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READING BETWEEN THE LINES OF FEMALE REDEMPTION IN PASCAL AMANFO'S *CELEBRITYMARRIAGE*(2017)

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Abstract

Film is an immensely powerful medium of representation and it has, for a long time, played defining roles in portraying what womanhood means or should mean. Nollywood films, in particular, have significantly aided the crystallisation of the place of women in Nigeria, to this end, social expectations and acceptable standards are often measured by on-screen images of women by growing Nollywood audiences both locally and internationally. This begs for an answer to the essential question of how women are being projected in contemporary Nollywood films. In recent years, there is a fair number of career-oriented women in Nollywood films with the examples of Fifty (2015), My Wife and I (2017) and Lion Heart (2018). While it may appear like women are gaining grounds on and off screen, it is imperative to interrogate if indeed these images are redeeming. Employing content analysis, this paper reads between the lines of redemption of women in Pascal Amanfo's Celebrity Marriage (2017).

Keywords: *Women, Nollywood, Subjugation, Redemption, Identity, Celebrity Marriage*

Introduction: Film Development, Women and Constructing Identities

The objectification of women, which is prevalent in many societies, is not a recent phenomenon and it is presented in many forms. Before the advent of film, women were already used as objects of spectacle. Badoe, Mama and Mekuria (2012, p.2) aver that several representations of women by Saartje Baartman in 19th century Europe made a public display at exhibitions of “the 'spectacle' of her body in a cage at popular freak shows”. In Nigeria, early female activists such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margearet Ekpo and a host of others have played huge roles in reshaping women's positions in a patriarchal society and several contemporary activists continue to take active parts to bridge the existing divide in political, economic and cultural spheres.

Media, however, has an undisputed power to reshape identities (Atilola & Olayiwola, 2011 p. 470). The film medium, in particular, has gained more grounds than ever before because of digital technologies and access. Nollywood films are continuously shown on Television and satellite in and outside Nigeria. As demand for Nollywood productions increase, so does the supply. In the last three decades, productions have been churning in excessively. Jonathan Haynes notes that as far back as 2007, there was the challenge of overproduction. He asserts “the market was

so saturated, it was difficult for any film to turn a decent profit” (2014, p. 54).

The reach and control of film production did not start out as widespread as it currently is. Although the history of Africans and cinema has been a long-standing one, the conditions were not advantageous to Africans. In the 1960s, after independence in many African nations, development of film making in Africa became gradual. However, Nigeria's great evolution occurred in the 1990s with the introduction of low-cost VCRs and it has been a non-stop race for three decades and counting. Jude Akudinobi avers that Nollywood has produced “critical spaces and reference points for the reappraisal of African cinema” (2015, p. 133). Nollywood, undoubtedly is an independent, self-developed industry that has encountered and surmounted many challenges in the ongoing process of attaining utmost commercial and far-reaching production success. This boom however began as a one-sided development in terms of gender representation with men being at the centre of the economic and production control. For a long time, women took the back burner in various aspects of the process film making, beginning with the paucity in representation in technical aspects, to their portrayal in productions.

In recent times, women have progressed from accepting the status quo, to being comfortable and confident enough to push the bar and become more significantly involved in pushing the narrative. Leading this pack of female film makers is Media Entrepreneur, Mo Abudu, whose recent involvement in cinema has birthed productions like *Wedding Party 1* (2016), *Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2017) and most recently *Oloture* (2019). In 2014, Abudu founded a Television network, Ebony Life TV where African-centered content is aired to a pan-African audience. More recently, she has signed production deals with SONY pictures and Netflix.

Asides women establishing themselves as strong voices in film production, there is also a rising number of female-led roles in Nollywood films, a welcome development. However, what is imperative is an accurate depiction of these lead characters in a way that embraces current progressive realities rather than distort it.

Positive characterisation of women is not alien to African cinema. Ousmane Sembène, a revolutionary filmmaker and writer, who is considered the founding father of African cinema, was a feminist filmmaker. He was absolute in his mission to use film as a tool to rewrite history. Salem Mekuria accurately posits, in reference to Sembène, that “films should teach us to read and to know and to enhance our sentiments”. (2012, p.8). Sembène's portrayal of women in films such as *Moolaadé* (2004) is of strength and defiance, exemplified by Colle's character. Colle's resistant actions against female genital cutting transcends her identity as a woman, it is a

positive portrayal of progressive human action. Sembène's films were made when projecting women in such strong lights was not popular. *Black Girl*, for example, was produced in 1966 and it centres on a female protagonist, Diouana, who leaves her country, Senegal, to work with a French couple in France. She meets a life different from her dreams of exploring France and caring for children, hence she begins to question her role. Her acts of defiance as she struggles in a foreign country to regain dignity and freedom from her oppressive employers speak of her strength. Although she ultimately commits suicide, the film itself is a reflection of colonised voices from the female perspective.

Foremost filmmakers initiated the possibility of the enormous influence that Cinema holds on a people's identity, therefore, continued intentional filmmaking is more imperative now in a world where identities are constantly shifting, and media plays a crucial role in this. Mekuria (2012) argues that “the immense power of cinema in conferring identities emanates from the fact that it is so close to real life” (p.8). Whether consciously or unconsciously, filmmakers cannot remove themselves from the content of their productions as these productions emanate from their sociocultural, political and religious environments. In contrast, on the viewers' part, there is a general lack of awareness of critical viewing and reading of films, hence the inability to separate the real from the imagined. Mekuria again posits that mainstream industries such as Hollywood have dwelt on this thin line by making “seamless productions blurring the difference between the real and the imagined” (2012, p.8). Films feel a lot like reality, not only owing to the technicalities of how certain camera angles and close up shots can make one feel present in a film, but also because of familiarity of content and context.

The content of Nollywood productions is one which is familiar to its audience, as such, productions increasingly enjoy expansive viewership across the world. Giovanna Santanera (2013) puts forward an interesting observation that Nigerians in Turin, Italy watch Nollywood films regularly as a form of idealist escape from their challenges and also because of the need to “measure themselves against a familiar, symbolic, and discursive order to cope with feelings of disorientation in a foreign society” (p. 246). Not only do Nollywood films provide succor to displaced and troubled minds, the films have become a largely uncontested yardstick for self-appraisal. For many Nollywood audiences, the relationship goes beyond being a causal pastime, it involves tremendous passion and devotion, and that includes Nigerians in Diaspora. Santanera (2013) notes that regardless of economic status, age and level of education, when it comes to Nollywood films,

Nigerian immigrants in Turin display passion. He avers that “They all eagerly await the latest releases and know the names of the actors and directors by name.” (p.247). Haynes' (2018) statement about the relatability of Nollywood films supports this, he posits that films “provide the primary audiovisual representation of life—of how to fall in love, of how gender relations should look, of what kind of house to desire, of how meals should be taken, of what to do with African hair—for many millions of black people” (p.86). This echoes the importance of intentionality in production as Nollywood films have inevitably become the tool through which moral standards, identities and acceptable ideals are being measured.

Navigating Patriarchy and Culture

One of the most significant points Betty Friedan makes in her groundbreaking book *Feminine Mystique* (1963) was the eye-opening emphasis on the existing divide between men and women that was normalised in magazines. This sprung up reactions in feminist scholars who began to pay critical attention to women's portrayal in which various forms of media including films, soap operas, magazines, newspapers and a host of other media outlets.

One must also consider how women are truly able to change the narrative if they do not have the same opportunities as men. When they do get such opportunities, they are expected to put their families and domestic affairs first, which is the case with Rita in *Celebrity Marriage* (2017) as will be discussed. Deborah Cameron in her book, *Feminism* (2018), notes that in 2016 men directed six times more films than women in Britain. Those that were directed by women are often low-budget productions and only “3 per cent of big-budget films are made by a woman director” (p, 107). Cameron explains that this is a result of “ingrained sexist assumptions that are difficult to challenge because they are rarely made explicit” (2018, p.107). This includes the assumption that women find it more challenging to manage a big production cast and crew. Nonetheless, as exemplified earlier through the Sembene example, positive and empowered female images are not gender exclusive. A handful of male filmmakers in Nigeria take advantage of the power they wield to educate and promote Nigeria's rich plethora of culture and cultural values, including the position and contributions of women. One of such is Tunde Kelani. A lot has been said about his films and his dedication to elevating the Yoruba culture and women. Giwa- Isekeije acknowledges Kelani's profound knowledge of the Yoruba culture and avers that he employs his works to showcase them “and make latent commentaries about how Yoruba culture and its traditional practices are

becoming casualties of modernization” (2019, p.103). We see his strong commitment in films like *Maami* (2011) and *Dazzling Mirage* (2014). Both films persuasively highlight often neglected struggles of women and spotlight their challenges, strength, tenacity and determination in addressing them.

One, however, cannot deny culture's role in many of the belittling stories about women, especially in the traditional context and scholars such as God'spresence (2014) and Ogunbiyi (2010) have queried such representations. The question lies in how the stories are told. Kayode Ogunfolabi, for example, argues that objectification of women becomes excused because of the pedagogic nature of Yoruba films. He posits that “female objectification becomes justified through its centrality to the development of the film's instructional machinery” (2019, p. 79). In the next section of this paper, Pascal Amanfo's 2017 film, *Celebrity Marriage* will be examined vis-à-vis culture and realistic expectations.

Synopsis of *Celebrity Marriage* (2017)

Produced in Nigeria in 2017 and directed by Pascal Amanfo, *Celebrity Marriage* is a melodrama that takes us through the lives of seemingly successful women whose personal situations contradict their public images. The title is appealing and so is the quality of star actors involved; the characters are portrayed by some of the most sought-after actors in Nollywood including Kanayo O. Kanayo, Tonto Dike, Toyin Abraham, Odunlade Adekola and Ghanaian actress, Jackie Appiah.

The narrative style is ambitious and experimental. The nonlinear plot is supported by a narrator who, at every highpoint, attempts to introduce or comment on the actions on screen. For the purpose of this analysis, attention will be paid mainly to three key female characters whose lives interconnect in the film. The stories of the central characters are told sequentially and the film consists of subplots that slightly connect to the main plot. As the film begins, we are introduced to the lives of Victoria (played by Jackie Appiah) – an actor who would go to any length to maintain her celebrity status and to stay relevant, Stephanie (Tonto Dike) – another celebrity actor who cheats on her husband without remorse or justification, and Rita (Toyin Abraham), the only character who is not portrayed as a 'bad girl' but is constantly abused by her unsupportive husband. All three women are actors who do all they can to remain relevant as celebrities, even if it means risking their lives. The women undergo a series of challenges, often self-induced, to stay atop, connoting a sense of superficiality attached to women's images.

Redemption or Subjugation of Female Characters

A cursory view of the prologue, as the narrator glamorises the characters' lives and achievements, gives some semblance of triumph for the women as driven and ambitious at the beginning of the film. However, the moment of potential victory is short-lived as we swiftly begin to see a downward spiral further along the opening sequence. All three female central characters are actors whose professional lives are incongruent with their personal lives. They are seemingly successful in the careers but their personal lives are as catastrophic as it gets.

From the start, the controversies surrounding the women are unveiled as the film opens with festivities of the alluring wedding reception of Stephanie, who at her own wedding is lost in thoughts amidst the merriments. With the use of a flashback, supported by the voice of the narrator, the source of her reverie is revealed—a shocking affair between Stephanie and her wedding chairman, Mr. Gabriel, whom we eventually learn is the groom's uncle. In the flashback, Stephanie is clad in her wedding dress and expresses her concerns to Mr. Gabriel who douses her fear, assuring her that he has everything under control. They both appear unperturbed by the severity of their actions as they adjust their appearances (zippers and makeup). Although there's no indication to suggest this except for their attire, it is assumed that their moment of infidelity occurred right before the wedding reception.

The motive for Stephanie's immoral association with Mr. Gabriel becomes clearer when Mr. Gabriel presents the newlyweds with the keys to an SUV back at the wedding reception. He possesses financial strength thus Stephanie's involvement is hinged on this as a means of maintaining her superstar lifestyle – a life she cannot readily afford nor maintain on her own.

Stereotyping women in Nollywood films is as old as Nollywood itself. One of the most disturbing stereotypes in *Celebrity Marriage* however is their inability of female characters to lead 'normal' lives as a result of their desire to succeed, albeit through indecent means. The women are depicted as controversial, having to either become successful through the help of men—Stephanie and Victoria, or to be successful only to be pulled down by their husbands—Rita. The reality of working hard to attain success and remain successful, is farfetched for the women. Two of the women Victoria and Stephanie both achieve fame and success through ill-gotten means. They are both connected to Mr. Gabriel as he either sleeps with or cut deals with them. Not only are they both aware of this, they detest each other because of it.

In addition to their inability to independently pursue their goals, the

challenges the women encounter largely stem from their relationships with men – their husbands, boyfriends or lovers. Further, the women's incapability to gain agency is blatant, especially in Rita's case as will now be discussed. These representations diminish the seeming stride the director initially makes in his effort to make a film with successful women as lead. What it does is that it shows how stunted progress against subjugation is in the film. Below is an analysis of the central female characters and what their images represent.

Rita's Irredeemable Case

Rita, played by Toyin Abraham, is one of the main characters in *Celebrity Marriage* (2017). Abraham is a fan favourite in mainstream Nollywood and the Yoruba stem of the industry. With an Instagram following of 6.3 million people, Abraham keeps her fans entertained through her comic appeal in her films. Her production of and role in *Alakada* 1, 2, and 3, *Alakada Reloaded* (2017) and *Fate of Alakada* (2020) show her commitment to consistently satisfy her audiences' cravings by making humor the central point of her characters. In *Celebrity Marriage*, her character is a victim of abuse, however, there is perceived difficulty for Abraham to neglect humour in spite of the seriousness of the role. Her comic propensities, in this case, tend to reduce the severity of the situation – the incessant domestic abuse she suffers from her husband.

Early on in the film, from the first scene in which she appears with her husband, Farouq (Odunlade Adekola), he insults and threatens to beat Rita up in public following her friendliness with a fan who excitedly approaches her. Her reaction to the threat of physical abuse appears comic and unrealistic as she runs around their SUV while being chased without the expected emotion of either fear or anger. This situation is the first of the numerous episodes of abuse she experiences from her husband as she continues to stand by him and do all in her power to please him.

In spite of the seeming redeeming portrayal of Rita; first as a lead character, secondly as successful, and thirdly as her family's breadwinner, suppression persists and undoubtedly overrules the seeming triumph. Rita is a successful film director and actor whose husband is intimidated by her achievements. He resists her progress by being both physically and verbally abusive and this plays out in every scene they both appear in. Nothing is said about what Farouq does exactly for a living, but Rita is the breadwinner of the family. She shoulders her family's responsibilities and only begs for her husband's support in doing so. Farouq however, disparages his wife's achievements and any sense of worth she may have at every given opportunity.

There is no justification for his barbarism other than unfounded jealousy and persistent demand to be respected.

One cannot help but question the rationale behind Rita's resistance to emancipate herself. She is supposedly hardworking, successful and smart, but puts up with her husband's relentless, barbaric excesses. A most fitting example of Farouq's unjustified excess is a scene where Rita comes home late after a long and tiring day on set and is received by a viscous husband who insists she returns to where ever she had been. This is of course accompanied by series of insults and curses. She indeed returns and fabricates lies to her colleague (who sees through her) when she is seen in the same clothes as the day before. Nigeria is a patriarchal society which fundamentally favours men in political, economic and in marital institutions. Nevertheless, domestic violence is a violation of fundamental human rights, which the Nigerian constitution is against. Domestic violence is a pervasive social issue in the world and in indeed in Nigeria. Amnesty international reports that Nigeria is among the countries in sub-Sahara Africa where two-thirds of women have at one time experienced male-partner violence (Amnesty International 2012). In the Nigerian traditional context, women are generally expected to submit their entirety to their husband's physical and sexual demands. Any attempt to defy this balance results in physical force to restore the male order of power (Tenkorang & Owusu 2013, p.68). This form of coercion and physical force is played out on many occasions in Rita and Farouq's marriage, with Rita at the receiving end. Farouq repeatedly finds reasons to remind his wife about his position and authority as the "Man of the House". He perceives his wife's independence and achievements as a contravention of the male superiority order. He is threatened by her success and gets the point of ridiculing her in the presence of her friend, Victoria.

Rita's redemption is nowhere in sight even as a glitter of hope arises with the intervention of Victoria, who persuades her to leave her husband and possibly blackmail him. The lingering question on one's mind is why she insists on staying with and making sacrifices (including halting her career) for a man who is ruthless to her. Her reason is not farfetched— stigma. She insists on maintaining a broken-down and abusive marriage so as to keep up appearances for the public. She takes the pains to apply makeup to cover her battered face and nurse her wounded body and mind, but she would not walk away and regain her self-worth. This portrayal presents her as superficial, cowardly and immensely subjugated. Shaka and Uchendu (2012) acknowledge the difficulty in understanding why women accept

subordination, nevertheless they provide a fitting observation:

Anthropologists have found that many repressed minority groups tend to adopt the attitudes of the stronger dominant group toward themselves. Women may do the same by accepting the submissive stereotype, and by this device are able to escape some of the anxiety which arises if they feel themselves to be oppressed. It is easier to accept the status quo than to rebel against it" (2012, p.5)

Rita's acceptance of the submissive stereotype climaxes when her husband decides to take another wife to further spite and embarrass her. The wedding holds but crashes when Rita, after declaring her undying love for Farouq, reveals an incriminating photo of the new bride with another man. Only then does Farouq realise his mistake, not for taking another bride, but for choosing the wrong one. The film ends amidst the confusion that ensues, without any sort of apology or remorse on Farouq's part. This leaves one wondering if this is the reality of life for women—accepting of tremendous degradation and risk of life, all in a bid to keep a man who sees no value in her.

Victoria, Stephanie and Fame-Thirsty Women

Victoria's character is played by Ghanaian Star, Jackie Appiah. Unlike Rita, Victoria is portrayed as reckless and this is done without moral justification or any justification at all. She is married to a footballer to whom she speaks over the phone, but one we never see. Victoria, like most of the women in the film, is a fame-thirsty actress who would go to any length to achieve fame. To maintain her seeming success as an actress, she cuts deals with Mr. Garbriel who manages his late brother's company until his nephew is ready to take it over. Further, to appear successful to her fans, Victoria fabricates stories to her soft-sell journalist friend about hers and her husband's flamboyant lifestyles. Her recklessness transcends her thirst for fame, and extends to an extra-marital affair with her co-star, Lotana, who is married to Mr. Gabriels's daughter. When Lotana is ripped off his deals as a result of his drug addiction, Victoria leaves him. Although their affair is an inexcusable one, that singular act once again suggests that she is only with him because of his thriving career. Stephanie, who on the other hand, is married to a loving man and heir to a successful business man, also finds ways to betray her husband. She irrationally has an affair with a man who is only deputising until her husband is ready to take over the

business. She is eventually betrayed by her best friend, Juliet, who is equally as desperate in her thirst for fame. Juliet exposes to Stephanie's husband, her use of contraceptives to prevent children that she pretends to desperately want, as well as her extra-marital affairs. The end for her is rejection from her husband when he finds out, and abandonment by Mr. Gabriel.

The other female characters in the subplot tow the same path of greed, infidelity and shameless pursuit of fame and money.

Conclusion

Deborah Cameron in her book, *Feminism* (2018) writes extensively on how women's contributions in various fields of endeavour such as science and the arts, are often undermined and relegated to backburners. In the arts, for instance, she asserts that a popular way of relegating women's work is to downgrade it to the “category of the 'minor'— to say, yes, some of these women are competent, but they do not rise to the level of greatness: their work is mediocre, derivative, trivial, sentimental, light” (2018, p.110). These meanings are reflective of the representations of the women in *Celebrity Marriage*. None, except for one, is acknowledged for hard work and talent as an actor, the general depiction is that they are slutty, money thirsty and lacking in talent.

Celebrity Marriage (2017) is problematic to women's images in a variety of ways. Not only is it dismissive of their intelligence, it especially lacks regard for actors, who, in reality, work hard for their accomplishments. The film's attempt to shed light on the lives of women in showbiz infuses in one's critical mind a confusing haze—are there no women who are successful actors without messy and controversial personal lives?

The women are portrayed in derogatory and superficial terms. They are put against each other very easily— friends betray friends and colleagues compete for the attention of the same man. Farouq's new bride, for instance, is Rita's colleague who boastfully declares to her friends that she is willing to be a second wife to Farouq. The women are largely beclouded by the love for money, fame and relevance to the point of losing their moral standards.

Rather than elevate the lead characters, attention is placed on their greed to use their bodies instead of their talents to accumulate wealth. There is no indication that lead character equals redeeming images in *Celebrity Marriage*. In essence, true redemption transcends the façade of female protagonists without genuine empowerment.

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Filmography

Alakada Reloaded (2017) dir. Toyin Abraham.
 Black Girl (1966) dir, Smebene Ousmane.
 Celebrity Marriage (2017) dir. Pascal Amanfo.

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