Chapter 8
Portrayal of Women in Nollywood Films and the Role of Women in National Development

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates how women are portrayed in Nollywood films, as well as the interpretation of their representations. It aims at understanding how the images of women are reflected in films, with a focus on investigating the influence of such portrayals on their role in national development. The methods adopted were Quantitative Content Analysis (five Nollywood films were content analysed) and Focus Group Discussion (three sessions of FGD were organised). Data collected and analysed show that over two-thirds of major female characters analysed were portrayed as dependent, 80% were depicted in such situations of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, while only 30% of the major female characters were portrayed as career professionals and intellectuals. It was observed from the analyses that portrayals and representations of women have negative influences on their contributions towards national development. The study concludes, therefore, that positive portrayal of women in Nollywood films should be encouraged. This can only be made possible through changing the narrative style of the film scripts. This is a call for more female script writers and directors to be involved in charting the narratives that will adequately give women a voice, new roles, and the right representation in Nollywood films.

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INTRODUCTION

The media has become inevitable in this present society. From newspapers to magazines, radio to television, the Internet to films, these various media outlets influence their audience in one way or another. The media inform, entertain, and educate us. Fischer (2010, p.1) says that “the impact of the media on our daily lives is tremendous, and most of the time we are not aware of this huge influential factor”. The media can “move our emotions, challenge our intellects, and insult our intelligence. They can also influence people’s beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and opinions on various issues without them even realising it” (Baran, 2010). Furthermore, the mass media, beyond the three core functions of providing information, education and entertainment, play a significant role in shaping the perceptions and worldviews of the audience through the messages they communicate and the interpretation they also give to the messages. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that, due to its especially powerful and pervasive nature, the media contributes to shaping people’s perception and opinion on issues having to do with social relationships and gender relations in the society.

Among the mass media of communication, television is seen as the most influential. By combining pictures and sound, TV can communicate messages which are impossible to convey as effectively by radio and or print. Television is the central cultural arm of society, as a culture’s primary story teller. It is the chief creator of entertainment and information for heterogeneous mass publics (Baran, 2009). Jonah (2011, p.1) points out that “Film is one of the channels of mass communication which is transmitted via the television which has grown over the years. It started as cinema and later grew into home video which many Nigerians patronize today”. Sambe (2008, p.142) defines film as series of motionless images projected into a screen so fast as to create in the mind of anyone watching the screen an impression of a motion. Nigerian films industry otherwise known as Nollywood films has come of age. Nigerian films daily flood the global channels with series of films which dwell on various aspects of life (Jonah, 2011).

Nigerian films are deeply rooted in the Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life (Onuzulike, 2007). Daramola (2008) supports this that the Nigerian film industry holds up a mirror to the society and projects what is seen in the society.

As the twentieth century ended, research evidences showed that Nigerian films were filled with negative and stereotypic images of women. This is done to the disadvantage of women as these images promote continuous domination by men and subordination and subjugation of women (Okunna, 2002). “Given the great influence that Nollywood has over African culture, such effect is reinforced by a massive consumption of Nigerian films by Africans living in Africa and off the shores of Africa” (Onuzulike, 2007, p. 237).

According to Amobi (2010, p.1), the treatment of women in films has occupied the realm of discourse for several decades now. Feminist scholars, critics and women’s movements have relentlessly challenged the stereotypical representations of women in Hollywood films (the American film industry), criticising their sexist depictions as whores, jilted mistresses, emotional cripples, sex-starved spinsters and psychotics. The Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, is no different as this entrant to the world of cinema has also been criticised for its portrayal of women as sex objects, weak, cold-hearted, materialistic, vengeful, vicious, diabolical, and scheming.

This study investigates why women’s roles are mostly captured in domestic spaces which shows them as a marginalised group whose functions in some of the films cannot go beyond those of being mothers,