



Evaluation of Child's Right Portrayal in Select Nollywood Films

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Nollywood films in promoting child rights in Nigeria. Using Development Media and Social Representation Theories, the study analyzed five locally produced movies and 663 respondents. The findings revealed that Nigerian films depict various issues of child rights, including neglect, child labor, emotional abuse, child battering, sexual abuse, gender discrimination, child kidnapping, child trafficking, and moral abuse. The study concluded that Nigerian movies provide a country perspective for deepening moral and social consciousness and advancing attitudinal change in child rights. The authors recommend that filmmakers continue producing films that address child rights issues to further advance justice against children.

INTRODUCTION

Child rights have stood as one of the leading issues of concern among the international community (United Nations Organisation, UNO, 2020; Odusile, 2019; Nuhu, 2017; Okooboh, 2016). The Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child describes a child as “a human being under 18 years of age unless the law of his or her country deems him or her to be an adult at an earlier age.” This same definition of a child is also adopted under the Nigerian law (Okooboh, 2016). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the inalienable rights of the child to include right to life, identity, expression, thought, education, healthcare, dignity, privacy, family life, among numerous others. While the concern for children’s rights is a global phenomenon, the developing nations of the world present a particularly difficult case. In the Sub-Saharan Africa, the child has remained vulnerable to all manner of difficulties and deprivations (United Nations Organisation, UNO, 2020). For instance, while almost 52 million children are in danger of dying before the age of five between the year 2019 and the year 2030, children in the Sub-Saharan Africa are 16 times more likely to be affected by such premature deaths. Similarly, nine out of every 10 children in this region of the world live in extreme poverty, while this region also accounts for more than a half of the 60 million children (of primary school age) that will be out of school globally between 2019 and 2030. It is also projected that over 150 million more girls will get married before they turn 18 years by the year 2030 (UNO, 2020).

Thus, violation of the rights of the child has continued almost unabated in the past decades, especially in the areas of right to life, dignity, good health, education, physical safety and self-determination among others (UNO, 2020; Okooboh, 2016). In Nigeria, the continued travails of the child have remained a huge concern (Onyido & Vareba, 2019; Okooboh, 2016). Common right abuses suffered by children in Nigeria have been identified to include child battering, child labour, child marriage, child sexual abuse, child neglect, deprivation of education, emotional torture, and female genital mutilation among others (Onyido & Vareba, 2019; Okooboh, 2016). Precisely, about 15 million children are estimated to be victims of child labour in Nigeria (Onyido & Vareba, 2019), over 10 million are suffering educational deprivation (UNICEF, 2018), about seven million are being sexually abused every year (Odusile, 2019), while over 21 million children are experiencing all sorts of physical and emotional trauma yearly in the country (Onyido & Vareba, 2019). The crisis in the North-East of Nigeria has greatly worsened the travails of children in Nigeria with children accounting for 60% of the 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region. This means that over 1.1 million children have been internally displayed with one in every four of them under the age five (UNICEF, 2020a). Also, the terrorist group, Boko Haram, has continued to forcefully recruit children as armed fighters with about 2, 000 children reportedly recruited in 2016 alone (Aderemi, 2017). Factors like poverty, ignorance, cultural worldview, religious beliefs, strife and political instability, as well as weak legal and institutional frameworks for enforcement of the rights of the child have been identified as being responsible for the continued abuses suffered by children in Nigeria and

other developing countries (UNO, 2020; Onyido & Vareba, 2019; Gambo et al, 2021).

In view of the foregoing, arresting this perennial problem of child's right abuse becomes an important task for Nigeria and other nations. The United Nations Organisation (UNO), in response to this, has factored welfare of children into the implementation mechanism of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Amidst this, the role of communication in the quest to protect the rights of the child cannot be overemphasised (UNO, 2020; Odusile, 2019). This is given the proven power of communication in fostering ideological and attitudinal change as well as building of a new culture in society (Baran, 2010; Moemeka, 1991; Ezeonyejiaku, & Onyejelem 2021). Among the various mass communication channels that will potentially prove viable in this respect is the nation's film industry given its popularity as a means of entertainment among the populace (Asogwa, Ibe & Ojih, 2015; Onuzulike, 2009). Christened Nollywood, the film industry in Nigeria, which received impetus in 1992 with the release of the blockbuster *Living in Bondage* as produced by Kenneth Nnebue, has quickly and continuously gathered momentum over the last two decades that it is today a force to reckon with globally. Thus without doubt, locally produced films have come to occupy an important place in the realm of Nigeria's contemporary communication culture which arguably positions them as a veritable tool for ideological propagation and social change (Onyejelem et al 2023). Against this background, the study sought to examine the potency and otherwise of the local film industry as viable vehicle for promoting the rights of the Nigerian child through their themes, ideological frames and narrative patterns in constructing social issues like child's rights in society.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a content analysis approach. The content analysis was qualitative in approach involving "critical discourse analysis - CDA". Critical discourse analysis is a qualitative content analysis that systematically and critically enables a vigorous assessment of what is meant when language is used to describe and explain a piece of communication in order to observe patterns relevant to the study objectives. According to Johnson & McLean (2020, p.1) "CDA scholars commonly view language as a form of social practice, and are concerned with systematically investigating hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse".

The study population covered five films produced in Nigeria within the five years of 2017 - 2020. According to data generated from the "National Film and Video Censors' Board" (2020) a total of 2857 number of films were produced in Nigeria between 2017 and 2020. It is from this population that five films were selected for the study. The researcher purposively selected five films produced in Nigeria between 2017 and 2020 which themes revolve around issues of the rights of the child. The films were also selected based on their ratings and recognition by Best of Nollywood. The descriptive thematic approach was adopted in analysing the film. The researcher critically viewed

the films under study, observing and isolating relevant themes which formed the basis of the analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The five films selected for this study – *Alter Ego* (2017), *Coming from Insanity* (2019), *Muna* (2019), *Nimbe* (2019), and *The Innocent* (2020) – all have child’s rights-centred themes. However, each of the movies has its distinct storyline and thematic emphasis. The researcher, in viewing the films, looked out for relevant discourses of child’s rights in them. The discourses found are:

The Discourse of Vulnerability

The Discourse of Moral/Legal Legitimacy, and

The Discourse of Gender Relations

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The foregoing discourses formed the basis of the CDA done on the films.

The Discourse of Vulnerability

One dominant discourse in the five selected films is that of vulnerability. The child is consistently presented as vulnerable and requiring a special protection. The effect of this ideological perspective is to evoke an image of power relations wherein the child, in relating with adults, is much the less powerful party. Images of child kidnapping, child trafficking, child labour, child battering, and child neglect are majorly deployed for realising this ideology. In *Coming from Insanity*, for instance, the image of child trafficking is emphatically foregrounded from the very beginning, as the viewer is greeted by an opening montage that reads:

Every year, thousands of West African children are trafficked into the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Most are used for domestic services. An estimated one percent will go on to engage in criminal activity. This is a true story of one of them.

Coming alongside this montage is a scene of a truck crossing a border with the trunk packed with children. These children are obviously victims of cross-border trafficking. These trafficked children become an epitome of vulnerability as they are torn completely away from familial love and protection to become an object of exploitations. At the home where the major character, Kosi, is sold to, Ken’s wife tells her husband in the course of an argument: “I brought that boy (Kosi) to this house for one reason: to keep this house clean” This meaning-laden statement helps the filmmaker to put in sharp relief the outrageous fate of trafficked children (like Kosi) wherein their human dignity and personal autonomy are subsumed under the imperative of exploitation of their labour power.

The Discourse of Moral/Legal Legitimacy

Clearly visible in the five films under study is the discourse of moral cum legal legitimacy. The fight against violation of child’s rights is foregrounded as a noble moral and legal cause. Individuals who have taken up

this fight are projected as engaged in a selfless service to humanity. In *Alter Ego*, for example Mr. Ighodaro introduces Barr Ada Igwe as one who has “dedicated her life to giving justice to the underprivileged... a profound lawyer.” In this context, “the underprivileged” becomes atomized to mean children alone, a strategy that helps reinforce the moral and legal imperative of fighting the cause of this group.

Instructively, the theme of justice is strongly foregrounded across the five films through overlexicalisation, as the filmmakers, via the voices of the characters, get the word “justice” continuously repeated in an ideological context that connects it exclusively to child’s rights. In *Muna*, the major character, Muna, talks several times about “bringing justice” to trafficked children. In fact, her vengeful mission against Mr. Lucas and his child trafficking ring is completely legitimised as a noble quest for justice irrespective of her unlawful approach. In *Alter Ego*, Barr Igwe, in her several court appearances against child abusers, is invariably forceful in pleading for justice. In the case of rape of a tenant’s child by the landlord, she, as always, says “I pray this court to ensure that justice is served.” Thus, the court sessions offer the opportunity for the filmmaker to foreground the theme of justice through repeated mention of the word.

Similarly, Barr Igwe’s role presents an absolute prioritisation of justice such that it must, at all costs, prevail over every other interest. Thus, not even the obviously strong emotional bonding that has emerged between her and Mr Ighodaro can derail her determination to nail the latter when it becomes obvious that he is a culprit of sex slavery “You want me to turn a deaf ear to a proven allegation of sexual abuse with hard facts?” she tells the sister when she objects to her court action against the man.

Importantly, the discourse of moral and legal legitimacy brings up a juxtaposition of two groups of characters – child’s rights abusers and child’s rights promoters. This creates a moral cum legal binary that glorifies the likes of Barr Igwe (in *Alter Ego*), Muna (in *Muna*), and Mrs Abbey and Uche (in *The Innocent*) while vilifying the likes of Mr Ighodaro and Mr Kolade (in *Alter Ego*), and Mrs IJ and Miss Linda (in *The Innocent*). Thus, the discourse resolves in the dialectics of good versus evil, justice versus injustice, and legitimacy versus illegitimacy. In other words, there is an attempt by the filmmakers to wholly legitimise child’s rights and the fight to protect them while entirely delegitimising all forms of abuse thereof.

The Discourse of Gender Relations

Visible in the child’s rights narratives in the films under study is the discourse of gender relations wherein the filmmakers attempt to highlight the imbalance in gender power as a factor in child abuse. Thus, since being a woman implies being the weaker sex, being a girl child equally implies being the weaker child. Stated differently, a female child suffers the same gender disadvantage as the female adult vis-à-vis the male child. This is to say that the dynamics of the patriarchal gender relations inscribes its marks on the fate of the girl child whose gender becomes a hindrance to her realizing her rights. In

Alter Ego, the name of the NGO run by Mr. Ighodaro – Save Our Girls Foundation – embodies this discourse, as it projects the girl child as particularly vulnerable, thus requiring a special protection. One of the goals of the organisation, as announced to an audience by Ighodaro, makes this evident: “We believe in promoting girls’ education. We ensure that they complete primary education as a minimum.”

Furthermore, in the same film, the gender injustice in matrimonial relations whereby a woman may lack the power of choice as to who becomes her partner is well depicted in the episode of rape and impregnation of a 15-year-old girl by their landlord. The woman whose daughter was abused is too afraid to seek justice: “If we make any wahala, im go marry am and make am him third wife,” she says (“If we make any troubles he [the landlord] will marry her and make her his third wife”). In other words, the abused girl will have no power to say no if her abuser decides to take her in as one of his wives. This is patriarchal marital privilege taking precedence over the rights of the girl child.

In *Nimbe*, the discourse of gender relations becomes very pronounced in the love affair between Peju and her boyfriend Lemo. Peju is obviously the weaker partner in the relationship. She cannot find real courage to boldly reject Lemo’s sexual advances; rather her refusal is patronizingly communicated – nay with an obsequious apology. When, however, Lemo sleeps with her by drugging her, she is able to confront him only weakly. Still, it is Lemo who prevails in terms of deciding the way forward – Peju’s procurement of an abortion, which unfortunately leads to her death. In summary, Peju’s love affair epitomises patriarchal gender relations where a woman has less say in such relationship. The poor girl turns out the submissive, cowed and oppressed partner – an ordeal she endures even unto death.

Interestingly, four of the five films under study (*The Innocent* being the exception) highlight the theme of sexual objectification of the feminine gender with the girl child being the focus. Scholars are agreed that sexual objectification is one of the most visible manifestations of the unjust gender relations foisted by patriarchy (Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar & Jimoh, 2014; Mitchell, 2011). In *Alter Ego* in particular, the theme of sexual objectification is well foregrounded via several episodes on the sexual abuse of the girl child. In *Muna*, this theme is emphatically projected in the trafficking episodes where sex slavery is the major motive for the illegal trade. In particular, the conversation between Luka and his fellow traffickers wherein they fantasise about the sexual desirability of some of the girls brings out this much. In *Nimbe*, Peju’s boyfriend, Lemo, is insistent on having sex with her; gaining sexual gratification through her body becomes a priority that he pursues even to the point of raping her. In *Coming from Insanity*, the wealth and class of the Hausa forex traders is enacted, instructively, via their ability to procure half-clad women to be entertaining them with erotic dance moves on stage. Interestingly, apart from *The Innocent*, all the other films studied have the girl child as the victim in all episodes of sexual abuse featured. Thus, the films could be said to embody the discourse of gender relations wherein the feminine gender is considered the more sexually vulnerable.

Analysis of Research Question

One research question was formulated for the study. The research question related to portrayal of child's rights issues in films.

Research Question One

How are child's rights depicted in the select Nollywood films? From the CDA done on the five films under study, it could be observed that human rights abuses suffered by the child were portrayed largely in terms of child neglect, child labour, child emotional abuse, child battering, and child sexual abuse. Others are gender discrimination, child kidnapping, child trafficking, and child moral abuse by way of exposure to corrupting influences.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research concluded that Nigerian filmmakers are conscious of the need to deploy film as a tool for promoting child's rights in the country. The storylines and themes of the films under study indicate this much. These films profoundly depict abuses of child's rights, the consequences attendant on them, and the imperative of retributive and restorative justice for the culprits and victims respectively.

Consequently, it is concluded that Nollywood offers Nigeria a real tool for deepening social consciousness and affecting behaviour change as far as the rights of the child are concerned. This is in line with the tenets of the Development Media Theory that consider the media as an instrument to be ideally deployed for advancing development goals of society (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012; McQuail, 2010). In other words, from the perspective of child's rights protection, Nollywood films may be said to have functioned in line with the doctrines of the Development Media Theory.

Based on findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Although it has been established that Nigerian movies offers the country perspective for deepening moral and social consciousness and advancing attitudinal change as far as the rights of the child are concerned, we recommend that filmmakers in the country should continue to produce movies that project issues related to the rights of the child. This will help to further advance the course for justice against the child.
2. The film industry alone cannot achieve the goal of ensuring child rights abuses are eradicated. Therefore, other concerned organisations and individuals in the society should complement efforts of the film industry in Nigeria, by joining the advocacy for the respect of the right of the child.

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