

Framing Gender Issues in Selected Nollywood Narratives

Seçili Nollywood Anlatılarında Toplumsal Cinsiyet Meselelerinin Çerçeveselenmesi

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Abstract

The resonance of debates and criticisms by media and feminist scholars about the huge disparity characterising the depiction of male and female gender in film narratives has necessitated the need to re-examine the representation of both genders in film narratives. Employing the mixed research modalities of content analysis, sampling, historicocritical, and key informant interview methods, this study investigates the framing of gender issues in selected Nollywood narratives. Anchored in the Framing Theory, the population of study comprised the 3,334 films produced in 2019, 2021, and 2022, out of which three widely acclaimed films -*Merry Men 2* (Moses Inwang, 2019), *One Lagos Night* (Ekene Som Mekwunye, 2021), and *Anikulapo* (Kunle Afolayan, 2022)- were purposively sampled and content analysed with an intention to unpacking the frames through which the filmmakers presented the male and female characters to the audience. Five juxtaposed and contradictory frames took centre stage in the analysis: Macho men versus weak women, objects of decency versus objects of seduction and sexploitation, the alpha male gazer versus the female object, diligent husbands versus lazy and full-time housewives, and benevolent men versus malevolent women. Since films are largely reflective of trends within the filmmakers' sociocultural milieu, it is concluded that much of the blame is not apportioned to the filmmakers. Nonetheless, since filmmakers wield much power regarding correcting wrong notions and ideologies in every society, the point is emphasised that Nigerian filmmakers or Nollywood content creators (NCCs) should rethink the framing of women in film narratives.

Keywords: Nollywood, framing, gender issues, NCCs, mass media

Öz

Medya araştırmacıları ve feminist akademisyenlerin sinema anlatılarında erkek ve kadın cinsiyetinin tasvirindeki büyük eşitsizliği karakterize eden tartışmaları ve eleştirilerinin yankıları, her iki cinsiyetin temsilini yeniden inceleme ihtiyacını doğurmuştur. Bu çalışma, içerik analizi, örnekleme, tarihsel eleştiri ve uzmanlar ile görüşme karma araştırma yöntemlerini kullanarak, seçilen Nollywood anlatılarında toplumsal cinsiyet meselelerinin çerçeveselenmesini araştırmaktadır. Çerçeveleme teorisine dayanan bu çalışma, 2019, 2021 ve 2022 yıllarında üretilen 3.334 filmi içeren bir popülasyondan oluşmakta olup, bunların arasından üç geniş çapta beğenilen film - *Merry Men 2* (Moses Inwang, 2019), *One Lagos Night* (Ekene Som Mekwunye, 2021) ve *Anikulapo* (Kunle Afolayan, 2022) - amaçlı olarak

örneklenmiş ve içerik analizi yapılmıştır. Bu analizde, film yapımcılarının erkek ve kadın karakterleri izleyiciye nasıl sunduğunu anlamak amacıyla beş zıt ve çelişkili çerçeve merkezde yer almıştır: Maço erkekler ve zayıf kadınlar, ahlaklılık nesnelere ve baştan çıkarma ve cinsel sömürü nesnelere, alfa erkek bakışı ve kadın nesnesi, çalışkan kocalar ve tembel tam zamanlı ev hanımları ile hayırsever erkekler ve kötücül kadınlar. Filmler büyük ölçüde film yapımcılarının sosyo-kültürel ortamlarındaki eğilimleri yansıttığından, suçun büyük bir kısmının film yapımcılarına yüklenmediği

sonucuna varılmıştır. Bununla birlikte, film yapımcılarının her toplumda yanlış düşünceleri ve ideolojileri düzeltme konusunda büyük bir güce sahip oldukları göz önüne alındığında, Nijeryalı film yapımcıları veya Nollywood içerik yaratıcılarının (NCC'ler) film anlatılarında kadınların çerçevelenmesini yeniden düşünmeleri gerektiği vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nollywood, çerçeveleme, toplumsal cinsiyet meseleleri, NCC'ler, kitle medyası

Introduction

The immense imbalance in Nigerian gender framing was brought to the forefront of global conversation in 2016 when Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, unequivocally announced during a state visit to Germany that "my wife belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room" (Ayo-Aderele, 2016; Omoera, 2020, p.32). Although the comment attracted backlash and condemnation from several quarters (especially from gender and feminist scholars), the President, unruffled and unapologetic, categorically stated in a subsequent interview with Phil Gayle that the fundamental purpose of his wife (Aisha Buhari) was to take good care of him. Hence, she should steer clear of politics. Buhari's statement speaks volumes of his perception of his wife and by extension, the women in larger Nigerian society. In their analysis, Emwinromwankhoe and Obaje claim that (2022, p. 26):

The comment—to a very large and significant extent—reveals how the president perceives and treats Aisha Buhari, the First Lady of the country. At the surface level, this means that the president sees her as nothing but a full-time housewife whose place starts and ends in the former's kitchen. Although atrocious at best, the phrase – 'the other room' – is worse. It simply connotes the fact that the First Lady is nothing short of an object of sexual gratification for the president.

Considering the issue from the perspective of Hollywood (American film culture), Emma Watson suggests an urgent balance between men and women with the comment that: "If men don't have to control, women won't have to be controlled. Both men and women should be free to be sensitive. Both men and women should be free to be strong. It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals" (Parker, 2016, p. 1). With a specific reference to the situation in Nigeria, Amonyeze, Nwafor, and Agbo (2023, p. 11) contend that "Nigerian movies could serve as a vehicle for gender equity. [...] Nollywood ought to pioneer the eradication of ornamental masculinity from its creative platform to ensure gender harmony." This position is fundamental to this discourse.

Across local and global symposia and fora, the issue of gender construction has been rehashed or repeated (Okunna, 2002; Ukata, 2010; Omoera, 2020; Elegbe, 2022). This is because there appears to be an inextricable link between gender equity and social development (Babatope, 2016). The predominant argument is that there is a

glaring disparity in the way males and females are represented in the media, and scholars have contended that while men have usually been favourably portrayed, women have often received the shorter end of the stick (Dutt, 2014; Omatsola, 2016; Ibbi, 2017; Joseph, 2019). Studies have also shown that women have been depicted in grossly negative, stereotypical, demeaning, and unpalatable ways in media such as music (Ogunsanya & Fadipe, 2022), advertisements (Adinlewa & Ojih, 2018; Rubio, 2018), television (Ojomo & Adekusibe, 2020), newspapers (Tesunbi & Ikwu, 2018; Oko-Epelle & Adelabu, 2022; Omoera & Ebobo, 2022), and film (Ukata, 2010; Chimbuto, 2016; Omoera, Elegbe, & Doghudje, 2019; Emwinromwankhoe, 2021; Omoera & Okwuowulu, 2021). Women in the mass media have been packaged and represented through various stereotypical and prejudicial lenses, including subordinates, full-time housewives, witches and destructive folk, prostitutes, objects of ritual and sexploitation, and paragons of waywardness (Dutt, 2014; Omoera, Elegbe & Doghudje, 2019; Omoera & Okwuowulu, 2021).

Women have also been portrayed as individuals who are terribly weak, unruly, inferior, emotional, dependent, stupid, devoid of reason, muted, and relationship-oriented (Ibbi, 2017; Joseph, 2019; Elegbe, 2022). The contrary has apparently been the case for men who have been depicted as strong, bold, and courageous, superior, independent, dominant, assertive, kind, and achievement-oriented (Cilliers, 2014). Men have been equally represented as incredibly sound, smart, sensible, intelligent, thoughtful, and powerful individuals who embody the ideals of humanity (Amonyeze et al., 2023). It is imperative that the framing of gender by the media is neither a product of chance nor happenstance. This is because the media do not exist in a vacuum. For instance, the Nigerian media industry, comprising Nollywood, operates within the Nigerian sociocultural milieu and is heavily impacted by the country's social, political, cultural, and economic dynamics. In other words, the media operate in societies, the implication of which is that they are heavily impacted by the culture and norms prevalent in the societies in which they operate.

There is often an intricate and strong link between society and the mass media (Joseph, 2019; Omoera, 2020). The media are invariably quintessential mirrors and windows through which people view society. On this basis, the media base their content on the happenings in every given society (Okunna, 2002; Dutt, 2014). Therefore, if there is a wide discrepancy in the media's representation of male and female gender, it is chiefly because that is what is obtainable in society. The media are akin to computer

screens that precisely display the stuff that has been fed into the computer. Garbage in, they say; garbage out! This, perhaps, gives credence to Iglesias' (2004) assertion that the media are gendered technologies (as cited in Omoera & Okwuowulu, 2021).

Omoera (2020) and Omoera and Okwuowulu (2021) contend that patriarchy is incredibly rife in various parts of the globe today, and regardless of the call for gender equality, sexism and masculine hegemony continue to rear their ugly heads. Aligning with the above position, Joseph (2019, p. 3) laments that, across various countries in today's world, "patriarchy is hierarchical. And even though men lead other men, they are still united in the common goal of dominating women." In African societies, especially Nigeria, sexism and gender imbalance have taken firm roots. Patriarchy in this part of the world takes on different shapes and forms and is as ubiquitous as it is poignant. The foregoing is ostensibly what informed Okunna's (2002) assertion that "gender relations in Nigeria are characterised by a lot of imbalances, to the disadvantage of women." Omoera and Okwuowulu (2021, p. 16) posited that in Nigeria, "patriarchy is so entrenched that there are parts of meat reserved only for the male gender." In other words, Nigerian society is steeped in patriarchy and male chauvinism, similar to most countries across the globe.

It cannot be questioned that the way male and female genders are represented in films ultimately influences people's perceptions of each gender in real life. This is because films are bestowed enormous power to influence societal culture, correct stereotypes and negative perceptions, sell ideologies, and mediate gender equity. With their tremendous artistry and incredibly emotive appeal, films have rendered themselves powerful tools for framing ideas, people, places, and objects (Mulvey, 1975; Okunna, 1996; Omoera & Ndu, 2023; O'Neil, 2016). It suffices to say that Nollywood, as an industry, has become a major stakeholder in the production and distribution of cultural and creative products in Nigeria and beyond (Omoera, 2009). Owing to the dexterity, doggedness, consistency, and ingenuity of Nigerian filmmakers, Nollywood has gained a stronghold locally and has attracted vast audiences among diasporic Nigerian communities and non-Nigerians in countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean (Ibbi, 2017; Joseph, 2019). Today, Nollywood is ranked as one of the largest film industries in the world, alongside Hollywood and Bollywood. Against this background, there is a compelling need to investigate the framing of gender issues in Nollywood narratives. At any rate, "narratives often include stories about people, their memories and reflections, the connections they make

between their past and present and the sense they make out of their lived experiences as well as their future projections” (Omoera & Ndu, 2023, p. 40).

Recent literature on Nollywood and gender is filled with studies (Dutt, 2014; Babatope, 2016; Ibbi, 2017; Joseph, 2019; Emwinromwankhoe, 2021) that analysed only the representation of women in Nollywood narratives. As such, there is an obvious dearth of literature on the depiction of men in Nollywood. The study by Amonyeze et al. (2023) sought to analyse the ornamentalisation of masculinity in Nollywood films, using *Backup Wife* (2017), *Celebrity Marriage* (2017) and *Let Karma* (2019) as pivots for analysis and discussion. Although theirs is a laudable study, its failure to bring the other gender into the equation—as was the case with the aforementioned studies—makes it appear a one-sided study. Thus, there is a lacuna in scholarship regarding the framing of male and female genders in Nollywood films. This article contributes to the literature on framing gender in Nollywood narratives.

It is worthy to note that the word, ‘gender’ has, in recent times, assumed fluid and nuanced dimensions, especially with the clamour for recognition by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, pansexual, asexual, intersexual (and many others that are still evolving) under the umbrella of the LGBTQ+ movement. Although such categorisations are gaining solid ground in Western countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), and Canada, with some scholars’ advocacy for their inclusion in every study carried out on gender (Browne, 2019; Cortez et al., 2019), the seeming lack of clarity in the description of gender roles will arguably problematise such research endeavours. Blackstone (2003, p. 335) submits that such evolving genders “are less likely to organise their lives in gendered ways because they do not have the ease of creating gendered patterns of behaviour.” Blackstone claims that lesbian couples, for example, are more likely to share housework because one person is clearly not mandated to play the role of housekeeper on the basis of sex. In addition, according to Nigeria’s *National Gender Policy* (2006), the reference book for discussions around the concept of gender within the country, the classification of gender remains two: ‘male’ and ‘female.’ Thus, every other gender that people may think of is outside the scope of this study.

Three widely acclaimed Nollywood films, *Merry Men 2* (Moses Inwang, 2019), *One Lagos Night* (Ekene Som Mekwunye (2021) and *Anikulapo* (Kunle Afolayan, 2022) was purposively selected and content analysed with a view to unravelling critical issues

regarding the framing of gender in Nollywood narratives. Five key stakeholders in the fields of filmmaking and film studies were interviewed, and the results were used to complement the content analysis method. The study was driven by three objectives: (a) to examine how gender ideology is formulated in contemporary Nollywood narratives; (b) to analyse the framing of gender issues in contemporary Nollywood narratives; and (c) to ascertain, through literature modelling, whether there is a significant difference between old and contemporary Nollywood narratives in terms of gender framing.

Synopses of *Merry Men 2* (2019), *One Lagos Night* (2021), and *Anikulapo* (2022)

Merry Men 2 (2019) is a crime thriller produced by Ayo Makun and directed by Moses Inwang, with a running time of 1 hour and 53 min. The film revolves around the lives of four friends – Ayo, Remi, Amaju and Naz – who, in a bid to rid society of alarming corruption, release a highly incriminating document against a top politician’s wife, Dame Maduka, the aftermath of which is that she is fingered in a twenty-count charge bordering on graft. In her desperation to free herself from impending culpability and an interminable time in gaol, Dame Maduka recruits and manipulates a group of highly skilled ladies -Zara, Sophie, Kenya, Hassana, and Calypso- who she uses as bait for the merry men. These ladies treacherously creep into the merry men’s abodes and abduct Kemi, Ayo’s sister-cum-Naz’s wife, in the process.

Dame Maduka gives the men 72 hours to break into the EFCD’s system and destroy every indicting document against her or risk losing Kemi. Having failed abysmally in their first move to rescue Kemi, Ayo suggests a collaborative effort between them and the ladies, and Dame Maduka gives a nod. They then disguise their way into the birthday bash of a popular senator, hack his computer and ‘destroy’ all the incriminating documents. Shortly after, Dame Maduka moves to eliminate the ladies as a way of sealing all loose ends, but they are rescued by the men during a sudden shoot-out that gets Dame Maduka running for her life. In the end, we learn that Ayo’s suggestion was a calculated scheme for the men to outsmart and double cross Dame Maduka.

One Lagos Night (2021) is a crime comedy produced and directed by Ekene Som Mekwunye, with a running time of 1 hour and 42 minutes. The film recounts the encounters of two close friends, Ehiz and Tayo, whose frustration with penury and wretched conditions drives a decision to rob Anita, a money launderer who is vacationing

in Nigeria. Events get twisted when they meet another gang of thieves (led by Radiant) who, based on a tip, also come for the same purpose. In the midst of the drama, a man in Radiant's camp receives a gunshot from Ehiz, while the others are tied to ropes.

Radiant eventually gets the luggage stuffed with US dollar notes from Anita but is accosted by Ehiz and Tayo, who forcefully take the money and lock him up in a room. However, there is a turn of fate as Poison, one of Radiant's men, overpowers the duo with a gun, sets Radiant free, and ties Ehiz and Tayo (together with Anita and her maid, Uloma) to chairs in the living room. Just as Radiant and Poison are about to take their final walk into victory, they come across a group of armed policemen who shoot them and take their luggage to the police station. The movie ends with Ehiz and Tayo receiving their share of the carted money from policemen, thus confirming that they both had pulled a fast one on Radiant and his gang.

Anikulapo (2022) is a Yoruba epic fantasy film produced and directed by Kunle Afolayan, with a running time of 2 hours, 16 min. Beginning 'in medias res' and set in the 17th century, the film tells the story of Saro, a dead man who is brought back to life through the mythical powers of the Akala bird. Through flashback, we are introduced to the circumstances leading to his death. Saro is a traveller from Gbongan whose search for new markets for his 'aso-ofi' (cloth) business lands him in Oyo, where he gets caught up in the web of love, greed, betrayal, and deceit. Gifted with charm and good looks, Saro finds his way into the heart of Awarun, who becomes his cougar. Leveraging Awarun's connections, Saro supplies 'aso-ofi' to the king's wives and gets romantically entangled with Arolake, the youngest queen.

Having had several sexual encounters, Saro and Arolake make plans to elope, but words soon get to the king, and Saro is caught and beaten to death. Upon his resurrection by the Akala bird, Saro and Arolake sojourn to a remote community where they deploy the Akala bird's power to raise the dead back to life, thereby earning him the name "Anikulapo," meaning "one who has death in his pouch." It does not take long for Saro's penchant for women, his Achilles' heel, and his tragic flaw to get the better part of him. Saro and Arolake are drawn to daggers, culminating in the former's ignominy, defeat, and fall. Although *Anikulapo* is set in the past and contains certain mythical elements, parallels can be drawn between the events in the film and the current socio-political realities in Nigeria. This informed the researchers' decision to include it in the corpus of selected films.

Theoretical Infrastructure

This study is underpinned by the Framing Theory, which was propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974. Goffman was a Canadian-American sociologist who argued that interpretive systems constitute pivotal elements of cultural belief systems. Goffman referred to these interpretive systems as frames we use to analyse and make sense of our world (Goffman, 1974). The Framing Theory evolved from an expansion of the Agenda-setting Theory of the mass media, which basically postulates that the mass media should pay considerable attention to certain events and construct such events within fields of meaning.

According to Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2016), framing is first performed by the source(s) of mass media messages and then deconstructed by the recipients of such messages. The theory has attracted the attention of such scholars like Entman (1993) and Epkins (2011), who helped modernise Goffman's earlier definition of the concept. For instance, Entman (1993, p. 3) states that "to frame a communicating text or message, is to provide certain facets of a perceived reality and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or a treatment recommendation." In other words, Entman claims that framing revolves around two primary concepts: selection and salience. Epkins (2011, p. 19) emphasised that "framing describes the process of content selection and exclusion, highlighting certain aspects over others to communicate a particular point of view."

Although Framing Theory had its initial roots in the fields of sociology and psychology, scholars (Entman, 1993; Asemah et al., 2016; Obaje, 2017) have posited that it can serve as a vital framework for interrogating information in communication-related fields such as journalism, political and development communication, advertising, public relations, and film. Regarding film studies, Framing Theory constitutes a strong foundation and pathway through which contentious issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture can be dissected and investigated. The theory is apposite and germane to this study because it will, on the one hand, serve as a salient guide for the researchers' deconstruction of gender ideologies embellished within contemporary Nollywood narratives and, on the other hand, assist the researchers in bringing to the fore the framing of male and female genders that are 'buried' in the narratives.

Methodological Consideration

The researchers adopted the mixed research methodology, with the selected movies being content-analysed to achieve the three objectives set for itself. The content analysis was complemented with historicocritical, sampling, and key informant interview (KII) methods as well as literature modelling (which was deployed with the specific intention of achieving the third objective). The study population comprised Nollywood films produced in 2019, 2021, and 2022. According to data from the National Film and Video Censors Board (2022) and Statista (2023), a total of 700 Nollywood films were produced in 2019, while 1,051 and 1,583 films were produced in 2021 and 2022 respectively, totalling 3,334 films. This figure forms the study population. Sampling was carried out in two stages. First, the researchers adopted simple random sampling to select three years from a sampling frame consisting of six years: 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

The researchers restricted the years in the frame to six because of the keyword, 'contemporary' in the research objectives. In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select a film for each of the chosen years: 2019, 2021, and 2022. The criteria for selecting each of the films included: (a) the film has a proportionate number of male and female characters; (b) the framing of gender issues is explicitly done within the film's universe; (c) the framing of each gender within the narrative has sociocultural implications on the Nigerian landscape; (d) the films are widely acclaimed; and (e) the films have been censored by the National Film and Video Censors Board. Six key informants of filmmaking and film studies were purposively selected as interviewees: Ambassador Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, a renowned Nollywood director and producer; Innocent Uwah, professor of film studies; Ambrose Uchenunu, professor of film and communications; and Ms. Iyen Agbonifo-Obaseki, Nollywood content creator and creative designer; Ms. Edith Osunde, Nollywood content creator and actress; and Dr. Charles Okwuowulu, a seasoned academic and filmmaker.

Portrayal of Male and Female Gender Onscreen

Film scholars have vociferously emphasised that a colossal imbalance underlies the portrayal of male and female gender onscreen. Mulvey (1975) argued that unlike men who play primary roles in films and form a major proportion of characters, women often play secondary and ornamental roles. Condemning this biased and untoward

trend, Mulvey (2009, p. 9) contends that “in cinema, women are coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness; they perform their traditional exhibitionist role. Even the stories in the films are men’s dreams, aspirations, heroism.” Mulvey further claims that even the story of the woman, as captured in the movies, is told from a masculine standpoint, as she is seldom given the agency to express herself or use her own words.

Building on Mulvey’s argument, Dutt (2014) opines that films have become potent tools through which filmmakers can valourise men and sexualise women. Having conducted a visual and semiotic analysis of three blockbuster Hollywood films, *The Avengers* (2012), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 2* (2011), and *Toy Story 3* (2010), the scholar contends that women in films have, more often than not, been underrepresented and misrepresented to viewers. Dutt (2014, p. 2) further avers that “women have made giant strides in all aspects of life, but their depiction on-screen has been stuck to patriarchal stereotypes and normative ideologies that do not reflect reality.”

Harris (2017) echoes the above argument. Harris asserted that gender representation bias is widespread in every cinema across the globe. Using the Israeli cinema as a basis for analysis, the scholar submits that “in the main, Israeli films about conflicts are war films, set on battlefields in which women are inherently absent as a characteristic genre” (p. 59). Similarly, Omatsola (2016) contended that the representation of male and female gender in movies is as good as two polar opposites, with women always on the negative side of the fence. Omatsola (2016, pp. 4-5) further stresses that:

Consistently, Nigerian video films portray the male gender as superior, given that they frequently dominate, make all decisions, and generally ‘cut the shots’ in the story lines. In addition, males in Nigerian culture can mete out any amount of ill-treatment to females and get away with it, as curiously, there are hardly any inhibit correctors in the traditional systems to check this kind of behaviour.

O’Neil (2016, p. 2) contends against the imbalance in gender construction in many Hollywood films, noting that “what is often depicted of women is stereotyped, hypersexualised portrayals as the love interest or sidekick, and not very often the lead.” The scholar further stresses that the majority of Hollywood filmmakers frame men and women in contradictory ways to appeal to audiences or gain staggering box office

records. Ukata (2010) condemns the manner of portrayal of women in Nollywood. She claims that there is a widened gap between the representation of male and female gender in sets. In her analysis of two Nollywood films, *Omata Women* (2003) and *More Than a Woman* (2005), Ukata posits that patriarchy takes centre stage in many Nollywood narratives, with women reduced to mere periphery and stripped of political, economic, and social power. Amonyeze et al. (2023) also decry the incredibly biased and contradictory representation of males and females in Nollywood, noting that the trend does not bode well for Nigerian women. Using *Backup Wife* (2017), *Celebrity Marriage* (2017), and *Let Karma* (2019) as fulcra for interrogating the ornamentalisation of masculinity in selected Nollywood films, Amonyeze et al. (2023, p. 1) conclude that “sexist behaviour is concealed in movies through a language of discourse that marks the female gender negatively while projecting masculinity as a shield.”

Omoera (2020) asserted the negative and stereotypical portrayal of women in Nollywood narratives. Omoera claims that women are usually muted and objectified in films, whereas men are bestowed with the power to speak and act. Contesting the disempowerment of women in *Adaze*, a Benin Nollywood film, Omoera opines that despite many holes in the character of Iyengumwena, the film’s protagonist, he is still puffed up with pride and displays excessive superiority over his wives and concubines, traits that the society within the film’s diegesis tolerates for no other reason than patriarchy. Omoera and Okwuowulu (2021) argue that women in many films are constructed to suit men’s chauvinistic and voyeuristic tendencies both in the diegetic and audiential universes. An analytical searchlight on three popular films directed by Frank Rajah Arase—*To Love a Prince* (2014), *The Maid I Hired* (2010), and *Why Did I Get Married?* (2007) – they conclude that there is ample evidence of voyeurism and exploitation in Ghanaian film culture.

Emwinromwankhoe (2021) aligned with the above position. He claims that the patriarchy and sexism prevalent in Nigerian society have unassailably crept their way into the world of Nollywood, with male and female genders receiving contrasting representations. After content analysis of two popular Nollywood films directed by females, *Isoken* (2017) and *King of Boys* (2018), Emwinromwankhoe (2021, p. 140) stated, “females in the films are portrayed in various negative ways such as sexual objects, weak and dependent folks, to mention just a few. This depiction is diametrically opposed to the way their male counterparts in the films are portrayed.”

With regard to the specific ways in which males and females have been portrayed in Nollywood narratives, scholarly evidence points in five contradictory directions. The first is the representation of men as powerful males and women as subordinates, second fiddles, or weaklings. Ibbi (2017) and Amonyenze et al. (2023) argue that the majority of Nollywood films place women in positions where they are totally below the men and often at their mercy. Even in rare instances where females are stamped with authority, they are constantly reminded that such authority amounts to nothing unless they bag husbands for themselves. Men are also portrayed as the epitome of decency, whereas women are represented as objects of indecency (Omoera, 2021; Ukata, 2010). A study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media revealed that women in Nollywood films are often shown in highly seductive attires, and are more likely to be portrayed as people who engage in sex work than male characters.

Furthermore, many males are represented as diligent and exemplary husbands, whereas women are depicted as unambitious or full-time housewives. Chimbuto (2016) and Omatsola (2016) asserted that females in Nollywood films are usually stereotyped as satisfied women whose primary duty is to produce children for their husbands. Omatsola (2016, p. 3) stresses that the term 'housewife' is "pre-eminently a stereotype as no woman is actually married to a house." There also exists the benevolent versus malevolent representation of both genders. Ukata (2010) and Dutt (2014) contend that the masculine nature of females is usually underscored when they are portrayed in positions of power. Ibbi (2017) added that women in this particular frame are often terribly mean and deadly to the extent of attracting reprisals from men who eventually rescue society from its clutches. Lastly, there is the alpha male gazer versus the female object in terms of depiction. Mulvey (1975) refers to this concept as "scopophilia," a concept that entails taking another person, usually a female, as a sexual object and subjecting her to a curious and controlling male gaze. Omoera (2021) opines that this trend is highly execrable because it demeans the feminine gender in the context of a larger society where "phallogentrism" and male hegemony are the order of the day.

Framing Gender Issues in the Selected Films

The males and females in the three selected movies are depicted in various contrasting and stereotypical ways. For instance, in *Anikulapo*, Saro is presented as the quintessential macho man who dominates the film universe with his physiognomy, ego, and charm. With these qualities, Saro meanders his way into the lives of Awarun and Arolake, after

which he allows his soft spot for women to get the very best of him. Saro also rapes Omowon, Arolake's maid, showing little or no sign of remorse for his misdeed. Arolake, the deuteragonist, is portrayed by an opposite light. Not only is she married off to the king at the tender age of fifteen, she is also barren and is the object of hatred and scorn from the other queens.

The above depiction of Arolake points in the direction of weakness, a frame that is terribly underscored when Arolake throws all caution to the wind regarding her amorous and clandestine relationship with Saro. Besides, Arolake's decision to hand Saro the healing gourd from the Akala bird connotes feminine weakness, as is Omowon's submissiveness to Saro during the rape scene. The zenith of male dominance and subjugation of females comes to light when Saro is confronted by Arolake for divulging her secret to the other women in the harem. He slams her and intones: "What?" How dare you say that? You dare talk to me like that?"

In *One Lagos Night*, we see a lot of males who, through their masculine nature, marginalise and subjugate women. This macho versus weakness framing of both genders is especially brought to life in a robbery scene where the robbers (especially Radiant and Poison) unleash grave terror on Anita in their bid to get the money. Anita and Uloma, the two females in the scene, express intense weakness as they cower and bow to the demands of these men. The following conversation between Radiant and Anita leads to the above point:

Radiant: (in a tone laced with command) "You! You should have a first-aid kit ready around here or somewhere."

Anita: "I do not even have a first-aid kit."

Radiant: "If I ask you again, I will slit your throat."

In *Merry Men 2*, we are presented with a large number of women who appear tough on the surface but whose underlying weaknesses are revealed as events progress. For example, shortly before they all make their way into the senator's birthday party where they 'destroy' the incriminating documents against Dame Maduka, Sophie laments that: "I don't want to die. I don't even want to go to gaol." The reverse is, however, true for men whose macho nature permeates the entire universe of the film and leads to their ultimate victory over Dame Maduka.

Five interviewees (Edith Osunde, 2022; Innocent Uwah, 2023; Iyen Agbonifo-Obaseki, 2023; Charles Okwuowulu, 2023; Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 2023) agreed that many Nollywood narratives place both genders in vivid contradictory roles that undoubtedly flow from stereotypes prevalent in Nigerian society. They asserted that Nollywood narratives place women and men on an unequal pedestal in terms of power and strength because of the trend in the larger society. Innocent Uwah categorically stated the following:

Since gender framing is a common feature that humanity uses to denote actions and activities in society, a film narrative insofar as it is a product of society is constructed according to iconic symbols and logical categories that operate in society. As human beings, people think and communicate based on manipulation made of binary opposition, which helps language give meaning in society. It is the same thing that film does by constructing characters and roles according to generic conventions and roles; for instance, a male is understandable only in comparison to a female, just as strength is meaningful only when compared to weakness.

Another framing angle observed, especially in *Merry Men 2*, is the representation of males as decent and modest individuals in contrast to females who are depicted as indecent. This indecency of females is closely tied to their use as baits for the men in the film. For instance, Hassana and Calypso, as well as two other girls who succeed in bringing down Remi and Amaju in the early minutes of the film, are seen in highly provocative outfits. Thus, they become objects for the male gaze and sexploitation of the film's diegesis. Sophie is also used to entrap Amaju in a later scene. Similarly, Amaju's undue emphasis on Sophia's curves during the shoot-out is, at best, a manifestation of sexual objectification and sexploitation. While he rains kicks on Sophia's assailant, he says: "Are you crazy?" "Are you mad? Is that type of shape in your family?" We also see a policewoman who willingly and brazenly throws herself at Ayo as the object of sexploitation.

In *One Lagos Night*, Anita and Uloma are portrayed in a similar way but with greater depth. Anita is clad in a nightdress for most of the film, with her cleavage exposed to men within the diegetic universe and, by extension, the audiencial universe. Anita even makes a move to seduce Ehiz, who surrenders to her enchantment except for the timely intervention of Tayo. Uloma is first presented as a sexual object to one of the

men in Radiant's gang. In a later scene, while Uloma is face-to-face with one of the thieves, she points at her large breasts and emphatically asks him: "Do you want this?" That is not all. In the midst of the chaos surrounding the robbery, we are surprised to see Uloma throwing herself at Tayo, her fiancé, and asking for sex. The reverse is, however, true for men who are dressed in decent clothes.

Although *Anikulapo* is set in the 17th century and the costumes worn are appropriate for this period of modesty and decency, we still find a few instances in which the issue of male gaze is brought to the fore. An example is when Saro first sees Arolake; he gazes at her for a long time without uttering a word. It is expedient to state here that this gaze is not one-sided. Arolake also gazes back at Saro, thus bringing up the concept of female gaze, which constitutes a subject of debate among film scholars. In the same scene, the female gaze is also treated when Omowunmi, filled with admiration and concupiscence, casts a furtive gaze at Saro. This Omowunmi's act is also reminiscent of the entrenchment of Saro's masculine nature. In a later scene, shortly before Omowon is raped by Saro, she is positioned as an object for Saro's gaze.

Commenting on issues relating to indecency, male gaze, and sexploitation in Nollywood, three interviewees argued that they form a large part of film narratives. However, they caution that filmmakers are not to blame for the trend, as films undoubtedly play to the norms and culture of every society, and Nigeria is not an exception. Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen put the issue in perspective with the assertion that

"If women in Nollywood films are sexually exploited, I do not think that this is intentionally done by filmmakers. For instance, as a film director, I can count so many films from my stable where women have been depicted as heroes. *Adesuwa* is just one of many. I always tell people that I am a female chauvinist, and so, I give women and women's issues a superb and favourable attention in my films."

Furthermore, the films except *One Lagos Night* portray the representation of men as husbands and diligent individuals and women as housewives and indolent individuals. In *Anikulapo*, Saro is presented as a talented, dexterous, and hard-working *aso-ofi* weaver. In the second part of the film, where he is given resurrection power, he is still portrayed in that light as he raises the dead in the community. But it is not so for most women, except Awarun, who is into the business of pottery and has numerous servants at her command. All the palace queens (including Arolake) are described as full-time housewives. The same is true of Omowon and Saro's other wives.

Merry Men 2 presents the merry men to us as hard-working men whose good nature spurs them into waging war against Dame Maduka, who is a symbol of evil. The women are depicted as individuals who have no other task to do except masterminding and executing evil in every nook and cranny of society. In *One Lagos Night*, the reverse is the case as the women are portrayed as workers, whereas the men are depicted as indolent people who think of nothing except moving to steal a woman. Anita is a money launderer, and though this is an illicit business, she is still different from the men (except one) who have nothing else to boast about than stealing. The interviewees also responded to the diligence versus indolence angle to framing in Nollywood narratives and stressed that although newer films appear to be changing the narratives, the worrisome trend cannot be excusable from societal culture.

Lastly, there are manifest and latent shades of the frames of benevolence versus malevolence in the films. In *Anikulapo*, the majority of the men (except Saro and the king) are treated as kind, amiable, and compassionate. The king's open preference for Arolake is a minus to his character, as it breeds animosity, hatred, and suspicion in the palace. It can also be argued that the king's act is an offshoot of polygamy, which is a given among many traditional rulers in Nigeria. We are also surprised to see a notorious male gossip, a usual stereotype for women in films. It is, however, not the case for women whose majority are depicted as mean, hostile, and wicked people. All the palace queens (except the most senior) display strong hatred for Arolake, and one among them attempts to poison her. Arolake is depicted as a highly unforgiving and vindictive woman who orchestrates Saro's shame and subsequent downfall, while Omowon, a former maid of Arolake, mocks and disrespects Omowon soon after she begins producing children. Omowunmi is depicted as a selfish and mean girl who blows the gaff on Arolake's and Saro's illicit affairs just because she cannot have Saro to herself.

Merry Men 2 takes the lead in terms of the framing mentioned above. While the men in the film are presented as good-natured, humane, and lovely individuals, the opposite is true for the females. For example, when the men notice a woman in labour during their outing in the second scene, they immediately rush her to the hospital for urgent medical attention. The height of men's benevolence to society is, however, seen in their victory over Dame Maduka. Regarding women, Dame Maduka is the definition of corruption, manipulation, hatred, revenge, and destruction. Dame Maduka's words to Amaju in a scene shed light on her: "Amaju, you know me better than your friends. Talk to them. Tell them that I'm desperate. Tell them I'll have Kemi strayed with a barbed

wire; her body dumped into a latrine pit wallowing in sheet."The other women in the film also display various forms of cruelty and brutality.

In *One Lagos Night*, there is a role reversal for men, as they are all presented as malevolent. The same applies to women. The men are presented as opportunistic, thieving, and heartless folk, while Anita, the lead female character, is depicted as a money launderer. Uloma is portrayed as insensitive and unsympathetic just as a nameless woman is depicted as the brain behind the robbery. In this respect, the interviewees all agreed that most Nollywood narratives play to the stereotypical portrayal of both genders in contradictory roles but nonetheless emphasise that such representations feed from the happenings in society. Charles Okwuowulu particularly noted the following:

Nollywood is conceived basically as a commercial industry and, as it were, it has basic values that bring to the table. When you want to look at such values, you often trace back to our culture, which is still terribly patriarchal.

Against this backdrop, it can be argued that contemporary Nollywood narratives toe the direction of imbalance in gender framing in previous Nollywood narratives. This is because men are mostly ornamentalized and the women, demonised, objectified, sexualised, or domesticated. Although one or two diversions were observed in the study, especially in *One Lagos Night*, such occurrences are, at best, marginal and have little or no implications on the overall construction of gender within the corpus of films examined. This finding is in tandem with Adelakun's (2010, p. 1) statement that there is "a noticeable trend in the Nigerian film industry. The women in the films come as wicked, manipulative, loose in morals, diabolic, and inferior to men." Elegbe (2016, p. 65) also gives credence to the above standpoint by stating that Nollywood films "mostly rely on cultural stereotypes" in their representation of men and women, "characterising women as seductive and scheming or vulnerable and naïve." Thus, the framing of gender issues in the three analysed films is parallel to the framing of such issues as noted in previous Nollywood narratives.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the framing of gender issues in selected Nollywood narratives, *Merry Men 2* (2019), *One Lagos Night* (2021), and *Anikulapo* (2022). Since these frames are parallel to the framing patterns of gender in previous Nollywood

movies, it can be deduced that there is great similarity between the previous and contemporary narratives in terms of gender framing. This finding, however, presents a puzzle as to why filmmakers keep treading the traditional and stereotypical path to gender framing in film narratives. A careful reflection of the situation unmasks some possible and plausible answers. First, since Nigerian society is insufferably patriarchal and stereotypical about gender roles, such gender stereotypes inexorably find their way into the universe of film narratives. Second, according to Ambrose Uchenunu (in an interview, 2019), “a large chunk of the male and female population in the Nigerian society represents what is portrayed in Nollywood narratives.” Uchenunu based his argument on the titillating clothing choices of females without the filmmakers’ prompting. Uchenunu also drew an allusion to the Michael Osifo saga, wherein the twenty-year-old lady, Chidinma Ojukwu, has been convicted for murder. Third, Nigerian filmmakers are incredibly patriarchal, as observed in both the literature and the analysis of the selected films. Fourth, Nigerian filmmakers are intent on meeting the expectations of the audience regarding gender construction. Since audiences are used to the glorification of men in juxtaposition to the demonisation and objectification of women, most of these filmmakers often pander to such depictions with a view to attracting wide viewership or favourable box office records. Therefore, while much blame will not be apportioned to the filmmakers, it is pertinent to state that they can do a lot about changing the stereotypical and imbalanced narratives. This is especially because this colossal imbalance in gender framing in the films will not only wreak havoc on the viewers’ notions of men and women but will further entrench the culture of patriarchy, which is currently the bane of the Nigerian society with regards to achieving gender equality. Granted, filmmaking is as much a business as art. But it becomes reprehensible when one is ‘slaughtered’ as a sacrifice on the altar of the other. In addition, filmmakers wield much power in correcting wrong notions and ideologies in every society. To this end, Nigerian filmmakers and Nollywood content creators must rethink the framing of women in film narratives.

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