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## **Conflicting Framings: Commoditisation of Female Body in Film and Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Gender inequality is central to women agitation and has remained the most engaging debate in contemporary academic discourse. Feminist writers, (whether in film, or literature) continue to present conflicting ideological frames that often criticize normative gender identity and establishing new orientations. Film, unlike literature, has a way of presenting reality in most captivating manner. Such is the case in Emen Isong's The Banker (2015), a Nigerian drama film, invoking "Laura Mulvey's "politics of male gaze" as stated in her Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. The paper notes that objectification of female body of the lead actress, is meant to satisfy sexual pleasure of the male clients; an act considered as a marketing tool in Nigerian Banking industry. The director's penchant for dancing between "marketing commodity" and commoditisation of female body", creates a conflicting communication duality. Using two theories, Media Representation and African Womanism, the paper explores gender dynamics in representation of female body as well as its implications on female identity in social institutions. Research Methodology is qualitative, with focus on critical analysis. It concludes that such representation poses not just identity crises for the female gender but also great security challenges as people learn more from media.*

**KEY WORDS:** commoditisation, female body, films, representation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the global transient culture, the cinema in all its ramifications, has assumed a dominant space, entertaining, highlighting and sometimes shaping people's perceptions of other races and creeds. Cinema, in the contemporary period, provides pleasurable leisure to greater percentage of viewing audiences, especially the youths. Films, which can be viewed at any given space courtesy of modern ICT technology, are gradually shaping the world. One of the goals of every form of mass media is setting agenda, and this is often illustrated by consistently presenting one version of reality to the audience. Western films specialise in creating stereotypes of races and culture, thereby creating "illusions of others" that are never like them. Extant literature from the West, unfortunately, suggests mainstream cinema such as "Hollywood" had a sterile configuration of others and "has played a decisive role in shaping" and protecting ideology of the West. Mass media, especially the cinema, remains a viable tool for "a dialectical portrayal of the otherness"(Marcos & Colón, 2016, p.12). Illustrating the functions of cinema further, Marcos and

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Colón point out that “an average Westerner’s understanding of “Others” rests solely on what they see on the screen since “most people do not have other ways to access those cultures but by seeing their representation on the screen. The ultimate aim of the utilisation of the other is making us feel that,... there is no other better than us” (Marcos & Colón, 2016,pp. 12-13).

African experience of cinema has remained a unique experiment over the decades partly because of the dynamic nature of arts itself and partly as a result of modern technological development alongside its accompanying challenges. The latest product of this experiment was the “invention of video film format” that replaced the costly celluloid film. Nigerian Nollywood seems to take the lead in this direction as Jedlowski (2010) observes.

The mentioned definition of “Nollywood” tends to objectify the Nigerian video phenomenon within the static category which works as a symmetrical opposition to, for instance, Hollywood’s definition of cinema. Nollywood has become the “other” of western cinema, an “other” which is strange and peculiar but at the same time fascinating and attractive because of the structure of its production system and the dimension of its popular success (2016, p.56).

Apparently, it is this “strange and peculiarity”, as well as “fascinating” characteristics of Nigerian “woods”, and not just Nollywood, that is overwhelming, attracting interest of film scholars to its study. The focus on study of Nigerian films as cultural expressions of the largest black nations on earth is engraved in the heart of some critics as yet another break-through in African scholarship. In the light of this conception, Okoye (2007) and (2010/2011) has interrogated “otherness” first, from the perspective of the West, and secondly, from African view point. His position is that “colonialist discourse silences the African subject and postcolonial theory, by inflicting textuality over existential reality” (Okoye, 2007,p. 26). In defense of Africa, Okoye avers that African video films, which are “populist, immediate and local” are nurtured to give “audience to the silence other of colonialist discourse”. Citing *Osuofia in London*, he postulates that the film “proffer a popular Nigerian representation of European Otherness”. Arguing further, he notes that, existential reality can only be seen or heard in virtual space, apparently through creating images of powerful heroes and heroines of African cinematic arts. Interestingly, Okoye suggests that Nigerian video film is a good tool for cultural re-branding of Africa, a means of re-writing African battered history and restoration of her dignity. In the context of Nigeria, how does the film medium achieve this noble objective? Again, Okoye (2010/2011) gives an example of how this could be done; by “anthropologising the West”. For him, “a Nigerian movie, *Osofia in London*, directed by Kingsley Ogoro, returns anthropological gaze of colonialist Europe on Europe itself and examines African representation in European discourses” (Okoye, 2010/11,p.82). Nigerian film as argued here, has through deliberate framings of filmic text, invites the audience to pass judgment and in the above case, in favour of Africa. Ironically “Europe never listens to its “others” and hates to be represented” (Okoye, 2010/11, p.79).

Thus, the task of re-awaking and re-invigorating African subjects and postcolonial theory seems to be gradually gaining the attention of African scholars and writers using specifically the film medium. While the black people’s identity is questioned within the ambit of cinema, women

identity crises in films also resurfaces within the male dominant media space, making scholars to argue that “this issue of feminist ideology of gender domination has gradually built up and manifested in films produced in the Nigerian film industry” (Utoh-Ojemudia and Okeke, 2018, p.43).

Within Nigerian film industry, entrance of women as filmmakers is beginning to attract attention of scholars and to create a shift of focus. *The Banker*, a film directed by Ikechukwu Onyeka, (and produced by Emem Isong, a leading female producer in the industry), showcase the ugly trend of using women body to make money in the name of marketing in Nigerian Banking Industry. The shots from the beginning to the end clearly showcase the negative notion on marketing in banking industry as a kind of corporate prostitution. Beautiful and attractive young women are sent to woo prospective rich clients who wish to open accounts in the bank. From the director’s perspective, the shots and the actions of the female banker clearly suggested lust and other seductive behaviours contrary to African culture.

Framing, a Communication Theory popularised by Robert Entman, suggests that the media draw the audience eye to a particular topics. According to Entman (1991), “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way, as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation and or treatment recommendation for the item”. The way in which “story” is presented creates a frame for the information”. This paper interrogates such actions which emphasis the opposite of the woman of African descent thus, creating a “new hybridity of “Other” that is neither here nor there. Using Media Theory of Representation and African Womanism, this paper argues on the social implication of such representation and its impact on sustainable development

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Media Representation as propounded by David Chandler (2006), “refers to the construction in any medium (especially the mass media) of the aspects of reality such as people, places, objects, events and cultural identities. The term refers to the process as well as to its product”. This theory explicitly looks at three basic concerns of how identity is portrayed, in media, how the producer chooses to produced it as well as the audience interpretation of what they see. In the film, *The Banker* by Emem Isong, for instance the director anchors the story as an auteur and furnishes the audience with his own creative vision. The audience perceives the vision of the director. Through the director’s basic shots, the story lines are sustained. The picture painted about the lead actress in the story by the director is that of a responsible African woman who will rather lose her job than “selling her body” to meet her monthly target.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Critical Discourse on Representation of Female Gender in Films**

For centuries, feminist arguments on films centred on representation and spectatorship. Earliest of these debates was initiated by Laura Mulvey (1989) and Claire Johnston (1973). The duo argue that women are largely absent from mainstream filmmaking as stakeholders. Laura Mulvey’s

essay on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” gives credence to the centrality of gender dynamics in the world’s most popular and most profitable entertainment industry. The theory states that sexualized image of women (in cinema) says little or nothing about women’s reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on female image. The basic argument in this theory is that cinema representation of image of women is supporting dominant phallogocentric patriarchy and also perpetuating its structures. She states that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/male”. She explained further that the pleasure gained from looking “scopophilic” is a male pleasure. One of the motivating factors propelling female filmmakers is the need to tell women story to reflect daily women realities in order to reduce what Chimamanda Adichie termed “her single story”. Consequently, some female filmmakers are writing back to their male counterparts deconstructing “the gaze.”

Mis-representation in Nigerian films occurs in two ways. First, it occurs in the form of female stereotypes; and secondly, in the form of cultural stereotypes. The former covers a range of critical writings against representation of female characters with negative images in films. Such negations include witches, prostitutes, evil doers, jezebels, husband snatchers, gossips, never-do wells, nincompoops. On the contrary, cultural stereotypes occur when filmmakers deliberately attack Nigerian/African culture by highlighting in their films negative aspects of customs and traditions that have gone into extinction or that are not even part of the people’s culture. Emen Isong’s *The Banker* questions women stereotypes. For instance, many critics have argued for or against the continued wanton display of nudity, as a form of stereotype on African culture. On the other hands, some critics insist that filmmakers draw inspiration from the things that happen in their physical environments. Film scholars such as Shaka & Uchendu (2012), Ayakoroma (2017) and Utoh-Ezeajugh (2008) have made useful contributions in this regard. Shaka & Uchendu (2012) argue that female gender is a victim of patriarchal gender role socialization and mental enslavement by citing how from the ancient Greek period, women were highly domesticated, leaving them the option of “directing all their physical and intellectual energies towards attracting husbands.” Consequently, representation of women in Nollywood films “is handled along the traditional lines of gender hierarchy in African society, such that the female seems always to be subject of male spectacle or vilification, serving more to be seen than heard” (Shaka, & Uchendu, 2012, p. 6).

The foregoing observation corresponds with the perception that women are victims of various cultural beliefs and discrimination. Women are not only treated as second class citizens, even their bodies are commoditized. Shaka & Uchendu, once more raise a very crucial point of “male gaze” and the “female being the object of gaze” which is often heightened in visual media such as films. Deliberate manipulation of female body, through erotic display is common in some Nigerian films such as *The Prostitute* (Amata, 2002), *Domitila I & II* (Ejiro Zeb, 1998), *Harlot* (Joe, 1998), and *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* (Onu, 1995, 1996).

Expanding literature on women in Nigerian film industry is filled with a repetition of how women are represented in the movie, a development that calls for further studies on participation of African women in film industry. Here are some examples: Ekwierhoma (2008) deliberates on “women

through the eye of the camera; the aesthetic challenge of Nigerian films”; Ossai (2008), “The packaging and manipulation of ‘weaker sex’ in Nigerian home video movie: a reflection”. Ayakoroma (2010), discusses “Nigerian video films and the image questions: a critical reading of Lancelot Oduawa Imasuen’s *Home in Exile*”. Stereotypical representation of female in the media distorts narratives on women as characters in a story, be it in the novel, or film. Such distortion creates an illusion of reality. The latest attempt to re-construct battered images of African women through screen media got a boost in Stephanie Okereke’s blockbuster, *Dry* (2013). The film “employs advocacy and propaganda in presenting an avalanche of women’s problems such as early marriage, child marriage and pregnancy, recto/vecto vagina fistula” (Nwanya, & Iorongurum, 2019, p. 234). It is believed that by utilizing media space to tell women story by women themselves, women issues will be placed in proper perspectives. This thinking informs the objectives of this paper which explores conflicting framings of women in a film directed by a man, and produced by a woman.

### **Representation of women in the Film, *The Banker* by Emen Isong**

The basic argument of this research is on consistent conflicting framings (especially of the lead character, Chinwe) in the above movie. “The Nigerian film industry has consistently communicated gender identities through the exhibition of gendered imagery in films especially in narratives involving couples in marital unions” (Utoh-Ojemudia & Okeke, 2018, p.46). Sexuality is also deployed either as an indirect or direct weapon to influence decisions, both at home and work place. Such is the case with Emen Isong’s *The Banker*, a contemporary Nigerian drama film genre exploring, sexual harassment and exploitation of women body. Corporate banking with its challenges imposes a moral dilemma female marketer. Such challenges are identity and moral crises. The general perception is that these female marketers are corporate prostitutes. The conflict in the movie therefore, raises two questions; is it morally wrong for a female banker to play along with her clients and retains her job or to maintain professional ethics and loss her job? This dilemma results in conflicting framings by the director. In what appeared to be an ideal Nigerian rich family setting, the camera pans from the long established shot, to an interior revealing a well lavishly furnished modern living room of Mr Kunle. It is in this living room that the family of four sits to decide the fate of a poor young woman Chinwe Odigbo, a banker with Gold Bank who will later be the daughter-in-law.

Ikechukwu Onyeka, the director of the film employs a binary narrative style that seems to be on both side of the story. His shorts confirm the saying that “most Nigerian movies have the female sex appeal” (Ayodele, 2018, p.242). On one hand, he showcase women as helpless victims of men, on the other hand, he depict women as their own enemies. The nonconformist female character, Chinwe is conventionally subjected to a lot of difficulties. First by her manager, who set a high target for her; second, by her fiancé’s father-in-law who rejects her for her career.

Conflicting framing occur beginning from the shots establishing Chinwe’s attempts to win an account to the point she finally wins the first one. It was not clear whether the meeting with Chief Odigbo is in his office or at home. There is an “economic of shots” omitting long established shots that can give details of the background. Questions imposed on the lead actor by Charles left much



to be desired. One is amazed to hear the bank manager, asking Chinwe in anger, “You think having sex with you is worth Three Hundred Million Dollars (\$300,000,000)? “Are you a virgin? Even if “You think that stupid degree you have is worth anything? The Manager consistently attempts to silence the feminine voices confining to the dictates of patriarchy. This reinforces the dominant ideology that women are supposed to conform to the cultural values dictated by a patriarchal society and anything other than being conformist is out of the norm. It has become a norm for male banker in position of authority to lord on the female bankers. Oppression of female is in line with “setting up high monthly target” and the desperation to meet up the target has become a norm. This scenario played out when the camera first zoom into Kunle Oyedepo’s mansion, and reveals a half naked Chinwe who is convinced that seductive look and appearance can bewitch her sex maniac young millionaire client.

The most awful representation of women in the film are shots suggesting “sensual images, such as eroticism, exploitation of sex and nudity. Continuous framing of erotic images of women bodies, prostitution, phonographic are all codes loaded with meanings. *The Banker*, brings to fore, Johnston (1979) argument on women’s cinema as counter Cinema in which she argues persuasively that from the time of silent cinema women has been stereotyped in films and calls for a cinema that challenges such narrow conventions. It is not clear if Emem Isong’s movie set out to heed this clarion call. Gender stereotyping, as portrayed in the film serves two purposes; first, it addresses the identity crisis rocking female bankers in the society. Second, it enables the audience to weigh between morality and ethics on one hand, and between evil and good on the other hand. Helen, the second female banker, and Chinwe’s roommate, often compromise her professional ethics by sleeping around with rich male clients and got the beating of her life from Mrs Aburi. While Chinwe’s non-compromising stand fetched her a dream husband and a peaceful home. At a point, the identity crisis deepens. The scene of discussion between the two roommates illustrates this further.

Helen When you walk into their offices with a very tight dress, what effect do you think it has on them? Or may be when you walk into their offices and cross your legs and your tight has been show? What effect do you think it has on them ?

Chinwe Lost over drive.

Helen And what will they not be willing to do at that time? ...who gains at this point? Is it the man who spends all his years trying to build an empire or a woman who just make a few million in a second?

As the films narrative spans from long shots to medium shots, and then close up shots, establishing the relation between one scene and another, and between one actor and another, domination of women’s public and private spaces, becomes a defining features of patriarchal dehumanisation. Indeed, “women are objectified and expressed in the artistic configuration as bodies of desire and

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pleasure (Okooome, 2019, p. 32) a subjugation that is consistently embellished and sustained throughout the film.

Basically, women in the film narrative style are not masters of themselves. They are not free to take decisions, whether as single ladies, or as mothers, workers or house wives. Such is the case of Chinwe, and her mother-in-law in the film, *the banker*. This reason for this is not far-fetched. Male dominance of women in virtually every sphere of human endeavours has been blame for women non-performance or passivity. In many patriarchal cultures, authority persistently resides with the male and As such, gender role consistently place women in a position of servitude and in position of dominance thereby limiting the ability of women to influence decisions which affect their own lives (Utoh-Ojemudia & Okeke, 2018, p. 44).

Within the convention of shots that form the film narrativity, ideological struggle exposing patriarchal conventions become manifest. This conventions, aptly described by Chinwe when she states “it is an extension of a man’s world thing” where woman’s opinions do not count. But women opinions eventually count because the ripples generated by Kunle’s father can only be settled by an accommodating wife and understanding daughter. Kunle’s father has previously acknowledged he has a dutiful wife who puts everything in place at home. The theory of womanism as expounded by Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi demands for peaceful solution in resolving conflict at home. Vivian, the mother of Kunle, is ever ready to bring about peaceful union between father and son by suggesting that their daughter-in-law should be put to taste. In this wise, African brand of feminism, that is “African Womannism” comes into play.

### **Representation and Challenges of Security in Nigerian’s Development**

All the argument on women representation in Nigerian film is summed up thus; “two dominant stereotype of representation of women by male director are women as mothers (Motherhood) and women as whores” (Dipio, 2014, p. 6). The last observation is prevailing in Emen Isong’s *The Banker*. “Corporate prostitution” imposes a serious security challenge in the contemporary period. The wrong signal to the media audience is that indecency attracts attention and quick reward in cash and kind. Continuous emphasis on nudity, seductive look, and other amorous behavior is a danger signal to teeming Nigerian youth who learn fast from social media. Besides, sexual violation of minor is one of the socio-cultural issues facing modern society and since most media audience internalises whatever message the get from the median. Deconstructing femininity therefore, requires firm and sincere purposeful presentation. Manipulation of female body, through erotic display of can only arose sexual feelings from the audience and says nothing about real responsible African woman as represented by Chinwe. The flash back scenes are not only contradictory, but also confusing. Mis-informing the public about banking profession and women carrier in the industry in a way bring discouragement to aspiring female bankers. Prostitution in any guise is evil and should be discouraged. Defamation of character of female bankers not only spells doom for the women, but to the industry at large. Besides, what other people from other countries see from our films, form greater percentage of their opinion of who we are. There is need therefore to build character, and strong institutions for our children. A young man recently was caught as arm robbery, when questioned by the police he claimed that he learnt arm robbery by

watching a popular Nigerian actor, Zubu Michael. This is one of the negative impacts of the media on the youth. Continuous framing and exposition of “woman body” is therefore a dangerous signal. Obviously, between reality and fiction, representation of women in the film as both commodity for trade and “a commodity for consumption” is a director’s attempt to depict the world of reality. A “representation” considered as false because it is a “misconstruction” that depict “women in films and real life as outlaws and evil to their families and society as a whole.” (Ayodele, 2018, p. 23). Though not all, representations in film are false and in the movie, *The Banker*, by Emem Isong, representation of “female body as a commodity of trade” in Nigerian Banking industry is a reflection of reality in some selected cases (for instance in the character, Helen). Other representation standing in sharp contrast with the philosophy of the lead character is from the scene of the flash back where Chinwe displays her previous bustle and hustles and attempt sedition in a bid to win accounts. It is a whole lot of subjective thinking and reasoning contradicting her moral stance. By inference, she often succumbs to the dictum of “corporate prostitution” at least in principle. Media representation of such awkward situation calls to mind the argument on censorship.

## CONCLUSION

The paper examines conflicting framings of women in Nigerian film industry as it relates to Emem Isong’s *The Banker* as an attempt aimed at perpetuating “male gaze” through corporate prostitution, a ploy seen as instrument of marketing in banking industry. What stands on the road to success and development in the film are multifarious; wickedness, greed, selfishness, and materialism. Nigerian as a Nation is faced with countless insecurity challenges at present. It is therefore a misgiving to escalate this situation by any act of commission. At the height of kidnapping, rape and other forms of insecurity, one expect film makers to play down on films projecting female sex appeal as these films send wrong signals to the public about women and neglect the good qualities they are made of. Though the director tries to balance the story by introducing, Vivian, Kunle’s mother as a model of African Motherhood, reconstructing women identity, in Nigerian film still remains a better option for rebuilding the image of the Nation.

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