

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)

Ethiopia

Vol. 7 (1), S/No 24, JANUARY, 2018: 98-107

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v7i1.10>

Deconstruction of Conservative Cinematic Narratives on Women's Identity: An Urging Necessity

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Abstract

Feminist film theory, with its focus on the representation of women in cinema, sets the stage for feminist film critics to address the distortions on women's identity in cinema. Little wonder that discourses in feminist film criticism attempt to suggest ways of deconstructing the distortions which are assumed to have resulted from the manipulative influence of male filmmakers. Their efforts in drawing the attention of film scholars to the perpetuation of the negative profiling of the woman's image in cinema result from the notion that early filmmakers were males who anchored their narratives on a male's world view. Therefore, to present an objective perspective, there is urging need for a re-definition of women's roles in cinema. Consequently, they surmised that the lopsided representation of women in cinema by males requires a deconstruction of this trend that undermines the best side of the other sex so as to accommodate a woman-centred ideology: this is in order to harness women's experiences. This work therefore, encourages the **less-favoured sex** to take up the fight with more determination to re-write history and change the ordering of regular but infamous dictates of culture and gender themes in film narratives. To this end, the "theory of deconstruction" will serve as the frame work for this study.

Key Words: Cinema, feminist film criticism, women filmmakers, manipulation, Stereotype, deconstruction

Introduction

Stereotypes and roles exclusiveness (in favour of the male gender) have been the clog in the spool of cinematography and movies. This also excludes variety and limits the audience and patronisers from the mixed thrills they ought to gain as a result of interchanging roles which could have left them with better sense of judgment and value for their investment in time and money.

Women have always been presented as objects of sacrifice, to appease men and to attend to their insatiable gusto. Perhaps, if women were marginalized, subdued, stereotyped and eliminated through the manner in which they are represented in most men's films, it would serve as catharsis or purgation for the furies of the males who do not see woman as the equal sex, but rather as competitor who should not be given a level-playing opportunity. This is at best a utopian submission because feminist film critics will never give up on their fight for proper and positive representation of women by filmmakers. Therefore, patriarchal cultural overtures and male chauvinism will continue to receive due whipping so long as feminism thrives and remains on course.

With the notion that film, just like theatre, is a strategic platform or medium for entertainment, disseminating of information, as well as for education, it is equally important that the messages and images projected reflect the true identities of women. Johnston (1976) however, making reference to Panofsky's observations, argues that the source of women stereotype is traceable to early cinema where man's image underwent rapid differentiation but that "the primitive stereotyping of women remained with some modifications." She observes that writing on women's stereotype in the media usually starts with "a monolithic view of the media as repressive and manipulative" and this has indeed made Hollywood to be seen "as a dream factory producing an oppressive cultural product" (Johnston, 1976, p. 209). This goes to show that women's stereotype as objects of male gaze, sex objects, sacrificers, etc. in cinema is purely a conscious manipulation that is strategically engrafted into cinematic narratives of male filmmakers to disparage women. The origin of this manipulation is farfetched thus:

Iconography as a specific kind of sign or cluster of signs based on certain conventions within the Hollywood genres has been partly responsible for the stereotyping of women within the commercial cinema in general, but the fact that there is a far greater differentiation of men's roles than of women's roles in the history of the cinema relates to sexist ideology itself, and the basic opposition which places man inside history, and woman as a historic and eternal. As the cinema developed, the stereotyping of man was increasingly interpreted as contravening the realization of the notion of 'character'; in the case of women, this was not the case; the dominant ideology presented her as eternal and unchanging, except for modifications in terms of fashion etc (Johnston, 1976, p. 209-210).

It is obvious that the Nigeria video film industry (Nollywood) only treaded along the path of its ancestors, hence the recurring decimal of women stereotypes in the manner as reflected in our films today. One may be tempted to ask the question: why does patriarchal culture disparage women? What harm will there be if women's strength are portrayed? Is there any justifiable basis for the distorted representations of women in cinema? Well, thanks to the challenges posed by feminist film critics who have traced the origin as well as questioned this "mis" representation, and have also taken further steps to launder the woman's image and deconstruct the "eternal and unchanging" image of women in cinema. Despite the fact that women have been projected, although in a very minimal way, as leaders and people who can effect positive changes in society, they are termed to be too ambitious and eventually humiliated and disparaged for trying to "lobby" for men's positions.

Gender Stereotype

The impact of gender stereotyping is said to affect women negatively, thus "in most instances gender stereotyping disadvantages women economically and socially, blocking them from a range of opportunities including access to more skilled and high paying forms of

employment” (Phalane, 2004, p. 161). This form of representation has been consistently presented, thus “woman as the bearer of continuity, the pierce-together, is a figure first of all in the men’s stories” (Sage, 1992, p. 178). This view is not different from Mulvey’s observation of the woman’s identity in films as object of male visual pleasure who is “displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look” (Mulvey, 1985, p. 311).

In her critical analysis of the films, *Cries and Whispers*, Constance Penley (1976) asserted that woman has been characterized in the same image throughout the history of films that have been produced; and that woman has been seen in diverse negative forms as “victim, temptress, evil incarnate, and earth mother” (Penley, 1976, p. 206). This representation of women’s image in cinema has been blamed on male directors, writers and artists who are guilty of this “emotional, physical, and intellectual crippling of women” (Penley, 1976, p. 207).

Women’s pernicious and perennial misrepresentation is often exaggerated in Nigerian video films to give it African uniqueness in form of witchcraft, ritual sacrifice, voodooism/spiritualism, self-sacrifice, etc. In a more succinct manner, Nnaemeka, (1998), posits that “the negative image of the African woman is purely created and promoted by the Western media, and sadly enough, has been internalized, reproduced, and disseminated by Africans themselves” (as cited in Okerri, 2006, p.82). This aligns with the understanding that the images of women in cinema are simply created and manipulated because “there is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming or broadcasting” (Johnston, 1976, p. 213). Johnston has drawn our attention to a very dynamic and strategic approach proposed by Hans Magnus Enzensberger which women filmmakers could adopt to salvage women’s image in cinema, thus: “the question is therefore not whether the media are manipulated, but who manipulates them. A revolutionary plan should not require the manipulators to disappear; on the contrary, it must make everyone a manipulator” (as cited in Okerri, 2006, p. 44). This proposal sets the motion for women filmmakers to “manipulate” as their male counterpart, by exploiting their creative ingenuity in redefining women’s roles in cinema and deconstructing the mundane stereotypes often seen in male-centric and male-dominated narratives. It is therefore very important for the filmmakers not to stop at denouncing, but to go on to deconstruct the matrix of the social institutions that have suppressed the woman’s image as a result of her gender.

Siew Hwa Beh, in her critical analysis of the film, *Vivre Sa Vie*, observed that the film uses prostitution as a metaphor for the study of woman, thus “every woman is directly or indirectly a prostitute” (Beh, 1976, p.180). Beh decried the stereotypes of “the woman as the excuse and victim of male action,” and “a woman leading a victorious army is a witch and a disciple of the devil,” thus summarized that all we see in films is “the tragedy of being a woman,” therefore the woman should be salvaged from her “eternal dilemma in a world that is defined by men, money, sex without love, and violence” (Beh, 1976, p.185).

In a different approach, Karyn Kay, in her work, *Sisters of the Night*, gave insight into “how our view of film history has been prearranged by film histories...” In her analysis of the film, *Marked Woman* (1937), she lays “special emphasis on the female characterizations as revealed by dialogue and action to show how the film rejects the customary myths about prostitution and criminal reform” (Nichol, 1976, p. 186).

Kay (1976) observed that, although the film had the disclaimer of “bearing no resemblance to any person or persons living or dead,” it shows the courage and power of women and it “defies every stereotype and every expectation common to the usually invisible melodramatic theatrics of the topical, expose drama.” She observed that the women in the film were not

portrayed as stereotypes of good-bad girls neither were they heroine, and they were not redeemed through love, romance nor did the film end in the “sacrifice-through-death” which ends most films on prostitution, but rather, “the genuineness of the ending” and the believable and due manner with which the characters acted made it striking and appreciated (Kay, 1976, pp. 186-187). Nevertheless, Kay decried the dilemma of the woman who always falls victim of the law in cases of prostitution where only the women are harassed and punished, while the male counterpart, even when found guilty under the law, are seldom convicted. Emma Goldman (as cited in Okerri, 2006, p.42) once posited that as for the woman, “...society creates the victims that it afterwards vainly attempts to get rid of.” The women, after all, no matter the nobility or bravery of their acts, are still outlaws from the community of people.

Thonborrow (1996, p. 209) decried the manner with which women are represented in the media where they “are given conflicting messages about who they are and what sort of behaviour is expected of them”. According to her, whatever material a woman reads, whether literature or entertainment, the text addresses her in a particular way which inadvertently makes her a particular kind of reader, and that the text also gives a specific social role and also positions the woman in a specific relationship with the world, just the way it has been represented by the text. Thus the woman is a consumer of art and media texts. She continues:

We could examine the role of women as producers of art and literature, or of women as ‘consumers’ of art and of media texts: as readers of books, as buyers, watchers, and users of television and radio, of videos. We could also look at how women are actually represented in paintings, in literature, in films, on the television screen and in advertisements (Thonborrow, 1996, p. 207).

It is disheartening to note that screen writers and directors use the media as a tool to manipulate the woman’s image as a show of their creative prowess without considering the impact such attempt may have on the identity they have constructed for her. Therefore, a reconstruction of a new narrative is required to showcase the strength and abilities of the emerging new woman. This measure has become necessary, because the messages women receive from the film, television, advertisements and the print media put undue pressure on them as they either strive to attain an unrealistic identity or goal, or they struggle in futility as they attempt to embrace a strange personality already carved out for them. This socially constructed identity becomes the bane of women’s assertiveness resulting to identity crises and struggles in finding oneself. These kinds of contradictions on a woman’s true identity constantly puts her under pressure in search of an acceptable identity that is agreeable with that projected by the manipulators therefore: “the kind of discourses assessed to women often present ideal image of what we should look like, and then make us worried because we do not shape up to that ideal” (Thonborrow, 1996, p. 210).

It is indeed very challenging the way the media use representations of women to sell products in advertisement, coupled with the discourses that accompany these images. Thonborrow cited an example of a car and price tattooed on a lady’s arm and wonders the relationship between a car and a woman’s body, thus remarks that “the discourse of car advertisements in general makes an interesting study into media representations of women, as they are often constructed around stereotypical background assumptions concerning the relationship between men, women, money and control” (Thonborrow, 1996, p. 212). The worrisome relationship between a car and a woman’s image in the media adverts published in the *Guardian* (11 June 1993) for a Rover Metro car prompted the evaluation below:

...so the link between the woman and the car is created by the use of particular... features: women, like cars, are ‘noticed’ and ‘looked over’ (i.e. they are the focus of

the male gaze); they can 'attract the wrong kind of attention' (i.e. sexual interest); and they can also be 'stolen' by rivals (there is a central-locking and anti-theft alarm); they can be bought (there is a price on the woman's body). So this advert hinges on an...metrical, heterosexual relationship of property and ownership, through the implication that men can 'possess' this car in the same way that they can possess a woman... (Thonborrow, 1996, p. 212).

Perhaps it goes without gainsaying to submit that the content of what is presented in the media is influenced by the perennial *status quo* existing in our patriarchal societies. Thus, the consumer is entertained with products, film, advert or any form of art that has been determined by culture hence women stereotypes in films have become the norm of the day.

On the contrary, Hauwa Sani Dangogo, in her article, "Women in Electronic Media" is optimistic that women's exploitation is to their advantage:

To my mind, our subjugation in the media is demonstrated by our having to be assigned to perform tasks thought to be exclusively for women rather than being allowed to follow the dictates of our consciences. We, depending on the area we are assigned, we work the same hours as our menfolk and get our entitlements if and when due (Dangogo, 1985, p. 210).

If it is true that in media houses, and in work places, men don't usurp and arrogate authority to themselves, but allow the women to have a fair share, then feminists have achieved a mile stone in this gender struggle. Talking about the Nigerian society, Madunagu's claims that "there are women in our society who occupy senior posts in economic, social and political institutions, government and para-government departments, and enjoy comparable privileges as their male counterparts" (Madunagu, 1985, p. 135). This assertion is endorsed by Eko and Emenyi (2002) that "the African women is not a new comer to the world of power as the gender inclusive nature of political institutions in some part of pre-colonial Africa shows" but that these women, who are models of power "used their positions of power to maintain social cohesion because power to them mean service to humanity not crass materialism" (Eko & Emenyi, 2002, p. 176).

In sum, negative or improper representation in the media is absolutely misleading and does not portray the true virtues, character and identity of women, irrespective of their race and geographical location. This may be subsumed in the submission that "the cinema has been described more than once as the realization of an ancient dream, or nightmare, depending on your point of view" (Mayne, 1990, p.16).

Theory of Deconstruction

To my mind, deconstruction has to do with a lot of experimentation, and deliberate reconstruction of new ideas or conceivable identities that align with reality. From a critical perspective, deconstruction is used to judge existing modes of narration and representation that do not portray the true identity, image, strength and role of women in society as reflected either in literature, art, media or cinema.

The term "deconstruction" which has Jacques Derrida as its chief proponent in the later part of the 1960s in France "denotes a particular kind of practice in reading and, thereby, a method of criticism and mode of analytical inquiry" (Presidential Lectures). Making reference to, Barbara Johnson's 1981 book titled *The Critical Difference*, the term was explained thus:

Deconstruction is not synonymous with "destruction", however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically

means "to undo" -- a virtual synonym for "to de-construct." ... If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself (Presidential Lectures).

In a more comprehensive manner, Catherine Turner (2016) makes clarification on deconstruction as she explains:

The idea of deconstruction is therefore concerned with countering the idea of a transcendental origin or natural referent. It refutes the notion that it is possible to transgress the institution in order to discover something beyond — the existence of an independent origin. This idea is famously encapsulated in the phrase ‘There is nothing outside of the text’, which is often used to summarise Derrida’s work. For Derrida the origin does not exist independently of its institution, but exists only ‘through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences...’ In his own words, Derrida terms this phenomenon ‘*différance*’, and it is this idea that forms the basis of deconstruction. *Différance* refers to the fact that meaning cannot be regarded as fixed or static, but is constantly evolving. It arises from the constant process of negotiation between competing concepts. Rather than pursuing the truth of a natural origin, what deconstruction requires is the interrogation of these competing interpretations that combine to produce meaning.

Having juxtaposed the various definitions of deconstruction, the attention of this work is to throw light on the need to “undo” the distortions that cinematic construction of the woman’s image in male narratives have done to the female gender and to re-direct the attention of female filmmakers to the efforts feminists film critics have made towards redeeming and re-defining women’s roles in cinema which feminist filmmakers must embrace and adopt in creating new identities for the emerging new woman.

Deconstruction of Conservative Cinematic Narratives to Highlight Virtues of Women

The general observation of feminist film critics on the manipulation of the woman’s image in cinema has resulted to the need for a redress to accentuate women’s experiences and women’s point of view in filming. As Ogunleye rightly observed:

the stories of women are not told from a woman’s point of view. Rather, what we see on screen are not women, but figments of the imagination of men—women as men perceive them, or as men would rather have them be—pure male construct (Ogunleye, 2005, p. 131).

It is obvious that women’s stereotypes on screen are tailored to the expectations and desires of male filmmakers. The notion that women’s works (writing, filming/producing/directing) should reflect woman-centred ideologies aligns with the notion that female writers “recognize the need for the liberation of women from the forces of socio-economic and political marginalization” (Evwierhoma, 2002, p.10). In her appraisal of the achievements of Nigerian female writers (despite their few numbers) towards actualizing women-centred ideologies, she writes:

Through their texts, female dignity, femininity, female protestation and feminine aesthetics are upheld. At the crux of all this is a development of freedom for females, settling the problem of ‘absence’ of women in important spheres, and correcting the notion of nothingness and being as they affect women” (Evwierhoma, 2002, p.11).

Perhaps, this is the most realistic form of deconstruction required of women where the social-cultural structures will not be destroyed but re-constructed to a new and reformed identity acceptable to women. The implication is that, if the cinematic construction of the woman's identity is manipulated by male filmmakers, then the process of deconstructing the roles allotted to them must start with a deliberate effort by women filmmakers through the process of manipulation. Therefore, one may inadvertently surmise that the act of manipulation is largely related to deconstruction.

Deconstruction of socially constructed or constituted ideologies must be taken seriously by women filmmakers so as to lay to rest the traditional approach to film narration where women are peeped at through a keyhole or where they are taken as sacrificial objects, or sexual objects, or any form of representation that debases the woman's true identity. Feminist filmmakers (script screen writers, directors and producers), are faced with the challenge to eradicate the dominant ideology so-called that the woman's image in film is static because this does not align with the current trend in our society today, especially in the political sector where women have taken great strides in occupying leadership positions all over the world, making remarkable impact.

Women have become trusted as better administrators globally, and this should be well represented in the films produced; after all, if what screenwriters project in film is all manipulations including women's stereotypes, then it is the duty of the female filmmakers, (if the males will not comply) to re-write their stories and reconstruct women's identity in accordance with current socio-political trends. As a matter of fact, Women should use the film medium to tell stories that explicate their experiences from their own perspective, and not just as an avenue to eke out living or to make ends meet. They must learn to clench the good part of the bargain. It is all about same humanity diverse in distinct equality. There is, after all, no 'greater-than' and no 'better-than' in the male-female natural construction and constitution.

Feminist Film Criticism: A Gender Power Broker

As earlier stated, it is important to note that the obligation of feminist film criticism is geared towards correcting the distortions of the woman's image as originated by a patriarchal culture. Mayne (1990) traces this representation to early films where "mostly men, but occasionally women, peek through keyholes, offering bold demonstrations of the voyeuristic pleasure that has been central to virtually every contemporary theory of the cinema" (Mayne, 1990, p.9). She buttresses the need "for feminism to be able to analyze the distortion and lies of patriarchal culture and also to let women tell their own stories from their own perspective because the perspective of women as 'real historical subjects' may not be reducible to the images of woman projected within patriarchy" (Mayne, 1990, pp.6-7). She refers to Teresa de Lauretis critical analysis of women's dilemma in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*: thus "woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking-glass held up to man" (as cited in Mayne, 1990, p. 6).

Mayne observes that the claims for a unique "women's" perceptive in feminist theory results from "the belief that there is a genuine female identity that has been repressed by patriarchy and which emerges through feminist practice" (Mayne, 1990, p. 7). This submission aligns with John Berger's observation:

Women are depicted in a quite different way from men---not because the feminine is different from the masculine---but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him (Berger, 1972, p. 64).

This however answers the question posited by Ann Kaplan: “is the gaze male?” Indeed, the male gazes at the female who is the object of the gaze because...“the gaze remains ‘male’ but is assumed by the female spectator as a disguise...” (as cited Mayne, 1990, p. 19).

The stance of feminist film criticism which rejects female gaze, female voyeurism, fetishistic desires, female as sex objects, etc as an embodiment of the woman’s film is the basis for the proposition for a deconstruction of instituted patriarchal structures that deny woman her true identity.

Mayne however, foresees prospect in the feminist interrogations of the cinema, explaining that

the narrative and visual staging of the cinematic desire relies, as most theoretical accounts would have it, on the massive disavowal of sexual difference and the subsequent alignment of cinematic representation with the male-centred scenarios (Mayne, 1990, p. 92).

Anything that suggests patriarchal domination in film viewing and production should be reviewed by both female screen writers and filmmakers. Any structure that makes the woman the viewed, and the man, the privileged viewer, ought to be deconstructed, so that the “belief in the positive value of female identity which, repressed by patriarchy, will be given its true voice by feminism” (Mayne, 1990, p. 90). The importance of female authorship cannot be underplayed just as Judith Mayne has asserted that

My point is not that feminist film critics have the proverbial “much to learn” from feminist literary critics, but rather that the paradigm of female authorship in literature may provide a useful point of departure to examine the status of female authorship in the cinema (Mayne, 1990, p. 91).

The filmmakers have a task to achieve. The onus lies now on them to redeem the debased image of the woman whose representation is a product of the society, the ideology of a patriarchal society. The representation of women in film is consequent upon the way the society and culture takes them, thus, “the audiences have the same ideology as the films that are produced for them; they fill the cinemas, and that is how the machine keeps turning” (Metz, 1985, p. 544).

So, whether the film producers are out to make money, or the directors and screenwriters are projecting an ideology that is already enmeshed in the culture, (since the representation of women is viewed as a social construct), it has been argued that the film produced is “the product of society which consumes it, as an orientation of consciousness, whose roots are unconscious, and without which we would be unable to understand the overall trajectory which founds the institution and accounts for its continuing existence” (Metz, 1985, p. 545).

An ideology may be a product of society, as posited by Christian Metz, and could be projected back to the viewing audience through the film medium. This shows that representation in film or cinema and literature is constructed by authors. This assumption is ascertained by Monteith (1986) who states that “one of the immense positive gains from feminist criticism has been the realization that the female in literature is a literary construct “(as cited in Eko and Emenyi, 2002, p 170).

Since literary works were first on the frontline to represent women in their stereotyped roles, which most films are emulating in Nigeria, the resultant effect should not be different. By this I mean that since literary feminist critics have championed the course of addressing the problem of female representation and gender profiling through female authorship, the gains

should also be exploited by feminist film critics and feminist filmmakers regarding positive representation of women in films. Female film makers should be committed to the feminist ideology which, according to Grace Okereke, is “sensitive inquiry into the female personality and her condition” (as cited in Eko & Emenyi, 2002, p. 171). This becomes imperative for that same film medium to reposition and re-represent the image of the woman, through narration, and project her in her true light, as a leader, a society builder and a *strong(er) sex*.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed that the image of the women, as represented in films, is socially constructed by a patriarchal structure that perpetually subjects the specie called woman to a state of sexual servitude and sensual degradation. The study further suggested that such structures which have continually been enmeshed in the psyche of the audience as well as filmmakers through repetition of stereotyped images in films ought to be deconstructed.

A juxtaposition of all the views projected by the feminist film critics examined in this study have revealed that women are exploited to their disadvantage and no matter the society (whether Western or African) where the filmmakers belong, negative female stereotypes are similar. And just as Eko and Emenyi (2002, p. 171) have observed: “Apart from very few exceptions, most of these films recount sordid tales of female atrocities against the social system.” It is therefore important for more females to be behind the camera (as directors and producers). By so doing, they will be in a better place to dictate and control the content of what is produced for the consumption of the viewing audience (Okerri, 2006, p.92).

Women filmmakers should produce more feminist oriented films and speak in their own voices through cinematic codes and techniques that tell their own stories and relate their experiences the way that is most suitable for them, because “the works of women filmmakers offer reformulations of cinematic identification and desire,” thus “the attempts by women directors to redefine, appropriate, or otherwise reinvent the cinema are crucial demonstrations that the boundaries of that supremely patriarchal form are more permeable, more open to feminist and female influence” (Mayne, 1990,p. 92).

In this respect, I should like to submit that female authors and filmmakers have all it takes to exterminate the patriarchal structures that have bound the woman both socially, economically, culturally, politically, financially and educationally. If the woman’s dilemma must be totally excised now and in the future, no one else should take the lead but women themselves. Only then could the female gender be extricated from the constructed negative cinematic identity and the male filmmakers will inadvertently or advertently ‘jump on the bandwagon.’

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