

Self-Affirmative Discourse on the Depiction of Female Sexuality in Nollywood

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Abstract

The study was carried out to determine how female sexuality is depicted in Nollywood and explored reasons for the depiction, albeit stereotypical. This research was anchored on genderlect and muted group theories. The researchers adopted library research method. The researchers did a review of essays, research works and media commentaries of scholars, essayists and commentators on the depiction of female sexuality in Nollywood. Findings showed that majority of Nollywood films represent female sexuality in stereotypical and debatable forms. The findings also showed that the representation of women in Nollywood has not witnessed any radical departure from the traditional pre-conceived roles of women in societies. The researchers, therefore, recommended among others, that the orientation, skill and capacity of Nollywood producers be strengthened in projecting balanced views of female sexuality themes as this would contribute to reducing stereotypical perception of women.

Keywords: Female Sexuality, Gender, Nollywood Films, Sexism, Stereotyping, Women, Women in Nollywood

Introduction

The global entertainment market topped \$100 billion for the first time ever in 2019, box office made \$42.2 billion globally and home/mobile entertainment accounts for \$58.8 billion worldwide (Escandon, 2020). The growing film industry of Nigeria, globally referred to as Nollywood (Ejiogu, 2021) contributes to box office successes. The box office figures above indicate the popularity and influence of the film industry. Film began at the end of the nineteenth century as a technological novelty...it was also almost instantly a true mass medium in the sense that it quite quickly reached a very large proportion of populations, even in rural areas. As a mass medium, film was partly a response to the 'invention' of leisure – time out of work – and an answer to the demand for affordable and (usually) respectable ways of enjoying free time for the whole family (McQuail, 2010).

The global successes of films have other impacts on society, including how subjects and themes are framed, portrayed and accepted by society. A number of analysts are of the opinion that mass media, in all forms, have some form of influence on public knowledge, perception and opinion, hence the presentation of themes and subjects by the mass media should not be ignored. Perceptions, attitudes and beliefs are cultivated via media exposure (Aromona, 2016). According to McQuail (2010, p. 13), "mass media are for most people the main channel of cultural representation and expression and the primary source for

images of social reality and materials for forming and maintaining social identity.” To clarify further, McQuail (2010) posits that “many media effects theory and research tend to focus on the potentially harmful social and cultural effects of the most popular forms of content, especially those that involve representations of sex and violence and on media influence on public knowledge and opinion.”

Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya & Osunkunle (2019) state that “critics of Nollywood, especially gender activists, have challenged its predominant, if not exclusive portrayal of women for its narrowly traditional occupational and domestic roles and images.” These critics bother that the media has the power to affect what the audience should “think about, know about and feel about” as propounded in the agenda setting theory of media. While stereotypical portrayal of women in any form cannot be justified, it would be helpful to understand the contributions of genderlect theory in explaining the stereotypical representation of women in Nollywood. Further, in correlating this paper’s findings on the stereotypical portrayal of women in Nollywood, muted group theory explains why women’s voices and other marginalised groups are muted or ignored. Nollywood is a male dominated industry which may explain why women’s voices are unheard or language structure men-determined. It is on this basis that this study was carried out to determine the depiction of female sexuality in Nollywood.

An Overview of Nollywood

The term 'Nollywood' was coined by the *New York Times* journalist, Norimitsu Onishi in 2002 when he observed film-making activity in Lagos, Nigeria. The term mirrors two of the most famous areas of film production: Hollywood in the US and Bollywood in India's Bombay (Igwe, 2015). Nollywood refers to “a popular epithet for the Nigerian film industry, the second-largest film industry after India’s Bollywood. ‘Nollywood’ is a derivation of both ‘Bollywood,’ a nickname for the Indian film industry and ‘Hollywood,’ the former centre of production for movies in the United States (Foster, 2022). However, not all stakeholders agree with the name Nollywood. Some are of the opinion that the name is a further colonisation of Nigeria. “...detractors say that the term, which originated with people outside of Nigeria has a connotation with the country’s past as a colony of imperialist nations (Foster, 2022). Others note that “Nollywood” suggests that the Nigerian film industry is a carbon of ‘Bollywood’ and ‘Hollywood’ and negates its achievements and cultural identity...Several filmmakers, including Kunle Afolayan and Tunde Kelani, have stated that the term ignores a prolific period in Nigerian film history before the phrase appeared in Western media in the 2000s.” It is important to state that mainstream film production in Nigeria predates the 1960s and 1970s (Okon, 2009). The video film industry is an important private sector player in the Nigerian economy (Asemah & Edegoh, 2013).

In a study conducted by Onuzulike (2007), cited in Usaini, Chilaka & Okorie (2017), it was discovered that “Nigerian films (Nollywood) are deeply rooted in the Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life.” Quoting Owens-Ibie (1998), Chimbuto (2015) notes that “the history of film or cinema in Nigeria dates back to 1903 when the first motion pictures were reportedly screened for the first time in Lagos at the Glover Memorial Hall. The films screened at this time were

imported from overseas.” The influence and impact of Nollywood is far-reaching, including the African continent. In his doctoral thesis, Chimbuto (2015) posits that “Nollywood film industry is fast becoming social, cultural and economic phenomenon among Malawian audiences. Every year, Nollywood actors visit Malawi and some Malawi print media have columns dedicated to Nollywood. According to unofficial statistics carried out by this study, nine out of every ten film enthusiasts in Malawi’s rural areas are Nollywood fanatics and at least seven out of ten people in the urban areas frequently watch Nollywood films. The films are more popular than both Hollywood and Bollywood films.” Esan (2008) who carried out an audience study based on a sample of UK Nollywood viewers. Esan’s study revealed that (UK) audiences found that the film (Nollywood) stories provide a link to their cultural heritage. Esan (2008) argued that the respondents believed that Nollywood films provide a platform for them to socialise. According to Nigeria’s National Film & Video Censorship Board (2014), Nollywood has become the country’s major contributor to the economy after oil and agriculture. Arguably, Nollywood can claim to have played a role in the shaping of public discourse in social and political issues (Chimbuto, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is predicated on the genderlect and muted group theories.

Genderlect Theory

Coined by Deborah Tannen in 1990, the term ‘genderlect’ is used to describe the theory that is connected to the assumption that women and men communicate differently. The premise is that because these genders use language differently, they should be regarded from a cross-cultural perspective. Hence, genderlect is a form of dialect used by different genders to communicate (IvyPanda, 2021). In explaining the theory, IvyPanda (2021) states that genderlect helps understand the different styles of communication and the specific language that these genders use. For instance, according to the theory, men and women use different dialects of the same language, which can lead to inconsistencies and misunderstandings. Women are more likely to communicate in order to connect with others and base their communication on emotions. Men usually engage in a conversation to achieve a special status, which is why they can be perceived as competitive and independent. In general, this theory helps understand the differences in how and why men and women communicate as well as what language structures they use to achieve their goals”. The theory does not grade conversation between men and women as superior and inferior, or right and wrong, rather the theory considers the gender conversation as different. Men and women therefore communicate as different cultures.

Some academics disagree with the genderlect theory arguing that the theory is based on the gender stereotype of men and women. Another argument made by critics is that the theory is focused on American culture and does not apply to other cultures...the genderlect theory can only be applied to some situations (Petrelli, 2015). Since men and women communicate differently, it may be assumed that what women may consider as unacceptable, may just be fine for men. This of course causes conflicts arising from

misunderstanding of language use. Could it, therefore, be assumed that while some language construct and description of women by men (“men’s language”) are considered stereotypic, men may have to make extra effort to spot these stereotypes? Do men agree with the concepts of stereotypes, as captured in this paper? This may necessitate another academic exercise. It should, however, be noted that stereotypical portrayal of women in any form cannot be justified. Thus, the theory is relevant to the study.

Muted Group

Introduced by British anthropologist, Edwin Ardener, muted group theory is the basic idea that in every society, there are cultural groups who are traditionally muted – given less access than members of the dominant groups to public discourse and to having their individual and community concerns heard (Meares, 2017). The theory refers and explains why “certain groups of people remain powerless compared to the others... the voices of the women and other unheard have been ignored and muted... the cause of muteness by a certain group of population especially that of women in the society...(Communication Theory, 2022). Continuing, Communication Theory (2022) posited that communication was started by men and due to that reason they take advantage of women. While speaking, women are considered less powerful than men and the reason behind this is simple psychology. Women’s needs are emotionally driven unlike men. And thus the perspective of women differs from men in all aspects.

Muted group theory has been criticised for not being useful because it engages in essentialism or the belief that all men are essentially the same and all women are essentially the same and the two differ from each other. These critics note that there is great difference within groups; sometimes, the difference within a group (such as women) can be greater than the difference between groups (women and men). Some critics of MGT argue that the theory has not been sufficiently integrated into empirical research. MGT also explains some problems women experience in speaking out in many settings (West & Turner, 2010, p. 498-499).

Assumptions from muted group theory may explain why women’s voices may not be as strong as that of men in society, including the media. Relying on the assumption of the theory, it would be that women keep silent or mute in predominantly male professions, like the media because they are not sure if what they say fit with the thinking. Many a time, women are forced to adapt to a “male” language they did not create and invariably appear “less articulate” than the dominant group. The theory creates understanding why women’s voices need to be understood and supported. It is on this note that the theory is relevant to the study.

Portrayal of Women in the Mass Media

The image and representation of women and girls in the media has long been a subject of concern. Research shows that there are many fewer females than males in almost all forms of mainstream media and those who do appear are often portrayed in very stereotypical ways (Edegoh & Asemah, 2013). Mass media have become powerful in today’s world. Not only do the mass media inform and educate citizens, they are also veritable tools in shaping

people's opinions and framing their outlook to life. Perceptions, attitudes and beliefs are cultivated via media exposure (Aromona, 2016). Media has a significant impact on how social and cultural norms relating to women and gender form and evolve (Sarikakis, 2013). Women participation and portrayal in the mass media important discussions among gender and rights advocates and feminists. Limpinnian (n.d), as cited in Asemah, Edegoh & Ojih (2013) observed that gender representation on the smallest scale has always been important for one to understand what it means to be male or female.

Several studies have revealed that women are traditionally portrayed in advertising in stereotypical roles or in ways that do not necessarily match reality and they all proved that women are always not well represented (Matlin, 1987; Asemah *et al* 2013; Edegoh, Asemah & Okpanachi, 2013). Major media do not perform well in gender representation across the world, with only a few exceptions. The 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project survey reported that the world we see in the news is a world in which women are virtually invisible (Gallagher, 2005). According to the Report, women are dramatically under-represented in the news, with only about one-fifth of news subjects being female (the topic of the news stories or interviewees). There was no single news topic in which women outnumbered men as newsmakers: only 14% of political stories were on women and 20% of business news focused on women. However, women are dominant in the media as celebrities (42%), royalty (33%) or "ordinary" people (Sarikakis, 2013).

To corroborate the assertion, Ojiakor, Adeline & Tubo (2018) posited that "the 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) studies have consistently revealed that women are grossly underrepresented in news coverage in contrast to men. The 2010 research confirmed an increase in women's presence in the news which nevertheless remains persistently low. At present, only 24% of the people heard, read about or seen in the news are female. This is a rise from 21% in 2005 and 18% five years prior, in 2000. The studies equally showed a paucity of women's voices in news media content in contrast to men's perspectives, resulting in news that presents a male-centred view of the world (GMMP, 2010).

Historically, the struggle to have a balanced representation of women dates back to the 18th century. According to Byerly (2022), women's exclusion from the serious news of the day was raised as early as the 18th century by women suffragists and women's rights activists in Europe and North America. The early suffrage leaders needed the attention of the news media to carry their ideas and activities to wider publics, but male-run newspapers and magazines largely ignored the women activists. The news outlets that did cover women frequently trivialised their goals. Continuing, Byerly (2022) explained the rise of women participation and representation in the media as follows:

Women brought a gendered analysis of the mass media to the global stage in the 1970s when a multipart critique was first presented at the 1976 Mexico City conference, which opened the U.N. Decade for Women. Much of the substance of that critique remains relevant today.

Advocates are concerned that the portrayal of women and their participation in media have direct bearing on the perception of women, even by women themselves. If not moderated, the stereotypical portrayal of women would detract from the strides achieved

by women. Chapman (2011) argued that...media attempts to make women's value and worth smaller. The African Training and Research Centre for Women (ECA) reiterated that by its portrayal of women, the mass media can either impede or foster women's integration in the development process.

Nollywood and Female Sexuality Representation

Nollywood is awash with films that depict female sexuality. Majority of these films, however, represent female sexuality in stereotypical and debatable forms. The representation of women in Nollywood has not witnessed any radical departure from the traditional preconception of women roles in societies over the two decades (Onyenankaya *et al* 2019). Interestingly, Nollywood is not the only culprit in the stereotypical and contentious portrayal of females in visual media. Smith, Choueiti & Pieper (2015) posited that controversial female sexuality portrayal is virtually the same, both in developed and developing nations. This is quite interesting considering that gender consciousness has longer and deeper roots in developed nations and women have stronger voices and increased faces and presence in those environments. Continuing, Davis (2010) asserted that the fact is women are seriously under-represented across nearly all sectors of the globe, not just on-screen, but for the most part we are simply not aware of the extent and media images exert a powerful influence in creating and perpetuating our unconscious bias.

The above position is supported by other scholars, including Ukata (2010) and Aromona (2016). Conventional portrayal of women in traditionally-defined roles for women still persists in a patriarchal society (Ukata, 2010), with no major change in the portrayal of women in the past five years (Aromona, 2016). Nollywood portrays women as appendages to men, object of sexual gratification or lust (Brock, 2009). Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar & Jimoh (2014) explained this further thus:

In the movie world, especially Nigeria's Nollywood, women were repeatedly portrayed as objects of sexual pleasure, domestic servants passive, inferior to and dependent on their male counterparts; a development that has further reinforced widely held societal norms and negative stereotypes of women in the society...women are generally portrayed as sex objects, domestic servants, weaker sex, wicked mothers-in-law, promiscuous, incapable of making wise decisions, cunning and using what they have (their bodies) to get whatever they want (material gains, boyfriends/husbands).

Women are presented in outrageous roles such as sophisticated thieves and murderers; a representation which conflicts with what women are known for. Women in most Nigerian videos resort to the use of charms which is superstitiously believed to embody magical powers like *juju* to get what they want. Moreover, women are portrayed as people with evil tendencies: criminals, prostitutes or rogues among other character portrayals with excessive or irrational devotion to the activities which eventually ruin them (Ukata, 2010). According to Osakpolor (2021), the portrayal of women in contemporary Nollywood films using 'Isoken' (2017) and 'King of Boys' (2018) as case studies showed

that women in the studied films were negatively portrayed in various ways which are at best, parallel to the stereotypical ways in which women were portrayed in previous Nollywood movies. Both films had women as protagonists...the films were directed by females...were very popular Nollywood films. The films were premiered and watched in cinemas within and outside the country...grossed colossal amounts at the box office. The films were winners of the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), the most prestigious movie awards for films produced and directed by Africans. On the portrayal of women in 'Isoken,' Osakpolor (2021) stated that Isoken as a movie is replete with lucid scenes that do not only relegate women to the background, but also present them as folk who cannot but play the second fiddle to their male counterparts. Continuing, Osakpolor (2021) highlights the stereotypical portrayal of women in 'Isoken.' His highlights include:

In the first scene, that is, the wedding ceremony of Osato, Isoken's youngest sister, Isoken is constantly reminded by her aunties present that God would provide her a husband. This is because the aunties ostensibly believe that it is very abnormal for Isoken's two younger sisters to get married before her. Women were also portrayed as sex objects in the film. This is brought to life when Kukwa, out of her urgent need for a man, flaunts her voluptuous figure to entice Chuks. The women, as it is portrayed, believe very much that they are sex objects for the men. In addition, women are portrayed as persons who should care less about their educational pursuit while they care more about getting married and being good housewives to their husbands. This is evident in the scene in which Isoken, in the midst of other family members, discloses her need to get an executive Master's in Business Administration (MBA) from a foreign university. Her mother, on hearing this, tells her: "Instead of you to come into the kitchen and assist us, you are here talking all over the place. Will MBA find you a husband or do they dash people children in the university? A woman should not read too much." This picture is very negative because women are very much in need of education as are men.

"King of Boys" is laden with scenes that portray women in a bad light. To start with, females in the film were depicted as objects for male gaze as well as objects for sexploitation by men. Females in the movie were portrayed as weak and dependent: persons who cannot, but be subordinate to their male counterparts. "King of Boys" also paints ambitious and highly successful women as bad wives, the women in "King of Boys" were portrayed as extremely dangerous, cruel and deadly. This is in contrast to the men who to a large extent, are positively portrayed. Kemi, for example, was portrayed as a crafty, wicked and extremely dangerous girl who no one messes with whereas her brother, Kitan, was portrayed as a spoilt, but indifferent young man (Osakpolor, 2021).

When it comes to perception, characters of the female sex were categorised as women and because of their sex, it also affects their gender role and perception. Thus, dialogues in the films such as "Mr & Mrs," "Not With My Daughter," "Royal Fight," "The Comforter" and "Last Vote" have shown that female characters are asked to behave

(‘perform’) differently because they are women (Chimbuto, 2015). Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar, Jimoh & Olorede (2014) in an analysis of the forms and patterns in select Nollywood films stated that women are generally portrayed as sex objects, domestic servants, weaker sex, wicked mothers-in-law, promiscuous, incapable of making wise decisions and cunning. Stereotypic portrayal of female sexuality in Nollywood is pervasive. In a study by Usaini *et al.* (2017), they noted that the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood has also been criticised for its portrayal of women as sex objects, weak, cold-hearted, materialistic, vengeful, vicious, diabolical and scheming. Additionally, Onyenakeya *et al.* (2019) argued that Nollywood continues its penchant of depicting successful and powerful women in social and domestic settings as dangerous and doomed for destruction. Also, Nollywood movies appear to remain persistent in typically depicting women as unambitious domestic servants (Aromona, 2016). Nigerian films were deeply rooted in the Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life (Onuzulike, 2007). Daramola (2008) supported the opinion that the Nigerian film industry holds up a mirror to the society and projects what is seen in the society.

The assertions by Onuzulike & Daramola gave a pointer to why female sexuality in Nollywood is stereotypic. Their assertions is a call for the Nigerian society to perhaps review and assess how the Nigerian woman is treated, both at public and private spaces, hence that portrayal in Nollywood. Some scholars also argued that low participation of women in the important movie making departments like scriptwriting, directing and producing further contribute to the stereotypic portrayal of women in Nollywood. In general, the Nollywood portrayal of women as sex or erotic pleasure objects who are inferior or dependent on men as domestic servants or wicked mother-in-law still persists. It is, therefore, safe to say that the portrayal of female sexuality is still steeped in stereotypes of roles, functions, expectations and duties assigned by society to women. A number of suggestions have been forwarded to help mitigate the stereotypic depiction of female sexuality in Nollywood. Alibbi (2018) argued in favour of the need for research to be properly conducted on the society before screenplays are written, to avoid misleading the public.

Implications of the Depiction on Society

Ann, Huma, Erika & Evie (2015) observed that unbalanced gender portrayal is widespread. Stereotypes are also prevalent in every day media. Women are often portrayed solely as homemakers and carers of the family, dependent on men or as objects of male attention. If women are portrayed only in traditional roles in the media, society’s attitudes and the expectations of women for themselves will necessarily be confined to these roles. On the other hand, if the media’s image of women reflects the full range of contributions women are making to society, societal attitude toward women will be correspondingly broadened (African Training and Research Centre for Women, 1985). In agreement with the above, Osakpolor (2021) posits that the way people, ideas and objects are portrayed in films affects the way viewers perceive the people, ideas and objects in real life.

In a study conducted by Okunna (2002), cited in Ojiakor *et al.* (2018), participants in a focus group discussion unanimously agreed that the negative and unrealistic portrayal

of women are capable of negatively influencing people's perception of women and behaviours towards them. From the data, the researcher concluded that such films will only lead to the subjugation of women by increasing men's disdain for women; sow distrust between women; undermine women's confidence in themselves and strengthen the forces which push women to the background in this patriarchal society. Portrayals and representations of women have negative influence on their contributions towards national development (Usaini *et al* 2017). Media stereotypes and sexist representation affect women as citizens and violate their human rights (Sarikakis, 2013).

Methodology

A review of essays, research works, Websites and media commentaries of scholars, essayists, and commentators on female sexuality in Nollywood was done to gather data for this study. The analytical method was employed for this study. In an analytical method, a researcher has to use facts or information which are already available and analyse these to make a critical evaluation of the material (Patowary, 2014).

Discussion

Arguably, very few institutions in our lives affect us more than the media. Their presence almost invades us. Media have become part of our lives and it is apparent we will never be able to reverse this fact. We will continue to be affected by media throughout our lives (West & Turner, 2010). Matthiesen-Jones (2021) argued that whether we realise it or not, what we read, see and hear in the media does affect us. Mass media have a strong and dominating influence on a person's perceptions (Cheng, Mitomo, Otsuka & Jeon, 2015). Continuing, West & Turner (2010) posit that television and other media play an extremely important role in how people view their world. In today's society, most people get their information from mediated sources rather than through direct experience. Therefore, mediated sources can shape a person's sense of reality. Amobi (2013) stated that one of the major media avenues where women are increasingly visible is in Nollywood films.

The positions of scholars reviewed in this work agree that mass media, in all forms, have some influence on public knowledge, perception and opinion. This also supports the position that the stereotypic representation of women by Nollywood has an effect on society's perception of women. According to Aromona (2018), this visibility and growth of Nollywood notwithstanding, the movie contents still reflect pictures that reinforce patriarchal notions and perpetuate gender disparity. Nollywood films produce images that further relegate women to positions of subservience and domestication. Because of exposure to these films, viewers cultivate beliefs that women should be inferior and less ambitious than their male counterparts should be, while being judged on their abilities to manage their homes and marriages. Thus, these films reaffirm the socio-cultural norms and expectations. Not a few scholars agreed on the potency of media and Nollywood to affect perceptions and craft narratives of a subject. The content of Nollywood movies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nollywood depiction of female sexuality still leaves much room for improvement as the stereotypical and regressive portrayal of women still persists. Based on the discourse, it is

obvious that this negative portrayal of female sexuality enforces harmful gender disparity on women. The researchers, therefore concludes that the earlier stereotypic portrayal of women is considered a national problem and tackled swiftly, the better it would be for society. The study reminds us that the media play critical roles in supporting women and girls to attain their highest potentials. Arising from the observations made in this paper, it is thus recommended that:

1. Nollywood movie producers' orientation, skill and capacity on balanced female sexuality portrayal should be strengthened through workshops and conferences.
2. Peer review of movies should be conducted with gender experts to ensure that the contents are current, unbiased and sensitive to gender and sexuality.
3. Gender advocates and feminists should produce or support the production of Nollywood movies that promote positive female sexuality themes or support women and he-for-she champions in the critical components of film making like scriptwriting, directing and producing.

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