

Rethinking the Image of Women in Recent Nigerian Video-films: The Example of Chinwe Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to interrogate the image of women presented to the Nigerian audience in recent Nigerian video-films against the backdrop of some earlier studies that affirm prejudiced and damaging portrayals of Nigerian women. Chinwe Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs* has been used as a representative sample of this new trend that projects women largely in positive light. The paper posits that there is, indeed, a need to further re-invent the image of women with a view to negotiating a better space for them, thereby ensuring gender balance. It, nevertheless, cautions against productions that will fall victims of negative, biased and/or inaccurate portrayals of the male gender, thus, rendering efforts of Nigerian video-filmmakers counter-productive.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that in the world of today, the popularity of video-films is already phenomenal. In many parts of Africa especially, the video-film has become the most accessible form of popular entertainment (Ogunleye 2003: ix; Ebewo 2003: 27). Interestingly, of several African nations where video-films have registered their presence, Nigeria stands most prominent, evident in how not less than 2000 video-films are released yearly, making the country ranked second among the filmmaking nations of the world (Ekwuazi, 2014: 335). In fact, the nation's massive film industry, dubbed 'Nollywood', is reportedly to now worth some N853.9bn (\$5.1bn, •3.7bn), constituting 1.2 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Products (GDP) (Abraham 2014)

The use of the video equipment as a narrative medium of popular entertainment in Nigeria had its springboard in the untimely demise of feature (celluloid) film production in the country over two decades ago. As will be recalled, indigenous feature film production began in the 1970s (Haynes 1997: 1; Okome 1997: 27), 'not only in reaction to and rejection of alien cultural domination but also to reinstate our own cultural heritage and re-orientate our own people suffering from colonial mentality' (Adesanya 1997: 13). Before then, both the colonial government and the early European missionaries were quick in exploiting the resources of the film. While the colonial

film unit churned out propaganda films aimed at justifying colonisation, as well as stirring up the colonised to willingly join the wars against Nazi Germany, the Church imported and exhibited both religious and non-religious films for the converts (Ekwuazi 1991: 2-3); operating on the principle that European “civilization” and “Christianity” hung together “as cause and effect, as root and branch” (Adedeji 1971: 25).

The imperative need to produce indigenous feature films, therefore, gave birth to an intellectual movement initiated by a handful of Nigerian writers and private film and performing arts graduates (Adesanya 1997: 13). However, the declining value of the naira, the resultant unwieldy cost of production coupled with the lack of proper marketing channels to guarantee the possibility of breaking even at the box office led to the untimely demise of feature film production in the country. As a consequence, some filmmakers briefly engaged in reversal filmmaking (Ekwuazi 2014: 335; Adesanya 1997: 15). The death of feature films production eventually led to the emergence of films shot on video which began in the late 80’s out of a desperate desire by producers to remain in the motion picture business (Adesanya 1997: 16).

Since its emergence as a popular means of mass entertainment, scholars’ engagements with Nigerian video-films have been in diverse proportions, ranging from scrutinising the Nigerian film industry (see Layiwola 2014; Brown 2014; Ekwuazi 2014 and 1991; Haynes and Okome 1997; Adesanya 1997), the Language question in Nigerian video-films (see Adeoti and Lawal 2014; Oyewo 2003), ethical foundations of Nigerian Video films and the challenges thereof (see Bello 2014; Enemaku 2003; Popoola 2003), to the image of women projected in Nigerian video films (see Azeez 2014, Anyanwu 2013; Idegu 2011, Okome 1997). Central to our engagement in this paper, however, is the image of women presented in Chinwe Egwuagu’s *Mr. & Mrs.*, foregrounding certain aspects we find fascinating due to their not too common traits.

Specifically, the image of women as wives and mothers-in-law will be focused on. Among other things, the implications of such recreated images of women will be interrogated. Of course, as earlier pointed out, we are not oblivious of other important writings on the image of women in Nigerian home videos. However, since most earlier studies essentially focused on the negative portrayals of women in these videos (criticising them for portraying women as evil, greedy, helpless, tempestuous, witches, husband snatchers/‘poisoners’, prostitutes, victims of men’s inordinate ambition, etc.) with only a cursory exploration of women projected in positive light in such films (see Anyanwu 2013; Idegu 2011), it is desired that the present study will be an advantageous chapter as it is intended to act as a provocation to further serious studies of changing reflection(s) of women in Nigerian video-films, while also advocating for more productions of such films.

Theoretical Framework

Our conceptual orientation for this study is hinged on Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory and Noel Carroll’s *Image Approach*. Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory posits that people learn new behaviours by vicariously experiencing the actions of others. According to Bandura, there are two basic modes of learning: direct experience and power of example. He, however, notes the implication of direct experience:

Experience is a tough teacher. Trial-and-error learning is tedious and hazardous when errors produce injurious consequence. Much of what we learn is through the power of modelling. Smart people learn from their successes and mistakes. Smarter people learn from the successes and mistakes of others. We shortcut the tedious and sometimes hazardous trial-and-error learning by using social modelling (Bandura 31).

Social Learning Theory states further that people learn not only in formal situations such as in classrooms, but also by observing models. To Barker, the largest portion of learning to adapt to society takes place through such observational learning. Models employed in this observational learning can be real life people or mass media characters (such as in video-films) (8). As Barker further points out, Social Learning Theory postulates that positive rewards have a vicarious effect upon the observer (in this case, the audience) and can motivate audience members into practising related behaviour(s). Similarly, punishing a role model for engaging in a socially undesirable act provides a vicarious experience for the observer (audience) and can restrain his or her practice of the same behaviour. This adoption has been called *modelling* as it is based on the role model's conduct.

The other theory adopted for this study is Noel Carroll's *image approach*, which is predicated on the possibility of studying the portrayal of women in film without recourse to psychoanalysis which early feminists embraced, but in finding the theoretical grounding for it in the theory of emotions. The theory states that people learn to identify their emotional states in terms of paradigm scenarios, which, in turns, also shape their emotions. In this case, the study of the image of women in film might be viewed as the search for paradigm scenarios that are available in our culture and which, by being available, may come to shape emotional responses to women.

Carroll points out that most paradigm scenarios are acquired through sources such as: observation and memory; stories told us on our caretaker's knee; stories told us by friends and school teachers; gossip, newspapers articles, self-help books, TV shows, novels, plays, and films, among others, and that these scenarios may have influence on our emotional behaviour (356). In Carroll's view, male emotional responses to women, for instance, will be shaped by the scenarios that they bring to those relations.

Carroll has provided us with different approaches to studying the image of women in film. These include: identifying negative recurring images of women that may have some influence on the emotional response of men (and by extension, women) to women; studying positive images of women in film with a belief that this may play a role in positive emotional responses to real women; interrogating recurring images of women in film with marked frequency, without commitments to how women always appear in film, even as it makes no claims to how all (male) viewers respond to those images; identifying recurring image of passive women in film as a statistical regularity without claiming any over-reaching generalizations, emphasising how this sort of imagery reinforces a range of paradigm scenarios which mobilize a wide variety of oppressive emotional responses by men toward women (357- 358).

In adopting these theories for our analysis, efforts will be concentrated on: interrogating the various images of women offered to the (Nigerian) audience in the selected film. This shall be achieved by examining the state(s) of some female characters in the film, their actions and/or reactions to the prevailing circumstance(s) in which they find themselves. Such depictions will be considered as both paradigm scenarios that are capable of defining emotional responses of men (and even women) to women, and also as emotional responses of the film writer and/or producer based on the paradigm scenarios that are available in the culture. That way, we will be able to engage in a debate as to the possible effect(s) of such portrayals on the psyche of the audience, while also noting the possible backlash of the roles assigned to the male gender in the film.

Telling the Story: A Cursory Note on *Mr & Mrs*

Mr & Mrs is an English language film, set within the domestic sphere, with a focus on issues that can affect healthy marriages. Specifically, the film beams a searchlight on two families, Susan and Kenneth Abbah's family, and Linda and Charles' family. The Abbahs' marital problems spring from the bossy and arrogant nature of Charles who decides that Susan should be a full house wife, believing this will prevent her from being negatively influenced by others. Though Susan, at first, dutifully agrees and carries out her conjugal duties, she later gets bogged down and makes known her dissatisfaction. She then pays a visit to Mrs Brown, a certified counsellor, who assures her of the importance of communication in marriage.

As the film progresses, Kenneth threatens Susan with a divorce. Kenneth's mother surfaces just then, counselling Kenneth to postpone his intention so as not to jeopardise his father's political ambition. Susan is spurred by this revelation, demanding an instant divorce. She, nevertheless, agrees to a secret divorce that will still ensure the two living under the same roof without any conjugal obligation.

Susan uses the liberty granted her to tune herself up, sleeping out at times, and also keeping a 'boyfriend'. Changes in Susan's lifestyle surprises and adversely affects Kenneth who later comes begging. Since Susan's acts are but a decoy to make Kenneth realise his mistakes, she agrees to a renewal of the vow between the two.

In what appears to be a sub-plot in the film, the 'loving and understanding' family of Linda and Charles is also focused on. Linda has an inordinate ambition of becoming a Regional Manager of her company, hence has less time for her family. She finds out that Charles is sleeping with their maid, Kate. Charles seizes the opportunity, confessing to being a good husband because Kate meets his needs. Linda realises her errors, and with the help of Susan who tactically sends Kate away, she reconciles with Charles.

Portraits of the Woman in *Mr & Mrs*

Mr & Mrs opens with a kitchen scene, revealing a worn out Susan peeling yam as she prepares dinner for Kenneth who arrives from work, then lapses into anger when he learns his food is not set. Kenneth's behavioural attitudes here reveal that Susan lives with a man that sees her more as a slave than a wife. No human consideration whatsoever is spared for Susan who

has been all about, making sure she buys everything needed by the family for the new month. To Kenneth, Susan's 'sluggishness' will only disrupt his activities for the night: eating, taking a nap and clubbing with the boys. Susan is further ridiculed in this manner: '...I make sure I provide everything we need as a family; you don't work. What is so difficult in being a house wife?'

Waking up at 4 a.m. to prepare breakfast then lunch is not new to Susan, and Kenneth sees no reason to show appreciation as he sees this as part of Susan's conjugal duties. If Susan ever receives anything for her efforts, they are barrages of insults, hauled at her and her family. Lamenting her woes later, Susan states, 'I have tried everything to be the best wife I can.... I love and respect my husband. I practically worship the ground that he walks on. Everything he wants I give to him.'

Susan's portrait reveals the plight of a woman trapped in the web of a marriage run by a domineering and self-opinionated husband. This reflection, of course, is a by-product of a daily experience in some quarters in Nigeria, and there are many Nigerian video-films replete with such portrayal. However, while Susan laments her woes, particularly as Kenneth sees her as a slave to do his biddings and satisfy his sexual pleasure, the film goes further to show how a woman poised to fight the burden of subjugation in her marriage goes about it. First, Susan vociferates her disapproval of her ill-treatments, not to an outsider but directly to her husband: "Why do you torment me, Ken.... I am tired of being a slave in my own home... I've lost my self esteem... I am no longer the woman I used to be. Look at me; look at my hair.' This fact is very important as it reveals a woman who values the essence of privacy in marriage but rejects the oppression and cultural domination that have come to define the institution.

Susan is, nevertheless, forced to take a step further in her bid to have a hold on Kenneth who has become worse and has even started cheating on her. The solution Susan seeks, however, defies the thinking process that has characterised many Nigerian video-films where the woman looks for a solution, either from a herbalist or spiritualist. Such solutions often come in different bags: the wife may be given love potion/'holy water' for the husband, thereby making him to love her beyond the limit of reasoning; the wife may kill the husband and inherit all his property; the wife may dull the senses of the man, thereby assuming the role of the 'man' of the house and paying the man back in his coin.

Interestingly, Susan chooses none of these options. Instead, she decides to have an audience with Mrs Brown, a certified counsellor and a lawyer. Her reason is summed up in her discussions, with Linda, '... all I ask is for Ken to love and respect me.... I love my family....' In essence, *Mr & Mrs* gives us a picture of a loving, considerate, but assertive wife, void of venomous traits ascribed to women in other similar video-films.

If Kenneth has hoped for a divorce as a way of punishing Susan for trying to assert herself, that is not to be as Susan is determined to make her marriage work, though not as it is. After another outpouring of insults with a divorce threat, Susan quickly thinks of a way out. When the visit to Mrs Brown fails to produce the desired result on Kenneth, she opts for a divorce knowing well the implications of such action on the political ambition of her father-in-law. Susan is, however, wise enough to have agreed to a secret divorce proposed by her mother-in-law, which still makes her live under the same roof with Charles. But Susan does not stop there; she also

suggests her counsellor as a perfect lawyer in handling the divorce papers, knowing well she can work with the counsellor to save her marriage.

Susan's actions before and after the divorce papers have been signed show her as an astute woman who evidently understands the psychology of her husband: first, she stops cooking for Kenneth, knowing this will adversely affect him as he neither eats outside nor eats stale food. Later, she starts dressing provocatively and spending some nights outside the home; she encourages her 'boyfriend' to come and pick her up from home; she brings home a dildo and places it where Kenneth can easily see it; she 'takes up' a job that pays her handsomely; she befriends the girlfriend Kenneth brings home as her rival but knows when and where to draw the line; she summons courage to face her 'terrorising' mother-in-law; she understands the perfect timing to re-embrace Kenneth after he has realised his errors and asked for her forgiveness.

Susan's attitudes show a strong-willed, intelligent and faithful woman. The fact that throughout her ordeals she never cheated or stopped loving Kenneth is a strong point as her supposed 'boyfriend' later turns out to be her counsellor's husband. Susan's qualities are best summed up in the words of her counsellor: '... Your home is a success story.... We all face challenges in our homes, but only the strong stay and fight.... You are a strong woman... When David wrote about the virtuous woman, he was actually talking about Susan Abbah.' Egwuagwu, by implication, has set up the film as a paradigm scenario through which both men and women can learn how to react to, handle and/or provide enduring solutions to marital squabbles.

Linda's story presents us with the picture of another wife who, at the surface, appears an antithesis of Susan. As an exemplar of the modern, visionary woman, Linda's resolve is to be the Regional manager of her company and so readily sacrifices everything to attain the lofty height: she resumes work at 6:30a.m. and comes home late; her maid, Kate, practically takes her place at home; her husband, Charles, follows her schedules, including when to make love to her. Since she cannot stand the heat, Linda only enters kitchen on 'Sundays for breakfast, and it's strictly bread and tea.' To demonstrate her hold on her husband, she once declares, "I've got Charles in my palm."

The often erroneous conclusion of many about a woman with Linda's tendencies is that she has hypnotised her husband. This mentality, of course, has translated into the production of Nigerian video-films with such reflection, making people believe that women are generally wicked, dangerous, and/or diabolical. However, a further, careful analysis of this film shows that the film is actually intended to deconstruct the generality of this conceived notion questioned through Linda who is simply an assertive, daring and goal-getter woman. She never uses any charm on her husband whom she loves dearly. As a matter of fact, she secures her husband's his employment for him and speaks highly of him, declaring her readiness to marry him in her second life.

If there is any error committed by Linda, it is more of an error of misplaced priority and error of judgement, which anyone in her shoes can make. As evident in the film, Linda has lived all her marital life, believing a lie that she lives with an angelic husband who simply understands her well and loves her unconditionally; hence, she carelessly transfers her expected responsibilities

to Kate. She does not comprehend the adverse effects of her actions on her home as Charles never complains but (re)assures her with words like 'Sweetie, I can't do anything contrary (to being the most caring and understanding husband); that will be going against our vows....' This fact evidently makes Linda to be astounded when she catches Charles sleeping with Kate. When the effects of her behaviour dawn on her, Linda's high status never affects her sense of judgement as she agrees to Charles' terms in settling their discord, overlooks his mistakes and works towards rebuilding her home.

Linda's actions before and after realising where she has erred appear instructive as they educate the audience not to see all women in Linda's shoes as evils. Besides, Linda's actions help the audience, in a similar state, to see where they might have been failing; hence, make necessary adjustments and strike a balance between their homes and careers. This is succinctly captured in the words of Susan during her interaction with Linda: 'Our home is the most important thing in our lives. Any woman who cannot keep a home has failed. A woman (who) has a home and a career has to learn to marry them both. That is success.' Linda, therefore, projects the image of a professional woman who is prone to error but tender, loving, believing and willing to make necessary adjustments, not a stereotypical hard-hearted woman.

In many Nigerian video-films, the *mother-in-law* syndrome is, undoubtedly, a recurrent decimal. Often, the mother-in-law is presented in two broad categories: the (extremely) wicked ones and the good ones. The good ones are normally concerned about the welfare of their sons' wives and, many a time, take sides with them. The number of these good ones is, however, in no way proportionate to the number of the wicked ones who can go to any length in achieving their set objectives. Terrible mothers-in-law may decide to hire assassins or thugs to deal decisively with their (would-be) daughters-in-law; they may equally visit an herbalist or a spiritualist so as to afflict their victims with one ailment or the other. Some may even propose that their sons' wives should not be able to conceive, only to turn around and make life unbearable for such women. Encouraging their sons to take another wife is also stock-in-trade for such mothers. Some mothers-in-law often appear indifferent to their daughters-in-law, but when they discover such daughters-in-law fail to bear children, particularly male children that will ensure the continuity of their family name(s), they are usually the first to declare a war on such wives. Their objective, in the context, is usually obvious: 'stay put and allow your husband to marry another wife that can bear children or pack your things and leave.' The popularity of this portrayal in Nigerian video-films has unconsciously struck fear into the hearts of many ladies, making them desirous of a man without a mother or pray for quick demise of such existing mother.

Egwuagu seems to be conscious of the general thinking surrounding mother-in-law quagmire; hence, decides to interrogate this through Mrs Abbah (Kenneth's mother) as a fine example of the mother-in-law who is against her son's wife. From the beginning to the end of the film, Mrs Abbah never hides her hatred for Susan whom she sees as a 'thing', 'wretched daughter of a wretched washman'. As she is against Kenneth marrying Susan in the first place, she wholeheartedly supports Kenneth's divorce plan. She, however, ensures the divorce is kept secret so as not to jeopardise her husband's political ambition.

A reading which favours Mrs Abbah as a wicked mother-in-law because of her role in the film may be misleading. Rather, it may be more appropriate to dismiss her actions as sheer manifestations of arrogance and social strata. If Mrs Abbah has anything against Susan, it is simply because of Susan's humble background. Given that many may still see her as wicked, it is essential to state that beyond verbalising her hatred for Susan, Mrs Abbah at no time engages in any diabolical means to afflict or get rid of Susan. Besides, when Kenneth hands her a card revealing his intention to renew his vow with Susan, Mrs Abbah raises no objection beyond expressing feeble disapproval. Same quiet grimace is given when her husband decides to buy Susan a new car for her exemplary behaviour.

Therefore, apart from showing that a strong-willed son can actually set limit of his mother's interference in his home, it appears part of the intentions of Egwuagu is to exonerate mothers-in-law from the aged-long evils that have generally defined them. In so doing, she makes the audience see them, not as wicked but humans with frailties like the rest of us.

There is, however, one fundamental issue that needs to be addressed. This has to do with the depiction of men in the film. If Carroll's submission, that most paradigm scenarios are acquired through sources such as films, is correct, and that these scenarios may have influence on one's emotional behaviour, especially male emotional responses to women; and if the argument of social learning theory that people learn new behaviours by experiencing the actions of others is anything to go by, then, the film might have sent out some wrong signals. This is particularly obvious in the case of Charles who cheats on Linda. As evident in the film, Charles feels no remorse for his action, neither does he suffer any consequence; rather, his action is justified as fallout of the irresponsibility of Linda who sacrifices her marital relations and obligations on the altar of inordinate ambition. The point here is that such reflection that does not actively canvass for the discouragement of the negative tendencies acted out on the screen may encourage sexual orgy or moral recklessness. This fact puts a mark against the ethical structure of the film.

Again, considering the actions and attitudes of Kenneth and Charles, one is tempted to ask: Do all men act the way the film portrays these husbands? Will most men in Kenneth's state condescend to the point of eating leftovers from their wives simply because their wives cannot prepare fresh food as if there are no joints/eateries around where such foods are sold and served? Don't we have some husbands in Charles' state that will still remain faithful to their wives despite their frailties? Will it not, therefore, be right to say the film is gendered as it appears to be biased in favour of women, bearing in mind that the film's title reads *Mr & Mrs*? These are important questions that beg answers as it appears there is over-generalisation of certain actions and reactions of men in the film.

The argument, therefore, is that as attempts are being made to redefine the woman, there should equally be a holistic approach to the depictions of men, and such should not be inaccurate, biased or counter-productive. The points raised here, it should be stressed, are by no means meant to discredit the intrinsic quality of the film; rather, they are expected to serve as eye-opener for the would-be filmmaker.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to interrogate the portrayals of women in recent Nigerian Video-films, against the backdrop of some earlier studies that affirm damaging, inaccurate, and stereotypical depictions of women. Chinwe Egwuagu's *Mr & Mrs* has been analysed as an exemplar of this new trend that projects women largely in positive light, emphasising such virtues as unconditional love, forgiveness, self assertion, effective communication in marriage, and wisdom in handling marital squabbles. The film equally makes an attempt to deconstruct some of the aged-notion about mothers-in-law and wives, dismissing their short-comings as frailties, rather than expressions of their villainous nature.

The fact that the film projects women largely in positive light, undoubtedly, presents the audience with positive models whose actions can be emulated so as to resolve whatever similar crises they are confronted with. Besides, the film has attempted to provide some kind of paradigm scenarios (guidance and direction) to couples as a way of maintaining a healthy relationship.

It is, nevertheless, observed that the film seems to be biased in its portrayals of the male gender, which necessitates the position that there should equally be a holistic approach to the depictions of men, and such should not be inaccurate or counter-productive. Therefore, even though the arts (including video production) are expected to reflect the society, it can be argued that they must also prescribe certain behaviours that can heal the society of its perceived ills, correcting abnormalities and projecting positive images.

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