

THE ROLE OF FILM IN THE QUEST FOR FEMININE VOICES: NOLLYWOOD VIDEO FILMS IN FOCUS.

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Abstract

There is a call for gender balance and parity. Film has also been seen as an effective means of propagating information to the masses. The message of the film sticks in the memory and influences behavioural patterns. This study examined the role which film has played and is playing in either fostering feminism or aiding ills against women. The research analyzed some Nollywood films with the aim of finding out the role such films have played in the quest for a feminine voice. The study was concluded by giving recommendations on how best a film can be used in projecting feminism.

Introduction

Film is a two edged sword which can either foster or curb inimical practices. The film medium is an instrument of restitution of social, religious, cultural and societal order. Its influence on its heterogeneous audience cannot be over emphasized. Film is a corrective tool when properly utilized. On the other hand, film can inculcate bad habits and practices when negatively utilized. This is attributed to the fact that the film medium is a machinery capable of influencing its audience. It is important to note that a great affinity exists between film and its audience. Therefore, the nature of the treatment of issues in a film can either positively affect lives or negatively do same.

Feminism may appear to have been over flogged considering the contributions of various writers and scholars on issues concerning women. An improvement on the status of women is quite evident in the recent political recognition given to women by Government of various Nations. Women also occupy some sensitive positions in Nigeria. Nevertheless, this does not mean that women are no longer subjected to ordeals as well as obnoxious practices especially in the rural

areas of the country where lots of women are uninformed about what constitutes their rights as well as what constitutes a violation of their rights.

This study tends to ascertain the extent to which Nigerian video films have either fostered the liberation of women or the extent to which these films have aided the ordeals and injustices meted on women. Whether film has served as an interventionist medium or whether it has fostered the promotion of our culturally pristine obnoxious practices within Africa and Nigeria in particular is of the moment. The study will examine the status of women as presented by scholars and Nigerian video films.

The Concept of Feminism

The feminine struggle has generated a lot of questions such as: the rationale behind the struggle? What has necessitated the struggle for the place of women? Ab initio, what was the position of women? Scholars have made much efforts to ascertain and trace the origin of violence against women. In asserting the position of women from inception, U.M, Mafa and L. Bukar as cited by Tony Nwazuoke, gave a pictorial illustration regarding the position and the treatment of women in Roman civilization which states that:

The wife was the purchased property of her husband. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office, be a witness, surety, tutor, curator; she could not adopt, be adopted or make will or contract (32)

Feminism refers to movements geared towards the welfare of the women. It tends to refer to diverse variety of beliefs and ideas that concern women. According to *New World Encyclopedia*:

Feminism comprises a number of social, cultural and political movements, theories and moral philosophies concerned with gender inequalities and equal rights for women. The term "feminism" originated from the French word "feminism", coined by the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, and was first used in English in the 1890s, in association with the movement for equal political and legal rights for women (1).

✓ The Feminine Gender Ordeal

The quest for the feminine voice is an important struggle owing to the fact that our societies especially many parts of the African continent have arrogated much power to the male folks, and have therefore diminished feminism. The female folks have been subjected to inhuman and obnoxious practices which are not in tandem with nature and which are equally repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience. Practices which threaten the existence of women include: widowhood rites and rituals, male child preference and dominance, female genital mutilation, denial of right to inheritance of a deceased husband's property, forceful marriage, rape, women and girl child trafficking, male preference to education rather than the females, sexual harassment especially in work places, and a whole lot of injustices on women.

It is still alarming that at each stage, the woman is still made to pass through practices that are degrading and as such diminishes her status. In a 2001 UNICEF sponsored project on women and violence termed "A Wake up Call" it was asserted that:

Violence against women throughout the life circle derives essentially from culturally traditional patterns, in particular, the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices and all acts of extremism linked to race, sex, language and religion that perpetuate the lower status accords to women in the family, work place, community and society (201).

The above citation is a true representation of an African society with reference to some parts of Nigeria where matriarchy is de-emphasized despite the various Conventions held within the various parts of the world including Nigeria on the status of women. For instance, the Eastern part of Nigeria still places importance on male child preference, performance and observation of widowhood rites, denial of rights to inheritance of a deceased property and so on. Ifeoma .P. Enemo chronicles that:

In Nawgu Anambra State, the widow, naked is taken to a shrine called Ajani by four naked men (priest) with whom she would have sexual intercourse so as to appease the spirit of her late

husband. Her consent is immaterial. After that, some Umuada will escort her to the stream to wash and then return home with them.

At the entrance of the house, she is given a cloth to cover herself before she enters the house. Also, in another area, the widow is led naked by Umuada to a stream where she would have sexual intercourse with ten men! Every part of her body will then be shaved by the Umuada, and she bathes and goes home (61-62).

Eze Eunice further laments that she:

Was taken out of her house upon her husband's death. Her head was shaved, she was kept in one room in the family's compound for a whole year. Eunice was not allowed to leave the family compound, change her clothes, use soap for showering, or cut or comb her hair. She spent the year in a corner of a room that was a dirty floor. Eunice survived the Widowhood Practice even with tuberculosis. Says Eunice, it was so painful to go through the mourning period. I could not go out of the house. I could not attend any festival or congregation. I suffered from many sleepless nights. I was so depressed. Many times I was in shock and disillusioned, not able to distinguish dreams from reality (1).

These inhuman practices are gross violation of the basic fundamental human rights of a person irrespective of gender. In a 2012 British Council publication, it was stated that:

Nigeria's 80.2 million women and girls have significantly worse life chances than men and also their sisters in comparable societies. Violence compounds and reinforces this disadvantage and exclusion (iii).

These reports and instances of right violation are but little reportage out of numerous unheard similar situations.

It is to these violations of women's rights that series of conventions and declarations on women's rights were made such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), established in 1946, the Convention on the

Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution of Others, 1949, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1952, the Convention on Consent of Marriage, 1962, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993 and many other Conventions and Declarations on women's rights. Tony Nwazuke in his discussion on the purpose of CEDAW asserts that:

CEDAW is aimed at the elimination of discriminatory behavior and practices detrimental to the exercise and enjoyment by women on human rights and fundamental freedoms on the principle of equality with men (34).

He further quotes Article 1 of CEDAW which defines discrimination against women as:

Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, on human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, culture, civil or any other field (Nwazuke: 34).

The Transformation Viability of Video Films

Film has a great influence on society. Film is an effective communicative medium which performs relative functions as that of mass media. Nnamdi Okenwa *et al* summarize the roles of the media in a society as:

Undoubtedly, the mass media possess enormous power both to influence and change behaviour at the information level. One of the most important functions that the media perform is to inform the public, create awareness of issues and generate public debate on them (99).

One can therefore deduce from the above quote that the media inform as well

as expose issues to the knowledge of its audience. Film is a process of communication and education. Apart from the entertainment values of film, it constitutes a strong medium through which people can learn new things. In affirmative, Clementina Abone posits that:

Film as a process of communication can be used to instruct and educate the growing generation of Nigerians in the schools since teaching and learning through film is proven and accepted method by educational establishment (28).

The effect of film is strong on its audience. Films seem to have the power to take people away from their immediate environment for a while and transcend them into the world of the film at that point of time. Hyginus Ekwuazi is of the conviction that "with the audience members, you abandon the real world, the world of your everyday existence; you are absorbed into the reel world, the world of the film" (13).

Synopsis of Selected Films

The Nigerian video film titled *The Three Widows* which was produced by Simon Emelu Chibuzor showcases the ordeal and widowhood rites which three princesses by the names Naomi, Azira, Tuara are meant to pass through only on the presumption of the death of the prince (their husband) which was believed that one of them may have necessitated or caused. The Prince (Tanga) is presented as an educated person who does not adhere to traditions of the land. Ironically he decides to marry the third wife on the premise that the second wife (Naomi) is scanned to be pregnant of a baby girl. The Prince orders that Naomi terminates the pregnancy. He further marries the third wife (Azira). The Prince is diagnosed of food poison and is reported dead by the family Doctor. The King's health worsens. The Prince's corpse is said to be undergoing autopsy in order to ascertain the actual food poison. As the autopsy is going on, the wives are forced to take oath of innocence as their hairs are shaved by the Umuadas. Azira is mainly suspected to have murdered the Prince since they were together when he slumped. The Chief Priest is consulted and he says that the princesses have no hand in the death of the Prince. Azira becomes pregnant and the royal house rejects her on the grounds that the presumed Prince died four days after marrying her and that the custom of the land demands that the Prince does not have sexual intercourse with the wife until after seven days of marriage. For Azira to

prove her innocence of being pregnant for the Prince, she is forced to swear an oath. The Chief Priest who is compromised uses his spell to make Azira appear guilty. The story climaxes as the truth unravels. The Prince surfaces having been treated secretly by the Family Doctor and a Drunk. Perpetrators are brought to justice by the god of the land and Azira is pronounced innocent.

The film *Mama Cash* by Ossy Affason Movies centers on a family where the mother of the house (Onyema) emphasizes the importance of making money no matter how. Onyema forces the first son (Ndubuisi) out of the house because of his poor economic status. Ifedigo the second son becomes her favorite because he is financially buoyant. Onyema cajoles Esther into marrying Ifedigo knowing full well that Esther is Ndubuisi's fiancée. Esther forfeits her education to marry Ifedigo. Onyema also compels Ego her only daughter into marrying Elvis (a rich drug Barron) against her wish to marry her love, Benson (a court clerk). Ndubuisi had earlier emphasized on Ego attending the university. Reversal of events takes place as Ifedigo becomes poor and Ndubuisi returns home rich. Elvis dies while trafficking in drugs and Ego returns home heavily pregnant, dejected and with no source of income to take care of her condition. Ndubuisi now becomes Onyema's favorite.

Issues

It is quite evident that these scenarios presented in the films used as case studies are reflections of the ordeals suffered by the female folk in the larger community. Thus, this establishes the relationship between arts and society. A work of art is usually a reflection of the society. The point of argument will be to ascertain the manner of presentation of these anomalies. For instance, the message of *The Three Widows* would have been stronger if the three princesses had stood their grounds through enforcing their rights by not being subjected to the widowhood rites. Considering the modern setting and era in the film, the princesses were presented as informed individuals and as such should have rebutted such pristine obnoxious practices. Their refusal wouldn't have tampered with the structure/plot of the film. Rather it would have gone a long way to proffer solutions to audience who are likely to become victims in future. Most Nigerian video films expose these ills and injustices without informing the populace on how to tackle such anomalies. In most cases where these video films offer solutions to problems highlighted, the

solutions do not educate the female folks on the place of the law and the rights at their disposals. Such salient issues are treated on the surface or are resolved by the intervention of some mystical powers. John Bittner posits that:

The message of the movies, like a bullet would be received by the individual directly, and it would have immediate effect on him, persuading him to do exactly the way the movie message advocates... (41-42).

From John Bittner's assertion one can infer that if for instance a video film through its content and resolution of issues leaves its female viewers at the merciful hands of men who perpetrate these acts, nature and mystical interventions (either the acts of gods or God), a female viewer sees these means as her only resort. Bashiru Akande Laisisi supports that:

Most Nigerian films rely on miracles and supernatural forces to resolve conflict as it was during the Greek era where writers of tragedies usually resolve conflicts with the appearance of the gods or other supernatural forces, most Nollywood films rely essentially on the power of miracles or supernatural power of the gods to resolve conflict (182).

The Nigerian video films most often present the Nigerian woman as a weakling who cannot defend herself from external harm. In most films where the woman is strong willed, she uses her sexuality to her own detriment. A good majority of Nollywood films portray women negatively. In x-raying the negative portrayal of women in films especially in Nollywood, Bayo Oluphunda strongly supports that:

For ages, women have been portrayed as the weaker sex in literature, film, and eventually television. This funnels into the age-old gender narrative and the power imbalance. The truth is that though movies may be reflections of the violence women suffer in the larger society, in actual fact, they also make them acceptable. Media shape our understanding of sexual violence, and there's a line between art and torture porn. So, if it is normal to hit a woman or gang-rape a girl in a movie, it also in reality emboldens the rapist because he knows he can get away with it. For some time now, if the women in a *Nollywood* movie are not

labelled as witches, raped or assaulted, they are portrayed as sluts, tramps, or greedy, grasping, hardened characters out to deceive everyone and use their sexuality as a means to their own selfish ends (1).

Mama Cash portrays women as people that are solely dependent on men for financial breakthrough. As we see in the film, Esther forfeits her education just to marry the rich Ifeadijo. Ego is also compelled by the mother to marry Elvis (a rich drug dealer). Here, money is emphasized above love and education. This is a replication of the present day Nigeria where ladies are money conscious. As the events reverse Esther and Ego could not help their situations and family because they lack the will power to fend for themselves (lack of education and confidence in ones abilities). This movie highlights the problems encountered when the girl child is uneducated. The character of Onyema in one of the situations says that "no matter how educated a woman is, she ends up in the kitchen". *Mama Cash* accomplished this statement by not elevating the status of the women shown in the movie. Ironically, the present day Nigerian man would prefer to marry an educated woman who will help provide for the family as well as fight for the rights of the family when he (the man) is gone.

What may be classified as the modern relegation of women to the background is the constant portrayal of women as cheap commodities in films. Nudity on the part of women in Nigerian video films is a hydra headed phenomenon. First, nudity on the part of women has become an effective means of ensuring video film sales. "sex sells is the use of sexual or erotic imagery (also called "sex appeal") in advertising to draw interest to and to help sell a particular product" (wikipedia: 1). Secondly, it has become a means through which ladies showcase their natural depositions without knowing that it rather diminishes their relevance and importance. A large number of the male populace sees ladies as people that can be bought over with money, thereby losing the pride and sense of decency expected from women and human race. This still refers to the status of women as presented in the early Roman era as cited in this study, that women are just but a purchase of their husbands.

A critical observation of the performance of these rites shows that the women carry out these rites on themselves on the orders and instructions of the male folks.

One wonders the rationale behind a woman molesting, beating up, circumcizing and doing a whole lot of injustice to another woman in the name of cultural practices even when she (the perpetrator) had passed through such stage and had undergone such traumatic experiences in life.

Conclusion

The home video is one of the most circulating image builders and opinion moulders. Film should therefore be explored towards fostering feminism. Abiola Odejide reiterates that “the mass media can by-pass communication channels and authority structures and reach people directly. They have repercussion on policies, tradition, education, religion and economy (6)”. Film being an aspect of mass media with its heterogeneous audience should be used to address problems associated with the female folks.

Recommendations

This study hereby advocates for the education of the girl child through restructuring and totally revamping the primary and secondary school curricula throughout the federation in order to accommodate the basic and fundamental human rights. When the girl child is informed of her rights, she would avert her being victimized.

There should be a platform for film makers and human rights advocates. Such forum should be to educate film makers on the importance of treating issues concerning women in such a way that the women will be educated on what their rights are as well as prevent such violations in future. Films should educate and entertain. The entertainment values of films should not be emphasized at the expense of its educative value. Nigerian video films should serve as an interventionist medium. Considering the fact that there is still high rate of illiteracy amongst people living in the rural areas, one wonders how well informed they are on their rights. Many a times, seminars, forums and symposiums are being held and journals and articles being published on gender issues. The basic questions are; how accessible are these publications to the women within the rural areas? If they are made available to these women, how do they comprehend the contents of the articles? What is the level of sensitization on gender issues? It is to these questions posed supra that the

film becomes development communication medium when properly explored.

This research calls for NGO's on issues concerning women to maximize the transformation potentials of film towards educating the populace on feminism. NGO's can get involved in film making and utilize its development communication ability. There should be more female producers who will champion the course of feminism just like what Emem Isong (Nollywood female producer) is doing with her Royal Art Film Academy.

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