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The Nigerian Entertainment Industry and Dramaturgy: Rethinking Gendered Stereotypes

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Abstract

The Nigerian entertainment industry has emerged as a significant cultural force in Africa. However, there are gender stereotypes resulting from socio-cultural conception of gender. This study therefore explores the pervasive gendered stereotypes within the Nigerian entertainment industry, with a particular emphasis on theatrical productions and films. The study aims to critically analyse how these stereotypes manifest in narratives, character portrayals, and thematic elements, thereby influencing societal perceptions of gender roles. As a theoretical framework, this study adopts New Historicism. This study adopts qualitative research methodology. Significantly, the research focuses on two prominent Nigerian films: Austen-Peters' *House of Ga'a* and *Funmilayo Ransome Kuti*. Both films serve as rich case studies, as they depict historical figures within Yoruba culture. Thus, providing a lens through which to examine gender representation in a culturally significant context. The analysis reveals how traditional portrayals reinforce patriarchal norms. Meanwhile, the findings also highlight instances where these narratives challenge and subvert established gender roles. Through the juxtaposition of the historical significance of the characters against societal expectations, the research underscores the dynamic interplay between entertainment and social commentary. This paper contributes to the discourse on gender representation in the Nigerian entertainment sector, advocating for a rethinking of gendered stereotypes. The findings also encourage playwrights to embrace more critical representations of gender. In general, this research fosters a broader understanding of how the entertainment industry can serve as a catalyst for social change, promoting gender equity and challenging stereotypes in Nigerian society.

Keywords: Gender, Stereotypes, Nollywood, Gendertainment, Culture

Introduction

In the opinion of Maton (2018), the Nigerian entertainment industry has emerged as a significant cultural force in Africa. Hence, influencing social norms and perceptions through its diverse forms, including film, music, and theater. Notably, Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, has gained international recognition (Amokeoja, 2024). Moreso the industry showcases stories that reflect societal values, challenges, and aspirations. Although, the portrayal of gender roles within this industry still reinforces traditional stereotypes. Thus, depicting women primarily as caregivers or objects of desire, while men are frequently cast as dominant figures. However, in recent times, there is a redefining of gender stereotypes.

Stereotypes are the traits and actions that individuals view as typical of a particular social group or even of those who are assumed to be its members (Stangor, 2016). When one thinks of a group of people, stereotypes are the images that come to mind (Lippman, 1922). However, gender stereotypes have the potential to be harmful in other situations by reinforcing boundaries and limiting chances, even though they might be helpful when making quick estimates (Ellemers, 2018). This study aims to explore how these gendered stereotypes are redefined in Nigerian dramaturgy and to consider the implications for societal perceptions of gender. To achieve this, this study selects two Nollywood movies produced recently. These are *House of Ga'a* (2024) and *Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti* (2024). *House of Ga'a* is an historical action drama set in the Oyo Empire. However, *Funmilayo-Ransome Kuti* is set in the tumultuous political landscape in Egba land. This was before Nigeria independence.

Stereotypes

According to Lindsey (2016), stereotypes are commonly held, generalised assumptions about shared characteristics (including strengths and weaknesses), predicated on the classification of groups. Based on traditional gendered stereotypes, women are more likely to possess communal traits like nurturing, empathy, and care for others than they are agentic traits like ambition, power, and competitiveness (Pulerwitz et al., 2019; Rudman, 2008). In addition to these descriptive stereotypes (beliefs about specific qualities a person possesses based on their gender) are prescriptive stereotypes, which are beliefs about certain characteristics that a person should possess based on their gender (Lindsey, 2016). Social norms about the ideals and practices of masculinity and femininity (physical characteristics, temperament, fitness for a given job or role, etc.) form the basis of gender-based stereotypes and are influenced by culture and time. (Kagesten et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2021).

Gender Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are generalisations about what men and women are like, and there typically is a great deal of consensus about them. The unequal distribution of men and women into social positions at work and at home is the source of gender stereotypes (Koenig and Eagly, 2014). Gender-based labour divisions have historically existed, and they can be seen in both foraging groups and more socioeconomically complex societies (Wood and Eagly, 2012). In the home, women have taken on the majority of caregiving responsibilities and basic household tasks. Women have historically

worked in people-oriented, service-oriented jobs rather than the things-oriented, competitive jobs that have historically been held by men (Lippa et al., 2014). Gender stereotypes arise from the disparate way that men and women are assigned to societal roles and the conclusions that follow about the characteristics of each gender (Koenig and Eagly, 2014).

Formation of Gender Stereotypes

The understanding of the influencing contexts that shape the perception of gender stereotypes is necessary because gender stereotypes can be formed early. For instance, girls are less likely than boys to think of members of their gender as "really, really smart," so even at the age of six, youngsters support gender stereotypes regarding cognition (Bian et al., 2017, p. 389). According to Bian et al. (2017), these ideas line up with the activities that boys and girls participate in. Both boys and girls continue to support traditional gender views during adolescence, with the help of their classmates, families, the media, and their schools (Kågesten et al., 2016). Gender stereotypes are ubiquitous in almost every facet of society, such as advertising (Åkestam et al., 2021), professional development and education (Myers et al., 2020), interactions with customers (Otterbring et al., 2021), employment prospects (Chang and Milkman, 2020), and wage negotiations (Pardal et al., 2020).

Nigeria Entertainment Industry

Nigeria's film business, known as Nollywood, employs over a million people, produces over 2000 films a year, and generates between $200 and $300 million in revenue overall. Because of its reputation for presenting stories in creative and innovative ways, Nollywood is reportedly the third-largest industry in the world (Maton, 2018). Nollywood's films are viewed not only in theatres but also in homes throughout Nigeria, Africa, and the world, thanks to the ease of distribution made possible by the digital revolution and increased investment from global companies. As a result, many people have come to love them (Okocha and Echoi, 2022).

The history of entertainment in Nigeria begins before the country gained its independence, when colonial filmmakers began making films for local audiences there and exhibited them through mobile cinema (Okocha and Echoi, 2022). In 1937, the colonial administration started building and running movie theatres. Nonetheless, foreign material was shown in theatres throughout this time. Yoruba travel theatre organisations, one of which was the Agbegijo and Alarinjo theatrical company, which had stage actors like Duro Ladipo, Ishola Ogunmola, Lere Paimo, and Oyin Adejobi, among others, complemented cinema screenings from the 1930s through the 1940s. Later, in 1949 and 1950, the Nigerian Film Unit was established in an effort to decentralise the making of colonial films. It screened health and educational films for the community using mobile cinema vans. It also produced newsreels and short videos for internal and international audiences, depicting festivals and colonial triumphs (Maton, 2018).

Nigeria had a significant influx of foreign films from the US, India, China, and Japan after gaining independence in 1960 and the opening of new theatres. On the other hand, indigenous efforts in Nigerian filmmaking began in the 1970s. The oil boom that occurred in Nigeria between 1973 and 1978 significantly contributed to the ad hoc development of the film

industry, which by then had grown to become a major employer of labour and played a vital social function as Nigerians visited the movies for amusement and leisure (Okocha and Echoi, 2022). In addition to movie theatres, television has emerged as a source of entertainment. Maton (2018) affirms that Nollywood films are deeply embedded in Nigerian cultural traditions and are based on Nigerian community life. Nigerian stories are told through African proverbs, idioms, costumes, antiques, cultural exhibits, and imagery.

Theoretical Framework

Yerli (2017) affirms that New Historicism is a critical framework that emerged in the late 20th century. New Historicism is primarily associated with literary theorists such as Stephen Greenblatt (Scheiding, 2012). This theory arose in response to traditional historical approaches that often-treated literary texts as mere reflections of their historical contexts. Instead, New Historicism posits that literature and history are interdependent, each influencing the other in complex ways (Yerli, 2017).

At its core, New Historicism emphasizes the cultural and social conditions surrounding a text's creation (Hickling, 2018). New Historicism argues that literary works are not isolated artifacts; rather, they are embedded within the historical moment that shapes their production and reception. Scheiding (2012) affirms that this perspective challenges the notion of a singular, objective history, suggesting instead that history is constructed through narrative and that different interpretations can coexist.

One of the hallmark concepts of New Historicism is the idea of "historical context." Unlike older forms of historicism that often prioritised chronological narratives, Wilson (2007) contends that New Historicism takes a more critical approach, examining the cultural discourses, social practices, and power structures that influence a text. This involves looking at a wide array of historical documents such as legal records, diaries, and pamphlets to understand the milieu in which a work was produced.

However, New Historicism is not without its criticisms. Some argue that its emphasis on context can lead to a neglect of the text itself, resulting in an overly contextualized reading that diminishes the literary qualities of the work. Despite these criticisms, New Historicism has significantly influenced literary studies.

Rethinking Gendered Stereotypes in House of Gaa

Using the perspectives of New Historicism, the representation of women in the play *House of Gaa* and its implications for understanding gendered stereotypes in contemporary Nigerian society is analysed.

The Oyomesi Council: Gender Exclusion

The all-male composition of the Oyomesi council further emphasizes the systemic exclusion of women from positions of power and decision-making. This portrayal parallels historical realities where women were often marginalized in political spheres. The absence of female representation in leadership roles reinforces the need for societal change and the importance of including diverse voices in governance.

Ayinba and the Domestic Sphere

Ayinba, as the first wife of Bashorun Gaa, epitomises the traditional portrayal of women as subservient and voiceless within the domestic sphere. Initially, her character aligns with the stereotype of the dutiful wife. Hence, lacking agency in her husband's decisions. In most cases, where she cannot question her husband's decision, she will rather result to persuasive expressions and calls her husband "*iba, olowo orimi*" meaning my Lord, my husband. This depiction resonates with historical narratives where women were often relegated to passive roles. However, at towards the end of the narrative, Ayinba questioned her husband outrightly when he declared that he would marry Agbonyin.

> **Ayinba:** *Iba*
> **Bashorun Gaa:** *Yes*
> **Ayinba:** *You're a good for nothing old man. You want to take over your younger brother's wife?*

This scene remains significant as Ayinba rises from being the stereotypical woman that cannot question her husband's decision. Additionally, the climactic moment of war serves as a pivotal turning point for all of Bashorun Gaa's wives. Ayinba and her fellow wives take up arms to defend their husband's empire. This act not only subverts their initial portrayal but also challenges the societal expectation that women are not fit for war.

Zeinab: From Object to Subject

Zeinab's character arc further complicates gender stereotypes. Initially perceived as a mere sex object by Bashorun Gaa.

> **Zeinab:** *What else does my Lord want me to do?*
> **Bashorun Gaa:** *I want all of you, your body and your heart.*

However, she undergoes a transformation through her assertiveness and intelligence. Her ability to articulate her worth and demand respect marks a significant departure from traditional representations of women as passive objects of desire. This shift highlights the potential for female empowerment and the importance of mutual respect in relationships. Significantly, Zeinab's journey speaks to a broader societal need for recognising women's voices and the complexities of their identities beyond mere stereotypes.

Agbonyin: Property and Agency

Agbonyin's narrative underscores the commodification of women in society. Initially treated as property to be exchanged between men. She had a forced marriage to Olukoye. After Olukoye's death, there was subsequent transfer to Bashorun Gaa.

Bashorun Gaa declared:

> *Agbonyin will not be a widow in her prime.*
> *She will remarry in the house of Gaa...*
> *I will be the one to remarry her.*

This scene illustrates the systemic oppression of women within patriarchal structures. Additionally, she he is not allowed to marry her choice who was Oyemekun. Moreover, her eventual use for ritual purposes also serves as a commentary on the ways in which women's bodies are objectified and exploited within cultural practices. In total, Agbonyin's character invites reflection on the historical context of women's roles and the need for a reimagined understanding of agency in the face of systemic oppression.

War and the Rise of Women Warriors

The initial absence of women warriors in the early scenes of war reinforces the notion of male dominance in battle. Yet, the introduction of Oyemekun, who trains under a woman in Dahomey, acts as a subversive element within the narrative. This development not only introduces the possibility of women as warriors but also challenges the notion that strength and valor are inherently masculine traits. It reflects a growing recognition of women's capabilities and the potential for them to redefine their roles in society.

Rethinking Gendered Stereotypes in Funmilayo Ramsome-Kuti

The film presents a compelling story that interrogates gender roles within Nigerian society, particularly Egba land. Funmilayo was a political campaigner, women's right activist and humanitarian. This analysis is through the lens of New Historicism.

Educational Barriers and Female Empowerment

Frances who later went by the name Funmilayo is supposed to go for apprenticeship after primary school because she is a girl. Moreover, there is no female secondary school in Abeokuta. Her mother had also become seamstress too. However, her father supports her passion to attend secondary school.

Mr Thomas: *I've changed my mind, you will go to a secondary school"*

After her admission to the school, she is constantly bullied by boys and called "nobody". Meanwhile, the initial limitation serves as a microcosm of the societal limitations placed on women. As the first girl at Abeokuta Grammar School, her achievement highlights the historical barriers to education for women in Nigeria during those periods. This moment is emblematic of the broader cultural attitudes that often prioritise male education and reinforce gender discrimination. Funmilayo's determination to pursue her education not only challenges these stereotypes but also serves as an inspiration for future generations of women. Consequently, her journey embodies the potential for education to empower women and create pathways for change.

Market Women and Collective Resistance

The plight of market women under the oppressive rule of the Parakoyi reflects the systemic exploitation faced by women in traditional roles. Initially portrayed as helpless victims, the market women’s vulnerability underscores the societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. When Funmilayo challenges the leader, the response is highly stereotypical.

Parakoyi leader: *Who are you woman? Looks like it's been long since your husband beat you last.*

This reflects the projection of women as a gender that should remain voiceless amidst oppression and exploitation. Funmilayo responds by slapping him and the act is described as "abomination". Funmilayo's audacious act of slapping the head of the Parakoyi marks a crucial turning point in the narrative. This moment of defiance illustrates a shift from passive acceptance to active resistance, challenging the stereotype of women as submissive and weak. Funmilayo's actions catalyse a collective awakening among the women, emphasizing the power of solidarity in confronting oppression.

Confrontation with Authority and Gender Dynamics

Funmilayo's confrontation with the King (Alake) serves as a critical commentary on the intersection of gender and authority. At the first meeting Funmilayo was expected to be silent.

Funmilayo: *Kabiyesi, may I rise to address you?*

Chief: *You can address Kabiyesi without rising... Wao! you're arrogant.*

This reveals the stereotypical view of women as subject who cannot make requests. Additionally, Alake's initial dismissal of Funmilayo's demands highlights the ingrained patriarchal attitudes that devalue women's voices. The remark about only respecting her because of her husband encapsulates the societal tendency to view women primarily through their relationships to men.

Chief: *You're enjoying your husband's protection; you are a nobody without him.*

However, as the narrative unfolds, the King's eventual agreement to the women's demands signifies a significant shift in the power dynamics. This moment represents not just a personal victory for Funmilayo but a broader societal acknowledgment of women's agency and their right to be heard.

So, the film illustrates a gradual redefinition of gender stereotypes, particularly through the character of Funmilayo. Her evolution from a constrained girl to a formidable activist challenges traditional notion of femininity. By positioning Funmilayo as a leader who commands respect and inspires change, the film disrupts the narrative that women are inherently subordinate. This redefinition is crucial in the context of Nigerian society. This is because cultural norms often dictate rigid gender roles. Funmilayo's story serves as a powerful example of how women can assert their rights and challenge systemic oppression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the characters of Ayinba, Zeinab, Agboyin, and other wives of Gaa, House of Gaa provides understanding of gendered stereotypes within the Nigerian context. Similarly, *Funmilayo Ramsome-Kuti* not only chronicles the life of a remarkable woman but also serves as a vehicle for rethinking gendered stereotypes within the Nigerian entertainment industry. Through New Historicism, it is possible to appreciate the historical context in which Funmilayo operated. Thus, revealing the complexities of her struggle against entrenched

patriarchal systems. So, New Historicism allows for the contextualisation of women representations within broader historical narratives. Thus, revealing how they reflect and challenge societal norms. As the Nigerian entertainment industry continues to evolve, the rethinking of gender roles is essential in fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

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