THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE AGAINST PHALLOCENTRIC DISCOURSES IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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Abstract
Feminists try to reimagine and redefine the representation of women's bodies in the media by challenging and subverting dominant patriarchal narratives mostly through the film medium. These creates a window of possibilities for women's embodiment and empowerments leading to the disruption of phallocentric tendencies and the Male Gaze concept, an aged long oppressive parameter used by the male gender to destabilize femininity. This study is aimed at discouraging and decentralizing patriarchal narratives that tend to oppress or subjugate women in the media through phallocentric tendencies or the Male Gaze concept and embedded within is the Femme Fatale tendency. Qualitative methodology was employed, using the Liberal and Radical theories as the base for the study. From the findings it is discovered that the society is influenced by socio-cultural traditions and beliefs that tend to subjugate the female gender using patriarchal lens. This notion cut across all sectors of life including, political, economy, social and other sectors. Women are considered as subversive, complementary, aesthetics and are being objectified. The researcher therefore recommends that women's bodies should not be objectified, classified or explored for pleasure alone but be dignified, empowered and investigated for hidden potentials.

Keywords: *Male Gaze, Femme Fatale, Androcentric, Phallocentric, Patriarchy*

Introduction

The society traditionally is patriarchal inclined. Men assume dominance and authority over women. It is a tradition that has led to marginalization, oppression and suppression of the rights of the female gender. It is believed that women were made to be seen but not heard. Men had majorly dominated most of the spheres in the society and the power of the 'pen' in their hands. The feminist theatre has been a tool to challenge these unethical norms. Feminist theorists and contemporary female film makers have critique these norms and tried to reclaim the stage/ screen from men, redefining the negative representation of the female bodies in the media and subverting the male gaze.

Through critical analysis of key feminist theories, new possibilities for women embodiment and agency are created to limit these societal ills that had for a very long time militated and silenced the voices of women, obviously, the stage is a platform for women to reclaim their bodies and challenge the patriarchal norms that have silenced them

In Africa, our film industry is reckoned with using culture, belief and history as parameters for casting and creating storylines because the film industry is a reflection of the society, it mirrors the society back to itself. Issues of women common interest or traditional norms are reflected from

their socio-economic, political, religious and cultural worlds. The basic watchword for women emancipation and equality is "change" and this and much more are achievable through advocacy, conscientization through plays and other narratives using the feminist theatre.

In *Theatre and Society* by Saint Gbilekaa, he posits that "if the theatre is to be consciously used as the weapon of collective struggle and as instrument of demolishing the squalid institutions that exploit and degrade humanity, it must involve the people, it must encourage them to protest, to resist and challenge all oppressive measures" (21).

Contemporary women film makers explored the world of men and their practices documenting them into plays, for instance, the South African experiences, "they reflect their lives… Stories that speak not only on abuses, disappointments, identity, racism and sexism but also of resilience, resistance, survival, liberation and a hope for a better life for themselves and their families" Katty Perkin (86). In conclusion, the contemporary women film makers can be seen on the platform of (i) agitation; (ii) conscientization; (iii) seek redress; (iv) recognition; (v) a vocal cord; (vi) re-creating a new phenomenon and appraisal for women; (vii) use for psychological or emotional healing; (viii) re-building confidence, independence and dignity; (ix) weapon of global socio-political and economic change against male hegemony (phallocentricism), femme fatale (negative representation of the female bodies) and the male gaze. This can be summed up in the words of Prof. Emmy Idegu in his play *Legendary Inikpi.*

> There is something about power that corrupts the human soul. Unchecked power soon finds victims is suppresses (sic), humiliates and even annihilates. The weaker the victim, the more ferocious is the attack on him. Where power does not find external victims, it soon turns on the weak within its domain and feed on him. But just as it is the tendency of the powerful to abuse his fellow men, so is it in the nature of the human spirit when it is at the receiving end and no matter how weak to protest, resist and fight back until it is free-free to determine its own destiny. This is the enduring lesson of history – that tyranny, no matter how strong will in the end lose the fight against the determination of even the weak to be free" (2).

The Male Gaze Concept

The feminist theatre cannot be complete without addressing the concept of the 'Male Gaze'. It is a concept that feminists theorists refer to as derogatory lens of masculinity against women visually through the power of sight (eye). The woman is viewed as an object of sexuality and pleasure for the male. Consequent upon that, women are portrayed as complementary, aesthetics, and stereotyped while the men are in control of affairs and often take challenging and domineering roles on set and behind the set. This concept was postulated by Laura Mulvey in

1975 in her work, *Visual Pleasure and Narratives*, where she advocated against women objectification also referred to as "scopophila" or "fetishization"

Categorizing on some selected films like *The Arbitrator*, a film directed by Niyi Akinmolayan film and produced by Chinaza Onuzo, Omolayo Adeola, and Zulu Oyibo. It was released in 2016. The film opens with the phallocentric concept in full glare. Gbenga Sani carries this concept in his characterization throughout the film. Also the plots centers round Dara Ogunjobi who was objectified by her boss Mr Sani. All the female characters suffer different level of misfortune from Mr Sani.

The Wedding Party film directed by Kemi Adetiba, and produced by Ijeoma Agu Konoye and Zulumoke Oyibo, released in 2016. The film carries the concept of the Male Gaze and the Femme Fatale among other topics. In the film *A Tribe Called Judah* by Funke Akindele, released in 2023.The female protagonist was not objectified but was portrayed as a strong character who tried to manage the home front. All her children had different fathers from different geographical background, a stigma on women dignity. She assumed a dual role of a father and mother. This reflect the agitation of the contemporary female film makers; the concept of 'breaking free'. These and many other performances revolt against the male gaze.

The feminists challenged objectification and the traditional notion of female beauty, exploring female sexuality and desire and also inviting audience participation, challenging, voyeurism and subverting patriarchal power structures, but celebrating female empowerment and agency. Men act and women appear, men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at, this initiate Laura pointing that the "male gaze is a powerful tool of patriarchal control, objectifying and fetishizing women's bodies" (15).

The male gaze goes beyond the ordinary look but the inner consciousness as internalized by women seeing themselves through this gaze. This could be psychologically too revealing for women whose privacy is being freely and un-authorizing invaded through the male gaze – power of the eye (sight). This is deteriorating to the dignity of women posing inequality, inferiority complex in the minds of women. "The male gaze reduces women to mere objects, stripping them of their agency and autonomy" Mackinnon (29).

Feminist artists, theorists and critics advocated that the "gaze" be returned by the women (oppositional gaze) If equality would be truly practiced and for social justice, growth and promotion of the feminine world. Equality demands fair approach and treatment, submerging suppression and subjugation under the cloak of civilization. Hooks says "Women must learn to return the gaze, to look back at men and challenge their power" (3).The male gaze can be resisted and subverted through alternative forms of representation and spectatorship. Conclusively, the male gaze concept can be termed as a cultural construct that reinforces women's oppression and marginalization.

Femme Fatale

The "femme fatale" is a patriarchal construct that reinforces women's objectification and marginalization as postulated by Mulvey. Femme fatale is an erroneous concept perceived that a

woman manipulates their beauty and charm to lure men into some compromising situations. Such women are classified as stereotype, seductive and manipulators. This concept is highly critiqued and totally rejected by feminists because it is demeaning and tries to perpetuate negative representation about women but rather giving credence and a playing ground for chauvinism and objectification. Women true potentials are under-represented and undervalued. "The femme fatale is a cultural icon that represents the feared and fantasized female other" (sic) Doane (24).

Conclusively, feminists lay emphasis on women's autonomy, intelligence and complexity. Women should be portrayed as active rather than passive, celebrated and not reduced to stereotype, pleasure givers and aesthetics. Women participation and activism be institutionalized and not rejected or questioned. Challenging and leadership roles should be assigned to women without bias, (multifaceted and nuance roles).

Phallocentric/Androcentric and the Women's Bodies

Phallocentric and Androcentric concepts are related but have distinct meanings. Phallocentric refers to the power of 'phallus' (penis). The phallus symbolizes power, authority and social control, emphasizing on the dominance of masculinity through the power of the phallus. The opinions of men are generalized and capsulated over the women's experiences.

Androcentric refers to when culture, knowledge is devoid of a feminine input. The focus is generally placed on men, their experiences, perspectives and values are considered superior over the women's. It gives regards to male norms and standards as the dominance force, marginalizing or undermining the female's experiences and contributions.

Phallocentric, a more abstract symbolic dominance using the phallic symbol (penis) while Androcentric has concrete practical consequences, where men dominate leadership positions.The word Phallocentric can literally be considered using the African context as culture and linguistic dominance of phallus paternity, patriarchal power and marginalizing the female body."The phallus is the privileged signifier of the patriarchal order" Luce, (24).This concept view the female body as absence, lack, fetishization reducing the value of female bodies and subjecting their inner strength "Women are the other, the inferior, the secondary" Simone de Beauvoir (75).

The negative representation of women in the media has been an aged long tussle by the feminists against the society dominated and controlled by masculinity, though through rigorous advocacy, campaigns and activism the traditional views is assuming a positive change.

Conclusively, we can say that "The representation of women's bodies on stage is a complex and multifaceted issue, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards gender, power and embodiment. "By examining the tension between objectification, agency and empowerment, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which women's bodies are performed perceived and politicized in theatrical contexts" (Artificial Intelligence).

Disrupting Phallocentricism and Androcentricism Dominance Using the Interventions of Digital Platforms

Phallocentricism, among other issues is considered as injustice against the feminine gender. Technological advancement had given an edge to feminism to forcefully push down their views and advocate for relevance and inclusivity. These devices have enhanced the aims of feminists globally. The media offers a unique opportunity to challenge and disrupt some obnoxious concepts popularized by men. These platforms help in subverting Phallocentric and Androcentricism narratives amplifying women's voices and creating new possibilities for feminist expression.

Traditional patriarchal dominance/structures are challenged; the women's voices, experiences, innovations and ideas are shared and amplified. Social media has given women a voice, a platform to express themselves and a way to connect with others, creating counter-narrations. Digital platforms can be used to challenge dominant narratives and create alternative stories that promote gender equality.

The social media facilitates on-line activism faster and reaching to a larger audience. It provides a safe haven for subjective advocacy and activism (digital platform). The media promotes collaboration and teamwork through globalization for social change. "Media representation matters and digital platforms can provide opportunities for diverse voices and perceptions to be heard" Gay (35). It allows interactions, experiences are widely shared through story-telling, empathy can be created and some dominant narrations can be unraveled. It's also a call for global connectivity where obstructive barriers are broken, biases are critiqued and a sense of belonging and acceptability is created and encouraged in women leading to a more resolved society.

Digital interventions against patriarchal dominance have a very wide benefit for the feminine gender; it enables women to represent themselves, exercising agency and control over their narratives. The media offer a unique opportunity to disrupt Phallocentric dominance and enable new opportunities for feminist expressions and activities. Leveraging on these opportunities the traditional patriarchal structures are challenged, women's voices are initiated and amplified, leading to a newform of representations created in the media for the feminine gender allowing for inclusivity and equitable society, (social change).

Scope

The study explores how media can be used by contemporary African female filmmakers to challenge the Male Gaze concept, patriarchal dominance while also trying to elevate the status of the feminine gender, equating them with their male counter-parts and elevating women's roles in the media beyond aesthetic, objectification or domestication to more challenging and tasking roles. It also examines how modern feminists can use the media to disrupt and challenge phallocentric tendencies. Some Nollywood films were analyzed with themes of objectification and breaking away.

Gaps: films are selected based on popularity and wide distribution, but indigenous films are not considered**,** these films are limited in number and may not suffice in justifying the findings of the

work. The findings of this work is limited to urban dwellers, rural dwellers, illiterates and other sects are not inclusive like the LGBTQ. The language is purely English, a non- English speaker may not benefit from the film except it is subtitled in the person's language. There are no prior interviews with stakeholders; accessibility to them was limited as a result of availability. The producers' liabilities, bias are not part of the research work.

Significance

The study is significant because it reveals how contemporary Nigerian women film makers uses the film via the power of the camera to disrupt phallocentric concepts identified by Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative* where she emphasized on the power of sight against women's bodies on stage (6). It is also significant as the researcher's attempt to align foreign theory, Radical and Liberal theories on African socio- cultural context. It creates an avenue for further analysis on how the female bodies is vividly fetishized on media and also allows other researchers continue academic debate and research on women's bodies on stage.

Contribution to knowledge

This topic immensely contributes to knowledge in different ways. These are empirical, theoretical, and methodological allowing deeper researches and scholarly work by other researchers. It reveals how female artists use their bodies on screen beyond the textual analysis to contest phallocentric tendencies. It allows the post documentationof such films for contemporary film stakeholders in the society and for future reference or study. It creates more in-depth on what is obtainable on the script as it allows a shift from book to screen for clearer view and understanding of the meaning of objectification. It allows audiences' perception and participation. This helps in shaping the film industry in characterization and portrayal

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Liberal and the Radical feminist theories. These theories examine the rights, freedom and other related issues. It refutes patriarchal oppression and advocates for inclusivity, and social change in the society. Some notable feminists took the lead in fighting for women equality and freedom; women should be seen and heard. These women includes; Mary Wollstonecraft, Bell Hooks, John Mill, Betty Friedan, Jill Dolan, Laura Mulvey, Simone De Beavoir Adiche Ngozi Chimamanda amongst many others. These women came in waves with various modifications but with a singular aim of creating a society where women and men are equal. These theories enable testability for validation and reliability, logical, and coherence. There are some core principles and key concepts in Liberal and Radical theories: these are;

Core concepts:

Equality: fair treatment and equal opportunities among gender

Individualism: personal autonomy and agency.

Freedom from oppressive parameters and structures
Collaborations: building team work and solidarity among women to create social change
Challenging patriarchy and all its dominant structures, exposing anddismantling those structures
Value for women's experiences and transformation

Key values

Gender equality: challenging gender based discrimination and analyzing power dynamics and institutions as opposed to phallocentricism
All-encompassing equal opportunities to both sexes as opposed to Androcentricism
Women having autonomy over their bodies, lives and decisions as opposed to male gaze, and the femme fatale. It is believed that the women's bodies are the battle ground on which war is being waged against them
Women's empowerment for productivity and performance and making reforms within existing systems is key to their dignity.

Gaps in Liberal and Radical Feminist Theories

The Liberalists considers equality in representation as key. The women bodies are considered as neutral and suitable for participation. The Radicalists analyzes every sexualized representation as patriarchal violence and advocate that women should live a separate life void of men. Both theories are alien to our African socio- cultural context. The study attempts to see how African film makers can disrupt phallocentricism within African socio- cultural context by proposing an embodied negro-feminist film theory that can relate or capture the African cultural contex

Findings

In the film *The Wedding Party* there are fragmentations of shots on Rosie's inviting costume and sensitive parts, her gestures and actions are direct examples of the male gaze concepts/ femme fatale. Also in film *The Arbitrator*, the opening scene reveals the phallus drive that naturally strives in masculinity. All the women in the film suffer one fatalill or the other in the hands of MrSanni. The film highly objectified women.

In the film, *The Tribe of Judah* reversed the notion of objectification as mostly portrayed in most films. The female lead character is the core narrative in the film; she carries the plots of the film in her characterizations as a single parent, playing the dual role of both parents, head of the family, bread winner and a mother's love and care for her children from different father with different geographical background. Her maternal experiences are beyond domestication and objectification but giving more value and pride to motherhood and femininity but diverse paternity of the children reveals an identity akin to objectification.

Conclusively, when a female character down play the male gaze concept and phallocentric tendencies, it builds support, confidence in women producing what can be called "didantic gaze", an outright imposition over Mulvey's concept of the male gaze.

Recommendations

In the case of academic or for scholarly research, various scenes of body disruption can be captured and archived for future reference. Sound and other suitable mechanisms can be generated to replace obnoxious scenes like, sexual violence, objectification and other abuses that are often reflected against women on the screen

Government should create a policy to distinguish bodily autonomy as narrative from sexualized or objectified spectacle. No fragmentations of women's bodies on screen, this may lead to eroticism in men.

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