ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Emergence of Nigerian Women Filmmakers and Their Contributions to Nollywood

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Abstract

The issue of gender has attracted so many comments in the media, especially as depicted in Nollywood films. Many of these films bear reflective roles and have shaped our ideas about social, cultural, political and economic issues. This paper is on the arrival of women filmmaker in Nollywood and their representation of the female gender in their films. The objectives were to ascertain the relevance of women filmmakers and their contributions to the development of the Nigerian film industry. This study focused on two films as the primary data with a view to ascertaining the level of female representation in Nigerian films. The findings are that the contributions of women filmmakers are the core of the changing narratives of the stereotypical storylines of women that have been used as the main plots in Nigeria films for decades. It concludes that women should take more active roles behind the camera and continue to define and redefine Nollywood. The study, therefore, recommends that female students should be encouraged to look at filmmaking as a career opportunity and the influence of successful women filmmakers as role models may have a positive influence on a student's career choice.

Keywords: Gender, Nollywood, Representation, Filmmakers, Narratives

Introduction

Since the start of filmmaking in Nigeria, women have been relegated to minor roles. The male gender have been mostly in charge of most production decisions behind the camera, while females settle for minor roles like costumier, make up and assistant to the heads of crew members. Meanwhile, females were negatively portrayed in films as sex objects, evil, wicked, diabolical and barren. This has contributed to male chauvinism in which the men are biased against women and it can be said that the films they watch may have impacted such behavior to an extent.

The first film was exhibited in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall. Nnabuko and Anatsui (2012, p. 214) further add that: "On Monday, August 12, 1903, the first motion picture was shown in Nigeria at the Glover Memorial hall in Lagos by Mr. Balboa of Barcelona, Spain, under the management of a Nigerian Herbert Macaulay …". Nollywood films are consumed on a daily basis worldwide, which bears a deep role in our lives and help shape our ideas about cultural, economic, social and political matters. In addition to the entertainment value of the films, they are also filled with messages that reach audiences far and wide. While some of these messages are clearly stated within the film narratives, others are like fine prints that can only be discerned by some reflections.

Many women conferences have been held to shed light on this stereotype in order to promote and elevate gender equality and woman empowerment. Most countries in Africa have constitutions that prohibit discrimination based on sex and recognized socioeconomic rights of all citizens, but there is a big gap between the provision of gender equality in the constitution and daily realities for women.

These days, however, not only are women taking up significant role behind the screen, but also political role, contesting for political positions in the country which they would not be able or allowed to do before, but has happened since gender sensitive laws have been developed in many countries including Nigeria.

In the recent times, women are seen taking up roles as filmmakers in both narrative and documentary productions. Now, they are not only seen on the screen but also behind the camera and taking significant roles as cinematographers, screenwriters, directors, producers and many more.

Feminist scholars, film critics, and activists have questioned the misrepresentation of women behind the camera and sexist stereotyped portrayal in front of the camera before now.

Lately however, women filmmakers are arising from such stereotypes and taking strong roles behind the camera. One of these filmmakers is Amaka Igwe, a female filmmaker who has helped break this stereotype and is recognized to be one of the second generation filmmakers who helped begin the video film era of Nollywood. There is also Emem Isong who already started writing and producing films in a male dominated industry as early as 1990s.

Statement of the Problem

Overtime, it has been observed that sufficient media platform and awareness has not been properly given to women filmmakers. Inadequate female filmmaker experts and role models in the profession is also part of the problem. Thus, the following questions would be answered by this study:

What is the relevance of women filmmakers in Nollywood?

Are women filmmakers of any significant importance to Nollywood filmmaking?

What are the contributions of women filmmakers to the Nigeria film industry?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

1. ascertain the relevance of women filmmakers in the development of Nollywood
2. evaluate the significance of women filmmakers in Nigeria; and
3. examine the contributions of women filmmaker.

Research Methodology

The methodology that is adopted for this paper in acquiring the relevant information needed to examine women filmmakers' emergence and their contributions in Nollywood is the qualitative method. The primary data was derived from examining two films by two women filmmakers in Nollywood while the secondary data was got from journals, books, and articles.

The female gender is taking up strong potential roles behind the camera that help in contributing to the transformation of what we call the New Nollywood. This paper would contribute to knowledge on the emergence and contribution of women filmmakers in Nollywood.

Genesis of Nollywood and Representation of Women

Nollywood is the name by which the Nigeria film industry is popularly known. The word "Nollywood" have no definite beginning and Onuzulike (2008, p. 25) emphasizes that Nollywood "is imitative of Hollywood in the same way that "Bollywood" was derived from joining Bali and Hollywood to describe the film industry of India." The colonial government (British) used film such as documentaries as a tool to programme their principles as well as to promote religious propaganda without putting the colonies interest in mind.

The first film was exhibited in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos. This was during the silent era of filmmaking. Akande (2017, p.1) believes "that the earliest and first feature film in Nigeria is titled *Palaver* (1926) directed and produced by Geoffrey Barkas which also was the first film that casted Nigerians in speaking role".

The documentaries shown by the colonial government did not satisfy the masses because the documentaries shown were propagandas. Then feature cinema came to be another form of entertainment, which was common in Lagos. Agbanoma (2007, p.8) in this situation emphasizes that:

> Cinemas became a common feature of the social life in the emerging lagoon city of Lagos in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Indeed before this period, cinema operations seem to have been limited to comparatively small scale cinematograph exhibitions. The establishment of big commercial cinema houses with branches in strategic parts of the country only began

in the late 1930s.

The establishment of commercial cinemas changed the state of affairs a bit with more Nigerian contents exhibited in the cinemas than before, as part of the drive to decentralize colonial film production. Effiong and Iseyen (2017, p. 77) state that: "This demonstrates the point that colonial authorities employed films to dismantle the social and cultural status of Nigerians, and therefore perpetuated their power throughout the country." In agreement with Effiong and Iseyen, the colonial government made films to pull apart the culture of Nigeria and her people to perpetuate their divide and rule policy. However, after the establishment of the Nigeria Film Unit, the films made were films against the colonial films. Films that promote and uplift the culture of Nigeria and her people.

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Nigeria Federal and State units replace the Colonial Film Unit and following the Colonial government footstep, showing documentaries and newsreels to promote the Nigerian government ideologies. Effiong and Iseyen (2017, p.77) emphasise that "Nigerians started the development of television dramas in the early 1960s as a means to educate the people about Nigeria and Nigerians instead of the foreign product that came from the colonial government".

Nigeria independence in 1960 lead to an opening in film production by Nigerians, using celluloid method of filmmaking as was the practice then. The success of independent indigenous filmmakers like Ola Balogun who produced and directed *Amadi* (1975) and *Ajani Ogun* (1976) was said to be the start of indigenous filmmaking in Nigeria. This opened an opportunity for theatre practitioners to move to the big screen, including their travelling troupes, and turning some of their stage performances to film. Theatre practitioners such as Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya, Ade Afolayan were known for migrating from stage to screen in the 1980s, bringing their stage attributes into films.

Filmmaking and its production in Nigeria became very successful which led to the establishment of Nigeria Film Corporation in 1979 that helped filmmaker to access funds and resources. The success of Nigeria filmmaking and production came crashing when the economy of the country started to run down and this in turn led to the devaluation of the Naira, insufficient production funds and lack of film stock resources which was a challenge for the filmmakers making film in celluloid.

At that point, the post production process became very expensive, which required travelling abroad. Due to the devaluation of the Naira, trips abroad for post-production processes was difficult and expensive, leading to shortage of standard film studio and production equipment. All these happened due to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Program (S.A.P) introduced by the military dictatorship of that period. Odedina (2017, p. 56) adds that:

> During the period, majority of the populace in Nigeria suffered poverty as a result of the SAP programme, where the Nigerian currency became worthless in comparison to the developed nations. This was actually the catalyst that hastened Nigerian video industry's evolution from celluloid film.

The factors above lead to a great decline in the cinema culture and film production in Nigeria. Cinema houses were being shut down or turned into religious meeting places, trips abroad for post-production processes could no longer be paid for because of the devaluation of Naira in early 1990s. In addition, Odedina (2017, p. 57) recalls that:

> The implication of the SAP programme on cost of production was that where one needed a few tens of thousands of the local currency (the Naira) to purchase and process film stocks in the UK, for instance before SAP, post-SAP meant the same production would now cost several hundreds of thousands of the same local currency.

The above is Odedina explaining fully the difference in value of the local currency (Naira) before SAP and after SAP and its consequences on filmmakers in Nigeria. The producers, thus, tried to find alternatives to the new realities in a bid to survive and the most obvious one to them after trials and errors is video film production.

The structural Adjustment Programme of the 1980s forced filmmakers into Video as another alternative and means of filmmaking in Nigeria. It is less expensive and the post production process is easier compared to celluloid. There have been various accounts of the origin of video film in Nigeria, with many not in agreement with Onuzulike (2008) who states that an Ibo-language production called *Living in Bondage*, produced by Ken Nnebue in 1992, ushered in the birth of Nollywood. This study opines that the cumulative efforts of the 1970s and 1980s productions led to what we know now and is globally acknowledged as Nollywood.

The first video films produced in Nigeria was *Ekun* (1986) by Alade Aromire and *Soso Meji* (1988) by Ade Ajiboye. However, although *Living in Bondage* (1992) is seen as the first commercial popular video film, several film historians and scholars like Odedina (2017) and Oyewo (2005) have argued that the video film industry was already flourishing before *Living in Bondage* (1992).

Nigerian producers and filmmakers moved to video because celluloid became unaffordable to them due to economic problem, while video opened doors for mass production because video is cost effective unlike celluloid. In quality of aesthetics however, the video film production is inferior compared to celluloid production and lacks professionalism unlike in the 1970s. The video film production was mainly for profit making and not putting professionalism into consideration.

The popular thriller film made on digital camera by Kunle Afolayan, *The Figurine* (2009), is considered the game changer for Nollywood, gaining attention from the media and people home and abroad. The film was a commercial and critical success in Nigeria. As the technology improved, filmmakers began to move to digital photography, with better production quality and professional aesthetics.

There have been developments in Nigeria and the world as a whole on women rights, women having their own voices heard and making decisions on their own. Although the patriarchy dominance still happens in some places (Nigeria included), it is not as rampant as it was before this present moment.

Nollywood has contributed to the undermining of women confidence in the society through the portrayal of women losing self-assurance and confidence in themselves and also feeling inferior to men. Some films have been made to break women from the yolk of stereotypes, because they discussed issues on girl child, women empowerment, and women rights. Women filmmakers have attempted to make films that would portrayed women differently from what some male colleague portrayed women to be in their films. Ukadike (1994, p 104) credits Safi Faye from Senegal as the first woman filmmaker in Africa, with her film *Kaddu Beykat* (1975) which was distributed commercially.

In Nigeria, there is no woman credited to be the first woman filmmaker as it is credited to French woman Alice Guy-Blache as the first woman filmmaker in the world and the first woman to own a studio. Tangcay (2020, p.1) admits that:

> Alice Guy- Blache was the first woman to direct a film. She helmed or produced over 1,000 movies, in addition to writing, editing and set decorating many of them. Guy-Blache also cast interracial actors long before Hollywood ever did. But she is hardly a household name….

One prominent woman filmmaker in Nigeria was Amaka Igwe, who is well known among filmmakers in Nigeria before and after her death in 2014. Amaka Igwe was recognized as one of the second generation filmmakers in the video era of Nollywood. In 2016 a documentary was dedicated to her titled *Amaka's Kin: The Women of Nollywood* (2016) directed by Tope Oshin, which talks about the journey and challenges of women directors in

Nollywod. Several women directors like Tope Oshin, Jadesola Osiberu, Mildred Okwo, Ronke Macaulay Omoni Oboli, Stephanie Linus, Ema Edosio, Michelle Bello and many more featured in this documentary where they talked about their struggles and journey as women and filmmakers in Nollywood and how Amaka Igwe has inspired them in their career. Amaka Igwe was popularly known for film and TV productions like *Rattle Snake* (1995), *Violated* (1996), *A Barber's Wisdom*, *Fuji House of Commotion* (2000s), and *Checkmate* (1991-1994). There is also Emem Isong who started writing and producing films in a male dominated industry in the early 1990s when she produced and wrote her first film *Jezebel* (1994).

Women filmmakers, in addition to the primary assignment of entertainment, also live under the microscope of their audience. Filmmaking is not a one person job; it entails different people in different fields that make up the production of a film. Ukata (2010) particularly adds that: "The patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society may have been one of the factors responsible for the late entrance of women into movie production in Nigeria as directors, producers, editors and cinematographers".

Women are now behind the camera taking up major roles, but this has not given women filmmakers the respect, honour and award that they deserve. Women are being neglected and underrated when on set, faced with challenges as filmmakers. Utor (2017, p. 7) discusses the challenges women face as filmmakers during a one on one interview with Michelle Bello, where she states that:

> I had a recent experience with a group of men. We were working on a movie project together and they brought me in as the producer. As the only woman on the table, it was like, 'oh, you are a woman; you don't really need the money. You are a wife; your husband will pay for whatever you need.' And I said, 'no; this is what I am worth. This is my fee; this is for my time and energy. I know what value I will bring to the project.

It appears so easy for any male to go into filmmaking without the fear of stereotypes, funding or even much work to be recognized and accepted in the society. The case is different for women because being a woman who desires to be a filmmaker in a society that believes a woman's place is in the kitchen and taking care of the home and children is an additional burden that their male counterparts don't have to deal with. In recent times there have been some improvements, not fully, but some noticeable changes of women behind the scene taking up active roles.

Nollywood Women behind the Camera

Women in Nigeria as a whole have fought to make a place and find a voice for themselves on their own through protests, movements, films and articles and so on. It is of no doubt that the Nigeria women filmmakers have hugely contributed to the economy of the country with films which made millions in the box office, pro viding employment for thousands and keeping the circulation of money moving. They have made history and changed history in the Nollywood, women like Kemi Adetiba, Funke Akindele-Bello, Bolanle Austen-Peters, Jade Osiberu, Genevieve Nnaji, Mo Abudu, Mildred Okro, Omoni Oboli, Tope Oshin, Ema Edosio and many more. These women have produced films which are directed by women filmmakers and have all changed film history in Nollywood.

This paper focuses on two films made by two different women behind the screen and which have given strong backbones to the female characters instead of being stereotyped in the typical patriarchal screen roles of Nollywood. Genevieve Nnaji*'s Lionheart* (2018) and Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike* (2016) are the two female filmmakers in question. They have been able to break stereotypes in the society, from being on the screen to going behind the screen and calling the shots.

Making her directorial debut film *Lionheart* (2018), Nnaji's film has taken a different turn by embedding Igbo culture and female empowerment together in a film. The Igbo is among the well-known and popular major tribes in Nigeria, and it also known to be patriarchy in nature. *Lionheart* is set

in a family where gender unfairness does not exist. Adeeze is allowed to work at the family company alongside with her father without her gender being put into consideration. Adeeze's younger brother Obiora, who wants to be a musician and has no interest in the business, in a typical Igbo home would have insisted that being the son, he works at the family company because of his gender and apparently heir to the company because he is the son of the family.

Nnaji has been able to change the narratives of the Igbo culture and female empowerment with her directorial debut film *Lionheart*. Chief Obiagu (her father) has not seen Adeeze for her gender but for her capability and strength, and he is not a man who believes that a male child is better than a female child. The film showcases positive representations and environment that allows both the female empowerment and Igbo culture as compatible by not negating the female child and allowing her to purse her dreams regardless of her gender. The film has not only centered on just the female gender issue alone, but also the male gender, family and love.

Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike* (2016), on the other hand, is another film dedicated to the evil of child for bride all over the world. The film has a story of activism and change. A film directed by Oboli is about a group of women in a community who denied their husbands sex in protest of standing up for a young girl who was bound by her father and against her mother's will to marry an elderly man.

Other women follow suit and these protests stirred a nationwide strike, where women deny their husbands sex including sex workers as well. These strikes and protests attract the world's attention with women around the globe protesting and going on strike in solidarity.

The film director Omoni Oboli was able to create a comical film while still retaining its message on child marriage. Using humor to pass a message to it audiences, the film is on a fight and protest against child marriage, using hashtag #childnotbride. Child marriage is a form of contemporary slavery given to the master against their own will, not having a voice of their own, passing through traumatic experience. This further leads to a child birthing a child, having health complications and an endless circle of poverty and misery.

Oboli and Nnaji have both made films that have narratives on activism and change, on female empowerment, the girl-child which have helped in reshaping societal norms. These women have contributed to Nollywood, changing narratives and not only making films for profit alone, but making and leaving an impact on their audiences and the society.

Findings

During the course of this paper on contributions of women filmmakers in the Nollywood using two films as case studies, it has been shown that Nollywood is still undergoing some societal stereotype reviews of female roles in the entertainment sector both in front of and behind the camera. The findings, therefore, were that the contribution of women filmmakers are the core of the changing narratives of the stereotypical narratives of women in Nigeria and the fact that several women have become relevant in their own rights which has enabled them to use this leverage to tell their stories both in front of and behind the cameras.

In addition to the above, the success of such movies by women that have taken chances in changing the narratives of Nollywood films by going against the norms have also contributed to some male filmmakers exploring the subject that seems as taboo until recently. These women filmmakers have become significant in Nollywood through their various contributions. Through their work, the scope of women portrayals and control behind the camera has been greatly expanded.

Conclusion

Nollywood is growing rapidly and has been changing over the years, gaining world recognitions and collaborations. Women filmmakers have contributed greatly to this growth and popularity of Nollywood. The study, therefore, concludes that more women need to take charge behind the camera, taking roles that continue to define and redefine Nigeria women multifaceted

characteristics and getting more involved in the filmmaking processes. It can be debated that men are biologically stronger than women, but filmmaking does not involve biological prowess. Women involvement in filmmaking has nothing to do with their physical strength, but their mental capacity. This would ensure that society starts looking at them beyond their gender alone but as role models, and not being side-lined in awards that they deserve for their hard work as filmmakers in the Nollywood.

Recommendations

Nollywood is young and still growing. This growth has to include the involvement and recognition of women filmmakers as equal partners. In addition to women filmmakers not getting enough recognition in Nollywood, there are not enough women in the different fields of film making processes**.** The study, therefore, recommends that female students are encouraged to look at the field of filmmaking as a career. Involving some of the successful female filmmakers to speak with such students in career choice will go a long way in making such goal achievable.

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