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NOLLYWOOD AND WOMEN: READING GENDER IN NIGERIAN CINEMA THROUGH 'SNAIL-SENSE' FEMINISM

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Abstract: From its inception in the early 1990s, Nollywood, the cinema of Nigeria, has complicated the representations of women in popular media, expanding, in the process, Nigeria's discourse landscape for scholars, filmmakers, media practitioners, and the public to engage gender and feminism questions. This paper deploys the "snail-sense feminism" of Akachi Ezeigbo to interrogate how contemporary indigenous African feminisms can be engaged in the reading of Nollywood melodrama. Using a critical discourse analysis of two films, Glamour Girls (1994) and Fifty (2015), it examines not only the performances of gender in Nollywood films, but also how these performances bear out the multiple and varied iterations of the indigenous feminisms by Nigerian feminist scholars who continue to question the dominant patriarchal normative order within the Nigerian society. Where Glamour Girls reveals, for instance, Nollywood's first framings of women from its early days, Fifty sheds light on how those portrayals have continued to be interrogated in Nollywood's present-day films. Highlighting the pushback on patriarchy (albeit sometimes understated and non-verbalized) by female characters in these films, the paper contends that rather than being an aberration, subversion of gender relations by women has been Nollywood's intended objective from the start.

Keywords: Nollywood, African Feminisms, Snail-Sense Feminism, *Glamour Girls*, *Fifty*

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian cinema took a popular turn when it embraced the video-filmmaking technologies in the early 1990s. To speedup sales of a large stock of blank videocassettes, electronic wares merchant Ken Nnebue decided to record melodrama on the cassettes. He teamed up with an out-of-work film graduate and they produced the now pathbreaking movie, *Living in Bondage* (1992). That venture launched Nollywood, an industry that quickly became the world's second largest film industry by volume, pro-

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ducing, at its peak by the mid-2000s, more than a thousand video-films annually. From inception, Nollywood has complicated the representations of women in popular media, expanding, in the process, Nigeria's discourse landscape for filmmakers, media practitioners, and the public to engage gender and feminism questions. Today, its scope has become transnational, extending to other African countries and the African Diaspora.

Leading Nollywood scholars, like Jonathan Haynes (2016) and Onookome Okome (2014) have noted how central Nollywood films have become to Nigeria's self-representation, making any discussion about the country's place in the world difficult without reference to the films. That representation, however, has not always been fair to women. Early Nollywood films portrayed them primarily as docile and submissive good wives or as home-wrecking prostitutes. In the last decade, however, through what some industry practitioners and scholars are calling the 'New Nollywood' (characterized by high quality feature length films shot for the large screen), more positive images of women are beginning to emerge in the films. One key factor influencing this new trend is the increasing number of young and talented Nigerian female filmmakers. Another factor is the rate at which feminism discussion permeates popular discourse in contemporary Nigeria.

This paper interrogates how contemporary indigenous African feminisms can be engaged in the reading of Nollywood melodrama. Employing a critical discourse analysis of two films, *Glamour Girls* (1994) and *Fifty* (2015), it examines not only the performance of gender in Nollywood films, but also the multiple and varied iterations of indigenous African feminisms by African feminist scholars who continue to question the dominant patriarchal normative order within the Nigerian society. Where *Glamour Girls* reveals Nollywood's first framings of women from its early days, *Fifty* sheds light on how those portrayals have continued to be interrogated in Nollywood's present-day films. Both films are women-centered; but while the one presents an obvious moral message that condemns women who exercise their independence by choosing what they make of their bodies as people not to be trusted, the other portrays, as a normal existence, the life of financially independent middle-aged women, who negotiate their existence and interaction with the world on their own terms, thereby complicating gender relationships and subverting patriarchal authorities.

Haynes (2016, 64) might have understated the extent of subversion, then, in early Nollywood films when he writes, for example: '*Glamour Girls* is set up to demonize its characters in obvious ways, but *subversive* understanding and sympathy may creep in' (emphasis added). This paper contends that subversion is not only intended in that film but has been

integral to Nollywood's objective all along in its portrayals of women. The paper derives its usage of subversion from Antonio Gramsci's (1985) conception of cultural hegemony, the ideological power structure inherent in every society. A dominant order, like patriarchy, hegemony implies, maintains the status quo by controlling, oftentimes, subliminally, every facet of society and culture. Subversion functions as counter-hegemony, but not always in a Marxist sense that effects forceful political changes within society (see Ledwith 2009). Following Gramsci, postmodern and poststructural scholars, particularly feminist writers among them (Simone de Beauvoir, Naomi Wolfe, and bell hooks, for example), have advocated for 'a very broad form of subversion' that transcends the concern with sabotaging the realm to focus instead on preeminent cultural forces like patriarchy and individualism (Allison, 2020). Subversion, then, as used in this paper, refers to any counter-hegemonic measure that undermines an established order. Even when it appears subtle in Nollywood films, it is, nonetheless, significant in that it continues to hint at the clamor for gender rethinking within the Nigerian society. It demonstrates, as Onookome Okome (2004, 5) puts it, 'that contemporary society is deeply concerned about the changes in the traditional image of women in Nigeria's post-colonial framework.'

'Women,' as used in this essay, sometimes functions as a synonym for 'gender,' which has undergone extensive development from its binary distinction with 'sex' in the 1960s and 1970s' Gender Studies (with 'sex' representing biological differences between females and males and 'gender' denoting historical and religiously-reinforced socio-cultural constructions of women and men) to the current multiple theories and often complicated analyses of its performance and discourse (King 2005). If as Teresa de Lauretis (1987, 5) argues, gender is 'both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning … to individuals within the society,' then the production of its representations remains a process that can be acted upon by the same individuals. Women in the films discussed in this chapter constitute themselves in ways different from the normative rendering of gender within the Nigerian society. The essay reads that alternative constitution as subversion and, so, employs, within that context, feminist theory, as appropriated by African feminist scholars, in its discussion of women and gender disruption in Nollywood melodramas.

The paper's focus on cis-gendered people does not imply non-recognition of notions of gender-nonconformity or non-heterosexuality. On the one hand, the emphasis derives partly from the awareness that snail-sense feminism, like a host of other continental African feminisms, theorizes gender from cis-women's perspective. In her critique of Alice Walker's (1983) womanism' and its emphasis on women's love and wom-

en's appreciation of other women and their sexuality, for instance, Mary Kolawale (1997, 15), argues that 'to the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue …' A focus on such a 'completely strange' concern, Kolawale contends, is 'at the heart of the rejection of feminism, not only by African women but by many Third World and non-Eurocentric women' (15). While it may be difficult to support Kolawale's claim that lesbianism was a 'non-existent' problem in Africa at the close of the last century (although silence or lack of public acknowledgement and open discourse do not equate non-existence; see Green-Simms [2016]), the realities of contemporary Africa continue to challenge her rigid stance, as additional voices demand inclusion not only in the contemporary popular expressions of gender and sexuality on the continent, but also in their scholarly articulations and discussions. On the other hand, the essay's accent on cis-gendered women partly stems from the fact that majority of Nollywood films, particularly the ones analyzed in this essay, question gender normativity of cis-gendered people. While few Nollywood films like *Emotional Crack* (2003) and *Love Police* (2015) explore the questions of sexuality beyond heterosexual relationships, fewer films like *Abba* (2016) and *Bobrisky in Love* (2019) have dwelt on transgender lives—even though the Nigerian government prohibits gay relationships and the country's film censor board does not approve movies made about such affinities (Onuah 2014, Augoye 2019).

GLAMOUR GIRLS, *FIFTY*, AND FEMALE INDEPENDENCE IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS

Nollywood melodramas present women who re-appropriate the mediums of their subjugation, subvert those mediums, and then re-center the discourse with the resources available to them. They do not always succeed in effecting large-scale change of mindset within the system, but they nonetheless introduce new voices into the discourse, questioning patriarchal normative structures within society. *Glamour Girls* demonstrates that much. Whatever else the film represents and despite the emphasis Nollywood scholars have placed on its unflattering portrayal of women as voiceless tools manipulated by men, the movie at its core grapples with how women, forced to navigate their concerns and social expectations for marriage within a culture that weights their values based on their marital status and perceived puritanical lifestyle, subvert that same culture in order to survive. Five women, four of whom are friends, navigate this labyrinth their way, albeit each desiring to have a man complete her through marriage. 'Oh, how I wish I could be married to a rich guy like you,' call girl Helen (Barbara Odoh) tells a male client (J.T. Tom West) who has taken her home for the night.

Released in 1994, the movie engages the socioeconomic accoutrements of the period (a military-ruled society reeling from the IMF and World Bank-imposed crippling Structural Adjustment Program at the wake of an oil boom that ended a decade earlier) to drive home its message. Traditionally, marriage guaranteed women access to economic power and social status, since women married at an early age and acquired recognition through and in the name of their husbands. But in a post-independent, globalizing economy where women no longer get married as early as they did in the past, where many of them need to acquire education beyond the secondary level, find employment, and begin to fend for themselves before marriage, the independent-minded, city-dwelling woman has to renegotiate her terms of engagement within a society that does not always provide her an enabling environment to succeed on her own. *Glamour Girls* offers one such possibility: to succeed, women have to leverage their intelligence, street smartness, and sexual appeal. As these women in the movies navigate their way through 'a world that is controlled by money, power, and sex,' they, explicitly or implicitly, deploy sex as 'a factor both as power and as a commodity of exchange' (Makarushka 1995, 145). From the start of the film, however, the movie score, which croons the line 'glamour girls don't fall in love; they do crime,' prejudices the viewer's take on the 'glamour girls.'

The movie opens with a timid Sandra (Jennifer Okere) arriving from out of town and being overwhelmed by the luxury and opulence of the city. Her life has been 'miserable,' she tells her friends, Doris (Gloria Anozie) and Thelma (Ngozi Ezeonu), for she has 'worked hard as a strong lady' since they left the university but has not been able to save any money. Getting a paid employment has not been easy because 'every man wants to sleep with [her] before they [even] listen to [her].' But she soon learns the ways of the city 'top class ladies' from her friends. Nollywood films often portray women who go into prostitution to seize control of a situation that otherwise exploited them in the hands of men who would rather take advantage of them than help them (see *Light Will Come* 2017). Doris points Sandra towards that philosophy of using what she has to get what she wants. She informs Sandra that that is the one sure way to play the game. Unlike Sandra who has failed to 'hook' a man after she has 'shown men [her] best behavior [and] cooked for them with all [her] money,' Doris tells her that a 'husband is no longer the prime issue in a woman's life.' What she should be thinking about instead is how to make her own money, for once she does that, she 'can buy [herself] a husband.'

Unlike *Glamour Girls*, *Fifty* (2015) presents four female friends who seek fulfillment not primarily through marriage but through their careers and other meaningful relationships, no matter how troubled or unbalanced the latter may be. Director Biyi Bandele centers his representation of

these women around the ambiguity of being successful and single at fifty, as the film begins and ends with snap shots of these high-flying, successful career women negotiating their individual lives as they approach 'the big number.' They navigate their existence interdependently but also individually, as each asserts control over particular spheres of her life but loses that power over other spheres. Lizzy (Ireti Doyle), for instance, holds it together as a topnotch gynecologist, but cedes control of her sexual life to a much younger toy boy Sammy (Emmanuel Ikubese). However, she does not hesitate to exercise that power and to send him packing when he brings another woman into her bed. Maria (Omoni Oboli) operates at the highest level at her architecture firm but fails to respect the boundaries of not dating a married man, Kunle (Wale Ojo), who also happens to be Tola's husband. Tola (Dakore Egbuson) is the first-rate television host whose obnoxious treatment of her colleagues and staffers, the viewer finds out later, reveals a traumatic childhood of a rape by her wealthy father. Again, to preserve a veneer of marriage, her mother refused to discuss that scarring experience with her as a child and when, in her adult life, Tola raises it with her, the mother blames her for running around naked in the house. Society has conditioned her to be a 'good wife' who finds excuses for her husband's injurious act even on her own innocent and defenseless daughter.

While Kate (Nse Ikpe-Etim), the only married one among the four friends, appears to be the weakest link in the group due to her simple approach to life, she turns out to hold the tension of their friendship in balance. As she battles breast cancer, unbeknownst to her husband and friends, she also manifests elements of socio-religious conditioning within her milieu to cede one's agency to religious authorities (who, more often than not, are men). At first, in denial of her life-threatening illness, Kate surrenders herself to God. 'I do not have cancer,' she tells her pastor, 'There must be a prayer you can say.' So, she prays for a miracle, combining Catholic and Pentecostal modes of worship. The viewer first encounters Kate at a vigil service in a Pentecostal church, offering a simple, general, and altruistic prayer of 'Father, I ask for blessings for my family.' It will not be until much later in the film that the real reason for spending most of her time in the church is revealed. Meanwhile, the pastor at the vigil invites the congregation, 'Children of God, it's time for a miracle tonight. Stand on your feet, open your mouth, and speak to your father right now.' Here, as in a case of *Glamour Girls,* where Sandra soliloquizes upon waking from a dream, 'I think God has revealed Dennis to me,' is a Pentecostal-charismatic approach to God—personal, direct, bold, goal-oriented, and acquisitive. Rooted in this tradition, Kate's prayer becomes more assertive, 'Father, I receive healing from you, in the mighty name of Jesus.'

Kate gets home from that vigil service as the dawn breaks, revealing her neighbors leaving for their day's activities, and goes straight to a Holy Family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph) altar in her sitting room. She kneels down, lights the candles, and intones the Hail Mary. Her desperation for divine healing also manifests a religious obsession typical of Nigerian Christians who believe that no matter the hopelessness of their predicament, God will always intervene to turn their lot around, through their faith and in spite of what expert medical knowledge says to the contrary. Hence, when, as she lies in bed and reads her bible after her post-vigil morning devotion, the husband inquires, 'when are you going to get your priorities right,' Kate ripostes, 'my priorities are right. God is first.' And because God is first, rather than starting her cancer treatment, Kate tells the pastor, 'the doctor is wrong; I'm convinced that he's wrong,' even though she acknowledges that rather than getting better like the pastor promised, her life 'is falling apart.' But then, 'what can a doctor do that God cannot?' she asks the pastor. After all, she has faith and goes to church regularly; so, it does not make any sense why God is 'unhappy' with her. There must be a prayer the pastor can say to make everything right again. More than a prayer, the pastor has the right sense of mind to insist that Kate seek medical solution to her illness.

AFRICAN FEMINISMS: INDIGENOUS ITERATIONS AND INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER

A reading of films like *Glamour Girls* and *Fifty* benefits from indigenous iterations of feminism by African feminist scholars. Understanding African feminisms as theorized by these scholars will help shed more light on the larger sociocultural questions of gender that Nollywood engages. Within the African continent and across its diaspora, women of African descent have always confronted problems and challenges of gender (and its later manifestations in feminism) as a relevant approach toward grasping and finding solutions to their women-related problems. Emerging within the third wave of the feminist movement in the 1980s, African feminisms benefitted enormously from the feminist theoretical foundations laid by the preceding era.

Riding the third wave of women's movement that champions 'post-feminism' feminism and its celebration of multiplicity of feminisms in its poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial outlooks, African feminist scholars draw inspiration from the experiences of their African lives to theorize African feminisms. They criticize the 'one sisterhood' of the second wave period for not accommodating the differences of race, nationality, culture, class, ethnicity, age, gender, and status. Scholars like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1981, 1994), Obioma Nnaemeka (1998, 2004), and

Akachi Ezeigbo (1996b, 2012, 2019), emphasize the pluralism of feminisms as well as note the significant differences in the African and Western approaches to the subject, collectively arguing that Africa offers a unique context for any meaningful analysis of feminism on the continent. They have theorized multiple African feminisms that are, as Nnaemeka (2004, 377) puts it, 'built on the indigenous.' But then to ensure that African feminists do not fall into the same monolithic pitfalls as their Western counterparts, Ogundipe-Leslie (9) also cautions that 'there is no such thing as 'the African woman.' Her identity and reality are complex and as such she cannot be essentialized as one. Within the cross-cultural perspective of her existence, then, the African woman 'represents much diversity in terms of nationality, class affiliation, generational differences, and particular historical experiences' (Chioma 1981, 7).

Alice Walker's (1983) 'womanism' becomes the first of the African feminisms to address this diversity against the backdrop of Western feminism. Critiquing the racism in white feminism theories as well as the sexism in patriarchy within black communities, Walker advocates womanism as a commitment to wholeness, harmony, and wellbeing of all humanity, inclusive of all females and males, which does not champion the hatred or exclusion of any gender by the Other. That standpoint not only holds femininity and the culture within which it exists in equal importance, it also rejects the term 'feminism' as used by white women of the second wave as well as contrasts with bell hooks' (1984) 'black feminism' and its demand to move the black feminist discourse from the margin to the center.

A decade after Walker's work, Clenora Hudson-Weems (1995) advanced a separatist 'Africana womanism' (from white feminism, black feminism, and African feminism) in her book, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. According to her, neither gender nor race makes one a feminist. Neither does an association with women's issues. Given their pro-family leanings, women of African descent can only identify as womanists, rather than as feminists. Unlike the white feminist who is engaged in 'an age-old battle with her white male counterpart for subjugating her as his property,' Hudson-Weems (1995, 155) maintains, 'the Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy.' That men are not the Africana women's primary enemy, it bears noting, does not mean that Africana men have always maintained an equal relationship with the women, given the unbalanced relationship between the two genders in the patriarchal African cultures. Besides, it is not clear how the 'unique expressions, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women' espoused by Hudson-Weems (1998, 155) differ from the concerns of the African women that African feminists advocate for, other than in the scope of the geography of Africana womanism. While African feminism focuses on the continent

and Black feminism concentrates more on the United States, Africana womanism is concerned with the women of African descent on the continent and in diaspora.

Indigenous African feminisms have continued to further the gender discourse that speaks to the reality of life of African women, albeit from particular understandings of these realities. Starting with Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's 'Black womanism' (1985), a number of indigenous African feminisms have emerged. Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1996) later narrows her 'Black womanism' down to 'African womanism,' steeping it in African communalism and setting it apart from Walker's and Hudson-Weems's with her Four Cs: consensus, conciliation, collaboration, and complementarity between African women and men. Other popular African feminisms include Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) 'Stiwanism' (STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Catherine Acholonu's (1995) 'Motherism' (emphasizing African value for motherhood), and Nnaemeka's (1998) 'nego-feminism' (negotiated feminism). More recent theories include Chioma Opara's (2005, 190) 'Femalism' (foregrounding the female body as 'the systemic site of discourse and hermeneutics'), Ezeigbo's (2012) 'Snail-Sense Feminism' (conciliatory and cooperative attitude toward men), and Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's (2019) 'Di Feminism' (inclusive, aware, and assertive gender engagement).

The multiplicity of their approaches to engaging the question of feminism indicates how committed African feminist scholars are to tackling such a complicated subject. Their diverse theories problematize any attempt at articulating a one-size-fits-all feminism that addresses the concerns of women of African descent. Even when one acknowledges the risk of these many attempts at theorizing feminism degenerating into a multiplicity of 'my feminism' in the face of the varied individualized approaches, the particularity of indigenous African feminisms, nonetheless, responds to specific regions and avoids generalizations.

Nnaemeka (2004, 380) builds her theory of nego-feminism on the idea of the 'African women's willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances.' She outlines the areas of divergence between African feminism and Western feminism and then contends that the identity of the former is rooted in its resistance to the latter: resistance against its radical feminism, harsh stance on motherhood, disruptive language that eschews negotiation and compromise, inordinate concern with sexuality, exclusion of men, and universalization of Western concepts of feminism (Nnaemeka 1998b). Unlike Ogundipe-Leslie who premises her treatment of gender on class, race, and sexual orientation, Nnaemeka (1998b, 7) argues that while those categories still matter, African women are more concerned with the 'basic issues of everyday life

[and as such want to] address such issues first as they configure and relate to their own lives and immediate surroundings.'

Ezeigbo (2012, 27), whose theory constitutes the backdrop against which this essay analyzes the films, further addresses those basic issues of everyday life that confront African women through her 'snail-sense feminism'—the 'conciliatory or cooperative attitude' that women should adopt in their relationship with men. This attitude, she argues, enables the snail to 'crawl over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue.' As the snail hauls along 'its house on its back without feeling the strain,' Ezeigbo (2012, 27) maintains, 'if danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe.' In this application of the snail's shell metaphor, however, Ezeigbo does not clarify how African women would ever successfully confront the challenges that patriarchy places before them if they keep withdrawing into their shells. Nonetheless, she insists that since a snail 'goes steadily forward … [and] does not confront objects but negotiates its way past any obstacle … a woman cannot but behave like a snail in [the African] patriarchal society.'

Whereas Ezeigbo's feminism advocates for a silent negotiation on the part of women, the female characters she creates in her novels and short stories approach feminism in more vocal and assertive ways. In 'The Departure,' for instance, with a voice 'quivering with anger,' she writes, Muta demands of her husband, Awa, who has woken her up so she will serve him dinner: 'Am I your wife or your slave in this house?' (Ezeigbo, 1996, 21). Awa, who has been doted on all his life under the protection of a patriarchal culture that normalized his male privileges, flees the bedroom 'like a defeated warrior fleeing the scene of battle'—the first time ever Muta his wife puts her foot 'down squarely on the ground' to challenge his disregard for her as well as his insensitivity and sense of entitlement (Ezeigbo 1996, 21).

Such is the strong character of Ezeigbo's female protagonists. To theorize a different image of women in her feminism suggests a creation of two worlds, one fictional, the other real, as well as separates both worlds from each other in the kind of order and structure she assigns to them. It would appear that Ezeigbo, then, is saying, almost two decades after creating the character of Muta, that the world and reality that Muta demands of her life has become unattainable by the real women whose life hers mimics and which Ezeigbo's indigenous feminism tries to capture or articulate.

Azodo (2019, 32) contends that Ezeigbo's feminism is impracticable given that it 'sacrifices women's respect and freedom at the altar of practicality and functionality.' Ezeigbo's solution, Azodo avers, contains the very gender inequality that African feminism sets out to address. 'The image of a woman as a crawling snail, bending, bowing, cajoling, conced-

ing, and negotiating her survival, her destiny, with sharp thorns that symbolize the men, is not an acceptable strategy of dialoguing from a position of strength' (Azodo 2019, 32). Azodo is not alone in disagreeing with Ezeigbo. At a 2018 conference in Chicago, Ezeigbo's reference to snail-sense feminism in her paper on Flora Nwapa's literary legacy drew some disapproving remarks from other Igbo female scholars present who objected to Ezeigbo's approach.

Ezeigbo (2012, 31) had made reference to the part of her theory that concludes thus: 'if women of the past adopted the strategy of the snail to survive, today's Nigerian woman should do no less as she negotiates and re-negotiates her way in her dealings with the men and society at large.' Evaluating an earlier version of Ezeigbo's theory, Nnaemeka (1998b), in her introduction to *Sisterhood: Feminism and Power*, makes reference to the challenge of engaging feminism in Africa on Ezeigbo's terms, despite acknowledging the strengths of her method. The female scholars at the conference raised a similar concern, calling attention to the fact that Ezeigbo's metaphor in itself is problematic. To raise the image of the African woman as a snail as well as to privilege her foremothers as yardstick for her gender relationship in contemporary times is to neglect the age-long sociocultural and religious load that has burdened her all her life, the scholars (Ada Agbasimalo and Azodo among them) argued.

One can read the scholars as saying, it is high time African women jettisoned both the load and its anachronistic image. It is high time they stood up and asserted themselves rather than keep retreating into their shells, for any situation that continues to put them in spaces where they need to thread carefully in order to survive is not worth taking up as a survival standard for women. It is such retreating that has continued to empower the oppressors of women, who perpetuate unfair treatment of women, knowing that the women would rather retreat than speak up and challenge the oppressors.

In her defense, however, Ezeigbo (2019) points out that focusing on the physical representation of the image of the snail misses the point of her theory, a symbolic meaning of the snail: carefully and doggedly navigating dangerous terrains and having a thick skin to retreat (she insists) in the face of a danger to its life. It's all a survival mechanism. In a 2019 essay, 'Unity in Diverse Indigenous Feminisms,' she further clarifies that the Igbo philosophical thought that undergirds her snail sense theory does not place the snail in any position of weakness from which it negotiates. Rather, the snail 'is at par with the objects it encounters on the way … [and, no matter the obstacle,] must have its way' (Ezeigbo 2019, 72). Ezeigbo's clarification, however, conflates the snail having its way with it finding its way. That the snail eventually maneuvers its way away from obstacles in

its course does not mean that it finally has its way. If anything, the obstacle, whatever it is, has its way instead.

Nevertheless, Ezeigbo (2019, 72-73) anchors the strength of her theory on her 'strong belief in dialogue or negotiation as the best means of achieving societal equilibrium or harmonious relationships between genders,' insisting that the 'virtues of sensitivity, resilience, negotiation, dialogue and self-empowerment' constitute the mechanism women need for their survival in a patriarchal ordered society. Hence, one can then locate the emphasis on Ezeigbo's snail-sense on 'sense' rather than on the structure of the snail.

Some of the female scholars at the Chicago conference, even though they disagreed in theory with Ezeigbo's approach, acknowledged that in practice her approach remains a reasonable one. One scholar cited an example of a colleague who survives in an environment where an insecure, unlettered spouse asserts his dominance by always putting his professor wife down and not even allowing her any option to express her opinion on family matters, in addition to constantly reminding her that although she might be educated, he paid for that education. The snail-sense approach, while it might not be ideal, the reporting scholar said, becomes the only survival mechanism available to her colleague, even with her academic achievements. Note, however, that nowhere in this account of controlling and constraining marriage is the option of quitting the said union muted. The emphasis remains on the preservation of the marriage.

"DANIEL IS MY HUSBAND, BUT I AM THE BOSS": NEGOTIATING MARRIAGE

Nollywood, no doubt, parades countless movies which, in line with what critics fault Ezeigbo's theory on, generally depict women as a passive and exploited group—wives, mothers, sisters, and girlfriends, used mainly as props to advance the narratives of their male counterparts who exercise power within a patriarchal society (Garritano 2000; see also Johnson and Culverson 2016). This paper, however, maintains that through the use of melodrama, Nollywood also presents women who, using varied subtle and overt means, subvert those representations that render them invisible and voiceless, as they constantly question the normative traditions that support such representations. The essay's interrogation of gender in Nollywood films follows in the feminist film scholarship approach of analyzing the representations of gender, women, and feminism in cinema. Championed by theorist Laura Mulvey and influenced by the psychoanalysis theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacaues Lakan, this insightful engagement continues to inform contemporary explorations of those categories particularly in the melodrama genres like Nollywood's.

In bemoaning her hard luck with finding a man to settle down with, for instance, Sandra, in *Glamour Girls*, might have been misled by a mindset that ties her worth as a woman to marriage, even at the cost of playing dumb and wasting her money on undeserving men, but Doris tells her not to worry. She can buy herself a husband instead. Better still, she can get a more generous older man, who is equally more considerate than a younger one, to pick up her bills, even when, like Doris, she is married. If the game is power and the exercise of it for influence, the 'Glamour Girls' are definitely pulling the strings. Men know this, as Doris tells Sandra: 'The problem with top class ladies is that men are scared of us.' This fear often masks itself as tradition, social mores, or gender shaming in order to control women. But Nollywood presents women who subvert the system by mastering the game.

Old habits persist and according to Caroline Walker Bynum, et al. (1986, 9), symbols, more than just being impacted, are often appropriated 'in a dialectical process [and made] subjective reality,' thereby making it difficult for one gender to let go of a worldview it appropriated and internalized based on the symbols constructed by a culture run by the other gender. Sandra does not think her social and material empowerment should be divorced from marriage. 'Who will marry you after all this?' she asks Thelma in reference to the latter's lifestyle. Sandra's query touches on the ever-present question of marriage that preoccupies many Nigerian women. Nigerian feminist scholars, like Ezeigbo, have theorized their feminisms within the parameters that assume the importance of marriage. Ezeigbo, as stated above, insists that dialogue and negotiation are central to her 'snail-sense' feminism. Even while she does not privilege marriage as the context for both dialogue and negotiation, it is difficult for one to imagine marriage being absent from or not playing a central role within the Igbo world in which Ezeigbo situates her feminism. Nnaemeka (1998b, 7) insists that African women are concerned more with the 'basic issues of everyday life.' Marriage constitutes an essential part of the concerns of that every day. Hence, Jane's (Liz Benson) statement confirms this: 'I've made it,' she tells Thelma, 'Desmond has promised me marriage.'

Many Nollywood films foreground marriage and the myriad burdens it places on Nigerian women: desire to marry, pressure and harassment from relatives to marry early, anxiety because of late marriage, the agony of a childless marriage, desperation for a male child, an overbearing mother-in-law, interference from either spouse's families, unjust treatment of widows, infidelity, domestic abuse, rape, et al. 'Glamour Girl' Jane's next move further buttresses the consuming concern that women have of marriage in Nigeria. Desmond (Sola Fosudo) plays a benevolent, gracious, and caring fiancé to Jane after discovering that she has a ten-year-old son.

He has no issues with that, yet Jane is troubled he might change his mind regarding his marriage proposal. He has no reason to, after all he 'picked [her] from the street,' Jane says through her tears. The tears dry out, however, as soon as Desmond reassures her that he will still marry her, no matter what. Desmond's appears the only profession of love in the movie not designed to manipulate the beloved. But then, the unstated control of his love is hidden in plain sight, as it is a love that 'picked' Jane from the street and brought her into his home to be made his own alone.

Unlike Desmond, Daniel (Ernest Obi) does not conceal his intent to check his woman. 'I am a man and I will always be in control,' he assures his friends to allay their fears about his relationship with a much older Doris. But Doris flips that script of male control in a man-woman relationship. She makes the money and pays the bills; and she lets Daniel know that—to keep him in check. While a patriarchal-ordered society might be weary of such a woman like Doris, Jane, however, professes her admiration for Doris's single-mindedness in going after what she wants, even if that has made her a control freak since their university days. She is one of a kind, as Jane points out: 'It's not every woman that needs someone to boss them around.' Society is changing and the women are applying the wisdom of the Igbo proverb that says that once the beat to a dance changes the dancer too must adjust their dance steps. Hence, to Sandra's 'the men should always be in charge. That's always the way it's meant to be,' Doris counters that 'things don't always go the way [they're] meant to be.' Even while maintaining her mistress's relationship with Alhaji when she is married to Daniel, Doris tells Alhaji, 'Daniel is my husband, but I am the boss.' She equally refers to Daniel as 'my prisoner.' To indicate a symbolic cultural humiliation of a man powerless before his woman, she makes Daniel wash her underpants, highlighting, in the process, how a culture has turned into an act of shame and indignity what ordinarily should be a sign of mutual respect, endearment, and love.

Doris hides her fear of being taken advantage of by her younger boyfriend, who might in the end elope with another woman of his own age. This concealed fear manifests in her control and unpleasant treatment of Daniel. Where, however, Doris succeeds or enjoys the good fortunes of luck in her control of Daniel, her friends Sandra and Jane do not. Sandra gambles with ceding control to boyfriend Dennis (Pat Attah) and loses. Dennis absconds with all the money she finally makes by dating an older man. Alex swindles Jane of her fiancé's money and cars by sweet-talking her into abandoning Desmond in the hospital for a promise of becoming a first lady of the country and traveling to America with Alex when he becomes president. Meanwhile, Desmond sustained his injuries from a car accident he has while traveling to take care of Jane's ill mother. 'God! How did you create women?' Desmond asks on his sick bed after reading Jane's

divorce papers. Nevertheless, no matter how evil Jane is portrayed to be here, she, like every other character in the movie, is leveraging her opportunities for her selfish ends. It is worthy of note that Alex's smooth operation on Jane structurally echoes the Nigerian advance fee fraud (locally known as 419, after a penal code) at its peak in the 1990s, a precursor of today's Internet scam. One notorious aspect of this is the love scam that women from across the globe continue to fall for today—making the desire for a loving relationship, if not marriage, a universal human need that can be easily exploited.

While marriage preoccupies the everyday existence of Nigerian women both in real life and in the characters that Nollywood creates, it is within the same marriage, as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, 75) argues, 'that the Nigerian woman suffers the most oppression.' First, she loses her daughter/sister status and other rights within her birth lineage and becomes 'a client or possession … voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except, in some cases, what accrues to her from her children.' Second, she loses a great deal of her personal freedom, a part of which she can only regain at an expensive price to herself by accommodating the existence of her husband's other women (wives and/or mistresses). Third, she submits to the husband's dominance 'or face execration and blame from the total society' (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, 75). Nevertheless, the woman is, at the same time, expected to 'stoop to conquer' by quietly accepting her subjection and subjugation in order to succeed. In a sense then, Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism which encourages women to negotiate their way gently through marital challenges in order to survive, although original in its articulation and insight, draws from a general common notion of survival mechanism deployed by African women in the realities of their daily existence. Doris, for one, refuses to play by such a rule.

Unlike their counterparts in *Glamour Girls*, the women of *Fifty* do not need men for their financial sustenance. *Fifty* reverses the *Glamour Girls*' trend: women make their own money and their men do the spending. Kate's husband and Lizzy's toy boy live off their women. Tola makes the point clear that she makes enough money when she screams at her stylist, 'how many times will I say it, money is not my problem, but how to spend it,' as she expresses her disappointment for the 'cheap' clothing items the stylist brings to costume her as the host of the 'Rich and Fabulous Tola' show. Her dressing, she insists, should scream 'class, style, glamour.' Tola might have a billionaire father, but she works hard to make her own money as a successful television host. The phrase 'money is not my problem' harkens back to a statement made by a former Nigerian military head of state who, in the heyday of Nigeria's oil boom in the 1970s, said that the country's problem was not money, but how to spend

it. But like Kate tells her 'self-employed entrepreneur' (read, unemployed) husband, everything was fine until he 'started being reckless with [her] money.' Nigerian had it together until it began spending money with a reckless abandon on unsupervised white elephant projects that became pipe drains for embezzlement and corruption.

While unflattering images of women still abound in Nollywood films, a film like *Fifty* also reflects a similar problem of representing women in the Hollywood melodrama. As Irena Makarushka (1995, 142) puts it, the women's film genre has often portrayed women as 'marginal personality types … who suffer from a wide variety of 'women's troubles.'" Depicted as 'depressed, unstable, incompetent, and weak,' Makarushka adds, women so represented 'become objects of male scrutiny and power.' Nevertheless, even while this paper contends that both *Glamour Girls* and *Fifty* consciously aim to subvert subservient images of women maintained through patriarchy by presenting strong female characters, these women oftentimes 'fall under the care of men' for being 'perceived as lacking the ability to control their emotions' (Makarushka, 142).

In *Fifty*, for instance, Maria's uncle intervenes and insists that she goes home to sort out her life, after Tola barges into Maria's construction firm's board meeting to confront her for being pregnant by her husband. Jamal (Timini Egbuson), Tola's son from her rape ordeal, stops her from slipping into a self-pity alcohol binging after she finds out he already knows that she is his real mother. The family has passed him off as her brother. Meanwhile Kate pleads with her male pastor to ask God to intervene in her health issue, even when she can and is encouraged to make that prayer directly to God. Towards the end of the film, as Lizzy crosses paths with a young boy on the stairs of the building where Tola hosts her birthday party, she contemplates making him a new boy toy to whom she will hand over the control of her sexual satisfaction. One might argue that since these female characters inhabit a world made up of men and women, their lives, by necessity, must interweave with those of the men. Hence, these strong, successful career women are bound to navigate the reality of their lives within this patriarchal world.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the narratives of *Glamour Girls* and *Fifty*, the boldness of what the films attempt remains fascinating. Nollywood reflects a new development where, like *Fifty*, its films signal a future filled with equal opportunities for women. That indication in itself also demonstrates developments in contemporary Nigeria, as women continue to advocate for equal recognition in society. Although no single indigenous feminism wholly encapsulates Nollywood's portrayals of women, the paper privileged Ezeigbo's snail-

sense feminism to highlight the complexities of that reality. Women's everyday lived experiences in Nigeria and Africa, as portrayed in the films and indicated by Ezeigbo's theory, contrast in multiple ways with the ideals of feminism, spotlighting the freedom of cinema to operate in the vanguard of exploring novel ideas and options. However, as the films illustrate, whereas the ideal feminism and equal gender relations might not yet be fully attained, African women continue to challenge patriarchal structures that undermine their existence and efforts at realizing that end, as they continue to subvert and re-engage these structures.

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