



ARTICLES



Nicholas Efe Akpore

Osun State University (Nigeria)

ORCID: 0000-0002-0653-114X

Nollywood and Female Gender Exploitation in Kenneth Gyang's *Oloture*

ABSTRACT. This study explores gender exploitation in *Oloture*, focusing on gender issues within the Nigerian film industry, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of women. Using Kenneth Gyang's *Oloture* as a case study, the research examines how Nollywood projects gender dynamics and its role in shaping societal perceptions. Given the persistent gender inequalities in contemporary society, this study is both relevant and necessary. These issues have fueled the rise of feminism—an ideology and movement advocating for women's emancipation. The paper investigates how gender is represented in Nollywood, assessing the industry's influence in shaping gender narratives. Employing literary and sociological methodologies, the study analyzes how audiences consciously and unconsciously absorb messages from films. The findings reveal that the film industry wields significant power in shaping viewers' perceptions through its portrayals. Given the urgent need to address gender discrimination and exploitation, all stakeholders must collaborate in tackling these issues. As a key recommendation, the study emphasizes the importance of women attaining economic empowerment, as this is crucial to bridging the persistent gender gap in society.

KEYWORDS: gender exploitation, feminism, film, Nollywood, women empowerment

Introduction

Gender is the socially and culturally constructed roles for men and women. For instance, gender roles of men as owners of property, decision makers and heads of household are socially, historically and culturally constructed and have nothing to do with biological differences. It is important to note the difference between gender and sex. Sex refers to the biological differences between male and female. For example, the adult female has breast that can secrete milk to feed a baby but the adult male does not have. Gender roles differ from one place to another and change with time. For the sake of this study, it is essential to also explain what gender relations mean. Gender Relations are part of social relations, referring to the

ways in which the social categories of men and women, male and female, relate over the whole range of social organisation, not just to interactions between individual men and women in the sphere of personal relationships, or in terms of biological reproduction (Allanana, 2013, p. 32). An end-product of gender relations is gender issue. Gender issue includes gender exploitation, gender discrimination and other related issues.

Gender issue is one of the most discussions in the social sciences nowadays. The discussion has spurred a movement known as feminism this can be simply referred to as fight against the oppression, subjugation and suppression of the female folks. Tracing the origin of gender issue is like tracing the origin of humans. It has been noted from time immemorial that women are seen as lesser to man in all ramifications. However, this belief has exceeded just a notion and transformed into practice which is very derogatory of the women folks. The women folks were used as slaves, seen as sex objects, raped, beaten unjustly and so on. In the modern sense of it, there are certain jobs that are not given to women, not because they are not qualified for it but because they are women. In schools, they are sexually harassed by lecturers for grade. There have been several incidents in various Nigerian institutions where lecturers are arraigned for failing female students just because the affected students refused to share bed with them. In some cases, they are discriminated against in their places of work and so on. The acts stated earlier among others birthed the feminist movement. This movement gets modified as time moves—there are different stripes of it.

The term ‘feminism’ has many different uses and its meanings are often contested. For example, some writers use the term feminism to refer to a historically specific political movement in the United States and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women, though there is no consensus on the exact list of these injustices. Generally, feminism is both an intellectual and a political movement that seeks justice for all women and the end of sexism in all forms. Motivated by the quest for social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, economic and political phenomena. While explaining the origin of this movement, the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy documents thus:

‘Contemporary feminist philosophical scholarship emerged in the 1970s as more women began careers in higher education, including philosophy. As they did so, they also began taking up matters from their own experience

for philosophical scrutiny. These scholars were both influenced both by feminist movement in their midst as well as by their philosophical training, which was anything but feminist. Until recently one could not go to a graduate school to study 'Feminist philosophy'. While students and scholars could turn to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir or look back historically to the writings of 'first wave' feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, most of the philosophers writing in the first decade of emergence of feminist philosophy brought their particular training and expertise to bear on analysing issues raised by the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, such as abortion, affirmative action, equal opportunity, the institutions of marriage, sexuality and love.' (249)

It can be deduced from the above that feminism is a wide subject, it is a movement, a philosophy, an ideology, a fight among other things. The injustices felt by the women folks are outlined to be fought by the feminists. In other instance, feminism seeks to erode patriarchy. Patriarchy was used originally to describe father as the head of the house, the post 1906s feminists refer to it as 'systematic organisation of male supremacy and female subordination' (Kramarae, 1981, p. 92).

The media has played a pivotal role in the gender issue discourse. Media plays a big role of influencing the people's daily lives, this is because of how people view the world in general. Mass media is an agent of socialisation and from this role; it has been attacked by an array of criticism from different portions of the society. There is a wide range of media among them are television shows, movies, the radio, newspaper, advertisements and many more. In these many forms of media, there are images of men and women. These images are depicted in different ways and with different characteristics and different meanings. The way these depictions can alter the way people perceive social realities. Images can therefore play a very crucial role in stimulating anti-social behaviours such as violence, crime and delinquency among others as argued by Manatu when she explains that;

To people such as radical feminists, mass media is seen as an agent of male chauvinism. This systematically depicts a male dominated socio-cultural, political and economic order. These depictions come about from the continuous reinforcement of the negative gender stereotype of women. (54)

The representation of women in visual media continues to ignite quite a considerable amount of debate and scholarly investigation across the

globe. In Nigeria, the roles and treatment of women in the nascent film industry popularly known as Nollywood remain contentious. Critics of Nollywood films especially feminist scholars have attacked the predominant, if not exclusive portrayal of women for its narrowly traditional occupational and domestic roles and images. It is against this background that this study seeks to explore female gender exploitation using *Oloture* by Kenneth Gyang as case study.

Statement of the Problem

This study is necessary as a result of the burning gender issues in present day society. This is what gave rise to feminism which is an ideology and a movement of women emancipation. Feminists feel there is a huge disparity in the societal roles of men and women. While men are seen as 'super' human being, women are seen as the weaker vessels this in turn relegated them in the space of things in the society. This is owing to a lot of things, one of which is stereotypes created by media such as books, movies, radios and so on; there are many 'bad' projections of the female gender in these medias such as objectification, inferiorisation and so on. As a result of this, there is a need to further investigate the gender issues as displayed in *Oloture*.

Methodology of the Study

The study employs the use of literary methodology which is a unit of qualitative research, for the purpose of data collection. The literary method will involve the discussion and exploration of documents. The documents here include textbooks, articles and journals, materials got online and so on. It will also feature the literary and analytical method of film criticism which will be used to critically discuss the selected film in relation to the subject matter of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the theory of feminism. Feminism is basically a movement against the oppression, maltreatment and subjugation

of the women folks. It aims at complete removal of sexism and patriarchy. Feminist criticism grew out of the women's movement that followed the World War II and seeks to analyse the role of gender in works of literature. The feminist theory is founded on three main principles:

- i. Women have something valuable to contribute to every aspect of the world.
- ii. As an oppressed group, women have been unable to achieve their potential, receive rewards, or gain full participation in society.
- iii. Feminist research should do more than critique, but should work towards social transformation (Ropers-Huilman, 1998, p. 202).

This paper will critique the representation of women in the Nollywood movie *Oloture* and also suggest solution towards a social transformation. To be able to fully address the set objectives, the form of feminism that will be used is Marxist/Socialist feminism. In this feminism, the lens of feminism incorporates perspectives of social justice as well as socio-economic differences. For many centuries, women were considered the property of men and a key cog in the capitalist machine from a commoditized perspective just as we have in *Oloture* where women are used to earn money for some people.

Marxist feminists argue that the path to gender equality is led by the destruction of our capitalist society. If there is no social class again in the society, equality will be achieved for all especially the women. Socialist feminists purport that women can only achieve true freedom when working to end both economic and cultural oppression.

Synopsis of Kenneth Gyang's *Oloture*

The film, *Oloture* was premiered on October 31, 2019 at Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia. In September 2020, Netflix acquires distribution rights to the film. Airing began on October 2, 2020. Within days of its release, *Oloture* ranked among the top 10 most watched movies in the world on Netflix. The movie was directed by Kenneth Gyang and produced by Temitayo Abudu, James Amuta and Heidi Uys. It features movie stars like Omoni Oboli, Beverly Osu, Segun Arinze, Yemi Solade, Sharon Ooja, Blossom Chukwujekwu and many more. The film is partially inspired and based on a 2014 article by Nigerian journalist Toboure Ovuorie in the Premium Times 'INVESTIGATION: Inside Nigeria's Ruthless Human Trafficking Mafia'. Toboure went undercover as a prostitute in the city of Abuja. The

article frames many of the scenes and themes of the film like the deeply entrenched corruption and criminality in the Nigerian political society that enables prostitution-trafficking rings.

Oloture translated as 'Endurance' is a captivating movie that explores the institution of women trafficking and prostitution in present day Nigeria. The film's protagonist, Ehi also known as Oloture (acted by Sharon Ooja) is an undercover journalist who with the partnership of her colleague in work, Emeka ventures into the prostitution business in Lagos so as to get to the root of the human trafficking business in Nigeria.

The movie begins by showing the viewers the Lagos prostitution business. Many of the prostitutes engage in street-based prostitution whereby they will stay at roadsides wearing provocative dresses, smoking cigarettes while they wave at men who might be their potential customers. It is shown to the viewers how these prostitutes cohabit, the way they communicate and many others. Ehi (Oloture) tries as much as possible to fit in to the society and Emeka visits her regularly.

Due to her mission in the business, Ehi confronts Linda, one of the prostitutes and asks her if she knows a way she can get to Europe. Linda reveals to Ehi that she has a 'Madam' who knows about such deal and she has been paying the Madam (who is later identified as Alero) in small instalments the fees that will take her to Europe, Italy to be precise. This sounds golden to Ehi as this seems to be a way for her to fulfil her mission. Unknowingly to Linda, Ehi follows Linda to Alero's shop, spying on what is going on before Alero's bodyguard catches her. She pleads to Alero that she is also interested in going to Italy. Alero gets offended with the fact that Linda refuses to keep the deal secret.

Not long after that, Alero gets the contract of supplying prostitutes for a politician's (Sir Philips) party and decides to recruit Ehi and her colleagues to the party. It was at this party that Alero agrees to take Ehi to Europe after introducing her to Sir Philips. Ehi devices a plan that she always do to avert any intimate relationship with her 'customers', this leads to her being drugged and raped by Sir Phillips. Ehi determined to continue the story decides to be paying to Alero for the trip.

The time to leave for Europe clocks and the ladies unpack their bags as they follow a big Marco-polo bus brought by Alero and her accomplices. They are camped at a building where they are trained. Linda gets killed because she is found using a phone which actually does not belong to her but to Ehi, the phone is found to have been sending info of their whereabouts outside. This prompts them to leave the building and set for Benin

republic. Having gotten the info, Emeka informs the police force and they raid the house only to found Linda's dead body. The trafficked ladies are later transported into Benin Republic including Ehi.

Thematic Preoccupations in *Oloture*

Themes are universal message that a work is trying to voice out, we have major and minor themes and some of them shall be discussed here:

Female gender objectification: It has been an issue from time immemorial that the female gender are objectified by their male counterparts—they are seen as sexual objects and relegated to the rear in the society. They are only to be 'seen' but not 'heard'. This has been a headache for emerging feminists on how to ensure that the imbalance is brought to a stop. If the inequality is addressed, women would be able to maximise their full potentials and there can be growth and development in the society.

Most female casts in the movie are relevant because of objectification. A lot of them are commercial sex workers, they take pleasure in selling their bodies. And the male folks see no use for them too except as sexual objects. The only seeming exception is Ehi because she has access to formal education. Even despite this, she is still being greatly admired as a sexual object when she goes undercover. The two businesses explored in the films have objectification of women as the common attribute.

Corruption: It is rare to see a work addressing societal issue in Nigeria without talking about corruption. Corruption is the act of compromising integrity. People who lack integrity are bent to undergo any act just because of money, this is evidently shown in some constructions in the play. Human trafficking is a menace identified and tackled by the Nigerian government. Many funds and human personnel has been spent on combating human trafficking but due to the dishonesty, greed and particularly corruption. Corruption is particularly evident in the later part of the movie—the moment Victor, Sheriff and co. are transporting the ladies into Benin Republic. They are not subjected to other checks by the immigration officers as the others. In fact, Victor is told to jump the queue so they can attend to them ahead of others. Victor in turn arranges dollar notes for the officers. Also, Emeka is not given audience to lodge the complaint of *Oloture* missing by the immigration officer's despite being identified as a press man. Their conversation went thus:

EMEKA: (*pleading to the officer*) ...this is a matter of life and death. It is very important. My staff is there (*pointing to the road ahead*) I really need to be there. Please sir, understand my point.

OFFICER 1: Mr. Man, you understand me now. I say shut up, enter that car and get out!

OFFICER 2: Mr. Man! Get out! (*about to shoot*).

Inordinate quest for wealth: The movie is poignant in depicting this theme. Many of the actions and inactions in the movie are guided by economic demands—quest for money. The theme can be linked to one of the Marxist theorists' propositions which is economic determinism. This means that every spheres and societal structures such as fashion, religion, politics, education, culture and so on are modelled by the economy. It places economy at the base (substructure) upon which other sectors (the superstructures) is built on. Characters like Linda, Blessing and Vanessa represent the commercial sex workers in the movie with the way they dress, act and talk—it brings to the audience a maximum feel of realism with how prostitutes out there really behave. The prostitutes in the movie do not 'willingly' go into the trade if not for money. Prostitution is usually termed transactional sex. They will give their customers pleasure and get paid in return, as they always say '*Money for hand, back for ground*' which means, 'pay me and you will have your way with my body'. The business-prostitution is a cruel one as the workers are prone to physical and emotional attacks. They engage in smoking, alcohol and all to put their troubles past them and to get into the mood. Linda advances cigarette to Ehi after she fled the hotel in the beginning of the movies having get physically injured and emotionally trouble.

This same inordinate quest for wealth is the same thing that drives Linda and other prostitutes to wanting to Europe to 'step-up'. Their belief is that there are better customers over there who will give them more money and their condition will change. The *middlemen* for the human trafficking business are also in quest of wealth. It is safe to conclude that they all anticipate a huge financial gain after successfully getting them to Europe. It is partly shown when Ehi requests that she should read the form they are asked to fill before signing different inhumane and gruesome demands of the company. Sheriff, Victor and Madam Alero especially are also in quest for better economic lifestyle by putting in for such ungodly act. The recruitment of ladies to politicians' parties by Madam Alero also does not go for free. In fact, this does not exclude the government operatives

too, especially the immigration officers as payment of bribes by these evil companies deny them opportunity to exercise their duties impartially.

Bad state of the nation: The country where the movie is set is one of the headquarters of poverty in the world. It is a country of over 200 million people and more than 50% of the citizenry live in poverty. The state of the nation is what determines how things work and are run. For instance, it is unheard of for Europeans or Americans to be trafficked into Africa, for what? This is because the situation in those continents is relatively okay and enduring compared to what we have in Africa and in Nigeria in particular. There are thousands of graduates who are not employed or under-employed. To find gainful employment is difficult just like looking for the teeth of a lion. The circumstances and frameworks put on ground are not conducive for economic development. This is what prompt many of the prostitutes, human traffickers and others out there to result into 'unholy swift' means for survival.

Another instance in the movie to show the condemnable state of the country is during Emeka's visit to the NAPTIP (National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons) office to work the rescue of Ehi's (*Oloture*) and others' rescue. NAPTIP is a body established by the Nigeria government under the leadership of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo to combat and reduce the rate of human trafficking in the country. *Oloture* and others would have been if there were enough personnel on ground when Emeka went. The Director, Jubril (acted by Yemi Solade) told Emeka that 'I hear you Mr Okolie (Emeka), all my men are out there on special operations today. It's not possible!' This signifies that the government does not pay attention to funding and equipping the agency for active performance. This singular reason compromised the rescue plan for Ehi and others.

Female Gender Exploitation in *Oloture*

The movie is largely peopled by ladies and women, the male characters in there have minor or little roles and significance. The representation of gender in Nollywood has quite dominated the scenery of movie studies and criticism for a while. *Oloture*, is another movie that shows the treatments women go through in patriarchal societies like Nigeria. The female characters in the movie are victims of exploitation. The only ones that can be mapped out of this group are Madam Alero and Ehi. Even with that, those two characters can be placed in exploitation game review. Ehi is

a journalist that jumps into the lion's den in the name of getting a story. She even gets physically and sexually abused as in the case of Sir Phillips and Chuks. She has superiors who are men, especially her supervisor, Emeka. Though it can be argued that due to the fact that they are male, they cannot venture into such sojourn. But the big question should be why are the women folk's victims of all cases. Ehi, the privileged lady gets exploited and even the unprivileged ones, Blessing, Vanessa, Linda and others face maximum exploitation.

Madam Alero though might be seen as a middleman but she herself is a victim of the corrupt system. She has little or no say in the business, she is either threatened or controlled by the male characters. For instance, she answers Sir Phillips' call anytime because of the monetary and political power. In other instance, she faces threats majorly because she is a female from people who are also in the line of the business. The first one is evident in a conversation between her and Tony, another 'middleman' in the business. The other incident is after Linda was caught with a phone and killed.

Victor: ...she dey send information give somebody, who she b? who she dey work for?... (Who is she (Linda), who does she work for? She is sending information to some people).

Alero: I no know o (I do not know).

Victor: dah one no b answer o (that is not an answer), na ur job to know (It is your responsibility to know), u suppose don investigate these things (you ought to have investigated things like this)...if any yawa dey on top this matter, u sef go hear am (if any problem comes from this, you will be dealt with too).

Alero looks perplexed after this statement.

By the virtue of hierarchy, Alero should be a senior to Victor, she has the major responsibility of recruiting ladies while Victor is like the Chief Security Officer of the network swears to deal with her if it happens that Linda is using the phone to communicate with the police. If he will at least maintain that things are in order, there should be a tone of regard to an extent. But since it is a patriarchal society, she has little or no 'rugged' power to resist such disrespect.

The next sets of women evidently exploited are the prostitutes and the victims of human trafficking. They are the sets of people who one way or the other have been denied the rights to make a justifiable means of living, these people have no option in the country and they see the transaction of their body as the last resort. Someone like Blessing on many occasions gets abused by her boyfriend, Chuks. Despite several series of advice from

friends to leave him, she insists she cannot leave Chuks. She is getting maltreated and she dares not leave—that is evil at its zenith.

The movie, *Oloture* shows that the world is still in the hands of men and if women do not find working solutions, issues like gender exploitation would still be in the society. And as our theory states, the only way for women to emancipate themselves is to get economic independence. We can see that from the movie that most of the women subjected to exploitation here are victims because of economic game-play. If they all reliable and legitimate means of survival, such would dare not happen. Even though it was not shown in the movie, Sir Phillips and other politicians like would definitely have wives and daughters and it is of a very high possibility that they would not be in such gathering in those positions. The movie has further illuminated the debate about the role of Nollywood in Gender projection. According to several interviews held with those who have seen the movie, they all argue from the same point of view that Nollywood movies count in the area of gender projection in our society, Nigeria.

Observation and Findings

After a successful work of this research, a lot of points have come to light. Gender projection is a sensitive issue and many Nollywood movies have aggravated the status of gender imbalance in the society. That is why we see women in movies acting as 'second-class' citizens to their male counterparts. This automatically affects the way viewers see things most especially the youths as they this projection engrave impressions in them. It has been observed that viewers take messages from movies quite serious either consciously or unconsciously and this has given the movie industry the ability to be able to control the minds of their viewers by what they show to them. Gender discrimination/exploitation is an issue that needs all hands-on deck to solve, all stakeholders must intensify efforts in fighting the issue.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The study recommends based on the observation of the study the solution to gender exploitation in the society. The theory employed to analyse this work forms the maxim of the solution discussion. Patriarchy is deter-

mined to 'dispower' women and keep them at the background. The roles women are allowed and expected to perform in the society are less-valued and not developmental, the voice to control this births feminism. In conclusion, the study recommends that women should seek economic power as this will be the absolute solution to the much-seen gap in gender relations in the society.

REFERENCES

- ABRAMS, M. (1999) *Glossary of Literary Terms USA*: Heinle & Heinle.
- ADESINA, A. (2010) Audience perception of portrayals of women in Nigerian Home video films. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, Vol. 2(9). Nov. Pp. 200–207.
- ADEWOYE, O.O.A., ABUBAKAR, A., & JIMOH, O. (2014) 'Rise of the 'homo erotica'? Portrayal of women and gender role stereotyping in movies: Analysis of two Nigerian movies'. *Developing Country Studies*, 4(4). Pp. 103–110.
- ALLANANA, M. (2013) Patriarchy and Gender Inequality In Nigeria: The Way Forward. *European Scientific Journal*, 9(17). e-ISSN 1857-7431. Pp. 152–190.
- ALZAHIRANI, F. (2016) The Portrayal of Women and Gender Roles in Films. *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research*, 7(4), April. Pp. 533–534.
- ANDREW, A. (2017) Stereotype Representation of Women in Nigerian Films. *Cinema Journal* ISSN 2158-8724 (online) 6(2). Pp. 82–96.
- EZEJUGH, T. & ANJIAH, E. (2017) Gender Domination and Domestic Violence in Nigerian Video Films: A Paradigmatic Appraisal. *UJAH* 18(3). Pp. 1–25.
- FAGBEMINIYI, F. (2012) Gender Discrimination and Development in Nigeria: Issues and Perspective. *Journal of the Population Association of Nigeria*, vol. 4, no. 1. Pp. 57–90.
- Glossary of Terms and Concepts UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia November 2017
- GYANG, K. 'Oloture' (movie) 2020.
- HAYNES, J. (2010) 'Literature Review: Nigeria and Ghanaian Videos'. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. 22(1). Pp. 105–120.
- KRAMARAE, C. (1981) A Feminist Critique of Sociolinguistics. *College English*, 41(2). Pp. 165–183.
- PASQUE, P. & WIMMER, B. (2011) An Introduction: Feminist Perspectives. *Women's & Gender Studies/Center for Social Justice* University of Oklahoma. Pp. 21–47.
- PIETER, F. (2001) *Media Studies volume 1: Institutions, Theories and Issues*, Lansdowne: Juta and Company.
- RANJAN, R. (2019) 'Understanding Feminism'. *International Journal Of English Language, Literature And Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 6(4). Pp. 120–122.
- ROPERS-HUILMAN, B. (1998) *Feminist Teaching in Theory and Practice: Situating Power and Knowledge in Poststructural Classrooms*. Teachers College Press. Pp. 200–203.
- SAMIDHA, P. (2008) Gender discrimination: Women perspectives. *Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies*, 5(2). Pp. 80–87.
- UKATA, A. (2010) 'Conflicting Framings of Women in Nollywood Videos'. *African Nebula*, 1(1). Pp. 67–75.