

## Negotiating the Female Gaze: Feminist Film Theory and the Cultural Politics of Gender in Nollywood

Isaiah U. Ilo, PhD

*Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja*

### Abstract

This essay explores the intersection of feminist film theory and the politics of gender representation in Nigerian cinema, with a particular focus on Nollywood as a dynamic site of visual negotiation. The analysis interrogates how the foundational concepts of the male and female gaze—originally theorised in Western cinematic contexts—are both reproduced and contested within Nollywood’s evolving narrative and aesthetic landscape. Through close readings of selected films such as *Silent Scandal*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *King of Boys*, the essay identifies visual and narrative strategies that reflect the persistence of patriarchal norms, as well as emergent practices that centre female subjectivity and agency. It further engages African feminist theoretical frameworks—specifically Nego-Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism, and STIWA—to contextualise these cinematic developments within indigenous epistemologies that prioritise negotiation, community, and relational autonomy. The study contends that while the male gaze remains entrenched in Nollywood’s representational codes, a culturally grounded female gaze is beginning to materialise—particularly through the work of female directors and gender-conscious narratives. Rather than seeking a wholesale adoption of Western feminist aesthetics, this emergent gaze is characterised by moral complexity, narrative depth, and an attentiveness to the socio-cultural realities that shape women’s lives in Nigeria. The essay thus positions Nollywood as a contested but fertile ground for reimagining feminist visual politics in Africa, where global feminist discourses intersect with local cultural imaginaries to produce hybrid forms of gendered representation. In doing so, it contributes to the broader project of decolonising film theory and expanding the lexicon through which feminist visibility is understood in postcolonial cinematic contexts.

**Keywords :** Nollywood Cinema, African Feminist Theory, Male and Female Gaze, Gender Representation in Film

### Introduction

The global proliferation of cinema has long been a site of ideological struggle, especially in relation to the representation of women. Feminist film theorists have persistently interrogated how mainstream cinematic traditions encode patriarchal values through visual and narrative conventions. At the heart of this critique lies Laura Mulvey’s influential concept of the “male gaze”, which, as she posits, structures classical cinema in a way that “pleasures the male spectator by subjecting the female body to his controlling and voyeuristic gaze” (Mulvey 11).

Though developed within the context of Hollywood, such frameworks have been widely adapted to interrogate other national cinemas, including Africa's most prolific: Nollywood.

As the Nigerian film industry has rapidly expanded into a global cultural force, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to its ideological underpinnings, particularly with regard to gender representation. Nollywood has become a critical mirror reflecting—and at times reinforcing—the cultural tensions within Nigerian society. While early Nollywood films often perpetuated narrow archetypes of womanhood, such as the obedient wife or the seductress, more recent narratives have begun to challenge these tropes, introducing women as complex agents of change. However, the extent to which Nollywood has incorporated feminist visual strategies, especially those associated with the “female gaze”, remains debatable. The “female gaze”, as theorised by critics like Kaja Silverman, seeks to re-centre the woman as an active subject whose internal experiences and desires structure cinematic meaning, offering an “alternative optic that destabilises the objectifying gaze of patriarchy” (Silverman 15).

Yet the application of feminist film theory to Nollywood raises significant methodological and epistemological challenges. Western feminist critiques often rest on cultural assumptions that may not fully account for the socio-religious, communal, and historical realities that underpin African narratives. Bell Hooks, in her seminal essay *The Oppositional Gaze*, warned against the universality of feminist visual theory, urging instead that “the black female spectator refuses to identify with the male gaze, choosing instead a critical distance that enables resistance” (Hooks 122). In similar terms, African feminist scholars such as Obioma Nnaemeka have developed alternative frameworks, such as Nego-Feminism, which emphasise negotiation, collaboration, and cultural embeddedness over confrontation (Nnaemeka 379). These indigenous feminist discourses are essential for analysing gender in Nollywood, as they reflect African women's lived experiences more accurately than Western feminist paradigms often allow.

This essay seeks to examine the tension and negotiation between feminist film theory and the cultural politics of gender representation in Nollywood. Specifically, it investigates how the concept of the “female gaze” interacts with Nigerian cultural narratives and whether Nollywood offers cinematic spaces that subvert the traditional male gaze. In doing so, the essay engages with feminist and African feminist theories, while drawing on close readings of selected Nollywood films, including *Silent Scandal* (2009), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), and *King of Boys* (2018). The analysis considers both visual aesthetics and narrative structures to assess whether Nollywood is merely replicating dominant gender ideologies or participating in the project of gendered cultural transformation. The central research questions guiding this investigation are: How does feminist film theory, particularly the concepts of the male and female gaze, illuminate gendered visibility in Nollywood? To what extent do Nollywood films challenge patriarchal cinematic traditions through their representation of women? And how do African feminist perspectives reshape our understanding of what constitutes a feminist visual politics within an African cultural context? By exploring these questions, the essay contributes to ongoing debates in film studies, gender theory, and African cultural studies. It argues that while Nollywood continues to reproduce certain patriarchal tropes, it also provides emergent spaces—especially through the work of female filmmakers and gender-conscious narratives—for the articulation of a distinctly African female gaze. This essay therefore positions Nollywood as a contested but dynamic site where global feminist discourses intersect with local cultural imaginaries.

### **Feminist Film Theory: Foundations and Evolutions**

Feminist film theory emerged in the 1970s as a critical response to the gendered visual regimes of mainstream cinema. Central to its early formulations was the recognition that cinema is not merely a vehicle for storytelling but a powerful ideological apparatus that constructs and perpetuates societal norms—particularly those related to gender and sexuality. In its foundational stage, feminist film theory interrogated the ways in which cinematic techniques,

narrative structures, and systems of looking encoded patriarchal ideologies, reducing women to passive visual objects within the diegesis of film.

One of the most influential early texts in the field is Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, which articulated the now-canonical concept of the "male gaze". Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argues that classical Hollywood cinema positions the female character as the object of male desire, both within the narrative and for the male spectator. She writes, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11). According to this logic, women in film are to-be-looked-at, while men are the bearers of the gaze—a configuration that reinforces patriarchal structures by granting agency to men and denying it to women. Mulvey's argument rests on two kinds of visual pleasure: scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) and narcissistic identification with the screen hero. Through these dual mechanisms, the spectator (assumed to be male) identifies with the male protagonist and objectifies the female character. This framing not only deprives women of narrative centrality but also of subjectivity. As such, mainstream cinema becomes a site where gender hierarchies are not only mirrored but produced and naturalised.

Following Mulvey, scholars such as E. Ann Kaplan expanded feminist film analysis by turning attention to women filmmakers and alternative cinematic practices. In *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, Kaplan highlights the potential of female auteurs to disrupt patriarchal cinematic conventions through more nuanced portrayals of women. She argues that "the female authorial voice may offer a rupture in dominant ideology by positioning women as subjects, not just objects" (Kaplan 45). This shift from analysing women *on screen* to recognising women *behind the camera* introduced a more optimistic horizon for feminist intervention in cinema, one that centred on creative agency and narrative control. Kaplan's approach also opened space for analysing genre, authorship, and spectatorship in more complex ways. For instance, she examines how female filmmakers resist or invert the male gaze by offering subjective depictions of female experience. However, Kaplan also warns that simply placing women behind the camera does not guarantee a feminist outcome. Films by women, like those by men, operate within institutional and cultural constraints that can replicate dominant ideologies unless consciously resisted.

While early feminist film theory laid crucial foundations, it was soon critiqued for its narrow focus on gender to the exclusion of race, class, sexuality, and culture. Much of the early theory, including Mulvey and Kaplan, was based on the experiences of white, Western, middle-class women, leading to what bell hooks famously called the "absence of black female spectators" in the theoretical canon (hooks 122). In *The Oppositional Gaze*, hooks critiques Mulvey's framework for its failure to consider how black women engage with cinema. She writes: "There is power in looking... but black women have had to develop an oppositional gaze that resists dominant forms of representation" (hooks 116). This insight prefigures Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorisation of intersectionality, which emphasises the interlocking systems of oppression that shape women's experiences. Crenshaw argues that women of colour often occupy spaces of "simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility," and any feminist analysis that ignores these intersections is fundamentally limited (Crenshaw 1244). In the realm of film, this means that representations of gender must also account for the ways in which race, colonialism, class, and sexuality inform how women are depicted and perceived. These critiques significantly expanded feminist film theory, leading to more inclusive frameworks that recognise the multiplicity of women's experiences. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Systems of oppression are interlocking and mutually reinforcing," and therefore, media analysis must attend to these overlapping structures (Collins 222). Intersectional feminist film theory thus opens space for analysing African cinema through a culturally grounded, historically situated lens, acknowledging that Western models alone cannot fully explain non-Western representations.

In response to the dominance of the male gaze, feminist theorists have also explored the notion of the "female gaze"—a counter-hegemonic visual strategy that centres women as subjects rather than objects. Though not as systematically theorised as the male gaze, the female gaze suggests an alternative cinematic grammar, one that foregrounds women's

emotional, psychological, and social realities. Kaja Silverman, for instance, argues that the female gaze reorients the camera to capture “the relational and affective dimensions of womanhood,” enabling the spectator to empathise with the female subject rather than objectify her (Silverman 77). Importantly, the female gaze is not merely about women looking or being looked at differently; it is a reorganisation of cinematic space and storytelling to reflect women’s lived experiences. It disrupts voyeurism and promotes identification with female characters through their subjective point of view. In this sense, it serves as a deconstructive and reconstructive tool within feminist film theory—critiquing existing paradigms while proposing new forms of representation. However, the applicability of the female gaze, like the male gaze, is not universal. In non-Western cinemas, particularly African film industries such as Nollywood, the concept must be culturally adapted. The female gaze in Nollywood cannot simply replicate Western feminist aesthetics; it must respond to local traditions, communal values, and socio-religious contexts. As such, the concept becomes more fluid, more negotiable—requiring an engagement not only with gender but with African feminist theories that are rooted in indigenous epistemologies.

### **Nollywood and Gender: Historical and Cultural Context**

Nollywood, Nigeria’s vibrant and prolific film industry, has grown over the past three decades to become the second-largest film industry in the world by volume, trailing only India’s Bollywood. Its reach spans not only Nigeria but also Africa and the African diaspora, making it an essential cultural platform through which narratives about identity, gender, class, and nationhood are constructed and contested. The gender dynamics within Nollywood, however, have long reflected broader patriarchal norms in Nigerian society—norms rooted in colonial history, religion, and deeply embedded cultural traditions.

From its inception in the early 1990s, Nollywood has been heavily influenced by traditional values concerning family, marriage, and morality. These themes, while reflective of everyday Nigerian life, have often reinforced patriarchal ideals. Women in early Nollywood films were frequently cast in roles that aligned with binary archetypes: the virtuous and suffering wife, the promiscuous and destructive seductress, or the scheming stepmother. These characters often existed in relation to male protagonists, functioning as moral touchstones or as cautionary figures. This narrative tendency is not coincidental. It mirrors societal expectations of womanhood that place a high premium on subservience, chastity, and domesticity. As Adewoye et al. argue, Nollywood has “tended to project Nigerian women in limited and stereotypical roles that conform to patriarchal expectations” (115). Female characters were rarely afforded narrative complexity or professional ambition outside of familial or romantic contexts. These portrayals are also deeply tied to Nigeria’s socio-religious climate. Islam and Christianity, both dominant religions in Nigeria, often reinforce conservative gender norms. The intersection of these religious doctrines with traditional customs creates a cultural matrix in which gender roles are tightly policed and deviations from normative femininity are either demonised or punished in narrative form. Thus, the early image of women in Nollywood is not simply a cinematic decision but a cultural symptom.

Another key factor influencing gender representation in Nollywood is the industry’s gender imbalance in terms of production roles. Historically, Nollywood has been male-dominated, especially in positions of power such as directing, producing, and screenwriting. This has significant implications for the kinds of stories told and the perspectives prioritised. As Onyenankaya, Mberu, and Aliyu note, “The predominance of male filmmakers has resulted in an androcentric narrative landscape, where female characters are frequently constructed through a male gaze” (98). This structural imbalance means that many of Nollywood’s representations of women have been filtered through male perspectives—visually, narratively, and ideologically. It is only in more recent years that a growing cohort of female directors, such as Genevieve Nnaji, Tope Oshin, and Kemi Adetiba, have begun to disrupt this hegemony. Their work often centres on female subjectivity and agency, signalling a shift in Nollywood’s gender politics. Still, the industry continues to grapple with embedded biases. Even female filmmakers may feel pressure to conform to mainstream expectations, often dictated by funding sources, audience preferences, and the pervasive influence of religious

and moral gatekeepers. As a result, even progressive narratives can be diluted by the necessity to align with culturally acceptable representations of femininity.

Unlike many Western feminist film theories that prioritise individual autonomy, Nigerian society—reflected in Nollywood—tends to foreground communal identity, particularly through the family. Women are often defined by their relational roles: as mothers, wives, daughters, and caregivers. Their worth is frequently measured by their ability to uphold the family unit and maintain social harmony. This cultural emphasis affects not only how female characters are portrayed but also how audiences interpret them. In Nigeria, a woman who defies patriarchal expectations may not be seen as a feminist hero, but as a social deviant. Consequently, Nollywood films often portray career-driven or independent women with ambivalence or suspicion. As Abah suggests, “Nigerian video-films tend to affirm the centrality of family and morality over personal ambition, especially for female characters” (47). Furthermore, many Nollywood narratives employ a moral economy in which women who transgress traditional norms are eventually punished, either through death, illness, or social exclusion. This serves a dual purpose: entertaining audiences and reinforcing societal codes. Such tropes reinforce the cultural view that a woman’s primary responsibility lies within the domestic sphere, and any deviation must be corrected through narrative justice.

Despite these constraints, Nollywood is not a static or monolithic industry. In recent years, there has been a discernible shift towards more complex portrayals of women, particularly in films produced for global platforms such as Netflix. Directors such as Genevieve Nnaji (*Lionheart*) and Kemi Adetiba (*King of Boys*) have created strong female protagonists who challenge conventional gender norms while still operating within culturally recognisable frameworks. These films do not necessarily reject Nigerian traditions, but they reimagine them in ways that accommodate female ambition, resilience, and authority. For example, *King of Boys* offers a vision of womanhood that combines maternal power with political acumen and moral ambiguity. Rather than conforming to the archetype of the self-sacrificing mother, the protagonist, Eniola Salami, embodies multiple—and often contradictory—identities, including that of a political strategist, businesswoman, and survivor of male violence. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts in Nigeria, including increased female participation in politics, education, and entrepreneurship. Nollywood, as both a mirror and moulder of society, has begun to capture these changes, albeit unevenly. While stereotypical portrayals persist, there is an emerging counter-narrative that portrays women as full human beings—flawed, aspirational, and empowered.

### **The Male Gaze in Nollywood: Case Studies and Critiques**

The concept of the male gaze, as formulated by Laura Mulvey, has provided a foundational lens for understanding how patriarchal ideologies are embedded in cinematic form. Nollywood, despite its cultural distinctiveness, often replicates many of the visual and narrative tropes Mulvey critiques in classical Hollywood cinema. Female characters in Nollywood are frequently objectified, their bodies framed for visual pleasure, and their roles subordinated to the advancement of male-centric narratives. This section interrogates these tendencies through close readings of selected Nollywood films and assesses the ideological consequences of such representations.

Nollywood films have historically framed women in ways that emphasise their appearance, sexuality, and subservience. Camera angles often linger on the female body—especially in scenes of romantic or emotional tension—prioritising visual pleasure over character development. This aligns with Mulvey’s notion that “woman as image” functions for “man as bearer of the look” (Mulvey 11). The mise-en-scène, costuming, and dialogue frequently reduce women to romantic objects or moral barometers, whose primary function is to validate or challenge male protagonists. Such visual strategies reinforce scopophilic pleasure—pleasure in looking—which Mulvey identifies as one of cinema’s central mechanisms for sustaining patriarchy. In Nollywood, this manifests not only in visual framing but in narrative roles that limit women’s complexity. Whether as the faithful wife, the seductress, or the tragic victim, women rarely drive the plot or possess autonomous arcs. Instead, their character trajectories are often tied to the moral or emotional journey of male characters.

*Teco Benson's Silent Scandal* exemplifies many of the patterns identified by Mulvey and later feminist theorists. The story revolves around a younger man entangled in a romantic relationship with an older, wealthy woman, played by Genevieve Nnaji. While on the surface this seems like a reversal of traditional gender roles, the film ultimately reinforces the male gaze by eroticising the older woman and framing her as emotionally unstable and morally ambiguous. The camera repeatedly captures her in revealing clothing, close-up shots focusing on her eyes and lips, and slow-motion sequences designed to seduce the viewer visually. Although she is wealthy and powerful, her authority is undermined by her emotional dependency on the male protagonist. Her character arc ends in shame and exclusion, reinforcing the notion that women who express sexual agency, especially outside age and marital norms, are ultimately deviant and must be punished. Despite being played by a respected female lead, the film constructs her subjectivity through the lens of male desire and moral anxiety. As Onyenakeya et al. note, "even when women in Nollywood appear empowered, their power is often sexualised and ultimately delegitimised" (99).

Directed by Ikechukwu Onyeka, *Mr. and Mrs.* portrays a troubled upper-middle-class marriage where the husband devalues his wife, treating her as little more than a domestic servant. The film initially appears to criticise the husband's behaviour and offer a redemptive arc for the wife. However, the resolution ultimately reinstates patriarchal order: the wife is rewarded only after she reasserts her femininity and rededicates herself to the marriage. Visually, the film aligns with Mulvey's schema: the wife is framed through soft-focus close-ups and idealised lighting, accentuating her beauty and emotional vulnerability. Although the narrative seems to celebrate her growth, the real transformation lies in how she regains her husband's affection—not in any personal or professional fulfilment. Her independence is temporary and conditional, and the film concludes with her reclaiming her role as a traditional wife. As Abah observes, "The redemption arc in such films often re-centres the man's approval as the ultimate goal of female character development" (49). In this sense, the film critiques patriarchy only to ultimately reaffirm it, using the aesthetics of the male gaze to render female empowerment safe and palatable.

The repeated deployment of the male gaze in Nollywood has significant implications for how audiences interpret gender roles. Nollywood's popularity—combined with its cultural resonance—means that its films contribute actively to the social construction of gender in Nigeria and beyond. As Smith et al. contend, "film functions not merely as reflection but as instruction, shaping the ways audiences think about gender, power, and possibility" (7). In societies where cinema is a major source of both entertainment and moral instruction, visual reinforcement of patriarchal norms can normalise inequality. For younger viewers, especially women, consistent exposure to objectified female figures and submissive romantic narratives can limit the imagined scope of womanhood. When women's value is persistently depicted through their beauty, virtue, or romantic desirability, their real-world agency is diminished. However, it is important to note that not all Nollywood films rely on the male gaze, and recent productions increasingly challenge this structure. Yet, the sheer volume of films that continue to reinforce these tropes indicates that the male gaze remains an entrenched visual logic in the industry.

### **African Feminist Film Critique: Beyond Western Gaze Theory**

While Western feminist film theory has provided foundational tools for analysing gender representation in cinema, its universal application across cultures has drawn increasing critique. Scholars have pointed out that Euro-American feminism often centres individual autonomy, binary gender resistance, and visual agency in ways that may not reflect the lived experiences or cultural frameworks of women in African societies. The African feminist tradition, in response, offers a more nuanced and contextually sensitive model—one that prioritises negotiation, communal well-being, and social harmony over confrontation and disruption. Applying these frameworks to Nollywood enables a richer reading of African women's representations and repositions feminist visual critique within culturally relevant paradigms.

Coined by Obioma Nnaemeka, *Nego-Feminism*—short for “no-ego feminism”—offers a model of African feminism built on the principles of negotiation, compromise, and collaboration. As Nnaemeka explains, “Nego-feminism stands for ‘no ego’ feminism, a feminism of negotiation, give-and-take, and compromise” (Nnaemeka 378). This model acknowledges the deeply communal nature of African societies, where individual autonomy is often mediated by family structures, religious expectations, and social obligations. In the context of Nollywood, Nego-Feminism does not necessarily demand a reversal of gender roles or radical defiance of patriarchy. Rather, it encourages portrayals of women who find power within, rather than outside, traditional structures. Films such as *Mr. and Mrs.* depict female protagonists who, while initially oppressed, assert themselves not by abandoning their families but by renegotiating their value within the domestic space. The wife’s eventual empowerment is not framed as rebellion, but as a form of dignified negotiation that upholds familial unity while demanding respect. This model resonates with Nigerian audiences, for whom public confrontation may be culturally discouraged, especially for women. As Ogundipe-Leslie notes, African feminism must engage with “the realities of African women’s lives, where negotiation, not antagonism, is often the path to empowerment” (27). In cinematic terms, this opens interpretive space for characters whose quiet strength, resilience, and cultural fluency are forms of feminist resistance.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Snail-Sense Feminism* further builds on the notion of culturally grounded resistance. Drawing metaphorically from the snail, this framework advocates for slow, steady, and context-sensitive progress for African women. Ezeigbo argues that African women “navigate social terrain cautiously, like the snail, negotiating obstacles and protecting themselves as they advance” (Ezeigbo 13). Snail-Sense Feminism is particularly well-suited to interpreting characters who embody indirect resistance or strategic agency. In many Nollywood films, female characters who initially appear submissive or complicit are revealed to be making calculated choices within constrained environments. These portrayals reflect a form of cultural resilience that may be invisible to Western feminist critique but highly legible within African contexts. A relevant example is *Adire* (2023), where the protagonist uses her social position and quiet intelligence to challenge systemic oppression in her community. Though she does not openly rebel, her incremental assertion of agency transforms the world around her. This patient, indirect approach aligns with Snail-Sense Feminism’s emphasis on long-term transformation rather than abrupt rupture. Snail-Sense Feminism also provides a corrective to critiques that equate feminism with militancy. In Ezeigbo’s framework, resilience, adaptability, and strategic withdrawal are not signs of weakness but culturally legitimate survival strategies. For Nollywood, this means that films centring quiet endurance or emotional intelligence can be as feminist as those featuring explicit resistance.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s *STIWA*—Social Transformation Including Women in Africa—offers a third, influential African feminist lens. STIWA rejects the wholesale adoption of Western feminist ideas and instead calls for African-led gender equity grounded in cultural realities. Ogundipe-Leslie insists that African feminism must be “about the inclusion of women in social transformation, not simply gender opposition” (Ogundipe-Leslie 11). STIWA critiques the way Western feminism often pits men and women against each other and instead envisions progress as a cooperative process involving both sexes. Nollywood films like *Lionheart* (2018), directed by Genevieve Nnaji, subtly reflect this ideology. In the film, the female protagonist, Adaeze, navigates a male-dominated business world not by dismantling the system, but by working collaboratively with her male counterparts and asserting competence within a shared cultural framework. Here, STIWA becomes a framework not only for representation but also for narrative design. It encourages the portrayal of women as co-participants in social change—leaders, yes, but also daughters, sisters, and citizens in dialogue with the society around them. By avoiding binary conflict and embracing relational politics, STIWA aligns well with Nollywood’s storytelling style, which often centres family and community over the individual.

Together, these African feminist frameworks challenge the universality of the male gaze and propose alternative ways of seeing women in cinema. Rather than demanding a complete inversion of visual power—where women dominate the screen as subjects of desire—they seek to expand the range of what female subjectivity can look like on screen. In this sense,

Nego-Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism, and STIWA function not as rejections of feminist film theory, but as necessary localisations—decolonising the gaze by embedding it in African cultural logics. These frameworks help us recognise that agency in Nollywood is often coded differently from its Hollywood counterpart. It may be expressed through negotiation rather than opposition, collaboration rather than autonomy, and patience rather than immediacy. These are not signs of feminist inadequacy, but evidence of culturally specific strategies that reflect the realities of African women's lives. As Nnaemeka writes, "To use Western feminist tools to interpret African texts without adaptation is to commit a form of epistemic violence" (Nnaemeka 360). In Nollywood, then, a woman who saves her marriage through negotiation, who asserts herself slowly within her social world, or who transforms her community through relational leadership, may be enacting feminism in deeply African terms.

### The Female Gaze in Nollywood: Possibilities and Limitations

The "female gaze," developed as a counterpoint to the male gaze in feminist film theory, seeks to portray women as subjects rather than objects—granting them emotional depth, narrative agency, and visual centrality. While the term is often debated and less formally codified than the male gaze, its basic premise is a reorientation of perspective: centring the lived experiences, emotional inner worlds, and desires of female characters. In Nollywood, the concept of the female gaze is still emerging, shaped by both local cultural norms and global cinematic influences. This section explores how the female gaze manifests in contemporary Nollywood films and the challenges that hinder its broader adoption.

In mainstream Nollywood cinema, women have long been framed through patriarchal visual logics, their value tied to physical beauty, romantic attachment, or family loyalty. The female gaze subverts this by presenting female characters with narrative and emotional agency. It seeks not to reverse objectification—by making men objects of desire—but to disrupt objectification altogether. As Kaja Silverman argues, the female gaze offers a "displacement of the masculine axis of vision" (Silverman 87), fostering more empathetic identification with women on screen. In this light, films that foreground a female character's subjectivity, decision-making, and complexity—without framing her body as spectacle—move toward the female gaze. While these efforts are still rare in Nollywood, a few significant examples signal a shift.

Directed by Biyi Bandele and adapted from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* exemplifies how Nollywood can depict women with psychological complexity and political agency. The film's protagonists, Olanna and Kainene, are not merely romantic or domestic figures; they are intellectuals and decision-makers navigating the personal and political turmoil of the Biafran War. Visually, the film avoids gratuitous sexualisation, instead focusing on expressions of fear, determination, and grief. The narrative offers access to the characters' inner thoughts and ethical struggles, positioning them as subjects of their own lives. As Olanna deals with betrayal, displacement, and trauma, her choices—however flawed—shape the direction of the story. This narrative centrality exemplifies the female gaze in practice: women are not seen merely through the eyes of others but through their own emotional and experiential lenses. As Crenshaw would assert, this portrayal is intersectional—it recognises how gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and history in shaping experience (Crenshaw 1253). *Half of a Yellow Sun* is therefore not only a feminist intervention but an African feminist one, resonant with the concerns of both Western and African feminist thought.

Directed by Kemi Adetiba, *King of Boys* is perhaps the most prominent Nollywood film to date that embodies the female gaze while reconfiguring the genre of political thriller. Its protagonist, Eniola Salami, is a complex, morally ambiguous woman navigating the violent and corrupt world of Lagos politics. She is powerful, feared, flawed, and fiercely maternal—all at once. What sets *King of Boys* apart is its refusal to frame Eniola through a sexualised or romantic lens. Her appearance is functional, her gaze direct, and her motivations rooted in political ambition and personal history rather than male desire. Adetiba's camera does not eroticise Eniola but instead captures her presence through intimate close-ups, dramatic lighting, and emotionally charged silence. The audience is invited into her internal world—her



grief, pride, and rage—rather than positioned to observe her as a passive object. The film thus demonstrates that Nollywood can centre female subjectivity even in traditionally male-dominated genres. Eniola is not a token female character; she is the narrative's engine. Moreover, her character reflects a specifically African feminist dynamic: maternal authority fused with public power, reminiscent of the archetypal "Mother of the Nation" but reframed for modern political critique.

Despite these innovations, the female gaze remains rare in Nollywood, largely due to the industry's reliance on audience expectations grounded in tradition, religion, and communal values. Films that foreground female independence or disrupt gender hierarchies often risk backlash or commercial underperformance. As Onyenakeya et al. note, "audiences conditioned by patriarchal norms may resist narratives that depict women as autonomous or confrontational" (103). Moreover, the female gaze often requires a narrative patience and aesthetic subtlety that contrasts with Nollywood's commercial formula—quick pacing, melodrama, and overt moralism. Creating space for female subjectivity on screen involves slowing down the narrative, allowing for introspection, silence, and complexity—elements that may be unfamiliar to audiences expecting more linear and didactic storytelling. Another constraint is the industry's continued male dominance in production. While female directors like Adetiba and Nnaji are breaking new ground, the majority of Nollywood films are still written, directed, and produced by men. As such, the aesthetic and narrative codes that prioritise male pleasure—both visual and ideological—remain dominant.

Importantly, the female gaze in Nollywood must also contend with African feminist values that prioritise community, negotiation, and social responsibility. Unlike some Western iterations of the female gaze, which emphasise individualism and personal desire, the African feminist lens encourages relational agency. Thus, films may reflect the female gaze not through radical autonomy but through moral ambiguity, emotional intelligence, and strategic positioning within family and society. In *The Wedding Party* (2016), for example, the protagonist Dunni is given a voice in decisions about marriage, identity, and self-respect. While still operating within the conventions of romantic comedy, the film grants her emotional depth and narrative power, subtly reflecting a domesticated form of the female gaze that aligns with Nego-Feminist ideals. Her agency lies not in defiance but in negotiation—asserting boundaries without severing cultural ties. This synthesis suggests that the female gaze in Nollywood cannot be imported wholesale from Western theory. It must be culturally negotiated—blending emotional subjectivity with collective identity, personal agency with communal values. In doing so, it offers a uniquely African mode of feminist visibility, one that is perhaps quieter, but no less radical.

## Conclusion and Implications

Nollywood stands at a significant crossroads in its cinematic evolution, particularly regarding gender representation. While the early years of Nigeria's film industry were marked by a strong adherence to patriarchal norms—reinforced through visual and narrative structures aligned with the male gaze—recent shifts in both thematic focus and authorship indicate a growing consciousness around gender, power, and representation. This essay has explored how feminist film theory, and specifically the concepts of the male and female gaze, can be applied to Nollywood, while also highlighting the limits of Western theoretical models when transposed to African contexts without adaptation. Through the analysis of selected Nollywood films such as *Silent Scandal*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *King of Boys*, we have seen how the male gaze continues to shape the framing and narrative function of female characters—frequently rendering them passive, sexualised, or constrained within domestic spheres. These patterns underscore Mulvey's claim that mainstream cinematic forms position women as objects of visual pleasure, subordinated to male narrative trajectories (Mulvey 11). Yet, the presence of more complex, agentic female characters in contemporary films suggests a gradual yet meaningful shift.

The introduction of African feminist frameworks—Nego-Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism, and STIWA—has been critical in reframing what feminist cinema can look like within Nollywood. These frameworks do not reject the need for gender equity but reposition it within communal, negotiated, and culturally embedded paradigms. As Nnaemeka reminds us, African feminism is “rooted in local epistemologies, concerned with relationality and collective transformation rather than individual antagonism” (Nnaemeka 379). In this light, Nollywood’s representations of women who navigate patriarchy through strategy, endurance, and negotiation can be understood as feminist, even if they do not conform to more confrontational Western models. The notion of the female gaze, while still underdeveloped in Nollywood, holds promise. Films by female directors such as Genevieve Nnaji and Kemi Adetiba have shown that it is possible to reorient cinematic perspective to centre women’s subjectivity, desires, and moral agency. Importantly, the female gaze in Nollywood must be flexible—attuned to African values, resistant to objectification, and open to diverse forms of empowerment. It may not always be overtly political, but it can be transformative in its quiet insistence on complexity, resilience, and authenticity.

The implications of this shift extend beyond the screen. As Nollywood continues to shape societal attitudes across Nigeria and the African continent, its representations of women carry significant pedagogical weight. Films that centre women as full human beings—emotionally complex, morally ambiguous, and socially engaged—have the potential to disrupt long-held gender stereotypes and inspire new visions of African womanhood. This, in turn, can contribute to broader cultural shifts in how gender roles are understood and enacted. However, challenges remain. The commercial pressures of the industry, audience conservatism, and male dominance behind the camera continue to constrain feminist innovation. Yet the increasing visibility of female filmmakers, the rise of digital platforms, and the globalisation of Nollywood content provide fertile ground for continued experimentation with feminist aesthetics and narratives. In conclusion, the negotiation of the female gaze in Nollywood is an ongoing and dynamic process. It is not a linear journey from oppression to liberation, but a complex cultural dialogue between tradition and transformation. As Nollywood continues to expand its reach and refine its voice, it carries with it the potential to model new forms of African feminist visuality—forms that are rooted in the past, responsive to the present, and imaginative about the future.

### Works Cited

- Abah, Adah L. “One Step Forward, Two Steps Backwards: African Women in Nigerian Video-Film.” *Communication and Development*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2008, pp. 45–62.
- Adimora-Ezeigbo, Akachi. “Snail-Sense Feminism: A Nigerian Model for Women’s Development.” *University of Lagos Press*, 2004, pp. 12–24.
- Adewoye, O., Odesanya, O., Abubakar, A. A., and Jimoh, H. “Portrayal and Perception of Nigerian Women in Nollywood Films.” *Journal of Communication and Language Arts*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 113–130.
- Bande, Biyi, director. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Soda Pictures, 2013.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.
- Ezeigbo, Akachi. *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model*. University of Lagos Press, 2004.
- Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. Routledge, 1983.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2004, pp. 357–385.

Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*. Africa World Press, 1994.

Onyenankeya, Kevin, Mberu, Blessing, and Aliyu, Omolade. "Gender Bias in Nollywood Films: Patterns, Implications, and Resistance." *African Journal of Gender and Media*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2019, pp. 92–108.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Indiana University Press, 1988.

Smith, Stacy L., Choueiti, Marc, and Pieper, Katherine. *Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014*. USC Annenberg, 2015.