

## **Single-Motherhood and Ethical Dilemmas in *A Tribe Called Judah***

**Nkechi Asiegbu Bature-Uzor**

Department of Film & Multimedia,  
Faculty of Communication & Media Studies,  
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria  
Email: [nkechi.bature-uzor@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:nkechi.bature-uzor@uniport.edu.ng)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3753-9312>

and

**Faustina Akudo Warri**

School of General Studies and Entrepreneurship Development,  
Nigerian British University, Asa, Abia State, Nigeria  
Email: [warri.faustina@nbu.edu.ng](mailto:warri.faustina@nbu.edu.ng)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9364-6443>

### **Abstract**

*A Tribe Called Judah* is a Nollywood movie directed by Funke Akindele and Adeoluwa Owu, released to cinemas nationwide on December 15, 2023. It is a crime/family drama whose thematic preoccupation pertains to family and society life as seen in the current Nigerian society. A reflection of the different facets of the urban life and problems of the society, *A Tribe Called Judah* threats themes of family love, single motherhood, crime, gangsterism, and abuse among others. The thrust of this study underscores single motherhood and ethical dilemmas. Anchored on the tenets of liberal feminist theory, the study looks at ethical issues in the Nigerian society as it concerns single parenthood, while articulating through the filmic actions and storyline the place of family and the ultimate sacrifice Jedidah's children have to make to save their mother. In its representation of single motherhood, *A Tribe called Judah* interrogates the societal values in the life of Jedidah and her five sons which one can equate to the wider Nigerian society representing five geo-political zones. It uses the film as a primary datum alongside other secondary materials to argue that parenting in the context of a single mother can be challenging and significantly shrouded with ethical challenges.

**Keywords:** Dilemma, Ethics, Liberal feminism, Motherhood, Single-parenthood.

### **Introduction**

Film, cinema, flicks or movies as it is rightly called is an audio-visual means of communication which like other media educate, inform, interpret, mobilize and entertain. The Nigerian film industry is one that arguably seems unaffected by the

economic instability in the country -judging from its output and circulation in the recent past (2010 – 2023). The industry has been growing in leaps; hence, it is popularly said that Nollywood produces “over 2,500 films annually” (Film threat staff, 2023). Pertaining to its circulation and consumption, Jonathan Haynes asserts that Nigerian films are “on television in Namibia and on sale in the streets of Kenya. In Congo, they are tuned down while an interpreter tells the story in Lingala or other languages. In New York, Chinese people are buying them. In Holland, Nollywood stars are recognized on the streets by people from Suriname, and in London they are hailed by Jamaicans’ (as cited in Uwah 2013, p. 87). An example of this industry’s success story is seen recently in the good circulation and viewership accorded the movie, *A Tribe Called Judah* (2023) directed by Funke Akindele and Adeoluwa Owu. As reported by one of the dailies in the country, the production is “the first Nollywood film to hit one billion dollars in the cinema” (*Vanguard* February 7, 2024). This paper will be discussing the said movie by looking at its narrative plotlines to underscore ethical concerns as well as analyze critically the depiction of the dilemmas of single parenthood in the life of the protagonist.

Onuzulike’s division of the periods of filmmaking in Nigeria would give us good grounds for clarification on this. According to him, “Nigeria's film history can be partitioned into four eras: the colonial period: 1903 -1960; the Independence period: 1960-1972; the Indigenization Decree period: 1972-1992; and the Nollywood period, 1992-Present” (Onuzulike, 2008, pp. 25-26). What Onuzulike means is that even though there has been filmmaking in Nigeria since 1903, and without arguing the fact that one cannot possibly to talk about film history in Nigeria without the likes of Hubert Ogunde (1916-1990) who shunned films like *Aye* (1980), *Ayanmo* (1986) *Jaiyesinmi* (1981), *Nollywoodization* of the Nigerian cinema only happened between 1992 and the present day. So, it is to be taken here that the history of Nollywood is not the history of cinema in Nigeria but only a part of it which it dates back to 1992 and this is thanks to Kenneth Nnebue who produced an Igbo language movie titled *Living in Bondage* (1992), a blockbuster that thrilled Nigerians and reshaped the industry in the digital dispensation with new energy.

Nollywood, therefore, can be seen as the last era in the Nigeria’s history of cinema before the emergence of the term ‘New Nollywood’. It is characterized by the making of films by Nigerians for Nigerians and the world with low budget. The low budget but high productivity of the Nollywood era makes it reasonable to agree with Alyssa that the coinage Nollywood came to mean creating something out of nothing when he opines that “Nollywood is best understood as the process of filmmaking with minimal, and I mean meager resources. A journalist, Onishi observed how the filmmakers created movies under volatile and unpredictable circumstances, with near impossible production environments. This helped Onishi coin the term, “Nollywood,” which means “nothing wood,” or rather, creating something out of nothing” (Alyssa, 2019). Since the inception of the Nigerian movie industry, it keeps evolving from stage to stage. Today, it has moved to what is called the New Nollywood era. *A tribe called Judah* is a Nollywood film of a kind because it is skillfully digital and a high budget production with excellent cinematography and aesthetics. The film represents what films in New Nollywood era

showcase big budget, highly digitalized productions, brilliant cinematography and superlative aesthetics.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This work adopts the liberal feminism theory as a framework for studying the film: *A Tribe Called Judah*. Liberal feminism emerged in history between the 17th and 18th centuries in western countries to educate women about their rights with liberal ideology and later expanded to the rest of the world. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists extended their arguments in favour of equal rights for women under the law to own property and to vote. Liberal feminism therefore is the most widely accepted social and political philosophy among feminists because it guarantees the rights of all without discrimination. It has arisen as a theoretical background to nurture the feminist movements (Herouach, 2019). Maynard is of the view that it is the main branch of contemporary feminism which tries to establish gender equality in the society (Maynard, 1995). It concentrates more on issues of equity and equality in the workplace, education and politics.

The pioneers of liberal feminism are Mary Wollstonecraft who is said to be known as the creator of feminism theory while others like John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill joined her to further expand its acceptance. They who acted for women's rights and liberation when the economic and social position of European women was very low (Herouach, 2019). John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, political economist, Member of Parliament (MP) and civil servant argued on its terms for equal economic opportunities, political rights and civil liberties for both men and women in his document, "The Subjection of Women". He thought that despite the same educational and civic opportunities as men, most women would choose to remain wives and mothers, by improving domestic life for the family. This is unlike Harriet Taylor who disagreed on Mill's concepts and argues that women would instead choose to participate more fully in public life, going beyond simply voting and performing charity works. He believes that they would prefer to become partners of men in productive industry and may therefore choose to have fewer children. His works is largely focused on issues of marriage and divorce as he believes that both divorced men and women have a role to play in children's lives (Mill & Mill, 1970).

Liberal feminism, therefore, is an ideology and theory that seeks equal opportunity for all in the society irrespective of their gender. It does not discriminate in job roles and is a philosophy that caters for the dignity of persons equally. It believes in taking responsibility for actions by individuals without making excuses based on gender limitations. For example: If a young man puts a young girl into a family way, it is believed that such a boy continues to live his life as though nothing happened just as in the case of the fathers of the children in the life of Jedidah Judah. Liberal feminism theory is of the view that women too should not be stopped by their mistakes but should be responsible for living their lives to the fullest. In other words, their dreams should not be aborted because of the shortcomings of their gender, hence women as in the case of Jedidah should continue to live life as planned before the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies in

their lives. This is the reason why a work like this adopts the liberal feminism theory as a bedrock in teasing out the courage shown by Jedidah Judah as a single parent in the movie despite so many social hurdles and gender discriminatory attitudes that ordinarily would have frustrated her in a patriarchal society like Nigeria.

### ***A Tribe Called Judah and its Narrative Evocations***

*A Tribe Called Judah* presents a household narration whose storyline is about an economically challenged single-mother, Jedidah (Funke Akindele) with her five sons, from five different fathers. Emeka (Jidekene Achufusi) is the first son, his father was Kalu. Kalu had put Jedidah in the family way and relocated. Adamu (Uzee Usman), the second son is Bako's son. Bako is from Kano, he left Jedidah because of family and religion related issues. His family rejected her because she is not a Muslim, so he left her and got married to another woman in Kano. The third child, Shina (Tobi Makinde), was sired by Lekan, a lesson teacher to her elder sons. Pere (Timini Egbuson) is the fourth child. His father, Boma married Jedidah, but he died shortly after. The last son, Ejiro (Olumide Oworu), was born out of a one-night stand at the peak of Jedidah's depression. Also, among the cast of the movie are Ebelle Okaro, Uzor Arukwe, Nse Ikpe Etim, Genoveva Umeh, Faith Williams, Nosa Rex, Greg Ojefua, Ibrahim Yekini and Boma Akpore.

The movie begins with an establishment shot of a low-cost area and a poorly ventilated house. The camera opens on Jedidah as she wakes up to prepare for the day's activities. She remembers the genesis of her problem through the voice over of her scolding father which is heard condemning her like someone lost far into a nightmare. Her father disowned her for getting pregnant out of wedlock. As a strong woman she is, she decides to carry her cross with strong determination and her trust in God. She says her morning prayer and anoints herself and the pictures of her sons hanging on the wall with a holy oil as she asks God to bless and protect the family. This religious practice showcases her as a believer in the Christian faith following popular piety as practiced in the society and her background as the child of a Reverend gentleman. Added to her faith is the fact that she values her work and does not depend on any one to provide for her. She works hard to make enough income for herself and her children and she has a total distrust on men. She is a driver of the popular Nigerian tricycle called Keke Napep which ordinarily may be considered a male kind of work in the society. But for her, it is the job she cherishes to put food on the table for the family. This is a clear indication that Jedidah is the breadwinner and head of her family despite her gender and situation in life. Jedidah is also a philanthropist in her own capacity. Though not wealthy, she is generous and caring. She gives support to the poor people of her community especially her fellow women. One of those she helped is Linda whom she gives some funds to start a pepper business. It happens that Linda's husband is not fully aware of who is sponsoring the business and feels displeased with the aid his wife is receiving. He suspects that she could be living a wayward lifestyle and destroys his wife's goods, thereby embarrassing and beating her in public. Jedidah drives her tricycle down to the scene and tries to intervene, but Linda's husband does not seem to take it and accuses her of being the one who takes

his wife to men who patronize her upon sleeping with her. Jedidah feels sad at this accusation and the destruction of her fellow woman's goods. As the man fights both his wife and Jedidah, Ejiro, Jedidah's last child is by the side and upon witnessing the drama, calls his brothers who immediately rushed to the scene carrying clubs and weapons to destroy the man. They beat Linda's husband to stupor and he could have been killed if not for Jedidah dismissing his sons and protecting the man.

Jedidah is a woman who does not let her past catch up with her. She does not languish in thoughts over the fathers of her children but encourages them to forget them and use the name, Judah as their surname. She treats her sons with undying love even though two of them turn out to be very difficult to be controlled in the community by giving her a bad image always. She struggles to provide food for them despite extremely saddled with challenges. She hides away to drink alcohol and suffers pains of sickness in her privacies. She is a typical example of a woman in single parenthood whose job is perplexing. What Reime, Reime, Reime, Ratner, Tomaselli-Reime, Kelly, Schuecking and Wenzlaff say of women who are single-parents is significantly true of her case. According to them, the fact remains true that single mothers face several challenges and that the unmarried mothers among them are usually those who face the worse economic circumstances, experience greater psychological stress during pregnancy, and are less likely to seek timely prenatal care than married mothers (2006). Even though the times of her pregnancies are not captured in the filmic narrative of *A Tribe Called Judah*, a critical viewer has every index thrown at him or her of the difficulties and challenges of Jedidah as a single parent. It is a struggle all through the duration of the film for her parenting engagement as a mother with sons that can be called a difficult nation, each representing one of the geopolitical zones of the country, Nigeria. Her sons deserve proper formal education like their peers but given their characters in the movie one is made to wonder if they are educated. This is a confirmation of the findings of scholars like Amato (2000) and Bradshaw, et al. (2012) that single mothers and their children can face elevated poverty and other wellbeing risks. This is because growing up in a single-mother family can lead to lower educational attainment and poor psychological wellbeing in adulthood.

Since Jedidah's children grew up without having quality education, they are not opportune to get good jobs or secure serious source of income. Emeka works as a sales representative at a mall while Adamu is a security guard at the same mall. Shina is a hoodlum while Pere is a pickpocket. Ejiro, the last born of the family is a painter with no tangible income or explicit evidence of scholarship. This structure of family makes most of them to be scattered and quarrelsome, bringing worries to their mother and in some cases involved in street fights. No doubt, all these alongside her alcoholism are factors militating against health and as seen to pull Jedidah down as she returns home to meet crisis among her children who typically constitutes a nation of a type. Although her sons have different fathers and born by men from different backgrounds, they are noticeably united. They are also desirous of the best for their mother and would do anything to protect her. This is seen in their worry and confusion when their mother's health begins to fail her. They have no money to take care of her health and being terribly challenged, their decision led to the main conflict of the narrative. The place they go to rob is Emeka's

former work place and without knowing that another gang led by the manager of the mall also came to steal. They all faced themselves in a fight to outdo one another. In the process Emeka is killed and his brothers are devastated. As the search for their hide out intensified because of the crime of stealing dollars from the mall, the surviving ones decide to leave the city with their mother through the water ways. There is no doubt therefore that the movie portrays the good, the bad and the ugly experiences most families pass through especially those whose source of livelihood is from a single parent. Thus, even in real life situation, this type of family and their members tend to face a range of challenges that subjects them to some level of unethical living. It is therefore the ethical challenges of scenarios like this that one can worry about in the formation of citizens in a place like Nigeria.

### **Ethical Issues in *A Tribe Called Judah* vis-à-vis the Challenges of Single Parenthood**

Etymologically, the word ethics comes from the Greek *he ethike tekhnē* that translates to the science of morals. This is to say that ethics denotes the principles of right or wrong, and good or bad (Omoera & Anyanwu, 2014). It helps to know and differentiate what is good from bad, moral from evil. Although lacking any force of law, ethics appeals to reason regarding respect for the dignity of every human person and thereby calls all to do well and avoid evil. This position agrees with Uwah's definition of ethics when he opines that:

Ethics is the aspect that concerns itself with the goodness or wrongfulness of human conducts in the society. Another way of saying this is that ethics discusses the morality of human actions. In the light of this, whatever is good is ethical whereas whatever is bad is unethical. Therefore, ethics is about what happens in the society – the norms, ethos, mores, and individual actions. It looks at human conducts to pass judgement on them not with the force of law but with the view of pointing at how things ought to be done. This means that the right place to examine ethics is in human actions by considering how good or wrong they are (Uwah, 2024).

In *A Tribe Called Judah*, a film well celebrated in the cinema world, is filled with actions that question the moral ethics of the characters even though the narrative is not a real-life story. In considering ethical challenges, one may be looking not only at the life and struggles of Jedidah but also on those of her children. In this sense one may rightly assert that from the first scene to the last there are issues that call for analysis of ethical judgment in the narrative plotlines. For example:

- a. Rev. Simon Judah disowns his daughter for being pregnant outside the framework of marriage. He is a renowned Pastor (man of God) who would not let anything tarnish his reputation, including the misconduct of his child who happens to be Jedidah Judah. The ethical question here is, whether there is any good reason in

justifying a father who disowns her own blood because she is pregnant? She may have done what is considered abominable but disowning a child is not the best thing to do at any point especially at her worst time ever. This may lead to a lot of dangers for both mother and child. She may even commit suicide at its worse. Hence, when teenagers get themselves into any kind of trouble it is expected that their parents should still be there to guide them out of it. If Jedidah had better chances, she may not have given birth to the other members of the *different nations* she calls family, meaning that the rejection by her father may have opened the window for her continued promiscuity which resulted to the other children.

- b. Another instance of ethical concern in the movie is when Emeka, the supposed upright son of Jedidah faces the dilemma when he heard that his mother is very sick and is being rushed to the hospital. He is caught between going to see his mother and remaining at work. He chooses to rush and see how he could help to get his mother back to life and lose his job. In this instance he chooses family first but receives an unfavourable consequence. One therefore wonders on ethical terms if going to save the life of the mother is not enough reason, and whether sacking him (even as it is the right punishment for abandoning his duty post) is the best action that could be given to him in such a situation.
- c. There is also the depiction of torture as an unethical conduct rehearsing popular culture in the movie whereby jungle justice is meted out on individual characters simply because they are perceived as perverts in the society and being caught by either the police or the villagers. Such bothers around getting justice and handling crimes in the community where Jedidah and her children lived and grew with others.
- d. Another serious depiction of an ethical laxity arises in the deception of the man whom Emeka was working for. He is a money launderer but hides under the coverage of furniture importer to commit illegal and unethical misdeeds. Upon investigation, it is found that he lies like someone who has no idea of anything foreign currency and this is being stalked under the cushions of his furniture. In response to a question thrown at him by the police, he asks: "Hard currency in this mall? People are wealthy in this mall? No, because in my shop, we go cashless" implying he has no hands in the crime, but he is the kingpin of the crime.
- e. The use of alcohol in the movie by both Jedidah Judah and the robbery gangs who steal from the mall is utterly unethical. They try to paint taking alcohol and smoking at the same time as a way of showcasing good life, thereby advertising it as glorious but it is something that can be said to be misleading for uncritical audience of film narratives. This, too, is ethically challenging since it can affect the worldview of young audiences with wrongful messages given them regarding the consumption of alcohol and smoking of cigarettes.
- f. The scene where the gangs are sharing dollars in wraps as loots from robbery is another incident of ethical concern in the movie. This is because the gang members tend to make the act of stealing seem like something good and sweet. Such is

wrong because not even the reason for engaging in the act can ever justify it since the end does not justify the means.

Outlining all the above points means that the narrative of the film under study can help underpin ethical concerns both in the film and the society at large. Since Nollywood picks plots and themes from popular culture, it is easy to see how these elements of the society are fused into the narrative to use in interrogating human actions and explore meaning of values in the society. In the life of Jedidah as a single parent, more of these issues can further be raised as one explores the struggles of the protagonist in the narrative as a single mother.

### **Jedidah: Single Parenthood as an Ethical Issue in Nollywood and in Nigeria**

Conception occurs by the fertilization of female eggs by the sperm of a male hence, every human being has a father and a mother biologically. Therefore, single parenthood here does not mean that the children being raised by a mother have no fathers. It simply denotes the fact that the children's parental responsibilities lie on the shoulders of their mothers alone when their fathers are absent. This may come to be in two ways: on one hand, if there is an adolescent woman's unplanned pregnancy and first birth which according to Wu, Bumpass and Musick, 2001 largely conditions her subsequent life trajectories, often adversely - regarding their educational and labour market opportunities as well as their marriage prospects. Although these scholars see this phase of parenthood as a thing of the past in many societies, it is a present continuous aspect of the phenomenon in a country like Nigeria. Put in another way, it does exist and is often characterized by some form of unwantedness and an aura of shamefulness around it. On the other hand, in recent times, some women have begun to choose being single parents because of some factors around them. This is what Foster, Jones and Hoffman (1998) acknowledged when they argue that Nowadays non-marital births occur within a wide age range but they are increasingly late, they are not necessarily first births, they may precede or follow a marriage, they are born to both unpartnered women and women living with the child's father, and they may speed up or slow down the transition to marriage. The changing profile of unmarried mothers could have important social implications.

Whether single parenthood is because of an unplanned pregnancy or a couple who falls out of wedlock or simply a woman's decision to have a child that will take care of her at old age, *A Tribe Called Judah* shows that it is uncritical to consider a single parent as a woman who is lazy, randy, wayward and a woman of easy virtue. The plot of the movie revolves around a single parent, Jedidah Judah. The narrative showcases how surviving efforts by women can change their life stories for the better. She bears five sons from different fathers and carries the burden of fending for them as a single-parent which automatically leaves her with zero or little chance of either getting married to a stable man or even having a better future. But she beats all odds and survives the terrain of condemnations to see her children grow into adulthood. In all these she showcased the



power of women in fending for themselves and competing with their male folk in the society without any hindrance or discrimination.

Akindele's films reflect the society and engage themselves with popular arguments of the masses as can be seen in *Omo Ghetto - The Saga* (2020) and *Battle on the Buka Street* (2022). The Nigerian society for instance sees single parenthood as somewhat untraditional and morally wrong. This for most people places some form of stigma on women and their families. This is why Jedidah's father justifies himself to disown her without any whims of conscience. In most part of Nigeria, one of the qualities to signify a family that raises their daughter(s) well is that they are not put in the family way outside the framework of marriage. When there is a case of unexpected pregnancy, the parents of the pregnant girl are usually seen to either force the girl to agree to go into marriage with any kind of man that comes around and if she objects, disown her. A good example of this scenario is the movie titled *The Hell Called You* (2023) directed by Boshi K. D. In this film, a well brought up light-skinned and an undergraduate beautiful lady, Thelma (Stella Udeze) whose father is a well-known born-again pastor gets numerous suitors.

But because she abhors premarital sex which most of them seek and the promise she made to herself not to go into marriage until after her studies, she is unable to marry on time. One of the suitors called Louis (Chidi Nwachukwu) who is ill-advised by his father decides to rape and get her pregnant. Thelma is devastated. She told her mother of her ordeal but receives not too sympathetic attention. Louis, knowing what he has done and aware that Thelma's parents would give her to anyone who comes around seeking her hand in marriage decides to introduce himself as Thelma's friend to the parents. Thelma ended up marrying Louis as her last option. In this way, the shame is supposedly removed from the family as she who is pregnant out of rape is made to end up with a husband. Moving in with Louis is not easy for Thelma. She is maltreated, physically and emotionally abused on daily basis. She runs back to her parents' house on several occasions for safety but forced back by her father who would not tolerate the sight of her or the idea of a divorcee daughter. But what could have been seen as an unfortunate case is made to become her chance of liberation. Her parents got wind of the slavery they pushed their daughter into in the name of marriage and the kind of man they gave their daughter to. They pity themselves as they come to know that their daughter must have been passing through a lot of woes given the animalistic tendencies the husband of their daughter exhibited before them.

Thelma eavesdrops on her husband's conversation and hear him reveal that he was the rapist that forcefully copulated with their daughter. She is heartbroken and decides to confront him on it. She packs her things and leaves to her father's house and is then welcomed back like a hero. Thus, film stories do not come from the vacuum but are mirrors that help viewers reflect on the society as they raise questions on unethical misconducts that go on in the society. Both in *A Tribe Called Judah* and *The Hell Called You*, one is led to the struggles and woes of women who are abandoned by their male partners. It is on this note that the lessons of the ideology of the liberal feminism theory is to be evoked as a way of empowerment in women who suffer unethical misconducts in the society. Silence may be golden but not in all cases since by continuing to suffer in silence,

women who are being maltreated in the society because of their gender or their ugly past can be unknowingly allowing the society to perpetuate a culture of death against womanhood. As good as Nollywood's narratives keep getting a lot is yet undone therefore filmmakers must be encouraged to reveal and condemn injustices against women because of their gender. This is one aspect that *A Tribe Called Judah* promotes by showing women empowerment while encouraging them not to wallow in self-pity in cases of their ugly past escapades.

### Conclusion

*A Tribe Called Judah* is a masterpiece. It is a film that represents the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and teaches among other things that even though there are varying languages, all can work together in unity to restore Nigeria's lost glory. It is a movie that does not judge gender and corrects errors in love and forgiveness. As a movie that showcases family love and single parenthood, it is a clarion call to parents to put in effort in training their children as to secure the future for them. As an ethically minded concept, it raises several ethical questions that interrogate the values of Nigerians as well as those of viewers on matters of life. This is what this essay has examined and feels that the storyline is a veritable tool for discussing ethics, cinema and society especially as it pertains to gender and the Nigerian nation.

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