Shanty Town: A Nollywood Proverb

Salawu Olajide
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The opening scene of *Shanty Town*, the mini-series currently running on Netflix, was rather long, graphic and brutal. Loud explosions, the rat-at-tat of guns, raining sand, frightened people running helter-skelter, heavy objects connecting with unprotected heads, more violent people with more guns that went on and on… but, no body parts flying through the air, and nary a single drop of blood splashing the camera (Tarantino style)… until the final shot that ended the life of a wanna-be saviour. A scene to satisfy the Nigerian obsession with Hollywood action films, except in this case, there was no 'hero' to save the day.

This scene anchored the film's exploration of the theme of political land-grabs that has been ongoing in several parts of Nigeria, particularly Lagos, for more than a century (*The Bombardment of Lagos*, 1851,https://www.nytimes.com/1861/10/20/archives/british-aggressions-in-africa-annexation-of-lagos.html, being the first). It brings to life the experience of many Indigenous peoples each time capitalists decide they need more real estate(read privatisation of public spaces and gentrification) to feed their insatiable appetites.

The directors then went on to establish crime the holy trinity of drugs, sex and body parts trafficking as its main theme.

Within two days of its release, *Shanty Town* climbed up to the No. 1 spot on the 'Most Watched' list in Nigeria and No. 17 internationally. A well deserved rating as it is a beautifully shot, well written, and fast paced film that managed to spray glitter over its loopholes and dangling story-lines (Nollywood staples).

However, *Shanty Town* is not the first of glamorous crime films coming out of Nollywood in recent times(particularly in the last two years). *Glamour Girls* (remake), *Soole*, *Blood Sisters*, *King of Boys* (1&2) and *Far From Home* have staked their claim on 'the most watched' series after their release.

In its defence, Nollywood has also produced stellar films in other genres like comedy (*The Lost Okoroshi*, *My Village People*, *Three Thieves,* and *Chief Daddy*) and period dramas (*Aníkúlápó*, *October 1st*, *Ẹlẹ́sin Ọba: The King's Horseman*, *King of Thieves*).

However, due to their inability to break away from relying heavily on tropes, misogyny and barely concealed morality lectures, their romantic comedies have rather fallen short of attaining the heights that crime and comedy has reached, particularly on streaming platforms. Which begs the question of what happened to Nigerian romantic comedies which were quite popular between the early eighties and nineties. With actors/producers like Isola Ogunsola (I-Show Pepper) and Adeyemi Afolayan (Ade Love) crowned the kings of romantic comedies both on the big screen and television.

Could it be that there's an evolution in the taste of the Nigerian film goer and Nollywood is yet to catch up with the times, particularly concerning romance and conservative ideas about gender roles within romantic partnerships? If this is the case why then has it been bold and daring when it comes to other film genres? What influence did *Jenifa* (2008) have on the redirection of Nigerian films from villainizing sex-work to examining sex trafficking and humanizing people involved in the oldest trade in the world?

Not only has Nollywood crime expanded conversations around sex work, they are also examining ideas of gender roles, 'morality' and capitalism. Post *Jenifa*, women have been gradually portrayed as powerful people with agency. There has also been valiant attempts at showcasing the cultures and religion of indigenous people without feeling the compulsion to dehumanize or reduce these traditional ways of life and beliefs, (*The Lost Okoroshi*, *Ẹlẹsin Ọba: The King's Horseman*, *My Village People*).

Traditional Nollywood is particularly enamoured with marriages and features heterosexual couples in most, if not all its offerings. In their imaginariums, rapists are punished by being forced to marry their victims(for the victim, marriage is justice). All husbands cheat, and the ones who get caught are fools who are eventually forgiven by their wives. Powerful women are witches who always get their just desserts at the end of the film. Mostly by death in the goriest manner imaginable, or the favourite, developing a mental health condition which eventually leads to homelessness and poverty. The only reason a man would do household chores or truly love his wife is through jazz, these stories are resolved when the woman gets punished with divorce or 'madness'.

Not that traditional Nollywood doesn't dip its toes into the territory of politics or even nationhood, but Tunde Kelani's productions *Ti Olúwa N'Ilẹ* (1993) and *Ṣaworo Idẹ*(1999) are the two that was able to marry great story telling with a tight production and enjoyed rave reviews. In this emerging Nollywood, Ishaya Bako's *4th Republic* (2019) and Kẹ́mi Adétiba's *King of Boys* (2018) lead the pack.

It is quite interesting that the genre that Nollywood has never stinted on in terms of storytelling, production quality, directing and casting is crime. For Nollywood, crime pays. Tade Ogidan, who has won several awards both within and outside the African continent can be said to be the king of crime storytelling. With stellar films like *Owo Blow*, *Diamond Ring*, *Dangerous Twins* and many more. With *Madam Dearest* and *Out of Bounds*, Tade Ogidan was able to establish the fact that Nollywood has the ability and wherewithal to produce psychological thrillers that portrays pain and tenderness without the caricaturing that accompanies such performances in the Nigerian film industry. Women in Ogidan's films are also full human beings with agency and power. Unfortunately his skills and way of seeing things is not shared by a majority of Nollywood producers, storytellers and backers.

The dehumanization of women and indigenous people living in Nigeria has a direct link to the history of film making. The first film ever made in Nigeria was *Palaver*, a celluloid film produced by Geoffrey Barkas in 1926. It was made barely 35 years after the Brothers Lumière (Auguste and Louis) captured a series of moving images on their new invention, the cinématographe.

What followed *Palaver* were a series of films and documentaries that firmly established white supremacy. These films not only dehumanised the black bodies featured in them in the story-telling

and how black bodies were shot, they also emphasize body parts that have been deemed 'ugly', women were sexualised and had their agency taken from them. The stories usually ended with uncalled for comparison with the white imagining of how societies should be run.

Kongi's Harvest, a play written (and starred in) by Wole Soyinka, was the first film produced that centred Nigerians and their story, although most of the crew members were foreigners. This, however, opened the floodgates for indigenous filmmakers like Ola Balogun, Jab Adu, and Eddie Ugboma.

Although Hubert Ogunde formed his mobile theatre company in 1945, his operas didn't make it to the big screen until *Aiyé* was produced in 1980. Around this time Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala) was also producing films for the big screen alongside Sadiq Balewa, John Ifoghale Amata, Eddie Ugbonah, Wale Adenuga(Papa Ajasco) etc. These producers were also creating plays, comedies and documentaries for television stations.

Although the 1980s was an important marker in film production, it is important to note that all the people involved in the creation and production are men. From writers to wardrobe.

From the very beginning, the Nigerian film industry was so notorious for sexual violence and exploitation that many parents refused to allow their daughters join theatre troops. And in order to involve women in their productions theatre owners resorted to entering polygamous relationships, particularly with younger women, in order to recruit and keep them in their companies. Although this practice has reduced somewhat, Nolywood is still grappling with sexual exploitation.

The introduction of video players led to the democratisation of film making, and opened the door to women and other minorities working underground to expand the limits of freedom within these spaces, which of course led to the creation of more jobs within the industry. A boom occurred in the industry between the mid-eighties to the early 2000's.

In spite of its advancement in production quality, Nollywood has been unable(read reluctant) to expand the limits of storytelling beyond the staple of cheating husbands, rapist turned lovers, witchcraft and armed robbers. Following the paths created by imperialists with surprising dedication and loyalty. Although the colour of the skin of the people both in front of and behind the camera had changed, the stories have not.

Religious filmmakers and comedians, in particular, have taken ownership of the violence perpetrated on vulnerable Nigerians, by deepening the demonisation of indigenous religions and way of life, and casting older women as witches and mammy-water roaming the face of the world, seeking who to devour. For Nollywood comedians sex workers, people living with disabilities and the LGBTQI community in Nigeria are fodders for humour. This has seeped into online skit making. The only way skit-makers seem to be able to make people laugh is by wearing female drag and making fun of women.

In their bid to cash out and deepen fear and religious fervour they have chosen to ignore the real life harm these films have caused innocent citizens and traumatising Nigerians who live in perpetual fear of their destinies being eaten. Instead of confronting the government about deepening poverty, the average Nigerian spends their time in religious houses, seeking 'spiritual' solutions to corruption and weaponised ineptitude.

A Nollywood producer once took to his social media page to complain about funding for Nollywood, how foreign investors with deep pockets are the ones actually dictating the kind of films that come out of Nollywood. Which begs the question of where all the monies being generated by the Nigerian

film industry since the 60's went to.

Although it appears that *Shanty Town* and the cohorts of films produced in the recent past are poised to change this narrative of certain subjects hitherto considered taboo, but there are still major sticking points.

As it is with *Shanty Town*, so it is with *Aníkúlápó* and other films daring to show nudity and sex scenes. It appears that the lens through which the colonials viewed and sexualised black female bodies has followed Nollywood into this new age. The nude scenes in most of these films are gratuitous, showing men handling female bodies with casual violence. While the sex scenes are mostly non-consensual. For example, in *Aníkúlápó*, the three major sex scenes that showed up in the film were borderline rape. With lovers taking their love interests by surprise, basically ignoring their protestations. While *Shanty Town* showed a rape scene, with the camera firmly on the rapist and the pain of the victim negligible. In fact the victim was blamed for getting raped. It was clear that the producers did not consider the triggering effect of rape scenes, rather focussing on pleasing an audience that gets off on watching women humiliated.

In all its doings Nollywood has been unable to express tenderness and sensitivity. Which goes back to its failure to make a true love story, as love in Nollywood is violent and demeaning.

Even in the most progressive films that establish the female as holders and wielders of power, there's always the centering of the masculine as the ultimate holders and wielders of power (*King of Boys I*, Lagidigba). In critiquing the world around it, Nollywood has refused to critique itself and the way it handles the stories of violence against persons. Which is why a lot of their films get backlash from discerning audience.

Films are one of the most powerful tools of engineering societal change, but Nollywood seems to be reluctant to step up to the challenge of creating art that will finally humanise Nigerians in all their glorious diversity.

Ayodele Olofintuade is a queer, non-binary, black feminist. She is the author of *Swallow: Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwúrà* (2022), *Lakiriboto Chronicles*: *A Brief History of Badly Behaved Women* (2018), *Eno's Story* (2010). Her speculative stories and creative non-fiction are housed in many literary journals. She is a researcher, who has written papers about African Feminisms and queerness in pre-colonial Yorùbá history. She runs an online Feminist and Queer ezine, 9jafeminista. She writes queer bodies into traditional Yorùbá families pre-colonialism and during neo-colonialism.