way home. Having encountered Femi's father downstairs, Chief Fernandez wanting to confirm if Shalewa was trying to make away with his valuables, given his past experiences with a beautiful damsel he once encountered that took him to the seventh heaven, asked his guard to strip Shalewa naked and had her searched by this thug. More so, in trying to drive home his point, described Shalewa as his son's playthings and in his words "one of his playthings, right?" So, a woman is not only seen and used as an object in the hands of men as portrayed in the movies but also referred to as items. Chief Fernandez was also seen touching Shalewa's breasts.

In episode 4 (35:55), women were blindfolded, tagged, and lined up (by their fellow woman) in a club, and were treated as auction materials where men had the pleasure of biddings, and possessing for a short period of time for their sexual escapades and gratifications; in the words of Ene (played by Nse Ikpe Etim) "thank you for the bid". Thus, presenting women as mere objects of gratifications; thus, the number tags placed on their bodies. The women were seen dancing, twerking, with their almost naked bodies, while the men were portrayed as responsible- all dressed in their moral decent native attires.

Also, in episode 4 (12:28), women, including Inem (played by Ini Edo) were seen dancing and twerking for men to be picked as objects that they are portrayed and perceived as in today's contemporary society, and as revealed by some films. At the end of the parade, a woman emerges as the winner, and in the words of Ene, "the second angel of the night is number 2", because a man, chief Fernandez had indicated interest in Inem and had seen in her, what gratifies his emotions/ sexual desires.

In the same episode, Chief Fernandez and Inem were seen in a room, Fernandez was seated comfortably on a couch commanding Inem to take off her clothes. When Inem expressed some objections, Chief Fernandez yelled at her and exclaimed, take off your clothe! When Inem tried to seduce him in a calm manner, he pounced on her, threw her on the bed, covered her mouth with an object, cuffed her hands, stripped her naked leaving only her pants and bra on, and abusing her for wearing different colours of pant and bra. In his words "look at you, they didn't tell you that I don't do different colours, that I do only to match", whilst still whipping her mercilessly. After which he poured some ointments on her and rapped her without mercy. In a bedroom escapade that would have been mutually engaged in and enjoyed. The following day, chief Fernandez came into the room, saw Inem still lying in pains and on the floor, asked one of his aids to tidy up his mess. In the words of

his aid (played by Ali Nuhu) "I trust the night was eventful" and in chief Fernandez's words "clean up this mess".

Negative portrayals of women- Summary of themes revealed from the Shanty Town Movie

The authors identified the following themes in the movie shanty town: (a) portrayal of women as thieves; (b) portrayal of women as objects for collateral; (c) portrayal of women as indecent and wayward; (d) portrayal of woman as whores; (e) portrayal of women as victims; (f) portrayal of women as inferior and subjective/ dependent to men; (g) portrayal of women as weak and useless; (h) portrayal of women as objects and tools for men's sexual gratifications; (i) money-making ventures; and finally as (j) as brain-washed individuals who lack confidence in themselves.

Summary of the negative themes revealed the shanty town film above.

Although the negative representation and projections of women by filmmakers/ cinema in Nigeria have ignited quite a good number of concerns from many from all walks of life including academic scholars and given that the cinema is greatly accused of failing to make genuine efforts in addressing and projecting the place of women in a favourable, positive, and systematic manner as argued by Onyenakeya et al. (2019). Regrettably, these negative portrayals of women are still hugely evident in today's contemporary movies as evident in the movie shanty town, and as chronicled in the preceding paragraph. This is, however, a clear indication that this stereotypical representation of women (which has been highly contentious and drawn attention by many including scholars) has, sadly, not been given any favourable and considerable attention by those concerned given its prevalence in most Nollywood films and has remained unaddressed.

Consequently, this shows that what matters to most filmmakers is the profit they stand to gain and the entertainment/ gratification these films provide to the end users, without considering the negative impact of such portrayals on some of their end users/ viewers. Thus, until positive steps are taken by filmmakers or by entertainment content creators in general and certain narratives rewritten and readdressed to redeem the images and the place of women in the societies (locally and internationally), this issue would remain highly contentious and debatable.

Conclusion

Although this movie was produced and targeted towards entertainment, the portrayal of women in this movie is so derogatory and calls for immediate reassessment. Women, generally, occupy important places and play vital roles in the society, as such, should not be portrayed in such negative lights, especially through films that have the potential of reaching heterogenous audiences. The constant portrayal of Nigerian women in such negative, irresponsible, derogatory, and demeaning manner would do more harm than good because it would constantly project women in a negative light.

Although it is near impossible for Nigerian filmmakers to suddenly rewrite or change the narratives as regards the stereotypical representation of women in the entertainment industry given the

length of time this issue has lingered and being contended. However, certain strategies should be put in place to help salvage the images of women through representation by filmmakers and those in the entertainment industry.

One of these strategies is already encoded in the Jackie's and Shalewa's characters who up until her brutal murder sought and fought for her freedom, and in Shalewa's character, was still fighting for her freedom to lead a decent and purposeful life. Women should be represented in Nollywood movies as autonomous- those who can make decisions for themselves devoid of any fears; and responsible in the society including the dress modes.

Secondly, although filmmakers and actors (who interpret these roles) engage in filmmaking, acting for profit and entertainment, female actresses should begin to rebuff some of these roles. By so doing, the filmmakers would understand the need for equality in gender representation in films. In other words, the fight for gender equality in films begins and ends with women.

It is pertinent to note that the authors are not in any way trying to criticise the efforts of shanty movie producers, writers, and directors, they are simply canvassing for equal representation of gender in films. As such, certain questions are raised: why are filmmakers not portraying men in negative lights- naked; objects to be used by many and for satisfaction; weak; good for organ harvesting; societal misfits, to mention but a few... If these portrayals are healthy and are acceptable norms in today's contemporary society, then, it should equally cut across all genders, as what is good for the geese should also be good for the gander.

Lastly, this is a clear indication that the Nigerian Film and Videos Censors Board is not functional and there is a need for them to step up their game and ensure that films are adequately censored to bring positive and balanced portrayals in the society.

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