# A Precious but Uncertain Gift

Salawu Olajide
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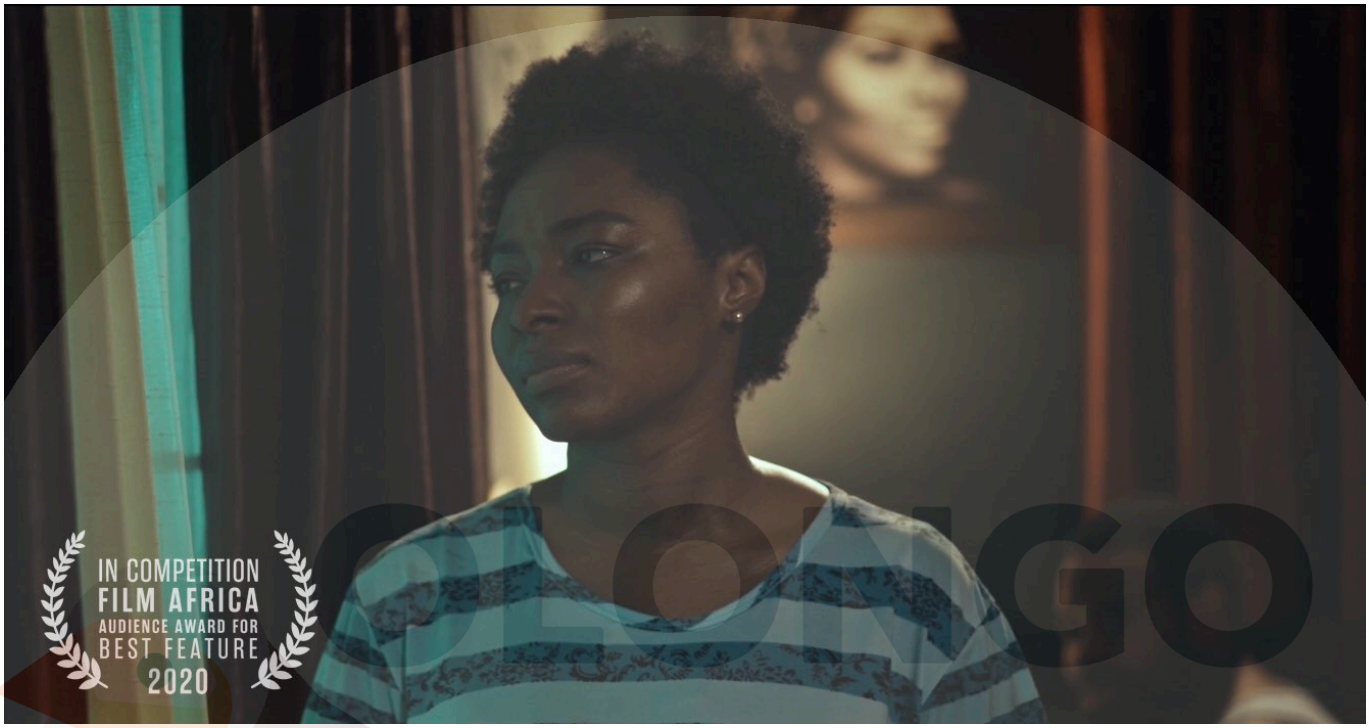


Nigeria's movie industry, Nollywood can no longer be regarded as a nascent industry, even though theorists and film historians are now defining the current age as the age of 'New Nollywood' because of advances in storytelling and cinematography. Still, the industry finds it difficult to move away from weak high society stories and romantic comedies. Occasionally, Nollywood has dealt with topical issues but the industry has been largely dominated by blockbusters that are made for profit. The work of education will hardly be done by blockbusters but it is guaranteed that movies that deal with topical issues would educate the public about important issues. Beyond education, the story will be relatable to most people and they will get a better understanding of it. This goal of gaining a better understanding of Postpartum Depression is what *For Maria Ebun Pataki* did for its audience. It develops a new and lucid understanding of the subject and refreshes insights through cinematic paradigm. By presenting the scenes and defamiliarizing social realities around postpartum depression, viewers of the movie would have a long standing question about motherhood answered; they would understand why a new mother who they knew behaved the way she did after childbirth.

The World Health Organization reports that up to 20% of new mothers in developing countries experience depression after childbirth. This illness, which is called Postpartum Depression, manifests in different ways and research on it is still developing. Also, it remains a taboo topic in many cultures as the affected people often feel shame so they pretend like it is not happening or simply wish it away. Neither of this helps as the illness does not go away, it only gets worse without treatment. Nigeria's movie industry, Nollywood has treated a lot of women's issues in times past but most of it has been through popular lenses, further validating popular myths and narratives about them.

In *For Maria Ebun Pataki,* Meg Otanwa's character, Derin, a new mother is unhappy after childbirth as the doctors inform her husband of a medical procedure they did. The procedure is later revealed as the removal of her uterus but that does not make her sad. Instead, she cannot place her finger on why she was sad after delivery. She is unable to breastfeed her baby and the baby cries every time

she carries it. She begins to see herself as an unworthy mother and the multitude of emotions she confronts make her depressed. Her husband, played by the talented Gabriel Afolayan, tries his best to assist her but it is simply not enough. Tina Mba, who played Derin's mother in law, also tries to assist her but she is unable to because the illness is unknown. The mother in law tried to treat Derin in her own way by encouraging her, supporting her, scolding her in some instances and praying. All these are still not enough and eventually, the mother in law had to leave at the suggestion of Derin.

The depression got worse and when it was eventually diagnosed and therapy suggested, the option was not taken. The story concludes with Derin committing suicide after dressing up and applying makeup on her face. One significant thing about the movie is that the cast and crew are not Nollywood's usual suspects. While the director, Damilola Orimogunje is not popular in the industry, he cannot be called an upcoming director as he has several short films and an excellent movie under his belt. He also co-wrote the movie with Tunray Femi , another gifted but not so popular writer. The only two popular faces among the cast and crew are veteran Tina Mba and Gabriel Afolayan. This suggests that even within the much touted New Nollywood, there are faces that are not popular but are making amazing movies that are not box office hits. These crew members gave 100% to their roles and it is obvious from the beginning of the movie till the end. Meg Otanwa was phenomenal as Derin, Gabriel Afolayan seemed perfect for the role and Tina Mba fits the role to a T. Beyond the actors' individual stellar contribution to the movie, the casting is also excellent and the actors are perfect for the roles they play.

At the center of the movie's plot is Postpartum Depression and this is what drives the plot for the entire duration of the movie. This technique is risky but the director managed to pull it off by sustaining viewers' attention. The characters are decentered so that the illness can be shown. The audience is confronted with the illness throughout the movie's duration and enough information is provided to show the problem and possible solutions but the tragic tenor of the movie is also moderated to make it less horrific. There is no frantic use of psychological tropes and even the suicide scene which ends it is craftily done. The audience knows about the illness and how dangerous it is but it does not scare them away, rather it makes them aware of it.

Meg Otanwa's character unfolds the illness without repetition and this is what sustained the plot. Also, possible sub plots are avoided and the illness is made the singular focus of the narrative. There are other subplots like the relationship between Derin and her husband, and the relationship between her and her mother in law that can be explored but the story does not do that. Instead, it avoids the binary view of conflict that is popular in Nollywood. The victim does not experience depression as a result of some sin she committed and those who tried to help her also gave their best, it just was not enough. The agency of the illness is also not put on any spiritual affliction. It just happens. While this might look simple, it is not, because of Nollywood's long history of conflict bifurcation.

The effort put into the movie was complemented by the quality of the cinematography and this makes it difficult for anyone to notice any lapses in the storytelling. The titular inflection of the movie is also inventive. 'For Maria Ebun Pataki' translates in English as 'For Mary, Precious Gift.' Mary is the biblical mother of Jesus who was born of Immaculate Conception and while 'Ebun Pataki' might seem like a regular Yoruba saying, it is a phrase made popular by Juju Musician, Ebenezer Obey Fabiyi from the title of his song of the same name. The song is popular because it is a staple at naming ceremonies in Nigeria. The title of the movie might also gesture towards the issue surrounding the birth of Jesus and the uproar generated by the Immaculate Conception. The Yoruba part of the title keys into popular Yoruba belief that a child is a precious gift to parents. The movie does a good job of showing that while a child is a precious gift; but it also shows that a child comes with all kinds of uncertainties like Postpartum Depression. Even though the character of Meg Otanwa commits suicide as a result of depression, she made the important point that depression

might not be physically obvious but it can lead to death. This tragic end qualifies the movie as high art, which is even more significant in a country where popular art has taken pre-eminence.

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**Ayọ̀délé Ìbíyẹmí** is a reader who writes occasionally. He works at the intersection of literature, Life Writing, Popular Music, Tech, (Multi)Media, History and Art. For him, language is very important and words are what make the world livable.