

Whose Vision is Kunle Afolayan's *Swallow*?

Salawu Olajide
October 24, 2021



Kunle Afolayan's latest Netflix original property, *Swallow* is an adaptation of the novel of the same title by Sefi Atta, one of the most influential contemporary Nigerian writers.

Released on the global platform as the big Independence Day release, Afolayan's visual interpretation futilely gropes for ideas about national identity, economic inequality and the ways that citizens become left behind by country. Not one of these emerges as a significant concern of the film. This is strange considering there are obvious parallels to be drawn between the social and political era that *Swallow* covers with the extreme disillusion of the present day.

What *Swallow* becomes instead is a loose and rambling narrative of a young woman, Tolani played by pop singer Niyola and the several ways in which she is let down both in her personal relationships and by a crumbling country.

Boasting no film experience beyond her music videos- and there aren't many of them- Niyola plays Tolani as a somber presence uninterested in the world around her. This total sum investment in her own melancholy keeps Tolani at a distance not just from audiences but also from her neighbors in the busy Lagos compound where she shares an apartment with her roommate and colleague, Rose (scene stealer, Ijeoma Grace-Agu).

Afolayan has been on a not-so-hot streak of employing newbies to play lead roles in his films. This and bad wigs are gradually becoming his signature tune. Whatever reasons Afolayan has for experimenting with newbies, the results have been spotty. For every Demola Adedoyin in *October 1*, there has been a Temi Otedola in his last Netflix effort, *Citation*.

He hasn't demonstrated himself to be an astute handler of (non) actors and whatever work he does with them off screen, barely any of it ever makes it on screen. Watching Otedola fail to emote

convincingly for instance in *Citation* or a painfully wooden Angélique Kidjo (bless her heart!) scaring up the screen in *The CEO*, makes quite the argument for actors starting in bit part roles and working their way up as they develop experience and technique.

But there is a valid case to be made for presenting opportunities to performers who may not get them otherwise. More so when they are a suitable fit for the roles and are willing to work hard. As Afolayan's discoveries go, Niyola is better than most. She arrives armed with an unmistakable screen presence that insists quietly on holding attention even if it does not quite light up the screen. Her years-long absence from the screens also reinforces the innocent and vulnerable sides to the character. The performance is well calibrated even if one note and her face often betrays her calculations as she reaches for her next move. Sharing plenty of scenes with Grace-Agu, a powerhouse performer any given Sunday certainly uplifts Niyola's otherwise staid performance.

Housing very few sparks, Atta's novel spends time and effort fleshing out the relationships between the women living in the same space with Tolani even as Rose hurtles towards her inevitable destination. Few novelists working today have demonstrated as much investment as Atta has in drawing out a variety of middle-class female experiences, particularly in Lagos.

Atta is credited as screenwriter here but writing for screen requires a different skill set than she seems to be familiar with. The women are present as marginal figures in Tolani's vortex but there is little chemistry connecting them. The film does not quite explain why there should be any emotional investment for instance in Eniola Badmus' Mrs Durojaiye or why Chioma Akpotha's Mama Chidi is a vital commentary on how a singular decision such as starting a family can derail a woman's potential.

Afolayan builds up a handsome picture and reunites with Jonathan Kovel who did the cinematography for his last film. Kovel's work feels more purposeful here as he finds ways of lighting up crowded spaces by playing with shadows and colours. The film does have a pretty sheen that betrays any pretensions to recreating Lagos city in the eighties. There are neat props, tacky wigs and yellow buses but the production design is more manipulated than created. As a result, the clever props do not quite come together to birth that seedy bustle of Lagos at the time.

Long past his prime, Afolayan is no longer as interested in taking creative risks. There is a sense of familiarity to his work that makes it easier than ever to take apart. Excesses like lengthy run times and vain self-promoting cameo appearances remain.

Swallow is a perfectly acceptable adaptation that speaks to the lumbering place that Afolayan has burrowed himself into at this stage in his career. The film is paced lazily and perhaps the most pointed flaw to be gleaned from it is that there is no acute- or chronic- directorial gaze tying all the separate departments and elements together.

Wilfred Okiche is a Nigerian film and theatre critic based in Lagos. He has mentored film critics at the Durban International Film Festival. He has participated in critics training programs in Berlin, Rotterdam, Locarno and Stockholm. He is a member of FIPRESCI.