

**FEMALE FILMMAKERS: TOWARDS RECONSTRUCTING WOMEN'S IMAGES IN
NOLLYWOOD FILMS**

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Dedication

To my sons who were my steady companions in this rewarding journey. Thank you for understanding and bearing with me through all the stages of this research. Ajibola—the young professor and Cool Kikiola as you both like to be addressed, your presence, energy and love kept me going. I cannot forget your shouts of joy when you heard that I finally submitted my thesis; you were immensely happy because “mummy will finally become a ‘Doctor’”. You daily inspire me to do and be more.

Declaration

I declare that the conceptualization and the execution of this thesis titled Female Filmmakers: Towards reconstructing women’s images in Nollywood films is the result of my own original work, except where due reference is made. This thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not currently submitted to any institution for any degree. I have identified the sources of all the information, whether quoted verbatim or paraphrased.

Name: Morountodun Joseph

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ABSTRACT

The last five years have produced a steady increase of women in creative and technical roles in Nollywood. Against the backdrop that women have mostly been portrayed in demeaning ways in a male-dominated industry, this research explores the films of four contemporary female filmmakers, and pays critical attention to the advancement of women's on-screen images and their narratives.

Through the textual analysis of films by four female filmmakers, namely Rukky Sanda, Michelle Bello, Stephanie Okereke-Linus and Omoni Oboli, whose films were produced between 2013 and 2016, I critically analyse their diverse stories, genres, themes and narrative styles, all of which are, however, centred on Nigerian women's contemporary experiences. I approach this research with the aim of seeking African feminist ways of reading the texts, since African feminists have questioned and challenged Western ideologies and called for African solutions to Africa's problems. Modupe Kolawole, for example, refutes the claim that African women's ideas about gender were learnt from the "global movement"; rather, some are inspired by accounts of African women's mobilization in the pre-colonial past, "individual women giants who transformed their societies in pre-colonial times, such as Nehanda of Zimbabwe, Nzinga of Angola, Nana Asantewa of Ghana" (2015:252). I approach the films using Catherine Acholunu's Motherism and Nnaemeka Obioma's Nego-feminism as conceptual frameworks.

With key attention paid to women's representation, I argue that representations of women in films, whether the product of male or female directors, are a construct of a larger cultural situation which cannot be dismissed, even though women are making efforts to use films as a tool for activism. However, for there to be an effective paradigm shift, patriarchy and traditions that oppress women are among the societal norms that must be addressed.

Morountodun Joseph
Cape Town, November 2018

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Employing African feminist theories as a framework, this study will critically examine selected Nigerian female filmmakers and map out their individual approaches to either redefining images of women or maintaining the stereotypical representations of women in an industry that is consistently challenged for misrepresentation of the roles and images of women. Nollywood films are often criticised for reflecting women in images of docility, domesticity, waywardness or redundancy amongst other unflattering images, particularly in films directed by men (God'spresence, 2007; Ukata, 2010; Bryce, 2012; Okocha & Akinwale, 2015). In the past, male-directed films were the focus of critics and researchers because of the incontestable dominance by men in the industry. It is hoped that, with the upsurge of female directors in the industry, these stereotypes will be met with positive counter narratives by women.

The slow but steady emergence of female filmmakers in Nigeria introduces fresh voices in a terrain largely controlled by men. There are expectations of new insights into African women's experiences when women tell their stories from their own point of view. Dipio succinctly points out that "the qualitative difference between a man and a woman is the new burst of energy a woman brings that has not yet been adequately used to address their common problems" (2014:13). A lot of attention has been drawn to the need for women to begin to step out as their own torchbearers. A forum tagged "Nollywood and the Dynamics of Representation", held in Lagos in 2010, drew attention to the need to address the undesirable impressions about women in Nollywood films. The forum emphasised that Nollywood, being a principal influence of popular culture in Africa, ought to seek ways of positively representing women in a manner that would empower others (Bryce, 2012:76). While there is still a paucity of female filmmakers in Nollywood, filmmaking provides an opportunity for women to break away from total dependence on men, particularly regarding telling African women's stories in films, representing women in more varied roles and rejecting rigid stereotypes.

Feminists believe that male-authored films have failed to represent women in a positive light, or in the reality of their existence and that leading female directors should feel obliged to speak against subordination. As Abah cautions, "the prevalence of the culture-bound traditional

definition of domestic roles for women is one of the reasons why change or diversity in the portrayal of the domestic lives of women would be very long in coming to Nollywood” (cited in Bryce, 2012:72). Undisputedly, women in Nigeria have been associated with myths and societal stigmas which have developed into stereotypes, including in films that limit their participation as active members of the society (Emelobe, 2015:533). Lindiwe Dovey’s description of the initial representation of women in African cinema is positive. In her article, “New Looks,” she states that “It is an understatement to call the body of work generally termed ‘African Cinema’ profoundly feminist”. She argues that right from the start of cinema in Africa, as far back as the 1960s, “there has been a consistent stream of films that focus on strong women characters, powerful and positive matriarchal cultures, and a critique of tyrannical, patriarchal cultures – whether colonial, neo-colonial or postcolonial” (2012:18). Although she acknowledges that the idea of one ‘African Cinema’ is a ‘myth’, she identifies the collective effort of a region to uphold women’s values, stating that it is “important to recognise how rare it is in the history of cinema that filmmakers from a particular region have collectively paid such attention to upholding the value of women and to critiquing patriarchy” (2012:19). She cites the examples of *Borom Sarret* (1963) and *Black Girl* (1996) both directed by Sembene Ousmane and *Sambizanga* (1972) directed by Sarah Maldoror, amongst others (Dovey, 2012: 18-19). Sembène Ousmane’s works uphold the value of women from his first film *Borom Sarret* to his last, *Moolaadé* (2004), and justify the description of him as a male feminist (Fofana: 2012:2). However, decades later in Anglophone West Africa, the focus is not quite the same. The objectification of women started from the first identified Nollywood film, *Living in Bondage* (1992), which depicts a feeble-minded, loyal and diligent wife, used as a get-rich-quick object of money by her husband. Many films have followed suit, but at the same time, a number of films have been deliberate in their effort to tell women’s stories through dignifying representations.

This study is not only interested in reading films in terms of their contents, but with a contextual understanding, including the extent to which the films reflect cultural hegemony. Like other artists, filmmakers cannot claim to be neutral. They, both male and female, employ a combination of their own distinctive experiences and ideologies, and their roles as members of a society in making films. This points to the fact that social contextual forces, such as the values and ideals of the community to which they belong, and their personal visions and interests, are reflected in the content of their works. Audiences also have a role to play. According to Dipio,

“the community, the artist and the film are linked”; for this reason, “it is important for the audience to recognise themselves and their history in the cinematic representation” (Dipio, 2014: 14) and this should incite questions.

My choice to focus on female directors was imperative at the commencement of this research. This is primarily because I consider it irresponsible to ignore stories of women who are so often regarded as custodians of memories, and women directors who invariably have a direct and personal involvement in stories. Women and cinema share a unique relationship, as Dipio points out, “both cinema and women are custodians and transmitters of memories passed on to the next generation” (2014:14). Indeed, stories should not be told from a single, and very often, stereotyped perspective, but from diverse viewpoints and experiences and this includes those of women. The comparative dearth of a body of female-directed films in circulation in Nigeria has further kindled my interest in this study to understand how women are portrayed in the works of female directors and also to identify existing gaps. Furthermore, not only are women misrepresented in film, which will be discussed in chapter two, they are also understudied. Meijer argues that “even literary criticism is predominantly male and the enunciation paradoxically focuses on the male critic rather than female artist’s work” (cited in Dipio 2014:16). The works of female filmmakers in Nollywood follow a similar pattern of attracting inadequate criticism, thus relegating the value of women’s work to the margins.

From the foregoing, it is clear that more critical attention should be paid to female filmmakers in Nollywood. Moreover, I am interested in determining whether female filmmakers replicate patriarchal gender patterns in Nigeria or are projecting a fresh image of contemporary African women. This critical analysis will put female directors to the test in their representations of women in films within Nigeria’s diverse sociocultural contexts.

Objectives of Study

The principal objective of this study is to provide an analysis of the representations of gender by female filmmakers. Further, there is a gap in terms of critical literature this study seeks to fill regarding the kind and amount of critical attention given to the works of female artists in Nollywood. African women are beginning to share their experiences by utilizing the film medium to tell their stories which provide an alternative expression to an apparent flooding by male filmmakers. This thesis highlights and raises several other questions such as:

- How do women represent women?
- How are women redefining the images of women in Nollywood films?
- What ideological messages are women passing on through their films?

Further, in the introductory chapters, I will be addressing the debate that the ‘images of women’ approach has generated.

Background: Nigerian Women, Culture and Patriarchy

Nigeria, like most African nations, has consistently been male-dominated in socio-economic, political and indeed the artistic, media and entertainment terrains. Patriarchy, which Heidi Hartman describes as “a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (cited in Oyewumi, 2003:48), is an indisputable reality in Nigeria. The patriarchal nature of the society sets the parameter for women’s structural position, and imposes the domestication of women. Patriarchy is hierarchical, and even though men lead other men, they are still unified in a common goal of dominating women (Oyewumi, 2003). The idea that women are inferior has been prevalent for so long that it has become legitimized in many parts of Africa. Men have continued to remain in seats of power and a lot of women have come to accept their own ‘weaknesses’. In the words of Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, a leading African theorist:

Most women accept their own natural inferiority from social training, punishments, deprivations or threats thereof. Many are socially raised to adulate, obey, and exploit men; blame, even hate other women and expect less proficiency from women, all perhaps in the hope of being rewarded by men. (2007:44)

Often times, women exploit men mostly for financial gains and this tells on the economic power men have over women. Ogundipe-Leslie has also argued about the use of patriarchy to box women as the principal transmitters of values, and this tradition makes it problematic for them to disentangle themselves from oppressive traditions. Patriarchy has kept women bound with the burden of so-called traditional heritage, not giving room for women to advance alongside their male counterparts. Several other scholars and theorists have articulated issues that surround the emancipation of women. They challenge how issues of female empowerment and

self-assertion are easily brushed over. Bolanle Awe, Micere Mugo, Helen Mugambi and Okonjo Ogunyemi, amongst others, have expressed their commitment, both theoretically and creatively, to the emancipation of women from the cords of silence. In her book, *Indigenous and Contemporary Gender Concepts and Issues in Africa* (2008), Ogundipe-Leslie addresses the seeming voiceless nature of African women. She states that African women are not silent, but the problem lies in the outright failure to search for their voices in the forms and manner with which they are presented (2004:44). What this suggests is that African women speak, however, their voices may not be loud or strong enough to break existing boundaries and they may not have access to power and public forums.

The last two decades have progressively given rise to feminist critics increasingly raising questions about what women's stories really involve, what they constitute, and how these stories are told: women's narratives should no longer be completely patterned on patriarchal narrative structures (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Adeleye-Fayemi, 1997). Some feminist scholars have pointed out that most narratives have more than a single story to tell; they should be told from both the male and female perspectives. King and Ferguson explain that "there is a need to hear women speak in their own voices so that we are invited into the ways women use language and experience to shape meanings on their own terms" (2011:3). This is to emphasise that the female voice provides first-hand narrations and reflections of experiences. Cultural impediments, however, have led women speaking both for themselves and for others to be often perceived to be arrogant and futile. This reflects deep-seated patriarchy present in many African cultures, where it is frowned upon for women to openly speak against patriarchy, either for themselves or for fellow women. It reflects the unpalatable space that the African woman occupies within her society, and this includes expectations to be silent in the face of oppression.

In some traditional societies such as in Northern Nigeria, as Stephanie Linus reveals in *Dry* (2014), there are cultural expectations for women to be domesticated primarily as mothers and wives, against their will. Therefore, while women are emancipating themselves and making efforts to liberate themselves, they are still tied to societal expectations. This inhibits gainful contributions women can make, not just to their families, but also to the society at large. In other words, these cultural impediments limit women to serving their family needs, so that individual achievements or aspirations are non-issues. As a result, some women are terrified into silence and those that are conscious enough to speak up are labelled as feminists—with negative

connotations. To this end, Catherine Acholonu (1998), whose work on Motherism will be explored more fully below, encourages women to embrace their individuality and break away from restrictions.

Culture, which is not innate, but largely learned and imbibed, plays a vital role in the way women are viewed in any given society. It sets the tone for ascribed gender roles which ripples into gender identity. This is seen in Carmela Garritano's *Women, Melodrama and Political Critique* as she looks to Teresa de Lauretis' concept of gender identity which is explained as emanating from social and cultural constructs and semiotics which gives meanings to individuals in the society (Garritano, 2000). The Nigerian film industry has steadily built on the rich and diversified cultural heritage Nigeria possesses. Describing culture, Adeyinka Ajayi notes that

Culture is the established pattern of behaviour among a people, an all-embracing and heterogeneous concept that encompasses every aspect of a man's [sic] life and experiences. It is perceived as a way of life or the totality of all human efforts and achievements in the struggle for survival in the midst of unfriendly and militant forces of nature (1998:409).

Olu Obafemi describes culture as being fundamental to all human existence and advancement. He emphasises that culture is dynamic and encompasses the way humans respond “to the challenges of life and living” (2011: 25). A people's culture informs their identity. We can gather, from the descriptions above, that for the most part, culture is acquired and experienced, therefore it can be transferred from one generation to another through a variety of modes, one of which is through media and communication (Ekeanyanwu, 2008). Unfortunately, aspects of the diverse Nigerian culture that are reflected in Nollywood films, especially regarding the portrayal of women, are mostly negative (Ukata: 2011).

Recent films like *The Real Side Chics* (2017) and *Sobi's Mystic* (2017) perpetuate the image of women as being wayward and as whores, which is in line with Dipio's assertion that being a whore is a common portrayal of women in the modern-urban context. These portrayals run contrary to Ogundipe and Acholonu's claim that, in some parts of Africa, such as the Igbo and Yoruba cultures, women are respected and treated as equals to men. Ogundipe explains this with reference to the priestess of Earth in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. She notes that, not only are women valuable, they are considered sacred because of their spiritual interactions. She states that women are charged with the exclusive responsibility of performing some of the most important rituals as priestesses, deities or Orisa of Yoruba culture. She further ascribes women's

sacredness to their contribution to reproduction –ability to give life, a power which only “God, the Creator and Supreme Being has” (2007:27). She states further that, in the Yoruba culture, it is not just a belief, but also a political and social practice that whatever a woman does not bless, will not flourish. Ogun dipe notes other aspects of a woman’s power such as her Spirituality, her ‘special connection to the spirit world’ and her body which is the ‘house of life’ (2007: 28-29). Some of these dignifying aspects of Nigerian cultures are not given proper attention in films. For example, in *The Real Side Chics*, mentioned above, a group of friends find themselves, one deliberately and another unintentionally, pressurizing married men for attention. One of the women, ID, who is aware of her ‘boyfriend’s’ marital status, throws herself at him and threatens to deal with his wife when she finds out about her (ID’s) involvement with her husband.

Cinema and women share an interesting relationship as curators and propagators of cultures. Since there are no longer traditional griots who retell history, the filmmaker may find him/herself in a position of a modern griot whose stories, like Sembène’s, transcend mere documentation and creatively rewrite important aspects of history. It is important for women to remove all impeding shackles of culture and take deliberate steps to rewrite their stories for growing audiences in Africa and across the globe. Going by the number of films sold per year, Nollywood audiences around the world are ready markets in which to invest stories. Moradewun Adejunmobi, citing Ogunbayo, gives an estimate of the sales a single film can realise. In her article “Charting Nollywood’s Appeal Globally and Locally”, she states that within Nigeria, “a successful film might sell between 50,000 and 120,000 copies”. The successful Nollywood blockbuster, *Osofia in London*, is “reported to have sold 400,000 copies in 2004” She rightly claims that “one would have to multiply these figures several times over to come close to the number of people who might actually watch each film within and outside Nigeria” (2010: 107).

Representations of Women in African Films and in Filmmaking

As the surge towards African independence gained impetus after World War II, many creative figures, such as Chinua Achebe, focused on projecting stories about Africa, against the stereotyped images of a people without identity and the history that was projected of them by the West. Dipio notes that “the African was often absent from the spotlight and, if at all present, was part of the bizarre and exotic objects that challenge Western heroisms” (2014:11). However, African literary patriarchs in a desperate bid to present the world with true African stories, often

forgot the important roles women played in the society and their contributions to liberation. From as early as the 1950's, narratives had been dominated by writers who told stories from the male point of view. Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Elechi Amadi, amongst others, presented African cultures and traditions from the male-oriented perspective, giving women little or no voice in their narratives. It was indeed of grave importance for them, especially during the 1960's wave of African writing, to combat cultural imperialism. However, women were neglected, and stories were told with no female heroes. In their feeble attempt to showcase Nigerian women, they often used derogatory metaphors. Flora Nwapa, the woman who eventually saw the need to write stories of women she had seen and experienced, which was missing in Nigerian male-authored books, suggests that, unlike in Senegalese author/film director Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) and South African writer Peter Abrahams' *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956), male literary fathers in Nigeria often depict "women negatively or in their subordination to men" (1998: 92).

In Nigerian literature particularly, one may refer to one of the most celebrated novels of African history, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). There are many instances of undignified portrayals of women. Except for Chielo, the priestess, Achebe conspicuously did not have any female character with substantive agency in the novel. The other women who were mentioned in the novel were presented more or less like 'second-class' citizens, having little or no say for themselves or the things around them. An oft-quoted example is Okonkwo's wife who is violated twice. On one occasion he is chastised, not for mishandling his wife, but for doing so during the period of peace thereby disrupting the communal flow being observed. (Nevertheless, it should be noted that feminist critics and scholars like Linda Strong-Leek [2014], have also pointed out the strength of character of the women like Ekwefi and Ezinma in the book, and the unique relationship between them as "comrades in arms" [2014:30]). The story of women's derogatory representation in Nigerian literature began to change when women began to write. The publication of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966 was a trail-blazer for women in the Nigerian literary scene and indeed in Africa as whole. In her own words, referring to her first two novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), she states that, "I tried in *Efuru* and *Idu* to elevate the woman to her rightful place...I tried to analyse the woman's economic position and the power she wields by the mere fact that she controls the pestle and the cooking pots" (Nwapa, 1998:93).

The history of African films offers close similarities to African literature, in the way that

artists moved from being fed with (mostly undesirable) content, to providing their own themes, and women becoming uncomfortable enough to step out to speak for themselves. With regard to cinema, Nigeria's exposure dates back to the colonial period; Jonathan Haynes writes:

Africa had been integrated into international cinema circuits since the beginning of cinema—there were film screenings in Lagos in 1903 but Africa was integrated on the worst possible terms. Cinema was a one-way street: Africans watched films but could not make them for lack of capital to fund productions and because of the complex and expensive training, infrastructure.... (2016:3)

Nigerians lacked the funds and the know-how to create their own content. There was very little support from the British Colonial Film Unit, even though an infrastructure was erected for some Africans to be trained. According to Haynes, the support stopped from the 1950s. Similarly, the efforts of the Nigerian government, through the Nigerian Film Corporation, to propagate and build “African values and national image” yielded little or nothing, leaving feature filmmaking to the commercial sector (Ekwuazi, cited in Haynes, 2016:3). Haynes further points out that things changed in the 1980s and 1990s with an influx of videos in west Africa, which he tags the ‘video boom’. This development, he writes, had a global impact on media, with the introduction of new video technologies such as video cassettes and recorders, DVD players and video projectors, among other things. This invariably led to the means through which what would be known as Nollywood materialised. Moradewun Adejunmobi asserts that, “One of the great accomplishments of Nigerian video film is that it has succeeded where African high literature and African cinema have failed thus far, that is, it has succeeded in generating an experience that is both African and popular with audiences” (2016:106). And when Nollywood began, men took the centre stage, beginning with foremost producer Kenneth Nnebue, and others like Tunde Kelani (*Ti Oluwa Ni Ile*, 1993), Zeb Ejiro (*Domitilla*, 1996) and Andy Amenechi (*Mortal Inheritance*, 1996), amongst others. Men took over the highly commercial enterprise of home videos when it began, and it has been predominantly shaped by male-defined standards, with women only beginning to become competitive in a territory that was once largely masculine.

Feminist scholars have repeatedly accused the media of being agents of chauvinism who reinforce patriarchal beliefs and patterns through television, radio, films, magazines and other forms of media. With regard to film, men have, for a long time, dominated the technical and production aspects of film industries in most parts of the world. It is not only in Nigeria that men

dominate in filmmaking. Film industries across the world have typically demonstrated the prevalence of male filmmakers. It might be shocking to note that up until 2009, only three women had been nominated as directors for the Oscars and none of the nominees won: Lina Wertmüller for *Seven Beauties* in 1976; Jane Campion for *The Piano* in 1993; and Sofia Coppola for *Lost in Translation* in 2003 (Dargis, 2009). Nollywood—the nomenclature popularly used to describe the Nigerian film industry— is no exception. According to Agbese, in Nollywood, “women account for less than one percent of producers, directors and writers” (cited in Ihentuge, 2015, 548:5). These figures may have increased over the past five years; however, the issue of the scarcity of female filmmakers and lack of recognition in the film industry is a concern that cuts across many countries of the world. It is especially prevalent in Africa and Nigeria specifically, considering the rapid growth of Nollywood.

Dovey contends that “Africa is no exception when it comes to the relative lack of a female presence in the most glamorous and important jobs in the industry” (Dovey, 2012: 21). Taking it further, she emphasizes that a number of women work as actresses and run film festivals, but the number of female directors is significantly low across the African continent. Furthermore, “globally; according to the Birds Eye View festival organisers, women make up less than 10% of film directors and less than 15% of screenwriters internationally” (<http://www.birds-eye-view.co.uk/198/about-us/about-us.html> cited in Dovey, 2012). In the same vein, in 2007, Kelly Hankin noted that “statistical and anecdotal evidence suggest that, in both the Hollywood and commercial independent film industries, female directors are not given the same support and opportunities as their male counterparts” (Hankin, 2007: 59-60). For a film industry that stands as a model which many film industries around the world often uncritically copy, the statistics are alarming. In the book, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetic and Politics* (2010), Diawara states that out of the thirty-one “films selected for the book and DVD project”, only four were films by women directors, and worse still, those works were merely brushed over without critical attention (cited in Dipio, 2014: 16).

Going by these disturbing records, one can safely say it is has been a struggle for women to receive the same kind of recognition as men for doing the same job. This leaves women filmmakers across the world to continue to fight a unique battle for equality. As a result of marginalisation, there is the risk of presenting to audiences a body of films with a lopsided representation of reality. This is because the lack of female presence amounts to lack of female

opinion, creating an unfair balance of options for viewers. Filmmaking by women not only creates a platform for them to share their stories, it also establishes their rejection of all inhibitions (such as traditional forms of culture) which prevent them from actualising their potential. As Johnson and Culverson (2016), aptly observe, “Telling one’s story, as a female, is in direct contrast to being socialised into a silence by societal and cultural norms” (2016: 5).

Indeed, the paucity of female directors is reflected in the representations of women in films, but there are other factors. While some researchers such as Emily God’spresence (2014) contend that women filmmakers’ involvement in film will advance on-screen images of women, some Nollywood practitioners also weigh in on the subject matter. Examples are the responses of three accomplished filmmakers, Tunde Kelani, Amaka Igwe and Kenneth Nnebue to the question of negative representations of women, particularly the good woman / bad woman binary. Foremost female Nollywood filmmaker, Amaka Igwe, interviewed by Uzoma Esonwanne, comments that, “the problem arises from Nigerians’ perception of women. There is a direct correlation between the way Nigerians perceive women and the way women are portrayed in films. The problem seems to be that the male directors who make such films are ignorant, aggressive, and gynophobic. Basically, many of them think that a woman is either good or evil, saint or devil...” (in Esonwanne, 2008:34). Well-respected filmmaker, Tunde Kelani, who is known to promote women’s cultural contributions in his films, on the other hand suggests that, “it depends on what one is trying to say [though] I know that in traditional Yoruba culture, women play an important role” (in Esowanne, 2008: 35). Finally, Kenneth Nnebue, Nollywood’s first recognised filmmaker suggests that “commercial interest is responsible. Generally, people believe that some women are bad. So, it is more profitable to portray bad women than good. It is also topical. A film whose female characters are good may not sell” (in Esonwanne, 2008).

From the responses above, it is evident that the reasons behind unflattering portrayals of women vary: they range from intent, to perception, culture, and ‘ignorance’ as Igwe suggests. However, one thing that stands out, which Nollywood is known for, is the focus on commercialism which drives film production. Filmmakers give audiences what they want, and that is sheer entertainment, oftentimes to the detriment of social relevance and aesthetic quality of the films. This view correlates with Moradewun Adejunmobi’s argument that, “Nigerian video film narratives are created and watched primarily for the purposes of entertainment” (2016: 109). The aim of the producers is to satisfy their audience’s entertainment needs, therefore little or no

thought is given to promoting the positive aspects of culture like the dual-sex system discussed in the next chapter or women's images, as long as the films are commercially viable.

Woven into Nollywood films are contemporary "cultural and political debates" (Okome, 2010:27). In any country in the world, the film industry serves as one of the biggest influences not just as "cultural propaganda", but also as "public education" (Adelakun, 2016: n.p). Inevitably, cultural propaganda exists in films by male and female directors. However, since most films are directed by men, and because Nigeria is generally very supportive of patriarchy, problematic examples of male-dominated behaviour are indeed largely reproduced in their films. Examples of some of these male practices are polygamy, philandering and wife-battering. While some films appear to validate such actions, some condemn it, while still entertaining their audiences. The decision on what to do with a story lies in the hands of a filmmaker. For example, Nollywood filmmaker, Morris K Sesay, in the film *Third Chance* (2017) impressively tells the story of a woman's journey to redemption and some of the travails modern women face in the name of marriage. It is a story in which a woman is violated by her rich husband, and her family members are humiliated because she is coerced (by her parents) to remain married, so as to maintain their lifestyle. The man gets away with battering his wife and threatens to seize all he has bought for her parents, including their house, should his wife (who finally escapes his captivity) not return. The most shocking aspect is her parents' (especially her mother's) nonchalance with regard to her life-threatening experiences, mandating her to endure his grievous excesses. The wife almost becomes a sacrificial lamb for her family, with near- death experiences at the hands of her husband. At the end of the film, however, she liberates herself by financially empowering herself, and physically fighting him back, before finally walking away.

The example of Sesay's film aside, however, negative representations of women by male filmmakers in Africa have been ongoing for decades and are not peculiar to Nollywood. Kenneth Harrow argues that, "When male filmmakers represented the 'women's condition', it was to show how women were oppressed and needed to become 'modern'. However, when women were the directors, the female characters were often more empowered" (2016:237). The examples of female filmmakers with empowered characters include Safi Faye's *Lettre Paysanne* (1975) and Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (1972). Sembène was key in bridging the confusing divide, especially in terms of women navigating the dichotomy of modernity and tradition as in his film, *Faat Kine* (2016: 236-237). Although, long before this, Sembène and his generation of

filmmakers had concerned themselves with women's issues, especially in relation to African patriarchy and Western Imperialism, the key agenda of these 'classics' as Harrow puts it, is women's liberation, and he gives the examples of Sembène's *La noire de...* (1966) and *Xala* (1975), Cissé's *Den Muso* (1975), Dikongué-Pipa's *Muna Moto* (1975) and *Le Prix de l'Indépendance* (1978), and Safi Faye's *Lettre Paysanne* (1975). These films, he points out, dealt with issues such as polygamy and "the conflict between 'modern' romance and 'traditional' marriage arrangements" among other things, which conforms to "stage one African feminism" (2016: 236).

Some filmmakers and critics blame contemporary women directors for not using their platform to project women's stories positively. In an interview with Connor Ryan, for example, Tunde Kelani expresses his disappointment in the way women filmmakers represent women, given their roles and power as storytellers. He asserts that "I'm disappointed by the women who have had the opportunities to be producers, too. Armed with such great responsibilities, they have misrepresented women, presenting themselves as armed robbers and prostitutes" (2014:176). Kelani speaks in general terms, as he makes no specific mention of any female filmmaker. His point here is acknowledged, however, in this study, I will be addressing the rising force of women who indeed challenge negative stereotypes. Contemporary Nigerian female filmmakers' narratives may (or may not) be counter-narratives to the negative representations of women that scholars and critics often accuse Nollywood of; however, they offer a much-needed balance to the overbearing male presence in the Nigerian film industry. Needless to say, women make up the bulk of Nollywood audiences.

Women are the biggest consumers of Nollywood whether at home, at their salons, offices or at their shops. These films have now become the major conversation starters for women just as football is to men. In northern Nigeria where women do not have access to education like their counter-parts in the east or west and mostly indoors, the audience is even larger. (Mohammed cited in Ihentuge 2015:546)

Film Studies Professor, Femi Shaka (2002), attributes this to the romantic preoccupations in Nigeria home videos. Further, like Shaka, Adejunmobi talks about relatability of the content to many cultural contexts as a major factor for the appreciation of Nollywood's films. She explains that, "Nollywood's mainly African audiences appear to have a particular appreciation for the portrayal of what they perceive to be familiar struggles represented on screen as subjects of high

dramatic tension and conflict” (Adejunmobi 2016: 109).

From the foregoing, it is clear that Nollywood filmmakers need to make more effort to re-orientate film audiences away from the negative perceptions of women that many Nollywood films offer. The same stereotypical portrayals of women as the less empowered, weaker sex within families still exist in many Nollywood films. Rather than promote the diverse roles women play in the new age, they further reinforce the age-old stereotypes of women as objects of desire and chattels (Ali and Khan, 2012). The limitation of roles women play undermines the reality of women’s experiences. The roles women play tend to be limiting and rigid as opposed to the dynamism and complexities of women in reality. In the article, “Detrimental Images of Nigerian Women in Nollywood films”, Abosede Ogunbiyi argues that women are often portrayed as two extremes—good or bad. She argues that “There is rarely a midpoint between the two polarities, or a realist compromise that involves a complex portrayal of characters. We seldom see films that portray African women the way they really are; not perfect but still strong, endearing, enduring, and complicated” (2010: 78). Indeed, there is a plethora of options to choose from as examples of ordinary women who might not have necessarily achieved extraordinary feats, but whose daily experiences depict hard work, integrity, perseverance and commitment, amidst many pitfalls. The detrimental depictions, Harrow claims, are not coincidental but strategic; the consumerist nature of Nollywood films has allowed it to “reconfigure the way that women were represented in the service of consumerist desire” (2016: 239).

Films do more than just reflect the society, they also inform and educate. Nollywood films already have the advantage of devoted audiences, hungry for culturally proximate content. Nollywood in its vastness has the potential to provide a platform for change where salient messages are woven into entertainment, as Omoni Oboli does in the film, *Wives on Strike* (2016). At this juncture, it is pertinent to ask again if female filmmakers in contemporary films are indeed making an effort to redefine images of women in a manner which boldly stands against subordination and stereotyping. It is an important aspect to address, more so because of Nollywood’s reach and the attention it has drawn over the past two decades, as noted above. Nigerian films have a wide viewership, even outside the African continent. With over 170 million potential viewers in Nigeria, women make up over a half of this population. Leveraging this number is a tool that filmmakers can deploy to project positive images of Africa and women

as hardworking, industrious and productive human beings.

As female filmmakers, making films means lending their voices, which creates an avenue to hear women express themselves and interpret culture according to their understanding and experience of it. This creates an avenue to build a wider female perspective in Nollywood and in African cinema at large. I make further reference to Hankin, whose article, “The Female Director: Documentaries about Women Filmmakers as Feminist Activism”, emphasizes the importance of women filmmakers being active players in the film industry. She states that “campaigning on behalf of women filmmakers is imperative because, as much as any other social or political influence, women’s cultural representation is pivotal to the shaping and redefining of feminism” (2007: 59). This suggests that women’s cultural representations, as well as the capability for women to redefine the image of women in films, is just as important as any other political and social feminist emancipation drive.

Nollywood and Female Filmmakers

When home videos started in Nigeria, they came at a time when people needed a taste of cultural staple in the form of entertainment, different from pirated Hollywood and Bollywood content available. Jonathan Haynes in the first chapter of his book, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (2016) describes how piracy, which has become endemic and serves as an impediment to Nollywood’s development, has been present since Nollywood’s foundation. He asserts that in 1984 when video cassette recorders made their way to Nigeria, they were put to good use with the subsequent importation of cameras to record social events like weddings and funerals. However, citing Brian Larkin (2004), he states an “infrastructure of piracy was created by businessmen like Kenneth Nnebue to service these VCRs, importing blank cassettes, pirating foreign film, reproducing them locally, and distributing them...” (2016:11). Nnebue’s first film was, however, a creative and experimental recording on imported blank videos cassettes.

According to Anyanwu, home video was welcomed with a combination of anxiety and satisfaction. There was a sense of satisfaction “because it has given to Nigerians what neither Hollywood nor Bollywood could give” (2003:82). Nollywood has indeed been a source of great cultural influence both in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. It created hope in a dwindling economy and a deteriorating national image. There was an expectation that its emergence would provide an opportunity to address the image foreigners imposed on Africans in their films (Emelobe,

2015:529).

Nollywood as a film industry is recognised as created by Nigerians, about Nigerians and for the Nigerian people. No one has laid claim to inventing the name; however, according to Jonathan Haynes (2016), the name was coined by a foreigner Norimitsu Onishi, a *New York Times* reporter in 2002. It was quickly adopted by Nigerian journalists who published it a few days later in the national newspaper, *The Guardian* (Jedlowski, 2011). The name Nollywood has been debated several times, mainly because the imposition and acceptance of the name is a phenomenon yet to be resolved. At the beginning, there was the impression that it was unwittingly adapted from its predecessors, Hollywood and Bollywood. Alessandro Jedlowski explains that although a lot of people quickly embraced the name, some industry practitioners rejected it. They oppose the idea of a growing indigenous phenomenon being given a “foreign label”. Jedlowski notes that “As postcolonial criticism has emphasised, the act of naming is in itself is an act of symbolic control” (2011:229). Haynes nonetheless argues that the term “is here to stay because it expresses the general Nigerian desire for a mass entertainment industry that can take its rightful place on the world stage, but both the term and the phenomenon need to be read as signs that the global media environment has become multipolar” (2007:106). Haynes further cites the theoretical postulation of geographers Sallie Marston, Keith Woodward, and John Paul Jones III for understanding Nollywood. They suggest that, rather than drawing compulsive comparisons with Hollywood, it should be seen as “an example of specifically situated, localized social activity, networked with other sites that produces something fundamentally different from Hollywood in production, distribution, consumption, and aesthetics” (Haynes, 2007:133). It is safe to say that, nomenclature aside, Nollywood has come to stay and has, indeed, yielded good fortune. In 2013, it “recorded a total revenue of Naira 1.72bn (US\$10.7m) ...making it number three globally in terms of revenue and quality of production, according to the local daily *Business Day*” (Africa Research Bulletin:2014). Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Culverson, citing Jake Bright note that “the Nigerian government released data for the first time showing Nollywood is a \$3.3. billion sector, with 1844 films produced in 2013 alone” (2016:2).

That said, however, there are controversies surrounding “Nollywood” being synonymous with the Nigerian film industry. Some industry practitioners argue that Nollywood is an all-encompassing name for the Nigerian film industry. For example, Fathia Balogun, a veteran

Yoruba actress, speaking to Pulse TV in an interview published on YouTube in August 2016 argues that, “Nollywood is Nollywood”. She maintains that there is no need for divisions into Kannywood or Yoruwood—belonging to the Hausas and Yorubas respectively.

However, Haynes, who has spent the past twenty years of his life researching Nollywood, claims that Nollywood specifically refers to films in the English Language “emanating from the production and distribution based in Lagos and in the eastern Nigerian cities of Onitsha, Asaba, Enugu and Aba” (2016: xxiii). Nollywood, however, cannot claim to exclude its derivatives like Kannywood (belonging to the North) and Yoruwood because, even though they have separate professional bodies, their actors (especially the Yoruba actors) often cross over to Nollywood, and with each passing day, the distinction becomes more blurred. Furthermore, filmmakers like Tunde Kelani make both Yoruba- and English- language films. Even though he is referred to as a Nollywood filmmaker, he has a large number of Yoruba films to his credit and they include *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (1993), *Saworoide* (1999), *Arugba* (2008), and *Maami* (2011) amongst others. Likewise, Funke Akindele, the creator of the character and film *Jenifa*, which has now become a household name, is well-known for her acting in both Yoruba- and English- language films. In fact, the character Jenifa, which she plays in her TV comedy *Jenifa’s Diary*, is a mesh of Yoruba and English—a village girl who cannot speak proper English, but speaks it anyway without letting that affect her self-confidence. Other actors like Odunlade Adegola, Toyin Abraham, Saheed Balogun and Sola Sobowale are some of the actors who were originally Yoruba film actors, but now feature in a lot of English-language films. If we look to Akin Adesokan’s discussion in “Nollywood: Outline of a Trans- ethnic Practice” it can be deduced that resistance to the term may be a question of appeal. Adesokan opines that Nollywood is usually discussed in the light of “the popular genre dramas with English as the default language” (2014: 116) which are targeted at a transnational audience. He explains that films in English, especially if made by a popular director such as Charles Novia, because of their “basic organization of visual, sonic, and rhetorical properties” (2016:117), will compel a wider appeal in Nollywood than a film directed by a less known Yoruba director living in a small Yoruba town. A Charles Novia film will have a greater popular and transnational reach, as it draws its narratives from genres like “romance and crime thrillers”, whereas a “morality tale” by Yoruba filmmaker, Yomi Ogunmola will have less “aesthetic appeal” (2016: 117).

Returning to discussion about the early days of Nollywood, Kenneth Nnebue produced

the first 'commercially packaged' film in Nollywood. He was the first to sell his film to consumers. There was no structure in place, therefore to say Nollywood was not intended to be a huge film industry would be accurate. In his own words, "I knew nothing about film direction or production before I started doing films. Actually, I was a trader. So my initial interest in films was only commercial. To be quite candid, it was Yoruba people who inspired me. They've been in the film industry for a long time" (Esonwanne, 2008: 26). At that time, he was simply a businessman making films for commercial purposes. However, Nnebue clearly has his footprint on Nollywood's sands of time, as Haynes notes: "Kenneth Nnebue's central role in the early history of Nigerian Video is well established" (2007:30). The fact that he "came up in a rough, jostling environment and he has a trader's canny shrewdness" seems to have helped (ibid. 32). Nnebue, an Igbo business man who sold video cassettes and electronic goods had initially been involved with the production and financing of Yoruba films including *Aje ni iya mi* in 1989 (Haynes, 2007). However, since *Living in Bondage* in 1992 and *Glamour Girls* (1994), Nollywood has rapidly developed to become the second-largest film industry in the world in terms of the volume of film production, following closely after Bollywood. Yearly production is estimated to be about 2000 and for a successful film, the number of sales is between 50,000 to 140,000 copies (cited in Adejunmobi 2016:107). This is made possible largely by the lack of structure and low cost of production. Cost of production on the average ranges from \$25,000 to \$50,000 (Miller, 2012: 112), and there are those that cost less than the low end of the range. For this reason, a lot of Nollywood films are criticised for very poor-quality productions and only a handful are considered for film festivals (Barrot, 2005). It only takes a few days to make films and the films are made mostly straight to video CD, an advancement from the straight to VHS format that once was. However, Nollywood has reached an era (Neo-Nollywood) where films are made with larger budgets, an eye for quality and international audiences in mind. Neo-Nollywood is a recent term for films that contest the pessimistic, mostly negative depiction of the industry. The phrase became popular around 2010 and it describes measures taken by filmmakers to take the film industry to the "next level" (Haynes: 2014). It disengages from the mediocrity that many Nollywood films were known for, despite the irony of being the second largest film-producing industry in the world after Bollywood. According to Adeshina Afolayan, "neo-Nollywood is a move away from the cinematic ebullience and mushrooming tendency of Nollywood towards a qualitative and aesthetic transformation of the industry" (2008:27). These

days less emphasis is placed on extended dialogue and more attention is paid to sound, cinematography and other aspects of mise-en-scène like setting, good lighting and the effective use of makeup and costume. Citing Deleuze, Afolayan proposes that a way to distinguish Nollywood and neo-Nollywood is to adopt the distinction between “commercial” and the “creative”. That is, “while the commercial is concerned with the need to further the capitalist creed of a rapid turnover, a creative work of art ‘always entails the creation of new spaces and time’ (*ibid*).

Since its emergence at the tail end of the 20th century, the Nigerian film industry has unarguably had a profound influence on the Nigerian culture specifically, and Africa in general. It has, over the years, become a phenomenon, not just in Africa but also around the world, with its films accessible in different parts of the world such as in Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Togo, the UK and the US, to name a few. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, for example, there is a channel solely dedicated to Nollywood content. Internet platforms such as Irokovtv and Ibakatv are also online platforms that provide Nigerian film content based on subscriptions. The films mirror the daily lives, fears, ambitions, hatreds, loves and struggles of ordinary Nigerian people. Nigerian filmmakers employ a plethora of distinctive African proverbs, costumes, music, idioms, cuisines and cultural displays in telling their stories. Most films centre on themes of love, violence, ritual, political struggle, ethnic war, family drama, romance, and religious conflict.

Not only has Nollywood carved a niche on the African continent, it has also gained transnational reach beyond the geographical borders of Africa in many regards. This is duly recognized and Nollywood’s transnational dimensions are briefly engaged with in course of this thesis, even if it is not the crux of this study. As Adejunmobi notes, “new developments in Nollywood’s interaction with global media deserve special attention” (2014:75). Many Nollywood critics and scholars including Adejunmobi (2014), who had earlier in 2007 described recent Nollywood films as a ‘minor transnational practice’, acknowledge that Nollywood filmmakers are endeavoring to “change Nollywood templates in the area of distribution” (*ibid*). They have sought for ways to gain widespread presence including having “theatrical release over STV [straight-to-video] productions” all in a bid to “seek more international recognition in their work” (2014:79). Theatrical releases as Adejunmobi rightly says, exhibit Nollywood as transnational, as many filmmakers have taken to screening their films in international venues such as the United Kingdom and the United States, before bringing screenings to Nigeria.

Nollywood filmmakers recognise the potential reach of their films, especially to audiences in the African diaspora who watch culturally familiar films, and they have expanded their distribution strategies through the use of online platforms to accommodate global audiences. Similarly, Haynes attests to the “huge market” Nollywood has outside of Africa. He says for example, that in “North America and Europe, distributors reproduce them” with or without buying rights, “and sell them through African grocery stores, hair salons, and video shops that normally also sell a range of other videos” (2017: 82). Netflix is also an available platform for viewers in Europe and America to watch a limited number of Nollywood films.

Transnationalism in Nollywood comes in various forms, including its genres. Filmmakers often draw from existing Western narrative forms, popularly melodrama and romantic comedies. Similarly, common in Nollywood films is the adoption of popular Hollywood names; film titles and sometimes plots are adapted into Nollywood films such as Rukky Sanda’s first production, *Lethal Woman* (2008), for which she says “I saw this American movie and I thought it would look good in a Nigerian movie and I copied it”(Adeyomi:2012). Likewise, Noah Tsika claims that Nollywood characters use Hollywood star names without necessarily accounting for them. He avers that “the seemingly unaccountable deployment of the names Valentino, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and especially Sharon Stone suggest, in fact, an eagerness to appropriate and thereby deconstruct the authority of Western standards of stardom” (2014:107). To emphasise Nollywood’s worldliness, Tsika again argues that failure to acknowledge Hollywood’s standard of stardom “represents a deconstructive gesture designed to destabilize any hierarchical relationship between American and African styles of stardom”. This system of silent “star-on-star mimicry” he argues, indicates that Nollywood is indeed an “archive of worldliness” (2014:107). Nollywood is indeed a worldly practice, however, in its worldliness, it invariably roots itself firmly in creating stories and characters drawn from, or adapted into socially and culturally relevant events that resonate with its core audiences. For Haynes (2016), Nollywood’s “international dimension was accidental”. What was deliberate, he says, was the establishment of a “synthetic and multicultural form of entertainment that would appeal across Nigerian national audiences,” that nevertheless brought for Nollywood recognition “across the continent and beyond” (2016: 79). It should also be noted that Nollywood’s international reach, especially within Africa, owes credit to MNET. Okome contends that around a decade after Nollywood commenced productions, MNET started broadcasting Nollywood films and devoted four

channels to it (2016:112). Since then, Nollywood's popularity has grown tremendously across Africa and so has the "popular perception of Nigerian cultures: urban and traditional" (2016: 112). What also makes Nollywood's reach extensive across Africa, some parts of Europe and America is the use of English language as a form of expression in Nollywood films.

However, despite Nollywood's success story and widespread reach, very few women are actively involved in making the films. The industry is largely made up of male directors and producers, while women take up less decisive functions such as acting, costuming and make-up where they have little control over direction. When asked in an interview with Connor Ryan if women are gaining prominence in Nollywood, Emem Isong, a female filmmaker, responds in the negative. She opines, "No I don't think women are taking over. It is a matter of interest.... in fact very few women are involved in directing films in Nollywood" (2014: 176). Historically, there has been a paucity of women directors in African cinema. It was not until the post-colonial era of the 70s and 80s that African women began to emerge as film directors, moving away from the typical function of being actresses. Women like Angola's Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye from Senegal, and Kenya's Anne Mungai made a limited number of films, many of which are not readily available in digital format. In "New Looks: The Rise of African Female Filmmakers" (2009), referenced above, Dovey asks why such great films as Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (1972) have neither been distributed widely enough, nor been found 'worthy' of being converted to digital format, in spite of Maldoror's personal struggle in women's liberation across the continent, and the significance of the film itself. When compared to their male counterparts, these women do not produce as many films as would be expected.

In Nigeria, there was scarcely any woman making films in the 70's and 80's as in most other African countries. There are a few cases like Lola Fani Kayode, who wrote and produced the popular soap opera, *Mirror in the Sun*, which aired on the Government-owned Television station, NTA, in the early to mid-1980s. Women did not actively begin to make films until the 90's, just before the advent of Nollywood. Amaka Igwe (of blessed memory), is recognised as one of the very first to break the jinx of an all-male-director culture in Nigeria. Igwe began her directorial career with Television drama series such as *Checkmate*, *Solitaire* and *Fuji House of Commotion*. For her it was an unplanned transition from TV to films as she states in her interview with Esonwanne: "I'd been directing 'soaps' for five years for NTA... So I progressed naturally from television to video, though doing the latter was also an experiment for me" (2008:

27). Speaking about filmmaking and the position of Nigerian filmmakers in Nigeria, Amaka Igwe asserts that:

Film for us is just storytelling. You don't need someone to tell you how to make a story. In Nigeria, we just do it our way and we're doing something right because our films are seen all over the world. Nigeria produces 2000 films a year and it works for us... (Utaka, 2010:1)

Amaka Igwe's successful films include *Rattlesnake 1, 2 and 3*, *Full Circle* and the very popular *Violated 1 and 2* (1996). Pioneer female filmmaker, Igwe blazed the trail for women filmmakers to project women's stories, especially their travails. One of her most celebrated films, *Violated* (1996), a hugely successful film in the year that it was released, narrates the story of a beautiful woman's union with a wealthy man and the many struggles of their marriage, including the involvement of her husband's ex-wife. As a romantic drama, *Violated* reminds one that as far back as 1996, women directors had already started projecting women's struggles in marriage and family life. The film features popular and celebrated actors including, Richard Mofe Damijo (RMD), Joke Silva and Ego Boyo. Haynes describes the opening of the film as an "attempt to open a high-end market" (1997:74). The premier was strategically planned with an opening in an exclusive venue in Lagos and high ticket prices. There was also a month's focus on radio and television publicity, which was unusual at the time. Even though filmmaking by women was inconsistent and Igwe herself was not consistent as a director, nonetheless, the success, value and celebration of *Violated* says a lot about how much women had already started putting into films at the cradle of Nollywood. On the bright side, the past five years have given rise to successful female directors excelling in spite of boundaries that inhibit them such as culture, financial limitations and the image women have of themselves. After Amaka Igwe, the next female filmmaker of note is Emem Isong who is a key player in old Nollywood and is "also pursuing New Nollywood strategies" as described by Haynes (2014:57). She began her filmmaking career as the scriptwriter and the co-producer of the film *Jezebel* in 1994. After many successful productions, she directed her first feature-length film *Champagne* (2014), which has an exclusively female crew—a deliberate effort to empower women in technical aspects of film production. Isong, like Igwe, is a trail blazer who has several award-winning films to her credit including *Memories of My Heart* (2010), *Silver Lining* (2012) and *Knocking on Heaven's Door* (2014).

Other female filmmakers include Ngozi Onwurah, director of *Shoot the Messenger* (2006); lawyer turned filmmaker Mildred Okwo who has to her credit *The Meeting* (2012) and *Suru'lere* (2016); Chineze Anyaene whose film, *Ije* (2012), shot in Nigeria and the US, has been thoroughly analysed by Nollywood film scholars like Umukoro and Okwuowulu (2010), and Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar and Jimoh (2014). There is also Chika Anada, whose film *B for Boy* (2013), questions cultural expectations of women.

Female filmmakers who have recently gained entrance into Nollywood include Dolapo Adeleke (fondly called LowlaDee) director of *Brave* (2014). There is also Jade Osiberu whose film, *Isoken* (2017), details the cultural travails of a Nigerian woman who is thirty-three, yet unmarried. The most recent hit maker is Kemi Adetiba an acclaimed music director who made her first feature film, *The Wedding Party*, in 2016 and is set to release another film, *King of Boys* in October 2018. Despite being her first feature-length film, *Wedding Party* did remarkably well in Nigeria cinemas. It was premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2016, and when it was released in the Nigerian cinemas it broke box-office records making two hundred million Naira (#200,000,000) within 16 days of its release in cinemas in December. The film was executive produced by Mo Abudu who is currently championing the African media space in her effort to take Africa to the world, through her TV channel EbonyLife TV. She recently partnered with Sony Pictures Television to develop a TV series based on the stories of ancient African female warriors. Mo Abudu, is herself a talk show host who “openly aspires to be the African Oprah Winfrey” as Haynes put it (2016: 79). In recent years, Abudu in her capacity as a producer, has created a good number of blockbuster films that beam light on contemporary Nigerian cultural space, with *Fifty* (2015), *The Wedding Party 2* (2017) and *Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2018) as examples

Feminism and Nigerian Filmmaking: Introductory observations

I would like to close this chapter by signposting the key feminist issues with which chapter two will deal. In the words of Susan Hayward:

The second wave (of feminism) took the world of academia and journalism in the Western world and Australia by storm and very quickly began to generate texts related to women's issues and, just as importantly, to disciplines taught within academia—including film studies. (2006: 134)

The core thesis of feminism is that women's voices must be heard; they must have equal opportunities to men, and their opinions must be valued and respected as individuals who are free to act on their own accord and make decisions that are not inhibited by their gender. If feminism centres on the emancipation of women and gender equity, cutting across all aspects of life and not just specific to certain spheres, then it would be fitting to pay attention to equality in an area as relevant as filmmaking.

Under the umbrella of feminism—which Oyewumi describes as America and Europe's "social movements founded to struggle for female equality" (2003:1)—are variants such as black feminism, white feminism, third-world feminism, Western feminism, and so on. Oyewumi explains these distinctions as a mirroring of the discrepancies that are a part of the progression of feminist discourse. African feminist theories have, over time, emerged, and vigorous efforts have been made to construct an enduring feminist canon that will be sustainable and also adequately represent African women's experiences. As Ogundipe articulates, "Feminism in Nigeria spawned Womanism then Motherism and other -isms as it did in the rest of Africa because African women wanted to express their own realities as they establish their differences from foreign feminisms" (2007: 7). In other words, it is an effort to theorize experiences, culture and realities that they could identify with.

This study specifically charts the stories women tell through their films. Using African feminist theories such as Motherism, which Acholonu proposed as "Africa's alternative to Western feminism" (Acholonu, 1995:110), Nego-feminism, a term coined by Obioma Nnaemeka in 1999 which she also proposes as a suitable option for African feminisms, and other feminist propositions by African scholars and critics, the works of four leading female directors who are breaking boundaries in Nollywood will be examined. Part of the second chapter of this research will navigate various African feminisms which will help to frame an understanding of women's experiences and African women's experiences specifically in the films under study. While engaging in critical scrutiny of African feminisms, Naomi Nkealah also argues that African feminisms are an "attempt to resist cultural imperialism" which makes the West undermine the "philosophical ideologies and belief systems of African peoples" (2016:52). I am aware that Acholonu and Nnaemeka are both Nigerian thinkers and authors and, in Chapter Two, will address the perceived risks of limiting my frame of analysis to regional or, possibly, essentialist theorizing (especially in the light of Nkealah's observations).

Describing Motherism, Acholonu charges women to be useful vessels in the nation but not to the detriment of their families. In Acholonu's book *Motherism* (1995), she suggests that Motherism, a concept that posits motherhood as being central to African women's experiences, should be an African alternative to feminism. Motherism postulates motherhood as the core of women's lives and experiences. Nego-feminism goes a step further by appealing to both sexes in a manner that negotiates a non-egoistic approach. It posits gender complementarity by being collaborative and non-confrontational (Nnaemeka, 1999). These African ideologies posit the 'accommodationist' approach, devoid of aggression. They embrace core African values such as collaboration and the centrality of family to women, while actively involving women in social transformation.

In order to fully achieve the objectives of this research, especially regarding understanding some idiosyncrasies, attitudes, approaches and actions of women in dealing with patriarchy, it is important to understand, or at least be familiar with how African feminisms work. As Carmela Garritano correctly points out, "Any attempt to offer feminist readings of African texts might first acknowledge and address recent criticisms of feminist scholarship that accuse feminism, as employed by Western academics of having both myopic vision and a proclivity for universalising" (2000: 168 -169). The theories with which I engage are not without their shortfalls to which scholars and critics have responded, some of which will be addressed in the course of this study.

It should be self-evident that women who have first-hand experiences over time will be able to share women's stories with deeper understanding and from their own perspective. Johnson and Culverson address the usual pattern of representation, stating that "efforts are being made to bring to the forefront the fact that Nollywood has not dealt with this aspect of the depiction of women, and that filmmakers often follow established patterns that satisfy audiences" (2016:7). They explain that a forum was funded through African Women's Development Fund in 2010, to address the topic "women and the dynamics of representation". In their book, however, they agree that many filmmakers are now more willing to explore the way women are represented. The position filmmakers hold is a powerful one, which if channeled positively, can rewrite stories and change perceptions. As an example, Ukwueze and Ekwugha argue that reshaping the country's image lies principally in the hands of filmmakers. In their words:

Re-shaping and rebranding Nigeria's image and diplomacy through Nollywood can be possible if the film makers and producers could see themselves as representing the country's image internationally thereby trying to transform the way Nigerians and the world see Nigeria in Nigerian films. (2013: 179)

According to Bayo Ogunjimi, in order to fully understand and speak against patriarchy in Nigeria, feminist scholars must first highlight how women are negatively portrayed in various discourses, and then exemplify images of what liberated womanhood looks like (Ogunjimi, 1997). His opinion is relevant to my research in chapter two which will review in more detail how women have been portrayed in Nollywood films by male and female filmmakers drawing on existing literature on representative Nollywood films.

At this point, it is important to make the critical distinction that not all female directors are feminist filmmakers, and that there are male filmmakers who may be regarded as feminist filmmakers including Tunde Kelani and Ola Balogun. Feminist filmmakers are ideologically well-grounded, therefore their films are inherently targeted towards viewers with didactic intents, with a view to re-orientate, enlighten, propagate and reposition them towards social reconstruction and transformation of already moulded mind-sets (Abhulimhen 2016:2). Many female filmmakers, on the other hand, are women who make films professionally as a career, but who are not necessarily feminist filmmakers. Even texts that demonstrate the conditions of women in patriarchal societies may not necessarily be considered feminist texts. Naomi Nkealah warns, with regards to African literature, that "not every text written by a woman, with the intention of demonstrating women's disadvantaged position vis-à-vis men's or women's potential to resist patriarchal coercion, translates as a feminist text" (2006: 137). To be regarded as a feminist text, there must be a demonstration of political and moral commitment to feminism.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

This chapter is divided into two main sections namely, the theoretical framework and a review of existing literature on gender representation in Nollywood films. This first part focuses on feminism. I broadly discuss the history of feminism and more specifically African feminist theories that have, and are still, emerging. I place emphasis on Nigerian feminists' approach in a bid to open up fresh ways of analysing films made by Nigerian women filmmakers, as well as the why and how of the roles women play.

When it comes to feminism, context plays a crucial role in its understanding. As Modupe Kolawole states “the failure to consider context accounts for misconceptions of the relevance of feminism in many Black African societies, including the rejection of feminism by some African scholars” (2002: 92). Although African feminism suggests feminisms in Africa, one must still consider the different ethnic, historical and cultural differences that affect the way feminism is theorised and practised within Africa. What African theorists and scholars do is try to deeply root the understanding of African feminisms in indigenous practices and lived experiences of women in Africa. It is understandable that Western feminism and African feminism have different cultural histories, hence there are so many points of divergence and an attempt to generalise feminism is problematic. African feminists make an effort to derive their theories from African traditions; however, not all aspects of African tradition are favourable to women. What these feminists do, nevertheless, is to map out aspects that valorise women and propagate aspects such as the dual-sex systems in some African traditions which recognise the uniqueness and significance of both sexes, the centrality of women in oral traditions and the inner strength of women which also credit to them the power of mother earth who gives life to all.

Historically, feminism started in Europe and America in the late eighteenth century as a struggle for the rights of women. The origin of the struggle for equal rights began when women became aware of their oppression and made conscious efforts to address it (Sotunsa, 2009:227). There have, however, been divergences even within the West from the very radical to the more liberal and approaches from women of colour in America and other parts of the world.

‘Feminism’ has become a culturally diverse term that has been defined by various people in different ways which makes it impossible to have an all-inclusive concise definition. Karen

Offen (1998) in her article “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach,” writes about the importance of having a specific cultural and historical understanding to be able to effectively define the concept of feminism. Nonetheless, the following postulations will highlight key aspects of feminism that are generally agreed upon.

According to Sondra Farganis, feminism “argues that women are oppressed or dominated by men and that the structural arrangements that initiate, support, and legitimate that systematic oppression constitute patriarchy” (1994: 15). The aim of feminism, thus, is to “constitute itself as a social and political movement to undo this domination” (1994:15). Maggie Humm submits that “the word feminism can stand for a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to transform society” (cited in Sotunsa, 2009: 227). Barbara Smith describes feminism as a “political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women” arguing that anything short of this is nothing but “female self-aggrandizement” (1980: 48). Cudd and Andreasen define feminism as an “attempt to make intellectual sense of, and then to critique, the subordination of women to men” (2005:1). Bolanle Sotunsa argues that “whether as a theory, a social movement or a political movement, feminism specifically focuses on women’s experiences and highlights various forms of oppression which the female gender is subjected to in the society” (2009:228). And finally, Molarra Ogundipe defines feminism as “a body of social philosophy that advocates and actively seeks the liberation and humanization of women in society” (2007:9).

It should be clear from the above that despite the various ways in which feminism has been described, it revolves around women’s experiences that result from the biological make-up of women and the socio-cultural constructions of the female gender. Too frequently, women are treated as inferior because of their biological composition which differs from that of men. Over the years, there have been several debates around the oppression of women based on sexual difference. Lois McNay, for example, claims that “the idea that women are inferior to men is naturalized and, thus, legitimized by reference to biology” (1992:17). There are certain social behavioural expectations from a woman because she is born biologically different and from that societies have constructed what constitutes ‘woman’. These expectations are a result of what has been learnt in the society through education and culture. Thus, feminist theories primarily revolve around gender equality. According to Farganis, “it is not that feminist theory is unaware

of other aspects of people's lives: rather, it is the centrality of gender over those other aspects that is at its core" (1994: 15). The various stages of feminism are often characterized as waves: first, second and third wave. The term 'wave' is generally used to describe the chronology of women's movements and ideology. However, scholars have challenged the accuracy of the term. Amber Kinser, for example, contends that "it is highly unlikely that these women thought of their activities as coming in feminist waves" (2004: 127-128). Similarly, Mann and Huffman (2005: 56) state that "wave approaches too often downplay the importance of individual and small-scale collective actions, as well as indirect and covert acts". Mann and Huffman's criticism is that the generalisation of feminist activities and ideologies often override very important contributions and roles individuals have played. Despite these criticisms, the term is still employed to categorize the series of feminist events and ideas over the centuries. The terms 'first-wave feminism' and 'second-wave feminism' were coined by Marsha Lear and according to Kinser (2004: 129), were a way of "negotiating a female space".

The seeds of feminism had already been planted long before it materialised into a structured movement as the first wave (Kinser, 2004). First-wave feminism occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and was marked with feminist activities focused on political and legal rights of women. Feminists of this period were largely concerned with "gaining equal political rights and economic opportunities" (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005:7). The struggle was based on the premise that women had equal reasoning ability to men. This meant that being female didn't impair their ability to think, and certainly shouldn't affect their right to vote. They had the same intellectual and rational ability that would enable them to be productive human beings in every capacity. The aim was to open up opportunities for women, with specific focus on suffrage. The actions of liberal feminists resulted in many profound changes in women's circumstances, including 1920's women's suffrage in some places, winning of property rights for women, education and professional opportunities and freedom in reproduction (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005:7).

Second-wave feminism began in the 1960s. Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 publication, *The Second Sex*, is attributed with having laid the ground work (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005). De Beauvoir stresses that patriarchy, which considers women inferior and thereby makes them the 'other' based on their biological composition, has become an accepted norm in society. Another great influence on second-wave feminism was Betty Friedan's bestselling 1963 publication, *The*

Feminine Mystique. She challenged and opened up debates about the representations of women in conventional media.

Second-wave feminist activities moved beyond the efforts of the first wave and focused on a wider range of issues that affected women's lives. Although feminists of the second wave acknowledged the importance of the struggles of first-wave feminists, they maintained that "political and legal equality was not enough to end women's oppression" (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005: 7). They criticised first-wave feminists for not pushing hard enough in the area of economic reform. In their argument, "feminism must demand full economic equality for women, rather than simple economic survival" (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005:7). The second-wave feminists expanded their struggle to include issues that concerned family, divorce, workplace, everyday habits and reproductive rights, among other issues. Their aim was to effect change in every area of the political, as well as the personal lives of women. The period from the middle to the end of the 1980's brought feminist achievements on the home front, extending to the workplace and many women were equipped with basic tenets of equality (Kinser, 2004).

The second wave of feminist activities did not pass without criticisms. Second-wave feminism was critiqued for being homogenized, addressing only the needs of white middle-class women. Women of colour, for example, argued that their experiences and interests were not adequately represented. Critiques were based on the fact that women of different races and social status do not have the same experiences, therefore, theirs was a different kind of oppression. Hence, there was the need for "a feminism that accepts diversity and allows for a multiplicity of feminist goals" rather than one that ignores differences (Cudd and Andreasen, 2005: 8). The claim was that the objective of feminism was to emancipate women from gender inequality globally, however, in practice, the specific needs of women of colour were not considered.

Third-wave feminism started at the end of the 1980's. It was a direct reaction to second-wave feminism. Mann and Huffman describe third-wave feminism as a "new discourse for understanding and framing gender relations that arose out of a critique of the second wave" (2005; 56). Feminists of the third wave desired to bring forward issues of diversity and make it a core area of feminist theory. Women of colour had played significant roles as writers and activists during the first and second waves. They are also considered to be the first to offer comprehensive criticism of second-wave feminism, and as a result, they are regarded as "pioneers" of third-wave feminism (Mann and Huffman, 2005:59). The beginning of the third

wave was championed by feminists who were mostly already deeply involved in the second wave. Amber Kinser lists women like Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde, Maxine Hong Kingston, and many other “feminists of colour who called for a new subjectivity” in a feminist voice (2004: 130). Author and social activist, bell hooks (1998), faults feminism for not considering black women. She specifically critiques Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963), despite its influence, for ignoring the existence of black women. The objective of third-wave feminists, however, is not to discredit the efforts and activities of the second-wave; rather, they seek to enhance the discourse to make it more diverse and all-encompassing.

The inadequacies of white middle-class feminism and the need to provide a theory that would cater to the specific needs of black women led African American women, and African women living in Africa to propose more suitable theories. In Africa, theories are emerging, and as expected, there are ongoing debates within African scholarly circles amongst critics and researchers about the most appropriate African feminist theory. In 2004, Obioma Nnaemeka wrote an interesting article, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way”, in which she questions and makes noteworthy observations about theory and the practicality of theories. Her stance is profoundly about the necessity to put theory, especially feminist theories as they concern African women, to good use. To start with, she remarks that many African women, especially those who live in Africa, are quick to dismiss theory, partly because of their need for practical approaches to the problems they are faced with. She does not, however, mince words on her position against ‘antitheory’. She argues that theory plays an important “role in helping to scrutinize, decipher, and name the everyday, even as the practice of everyday informs theory making” (2004: 358). Nnaemeka’s position is that theory should not be a rigid and one-directional “enterprise” that emerges from one position and applies to all; rather, she argues for the possibility of a diverse but connected “framework” from different locations that connects “in a way that accommodates different realities and histories” (2004: 262), one that is pragmatic.

African Feminism(s)

There is no question that in order to investigate the construction of gender in any contemporary African society, the role and impact of the West must be examined, not only

because most African societies came under European rule at the end of the nineteenth century, but also because of the continued dominance of the West in the production of knowledge.

Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003: 25)

These words by a Nigerian feminist scholar and associate professor of sociology are an important epigraph to this section of the chapter because of the wide variation in the histories of African feminism and the reactions to Western feminism and the conceptualization of feminism in Africa. This is in line with Mary Kolawole's comment that:

The issue (of conceptualization) has been polarized—some scholars accept global feminism(s) as an umbrella for women's struggle that has motivated and encouraged African women. Others reject the politics of appropriation and otherness implied in feminism as they also decry any deliberate act of self-effacement deriving from tradition or externalized 'isms'. (2005: 253)

Rather than adopting "exclusive and essentialist" theories, Kolawole identifies with the category of feminist scholars that deconstruct existing feminism, "traditional ideologies, malestreaming and mainstreaming strategies of gender intervention" (ibid.). She refutes the claim that African women's idea about gender was learnt from the "global movement;" rather, some are inspired by accounts of African women's mobilization in the past. She cites "individual women giants who transformed their societies in pre-colonial times, such as Nehanda of Zimbabwe, Nzinga of Angola, Nana Asantewa of Ghana" as examples. Further, she asserts that, contrary to beliefs that African women's voices against oppression are not loud enough, "history confirms that they have struggled for their rights in incredibly radical ways since pre-colonial times according to the exigencies of the time and place" (2005: 252).

Like Western feminism, African feminism cannot categorically be defined to mean one thing because it comes in various expressions and represents diverse cultures and traditions. Africa is a geographical landscape made up of 54 countries who have cultures, traditions and ethnicities. A country like Nigeria, which is the largest in Africa, prides herself with over 250 ethnic groups with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo being the largest. As such, various ideological and theoretical persuasions exist, especially among scholars. This leads me to Nnaemeka's observation that "the majority of African women are not hung up on articulating their feminism; they just do it" (2008:5). For these reasons, attempting to define African feminism in a monolithic way will open up problems of accuracy. Therefore, as Nnaemeka

(1998) suggests, a pluralist approach (such as African feminisms) which captures the heterogeneity of African cultures and histories may be an appropriate premise. In spite of the difficulty of adequately defining African feminism, Carole Boyce Davies' explanation cogently puts it into proper perspective. She explains that African feminism acknowledges that African men and women are both fighting against "foreign domination and exploitation". She asserts that African feminism is not antagonistic towards men; rather it encourages them to participate in women's unique struggle against subjugation (in Guy-Sheftall, 2003: 32).

Borrowing the term 'feminisms' from Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) and Nnaemeka (1998), this study views African feminism as the various feminisms that are representative of culturally and politically specific experiences, that are specific to African women. I agree with Obioma Nnaemeka (2005) that African women are fighting against two forces -- the internal force of patriarchy and the external war against imperialism -- which requires great effort. The focus here is primarily on Nigerian feminists and their effort to bring to the fore feminisms that are directly relevant to the socio-cultural, political and historical context. This does not strictly eliminate inputs from feminists who are not geographically present in Nigeria. As Lewis puts it, "African feminism embraces the work of theorists located in the United States but committed to gender analysis of African contexts like Ifi Amadiume" (2001:5). Generally speaking, there exist, in African feminisms, some commonalities in beliefs and ideologies that uniquely bind these feminisms. One of these is the 'accommodationist', communalist, non-antagonistic approach to feminism. Examples can be drawn from the manner in which many scholars and writers engage with their texts. The words of foremost Nigerian writer, Flora Nwapa, at a paper presented at the first 'Women in Africa and Africa in Diaspora conference' provides some basic tenets that are common to African feminisms. She proposes that:

Our task should be to exploit elements of our indigenous traditions--such as democracy, tolerance, sharing, and mutual support--in order to achieve our goal...there should be interdependence and some measure of understanding which blossoms into mutual understanding and respect. (Nwapa, 1998: 98)

Together, mutual understanding, complementarity are salient positions that recur in the works of many Nigerian writers, critics and scholars alike, who may not necessarily be feminists (or want to be referred to as such). The rest of this section will focus more critically on Nigerian scholars and feminists and their view and contributions to the feminist discourse.

Women in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, are careful of being tagged feminists because

of the negative connotations associated with the term, such as the anti-male notion it is believed to propagate. There was (and there still is) a distancing from the term by women, which meant being cautious of wholly imbibing a theory / movement that was homogeneous and didn't fit their own ideals, particularly the radical form of feminism. Gwendolyn Mikell confirms this when she says, "there were relatively few African women who used the term 'feminism' prior to the 1990s, and those who do so now are explicit in acknowledging the breadth that appears within it" (1995: 406). Naomi Nkealah supports this as she claims that the term feminism immediately conjures misconceptions of "anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion", which must be corrected (2006:134). Established writer, Buchi Emecheta, one of the pioneers of female writing in Nigeria consistently distanced herself from being referred to as a feminist. Some of her books, such as *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), depict the struggles, joys and pains of women. A reflection of some of her own personal struggles and search for fulfillment is seen in *Head Above Water* (1986). However, she resists embracing the term feminism, which, in my view, is a stance borne out of resistance to western feminist hegemony. In an interview in 1994 she succinctly states thus:

I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist that is your business; but I don't subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too? (cited in Mikell, 1995: 406)

There are, however, other African writers who wear the title boldly. Ama Ata Aidoo, a foremost Ghanaian author, is not only unashamed to be called a feminist, she also insists that everyone – male and female— should be a feminist (Aidoo, 1998:47). When women openly declare to be feminists, they are attacked, and so scholars have sought for ways to achieve the same purpose of emancipating women without necessarily being called feminists. They have looked for more subtle nomenclatures such as 'womanism', which many African scholars like Okonjo Ogunyemi and Modupe Kolawole have identified with.

Womanism, which is generally a widely-accepted form of feminism in Nigeria, was first defined by American novelist, Alice Walker in her work, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983) with the aim of catering to the experiences of Black women. It differs from canonical white feminism in many respects such as, first, it recognises the "triple oppression" black women face, namely class, gender and racial oppression (Sotunsa, 2009: 230).

Secondly, it recognises male involvement in the struggle against sexist oppression. Although focused on black women, male participation was considered important to female struggles. Thus, hooks categorically argues that womanists “believe in partnership with their men folk. This characteristic distinguishes womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist ideology” (1998: 845). In other words, womanism diverges from feminism in the sense that it recognises the specific needs of women of African descent in their struggle against racial, gender and classist oppression and encourages the full involvement of men in their struggle.

Literary critic Okonjo Ogunyemi, was the first Nigerian to have used the term ‘womanism’ as appropriate for African feminism in her article, “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English”(1985). Her discussion, though not totally derived from Alice Walker’s definition, shares some commonalities with hers. She rejects compromise between black feminism and radical feminism on the grounds of dissimilar experiences, based on race. She explains as follows:

Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. (Ogunyemi, 1998:65)

Agreeing, Kolawole (1998), who also proposes womanism, describes this theory as a suitable African feminist theory. She suggests that the nomenclature identifies with women’s experiences, and also, because the term “sounds softer”, women are able to more easily identify with it (cited in Ogundipe, 2007:10). Womanism sees no contest between men and women, but promotes a relationship that is complementary.

Another leading Nigerian theorist who has also proposed an African alternative to Western feminism is Molaria Ogundipe, a professor who has spent decades teaching, writing, researching and actively participating in gender issues that specifically relate to different African cultures. Ogundipe argues that women in Africa had in the pre—colonial times practiced their own form of feminism through traditional activism before any Western contact. In 1994, she came up with the acronym, STIWANISM, which stands for Social Transformation Including Women In Africa. Explaining the theory, she states that she “wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation” as against antagonizing men or competing with them. She stresses that building a harmonious society is both the duty and in the interest of men and

women. Like other scholars, Ogundipe also talks about the detachment African women have from the word 'feminism'. She asserts that those "who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as 'feminist' unless they are particularly strong in character enough to maintain their stance (cited in Sotunsa, 2009:231). Ultimately, the intention of the theory is to shift people's attention from debates on women wanting to be like men or African feminism imitating Western feminism, to that which is essential: for women to position themselves for positive transformation in Africa.

The African feminist discourse is on-going; thus, fresh and new insights are consistently being thrown up. In "Beyond an Epistemology of Bread, Butter, Culture and Power: Mapping the African Feminist Movement", Sinmi Akin-Aina notes that African feminism embodies a continuous process of "self-definition" and "re-definition" which comprises a wide range of participants who resist confinement by Western feminisms (Akin-Aina, 2011: 66). What defines African feminism is the peculiarity of African women's experiences characterized by contextual and historical forces and a refusal to be spoken for and misconstrued.

Categorizing African feminism, Olabisi Aina avers that "African feminism may be better explained within different historical epochs— precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial" (1998: 69). Aina explains that within the traditional African system, women had "some degree of security", and at the same time some of its structures provided avenues for the oppression of women. Some of the oppressive traditional societal structures, she states, include polygamy, a practice which gives men the liberty to marry more than one wife; widowhood rites, a practice which subjects women to some demeaning acts like head shaving; arranged and child marriages, as well as rights of inheritance given only to the male child. Aina's argument is that the African traditional structure laid the foundation that "capitalist imperialism" built on to dominate women in Africa. She contends that today, African women's struggles are not limited to challenging "foreign domination", but are more concerned with issues of survival such as "famine, hunger, drought, disease and war". Hence, empowerment for African women includes "good education", combining motherhood responsibilities with being a "productive member of the society", and encouraging men to be participants in the fight against oppressive structures (1998: 69-72).

Amina Mama agrees, but expands these insights to what she views as daily universal experiences of women. She explains: "It seems obvious to me that African women do have aspirations that go far beyond securing their survival: political, economic, social, intellectual,

professional and indeed personal desires for change”. She says further in the same interview with Elaine Salo, that those experiences are, so to speak, transnational, “merely symptomatic of a global grid of patriarchal power, and all the social, political and economic injustices that delivers to women and to Africans” (Salo: 2001:60). From the foregoing, it is apt to say that because of Africa’s historical context there are recurrent references to “western” or “foreign” feminism first, before contextualising African feminism. These references are sometimes made in relation to globalisation or colonisation, which imposed their own systems and ideas, but the influence is profound.

Zulu Sofola puts forward a rather interesting angle that, in Africa, the “academe” is not automatically the most appropriate place to discover real issues that concern Africa. She considers that the Western academy perpetrates a form of “brainwashing”. She opines that Western education has done more damage than good, especially to the African woman, and provides several reasons. One is the lack of provision for others by the “male-centred European and Arab systems” which are unlike the traditional systems in many African cultures which has “room for more”. The societies are often very communal and there exists interdependence between sexes. As she explains, women have always had an important role to play within African cosmology. Another kind of damage which Sofola points out is the single “channel of socio-political power”, which, of course, is male. She also mentions the damaging effect of “sexist notions” learnt in schools and propagated by the media on “women’s self-image” (1998:62). She strongly believes that westernisation has been disadvantageous to the African woman. She puts things in context with the example of the precolonial Ondo system in Nigeria:

There is a female line of power which in combination with the male line of power forms a joint Council of High Chiefs that serves as the Supreme Executive Council of the kingdom, the Osogbo.... A similar system existed in Ile-ife until European/Arab encroachment destabilized everything. For it was at the High Chief level that powerful women emerged in their own right as astute politicians to become Obas (Kings) in the Kingdom. (Sofola, 1998: 58/59).

She argues that the African woman is strong, independent, not antagonistic, yet self-willed and capable of achieving greatness side by side with her male counterpart, or on her own. Examples include Queen Amina of Zaria and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti. In this sense, it can be deduced from Aina and Sofola’s argument that African women had their own feminism, practised in their own indigenous way, but are now often impaired by a combination of unfavourable traditional

structures and imperialism.

Bolanle Awe, a retired Professor of History in Nigeria, slightly differs while mapping the position of “The Iyalode in the traditional Yoruba political system”; she states that one cannot make generalized statements about the position of women in all of the Yoruba land. She states that while it is true that a few women in the history of the Yoruba were made Oba, it cannot be considered as a usual occurrence because of the patrilineal nature of the Yoruba society. The ‘Iyalode’ was a female political spokesperson designated to be a voice for women in government because women had no direct involvement in the political process (Awe: 1995). In spite of this, and the historical problems with women’s political and economic independence, Awe’s position remains, also, that colonialism has indeed had negative effects on women’s role in the Yoruba society.

Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi asserts that “self-determination” was in fact a way of life in many African societies practiced by both men and women (2003: 1). This value, according to Oyewumi, has been cut short as a result of a number of the “global historical processes” like European colonisation and the slave trade. The resultant effect is the dependence on Europe and America for ideas which are not always beneficial to Africans. She explains the difficulty of singling out African feminism without making reference to Western feminism because many of the ideas and practices of the latter have been infused into the African day-to-day way of life. She describes sisterhood, a term commonly used as a bond for political activism amongst feminists of various histories, as “a mantra which assumes the common victimhood of all women” (2003: 3). Oyewumi further explains that sisterhood was formed based on common oppressions, a solace from victimization and, also, a shared “political activism”. There are, of course, criticisms of the use of the terminology, particularly from the perspective of African Americans regarding issues of race and class segregation. Oyewumi, citing bell hooks, states that there is indeed a possibility of sisterhood which cuts across race and culture, but this must take a deliberate effort. She states that, “for hooks, the problem with the concept of sisterhood is that it takes political solidarity for granted rather than as a goal to be worked at and achieved” (2003: 4). Thus, there must be a conscious effort to work towards surmounting barriers such as problems caused by race so as to foster a harmonious relationship within the confines of sisterhood, with the aim of making it indeed a ‘place’ of safety or in the words of Oyewumi, a female “solidarity” (2003:4) for all women regardless of culture, race or class.

Obioma Nnaemeka is consistent in her clamour for a meeting point, where there are no discrepancies between lived experiences and theory. She asserts that “the work of women in Africa is located at the boundary where the academy meets what lies beyond it, a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives form to theory, allows the simultaneous gesture of theorizing practice and practicing theory, and anticipates the mediation of policy, thereby disrupting the notion of the academy and activism as stable sites” (2003:277). What is imperative, and what Nnaemeka points out here is the futility of theory without practice and the importance of theorizing that which is reality: the experiences of African women which informs African feminism.

In as much as it is difficult to confine African feminism to one singular definition, one cannot fail to point out apparent similarities central to the discourse by scholars. The first is motherhood, which Aina (1998) mentions above and which Acholonu postulates in her theory, Motherism. Also, while describing the four essential categories of womanhood, Zulu Sofola mentions motherhood as one of the classifications: “(1) the divine equal of man in essence, (2) as a daughter, (3) as a mother, (4) as a wife” (1998: 54).

Another aspect that stands out in the various definitions, descriptions and theories of African feminism is communalism. Individualism is not often a social reality in many African (traditional) communities, in the sense that there is a lot of involvement amongst family and kin in many aspects of people’s lives: from day- to- day events like communal cooking, to more special occasions where extended family members get to be involved in giving a new- born child one of his/her numerous names, or the investigation and acceptance of a spouse for marriage which often involves the consent of extended family members. An individual who is excluded or banned from being a part of his community suffers ostracism. This is the reason why the inclusion of men often crops up in African feminist theories such as in Womanism, Nego-feminism, STIWANISM and even Motherism. According to Sofola, “the world view of the African is rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism” (1998:54). Community, in the social structure of many African societies, informs the way women see men as partners such that both sexes have individual roles to play in the growth and development of the home and the society at large. Thus, in Nigeria there was a “dual-sex system of socio-political organization” particularly in the Igbo traditional unit in Nigeria described by Kamene Okonjo as follows:

The African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather, African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where all its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society. Hence the establishment of a dual-sex power structure. (Cited in Sofola, 1998:54)

The dual-sex power structure suggests that the socio-political structure gives room for women, alongside their male counterparts, to co-rule and be active, relevant players in the traditional African system of government. African feminist thinkers including Aina (1998) and Sofola (1998), point a finger to imperialism and western education as major factors that have aided in silencing the voices of African women. There seems to be an attack on, and a reaction to Westernisation which is sometimes subtle, and sometimes overt, such as in the case of Sofola who argues that women in the academy, whom she considers “brainwashed” by western ideas and cultures, are “not well because their psyche has been diseased through the devastating onslaught of European and Arab cultures” (1998). In essence, many African feminists put forward the image of African women who are self-reliant, such that they know how to deal with their challenges without external help, especially including Western influences, because of the peculiarities of their experience. And while they propose cooperation with men, it is not from a place of lack of agency, but independent people working together with an understanding. Nnaemeka’s Nego-feminism, a feminism of negotiation, appeals to this understanding. The theory does not only postulate a negotiation between genders, it also offers a way forward for intercultural collaboration. She opines that “border crossing” requires conscious effort to learn “about” the “other”. However, what is more imperative, she says, is “learning from the other”. The difference between the two, as she explains, is that “learning from requires a high dose of humility tinged with civility”. Whereas, “learning about” usually brings about “arrogant interrogators” (Cited in Kamaara, Vasko and Viau, 2012: 49).

While it is pertinent to collaborate, accommodate and negotiate with the “other”, it is, first of all, important to acknowledge and appreciate identity, whether in terms of gender or culture. “Other” in the context in which I have used it is not derogatory, but that which is typically un-African or non-female. This will provide an understanding of how women in the theories used in this study, tackle patriarchy. Many African feminist thinkers are themselves engaged with the West in various ways. Nnaemeka lives in the US and works at the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

African scholars, Nnaemeka inclusive, stress the need to identify and build on what is African. Elucidating this, Claude Ake strongly posits that “we cannot significantly advance the development of Africa unless we take African societies seriously as they are, not as they ought to be or even as they might be...” (cited in Nnaemeka 2003:376). This does not take away the fact that many African societies, through various experiences, such as colonialism, have become hybridised, transnational, pluralistic and are still evolving. Within a globalised world, the context of this study identifies with a postcolonial space with a clear understanding that there were traditional systems in existence before colonisation, and power dynamics that are quite different from what colonisation brought. It is therefore important to understand how women in Nigeria, who have found themselves in the labyrinth of gender oppression and Western imperialism, express themselves without losing their cultural and individual identities as females. In the light of the above, it is worth referring to Amina Mama’s cautionary observations regarding Western and African feminist binaries:

To put it bluntly, white feminism has never been strong enough to be 'the enemy' -- in the way that say, global capitalism can be viewed as an enemy. The constant tirades against 'white' do not have the same strategic relevance as they might have had 20 years ago when we first subjected feminism to anti-racist scrutiny. Since then many Westerners have not only listened to the critiques of African and other so-called third world feminists - they have also re-considered their earlier simplistic paradigms and come up with more complex theories. (Cited in Salo, 2001: 61)

Nego-feminism

Before Obioma Nnaemeka proposed Nego-feminism, she had already started setting the stage for it when she gave details of African feminism and made comparisons with Western feminism in her lengthy introduction to *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power* (1998). In the book, she explains how African feminism differs from Western feminisms. Those discrepancies contribute to understanding African feminism. She explains that, “African feminism is not reactive, it is proactive. It has a life of its own rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance” (1998:9). While pointing out divergences from Western feminism, she mentions that African feminism is certainly not “radical feminism”, and also, among other things, that with the “language of feminist engagement in Africa (collaborate, negotiate, compromise),...African feminism

challenges through negotiation and compromise” (Nnaemeka, 1998:6). However, she states clearly that the best way to understand African feminism is not to set it against Western feminism but to look into the African context in itself. This non-radical and subtle approach is what she proposes in Nego-feminism. Scholars and researchers have employed the theory as a tool for understanding cultures and intercultural collaborations (see Kamaara, Vasko and Viau 2012). The theory has also been adopted as a tool of analysis in literature by African scholars like Alkali, Talif and Jan in their article, “Violence and Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Novels: The Nego-Feminist Option” (2013). Nnaemeka puts the concept of Nego-feminism into perspective in her 2004 article “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way”. She articulates it thus:

First, nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second, nego-feminism stands for “no ego” feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance. Here, negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/ exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around.” African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal landmines. (Nnaemeka, 2003: 277-278).

Negotiation is key to this theory and it requires the ability to resolve problems without antagonism. Nnaemeka gives examples of situations where collaboration, community and negotiation are used to tackle the ‘other’ and patriarchy. One such is Ifeyinwa Nzeako’s approach to handling a complicated situation with the government. Nzeako is the National President of the Nigerian National Council of Women’s Societies (NCWS). Nnaemeka writes that when Nzeako learned that the government had stopped a policy to grant married female public workers housing benefits, she refrained from being confrontational in a situation that clearly reeked of gender bias against women. What she did, however, was to point out the detriments of the policy and its effect on children’s welfare. According to Obioma, “knowing how to negotiate cultural spaces, the NCWS leadership shifted the argument from gender equity to family well-being/children’s welfare and accomplished its goals” (2003:381). For Obioma Nnaemeka, the theory is clearly built around African traditional values, especially in terms of how women operate within the society, and more specifically, how women navigate their way in patriarchal setups. Nego-feminism, as Nnaemeka proposes, is neither a radical nor aggressive approach, but one that gives room for collaboration and mutual agreement; one which sometimes

involves sacrifice; but ultimately, one that builds on negotiation, co-operation and togetherness without arrogance.

Emphasis is placed on inclusiveness and the willingness of African women to negotiate with men, and she refers to the Senegalese theorist and Professor of African studies, Filomina Steady's (1987) submission that for African women, the "male is not 'the other' but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself" (Steady, cited in Nnaemeka 2003: 380). In other words, men are not seen as rivals or competitors, but as useful complements even because of difference in sex. The theory suggests that African women are open to working with men in order to successfully achieve set goals. Nnaemeka further emphasizes a third space wherein practice and theory meet policy, to address everything that relates to African women. Nnaemeka's intention is for Nego-feminism to bridge the gap between anti-male and anti-feminists, to provide a meeting point for both men and women, in a bid to emancipate women. Nego-feminism is the middle point where men and women meet in compromise. This enables a situation whereby those who are against feminism do not see it as an overt attack against men and vice-versa. Speaking of Nego-feminism Alkali, Talif and Jan assert that "while male chauvinism vanishes, it is not replaced by a role reversal, or replaced by feminist ego. It is the coming together of men and women for harmonious survival where there is no victor nor vanquished" (2013:12). In their analysis of Ify Osammor's *The Triumph of the Water Lily* (1996), Nkem, a woman who is unable chooses to leave her husband's house giving room for another woman to have his babies, whilst not completely giving up on him. Alkali, Tali and Jan describe this approach as Nego-feminist because, in the end, even though circumstances do not permit them to be together as husband and wife, Nkem still chooses to preserve the love they share and not turn antagonistic against her husband (2013: 13). Again, Alkali, Talif and Jan, in their article "Violence and Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Novels: The Nego-Feminist Option" argue that with Nego-feminism, both men and women are ready allies in progress. They state that whereas "arrant feminism is a closed gender genre reflective of what has already occurred, Nego-feminism is open — to the present and the future" (2013). Nego-feminism proposes an interdependent approach whereby both sexes thrive with support from each other and handle discord harmoniously. It appeals to the ego of both sexes, discourages antagonism, and charges for partnership towards a progressive result.

Negotiation has been central to some other books and articles written by Nnaemeka. For example, in “Urban Spaces, Women’s Places”, she maintains that negotiation and moderation are key ingredients for social change. She asserts that there would not be so much fuss about feminism if “feminist praxis could allow itself to be guided by its own ideal” that is, as a “pedagogy and a philosophy of social change, feminism mandates involvement, and as an ethics of fair share and live and let live, it advocates moderation and negotiation and counsels against extremes and winner-take-all mentality” (1997: 163). Nnaemeka places a lot of emphasis on kinship — an important relational existence in Nigerian societies. Recognising kinship roles is a step in the right direction towards a better understanding of African women’s identities and how feminism works in African societies. This is bearing in mind that because of cultural and historical differences, practices are varied, even within African cultures. Values, practices and norms differ and these reflect in how African feminism is defined, both in theory and practice.

There’s the need for Africans to identify with and propagate positive aspects of their culture. Speaking of this, Oyeronke Oyewumi, in her book titled *The Invention of Women* (1997), asserts that rather than considering Western practices as the standard, they should be seen as an exception in African spaces. This is relevant with regard to the amount of influence the West has on contemporary African societies, many of whom jettison their culture for Western trends. This includes common trends like bleaching to lighter skin tones and wearing of long blonde weaves in a bid to conform to the ‘standard’ of beauty, as seen in various media channels. However, indigenous practices are increasingly being embraced and celebrated, with specific examples of cultural representation in Nigerian films like Tunde Kelani’s *Oleku* (1997) and Kunle Afolayan’s *October 1* (2014). Tunde Kelani not only promotes African tradition through the setting, language, ideals and costumes in his films, the women in his films are also mostly intelligent and articulate.

In previous publications, Nnaemeka discusses motherhood as an important aspect of women’s lives in Africa, in what she calls “othering of motherhood”, in her book, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature* (1997). She avers that with African texts, writers do not address motherhood in terms of a ‘patriarchal institution’, but one that has an experience of its own which comes ‘with its pains and rewards’, and she exemplifies this with Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* (1979). Nnaemeka distinguishes motherhood as an experience and as an

institution. She opines that women experience the institution of motherhood that patriarchy constructs. She explains that, based on the texts, even though women are aware that motherhood challenges are inevitable, they are prepared to go through with it, as they stand to benefit from it at the end of the day. However, the unjustified forms of abuse that come with ‘motherhood under patriarchy’ are rejected. This is with the aim of separating motherhood from victimhood.

In Nigeria, motherhood is taken very seriously and women gain such status not only by way of reproduction, but also by nurturing. As Oyewumi contends, to Africans “the model of motherhood is absolutely natural, because if anything binds women together in collective experience, it is child-bearing and the mothering of children, and consequently the nurturing of community” (2003:4). Even though the context of her submission is that of kinship in sisterhood, it does not take away the truth in the statement that nurturing is just as important an aspect of motherhood as reproduction in the African social space.

However, one may still ponder on the reason why, in the same traditional African societies, many women are considered ‘incomplete’ by the society if they are unable to bear children. Writers like Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa have written about how some women never experience the ‘privilege’ of child bearing. Flora Nwapa (1998) states that in *Efuru* (1966) which is her first novel, she models her main characters on inspiring women she encountered growing up. The women, she states, were not just mothers and wives, but well-to-do women in the society who, aside from being successful in their trade, took care of their children as well as their husbands. In “Women and Creative Writing in Africa” (1998), Nwapa explains that despite *Efuru*’s position in the society, she is unable to have children and she can’t do anything about it. In both *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970) she explains that her aim was to recreate the experience of African women in traditional societies, especially in relation to the “problem of procreation, infertility and child-rearing”. She touches on the agony and shame childless women experience in traditional societies. *Efuru* tells the story of a good looking, industrious and successful woman, who happens to be childless. In the book, *Efuru* often ponders on why she is being denied the joy of motherhood in her prime. *Efuru* is described using such terms as ‘handicap’ and ‘luckless’, to reiterate the value the society places on motherhood, such that, in the traditional sense, a woman who is unable to bear a child is not complete, has bad luck, or is sometimes tagged a witch who has killed her unborn children in the spiritual realm. Nwapa encourages the creation of characters that are fulfilled and not restricted by societal expectations

like “marriage and motherhood”. She explains in her article that “there must be choices because this handicap, childlessness, does not make a woman less than a woman” (1998:97).

However, she does not end the article without stating that despite being strong and capable of being independent, women should be unprejudiced in relating with men. This, again, gravitates towards the ideal of tolerance and compromise that Nego-feminism offers, as do most African feminisms like ‘Snail Sense Feminism’ developed by Akachi Ezeigbo, which she explains, in part, as “the tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men” (2012:21). Further, Nwapa notes, “Our task should be to exploit the elements of our indigenous traditions- such as democracy, tolerance, sharing, and mutual support in order to achieve our goal...There should be interdependence and some measure of understanding which blossoms to mutual respect and equality” (1998:98).

The concept of womanhood in the traditional African context is one which provokes the question of what womanhood is. What makes a woman, woman? Looking at the example of Efurú again, her inability to bear a child puts her womanhood to the test in the eyes of her husband and the entire community. Filmmakers have also represented the devastating effect of childlessness on marriages, especially on women (see *The Surrogate*, directed by Sobe Charles and Akin Tijani, 2017). Thus, one is led to ask if reproduction is the ultimate test of womanhood. Gilbert, Efurú’s second husband, neglects her because of her inability to reproduce. This is very reflective of what happens in reality. In many traditional societies in Africa, being childless is the worst calamity any woman can encounter, and for this reason, women go to various lengths to have babies, including seeking supernatural, medical or religious means. In the end, Efurú is elevated to an esteemed position to be the priestess of the water goddess. By virtue of this, she is raised above her fellow humans as she has direct communication with gods and goddesses. Although the resolution here seems unpragmatic in the societal context, Nwapa’s aim is to symbolically valorise women as human beings who should be respected beyond their reproductive capabilities and societal expectations, as their inability (or unwillingness) to reproduce does not hinder the protagonist’s capabilities to perform her responsibilities or attain desired feats.

Undeniably, motherhood is an integral part of a woman’s life in many African contexts. Whether or not she chooses to remain childless, the family and society, largely because of the sense of community, make it their duty to pressurise her into it. The idea of choosing to remain

childless, in Nigeria, is a foreign notion in theory and to a high degree, in practice. Latifat Ibisom and Noris Mudege's research into "Childlessness in Nigeria: Perceptions and Acceptability" gives evidence of this. According to their research, based on discussions with focus groups, they state that "regardless of the reason, voluntary childlessness evoked strong negative feelings among discussants" (2014:61). True agency is being able to decide what to do and how to do it, but it is not always that straightforward in situations where culture is an integral part of daily experience, and key to that culture is child bearing. However, to address the lingering question of the relationship between motherhood and womanhood, Oyewumi observes: "In much of Africa, womanhood transcends being a social role, identity, position, or location" (2003:2). This, she says, is because individuals do not just play one role, they have multiple roles and relationships some of which are advantageous and others not so much. What this means in the present context is that, even though motherhood is key to womanhood in the African traditional context, and indeed in Africa as a whole, women still have other important (sometimes overlapping) positions they fill and are fulfilled in, which are not limited to reproduction.

Motherism

While I have discussed, above, the role of motherhood in many societies in Africa and Nigeria in particular, I now turn to Catherine Acholonu's interesting, if, in some critical views, contested, development of the term 'Motherism' which explores the concept beyond the confines of reproduction but also encapsulates humanity and gender inclusiveness. Acholonu, a Nigerian writer, political activist and scholar, whom Nduka Otiono describes, at the time of her death in 2014, as a "goddess of the intellectual market square" (2014: 67), is well reputed for her intellectual activism, which she earned through her "provocative and eclectic publications" (ibid). Acholonu is unconventional in her approach to intellectual and political issues and this became pronounced in the mid-1980s when she launched eight books all at once. In the political space, she earned remarkable recognition amongst "male gladiators and chauvinists" as she "proved her mettle as a fighter and promoted her irrepressible spirit of a goddess" (2014:68). Otiono analyses the marriage of ritual, spiritual and pragmatic elements that mark Acholonu's world view, notable in the poem that forms the epigraph to the article:

The goddess that is everywhere
streams into my veins

that I may live
that you may drink
I am the goddess
Of the market square. (in Otiono, 2014: 67)

In her interview with Otiono (2014), Acholonu states that her field of research is Fundamental Studies which involves the need to “think deeply about the origin of things” (2014: 72). This statement is a premise to understanding the basis of her theory, Motherism.

Motherism builds on the tenets of motherhood and promotes complementarity of sexes. Motherism is an Afrocentric feminist theory postulated by the late Catherine Acholonu as “central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages” (1995:110). Motherism does not suggest that every woman is expected to be a mother, because even a man can be a Motherist. What motherhood is to Motherism is that in its core, it borrows the values and attributes of an ideal vision of motherhood, one of which is the love of a mother for a child. Acholonu explains the importance of motherhood in the African context and in her view, it is around motherhood that a relevant African feminist theory can be built. She explains that motherhood has been central to African culture, literature, psychology, arts and philosophy (1995:110).

Her proposition of Motherism is anchored in her perception of African experiences and reality. She grounds her theory in humanity, togetherness and peaceful co-existence. Accordingly, she asserts that the “weapon of Motherism is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation, as has been the case with radical feminism” (1995: 111). Motherism is gender neutral, therefore a man can be a Motherist if he chooses to. She does not reject the involvement of men, neither does she suggest that every woman must be a mother. Anyone who embraces the ideals, as mentioned above, is a Motherist. Interestingly, Catherine Acholonu, like Obioma Nnaemeka, draws heavily from Sierra Leonean Professor of African Studies, Filomena Steady’s humanistic feminist view that solving Africa’s challenges depends largely on the complementarity of sexes and “the totality of human existence within a balanced ecosystem”. Acholonu cites her thus:

Africa as the birthplace of human life must also be the birthplace of human struggle. One can optimistically conclude...that by virtue of its inclusive and humanistic character, the emergence

of African feminism no doubt signals a major step in the intellectual and pragmatic struggle for societies devoid of class, caste, racial and gender basis. (1995:112)

As Steady points out, inclusiveness as well as humanistic qualities are key to African feminism. The focus is very strategic in the way it is not only about women being able to reach any pinnacle they aspire to, but creating an environment that allows and encourages them to do this. That is where humanistic attributes such as tolerance come in. Gender tolerance allows for men to see the value of women as people who are not less human, less intelligent or ambitious. According to Roseline Yacim, the true essence of Motherism is “continuous mutual understanding, togetherness which creates a peaceful harmonious atmosphere or environment” (2015: 192).

Speaking specifically about how the theory relates to motherhood and family, Acholonu in her explanation offers her views of the characteristics of a good mother such as love for God, family values, regard for differences (1995:112-113). The essence of loving God does not exclude those who do not follow conventional religion; it emphasises love for all that is perceived ‘good’, which also reiterates the centrality of love to the theory. The above further emphasizes the point made earlier that, for Motherism, womanhood is not defined by being a mother, and being a Motherist is neither determined by being female nor the ability or willingness to reproduce, but the possession of certain humane qualities and instincts such as love, protection, tolerance, a sense of responsibility and nurturing to mention a few.

Because Motherism is hinged on the above complex definition of motherhood, the theory places ample emphasis on family and family values. Roseline Yacim, in her article “Demystifying Motherism in a Dialectical Discourse: The example of Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh’s *Nneora: An African Doll’s House*” (2015), notes that Utoh-Ezeajugh recreates Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1897) in the African context and creates a woman who, in spite of her patience and being challenged by her husband, chooses family and responsibility over leaving home (2015:198). She concludes that, as a female dramatist, Utoh-Ezeajugh made a deliberate attempt to proffer a means of peaceful co-existence which involves forgiveness, reconciliation and accommodation by both sexes. The symbolic title of the book which translates as ‘Mother of all’, according to Yacim, echoes the “virtues of tolerance, forgiveness, accommodation, reconciliation, love for herself, her husband, her children and her environment” (2015:199).

As mentioned earlier, African feminists are grounded in African ideals and sometimes it may appear as if lines of distinction between them are blurred. From Womanism (Okonjo Ogunyemi/ Mary Kolawole), to STIWANISM (Molara Ogundipe Leslie), Snail-sense feminism (Akachi Ezeigbo), as well as Motherism and Nego-feminism, collective effort and inclusiveness are paramount traits and the theories can be easily related to each other. Nevertheless, each has its own focus. For Motherism, love and nurture are central (Acholonu, 1995: 111). I would emphasize here that being a Motherist, love and nurture are not limited to children, but extend to the society at large with the aim of creating a peaceful and harmonious co-existence.

The centrality of Nego-feminism, on the other hand, is negotiation—in the practical sense on the word. Nnaemeka explains that feminism for African women is not a “construct” but a practice. That is, it is not a handbook that can be referred to as the situation arises, but a lived reality in which women practically negotiate situations subtly, so as to bring about a non-catastrophic resolution.

Complexities and Contradictions

The theories explored above may be argued to be dated, given that their development goes back to the late nineties. Thus, their applicability and relevance may be questioned in contemporary societies. Globalisation and geographical factors such as migrations are some of the reasons why some of the theories should indeed be interrogated. For example, how relevant is Acholonu’s theory to an African living in Europe who finds communality in the way it is explained in the African context impracticable? Can or should there be one feminist theory applicable to Africans as many African feminist theorists postulate (i.e as an African alternative to Western feminism), bearing in mind the vastness of space, culture and traditions?

Naomi Nkealah categorises the challenges of African feminisms into two groups, namely, “Inclusion vs Exclusion” and “conceptualisation and target”. In developing her argument regarding inclusion and exclusion, Nkealah contends that every “brand” of African feminism is targeted towards a specific group of “gender-conscious” people to the exclusion of others (2016: 64). She challenges African feminists for not paying attention to lesbians who are already stigmatised in many societies, asserting that “it is gravely problematic to subscribe to a feminism that sweeps sexuality issues under the carpet” (2016: 65). She also asks questions about the specific group of African women for whom African feminists apparently theorise: “continental

African women or diasporic African women or both?”(2016: 66). She also ponders on who they prioritize, women living in Africa, Europe or America. Admittedly, these are relevant questions that undermine the authority of African feminisms as true alternatives to ‘hegemonic’ Western feminism.

The Motherist theory, though very relevant to this study, poses some questions that should not be ignored. One of such is a pertinent question Desiree Lewis puts forward when she argues that by “celebrating purely symbolic roles for women, or affirming gendered roles of services and nurturing, Acholonu ultimately reinforces standard gendered stereotypes” (2001:6). This is open for debate, however. As explained, Acholonu does not only refer to nurturing as women’s roles but as humanistic roles, neither does she apply Motherism only to women. However, it is true that the effectiveness of Motherism is open to debate in a contemporary world where patriarchal violence manifests itself in increasing physical and mental abuse, occupational gendered discrimination, molestation and crimes against women. How should women deal with such? These are areas of import not addressed by many African theories, including Motherism.

Further, it is important to ask, as Nkealah does, whether African feminists are themselves not adopting the exclusiveness of which they accuse Western feminists? Many African feminist theorists propose feminism(s) that appeal to culturally (and mostly geographically) specific African women, as a replacement for what Western feminism offers. It is difficult to ascertain who these theories are meant for, as some aspects conform to what is widely culturally accepted, without considerations for minorities. For example, the theories I outline are invariably heteronormative. These African feminisms exclude non-heterosexuals, either implicitly or explicitly. Kolawole, for example, asserts that for most Africans, lesbianism does not exist because it is a form of expression that is alien to the African worldview (1997:15). While discussing African feminisms and the exclusion of lesbianism, Naomi Nkealah argues that “African womanism overtly rejects lesbianism, while stiwanism subtly dismisses lesbian politics” (2006:65). Sylvia Tamale in *African Sexualities: A Reader* (2011), contextualises sexualities in Africa historically and asserts that various “forces interrupted the shape of sexualities” in Africa and redefined “notions of morality”. Sexualities are contained in “social and political spaces through both penal codification and complex alliances with political and religious authority...” (2011:2). The implication, therefore, is that theorists have themselves compromised with some of the stipulations about what is permissible; their worldviews have

been confined by religious, political and sociocultural spaces that limit the inclusiveness of their theories. As Tamale points out, there are standardised global perceptions of African sexualities that remove “questions of diversities and complexities of sexual relations” (2011: 2). She further argues that the idea of a single, static “sexuality for all Africans is out of touch” with people’s identities and experiences and also with “current activism and scholarship” (2012: 2). The focus of this thesis is on films that prioritise heterosexual relations, with the consciousness that the issue of theorizing, and analyzing representations of, non-heteronormative sexuality is enormously complex.

In recent years, in spite of the criminalization of homosexuality (by the Goodluck Jonathan administration), Nigerians in the Diaspora whose sexual orientations are welcomed abroad have turned into advocates for gay rights: Bisi Alimi, the first Nigerian to openly come out on Television as gay is an example. Where then must the minorities who live in Nigeria turn, ideologically? Sylvia Tamale in her reader warns researchers and scholars of sexualities to be wary of falling into the “homogenising trap” and to avoid “homogenizing and essentialising people’s sexualities” (2011:4). Tamale (2013) speaks against religious and political interferences that incite homophobia. She asserts that the “antihomosexuality rhetoric serves to strengthen the standing of its proponents in mainstream thought and maintains their social relevance— whether in the West or in Africa” (2011:34).

This brings to mind the question of dominance. Carol Boyce Davies, in “Beyond Unicentricity: Transcultural Black Presence,” conceptualises unicentricity as a one-centered “logic which demands a single center...from which all else emanates” (1999:96). With ‘unicentricity’ there exists dominance; it operates as a reservoir (of knowledge, ideas, resources etc.) which flows to other channels. Davies explains that unicentricity cannot accommodate a “multiple and equal” centre, rather it operates as a single centre which constantly expands. She argues that unicentricity is the “logic of Eurocentrism as well as that of its counter discourse, Afrocentrism” (1999:96). This logic may be applied to hegemony in feminist discourses. In order to avoid hegemony and promote inclusiveness, there has to be openness to ideas, cultures and orientations similar to what Nnaemeka proposes in “border crossing”, earlier discussed. Adaptable approaches should be employed in applying African feminisms, given how global the world is, and especially because many of the theorists themselves are not geographically bound in Africa and may have absorbed (with or without realization) transnational variations in the

manner of thought, education, ideals and action. This permits wider possibilities, prevents dominance, and encourages inclusion in their theorisation.

Contemporary Nigerian feminist and author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, employs more radical approaches to feminism, some of which have raised debates regarding their applicability in the Nigerian context. For example, in a recent interview with Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show* (2018), she argues against chivalry, especially when it is applied in the context of women being seen as weak. She speaks against such actions as men opening doors for women on the assumption that women are the weaker sex. In the same interview, she expresses her displeasure with how women are assumed to be weak and are considered first, along with children, in crisis situations. She takes a position of absolute equality between men and women. Her feminist, and often controversial, position has also gained international attention, especially in the light her interview with former United States' 'First Lady' and former presidential aspirant, Hillary Clinton, where she queries Clinton's choice of "wife" as her first identity descriptor on her Twitter bio, which the former First Lady agrees to change (BookTV: 2018). Her forthrightness brings about controversy, and many of her speeches revolve around women's position and her zeal to address gender equality..

Adichie contextualises her position in her published TEDTalk "We should all be feminists" (2014). She cites as examples cultural and social impediments that confront females and proposes an ideal situation where everyone is a feminist. She explains the societal expectations on girls: "We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful otherwise you will threaten the man". These are real inhibitions to the emancipation of girls, if they must truly be liberated from hindrances that inhibit the possibility of equality. With practical and personal contemporary illustrations, she elucidates her points. In *Dear Ijeawele, or A feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), a letter responding to her friend who inquires about raising her daughter as a feminist, Adichie questions the absurdity of the society teaching only girls to "aspire to marriage," and not boys. This point can be related to Michelle Bello's film, *Flower Girl* which is analysed in the fourth chapter of this study. Pressure to get married and to maintain the home are real burdens mounted on women, while men are deemed 'eligible' until they decide to choose a partner.

Further, it is pertinent to note that, unlike some older generations of African feminists, Adichie clearly articulates the disservice patriarchy does to men. In her words, "But by far the

worst thing we do to males—by making them feel they have to be hard—is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The harder a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is” (2014). She advocates for gender equality, calling into question the culture that promotes inequality. She proposes that men should recognise and reject elements of deep-seated patriarchy, and that women should refuse to be burdened with societal expectations, and live as human beings who are equals—feminists. Adichie, thus, overtly condemns patriarchal cultural conditions and calls for progressive and pragmatic approaches to gender equality.

While Adichie’s position is clearly strong and inspiring, I also argue that older theories remain relevant. Africa, and, more specifically, Nigeria, is a large entity connected to the rest of the world in complex flows, and an attempt at inclusivity in regard to gendered theories and practices, both rooted in Africa and emerging from beyond Africa, is important. Carole Boyce-Davies, in the article explored above, proposes the idea of ‘transcultural paradigms’, and contends that “rather than a giant, monolithic, traditional African culture, we can assert multiple, transcultural presences within and outside Africa” (1999:106). So, too, Achille Mbembe’s (2002) philosophy of African identity is key to understanding limitations that borders (physical and theoretical) create. He posits that “African identity” cannot be neatly defined and attempts to define it will continue to fail so long “criticisms of African imaginations of the self and the world remain trapped within a conception of identity as geography—in other words, of time and space” (2012:270). Boundaries, in any form or intent, cut people off. Davies’ assertion is relevant here:

A world in which we consider variable approaches seems appropriate for a number of reasons. It gives us more scope: It prevents fascism and the kind of dominance that we have seen under Eurocentricism; and it opens a wider range for reflection. (1999: 106)

Feminism should be about an all-inclusive discourse and practice with the sole aim of emancipating women and bringing about true equality. Applying geographical, national and cultural boundaries to feminism could be as limiting as patriarchy itself. Migrations, education, exposure and the media are as great influences on identity as local culture. Therefore, African and other feminisms should not be rigid discourses.

To conclude this section, I refer to the conclusion of Shereen Essof’s (2001) report on a workshop held to deliberate on feminisms in Africa. The report provides interesting insights into discussions between scholars and activists about what African feminism means. Several

interesting points were raised including Amina Mama's categorisation of the schools of thoughts of African feminists, which include those who argue that feminism is not African and is irrelevant to "Africa's political, social and economic realities", as well as those who acknowledge the relevance of feminism "as an ideology that recognises that women's equality has to be overcome but suggests the need to overcome it differently" (2001: 124). The general conclusion is that "feminists in Africa must continue to work hard to develop truly transformative critiques of and interventions into patriarchal and elitist structures and organisations" (2001: 127). Thus, there is the need for a continuous process of change. However, this is not said without acknowledging the challenges that come with divergent views on a discourse as personal, yet public, as feminism.

The rest of this chapter will offer a broad overview of patterns of gender representations in Nollywood films as generally portrayed by male filmmakers.

Gender Representations in Nollywood

Literature on media and gender is vast, especially in terms of media representations of women. Research on Nigerian films indicates that cultural and ideological messages are reflected in films. Shaka and Uchendu, for example, point out that "More often than not, films rely on cultural stereotypes in construction of victimization, characterizing women as seductive and scheming or vulnerable and naïve" (Shaka and Uchendu, 2012:5). Unfortunately, the aspects of culture represented in many films tend to be unfavourable towards women. There is an apparent trajectory right from the foundation of Nollywood, from the example of *Living in Bondage* (1992), where negative, stereotypic and regressive trends and social constructions of women are reflected by male filmmakers who dominate the Nigerian filmmaking industry. Because filmmakers have so often relied on social constructions which exalt patriarchal structures, women have been trapped in age-old traditions and images in films. Abena Busia in an opening remark in a forum "Nollywood and the Dynamics of Representation" mentions two oppositional tropes in Nollywood films, namely food and cars. Preparing food is a woman's test of womanliness and a "major index of cultural significance . . . of gender relations and a woman's moral standing." Cars on the other hand are "a potent symbol of a man's (frequently rising) power..." (cited in Bryce, 2012: 76). This simple opposition, she claims, is not reflective of the true multiplicity of women's roles in contemporary Nigeria.

In “Conflicting Framings of Women in Nollywood Videos”, Agatha Utaka (2010) criticises Nollywood films for grossly misrepresenting women. She attributes this gross misrepresentation to filmmakers who do not appropriately represent women in the “reality of things in the real world” (2010:65). In her reading and analysis of two Nollywood films (both directed by men), *Omata Women* (2003) and *More than a Woman* (2004), she interrogates how Nollywood films thrive on conflicting and unrealistic images of women which are reproductions of patriarchal ideologies. The implication of these unrealistic representations or “reversal of roles” as she puts it, is that “women are made to be seen and read in both the films and in real life as outlaws and evil to their families and society as a whole” (2010:1).

God’spresence (2014) attributes the lopsided representation of women in Nollywood films by men largely to sexism. While analysing *The Evil Queen* (Iyke Odife, 2007), in which the Queen is portrayed as a callous, power-hungry leader who symbolizes doom, she strongly encourages women to re-write their own stories and jettison stereotypic gender-based bias, patriarchy, and chauvinistic thematic preoccupations. Critics, thus, do recognise the problematic recurrence of male dominance in media and (Nollywood) films, and that there is an urgent need for a paradigm shift.

The representations of women as certain stereotypes are, however, not peculiar to Nollywood. God’spresence traces the origin of female stereotyping in Nollywood, which is still developing and learning its modes, to Hollywood. She observes that “Johnston has succinctly traced the source of the woman's stereotyped image in film as having originated from Hollywood filmmakers who see the man's role as being dynamic and the woman's role as static” (God’spresence, 2014: 99). Adewoye, Odesanya, Jimoh and Olorede (2014) have a similar opinion; they argue that Nollywood did not only learn the modes of filmmaking from Hollywood, they also imbibed the politics of stereotyping in the portrayals of women. These stereotypes have nevertheless not gone unchallenged by Nigerian critics. Feminist and film critics like Femi Shaka, Onookome Okome, Frank Ukadike, Foluke Ogunleye and others have challenged the basis for such representations in Nollywood films. Speaking of the Ghanaian counterpart of Nollywood, which is popularly referred to as Ghallywood, Andy Ofori-Birikorang and Dorcas Amina Donkor argue that women are well represented in popular Ghanaian films in terms of quantity. However, they are mostly portrayed as “vituperative, dependent, domestic, diabolic, sex objects, accommodating, enduring and gullible” (2014: 42). This is very similar to

what may be seen in Nollywood. Ofori-Birikorang and Donkor further aver that these portrayals buttress the fact that women are already traditionally subjugated, thus this plants seeds of “distrust among women and strengthens the forces which put them into the fringes of social life” (2014:42). Films undoubtedly mirror the society, and in turn, the society feeds off films.

Ofori-Birikorang and Donkor (2014) also observe that several scholars including Larkin (2008) and Haynes (2010) agree that “cultural revival or cultural authenticity”, which were at the beginning of African cinema the primary concerns, are no longer the focus of most African filmmakers. In Nollywood in particular, many filmmakers’ focus has indeed shifted to entertainment and filmmaking has essentially become a money-making apparatus. Early African filmmakers of whom Sembène Ousmane was a key figure, put a lot of effort into showcasing authentic African cultures and traditions. Dipio argues that some African filmmakers put themselves in the position of a griot. In this way, he “expresses himself by interpreting history and presenting it in an alternative way”. And more importantly, “he is often critical and challenges oppressive social structures” (2014: 4). It is necessary to recall here that Nollywood’s foundation is commercial. It has always been entertainment driven, with the focus on commercial viability, with only a few exceptions placing emphasis on other things like cultural revival. A large number of Nollywood filmmakers are business-minded storytellers who never attended film schools.

Femi Shaka and Ola Uchendu attempt to put these representations in context. According to them, women have from childhood been put in positions of victimhood by the society. They argue that “from infancy she is a victim of the patriarchal brand of socialization which conditions her mentally and physically as a willing slave of man; as a recreational facility to man; as an ornament or a piece of art work to be viewed and admired” (2012:5). What this infers is that the society has already placed the girl-child in certain conditions with regard to thinking, speaking and acting, and, as a result, they grow up considering many patriarchal ideas as normal and these often go unchallenged. Further, Shaka and Uchendu claim that women themselves sometimes perpetuate these beliefs because their minds have been conditioned to believe that they are inferior to men. Nollywood unfortunately further propagates this with their presentation of the “good girl/ bad girl dichotomy” which invariably provides “a code of conduct for women to follow in order to avoid victimization” (2012:5). In essence, it is easier for many women to

accept this as the norm and stick to what the society and the media dictate as the ‘good girl,’ than to challenge it and risk being further victimized. In Shaka and Uchendu’s words:

Anthropologists have found that many repressed minority groups tend to adopt the attitudes of the stronger dominant group toward themselves. Women may do the same by accepting the submissive stereotype, and by this device are able to escape some of the anxiety which arises if they feel themselves to be oppressed. It is easier to accept the status quo than to rebel against it, particularly if you rationalise that because of your sex you can never achieve as much as a man. (2012:5)

While Shaka and Uchendu’s opinions are valid, with modernisation and, of course feminism, the paradigm is shifting; a lot of women have gained consciousness about the need to challenge stereotypes and certain expectations both in reality and in representations in the film world. More and more women are stepping up to play active roles in filmmaking; at the same time, critics and scholars are questioning the stereotypic depiction of women in films.

A similar viewpoint to Shaka and Uchendu is contained in the argument put forward by Adewoye, Odesanya, Jimoh and Olorede (2014:105) who argue that media images greatly shape the way people understand reality and stimulate certain behavioural patterns in film audiences. They analyse two Nigerian films *Ije* (Chineze Anyaene, 2012) and *Mr and Mrs* (Ikechukwu Onyeka, 2012), and categorise three major ways in which women are portrayed in Nollywood films. Firstly, they are frequently depicted as domestic servants. The authors state that this is one of the most dominant roles in which women are portrayed in these films. Conversely, David Gauntlett points out that, invariably, women who work in professional spaces, especially if they are also wives and mothers, are not depicted on screen (cited in Adewoye et al, 2014). Secondly, women are very often presented as sex objects—sexualising women in films is one of the dominant stereotypes not just in Nollywood but also Hollywood and Bollywood. Thirdly, women are shown as the weaker sex. This puts women in positions of less power not only physically, but also emotionally and sometimes mentally (Adewoye et al, 2014).

While Shaka and Uchendu see women’s portrayals (especially the objectification of women) in films as being a reflection of society, other researchers including Mary Okocha and Tosan Akinwale (2015) opine that such representations are unrealistic. In “Reconstructing Motherhood in Nigerian films”, Okocha and Akinwale stress the unrealistic depiction of women

in Nollywood films especially as they relate to motherhood. They aver that in reality, “motherhood is considered sacred and highly placed in every society in Nigeria” (2015: 78). They examine the ideas of motherhood as portrayed by female directors and producers, notably Agatha Amata and Funke Akindele in the films *Aye Olomo kan* (2009) and *The Widow* (2005) and make several interesting observations about these complex portrayals. First, that the birthing process is not only what makes a woman a mother, but, importantly, nurturing and training a child in the right way. This is exemplified in the analysis of *Aye Olomo kan* where they point out that a mother’s failure to fulfill her maternal responsibilities to her child comes with dire consequences. They emphasize, also, that motherhood is not just an individual responsibility, but, a ‘public institution’ with the entire community as participants. In the same film, Demilade’s mother fails to fulfill her responsibility of bringing up her only child by over-pampering her. The child suffers the consequences, but this is redeemed by their cook who comes to her aid just in the nick of time. This emphasises that in many traditional African settings, childrearing is a collective responsibility and is not the sole responsibility of the mother, even though women may take their roles as mothers very seriously. This point is further emphasised in their analysis of the second film, *Widow*. They examine how, after the death of her husband, a woman sacrifices all that she has, almost to the point of losing her sanity, for the sake of her children. The article illustrates important aspects of motherhood as dramatised in the films: the challenges that women are faced with as mothers and the sacrifices they make for their children’s wellbeing.

From the foregoing, it appears that many scholars agree that women have been unfairly represented in Nollywood films. To recall my comments in my introductory chapter, the question is thus: “Will, and, if so, how will this change when more female filmmakers take the stage?” According to Jamilya Mohammed, with the presence of more female filmmakers in the industry “the situation of women’s role in the films might change tremendously” (cited in Ihentuge, 2015:548). On the contrary, Chisimdi Ihentuge argues that representations of gender in films have nothing to do with the gender of the artist, stating that, “there have been cases of female filmmakers whose works have been read as further bastardizing the image of women, just as there have been male filmmakers, who have presented appreciable images of women in their works” (2015: 548). While this is true, it would not be fallacious to say that the presence of more female filmmakers (including producers, writers and directors) in the industry would tremendously improve the chances of women being better portrayed, as God’s presence has

stated: “If the woman's dilemma must be totally circumvented and finally laid to rest in the nearest future, then no one else should take the lead in the struggle, but women themselves” (2014:117). In literature, we saw Flora Nwapa breaking the chain of an all-male circle in Nigerian literature, women’s experiences and insights from the female point of view started coming to light and stereotypes started being challenged as more female writers like Buchi Emecheta and Zainab Alkali, amongst others, came on board as female writers.

Jane Bryce in “Signs of femininity, symptoms of malaise: contextualising figurations of women in Nollywood” offers an interesting argument on images of women in Nollywood. She opines that as film audiences, we should look beyond the direct correlation between screen lives and real lives, arguing that, “the problem goes beyond not showing women as they really are, it is our failure to recognize that all art falsifies reality” (2012:72). What is really needed, Bryce argues, is sufficient focus on the “semiotic power of images” and how these can “work against the grain of received opinion, and their openness to alternative interpretations” (2012:72). She follows Karen Barber’s argument that powerful messages are often compressed into “loopholes, fissures, and silences, and in the gap between desire and reality we can often discern meanings that exceed intention” (2012: 72). Bryce asserts that “representations taken to be ‘negative’” should be interpreted beyond their surface meanings as “coded expressions of social fears and individual desires that cannot be articulated in any other way” (2012:73). In her opinion, what is at risk goes beyond contending forms “of modernity, of modes of representation and their relationship to truth”. Bryce notes that scholars, like Brian Larkin and Kenneth Harrow, are making an effort to engage with what filmmakers are actually doing. Therefore, it is expedient to create fresh “critical and conceptual tools to catch up with what is turning out to be a major transformation of African media” (2012:78). Jonathan Haynes, thus, recommends the need for a “critical apparatus that will do justice to forms of popular political consciousness that may be unfamiliar or disconcerting” (2012: 79). The ‘unfamiliar’ or ‘disconcerting’ elements, especially of earlier Nollywood films, are taken up by Bryce when she observes that Nollywood films do not concern themselves with realism outside the superficialities (i.e expensive cars, luxurious furnishings”. Its oral storytelling approaches, she asserts, “make for a decidedly nonlinear, nonrealist style of representation that privileges the supernatural, the liminal, and the nonrational” (2012:79). Concluding her discussion of Nollywood films made between 1992 and

2008, Bryce argues that if women's representation in films seems to be negative, then what must be explored is Nollywood's particular aesthetic choices. She writes,

If many of the roles given to women appear to be "negative," we should not make the mistake of reading them literally. Rather than looking for a one-to-one relationship with reality, we need to read Nollywood as part of the "crisis of representation," and its modes of signification as a dramatization of that crisis. (2012:84).

She goes on to note:

Emerging at the moment of Nigeria's greatest structural malfunction, Nollywood calls into question the tropes of heroism and the norms of masculinity and femininity that have informed the national post-Independence project. Looked at in this light, it is both futile and anachronistic to ask it to offer "positive" representations of women or anyone else. (ibid)

While I appreciate the pitfalls of the "images of women" school of criticism (see for example, Toril Moi's early critique of what she saw as "humanist essentialism" (1985; see also Radford's review [1986], and Fuss's discussion, [1989]), I do want to engage with the ways in which the filmmakers who are the focus of this thesis dramatise the possibilities for women to play creative, intelligent and active roles in their worlds. Of course, the narratives also present the obverse: women who are selfish, destructive, and dangerous. At all times the semiotic aspects of the films inform the representations of these women. The films, made between 2013 and 2016, that I discuss in this study break away from Nollywood films that deal with the supernatural, the grotesque, extreme graphic violence, and so on, and are quite often explicitly aligned to realist modes of filmmaking, albeit inflected by genres like social realism, romantic comedy, satire and in *Keeping my Man*, a kind of morality play structure. The films wear their ideological hearts on their sleeves and lend themselves openly to explorations of contiguity between screen lives and real lives. However, close attention will still be paid to the films as fictional cinematic constructions.

To avoid repetition which has, as Haynes (2010) points out, become a common trend in critical literature on Nollywood, it will suffice to say that there is an extensive study of the portrayal of women in Nollywood films by male filmmakers (see also Umukoro & Okwuowulu,

2010; Gadzekpo, 2011; Kur Aagudosy, & Ohewere, 2011, Ukwueze & Ekwugha, 2013; Dunu, Ukwueze & Okafor, 2015, Ogunbiyi, 2010). Most of these studies point toward negative stereotypical representations of women. Because men have controlled the film industry for so long, theorists claim that the world is depicted through the stereotyped gaze of male artists (Lovey, 2004). As such, feminist scholars and critics declare that no matter how hard male artists or filmmakers try, they cannot sufficiently represent women's experiences the way women would (Dipio, 2014). This, however, does not disregard the efforts of male filmmakers who have in various ways in their films contributed towards valorising women.

In the chapters that follow, the analyses aim to open up ways of understanding characters, roles and experiences of women (and men) from female filmmakers' point of view, using insights that are helpful, illuminating and derived from key African feminist thinkers, but also drawing on an awareness of the connectedness of the films and their directors to the wider world.

Focus of this Study

Critics and scholars seldom pay critical attention to filmmakers in the study of Nollywood films as much as they do to the stars. Jonathan Haynes attests to this when he says that "the dearth of academic studies of individual filmmakers is partly to be explained by the relative aesthetic weakness of the video in the general eyes of those who are used to thinking about international cinema" (Haynes, 2010: 14). More recently, with the consciousness that filmmakers have of an international viewership, more deliberate efforts are being put into Nollywood films to make them appeal to international audiences. Consequently, more academic attention is now being paid to Nollywood films and filmmakers alike. A few filmmakers like Zeb Ejiro, Teco Benson, Tunde Kelani and Kunle Afolayan are acclaimed auteurs to whom critical attention has been paid in recent times (Shaka, 2015; Afolayan, 2010). Less common is the case with female filmmakers, largely because they have only recently begun to gather recognisable, as well as irrefutable, clout in the industry.

The number of women filmmakers I shall study has been streamlined to four filmmakers partly because of availability and accessibility, but also because of the inherent interest, value and contemporary relevance of their work. While my analyses will be informed by the African feminist theories described above, they will also engage with concerns of particular interest to the individual films including conditions of production, genre, *mise-en-scène* and performance. I

shall focus especially on the work of Rukky Sanda, Michelle Bello, Stephanie Linus and Omoni Oboli. These women are contemporary filmmakers who have, among other women, defied barriers and are doing remarkably well as filmmakers. In the course of analysis, a range of other female filmmakers will be referenced.

RUKKY SANDA

Rukky Sanda is an actress, a scriptwriter, a director and a producer. Born on 23rd August, 1984, she started acting as a student in 2004 and now owns a film production company, Rukky Sanda Productions (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rukky_Sanda). Her film *Keeping My Man* (2013) which she wrote, directed and produced will be examined in this study. Other films directed by Rukky Sanda include *Gold Diggin* (2014) and *Dark* (2015). In the next chapter, I will examine how Sanda addresses sexual, romantic and marital conflicts in the modern Nigerian social context. I also address her narrative style and techniques and their flaws.

Sanda as a filmmaker articulates what Nollywood represents in some ways. Like the industry, she started out as an amateur with no filmmaking acumen or background and she has been relentless in her pursuit to perfect her craft as a filmmaker. She has been able to maneuver through the limitations of the industry, deploying a business approach, and has maintained this through the years. Another interest in Sanda lies in the fact that, off screen, she has maintained an intriguing image mainly through her ostentatious, sometimes controversial, public presentation of herself. This flashiness is interestingly reflected in her characters in most of her films including *Keeping my Man* (2013). The curious relationship between her off-screen image and her films presents Sanda as a unique, unconventional filmmaker to be explored.

MICHELLE BELLO

The second filmmaker of interest is Michelle Bello, a British Nigerian, born on 30th September 1980. She did her postgraduate studies in communications and specialised in film directing at Regent University, Virginia in 2011, after which she directed the hit film *Flower Girl*. *Flower Girl* was released in 2013 in Nigeria and was also premiered in other countries like the United Kingdom, Ghana and in the United States at the Hollywood Black Film Festival in Los Angeles in October 2013. Before *Flower Girl*, Bello had directed and produced other films like *Sheltered* (2005) and *Small Boy* (2007). *Small Boy*, which was first released in the United States was a

huge success. It was nominated in two categories at the American Black Film Festival in Los Angeles in 2008 and, back home, it won Best Art Direction and Best Young Child Actor at the African Film Academy Awards in 2009 (www.imdb.com/name/nm3700303/bio?). Other local and international awards to her credit include The Trailblazer Award - Africa Magic Viewer's Choice Awards in 2014 and Best African Film - Black International Film Festival U.K in 2013.

Flower Girl, a romantic comedy about marriage and relationships set in Lagos, Nigeria will be critically examined in chapter four. Its appeal for this study mainly lies in the way the genre of the romantic comedy is adapted into a modern Nigerian story, with vibrant characters that bring the story to life. Bello's versatility as a director is presented in this film. Apart from feature and short films, Bello is also involved in Television production and directing. In 2007, she was an Associate Producer of the first season of the classic talk show, *Moments with Mo*, now simply referred to as *Moments*. She also directed *Sesame Street Nigeria*, season one in 2009.

STEPHANIE OKEREKE LINUS

Stephanie Okereke Linus is one of the first female directors in Nigeria to have a successful career as actor, scriptwriter, producer and director. She was born on the 2nd of October, 1982 in Ngor Okpala, Imo State, Nigeria. She started acting as a teenager in 1997 and when she graduated from New York Film Academy in 2007, she kicked off her directing career with the film, *Through the Glass* (2008, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanie_Okereke_Linus). As media critic, Noah Tsika, points out, Okereke Linus "simply creates her own opportunities, bypassing traditional Nigerian funding sources to produce her own scripts" (2015: 37). Indeed, in recent times, she rarely features in films outside her own. In 2014, she directed the film titled *Dry* – a heart-wrenching, deeply emotional film. The theme exposes the ills of child marriage and some barbaric cultural practices.

Dry is a fitting choice for this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, it focuses on women and girls trapped in damaging traditional Nigerian cultures in modern times. As earlier mentioned, most Nollywood filmmakers tell commercially viable stories that easily appeal to audiences. However, Linus takes a daring step by going the less popular route. Secondly, it is a timely film that was released about the time when the child marriage controversy was at its peak in Nigeria, which was in 2013 and 2014.

Linus has received numerous awards both as a filmmaker and an actor including Best

Actress in A Leading role at the Pan-African Film Festival (2016) and Best Director at the 2016 Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Award. Chapter five explores the diverse ways in which women are represented in *Dry*, as well as Linus' approach to highlighting significant social problems in society.

OMONI OBOLI

Omoni Oboli began her career as an actress, winning several awards before becoming a filmmaker. Oboli, originally from Delta state, was born on 22nd April, 1978 in Benin City. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in foreign languages at the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. Her acting career took off in 1999, but she launched her directorial debut only in 2014 with her hit film, *Being Mrs Elliot* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omoni_Oboli). Oboli is a versatile artist who has featured in many award-winning films. She took an acting break during the course of her career (1997-2009) and upon her return she has featured in award-winning films like *Figurine* (2009), *Anchor Baby* (2010), *Feathered Dreams*, and more recently the much-talked-about, high-profile film, *Fifty* (2015).

Since she began directing, she has consistently played the leading woman in her films. She not only directs and acts in her films, she also serves as a scriptwriter and producer. She has subsequently directed other films like *First Lady* (2015), *Wives on Strike* (2016), a comedy laced with a strong political statement and *Okafors Law* (2016). *Wives on Strike* (2016), which she directed and produced, was particularly record-breaking in Nigerian cinemas. It garnered a total of 51 million Naira, within seventeen days of its debut in cinemas across Nigeria (Onikoyi, 2016).

Wives on Strike is of particular interest because, similarly to *Dry*, it is built around a social message and may be read through recent and historical events as well as intertexts like Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015). Oboli uses everyday market women to explore a topical issue in a conservative society. Oboli has rapidly developed her skills and has had a successful career. Her first two films, *Being Mrs Elliot* (2014) and *First Lady* (2015), were both top-box-office films during their cinema screenings. Oboli has made four very successful films within three years and is currently working on the fifth—*Wives on Strike: The Revolution*, a sequel to *Wives on Strike*. As a professional director, she is empowered to speak through her craft.

CHAPTER THREE

Keeping My Man, dir. Rukky Sanda (2013)

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is *Keeping My Man*, a slightly unconventional Nollywood film by scriptwriter, producer, director and Nollywood actress, Rukky Sanda. A lot like Stephanie Okereke Linus who, in recent times, rarely depends on producers for film roles (and who will be the focus of chapter five), Sanda has taken it upon herself to create her own stories and be the star in her own films. As a graduate of Banking and Finance who had her first acting role in 2004, her rise in the film industry has been consistent, having featured in over forty films since her acting career properly kicked off in 2007. In this chapter, *Keeping My Man* is analysed with the consciousness that the content of the film emanates from a range of social realities in both traditional and modern Nigerian society, one of the most prominent being sexuality and conflict in marriages.

Harnessing Multiple Roles: Problems and Challenges

Like many Nollywood filmmakers, Rukky Sanda started her career as an amateur and has been honing her talent through the practical process of filmmaking. She is not professionally trained as a filmmaker; however, she boldly wears the hats of actor, director, scriptwriter and producer in her productions. She has fully embraced this multiplicity and is committed to championing her own course. In an interview with Adeola Adeyemo in 2012, Sanda reveals that “there are few people I’m ever going to act for, very few people, because not everybody is doing what we are doing now” (2012:n.p). Sanda forges ahead with her productions in a rapidly growing industry with booming opportunities for anyone courageous enough for its numerous challenges. She does so with an assured intention to improve her craft, project after project. The past five years have indeed given rise to many women like Kemi Adetiba, Omoni Oboli and Biodun Stephen who defy gender as a barrier to actualising their dreams.

Embracing multiple roles is a laudable milestone for this generation of women filmmakers. In the same interview mentioned above, Sanda acknowledges that she is involved in every aspect of her film production. She also discloses that for her, filmmaking is strictly business (Adeyemo: 2012). In other words, she began with a clear purpose of monetising her

craft and excelling, therefore the passion to change the narratives of women may be a secondary motivation. It may be expected that her oeuvre will centre on meeting the entertainment needs of her audience using affordable and available resources. This gives an inkling of the possible thematic explorations of her films, which mostly centre on love and romance. Frankly, unlike some of her colleagues (such as Omoni Oboli and Stephanie Linus), who use their platforms as filmmakers to create social awareness and challenge social issues, without forsaking entertainment value, activism is not an immediate concern for Sanda. Her films are indeed mostly geared towards commercialism and entertainment. Therefore, for her, it is a means to financial empowerment. Achieving her goals depends on converting her imaginative material into marketable commodities. Nevertheless, while Sanda does not obviously tackle social issues head on, nor use her films to challenge political issues, some of her films do project the fact that films are forms of cultural anthropology, as seen in *Keeping my Man*.

With her film production company, she is actively involved in creating her films from start to finish. She is a hands-on filmmaker who, as a scriptwriter conceives the idea; as an actor, brings the script to life; as a director, interprets the vision; and as a producer, oversees the finances and production of the project. However, there are a few noticeable problems in her films which may have been addressed with greater professionalism. For instance, in *Gold Diggin* (2013) there are several glaring technical glitches that override the flow of the pleasurable experience. Dull and mechanical dialogue, unconnected storyline lacking in climax, lifeless interpretation of roles, and other technical problems, most glaringly, sound, are some of the examples of the aesthetic weakness in this film. The film has variations in sound quality and from time to time the conversations become barely audible, either because of fluctuations in volume or soundtracks that drown the dialogue. Sound fluctuations also occur in her other films like *Keeping My Man* (2013) and *What's Within* (2014). Oghenevize Umukoro attributes sound inconsistencies in some Nollywood films to “unprofessionalism”, and incorrect use microphones (2016: 131). However, such mistakes are often part of the industry itself, which, during its twenty years of existence, has gone through various phases of development. Its sustaining power has largely been the sheer doggedness to keep trying, one imperfection after the other. Nollywood productions have had momentous accomplishments within the past five to ten years. Thus, Sanda’s most recent film, *Aviva’s Pearl* (2017), which she directed, starred in and co-produced proves to be a noteworthy leap from her past works, in terms of story and

technicalities. For example, there are no fluctuations in sound that used to serve as a distraction to viewers. There are also deeper levels of dialogue and more believable acting. This improvement may be because Sanda has fewer roles and is able to focus more on the ones she has. She is also not the screenwriter (of *Aviva's Pearl*) as weak scripts are the major downside of most of her films, especially *Keeping My Man*. The problem of the screenplay in *Keeping My Man* will be addressed shortly.

An online search into audience perception of *Keeping My Man* reveals a diversity of responses. These responses are not only to *Keeping My Man*, but also to Nollywood films in general. Following a review of the film on YouTube, viewers give varied feedback such as a disappointed viewer who says, "I cringed watching this film. Actors trying too hard to be American. I watch Nigerian films for the simple fact that they are...Nigerian". This comment attests to the fact that Nollywood, for good or ill in this case, is a worldly practice and actors and actresses have adopted Western standards, especially in modes of speaking. In the review, others pay attention to the actors' delivery and the technical aspects, and do enjoy it. A delighted viewer says, "This was a pretty good film. I love independent films. They are the best". The fact that Sanda is an independent filmmaker, as are many Nollywood filmmakers, gives her complete authority and flexibility in narration, cast and rights over her films which many viewers identify with. For a less impressed viewer, "This film was hard to swallow! Oy!! Couldn't even end it" (Adebayo, 2013). This last comment points to her (lack of) proficiency as a filmmaker. As a filmmaker who takes on multiple roles, attention needs to be paid to each role so as to meet current standards in Nollywood. These responsibilities require time, dedication and effort. Every role is distinctly important. Getting it right starts from the story; the fact that a director has the liberty to interpret stories at his or her own discretion does not diminish the importance of a well-written script as a foundation to build on. Arguably, the writer already assures the quality of the story so that even when or if it is tweaked, its effectiveness remains. Conversely, a well-written script can be destroyed by a director who lacks skills or one who is too much in conflict with the writer's vision. Best Ugala explains this:

The original scripts may even be rewritten and the camera directions may be completely changed. This does not vitiate the relevance and importance of scriptwriters. The cinematic potential of a good script can be ruined in the hands of a lousy director while a poorly written script can be transformed into a great hit on the screen by an ingenious director. (Ugala, 2015: 745).

The question here is, ‘What happens when the same person writes as well as directs a film?’ Does this dual function diminish creative depth and versatility or does it enhance it? This question comes to mind after watching *Keeping My Man*. The film’s script is flawed in several ways and its effects are evident. Sanda’s characters are rigid, two-dimensional characters who do not develop, but simply produce surprises at the film’s denouement. This happens in several instances, such as Zion’s ‘surprise’ baby whom we do not see, nor is it mentioned until the end of the film. Another example is Rasheed’s sudden, unexplained change of mind to the point of offering to buy dress-up costumes for his wife, after having passionately condemned them throughout the film. The script is also unfair to Maya, whose character is undeveloped and who often takes ludicrous steps to draw her husband’s attention. And of course, there are Tamar’s ‘invisible children’ which she talks about so much, but we never see. Other examples will be cited in the course of the analysis. The film seems to ignore an audience’s intelligence and this affects the overall appreciation of the film.

One other drawback in the story of *Keeping My Man* lies in the inability of most of the actors to make viewers emotionally identify with her characters, including the intended hero, Zion (Sanda herself). She presents herself as the lead character, yet she fails to carry her audience along. From the point of view of Michael Hauge, cited by Ari Hiltunen in the book *Aristotle in Hollywood: Visual Stories that Work* (2002), five elements are essential to a conventional, market-driven film’s success. First among the list is that a film needs a hero “whose visible motivation drives the plot”. Secondly, “the audience must identify with that hero; they must experience emotion through the main character”. The third point Hauge makes is that “there must be a clear, specific motivation or objective that the hero hopes to achieve”. This refers to his/her focus and what he/she pursues in the film. Fourthly, “the hero must face serious challenges and obstacles in pursuing his objective.” Finally, “the hero must be able to exhibit courage when facing challenges” (2002: 47). With regard to *Keeping My Man*, which revolves around three married couples with divergent matrimonial problems, the question of a hero is tricky. Viewers are likely to choose who their heroes are based on whose character they resonate with best. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore Sanda’s presentation of Zion, the woman with the seemingly perfect marriage, as the ‘hero,’ or, at least, main protagonist, of the film. The storyline points to this, and her motivation for a picture-perfect marriage for herself and her friends drives the plot.

Zion's persona generates an emotional disconnection from the audience at the beginning of the film. This is because her character is not very convincing in the Nigerian, or perhaps any, context. Sanda tries to fit Zion into the potentially complex combination of a 'good' housewife with a wild side, but the strokes are very broad, and the duality proposed also clichéd: see, for example the suburban housewives caught between conformism and rebellion from Douglas Sirk's melodramas to *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), minimally adapted to *Desperate Housewives Africa* (2015). Zion's dual identities are, however entirely subservient to her desire to please her husband. From the onset, she appears to be too many things rolled into one, none of which is given room to develop or be subtly dramatised. She is beautiful and devout. She is a dutiful wife who cooks committedly and is always ready to please her husband, in and outside the bedroom. She is also flamboyant in her appearance — adorned with gold hair extensions, extended eyelashes and long, flashy fingernails. Her main concern, for much of the film, is how to dress up for her husband or serve him his favourite meals. She has no job, but drives expensive cars. This means, of course, that her husband provides all her needs. She also seemingly has the perfect husband who loves and attends to her needs. Amongst her friends, she has unparalleled knowledge of what makes a perfect marriage. In essence, there is not much room for the average viewer, who has a complex life, to connect with this caricature. As a result, when her husband's infidelity is exposed, the initial emotional response is unlikely to be empathy. In fact, her friends appear pleased, or at best, relieved to know that her marriage is not perfect after all. What makes the plot even more alienating is Sanda's brittle acting. As the lead actor, Sanda makes little effort to bring life and depth to her character. The focus appears to be largely on the way she looks—characterised by heavy makeup and sensual clothes, rather than making her actions believable. Most noticeable are her exaggerations in painting a picture of seamless chemistry with her husband. She is very eager to serve his meals when he gets back from work (the good wife) and then to serve him what she refers to as 'dessert', in an awkwardly sensual transition.

Ramsey Noah (Tokunbo), Monalisa Chinda (Tamar) and Ini Edo (Maya), provide performances that are more persuasive than Sanda's, although they have also, indeed, given better performances in other films. For example, Ramsey Noah, who has won many awards and recently won the award for the Best Actor for his role in the film *76* (2016), is one of Nigeria's most acclaimed actors. His role in *Silent Night*, which shot him to the limelight in 1996 where he played a young son of a judge who joins a gang of

criminals, presented him as a star to look out for, and he has since then built and maintained his status as one of Nigeria's best actors. Alexx Ekubo (Rasheed), on the other hand, is mediocre in the role of a conservative husband, the opposite of the playboy roles he usually plays. This kind of film acting is, of course, a collaborative effort, therefore there has to be synergy between the actors to produce a good effect. It is arguable that, aside from poor scripting, the sloppiness of the actors' performances is also owing to poor directing by Sanda.

Having said that, Sanda's oeuvre shows that she pays attention to her casting, even if she does not effectively direct the cast once she has secured them. She understands the commercial value of stars in Nollywood and as a self-proclaimed business woman, she uses stars to the advantage of her productions. From as far back as her first production, *Lethal Woman* (2008), she drew her cast from across the country with a cast that included Mary Remmy Njoku, Yemi Blaq, Oge Okoye, Ngozi Ezeonu and herself. *Gold Diggin's* cast includes popular stars like Alexx Ekubo, Venita Akpofure, Ik Ogbonna, controversial TV personality, Denrele Edun, musician, Dammy Krane and star Ghanaian actress, Yvonne Nelson. In *What's Within* her focus is a lot more on the male stars: Alexx Ekubo again, Bolanle Ninolowo, IK Ogbona, Joseph Benjamin. In this film, star female actors are limited to herself and Adunni Adewale. Sanda cleverly employs a combination of stars not just from the Yoruba and the Igbo ethnic groups which make up most of Nollywood, but includes neighbouring West African country, Ghana. This is what Moradewun Adejunmobi (2014) calls a form of "minor transnationalism" which ignores borders. Cultural dissemination is on the increase in Nollywood, and this allows for actors from different ethnic groups to play characters, and to learn and speak languages different from theirs; Sanda and other contemporary filmmakers demonstrate such cultural crossover in their films. For example, filmmaker Muiyiwa Aluko stars fast-rising actress, Ini Dima-Okojie, who is originally from Edo state, as a Muslim Hausa woman in the romantic drama, *North East* (2016). The same applies to Alexx Ekubo, an Igbo man who plays a Yoruba man, Rasheed, in *Keeping My Man*. Quite often in the film, he code-switches from English to Yoruba without totally losing his Igbo intonation.

Keeping my Man: Mirroring Gender Dynamics in Nigerian Society

Central to many Nollywood productions is the portrayal of the preoccupations of contemporary urban lives. Nollywood crystallises the daily struggles, romances both fleeting and committed,

wealth accumulation, family and domestic relationships, career- and dream-chasing, rituals, politics and socio-cultural traditions.

Over the last two decades, many films have attempted to project the nation's cultural identity in different forms. Examples are among of the industry's earliest films, such as Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), Chika Onukwufor's *Glamour Girls* (1994), and Zeb Ejiro's *Domitilla* (1997). *Glamour Girls* came shortly after *Living in Bondage*'s success, and they both revolve around themes of "moral turbulence and pervasive anxiety of the post-oil boom era; the garish glamour of Lagos; titillating and dangerous sexuality; melodramatic domestic conflicts..." (Haynes, 2007:31). *Glamour Girls*, subtitled *The Italian Connection*, specifically exposes the negative, booming business of sex trafficking of women and young girls to the West. The action in *Domitilla* is similar to the survival mechanisms of *Glamour Girls*, with a unique curve, however. The film tells the story of a woman's transition from being a prostitute to finding redemption. According to Onookome Okome, it is "remarkably different from traditional Nollywood filmmaking because it privileges the art of dreaming in this city in a unique and refreshing manner" (2012:170). Among other things, it tells the story of hope, the type that urban everyday people hold on to that allows them to strive for a brighter future, against glaring odds.

While sexuality is central to *Glamour Girls* and *Domitilla*, the inflection offered by *Keeping My Man* is different: Sanda's film focuses on the themes of love, marriage and domestic conflicts. It brings to the fore discussions of sexual crises and desire in marriage. These are concerns that are frequently not given enough thought, considering the mass churning out of films in the industry—a fascinating aspect in a society whose films typically shy away from discussions of sexual problems in marriages and a reflection of the society's own cautiousness. However, less evident is the fact that there is a paucity of scholarly studies of sexuality by African feminists. Several years back, Amina Mama, a prominent African scholar and feminist, one of the few who have discussed sexuality in Africa, asserted that "the historical legacy of racist fascination with Africans' allegedly profligate sexuality has deterred researchers" (1996:39). Despite this, it is important that the African feminist intellectual should demystify any blurred ideological representation. Many scholars agree that desire and sexuality have largely been muted topics. Part of Signe Arnfred's introductory chapter to her book, *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, explains that female desire is under-investigated and has "rarely been an

object of analysis” (2004:7). She observes that, even when there is attention to African sexuality, it is from a standpoint of “moral condemnation” and rarely the focus of an objective inquiry.

In recent times however, more attention is being paid to sexuality in Africa. Rachel Spronk, for example, conducts insightful research on sexuality among young professionals in Nairobi, Kenya, and she argues that sexuality is a “sensitive conductor of cultural influences, and, hence, of social and political divisions” (2012: 3). As a result, study on sex requires careful methods, because sex is intersubjective as it “varies in intensity and meaning”. For her methodology, she employs personal approaches of interviewing including “sharing daily activities” with a small group of informants. She opines that the body of work on sex in Africa has been studied mostly from the angle of public health, particularly in relation to AIDS. Since the 1980s, the prevalence of AIDS in Africa has brought about numerous studies on sex and they are mostly “characterised by the quantification of sex into behavioural frequencies and attitudinal scores” (2012:3). Spronk also points out that this type of research limits the “human motivation” factor, thereby sex is simplified as an act bereft of meaning. She argues that sexuality is “socially constructed” and proposes the study of sexuality from three foci namely, “the personal, the intersubjective and the social dimensions of sex” (2012: 3).

Silencing of, or shying away from discussing women’s sexuality is a problem which many women, including scholars, have to deal with. Many cultures in Nigeria suppress public, and often times private expressions of sex, whether negative or positive. As an example, a study of *Sexual Problems Among Married Nigerian Women* conducted in Central Nigeria observes that, “sexuality is a sensitive area for most persons”. It is seen as a “taboo” and is discussed with “embarrassment, shyness and inexperience...” (Ojomu, Thacher and Obadofin, 2007:300). Apart from the sheer ignorance many women have about their sexuality, publicly embracing it, it is assumed, strips them of their shielded respectability—it is an activity for less moral people. Ojomu et al further state that, “beliefs about female sexuality are influenced by culture, education and religion” (ibid). Religion and traditions have been very instrumental to people’s disposition, especially women. This is so because, these two factors are the moral compasses that drive many social institutions, including marriage. A religion like Christianity, for example, according to Signe Arnfred, does not only determine the perception of gender relations, it also influences people’s perception of themselves, “their past and present” (2005:14). It preaches submission to the man who is the head of the home and this is adhered to dutifully, mostly

without cognizance of other aspects of the religion that preaches respect. Respect, in this case should amount to mutual understanding and tolerance for each other's needs and desires.

Further, the majority of women in many parts of Nigeria have, over time, accepted that they are subject to men; therefore, addressing an area as sacred and intimate as sex in marriage is absurd. It is worse when the expressions relate to their lack of sexual satisfaction. In the past, parents—the very first educators a child has—hardly ever teach or talk to their children about sex or sexual expectations as they grow up. I refer here to conversations in which women's sexual needs or the lack of them, are addressed. Even then, only a handful of films in Nollywood engage with issues related to sex as it affects marriages, or sexual conflicts when they arise. Fairly common are sex scenes—where viewers are left to imagine what's going on under the sheets. It is not as if there are no pornographic films like *Pregnant Hawkers* (2015) and *Lesbian Sisters* (2015) in Nollywood. It is the deeper issues that surround sexual problems in marriages that are often glossed over. Such stories are what female filmmakers may have to tell themselves from their worldview, and that is what Sanda attempts to address.

Nollywood and Lagos

Keeping My Man, which premiered in Lagos in 2013, tells the story of three young couples living an 'urban' lifestyle in Lagos. All three families are close friends; the wives are best friends and so are the husbands. Their lifestyles are furnished with posh cars, comfortable houses, and, for the women, striking costumes and flashy accessories. They are typically urbane people whose lives seem good on the surface, but there are internal turbulences that stir up peaceful coexistence in their homes. Each family carries the burdens of unique marital experience that revolve around their sexual relationships or the lack thereof, which then impact their relationships in diverse ways.

The film is set in the vibrant city of Lagos which has a dense population of about twenty-one million people. It is considered to be the commercial hub of Nigeria, and indeed of West Africa. Often identified by sprawling sky-scrapers, monumental edifices like the National Theatre, a dizzying crowd of people walking the streets and yellow buses referred to as *Danfo*, Lagos forms the setting of many urban stories in Nollywood. As Jonathan Haynes puts it, "Lagos is where Nollywood is primarily located, and for budgetary reasons its films are always shot on location, most often in Lagos, which serves as the ground of the films" (2007:133). The

projection of Lagos is not limited to the symbol of visually imposing structures often accompanied by rowdiness, it also allows viewers to identify “dramatically, emotionally, morally, socially, politically, and spiritually with the city and everything it embodies” (ibid). Films shot in Lagos often have a feel of what is popularly referred to as the ‘spirit of Lagos,’ not in reference to something tangible or monolithic, but the paradoxes of the calm and opulence of Ikoyi and its environs, the maddening traffic, the glamorized night life, abject poverty in the midst of elite opulence, myriad, random crimes and an untamed fast-paced life of millions of people in a hurry to make the best of the day. It is what Akin Adesokan refers to as a “spectacular example of the postcolonial incredible” (1996:96). One of the most distinguishing features, again, is the allure of wealth and riches. As Haynes describes it, “Wealth in the most tangible, desired forms is fundamental to the lure of Lagos and is at the heart of Nollywood imagery and thematics” (Haynes 2007:40). It is the plurality of its manifestations that makes up a bedrock of ideas from which thousands of stories yearly emerge.

The urban life depicts a variety of ways in which women may be presented, and it is from this multifaceted space that Sanda interprets her characters who consist of women in their diverse relationships with their spouses. In Onookome Okome’s incisive article, “Nollywood, Lagos, and the Good Time Woman,” in which he discusses Zeb Ejiro’s *Domitilla* (1997), he explains that “the map of urban relationships is a contrast to that which exists in rural Africa because the city is defined by new sets of social and cultural values” (2012: 168). The urban space encourages diversity of culture, unlimited exposure, and according to Kenneth Little, “it is the city that proves the best guide to current social attitudes and trends” rather than the rural life (cited in Okome, 2012: 168). The state of modernity fosters the setting and acceptance of new standards, often in response to highly consumed media, and this does not always manifest in positive representations. Thus, Okome argues that sometimes “the new social conditions permitted by the city that women must navigate are actually disempowering” (ibid). These new social conditions produce stereotypes, high social expectations, class struggles and economic instability. This unbridled liberty is often the Achilles heel of many women who find themselves involved in prostitution perpetrated by deceptively generous wealthy men.

In *Keeping My Man*, the families are well-established and they live comfortable lives. The precise location is the 1004 estate, a luxury high-rise development in the heart of Lagos. It should be mentioned here that because this film is self-funded, the budget may be

understandably tight, and this takes a toll on many aspects of the film, including its location. Sanda uses the same apartment for all the families, but dresses it differently to suggest their different personal contexts. As Oghenevize Umukoro says, “the way the audience sees the actor [or character] is greatly affected by the entire mise-en-scène” (2016:137). However, the picture of comfort is successfully painted and urban life takes a different shape in the film. The social diversity of the urban life exposes characters to various levels of expressiveness, including audacious sexual experiments. However, these expressions have different results for the women (Zion and Maya) who leave ‘tradition’ to experiment with new, daring sexual exploits to spice up their marriages. Zion masterminds experimentations to sustain the momentum of her sexual relations with her husband and her husband welcomes them, loves them even. Maya, on the other hand, feels pressured to keep up with Zion’s pace. For her, sexual life with her husband is unsatisfying; however, what she gets is a series of embarrassing rejections.

Conflict in the film arises from dissatisfaction in relationships. Viewers are aware of two couples’ conflict from the onset of the film, while the third couple lives a seemingly happy life until much later in the film. The story also emphasises power relations in sexual matters. For one woman, Tamar (Monalisa Chinda), her marriage to her husband, Lanre (Kenneth Okolie), is almost crippled because of their lack of intimacy and her unwillingness to communicate her feelings to her husband. Tamar finds intimacy with her husband loathsome, and consciously attempts to maintain, if possible, a social space between them. She tends, nevertheless, to have an upper hand in their marriage.

Unlike what the title suggests—the effort of a woman to save her relationship—the actions in the film surprisingly diverge from that. They present a combination of efforts by both men and women. All three men, in diverse ways, contribute significantly to the success or failure of their marriages. Invariably, *Keeping My Man* depicts one thing: that it takes mutual effort and understanding, rather than one partner’s singular effort, to sustain relationships. It takes withdrawal from ego (no ego) and the willingness to negotiate, the type of accommodation that Obioma Nnaemeka expounds in Nego-feminism, to make marriages work.

Exploring sexuality and resolving conflicts

Expressions of sexuality are diverse and each specificity should be acknowledged. As human beings, preferences and personal choices make up our individuality. This is seen in the various

manifestations of sexual relationships, desire and lack of it in *Keeping My Man*. I argue that Nego-feminism offers a useful entry into a discussion of these manifestations. Proverbs, oral myths, folktales as well as data collection have “provided a rich repertoire of traditional philosophies and ideologies on gender in African societies, past and present” (Kolawole, 2004: 263). As such, Obioma Nnaemaka’s theory hinges on some African proverbs that respect the uniqueness of individuality, but at the same time foster collaborations and alliances. She cites examples from diverse cultures in Africa, such as the Igbo proverb that says, “When something stands, something stands beside it”; the Ashanti proverb that says, “One head cannot go into counsel”; and the Sotho proverb that says, “A person is a person because of other people!” (Nnaemeka, 2004: 376). In other words (to adapt the Englishman, John Donne, this time), no one is an island and people need other people to survive and achieve greatness. Uniqueness is seen as a positive attribute that enhances partnerships, rather than as divisive. In the film under study, different binaries arise, such as struggles between tradition and modernity, individuality and partnerships, desire and indifference. Choices are made, individual choices within the institution of marriage, some of which have shattering consequences, while some are salvaged.

Zion and Tokunbo

The first impression one gets of Zion and Tokunbo is that they are a committed and happy couple. They put conscious effort into actualising their dream marriage—largely through the efforts of Zion. Her and Maya’s efforts are indeed what the title, *Keeping My Man*, literally refers to. Zion’s commitment to her marriage is overt at the beginning of the film, expanding as the film progresses, until it hits a downward slope. We get the picture of a dutiful wife in the opening scene when Zion is awoken by a buzzing alarm in time to prepare breakfast for her husband. In that scene, we also see her religious framing, a way of projecting her as a ‘good wife’. In that first scene, the very first thing she does as she wakes up, is go on her knees to pray. There’s a lot of morality attached to religiosity and the act is meant to impress upon the mind of the viewer a good image of Zion. However, there is lack of continuity in this aspect of her. That first prayer is the closest she gets to demonstrating her piety throughout the film.

The first scene establishes two things about this couple. First is their rather flashy lifestyle, depicted by their large room, oddly decorated in dominating black and a combination of red, white and gold colours. These colours coordinate with Tokunbo’s white shirt and black

trousers as well as well as Zion's red pyjama top and white shorts, giving an indication of their lifestyle as well as their dominating personae and presence in the film. The colour coordination also suggests the harmony that seems to exist between them. The frame below is an example of their relationship pattern, before it falls apart. Zion holds everything together and dictates the tone of their marriage. She appears to dominate, however, she does so tenderly without being imposing, as the image below shows. She pampers her husband and he relishes the attention he gets from her.



Zion waking Tokunbo up for work after preparing him breakfast

Tokunbo's infidelity comes as a rude shock to Zion because, all along, he cleverly conceals his promiscuity. He pretends to be faithful to her and committed to their marriage. For example, he returns home one day after an evening out with another woman, and he lies to Zion about his whereabouts. He tells her how hectic work is, and as compassionate as always, an unsuspecting Zion serves him dinner and massages him to make him feel better. Her first reaction to the news of his infidelity is denial. On the day she finds out, she is in an exceptionally happy mood on a night out for drinks with her friends. Her friends, who by then have found out Tokunbo's secret from their husbands, remain awkwardly quiet. "Life is so good. Cheers!", she says, as she raises her glass, but that is met with silence from her friends. She pushes further with yet another sanctimonious speech, "What is going on with you guys? Why are you guys so moody and quiet today? Look, I know you're going through a lot in your marriages and you have

problems but I promise you we are going to fix it”. The scene is very ironic as she starts the night in her usual manner of being the self-appointed ‘marriage counsellor’. However, when her hesitant friends reveal to her what they know about her husband, her response is unexpected: “How dare all three of you sit down here and fabricate such lies about my husband”. She fiercely defends her husband and, in her fury, she accuses her friends of being envious. The ironic turn of events is that, while she single-handedly champions the cause for her friends to negotiate peace in their marriages, hers is crumbling. She, as well as her friends, thought Tokunbo was the ‘perfect husband’ as Maya says to her husband in a bid to make him act like Tokunbo. The aftermath is devastation for both of them; remorseful Tokunbo seeks forgiveness, but Zion is unable to come to terms with his behaviour. The impact his infidelity has on her not only manifests itself in the broken trust or the pain of being cheated on by a loved one, but also the embarrassment and the irony of the situation. She feels extremely embarrassed because all along, she occupies the position of the closest thing to a marriage counselor among her circle of friends. Hers, as mentioned above, was the paradigm against which the other marriages were gauged. She often encourages her friends to communicate with their partners, using herself and her husband as examples. During their married-women’s hangouts, she never has anything to complain about when Maya rants about her husband’s unreceptiveness, and Tamar about her husband’s insatiable sexual appetite. Similarly, and equally ironically, among the male circle of friends, Tokunbo is the one who takes it upon himself to advise his friends when they lay complaints against their wives. He encourages them to communicate effectively. He says categorically, “My wife knows what I like, she knows what I want and she gives it to me...and I give her what she wants back too”. However, he agrees that they also have their problems and his marriage is not “all that perfect,” suggesting that he suffers discontent in his marriage of which Zion is oblivious. One of the flaws in the film’s plot is that we never see what these discontents are or why Tokunbo engages in his serial philandering.

At the end of the day, things are not what they appear to be in their marriage. It is plagued with deception and hidden pain, while displaying a façade of bliss. It is only after his infidelity that Zion begins to reveal some of her well-concealed pain. She is outraged because she commits herself to him and gives up her personal aspirations to make him happy. “I’ve lost myself trying to be the woman you want me to be... I do everything for you, Tokunbo”, she says amidst tears, on the night Tokunbo saunters home, unsuspectingly, to realise his secret is no

longer one. Zion completely shuts him out, as he in turn becomes truly repentant. In order to numb the pain, she resorts to drinking and keeping late nights. Life for them takes an unexpected curve, and their story ends with Zion moving out of the house and out of Tokunbo's life.

Theirs is a controversial ending: after being married for eight years their union breaks down mainly because of unshared values. 'Shared values', which Nnaemeka describes as the foundation upon which Nego-feminism is built, is missing in their union. Nothing seems out of place until Tokunbo's infidelity is found out. Not until then does Zion begin to reveal her innermost pain and concealed emotions. She is saddened because she let go of her dreams for the sake of their marriage, meaning that her own needs were not included in the equation. There was no negotiation when it came to her needs. Although it is not clear if she had, at any point, disclosed what she really wanted from life or if she had shared her dreams with her husband, it is clear that she gives up her personal aspirations to please him. Tokunbo is aware of this, therefore he takes her and the marriage for granted. He once brags to his friends that, "The blonde hair she's sporting, she knows I love it and then she keeps it". Never does he, or even Zion, mention any sacrifices for her. He does nothing for her, apart from the obvious fact that he is the sole provider. So, when Zion finds out about the infidelity, she rebels and starts wearing short black hair, the exact opposite of what he loves.

To situate Tokunbo's inexcusable behaviour in a wider context, Daniel Smith offers interesting insights. He researches women's experiences, attitudes and responses to men's infidelity in Nigeria. He avers that, infidelity in men, which is more frequent, is often attributed to inherent male tendency. In other words, there is some level of acceptability and justification for infidelity on the part of men. Some of the respondents of his interview confirm this, saying "It is something men need, especially African men. You know we have a polygamous culture...we still have the desire for more than one wife" (2009:166 -167). This continuing masculinist trend is clearly present in *Keeping my Man* and one could argue that Sanda consciously critiques the assumption that cheating is considered an innate male tendency.

As Smith points out, men's infidelity is "socially produced". It is backed by cultures and tradition that canonise practices that subdue women. Undoubtedly, infidelity is frowned upon in modern marriages, but it is often excused. Smith further discusses the gendered norms that surround the notion of men's innate desire for several sexual partners, which is indeed borne of a larger patriarchal order supported by cultures and traditions. As reported by Smith, several male

respondents discuss openly and boastfully about their escapades outside matrimony. One says, “If I catch my wife, she’s gone; if she catches me, she’s gone too” (2009: 167). The statement reeks of arrogance, but is unfortunately true in many cases. We see how Zion leaves her cheating husband out of disappointment, shame and despair. She is not the one who is unfaithful, but she is the one who leaves her home. If probed further, this may be due to the economic power men hold and unfavourable laws. If tables were turned, that is, if a man found his wife to be unfaithful, she wouldn’t leave of her own volition, but would more likely be forced out by her enraged husband, and of course, his economic power makes such decisions easy for him. The respondent’s statement further suggests the unacceptability of women being privy to their husbands’ extramarital affairs. This is an example of how double standards operate even in modern marriages.

Smith’s article exposes women’s divergent views on infidelity in marriages, including the role love plays. His study, which was conducted in south-eastern Nigeria, explains that even though women feel betrayed by the infidelity of their husbands, they manipulate gendered cultural expectations about marriage to manage sometimes problematic relationships. He asserts that “how Igbo women react to their husbands’ cheating depends on a complicated mix of contextual factors that are powerfully inflected by the idea of love”. Whichever way a woman chooses to react to her husband’s act of infidelity, Smith asserts, “must be understood in relation to the varying ways that love is intertwined with other dimensions of marriage” (20019:171). Nego-feminism aims to dismantle discord between women and men. It espouses co-operation of both sexes and mutual understanding. Zion and Tokunbo’s union lacks these fundamental principles, and so it crumbles. After Zion finds out about Tokunbo’s other life, she begins to open up a side of her that her friends are not aware of; she tells Tamar how deeply she has lived her life for her husband without realising it. At this point in the film, she has let go of the heavy makeup, the long blonde hair and her once flashy costume is toned down. She looks sober, drained and unhappy in her black dress that reflects her emotional state of mind. She mourns what her life used to be and how much time she has wasted, slaving away for him. She says with a tone of finality, “I didn’t even realise how long twenty-four hours was because I was busy being a robot, doing what I thought I had to do to keep my man. Yet, you can never keep a stray dog, there’s nothing you can do to keep a stray dog from going astray. I’m tired”.

Tyler Perry’s film *Acrimony* (2018), also focusing on infidelity, offers a different

perspective. Here, we see a different reaction from a committed woman, Melinda Moore (Taraji P. Henson), to her unfaithful husband, Robert Gayle's (Lyric Bent) betrayal. The story is narrated as a psychological thriller, which is completely different, in terms of genre, from *Keeping my Man's* almost schematic morality-play type of narrative. In this case, the effect infidelity has on the wife, Melinda, has a more catastrophic outcome. *Acrimony* narrates a story of anger and extreme bitterness resulting from betrayal. We see how power dynamics work differently, and how it influences Melinda's attitude to her husband and her response to his betrayal. Her financial control gives her the upper hand in the relationship as he looks to her almost completely for support, and eventually loses her inheritance for his sake. In the end, she becomes deranged, when, after she divorces him, he finally gets a career breakthrough in the form of a multimillion dollar deal and gets engaged to his ex, with whom he earlier had an affair. Most of the story is told as a flashback from Melinda's viewpoint where the extent of her bitterness is perceived. Unlike Zion who internalises the effect of betrayal, Melinda expresses hers violently. After taking many steps to make her ex-husband and his new wife's lives miserable, she resorts to attempting to kill them on their honeymoon, which leads to her own death. The heightened melodrama of this American film foregrounds the different narrative approach taken by Sanda, whose much more static, almost ritualised, film depends mostly on a series of conversations/confrontations between the couples or discussions between the husbands with each other and the wives with each other in their favourite hang-outs. The "reveal" of Tokunbo's infidelity is the key plot point that resolves the varied relationships.

Through its varied marital relationships, Sanda's film suggests that there are multiple ways of experiencing and negotiating marriage. As Nnaemeka asserts, negotiation is the most central focus of Nego-feminism. How well does this work in situations where there is infidelity? Can and should a woman remain in a marriage where her husband is unfaithful, and vice-versa? Adichie's response to this in *Dear Ijeawele* (2017) is that the specific context should determine what is right to do. As such, if tables were turned, and the husband finds his wife cheating, will he be open to working things out? Only if the answer is "Yes," should a woman negotiate with a man who is unfaithful. However, many women choose to remain in the marriage for several reasons, including economic dependence, class-status, and as Smith (2009) points out, for the sake of the children. While infidelity is universal, the reasons women choose to stay or leave are both societal and personal. The shame of being divorced or being single again, apart from

finances, is a key reason why women in Nigeria stay, or sometimes, turn a blind eye to their cheating spouses. As earlier discussed, infidelity has been excused in many ways in the Nigerian context, such that some men feel entitled to it simply because they are ‘men’.

Nego-feminism encourages cooperation and discourages self-centeredness, especially in situations where partnerships are crucial for harmonious co-existence, such as in marriages. The society is already gendered and largely unfair to women. Adichie’s observation in her TedTalk and essay, “We Should All Be Feminists”, is relevant here. Unjustified pressure is mounted on women to maintain the family. Zion chooses to walk away and build her life anew. For her, cooperation no longer applies, and forgiveness seems to be out of place. As a theory of give and take, Zion sells herself short by being the giver and not allowing herself to take. She is entrenched in the belief that a man comes first and her needs are secondary to his. She downplays herself as a woman, without recognising the power of first having an identity and then being able to negotiate— for the betterment of the marriage. Therefore, when the marriage in which she is heavily invested fails, she has nothing to fall back on. She had given everything, not because of direct force, not even her husband’s forceful demands, but because her own internalised belief is that it is her sole responsibility to keep her man. The last scene is flawed, however: throughout the film we are unaware that she has children, nor do we see any child with her, but in the last scene, she is seen with a baby when she leaves. The baby Zion carries is younger than six months, and is never seen or referred to before then. Thus, where her defiant decision to set out on her own should be a provocative statement of independence, it seems like a rushed, incoherent denouement that leaves dangling questions.

I have proposed that Zion is the film’s main protagonist and her narrative arc the most dramatic. It is also the arc that refutes the possibility of negotiation and acts as a foil to the other two relationships where negotiation becomes the key to their survival. In these two cases, then, Nego-feminism may be seen as a creative and practical solution to working through the marriage crisis.

Tamar and Lanre

Tamar and Lanre’s story is uniquely different from Zion’s. Their journey is a depiction of pain and the process of growth. It is a representation of a deeper social issue mirrored in the character of one woman, Tamar and her husband, Lanre. Tamar loves her husband, but attempts (unsuccessfully) to deal with her personal battles before she eventually submits to being sexually

involved with her husband. She tries to protect her own personal fulfilment as a woman, but does so in silence and keeps her husband in the dark about it. As earlier discussed, many African women are conservative about their sexuality, including talking about it. This social practice is mirrored in Tamar's character. For reasons unknown to her husband, she continuously shuts him out, but opens up to her friends.

Mary Kolawole argues that, "It is considered culturally incorrect for women to be a focal participant in social structures" and that "such ideologies and beliefs call for decoding of culture to unpack gender myths and philosophies that keep women in liminal spaces, as well as recoding of new ideologies" (2004:255). This prevalent 'culture of silence' as Kolawole phrases it, has been on the front burner of the discourses by many female African writers and critics, many of whom have turned theorists. The idea of projecting women's voices positively is that it exposes women to more visibility on the African continent, and this is a "symbol of their empowerment" (ibid). Within her home, Tamar takes refuge in silence. She has a husband who is very willing to listen, but she refuses to talk until it is almost too late. Her silence on sexual matters is not out of fear or respect as custom has so often decreed; she uses very calculating tactics to avoid him. When she eventually agrees to see a therapist, it takes her several visits to eventually openly express her concerns about her sexual relationship with her husband. It is ironic that Lanre, her husband, who genuinely cares for her and shows her affection in the way none of the other husbands do, is the one whose efforts go unreciprocated. He goes out of his way to make her happy, such as with his random acts of buying her flowers, not making a fuss about her drinking habits, and when one day he returns from work to find her drinking and fails to prepare dinner, he accepts it calmly. He is portrayed as the most tolerant of the three husbands.

Sanda introduces the relationship dynamics of each couple in their first appearances. The image below frames the conflict between Lanre and Tamar. He wakes her up to ask for his car keys, but she is still heavy-eyed and does not know where she put them. She grabs her bottle of wine and from there we begin to get a sense of their personae and their attitudes to each other. Tamar is withdrawn and exudes indifference, while Lanre is more committed and appears to take things more seriously. He makes the move and pushes for what he wants, while Tamar suppresses her emotions and takes succour in other things. Initially, it is unclear why she takes to drinking, but it is undoubtedly an indication of something wrong. Their first scene also gives a glimpse of their less exotic lifestyle with less attention to aesthetics and extravagance. We see in

the image below how clothes and bags are hung on a rail rather than in a wardrobe. Colours in their apartment are significantly toned down, and little detail is paid to furniture and decorations to adorn their home. This reflects Tamar's personal preferences as seen in her appearance. Unlike the other women in the film, she does not pay particular attention in dressing up to look radiant, especially for the sake of her husband.



Tamar and Lanre's first scene. Lanre is set to leave for work while Tamar settles for a bottle of wine.

Lanre and Tamar's conflict arises from rejection, and this takes its course from their first scene which has Tamar dodging Lanre's kiss. At that point, her irritation and reluctance may be excused as early-morning moodiness. However, by the second time her resistance is more apparent. By its third appearance, it is clear that there is an underlying problem. At this point, it suggests more than being in an unpleasant mood and becomes a very desperate effort to stay away from him by all means necessary. As the picture becomes clearer, the understanding becomes blurry and the only lingering question is why? Why is she married to a man whom she cannot bear to kiss, or be intimate with, or worse still, why is she so silent about it? Tamar's most dramatic rejection takes place when she appears sexily dressed and ready to go to a party with her desiring husband, but then promptly pleads cramps and refuses to accompany him. He is understandably perplexed.



Tamar feigns being sick to avoid being touched by her husband

What makes her relentless rejections worse is the fact Tamar's silence is directed only at her husband. With her friends, on the contrary, she reminisces about the times she was in charge of her own body, as opposed to her present situation where her husband incessantly badgers her for sex. She says she is physically and emotionally drained by her experiences of motherhood, childbearing and changing body image. She tells of her exhaustion after undergoing abortions on several occasions because her husband does not use protection and pills fail her. Only then might viewers understand and become sympathetic towards her plight, her longing for freedom, and ownership and control of herself. What she wants, it seems, is the right over her own body. Her plight would, of course, have been more persuasive had we seen the children. She tells her friends, "Lanre doesn't care, he has no freaking idea". Their lack of communication prevents them, however, from collaborating in seeking for a middle ground where they can meet, which is what Nego-feminism advocates. "Nego-feminism describes a new paradigm that can, finally, take us beyond winners and losers in an endless gender war!" (Alkali et al, 2013: 248). In a bid to negotiate and find a common ground, Lanre suggests they visit a therapist.

Their marriage goes through turmoil, but through it all, ineffective communication is the catalyst. Their first serious discussion about their marital stress is initiated by Tamar who tenderly apologises for the distance between them. Unusually, she is extremely relaxed around him and the mood is pleasant, but generalises about her feelings of stress and her real concerns

remain undisclosed. Up to this point, her approach to liberalising herself is candidly based on self, while Lanre's approach is more situated in "no ego" feminism. Each time he is confronted with rejection from his wife, he looks for new ways to get through to her—buying her flowers and wine, seeking therapy. At the end of their discussion, he very willingly shows her his support and promises to wait and be there for her, no matter how long it takes. After further cat-and-mouse games, she finally agrees to therapy leading to more candour as she tells her husband: "Lanre I've worked so hard to put this body back in shape, now you want to ruin it with your insatiable desire". Tamar makes progress by finally speaking up, but she is not ready to compromise. She wants her husband to remain the same loving, responsible husband and father, but wants to exclude sexual intercourse from their marriage. Lanre finds it outrageous, as well as impractical, not to have sex with his own wife whom he loves dearly, yet he may be seen as a sympathetic figure and example of Nego-feminism in action. As an inclusive feminism, it involves the participation of men. If a man sets aside his ego, genuinely seeks to collaborate and is willing to negotiate and if necessary, compromise for a peaceful existence with his female counterpart, regardless of his political persuasion, economic class or financial status, then he is by all means a Nego-feminist. Right from the beginning of the film, Lanre is open to dialogue as he patiently deals with Tamar's excesses until she eventually capitulates, prompted in no small measure by the lesson of Zion's failed marriage. Her character, as well as Zion's develops the most in the film; having started off as uncompromising and rather unapproachable, she gradually loosens up. She gets to a point where she begins to talk openly about personal issues she once deemed taboo. In the end, she realises her errors and asks to start with a clean slate.

Maya and Rasheed

In the schematic structure of the narrative, Maya and Rasheed represent the obverse of Tamar and Lanre. Here Maya deviates from the norm of submissive wife when she suddenly becomes a sexually adventurous woman who doesn't wait for her husband to initiate sex; but her very traditional husband is repeatedly unreceptive to her attempts. For him it's a paradigm shift that is unacceptable and this is reflective of a larger society's reluctance to accept changing ideologies and practices, especially of women embracing their strengths and womanhood.

Rachel Spronk's (2012) study, *Ambiguous Pleasures: Sexuality and Middle Class Self-Perceptions in Nairobi*, reveals many interesting details, including her observation that "sex can be the cause of an ideological debate as well as a source of pleasure" (2012: 2). She explores

“public understanding” as well as “private experiences” of sexuality, and how sometimes theory and practice clash. The place of tradition and people’s attitude to it is also revealed in several instances. In an initial meeting, one of her interviewees (Patrick) fiercely defends a tradition—female circumcision—which he, in reality, resists. As Patrick later explains, he does so because, to him, Spronk is a foreigner (Westerner), and it is his responsibility to defend his ‘African’ tradition. During further discussions, Patrick reveals he will never marry or be intimate with a circumcised woman, because intimate pleasure will be one-sided, he says. His position differs from what we see in Rasheed, who stubbornly holds on to aspects of his tradition, such as his unreciprocated expectations from his wife to be ready to perform her ‘wifely’ duties when he wants to have sex with her, even when it is tearing his marriage down. He remains unperturbed by his partner’s lack of sexual satisfaction.

Rasheed is blandly satisfied with his own little efforts and expects the same from his wife, whereas Maya is bold and experimental about her sexuality. Patrick’s sex life with his partner, as he describes, is “good” because it gives him pleasure and he feels manly. However, he wants a deeper level of connection, but feels asking for it may amount to compromising his masculinity, thereby making him appear weak (2012:6). The male ego frequently leads African men to feel the need to always be in charge, even to their own detriment. Again, as Adichie (2014) sums it up, patriarchy does a great disservice to men as their ‘fragile egos’ need to be protected. While Patrick desires a deeper level of emotional connection to his partner and feels too egoistic to express it, Rasheed is satisfied with his sex life and is too egoistic to care about his wife’s dissatisfaction.

We see a pattern very similar to what Lanre experiences with Tamar, as Maya suffers repeated, humiliating rejections by her husband. He also does not justify his actions which suggest that he enjoys mocking her needs. Although he insists that he loves her, his behaviour is ruthless and inexplicable. The script is, however, generally less interested in psychological complexity than in roughly sketched character types. *Mise-en-scène* sometimes seems to do the work of suggesting states of mind. In the image below, we see how embarrassed Maya is when her husband leaves her standing with the picture frame on the wall serving as a symbol of consolation for her. She appears to share the same emotional state of loneliness, and neglect with the girl in the frame. It is noted, as mentioned earlier, that Sanda uses the same location and dresses them differently for all three families. While this couple’s bedroom is quite plain, the

living room displays an array of clashing colours and furniture, suggesting disharmony.



Rasheed hands a dejected Maya his trouser and wristwatch and then turns his back on her

Maya's attempts to entice her husband are increasingly bizarre, sometimes verging on farce, and this creates an uneven balance between slapstick and social critique. Rather than back down before Rasheed's angry resistance, she takes her experiments a notch higher after each unsuccessful attempt to lure him. As an example, in less than one day, she makes two spontaneous decisions to surprise her husband. First is her failed attempt to have sex with him in his office, which of course ends awkwardly. When that fails, she proceeds to surprise her husband by playing dress-up as a French maid in a skimpy costume. Suffice to say that an astonished Rasheed does not mince his words as he rebukes her. "Are you out of your mind? Why are you dressed like a whore?" he asks, walking out on her. Once again, Maya is framed in the company of the pictures on the wall (fig below). They are obviously set up by Sanda as signs of Maya's desire to be desired and bear no realistic relationship to the kind of *mise-en-scène* one would imagine for Rasheed. The image in the frame recalls Marilyn Monroe's famous pose from *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), although the colour scheme of red, black and white that Maya mimics is vulgar and garish, it rhymes with the loud colour scheme and cluttered furnishings of the room. The picture does possibly suggest a connection between Monroe and what Maya aspires to, although the combination of sexual power and vulnerability associated with Monroe may also highlight the sad ironies of Maya's desperate attempts to seduce her husband. The

kitsch nude is even more out of place, while the black, red and white colour combination is similar to the colour scheme used for Zion's home mentioned earlier.



Disappointed Rasheed lashing out on his wife

Rasheed is traditional in many ways, especially in relation to his expectations from his wife. He represents the contemporary generation of many Nigerian men who try to reconcile the past and present. Many of them grew up in very traditional homes where most women were less expressive and generally more conforming. They are men who grew up seeing their fathers in charge of the decisions and who also got away with many excesses. They grew up in households where mothers would make their opinions known only when they deemed it appropriate, but would rarely have confrontations with or antagonise their husbands (especially in public). Thus, many male products from that generation who are deeply entrenched in such traditions are confronted with the challenge to find fresh ways to negotiate the new social realities, especially in matrimony. They now have as wives women who are more empowered, exposed and expressive. The process of unlearning some traditions and embracing the reality of a paradigm shift is often daunting. It is a process of effectively negotiating with women who are consciously doing away with outmoded traditions and creating new identities. It is this category of men that Rasheed represents in the film. He loves his wife, but believes he owns her and has the authority to control her. He often treats her like a possession who must be obedient. Deviations from his expectations trigger conflicts between them. In his own case, his expectations are modesty and total submissiveness from his wife. However, Maya goes through grotesquely comic extremes in

her search for marital fulfilment, such as when she handcuffs herself to the bed and has to deal with the embarrassment of sleeping that way all night.

The core of their conflicts arises from the inability to mutually and harmoniously negotiate differences. Unlike Lanre who has ‘no-ego’, a principal tenet of Nego-feminism, Rasheed is full of ego. It is not out of place to say that he forgets to drop his machismo at the doorstep of matrimony. It gets to the point where Maya concludes to her friends that he disregards her feelings, she tells them that Rasheed thinks it’s a man’s world and expects her to move every time he says so. It takes a while for Maya, who has sought diverse ways to get her husband’s attention, to finally voice her feelings. She is hesitant because of the accumulation of deeply embarrassing situations she has experienced, but when she speaks, she explains her intent of spicing up their marriage, which is why she tries to experiment. In response, Rasheed emphasises the assurance of his love. They both want different things from their marriage. For Rasheed, telling her that he loves her and being married to her, is enough to justify his love. In his opinion, other expressions of love are unnecessary. Maya, on the other hand, wants him to be expressive about his feelings and to reciprocate her efforts. Maya’s fight for recognition is evident. Her anger is, symbolically, directed not only at Rasheed, but also a culture that allows his views. Maya finally accuses her husband of infidelity, this being the only reason she can think of for his behaviour towards her. For the first time, she abandons conventional manners and fully expresses herself. Maya is played by Ini Edo, who is known for her convincingly dramatic roles, as in *Desperate House Girls* (dir. Desmond Elliot, 2013) and *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* (dir. Desmond Elliot, 2014). Here, in Sanda’s film, she persuasively performs an angry, deprived and frustrated woman who can no longer be held back, to overcome the ludicrous image she has depicted up to this point.



Maya demands respect and love from her husband

She demands to be treated like the woman he married, one who needs love, attention and sexual satisfaction. However, Rasheed insists that meeting all her financial needs should be enough to make her happy. This gives him his sense of ownership over his wife. So, whilst Maya demands to be pleased in other ways, Rasheed does not see what else needs to be done. Rasheed and Maya only begin to exhibit Nego-feminist traits towards the end of the film. Reality sets in only after Zion and Tokunbo's marriage fails and they express mutual regret for their behaviour towards each other and, in effect, agree to chart a new course through "negotiations and compromise", as Nnaemeka would say (2003: 378). A clear case of compromise emerges when Maya promises to discard her costumes and skimpy clothes, because her husband has shown a dislike for them. A newly repentant Rasheed, however, will have none of that. He encourages her not to, and goes a step further by adding that he has bought her some more. This sudden turn of events is scarcely believable, especially as it occurs without an explanation or a build-up, but serves the moral of the story. Maya is ecstatic at the prospect of the new chapter in their marriage. We see how Rasheed eventually looks beyond tradition and ego, to the possibilities that abound from being open to new realities and complementing his wife's efforts. He lays his ego down the moment he kneels before his wife, a gesture he would normally have found bizarre, had he not chosen the way of negotiation, 'no ego' and compromise; the Nego-feminist way, where ego is non-existent in negotiation. They begin a new chapter in their lives where there is mutuality and collaboration. Nego-feminism offers a win-win solution.

Conclusion

Keeping my Man may be read as a Nego-feminist text in diverse ways, including the lack of extremities such as physical abuse in the entire text. However, more important is the willingness for reformation and collaboration. While there are multiple conflicts in the film, the end result for two of the couples is compromise; this is in line with Nnaemeka's assertion that, "African feminism challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise" (2003:380). Sanda tries to emphasise negotiation with the portrayal of women who explore, are daring, and are able to speak about their sexualities. However, there is the very conspicuous occupational stereotype exemplified here by the 'career husband versus unambitious wife', as well as the objectification of women. Women portrayed as housewives and confined in domestic spaces is not a stereotype limited to Nollywood and in this film the women all wait on their husbands to provide for their needs, encouraging two of them, Rasheed and Tokunbo, to think that that is all they need do to satisfy their partners. Not only are the women depicted as housewives, their conversations are also always centred on their marriages and they spend their time scheming.

The characters who do resolve their differences achieve this through dialogue and willingness to co-operate, rather than continuing with their conflicts. Both men and women are involved in finding a solution to the marriage problem, as revealed, for example, in the tenacity with which Lanre spearheads the cause of togetherness and intimacy in his marriage. His example opposes the way in which men (and women) are socialised in a patriarchal society which gives men superiority, although elements of this hierarchy occasionally manifest themselves. In general, however, the characters are very open to discussions that foster harmony and unity in their various homes. They all succeed in this except for Tokunbo whose betrayal results in his wife leaving. She leaves him not only because he goes so far as having sexual affairs with some of her friends, but also for the fact that she wakes up to the realisation that she has become a shadow of who she says she used to be, enslaved to her husband's needs. She realises the depth of his domination over her life and she decides to set herself free. Hers and her husband's case greatly differ from others because they started off seemingly following the Nego-feminist model in their peaceful, harmonious relationship. They speak about dialogue and compromise to their friends but do not practice it themselves. The illusion of their 'perfect' marriage is a façade to cover up the unspoken problems they both experience. However, when they encounter conflict, the damage is already done. As pointed out in the introductory chapters,

some African feminisms appear passive, especially when assertive actions are required. In order to progress, it is those cultural limitations that must sometimes be removed, rather than negotiated with. Zion confronts the shame and any other stereotype associated with divorce and she exits; for her there is no further room for negotiation. She demonstrates self-worth and agency despite being portrayed for the most part of the film as a woman who lives for her husband. She chooses that, rather than being vengeful or remaining in a toxic relationship where pain, distrust and misery thrive. The film is like a morality play, as suggested earlier, in the light of the way the characters resolve their conflicts.

CHAPTER FOUR

Flower Girl, dir. Michelle Bello (2013)

Stars and Casting

The selection of actors in *Flower Girl* is reflective of the Nollywood star system noted above, a very significant aspect of the industry. As Lizelle Bisschoff points out, it is “the most important part of the industry” (2016:140). The stars, and the frequency of their appearances, are often more vital than the directors to the film’s success. As a result, directors are very deliberate in the selection of actors because of their importance to the film’s entertainment and commercial success. Relatively older actors who were the faces of Nollywood in the late 1990s and early 2000s (and still are) like Richard Mofe Damijo (RMD), Rita Dominic, Jim Iyke, Omotola Jolade, Stephanie Okereke Linus, Ramsey Noah, Kate Henshaw and Genevieve Nnaji have set the pace for newer, but equally famous ones like O.C Ukeje, Adesua Utomi, Blossom Chukwujekwu, Bolanle Ninolowo, Lala Akindoju, Femi Jacobs and a host of others.

Bisschoff is right in her observation that “Nollywood stars are celebrities, role models, pacesetters and cultural ambassadors” (2016:140). And for a lot of them, their off-screen image often reflects their on-screen roles. An example is the role of the pretty girl-next-door, Kemi Williams, that Damilola Adegbite plays in *Flower Girl*. Damilola was widely known for her role, Thelema Duke, in the popular Africa Magic Television drama, *Tinsel*. She gained popularity with the show and has been more consistent with her appearances in Television Drama series, including *Before 30*, than in films. She plays roles that many young women are able to identify with. For example, in *Before 30*, she plays the role of a woman whose plan is to find the right man and get married before she turns 30. Off- screen, as evident in the simplicity with which she expresses herself on her personal social media activities, she appears as the pretty, ordinary girl-next-door with little or no controversies. In contrast, the on-screen image some actors have created and maintained over time are polar opposites to who they are off-screen. This holds true for actors like Patience Ozokwor who maintains her no-nonsense, wicked stepmother / mother-in-law image in a lot of films. In a recent interview with a Ghanaian presenter of RTV posted on YouTube in 2016, she spoke extensively about her life as a Christian, which is completely different from her heathenish and wicked image on screen and in the interview, she was addressed as Evangelist Patience Ozokwor. There is also Segun Arinze who is known for his bad

boy image for which he became popular in his role, Black Arrow, in *Silent Night* in 1996, but who, in reality, is a soft-spoken and easy-going person.

The selection of the cast in *Flower Girl*, in no small measure, propels the film's narrative. The cast is a combination of well-blended actors from different parts of Nigeria, and Ghana. While some of the actors like Blossom Chukwujekwu were not so big at the time, they have now grown to become household names. Chukwujekwu appeared in his first feature film, *Private Storm* (2009), together with big names like Ramsey Noah and Omotola Jalade. *Flower Girl* was indeed Chukwujekwu's breakout film with his role as Tunde Kulani—a playboy who falls in love and learns to commit himself to the relationship. Ghanaian actor, Chris Attah, was popular for his role, Kwame Mensah, in the Television Series *Tinsel*, which shot him into the limelight, especially with the Nigerian audience. His role as Umar, a socially awkward, strait-jacketed lawyer contrasts sharply with that of his rival in *Flower Girl*, Tunde Kulani, an outgoing, successful actor. Veteran broadcaster who ventures into acting from time to time, Patrick Doyle, plays the role of Mr Williams, Kemi's Dad, while Television personality and long-time 53 Extra presenter, Eku Edewor, performed in her first major film role with her portrayal of a 'side-chick', Sapphire, in *Flower Girl*.

In Chapter Three, I explored the strengths and weaknesses of Rukky Sanda's contribution to the representation of women in her film, *Keeping My Man*. In this chapter, I shall be examining Michelle Bello's adaptation of the genre of the romantic comedy to open up new perceptions of women in Nigerian society. She takes a mainstream genre that reached the height of success in Hollywood and uses it to address specific concerns in her own society. I shall also be exploring the possibilities that Motherism enables in the analysis of Bello's very successful romantic comedy.

Flower Girl: The Genre

Barclays Ayakoroma describes genres as "recognisable groups, which are bound by certain characteristics whether in the literary or film form" (2014: 81- 82). In his book, *Trends in Nollywood* (2014), he provides a chronology of genres in Nollywood since the first Nollywood production, *Living in Bondage*. However, in his classifications, Ayakoroma makes no mention of romantic comedy as a genre in Nollywood. He mentions romantic films, which he refers to as the "love and romance genre", but leaves out romantic films that include comedy. Romantic comedy is a popular genre in Nollywood, but it has been much neglected as an area of study.

When Love Happens (2014), *Being Mrs Elliot* (2014), *North East* (2016), *The Wedding Party* (2016) and *Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2017) are examples of successful romantic comedies that have emerged from the Nigerian film industry in recent times. *The Wedding Party*, directed by a woman, Kemi Adetiba, has recently been named the highest selling box-office film in Nollywood history. These films did well in the cinemas and they come highly recommended with rave reviews on the internet platforms such as film review websites, Irokovtv and Ibakatv. One viewer, after watching *North East* for the first time concludes her review on thefilmencil.com with the words, “to ensure I wasn’t under the influence of some narcotics which excited my senses the fateful night I saw #NorthEast the first time, I have plans to see the film again in the cinemas with even more friends (something that has happened just three times in my entire life)”. Such is the emotive power of a good romantic comedy, which falls in line with the triadic composition of genre criticism involving the “artist-film-audience”:

Genres emerge as products of a three-way negotiation between audiences, filmmakers and film producers; and the primary object of a genre in the filmic experience is to create recognition in the minds of the audience who watch a production in the context of other films (Turner, cited in Ayakoroma, 2014:84).

Flower Girl was a hit for producer and director, Michelle Bello. In an interview upon its UK release, she declared that *Flower Girl* was conceived while she was a Masters student at Regent University and she decided on the story because of her love for romantic comedies (SmartMonkeyTv, 2013). Her idea was later developed into a script by her brother, Jigi Bello. One of the characteristics of genre, Ayakoroma describes, is that “one must be able to explain the principles on which it can meaningfully be associated with films of that genre” (2014: 81). The romantic comedy genre, which Bello adapts from Hollywood to Nollywood, crosses international borders and makes effective use of its Lagos setting

As Stacey Abbot and Deborah Jermyn point out, romantic comedies remain a favourite for fans, even though they frequently struggle “to be taken seriously— to win awards or critical enthusiasm or academic attention...” (2008:2). The reasons for this lack of serious consideration, Abbot and Jermyn point out, is that, firstly, its audiences are reputed to be largely female and so “‘chick flicks’ in all their incarnations are frequently critically constructed as inherently trite or lightweight”. Secondly, the romantic comedy is presumed to be “essentially calculating in its

execution”. As such, they are perceived to lack spontaneity. Thirdly, it is considered to be “slavishly formulaic, adhering to well-worn and obvious conventions (boy meets girl...)”, and finally, the elicitation of laughter is regarded as “anti-intellectual” and disallows serious reflection in the viewer (ibid). In response to such criticisms, which Abbot and Jermyn consider “well-worn”, they explain the importance of trying to understand how the genre has been able to consistently evoke a high degree of “emotional and personal” effect from its viewers. Describing romantic comedy as a “living genre”, they maintain that despite having upheld certain conventions over time, it is able to continually “negotiate and respond dynamically to the issues and preoccupations of its time” (2008: 2-3). This underpins Ayakoroma’s argument that genres go beyond repetition. He explains that while genres are stable, they are open to transformation (2014: 81). Similarly, Celestino Deleyto, in his book *The Secret Life Romantic Comedy* (2008), refutes the notion that the genre always requires a happy ending. Rather than paying attention to the resolution, the focus should be on how the plot unravels the story of intimacy. He calls for everyone, including scholars, critics and audiences, to jettison preconceived notions about romantic comedy as a genre.

Flower Girl encapsulates what a romantic comedy is about based on Abbott and Jermyn’s argument that “the search for love” is a significant component in the genre. By taking a cursory look at the film’s title without necessarily watching the film, certain assumptions can immediately be drawn about what to expect. One is that it has to do with romance. The title, *Flower Girl*, itself, suggests a girl who loves, owns, sells or works with flowers, as well as the flower girl who traditionally attends to the bride. Further, flowers, among other things, symbolize love and purity, all pointing towards goodness. From a feminist perspective, it can be argued that the title already puts the ‘flower girl’ in a gendered position where she is expected to play the ‘good girl’ role and possess ‘good girl’ attributes. As pointed out above, very often, women in Nollywood films play roles that the society expects of women. There is a lot of conformity to socially constructed gender expectations. Unfortunately, even when the roles are perceived as negative or demeaning to women, a lot of men embrace those representations. For example, in a reception study conducted in Nigeria, it was discovered that there are “striking disparities in ways men and women internalize women’s portrayals in the films; while men tend to see nothing wrong with the representations of women in films and wish such to continue unmodified for the reinforcement of Nigerian culture, women, contrarily perceive the portrayals

in negative lights” (Azeez, cited in Dunu, Ukwueze and Okafor, 2015).

Shaka and Uchendu (2012:3) contend that gender roles and gender identity begin by the way parents and close family members discriminate between the male and female infant (in favour of the male) which “imprints a distinct pattern of behaviour in the first three years of the child’s life” (3). In other words, the child’s mind is preconditioned to start thinking and acting in a ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ way from an early age. For females, the expectations from them are to be polite, well-mannered, domestic, not too vocal nor ambitious. She is generally conditioned to fit into how a girl is “expected to behave in a patriarchal society” (ibid).

In sum, *Flower Girl* is a romantic comedy directed by a female filmmaker in Nollywood. This combination offers the viewer the experiences of a girl in love, in a male-dominated society from the point of view of a woman—creatively laced with humour. It is a story of love, and as Karen Bowdre’s observes, citing Wes Gehring’s book, *Romantic vs Screwball comedy: Charting the Difference* (2002), the comedic moments in a romantic comedy do not undermine the seriousness of love. I shall be focusing on plot and character development in some detail in what follows, as these are crucial to unfolding the ways in which Bello both adheres to genre conventions and adapts them to a specific spatial and cultural location.

The Plot of *Flower Girl*

Like many romantic Nollywood films with cliché stories, *Flower Girl* takes us through the whirlwind romance in the life of Kemi, a beautiful unassuming young girl from a humble close-knit family of three. Stylistically, the film does not offer much difference from most romantic, urban Nigerian films. The plot is straightforward and the setting is familiar. Nollywood productions are, however, improving daily, and it may be considered neo-Nollywood. *Flower Girl* may be considered neo-Nollywood because of the good production quality, the emphasis placed on the use of cinematography to tell stories rather than unnecessarily lengthy dialogue and adequate attention to details, among other things. Bello takes a simple, familiar love story and creatively develops it into an enjoyable romantic comedy, without losing sight of culturally specific elements such as music that attract the attention of Nollywood audiences.

Set in the contemporary city of Lagos, the director follows the lives and loves of a young Nigerian couple, with particular focus on Kemi, who contentedly works in a flower shop owned by her family. Her ambition lies not in pursuing a career, but in getting married. The dramatic tone for romance is set early on in the film with a shot of Kemi clearly lost in thought as she

watches, oblivious to her immediate environment, the bliss of a client getting married. The film begins with a prologue that foreshadows the events that will unfold in the rest of the film. It is symbolic of Kemi's longing for romance, and its elusiveness in her life. It shows Kemi as a little flower girl, happily holding and playing with a flower with fondness when, out of nowhere, a young boy of about her age appears, yanks the flower away and runs off with it. Little Kemi gives the young boy, who has just grabbed her happiness, a chase until they run out of frame and in the shot that follows we are presented with an image of a grown-up Kemi holding a bouquet of flowers looking dishevelled, apparently late for a client's wedding. Her long-time boyfriend, Umar, played by Chris Attoh, has an entirely different persona. He has a stern exterior and is characterised by an even tougher personality. Even though he is aware of Kemi's overarching desire to get married, he often consciously ignores her. He is an extremely focused individual who has his career, making money and promotion at work as his top priorities. In the first half of the film, Umar is presented as having apparent distaste for Kemi's clingy acts of desperation for marriage, which he later uses to his own advantage. When he unexpectedly breaks up with Kemi after publicly shaming her on the night she thought he would propose to her, her life seemingly ends abruptly. She goes through a very difficult breakup, more so because she still has to work, which means dealing with clients who are mostly getting married or celebrating love. Her job involves making other people's romantic dreams come true.

In a flagrant 'meet cute', Kemi accidentally crosses paths with Tunde Kulani, a handsome celebrity actor, when she is knocked down by his car whilst still mourning her recently ended relationship with Umar. Overcome with thoughts of Umar, she unintentionally walks into Tunde's approaching vehicle. Tunde takes her home after which she narrates her ordeal. They plan to get Umar to propose by making him jealous. This involves glamorizing a pretty girl-next-door Kemi and making public appearances together as a couple. The way she eventually evolves is characteristic of many romantic films, comparable to a Cinderella transformation, as she becomes a more elegant version of herself. Without realising it however their own romance is woven into the plan, as they both slowly fall in love.

The local contemporary Lagos setting which has become the Nollywood quintessential hotspot for filming plays a vital part in the film. Viewers are presented with some of the ambience of the city life such as night life, a glimpse of a traditional wedding, music and dance. Bello's generous infusion of indigenous music, both in the form of diegetic and non-diegetic

sounds, primarily by Nigerian artists in the party and club scenes, and as soundtrack, gives viewers the feel of Nigerian music.

Music plays a vital role in *Flower Girl* in the way the director uses sound to convey, and sometimes reinforce, the actions in various instances. One example occurs during Kemi's make-over in preparation for her party appearance with Tunde, which will be used on the front cover of a magazine. Accompanied by Tunde, she changes into various outfits looking for the perfect fit with "Fine Lady" by Lynxx playing in the background. The music plays on as she friskily changes outfits, but the song finally makes sense when Kemi steps out in a short, beautiful black and white dress and Tunde is momentarily lost for words. When he finds his voice eventually, he gives a definite approval for the dress. That moment signifies a transition from her being merely a woman he had met by chance, to being a beautiful woman with whom he is capable of falling in love. This reiterates how the romantic comedy genre relies on physical attraction to pave the way for deeper understanding and emotions. This is reminiscent of *Pretty Woman* (1990) and the unusual love between a random 'hooker', Vivian (Julia Roberts) and a wealthy businessman, Edward (Richard Gere). The combination of innocent and sexy charm that Kemi and Vivian exude, turn them from random women to women who capture the hearts of their men. Tunde bears similarities with Edward in the sense that they both eventually commit to an unlikely woman from a lower socio-economic class. This reiterates the centrality of love and unpredictability to the romantic comedy genre. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Nollywood presents itself as transnational in diverse dimensions. The use of genre, such as Bello's total embrace of romantic comedy and generous use of standard practices of the genre such as the meet cute, visual transformation (exemplified in the 'Cinderella' scene) and adaptation of popular Hollywood tropes, are just a few examples. As this chapter progresses, I shall also show how the African theory of Motherism may enrich our understanding of Bello's adaptation of this Hollywood genre.

Representation of Women in *Flower Girl*

The narrative in *Flower Girl* brings to the fore one of the most vulnerable moments in the life of a young Nigerian woman who is 'ripe' and desperate for marriage. Kemi's dilemma represents the experiences of many women who desire specific attributes in a potential spouse but culture or the society they find themselves in impede their natural instinct to ask for or pursue what they want, and in this case, a man who will love her for who she is and marry her. In

as much as there is a plethora of rich cultural practices in Nigeria, such as the traditional marriages and naming ceremonies, agency regarding one of the most important decisions in the lives of women is limited. For instance, Kemi has the liberty to say no to Umar or Tunde's marriage proposal, but would be frowned upon, condemned even, if she directly asked Umar or Tunde to marry her. This invariably means that women are expected to wait and choose from whatever options come their way. For this reason, Kemi tries to manipulate Umar into marriage; however, her effort backfires. (It must be admitted of course, that in Western societies where 'women's liberation' is supposed to have taken a firmer foothold, there is still the assumption that women wait to be asked by men for 'their hands' in marriage).

It is a common occurrence for female filmmakers to address issues that are related to their experiences as women. Thus, one finds female directors predominantly addressing themes like love, motherhood, relationships, career and identity. Generally speaking, there is a thematic trend in Nollywood films where acts of desperation and the desire to get married are key to female characters' focus. Examples can be found in films like *Mrs Somebody* (2014) *When Love Happens* (2014), *Diary of a Lagos Girl* (2015), *29 & Miserable* (2016), *Chasing Rainbows* (2016), *Sunshine* (2018) to mention a few.

An analysis of the main female characters in *Flower Girl* indicates how Michelle Bello portrays contemporary Nigerian women. She mirrors in *Flower Girl* a young girl's dream. It is common in Nigeria for marriage expectations to begin to mount when a woman is in her mid-twenties, as noted by Adichie (2017). This is sometimes a result of peer, family or societal pressures, or just a personal desire for marriage as self-fulfilment. However, just as there are numerous young women who desire marriage, there is also a sizeable number of goal-driven women of marriageable age with thriving careers. However, Bello does not focus on the latter because none of female characters in her film are career-driven and their goals are orientated around relationships. Thus, Kemi is a beautiful, everyday type of girl who seeks commitment from her boyfriend. What is salient to Kemi's role is her nagging desperation to get married and the entire film revolves around this. The manner in which she seeks attention, however, is mostly humorous. Bello is able to dilute some of the tense moments in the film with humour, in line with Celestino Deleyto's observations on the genre of romantic comedy (as summarised by Tamar McDonald):

The laughter engendered by comedy is vital, Deleyto insists, to the success of the romantic comedy's project. He finds that humour is imperative to the creation of what he calls the space of romantic comedy, a protective bubble inside the film which permits the characters room and time to find themselves. (2009:164)

Bello infuses a lot of humour into the film especially in the way that Kemi tries to get the attention of both Umar and Tunde, which is very engaging. For example, in the scene of her makeover, not only is she endeared to audiences, we see how Tunde begins to relax and warm up to her goofiness. The entire sequence is laced with humour, from when they both walk into the showroom and Kemi begins to admire a fabric until Tunde offhandedly points out that “that’s a table cloth”, to the manner in which the owners briskly walk her out of the showroom mistaking her for a tramp until Tunde announces that she needs a makeover and should be allowed back in. Here the film again recalls Garry Marshall’s *Pretty Woman* (1990). The scene is similar to how Vivian is treated when she goes to a highbrow store and is disregarded because she looks like a tramp, and is only paid proper attention when Edward steps in.

Umar is a lot less sympathetic than Tunde as he is portrayed as a ‘nerd’ who hardly ever smiles or finds humour in anything. An example is the opening wedding scene when Kemi is happily dancing and trying to get him involved. He doesn’t find that amusing, he just wants them to leave the venue, and from there we begin to sense his lack of interest in romance. Desperation is one of the most striking representations of Kemi. Her desperate desire to get married is portrayed in several scenes. At the end of the first scene of the film, Umar walks into a hall where a wedding is taking place and Kemi, carried away, literally bumps into him. He has come to take her out on a date and he practically drags her out of the wedding venue. Kemi is reluctant to leave her client’s wedding: she is single, has an unyielding boyfriend and so being at a wedding makes her dream even more about hers. In the next scene, they (Kemi and Umar) are in a restaurant and Kemi is clearly still caught up with her emotions. She is overwhelmed by thoughts of her own elusive wedding and sulks. Umar’s attention is quickly drawn to this and the following conversation ensues:

Umar: I know that face, I know what it means. Look, Kemi, soon I’ll move myself up in the firm, to a real job, to real money, then we can...

Kemi: Then we can what? (eyes now bright and expectant)

Umar: (Gesticulates with his hands)

Kemi: Oh, I'm sorry, I can't hear you. My ears aren't working so well. I didn't hear that last part. And then we can...? (She teases excitedly)

Umar: And then we can get married.

On hearing this, Kemi leaps for joy almost breaking a plate in the process. We are made to believe that Umar is very aware of her desperation and her systematic way of drawing his attention. He gets the message when she sulks leading him to say, "I know that face" and assures her of marriage on the condition that he gets promoted at work. Theirs is not a relationship where there is mutual respect. Umar is the dominant one in the relationship, while Kemi would do almost anything to stay in the relationship and get married. Not only do his words and tone suggest a dominating character, his stiff and unrelaxed body language supports it, but Kemi is blinded by love.

In the same scene, Kemi's friend, Stella, joins the duo at the dinner table. Umar excuses himself because he and Stella clearly don't get along too well, despite the fact that they work in the same organisation. From the onset, we see how Stella's larger-than-life, bubbly character rubs off on Kemi. As soon as Umar is out of earshot, Stella informs Kemi of a possible promotion at work for Umar and Kemi immediately takes it as a definite sign that marriage is next on the agenda, in the light of her earlier conversation with him. In contagious excitement, she responds, "Stella! Do you know what this means? ...We're getting married, we're getting married...". Stella joins Kemi in her euphoria as she giggles and screams in excitement, disregarding the apparent displeasure of other customers in the restaurant. Two friends who understand each other is clearly depicted in the scene. Kemi and Stella's friendship is effortless, and on some occasions, it reduces the rising pressure between Kemi and Umar, making us see another side of Kemi's persona. Stella's character, her exaggerated actions and responses are often humorous and we see an example of this when she goes from her otherwise serious composure and joins Kemi in screaming "We're getting married!"

Another key scene is where Umar rings an over-expectant Kemi, who had been waiting for his call all day. He calls to invite her to dinner with his boss and his wife. The dinner concerns his promotion and his motive for inviting Kemi is so that his boss will consider him a serious enough person for promotion. Umar would not ordinarily have invited Kemi for such an important meeting, as he eventually says when the dinner goes wrong. After the telephone conversation, Kemi and her friend, Stella, who was her partner-in-waiting, ecstatically express

their anticipation of a marriage proposal. Their excessive, even shrill, delight is comic, but also underlines Kemi's desperation. Based on the earlier conversation with Stella, her hopes are high. She has convinced herself that the proposal is imminent, and a dinner invitation from Umar is read as a step closer to marriage. Although there are pressures on women to get married, Bello's protagonist is *not seen* to be pressured by her parents or her friends; she is only pressured by her own desires (which have, one may assume, been constructed by gendered socialization).

Kemi spends a lot of time juggling between trying to get Umar to propose and when that fails, trying to win him back. When in the end she gets him back and he proposes, she finds out that it's for all the wrong reasons. There were clear signs why Kemi should have backed out of the relationship earlier on, the first being that Umar does not respect her. The scene where Umar invites Kemi for a date with his boss and his wife, and Kemi fails to calm down enough to have a decent dinner because she thought the date was about their proposal, points to this. Indeed, one cannot really fault Umar for not according her some respect because of the way she presents herself to him as needy. In that scene, Kemi shuts down Umar's boss and tells everyone else to keep the place quiet, just because she thinks that Umar is about to make an important announcement. In the end, he openly breaks up with her and tells her to 'grow up'. The scene, however, ends with a revelation of Kemi's feisty side, when an angry, embarrassed Kemi on her way out, thinks better of simply retreating and dramatically empties the contents of an ice bucket on him. She lets out her anger and probably felt better in that moment, but in subsequent scenes we see how devastated she is.

The second sign of doom in their relationship is Umar's lack of commitment and stinginess. He once told Kemi he was going to 'flash' her, rather than call her, which meant he couldn't be bothered wasting his call credit on her. This comment is made to Stella's disgust, who immediately 'christens' him 'Mr. No Credit'. Thirdly, he is self-centred in the sense that he does not see beyond his own career and what would benefit him, to the extent that he finally agrees to marry Kemi (based on the schemes of Sapphire, Tunde's glamorous ex-girlfriend), in order to get promoted at work. Unlike Umar, who is focused on his career and other life issues, Kemi pays attention to domesticity. First of all, their careers are indicators of gender stereotypes in the workplace and the sort of economic positions many women are believed to hold in the society. Umar, a lawyer, works in a well-structured organisation with a white-collar job; Kemi works in a flower shop which appears to be less demanding. Shaka and Uchendu's article,

“Gender Representation in Nollywood Video Film Culture”, effectively illuminates Kemi and Umar’s case. They explain how society nurtures men and women differently and how this shapes how they turn out:

Her mental energy is expended thinking of and imagining a prince charming of a husband with whom she will live happily ever after. She gives no thought to the resources that will sustain that life with her prince charming. She gives no thought to unforeseen events and circumstances such as death and natural disaster. She gives no thought to her personal individuality. She gives no thought to the possibility of her life without a man. Her individuality and personality are lost or subsumed in that of the man in her thoughts. (2012: 3)

In contrast, from an early age, “...the male child is using his mental energies to establish a solid economic, social and political foundation for the future” (2012: 4). Kemi indeed spends a lot of time imagining her life with her Prince Charming and pays no attention to how to be resourceful or grow her business. At an early age, a boy- and a girl-child’s mentality is preconditioned to think in certain ways and to act differently. A lot of women subconsciously need to prove that they are good enough for a man, while the man, by virtue of being a man, is already good enough and only needs to chase after more important things like money and cars.

On more than one occasion in *Flower Girl*, Kemi fights for the sake of her love interest. She has confrontations with other women, not for work, but over Tunde, an indication of where her values are placed. She has a little face-off at the salon with two women who are drooling over Tunde; she also has a violent confrontation at the airport with Tunde’s former girlfriend, Sapphire. In this case, there is an actual altercation and a fight which involves hair-pulling and both women rolling on the floor. The scene is an example of slapstick but has serious undertones regarding the obsession with women fighting for their men, as explored above. Kemi is not alone in her fight for love. Tunde also engages in physical combat with Umar. In their context however, we are made to believe that Tunde is drunk, and this somehow provides a justification for his inappropriate behaviour. The impression is given that he was under the influence of alcohol and ordinarily wouldn’t have engaged in the demeaning act of fighting over a girl. However, his drunken state is also a cover-up for his emotion. This is later revealed when Sapphire divulges that he (Tunde) never gets drunk on one bottle of champagne. Apparently, it is Tunde’s way of covering up a battle seemingly lost, even before he engaged in the physical fight. He had fallen in love with Kemi and didn’t let her know, either because of Kemi’s apparent obsession over Umar, or because he is afraid of being openly rejected— an unusual feeling for

him. As Sapphire points out, “We could still be really good friends. I’ve known you to have so many girls”. To which he responds, “This one is different.”

Kemi’s sidekick, Stella, played by Bikiya Graham Douglas, offers a different kind of foil from that of the stereotyped jealous ‘other woman’, portrayed by Sapphire. Stella brings a lot of humour and vibrancy to the film. Her effort in the film was rewarded when she won the AMVCA (Africa Magic Viewer’s Choice Awards) for the best supporting actress for her role. She is portrayed as very outspoken and sassy. Her vivacious attitude is introduced right from her first appearance in the film when she rudely interrupts Kemi and Umar’s date and is unapologetic about it. Her personality is bold and daring and she amplifies the part. She also sometimes comes across as rude, as she interrupts conversations and is not courteous enough to wait to be introduced before talking, awed no doubt by star status, for example, in her first meeting with Tunde. Her character is somewhere between funny and annoying. Despite this, she and her friend, Kemi, get along well. She supports her friend, advises her and sticks by her, and thankfully she does not play the jealous woman who would backstab her friend and aim for that friend’s man— such as in *Swing of Emotion* (2012).

Occupational Roles

Women are gaining more recognition for the work they do. Many occupations that used to be considered strictly for men are slowly being occupied by women. For this reason, it is arguably part of the job of the filmmaker, as a curator of the society, to represent and depict such progress in their films. If women are continuously stereotyped by Nigerian filmmakers who disregard change, no matter how small, then viewers around the world will be left with the wrong impression about the reality of the rising stature of women in the world. This is why, in the review of Nollywood films in Chapter Two, there appears to be a consensus that women are represented unrealistically. Viewers who know nothing about Nigeria cannot be blamed if their perception of Nigerian women depends on those images seen in Nigerian films, since they possibly have no other points of reference. Abosede Ogunbiyi (2010) argues that Nollywood films portray women in extremes—the good and the bad. She argues that women are rarely portrayed realistically, therefore, they are either extremely good or extremely bad. This is however not entirely true in films like *Flower Girl*. Taking the character of Stella for example, even though she comes across as annoying and rude, she is not a bad person who is capable only

of doing evil. Sapphire on the other hand is conniving and self-centred and right from when she is introduced to the film, she is presented as manipulative—attempting to talk Tunde into letting her go to the United States with him and setting Kemi up for disappointment and grief. However, the women in *Flower Girl* are not representative of goal-driven, emancipated women.

In terms of occupational roles, the women in *Flower Girl* do not have thriving careers. Unlike the male characters who have good jobs and are financially independent, the female characters are unambitious professionally. Tunde and Umar, the two lead male characters appear to be doing relatively well, career-wise. Though Tunde does not have a white-collar job, in the sense of what Mr. Williams (Kemi's father) calls a 'proper job', he is a successful, rich and famous actor. His career as an actor is questioned by Mr. Williams when Tunde tells him he is an actor on their first meeting. His amusing reaction is, "Don't worry, young man, one day you will get a real job". Mr Williams does not consider Tunde's job as a proper job and this, paradoxically, comes shortly after both he and his wife had just condemned Umar for being too serious and "carrying on as if he created the concept of work," in Mr. Williams' words. Mr. Williams' blend of conservatism and liberalism may point to Kemi's mix of traditionalism and assertiveness. Umar, on the other hand, is presented as a professional—a dedicated lawyer on his way to the peak of his career.

The Image of the Housewife

An analysis of the occupational roles indicates that the women in *Flower Girl* have stereotypical gendered careers. The females have occupations that range from secretary to hairstylists to florists and housewives. In Nollywood, housewives are typically represented as having rich husbands who provide for their needs, while they stay at home to meet their husbands' demands. At other times, however, they may be presented as wives of a struggling man who stays at home and does petty trading. A pointer to how commonly women in Nollywood are represented in this light is the fact that the four primary films analysed in this study have at least one woman as a housewife, as against only one man who is not gainfully employed. Mrs. Williams, Kemi's mother, is portrayed as very kind and homey, the 'good girl' Ogunbiyi speaks of. Alibi (2018) lists the housewife as "the most favoured stereotype in Nigerian films", a role he explains that "exists only to support her husband and children" (2018:63). Again, Nollywood is not alone in offering the recurring and invariably reductive role of woman as housewife. The role proliferates in Western popular culture. Speaking of motherhood, Adichie, in her book *Dear Ijeawele, or A*

Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions (2017), acknowledges that motherhood is a “glorious gift”, however, women should not define themselves exclusively by motherhood. She recommends that women should have careers and even if they do not love their jobs, they should love what their jobs give them, such as confidence and income.

Other Roles

Kemi works in a flower shop which she loves and is fulfilled by, but she is not ambitious. Her job is unstructured, (a little like Tunde’s) and this makes her a potentially perfect wife who has time to devote to a husband (who has a more serious job and busy work schedule—Umar). Stella’s work as a secretary in Umar’s organization is a variation on another Nollywood trope: the unfriendly secretary. This role is seen in Nigerian films like *The Meeting* (2013) and *Love Regardless* (2015).

The one female character who seems to be in control is Mrs. Ada, to whom Tunde introduces Kemi at the party. Her occupation is not specifically mentioned but it may be deduced that she is the publisher of the magazine in which the pair plan to appear. She calls the shots and her tone is authoritative. Even though her appearance in the film lasts less than three minutes and she appears just once, there is no doubt that she dominates both the men and the women around her. In essence, Michelle Bello, being a female filmmaker, doesn’t appear to have made a decisive effort to change the trend in which women are viewed in Nollywood in terms of occupational roles. This observation is made, however, bearing in mind what the genre focus of the film is—love and romance. It is not a didactically socially conscious film that aims to sensitize audiences about societal ills or women’s ability and contributions to the society.

A Mother’s Role

While *Flower Girl* is not focused on radical revisioning of women’s on-screen images, there are pervasive motifs in the film, characteristic of African women (and men) of strength of character, perseverance, complementarity and love. *Flower Girl* lends itself to analysis through the lens of Motherism and it is to this exploration that I now turn. Acholonu is an influential voice in African feminism. She is reputed to be radical in her political and intellectual work. Nudka Otiono’s description of Acholonu as a “goddess of the intellectual market square” speaks

volumes about her active and daring works as an intellectual. Her radicalism transcends her “esoteric” and “provocative” publications, it speaks, also, of her political endeavours. As Otiono puts it, she is a worthy example of a “Nigerian female intellectual who has dared to wade into Nigeria’s male –dominated treacherous political waters” (2014: 67-68). She vied for presidential and gubernatorial elections in Nigeria. She also received a “commendation letter from U.S President Bill Clinton” for his recognition of her intellectual work. Part of her radicalism is her interrogation of former Vice President Al Gore’s “views on the search for alternative options for development” (2014: 70). She is considered radical because of her provocative and daring energy, when this is combined with her intellectuality, she produces profound and differing views on knowledge production and dissemination. This reflects in her approach to feminism. In her influential book *Motherism: An Afrocentric alternative to Western Feminism* which was her Fulbright Scholar Project, Catherine Acholonu makes profound statements about the situations and positions of African women. She defines womanhood in six dimensions in African cosmology: the woman as a daughter/ sister, mother, wife, queen/ priestess, a goddess, and the woman as a husband. Each of these statuses occupy a unique and specific role either in the society or in the family. There is a lot of demand and dependence on women for growth as well as stability, thus the African woman is known for her ability to multi-function in various capacities within the society. In this analysis of Bello’s film, the woman is viewed in only three of the dimensions— as the daughter/sister, a mother and as the wife. Acholonu says of the African woman, “her life is one that calls for constant sacrifice;” she says further that “she is the bedrock of the family. She is a powder keg that must never be allowed to explode” (1995: 25). This statement is rich in paradox: Acholonu acknowledges the devotion and sacrifices of a mother which she sees as a symbol of strength, without which everything falls apart. The term “Motherism” is obviously derived from the word mother— but the concept stresses that both women and men take part, biologically, and socially, in nurturing the child. Evelyn Glenn argues that for the greater part of the twentieth century, women were almost exclusively responsible for the child’s formative years. This was the universal ideal made popular by the white American middle class. Other offshoots of the term Mother are Motherhood (a state and the experiences of being a mother) and Mothering (nurturing a child). Mothering, as Glenn notes, is a “historically and culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another” (1994: 3). The roles of mothering differ from culture to culture. From the above definition, it

could mean man or woman, just as with Motherism. The term, like gender, as Glenn further points out, is socially constructed. She notes that “mothering is constructed through men and women’s actions within specific historical circumstances” (ibid).

Women, especially feminists, have challenged theories of how women’s responsibilities are tied to biological explanations (biological determinism). For example, Nancy Chodorow, according to Glenn, employs “psychoanalytic relations theory” to explain the patterns of mothering, transferred through “the very experiences of being mothered by women” (1994:4). In other words, the attachment through nurturing by the mother readily prepares a girl for the position. In contrast, boys, by way of less attachment to the mother, develop a sense of self, independence and “construct a male identity” (1994:4). Glenn’s observation that “shared mothering has been characteristic of African American communities since slavery” relates to Acholonu’s argument of communality among Africans. Acholonu weaves the theory into the preservation of traditional and cultural values. She makes strong connections between motherhood and humanity stating that motherhood is the “central focus of African Art, African Literature (especially women’s writing), African culture, African psychology, oral traditions and empirical philosophy”(1995:26). Acholonu refers to motherhood as focal point in Africa because many areas in art, culture and intellectuality revolve around it. Women’s roles in oral traditions as storytellers points to this and so do the type of emphasis placed on motherhood by women writers, as seen in the works of Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, early women writers in Nigeria. To Roseline Yacim, the crux of Motherism is to strive “towards continuous mutual understanding, togetherness which creates a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere or environment” (2015:192). Acholonu’s discussion of Motherism, however contentious in some respects, nevertheless provides illuminating ways in which aspects of contemporary Nigerian society can be analysed. In spite of modernisation and globalisation, traditional culture in Nigeria continues to play a key role in everyday lives. Modernity is a gradual process, where values not aligned with popular perceptions may be termed extreme and therefore discarded. In the African context, the role of a mother is pivotal in the society. She cares for and nurtures her children and those around her. She feels responsible, not just for her own children but also her neighbours’ children and any other person she considers in the position of a child.

It is important to take cognizance of the relationship between Kemi and her mother. Their relationship is cordial. Theirs is not the cat-and-mouse type of relationship, which often arises

out of pressures from the mother (and sometimes father) on their daughter to get married when they reach a certain age, and especially if they reside together. It is worth noting that Kemi still stays with her parents and this is not unusual in the Nigerian context. It is a 'Nigerian thing' as most parents are reluctant to give consent to their daughters to live alone before marriage. Living alone before marriage is often considered to offer too much freedom which may cause a delay in marriage, because such women may become wayward owing to too much liberty to do as they please without guidance. So, daughters are likely to live with their parents until they are married. Whether living at home until marrying actually diminishes waywardness amongst women is uncertain, but it certainly reduces agency and the sense of responsibility among women. The ideal Nigerian societal expectation would thus be 'from her parents' house to her marital home'—and this is the practice in a lot of cases. Kemi's relationship with her parents, nevertheless, is a happy one. Kemi and Mrs. Williams appear together only a few times in the film. However, the most significant scene that changes the course of events in the film is when Kemi candidly talks to her mother about her insecurities. It is her wedding morning and Kemi has been, quite unhappily, preparing for the occasion. She is not the typical happy bride; she is downcast and not her usual cheerful self. Her conversation with her mother is her cry for help. It is indeed her last chance to escape from the disaster that her marriage to Umar promises to be.

The scene begins with a medium close-up of Kemi getting dressed and made-up for her wedding. Her best friend, Stella, casually remarks on how she cannot believe Kemi is getting married. Kemi does not respond; rather, she excuses her makeup artist and asks Stella for some water in order to have the room to herself and her mother. Her silence hinges on her fears and uncertainty about her immediate future. She tries to find assurance that she is on the right path and so, left alone with her mother, she takes a deep breath (a sign that she is burdened with worries) and asks her mother how she felt when she was getting married, to which Mrs. Williams responds that she got married in the village and "there was no time to think or talk". Kemi knows she should be, if not ecstatic, at least happy on the day she has worked hard towards for so long; rather, she is unusually calm and her eyes are sad. And so, unsatisfied with the answer, she presses further, "Yes...but how did you feel?" Her mother tells her, "I was scared, but I was happy. I knew that whatever came, that I would be happy to spend the rest of my life with your father...." In this intense moment of truth, Kemi pours her heart out to her mother. She tells her mother she doesn't feel that way. In her precise words, "I don't feel anything. It's like I'm still

waiting for something to happen”. She is not convinced that, like her mother, she will be ready to spend the rest of her life with Umar. Her mother’s attempt to encourage her falls on deaf ears. Eventually, an emotional Mrs. Williams embraces her daughter and says, “You’re my one and only daughter and I want you to be happy. Follow your heart, wherever that may lead”.

The scene is very emotional in its depiction of a ‘mother-daughter’ moment of truth. It depicts the pivotal role a mother plays in a child’s life and the trust that exists between them. Kemi trusts her mother enough to say those words, even though they are hard words to say. The reassurance of her mother gives Kemi the boldness to confront Umar, as well as make up her mind to cancel the impending wedding. She gets the support of both her father and her mother to choose happiness over whatever money they had spent in preparation for the wedding. Even though her parents might have been a bit disappointed, they are neither sad nor assertive. They are not disturbed about the embarrassment of a cancelled wedding or the cost incurred. Bello portrays their support for their daughter’s right to happiness and freedom; not bound by the society’s expectations. Further, this exemplifies Acholonu’s description of a Motherist as a “man or a woman with a sense of history and continuity ever poised to question the status quo (1995:113). While they love and respect the marriage institution which gives a sense of history, and they want their daughter to continue in it by getting married, what they question in this context is a failing relationship and an imminent calamitous marriage. Further, a Motherist is “ever ready to make personal sacrifices for the good of others like most mothers would, for no matter his/her age or sex the Motherist is essentially a mother” (1995:113). Marriage is taken very seriously and a cancelled wedding is nothing short of a family embarrassment. Kemi’s parents sacrifice their own desires for their daughter’s ultimate happiness. Mrs. Williams’ reaction may not be typical of most mothers’ response to their child calling off their wedding on the wedding morning, but it represents what Acholonu espouses with Motherism. (The abrasive sarcasm of Kat’s mother in *The Wedding Date* [2005, directed by Clare Kilner], after her daughter’s wedding failed to materialise, is just one example from the romantic comedy genre of a mother who fails Acholonu’s test of a motherist).

Tunde’s Development

Acholonu makes it clear in her presentation of the theory that being a Motherist is not determined by gender, but humane attributes. The ‘mother’ in Motherism symbolises love,

nurture and the sense of responsibility that comes with motherhood. Going by that, we see how Kemi's father takes nurturing very seriously and how Tunde's character also significantly develops through the course of the film: from the 'bad boy' persona he espoused at the beginning of the film, to being the man who is in love and goes through its processes, including being vulnerable; from a man who is used to having his way with women, to a man who had to literally fight over a woman; from a man who didn't give a thought to settling down to marriage, to a man who nervously, but happily gets on his knees to propose to the woman he loves. Tunde becomes a man who invests his time and emotions in a woman, a man who makes personal sacrifices for the sake of love.

Kemi on her part, despite her portrayal as a girl who is foolishly in love with love, possesses inner strength and determination to stand against what does not feel right and what she no longer believes. Her growth is similar to Tunde's. They both start off as quite unstable characters, but they end up strong. The question that needs pondering, however, is whether Kemi would still have held on to her resolve if she did not have the option to go back to Tunde. The answer, I would say, is yes, based on the fact that she eventually sees Umar for the self-centred, manipulative and uncommitted partner he is. He didn't really love her, he just used her. If nothing else, Kemi evidently believed in and stood for love and Umar confessed to not loving her.

Family Bond

Michelle Bello is able to construct, within her story, a family that embodies love, peace and togetherness and shows the importance of the familial bond. Mrs. Williams is nurturing, and so is her husband. Feminism in *Flower Girl* is not radical, it is subtle, but it is present and illustrates both African and Motherist values in its embrace of family. For Acholonu, the "task of the Motherist is that of healing and protecting the natural cohesive essence of the family, the child, the society and the environment" (1995:111). The mother-daughter, husband-wife and father-daughter relationship dynamics in the film clearly encapsulate the strong family bond in the Williams household. Kemi is brought up by parents who dote on her and there is evidently a high degree of closeness and unity amongst them. They support her through her highs and lows, through the moments she behaved foolishly out of her love for Umar and during their break up. Her father, Mr. Williams, also embodies love, he pays attention to details. It is clear that he never misses a thing, especially things that concern his family, such as him noticing his daughter's new

hairdo at the dinner table. “I am not quite sure about this new hairdo” he teases, after Kemi has added hair-extensions which make her look more glamorous.

Her parents are loving and nurturing, not just to their daughter, but to other people they come across such as their daughter’s friends. They are warm, welcoming and open their home. For instance, after they have just returned from a trip to the Northern part of Nigeria, they are quick to invite Tunde, whom they have just met, for dinner. On that occasion, Tunde is dropping Kemi off, when Mr. and Mrs. Williams meet him for the first time, only for a few minutes, before opening their home to him. Kemi’s actions before her parents meet Tunde humorously show that Kemi knows just how innocently intrusive her parents are. Whilst still in the car, she sights her mother in the dark and quickly ducks, and tries to talk Tunde into doing the same to avoid her parents seeing them. She is, however, too late as Mrs. Williams, accompanied by her husband, pops her head through the window. True to her fears, Mrs. Williams insists that Tunde join them, even after he declines. She is determined, though, and her husband, without thinking twice, urges Tunde on with words like, “My wife makes an excellent meal” and “Nobody says no to my wife”. Tunde is left with no choice but to join the Williams’ for an impromptu dinner where they learn more about him. No part of the film shows any discord or dispute between Kemi’s parents, therefore we are not sure how conflicts are resolved by them; what we see is a family that is harmonious.

Romantic Love: Kemi’s Growth

Love, at the onset of the film, seems unfair to Kemi who gives it all she has. The story places Kemi in a position of vulnerability and this recalls Thomas and Cole’s claim that scholars and feminists critique romantic love for assuming and propagating “gender inequality” (2009: 25). Kemi fights to be loved back, until she meets and falls in love with Tunde. Her experiences match Thomas and Cole’s claim, as they further cite Simone de Beauvoir’s faulting of romantic love for “cloaking and deepening women’s oppression” (2009: 25). Other radical feminists built upon this and argue that love is “an ideological smoke screen for gender inequality” (2009:25). From a psychoanalytic perspective, as Thomas and Cole point out, romantic love permits “the abnegation of women and their achievements by encouraging women to sacrifice their own interests to those of men” (2009:25). Further, Kemi’s acts of desperation recall Adichie’s assertions in *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist’s Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) where she critiques the society for expecting too much from women in marriage and relationships, and

urges women to rid themselves of such burdens.

In the end, though, Kemi owns her voice. In the confession scene that leads to the break-off of Kemi and Umar's marriage, Kemi approaches Umar in her wedding dress after her talk with her mother. Umar, who is clad in a black suit preparing for the event, smiles as he sees her but he is a bit surprised; at this point he is unaware of what lies ahead. Kemi doesn't smile. Her lack of cheer prompts him to ask, "Are you alright Kemi?" She does not hesitate to let him know they need to talk as she looks into his eyes grimly and says, "I don't want to get married". His response, "I know" comes as an utter shock to Kemi and she demands an explanation. With lack of empathy for her feelings, he tells Kemi she has lost her "sparkle just getting over lover boy" (referring to Tunde). She is even more surprised when he says, "I'm still willing to marry you" to which she retorts "Wow, you make it sound like I'm a burden". Umar makes a weak attempt to persuade her but she says, "Umar, I'm not going to marry you if we don't love each other," stressing her faith in love. However, Umar's response nullifies any hope she may have had about his love for her. He is more interested in his ego and whatever would build him up professionally. He brags about no longer being a paralegal, but now an associate, how he's "making real money" and will take care of her and her family. He concludes with the most demeaning words a man could say to a woman who had done all in her power to make him love her, "It's not even as if we don't like each other". He then says "So, get dressed, some very important people are relying on us to get married". Umar doesn't love Kemi and he doesn't try to hide it. Marriage, for him, is a business deal. He agrees to marry Kemi so as to gain favours at work. Through a flashback, Umar unashamedly tells Kemi how Sapphire had talked his boss into getting Kemi out of the picture so that Tunde would be free to travel. Apparently, investors from Umar's firm had invested in the film Tunde had been invited to star in. Umar is willing to 'remove Kemi from the equation' by marrying her, to win favours from his boss. At the end of his revelation (the flashback), Kemi is utterly shocked but not devastated and once again, she doesn't go without leaving him with something to remember. While Umar is basking in the euphoria of his 'achievement', Kemi sarcastically laughs with him for a moment, and in the next moment she kicks him in the groin, a more violent counterpart to throwing a bucket of water over him earlier in the film. Kemi's capacity for physical comedy is notable. She yells, "you're disgusting", before she storms out of the room and out of his life. She had sensed there was something wrong, but did not know to what extent. Not only is she treated badly, he

unapologetically brags about it to her face. She is right to feel used by him and to call off the wedding. She had walked into his room with doubts but leaves completely sure that calling off the wedding was the right thing to do. Kemi's strength is made obvious in her resolve.

Her character is that of a woman in a relationship where love is unreciprocated. This makes her initially vulnerable, but she proves to be a fighter. She fights for what she believes in, and who she believes in. She fights for love. Her struggles are for the ideology and the institutions she holds on to so dearly. An example of this is when she is speaking to Tunde after the accident and she says, "All I wanted to do was to get married. I love him and he loves me, so what is the problem". She believes in the genuineness and power of love. She sees love in her parents' example and aspires to that. In the end, Kemi is a woman who discovers herself and her sense of self-worth, one who won't settle for less than she deserves. We see how her character develops from someone hopelessly in love who would do anything to hold on to love, including pretending and scheming, to a woman who, even though in love, is trusting and willing to wait for her partner. She comes to the realisation that she couldn't compel Umar to love her— love comes with will and desire. Having fought with, cried and schemed over Umar, she finds out that he still doesn't want to marry her for love, but for material gain.

To conclude, women, in spite of patriarchy, find themselves in positions where they have to look within and draw strength to confront their problems. In *Flower Girl*, sometimes they do not do this alone; as Acholonu suggests, it involves the complementarity of both sexes. This works for Mr. and Mrs. Williams, and also for Kemi and Tunde. We see how Kemi failed trying to build a relationship all on her own with Umar. However, her relationship with Tunde succeeds because they are both involved, in love and resolved to make it work.

CHAPTER FIVE

***Dry*, dir. Stephanie Linus (2014)**

Introduction

Script writer, director, actress and producer, Stephanie Linus is not new to the Nigerian film industry. She is a Nollywood veteran who started as an actress back in 1997 when Nollywood was just finding its feet. Noah Tsika (2015), whose book *Nollywood Stars* is a comprehensive examination of Nollywood stardom, accurately describes her, alongside Genevieve Nnaji and Ebbe Bassey, as a Nollywood icon. She is indeed an icon of the film industry having appeared in over six dozen films and found her own voice as a filmmaker. She had her directorial debut with the film, *Through the Glass*, in 2008 after graduating from the New York Film Academy. It was a worthy baptism for her into the world of filmmaking. Filmed in the United States, *Through the Glass* tells the story of a man who finds himself stuck and helpless with a baby. He seeks the help of his Nigerian neighbour, Ada (Stephanie Linus), and they fall in love in the process. The film was written, produced and directed by Stephanie Linus, a rare feat for women in the Nigerian film industry at the time. Part of its success story is its nomination for Best Screenplay at the 5th Africa Film Academy Awards in 2009.

Linus was an actress for about ten years before venturing into the male-dominated world of film directing and has used the platform to decisively speak through her work. Successful in its own right, *Through the Glass* also tested the waters for Linus in her multiple roles as a director, producer, writer and protagonist of her films. Linus' Western education and exposure are reflective in her films not only in terms of casting and locations, but also in terms of values and ideals. *Dry* may be seen in transnational terms as a result of its locations as well as its cast and crew. It was filmed in both Nigeria and Wales and promotes positive Western practices, such as good healthcare system and philanthropy. Linus incorporates cast and crew members within Nigeria and internationally. Some of the international cast and crew members include: British actor Darwin Shaw who plays Alex; Zara's adopted mother; the editor, Jane Lawalata; the set director, Rhiannon Causey; and the art director, Mytte Godwyn. Linus is not alone in the tradition which Tsika refers to as "global participation" of actors (2015). Several other Nigerian filmmakers have found collaborations outside Nollywood useful in realising their films. Examples include Chineze Anyaene's *Ije* (2012), Tony Abulu's *Dr Bello* (2012), Peter Robert's

30 days in Atlanta (2014), and Kunle Afolayan's *CEO* (2016). *Dry* is not especially interested in star casting, especially with regard to the newer faces of Nollywood; however, the presence and artistic relevance of veteran actors like Olu Jacobs and Liz Benson contribute authority to the seriousness of the film's concerns. Liz Benson, whose role in the 1993 Soap Opera, *Fortunes*, shot her into the limelight, plays the role of the local clinic Matron, while Olu Jacobs, who had started acting as far back as the 1970s, plays the role of the Speaker of the House. *Dry* was released in 2014 and it continues to remain relevant and garner attention across the world. Linus recently screened and discussed the film at the 2017 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Its warm reception over the years is due not only to the power of the storyline, but also its skilled acting, thought-provoking dialogue, effective cinematography and sound and the powerful evocation of place through location shooting and mise-en-scène. Reviews praise the director for "... unforgettable characters, stapled with a storyline that, at once, amazes and truncates you" (Onyeka Nwelue, 2015), while Pulse TV notes that "the interpretation of the screenplay is forceful and persuasive, it's guaranteed to awaken the viewer to the plight of women around them" (2016). Because the film is both aesthetically and socio-politically complex, I shall be devoting more space below to close analyses of key scenes.

Stephanie Linus conveys reality as closely as possible, partly through sustaining the physical and cultural accuracy of the settings through location shooting in Wales and especially Northern Nigeria, where we see dwellings made with mud and thatched roofs in traditional family compounds, animals carelessly roaming the streets, untarred roads, trees heavy with green leaves and mats spread on the bare ground. The costume and makeup support the scenic realism of people living in Northern Nigeria, known as the Hausas, who are predominantly Muslims. The women are mostly modestly dressed in simple tailored African wax prints referred to as *Ankara* fabrics, their heads are covered with scarves and they sometimes put on full-length Hijabs. The men are mostly clad in long flowing Kaftans, trousers and caps. These are common modes of dress by Hausas. This attention to the details of mise-en-scène contributes to the qualities of realism in the film and will anchor the development of melodrama as the conflict between good and evil, victim and victimiser and the build-up of almost unbearable suspense develops.

Dry challenges long-held traditional practices that have shackled its victims— who are mostly young girls. Child marriage, availability of, and access to, proper health care facilities are some of the areas tackled in the film. Linus follows the path of foremost West African

filmmaker, Sembène Ousmane, who is popularly referred to as the father of African Cinema and whom many call a feminist, in questioning harmful and unacceptable traditional practices. As Amadou Fofana rightly observes, “Sembène believed African women were often silenced and they lacked public venues in which to voice their views...his cinema, therefore, served as a forum for debating women’s issues” and at the same time “a voice for the poor and marginalized” (Fofana, 2012:165). For instance, Sembène tackles female circumcision in *Moolaadé* (2005). In the film, young girls are subjected to the harmful practice of genital mutilation and it takes the militancy of women, led by Collé, to seek for its termination. Collé, against all odds, refuses to let her daughter be circumcised. As a result, other girls run to her for safety and her compound, as long as they are inside, becomes an abode for protection for them, because Moolaadé (protection) has been invoked. Deepa Mehta in *Water* (2005) follows a similar pattern as she touches on the issue of child marriage while confronting the disturbing injustices, repression and subjugation of Hindu widows in India. Set in 1938, it tells the story of Chuyia, an eight-year-old girl who had been betrothed but suddenly becomes widowed and cast out to live with other widows. Abandoned by her parents, she soon rises above her present predicament as she stirs up the spirits of other widows.

Similarly, in *Dry*, some local practices like child marriage, unprofessional home delivery and fistula continuously have adverse effects on the health and lives of young girls, until Zara (Stephanie Linus) becomes a voice for the affected. As in *Moolaadé*, it takes one person—a woman—to initiate a stance against harmful practices for which innocent young girls are the victims. Linus’s commitment to bringing awareness to these harmful practices transcends the use of film as a tool; she is also actively involved in humanitarian works off-screen. Just recently, she was appointed as a United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) regional ambassador for West and Central Africa. *Dry* is largely about creating awareness of the conditions of women, specifically their reproductive health.

Women are increasingly bringing more to the table with socially committed films like Stephanie Linus’s *Dry*, so rich in historical, social and cultural relevance. As Agatha Utaka correctly observes, women employ “art as an agency for re-shaping women within the society, towards women becoming more independently defined and self-actualized” (2010:100). This is not to imply that all female filmmakers do this or even attempt to. However, some do. Stephanie Linus identifies with the number of women who are using films to re-shape the lives of women

within the society. Similarly, Utaka asserts that in the film *I Was Wrong* (2004), Helen Ukpabio effectively employs “art to address the socio-religious, political and economic concerns in the society. She uses her film to examine the society’s weaknesses while seeking to interrogate why things are the way they are in terms of the derogatory roles associated with women and which also informs how women are represented in films” (Utaka 2010; 100-101). This is similar to Stephanie Linus’s approach. She portrays the reality of the lives of girls in a specific geographical area, not minding how delicate the subject is, to ignite the consciousness of its viewers.

The Plot of *Dry*

Dry tells the story of a mother and her daughter’s journey for survival. Shot in present-day Wales and Nigeria, *Dry* explores the extreme variation in the lives of Zara—a once helpless orphan who, through the help of her adopted mother, transforms into an accomplished medical doctor— and her daughter, Halima, who still lives in a rural village in Nigeria. The locations of the films (Wales and Nigeria) provide an unconventional, transnational dimension to view events and character development. Zara develops from a girl whose life was once riddled with pain, betrayal, shame and uncertainty, to a woman who audaciously speaks, works and stands up for other women and young girls. These developments are the result of her modern (and Western) education, a supportive family (her adopted mother) and an enabling environment, none of which she was privileged to have growing up in Nigeria. The real action starts when she decides to return to Nigeria, a decision spurred by the possibility that the daughter, Halima, to whom she gave birth as a teenager, and whom she assumed dead, might still be alive. Her daughter, it emerges, was sold to Hadiza (Halima’s supposed mother), who was desperate, but unable to bear children. In her desperation, she connived with Madam Kojo who stole Zara’s baby at birth and sold her to Hadiza. The circumstances that surround Zara’s pregnancy and childbirth are so horrible that she tries to suppress them until circumstances force her to confront them.

Halima is Zara’s thirteen-year-old daughter who lives in a remote area in Northern Nigeria. She is robbed of her childhood when she is married off to a man old enough to be her father, against her will. This singular act changes the course of her life and ultimately leads to her death. On returning to Nigeria, Zara desperately searches for Halima, but in spite of her efforts, she meets her daughter for the first time only on her death-bed. Though shattered by the

death of her daughter, Zara champions the cause of other children who are in, or will potentially be in, the same circumstances as her daughter if nothing is done.

In terms of characterisation, Stephanie Linus employs a wide range of female characters who play diverse roles in the film, such as the strong-willed; the passive object of domination; the brave; the career woman; the housewife. These different characters help to create the reality her film intends to portray. Linus is very deliberate in her feminist quest to redefine the image of women by speaking for voiceless female victims of patriarchy and tradition. She also consciously uses entertainment to sensitize people about the reality of the plight of marginalised people, here notably young, uneducated women. In an interview with Glendora Meikle (2015), she says, “Nollywood [Nigeria's Hollywood] is the third largest filmmaking industry in the world. So, when people come for entertainment, I'm actually passing this message to them. That's the way I could contribute” (n.p). Indeed, she creates awareness about important aspects of the society that are often ignored, and she does this while entertaining viewers.

Motherism and the Representation of Women in *Dry*

Like other African feminists, Catherine Acholonu's position, as indicated above, is that African women must solve their problems in their own way. However, identity formation is a product of many factors, including education and exposures. We see the impact of Zara's western exposures in the formation of her identity and her approach to surmounting challenges. Filomena Steady also speaks forcefully about approaching women as humans, “rather than sexual beings” (cited in Yesibo, 2015:609). Acholonu is right in her argument, articulated over twenty years ago, that “the presence of men, their roles, their gender, often receive greater projection in the society's eye” (1995: 16). This continues to be the current reality in many African societies where, by being male, they have greater privileges than women and this imbalance is especially evident in *Dry*, where we see injustices imposed on women because of their sex, the expectations forced on them and the negligence accorded them. African feminists pay attention to the role of women in the society in terms of their strength and how they wield their power for the growth and development of their homes and the larger society. Zara is an embodiment of strength, in spite of her weaknesses such as some episodes of self-doubt; she is a woman determined to change the lives of a generation of women in the midst of patriarchy. Some of the characters such as Zara, her adopted mother and Fatima project strong Motherist attributes. Like Adichie (2014), who

really is not a theorist, but a very expressive feminist, Zara attempts to eliminate social injustices against women at their roots. She takes practical approaches and mobilises people around her, she is very assertive about and condemns men when she has to. While she seeks the cooperation of men where necessary, she does not totally rely on their cooperation to emancipate women.

Mary Lewu points out that “the moment a girl-child is born in Nigeria, she starts to encounter discrimination. People who come to felicitate often greet the birth of a girl-child with less glee than that of a boy” (2015:564). She describes how culture, colonial legacy, religion, education (when boys’ education is prioritised), political discrimination, employment, and legal practices are all areas where women are obstructed (2015: 564-569). Cultural, socio-economic and class factors impede the advancement of women and make them reliant on men. To lessen this, women are obliged to equip themselves to be self-reliant so as to be recognised and appreciated in a society that privileges men. The privileging of men over women is clearly highlighted in various ways in *Dry*, as the females are subjected to a wide range of hazards and unrealistic expectations. When Zara returns from Wales to Nigeria, it takes her expertise, experience gained from Wales, as well as her Motherist inclinations to do all she does to assuage the declining state of women in her country home.

The Role of Zara: From Voicelessness to Heroism

As the protagonist, viewers are quickly introduced to Zara’s struggles in the prologue of the film in which she is running, in slow motion, through a maze of burning huts wherein her parents are killed. The tragic images are accompanied by a non-diegetic dirge, that reinforces the images of calamity and agony. Everything about the scene spells doom; the setting is a small village covered in darkness. With the exception of the flames from the burning huts, there is no other source of light in the commotion that everyone, mostly children, scuffle to run away from. The darkness effectively introduces us to Zara’s dark past that we will come to know. At this point, however, Zara is an orphan with an uncertain future.

We don’t know exactly how the commotion of the prologue ends; however, the next time we see Zara, she is grown-up and accomplished. She has become a full-grown woman with hybridised cross-cultural experiences which shape her negotiations through the unfolding of the narrative. She is re-introduced in a way that emphasises her current status and the radical differences between past and present. At the beginning of the scene, an aerial shot provides a view of the peaceful historic town of Aberystwyth (where Zara now lives), a sharp contrast with

the chaos of the previous scene. The film, thus, takes us from where and how Zara used to live, to what her life is currently like. The voice of a male speaker concurrently lauds the town and the University where an award ceremony is taking place. In this scene, Zara is introduced as a doctor and philanthropist as she receives a humanitarian award. She receives accolades from the speaker who talks about her past humanitarian works which include working “tirelessly to raise funds for cancer research and treatment”, as well as providing “support for teenage pregnancies”. Very clearly, we see how Zara has developed from a helpless orphaned teenager, to a benevolent adult who spends her time helping others.

Another interesting aspect of this scene is its presentation of her personal relationships—especially with her boyfriend. During the ceremony, a very supportive Dr Alex (her boyfriend and colleague), sits next to her with vivid admiration, indicating his support for and pride in her (fig. below). This is evident in the way they look into each other’s eyes a couple of times during the brief moment the speaker talks about Zara’s accomplishments. At one point, Zara looks away, but Alex’s look lingers a little longer as he smiles proudly. We also get a sense of the dynamics of their relationship from that scene, manifested in the frame below. For the most part in their relationship, as depicted in the frame, Alex focuses on her, while Zara has her mind on other things. They are in love and show each other support; however, Zara doesn’t let their relationship get in the way of her personal commitments and personal struggles. For instance, she literally puts their relationship on hold, amidst their relationship glitches, when she eventually makes up her mind to return to Nigeria in search of her daughter. Even her trips to the therapist are kept secret. She is very reluctant to disclose to Alex her personal struggles and her decision to see a therapist.



Alex, Zara's boyfriend, looking proudly at her during an award ceremony.

Their relationship is almost jeopardised when Alex coincidentally spots Zara leaving an appointment with her therapist and he assumes she's having an affair with him. At the end of the day, however, he comes to terms with her decisions when he understands the full situation, which Zara never told him about except through a letter when she was leaving Wales. Thereafter, he goes as far as showing up unexpectedly in Nigeria to support her. Alex is the one male figure projected in a positive light in the film and this can be read in terms of the value of his humanity, as Steady and Acholonu describe, reaching more deeply than the colour of the skin. When he goes to Nigeria, he does not go empty-handed, but with much-needed medical supplies and he stands by Zara through her activism. He is portrayed as a selfless and committed man, not only to Zara but also to what she stands for. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), we see a similar representation of a white male British, Richard Churchill, who is treated more sympathetically than the black men in the film.

Zara's relationship with Alex, however, is not central to the film's narrative. Linus systematically reveals various aspects of Zara's life through the progression of the scenes— from her philanthropic side, to her love life and then her professional life. Her passion for her job and care for her patients are also established. These features are not only hinted at during the award ceremony; the entire film largely revolves around her zeal to make a difference in peoples' lives—especially women. It is not a coincidence that she is a doctor who specialises in gynaecology / obstetrics, which deals with issues relating to women's reproductive health. The

first time she is shown engaging with a patient at the hospital is when she walks into the hospital building and is met by one of her patients who welcomes her with a complaint about wanting to go home to her family to celebrate Mother's Day. Zara gently explains the need to run some more tests on her and if she is alright, she'll be free to go home. The patient who had been upset, relaxes after those words. It is indeed not just the words that relax her (a nurse had attempted to persuade her), as we are made to see, but the calm assurance with which she speaks that reassures the patient. It is this passion and commitment that she takes back to Nigeria to save the lives of people who are otherwise left for dead. Not only does her profession represent heroism (a doctor who saves lives), her personality reflects it.

Zara is portrayed as a heroic woman with vulnerabilities. Her otherwise well-managed life is impaired by her personal struggles. However, despite these battles, she is bound by duty and committed to saving lives. She is still emotionally tied to her roots, and reluctant to confront her past. In a key scene during a session with her therapist, her inner battles begin to reveal themselves. We learn, for the first time, that Zara was saved from her predicament as a helpless orphan by her adopted mother, while the latter was in Nigeria on a medical mission. Zara did not return to Nigeria because of the troubled memories she has. Even as an adult, she adamantly refuses to consider going back despite the opportunity presenting itself to her at work. In one scene, while trying to get Zara to confront her past, her therapist asks her if she would go to Nigeria with her mother on her next medical mission and she responds, "I've told you before, my life is here". The therapist again asks, "When do we break this wall?" She is beclouded by the memories of her past, of being betrayed, oppressed and taken advantage of. She often has flashbacks to her life as a teenager—the fire, being raped, being prostituted and her childbirth experience. (Linus uses flashbacks as an important narrative tool to convey important information about Zara's past. On several occasions, she employs flashbacks and music as key elements of melodrama to drive home the point). I will explore the use of flashbacks in more detail later in the chapter. Zara, however, declines when the people that surround her, for different reasons, urge her go to Nigeria. Her colleagues try to convince her to represent the hospital in partnership with a pharmaceutical company, since she is from Africa. Her immediate response is, "Just because I'm from there doesn't mean I know about it more than anyone else". She speaks to Alex about it and he also thinks it's a great idea and offers his support to go with her. Unaware of her story, he doesn't see any reason why she should decline such an

opportunity. However, in a twist of events, resulting from her mother's health challenge, coupled with the realisation that the daughter she assumed dead at birth is possibly alive, Zara finally embarks on the much-dreaded journey.

Before she embarks on her trip however, certain events occur which help to shape our understanding of her past in connection to the present. We see how her experiences as a pregnant teenager in a remote village in Nigeria are radically different from the experience of one of her teenage patients in Wales who is unaware of her privileges. This brings back for Zara memories of her own experience of giving birth. The meeting ruffles her more than usual as she narrates it to the therapist on her next visit. She tells him about her encounter with the white pregnant teenager, who, after being told that natural birth poses risks to her health because of her narrow pelvis, insists on going ahead. The encounter highlights fundamental differences between rural life and modernity; the power of choice and being helpless. The teenager, though young, has the advantage of choice, whereas Zara did not when she was in a similar situation. She didn't have a chance to choose how she wanted her delivery, neither was her health considered. She was poor, helpless and alone and the hospital was dingy and ill-equipped. Her experience with the teenager also boosts her drive to make local hospitals operational and properly equipped in her town in Nigeria. The comparison serves as a political message for Nigerian leaders and decision makers to ponder on the need to improve basic social amenities such as providing well-equipped hospitals in the rural areas.

Narrating her experience many years later, the memories are still fresh and the emotional and psychological pain endure. In that same scene, Zara reveals that she can't let go of the pain and shame that come with rape, improper child-bearing procedures, losing her baby and the disease, fistula. Here is part of the dialogue between her and her therapist:

Zara: I couldn't believe those two, acting as if I suggested the worst option to them.

Therapist: We advise and the patient decides.

Zara: Yeah, they're very lucky to even have a choice, some people don't. I didn't have a choice... It was very painful.

Those words are followed by a quick flashback to her delivery, which shows teenage Zara, sweating and screaming in anguish on the delivery bed. The pain she went through demonstrates that given a choice, she would have gladly taken it.

Through the course of the film, Zara's character develops from a timid girl who was once at the mercy of other people, to a woman who is empowered and consciously uses her voice to liberate other women. When her daughter dies as a result of negligence and lack of proper medical care, it is both tragic and also the start of a new chapter. It is the most heart-rending scene of the film, because Halima dies when she is about to get a chance to live a good life. Halima's death awakens in Zara a firmer resolve to do all in her power to end the cycle. Also noteworthy is the inherent humaneness Zara exhibits which is not bound by location, established at the onset of the film. Her involvement in charity work in Wales is a preparation for what she will eventually do in Nigeria. Her personal experiences and the influence of her mother, whose life is committed to her mission, shape her into the woman she becomes. Her arrival in Nigeria marks the beginning of unforeseen events which propel her into full-blown activism. Zara's role as a mother is not fully explored with her biological child, Halima, because of the latter's death, but she, nevertheless, nurtures the people around her—from her patients in Wales, to the sick and helpless women in Nigeria.

Acholonu points out that “the African Motherist must embrace the whole gamut of the human struggle” (1995:111). Zara makes this her personal cause and takes drastic steps to solving the endemic problems. She puts aside her personal pain and makes herself responsible for the destiny of thousands of other girls who could end up like her daughter. Therefore, as much as she is consumed by the death of her daughter, she is undeterred in her resolve to speak for the voiceless. She goes as far as addressing the National Assembly, even when her uncle who raped her as a teenage girl is one of the lawmakers. She states her case clearly and boldly before the House, using her personal experience as a reference point. At the end of her emotional speech, she exposes her uncle publicly, asking that the law should take its course against him for raping her as an innocent girl many years ago. In this way, Acholonu's Motherist approach applies. Zara uses the law and non-violent confrontation to get justice. Given the way the society works where men, especially those in power, have more privileges, she knows quite well that she can't make headway on her own and so she does the reasonable thing to do, she turns to justice to take its course.

As a female and feminist filmmaker, Linus represents women in the way she wants women to be seen: their struggles, achievements and especially the heights they are capable of attaining. Zara is an example of a girl from a lowly background who was given the right

opportunity and she uses it appropriately. Her character is complex but realistic: she combines both strengths and weaknesses, a painful past and an assured future, both fears and determination. Her demeanour a lot of times is that of someone who is in charge and has everything figured out, but within her there are demons that even her boyfriend knows nothing about and these contribute to her inability to fully commit herself and time to her boyfriend. She battles with emotions like self-doubt, bringing about the need for validation, and so runs to her mother. For instance, she flees an imminent proposal when she finds the ring where Alex hides it, while he prepares a meal for an intimate candle-lit dinner. She tells her mother she doesn't feel that she is good enough. Her mother, who personifies liberation and solace for her, reassures her with the words, "I've always told you, don't judge yourself so harshly. You're beautiful, successful, you're one of the best doctors in town. Why on earth would you think you're not good enough?"

A crucial aspect in the representation of women is the way Linus, who plays the protagonist of the film, boldly embraces her dark skin colour and natural beauty. Often, female protagonists in Nollywood films are stereotyped as light-skinned women who wear long, flowing hair such as Zion and Tamar in *Keeping my Man*. Linus challenges the pervasive representation of women who appear the way beauty is defined by the media. Her unaffected dress and makeup aid in understanding her character better. She is beautiful in a way that is not distracting but suits her persona in the film. Her tasteful manner of dressing in Wales does not significantly change even when she arrives Nigeria, although her choices indicate how she has embraced her African identity (although her hair is straightened) and creatively engaged with her traumatic history. In an early scene in Wales, she wears a plain black dress with a touch of peach. By the final scene of the film, we see her in a colourful, long fitting skirt and blouse with a matching scarf made of African wax print. The colour contrasts in the two scenes—the opening scene and the closing scene—echoes her emotional development in the narrative. One might argue that the colour choices reflect her state of mind. In the first scene, she puts on black, which although it represents power and dominance, may also signify an austere repression. At that point in Zara's life, everything that appears rosy and composed from the outside—thriving career and healthy relationship—is a façade that covers the pain of the wounds from her past. She had worked hard to earn her success, but is quite unable to relish it the way she should. In the final scene however, she had found emotional closure and hope. This happens after so many other eye-opening

experiences on her return to Nigeria. As an example, she returns to find out that there is no significant change from what she left, in the lives of women and young girls. She comes back after over a decade to find ill-equipped and low-staffed hospitals, people with ignorant mind-sets, child marriage and many avoidable deaths. She finds herself in a position to help and so she does. It seems like a return to the place where her heart is. Her colourful costume in the final scene thus represents hope and a bright future for her and the entire community.

Halima: The Representation of a Silenced Girl

Young and promising, Halima is first viewed in the film as she playfully saunters into her father's compound in the company of her friends. At this point she is free and carefree. The scene establishes what being a child growing up in the village is like; no television, no internet, just her playing in front of their tiny mud house, contented with spending time with her friends. This innocent moment is significant for her. It is the moment her father is concurrently negotiating marriage plans with Sani, her soon-to-be husband, in the company of another member of Sani's family referred to as Alhaji. In typical Hausa fashion, they squat on a mat outside the huts and the men query her father's reluctance to pick a wedding date. Sani steals glances at Halima who is oblivious of him as she continues to play games with her friend. As he looks at her, he smiles to himself in satisfaction. Halima's child-like look is emphasised as she innocently plays with her friends. As a thirteen-year-old, she is still a child who is just entering adolescence. She is yet to develop into a woman and her budding physical features serve as a reminder of how underdeveloped a thirteen-year-old still is.

Whilst playing with her friends, she is unaware of the plans her father makes to marry her off in the week that will follow. These are her last few days to enjoy her childhood. This film is very strategic, as it was released while the dust of a major nationwide campaign of protest against a controversial story of child brides had not yet properly settled in Nigeria. The campaign was against a Nigerian senator, Senator Yerima, who divorced his seventeen-year-old wife to marry a thirteen-year-old girl. It drew immense attention, especially on social media, with the hashtag '#child not bride' used to draw awareness to the unacceptability of child marriage. The scene described above testifies to how Halima is treated by her parents and her husband. Firstly, we are made aware of the commodification of Halima. She becomes an object of bargaining and, when the right amount is paid, she can be taken away. Her father complains about the material things he needs to put in place in order to fix a wedding date and Sani promises to take care of

the expenses. With that, the deal is sealed and, like an item of exchange, she is set to be handed over. Secondly, Halima is an object of the male gaze for Sani. Despite the fact that Halima looks like a child and makes no deliberate effort to appear sexual, Sani still regards her as a sexual object, “to be looked at,” in Laura Mulvey’s words rather than being active agent (1975: 809).

Halima’s character is well-performed by actress Zubaidat Ibrahim Fagge, in her acting debut. She plays the character of a young girl approaching adolescence, who inadvertently transitions into womanhood in an unprecedented way. She is very believable as she embraces the attitude of a child who has mostly lost hope and is sad. This is seen from the way tears freely trickle down her face, and the way she hardly ever smiles even when she is given gifts. She changes from the happy girl who carelessly plays around in the compound, to a gloomy girl whose life is crashing before her very eyes.

The most distinctive characteristic of Halima is that, even when she speaks of her feelings, her voice is not heard. She represents underaged girls who are forced into marriage, taking with them their unfulfilled dreams. Her life is controlled by forces beyond her. She is young but not too young to know that she is not ready to get married. She tells her mother this, but her opinion is irrelevant in the circumstances in which she finds herself. She has no authority over either the choice of her life partner or her readiness to get married. Her plea to her mother, who doesn’t see past the immediate material gratification the groom-to-be offers, falls on deaf ears. This is indeed a real problem many families face, especially in Northern Nigeria where poverty, tradition and lack of access to education play a big role in early marriages. Her lack of education and problematic traditional culture make her very vulnerable. Susheela Singh and Renee Samara (1996) confirm that the result of a demographic and health survey reveals that a significant number of girls marry as adolescents in developing countries, stating that a woman who has secondary education is a lot less likely to marry as an adolescent. In Halima’s case, there is not much purpose for her in the eyes of her parents other than to wait to be ‘old’ enough to get married and start procreating.

Similarly, and more specific to Northern Nigeria, Annie Bunting and Sally Engle Merry point out that while young boys are sent to Islamic schools or sent to the streets to beg for alms (the latter is in itself abusive), “adolescent women in Northern Nigeria” are married off young. This amounts to fewer opportunities and greater restrictions as they enter into motherhood. Bunting and Merry further assert that “various groups inside and outside Nigeria have defined

early marriage either as a human rights violation, a health hazard, a response to governmental crisis and economic uncertainty, or a religious duty to prevent promiscuity” (2006: 321-322). Linus uses Halima to represent such girls who are subjected to a life they do not want for themselves, or are fully aware of.

Grace Atim states how deeply entrenched child marriage is in Northern Nigeria. She asserts that a lot of societies, predominantly in Northern Nigeria, still “support the idea that girls should marry at or soon after puberty” (2017:74). As soon as a girl reaches puberty, she may be set up for marriage; in many cases she would have been already betrothed. For many parents, child marriage is used as a “family building strategy, an economic arrangement or a way to protect girls from unwelcome sexual advances” (2017:74). This blinds them from seeing potential, more damaging effects of their actions. Atim cites some alarming reports to support the prevalence of child marriage in Nigeria. For example, Time News (2008) reports that “Northern Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world”; she also cites British Council report which claims that in Northern Nigeria, over half of “Nigerian women in the North are married by the age of 16 and are expected to give birth to a child during the first year of marriage” (cited in Atim, 2017: 75-76). A more recent article by Association for Reproductive and Family Health (2018) confirms that “out of the top 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage across the globe, 17 are African countries, and Nigeria ranks at number 11”. (<http://arfh-ng.org/child-marriage-an-unending-abomination-in-nigeria/>). It is surprising that in modern times girls are still subjected to such conditions. For the practice to be brought to a complete end, it will require more than just the effort of NGOs. Families, communities and the Government also have important roles to play. Of course, powerful and successful films such as *Dry* can make a considerable contribution to change. Halima is an uneducated, inexperienced young girl who is a victim of tradition. On the same night of Sani’s visit to her father, she lies secluded on a bench all alone in the dark. She is physically and mentally removed from the bliss of innocence that her brother and sister enjoy, as they sit by the fire and listen to their father’s dramatic folktales. The setting mirrors what a typical night in the village would be. There is no power supply or the luxury of Television or internet, therefore, such folktales are important aspects of a child’s development, as they serve as both entertainment and education. Halima’s sister and brother calmly listen to their father’s tale of the tortoise, while squatting on a mat outside their huts. Their mother emerges from the hut, looks around and notices Halima’s absence. As the scene

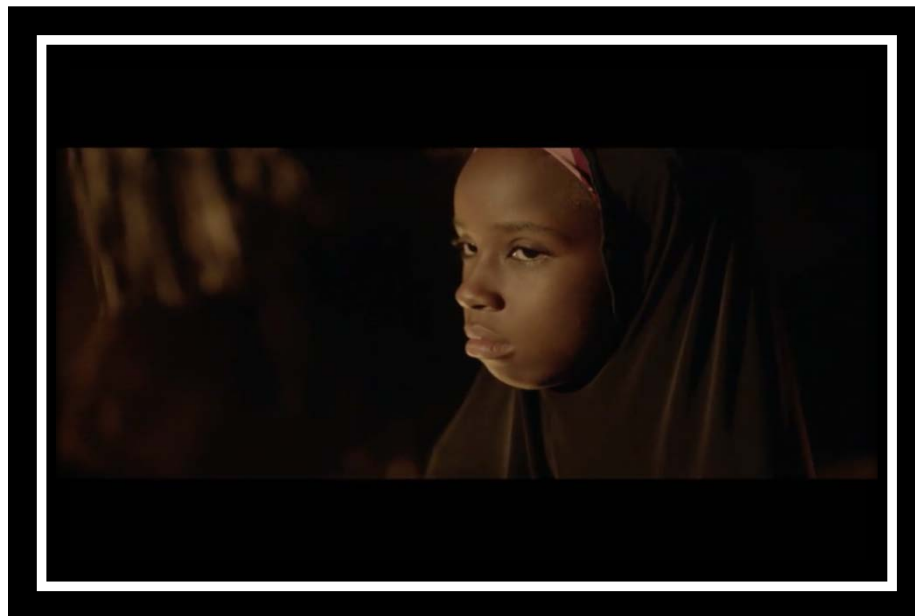
cuts to where Halima is, a melancholy soundtrack is introduced and the setting is darker as there is no camp fire close by to illuminate her surroundings. Her mother finds Halima lying on a bench and asks why she is not with her brother and sister. She responds with teary eyes, “Ma, I don’t want to marry now”.

Apparently, her mother is also helpless in that situation. Based on sexual prejudices emanating from cultural practice, women are generally considered inferior to men, and so, even her mother is curtailed in both her actions and her thoughts. She is also conditioned by tradition and she does not try to challenge her husband. So, she chooses the easy way out and tries to persuade Halima to see the bright side of it: “Halima, you’re too young to understand these things. You are young and this is the right time”, she says. In other words, Halima is not expected to understand the situation she is getting into but has to accept it regardless. The fact that the mother says Halima is too young to understand a decision as important as marriage, demonstrates that her daughter is indeed too young to get married, but the mother fails to appreciate the awful irony of her words. Halima has no understanding of what it means to get married and she is not offered any explanation. However, she understands that she will be taken away from her parents to live with a man she barely knows—and his other wives.

Halima’s mother doesn’t make any effort to understand or empathise with her daughter. We may assume that she was also married off at an early age. She believes her duty is to persuade her daughter and so she says, “...when you are old and worn out, who will marry you? And Sani has been so generous, see all the gifts he showers on us every now and then. It seems he is the right man for you”. Halima keeps a straight face, even as her mother places her hand on her shoulder to reassure her. Again, the question of commodification arises. Halima’s worth is measured by the number of gifts Sani offers. Her mother’s tone suggests that she’s privileged to be offered such gifts. Further, the statement reminds us of the relationship between poverty and the pursuance of material wealth. Halima’s parents are highly enticed by Sani’s wealth, while marrying many wives supposedly proves that Sani is wealthy enough to take care of them all. Halima’s parents never try to hide their pleasure in receiving his money and gifts. In fact, they’re proud that a rich man is sufficiently desirous of their daughter to marry her. All these matters, however, seem inconsequential to Halima at this point. Her next question, “Why me?”, which she asks in childlike innocence, is a burdened plea for answers. More shocking, however, is her mother’s revelation that her younger sister, who has also been betrothed in the past year, will get

married next and is only waiting for Halima to get married because she is the first child. The statement is a reminder that Halima's situation is not a one-time occurrence, but a pattern.

"Mother, please!" Halima begs. Her hopes to win her mother's empathy fails. Her mother's attempt to get her excited doesn't work either, even as she says, "...see my Halima, getting married to a very rich man. Your friends and their mothers will be so jealous of you". Halima does not smile. She remains sad and there is fear, disappointment and misery in her eyes. The scene is shot at night, and the stark darkness that hovers is symbolic of the darkness that beclouds Halima's mind. It also enhances the sombre mood of the scene. She appears lost and alone, uncertain about what's to come. She also wears a black Hijab which covers her head and most parts of her body, closely blending with the night. The setting and costume suggest a transition to an unknown world for her, complete with sorrow, pain, abandonment and eventual death.



Sad Halima pleading with her mother

A very important event in the film is Halima's wedding to Sani because it serves as a middle point between an end to the innocence of girlhood and the beginning of the travails that womanhood inflicts on her. It marks the beginning of a drastic change from the familiar to the unknown. There is a striking juxtaposition of celebration and sadness in the scene as it begins with a close shot of her face with tears trickling down her cheeks. Her misery is crosscut with images of her family members and friends eating and making merry in celebration of their union. We also see Halima's father who, very satisfied, is counting the money Sani brings as bride

price, ensuring that the full amount is there and giving his blessings to their marriage. However, Halima remains rigid and unresponsive to the festivities around her.

Halima's wedding is a deeply unhappy day for her as the scene opens with her, sombre and crying (this soon becomes a familiar image of her). Her mother walks in from attending to guests. "How is my beautiful daughter doing?" she asks, in high spirits as she walks into the hut, smiling and apparently with a sense of fulfilment, which she tries without success to pass on to her daughter. Hadiza is obsessed with Sani's money and tries to entice her daughter the way she has been enticed. Throughout Halima's questioning, Hadiza never offers any cogent reason for the marriage except Sani's money and how he has been generous to them. She does this again when she says, "My daughter, all your friends are going to be jealous of you because you're marrying a rich husband, and even those who cannot find husbands for their own daughters. Cheer up my dear, cheer up!"

Halima's story ends tragically. Her pregnancy, which leads to her sickness and eventual death is a painful, unexpected outcome of the film. If anything, viewers are eager to see Halima smile at the end of her struggle and pain—especially since she was so close to coming in contact with her real mother. There is a glitter of hope when Zara comes to the village market square (to raise awareness with her mobile hospital team) and we see, in another part of the same village, how Halima is the butt of laughter and abuse, with objects and insults being hurled at her, suffering humiliation in an inhumane way. Zara makes an attempt to go and help her, despite being unaware that she is her daughter, but she is dissuaded by the clinic Matron who insinuates that it is unsafe. The sequence further leaves viewers at the edge of their seats as this critical coincidence of events does not bring mother and daughter together. Zara is close, only few metres away from seeing the daughter she returns to Nigeria to find, but they are both unaware. Linus uses parallel editing very effectively to heighten the existing tension and stir up the emotions of the viewers.

The scene where Halima is publicly disgraced is the final straw for her. It breaks every iota of hope she has left in her. After having a still-birth and struggling with fistula which makes her leak urine uncontrollably, she is at the mercy of an unsupportive family and an ignorant community. No one understands her sickness—her mother-in-law (Hajia) attributes it to various things including adultery, and then witchcraft and the community thinks she is cursed. Hajia's ignorance is heightened by the fact that she is unwilling to listen to anyone, and there is in fact

no one able to challenge her. Her son never does, and her daughters-in-law, save for Fatima, do not question her judgement. Sani once makes a feeble attempt to rise to Halima's defence when his mother accuses Halima of adultery, and in her defence, he points out that he married her a virgin. However, he is easily convinced when she reminds him of the times she stayed out late. His authority in the film is often questionable, because his mother is really in charge. In essence, he is the ceremonial head who would not make firm decisions without his mother's strong backing. This is most evident in the way she gradually lures him into sending Halima away. This example of the destructive mother, whose main desire is to wield power over her son, counterpoints the good mothers in the film and suggests how the ideals of Motherism are not necessarily to be identified with biological mothers.

The day Halima gets thrown out of Sani's house is a dramatic one that shows just how terribly she is treated, as the pouring rain intensifies the drama-filled action. Amidst the sound of rain and Sani's angry voice, is the sound of a flung basket that hits the wet, muddy ground, followed by a metal suitcase and then a folded mat, all belonging to Halima. And so, before Sani forcefully pushes Halima out, viewers are already aware of what is about to happen. Sani says angry, hateful words in Hausa (subtitled in English) to Halima such as: "Go and die there!", "Not in this house, I'm done with you!" He finally succumbs to pressures, mostly from his mother, to get rid of her. In his uncontained outbursts, he pushes her into the rain and she falls to the ground. He instructs her to go back to her parents, so they too can share in the embarrassment. For the first time, he verbalizes his distrust of her, saying "You are the one who knows who you slept with that gave you this terrible disease". For the first time as well, Halima begs to stay with him, calling him her husband—which she rarely does—and pleading her innocence. She lets him know her parents will reject her, and they do. The manner in which Halima is treated by her husband and her own family expresses the lack of value given to a girl-child. She is as good as being left for dead after being humiliated repeatedly. In this scene, the way she is treated is comparable to being treated as less than human and the worst thing is that her own family also rejects her.



Sani sending Halima away

Her situation is a reminder of what Steve Neale describes as one of the most important aspects of melodrama, the “ability to move its spectators and in particular to make them cry” (1986:6). The use of emotion is one of the key elements of melodrama and Linus uses it pervasively through various techniques, including music and flashbacks. Shingler and Mercer point out that “music is used to mark the emotional events, constituting a system of punctuation, heightening the expressive and emotional contrasts of the storyline.” They state further that “In such moments, music makes films much more dramatic” (2004:13). Linus fully understands the strategies of melodrama and uses them to provoke various types of emotions in her audiences throughout the film. When Halima dies after a series of traumatic experiences, the tone is one of gloom and finality which is emphasised by the soundtrack, which is a dirge, as Halima lies dead before her wailing mother. However, Linus turns Halima’s death into a rebirth: a new chapter of hope for many other women who may be waiting in line to die. The film does end on a positive note, leaving with the viewers a sense of hope and victory.

Sani’s Wives: Domesticity and Polygamy in *Dry*

James Fenskke (2015) in “African Polygamy: Past and Present” argues that polygamy is pervasive on the African continent. In Nigeria, some traditions and indeed religions permit a man to have more than one wife, even though its occurrences are gradually fading in modern societies. Also, many young girls still fall victim and are deprived, in most cases, of education,

good health and personal ambitions, especially if they are married off at an early age. Acholonu evidently faults colonisation for a lot of the woe of African women. With regards to polygamy, which is a largely contested patriarchal cultural practice that began before colonisation, she argues that even though men were allowed to marry several wives, each wife was respected in her own right and had substantial power over herself and her children (1995:18). It is very idealistic, nonetheless, to claim that African women were without problems before the Europeans came to Africa to introduce foreign systems and ideas. In spite of this, she recognises that the world is continually changing, therefore the roles of women are changing (1995:19).

Halima's marriage to Sani makes her his fourth wife. At the very onset, her new family looks like a welcoming environment when, after the wedding ceremony, Halima is accompanied to her husband's house by her friends who cheer her on and sing as they make their way. Her expectant mother-in-law warmly receives and presents her with gifts, with prospects of a warm household. The first sign of trouble, however, is when Sani's two younger wives stand aloof with no attempt to hide their displeasure with her presence. Their body language reveals all there is to know, as the frame below testifies.



Sani's younger wives' disposition towards Halima

Sani's first wife, Fatima, is a happy, welcoming and good-natured woman. However, the younger women despise Halima so much that their antagonism almost overshadows Fatima's effort to support and protect her, especially during the course of her sickness. Competition

among wives, Riley Bove and Claudia Vallengia assert, is “heightened whenever women depend more directly on their husband for emotional fulfilment and access to resources” (2008:22). Sani’s younger wives do not welcome the fact that their husband has another wife – a newer wife who will get more attention. The aggression is based on the realisation that they have to compete now, more than ever, for their husband’s attention. Women and girls, like Halima, go into polygamous marriages rarely because they wish to, but mostly as a result of family pressures, tradition, poverty and lack of access to education. Other reasons include religious beliefs associated with the society’s way of helping to reduce promiscuity among women. Saddiqa, Tolhurst, Lalloo and Theobald, whose research focus is the relationship between HIV and polygamy, using Maiduguri, a city in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria as a case study, claim that most of the male and female participants in the focus group discussion agree that women outnumber men in their society. Hence, there are “excess women in society who if not taken care of through marital relationships would be living as commercial sex workers” (2010: 148). This view is attached to religion, and supported by Muslim leaders. Saddiqa et al articulate it thus: “Muslim leaders and most male and female Muslim participants, believed that polygamy as prescribed by Islam provided a solution to the perceived male-female imbalance in the population”. Nevertheless, they are fully aware of the effects associated with the practice of polygamy (ibid). Accordingly, most participants believe that polygamy results in “stiff competition between co-wives over the care of their husband. Most participants thought that men benefited from such competition as the women out-did each other to gain favour from the man” (ibid). Linus does not present polygamy in a positive light. Halima experiences neglect from her husband when she falls sick. Sani is quick to go into the waiting arms of one his other wives when he is no longer able to have sexual intercourse with her. Because he has other options, he is less empathic towards Halima’s plight; consequently, she is left to deal with her sickness on her own.

Acholonu (2005) argues for the gains of polygamy in pre-colonial Nigeria, describing the power it constitutes for each woman. To her, colonisation brought a disruption to this order. The kind of order she describes is similar to what exists in *Moolaadé*, in which the three wives of Cire have a sisterhood that is both harmonious and hierarchical. Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi faults Western feminists for using monogamy as the accepted yardstick for marriage. She argues against the assumption that monogamy should be seen as the status quo, while neglecting “the

feelings and perspectives of those who experience it [polygamy] as the only form of marriage...” (2003:32). In her opinion, “child care” is among the benefits of polygamy, and can be shared among the wives to enhance some level of freedom to work (ibid). Oyewumi’s argument is one which Linus, perhaps drawing on the transnational perspective so evident in her film, plainly negates. She depicts, in part, the difficult predicament of women who are in polygamous marriages. Rivalry, lack of personal development and no agency are some of the results of polygamy as seen in *Dry*. All of Sani’s wives are portrayed from the domestic viewpoint — taking care of the home or being idle. Their lives revolve around Sani and their little huts. It is an unhealthy environment complete with antagonism and strife. In other words, women who could potentially be productive members of the society become women whose principal objective is to get the best of their husband through any means possible.

Polygamy for Sani is a self-gratifying act aimed at satisfying his sexual desires. He does not care much about Halima or her state of health. Hence, he easily discards her without empathy or remorse. Immediately after he banishes Halima, he starts making plans to marry another wife, a decision orchestrated by his mother to the dismay of his other wives. According to him, marrying another wife will cleanse the house and restore his dignity.

Hajia: The Role of the Mother-in-law

Sani’s mother is the family matriarch who firmly positions herself in charge of her family affairs. Three times widowed, she describes her dead husbands as having “fragile hearts”, which, one may speculate, means lacking the ability to cope with her. Upon Halima’s arrival, Hajia, as she is fondly called, exudes warmth and charm towards the newest bride of the family. Hajia initially makes an effort to establish a personal relationship with Halima and speaks to her as a grandmother would her granddaughter. This is exemplified when shortly after her arrival into their home, they sit on the mat outside as she tells Halima about herself. “I was exactly like you when I married my first husband”, she says. “That was before he died”, she goes on, “poor man, he had a fragile heart. But after then, I married my second husband, which is Sani’s father—Sani your husband, Sani’s father loved me. He couldn’t get his hands off me, but after a while, he too died. He too had a fragile heart”. Her effort to warm up to Halima is short-lived, because as soon as the first sign of trouble appears, her attitude changes. As a woman old enough to be Halima’s grandmother, her complete lack of empathy for Halima is, at first, baffling.

Her actions follow the trend of negative portrayals of mothers-in law in Nollywood as Agbese Aje-Ori contends. In her analysis of the portrayal of mothers-in-law in Nollywood films, she argues that the general depiction is that they are “vindictive, manipulative, troublesome, problematic, controlling, jealous, intrusive, talkative, wicked, forceful, and critical” (2016: 2010). (Of course, the trope of the offensive mother-in-law is not limited to Nollywood) Hajia indeed fits almost all of these categories. Losing three husbands in her lifetime does not turn her into a helpless melancholic widow, but one who channels her energy into manipulating and controlling her son’s home. She makes interfering in the affairs of her son’s household her personal business. However, this sort of involvement, which can be considered intrusion, is commonplace in many African families, as Linus simply replicates societal experiences. I refer to Oyeronke Oyewumi’s argument about communalism being an inherent ideal in the African context. She argues that “despite the great impact of Christianity, the institutionalization of a European-derived colonial legal system, and the ongoing practices of modern global institutions, the nuclear family remains a mirage on the African continent” (2003:11). It is quite common in many homes to welcome extended family members as part of their immediate family, such that there is no clear-cut distinction amongst them. Extended family members depend on each other in various capacities, ranging from economic needs, to financial dependence and emotional support. This is more prominent in rural areas where communality and open plan living are common. Therefore, Sani does not see his mother’s intrusion as being out of place. She is a dominating force in Sani’s household. Her only interest is her son and she does not let anything get in the way of what she thinks is good for him. It does not excuse her inhumanity towards Halima, neither does it excuse her ignorance. She also does not hide her disregard for her son’s other wives, making it clear that her only concern is her son.

Zara’s Mother: A representation of humanitarianism

Zara’s mother embodies love, selflessness and nurture. A white woman who lives in a foreign land, she rescues Zara in her village at her lowest point in life and gives her an opportunity to become great. Not only is she Zara’s saving grace, she extends her care to a whole range of women about whom she knows nothing. She is personally committed to her mission to go to Africa every year to render help in the health sector where it is really needed, and it is on one of these missions that she saves the young Zara.

Zara is very much shaped by her mother's practices and beliefs, and this cannot be overstated. She has a very intimate relationship with her mother who is the strong refuge to whom she runs when she can no longer hold herself together. Their bond is established in the few times they are filmed together, such as simply being present at the award ceremony to support her daughter. She is the one Zara runs to whenever she has self-doubts, as demonstrated during Alex's unexpected intention to propose when she feels insecure. Zara confides in her when she and Alex have a misunderstanding, during which Alex also turns up. His visit to Zara's mother reaffirms her welcoming motherly nature. Alex tells her, "I'm afraid she might have broken up with me", looking troubled. Zara's mom reassures him that she'll talk to her but when she walks into the room, she finds Zara holding a file that shows evidence that her daughter might be alive. Her adopted mother reveals that she was trying to protect Zara when the latter questions her about her silence regarding the new information about her lost daughter: "I tried to, but you were too scared to hear me out" she says. Her mother talks about how she has seen her accomplish so much in silent pain. The scene takes an unforeseen turn when Zara's mother collapses, only to wake up in a hospital bed and be declared unfit to travel on her medical mission. Notably, the first thing she thinks of and asks about on regaining consciousness is her trip. She cries for the thousands of women who depend on her, but whom she can no longer help. The way she selflessly shows genuine concern for people whom she does not necessarily know, but cares about because they are helpless human beings, embodies humanism from which Motherism draws its fundamentals—love, nature and nurture.

Hadiza – A woman conditioned by tradition

Hadiza represents women who accept the unfavourable conditions that tradition throws at them without realising it. It appears as if she is ignorant of a world outside her own. She is portrayed as a dutiful and submissive wife to her husband; one who understands tradition and would hardly question it. This is why her desire to have a child, as her husband and family would expect of her, pushes her to deceive her husband into believing she gave birth to Halima. Her desperation can be seen in how, to prevent her husband from marrying a second wife, she connives to steal a child so as to fulfil her marital 'responsibility', and she keeps her action a secret for thirteen years. Lack of exposure may have led her to believe, without medical facts, that a childless marriage is as a result of the wife's fertility problems, not the husband's. Modern civilisation has

reduced these assumptions, but not totally eliminated them. Therefore, the woman takes it upon herself to find solutions to 'her' problem, as Hadiza does.

Hadiza, as a housewife, knows her place and will not overstep her boundaries. She takes care of the home and supports her husband. She rarely challenges him, even in dire circumstances such as when Sani sends Halima out of the house. As much as she loves her daughter, she does not jeopardise her position as a dutiful wife for her sake. When Sani banishes Halima and she goes back home to seek solace with her parents, her father also coldly rejects her. Hadiza welcomes her but when her husband refuses, she is only able to express her disappointment after he ignores her plea. And so, her daughter is left to wander off in the middle of the night, sick and desolate. We see how submissiveness to, and fear of, her husband comes before her love for her child. Hence, she is forced to visit Halima in her abandoned dwelling where she lives as a castaway. In the end, however, Hadiza realises the severity of the situation when Halima's health deteriorates and she cries with regret. She was in the best position to save her daughter even if it meant defying her husband, but she was too timid and to do anything about it.

Fatima: Negotiating Tradition

Fatima, the first wife of Sani, represents a woman caught between tradition and modernity. She struggles with destructive traditions, expectations and injustices but cannot singlehandedly remedy the situation. She is caught between the past and the future. She seeks to jettison traditional medicine and embrace civilized medical practices but has no support in her quest to help Halima. She is aware that there is a solution, but she is crippled by her lack of education and support. Nevertheless, in spite of these constraints, she does all that is within her power. She is the one person that stands up for Halima on many occasions when every other person is against her. On a few occasions, at risk to herself, in the face of deeply entrenched traditions that exalt patriarchy, she ignores the consequence her actions might have on her marriage and helps Halima. She does not think of her loss should her husband abandon her, even though she lacks financial independence.

African feminists are aware of the socio-cultural conditions of women in Africa, such as polygamy, examined above. Despite the fact that Fatima is faced with the reality of polygamy,

she exudes strength of character. She does not allow herself to be curtailed from helping others (Halima) at the risk of losing everything. She puts her marriage on the line while helping an innocent girl, something which Halima's supposed mother does not do. Her actions recall part of Acholonu's postulation of a Motherist as someone who is "ever ready to make personal sacrifices for the good of others like a mother would" (1995:113). Polygamy does not make her passive. She exhibits open defiance as she questions her mother-in-law and husband in the face of entrenched traditions that exalt patriarchy. She looks beyond the consequences of her actions while questioning, as well as confronting inhumanity.

When Sani bans Halima from leaving her room because of the public shame she brings to the family whenever she steps out, Fatima, out of empathy takes her out. She takes her to the market and on their return, they are confronted by Hajia, who comes charging at them furiously. The long shot, with a low angle camera captures her rage as she draws closer to them. She is shocked by the audacity Fatima has shown by taking Halima out against their husband's instructions. When questioned, Fatima firmly explains that she took Halima to the market because she had not been out for a while. Fatima is not terrified of Hajia who expects to be accorded the same kind of respect as her son. Fatima is the only one among the wives who questions or defies their husband's authority. She single-handedly continuously seeks medical help for Halima when her sickness worsens. In spite of her husband's threat to banish her should she be seen with Halima, she stands by her, feeding her and trying to nurture her back to health. Her position in Halima's life is nothing short of the ideal of the mother who deeply cares for her daughter and would do anything for.

Madam Kojo: Women Working Against Other Women

The theme of prostitution is manifested in *Dry* through the role of Madam Kojo, a pimp who uses young girls for 'business'. She is in charge of several young and helpless girls whom she prostitutes in exchange for money. This aspect of the film reiterates the prevailing socio-economic and class struggles present in many parts of Nigeria riddled with poverty where people struggle for survival. In many cases, girls are lured into prostitution, while some deliberately participate to make ends meet.¹ Zara's experiences as a younger woman are not narrated in a

Zara was forced into it and her situation is similar to what happens in *Hotel Choco* (2017). *Hotel Choco* is a film based on a real-life story of two sisters who lose all they have, including their family members to poverty and are

linear progression, however, the story is clear. All the scenes of her past are shown in flashbacks— sometimes in moments of reflection and emotional recollections. They all serve a key function in dramatizing how Zara’s past shapes her present. For example, when she returns to Nigeria in search of Halima and finally locates Madam Kojo who is her only hope of finding out about her daughter, she has a flashback to the birth of her daughter. The old house and Madam Kojo are vivid reminders to Zara of her past. She remembers, as she takes a few steps into her house, the pains of childbirth. It’s also a reminder that no matter how long ago it happened, she will never forget the experiences, neither will she forget her child. Her experiences with Madam Kojo are unpleasant: the house and Madam Kojo are symbols of a painful past of being maltreated, prostituted and deprived of her daughter. Maureen Turim notes that “flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference” (1989:1). As explained, the flashback reconnects various moments, especially of significance, from her past to her present events. The collusion between the present and past events underpins the relationship between “memory and history” and their impact on the development of a sense of self. Turim further explains the role of memory in flashbacks, noting that “it strengthens or protects or it repeats and haunts” (1989:2). Linus employs the latter in a great degree as Zara’s life is haunted with a repetition of painful memories that interject her life. Turim argues that it was the acceptance the term ‘flashback’ to film criticism that validated its use in literature and theatre, even though techniques similar to flashbacks had been used as narrative styles in literature and theatre before films. She argues that the etymology of the term which means the return of a narrative past to a narrative present is “derived from the speed with which cinematic editing was able to cut decisively to another space and time” (1989:4). The flashbacks that Zara experiences dramatise the ways in which Zara’s repressed memories of her traumatic past resurface and force her to come to terms with that past and achieve both emotional and physical wholeness. In a flash, she recollects the unbearable memories of her past and even though it was a painful experience for her, the flashback and her meeting with Madam Kojo serves almost like a closure for her. Her return to her homeland and place of trauma serves also as a journey into her fuller understanding of herself that gives her the power to act more courageously on behalf of the young oppressed girls.

deceived by their mother’s friend who promises them a better life but ends up selling them into prostitution instead. In both films, the victims are helpless, young and taken advantage of by older women.

When Zara sees Madam Kojo, she is unrecognisable. She is transformed into a shadow of her former self. She suffered a stroke, as we get to know later, and is hardly able to move or talk. This brings to mind how conflicts are resolved in many Nollywood films. Often, evildoers or criminals get away with their crimes, but in many cases Nigerian filmmakers do not rely on the law to effect justice on offenders; rather, they use higher, supernatural forces to bring judgment against them whether in the form of sickness, total downfall or even death. The society is one that strongly believes in a supreme being, a higher power beyond the physical, who rewards people in their own coin, whether good or bad. Jonathan Haynes (2010), citing Wendy Griswold, observes that crime fiction in Nollywood films differ from Western crime fiction which employs rational investigative processes. To Haynes, crimes are almost always solved in two ways: firstly, “[i]n the light of melodrama, as the extreme form of emotional conflicts among intimates, and therefore as something to be resolved through emotional means” (2010:19). Quite often, in Nollywood, resolutions are not reached in a logical problem-solving manner; rather, filmmakers aim to satisfy expectations of viewers who are emotionally invested. Linus employs the use of raw emotions to drive the message on many occasions. The second way is “in the light of the supernatural” (Haynes, 2010: 19). While there are no obvious supernatural references in *Dry*, and neither is it a generic crime film, it is clear that Madam Kojo’s eventual downfall is a case of just desserts, whatever the agent. She did evil and must be repaid with evil, and this gives a sense of satisfaction to viewers.

Zara goes into Madam Kojo’s old house not knowing what to expect and is taken aback to see a lonely Madam Kojo, sitting and holding a walking stick in one corner of the small house. The memory of Madam Kojo she has is that of a stern, wicked and greedy, but strong woman, which is nothing like the old, unkempt and sick woman before her. “Madam Kojo, do you remember me?” are the first words she says to her. Madam Kojo doesn’t respond. Zara’s movement suggests someone who is unsure and her facial expression initially depicts fear. “It’s Zara... Where is my child?”, she says, her voice firmer now. Her expression swiftly changes from uncertainty to resentment and then anger. Madam Kojo moves her fingers on hearing Zara’s name, but cannot speak. Only then does Zara realise the extent of Madam Kojo’s condition. She cries for the lost hope of ever seeing her daughter. Linus’s performance of Zara in this scene, and indeed throughout the film, is very nuanced, her facial expressions subtly altering with her emotions, as she moves from fear to anger to sadness. That day, she leaves not knowing

the fate of her daughter. She, however, finds hope on her next visit through the help of Madam Kojo's daughter who tells Zara about Hadiza.

Madam Kojo's relevance in the narrative hinges on the fact that women are sometimes the downfall of other women. (Comparative points of reference might include the brothel owner in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* [1988] or Madame Nell in Louis Malle's controversial *Pretty Baby* [1978]). Madam Kojo's primary concern is her business and she sees Zara only as another means to expand her business even though she is a young orphaned girl. She uses girls as objects of sex without the slightest guilt. We see the moment in the past when one of her several clients comes to pick his next victim and madam Kojo proudly lines the girls up so he can make his choice. The man's choice is young Zara. Zara is sent to have sex with the old man, but she rebels and bites off his ear. The aftermath is more suffering for her as Madam Kojo, whose only concern is her business and its reputation, orders for her to be mercilessly dealt with.

Representing Reality

As the discussion above has demonstrated, *Dry* is deeply concerned with representing a wide range of social predicaments faced by women and girls in Nigeria. It depicts the fate of under-aged, uneducated girls in many parts of Africa. It begins by presenting the conflicts and progresses in unravelling them and then reaching a resolution. Linus touches on an array of problems ranging from health, social, traditional and educational spheres and proffers workable solutions, which are essentially awareness and government involvement. Linus endeavours to mirror reality as closely as possible so as to make the film relatable. Realism in the film enables audiences familiar with the world it portrays to recognise it and identify with the issues it raises, while less familiar audiences may gain a better understanding about the practices and culture of that world. She uses her camera and her command of cinematic conventions to convey these in an unambiguous way. The action is clearly developed and every scene has its own unique message which, summed up, makes up a coherently presented narrative. Some of the events in the film reflect the daily experiences of, not just the people living in Northern Nigeria, but all people across Nigeria. A good example is the unexpected power failure in a clinic scene. Despite its significance, the scene provides a comic relief to the tension that steadily builds up in the narrative. The scene is both comic and satirical as it also conveys the poor state of social amenities in the country which the government has failed to address. Key to this comic relief is

the character of Dr Mutanga who is a popular comedian referred to as *Klint da drunk* off screen. Even though he plays the serious role of a doctor, comic moments punctuate his role, such as chasing a patient from the hospital premises out of frustration or sticking a pen in his hair and looking for it, indicating his absentmindedness.

More crucial, Linus highlights the severe pain of her characters. As an example, we see what becomes of Halima during the last stages of her sickness, right before her death. She becomes pitiful— sick, hungry and left for dying and we are made to go through her struggle to live with her. She suffers terrible shame through the nature of her sickness. For her, it starts as a mystery when she wakes up one morning to feel an unusual wetness in her bed. From then onwards, she experiences several episodes of embarrassment as a result of fistula. She leaks urine uncontrollably, coupled with a stench, but what makes it worse is the lack of support she receives from her family. She soon becomes a laughing stock in the community, beginning with her co-wives who are happy to have another reason to frustrate her and embarrass her.

Another realistic portrayal, which is painful to watch, is Halima's birth experience. This is not only because Halima is still a child and in no way prepared, it's also because of the careless handling of her delivery. Marrying Sani is a frightening fate for Halima. The depth of ignorance exhibited by his family is what eventually ends her life. From the onset of her labour pains, at least one day before Halima's actual delivery, Sani and his mother experience pandemonium. At this point, they do not consider taking her to the hospital and when Fatima suggests it, her suggestion is overridden by an untrained birth attendant. Sani, who finds himself confused and helpless, is reliant on his mother and the attendant. The attendant assures them that Halima will be fine, rejecting any thoughts of going to the hospital. According to her, she takes the delivery of all the children in the village and they trust her. Linus exposes archaic traditions to get her message across, especially those that negatively affect women's health and wellbeing. Halima's eventual death, though painful, is instructive. It makes viewers think deeply about the film as a representation of the tragedies of reality.

Halima's actual delivery scene is harrowing. The sharp sound of Halima's screams opens the scene. From a low camera angle, the birth attendant is seen squatting over Halima who is lying down on her back and sweating profusely. "Push harder," she says, as Sani's mother and Fatima sit by her side to encourage her. The music score is mysterious and forbidding, foregrounding the imminent doom as Halima battles for her life and that of her child. In a

shocking moment, the birth attendant brings out a blade and cuts through Halima. While the scene is not as graphic as it could have been, it is nevertheless gruelling to watch. A panicking Sani is outside the hut anxiously awaiting the cry of his baby, and for the first time, he demonstrates genuine concern and fear. The delivery scene reveals a vulnerable side to Sani, who is completely ignorant of what Halima is going through. As always, he surrenders to his mother and looks up to God for a positive outcome, but Halima gives birth to a stillborn child.

Linus clearly propagates the rejection of unproductive as well as barbaric traditions, and she speaks for embracing modernity. Zara arrives from the Western world where she has received education and is equipped with knowledge of how medicine is practiced, as against how women pointlessly lose their lives while holding on to traditional methods of childbirth, for example. Some of these methods have been practiced repeatedly without improvement, thus bringing about the same devastating results in many situations. Her message for the espousal of modern and professional solutions, especially in regard to health issues, is central to her mission to Nigeria and speaks for the director. Linus propagates a rejection of old and regressive ways and embraces new and progressive practices. Zara emerges as a hybrid of the modern and the traditional and this reflects the director's stance. Polygamy, child-marriage and traditional medicine are all assertively condemned in this film as Linus presents modernity. The director also presents an ideological position which, beyond Motherism, calls for jettisoning of repressive traditions, and unwholesome practices that pressurise and objectify women and girls. She espouses the need to embrace, where necessary, new and pragmatic ways of addressing problems, especially as they concern women.

Zara mourns her daughter, but she draws strength from the pain of her loss and uses it as a springboard to leap ahead. She forges on to advocate for a reform in the health care system. Her personal experience of fistula and that of her daughter, coupled with the fact that she is a medical doctor, enables her to identify and relate to the problem. She recognises the apparent lack of health care facilities and the ignorance of the people. Being a fortunate survivor herself, she establishes a centre 'Halima Fistula Hospital and School of Education', named after her daughter. She actively speaks against female circumcision and teenage pregnancy, and for the Child's Rights Act. Stephanie Linus employs a humanitarian approach to tackling cultural and social constraints in the film. This is in line with Melissa Thackway's argument which Utaka

cites that, “African women face a lot of cultural constraints which could be reversed through sensitization programmes”. Utaka notes further that Thackway

...intimates how women’s societies and Non-Governmental Agencies (NGO’s) have been trying to educate women on the need to end certain traditional practices like female circumcision and child marriages among others. She points out that women who have been sensitized by various women’s agencies have started applying such knowledge to their respective situations. (Utaka: 2010: 40).

This is the activist approach that Linus takes in *Dry*. Zara, through awareness and sensitization, consciously elects to become the voice of numerous voiceless teenage girls who daily struggle to stay alive, to be healthy and have meaningful lives. Linus uses her expertise as a director and her voice as a woman to address gender-based inequality and the plight of young girls. Her portrayal of female characters is varied. She creates characters who manifest great strength and those who exhibit complete weakness in the face of tradition. Her characters are complex and the film is unflinching as it explicitly confronts issues, seen in the way it climaxes with a speech at the National Assembly, with a call for lawmakers to abolish child marriage. The ovation is loudest at the very end of Zara’s speech when she publicly exposes a current lawmaker, her uncle, who raped her as a little girl and asks for him to be brought to justice.

CHAPTER SIX

Wives on Strike, dir. Omoni Oboli (2016)

Introduction

Writer, producer, actor and director, Omoni Oboli, is currently one of Nigeria's foremost female filmmakers. An accomplished actor in her own right, she has delved fully into filmmaking and has been directing films yearly since her debut film, *Being Mrs Elliot* in 2014, followed by *The First Lady* in 2015. Following the outcome of these two commercially successful romantic comedies, she went a slightly different route in 2016 with the production of her satirical comedy, *Wives on Strike*, and in that same year, she released another romantic comedy titled *Okafor's Law*. Romance and comedy are undoubtedly Oboli's strong points evident since the start of her filmmaking career. The past three years have proven Omoni Oboli to be a force to be reckoned with in Nollywood—a female filmmaker who is steadily gathering clout in a male-dominated film industry. Her consistency has brought recognition to her both locally and internationally as she is currently one of the Toronto International Film Festival's ambassadors for their 'Share Her Journey' campaign.

The film under study in this chapter is one of her more recent films, *Wives on Strike* (2016). *Wives on Strike* is a satire set mainly in Lagos's suburbs and critiques underaged marriage. The story is centred on a group of four local market women who take a stand for their friend whose thirteen-year-old daughter, Amina, is about to be married off to a much older man. The women respond to this by embarking on a sex strike when one of the women's husband's, Papa Ngozi, refuses his wife's request to persuade Amina's father against his decision. A coincidental filming of the occasion when the four market women challenge the groom (Alhaji) as he comes to take his young bride draws media attention to them, and in a short while they become a topic of national interest. What begins as one woman's reaction to her husband's insensitivity soon becomes a unanimous agreement among friends to stop having sex with their husbands, backed by the slogan 'Women, Power!' Their movement very rapidly escalates to a national outpouring where seemingly all the nation's women, including prostitutes, join in.

Oboli delivers a crucial message while entertaining her viewers, as the issue of underaged marriage was one of great societal import at the time it was produced. According to a UNICEF publication, "issues of child rights protection are on the residual list of the Nigerian Constitution,

giving states exclusive responsibility and jurisdiction to make laws” (Nwauche: 2015). The aim of the strike in her film was to draw attention to those states that are yet to implement already-outlawed underaged marriage in Nigeria. The striking women do not understand their action in the wider national context until a more sophisticated woman, a senator’s wife who sympathises with their movement, educates them. In the end, Mama Ngozi and her friends gather immense clout, enough to spark the attention of lawmakers who eventually grant them their desire.

Before *Wives on Strike* was released to Nigerian cinemas, there was a lot of anticipation by Nollywood cinephiles and critics alike, mostly because of the publicity on media platforms, especially social media. However, mixed reactions followed quickly when people watched and the film generated some controversy (Izuzu, 2016; Obenson, 2016). The criticisms may have served as good publicity, an unexpected catalyst that helped to push the film to the status of the second highest grossing film at the box office that year. The main bone of contention was that *Wives on Strike* plagiarised Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq* (2015), which is, itself, an adaptation of Aristophanes’ 411 BC Greek play, *Lysistrata*. Oboli has granted several interviews to address this allegation. According to Oboli, she wanted to make a film about women going on strike and had to find a reason for the strike. The child-not-bride campaign in 2013 felt apt, she says, and so she wrote the script and started shooting in 2014 (<https://www.pulse.ng/entertainment/movies/omoni-oboli-actress-responds-to-reports-that-wives-on-strike-was-copied-from-spike-lees-chiraq-id4799212.htm>). She states explicitly that she had no knowledge that other filmmakers and playwrights had conceived the idea before her. Further, she clarifies that, while she started principal photography on *Wives on Strike* in 2014, Spike Lee only started shooting *Chi-Raq* in June 2015. (www.naijagists.com/omoni-oboli-denies-she-copied-spike=lee-chiraq-isea-in-wive-on-strike-nollywood-movie/). *Wives on Strike* undoubtedly remains original in its style and context. Omoni Oboli’s film does, like Lee’s, dramatise the process of recognition and acceptance of the inherent power of sexuality. Both films offer the same non-violent approach to challenge demanding situations that extend beyond the confines of the family: women take the decision to withhold sex for a greater good.

The idea of women using sex as a means of non-violent resistance has been approached in several ways. It was, as mentioned above, presented as far back as two and a half millennia ago in the play *Lysistrata*, an anti-war comedy by Aristophanes. Helen Morales points out that “*Lysistrata* has become the go-to trope for any women’s activism involving the withdrawal of

sex” (2013: 284). Indeed, almost a century ago, Lillian Sutton Pelee wrote a play titled *Wives on Strike* (1920), a satirical comedy that narrates women’s actions in the face of subjugation. In the play, the response by women extends beyond the withdrawal of sex: it involves the abandonment of wifely duties in their entirety. The central character Betty, who is initially wholeheartedly committed to her husband and excuses his excesses, goes on strike when she realises the depth of her husband’s lack of respect and regard for her and all women. She leaves her husband and spends the time empowering herself economically. This she does in order to prove to her husband, who thinks very little of women, that men and women are equal. In the end, she achieves her objective as she becomes a successful business woman whom her husband comes to appreciate, thus demonstrating that if given the chance, women can achieve as much as men.

So too, feminist Nigerian writer Stella Oyedepo addresses patriarchal excesses using strike action relating to both food and sex to rebel against men in her play *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* (2002). Not only has her play inspired theatrical performances, activists have also adopted the ‘no-sex’ approach as a weapon against war. This strategy has been adopted on several occasions in Africa. For example, in 2003 a group of about six thousand women had stayed away from their partners for about two months to protest crops being eaten by cattle in Cameroon. Organised by the local women’s society, the strike was carried out to cleanse the society of its evil in the village of Aghem (BBC News:2003). Similarly, Leymah Roberta Gbowee, a Liberian peace activist who, in 2011, won the Nobel Prize for Peace, employed a sex strike as a protest tool in her women-led movement to end the Liberian civil war. During the civil war in Liberia, Gbowee mobilised women to stage non-violent protests, interreligious pray-ins, as well as sex strikes demanding reconciliation and peace from men. The protest received immense national and international media attention, bringing about comparisons between Gbowee and the character Lysistrata in Aristophanes’ play. R. Weinrich commented in Gossip Central that “Self-assured and instinctively political Gbowee is a modern day Lysistrata in the ancient Greek satirist Aristophanes’ play” (cited in Morales: 281-2). The Daily Telegraph observed, “perhaps her [Gbowee's] most famous moment came in 2002, when she persuaded many Liberian women to withhold sex from their warring menfolk unless they came to the negotiating table, a devastatingly successful campaign inspired by the Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*” (cited in Morales, 2013: 283). The documentary, *Pray the Devil back to Hell* (2008), acclaims Gbowee and her group for playing a critical role in compelling the then president of Liberia,

Charles Taylor, and the men into peace talks (Morales, 2013: 283). Her actions have not only won her a Nobel Prize, they have inspired films. Lee, himself, in *Chi-Raq*, refers to Gbowee. She is mentioned in the film as the key inspiration behind the instigation of a sex strike in pursuance of peace negotiations led by the protagonist, Lysistrata.

A summary of sex strikes in real-life situations, plays and films is a useful backdrop to the analysis of Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike* in this chapter. The film's plot has many practical and artistic precedents suggesting a rich intertextuality. Oboli does not give direct acknowledgements or references to any of the above, except for the fact that the title of her film, *Wives on Strike* is the same as Lillian Sutton Pelee's play. However, the intertextual play with texts and events above will form part of the discussion in this chapter in a demonstration of the wide appeal of the issues raised by the film, particularly the power that women acting in concert against patriarchal subjugation might achieve.

Intertextuality in *Wives on Strike*: From Lagos to Chicago

While the extent of Oboli's conscious borrowing from precursor texts is open to debate, what is common to all is that the strikes achieve their aim. Over the years, scholars and critics have expanded the concept of intertextuality to such areas of study as Television, newspapers and films. Helle Hastrup asserts that intertextuality is a storytelling device that helps to drive a story forward. However, discovering intertextual connections is left to viewers. Hastrup cites Umberto Eco's statement that, "in order to have a function, intertextuality must be able to be acknowledged by the viewer" (cited in Hastrup, 2014:187). It generates interconnectedness between texts that allows the reader, or viewer, to develop a complex understanding relating different works. In this study, the interactions between *Wives on Strike* and *Chi-Raq*, may be actualised (by the informed viewer) in dynamic and fluid ways.

There are several connections between the two films, despite their starkly different contexts. One is set in a first-world country, in a city that is beleaguered by contemporary problems similar to war situations, in which gun violence is at the top of the list. The other film is set in a developing country, faced with modern-day injustice regarding the rights of young, innocent citizens. The primary and the most significant interconnection between both films is the use of a sex boycott as a means of resolution to the societal problems. What spurs the action of the women is the unjustifiable effects that the decisions of one group of people have on others.

In *Chi-Raq*, the protest is against gun-waging men who risk their own lives as well as those of others in their gang-related clashes. As a result, innocent lives are lost and, in a recent case, a young neighbourhood girl dies. This shocking event leads to a church service in honour of the girl and that stirs up an awakening in many people, including Lysistrata. In *Wives on Strike*, the impact of the laws affecting girls is less immediate, but the result is just as significant because, in many cases, girls who get married at a tender age end up with fatal diseases and sometimes die. For this reason, rather than witness their friend's daughter's experience of child marriage, a small group of women take matters into their own hands. Both films clearly underscore the vital contributions of women to society building, promotion of justice and the fostering of a harmonious environment. Further, both films are deliberately didactic films, relevant to the conscience of the societies where they are produced. Lee, who is popular for taking risks and speaking his mind through his films, is relatively observant of the original text. Adapting Aristophanes' comedy, Lee generously employs an array of music using artists that include Nick Cannon and Jennifer Hudson— both actors in the film. Rhymed dialogue is key to the film. Ann Hornaday notes that "*Chi-Raq* doesn't fit neatly into any genre.... It's a satire stuffed into a musical tucked into a melodrama, fused together by Lee's signature visual brio and Terence Blanchard's elegant orchestral score" (www.washingtonpost.com). Oboli's *Wives on Strike* adapts differently, notably in its use of pidgin English. The film is a comic satire that successfully addresses a contemporary problem. "Lock it up", the women in *Chi-Raq* chant to signify their commitment to the strike, while the women in *Wives on Strike* go for the pidgin English translation "Lock up", a phrase that in both cases signifies denial of rights of access to their bodies until their demands are met. Oboli adopts the use of pidgin English to present most of the characters, especially the women, as uneducated people from lower stratum of the society. In Nigeria, pidgin English is commonly spoken by semi-illiterates who hold minimal political power. The market women's approach to the protest suggests that they have nothing to lose. They speak pidgin unashamedly till the end of the film, even when they appear on national TV to speak about their struggle.

The success of the strikes owes a lot to the resolute steadfastness and the ability of both Mama Ngozi, in Oboli's film, and Lysistrata, in Lee's, to effectively lead the other women in a cause they believe is right. They both have partners they truly love, with whom they have good relationships before the commencement of the strikes. However, they willingly sacrifice the

affection they experience for the sake of a broader humanity. The strike, though successful, ends differently for both women. For Mama Ngozi, it is a happy reunion with her husband, a kick-off from where they left off. In *Lysistrata*'s case, her boyfriend ends up being the culprit behind the killing of the neighbourhood girl. He confesses to this and is arrested, which leaves *Lysistrata* with mixed feelings— a sense of victory and loss. Lee's adaptation is underpinned by tragedy, while *Oboli*'s endorses the hope associated with the genre of comedy.

Despite similarities, there are many areas of departure in the two films, especially in terms of sustaining a wholly comic resolution. Speaking about the reportage of the Liberian sex strike, Morales says: "Sex strikes in the more developed modern world arise from very different circumstances, and with very different consequences, from those described by Gbowee. This is one reason why the sex strikes in the less developed world are typically discussed in a tragic register, rather than a comic one" (2013: 288). Challenging this view, there are no tragic outcomes in *Wives on Strike*. The film starts comically, from the introduction of the film where the friends exhibit their excitement to be on TV while being interviewed, to the very end where Mama Ngozi is offered a huge sum of money by a well-known producer for the rights to turn her story into a film, making her husband declare that he married her because he has always known that she's a lucky woman.

The divergences also include a shift in the prompt to action. The chronology of both films follow the cause and effect technique where the witnessing of unpleasant occurrences results in an immediate call for action. However, the protagonist's actions differ in *Wives on Strike*. Unlike *Lysistrata*, whose motivation is influenced by others, Mama Ngozi's immediate action is self-inspired. The support she receives from her friends and subsequently other women, reinforces her strategy. The decision to withhold sex from her husband is a reaction to a disagreement between them, and her spontaneous reaction develops into a phenomenon within a short space of time. She tells her friends what transpired between her and her husband the night before, and that she has taken steps to 'lock up'. The women pledge their immediate support without debate. It is, of course, unconvincing that all three the women, who, like her, are not directly affected by the problem, unthinkingly join the strike without considering the consequences it might have on their households. This is especially so because the social context is patriarchal. It is one which holds men in high regard and their decisions, if not final, are very respected.

In *Chi-Raq*, we see the build-up of Lysistrata's inspiration, which is then followed by swift action. Lysistrata, the woman who leads the sex strike, is the girlfriend of Chi-Raq, the Spartan gang leader whose opposition to another gang (Trojans) leaves many dead, jailed and maimed. Set in Chicago in the United States, the title references Chicago and Iraq because of the number of deaths by guns relating to war situations. Lysistrata's anger is directed against guns and gun violence in Chicago. The first spur to action takes place when, following a shootout between her boyfriend and the opposing gang which has them burning his house, she visits a neighbour, Miss Helen (Angela Bassett), who utilises the opportunity to speak to her already troubled conscience after visiting the scene where a young neighbourhood girl had been shot. Miss Helen occupies the position of an older woman with deep experience and wisdom, and speaks briefly to her about channelling her sexual hold on Chi-Raq towards the negotiation of peace. She takes it a step further by referring her to Liberian peace activist, Leymah Gbowee.

We are taken through the process of Lysistrata's growing commitment, beginning with her conversation with Miss Helen, to when she researches Gbowee. This leads to a deciding moment when she repeats the words, "You go and get it", while watching Gbowee's video online. As we see with Mama Ngozi, the next course of action is setting up a meeting with her friends, and in this case, they collaborate with the girlfriends of the opposing gang members, but not without an initial face-off where the women, through ribald debate, eventually come to see that they do share a common ideal of peace in the community and the safety of their men and their children. With the women in agreement, Lysistrata assumes the leadership role, taking charge of the initially small group and maintaining her position as the group expands with a lot more women joining. From the beginning, she appears to know what she is up against and with mentorship, guidance and support, she is prepared for it. When necessary, she persuades her friends to look beyond immediate personal gratification and focus on the long-term rewards.

This discussion of the step-by-step unfolding of the decision-making in *Chi-Raq* highlights a key omission in *Wives on Strike*: the question of how the striking women feel about being sex-deprived and how they suppress their desires. Withholding sex from their male partners amounts to being, themselves, deprived of sex. What we are made to see in Oboli's film, however, is a group of women who are determined, at all costs, to make their voices heard. Oboli portrays a group of illiterate women who resolve to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the society, with no discussions about the women's feelings. If anything, they appear

indifferent about whatever effects their action might have on them: in their gatherings, no one complains or hints about being personally affected by lack of sex. There is also no comment about the repercussions of their actions on their marriages, which in this context could include infidelity or the possibility of their husbands having second wives. It appears as if the women either have no sexual urges like their husbands do, or they are too ashamed to speak about them. Perhaps they are just meant to be seen as absolutely resolute in their task— regardless of the risk to the unity of their marriages and sexual satisfaction—to win the freedom of the younger generation of women who otherwise have no one to speak on their behalf. Nonetheless, the silence is conspicuous and may recall the silence on sexual matters attributed to many African cultures as discussed in chapter three of this research. Even though the women are extremely focused on the strike, they are mute about their desires, even amongst themselves. However, noting that missing element of the film reminds us that this is not a realist exploration of the relationship between sex, desire and power, but a comic fantasy that simplifies the action and the psychology that underpins it; the emphasis is solely on the potential of women to channel their strength to use men's sexual insatiability against them for positive causes.

There is a noticeable departure between *Wives on Strike* and *Chi-Raq* in terms of the strategies employed by the women leaders to actualise their plans. Mama Ngozi and her friends go ahead with the sex strike without any strategy in place. In plain terms, they have no plan. They are moved by compassion but, unlike Lysistrata who has the radical Catholic priest and Miss Helen for guidance, they have no mentors or direction. The closest person to a mentor to them is Vera, the senator's wife, who educates them and gives them a platform to propagate their cause. Apart from that, the situation looks bleak especially for the husbands who feel helpless, being punished for a sin they did not commit. At one point, a frustrated Papa Ngozi is prompted to ask his wife what she plans to do if, for a whole year, there is no response from the Government. Getting very irritated after his failed attempt at persuading his wife to indulge him in what he terms, "welfare sex", he asks her what her plans are but she is left speechless and clueless. Other than the coincidental media coverage that advertises their locally- based agenda to the nation, their aim is to keep striking until their husbands come together to echo their voices to the government. Conversely, the women of *Chi-Raq* are more strategic about their objective. From their costumes and colour co-ordination, to rhythmic call-and-response motivational talks which further highlight the musical aspect of the film, they eventually take over the city's

National Guard armoury through flirtatious engagement and they do not stop until the gang wars eventually stop and the men lay their guns down. Finally, a key divergence between *Wives on Strike* and *Chi-Raq* lies in the unique social, cultural and historical settings of the films, and these shape the films' narratives. Spike Lee, as well as Omoni Oboli, engage in issues of social significance and draw inspiration from contemporary societal problems. Chicago's violent, gun-toting society, and the problems of gender politics in the black American community are primary concerns for Lee. While Oboli's film is also deeply concerned with gender politics, the context and inflection are very different, i.e. detrimental government policies that negatively affect young girls. We saw, in chapter 5, how this subject matter was dealt with by Stephanie Linus in *Dry* (2014). Oboli employs her own specific comic angle to deal with the same recurring political problem of underaged marriage.

While *Wives on Strike* demonstrates various points of connection with *Chi-Raq*, as described above, a common point of reference that underpins them both is the Liberian strike led by Gbowee in 2003. Many of the women who were involved in the Liberian protests were everyday ordinary people, including market women. However, slightly contrary to popular media assumptions that the sex strike was the only weapon the Liberian women employed, Gbowee asserts that there was more to the protest than the sex strike. In her words:

But the truth is that the greatest weapons of the Liberian women's movement were moral clarity, persistence, and patience. Nothing happened overnight. In fact, it took three years of community awareness, sit-ins, and nonviolent demonstrations staged by ordinary 'market women' – years of gathering in the roads in eye-catching white T-shirts, demanding the attention of convoys of officials and media folks who would glimpse the signs and the dancing, would hear the chanting and the singing.

(cited in Morales, 2013:288)

Gbowee tirelessly rallied thousands of other women into a political force in protest against violence. Similar to Gbowee's description above, Oboli uses "ordinary market women" as instruments of change. They are also dedicated to see the cause to the end, even if, as for the Liberian women, it might take years of persistence and patience. However, unlike Gbowee, Oboli's characters are completely focused on the action of the strike, with no structured agenda in place. The local women who would ordinarily not concern themselves with issues of governance and policy making, suddenly champion a protest, and they relish the attention it brings.

The latter part of the film introduces a more refined setting than the market place. A subplot introduces two important characters to the story—Senator Aniete and his wife, Vera. Vera steps up to amplify the voice of the market women and puts their protest in context. She uses her media platform to propagate the market women’s clamour, and this successfully draws government attention—especially because of her husband’s political position. Her actions, however, spark friction between her and her husband who worries about the implications on his political standing of her public endorsement of the strike. He forbids his wife from being a party to it, stating that the issue has not been “specifically addressed in the House yet”. For Vera, it is an opportunity to be a part of a good cause, therefore she ignores her husband’s decree. She sees it as an avenue to remind him of the purpose for which he is serving as a Senator. This is one of the key aspects satirised in the film. Part of the objective of the film is to prick the conscience of political leaders. For example, Vera challenges him at one point: “What I’m doing might be bad for your party, but trust me, it is good for your conscience!” Oboli uses the conflict between the senator and his wife to reflect on politicians and government officials who make hollow promises while campaigning, but end up not fulfilling same once they win elections and are in positions of power. It is a realistic representation of a characteristic of the Nigerian political scene, and indeed of the globally widespread betrayal of their promises by politicians. More often than not, people’s hopes are dashed due to the failure of politicians to perform their duties. This aspect of the film is morally instructive, serving as a message to those who, like Senator Aniete, start off as upright individuals with genuine concerns to serve the nation, but get carried away by greed for power and influence.

The comic aspects of *Wives on Strike* are key to delivering the gravity of the subject matter. Humour leavens the severity and sensitivity of the message Oboli intends to convey. She is able to maintain a reasonable balance, particularly with the introduction of the more serious side of politics. The actors perform their roles with relaxed ease, although Mama Ngozi’s closest ally, referred to as Madam 12:30, serves a more exuberantly comic purpose. She gained her name through her resumption time at her food canteen which is at 12:30pm. Madam 12:30’s actions are deliberately exaggerated in almost all the scenes. Her boisterous personality almost overshadows that of the protagonist, as she takes centre stage in the strike. This is depicted by her loud tone of voice in discussions, her overly dramatic gestures and her slightly intimidating frame. The most highlighted aspect of comedy is the effect of the strike on the women’s

husbands who gather in beer parlours on several occasions to discuss the state of affairs and strategies that can be employed to lessen their burden. The setting of their gatherings is typical of lower-class, and sometimes middle-class men, who meet up in open-air spaces to socialise. They talk, drink beer and snack on locally-made delicacies.

Oboli recognises the importance of using the right actors and features versatile and accomplished Nigerian actors like Uche Jumbo², Kenneth Okonkwo, Chioma Akpotha, Kalu Ikeagwu Kehinde Bankole, and Ufuoma McDermott, while she herself plays the lead role. (Even though humour is an integral part of the film's success, only one member of cast is a comedian in real life, Julius Agu, who plays Callistus, Madam 12:30's husband).

One of the most distinctive aspects of the film's style is the use of language. The language use in *Wives on Strike* distinguishes it from other mainstream Nollywood films that have adopted English, often spoken with foreign accents, as the unofficial form of expression. Oboli's film follows the example of Zeb Ejiro's *Domitilla* (1996), which is the first Nollywood film to adopt pidgin English all through the film, although many other films over the years have been produced in pidgin, either in full or in part. Oboli employs pidgin English as the main language of expression and provides English subtitles. It should be noted that its significance is to reiterate the semi-illiterate status of the market women and their husbands, most of whom are uneducated, and the power of the collective efforts of the grassroots community. Although it is mentioned in passing that some of the local characters, such as Papa Ngozi, are educated up to the secondary school level, a level high enough to be able to communicate in conventional English, he belongs to a social circle where people ordinarily have no use for it. Being an automobile mechanic, his job is to repair damaged cars, and he normally goes about his daily business speaking pidgin English to his colleagues and clients. His wife, who pioneers and leads the strike, is a small-time trader in the local market where she spends her time selling fabrics and conversing with her friends—her actions in the film are typical of market women who are very vocal and are seen as carefree. Though uneducated, she is charismatic and, with the unwavering support of her friends, she takes up the cause to stand against injustice.

Oboli has explored several themes in her films ranging from love, betrayal, politics,

Uche Jombo is a veteran actress, screenwriter and film producer who ventured into acting in 1999. Among the popular films she has featured in are *Damage* (2011) and *Mrs Somebody* (2012). The other actors mentioned above are also veterans and respected actors whose works have spanned the years, such as Kenneth Okonkwo who played the protagonist of the first Nollywood production, *Living in Bondage* (1992).

scandal and marriage over the short span of her directing career. Of all these, *Wives on Strike* has proved to be her most socially conscious film to date. Like Stephanie Linus, she draws attention to the spate of child marriages in the country, and proposes women's ability to wield their power non-violently through their sexuality and the power in collaboration and numbers. The latter would clearly be endorsed by Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminist approach, which argues that collaboration is one of the key approaches to negotiation. The aim of the women's strike is to starve their husbands of sex to the point of surrender, where they will be compelled to join their voices to those of their wives and against the government. The women recognise the power in unity and collaboration, therefore their intention is not to restrict the men from the protest, but to join forces with them.

Negotiating Freedom Through Sexuality

African women working for social change build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives —Obioma Nnaemeka. (2004:380)

The road that the women in *Wives on Strike* travel in pursuit of their objective is one that is least expected, even though the title is indicative of some sort of boycott or protest. However, a 'sex strike' is unexpected, mainly because of the film's social context. As discussed extensively in previous chapters, Nigeria is a society where patriarchy takes precedence in the social order. Not only is the society patriarchal, it is also very traditional. For this reason, women presumably do not have the exclusive right to make decisions as weighty as denying their spouses sex, especially in matrimony. This is consonant with Molaria Ogundipe's statement in her book, *Indigenous and Contemporary Gender Concepts and Issues in Africa* that "in many African cultures women are considered sacred, particularly as mothers, but not as wives..." (2007:22). In the context in which she speaks, mothers are highly regarded, but wives are yet to attain the same level of respect that makes mothers sacred. Generally speaking, wives are expected to bow to their husbands' authority and should not be able to independently decide to deprive their husbands of anything, especially sex. In modern times, these expectations are often mutual. In this sense, neither a wife nor a husband can solely make such a decision without the risk of ruining the marital peace—as Rukky Sanda depicts in *Keeping my Man*. However, more dominant is the idea, as well as practice, of a man's undisputed authority over his wife, and this

has been depicted in many films either in a deliberate effort to draw attention to it, or as part of a story with another focus. As examples, we see how thirteen-year-old Halima in a rural setting is raped by her husband when she declines sex in Stephanie Linus' *Dry*, and in a more urban space, Rukky Sanda depicts a state of conjugal unrest when a full-grown woman, Tamar, decides to be sexually inactive because she no longer wants children in *Keeping my Man*. Furthermore, withholding sex is typically not a proposition that women in this clime will readily agree to, owing to open-extra-marital relationships of men and the preparedness of women to do all in their power to 'keep their men' (see Maya and Zion's characters in *Keeping my Man*). Also, there is a general acceptance by many women that they are the weaker sex, and this is often applied in every sense of the word. Therefore, in many families, women rely on their husbands for provision, leadership and 'protection'. Against this backdrop, Oboli's approach is one which, if practiced in reality, may not become public, neither will it lead to a festival of women's liberty. More probable would be a silent protest behind closed doors, where domestic issues are ironed out without being publicised.

Oboli decided to take a route sparsely travelled by Nigerian filmmakers when she wrote, directed and produced *Wives on Strike*. She advocates for underaged girls who are innocently given away in marriage, mostly to much older men. She emphasises the essence of the film when, at the end, she dedicates the film to the child brides "all over the world". She further implores viewers to be part of the society's conscience and become heroes by appealing to the sensibilities of viewers with the words, "may we rise up and fight for these ones who have had their freedom and childhood stolen from them".

Oboli does not hesitate to depict the seriousness of the film's subject matter. The film's poster (below) foregrounds the resoluteness of the group of market women who spearhead the campaign, first against their husbands, but ultimately against the lawmakers. The women represent the stratum of lower-class society practicing an informal economy with their own little businesses that keep them going and who are not directly benefiting from the government. The poster depicts a paradoxical image of women who are beautifully clad in bright floral dresses which depict femininity but their facial expressions also express toughness and determination. Their body language suggests readiness for war, while their floral attire suggests the affirmation of life. However, they engage in the fight without physical weaponry.



The symbolic poster of *Wives on Strikes*

Their inherent strength is revealed when proud rebel leader Madam 12:30 declares at the beginning of their strike, “We are powerful! We just don’t know we are powerful. Just look at us! Women!!!” As soon as Mama Ngozi announces to her friends that she has begun a protest against her husband by denying him sex, her friends pledge their support in solidarity. For them the strike serves as a revelation of a power they possess but neglect; an eye opener that their weapon is their sexual hold over men.

This revelation is similar to the strike that occurs in Lillian Sutton Pelee’s play, *Wives on Strike* (1920). In it Betty, the protagonist, who leaves her husband without looking back and upholds her dignity as a woman, explains the importance of the strike which many sectors of the society were involved in at that time. She says to her husband, “I know that the strike is the modern weapon of protest, and I intend to use that weapon to get what I want”. Mama Ngozi and her cohorts also meaningfully utilise the sex boycott as a weapon of protest, and this, eventually, leads to an unprecedented revolution. With the newfound power, the women are able to negotiate without elaborate rhetoric, education, political or financial influence.



The market women joining forces.

The unanimous agreement to join Mama Ngozi in the strike is fuelled by one of the group of four friends, who informs them that she heard over the news of a bill passed by the Senate that grants men the liberty to marry underaged girls. Disgusted, she says, “The Senate were discussing the passing of a bill so these dirty old men can marry little girls”. The other women’s initial response is disbelief, followed by an outburst of complaints about the numerous problems the society is plagued with, and, specifically, they claim the government neglects to focus on innocent young girls. Oboli uses the conversation of the market women to point out societal ills, lack of infrastructure and the effect on ordinary people. During their first unintended meeting, a movement begins. The strike is a spontaneous revolt. On the day the women make their decision, Mama Ngozi did not go to the market with the intention of telling her friends about her disagreement with her husband. Their conversation led to it. The strike starts as a combination of offhanded discussions and complaints and leads to a demand for change.

An important point to note about the strike is that it is not a gathering of frustrated women who are bitter with their husbands. Before the strike commences, Oboli clearly reveals the affection that exists in Papa and Mama Ngozi’s marriage, in the initial scenes. They enjoy a cordial relationship with the action mostly set in their modest living room and bedroom. Oboli depicts a contented couple who live and survive happily on the meagre income from their individual businesses. However, more importantly, she establishes that they have a healthy sexual relationship. This is revealed in a scene where Papa Ngozi leaves his mechanic’s

workshop in a rush, hinting to his friend, who comes visiting, that his urgent departure is for him to go and “enjoy” his wife. His wife is equally receptive of him, and she satisfies his sexual appetite even when she teases him with words like, “You no dey tire?” (Don’t you ever get tired?). Conjugal unity and co-operation between them is further displayed in another scene during their meal time (the scene that leads to their quarrel). They are seen leisurely chatting and eating from the same dish during dinner. That singular act symbolizes togetherness and unity in their home. With their daughter, Ngozi, away, they live like a newlywed couple. Even though we never see Ngozi, her name comes up many times in the film and it is mentioned that she is away in boarding school. That is Oboli’s way of explaining Ngozi’s noticeable absence in the film. It also shows the importance they attach to education, as Ngozi, who is inferred to be Amina’s friend, is in school, while Amina is about to be married off as will be discussed shortly.

Everything seems rosy between the couple until Mama Ngozi’s friend, Mama Amina, seeks solace from her. She tells her about her thirteen-year-old daughter Amina’s imminent marriage to Alhaji— a marriage arranged by Amina’s father. Mama Ngozi’s empathy for Mama Amina’s condition leads her to discuss the situation with her husband and she implores him to have a man-to-man conversation with Papa Amina. She does not ask for much, only for her husband to persuade Papa Amina to rethink his decision. To her utter disappointment, however, her husband declines her request on the grounds that it is unmanly for him to interfere in another man’s decision. He also points out that it is an acceptable practice in Amina’s culture. He sees it as belittling to meddle in other people’s businesses—he clearly wouldn’t want the same done to him were the tables turned. In different ways, Mama Ngozi’s humane and selfless attributes are exemplified in her rousing indignation against her husband’s disposition. While she selflessly advocates for Amina, her husband remains unperturbed. She is displeased about his position in the situation, how he finds it unimaginable for his own daughter (threatening war against anyone who comes near her), but is indifferent about helping someone else’s daughter. Within split seconds her body language changes and so does the atmosphere—it goes from being calm to being tense.

Noteworthy is the negotiation curve that takes place during their discussion. With the intention of getting her husband to empathise, she goes from being soft spoken at the beginning of their conversation, to being angry when she perceives his reluctance, and then back to trying to calmly persuade him. When, eventually, she finds him unyielding, she walks out on him. That

night, she displays her displeasure when her husband approaches her in bed as, we can assume, he normally would, but she adamantly refuses to let him touch her. She uses her head scarf as a demarcation between them in bed and orders her shocked husband not to cross the line. She finds a moment amidst his confusion to remind him of how she had begged him earlier to speak to Papa Amina but he declined. Her actions are like those of a Motherist who puts the needs of others before hers. She does not place her child above other people's children and does so at the expense of peace in her home. She finds the act unimaginable for her daughter, therefore, it is unacceptable for every other girl. Her husband on the other hand, admits it is unacceptable, but would rather mind his own business. In her disappointment, she accuses her husband of being among the people who are 'spoiling' Nigeria with their indifference about the plight of the helpless. Her Motherist traits are further expanded in the way she is committed to Mama Amina's wellbeing, occasionally giving her money and at the same time encouraging her to be financially empowered.

A very significant subplot is the story of Mama and Papa Amina, the parents of Amina, whose intended marriage ignites the decision to protest. Papa Amina is stubborn and has very myopic views about women, thus his wife struggles to alleviate their stagnant financial situation. The trajectory of Mama Amina's victory over her husband's obdurate refusal to allow her work and earn income is one which she negotiates gradually, rather than forcefully. The couple is a muslim family from the Northern part of Nigeria, with a key emphasis on her submissiveness towards her husband. The first time they are shown together, we see how Mama Amina helplessly begs her husband to reconsider his decision to marry Amina to Alhaji. Her squatting position at his feet while he is seated majestically on a couch paints the picture that his authority over her is unquestioned. Not only is Mama Amina seated on the floor, she speaks quietly despite her state of severe unhappiness. "Papa Amina, what kind of good can come out of this?" she asks her husband who aggressively responds, "Good for the family. Can't you see how difficult it is to even feed?" This prompts her to remind him that she is a trained teacher. She offers to look for a job to relieve him of the financial burden. From their discussion, we gather that the whole family is reliant on him for sustenance, that Mama Amina is educated and willing to work but her husband forbids her from working, and that she needs his express permission to make decisions in practically all areas. This underscores her submissiveness and at the same time reveals her fear and helplessness.

Mama Amina's helpless state is revealed in many instances, especially when she has a minor automobile accident and is helped by Mama Ngozi whose arrival at the accident scene is timely. However, when after taking her home she will not stop wailing, Mama Ngozi is prompted to question the real reason behind her tears. It is at that point that she opens up about her husband's decision to marry Amina off. She is so frustrated by the situation that she tells Mama Ngozi she wishes she had been killed in the accident. This aspect of the film has similarities to the helplessness of Halima's adopted mother in *Dry* (2014). It mirrors the helpless state of many women when it comes to decision-making regarding their daughters' marriage in many traditions. In both films, the girls are betrothed to the men at very tender ages, before they are able to fully form their own personalities or identify what they want in a life partner. Their husbands are 'rich' men who would supposedly alleviate the family's state of poverty. The difference, however, is that in *Dry*, Halima's mother surrenders to her helplessness, she is carried away by immediate material benefits, not realising the gravity of their decision until it is too late. Mama Amina, on the other hand, is terrified by the very thought of her young daughter getting married and she reacts. She is educated and, we can conclude, more enlightened. For this reason, she makes an effort to negotiate with her husband and seeks help from her friends. In her case, she puts her daughter's needs above everything else. She is willing to work but is forbidden to do so by her husband. At the end of the day she finds a way to do so without their marriage crumbling. Looking at the pattern in both films, poverty is a common denominator, and so are ignorance and selfishness on the part of the fathers.

In Mama and Papa Amina's first scene together, Papa Amina is vehement about his decisions and insists that neither will she get a job, nor will Amina remain in their house. Alhaji will sponsor both Amina and her brother to go to school, he says to his wife. Mama Amina is devastated by the thought of her young daughter sleeping in an old man's bed and so she continues to plead with him. Prior to her parents' conversation Amina is oblivious of her imminent marriage. However, in that scene, she is shown hiding her tiny frame behind the thin curtain that separates the small living room from the bedroom, listening to every word her parents utter. She tearfully takes in the words—the stark reality of her life. This image of her reinforces the larger significance of her plight and the protest—a call to end the seizing of girls' innocence, the stealing of both their future and the actualisation of their potential. Papa Amina is both ignorant and greedy, which is demonstrated when he insists that Amina will be happy in

Alhaji's "big fine house" and will be travelling across the world. He scolds his wife for not being happy with the fact that despite Alhaji's status and wealth, he has decided to choose their daughter for a bride. Their poverty drives Amina's hurried marriage. It gets as bad as having no food at home and in such situations, Mama Amina's friends give her money and food. The support and encouragement she receives from her friends, who all have one form of business or another, emboldens her to eventually empower herself.

Very heart wrenching is the tête-à-tête Mama Amina shares with her daughter on the day Alhaji comes to take her away. There is a final plea for Amina who hopefully clings to her mother, while a melancholy score underpins the emotion of the scene. The scene recalls the moment in *Dry*, when upon realising she is getting married, Halima pleads with her mother to save her. Like Halima who secludes herself from her family on a dark night, Amina is seated alone at the edge of the bed in their sparsely decorated room. Not only is she alone, her head is bowed in dejection. Her mother quietly walks in, sits next to her, and says her name, "Amina", as she simultaneously pats her on the back, reassuringly. The unwillingness to let go is depicted in her actions and her words as she speaks to her daughter with solemn tenderness. Mama Amina makes an effort to reassure her daughter. Having surrendered to her husband's authority, she speaks to her daughter instead. She tells her that she acknowledges and understands her sadness, but that the situation is beyond her. "It is not my will that you go with them but your father thinks it's in your best interest", she admits. Her reassurance does not diminish Amina's pain and fear as she pleads desperately, "Mummy, save me!"

The scene is a deeply distressing one that demonstrates the confidence of a daughter in her mother, who feels helpless. The scene is one of the defining moments in the film. It demonstrates the emotions many girls have to go through as a result of traditions and their parents' moral blindness. The painful exchange takes place right before Amina is unceremoniously handed over to her proposed husband and his family who are anxiously waiting in the living room, separated only by the red curtain. The red curtain, which is the brightest property owned by Amina's parents, is an important prop and signifies their state of poverty. It is a thin piece of cloth that, in that moment, serves as a dividing line between Amina's innocence and the abuse to which she will be subjected.



Heart breaking mother-daughter scene before Amina is received by her groom

In a comforting turn of events, in tune with the comic vision of the film that assures a happy ending, Amina is literally rescued from the ‘hands’ of her husband and his relatives. This happens when Mama Ngozi and her cohorts waylay them upon their exit, threatening to call ‘area boys’ (touts), if they attempt to leave with Amina. Terrified, the would-be groom flees the scene without his bride. The women are visibly outraged by Alhaji’s shameless audacity to marry a child as young as Amina; one of the women confronts Alhaji with the information that she still bathes Amina and did so that morning. Her statement emphasises how reprehensible the act is and how premature marriage is for Amina. It is not clear how the situation is resolved between the bride and groom’s family; what we do know is that Amina is rescued from Alhaji and the chapter of her proposed marriage is closed as she remains with her parents.

Eventually, Mama Amina finds a way to liberate herself from her husband’s baseless restriction from working.. With the help of her friends, she buys a sewing machine and starts her sewing business. Upon seeing the machine, Papa Amina is initially agitated, but unexpectedly becomes cheerful when he realises that the business will not cost him anything. At that point, there is a drastic turnaround from someone who would have none of it, to someone who accepts and embraces her decision. Mama Amina, not knowing what to expect from her husband is initially cowed; however, her husband acknowledges the effort of her friends in making her

dream a reality. In his words, “Those your friends. Those women, they are real friends”. Their story ends on a happy note, with a message of patience, persistence and strong will, albeit Mama Amina has to compromise by taking up a conventionally domestic occupation, rather than using her professional qualification as a teacher.

Mama Amina is apparently more conditioned by tradition and religion than the rest of her friends who take the initiative to start the strike. She is nevertheless victorious in her will to contribute financially and alleviate the condition of her family. Her approach to victory is different from that of her audacious friends. Hers is a subtle and very patient form of negotiation. Through her actions, one better understands what Nnaemeka means when she says, “In this journey that is feminist engagement, we need to walk like the chameleon—goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views” (2004: 382). Mama Amina’s cautious, non-confrontational approach may have appeared weak and demeaning, but in the end, she gets what she wants most for herself (a teaching career seems not be her key aim). Her marriage remains intact and she earns the respect and support of her husband, she starts a new business to support her household, and most importantly, her daughter is not married off. All these successes, however, would have been unachievable without the efforts of her friends.

One of the most salient themes of the film is the power of collaboration, and this, as stressed above, is a key tenet of both Motherism and Nego-feminism. All through the film, the women act as strong pillars of support for Mama Amina. A deep unified sisterhood is formed in their efforts to stand up for their friend when she can’t stand on her own. Their support is seen in the selfless way her situation takes precedence over theirs. They not only sympathise with her, they scold her for not trying hard enough, encouraging her to empower herself. For example, in the scene where they meet up in Madam 12:30’s shop and she recounts the severity of her situation, stating that she does not know where her next meal will come from and further stating that she has given up hope of saving Amina, Madam 12:30 reprimands her by telling her that she cannot afford to simply give up. She speaks to her as she would her child:

Madam 12:30: You will fight for your child! Didn’t you give birth to her? Don’t you know that as things have happened this way, if anything happens to Amina, you will not be able to forgive yourself?

She further blames her for being idle, “Don’t you know that your husband’s behaviour is motivated by money?” Apparently, Mama Amina has been silent about her true situation until she reveals to them that her husband will not allow her to work. “My sister, you wouldn’t understand”, she says. “You see my husband, he believes a woman’s place is to sit at home and look after children”. The scene ends with the women, who themselves are not financially buoyant, supporting her in the small way they can—with cash and food.

In many instances, Catherine Acholonu’s Motherist theory and Obioma Nnaemeka’s Nego-feminism open up ways of reading the actions in the film, and in some instances, they merge. Acholonu’s proposal that “A Motherist hates to see others suffer, hates to kill, hates wars, hates oppression, injustice in all its forms” (1995:113) effectively glosses the actions of the women who take up the fight for justice for their friend’s daughter and thousands of other girls they do not know. This, in a nutshell, is what the narrative of *Wives on Strike* revolves around—sacrifices for the good of others. The strike that they embark on is not for their personal good, it is a battle they decided to fully commit to, ignoring the potential jeopardy it could cause to their marriages.

Obioma Nnaemeka, on the other hand, explains in broader terms how Nego-feminism is not comparable to a set of rules to which one refers for guidance, but describes an ability to handle unfavourable circumstances as they occur. She states that Nego-feminism “knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework” (2004: 378). This explanation illuminates the unusual strategy the women employ by attacking a societal and political issue with a domestic weapon. It explains the seeming lack of structure and strategy the women have in addressing the problem. However, despite their lack of strategy in a strike that begins spontaneously, they do not lack resoluteness and focus. They start with the aim of drawing their husbands’ attention, negotiating with them to join their voices to theirs and against the government. The men eventually support their wives, not because they particularly care about the plight of the young girls, but because they want their lives back in order. They realise how vehement the women are about not giving up until their demands are met. In the end, even power-drunk Senator Aniete lays down his guard by giving up his personal political ambition for the good of the girls when his wife does not give in.

A significant aspect of the narrative is the position and reactions of the men to the situation in which they suddenly find themselves. While the strike is going on, the group of perplexed husbands go through a series of casual, sometimes chaotic gatherings over drinks to reflect on the calamitous condition and to proffer a solution. We are presented with a case of confused men who are clueless about how to handle their current predicament, often resulting in a blame game about whose wife is at fault. Callistus, Madam 12:30's husband, who is the most devastated, never hesitates to pick a quarrel with Papa Ngozi, claiming that his wife started the 'club'. Papa Ngozi on the other hand, retorts by calling Callistus' wife a blind follower. Their actions contrast with those of the women who put up a united front, never arguing or quarrelling. The men, individually, employ various tactics to get their wives to forsake the strike. They begin with a militarised approach, but when that proves abortive, they resort to bribery and flattery which involves buying gifts and sweet-talking them. The women do not succumb to the various strategies the men employ, leading to a final surrender by the men.

The frustration gets so bad that Papa Ngozi, on one occasion, comes home drunk. At that point, it has become evident to him that he has lost his supposed masculine grip on his wife. However, despite several instances of disagreement with his wife within their home, he supports her without. He does not tolerate negative inferences about his wife from his friends. This is an example of Oboli's agenda for women to be portrayed respectably in films, and to be respected by their husbands. In many ways, Oboli deliberately negates some of the stereotypes of women presented in Nollywood films. These include the image of being lazy, quarrelsome and idle housewives. It is a move away from the ridiculing of women in films such as in *Mr and Mrs* (2012) and *Ije* (2012). Adewoye, Odusanya et al, in their study of these films conclude that women are "portrayed in the films as sex objects and objects of erotic gaze for men" (2014:103). This is clearly not the case in *Wives on Strike*.

The initial response by the husbands is characteristic of men who have been socialised into believing they are in charge of their wives, or worse still, possess them. Although they do not take drastic action like threatening to leave their wives or marry other wives, Madam 12:30's husband and his friend, Bosco, do attempt to patronise prostitutes. This fails, however, when they are scammed by one who is also involved in the strike, and takes their money. The film shows the humbling process that the men, who have been nurtured into having autocratic tendencies, go through. They go from being in charge to begging and buying gifts for their wives

to bribe them for ‘cheat sex’, when all else fails. The objective of the women is largely realised when the men join them to seek government intervention through the media. They grant media interviews calling for the government to respond to their wives. When they are approached by newsmen during one of their evening hangouts, they offload their frustrations, stressing that they are ‘tired’ as they take turns to speak:

Bosco: We are begging. We are tired of this strike! What is it?

Callistus: Help us tell the government we are tired! Please help us ask them! Don’t they have wives? Is this situation not in their own homes? We are tired! Our wives have refused to have sex with us. They should help us consider the issue properly. We are tired.

Papa Ngozi: My wife and I have quarrelled so many times about this issue. Government, I beg you in the name of God, let’s consider this issue very well. What these women are saying is not a bad thing. Let’s allow our daughters to be mature before giving them out in marriage...

They finally address the crux of the strike which they had shied away from acknowledging or even discussing. All the while, their grievances have been about the effects the strike has on them. They focus on these effects for so long that they do not stop to consider what the women are actually saying or how they can productively collaborate with them. When the government eventually announces that they’ve amended the law, their jubilation cannot be contained as they all speedily find their way back to their various homes, to their wives.

The striking women, notably, draw attention to the paucity of women in positions of leadership and power in the Nigerian government. Madam 12:30 in her comic way joyfully cheers on the strike stating that men make up the majority of lawmakers. This is true, even though women make up about half of the nation’s population. Several political scholars have studied women’s involvement in politics especially since Nigeria finally became a democratic nation 1999. Damilola Taiye Agbalajobi’s study, *Women’s Participation and Political Process in Nigeria* (2010), asserts that the concept of gendered division of labour is applied to women’s participation in politics, thus reducing active participation of women in politics. The women’s strike is a protest for social change. Their actions are reflections of Nnaemeka’s assertion that: “African women’s engagement still nurtures the compromise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society” (2003: 381). For them, sex becomes a weapon, and as mentioned earlier, it is a universal weapon of negotiation that has been explored in films,

literature and indeed in real life. At the end of *Wives on Strike*, the women are not only victorious, they are respected. They are respected for their boldness, commitment, selflessness and perseverance. Papa Ngozi acknowledges his wife's wisdom. He openly declares his respect for her choices and individuality as a woman. Oboli is able to use the very cultural and societal impediments that normally work against women, to exalt them. She portrays an image of women who rise above challenges and pressures, bringing men along with them in their call for a safer society for young girls.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore how, with the steady rise of women filmmakers in Nollywood, women are being represented in their films and how African feminist theories help to understand the films under discussion. Attempts to apply specifically African theories, however, occasionally raise problems, such as the divergent exposures and experiences of the filmmakers themselves, as well as globalisation which permits increasingly borderless ideologies. As discussed in the introductory chapters of this work, African feminists seek African feminist theories to address African issues. However, some scholars challenge the possibility of this approach in a globalized world. As an example, Naomi Nkealah (2006) likens the rejection of Western feminism simply because it is Western, to one “saying that English is not a language to be used in Africa because it was brought to Africa and imposed on African peoples by European colonizers” (2006:137).

In the second chapter, I discuss the similarities that exist between African feminist theories with regards to fundamental principles, such as communality, male inclusion, complementarity of sexes, mutual understanding and tolerance. Inclusion of men in emancipating women and bringing about equality is a very key approach proposed by many African feminisms, especially the main theories I use in this study: Motherism and Nego-feminism. Similarly, contemporary African author and feminist, Adichie, speaks for the importance of the participation of men in emancipating women and bringing about true equality. She speaks forcefully about the inclusion of men in feminism in a recent interview on *The Daily Show* (2018). In an interview with Trevor Noah, she asserts that “men have to be on board” and argues that “you can change women all you want, if you don’t change men, nothing changes...because we share the world”. She also adds, interestingly, that “men are more likely to listen to men”. As egoistic as that makes men look, Adichie’s point of view is that with more men like Barack Obama on board, actualisation of equality will progress more rapidly. Without a doubt, African feminists’ emphasis is on men as equal partners in the feminist movement and this emanates from the communal society that is part of African histories, such as the dual-sex systems discussed earlier, where women and men work as equal and important participants in moving the family and communities forward.

African feminists, both new and old, agree on one thing: the importance of having men on board if there is to be a paradigm shift in gender equity. This applies to feminists who live not only in Africa, but around the world. While I agree on the importance of inclusion and the emancipation of women in economic, political, social and, indeed, all spheres of human endeavour, I believe that women must themselves jettison all inhibitions that tie them down. They must look beyond negative stereotypes that surround the term 'feminism'. Feminism must be seen as a humanistic ideology which has as its crux social, political and economic elevation of women as equal humans. Many women in Africa specifically, and around the world in general, still avoid being associated with the term feminism. Deborah Cameron notes that "then, as now, one reason for women's reluctance to call themselves feminists was their awareness of the negative stereotype associated with the label". She asserts that feminism "has a long history of being used to disparage women as dour, unfeminine man-haters" (2018: 1-2). I conclude that women must themselves be oriented towards understanding feminism as a political movement that is not anti-male or anti-family but as a movement which seeks equity. Once women themselves accept the idea of feminism, then a giant leap has been taken. According to Cameron, a year after Adichie's 'We should all be feminists', the result of a survey conducted in the United Kingdom suggests that women "were not so sure". She states that most women agreed that "feminism was still needed" and about half of them said "they would not call themselves feminist". A rather interesting revelation is that one in five women considered the word an "insult" (2018: 1). Enlightening women that feminism is a non-antagonistic, non-violent, non-egoistic movement that seeks equity for women is an important and progressive way to reduce stereotypes that surround the term and to make it more inclusive.

African feminist postulations apply to all the films analysed to varying degrees. For example, following the principle of tolerance and mutual understanding, one of the most tolerant characters in all the films analysed is a man—Lanre, in the film *Keeping my Man*. This is not to disregard other characters and the degree of effort they put into making their relationships work. However, I choose Lanre because he is denied sex repeatedly, and this happens in a social context where such an occurrence is gravely unacceptable. His is not the situation that occurs in *Wives on Strike* where the women openly declare their purpose for boycotting sex. In his own case, he is kept in the dark as to why the woman he loves despises physical affection and denies him intimacy, in spite of all his efforts. He exhibits a desire to understand his wife and make

things work despite the initial antagonism from her. Lanre's portrayal negates the macho stereotypes of men as stern and unromantic with no time for family as seen in many Nollywood films, including Rasheed in the same film. One cannot claim that Sanda makes a serious effort to rewrite the story of women; however, my reading of the film suggests a message of negotiation and no ego, as Nnaemeka Obioma describes it in her work: the need for dual effort and inclusion of men, sacrifices and tolerance in making marriages or any kind of relationship work.

In *Flower Girl*, a romantic comedy, the vulnerability of a young woman, Kemi, is laid bare. Within the expectations of the genre, we see the character development of a naïve girl in love, who was once manipulative and insecure, growing into a woman who, while in love again, is now more mature, trusting and patient. She grows to understand the futility of a forced a relationship and the importance of trust, love and mutual effort in a relationship. Motherism as a conceptual framework is used in different ways to analyse and understand the characters, such as the warmth and nurturing tendencies of her parents.

Dry is the most profound, thought-provoking film under consideration. It is a socially relevant film that creates awareness where there is little or none. Because of the focus of the film, there is a wide array of ways women are represented: strong, weak, complex and subdued characters. The protagonist, however, is a dominant female force who rises through various life-threatening challenges, overcomes them and channels her energy to helping others. Amongst other things, we see how the film exposes viewers to the paradoxical relationship between the West (Aberystwyth) and a rural community in Nigeria. This paradox lies in the wide developmental gap that nevertheless suggests similarities in human experience. This includes teenage pregnancy, love and indeed the humane characteristics of Zara's mother whose love and humane-ness, as exhibited through Zara, is borderless. A salient message to take away is the strength and willpower of women to navigate difficult circumstances which the society forces on them by virtue of being female. In reality, not all women surmount the challenges and Linus depicts this clearly. However, some do and if anything, Linus creates female characters whose memories will linger and endure. This is not just because of the outcome of events, but because of characters whose experiences, like Halima's, are poignant reflections of the effects of patriarchy and tradition.

In the final chapter, Omoni Oboli takes an unconventional curve with *Wives on Strike* and this starkly shows, as with *Dry*, the conscious effort women are making to make an impact on

their societies through films. She does not represent women as human beings only to be pitied and patronised, but also as emancipated people, unbounded by class, who take bold steps to change the course of the societal degeneration. She uses uneducated market women to champion the cause for change. Motherism and Nego-feminism are both frameworks through which we may examine the ways in which the film's striking women negotiate for their demands to be met. These theories encourage an approach that takes context into account in solving the manifold problems that African women are faced with, and, moreover, in a way that tries to avoid destroying relationships.

It is clear that women are increasingly making an effort to use their platforms as female filmmakers to address social issues that are often swept under the carpet. Of the four films analysed, two are overtly socio-politically relevant films intended to draw the consciousness of viewers to unpleasant and damaging situations. The films aim not only at commercial viability, they also specifically address relevant and controversial issues. In all of the films, the plight and experiences of women are the key concerns, framed in different ways through narrative focus and genre. These films give deeper insights into women's experiences told from the point of view of women, including, love, romance, sexuality, health issues, friendship, education, marriage, polygamy and child marriage.

Nonetheless, men still remain dominant in the industry and women filmmakers are, at this point, simply scratching the surface. Only a handful of women are making a significant effort to chart a different course in terms of representations that desist from stereotyping, and their efforts are not yet having a major impact. Linus and Oboli, notably, have proven that it is possible to choose roads less travelled and turn unlikely stories into commercially successful films, without compromising the message.

Given the huge volume of Nollywood production, there are inevitably several avenues of research that remain wide open, but where the researcher will need to surmount ongoing obstacles of access and distribution. So, for example, I had hoped to include one of Nollywood's most versatile female filmmakers, Tope Oshin, with whom I was in contact for a brief period. Unfortunately, she explained, her films were not available for either private or public purchase. They were exclusive to Ebony Life TV. What that meant was that I had to wait until airing times on Ebony Life to watch her films, impracticable for someone who was anxious to make progress on her research. These problems of film distribution pertain extensively in Africa, of course, and

the task of widening affordable and easier access to African film remains ongoing. A related area of research would include following Lindiwe Dovey's lead with regard to the culture of film festivals (2015), and how these might be exploited to disseminate the rapidly developing work of Nollywood female filmmakers. So, too, audience perception of, and reception to, the representation of women in films produced by Nollywood filmmakers, male and female, is worth serious exploration. Does the gendered identity of the filmmakers make a difference in the viewing experience of women in the audience, for example? If yes, then what and how? Are women filmmakers contributing in substantial and radical ways to the perceptions of women's multiple identities, including their sexualities, their personal and professional aspirations, their ways of being in an increasingly, if problematically, interconnected world? What I have attempted in this thesis is to join and extend the conversation.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanie_Linus.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omoni_Oboli.

Filmography

Primary Filmography

Dry (2014). Directed by Stephanie Linus. Produced by Next Page Productions, Nigeria and Wales.

Flower Girl (2013). Directed by Michelle Bello. Produced by Blue Star Entertainments, Lagos, Nigeria.

Keeping my Man (2013). Directed by Rukky Sanda. Produced by Rukky Sanda Studios, Lagos, Nigeria.

Wives on Strike (2016). Directed by Omoni Oboli. Produced by Omoni Oboli, Lagos Nigeria.

Secondary Filmography

Acrimony (2018). Directed by Tyler Perry. Produced by Tyler Perry. (Atlanta, U.S.A).

Anchor Baby (2010). Directed by Lonzo Nzekwe. Produced by Lonzo Nzekwe and Jeremy Hood. (Nigeria and Canada).

Aviva's Pearl (2016). Directed by Rukky Sanda. (Lagos, Nigeria).

Chasing Rainbows (2016). Directed by Daniel Emeke Oriahi. Produced by Ijeoma Agu. (Lagos, Nigeria)

Chi-Raq (2015). Directed by Spike Lee. Produced by Spike Lee. (Chicago, U.S.A).

Desperate Housegirls (2013). Directed by Desmond Elliot. Produced by Uduak Isong. (Nigeria).

Desperate Housewives (2004-2012). Produced by Charles Skouras III, Stephaie Hagen. Alexanra Cunningham, Jamie Gorenberg, Kevin Etten, Tracey Stern, Patty Lin and Annie Weisman.

Domitila (1996). Directed by Zeb Ejiro. Produced by Zeb Ejiro.

Feathered Dreams (2012). Directed by Andrew Rozhen. Produced by Austeen Eboka, Michael Maltsev, Igot Maron, Philipp Rozhen. (Nigeria,Ukraine).

First Lady (2015) Directed by Omoni Oboli. Produced by Omoni Oboli (Nigeria).

Half of a Yellow Sun (2013). Directed by Biyi Bandele. Produced by Andrea Calderwood and Gail Egan. (Nigeria).

Ije (2010). Directed by Chineze Anyaene. Produced by Xandria Productions (Nigeria and United States).

Knocking on Heaven's Door (2014). Directed by Desmond Elliot. Produced by Emem Isong. (Nigeria).

Living in Bondage (1992). Directed by Chris Obi Rapu. Produced by Kenneth Nnebue (Nigeria).

Moolaade (2004). Directed by Ousmane Sembène. Produced by Ousmane Sembène and Thierry Lenouvel.

Mr and Mrs (2012). Directed by Kechukwu Onyeka. Produced by Chinewe Egwuagu. (Nigeria).

North East (2016). Directed by Muyiwa Aluko. Produced by Watts Camera Action Production. (Lagos, Nigera).

October 1 (2014). Directed by Kunle Afolayan. Produced by Kunle Afolayan (Unuted States).

Okafors Law (2016). Directed by Omoni Oboli. Produced by Omoni Oboli. (Lagos, Nigeria).

Oleku (1997). Directed by Tunde Kelani. Produced by Mainframe Productions

Pretty Woman (1990). Directed by Garry Marshall. Produced by Arnon Milchan, Steven Reuther and Cary W. Goldstein. (United States)

Sobi's Mystic (2017). Directed by Biodun Stephen. Produced by Biodun Stephen (Lagos, Nigeria).

Swing of Emotion (2012). Directed by Ifeanyi Ogbonna, Produced by Onyekachukwu Afube (Lagos, Nigeria).

The Figurine (2009). Directed by Kunle Afolayan. Produced by Golden Effects. (Nigeria).

The Real Side Chics (2017). Directed by Chris Eneaji. Produced by Udezeh Oyinye (Lagos, Nigeria).

The Third Chance (2017). Directed by Moris Sesay. Produced by Moris Sessay (Nigeria).

The Wedding Date (2005). Directed by Clare Kiliner. Produced by Jessica Bendinger, Mairi Bett, Paul Brooks, Michelle Chydzik Sowa and Nathalie Marciano.

Violated (1996). Directed by Amaka Igwe (Lagos, Nigeria). Produced by Ego Boyo and Charles Igwe.

Water (2005). Directed by Deepa Metha. Produced by David Hamilton. (India).

Wives on Strike: The Revolution. (2017). Directed by Omoni Oboli. Produced by Omoni Oboli. (Nigeria).

