NEGATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN NOLLYWOOD:
A READING OF IKECHUWUKU ONYEKA’S MR AND MRS

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ABSTRACT
Masculinity is a social construct that defines man’s social relation within the gender hierarchy in society. Over the years, gender has narrowly been screwed to depict feminism which in itself struggles towards negotiating social power for the feminine gender. However, in doing this, feminism has subtly achieved an ideological imaging of the male as brutish, savage, demonic, power obsessed and most of all domineering. This has gradually become a mainstream narrative through which masculinity is understood. Thus the average man is seen as potentially violent, power obsessed, chauvinistic and domineering. The implication is that masculinity in itself is a social havoc. This forms the core of this research. The researcher in this work disputes this negative construct of the masculine model as a social menace. The researcher argued that while the aforementioned negative traits exist, that they are individual social disorder which in itself does not represent masculinity as a generic social construct. The researcher used the qualitative research method with particular resort to the case study approach for his data collection and analysis. The research is hinged on the ‘Social role theory of Sex’.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, Negative, Representations, Nollywood

INTRODUCTION

Gender is a social construct through which individuals relate to their social environment. Gender creates a divide which mostly is dictated by one’s sexuality and in effect, one’s inheritance of the genitalia. In effect, these directly or indirectly create social roles and behavioral patterns which are assessed and accepted in society based on one’s gender orientation. Thus every society has defined gender roles and social conducts expected of the two traditional genders that make up the society. However, with the emergence of the feminist movement which is geared towards a depatriachization of the society, masculinity has since been subjected to a crisis of model and form.

*Ibu Nwoke* is the Igbo phrase that best describes masculinity within the Igbo traditional parlance. Thus, for someone to be described as masculine or for the society to really affirm that one is really *nwoke* within the Igbo cosmology, the person must have performed any of the two traditional roles for which a *Nwoke* is generally known. These two traditional roles are
classifiable within the purviews of reproductive sexuality and social functionality. One who is really considered *Nwoke* is expected not to be found wanting in any of the two. The implication is that such a person must have the virility of the reproductive enterprise and viability of meeting the social roles expected of him as a man within the family and the larger society. Therefore, masculinity is spatially defined and is socio-culturally unique to every society just like femininity.

However, in modern times, masculinity as a social construct is most times narrowly defined or represented within the negative exhibitions of some male individuals. Some of the socio-pathic actions of individuals which most times are not limited to the males alone is rushedly lumped together and given a very hasty generalization as ‘masculine’. Thus Raewyn Connell opines that “The gender position that society constructs for men may not correspond exactly with what men actually are, or desire to be, or what they actually do”(140)

This in effect does a great disservice to the male gender as it casts it in negative light. This is quite worrisome as it affects every aspect of a man’s life. It is important to note that behaviors laced with elements of chauvinism, misogyny, hostile sexism, homophobia etc. are not ideal to masculinity but are social deviations by some male individuals whose affect in life has conditioned to exhibit the negative orientations. Thus, Connel advises that “It is therefore necessary to study masculinity as well as men” (140)

More so, these erroneous depictions of masculinity are perpetually archived in the main stream media as standards for masculinity. The media is a very powerful tool that shapes and models the mind and the conscience of society. The media through a continuous presentation and repetition of a particular issue shapes people’s views and understanding of such issue. This omnibus power of the media to shape how the society views itself has all been espoused and summarized in media theories such as the media construction theory, media representation theory and media framing theory. These theories all point to the fact that when a thing is contrived and presented in the media repeatedly, the society surreptitiously buys into that agenda and considers it as a common standard. Espousing this notion, Stanley Baran opines:

> The media so fully saturate our everyday lives that we are often unconscious of their presence, not to mention their influence. Media inform us, entertain us, delight us, annoy us. They move our emotions, challenge our intellects, insult our intelligence. Media often reduce us to mere commodities for sale to the highest bidder. Media help us; they shape our realities. (4)

Film is a major genre of media that has tremendous access to the heart of society. Nigerian films most certainly are greatly appreciated both within and outside the local hemisphere. In effect, Nollywood films unsuspectingly create standards and influence how Nigerians view themselves and how they are viewed in Diaspora. The influence is unimaginable as it permeates the heart and mind of the subcultures of society. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ekene Anija (3) argue that the film makers knowing the power of the film too, deliberately make films to transform society. In affirmation of this claim, Uchenna Onuzulike (139) opines that “the rest of African countries believe that Nigerians are what are depicted in Nigerian movies”.

With this spate of influence, it is therefore very pertinent to review media representations
of society especially where the representations are biased and injurious to the ego and persona of any section of society. This is the background on which this study is built. Thus this study is a critique of the Nollywood representations of masculinity. Omoni Oboli’s *Wives on Strike* and Ikechukwu Onyeka’s *Mr. and Mrs* are the case studies on which the arguments of this research work will be built.

**MASCU LINITY: AN OVERVIEW**

Masculinity literally means manliness. *Flourish Itulua-Abumere* (42) defines it as “those behaviors, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine”. Being masculine has been loosely defined to mean different things to different people. However, one major unifying factor is that masculinity is mostly a gender construct used to qualify certain attributes of men. Just like culture, its prevalent meaning and understanding differs in every society. The implication is that masculinity as a social concept may defy a singular definition.

Thus, masculinity basically implies a set of values possessed and exhibited mostly by men in relation to the opposite gender. These values appear in different dimensions and are used as adjective to qualify the manly nature in different situations. Rachel Jewkes et al thus opine ‘Masculinities are multiple, fluid and dynamic’. In effect, ‘masculinity’ is composed of many masculinities (John Beynon, 1). The implication is that masculinity is a shifting concept. Some of the situational conditions of masculinity include:

a. Masculinity in relation to the male body
b. Masculinity in relation to sexuality
c. Masculinity in relation to social roles
d. Masculinity in relation to Emotion and Carriages

While maleness is biological, masculinity is cultural. The implication is that masculinity is a social construct built around the ideals through which men can be viewed and related with. It varies and morphs in time depending on provisions of socio-economic and cultural determinisms. Thus what is seen and described as masculine in Nigeria may vary copiously with what is seen and described as masculine in the United States. Even within the microcosm of Nigeria as a civil entity, masculinity is further defined within the cultural provisions of the various ethnicities that make up the country.

Masculinity is often attributed in relation to body appearance. Strong muscles and hard physical looks are most times considered masculine. Thus, macho and depictions of raw power are also considered masculine. In effect, the social construction of masculinity in relation to specific body appearance has created a standard for a typical male body which must be macho, muscle filled and sturdy in appearance. This is evidenced in the Igbo adage ‘*afu dimkpa, afu ogologo imi*’. While proverbs are not to be interpreted with literal understanding, a literal reading of it may further reveal some of the cultural perspectives that preform an understanding of the object metaphors used in crafting it. The proverb above uses body mass to qualify what an ideal male body should be. In literal terms, a real man is known by his strong build. This literal denotation of masculinity has translated into a cultural perspective of men as beings that must not express emotions in public within the Igbo cultural realities. It is evidenced in ubiquitous
cultural memes like ‘Real men don’t cry’. Thus a man is expected to exhibit a show of strength at all times. The psychological implication is that men who are real men must learn to suppress their fears and emotions in order not to be seen as weak which in effect translates to ‘not being man enough’. This is typically exemplified in Chinua Achebe’s narrative of Okonwo the alpha male who tore through the ranks of success due to his physical prowess. However Okonkwo becomes the one to kill Ikemefuna, a boy he loves so much out of fear of being seen as weak. In Achebe’s words, “Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (43). Thus weakness is a quality that contravenes the cultural perspective of masculinity in many world cultures. Thus to be a real man is to be bold, fearless, daring and dauntless.

Sexuality is another aspect of cultural masculinity in many places. The male sex organ is thus used as a symbol of masculinity. A real man is expected to be a sexual warrior who must possess the strength of a horse and the flexibility of a cat. This idea is mostly prevalent in most youths who associate the male identity with sexual prowess. Thus many who attain gladiatorial stance on coital relations are considered real men by their spouses. This construct of masculinity however punctures the ego of many men who find it difficult to live up to the sexual acrobatics needed to impress their female partners. Many in a bid not to be seen as weak go to the extent of using drugs to stimulate their sexual performance. Another dimension to this shade of masculinity is in the virility of the sexual enterprise. Men who are not able to impregnate their wives are sometimes not considered real men. In the Igbo traditional setup, such men invariably are considered ‘not man enough’.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main disputations of this research stem from gender with particular interest in the mainstream narratives of masculinity especially by the Nigerian film industry. In effect, this study is built around the pillars of gender role theory. While the theory tries to depict in actuality the ideal masculine construct, it also shows a deviation from the ideal which mostly results in deviant behaviors.

The gender role theory stems from the social role theory that focuses on the relationship between individuals, groups, societies, and economic systems as developed by social systems in which people live (Agnes Dulin, 104). The gender role theory was propounded by the duo of Alice Eagly and Wendy Wood. The theory posits that the differences and similarities in gender are determined by observable roles people play in society. According to Alice and Wendy:

Men and women are differently distributed into social roles because of humans’ evolved physical sex differences in which men are larger, faster, and have greater upper-body strength, and women gestate and nurse children. (3)

Thus the implication is that social roles are delineated based on suitability highly dependent on bio-physical factors. For example, men are normally trusted with servile work due to their strong physical build. Men are naturally physically stronger than women and so naturally the roles delineated for them are roles that require their special physical attributes and mental
capacities. Within the broader perspective of social role, people are thrust with different responsibilities in society and expectations are made of them based on the roles. A typical example is a traditional family set up. The father, mother and children all have roles sociologically expected of them to play for the health and good of such family. Gender role further explicates social duties based on one’s gender. Sussan Shimnoff is of the opinion that gender role theory is grounded in the supposition that individuals socially identified as males and females tend to occupy different roles within social structures and tend to be judged against divergent expectations for how they ought to behave.”

MR. AND MRS.: A SYNOPSIS

Mr. and Mrs. is a family drama built around the many conflicts that challenge many young marriages in the contemporary world. Bloated by pride and the discovery of wealth, Kenneth Abah confines the wife to the home as a house wife. Sussan a beautiful, humble and homely master degree holder in Law accepts the role and struggles to keep her family happy and peaceful. However, Ken takes advantage of this profound humility and begins to treat Sussan in ways that dehumanize her and makes her loose herself esteem. Sussan becomes very unhappy and tries to communicate her unhappiness to Ken but Ken shuts her out. She decides to fight for her marriage and her sanity. Ken threatens her with a divorce and she catches in on the opportunity and uses it to rekindle the fire of love in Ken. Ken realizes his mistakes and apologizes to Sussan. Sussan accepts the apology but gives a condition under which the marriage can be resuscitated. They renew their marriage vow with the understanding that their stay in the marriage will be as partners and will accord each other appropriate respect and support.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Mr and Mrs is more like a feminist advocacy movie. It stereotypes men and presents men in the light of typical feminist stereotypes of masculinity. Ken is presented in the movie as a very unreasonable, inconsiderate, controlling and chauvinistic husband. He lacks emotional understanding and treats the wife like a typical house maid. The director accosts the audience with this heated temperature in the narrative starting with the very first scene of the movie. The movie starts with a montage revealing Sussan in the kitchen peeling yams. This is in preparation for the thematic core which the director does not waste time to let the audience into. The beastly arrogance, chauvinistic and hegemonic nature of Ken is opened up in the scene that follows Ken comes back from work and is welcomed by a wife and the following conversation ensues:

Sussan – hello darling, how was work today?
Ken – (Unconcernedly) like every other day. Food is not yet ready?
Sussan – No… it will be ready in a second, I was…
Ken - (Cuts in) Susan its Friday, you know I have to eat, take a nap before clubbing with the boys
Sussan- darling today was very hectic. I had to do the monthly shopping and then I had to do the laundry before…
Ken – (cuts in) Just get my food. I don’t get it, I make sure I provide everything we need as family. What is so difficult in being a housewife?  
Sussan – (pouring juice for him) I told you today has been very hectic, it’s not been easy with me  
Ken - (cuts in) what is this, I made it clear this morning, mango juice  
Sussan– mango is a seasonal fruit  
Ken - I don’t bloody care, get this thing off my table

The image being created is that of a sociopath who derives pleasure from making a loved one suffer. Ken is shown as a slave driver whose only interest is feeding his ego while accomplishing his gender role as a husband. However, this contravenes the gender role theory which has duties stipulated for the husband as well as the wife. While Sussan is presented as a feminine stereotype who is marginalized, maltreated and emotionally tortured by a brutish masculine while being subservient, Ken is presented as a typical masculine stereotype who is a control freak, a chauvinist and a brutalizer. This toxifies the relationship and tugs on the emotional dispositions of the audience to take sides. The implication is simple, men are brutes who always want to lord it over the women. While it is not rare to find men who may without much ado fit into the character of Ken in real life, It is however necessary to identify such traits for what it is; hegemonic masculinity. Ken fits into this deviant of ideal masculine character. The common traits are all existent within the character build of Ken; toxic, controlling, chauvinistic, self-centered and proud. It is pertinent to note that this is a social misdemeanor that is acquired. As the theory of hegemonic masculinity rightly points out, such traits are unconsciously imbibed while they are exhibited by male models around children. Ken’s insensitivity to the wife’s suffering is further painted in his demands most especially with his food menu. He does not eat stale food! The implication is that Sussan must prepare three square meals everyday without the leisure of rest. This excessive demand and his constant harassment of Sussan’s family leads Sussan to self-doubt and loss of self-esteem. The discussion below typifies it:

Ken - Your role as my wife does not end at the kitchen you know  
Sussan – I have to tidy this up in preparation for tomorrow  
Ken - and come to bed tired?  
Sussan– why do you torment me Ken? Your friends come here every Sunday and I feed them and am left with these dirty dishes  
Ken - but I am not complaining  
Sussan – but I am. I need help  
Ken - to cook for me? To take care of me?  
Sussan – I will do the cooking; to tidy up  
Ken - why do we have to go over this again just because I.  
Sussan– just because I am tired of being a slave in my own home. Just because I have lost my self-esteem. Just because I am no longer the woman I used to be. Look at me, look at my hair. I am unkempt. We were never like this Ken before your family…
The film goes further to validate its use of Ken as a quintessential masculine character. It is however pertinent to note that this is a case of careless generalization. The malady seen in Ken is also seen and witnessed in Linda who fails in her duty as a wife and a mother. The difference is that while the director sees Linda’s act as an individual act, he generalizes Ken’s behavior as a representation of masculinity. The following comment by the counselor evidences it:

Counselor: Men, pride, indecision, let go, no. They want to be in charge all the time. If she had been depressed he would have been happier.

The height of this misrepresentation comes as a summative line used in teaching women how to handle the homes. In Sussan’s words ‘These men are babies, when they mess up we clean up the mess’. However, the director does not hide his bias in the gender representation. He presents the women as caring, loving, enduring and humane. In his delineation of the gender role for women, he speaks through Susan:

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.

It is therefore crystal clear that the misrepresentation of masculinity in the film stems from the gender bias that is preformed in the mind of the director. Thus, he engages in gender politics, while lifting one, he demonizes the other and makes it seem responsible for most marriage breakups in contemporary society. While it is very agreeable that male characters like Ken exist in real life, it is very pertinent to consciously draw a divide between that which is normal and that which is abnormal. Using the abnormal which in itself is social deviation to make a generic representation of the whole is pure disservice to the whole being ill-represented. Ken in the movie is a social deviant, a wife beater and a sadist. While men like Ken are socio-paths sadists, masculinity defies this definition and does not fit into the purview of this gender stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

“The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story”

(Chimamanda Adichie)

The feminist movement has influenced greatly how people view masculinity. The stereotypical narrative of masculinity as chauvinistic, controlling and hegemonic has become a mainstream narrative. Thus, a man is naturally considered potentially dangerous and portends these traits. It is however pertinent to state that the traits of chauvinism and its accompanying vices are traits that are not unique to masculinity. Rather, they are deviant traits possessed by many whose nurture were constructed by models of violence, arrogance, pride and rudeness. Toxicity is not a masculine reserve; it is exhibited across gender lines and is dependent on one’s social dispositions and influences. While it is possible to find men like Ken who are toxic in
their social dealings with the opposite sex, it is also possible to find women like Lynda who find it pleasurable to be controlling and toxic in their social dealings with the opposite sex too. It is therefore very necessary to note that social deviant behaviours should not amount to generic representation of the masculinity in negative light.

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