

Cast Me not as a Succubus or a Jezebel: Nollywood Actresses and the Struggle against Women Stereotyping

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Abstract

The stereotyping and sexual objectification of womanhood in Nollywood films have partly been attributed to Nigerian actresses. According to a number of critics and scholars, female actors' passivity and complicity are to blame for the continuous negative portrayals of women in films. This popular belief follows from the arguable myth that female actors most often accept demeaning roles in films; meanwhile, it is axiomatic that if they reject such roles, androcentric/sexist screen writers will be compelled to develop better female characters for their films. If the above logic seems pertinent, it tends to hastily generalise on Nollywood actresses' attitude towards the objectification of womanhood. The logic also fails to recognise the grossly understudied efforts made by many Nigerian actresses against women stereotyping in the Nigerian film industry.

This paper focuses on these understudied efforts with a view of filling a knowledge gap. Specifically, the paper hinges on secondary sources and critical observations to explore some of the ways in which Nollywood actresses have struggled – and continue to struggle – against women's stereotyping in Nollywood films. In the first place, the paper examines women stereotyping and objectification in Nollywood films; and in the second it explores three ways in which Nigerian actresses resist their stereotyping in the Nigerian film industry. These include the rejection of demeaning roles, feminine feminist cinema and the tendency to request the same demeaning roles for men.

Keywords: sexual objectification, stereotyping, pornography, Nollywood, counter hegemony, conservatism, feminism.

Introduction

The persistent stereotyping and sexual objectification of womanhood in films have been attributed not only to the male domination of the cinema industry, but also to the complicity and passivity of female stakeholders of the cinema industry. According to a number of critics, women themselves seem to do nothing or very little to resist the stereotyping and sexual objectification of their gender in films (Okuna 1996; Connor 2014). This position is somewhat evidenced by the fact that many actresses and other female stakeholders of the film industry tend not to find anything wrong with women being treated as sexual objects in film. Many of them condone or tolerate being stereotyped or objectified in films, while others just think that the whole feminist “razzmatazz” over women sexual objectification in the entertainment industry as a whole is a

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false debate or a mere drama. A case in point is Hollywood actress Sophia Vergara who, in an interview granted the American tabloid *Edit Magazine*, affirmed that she finds nothing abnormal about being treated as a sex object in a film. The *Modern Family* actress specifically observed that she has never understood all the fuss and false debate around women objectification in Hollywood films. In her words: “I’ve never understood why women get so offended [by being objectified]. I just don’t believe in all that drama, which is why I’ve made a whole joke out of it. I am secure enough not to take it all that seriously, and I like to laugh at myself” (cited in Ngomba 2016: 34).

Like Vergara, many Nigerian actresses do regard being objectified in Nollywood films either as normal or a current they cannot really fight. A case in point is Nollywood actress Queeneth Hilbert. In an interview in the Nigerian tabloid *Vanguard*, Hilbert contended that pornography – which is popularly considered a site of women sexual objectification – is a decided necessity in Nollywood. According to her, pornography has the potential of making Nollywood films realistic and of a very high standard. Other Nollywood actresses such as Judith Opara Mazagwu (alias Afrocandy) and pornstar Mareme Edet (alias Uglyglaz) have expressed similar views on pornography and women sexual objectification in films (Endong 2020). In an interview granted the Nigerian tabloid *OsunDefender*, Afrocandy in particular defended her choice to play sexual roles in a highly sexualised – nay pornographic – movie claiming that:

The fact that I chose to make romance and sex scenes in my movies real should not make me a porn star. [...] Why are eyebrows being raised over this my movie? Or, is it because it has to do with sex, which is supposed to be a way of life? I find that to be sexist honestly. You can call me daring, brave, bold and beautiful. And I will like you to tell me what you call movies like ‘Basic Instinct’, ‘I spit on your grave’ and the likes of them. And I’ll also like you to tell me what you may call actors like Sharon Stone, Halley Berry and co for taking similar roles in those movies before I can answer you directly (cited in Aromosele 2014: 19).

Actresses who support or tolerate pornography and women objectification in films tend to hinge on a kind of acting deontology which defines the actress as an automate. They believe an actress should not really question a script on the basis of its sex contents or its being sexualised. To many such actresses, accepting any kind of sexual role is as simple as doing their job. In other words, an actress who for instance, goes nude or has sex onscreen in line with a film script is simply doing her job. She should neither be taxed with immorality nor be even viewed as being sexually objectified. She is mechanically interpreting a script that dictates her performance, and not acting her real self.

In view of the above, a number of Nigerian film and gender scholars have not hesitated to hold Nollywood actresses and female directors partly responsible for the continuous stereotyping and mis-representation of womanhood in Nigerian films. Tunde Kelani (interviewed by Connor, 2014) has for instance taxed Nollywood female film directors with replicating the same negative stereotypes used to represent women in Nigerian films. He lamented that he is “disappointed by the women who have had the opportunities to be producers, too. Armed with such great responsibilities, they have misrepresented women, presenting themselves as armed robbers and prostitutes” (cited in Connor 2014: 176).

Okunna (1996) has similarly noted that if Nollywood actresses rejected some of the demeaning roles they are asked to play, the objectification and negative portrayals of womanhood in Nigerian films would have reduced considerably in the Nigerian motion picture industry. As Okunna puts it, “if women refuse to play roles which debase them and subjugate them, film makers will create women characters that actresses will be willing to play” (34). In Okunna’s view, female actors’ acceptance of demeaning, sexual or pornographic roles in Nollywood films serves as evidence of their complicity with a system which works against them. The acceptance is also the sign of a passivity which enables their being objectified.

Okunna's hypothesis sounds pertinent. However it tends to hastily generalise on Nigerian actresses' disposition to accept demeaning roles in film productions. Although the mainstream thinking has been that Nigerian actresses' passivity is partly to blame for the prevalence of women stereotyping in Nollywood, it must be underlined that not all Nollywood actresses buy the idea of stereotyping or objectifying women in the industry. A good number of female Nigerian actors do adopt various strategies to resist the women objectification current in Nollywood films. These strategies – which range from rejecting objectifying roles to directing their own films with feminist inclinations – have not attracted considerable attention from both Nigerian and non-Nigerian scholars. Such strategies are therefore a very interesting topic for scholarly investigation.

Using critical observations and a systematic review of secondary sources, this paper sets out to fill the above-mentioned gap in knowledge. The paper specifically explores some of the ways in which Nollywood actresses have struggled and continue to struggle against women stereotyping in films. In the first place, the article examines women stereotyping and objectification in Nollywood films; and in the second place, it explores the ways in which Nigerian actresses resist women stereotyping and objectification in the Nigerian film industry.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in the feminist film theory. By definition, feminism is a socio-philosophical and political movement which seeks justice for or the betterment of women. Many authors associate the term with issues such as protest on behalf of women or campaigns for women's emancipation in a context of patriarchy (Doane 1987). However, the term should be defined as the "belief in and advocacy of equal rights for women based on the idea of the equality of the sexes" (McAfee, 2018). It does not necessarily imply protest or campaigns against male domination. Following this line of thought, Afam (1996) conceptualises feminism in the domains of politics, culture and communication as a situation where women express their point of view in an uncensored medium. He explains that "the issue is not necessarily whether what the women say is radically opposed to established conventions, but that what they say represents their own honest, realistic and constructive perception of order and stability in the society" (Afam 1996: 44).

Feminism is used as a valuable theory in such domains as cultural studies, women and gender studies, the arts and communication, among others. In line with this, a feminist film theory has emerged, propounded by the likes of Muvley (1989), Kuhn (1994), Nussbaum (1995, 2007), and MacKinnon (1989). Proponents of the feminist film theory focus on gender inequality in films and the feminine discourse. As a theory of cinema, the feminist film theory opposes the secondary and demeaning representation of women in film texts. Studies that hinge on this theory mostly denounce the sexual objectification of women in films, particularly those inspired by patriarchy. Concretely, the theory has two main tenets. In the first place, it uses insights from the Marxist critique of ideology, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and semiotics to attack classical cinema for its stereotyped portrayals of womanhood. In tandem with this, it argues that cinema is more than a simple reflection of social relations, as it constructs meanings about sexual difference and sexuality. Feminist film scholars thus argue that cinema tends to represent women as passive sex objects or as stereotypes which range from the *femme fatale* to housewives (de Lauretis 1984, Freeland 2012, Guilluy 2018). By repeatedly tapping into these stereotypes, cinema objectionably distorts reality and socialises women into accepting an inferior status in society. Using the above thesis as premise, feminist film scholars call for a reversal of the misrepresentation and sexist images of women in cinema.

Laura Muvley (1989) captures the first above-mentioned tenet. In her popular paper titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", she argues that cinema positions men and women differently. Such positioning presents men as subjects or agents who drive the film's narrative forward, while women are simple objects for masculine desire and fetishistic gazing. Using

psychoanalytic concepts such as Freud's scopophilia (the pleasure of looking), Muvley further argues that films tend to stimulate visual pleasure by integrating aspects of voyeurism and narcissism into their stories and images. Voyeurism is seen in the fact that classical films make the woman the spectacle by presenting her as the sex object to be gazed at. This happens in two ways: first, the camera tends in classical films to film from the optical and libidinal point of view of the heterosexual male character; second, male characters in most films direct their gaze toward female characters. These two situations logically cause the spectators to likely identify with the male perspective. This ultimately creates a situation where the female characters in films are objectified on three levels: the camera, the male character and the spectators. In other words, the camera, the male characters in the film and the spectators all objectify the female character.

The second main tenet of the feminist film theory is that there is a need for women-driven cinema – or filmmaking by women. The theory is rooted in the belief that the feminine cinema paradigm has the potential to deconstruct negative representations of the female folk and empower women to tell their stories by themselves. As explained by Anneke (2016), feminist film scholars ardently believe that feminine filmmaking rooted in avant-garde film traditions could be a counter force to sexist and male-centred classical films. He claims that the idea is that “only a deconstruction of classical visual and narrative codes and conventions could allow for an exploration of female subjectivity, gaze, and desire” (Anneke 2016: 4).

Women Stereotyping and Sexual Objectification in Nollywood Films

In a highly patriarchal society like Nigeria, women are bound in most social institutions to be relegated to the background (Ogege 2011). They are generally not only regarded as beings who are inferior to men, but also as objects. Popular beliefs particularly make them be regarded as sex objects. In many Nigerian cultures, women should be kept outside the sphere of power and public life. Their place is at home or better, in the kitchen. They are saddled with the role of rearing and nurturing children while their husbands are entitled to work (Ogege 2011, Oyinade, Daramola & Ishola 2013). Additionally, women owe their husbands perfect and unflinching submission. In some cultures, they have no right to inherit landed properties and must keep themselves virgin until marriage in order to earn the respect of their community. In line with this, various strictures and structures are put in place to encourage virginity exclusively among the women before marriage (Makama 2013).

Furthermore, in the popular fantasy, a woman is a very emotional being whose major ambition in life is to find a husband. According to this popular belief, a woman is ready to use seduction and black magic to secure the love of a man (Chika 2012). A related myth says that a woman's role is solely to satisfy her husband and prove her *womanness* or femininity by giving birth, particularly to male children. In tandem with this, the girl child is not [considered to be] as prominent as her male counterpart. Her education is not as important as that of the male child (Chika 2012, Ifemeje & Ikpeze 2012). Thus, the male child is given prominence. Other popular beliefs in the Nigerian society represent the woman as a man's property and a being that exists principally for the sexual gratification of the man, who may not always be her husband. In line with all these popular beliefs, women are most often misrepresented and sexually objectified in Nollywood films.

By definition, women's sexual objectification is a situation where a female person is treated as a sex object (Nussbaum 2007). It is also a context in which “a woman's body, body parts or sexual functions are isolated from her whole and complex being and treated as objects simply to be looked at, coveted or touched” (Rooney 2014: 63). Sexual objectification is thus associated with the act of denying personhood to a woman. It entails viewing a woman's body or body parts primarily as physical objects of male sexual desires (Bartky, 1990; Szymanski, Moffit & Carr, 2011). The phenomenon is associated with various social anomalies. Mackinnon (1989) contends that “to be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being

that defines you as to be sexually used” (Szymanski, Moffit & Car 2011: 140). In line with this, it has been argued that the Nigerian society often imposes a social meaning on its women which makes them popularly viewed as “proper objects of instrumentalising attitudes and treatment that undermine their autonomy and equal social standing” (Jutten 2016: 28). In the male-dominated Nigerian video film industry, this women’s sexual objectification takes various forms. It ranges from situations where female actors are made to act scantily clad or naked to the phenomenon commonly called the male gaze. Many Nollywood film productions have scenes where emphasis is placed not on the personality of actors but rather on their bodies. In such films, actresses are generally depicted as objects of desire is made more pronounced in films such as Sylvester Obadigies’s *Blackberry Babes* and James Udo’s *Calabar Girls* where female sexuality has nothing to do with the film directors’ messages or where a proportional male nudity is not exhibited in the film scenes.

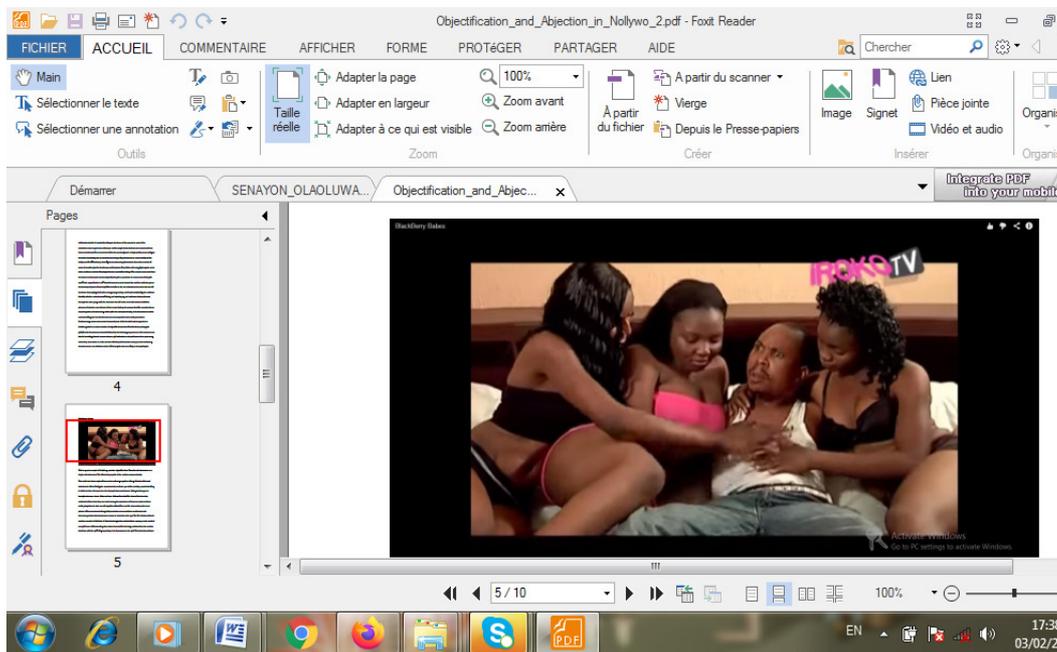


Image 1 A scene in *Blackberry Babes*

In Image 1, for instance, one may observe that the film director chooses to “spice up” his film with sex-biased nudity scenes. In these scenes, only women are scantily clad and made to play the titillating role, their male counterparts are dressed more decently. In this image, the male actor – playing the role of a university teacher faced with sexual harassment from three of his students – has his private parts well covered; meanwhile his female counterparts are cast half naked and in a highly sexual way.



Image 2 Poster of *Calabar Girl*

A similar situation is seen in Image 2 above, where only female nakedness is used to hyper-sexualise the film poster for Jerry Don Nwachukwu's *Calabar Girl*. Here the female Nollywood actresses are eroticised and made to appear as objects to be coveted. Their bodies are exhibited visibly to entice and attract heterosexual male viewers. While the actresses are “paraded” as sex objects, their male counterparts in the poster are spared titillating roles. The latter’s way of dressing is less revealing compared to that of the female actors.

Besides being eroticised, Nollywood actresses are usually represented along negative stereotypes. In line with this, commentators such as Anaza (2019), Endong (2019), Ibbey (2017), Okafor (2018), O’Lekam (2017) and Aje-Ori (2012) among others, have highlighted negative stereotypes that are commonly used to represent women in Nollywood films. These include:

The femme fatale who, as a woman, is deadly in nature. By the beauty ideals of the Nigerian society, she is highly attractive. She also deploys her sexuality to destroy men or to attain her selfish goals.

The gold digger who gets married to a decent man, not for love but pecuniary reasons. The *gold digger* comes in the form of a young and very beautiful girl who seduces or uses magic to seduce a wealthy or highly-placed man with a view to getting married to him. This stereotype is seen in *Glamour Girls*.

The housewife who is man’s helper. She is submissive and uses all resources at her disposal to assist her husband and enable him to succeed in life.

The object of bartering which is a stereotype used to represent women as objects used by their parents or guardians for their selfish purposes. It portrays a girl who is used by her guardians or parents who seek to bail themselves out of some unpleasant situations.

The object of ritual which is used to portray women as objects used by the rich or cultists as sacrificial lambs in their quest for money or power. This stereotype is for instance observed in Kenneth Kebue’s 1996 *Living in Bondage*, the film that kick-started the Nollywood cinematic movement. In the film, the heroine’s husband sacrifices her to occult powers in order to acquire wealth and upward social mobility.

The object of sexploitation: which is a stereotype used to portray women as people who are sexually exploited by powerful men. It usually takes the form of a lecturer who exploits his female students or a boss who pressurises or lures his house girl into unwanted sex.

The witch, which is used to represent women (particularly old ones) as beings who are bent on frustrating the plans of their neighbours through mystical powers.

The prostitute, who usually is a city girl who achieves upward economic and social mobility by offering her body to rich men.

The second choice, which is a stereotype used to portray women as second-class citizens, compared to their male counterpart. This often takes the form of a little girl who is denied access to things like education, inheritance or even life, to the advantage of her brothers.

Thus, women are usually stereotyped in Nollywood films. This stereotyping is accentuated by the fact that women's representation in the cinematic industry is predominantly in the hands of men. Anaza (2019) rightly observes that "while Nollywood places African representation in African hands, those hands are usually male, and it's evident. Nollywood fails at treating women as complex, self-sustaining entities outside of their male characters" (Anaza 2019: 28).

This male domination of the industry and stereotyping of women often leads female actors to play debasing or sexual roles in Nollywood movies. As earlier mentioned, it is often argued that, by accepting such roles, women passively participate in their sexual objectification. It has also been argued that Nollywood actresses' acceptance of such demeaning roles also shows that the beliefs structuring the worldviews of Nigerians have successfully socialised them into accepting seeing no harm in becoming the spectacle in a cinematic context. They are both victims and servants of a patriarchal system. However, the next section will nuance this argument.

Nollywood Actresses' Resistance to Women's Sexual Objectification and Stereotyping

The fact that a good number, if not the majority, of actresses contribute to the sexual objectification of women in Nollywood does not mean that all female actors in the industry are passive *vis à vis* the phenomenon. While some actresses passively accept to play sexual roles, others do counter sexual objectification through overt or implicit resistance. Such resistance has taken various forms and has been manifested in various film projects. In this section, three approaches to resisting sexual objectification in Nollywood will be examined, namely the rejection of demeaning roles, feminine feminist cinema production and the tendency to request the same demeaning roles for men.

Rejection of Demeaning Roles

Before delving into the ways in which Nollywood actresses reject stereotyping and debasing roles, it will be helpful to define the concept of "demeaning roles" technically. Actually, the term "demeaning roles" refers to roles that debase women and make them sexually objectified. They include sexual and nude acting for scenes or films which do not essentially need nudity or sex to convey their respective messages. As has been noted by various commentators, tasteful or useful female nudity should be differentiated from gratuitous nudity. The former is key to expressing the message of the film director, while the latter is dispensable and most often used subtly or explicitly to sexualise the film. Gratuitous nudity and sex scene/roles are mainly driven by the author, screen writer, producer or director's will to invest their film with soft-core or hardcore porn and ultimately attract audiences. This is in line with the popular but problematic belief that sex sells any movie. Nollywood actress Moet Abebe highlights the difference between gratuitous nudity, which is a site of women's objectification in films, and tasteful nudity which is indispensable. She suggests that the two types are determined by how long they are allowed to feature in the scenes of a film and the level of decency of the film's script. She says that when a

film is exclusively or essentially about sex, it is pornographic and demeaning for a woman. Meanwhile, when sex is used to move the story and the characters forwards as well as a vehicle to convey a specific meaning, it ceases to be objectifying or a site of women stereotyping. In line with this, she contends:

I'm not going to do that kind of motion picture where all we discuss is sex. Anyway if there's a scene and the length of its not very provocative and the length of my understanding identifies with the real character, why not? I'm not going to go nude or anything like that, however I do accept that there's tasteful nakedness. I'm not going to do anything disagreeable. If the length of it is important to [parts of the movie], why [will I not accept the role]? (cited in Dimita Papers 2015: 14)

Still in line with the above position, commentators often argue that sex or nudity become pornographic and a site of women's objectification depending on the context in which they are used in a film and the degree to which camera angles are used to depict female nudity or sexual acts involving female actors. Actually, it is often the camera which is responsible for forcing the entire audience into the position of an *objectifier*. It is also camera angles that can make actresses be seen onscreen through the supposed male gaze.

It should however be underlined that a role is usually deemed demeaning based on the cultural norms governing the community in which the actress subsists as well as on actresses' personal acting philosophies. In line with this, roles that are debasing, demeaning or damaging for African/Nigerian actresses may not necessarily be so for Western or Westernised actresses. The conservative current prevailing in Nigeria may push certain Nigerian actresses to view sexual roles as demeaning; while their western counterparts who are more liberal see no problem in commodified sex or acting nude in movies. Nollywood actress Bukky Amos (cited in Van Deven 2009), in reaction to her Nollywood counterpart Omoni's vehement rejection of a sexual role in a Hollywood film, argued that: "Omoni has the right to her decision, but if another Nollywood actress accepts the role, such actress should not be tagged irresponsible or immoral [...] Africans have got cultural based beliefs, no doubt about it, but the movie we are talking about here is Hollywood, and not Nollywood movie" (cited in Van Deven 2009: 43). Bukky was particularly reacting to Omoni's description of acting nude and having sex on camera in the film project as a form of "trash" that should outright be judged as un-African and counter to Nigerian cultures.

Like Bukky, another Nollywood actress contends that accepting or rejecting a sexual role or script should not *sensu stricto* be considered as the determinant of an actress's morality, worth or professionalism. It is rather an index of her personal philosophy of acting. In a 2014 interview in the Nigerian tabloid *Vanguard*, she explained:

If you] get on set and they give you a script and ask you to 'undress' [it will be] a 'Yes' or 'No' thing. People choose to go on set and decide to go nude for a reason while others do not go nude for a reason. It doesn't mean that the person who has gone nude on TV is worse than the person who hasn't gone nude and it doesn't mean that the person who hasn't gone nude is more righteous than the person that has gone nude; it's just a matter of choice. (cited in Sholola & Nwanze 2014: 48).

Bukky' and Uche's above-mentioned contentions reveal a paradoxical situation. It shows that though conservatism still prevails strongly in Nigeria, the possibility that a female actor might accept a sexual or nudity role in Nollywood remains real. In line with this, there have been many cases of Nollywood actresses who boldly took sexual or nude roles in Nollywood or Hollywood films, despite the asphyxiating Nigerian conservatism and patriarchy. These Nigerian actresses acted in nude scenes and performed daring depictions of sex in Nollywood movies but ended up paying a heavy moral price for their bold actions. A case in point is Nollywood actress Maria Francis, whose nude acting in Krissijohn's *A Village in Africa*, earned her heavy criticism from the

Nigerian public. This acting experience caused Maria Francis to be profiled as a prostitute (Endong 2021).

In spite of the high number of actresses who are favourable to commodified sexuality in Nollywood, there have been various cases of female Nigerian actors who rejected nude or sexual roles, deeming them debasing and damaging to them on conservative, spiritual or feminist biases. Two cases have been highlighted in the preceding paragraphs of this paper. Another example is that of Nollywood star Abere Agu who, when asked whether she would act naked or have sex on camera in a Nollywood movie, responded in the negative. She confided, "I won't act nude but it'll depend on the kind of nudity. Also, keep in mind way too that my system will be the temple of God. I will not defile it" (Cited in *Dimita Paper* 2016). A similar attitude is exhibited by Nollywood actress Uche Iwuanyanwu (cited in Sholola and Nwanze 2014). The latter rejects acting nude, having sex on camera or doing a depiction of sex, essentially for conservative and spiritual reasons. She argues:

If I get a script that's a sexual script, it doesn't mean I have to make love in front of the camera, I just need to act. For the fact that I've accepted a script, it means I should be able to do the job but I'm not saying I would go nude in front of the camera. I'm saying I would want to be professional about my job. If I get a script and I have to go nude, I don't have to take jobs like that, I can take jobs that are decent because this is Africa and we respect our bodies so much, so nothing would make me go completely nude or act porn (cited in Sholola and Nwanze 2014: 48).

With the prevalence of religions such as Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, Nollywood actresses are increasingly driven by spirituality in their philosophy of acting. This spiritual disposition often spurs them into viewing sexual acting as a danger to their moral and spiritual health. Uche Iwuanyanwu, for instance, sees having sex on camera as a spiritually dangerous experiment. In her own words, "Sex is spiritual to me; that's what I think. To other people it might not be, but to me, it's very spiritual. If I have to go into sex, it has to be with the right person because spirits are actually transferable through sex" (cited in Sholola & Nwanze 2014: 18).

The above examples show how a number of Nollywood actresses are predisposed to reject what they and the majority of Nigerian audiences and feminist critics may view as demeaning roles for actresses. The examples show that not all Nollywood actresses are passive vectors of women's sexual objectification in Nollywood.

Taking a Career in Directing and espousing the Feminist Cinema Paradigm

Another way through which Nollywood actresses have challenged their sexual objectification in Nollywood has been by espousing the feminist cinema paradigm. A number of actresses have moved into the directing profession and produced films that subtly correct women's stereotyping or objectification. A case in point is Genevieve Naji who directed a 2018 feminist movie titled *Lion's Heart*. In this film the female director does not only attribute lead roles to women; but she also twists her script in a way as to suggest that the "*femme fatale*", "gold digger", "housewife", "the prostitute" and "second choice" stereotypes often used to represent women in Nollywood are all baseless.

The film is about a young woman called Adaeze who is compelled to take over the management of her father's transport company called "LionHeart". Out of love and respect, her father chooses her over her brother, and entrusts her with the responsibility of managing the family business. The transport company is on the verge of bankruptcy because of a variety of factors. Adaeze succeeds in designing the best solutions to the enterprise's problems. She revives the business in a spectacular way, suggesting that Nigerian women can be as good, if not better than men, in business management. Thus, the protagonist of the film played by Genevieve Nnaji herself symbolises the woman who is as "manly as men". In the film, Adaeze is made to work with her uncle not as a subaltern but as a partner with her uncle. In some

sequences, she is sexually harassed, has a connection with a man from outside her Igbo tribe and is compelled to face various complexities that characterise the life of a typical Nigerian woman. Still, the film's narrative deliberately avoids the common Nollywood tropes and negative stereotypes of women. It avoids the emphasis on the common stereotypes such as the woman who desperately seeks to get married or fertile to win the respect and love of her husband.

In a critique of the film, Anaza (2019) states that *Lion's Heart* is a film which preaches women's empowerment and deconstructs the multiple negative stereotypes often used by Nigerian film directors to misrepresent the Nigerian woman. The critic observes that the film has revolutionised the depiction of African women on film. It "does what many Hollywood films refuse to do": portraying African modernity around "an agency-having African woman". She also observes that Genevieve Nnaji's film is one of the multiple manifestations of a woman-driven cinematic current which aims to counter the age-old stereotyping of women in Nollywood. She writes that Nnaji "is not alone in her focus on nuance and complex stories. She is part of the growing community of Nigerian female filmmakers in an era many are calling 'New Nollywood.'" Along with the likes of Kemi Adetiba, Tope Oshin Ogun, and Jade Osiberu, she is "transforming female representation [...] through their the cinematography, direction and writing" (Anaza 2019: 32).

Requesting the Same Demeaning Roles for Men

Sexual objectification is often defined on the basis of the extent to which the "denial of personhood" and treatment of actors as sex objects is sex-biased or gendered. In line with this, Downs, Shaan and Cowan (2006) define women's sexual objectification as a double standard situation in which women are made to dress and act in a very sexual way while their male counterparts are exempted from such demeaning treatment or roles. Similarly, a number of feminist commentators often criticise the exclusive attribution of sexual roles to women in contexts of actor casting or film production. In effect, in typical sex or nudity scenes there are higher probabilities for breasts and female butts than penises to be exhibited or used as bait to attract audiences. In view of this, a number of commentators contend that to redress this form of women sexual objectification, scriptwriters and film directors should not discriminate on the basis of gender when it comes to the eroticisation of their characters or actors. The online tabloid *Girl Talk* (2016) captures this contention. It reviews a number of female Hollywood actresses who espouse the idea of balancing out sexually objectifying scenes on the basis of gender. The tabloid actually says:

We can think of many shows that have no holds barred when it comes to female nudity, but it's a different story when it comes to men. HBO's 'Game of Thrones' is great example, where the majority of female characters are required to get their kit off. And it's not just audiences noticing, but cast members themselves have spoken about how there needs to be a "balancing out" of the nude scenes. Kit Harington who plays Jon Snow told GO Magazine that if nudity is part of a story, then it's only fair all characters partake. Dutch actress Carice van Houten, who plays the Red Priestess Melisandre, called for more male nudity in the show and that nudity in general should be functional, not just objectifying (Girl Talk 2016: 11).

In line with the above concern, a number of Nollywood female film directors, particularly those who produce blue films or soft porn, have sought to balance out nude or sex scenes in their films. A case in point is Judith Okpara Mazagwu alias Afro candy who, in her 2015 *Destructive Instinct 1, 2 and 3*, does not discriminate as regards female and male nudity in sex scenes. In her highly controversial film, Afro candy makes her female protagonist (played by herself), be involved in various sexual acts with a male. In all the film's sex scenes, there is a relatively equal amount of male and female nudity, so much so that the male actor who played the role of the female protagonist's boyfriend in the film was shamed and vehemently criticised

by the Nigerian public for exhibiting his nudity and having sex on camera. The most virulent part of this criticism came from the male actor's girlfriend. The above-mentioned criticism even spurred the latter to pull out of the film project and to request the deletion of the scenes in which he had acted. In a commentary paper written by Njoku and published in the Nigerian tabloid *Vanguard*, Afro candy throws some light on this issue. She explains that:

My people judge this case for me. [...] I cast this guy in my movie, he came on set, I explained everything to him and asked him if he would have any problems with playing the role the way I wanted it. He said, he was okay with it and I quote him, "I am an adult, I can do whatever I want and nobody pays my bills"....Then Camera was rolling, action, he jumps into bed with me, squeezes my boob and my butt enjoying himself. Now, the trailer came out with an explosion, and he is threatening me to 'Remove the Video from the Internet, and remove him from the movie [because]' his 'Baby Mama' has thrown him out. (cited in Njoku 2013: 36)

Afro candy's decision to cast a male actor in a sexual manner has mostly been negatively interpreted by the Nigerian public. Commentators have read it as pornography, immorality and a very daring impact on Nollywood. Inasmuch as her directorial decision is controversial and pornographic, she went counter to the popular tendency among Nollywood film directors to *genderise* sexual roles in Nollywood films. In effect, she produced a film where the same demeaning/sexual roles are played by both female and male actors. In other words, she propounded the idea of balancing out sexually objectifying scenes on gender biases.

Conclusion

The stereotyping and sexual objectification of womanhood in Nollywood films have partly been attributed to Nigerian actresses. According to a number of critics and scholars, female actors' passivity and complicity are to blame for the continuous negative portrayals of women in films. This line of argument follows from the arguable belief that female actors most often accept offers to play demeaning roles in films; while, it is axiomatic that if they reject such roles, androcentric/sexist screen writers will be compelled to develop better female characters for their films.

This paper has argued that, if the above logic is pertinent, it tends to generalise Nollywood actresses' attitude towards the objectification of womanhood. The paper also argued that the above belief fails to recognise the understudied efforts made by many Nigerian actresses against women's stereotyping in the Nigerian film industry. Actually, the fact that a good number if not the majority of actresses aid women's sexual objectification in Nollywood by accepting to play demeaning roles in films, does not mean that all female actors in the industry are passive *vis à vis* the phenomenon of women's sexual objectification. While some actresses passively agree to play sexual roles, others do counter sexual objectification through overt or implicit resistance. Such resistance usually takes various forms and has been manifested in various film projects. Three ways in which this resistance has manifested are the rejection of demeaning roles, feminist cinema and the tendency to request the same demeaning roles for men.

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