

THE SELF-SACRIFICING IMAGE AS A GENRE IN NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS.

BY

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Abstract

Creativity in the real sense of it projects new or already existing issues differently which may engender questions and sometimes proffer solutions. Thus, women's representation as victims of self-sacrifice in films could be termed a product of artistic creation extracted from socially constructed roles for the female folk. It is against this background that the theme of self-sacrificing image as a genre in films has been examined to know its source or origin and its relation to women's representation in the Nigerian video film industry. Furthermore, this work is set to highlight its emergence through the analyses of some Nollywood films that have presented women as victim of this kind of creative representation. The main focus is on the pains, marginalization and subjugation of women as occasioned by instituted patriarchal structures in our society. Selected films that have been examined under this theme are: Living in Bondage I & II (Vic Mordi & Christian onu, 1992), Mother's Cry (Zack Orji, 2002), Living Dead (Ekenna U. Igwe, 2004), and Yesterday (Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 1998)

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Introduction

A genre could be referred to as a type or style of film that is

peculiar, which can be easily identified or recognized because of its unique pattern or special feature. More so, films dealing with the same topic or theme make up a genre. Such films draw their stories from issues or events that occur in a society and they eventually gain a much wider audience acceptance. Their success and strength as a movie cycle, according to Richard Griffith "lay in the fact that the story was really there, and that the audience knew it" (Griffith, 1976, p.117). Due to the influx of theme films as a result of their wide acceptance, the cycle has developed into a permanent genre, and today we can refer to films with the theme of self-sacrificing image as a genre in Nigerian video films. This is true of the fact that "a story 'theme' becomes popular enough with general audiences to warrant a cycle of films to be built around it" (Griffith, 1976, p.113).

To complement Griffith's assertion, Bill Nichols stated that Andrew Tudor sees genre as a cultural consensus and that 'genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (Nichols, 1976, p.118). However, Tudor, in his article "Genre and Critical Methodology," argues that for the term genre to be used in representing a group of cycle or films, it means such films share some indefinable attributes with other films. According to him, such films draw on a set of conventions which means that they have in common certain themes, certain typical actions and certain characteristic mannerisms (Tudor, 1976, p.120). This is true of films with the theme of self-sacrificing image which have certain attributes or conventions that are common to them.

Established conventions which constitute the self-

sacrificing image as a genre in Nigerian video films include: women majoring as bread winners of the home which gets to its peak when they become widowed; mothers doing odd jobs and going through unimaginable toils just to cater for their children; widows being falsely accused of witchcraft and prostitution and as killers of their husbands; mothers being rejected by their own children whom they have toiled for and have experienced self-denial and sacrifice; mothers being referred to as nagging women especially when they insist that their husbands utilize their incomes judiciously for the welfare of the home; women being treated as worthless beings by their husbands and the society, and their husbands properties are confiscated as they become widows; and other conventions or characteristics that make them a cycle of films. Films with the above mentioned conventions that will be discussed include: *Living Dead*, *Yesterday*, *Living in Bondage* and *Mother's Cry*.

Conversely, Tudor emphasizes that a genre has to be recognized in a particular culture which the film represents, and not just the attributes alone; that means, genre is culture-based. He explains that "the crucial factors which distinguished a genre are not only characteristics inherent to the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture which we are operating" (Tudor, 1976, p.122). The cultural practices women are subjected to are a reflection of the African culture, where patriarchy prevails and that is why such films are produced and are automatically accepted by a wide viewership.

The Nigerian society has seen the woman as a burden bearer and a sacrificer who takes up the responsibility of

building her home because "a wise woman builds her home" no matter the torture or toil she experiences. This widely accepted notion of associating the woman with suffering and marginalization is very prevalent in Nigerian video films that fall within the genre of self-sacrificing image. This shows that this genre is about films which seek to reveal the negative roles of women in the society. Thus, Tudor succinctly states that genre is a

conception existing in the culture of any particular group or society; it is not a way in which a critic classifies films for methodological purposes, but the much looser way in which an audience classifies its films (Tudor, 1976, p.123).

The Emergence of the Self-Sacrificing Image

Since the emergence of the Nigerian video film industry in 1992, the theme of self-sacrifice whereby the female folk is subjected to untold hardship and unimaginable painful and horrible ordeals has been prevalent in the films produced. This theme of self-sacrifice has since become a genre in the Nigerian video film industry. However, it is pertinent to emphasize that a genre is established when a particular theme, storyline or subject matter reoccurs in the films. The stories that are told may present a group of people or a person, a situation or phenomenon or even a culture in a particular way that makes it peculiar. These archetypal characters or events become regular occurrences which become established with the passage of time. Whether such portrayal is deliberate or not, it becomes a pattern or mode of representation. In the Nigerian video film industry, this representation of self-sacrificing

image has become a genre, just like other genre oriented films. Nigerian video films which portray women in this light will be discussed briefly to lay the foundation for this discourse.

At the emergence of the Nigerian video film industry, genre oriented films which bore the themes of rituals, epics, vigilante, etc. emerged. In the same manner, the theme of self-sacrifice was embedded in all of them, and presented in different forms, which gradually became prominent as the industry developed. With the passage of time, self-sacrifice was given wide projection in films as central theme which has given it the status of a genre. According to Shaka, "a genre season sometimes attracts over a hundred films and producing anything outside the reigning genre can bring about financial disaster" (Shaka, 2002, p.18). This means that a class of film must contain a good number or cycle of films to be identified as a genre. In another instance, Shaka remarks that, for genre to exist, there must be the deliberate application of the method of parodying, which is an act of imitation from a distance. He remarks that such imitation is either intended to accept the notion or critique or downplay on the film. Conversely, Helen Chukwuma, however gives a glimpse of women's representation as self-sacrificers in creative writing when she succinctly remarks that:

In literature, we talk about the self-sacrificing mother image. She toils, she suffers, and the only gain she has is the hope that, "these children will grow up to be somebody, someday." But when they're somebody, they either forget her or she's too old to even benefit from the fruit of her labour (Koroye & Ifeancha, 2003, p.15).

It is apparent that the representation of women in Nigerian video films is drawn from literary work. This agrees with McLuhan's (1996) dictum that the structure of one medium becomes the content of the medium that follows it. He believes that movie have drawn very heavily on literary works as source material - more specifically, on the novel's narrative fiction approach, and on stage plays, novellas, short stories, and nonfiction to a lesser extent (as cited in Jowett & Linton, 1989 p.19). One of such is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1985) which was adapted into the film medium. This video form of *Things Fall Apart* also helped in heralding and popularizing the Nigerian video film industry.

Femi Shaka succinctly traces the source of the recurring themes of woman's marginalization, subjugation and self-sacrifice in Nollywood films in the course of an interview with Nwagbo Nnenyelike, in the *Daily Sun* (2004, May 21) with the caption "Nollywood' ll capture Africa". Shaka asserts that the Nigerian video film industry, which has been appropriately named "Nollywood" is vibrant and healthy, being the third largest in the world outside Hollywood (USA) and Bollywood (India). And that, so many people who do not know how these recurring themes come about as well as the manner in which the film industry functions assume that "producers come together and decide on a particular story or thematic slant." He makes the situation clearer by stating that:

It is an industry that is functioning on the rule of market demand. If a particular story is released into the market this week and it is selling, other producers would order their script writers to do a

similar story. Then a director is hired to shoot it. That is why you see that almost the same genre of story is released into the market. So the market determines what to produce. It is the same in Hollywood. Filmmakers are out to make money (Nnonyelike, 2004 p.19).

What more can we say if it is the market that determines what should be produced. The probing question will now be: "what category of persons constitute the market audience?" (i.e the buyers). The onus therefore lies on the film producers, directors as well as scriptwriters, in the Nigerian video film industry to project the image and strength of the Nigerian woman, as well as our values and believes in a positive light. This is in line with Chikelu's mind-bugging charge to the independent producers when he says:

There must be heightened consciousness of your influence and your duty. However, can your work contribute in encouraging positive values? Does your production reward good and punish evil? Does it emphasize the value of education, the reward of hard work? Does your production support our traditional value system? Does it showcase all that is good about our very rich cultural heritage? Is there anything good in Nigeria? Do any of those good things ever gain prominence in your production? (Garba, 2003, p.66).

Nigerian Video Films with Self-Sacrificing Image

The genre "self-sacrificing image" has been given prominence since the inception of the Nigerian video film industry. Its

emergence is traceable to Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage I & II* (Vic Mordi & Christian Onu, 1992), and its wide patronage led to a production of similar films which have now established it as a genre. The self-sacrificing image as a genre in Nigerian video films will be looked at in some video films that have so far projected or portrayed the female folk in such light.

In *Living in Bondage* (1992), Merit (Nnenna Nwabueze) becomes the victim of ritual sacrifice by her husband, Andy Okeke, (Kenneth Okonkwo) due to his love for quick wealth. Just like the way all African women try to raise their husbands financial status in order to boost their ego, Merit who hails from a rich family assists her husband, Andy, with the sum of N20,000.00 which she received from her parents. Unfortunately, Andy invests the money on a shady deal with fraudsters.

True to the archetypal character of the self-sacrificing image, Merit, having denied herself the pleasure of enjoying her money, diverted it into supporting her husband's financial state. She is ritually sacrificed by her husband whose love for money would not let him value the woman who has gone through the ordeals of his financial stagnation. Merit whose blood was sucked for ritual exercise, after being drugged, later becomes sick and finally dies. Her husband did not bother about her commitment to their marriage vow neither did he appreciate her attempts to help uplift his financial status in a decent way (without involving in any dubious means of acquiring quick wealth). Ironically, her life is sacrificed and Andy becomes wealthy within a short while. The wealth of

Andy which he valued more at the expense of Merit's life shows the extent of the lack of value for a woman's life and the height of sexism. In this light, Shaka, in his article "History, Genres & Texts of the Emergent Video Film Industry in Nigeria" analyzes *Living in Bondage* by stating that the female characters in the film have been constructed as objects of male spectacle and sexual pleasure, and that they are not independent:

Of the lot, of course, Merit is made the sacrificial lamb, so that Andy Okeke can achieve male success, which is equated in this film with acquisition of expensive automobiles, palatial homes and women. When women are not confined to their domestic space as meek wives, as in the case of Merit, they are represented as expendable commodities like Tina the prostitute who can be picked off the street at night by men and used for whatever they like, including ritual sacrifice. (Shaka, 2002. p.27).

Looking at the self-sacrificing image in a different light brings us to the video film *Mother's Cry* (Zack Orji, 2002). The representation of women as victims of ritual sacrifices, with the passage of time, has graduated to their being represented as struggling, toiling, burden bearers, who eventually may or may not enjoy the fruits of their labour in their marital relationship. This is the case with *Mother's Cry* where Chief Okonkwo (Larry Kold Sweat) calls his wife whom he has been married to for 25 years a harlot, simply because he has entangled himself in an affair with a young lady, Ijeoma. Chief's wife, Akudiya (Winnifred) cries out to her husband by saying, "after twenty-five years of marriage, you suddenly

realize I am lazy and a harlot." Ijeoma (Ngozi Orji) who is now Chief's mistress and a friend to Chief's daughter, Adaku (Victoria Ihama) tells chief that Adaku is suspicious of him having an affair hence his unhealthy attitude towards his wife. In response, Chief asks her: "what do you want me to do? You want her friendship or you want my love?" Chief's conclusion is that he is going to send his wife away.

Chief tells his son, Makwo, to warn his mother who has suddenly turned evil to change her ways. He notes that but for his spiritual sense, she would have killed him long ago. Six months later, Chief introduces Ijeoma to his family saying "this is my new wife," and that she will take over from their mother. A woman who has toiled with him these past twenty-five years now has to sacrifice the gains of her sweat for a stranger. Chief orders Akudiya: "you have three hours to leave this house." Akudiya and her two children: Adaku and Makwo leave the house to chief. They go to leave with her brother Oke, (Zack Orji) who later encourages them to fight for a portion of their father's property. Eventually, Makwo forcefully takes the guests' house from their father and they started living in it. Akudiya's only source of income is her brother, Oke. As the film progresses, Makwo steals Ijeoma's heart from his father and he decides marrying her without his parent's consent. He gets twelve million naira cheque from Ijeoma (all the savings she got from Makwo's father) and they get married.

The pains of being denied the fruit of her labour, after her input into her matrimonial home for twenty-five years makes Akudiya to fall sick. Meanwhile, Chief has started realizing his

mistakes. He uses Akudiya's illness as an excuse to reconcile with her and begs for forgiveness. He asks her to return to his house but Akudiya's brother, who has been fending for them, will not release her. He retorts: "my sister whom you called a harlot?"; "my sister you disgraced like a bag?" Akudiya, on the other hand, tells her brother: "please Oke, help me talk to everybody. Okonkwo is my husband and I know his weaknesses. Help me talk to everybody to forgive him." Typical of an archetypal character, as self-sacrificer, Akudiya did not count her husband's sin against him. She sees all her rejection and pain as part of her sacrifices, being a helpless woman in a patriarchal society where the woman is assumed to bear the burden and lay down her life and pleasures for the happiness of the man and peace of the home. Although Akudiya gets a new car as a birthday present from her husband, yet it cannot wipe away the agonies, pains abandonment and heart-break she suffers.

The self-sacrificing image as a genre in Nigerian video films has been presented in a more bizarre form by subjecting a widow to harmful widowhood practices at the death of her husband. This self-sacrificing image which has been represented in various forms has never presented the woman as innocent, as a happy being or as a person who deserves to enjoy the fruits of labour. In the films, *Living Dead* (Ekenna U. Igwe, 2004), and *Yesterday* (Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 1998), the image has been projected in such a way that womanhood seem more like a burden and a regrettable state to the human race. In both films, the wives are victims of a barbaric culture whereby at the death of their husbands they are subjected to

harmful practices such as washing the corpses for them to drink and accusing them of killing their husbands. In *Living Dead*, Chris (Kanayo O. Kanayo) drinks and sometimes falls by the roadside while his wife, Patricia (Edith Azu) goes to work and tries her best to pay the house rent and caters for the family. Patricia suddenly becomes the bread-winner of the home as Chris loses his job.

In spite of her sacrifices, her in-laws, especially Adaobi (Franca Brown) would not let her have peace because she (Patricia) is not yet pregnant. Adaobi calls her a witch and a diabolic woman who has subjected her brother to a house-man while she (Patricia) works so as to assume authority in the home. Patricia finally becomes pregnant but cries for the absence of her husband who is assumed to have been brutally murdered by ritualists, having stayed late in the night drunk. Adaobi and other family members shave Patricia's hair, wash the corpse for her to drink and make her to swear of her innocence (not having a hand) in her husband's death. Patricia could not fathom the reason for her misery. The village women beat her up, tear off her clothes as they say to each other "let us teach her our tradition and custom," but her mother-in-law confronts Adaobi and her team for this wicked act. Adaobi replies: "mama, she has killed your son, my own brother. If you will allow it, me, Adaobi, will not allow it."

The shame and pain Patricia goes through in the village makes her to tell her friends: "I came ready to face them, ready to face the humiliation." She adds that "I want to prove to them that I didn't use him for rituals." Patricia also says, "I know they want nothing short of disgrace and death for me." She is

called a witch and her penalty is that she be stoned to death. According to one of the women in the "Umuada" group who are responsible for all the calamities meted on Patricia, "Patricia is only going through our traditional burial rite."

As the villagers stone her, Chris appears with a group of policemen explaining that he was detained for drinking and has been mistaken for the dead man. Realizing it was a mistaken identity, Patricia asks Adaobi "I hope you have satisfied yourself. I also hope that you are satisfied that I'm neither a witch nor I killed your brother for ritual." Despite a proposal for marriage made to Patricia by her former male friend, and the attempt by Alex (Patricia's brother) to make her forget about her wayward husband, the self-sacrificing spirit in her (Patricia) would not let her forsake her husband. She explains to Alex that Chris was a good man and that he only started drinking when he lost his job, and that "why shouldn't I help pick him up now that he is down?," "besides, my child should have a father," this is because she is now three months pregnant.

No man can be tolerant enough to accept a wayward wife but a woman is characterized by suffering, toiling, and pains, and she is compelled to stick to her marriage vows especially when a child is involved in the relationship. Despite her painful ordeals, Patricia decides to go through more sacrifices of her image in order for her unborn child to have a father. In the case of Elo (Liz Benson) in *Yesterday*, her sacrifices include: the starvation she experienced, the attempted rape by her late husband's elder brother, and her son that is taken from her during her forceful confinement. To worsen her trauma,

the bath water from her husband's corpse is given to her to drink (which she refuses to drink), and the house built by her husband is confiscated by her husband's elder brother, Matthew (Ejike Asiegbu). Her painful experiences are nothing compared to her love for her late husband and the future of her little baby. She decides to bear them all and prepares to bring up her son, her only hope for the future, as the source of her joy.

The self-sacrificing image is characterized by sorrowful and painful experiences of self-denial, and of pity, whereby the woman endures pain, even unto death at the expense of her children's survival and success in life. A woman loses her identity and self-worth just for her children's future and welfare. The portrayal of the female folk in this light, has never given a positive image of womanhood, which is often associated with bitterness, anger, sorrow, regrets and sometimes death. These experiences which could be termed, in Elo's words, in *Yesterday*, as "wicked", "crude" and "inhuman" show that the battle against gender inequality must continue to rage until there is a change in favour of the female folk. In Elo's words:

This is not a question of feminism, no. It is a question of cleansing society; A question of getting rid of those obnoxious and barbaric practices to debase womanhood and mankind.

Women seem to be helpless in this battle because these practices are embedded in our custom and tradition thus, the question is "of what essence are these practices?" Even if such practices are customary, we are all aware that culture is dynamic therefore, there must be a change because according

to Elo: "I'm sure no gentleman here would allow his wife, mother, sister to be dehumanized and traumatized."

Summary and Conclusion

It is however obvious that the films produced under the genre "the self-sacrificing image" are so numerous that even after the season of the influx of this genre, subsequent films produced still project the self-sacrificing image either as a major theme or sub-theme. This representation has not been given favourable consideration by both scripts/screenwriters and film producers, in the way females are portrayed in their films. The portrayal of the self-sacrificing image, as a genre is summarized by Shaka in the following words:

Most of the video films revolve around family melodramas in which female familial desires and pleasures are rendered as unattainable aspirations either as a result of the patriarchal structures of the society, the demands and institutional practices of modernity as played out in urban Nigeria, the constant push and pull of traditional African institutional practices in relation to those of modernity or intra-female gender squabbles. Thus in both domestic and public spheres, gender inequalities are constantly rehashed and played out without much room given to creative political projects of the sort that help liberate female gender (Shaka, 2002, p.27).

This representation of the self-sacrificing mother image as a genre in Nollywood film medium, like other media is summed up painfully by Ama Ata Aidoo in her article titled "The African Woman Today" when she observes that:

But there is no doubt that, ever since, the image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western Photojournalism that the Africa woman is old beyond her years. She is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand (Aidoo, 1998, p.39).

Having exhaustively examined the self-sacrificing image as a genre, it is pertinent however, at this juncture, to conclude that motherhood is characterized by anxiety, suffering and sacrifice and sometimes death, and the repetition or frequent representation of women in this manner through the powerful influence of the media gives them a permanent identity as sufferers. This aligns with Martin Joly's submission that:

But the memory of an image will also be the more forcible the more the visual message has been repeated: repetition and reutilization can also make up for the impossibility of contemplating the animated, sequential image, whether we are speaking of an image in the cinema or, even more particularly, in the media (Joly, 1996, p.48).

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