

UNMASKING THE GAZE OF THE ALPHA MALE GAZER IN KANNYWOOD

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Abstract

Kano, the centre of commerce in Northern Nigeria, and now, a melting point for creative endeavours has birthed Kannywood, the Hausa movie/music industry, which produces films/music videos in the Hausa Language. It is expected that the industry appropriates some Hausa prudish culture, norms and values that repudiate women's apparency and audibility in "public spaces". From a standpoint, "provocative" appearances of females which create sensual proclivities in male viewers in these visual materials have been catechised by some cultural and Islamic critics, who proclaim that Kannywood has been proliferated with non-cultural motifs, images, and scenes associated with Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Nigerian mainstream movie industry, Nollywood. Consequently, such artistic undertakings are proscribed from public viewing. Actors, film producers, directors suffer severe admonishment or outright banishment from the activities of the industry to avoid the spread of materials that the Kano State Censorship Board, other regulatory bodies and associations deem as unbecoming. A converse proposition is that the absence of females in these visual materials endangers the patronage. This paper uses Laura Mulvey's concept of 'Male-Gazing' to argue that the censoring of video vixens in Kannywood is done to gratify the hedonistic tendencies alpha-male of the Industry. It contends that the representation of 'slay queens' or vixens in Kannywood is inverted. It argues that whilst lewdness may tickle the fancy of the male-gazer in Hollywood, Nollywood, and other film industries, wholesomeness or shyness as represented in the prejudiced images in Kannywood delight the sexual fancies of the male-gazers of Kannywood. The paper submits that the Hausa movie industry should align its artistic abilities with global appeal while at the same time allowing for strong local renditions.

Keywords: *Gaze, Gazer, Male Gaze, Alpha male, Kannywood*

INTRODUCTION

Gaze is a concept in postcolonial feminist theory that has found a place in film criticism. As a concept in film criticism, it implies that the spectator-audience may be engaging in more than just “looking” at an actor or actress. Schroeder (1998: 208) believes that it “signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze.” Therefore, it is essential to make a clear distinction between the “look” – meaning it is open to all viewers, and the “gaze”, which is seen as a form of viewing that reflects gender code of erotic desire (Evans & Gamman 1995: 16). As a theory, Gaze implies the act of re/presenting a film character to arouse the opposite sex. The Hausa movie industry, otherwise known as Kannywood has since inception, guided against representational arts that tend to arouse or promote lewdness to its largely Muslim Hausa population domiciled in Northern Nigeria and beyond. Governmental and non-government bodies such as the Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) and Motion Picture Practitioners Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN), Kano State Chapter have developed strict rules to regulate the activities of the movie industry. For the most part, the tenets of these rules are drawn from Shari’a. The Shari’a comprises of injunctions from the Qur’an, Sunnah, Ijma’ and Qiyas.

The Kano State Censorship Board (KSCB) oversees and regulates all the contents in Kannywood; from the film script itself, film production, to the artwork on the DVD case. This makes the Hausa movie industry one of the most regulated movie industries in the world in terms of censorship of obscene entertainment. Nevertheless, on several occasions, there have been ideological clashes between filmmakers and the KSCB, with KSCB mostly accusing Kannywood film-makers of mishandling and misrepresenting the socio-cultural and religious values of Muslims of Hausa extraction. The bone of contention is mostly about the representation of the female subjects—the objects of the male gaze. KSCB’s efforts to promote wholesome female film characters

have invariably led to the construction of prejudiced female identity to suit the gaze of male viewers. This is so because what is considered sexually provocative is cultural and subjective. A culture exposed to a practice where the display of some parts of the female body is insignia to a woman's beauty may not consider such representation as provocative in a film. In the same vein, in some cultures, a veiled body, shyness or chastity is a conditionality of a woman's beauty. Thus, the veiled or bodily-covered video vixens in Kannywood arguably submit themselves as subjects of the male gaze. The male gaze, in this context, is the transfixation on the body of the chaste, veiled or faithful female film character. The conservative pursuits of Kannywood are only a mask to service the intemperance of the elite and religious scholars. The object of gaze is conditioned by religion and cultural stringency of the alpha-male gazers, the KSCB and MOPPAN, a male-dominated board and association. The premise of this paper is anchored on Kannywood's inversion of the concept of gaze. To proceed, it is important to understand the theory of gaze vis-à-vis the production of veiled video vixens in Kannywood.

VIDEO VIXENS AND THE CONCEPT OF GAZE

The conception of a 'video vixen' as a sexy female dancer in music and film videos, whose revealing appearance is capable of causing masturbation and impulsive ejaculation for male viewers needs to be dispelled. Literally, a vixen is a female fox or a belligerent female. A video vixen should, therefore, be a fox dancing in a video or a woman who interrogates the socio-cultural stringency and questions the manipulation of a certain classification of persons to favour the 'other'. In cinema culture, the engagement of females by some filmmakers in certain film genres and music videos is a strategy to enhance the commercial value of their products. On the one hand, women become objects of attraction to consumers who are entertained and are subsequently charmed by them for various reasons. On the other hand, we find audiences criticising the roles and appearances of females in films and condemning them to

perdition. This disparity creates contradictory motifs for depictions, which in both ways have damaging implications on the images of these females beyond the screen (Adamu, 2004; Adamu, Adamu & Jibril 2004: 350).

The latter argument above clearly explains the propensity of some conservative societies to vilify the business of filmmaking and decry with all seriousness, film and other related materials. Surprisingly, for instance, Kano, the largest city and unarguably the hub of filmmaking in the northern part of Nigeria places restrictions on aspects of film production, owing to its religious vibrancy and social conservatism. The 'haramisation' (prohibition) of film in this locality stems from the influence of prominent Islamic scholars on the citizenry to perceive film as anti-cultural and irreligious material that opposes the ethos of the Hausa Muslim society. This claim is grounded basically on the illicit and visual vulgarity in the representation of women in films. Yet, regardless of the vituperations and condemnations suffered by most filmmakers and females in Kannywood, the success or failure of their films is still dependent on the depiction of women in song and dance sequences in these films. Adherence to religious and cultural doctrines with reference to the participation of women and their demeanors are expected to take primacy in films in a predominant Hausa Muslim society like Kano. This accounts for the constant interrogation of the industry by the state, Islamic critics and cultural adherents who have endlessly argued the amity of film with Islam, (Ahmad, 2004; Muhammad 2013). To avoid the production and proliferation of provocative images in the Hausa movie industry especially in the re/presentation of female bodies, the KSCB has stringent guidelines for projecting female characters as well as other film contents.. The purpose is to ensure decorum while dispelling characterisations or scenes that provoke male gaze.

The theory of Male Gaze is premised on the act of depicting women and the world in the visual arts and literature, from a

masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer (Eaton, 2008; Luczynska-Holdys, 2013). According to Mulvey (1999: 384), the male gaze has three perspectives: that of the person behind the camera; that of the characters within the representation; and that of the spectator. Going further, Mulvey (2009: 713) argues that the male gaze is comparable to scopophilia, which is sexual pleasure derived from observing the passive female as an object. In addition, Paul (2015: 467) also notes that

The theory of male gaze proposes that an asymmetry of power between the genders is a controlling force in cinema; and that the male gaze is constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy.

The above assertion follows the perspective that male gaze occurs when the camera places the viewer in the perspective of a heterosexual man whose sight lingers on the curves of a woman's body (Streeter et al, 2005, online). Usually, the male gaze displays the woman on two different levels: as an erotic object for the characters in the film story, and as an erotic object for the male viewer of the film. By way of the male gaze, the man emerges as the dominant power within the film fantasy, in which the woman is a passive object for the active gaze of the male viewer. Mulvey (2009:737) affirms that the passive-object and active-viewer pairing is basic to the patriarchal order and is typical in the "illusionistic narrative film" of mainstream cinema, where the male gaze has precedence over the female gaze — the underlying asymmetry of social and political power, between the sexes. This inequality, Pritchard and Morgan (2000: 886) argue, can be attributed to patriarchy, which has been defined as a social ideology embedded in the belief systems of a theocratic state and patriarchal societies. It is either masculine individuals or institutions created by these

individuals that exert power to determine what is considered “acceptable”. Mulvey (2009: 713-714) describes two central forms of gazing based on Freud’s concept of scopophilia, as: “pleasure that is linked to sexual attraction (voyeurism) and scopophilic pleasure that is linked to narcissistic identification (the introjection of ideal egos)”, in order to demonstrate how women have historically been forced to view film through the “male gaze”. It also suggests that the male gaze denies women their human identity, relegating them to the status of objects to be admired for physical appearance and male sexual desires and fantasies. Mulvey (2009: 711-712) discusses several types of spectatorship that may occur while viewing a film. They can involve unconsciously or, in some cases, consciously engaging in the typical, ascribed societal roles of men and women. Laura Mulvey’s premise of re/representing women has a direct bearing on the extant realities in Kannywood where the alpha-males in religious scholarship control the narrative, discourse, and representation to suit their contexts.

In relation to religious phallocentrism as proposed by Mulvey (1999: 387), the Hausa movie industry can be viewed in “three different looks”; the first refers to the camera as it records the actual events of the film, the second describes the characters within the representation, and the third refers to the characters that interact with one another throughout the film. The main idea that brings these actions together is that “looking” is generally seen as an active male role, while the passive role of being looked at is immediately adopted as a female characteristic. This is so because many of Kannywood’s film stories are built around women; the characters behind the camera, those who produce, direct and censor the movies are majorly males. Thus, it is under the patriarchal circumstance like this that Laura Mulvey (2009: 736) argues that women in film are tied to desire and that female characters hold an “appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact”. For Kannywood, unlike the other industries e.g. Nollywood, the female actor represents a character that directly affects the

outcome of a plot or keeps the storyline going. However, the woman is passive to the active gaze from the man, and this can be linked to scopophilia (or scoptophilia), which can be described as pleasure derived from looking. As an expression of sexuality, scopophilia refers to the sexual pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects: erotic photographs, pornography, naked bodies and so forth.

The three tools of analysis for understanding male gaze identified by Laura Mulvey exist in Kannywood. First, the line of production in Kannywood is mostly manned by the male gender; second, the description of females in terms of characterisation is determined by the male gender, and last, the issues around control are also manned by religiously conditioned scholar-critics. Thus, the female images seen on the screen are not as consecrated as the KSCB, MOPPAN, religious scholars and elites want the world to believe. Even though they are garbed with a veil or with fully covered attire, they culturally arouse sexual pleasures. This is evident in the kind of close-up shots directed on the covered bodily parts of the female characters. The camera does most of the work in directing the male gaze. This goes in line with McLuhan's (1994: 7) declaration that "the medium is the message", deliberately creating a symbolic relationship between the medium and the message, whereby the medium influences perception. For example, in most Kannywood movies, there are always interludes of musical demonstrations. In these musical displays, there are vixens who manipulate parts of their body to show attraction. Even though such video vixens are mostly "well-dressed", their movements invite the viewers to contemplate sex, or, make them an object of male desires.

In the description of the female characters within the representation, the attributes of female characters are accentuated with camera angles always in the spirit of capturing the genitals of video vixens. The breast, lip, hip, finger, eye, tongue are mostly

victims of close-up shots in many Kannywood productions. Furthermore, the *mise-en-scene* is also used to initiate gaze. There are also bodily gestures and acting that court sexual stimulation and receptivity. For example, the excessive biting of the lips of female characters, the enraptured gaze on the bosoms of female actors and the inordinate close shots of the mouth movements of female characters in dialogue is filmed for the gratification of the male gaze. The enjoyment of Kannywood productions is phallogentric in that what is filmed is a culturally informed representation to suit the male. The continuous recording, and representation of females in Kannywood has made it normal for women to accept the construct of gender. Dul (2004: 189) notes that

The controlling factor in the gaze is that of the camera, which in effect, means the director's. This is because it is in the shot ((of) or whatever definition it may be) that the meaning is created, and it is on the shot that the gaze is focused. Now, whereas the shot on its own can produce a meaning, its total communication value lies in its relationship with several other production sub-elements, inclusive of culture. Apart from our own comprehension limitations, these sub-elements are what account for the differences in the meaning we decode from our gaze. The shot includes elements such as lighting, colors (of costumes, etc), the props and property, and yes the costume itself — none of which should be found in a shot without reason.

What Dul explicitly means is that it is what the mind designs that the camera reproduces for the audience to gaze upon, and the design of the mind is a function of culture and environment, as well as one's general worldview. One's religion, of course, plays an important part in the creation of our worldview. Religion, Dul

argues, plays a critical role in Hausa video film composition. Dul (2004: 189) further asserts that

A film shot by a Muslim, within a Muslim environment cannot, willingly or otherwise, create a picture that overtly creates the male gaze... The director of the Hausa film now seems quite conscious of the demands of his society on him. If he lacked a guiding principle before or was merely being commercial, or just a copycat, the institution of Shari'a has now measured his bounds for him.

This statement cannot be said to be true considering the fact that the concept of gaze is fluid and culture-bound. Fixation on shy female characters or video vixens and close-upping on sensitive parts of their body as practiced by Kannywood directors and overlooked by the KSCB can be likened to objectification of the female gender. By the shyness of female characters, the Kannywood audience are tempted to think that shy female characters are chaste, beautiful, and virtuous, hence, they easily become the subject of desire by male viewers. This, more often, manifests in Kannywood's film narratives in that it is the shy bodily-covered or veiled females that are good in the eyes of other male characters while the expressive, free-spirited females are perceived as *karuwai* (prostitutes) or bad. For instance, in Adam A. Zango's *Basaja Gidan Yari*, the film character, Zainab (aka Zee), played by Hadiza Gabon is considered to be rascally because of her boldness and free-spiritedness. The same thing can be said of Safnat Safiyu (Sharifat Ibrahim Nagudu) in Alfazze Mohammed's *Hakkin Mata* (2016). Now, if what creates the gaze is the shot, then, we need to look briefly at how these directors use the shots and the mise-en-scene. To achieve this, this paper will contrapuntally read the gaze in Dul Johnson's case for *Alhern Allah* and *Basaja Gidan Yari*, the selected movies.

THE GAZE IN *ALHERIN ALLAH*

Auwal Abdullahi's *Alherin Allah* tells the story of Auwal and Khadija, two lovers with a desire to live together until their relationship goes sour. Khadija abandons Auwal for a new-found man. Auwal begins a search for someone to love. However, Khadija's new-found love does not work. Khadija announces her desires to return to Auwal. When Auwal eventually finds true love in Amina, the affection between Auwal and Khadija becomes cold. *Alheri Allah* is generally a case of lovers being strangers.

This film is a romance story. As Dul (2004: 190) notes, "it is the kind of film in which a director would want to create pictures that appeal to the sensual side of the viewer, particularly the male viewer". He notes that one can watch this film without feeling the smallest sense of arousal because there is little or no contact between the principal characters, Auwal and Khadija. Going further, he affirms that

When the lovers are together, the picture one gets is of two estranged people who may have a desire to be together, or to talk to one another. This is what happens when Auwal visits Khadija at her house. Within the culture, Auwal is not expected to go into the house, and so she brings a mat for him to sit on outside. She sits with him, each looking straight in his and her front. There is hardly any eye contact. In fact, there is uneasiness in the air all through the period they are together. (Dul, 2004: 190)

Dul Johnson's interpretation of this scene is limited. First, Auwal and Khadija are never estranged whenever they are together because the portrayal of their romance has to follow the patterns of culture in the immediate environment they find themselves in. In fact, that Khadija looks straight-faced subtly courts male gaze; that defines her as beautiful and virtuous in the eyes of her co-actor,

Auwal, the alpha males as well as Hausa Muslim viewers. That is the behavioural reaction that her society expects and demands of her before male suitors. The lack of eye contact, even more, makes Khadija a subject of male escapade. When Khadija playfully slaps Auwal on the cheek, the camera movement is short and fleeting. This scene suggests the crossing of the cultural boundary, something that may have made Khadija's gazers drop their sensual endearment to her.

The beautiful plait resting comfortably on Khadija's head is flaunted even if Dul Johnson will not agree to it. Khadija may not have openly or consciously opened her hair for male gazers to appreciate but the winds, camera shots and other elements of mise-en-scene make it a deliberate part of the story. Her struggling overtime to cover her hair as the gentle winds continue to blow contribute to her sexual attractiveness to male viewers. However, when the relationship between Auwal and Khadija begins to turn sour Khadija can be seen in her new boyfriend's car where physical contact between them is made. They hug as seen in the picnic scene. This scene turns the males off rather than it turning them on. This is because it is 'haram' for two unmarried people of opposite sex to hug. The intricacies of culture can be seen here. In the conventional sense, romantic scenes can turn the universal audience on but it is not so with the culturally sensitive makers and viewers of Kannywood. Romantic scenes in the Western sense are a complete turn off in the filmic representations in Kannywood. Thus, conceptualising male gaze to mean the mere fixation on the sexualised female body or stimulating display of parts of the female body is a wrong way of understanding the theory of gaze. Adam Zango's *Basaja Gidan Yari* also presents the ambivalence of gaze in Kannywood.

THE GAZE IN *BASAJA GIDAN YARI*

In Adam Zango's *Basaja Gidan Yari* the film critic is presented with another lens of understanding gaze in Kannywood. The movie tells

the story of Jabir, played by Adam Zango, who goes about tricking wealthy fraudsters. He recovers stolen wealth from them, which he returns to the rightful owners. Trouble begins when he falls in love with a daughter of a wealthy parent and subsequently dupes them. Unbeknownst to him, his love interest, Zee, played by Hadiza Gabon, whose father falls prey to Jabir's antics, is secretly working with the police to bring him to book. Jabir arranges his own arrest and he is sent to jail. His goal is to meet Hassan Dau, a certain prison inmate he desires to con. All through the film, Zee pries around trying to find out the reasons why Jabir pretends to be a prisoner to evade arrest. Unfortunately for Jabir, Zee is better prepared for the game. She is also determined to make sure that Jabir does not get away with his crime this time around as he has always done in the past. The clever and deceitful imprints of the characters, both male and female are rife in the movie. Things take a different turn for Jabir who plans to stay for a few days in the prison when Zee establishes a cordial relationship with the prison Commandant. The latter is a mean and strict officer who is also poised to ensure that Jabir gets a taste of his own medicine.

The film reaches a climax when Jabir, through his network of friends, gets hold of a mobile phone and begins communicating with his crew in the outside world. His dangerous ally, "Sardauna", arrives from Saudi Arabia, to assist Dauda (his master planner) in making sure that Jabir succeeds in his missions. Zee continuously sees through Jabir's tricks and blocks his plans on escape from prison. What ensues afterward is the arrival of Sardauna whose appearance further deepened the film's story.

The movie characters to be considered here are Zee and Kairat, two seemingly desperate and dangerous women that defy the religious codes of dressing for women of Hausa extraction. For the most part, Zee is flimsily dressed exposing her hair and could look into the eyes of her male assailants. Ordinarily, for Nollywood or non-Hausa Muslim viewers, she could become a subject to be gazed at

because of her smashing beauty, costumes, make-up, female embodiments as well as the mise-en-scene which aided her characterization, but it is not so because her dress-sense in the movie may be considered conservative in other Nigerian cultures; of course, to the angst of the Hausa Muslims. Again, one may also be tempted to think that for Hausa Muslims, her flippant behaviours, dressing, and gestures may arouse the committed Kannywood viewers but it is not so. In fact, her attitudes in *Basaja Gidan Yari* provoke the cultural sensibility of the tradition she represents thereby making her first-hand viewers to tag her as rascally, thus, an individual that cannot be gazed at. Zango, the movie director deliberately portrays her as an 'un-gazed at' because it serves the culture of his audience in that it is in their practice to view religiously irresponsible women or non-conformist as prostitutes. In spite of all her dashing beauty, she is portrayed in the movie text as impious and hence cannot be a subject of gaze. In Kannywood, the woman that exposes her body is not the person to be gazed at by males, it is the one who covers her body and conforms to the behavioural patterns instituted by religion. It is the pious one who unknowingly or subconsciously shows glimpses of her beauty through the circumstantial or occasional display of her femininity, hair, bossom and is caught on camera.

CONCLUSION

The concept of gaze can only be understood from the lens of the culture producing it. If gaze is not created from the viewpoint of the culture that produces the film, the viewing society can be said to be involved in the process of instituting a new culture for their society. Kannywood's productions have shown that film is not just a cultural element; it is also the creator of a new concept of understanding the gaze culture. The directors of Hausa films seem to be quite conscious of the demands of their society on them. Hence, they have remained committed to projecting women in ways that fit the desires of males or patriarchal construction of their gender. To sustain this construction, there is a heavy reliance on

the religious law, Shari'a, the knob of the Kano State Censors Board's policies. More so, there is also the *Hisbah*, a kind of religious police who arrests offenders on religious grounds. The enforcement of KSCB's regulatory laws makes it difficult for the Hausa movie industry to court universal appeal not to talk of having a robust financial power. Kannywood represents 32% of video productions in Nigeria yet, the industry does not have the same economic war chest that its counterparts in other regions have. At this stage of Kannywood's development, it should be competing with Nollywood in terms of its ability to attract significant investments, market and profits. To be an economic thriving industry, there is a need to break the monopoly or high-handedness of KSCB without of course infringing on the fundamental aspects of Islam. Like the ubiquitous emergence of Nollywood in Enugu, Asaba, Benin and other cities producing films in English, cities in Northern Nigeria should take the initiative by producing moderate film contents which both appeal to Islam and secularity. This way, the stronghold of KSCB and religious savvy resident in Kano can be reduced.

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