

GENDER CONSTRUCTION, DOMESTIC CRISIS AND THE COMMUNICATION OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN SELECTED NIGERIAN FILMS

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*<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm.v.12.1.3>

Abstract

This paper examines the construction of gender identities in marital unions in Nigerian films, and further interrogates how these identities communicate femininity and masculinity to the level of generating domestic crisis. The research is conducted using the interpretative and content analysis approach of the qualitative method to critically analyze two films produced in the Nigerian film industry for purposes of determining how the construction of gender identities in marital unions engender domestic crisis. The findings reveal that in an attempt to establish gender identities and self assertion, domestic crisis often erupts and continues to rage to the detriment of the expected peaceful co-existence and companionship in marital unions. The study concludes that the construction of gender identities in marital relationships generate crisis especially in situations where couples engage in struggles to dominate and suppress the other or to resist domination by another. Based on the findings, the study advocates for a better understanding among couples which will lay the foundation for mutual peaceful co-existence and encourages film directors to give more exposition to gender domination in films as it relates to both male and female.

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Introduction

Nigerian films are popular sources of entertainment, information and education for the teeming mass who more often than not, interpret the films as happenings in the society. These films are accepted as mediums for the dissemination of socio-political information and for x-raying societal preoccupations. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh corroborates this assertion in her article titled "Costuming To Corrupt: Nigerian Video Films and the Image Question" by confirming that

Nigerian video films have become popular not just with Nigerian audiences but with an international and multi-cultural mix of audiences in recent years. The films are being marketed and consumed all over the African continent and have attracted the attention of cable Television networks in different parts of Africa.... One can therefore make bold to assert that these films are currently the most popular means of entertainment in the nation. (2)

The films address varied socio-cultural issues including gender identities and the persistent subjugation and oppression of women in a patriarchal society. In Nigeria, domestic violence and gender domination is hinged on male domination over females which has generated unending controversies. This appears to have its base on the concept of feminism which preaches egalitarianism or equality of sexes. This issue of feminist ideology of gender domination has gradually built up and manifested in films produced in the Nigerian Film Industry. Many scholars are of the view that men dominate the lives of women in most spheres, and limit the ability of women to

change their own circumstances. In many Patriarchal cultures, authority persistently resides with the male and as such, gender roles consistently place women in a position of servitude and men in a position of dominance thereby limiting the ability of women to influence decisions which affect their own lives. Social structure and gender roles form important parts of cultures and societies thereby placing gender inequality as an essential cultural ingredient for perceived socio-cultural stability in a male dominated sphere. As Utoh-Ezeajugh further observes in her work titled "Nigerian Female Playwrights and the Evolution of a Literary Style: Gendered Discourse in the Plays of Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami-Agunloye and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh

In the social structure of most African societies, men are groomed from birth to imbibe an attitude of supremacy over women, who are then nurtured to feel and act inferior to men. In operating within the sphere of social conventions and cultural restrictions, the woman is regarded as being less intelligent, less creative, less productive and of less economic value and by implication of less social value than men.(104)

These factors are visible in many unequal cultures, and are amongst the most persistent hindrances to the development of gender equality, and may perhaps explain why women are often as culpable as men in an attempt to perpetuate gender inequality and assert their authority. This situation often leads to crisis, especially in a marital union. Understandably, over the years, scholars have articulated varied feminist standpoints to address the issue of women

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oppression and gender inequality. Accordingly, Utoh-Ezeajugh makes this submission:

Feminist postulations hinging on varied ideological conceptions have been espoused by scholars concerned with the empowerment, self-actualisation and self-reclamation of the woman in a male-dominated world. From feminism to femalism, to womanism, to motherism, to black feminism, and humanism, the subjugation of women has taken centre space in literary discourse on gender interactions. (107)

Gender Construction and Domestic Crisis

Janet Chafetz, in her book titled *Masculine, Feminine or Human?* observes that femininity and Masculinity are often socially ascribed and communicated. Thus;

The words used to describe the masculine role are quite positive: ‘practical’ ‘logical’ ‘experienced’ ‘brave’ ‘trustworthy’ ... the tone of the words used to describe femininity is considerably, different. Such terms as ‘petty’ ‘fickle’ ... ‘frivolous’ ‘shallow’ and ‘vain’ are very negatively charged in the society. (41)

In the same vein, *Psychology Research and Reference* presents the view that

the terms masculinity and femininity refer to traits or characteristics typically associated with being male or

female, respectively. Traditionally, masculinity and femininity have been conceptualized as opposite ends of a single dimension, with masculinity at one extreme and femininity at the other. (Internet Source)

The Nigerian film Industry (Nollywood) has consistently communicated gender identities through the exhibition of gendered images and imagery in films especially in narratives involving couples in marital unions. In their bid to express their 'maleness' or 'femaleness' characters often generate conflicts that ultimately envelope and throw them into unmitigated crisis. Domestic crisis can be given vent by either the man or the woman involved in the union and it may occur within the home or in the wider community. Although it is generally believed that women are often at the receiving end of domestic conflicts, it is not totally the case, because men too are also prone and are actually sometimes at the receiving end where they are violently treated. This type of violence is not as popular as violence on women and this may be because most men who suffer this type of violence are so obsessed with communicating their masculinity that they are often ashamed to mention it for fear of being seen as 'not manly'. When for instance, a woman continuously belittles her man, ridicules him or even compares him to his mates who seem to be doing better than him, it is a form of domestic abuse and this may eat at the man's ego while boosting the woman's self esteem as a perceived stronger or more focused partner. Such a man may be taken as one in an abusive relationship but he may not even view it in that light because of his desire to be a 'manly man' and probably, because the woman is so subtle about it and probably because it does not leave physical marks.

Other issues such as possessiveness and manipulation, may be interpreted as subtle abuses in a relationship. According to Watts and Zimmermann, "the under-reporting of domestic violence is

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almost universal and may be due to the sensitive nature of the subject" (31). The reality on ground is that husband punching, slapping, kicking, nail scratching, sex deprivation and killing are realities that occur in Nigeria.

Accordingly, Alokun submits that

Domestic violence is also known as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, battering, family violence and intimate partner violence (IPV). It is a pattern of abusive behaviours by one partner against another in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family or cohabitation. Domestic violence, so defined, has many forms, including physical aggression or assault (hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects), or threats thereof; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; controlling or domineering; intimidation; stalking; passive/covert abuse... (100)

The above assertion implies that domestic violence is the object of continuous abuse on a partner in a matrimonial home which causes pain, distress or injury. This amounts to both psychological and physical abuse from one partner to another. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of the traditional society. It is a structure of a set of social relations with material base which enables men to lord it over women. From this point of view, it can be asserted that domestic conflict can be generated by either the man or the woman in a bid to express either masculinity or femininity. K. Animasaun and Y. A. Animasaun have observed that,

...women are seen to be objects of abuse at three levels, namely: the home or family level, the community through Patriarchal and cultural dictates or practices; and at the state level, through political, legislative or administrative inhibitions... And these three levels are extended to areas of sexual harassment, forced treatments and abusive medication, commercialization of women contraception due to forced labour... (63)

Mulroney, J. Chan acknowledges the fact of women's violence against men, especially in marital unions and goes further to state the possible hindrances to exposing such situations. Thus;

"A further problem for researching the incidences of violence perpetrated against men is that it can be difficult to differentiate men who are perpetrating violence from male victims..."

Although it is true that men are sometimes victims and shy away from reporting, it should be noted, that women also under-report violence for reasons such as fear of reprisals- fear that their children will be taken away and a hope that their partner will change. It is documented that female victims under-report their victimization and the evidence is that men tend to over-estimate their partner's violence while women under-estimate their partner's violence by normalizing or excusing it (Floyd, 4).

Thus, the attempt by each partner to express his/her masculinity or femininity within the confines of their relationship often attracts domestic conflict and violence and there is the possibility that as an aftermath, depression and stress may set in and both parties will definitely get affected psychologically which can be devastating and long lasting. The long term effects of these crisis in a marital relationship are many and varied. They may for instance pose a danger to a woman's reproductive health and can scar a survivor psychologically, cognitively and interpersonally. A woman who

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experiences domestic violence and lives in an abusive relationship with her partner may be forced to become pregnant or have an abortion against her will, or her partner may knowingly expose her to a sexually transmitted infection. Men who are abused in a relationship, may take to excessive drinking and smoking amongst other habits and may become perpetrators of rape and other criminal acts, in an attempt to vent their frustration on weaker or more vulnerable persons and prove their masculinity.

It is believed that domestic crisis can be generated by immense economic deprivation. The stress imposed by poverty upon family life is often seen to be the propeller of domestic crisis. As much as this may be true, violence still exists within the confines of affluent homes whereby either the husband or the wife is craftily and psychologically weighing the partner down in order to gain control either because he or she is the bread winner of the family or occupies a higher social status. Moreover, obligations to extended family members as well as polygamy may also become frequent sources of crisis.

Battering, being one of the major forms of domestic violence in every society is recognized as a repeated pattern of inflicting harm both sexually, psychologically and physically. In this wise, Almosed states that “wife battering is the most wide spread violence against women” (70). The forms include emotional, sexual and physical battering but the bottom line or end result is pain and suffering being inflicted on the victim. Wife battering is thus described as a form of physical abuse that includes the following acts; ‘threats, punching, kicking, rape or coercive sex, throwing a woman down the stairs, hitting, shoving, kicking, bruising, stabbing, shooting, beating, belittling and slapping (Oyedokun, 309). However, these forms of battering listed above are not only perpetrated by men but rather, could also be perpetrated by women. As has been noted, these acts come in during arguments between

married and unmarried couples whereby the woman or the man could react in anger resulting to one hitting the other to assert his/her authority/superiority. man.

More recent research on domestic violence also militates against the simplistic feminist assertion that patriarchy is the ultimate cause of all violence against women. There is a growing consensus that no single factor explains men's violence against women; it is multi-factorial with many different and often overlapping causes. While some of these factors are undoubtedly influenced and aggravated by various forms of patriarchy, several of these factors transcend them. For example, researchers note that there are biological (differences in brain structure, brain functioning, and hormones), intra-psycho (personality disorders, attachment disorders), and social construct (childhood experiences of violence) factors in men's violence against women. Some feminist scholars are quick to dismiss other explanations for domestic violence in favour of their global indictment of men and patriarchy. Unfortunately, these situations have contributed to a highly politicized and adversarial context in which men and women's experiences of domestic conflict are placed in competition with each other.

This study is anchored on the "Power and Control Wheel" postulation commonly used by both advocates and researchers to assert that in domestic crisis, the motive of any of the partners for being violent is to gain power and control over the subordinate. The Power and Control Wheel places power and control at its core with eight spokes emanating from it and physical violence as the outer wheel holding everything together. According to the most common explanation of the wheel, each spoke represents a tool or type of an external social power resource the barterers can use to exercise their dominance over their intimate partners, with dominance being a behaviour that has the acquisition of power and control as its objective. The exact behaviours of each individual barterer and how they fit into each of the eight areas will vary based upon which

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external or social power resources they possess and to what degree they possess them relative to the resources their intimate partner possesses.

Gender Construction and Domestic Crisis in *Stronger than Pain 1&2* Directed by Tchidi Chikere

"Stronger than Pain" is an epic film that centres on a husband beater and a wife defender. Eringa is a domineering wife who keeps hitting and pursuing her husband around. Her husband Ulonna on the other hand appears to love her to the point of almost worshipping her. The film narrative presents a situation of role reversal, as the husband ends up running errands for his wife the same way that women do for their husbands in any African traditional set-up. This makes him a weakling and an object of scorn in the village. *Stronger than Pain 1&2* showcases the use of aggression and violence by a partner to claim gender supremacy within a marital union. The director of the film has succeeded in painting and exaggerating the image of domestic crisis in Nigeria by elevating the status of the wife to that of an authoritarian partner who must be obeyed and served. This nullifies the cultural view that man are the head of the family. Although Eringa is a domineering wife, her character seems extremely exaggerated. Ulonna is presented as one who craves after his wife's sexual appeal and because of that, she resorts to physical abuse as a way of asserting her supremacy. In asserting her gender superiority, Eringa, demands total authority over her husband in exchange for the sexual satisfaction which she gives him. The spousal abuse is presented in the film in such a way that one is left in no doubt that the woman is in charge.

This is evident in one of the scenes where we see Eringa scolding Ulonna her husband after she finds him drinking with his age mates, thus:

Eringa: don't you know it's getting late; you should be coming home attending to your wife. Why on earth should you prefer the company of your age mates that have no wives to the company of your wife...umhh?

Ulonna: You are right. Do you know you're correct, how can I prefer their company to my ezigbo? It was only that they were pressuring me; they were almost forcing me to take the drink. Please my dear, am very sorry...just tell me what I can do to appease you...ehh.

Eringa: I want to take a warm bath, go and boil water for me.

Ulonna: Ok.

Eringa: Don't make it too hot, a warm bath will just be good enough.

Ulonna: Ok, not too hot not too cold.

The above dialogue portrays Ulonna as a weak man who has no misgivings about being subservient to his wife Eringa. Despite all efforts by Ulonna's sister Adanna and his in-law to drive away Eringa, they are not successful because of Buchi's failure to seduce him. However, when eventually the elders succeed in driving her away, Ulonna continues sneaking Eringa into his hut at night with the intention of sending her away in the early hours of the morning. This is a pointer to the level that a man is willing to descend to, when he is attracted to a woman. This is what made Ulonna to lose respect and credibility among his mates. Thus, men are portrayed as the weaker sex because of such vulnerability. In *Stronger than Pain*, Eringa is the matriarch of the film, very domineering and possessive. Ulonna suffers psychological and emotional abuse in her hands while Eringa faces an inner conflict of insecurity in her marriage. Although Ulonna loves her because of her sex appeal, she still battles with the fear of losing her husband, hence, she resorts to the use of violence in order to get

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total compliance from her husband and the assurance that she is still in charge.

Gender Construction and Domestic Crisis in *The Rope of My Blood* Directed by Amechi Ukaeje

The Rope of my Blood is a film which presents a marital union where the husband is subjected to a high level of emotional torture. It describes the matriarchal system where the woman rules the man of the house. The film narrative is about Frank and Anene's relationship. Anene had sworn to make Frank's marriage to her unbearable since she was not able to marry Lawrence whom she met and fell in love with during her Law School, because of a long standing blood covenant she had entered into with Frank when he was funding her education. The film narrative, portrays emotional torture and sexual starvation which are good examples of domestic violence. Anene's chauvinistic practices represent the African matriarchal dominance. This is seen in the scene where Anene is discussing with her friend Chinwe while talking about Frank. She addressed Frank as one who is below her social status. She describes her husband as an uneducated fool, even when her friend observes that Frank speaks good English.

Anene in *Rope of My Blood* is the matriarch of the film who controls and abuses the husband both psychologically, emotionally and also sexually (sex starvation) by not fulfilling her conjugal rights simply because of her assumed social status. As a well trained lawyer, she has a superiority complex which makes her socially incompatible with Frank, an uneducated business man. In her bid to get Frank to divorce her willingly, she subjects him to all manners of abuses just to get him to comply with her demands and give her freedom. However, although Anene, in the film is subjecting her husband to emotional abuse by the character she puts up, she too is undergoing an inner conflict - a psychological torture

all in the name of class consciousness. She wants a divorce but she is being held back because of the consequences of the oath they took earlier. The only way out is if Frank willingly grants her the divorce because according to the native doctor that she consulted, she runs the risk of running mad if she tries to pull out of the marriage. Anene takes it that Frank her husband is being cruel by refusing to let her go. It eventually takes the intervention of the family and her friend Chinwe to put up a scheme that gets her jealous and makes her realize her mistake and then resolve the domestic crisis that had been raging.

It goes without saying that at the denouement of both films- Stronger than Pain and the Rope of my blood, the ills of extreme femininity and masculinity are exposed. Given the natural complimentary of men and women, gender identities ought not to highlight the differences found within the divides, rather, points of strength should be highlighted. Female dominance over their male counterparts is mostly hinged on western education and feminist ideologies. This is also explicated in the selected films that educated and enlightened women stand up to their husbands which often times result in arguments and emotional crisis, and of course, domestic abuses.

Conclusion

In this study, we have interrogated gender construction and the expression of femininity and Masculinity in marital unions, as presented in Nollywood films. While domestic crisis continues to envelope many marital relationships, scholars have tended to present the stereotypical view that men are always the aggressors while women are always at the receiving end. An analysis of the films under study has exposed the fact that this submission is not totally true. Although there is considerable evidence that patriarchy fuels domestic crisis, other issues such as asserting gender identities and power control play critical roles in generating and sustaining domestic crisis. The films that were analyzed for this study present

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good examples of negative gender communication in marital unions or other types of relationships. Women rather than men wield the power in those films and in what one is tempted to call role-reversal, the women subjugate their men to docility and submission. The men, in their bid to sustain their masculinity, accept and struggle to contain their partner's excesses without as much as a whimper, so as not to expose the real situation of things and bring themselves (their masculinity) to ridicule. For women under patriarchal suppression, the struggle remains to recapture the eroding self esteem. The study goes to prove that all forms of patriarchy and matriarchy can and do contribute to domestic crisis especially when one of the partners attempts to dominate and subjugate the other.

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