Womanhood Beyond Stereotypes

Interrogating Women & Future-Making in Contemporary African Films

EZINNE M. EZEPUE

> "Until Lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter."
> *African Proverb*

Abstract

Japhet & Feek,[1] as well as other scholars, have indicated that fictional narratives can be used successfully as an agent of change. My research argues that African men, benefiting from the superior position Colonialism left them, have used Film as a medium to tame and shape African women, defining expectations for women, prescribing the 'acceptable' virtues, and discouraging 'unwholesome' and 'unbecoming' behaviors. Throughout postcolonial Africa, women have been thus stereotyped, usually portrayed as one-dimensional characters who are extremely good, loyal, and virtuous or portrayed in antagonistic ways as ill-mannered, impatient, and poorly groomed. But in contemporary Africa, the tables are turning and questions are being asked about existing orders and the definitions of woman and womanhood. Women are increasingly becoming active in the industry, and this is warranting that their portrayals in films are changing. What is the implication of this? If stereotyping women in postcolonial African films shaped women into

1 Japhet, Garth/Feek, Warren: "Storytelling can be a Force for Social Change: Here's How," in: *World Economic Forum* 2018, accessed 30/1/2023, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/06/storytelling-for-social-change-communication-initiative/

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

conformity, can the changing portrayal create a reversal? Can it lead to behavioral modification and the emancipation of African women? This article aims at understanding the possibilities of using fictional narratives to affect concrete behavioral modifications in how the African woman is perceived and understood. Through content analysis of selected films from across African film industries, especially those directed by women, this study intends to establish how differently women are being portrayed and what this could mean for Africa and African women of the future.

1 INTRODUCTION

"I was a movie-struck kid, and I learned much from watching the screen, including things about men and women that I later had to unlearn or learn to ignore. I learned that women needed to be protected, controlled, and left at home. I learned that men led, women followed."[2]

Writing for *The New York Times*, Manohla Dargis' reflects on what the movies taught her about being a woman. The author highlights that besides the stereotypes of 'women are to be kissed,' 'women need spanking,' and 'women live to support men,' some films are teaching women to transcend these stereotypes and become heroes too. But this is not restricted to Dargis' America. Growing up, what I learned from films about being a Nigerian woman in particular and an African woman in general, is that I belong to somebody at every stage in life—first to my father and family, then to a husband and his family. I learned that I must do as I am told, be patient and loving, forgiving and enduring, submissive, and never talk back to a man, especially father, uncles, or husband. I learned that men are the center of my world and I have no independence from them. This reflects in my earlier publication nearly a decade ago.[3] Like Dargis, I had to unlearn a number of things I learned through films. This little preamble goes to illustrate the potency of film as a tool for shaping the behaviors/beliefs of a people. Films have been and

2 Dargis, Manohla: "What the Movies Taught Me About Being a Woman," in: *The New York Times* 2018: n.p., accessed 20/11/2022, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/30/movies/women-in-movies.html

3 Igwe, Ezinne: "Cultural Representation and Intercultural Interaction: Nigerian Women in Films," in: *Creative Artist: A Journal pf Theatre & Media Studies*. 8(2014), pp. 54-73.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

continue to be used for propaganda. Although Reeves[4] argues that the power of film as propaganda is more myth than reality, my personal experience as well as research by Kubrak[5] indicates that film becomes a powerful tool when used to teach and reiterate socially accepted values, stereotypes, realities and 'truths'. To further enforce these teachings, adherers are rewarded while non-adherers are punished. Many African films, with the exemption of those made by some early post-colonial filmmakers, but especially Ousmane Sembène who explored themes of women empowerment,[6] have contributed to such shape-shifting, creating images that are acceptable to the society as well as images endorsed and acceptable to men, the patriarchs. For Sembène, filmmaking was radical and significant to how one is able to rethink and redefine freedom in post-colonial Africa.[7] His films empowered women as much as they did men. Through films, I was informed about acceptable feminine qualities, the same qualities re-echoed in/through socialization. Films have been used to keep women in the position colonialism had left them—relegated, and stripped of value and relevance.[8] Colonialism fortified, advanced and justified patriarchy, promoting an already existing prioritization of male children, further suppressing the woman by the sort of role reserved, and the future prepared for her.[9] While men worked and earned, women were groomed to be homemakers. Ignoring examples of ambitious women who existed in Africa prior to or during colonialism,[10] the postcolonial woman is "portrayed by both

4 Reeves, Nicholas: "The Power of Film Propaganda—Myth or Reality," in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13(1993), pp. 181-201, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439689300260201

5 Kubrak, Tina: "Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitude after Watching aMovie,"in:*BehavioralSciences*10(2020),pp.86, https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fbs10050086

6 Sawadogo, Boukary: *African Film Studies: An Introduction* (2nd ed), New York: Routledge 2023.

7 Konate, Awa: "Talk on Ousmane Sembène and African Cinema," in: YouTube Video 1:22:55, 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1kEDi_0woM

8 Sheldon, Kathleen: *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century*, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2017.

9 Segueda, Wendpanga: "Imported Religions, Colonialism and The Situation of Women in Africa," in: *Schriftenreihe Junges Afrikazentrum der Universität Würzburg* 3(2015), pp. 1-23, https://opus.bibliothek.uni-wuerzburg.de/opus4-wuerzburg/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/12240/file/JAZ03_Segueda.pdf

10 Ogbomo, O. W./Ogbomo, Q. O.: "Women and Society in Pre-Colonial Iyede," in: Anthropos. 88(1993), pp. 431-441, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40463751

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

colonial and patriarchal male perceptions,"[11] a gaze that determined her behavior and roles in society. Through film, men dictated and prescribed to women, conjuring their ideal woman and impressing her on the audience. Women filmmakers at this time were rare, with Safi Faye being credited as the first African woman to make an African film— KADDU BEYKAT (1975), and hence called the mother of African cinema. KADDU BEYKAT mirrors the daily lives of African men and women who are struggling through nature and nurture—drought and the burden of colonial taxes. Set during the colonial times, it portrays women as homemakers with no ambition but marriage and raising a family. Nonetheless, Faye presents the woman, both in KADDU BEYKAT and FAD'JAL (1979), not as object, but as subject, physically and temporally dynamic.[12]

This study is interested in interrogating, how films were used by filmmakers through the patriarchal lens, to dictate to women audience members, thus molding them into the ideal persons desired of them. Drawing examples from films made in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, this study will attempt to illustrate how the portrayal of women in films was a deliberate effort towards shaping the woman to the expectations and dictates of patriarchy. This birthed the stereotyping of women in films, creating one-dimensional characters which lacked depth and strength. Once this is established, this study will then attempt to establish how women began to be recast in and through films. Recast in this context will mean being represented differently from existing stereotypical portrayals. Drawing examples from films produced in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the study will attempt a discourse on the differing and new interpretations given to women and womanhood in films made by African filmmakers. It will equally look critically at what difference the presence of women in film production is contributing to the new interpretations women are receiving in films. In essence, this study will critically review films directed and/or produced by women/feminists. Finally, the study will inquire into the future of women in Africa, querying the impact of this changing representation of women and the possibilities of its leading to the emancipation of the African woman. In what ways are films being used as a tool to effectively realize the goals of feminist struggles in Africa?

11 Bolat, Eren: Postcolonial Representation of the African Woman in the Selected Works of Ngugi and Adichie, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2022, p. 12.

12 Riesco, Beatriz: "The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation," in: *Buala* 2011, accessed 22/11/2022, https://www.buala.org/en/afroscreen/the-woman-in-contemporary-african-cinema-protagonism-and-representation

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2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, FRAMEWORK, AND METHODOLOGY

In addition to the question above, this study intends to pose two other overarching questions:

How differently do contemporary African women filmmakers portray African women in films? What are the possibilities of this difference causing the emancipation of African women? To answer these questions, this section gives context to the African variant of feminism, the framework for this study. Feminism in Africa has struggled with efficiency and acceptance, despite deliberate attempts to de-westernize the movement and localize it within existing African cultures. While Western feminism is characterized by confrontation, aggression, and militancy,[13] African feminism, according to Nnaemeka,[14] is characterized by negotiation, a willingness to accommodate and endure, to win some and lose some. Named differently—womanism,[15] black womanism,[16] Motherism,[17] Stiwanism,[18] Snail-sense,[19] Nego-feminism,[20]—feminism in Africa appears to adjust its definitions and purpose in search of acceptance. African feminisms attempt to find relevance in existing African norms and cultures, some of which are detrimental to womenfolk as well as children. Instances abound and include, but are not limited to early marriage for girls, female genital mutilation, marginalization of women who have no child or male children, and by extension, a nuanced rejection of the girl child, the forceful transfer of a woman to her husband's next of kin upon his demise, limited leisure time for the girl child compared to male children,

13 Acholonu, Catherine: *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Owerri: Afa Publications 1995.

14 Nnaemeka, Obioma (ed.): *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc. 1998.

15 Ogunyemi, Chikwenye-Okonjo. "Women and Nigerian literature," in: Ogunbiyi, Yomi (ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature,* Lagos: Guardian Books 1988.

16 Adesanmi, Pius: "Of Postcolonial Entanglement and Durée: Reflections on the Francophone Novel," in: *Comparative Literature*. 56 (2004), pp. 227-42.

17 C. Acholonu: Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism.

18 Ogundipe-Leslie, Molara: *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, New Jersey: African World Press 1994.

19 Ezeigbo, Akachi: Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective, Lagos: Vista Books 1996.

20 Nnaemeka, Obioma: "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's Way," in: *Signs: Journal of Women in* Culture *and Society* 29 (2003), pp. 357-385.

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Okujepisa omukazendu—a Herero term for wife swapping practice among the Himba people of Northern Namibia, *Trokosi*—an Ewe term for girl slave-child in Ghana, breast ironing in Cameroun—a preventive step for early sexual activity among girls, *Kusasa fumbi*—the Chewa (Bantu) term for sexual cleansing in Malawi.

African feminisms have continued to show deference to African cultures while attempting to argue that culture is never static, but ever-changing and dynamic. For a movement that began to solidify in the mid-1970s, its achievement has been more productive in scholarship than in practicality. With the exception of a few African countries which have enacted reforms increasing gender equality, African women remain largely marginalized and underrepresented, especially in politics and economics and their inequality to men remains wide and unabridged. The hostility that feminism encounters in Africa indirectly affects the demand for women's empowerment, a feminist agenda that patriarchy wishes to isolate and control among the many demands of feminism. Hence Senzu[21] opines that the feminist agenda, i.e., the demands for equality of rights and liberties between genders, remains inapplicable in Africa. This author's position becomes further disturbing as he recommends that due to a rise in the number of broken homes, women should not be educated about feminism, but rather empowered to 'improve' in their current subordinate positions to men. This position sounds absurd as Senzu suggests that emancipation and enlightenment in women account for failed marriages and broken homes. Advocating for the non-emancipation of African women whose life dreams should be about building stronger families, the author enjoins that woman be empowered only in house management and technical skills for economic contribution. Senzu's position serves as an illustration of the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of feminist standpoints and struggles in Africa which have birthed hostility and rejection against the movement.

Mansoor[22] for example attempts to put this misunderstanding in a scholarly perspective by implying that 'third world' feminism (a rather broad category) copies or mirrors Western feminism. Without attempting to critically evaluate the positions of renowned 'third world' feminist scholars and scholarship, the author presumes a total understanding of feminism in the 'third world,' falling victim to

21 Senzu, Emmanuel: "The Economic Ramification in Equating Women Empowerment with Feminism in Africa," in: *Frederic Bastiat Institute* 2016, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/83490/1/MPRA_paper_83490.pdf

22 Mansoor Asma: "Erratum: "Marginalization' in Third World Feminism: its Problematics and Theoretical Reconfiguration," in: *Palgrave Communications* 2(2016), pp. 1-9, doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2016.26.

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their own assumption by persistently referring to Western scholars—Derida, Eisenstein, and Bhabha. Without actively looking inward to truly define her standpoint and argument as a 'third world woman,' Mansoor advises 'third world' feminists to "engage in agentive practices to re-view herself in herself."[23] Replete with such ornamentalism, Mansoor's study does not demonstrate an understanding of the demands of feminism in Africa or anywhere else in the third world. Feminism in Africa, as understood by African feminists, is an opportunity to address African-woman-related challenges like early marriage, gender preference, education for the girl child, gender roles or career and stereotyping, lack of representation in politics, economic empowerment, gender-based violence, and other issues which have continued to cause and perpetrate gender inequality in the society. Hence, contrary to Mansoor's claims, African feminism is largely situated within the African woman's challenge and not indiscriminately mirroring Western feminism. African feminist scholars and theorists mentioned earlier have variously attempted to conceptualize African feminist standpoint and identity, once described as African Sisterhood.

Because anti-feminists like Senzu fail to understand the demands of African feminism, they equally fail to recognize that African feminism is radically different from Western feminism. While Western feminism is disruptive, forceful, confrontational, and radical, African feminisms are persuasive, and by advocating negotiation, wish to achieve a harmony between women's need for emancipation and respect for existing patricultural values. Patricultural values are those cultural values that acknowledge, if not uphold, and exist in deference to patriarchy in society. These values, prized among men, are engrained in society such that men are favored and prioritized only for being biologically male and women become subordinate. What the author Senzu and other anti-feminist Africans are resisting is the rise of a generation of women who are resisters of patriarchal subjugation, women who tow the paths of early African women who stood out in public spheres, who were anti-patriarchal and uncompromisingly anti-colonial like Hudda Shaarawi of Egypt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti or Nwanyeruwa of Nigeria, Mabel Dove Danquah of Ghana, Lilian Ngoyi of South Africa, Wambui Otieno of Kenya, Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana of Zimbabwe, Bibi Titi Mohammed of Tanzania, among others. The feminism which continues to be resisted in Africa is defined as "a celebration of the amazing power, beauty, knowledge, courage and farsightedness of women who say 'No,' unequivocally and unambiguously, to any

23 A. Mansoor: "Erratum: "Marginalization" in Third World Feminism: its Problematics and Theoretical Reconfiguration", p. 9.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

and all forms of oppression, repression and exclusion."[24] African feminisms are therefore careful not to offend or oppose, hence their description as nego-feminism[25]—the feminism of negotiation. Feminism projects and promotes the sister archetype portrayed in Ousmane Sembène's EMITAI (1971), defined by courage, unity, defiance, and fearlessness. The women in EMITAI defied the men who attempted to bring discord among them, stood firm against colonial oppression and held down the village when their men buckled under colonial suppression.

Through societal structure, informal education, and entertainment (film, radio, tv, theatre), African women have been taught and continue to be groomed to exist in the shadows of men who run the homes and society. In their study on the social construction of gender in traditional Igbo (Nigeria) society, Anah & Okere[26] illustrate how gender (positionality, responsibility, roles) is culturally and psychologically produced. The authors highlight how selected play texts, while differing to some extent, punctuate lines, arguments, and advice with the reminder of how and what a woman should be, emphasizing and re-emphasizing them for the purpose of assimilation. There is a need for women and girls to begin to unlearn the existing definition of 'African woman,' lose the stereotyped identity, and relearn to exist as humans of equal standing with men. This study is proposing that through entertainment, the sister archetype could be reignited in women, and the goals of realizing gender parity in Africa, projected 140 years into the future,[27] could be attained sooner.

Having established that film was instrumental in designing and promoting a patriarchy-conforming identity for women, it becomes important to add that through film, a purposefully redesigned and redefined identity can be promoted

24 McFadden, Patricia/Twasiima, Patricia: *A Feminist Conversation: Situating our Radical Ideas and Energies in the Contemporary African Context,* Maputo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2018, p.2, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/14981-20190219.pdf

25 O. Nnaemeka "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's Way."

26 Anah, Cletus/Okere, Mary: "The Social Construction of Gender in Traditional Igbo Societies: A Comparative Study of Language used as Socialization in John Munonye's *The Only Son* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*," in: *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 9(2019), pp. 84-90.

27 Moodley, Lohini/Kuyoro, Mayowa/Holt, Tania/Leke, Acha/Madgavkar, Anu/Krishnan, Mekala/Akintayo, Folakemi: "The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Africa,"in: *McKinsey Global Institute* 2019, https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-africa

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

for women. Following a study of over 20,000 people who saw Robert Kenner's FOOD, INC (2008), researchers submit that films successfully impact audience behavior.[28] Through purposefully designed films, women can be persuaded to alter their behavior, mindset and perception of themselves in order to improve their existence. This process requires strong women willing to stand up to or ignore criticisms such as those faced by feminism and African feminists. It equally requires sustainability as Kubrak[29] suggests that single movie exposure does not always leave a lasting effect on viewers' attitudes. Kubrak's study equally suggests that content must be category-specific, for example, gender, race, or age, for efficiency. Hence, Hanich[30] argues that cinematic experience, and indeed its effect on the viewers, is not static, but constantly evolving and transforming the attention, intention, actions, and emotions of both the filmmakers and the audiences. Films affect or shape value and belief formation, hence it is important to pass the right and valuable information through films. For this reason, there is a need to critically evaluate films made for, by, and about women, especially women in Africa who rank among the most marginalized women in third-world societies. The scope of this research will therefore not be limited to films made by women, but will equally include African films made for and about women. For the purpose of this study, 'African films' will be those films produced by Africans living in Africa or the diaspora which target Africans living in Africa.

3 THE MOLD: WOMEN THROUGH THE PATRIARCHAL LENS

The essence of this study is not to determine or satisfy the standards set by men for women, but essentially to understand the nature and motive of the standard and how, by understanding this, filmmakers are currently attempting to reverse it. In this section, I will establish how colonialism and religion hybridized existing cultures, empowered men, and informed the representation which was projected for

28 DeMos, Jackson: "Research Study finds that a film can have measurable impact on audience behavior," 2012, accessed 15/-7/2022, https://annenberg.usc.edu/news/centers/research-study-finds-film-can-have-measurable-impact-audience-behavior

29 Kubrak, Tina: "Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitude after Watching a Movie," in: *Behavioral Sciences* 10 (2020), p.86, https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fbs10050086

30 Hanich, Julian: *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2018.

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women through films in order to shape their behavior. I interpret this 'shaping' as a mold that determined who a woman was and how she must act in public and private spaces. The effects of colonialism continue to reflect on all aspects of African existence, including the position of women in society. It is important to note that although pre-colonial Africa was largely patriarchal, women still enjoyed some privileges and prominence, and were not as subjugated as they later became following colonialism which further relegated them. Authors such as Davies,[31] Sudarkasa,[32] Leith-Ress,[33] Bolat,[34] among others have attempted to describe pre-colonial African women. While reading Walter Rodney's position on the colonial impact on women in Africa, the feminist, Angela Davis[35] avers that colonialism re-ordered labor and its definition in Africa, whereby women's work became traditional and backward. Colonialism equally warranted that women's status diminished, hence the consequent loss of rights to determine indigenous standards of labor merit following independence. As a result of colonialism, African women ceased to be history-makers. For example, the Ghanaian queen mother, Yaa Asantewaa I, was captured and sent into exile following her uprising against the British colonialist over their attempt to seize the Golden Stool of Ashanti. It also caused the dearth of the Dahomey Amazons,[36] deprived them of significant pre-colonial political power,[37] and quelled several women's uprisings across the African

31 Davies, Carole: "Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," in: Davies, Carole/Davies, Carole Boyce/Graves, Anne Adams (eds.), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, Africa World: New Jersey 1986, pp. 1-23.

32 Sudarkasa, Niara: "The Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies," in: *Feminist Studies* 12(1986), pp. 91-103.

33 Leith-Ress, Sylvia: *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965.

34 Bolat, Eren: Postcolonial Representation of the African Woman in the Selected Works of Ngugi and Adichie, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2022.

35 Davis, Angela: "Walter Rodney's Legacy" 2019, accessed 16/07/2022, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4127-walter-rodney-s-legacy-by-angela-davis

36 Alpern, Stanley: *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey*, New York: New York University Press 2011; Masioni, Pat/Serbin, Sylvia/ Joubeaud, Edouard: "The Women Soldiers of Dahomey," in: *UNESCO Series on Women in African History*, Open Access Repository, Paris: UNESCO 2014, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230934

37 Hanson, Holly: "Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women's Political Power in Nineteenth-Century East Africa," in: Allman,

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continent. The impressive story of the Dahomey Amazons inspired the Hollywood film, THE WOMAN KING (2022).

Recalling colonial activities in Zimbabwe, Jackson[38] explains that only men were considered natives and thus granted passes into 'Whitemen's' Township. Although this allows women more freedom of movement, Oyewumi[39] clarifies this as a Western ideology that identifies only men as citizens and thus, of any relevance. Colonialism set a standard for women based on European expectations of women at the time. In their analysis of some European fairy tales from which early Disney princesses were created, Doster[40] establishes European expectations of an ideal woman—passive, patient, enduring, forgiving, designed for home and domestic chores, to be provided for and rescued by a man. The idea here is not to blame African women's subjugation on colonialism but to ponder on what could have become without colonial interference. In their discussion of marriage and marrying among the traditionally matrilineal Ashanti people of Ghana, Allman & Tashjian observe a deterioration in women's status "as strategic resources such as land, labor, and cash income increasingly concentrated in male hands,"[41] birthing laws which turned the once independent women into men's 'pawns'. Colonialism thus further reinforced traditional African patriarchal formation, engraving it into all aspects of existence for the woman and giving absolute power to the men. Oyewumi[42] attempts to clarify the impact of colonial intrusion on the Yoruba cosmological understanding of certain terms such as gender and sex, social and biological responsibilities. The author explains that in indigenous Yoruba conception, one's anatomy (biological make-up) did not determine or define their social

Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp. 219-236.

38 Jackson, Lynette: "'When in the White Man's Town': Zimbabwean Women Remember Chibeura," in: Allman, Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories,* Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp. 191-215.

39 Oyewumi, Oyeronke: The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1997.

40 Doster, Irene Virginia: *The Disney Dilemma: Modernized Fairy Tales or Modern Disaster?*, Dissertation, Tennessee 2002, https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/532

41 Allman, Jean Marie/Tashjian, Victoria: *I Will Not Eat Stone: A Women's History of Colonial Asante*, Portsmouth: Heinemann 2000, p. 238.

42 O. Oyewumi: The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses.

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responsibility. Among African Muslims, Schildkrout[43] notes, Islam and the purdah system ensured strict segregation based more on gender than age. In essence, across Africa, religion and colonialism enforced the patriarchal lens through which women became molded and defined within and beyond colonial Africa. Urbanization in Africa following the independence of states in the 1960s, saw the influx of men into urban areas, leaving large numbers of women in rural areas, whose occupation was largely unpaid domestic labor and agriculture. This economic disempowerment, in addition to religious teachings, further relegated women, making them vulnerably dependent on the men in their lives, and thus malleable.

Oyewumi and Rideout,[44] among others argue that African women were colonized twice—first as Africans and then as women. Colonialism altered an existing mold with which African women defined womanhood—the African Sisterhood. It has been argued that because a linguistic equivalent for sisterhood might not have existed in pre-colonial and early colonial Africa, co-motherhood would be more appropriate to describe the existing female solidarity in the period.[45] While this position is in the least assumptive, if not unfounded, my concern here is not to trace the term's (or archetype's) history or evolution. The point is to establish that the idea of sisterhood existed and thrived among African women, constituting their manner of showing solidarity, training, indoctrinating, and building a strong society of/for woman. Contributors to Nnaemeka's[46] edited volume on sisterhood and feminism have established the archetype as inherent to traditional African women and society. Bastian documents that while bearing witness before a colonial court to the massacre of women who participated in the *Ogu Umunwanyi* (Women's Fight) of 1929 in Aba, South Eastern Nigeria, witness Ahudi of Nsidimo alludes to this sisterhood, expecting that it is a lifestyle understood by women across the globe:

"If you come to a satisfactory conclusion that will satisfy all the women here, then peace will be restored. If not, then we will create trouble again. No doubt women like ourselves

43 Schildkrout, Enid: "Dependence and Autonomy: The Economic Activities of Secluded Hausa Women in Kano, Nigeria," in: Bay, Edna (ed.), *Women and Work in Africa,* Oxon: Routledge 2018.

44 Rideout, Jennifer: "Toward a New Nigerian Womanhood: Woman as Nation in Half of a Yellow Sun," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 36(2014), pp. 71-81, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5213

45 McDonald, Katrina: *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity, and Contemporary Black Women,* Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2007.

46 O. Nnaemeka: Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora.

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are in your own country. IF NEED BE WE SHALL WRITE TO THEM TO HELP US. We shall continue fighting until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled."[47]

The fight was the women's way of objecting to the colonial administration's attempt to destabilize existing structures, evidence of the independence and power which women wielded in pre-colonial Africa.[48]

Contrary to this fierceness, sisterhood, and independence documented of pre-colonial and colonial women, Dovey[49] observes that Nollywood, which became popular in 1992, introduced a 'voyeuristic,' 'pleasure-driven,' representation of women in films. A filmmaking model that objectified woman and fixated its gaze on her body. According to Ogundele, "in the representations of women is concentrated all the distortion of tradition compounded by contemporary male prejudices."[50] Ibbi's[51] study of the representation of women in Nigerian films illustrates how negative portrayals of women in these early video films have turned stereotypical, providing single narratives on women, their capabilities, and impact on society. Ogundele[52] adds that films written, directed, and produced by women in the early days of the industry, were also ingrained with sexist ideologies and stereotypical portrayals of women. This model, emulated across several African states—Ghana, Cameroun, and Kenya, among others, mirrored the shifts in power

47 Bastian, Misty: "'Vultures of the Marketplace': South-eastern Nigerian Women and Discourses of the Ogu Umunwaanyi (Women's War) of 1929," in: Allman, Jean/Geiger, Susan/Musisi, Nakanyike (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories,* Indiana: Indiana University Press 2002, pp.260-281, here p. 275.

48 Nzegwu, Nkiru: "Recovering Igbo Traditions: A Case for Indigenous Women's Organizations in Development," in: Nussbaum, Martha/Glover, Jonathan (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities,* ed. Nussbaum, New York: Oxford University Press 1995, pp. 444-466, https://doi.org/10.1093/0198289642.003.0021

49 Dovey, Lindiwe: "New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers," in: *Feminist Africa* 16(2012), pp. 18-36.

50 Ogundele, Wole: "From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater," in: Haynes, Jonathan (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films,* Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies 2000, pp. 111.

51 Ibbi, Andrew: "Stereotype Representation of Women in Nigerian Films," in: *Cinej Cinema Journal* 6(2017), pp. 50-70, https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2017.166

52 W. Ogundele: "From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater."

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839464861-011 - am 13.02.2026, 14:59:45. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

and exaggerated the breakdown of social structures on which women's coalitions were mostly formed,[53] thus destroying the foundation on which women's sisterhood archetype was built. But this mold representing women through patriarchal lenses was not solely created by Nollywood. LOVE BREWED IN THE AFRICAN POT (1980) defines acceptable 'qualities' of a 'good woman,' fitting her into a mold that defines 'perfect and peaceful' co-existence with men, in homes and society. The film further enforced its teaching through reward and punishment for adherers and dissenters.

In this film, Mr. Bensah educates his daughter on the qualities of a good woman:

"A good woman is a woman who cooks well, works hard for the home and family (*signs to his wife to top his tea*), a good woman does not talk back to her husband. Your mother is a good woman."

His daughter does not only talk back at home but refuses to marry according to his dictates. However, she is punished, not only with an unhappy home but ends up psychotic. Films such as LOVE BREWED IN THE AFRICAN POT deny women of power and ownership of their sexuality. Through such films, filmmakers contributed to further destroying the essence of sisterhood by stereotyping women.

By stereotyping women in films, filmmakers promoted an identity that sold male-desired values to women, pitching women against women and thus ensuring that the sister essence is not revived. Contemporary examples include, but are not limited to: MALAIKA NIGHTS (2014) in which women are portrayed as inept, docile, evil, and greedy, with a sister murdering her sibling to secure herself a man; FATUMA (2018) which defines a virtuous woman as enduring, forgiving, submissive, long-suffering as Fatuma who welcomes her reckless and unfaithful husband after he sells her crops to fund his mistress's education; THE UNKNOWN SAINT (2019), where women are faceless, voiceless and brunt-bearers; here, a man blames his wife for giving him a 'useless' son. The list is endless and the

53 Derrickson, Teresa: "Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emechta's *The Joys of Motherhood,"* in: *International Fiction Review*. 29(2002): n.p., https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7715/8772

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stereotype unrelenting. Petty,[54] Ogundele,[55] Okwuowulu,[56] among others, observe that female directors equally contribute to promoting the chauvinist stereotypical female construct established by men. Thus, rather than change the narratives as African women attain some levels of emancipation, such films only reinvent them, recycling the docile, powerless, subservient, passive, and weak woman narrative. For example, in CHIEF DADDY (2018), Lady Kay Beecroft, the elegant wife of the multimillionaire, Chief Beecroft, goes completely bankrupt immediately after the death of her husband. His daughters, Tinu and Teni begin to fail in their business without an explanation. This recycles the popular Nollywood narrative of women who once lived in the cities and in comfort only to relocate to the villages or slums and suffer following the deaths of their husbands. Like Olayiwola,[57] one may indeed argue that this misrepresentation is unintentional, oftentimes an attempt to discourage unacceptable behavior in the audience. However, it also 'unintentionally' promotes stereotypes and profiling.

4 THE RECAST: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN

As noted earlier, female filmmakers equally promote stereotypical representations of women. Some, however, are becoming conscious of how this lopsided portrayal contributes to molding women, and raising girl children to believe that such misrepresentation truly defines them. Female film directors and producers, actresses, and scriptwriters are becoming more aware of how women's representation in films impacts on the wider perception of women in society. Films have been used successfully to create an identity for women by molding them as desirable to men

54 Petty, Sheila: ""How an African Woman Can Be": African Women Filmmakers Construct Women," in: *Discourse* 18(1996): pp. 72-88.

55 W. Ogundele: "From Folk Opera to Soap Opera: Improvisations and Transformations in Yoruba Popular Theater."

56 Okwuowulu, Charles: "Nollywood and the (Re)Construction of Femininity in Female Narratives: A Critical Appraisal," in: *African Performance Review* 11(2019), pp. 41-56.

57 Olayiwola, Elizabeth: "New Nollywood and the Female Gaze: Changing Female Stereotypes in Nigerian Cinema," in: *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40(2021), pp. 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2021.1984822

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and their bodies have been commodified for the male gaze and sexual pleasure.[58] Through enculturation and socialization, the new values and virtues presented in films become the defining qualities of ideal versus loose women in society. As Azeez explains, films

"[…] are devoted to controlling and dominating women and they do this in such a way as to make the control and domination seem natural and given, but with the power to propel women to internalize their objectives."[59]

In this section, I wish to engage with how African cinema is leveraging on cultural cross-pollination, filmmakers' self-consciousness, and increasing opportunities and awareness, to re-position the woman by countering internalized stereotypical representations of the African woman. While molding women into conformity, stereotyping became the medium's way of projecting an identity and through reward and punishment, the audience is informed about what is expected and acceptable. A reversal of this process requires an unlearning of established ethos. It demands deliberate or purposeful storytelling which counters existing narrative on and around the woman. Contemporary filmmakers, especially women, are becoming unapologetic in their representation of fellow women in character and personality. In so doing, the audience gets varied narratives on the woman, rather than the lone binary which Chari[60] categorizes as Free Agents (e.g., the femme fatale, aggressive, over-sexed woman) and Boxed Women (e.g., the docile, subordinated, dependent, long-suffering woman). The author argues that lone-binary films offer the female audience no role models to aspire towards. Sadly, this representation has become the norm and a stereotypical definition of women in films; a chauvinistic approach geared towards manipulation and control of womenfolk. Hence, Olujinmi[61] urges that a more realistic and balanced image of women in society should be presented.

58 Mulvey, Laura: "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in: *Screen* 16(1975), pp. 6-18, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

59 Azeez, Adesina: "Audience Perception of Portrayal of Women in Nigerian Home Video Films," in: *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 2(2010): p. 201.

60 Chari, Tendai: "Representation of Women in Selected Zimbabwean Films and Videos," in: *Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera,* ed. Ogunleye, Foluke. Manzini: African Publishers 2003, pp.128-145.

61 Olujinmi, Bunmi: "The Image of Women in Yoruba Films: An Evaluation," in: Ogunleye, Foluke (ed.), *Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera,* Manzini: African Publishers 2003, pp. 119-127.

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A change in narrative is currently observable across film industries in Africa. Films from male directors such Abderrahmane Sissako, Joseph Gaï Ramaka, Moussa Sène Absa, Jean-Marie Teno, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, among others, have portrayed female protagonists who are multidimensional and un-stereotypical. Dovey notes that the females in their films are "unconventional, rounded, sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes fighters."[62] The author describes their films as male-authored feminist cinema, representing women as strong and unrestricted, films that uphold the value of women and appear critical of patriarchy. But the rise of women in the film industry is contributing 'an own voice' to recasting women, their roles, and perceptions in films. They are turning the tables on stereotypical portrayals of women, and in some cases, offering exemplars for African women of the future. While these films are not completely without problematic female representations,[63] I choose to examine the positive or at least, conversation-inducing, un-stereotypical portrayals and how these are countering the status quo. I will draw examples from films to illustrate how contemporary representations of women can be read as attempts to recast modern and future African women.

In the sci-fi short, PUMZI (2010), Wanuri Kahiu projects the image of a nurturing female lead who is also pre-emptive and pursues her intuition, against established authority, to contribute to salvaging the eco-system. In I SING OF A WELL (2009), Leila Djansi addresses a number of issues including the helplessness of women in the face of tradition and customs. Although Djansi offers no respite or solution to the problem her women face in their traditionally patriarchal African society—like the choice of whom to marry, cost of dowry, interference of external family members in their affairs, etc., she creates strong women who negotiate around rather than succumb to these challenges. Negotiating around patriarchal bottlenecks or Nego-feminism,[64] is best reflected in Mmabatho Montsho's GROOM'S PRICE (2017). In a previous study, I observed that Montsho's use of tight spaces illustrates the intrusiveness and rigidity of some African traditions as well as the futility of negotiations[65]—the problem never goes away. This results from a single-sided negotiation—women negotiating a place of 'equity' in a rather rigid culture.

62 L. Dovey: "New Looks: The Rise of African Women Filmmakers," here p. 19.

63 Ibid.

64 O. Nnaemeka "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's Way."

65 Ezepue, Ezinne: "Mmabatho Montsho, director. THE GROOM'S PRICE. 2017. 25 minutes. English/Zulu. South Africa. The National Film & Video Foundation. No price reported," in: *African Studies Review* 66(2022), pp. 1-3, https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.108

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Filmmakers quite often represent women in non-controversial topics, like politics and nationhood in Jenna Bass' THE TUNNEL (2010, Zimbabwe), violence and the female body in Raja Amari's DOHAWA (2009, Tunisia), custom and tradition in Oshosheni Hiveluah's TJITJI: THE HIMBA GIRL (2015, Namibia), career choice in Salla Sorri and Jessie Chisi's BETWEEN RINGS: THE ESTHER PHIRI STORY (2014, Zambia), child marriage in Enah Johnscott's THE FISHERMAN'S DIARY (2020, Cameroun), gender hierarchy in Gretel Marín's BLOW IN THE BACKYARD (2021, Angola), gender role in Ramata Toulaye Sy's ASTEL (2021, Senegal). Some filmmakers have also attempted to tackle certain 'forbidden' issues through their films. For example, Wanuri Kahiu's RAFIKI (2019) and Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim's ÌFÉ (2020), Kenyan and Nigerian LGBT romantic films, and the duo, Bailey and Onuorah's documentary about being queer in Nigeria, THE LEGEND OF THE UNDERGROUND (2021). While the documentary gets an HBO distribution (unavailable in Nigeria), Kahiu's and Adie's films were banned from screening in their countries. This goes to illustrate the institutional and cultural obstacles which hinder progressive ideas and movements, including feminism and gender equality.[66]

In Nollywood's Netflix original four-part mini-series, BLOOD SISTERS (2022), the Nigerian woman, especially the contemporary woman, is given a new ability, dream, ambition, and a character with depth. Created by a team that includes strong women such as Mosunmola (Mo) Abudu, Tamara Aihie, and Zelipa Zulu, BLOOD SISTERS eschews a number of stereotypes. In my reading of the limited series, I pointed out that although some stereotypes persist among the aging parents, the young women, Kemi and Sarah, share a bond and sisterhood which is tested to its limits.[67] Approaching gender issues from the crime genre, BLOOD SISTERS promotes the sister-archetype by creatively suggesting that when women are supportive of each other, they achieve more. Unlike in Genevieve Nnaji's LIONHEART (2018) where the protagonist, Adaeze, struggles alone to prove herself 'enough' to oversee her father's transportation company, Kemi and Sarah have each other. While this does not make their journey any easier, it confutes the

66 For a society to become fully progressive, it must be inclusive and the benefits of an inclusive society, according to Lutfiyya & Bartlett (2020: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1022), are multifaceted, including social and economic benefits. The duo argues that incremental social change, reflected in policies, must be embraced to bring about transformative social change.

67 Ezepue, Ezinne: "BLOOD SISTERS: Why the Mini-Series on Netflix Sets a New Pace for Nollywood," in: *The Conversations*, accessed 10/11/2022, https://theconversation.com/amp/blood-sisters-why-the-mini-series-on-netflix-sets-a-new-pace-for-nollywood-184072. Published 02/06/2022.

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existing narrative that a woman is her fellow woman's worst enemy. Unlike films made to mold women into conformity, these films do not indulge in scenes where women idle away discussing men and their desires. Often scoring high on the Bechdel test,[68] films like WHO IS THE BOSS (2020), THE VOICELESS (2020), OLOTURE (2020), and limited series BLOOD SISTERS (2022), KING OF BOYS (2018/2021), among others are providing a new mold for recasting the contemporary Nigerian woman.

But beyond passing a Bechdel Test, feminist films advocate that the social, legal, political, and economic rights of women be the same and equal to men's.[69] The author adds that such films are intended to inspire and start a conversation on and around women, their lived experiences, and their status. The aim of such films is not to un-stereotypically represent women, but to educate the audience about social inequality. Rungano Nyoni achieves this through her film, I AM NOT A WITCH (2017), which mirrors a culture practiced in some parts of Africa[70] where women are branded witches and discriminated against. Unlike the aged grandmother 'witch' in Idrissa Ouédraogo YAABA (1989), the protagonist of I AM NOT A WITCH is a nine-year-old orphan Shula, labeled a witch following a number of unfortunate coincidences. She, along with other older women tagged 'witches,' is exploited and inhumanely treated. Despite the care and support she gets from her

68 Bechdel Test, named after the American cartoonist, Alison Bechdel, is a set of structural criteria which evaluates women's involvement and dialogue in films using simple quantitative formula. For a film to be feminist, it must pass three tests —have at least 2 female characters, who talk to each, about something other than a man. For more information, please refer to O'Meara: "What 'The Bechdel Test' Doesn't tell us: Examining Women's Verbal and Vocal (dis)empowerment in Cinema," in: *Feminist Media Studies* 16(6) (2016): pp. 1120-1123, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1234239

69 Budowski, Jade: "So What Really Makes A Film 'Feminist'?" in: *Decider* 2018. Accessed 16/07/2022, https://decider.com/2018/02/19/what-really-makes-a-film-feminist/

70 For more academic insight into the practice and understandings of witchcraft in Africa, refer to Kroesbergen-Kamps: "Witchcraft After Modernity: Old and New Directions in the Study of Witchcraft in Africa," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10(3) (2020), pp. 860-873; and for witchcraft in the Zambia: Mufuzi: "The Practice of Witchcraft and the Changing Patterns of its Paraphernalia in the Light of Technologically Produced Goods as Presented by Livingstone Museum, 1930s-1973," in: *Zambia Social Science Journal* 5(1) (2014), pp.50-71, https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/vol5/iss1/5

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fellow 'witches,' Shula's depression mounts. She leaves the community, in search of liberation, but returns dead, murdered for being a 'witch'. Like OLOTURE (2020) which explores social injustice and inequality against women, I AM NOT A WITCH not only advances the sister-archetype but also encourages conversations around inequality, misogyny, misrepresentation and profiling. GG7733, a contributor to a YouTube conversation on I AM NOT A WITCH, understands this as a problem unspecific to African society. Describing the film as a metaphor, she opines:

"I can relate to this girl's (Shula's) character, just someone trying to live a life, just getting too tired to fight anymore. Can you just be left alone to be yourself and not constantly have to fight someone else's hatred, someone else's fear, or any number of ways in which a woman is objectified as a female. This is an everyday, every kind of society, every echelon of society, every woman's problem."[71]

A successfully feminist film must raise such consciousness in the viewers—a realization that fellow women are not always enemies or contenders, but fellow victims of stereotypical representations and profiling. An African feminist film must achieve this purpose of addressing such issues—initiating a conversation around women's rights and well-being and importantly, reigniting the sisterhood and strength which stereotyping and profiling of women have destroyed. Shula's death motivates the 'witches' to dare to live free in solidarity, a bleak and uncertain future notwithstanding.

These uncertainties and the courage to face them serve as motivation for contemporary African filmmakers who tell stories about women. If there exists a connection between the passive or docile women and the type of films promoted in the past, it is expected that a new generation of women will be formed by the types of films currently being made. Docility and passivity in women will yield to boldness in the future if and when Africans are adequately educated on gender equity and fairness. This position explains the need for women to retake and reform the place of ideology formation. With her award-winning film, ADAM (2019), Maryam Touzani tells the story of two women struggling with their truths and realities in a society that is brutally oppressive and merciless to women. Through an exploration of their personal traumas, especially that of the unwed pregnant Samia, Touzani advocates for a re-examination of prejudices against women. While Touzani only re-enacts women's plight in her film, demonstrating women's inner

71 Get into Film: "I am Not a Witch Interview with Rungano Nyoni," YouTube Video, 7:23,2017, accessed5/07/2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE8eUU7SkWo

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strength as they face the challenges of existing daily in an unforgiving patriarchal society, Donovan Marsh's I AM ALL GIRLS (2021) portrays women taking action to fix their problems. The protagonist, Ntombizonke (Ntombi) Bapai, trafficked, sexually abused, and held captive as a sex slave from when she was a little girl until she's admitted into the South African Police Academy, is on a mission to track down her abusers. Unlike her colleague Jodie who is emotionally traumatized from rescuing and sometimes failing to rescue young kidnapped and trafficked children, Ntombi strategically avenges all five of the girls who were trafficked with her. Ntombi dies unavenged, prompting Jodie to go undercover. One may question the sensibility of self-justice or taking laws into one's hands and killing offenders and how this makes one a hero. As Korsgaard[72] suggests, taking laws into one's hands is both morally and politically problematic. An important question, however, for many societies in Africa where justice is more often denied than served, is how should offenders be discouraged in a society where the offended gets no justice. With widespread corruption, and a lack of public trust in law enforcement agencies, citizens, Faull[73] maintains, will more likely engage in illicit activities, avoid tax, resort to violence or take laws into their hands to solve problems. While Faull writes for South African society, this reality is widespread across African states, including Nigeria. But can film promote a change if the system remains unchanging?

In Nigeria, Kenneth Gyang's OLOTURE (2020) tells a similar story—of sex trafficking. Concerned over the rising number of women being trafficked in the country, Ehi, a young journalist, goes undercover, pretending to be a prostitute, Oloture, to uncover the criminal gang behind the multimillion-dollar business. Although she gets her story, she does not stop, despite the impending danger and unknown future threatening her. Having been battered, raped, and lied to, she is further motivated to discover the fate of her fellow women. I AM ALL GIRLS and OLOTURE are based on true life experiences, and these stories provide an insight into the multidimensionality of women and their struggles beyond the stereotypes used to profile and define women. In Ntombi and Oloture, the audiences see heroes in women too, inspiring a future of female heroes.

72 Korsgaard, Christine: "Taking the Law into Our Own Hands: Kant on the Right to Revolution," in: Korsgaard, Christine (ed.), *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology,* New York: Oxford University Press 2008, pp. 233-262, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199552733.003.0009

73 Faull, Andrew: "South Africa's Renewal Starts with the Rule of Law," *Institute for Security Studies* 2021, accessed 12/03/2023, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-africas-renewal-begins-with-the-rule-of-law

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Alanna Brown looks beyond heroines and explores the theme of sisterhood in TREES OF PEACE (2022). Women have been persistently stereotyped as antagonistic toward fellow women. The moral is that women are not to be trusted, but men are. TREES OF PEACE, is set in the Rwandan 'ethnic cleansing' genocide of 1994 when hundreds of thousands of people—men, women, and children, were massacred and the surviving were left in hiding for several weeks without food or shelter. Four women from different cultural and social backgrounds—Annick, Peyton, Mutesi and Jeanette, build an unbreakable friendship while hiding in a small underground storage underneath Annick's kitchen. It was tumultuous at first, but the sisterhood which they built in these 81 days of hiding sustained them. Strengthened by this sisterhood and the new bond she has developed, Mutesi, previously sexually abused by her uncle and told to be silent about it by older women, vows never to be hurt again by a man. Also based on a true story, TREES OF PEACE indicates that the revival of sisterhood among women is quintessential to empowerment and progressive feminist struggles in Africa.

Filmmakers such as these mentioned above, both male and female, are redefining the African woman through their films. According to Hooks,[74] they are "talking back" both to audience and content creators, a reassertion of women as subjects, not objects, proffering their own definition of women's reality, shaping their identity and the conception of it, making their history and telling their story from their perspective. This perspective, Baker adds, creatively opposes "mainstream representations of Black femaleness."[75] How women are represented in films matters and impacts how they are perceived. Hence Hall, Evans & Nixon's[76] submission that meanings are formulated through representations, including the words used to describe them, stories told about them as well as images produced on them. Filmmakers who are attempting to recast women through their films target reconstruction of meaning and disruption of "the unidimensional images"[77] that control their experiences and opportunities, thus projecting a resistance to objectification, stereotyping, and oppression.

74 Hooks, Bell: *Talking Back: Inking Feminist, Inking Black,* Cambridge: South End Press 1989.

75 Baker, Christina: *Contemporary Black Women Filmmakers and the Art of Resistance*, Columbus: Ohio State University 2018, p. 3.

76 Hall, Stuart/Evans, Jessica/Nixon, Sean (eds.): *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2nd ed), Milton Keynes: Sage Publications Ltd 2013.

77 C. Baker: Contemporary Black Women Filmmakers and the Art of Resistance, p. 3.

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5 THE FUTURE: WOMEN IN FILM AND THE EMANCIPATION STRUGGLE

Harrow[78] once wondered why the active body of female African filmmakers, like Safi Faye, Anne-Laure Folly, Sarah Maldoror, were not disrupting the established norm or what I refer to here as stereotypes. Putting this wonderment in context and the filmmakers' times in perspective, Riesco[79] argues that their tenacity laid the foundation for the more daring representations observable in contemporary African cinema. This section will argue that the future of women in film and the emancipation struggle lies with what women filmmakers do with the medium presently. In the section above, I attempted to establish that filmmakers are creating disruptors, heroines, or models by representing the multidimensional challenges women encounter in contemporary African society. Through these films, the audiences are made aware that women too can be multifaceted and elusive.[80] What and how much this achieves will be determined by the sustainability of this representation. The promise in the contemporary representation of women in films and filmmaking heightened by a growing global culture offers a hopeful future.

With the success of ADAM, Touzani hopes to inspire women filmmakers to lend their voices to the course through their stories. While she believes much more change is desired both in the perception and representation of women, she's optimistic that change is on course.[81] As Cook and Johnston[82] discuss in their critical

78 Harrow, Kenneth (ed.): "Women with open eyes, Women of Stone and Hammers: Western Feminist and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice," in: Harrow, Kenneth (ed.), *Postcolonial and Feminist Readings,* Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, Inc. 1999, pp. 225- 240.

79 Riesco, Beatriz: "The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation," in: *Buala* 2011, accessed 22/11/2022, https://www.buala.org/en/afroscreen/the-woman-in-contemporary-african-cinema-protagonism-and-representation

80 B. Riesco: "The Woman in Contemporary African Cinema: Protagonism and Representation."

81 Stewart, Sophia: "Cannes 2019 Women Directors: Meet Maryam Touzani —'Adam'," in: *Women and Hollywood* 2019, accessed 25/07/2022, https://womenandhollywood.com/cannes-2019-women-directors-meet-maryam-touzani-adam/

82 Cook, Pam/Johnston, Claire: "The place of Woman in the cinema of Raoul Walsh," in Nichols, Bill (ed.), *Movies and Methods* Vol.II, Los Angeles: University of California Press 1985, pp. 379-390.

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strategies to realizing the aims and objectives of women's movement, mobilizing the media for women's struggle is essential. The number of female filmmakers is rising across film industries in Africa and some female filmmakers are actively advocating for and supporting the inclusion of more females in the industry. From Seko Shamte's all-female production team for BINTI (2021, Tanzania), to networks such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, Sisters Working in Film and Television of South Africa, and individual filmmakers and producers, female Africans are getting more opportunities to empower themselves and others through self-expression in films. A new generation of African females is on the rise, refusing to be complacent, docile, or profiled by existing 'unagreeable' norms disguised as traditions or culture. Kenyan filmmaker Dorothy Ghettuba insists that the time is now for women to raise their voices that need to be heard.[83] But the task of altering the future is not easy. Head of programming at Mosunmola (Mo) Abudu's EbonyLife Media, Heidi Uys, offers, "As women, and as trailblazers, we have a mammoth task ahead of ourselves because there isn't an instance as a woman where you don't have to prove to men that you're up to the job."[84]

Kemi Adetiba, writer and director of Nollywood's most sensational, high grossing non-comedy film—KING OF BOYS (2018/2021)—argues that every woman needs the positive impact that these films and representations are promoting. In an interview, she describes her worldview as a woman:

> "I don't think the way everybody else does. I grew up with a strong mum that excelled in her career, she excelled in her personal life. I am used to having strong women mentors around me. I have been mentored by them, tutored by them so I can't distinguish that a man is supposed to do something."[85]

Kemi Adetiba evidences this in the creation of the anti-hero, Eniola Salami, in KING OF BOYS (2018/2021). Young Eniola escapes from domestic violence and is trafficked as a sex slave until she meets Alhaji Salami who keeps her as his mistress. Eniola learns from the unfairness of life, advancing from a passive victim of

83 Vourlias, Christopher: "For the Women Driving the Booming African Screen Industries, the 'Time IS Now'," in: *Variety* 2022, accessed 22/11/2022, https://variety.com/2022/tv/global/african-women-driving-film-tv-boom-1235185815/amp/

84 Ibid., n.p.

85 Ukiwe, Urenna: "King Siblings: Kemi and Remi Adetiba," in: *Life: The Guardian Magazine* 2018, accessed 26/7/2022, https://guardian.ng/life/king-siblings-kemi-and-remi-adetiba/, n.p.

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circumstances to an active anti-hero. She leverages every opportunity, growing with her personal experiences, remaining human and even compassionate sometimes, toughening up with every challenge and setback, masterminding and manipulating incidents until she marries Salami and occupies his position as head of the criminal underworld lords following his death. Eniola becomes powerful, effectively competing with men in a male-dominated underworld while raising her children and growing her business empire and political ambitions. Eniola effectively balances her personal and career lives, safe for the sibling rivalry between her children and her son's overbearing sense of entitlement. Audience members have expressed awe and admiration for the character of Eniola Salami. In her review of this character, Animashaun opines that Eniola "is one of the most important female characters in Nollywood history, as we rarely ever see a woman in as much control as she is, daring to cross as many boundaries as she did."[86] Animashaun, like many other viewers and scholars, including my position earlier in this chapter, adds that Nollywood portrays women as either inherently good or inherently bad, translating societal views and impositions on women to the screen with a melodramatic exaggeration. Eniola Salami is human, complex, and flawed, a perfect anti-hero who celebrates her femininity and womanhood while subverting societal expectations and returning stronger in the sequel despite losing everything in the first part. My position must not be read as an exaltation of Eniola as a perfect role model, but a reading of the portrayal of women in a film that subverts existing stereotypes, making her multidimensional and giving her depth. Osakpolor[87] reads Eniola's character as an extension of the 'crafty and deadly' woman stereotype which abounds in Nigerian and African narratives. However, despite her flaws and weaknesses, Adetiba sustains Eniola's ambition, strengthening rather than breaking her with every tragedy she encounters. Eniola is shaped by the circumstances surrounding her, and she creates defenses in order to survive as a single mother and build a future for her children. Eniola is not a role model considering her ruthlessness, but she commands conversations around the potentials and capabilities of women masked under expectations of passivity and subservience.

86 Animashaun, Damilola: "Alhaja Eniola Salami is One of Nollywood's Most Important Female Characters," in: *Native,* 22/03/2022, accessed 22/11/2022, https://thenativemag.com/looks-like-king-boys-sequel-well-way/, n.p.

87 Osakpolor, Emwinromwankhoe: "Portrayal of Women in Contemporary Nollywood Films: Isoken and King of Boys in Focus," in: *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 9 (2021), pp. 117-145, DOI 10.5195/cinej.2021.299.

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Reminded daily of her past, Eniola molds her adopted daughter, Kemi, into a miniature version of herself, while her son, Kitan, is spoiled, overbearing, and feels entitled. Kemi is raised to be anything but the stereotypical woman expected to be passive and enduring while waiting for a prince to rescue her through marriage. One could read Eniola's concern over Kemi more than Kitan as a shift from society's obsession with male children and their welfare, a call to give attention to the girl child, especially her future ambitions, potential, and contribution to society. But this equally raises questions about the preparedness of male children for the emancipation of girls. Kitan is not exactly a reflection of Eniola's failure as a mother as typical African films would make women believe—a woman who is career-driven often neglects her children. Kitan is a reflection of a society that accords privileges, not based on merit, but on gender and sometimes, age. Kitan does not work hard at improving himself because he is certain that, being the only male child of his mother, her wealth is automatically his to inherit. This mentality is portrayed in Femi Beecroft (CHIEF DADDY, 2018), who, believing himself to be an only son and thus heir apparent of his wealthy father's empire, does not build a career for himself. This male-child supremacy is thus being challenged. Biodun Stephen's BREADED LIFE (2021), for example, focuses on male-child supremacy and their feelings of entitlement. The dramedy tells the story of a young man whose life is altered following an accident. Here, Biodun creates a mother who does not succumb to and take over guilt as a result of her son's wrong personal choices. Films like BREADED LIFE and KING OF BOYS are countering the stereotypical narrative that every let-down (e.g., marital failure, childlessness, infidelity, family problems, domestic violence, etc.) emanate from women. Like misogyny, this knowledge has become systemic, internalized through socialization and thus no longer feels wrong, oppressive or prejudiced.

With a rise in films that promote emancipated women's tales, filmmakers are educating young females who will build another generation of stronger women. Narratives from these filmmakers hint that it is not unhealthy, unethical, uncultured, or abnormal for women to want/have it all and still be strong. As told in Chinasa Onuzo's *Who's the Boss* (2020), being a strong woman is not about not needing help and support from others—men and women alike, but building on and maximizing one's inner strength for empowerment. The woman in African films of today must continue to be empowered and emancipated in order to birth a new generation of empowered and emancipated females. Through film, women and men can be enlightened about, and prepared for, gender equity. White[88] avers that

88 White, Patricia: "Feminism and Film," *Oxford Guide To Film Studies* 1998, pp.117-131, accessed 17/07/2022, https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-6lm-media/18

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the presence of women in filmmaking forms a prominent model of resistance and opposition to stereotyping and the status quo. Their works will serve as a reference for the theoretical effort feminists in Africa have contributed toward attaining gender equality. Women must be consciously promoted outside of traditional or stereotypical gender roles. That way, filmmakers can attain a reversal of stereotypes and build a future where women compete in fairness with men. The journey to this anticipated future is slow, but steady, "we don't have equality, but we really do have increasingly improved representation, and we've got to continue to fight for that."[89] This is the assurance for a future of emancipated women.

6 CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to interrogate changes in the representation of women in African films. Here, I discussed how African women in pre-colonial Africa upheld and cherished a sisterhood that united them, a sisterhood that embraced women from across tongues, tribes, and races. Colonialism however introduced a new definition and role for the woman, one which further reinforced existing patriarchal dominance over her. With the attainment of independence across Africa, film continued to be used as a medium to entertain and educate the audience on these new definitions. Discussed under the mold, the recast, and the future, this study has attempted to put in context and capture the changes in representations of women, especially following the active involvement of female and feminist filmmakers.

This study finds that the active involvement of women in African cinema is not birthing a cinema of opposition, but rather a cinema of redress. Women are subtly challenging unwholesome definitions of women, putting in their place more rounded and inspiring ones. The participation of women in filmmaking, especially as directors, scriptwriters and producers, is leading to changes in the on-screen representation of women, rewriting the misrepresentation which women have received both in colonial and postcolonial Africa. By so doing, these films are educating the audience about a 'new' woman, shaping their thoughts and perceptions of women of the future. These filmmakers are countering established stereotypes, creating female characters with depth and purpose. They are raising the argument that women are and can be more than the stereotypes projected through these films. Drawing examples from contemporary films which portray women

89 C. Vourlias: "For the Women Driving the Booming African Screen Industries, the 'Time IS Now'," n.p.

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differently, this chapter concludes that a narrative and portrayal twist is observable in these African films which, if sustained, would impact positively on gender equality struggle in Africa. Gender equality will in turn lead to better education, and contribute to individual, collective, and national growth as well as the advancement of society. What would be necessary is further studies interrogating the preparedness of traditional African men for this equality of genders and emancipation of women as well as the changes they will force on African cultures.

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