

RE-IMAGING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE IN NOLLYWOOD CINEMA: EXAMINING TONGUES OF FIRE AND WIVES ON STRIKE

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ABSTRACT

Much as the goal of feminist film critics is to press for change by advocating the reconstruction of (mis)representations of female power and femininity in cinema, the onus lies on female and feminist filmmakers to create feminist consciousness amongst viewers on the dangers of stereotypes of powerlessness and denigrating identity that downplay woman's true strength and identity. Woman's emotional, sexual and physical power has often been ironically misconstrued with identities of the voiceless and powerless. Thus, the argument to deconstruct the mundane stereotype and re-image the woman's identity through the woman's film, as counter cinema, puts feminist filmmakers at a vantage position to tell women's stories from a woman's point of view. This desire to correct the (mis)representations of women in cinema is derived from the notion that women will better tell their own stories themselves. However, some male filmmakers have consciously or inadvertently aligned with this feminist ideology in co-creating women's empowerment in cinema by projecting female characters with admirable courage, power, resistance, and enduring resilience.

This study examines how female power and resistance are constructed in the selected films. The set objectives are: 1) to change the mundane narratives of negative female stereotypes often replicated in cinema, 2) to examine how female power and resistance are represented in the films under study, and 3) to view female resistance within a patriarchal space. This study adopts the analytical methodological approach in the appraisal of two Nollywood films: *Tongues of Fire*, and *Wives on Strike*. Analyses of these films reveal a new dimension to women's empowerment and resistance within a patriarchal milieu, and the positive results female power can produce when explored. This study concludes that re-imaging women's empowerment in cinema is cardinal to feminine power and identity within a patriarchal society. This work therefore recommends that Nollywood female filmmakers give a feminist perspective to women's identity and representation in cinema. It also advocates that male filmmakers be co-creators of this new and emerging identity.

Keywords: Women, Power, Identity, Cinema, Representation

Introduction

The representation of women in cinema is of great concern to feminist film critics. Issues bordering on gender stereotyping, objectification of women, imaging of women, gender identity, women's power and their human rights, etc are crucial in feminist discourses whether in cinema, drama, literature or art. Critical comments by feminist theorists and critics are fundamental to feminist discourses. Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, according to Modleski, is often regarded as the "founding document of feminist film theory;"

and as Constance Penley observed, it is important for its provision of “the theoretical grounds for the rejection of Hollywood and its pleasures” (as cited in Freeland).

Patriarchy, which is a system of male dominance, has often posed a challenge to women’s access to power and their fundamental human rights. Collins English Dictionary defines Patriarchy as “a system in which men have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group.” Therefore, it is natural for women to display some forms of resistance in order to achieve their goals. Resistance becomes a potent weapon because “although African feminism advocates cooperation and power sharing, sometimes, the male factor (dominance and subjugation) may override feminine innocence,” (as cited in God’spresence, 2014/2015, p. 219). Women’s resistance and exploitation of their innate power becomes a necessity to prevent them from succumbing to patriarchal pressures that might put them at a disadvantaged position.

Methodology

The study is foregrounded by the concept of counter cinema and theory of deconstruction. It adopted the analytic methodology in the appraisal of films selected. It is believed that stereotyped roles of women in cinema are a creation from a male’s perspective, thus feminist film critics like Claire Johnston have advocated counter cinema as alternative narrative. Johnston’s counter cinema argues on the role of the camera in the manipulation and misrepresentation of women’s true identity and image in cinema, and advocates women’s cinema which must tell women’s stories from a woman’s point of view because the camera cannot capture the reality of women’s oppression, thus “new meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeoisie cinema within the text of the film” (Johnston, 1976, p214).

Theory of deconstruction does not necessarily mean to destroy but to reconstruct, to re-create something or an ideology. Deconstruction, according to Presidential Lectures, means “to undo” which is related to “analysis” thus “a deconstructive reading is a reading which analyzes the specificity of a text’s critical difference from itself” (as cited in God’spresence, 2018, p.103). However, Catherine Turner (2016) explains deconstruction as being “concerned with countering the idea of a transcendental origin or natural referent” and it also requires “the interrogation of these competing interpretations that combine to produce meaning” (as cited in God’spresence, 2018, p.103).

In the context of this study, deconstruction will be viewed from the perspective of the alternative and experimental narrative given to women’s empowerment in the films under study

to counter and undo the stereotyped representations that have been perpetuated in Nollywood. It has been observed that issues of “male dominance and sexual exploitation of women” put women at a disadvantaged position because “these media images carry to extremes long-standing cultural views of masculinity as aggressive and femininity as passive” (Wood, 1994, p.36). Thus, the representation of women in cinema is distorted through negative stereotypes because “men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender” (Wood, 1994, p 31).

Film Analysis:

Synopsis

Wives on Strike is in two parts. This work concentrates on part one, which focuses on child bride as a prevalent phenomenon in Africa. Directed and produced by a female, Omoni Oboli, it tells the story of some unassuming market women led by Mama Ngozi (Omoni Oboli) who see the helplessness of their friend, Mama Amina (Ufuoma McDermott), as she watches her 13 year-old daughter, Amina, who is about to be married off to an Alhaji by her father. The women see this development as an opportunity to fight against child marriage since all the men, especially Papa Ngozi decline from helping to speak to Amina’s father to stop the marriage. These aggrieved market women comprising Mama Ngozi, Madam 12.30 (Uche Jombo-Rodriguez) and two other market women decide to “lock up” their sexual obligations to their husbands. The men feel frustrated by this “club” formed by the women, and in the bid to satisfy their urge, Cali (Julius Agu) and his colleague turn to commercial sex workers who also deny them their sex services in solidarity with the other striking women. Helpless, the men are compelled to succumb to the women’s resistance against child marriage, as another woman and media personality (Chioma Akpotha) takes the battle to the global stage through her television programme, thereby making these women international stars in winning the war against child bride.

Conversely, *Tongues of Fire* is a film produced by a male. It tells the story of survival and fight for women’s right in a polygamous family. Clara (Hilda Dokubo) who is the second wife of Chief Fredrick (Amaechi Muonagor) does not see the need to be silent when she could use her tongue to fight for her rights and recognition in her matrimonial home. Being the mother of three males and one female, she feels at advantage over her mate, Chinyere (Rachael Oniga), who has only girls. Set in a patriarchal culture where females are regarded as mere commodities

to be sold to the highest bidder as wives, Clara prides herself as mother to the heir apparent to her husband's wealth and inheritance. Her sons become unruly as they fight with weapons leading to the death of their uncle, Mazi Njoku (Obi Poly) and injury of his son, Chukwuma (Mberede Kingsley).

In line with tradition, Mazi Njoku's wife, Uloaku (Juliet Anuma) is bequeathed to Chief Fred as wife. Saddled with the burden of three wives Fred's problems escalate as quarrels and fights become unbearable for him and he dies of heart attack, while Clara seizes the occasion to confiscate properties and documents of her late husband knowing full well of the culture that will not let women share the properties of their late husband. At the end, Clara attempts committing suicide upon her realization that her 'inherited mate,' Uloaku, whom late Chief Fred refused to have any intimate relationship with while alive, is now pregnant for her first son K.C (Austine Uzoegbu Prince). Fortunately, Nelly (Estella Etimbuk Out), Clara's only daughter, comes to her rescue resulting to a family reconciliation and reunion.

Female Resistance and Patriarchy

In *Tongues of Fire*, although Clara is made to succumb to pressure yet, she epitomizes female power of resistance in a patriarchal space. It is important to note that despite the pressure from the Igwe and his council of chiefs for Clara to give up her husband's properties and documents, her tongue was not immobile. Her vociferous posture and resilience bewildered them all as she insisted on her rights. She tells the women's associated her reasons for taking that step:

We are all women, and you understand the tradition very well. When a woman is believed, she is accused of killing the husband, and then she is allowed to wallow in her solitude, and then cry herself until she is tired. I was not ready to be in that position. I was not ready to be sorry. So when I noticed that the inevitable has happened, eh, I could not wake up Frederick anymore, I'm not God, what did I have to do? I acted immediately. I took what was mine. And I am not sorry for it. I do not hold anybody any apology.

Clara capitalizes on the norms of giving power to the male gender in African culture to stand both for her right and that of her children in her matrimonial home, having given birth to three males as against her mate, Chinyere who has girls only. She was represented as a rival and arch enemy of her mate, saying: "it is only a foolish woman who does not know that these

things are strangers in their father's house. Are these children? Very soon people will come and buy them all off. These things are for sale. Are these children?" It is obvious that the filmmaker produced the film from a patriarchal cultural perspective typical of African culture that sees inheritance as the exclusive preserve of the male while the female is married off. Much as the male filmmaker tries to portray the helplessness of women in a culture that denigrates womanhood, he still demonstrates female power through Clara.

However, in *Wives on Strike*, the plight of the female gender in a culture that is oppressive is represented in a more deplorable manner through child marriage. Thanks to the market women led by mama Ngozi whose wish for a new definition and identity of womanhood created a platform to resist policies that are patriarchal in nature. Mama Ngozi, who is worried about the nonchalance of their men on this disturbing issue, tells Amina's mother: "I don't understand how your husband can't see this matter the way it truly is."

Mama Amina and her friends, the market women cannot fathom the decision of Papa Amina in wanting to give out a 13- year- old Amina in marriage, while full grown women are all over the place looking for a marriage partner. Madam 12:30 queries why "a man wants to marry a thirteen year old that hasn't even developed breasts?" She explains one of the challenges of child marriage as urine leakage resulting to Vesicovaginal fistula, (**VVF**), making it a death sentence for these children. Having understood the enormity of the plight of Amina in particular and the child- brides in general, Madam 12:30 reacts: "Mama Ngozi, this matter is making me upset," she continues "I'm even angry at my husband now as if he's part of committing this abomination."

Madam 12:30 views child marriage as an abominable act and this propelled these women into sex strike that engulfed all the women because they see all men including their husbands who have refused to prevent their fellow man from this inhuman act, as perpetrators of this 'abomination.' Of course, the only understanding Papa Amina has, like other men, is that, giving Amina to Alhaji as wife would alleviate the poverty in the family. This kind of discrimination against the female gender is what feminist critics kick against because it fosters male dominance and gender inequality. This male domination is seen in form of "discrimination, violence and the denial of certain rights which consequently has placed women as subordinates to men" (Adaji and Gowon, 2011, p.193).

Female Power and Resistance in *Wives on Strike* and *Tongues of Fire*

Female power and resistance are prominent factors that helped the women achieve their goals in both films. Clara, in *Tongues of Fire* exhibits power in a dimension that beats the wits of both the males and females. Her resilience as evidence in her speech coupled with an inner spirit of determination and self worth aided her in pulling down and deconstructing male hegemony to establish female presence. Clara is a character that is proud to be a woman regardless of the stumbling blocks and unsavouring conditions that custom and tradition holds for women. She knows what it takes to challenge such traditions and she is ready for a confrontation, explaining that she holds no apology for who she is: “it is not my fault that at every minute, I use my number 6. It is also not my faults that while people are thinking and planning softly, I just act. What I do is to protect what is mine.”

It is glaring that Clara’s power of resistance lies in her understanding of the fact that strategizing and taking people unawares puts her step ahead of others. And she does that without remorse or self criticism which most women allow to strip them of their innate strength. She also realizes the power of her tongue as her source of strength which she would not let any man, not even her husband to hush: Clara: “Why should I shut up? Why won’t I shout? Why can’t I talk? What is all these rubbish?” Clara realizes the need for women to speak up just as she tells her husband about Chinyere, her mate, that: “I cannot sit down here and begin to discuss issues with a woman who cannot talk in public.”

In *Wives on Strike*, the market women decided to exhibit their power collectively to make remarkable impact by urging themselves to resist child marriage even if their husbands would not help them. Mama Amina tells her fellow women her helplessness in trying to resist her husband’s decision for Amina’s marriage, but Madam 12:30 tells her: “you shouldn’t just give up like that” and also “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? I can’t lie, you are also to blame.”

Women Changing the Stereotypes: A New Dimension of Female Power and Resistance in Nollywood.

It is interesting to note that male partnership as co-creators of women’s empowerment is evident in *Tongues of Fire* thereby changing the stereotypes. In *Wives on Strike*, Omoni originated a new narrative in Nollywood cinema where at the end of the film, women are not punished for being vocal or assertive. The solidarity and resilience of the women created a platform for women’s voices to be heard within their communities, spreading to the media, and making them

global actors before the very eyes of those who oppress them. They were able to convey their pains, desires, message, struggles, their fight and resistance to the watching world.

It is interesting to note that women's power is hidden from them by the same men who make them feel powerless. Despite Clara's pride of having male children as against Chinyere's daughters, the council of elders headed by the Igwe realize the power of women as he corrects the notion that "sons are a pride to the home but daughters are the builders of the home." This lays credence to my claim that the family is built up by the female, the home space where the male prides himself as head. This pride of place symbolizes women's empowerment in a space where they are often erroneously regarded as strangers who will soon be sold off through marriage.

However, findings from researches on women's representation in films generally and Nollywood in particular earthed the following: "that women are vastly underrepresented in film, and when they are featured, their characters tend to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes;" and also "existing research finds that some of the lessons they offer for women and girls can be disempowering" thus it is assumed that "Nollywood teaches viewers that women should not pursue power and, if they do, it will come at a high price" (OAK foundation, pp.4-5).

To deconstruct negative stereotypes and re-image women's empowerment requires women to tell their own stories as Oboli has done which aligns with Maureen Blackwood and Martina Attille's assertion that black women "must be the ones who define the areas of importance in (their) lives: work toward the break-down of 'mainstream' convention and popular assumptions perpetuated by existing forms of cinema and television" (as cited in Ukadike, 2013, p.69). It is important to note that Oboli has used *Wives on Strike* as counter cinema to deconstruct the stereotyped perpetuated by male filmmakers because they will always tell their stories from a male's point of view just as Ogunleye observed that the representation of women in Nollywood is "figments of the imagination of men" and a "pure male construct" (2005,p131).

Summary and Conclusion

This work examines how women's power is constructed in two Nollywood films, *Wives on Strike* and *Tongues of Fire* to see a new dimension of female empowerment and resistance within a patriarchal culture. The work situates female resistance within the contexts of child marriage, the status of women and challenges of females in a polygamous family. This work has viewed the role of male filmmakers as co-creators of female power through the film

Tongues of Fire. The contributions of female filmmakers in re-imaging female empowerment and resistance have been made evident in Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike*.

Findings have shown that the women in both films are represented as potent forces that can cause social change. This study finds out that women's strength lies in their **collectiveness** and solidarity as seen in *Wives on Strike* and in their ability to speak up and stand for their rights as evident in *Tongues of Fire*. This study suggests that women should not be afraid to speak up, and should consolidate in their strength to resist because in togetherness and solidarity, in that spirit of sisterhood and collectivity lies their power and victory. Therefore, counter cinema should serve as a medium for deconstructing the dominant ideology of powerlessness that pervades the cinema screen and to re-image women's empowerment so as to provide "a viable alternative to the rigid hierarchically structures of male-dominated cinema" (Johnston, 1976, p 217).

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