

THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINISM IN NIGERIAN MEDIA:  
A LOOK AT IGBO CULTURE FILMS

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## **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the subject of feminism in the Nigerian media, particularly on how issues related to women's rights and gender discrimination have been addressed in Igbo culture Nigerian films. For several decades, the Nigerian home video industry, dominated by Igbo culture-themed films, has been one of the most influential media forms across Nigeria and Africa in general. These films are a staple in many homes; the images, narratives, and ideas that they disseminate go a long way in shaping or reinforcing public perceptions about the role of women and their status in society. Taking a critical look at how feminism has evolved in Nigerian films, this thesis investigates the extent to which films merely reflect the existing reality of Igbo patriarchal societal structures or persist in propagating dated and unrealistic stereotypes by specifically focusing on two relevant Igbo culture films –*Things Fall Apart* (1987) produced by Peter Igbo, directed by David Orere and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) produced by Andrea Calderwood and directed by Biyi Bandele. Both films were adapted from novels of the same titles by Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Adichie, respectively, and illuminate the depiction of women in the Nigerian media. Based on insights generated from the research evidence, this thesis establishes that Igbo culture films were previously instruments for perpetuating gender inequality by reinforcing and disseminating socially constructed notions of female subordination and male dominance. However, in the last decade, there has emerged an increasing tendency in modern Igbo films towards activism for gender equality and social change. Films like *Wives on Strike* (Omoni Oboli, 2016) and *Dry* (Stephanie Linus, 2014) for instance, have tackled issues of child marriage and female education. The thesis concludes that the prospects for a more positive depiction of

women and feminism in Igbo culture films and in the Nigerian media generally are influenced by the prevailing societal orientations towards the issue within Nigerian society. It is suggested that films, being important agents of social change and orientation, can play a critical agenda-setting role in stimulating changes in attitudes towards issues of gender equality within the Nigerian society.

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## **Dedication**

Dear Jesus, I am absolutely nothing without you.

To my mummy, this one is for you. Thank you for being the wind beneath my wings.

Yvonne and Janelle, you are my sunshine, my unending inspiration and I am courageous in the face of adversity because you chose me as your mama. I want you to know that you can do absolutely anything you set your minds to.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

Attitudes towards women and gender equality in Nigeria have always been influenced by deep historical and cultural underpinnings, bordering mainly on the social structures and expectations of traditional society. While these dominant attitudes chiefly reflect the patriarchal and male dominated nature of most ethnic groups within Nigeria, there is a general sense in which it has always been accepted as normal for certain roles or attributes to be assigned to female members of society, whereas other, often more consequential roles are reserved for men (Allanana, 2013). Since these orientations have underlined social organization and normative values for centuries, there has been an enduring and seemingly self-reproducing acceptance of gender roles, responsibilities and expectations by both male and female members of Nigerian society, with little emphasis on their implications for gender equality and the rights of women.

In marriage, for example, because of the value placed on males under Igbo custom, there is usually immense pressure on wives to give birth to sons, since women who give birth to female children are often shamed for producing girls (Nnadi, 2013). This, in addition to placing women in a situation where they inadvertently encourage the subordination of females through preference for male children, also directly affects their reproductive decisions. Women who give birth to a girl-child become unhappy because of the fear of rejection and disappointment by the husband and his extended family. Besides, while growing up, the girl-child is directly and indirectly socialized to accept her subordinate position to the male child in stark contrast to the central notion of liberal feminist theory, which holds that male and female children are born with equivalent potentials that can be fully realized under the right circumstances (Okunna, 2002). The implications for women and the wider society are far-reaching.

Consequently, vast sections of the Nigerian society, especially among Igbo communities, consider the male gender as superior to the female gender, and this trend has been enacted in different media and art forms, including Igbo films.

Although there have been modest efforts to challenge gender inequality and champion women's rights at the level of discourse and advocacy, there has remained a seeming difficulty in sharing the views of feminism across the board, especially through the crucial vehicle of the mass media. Applying Western understandings of feminism to African social contexts has always been a slippery slope; apart from the argument that the essential notions and conclusions of Western feminism mainly apply to women in western societies, there is also the widely held view that mainstream feminist ideas largely ignore the socio-cultural influences on female identity and on African feminist development from the pre-colonial era to the 21st century (McEwan, 2001; Pereira, 2004; Dixon, 2011). The unsuitability of Western feminist ideas for non-Western contexts is perhaps most evident in the way feminism is portrayed in popular media. Much of the media portrayals of women in Western and non-Western societies reflect their respective and often differing levels of gender equality, rights, expectations, cultural norms, and development (Dixon, 2011). This is to say that the way that women are portrayed in different cultures is a reflection of the pervading social structures in those societies. The role of the media in the overall feminist and gender discourse is particularly crucial, given the media's central influence in depicting reality, perpetuating stereotypes, reinforcing status quos, or acting as agents of socialization and social change (Kim, 2008; Sarkar, 2014).

Accordingly, this thesis seeks to explore the evolution and current state of feminist representation in the Nigerian media, with emphasis on Igbo culture films. As Igbo culture films are widely popular and representative of the broader Nigerian socio-cultural environment, exploring the portrayal of women through this aspect of the

popular media potentially offers an interesting and insightful pathway for understanding the evolution of the feminist discourse in the Nigerian context. As is often the case with media and society, the evolution of feminism in Igbo culture Nigerian films has followed patterns defined by prevailing traditional and social realities. The Igbo ethnic group, which is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, is traditionally characterized by a patriarchal system in which men are deemed superior to women both within the family structures and in the community (Dogo, 2014). Regardless of other potentially redeeming characteristics, a man's ability to "control his women folk" is seen as the defining indicator of his manhood, and this idea was depicted in pioneer Igbo culture-themed texts such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958, 37) and subsequent film adaptations (Ozumba, 2005).

In recent years, however, a growing number of Igbo culture films in the Nigerian home video industry have attempted to portray women and gender roles in ways that align more with the essence of nego-feminism which is the African strand explored in this study. Films such as *Wives on Strike* (Omoni Oboli, 2016) and *Dry* (Stephanie Linus, 2014) have been released bearing messages of equality and complementarity, advocating an end to child marriage and female subjugation. These movies and others are emerging from female directors to question the traditional norms of patriarchy, son preference, female subservience, and male domination and to encourage the pursuit of women's rights and empowerment without negating the role of men in the process. More narratives and representations are now motivated, at least in part, by the general feminist movement which rejects inferiority and strives for recognition, highlighting the agency of women as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings in society (Chukwuma, 1994). In crafting their narratives, some Igbo culture films of the modern era seek to give greater voice to women, having realized

that silence and voicelessness were the most effective tools for perpetuating patriarchy and male hegemony (Ifechelobi, 2014).

Fortunately, in addition to Oboli and Linus, more women are also taking up directorial roles and are producing their own films. For instance, the highest grossing Nollywood movie of 2016, *The Wedding Party* was produced by Mo Abudu and directed by Kemi Adetiba, both women. Other influential female directors and producers, such as Mary Remmy Njoku (who owns ROK studios), are working tirelessly to change the industry from an exclusive male enterprise to a progressive industry on the path of heightened international success. This growing influence of feminist thought within the industry, and as exemplified in the plots and character arcs of recent Nigerian Igbo culture films, does not necessarily mean that feminism is a new development, as records exist outlining Igbo women's struggles to rectify perceived discrimination in the society since the precolonial era (Oriji, 2000). Women participated in various movements and activities aimed at improving their individual and collective rights and opportunities and advancing development even though this was not expressly identified or labelled as "feminism" at the time (Rosen, 1983; Oriji, 2000; Ukagba, 2010). New feminist directions in Igbo films, which are recapitulated in the literature review below, seem to pay tribute to this previously understated notion of strong and socially conscious women who do not necessarily seek to undermine the authority of men or engage in battles of supremacy against men but are more interested in highlighting gender equality and rejecting notions of subjugation or discrimination in gender relations. This trend, at least in part, has been driven by increased awareness of feminism and its goals among Igbo women and Nigerian women in general.

Furthermore, the role of influential Igbo authors and their literary works in increasing consciousness about women's rights and redressing previous misconceptions about the role of women in society cannot be overlooked. Authors such as Flora Nwapa

and Chimamanda Adichie, who are two of the most prominent female writers of Igbo descent in the postcolonial era, have significantly influenced popular media conceptions about the feminist movement in Nigeria. Their work provides some level of context for this study's investigation of the evolution of feminism in the Nigerian media. Interestingly, the evolution of feminist thought in the postcolonial era began as a response to the misrepresentation of women in the works of pioneer male authors.

It has been found, in this regard, that Flora Nwapa's first novel, *Efuru* (1966) for example, was written as a feminist response to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (which adaptation to film is analyzed in this study). Nwapa presented strong lead female characters who are leading exceptional lives in their societies as opposed to Achebe's portrayal of women as adjuncts to the men in *Things Fall Apart*. *Efuru* and other female characters in Nwapa's work are given more visible spaces as village women in a patriarchal society creating admirable lives for themselves. From that era until the present, other feminist writers have taken up the baton to rewrite the state of Nigerian women within literature (Otuegbe, 2014, 4-5). For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who is a vocal feminist and cultural icon, has presented in all her successful works of fiction and non-fiction, the importance of gender equality.

This literary evolution is similar to the ongoing re-presentation of women, borne out of the biased portrayals of female characters in film. Like almost everything else, film-making was a male-dominated enterprise until very recently; according to Bunmi Olujinmi (2008, 119), film producers/directors churn out films complicit with male domination that emanate from the patriarchal attitudes and values. Consequently, the woman is depicted as tempestuous, devilish and perpetually as a weeping and unsympathetic character. In fact, there is a culture within the industry that dictates how women's lives should be lived. As summarized by Shaka and Uchendu:

Nollywood video film culture presents a code of conduct for women to follow in order to avoid victimization. The major lesson for women is “act appropriately or suffer the consequences.” Women are not treated as ends in their own rights, but as instruments of the ends of others – reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, and agents of family prosperity. Patriarchy confers men with certain unspoken freedoms including the freedom to have sex with multiple partners, without society’s condemnation or stigmatization. For women, virtues of submission, docility, self-effacement, self-sacrifice are emphasized and instilled, often meaning that she must remain devoted to her husband even if he seeks pleasure elsewhere.

(2012, 6)

This intersection of media and society means that the prevailing ethos of the society during a given period shapes the content and messages disseminated by the media, while it is also possible for the media to set the agenda and take on an activist role to influence or change popular culture and orientations (Gurevitch et al., 2005). For a long time, the dominant attitude towards feminism in Nigeria was one of cynicism and stigmatization. Women who openly challenged the patriarchal status quo or identified with the feminist movement were regarded as men haters, frustrated women with failed relationships, or deviants who are reluctant to conform to societal expectations as regards the role of women (Abdul et al., 2012). Indeed, this attitude was not only displayed by men, but also by women who did not understand the basis for demanding gender equality or challenging the tradition of female subjugation and male dominance. Even in recent years, feminism is considered as a somewhat “dirty” word in Nigeria

(Anadu, 2014, 5), and this puts self-identified feminists under pressure to defend the appropriateness of their cause.

It is also important to consider that it appears that the direction a film follows depends on whether a director chooses to reproduce common dogmas among Igbo communities, as my analysis of *Things Fall Apart* will show, or if they decide, instead, to illuminate the evolving trends and set the agenda for positive change in beliefs and attitudes, as is evident in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. The full extent of this directorial sway and other societal factors, such as education and economic status, and how they impact the depiction of women, constitutes a major part of the analyses of the two Igbo culture films under study. This thesis, therefore, takes a critical and incisive look at how the Nigerian media has dealt with the subject of feminism in the postcolonial era by comparing the depiction of women in two films from different generations. Scholarly works with influential ideas relating to feminism (particularly in the African context) are utilized to illuminate the key issues and uncover the evolving attitudes of the Nigerian media and society towards feminism. This provides the underlying framework for exploring the topic and contextualizing the evolution of feminism in Nigerian media.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Extensive scholarly effort has been devoted to different aspects of the booming Nigerian movie industry and the place of women in the media. For instance, Onuzulike (2014) studied the impact of the Nollywood films on Nigerian environment and culture. Other examples abound, as will be evident in the literature review, below, but little has been done specifically in tracing the evolution of women in Igbo culture films and the contribution of feminist thought to the changes in women's agency and how those

changes have visibly contributed to societal progress. It is this scholarly gap that necessitates the present study. The main underlying problem is rooted within the mutually reinforcing nature of the relationship between media and society, specifically in terms of negative attitudes towards women's rights and gender equality. It is therefore, worthwhile to examine the extent to which the media, particularly films portraying Igbo culture, affect the orientations and perceptions of viewers. This involves addressing the roots of gender discrimination and stereotypes, and how attitudes towards these issues have shaped understandings of feminism in Nigeria over the years.

Many previous studies on feminism and the media seem to rely too much on generalizations relating to the components of feminism, its depictions in the media, the moderating role of socio-cultural norms, and the applicability of core principles and ideas across cultures (Lynes, 2012); although a number of studies do narrow their investigation to specific cultures, evaluating how intersections between the media and society affect attitudes towards feminism. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2005) for example, outlined the contributions of Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis and Barbara Creed to feminist film theory, from the concept of the male gaze to a psychoanalytical and semiotic criticism that transcend a simple focus on the images of women. Despite these efforts to get a grip on the deeper psychological, social and political connection of feminism and film, there is still a relative paucity of research on the portrayal of feminism in the film aspect of the media in Africa, and specifically in Nigeria, although Ukata (2010) and Shaka & Uchendu (2012) have studied gender representation in Nollywood.

On the one hand, this thesis is significant because it highlights the cultural specificity of understandings and applications of feminist ideas in the African context. What this means is that the study illuminates the role of prevailing traditional cultures

in Africa and Nigeria specifically in the evolving attitudes towards the central principles of African feminism. On the other hand, it calls attention to the different ways that films have depicted feminism and the rights of women in Nigeria, and the extent to which these varying depictions have reflected or influenced general attitudes within Nigerian society, with regards to the image, roles, and rights of women. This contributes to the broader feminist literature that seeks to promote a cross-cultural perspective, one that encourages a more layered, context-based understanding of how notions of feminism and its portrayal in the media differ according to the distinct narratives of each society. In addition to these, this thesis seeks to answer the questions of how issues relating to gender equality, women's rights and feminism in general have been portrayed in the Nigerian media, particularly in Igbo culture films in the postcolonial era as well as what factors influenced the portrayal of feminism and women in Igbo culture films in the past, and how they might influence portrayals in the future.

### **1.3 Summary and Outline of Chapters**

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a background to the study in terms of feminism, media, and the Nigerian society. It introduces the research problem that the study addresses, indicates the significance of the study in terms of the gaps in current literature that it intends to fill, and sets down the research aim and objectives as well as the research questions. Chapter 2 reviews the literature in terms of the relevant past work and scholarly perspectives on feminism, with a focus on the Nigerian (and African) context in relation to media portrayals of gender issues and women's rights, illuminating key insights, pointing out important problem areas, and highlighting vital gaps. It also outlines the theoretical framework for the research that

considers the cultural specificities and intersections that define feminism within the Nigerian context. Chapter 3 outlines the theories, research design, research method, samples, and analytical procedures that underpin the present study. This chapter indicates that the general research design of this study is based on the qualitative research approach, using textual analysis as the main research method, coupled with discourse analysis as the ancillary data analysis method. Chapter 4 offers a close critical analysis of two key Igbo culture films *Things Fall Apart* (1987) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), with corresponding discussions of the key thematic elements identified in the films, to ascertain how issues pertaining to women, gender inequality, women's rights, and feminism are represented. Chapter 5 summarizes and interprets the research findings and establishes connections between or suggests challenges to the results and previous research perspectives, highlighting key contextual elements arising from the analysis. The chapter also offers recommendations on future research directions with regards to the treatment of gender issues and women's rights in the Nigerian media.

## CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Feminism, Media and the Moderating Role of Culture

As with many social constructs and concepts, feminism is an idea that lacks definitional consensus, since it comprises a multiplicity of perspectives shaped by different understandings and interpretations. The literature on feminism has long battled with the surprisingly difficult questions of what feminism is and who is a feminist, with researchers and scholars tackling the issue from decidedly limited points of view. While some authors have suggested that notions of feminism are variable across ethnicities, national boundaries and cultures (e.g. Roth, 2004; Dixon, 2011), others insist that there are universal themes, assumptions, and precepts that constitute the foundational essence of feminism as an idea and as a movement (e.g. Hoffman, 2001). Some segments of the literature have even contested the singularity of the concept itself (preferring plural nomenclature such as feminisms or multiple feminisms), suggesting that the idea of feminism is not reducible to a singular term because of the multiplicity of its applications and connotations (e.g. Mangena, 2003; Gay, 2014). However, for the purpose of this study, the semantic and conceptual debate on the meaning of feminism does not detract from the clarity of its basic purpose in terms of its commitment to the empowerment and emancipation of women (Hoffman, 2001, 193).

Perhaps the most important vehicle for actualizing feminism's commitment to women's rights are the media, and numerous authors have explored the central roles of the media as a facilitator, a stumbling block, and a mediator in the dissemination and molding of ideas within global cultures. For instance, Stuart Hall pointed out that the media, being key ideological institutions, play an important role in sustaining the dominant social order, not merely by expressing or mirroring an already existing meaning, but also by (re)constructing reality through "the recurrent sequence of

selecting and presenting, or structuring and shaping” (1982, 63–64). Moreover, Sumi Kim (2008), in her study of the hegemonic role of the mass media in feminist discourse, argued that diverse media forms consistently depict women in terms of very rigid gender roles and expectations apportioned by society. These roles and expectations are presented in the media as having to do with some kind of “ideal womanhood” which comprises attributes such as submissiveness, domesticity, and piety (Kim, 2008, 393). This representation also includes a portrayal of women as both sex objects and homemakers, depending on the narrative that the media chooses to spin. The cultural underpinning of this media representation is evident in the way that vast sections of the audience consider these gender stereotypes to be typical (Kandiyoti, 2000).

However, since culture is dynamic and not static, the literature recognizes that the media’s engagement with feminism also reflects evolving attitudes in the society towards issues related to gender roles, expectations and the rights of women. Joanne Hollows (2000) points out that with popular culture being in a constant state of flux, attitudes towards feminism and media messages about feminism are likely to evolve as well. Indeed, she contends that it is possible for the media to facilitate the absorption of feminism into the dominant ideology within popular culture, although this presents the risk of losing its radical potential and becoming aligned to conservative agendas that seek to preserve the status quo. This perspective is interesting because it exposes the inherent complexities and contradictions in the nexus between popular culture, the media, and feminism.

On the one hand, evolving popular culture may open up possibilities for the reformulation of notions about feminism, especially with the help of the media. On the other hand, attempts towards feminist reformulation in the media may unwittingly produce representations that re-contextualize feminist advances in ways that make them

ultimately reinforce prevailing patriarchal codes and discourses (Kim, 2008; Shugart et al., 2001). This implies that if, for instance, the media presents the feminist discourse in a way that creates tension with the dominant social order, the resulting resistance and imbalances may serve to justify the status quo rather than displace it (Milkie, 2002). In effect, this suggests that the extent to which the media is able to advance the feminist discourse depends on how well its representations align with the evolutionary trend in popular culture. In this way, the literature acknowledges that culture has a mediating influence on media representations of feminism.

## **2.2 Feminism in the Nigerian Context**

To understand how the Nigerian media deals with the subject of feminism, it is important to first contextualize the phenomenon of feminism as it applies to Nigerian society and, by extension, Africa. However, it is important to point out that the literature does not necessarily suggest that feminism in Nigeria or Africa operates on the basis of a different set of definitions. Just as Jane Freedman (2001) explained that feminism generally concerns itself with the inferior position of women in society and the discrimination that women encounter principally because of sexism, feminism in the Nigerian context at the most fundamental level is also concerned with advancing the rights of women and addressing the problem of discrimination against them (Ezeigbo, 1996; Kangiwa, 2015). In this way, the feminist discourse in Nigeria seeks changes in the socio-cultural, political and economic order, with the aim of reducing or overcoming any sex-based discrimination against women. While this may seem like the standard precepts upon which the dominant Western feminism model thrives, a number of scholars have identified patterns of cultural specificity and contextual difference that exist between Western feminism and the Nigerian and African strand of feminism.

Authors such as Chilla Bulbeck (1998), Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (1997) and Karlyn Crowley (2014) argue that Western notions of feminism, which are underpinned by the experiences and realities of women in Western cultures, are incompatible with the unique circumstances of women in African societies. One such notion has to do with the social construction of gender. Oyěwùmí argues that understanding the social construction of gender as a means by which all women, as a collective, are oppressed globally fails to take into account important variations in world-views, histories, and social organization across the world. She further contends that the difference between Western and African notions of feminism lies in the family unit. In the western setting, the nuclear family logic necessitates the configuring of women in terms of wife and mother and restricts their agency within those definitions. However, in her Nigerian Yoruba example, Oyěwùmí points out that seniority, not gender, plays the most important role because “the traditional Yoruba family can be described as a non-gendered family” (1997, 1-3). As a result of this assertion that western feminist ideas cannot be universalized, attempts have been made to re-conceptualize feminism in a way that fits the African context and aligns with the experiences and yearnings of women in the continent.

For instance, Josephine Ahikire (2014) asserts that in African contexts, the idea of feminism encompasses experiential, philosophical, and practical components which inform women’s movement, political strategies and practices across the continent. Ahikire goes further to conceptualize feminism in Africa as an “ideological force that fundamentally challenges existing patriarchal orthodoxies” (9). The point of departure, the author argues, is that the feminist struggle in African societies often represents a principled stance against the mainstream of patriarchal power. In this context, feminism is treated as part of the evolving reality of Africa’s broader body politic, thus setting

milestones for progress and providing the space for theorizing about the transformative changes that feminism can promote in Africa.

In another sense, feminism in Africa places considerable emphasis on locating complementarities between the African man and woman and negotiating between aspects of existing cultural realities and new ways of perceiving the essence of womanhood (Sotunsa, 2008). In other words, African feminism does not seek to deny the significance of customs and traditions in African society especially as they concern gender roles, expectations and family structures. Instead, it is more interested in constantly negotiating with elements of tradition and the ultimate goal of achieving emancipation and gender equality for women (Akin-Aina, 2011). In short, proponents of African feminism suggest that it is essentially a “feminism of negotiation” that resists the misrepresentations and distortions of western global feminism (Akin-Aina, 2011, p. 66).

This emphasis on negotiation rather than militancy or confrontation largely explains feminism in the Nigerian context. Such “nego-feminism” as prominent Nigerian feminist, Obioma Nnaemeka coined it, reflects a tendency towards compromise, while contending with the different dimensions of patriarchy in the country (2004, 22). Nnaemeka suggests that nego-feminism stands on the twin pillars of negotiation and “no ego” which speak to the principles of give and take, balance, and absence of ego or pride in the delicate processes of detonating “patriarchal landmines” (22). This means that in Nigeria, the feminist movement recognizes shared cultural values and how deeply such values may shape perceptions and understandings. Consequently, adopting a conciliatory stance anchored on a willingness to dialogue, negotiate and make compromises is the only effective way to advance women’s rights and achieve emancipation on an incremental basis (Ezeigbo, 2012; Ezenwanebe, 2015).

While mainstream feminism may not see the need to negotiate with existing structures of gender discrimination and may actively pursue an unconditional and non-negotiable dismantling of such structures, the complex cultural realities in Nigeria potentially render such an approach ineffective. Akachi Ezeigbo (2012) formulated what she describes as “snail-sense feminism” adapted specifically to the Nigerian context, which calls for a more strategic, culturally aware form of feminism in which women actively engage men with the aim of working together as co-equals to advance society. This model of feminism seeks to advance both men and women within the traditional paradigm, adopting a diplomatic approach rather than dislocating traditional Nigerian family structures and setting women on their own pedestal as Western feminism is sometimes believed to have done. For Ezeigbo, the snail-sense model of feminism is adapted to “the condition of Nigerian women, and their reaction and response to socio-cultural and political forces that have impacted and still impact on their lives” (2012, 25).

This model proposes that the feminist movement and ideology in Nigeria require an application of certain attributes of the snail in order to confront and overcome the issues and obstacles affecting women. Ezeigbo (2012) contends that the snail’s wisdom, sensitivity, resilience, and doggedness is responsible for its capacity to successfully navigate through boulders and dangerous objects whilst carrying its heavy shell on its back. Added to this are the snail’s tact, patience and conciliatory attitude which all represent survival strategies that enable it to achieve its aims in spite of enormous obstacles. Accordingly, the kind of feminism that works in Nigeria, is one that adopts the qualities of the snail to negotiate around deeply entrenched patriarchal structures to advance the cause of gender equality and promote the emancipation of Nigerian women. A situation in which this plays out is in the Supreme court ruling of 2004 which gave Igbo women the right to inheriting property. The victory came after a

long period of negotiation and advocacy which began with Ada Ukeje in 1981. The age long tradition that forbade female children from inheriting their parents' properties was finally overturned (Banjo, 2013).

Similarly, the concept of African womanism is another useful adaptation of feminism to the Nigerian and sub-Saharan African context, and its aim is to promote complementarity between African men and women in their joint struggle to overcome different forms of racial discrimination since the colonial era. As Ogunyemi (1985) explained, African womanism is not woman centered but black centered, and it is essentially accommodationist in the sense that it encourages meaningful relations between black men, women, and children and is committed to ensuring that men change their sexist stand. For womanists, according to Ogunyemi (1998), African men are neither the enemy nor the impediment to the progress of African women. Instead, African men are seen as allies that help women overcome the problems associated with colonialism and neo-colonialism and can take on the role of supporters for defending the rights of women. Rather than seeming combative, womanism as an adaptation of feminism to the Nigerian context challenges men to be aware of women's subjugation and to help address this abnormality as part of a wider effort to fight against oppression of African people in general.

For Molaria Ogunjipe-Leslie, the most effective strand of feminism for Africa is Stiwanism which is "social transformation including women." Her reason is simply because she believes that what is required in Africa is social transformation:

It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is

also in their interest. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening ... Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women’s lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as “feminist” unless they are particularly strong in character (1994, 2).

Like nego-feminism, Stiwanism seeks to negotiate the best place for African women through inclusiveness in social transformation efforts. Instead of advocating the liberation of women from Patriarchy, Stiwanism encourages equal efforts from men and women towards social transformation in Africa which includes bringing an end to systems that subjugate women. It is this peculiarity of African situations that makes African and Nigerian feminism a slippery slope and this line of reasoning always affects women. For instance, postcolonialism, the Civil Rights Movement, or indeed any other struggle against human oppression, has been treated as universally male and has consequently exhibited “gender blindness” (Loomba, 1998, 163) in their quests to create change. From Ogundipe-Leslie’s position on Stiwanism, and all the other strands mentioned, it seems that a general development of the African continent takes precedence over any struggle for equality and women and men are only supposed to co-exist peacefully. However, the failure of film makers to incorporate this nego-feminist representation continues to pose a threat to the image of the woman within society.

### **2.3 Feminism and Gender Portrayals in the Nigerian Media**

Igbo culture films are part of Nigerian movies called video films, or home videos, because they are shot directly on video (including digital) for home viewing (Larkin, 2002, 2). Labelled Nollywood and marketed across the continent and abroad, the films have been described as “one of the greatest explosions of popular culture the continent has ever seen” (Haynes, 2000, 1) and have replaced television in many homes.

Nollywood’s popularity for making films directly to video has a history that can be traced to the government’s Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s which affected many Nigerians financially. Unable to afford celluloid, Nigerian film makers resorted to the use of other formats, such as video cassettes.

In 1992, Kenneth Nnebue used cassettes imported from Taiwan to dub *Living in Bondage*, which was produced by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, directed by Victor Mordi and marketed by Nnebue himself. Many have credited *Living in Bondage* for ushering in the name “Nollywood” (Abah 2008; Haynes 2000). Nollywood, which is an analogy for “Hollywood” in the Nigerian context (similar to “Bollywood” in the context of the Mumbai, India, Hindi-language film industry), has since been churning out movies in the most prolific manner. The history of film in Nigeria, however, can be traced to the colonial period. Onuzulike (2014) argues that, since 1903, when the first screening of a film took place at Glover Memorial Hall, in Lagos, cinema has evolved through the colonial era, the independence era, the indigenization era and the Nollywood period (Mgbejume 1989; Okon 1990; Onuzulike 2010).

*Living in Bondage* (1992) was a huge commercial success selling over 750,000 copies upon release. Because the film was made in the Igbo language and is typically credited with ushering in Nollywood films (*The Economist* 2006), it became a representative of the Igbo culture and society. This equating of Nollywood films’

portrayals to Igbo culture has since remained undeniable especially since this phenomenal industry is dominated by the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria; they have provided a platform for portraying culture and as a vehicle to address societal issues.

A UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2009 survey ranked Nollywood as the second largest film producer in the world, behind India's Bollywood. Hollywood was ranked third. According to the survey, Bollywood produced 1,091 feature length films; Nollywood produced 872 in video format, while Hollywood released 485 major film productions. The importance of these statistics to Onuzulike (2014), is the debunking of the assumption that Hollywood makes more movies since it is more popular and has significantly higher marketing budgets (287). He also found that despite Nollywood's slim video production budgets, film distribution and access is cheaper, and the industry is tailored to tell home-grown stories which appeal to indigenous audiences in Africa and its diaspora.

There are of course, positive and negative aspects of Nollywood. For instance, a report in *The Economist* (2006) has credited the industry with employing over one million people a year in Nigeria, making it the second largest employment sector after agriculture. The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) estimates that the industry generates sales of between \$200 million and \$300 million per year and provides substantial revenue to the government (Onuzulike 2014). Given that mass media are cultural industries, Nigerian video films might be good sources for learning Nigerian cultural beliefs, values and attitudes regarding gender. (Agbese, 2011). The negative and stereotypical portrayals in the films are problematic; the fixation with the blood money syndrome where young Igbo men only attain financial freedom by joining secret cults where they have to sacrifice human beings in exchange for "blood money," for example, has been a pervading theme in the films since *Living in Bondage* (1992),

and which persists to recent times. One of the other areas in which this negativity is perpetuated is in the area of women's images within the films.

Shaka and Uchendu (2012) have summarized the unhealthy treatment of women in Nigerian films by corroborating Gregory Austen's description of Nigerian women as the sacrificial lambs of moviedom. They believe that Nollywood's skewed representation of women can be traced back to Classical Greek drama. *Living in Bondage*, for instance, presents the female protagonist, Merit, as a meek submissive wife whose husband Andy offers her as a sacrifice to activate instant riches. When Andy hesitates, his fellow cultists explain to him that money is more important than women. This is because in their rationalization, an extremely rich man has access to a variety of beautiful women at his beck and call. It becomes obvious at this point that women are portrayed as usable pawns to be utilized at the pleasure of men. Unfortunately, this image of the docile pawn is not the only way that women are misrepresented; when they are cast in a light of strength, they are often diabolical and evil femme fatales, witches, evil stepmothers and so forth. In *Circle of Doom* (Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, 1993) the evil woman motif plays out as two women fight over the attention of a man—one is his submissive wife while the other is a diabolical mistress. In *Glamour Girls I & II* (Kenneth Nnebue, 1994) women are depicted as promiscuous and greedy while *Evil Passion* (Zeb Ejiro, 1994) and *Nneka: The Pretty Serpent* (Zeb Ejiro, 1994) portray women as demonic and malevolent.

This femme fatale image is made to read as a signifier for waywardness and promiscuity (Shaka, 2007, 140-143). Furthermore, Femi Shaka suggests that this patriarchal pattern of representing women in Nollywood, which is replicated in the traditional stereotypes of ethnicity and ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, is due to lack of experimentation in an industry driven essentially by a commercial survival mentality imposed by the harsh economic realities of the Structural Adjustment Programme of

the 1980s and early 1990s, which was an economic sanction that limited access to funds for Nigerians.

Shaka and Uchendu (2012) also highlight films like *Married to the Enemy* (Willie Agenge, 2007) and *Women's Cot* (Dickson Iroegbu, 2005) which portray the women as husband-killers who deserve society's condemnation and harsh treatment. *Women's Cot* in particular, appears to present the message that whenever and wherever women are allowed to pull their strength and resources together, they use it to plan evil against their men. In this film, women are represented as preferring dead husbands. The radical feminist stance of self-sufficiency is abused as women only help each other stand with the condition that they remain unmarried or widowed (by any means possible) if they are already married. *August Meeting* (Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 2003) is another film that shows women baring all their fangs of meanness, wickedness and hatred, and unleashing diabolical mayhem against one another in bitter rivalry for the political post of president of the women's union. The men have to step in to ban the meeting to save women, as it were, from themselves. The portrayal here is that left alone, women are not intelligent and articulate enough to carry out projects motivated by good intentions without endangering themselves, like halfwits, or toddlers at play, who have to be constantly watched lest they harm one another or even themselves (Shaka and Uchendu 2012).

As a result of the increasing popularity of these Igbo films, budding film makers continue in the same line of commercializing this demeaning idea of womanhood—from the epic genre, where women scheme and plot to commit evil; to the romantic genre, where they are often portrayed as weak women who not only fight for the affections of men but who are also subjected to different kinds of humiliation in marriages to promiscuous men, where they must remain to prove their worth as good

women or resort to murder as evil women. It seems that no middle ground can be negotiated for women within the films.

Nollywood is implicated as the branch of the media that is most responsible for perpetuating the unfavorable stereotypes of women as inferior or subordinate to men (Endong & Obonganwan, 2015; Kangiwa, 2015; Azeez, 2010). Evidence in the Nigerian feminism and gender studies literature suggest that not only is the film industry least amenable to advancing feminism, it apparently prefers to portray women in line with the most extreme and dated interpretations of traditional patriarchal structures. Indeed, Garba Kangiwa (2015, 757) criticizes Nigerian films as “ideological apparatuses” for the dissemination of images, ideas, myths, and misapprehensions that uphold the dominance of men and perpetually consign women to comparatively inferior positions. Onookome Okome (1997) lamented that, since the release of *Living in Bondage* (Kenneth Nnebue, 1992), which is arguably the pioneering film of modern Nollywood Igbo-culture themed cinema, the Nigerian film industry has remained stuck with the preference for narratives based on patriarchal and Afro-Christian notions of female weakness and docility; this follows in the steps of previous broadcast films and series such as *Things Fall Apart* (1987), created by the Nigerian Television Authority.

Nigerian feminist scholars such as Akachi Ezeigbo (1996) and Chinyere Okunna (2002) complained that Nigerian home video films not only emphasize the stereotype of women as subservient or inferior to men, but also negatively portray women as fit for domestic roles rather than career or professional roles, wayward and bereft of morality, unabashedly materialistic, and lazy and over dependent on men. These views are consistent with the findings and observations of numerous studies of the representation of women in the Nigerian film industry. There is almost a universal agreement that women are generally portrayed in a disempowering, uncomplimentary,

and in a sense unrealistic way, at least when examining such portrayals from feminist perspectives.

For Nigerian feminist scholars and observers, perhaps the biggest concern about the projection of subordinate female stereotypes in Igbo Culture films and Nigerian films as a whole is that Nollywood films have long been a staple in many Nigerian and African homes and an influencer of popular culture (Ogunleye, 2003). For many African families, Nollywood films are a necessity of sorts, and the relatable narratives and traditions depicted in the films not only influence lifestyles, but also reinforce beliefs and orientations (Akinyemi, 2011; Apakama, 2015). This happens not only within the geographical space of continental Africa, but also throughout the diaspora, as Nigerian films are now extensively distributed globally through formal channels, such as film festivals and cinema showings, as well as other unofficial outlets, such as YouTube streaming and website downloads. This wide reach and ease of access means that the messages disseminated by Nigerian films potentially affect the views of not only Africans living in Africa, but also worldwide audiences. Such extensive popularity and spread of Nigerian films mean that the continued stereotypical portrayal of women may create and sustain unhelpful impressions about the reality of women's rights in modern Nigerian society.

Given the influence of the mass media as a teacher of social norms, particularly for young people, scholars have argued that it is crucial for media messages and narratives to reinforce the positive changes envisaged by society with regards to gender equality (Wynns & Rosenfeld, 2003). This thinking explains the fears expressed by authors such as Ofori-Birikorang & Donkor (2014) and Akashoro (2010) that the pervasiveness and popularity of films which reinforce negative images and stereotypes of women may erode the little gains achieved in the struggle for women's emancipation. In Western societies, despite stereotypical portrayals of women in films,

feminists are able to challenge the existing order and the dominant ideology by creating a counter rhetoric through independent films. Some scholars argue that the feminist movement has brought improvements in the representation of women in television and film over the last three decades (Global Status of Women, 2009).

It has been suggested that a potentially powerful way to redress the negative portrayal of women in African films is to encourage greater participation of women film directors, since the narrative and aesthetic approaches they employ may significantly contribute to the evolution of African film narratives in general (Petty, 2012). In addition to advocating for greater participation of female filmmakers in Nollywood as a way to ensure more positive portrayals of women, it is also argued that an effective solution to the problem is to encourage filmmakers, both male and female, to recognize their role as powerful agents of change (Ogunleye, 2003). What this means is that filmmakers in Nigeria should not merely showcase negative stereotypes or depict the purported “reality” about gender roles and characteristics in society but should instead propagate positive models about women and redirect public consciousness towards the imperative of gender equality.

## **CHAPTER 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### **3.1 Theoretical Framework**

Any attempt to establish a fitting theoretical framework for studying feminism in Nigeria and Africa by extension would present an interesting conundrum. Since the depiction of women in Igbo culture films is the main preoccupation of this thesis, a researcher might choose between classic liberal feminist theory, or in this case, feminist film theory, and any theoretical adaptation that factors in the unique African experience in terms of how women are portrayed according to the prevailing understandings of culture and tradition. Ordinarily, feminist film theory, which derives from the broader feminist theory, is used to explore the theoretical underpinnings of women's position in films.

In Nigeria specifically, the portrayal of women goes beyond presenting them merely as sex objects for voyeuristic male audiences as other feminist film scholars have highlighted and instead centers more on the sheer subordination, subservience, and subjugation of women in relation to men (Okunna, 1996; Shaka & Uchendu, 2012), a situation not adequately addressed in conventional Western feminist film theory. Since Western society appears to have achieved a greater level of gender equality and women's rights than developing countries such as Nigeria, it makes sense that the respective film cultures will reflect the different social realities and levels of development applicable in each society.

The theoretical framework for this thesis, therefore, comprises theories that help explain the perpetuation of stereotypes relating to women's subordination and inferiority to men in Nigerian Igbo-culture films, as well as the intersections between traditional structures, understandings and interpretations of culture, audience preferences, film messages, and attitudes towards change in the societal perception of

women. One of the most useful theories for investigating the negative stereotyping of women in Nigerian films is George Gerbner's Cultivation theory, which posits that television and cinema influence concepts of social reality (in Potter, 2014). In other words, with increased exposure to images in film and television, audiences can be "cultivated" to believe that what they watch is a correct reflection of reality. In the case of the Nigerian home video industry, Okunna (2002) argues that the negative images of women in films often have such cultivation effects on young people, especially girls, in the sense that these images can make them feel ashamed that they are female and potentially lead them to accept the uncomplimentary film portrayal of females as accurate.

According to Cultivation theory, the repetitive depiction of females as subordinate, dependent, or subservient to men in Nigerian films has the dual effect of forcing women to accept and conform to biased gender stereotypes and also convincing general audiences that such degrading stereotypes of women represents reality and normality. The relevance of Cultivation theory in the context of this study lies in the emphasis it places on the power of the media, particularly films, as an influencer of public perceptions and propagator of social reality. This theory makes it clear that regardless of prior beliefs or orientations, the public's perceptions of women and their position within Nigerian society is causally related to the messages and ideas repeatedly disseminated by pervasive media forms such as Nollywood. In essence, cultivation theory sees the media as a socializing agent that gradually shapes how audiences perceive, interpret, and understand reality.

Another useful and complementary theory for exploring the portrayal of women in Nigerian films is the Reinforcement theory, also known as the Limited Effects or Phenomenistic theory, which de-emphasizes the effects of the media and underscores the importance of social and psychological factors on public perceptions.

Proposed by Joseph Klapper (1960), the Reinforcement theory of media asserts that the media does not have a dominant effect on audiences' beliefs, motives, and attitudes. This theory does not deny the influence of the media. Instead, it maintains that the media's effect on audience perceptions is limited, mainly because individuals tend to selectively filter their life experiences and selectively perceive or retain media messages. The central postulation of Klapper's reinforcement theory is that media portrayals reinforce established behaviors and orientations within audiences, rather than cultivate or originate them. Applied in the Nigerian context, Ezeigbo (1996) argued that Nigerian home video movies provoke dismay among women by reinforcing negative and damaging images of women already prevalent within the wider Nigerian society. In this way, it seems that scholars such as Ezeigbo (1996) do not blame the Nigerian film industry for originating the negative stereotypes about women, but for propagating and reinforcing them.

The relationship between the Cultivation theory and Reinforcement theory in the context of this study is the interconnectedness of the gender stereotypes which are already in existence in the society and in the media and the manner in which media portrayals of women perpetuate them. Nego-feminism on the other hand, offers an understanding of the non-universality of Western feminism by revealing the intricacies of gender relations in Igbo culture and the extent to which progress has been made towards liberating women from subjugation within society and on screen.

The preferred theoretical framework is a functional blend of the Cultivation and Reinforcement theories, within the backdrop of postcolonial feminist theory, specifically nego-feminism, which focuses on the image of “women” within Igbo society as opposed to Western feminist film theorists' preoccupation with other aspects of women's portrayal like voyeurism or ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. A vocal critic of the universalized Western feminist criticism, Sandra Ponzanesi (2017) has suggested a

postcolonial feminism applicable to non-Western films which collectively demonstrates the causal and mutually reinforcing relationship between media (Nigerian films) and the society. She draws attention to Ella Shohat's "Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a feminist Ethnography of the Cinema," which argues that in order to discourage the stereotypical portrayals of the other and their world in western films, a postcolonial theory of analysis has to be applied—one that puts the peculiarities and histories of different cultures into consideration. She proposes a commitment to "nation, race and gender, critiquing national movements and ethnic communities that are exclusive and monocultural" (in Ponzanesi 2017, 5).

This theoretical framework facilitates the understanding of how existing dominant beliefs and norms in society provide the raw materials for negative representation of women in Nigerian films on the one hand, and how Nigerian films amplify adverse perceptions and stereotypes on the other hand, thereby sustaining the vicious cycle. What this means is that it is important to pay equal attention to the role of the Nigerian media in shaping views about feminism, as well as the role of the larger society's dominant belief and value systems in shaping the media's approach to feminism. This theoretical framework offers the systematic platform for conducting the investigation and making sense of the mediating variables and issues.

### **3.2 Methodology**

This thesis implements an interpretative design to analyze Igbo culture Nigerian movies within a nego-feminist, postcolonial feminist film theory and cultivation theory milieu. It employs a qualitative research method centered on library and internet sources. The explanation of the concepts of nego feminism and the application of cultivation theory to Igbo culture films are examined based on available secondary sources. Furthermore, these concepts present the conceptual framework for the study as well as tools for analyzing the primary sources. The primary data are selected from two Igbo culture films of different eras, to examine the evolving nature of women's portrayals in the films and how they have affected perceptions and women's place in the Nigerian society. The ways that the society itself influences the situation of women in the movies are also investigated.

Textual and visual analyses are particularly suitable for the purpose of the present study. As David Silverman (2006) pointed out, textual analysis is an excellent methodological tool for qualitative studies in which relatively large amounts of data are organized and categorized. In line with the earlier mentioned emphasis of the qualitative approach on meaning and interpretation, these methods are useful for extracting meaning within data through the interpretation of single or multiple texts (Jankowski & Jensen, 1991) and aid in uncovering information pertaining to a given group or culture (such as women in Nigeria) in terms of how they are represented throughout the work (in the Igbo culture films under focus). In their introduction to their survey of this method, Wodak and Meyer (2015) suggest its suitability for non-verbal (semiotic, multimodal, visual) aspects of interaction and communication: gesture, images, film, the internet and multimedia, etc. For this study, of course, it is employed with respect to film and African feminism. Thus, the mode of data collection

is by interpretative analysis of the Nigerian version of the screen adaptations of *Things Fall Apart* released in 1987 and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013).

### **3.3 Research Design and Sample**

This study adopts qualitative research methodology and an interpretive design. It is a qualitative investigation of the evolution of feminism in the Nigerian media with emphasis on Igbo culture films. The qualitative research approach is a natural choice for this study, owing to its emphasis on meaning and interpretation, as well as its focus on understanding as opposed to measuring (Gordon, 1999). The qualitative method thrives in research studies that are concerned with ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, seeking to gain in-depth understanding of the subject being investigated.

The methodology entails “the study of spoken and written representations and records of human experience, using multiple methods and multiple sources of data” (Hughes, 1999, p.4). Hughes also recognized a number of different modes of data collection for qualitative research as interviews, observation, participant observation and documents. No matter the design or perspective a research work adopts, “the data in most qualitative research come down to these main types” (Punch, 1998, p. 174). These modes of data collection fit into the broader classification of the two basic types of data used in the research method, namely: verbal and visual data. Whereas verbal data are assembled as narratives or interviews, visual data are developed by utilizing the different methods of observation from participant and non-participant observant to ethnography and analyses of photographs and films. Flick argues that, “verbal and visual data are transformed into texts by documenting them and by transcription” (Flick, quoted in Hughes 1998, pp.11-12). Different modes are used for collecting empirical materials in this method- from interview to direct observation, analysis of artifacts, documents, and cultural records, to the use of visual materials or personal experience. Qualitative researchers may also use a variety of different methods of

reading and analyzing interviews or cultural texts, including content, narrative, and semiotic strategies.

The selected films for analysis are significant because while they both foreground the patriarchal structures of traditional Igbo society during the pre-colonial and postcolonial periods respectively, they also offer stark differences in the way women are depicted, and therefore facilitate a balanced understanding of the evolution of feminism in Nigerian Igbo culture films. Rather than seeking to confirm or disconfirm theory, the goal is to map the observable patterns of representation of women as compared to men in *Things Fall Apart* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* in relation to the key characters, dialogues, visual properties and overall narratives. The fact that the films were released in different eras is also a reflection of the interest in finding out how portrayals of women have evolved over time in Igbo culture films. In addition, similar characteristics or recurring themes that consistently emanated from each film are identified in order to gain insight into the films' treatments of ideas and ideals fundamentally associated with feminism and women's rights.

### **3.4 Analytical Procedure**

Analysis of the emergent patterns, themes, stereotypes, and characteristics of the individual films required coding sheets for recording relevant textual information obtained by viewing the films. In other words, this involved paying close attention to dialogues and narratives, and taking note of the themes, language, and meanings communicated in the films. Through keen observation, several visual components of the films are noted and key elements relating to traits of the female characters, patterns of communication between male and female characters, and relationships between female and male characters are observed. These elements are broken down into two thematic categories – representation of behavior and interactions, and representation of

attitudes towards the rights of women. These categories provide a suitable analytical framework for assessing the portrayals of women and feminism in the respective films. On one hand, the observance of behavior and interactions in the films encompass both the behaviors of the women and men, to determine the extent to which these behaviors indicate stereotypical reinforcements of gender role expectations. The overt nature of behavior makes it a particularly valuable source of information relating to gender stereotypes and attitudes towards feminism.

Furthermore, interactions between characters in the respective films are crucial pointers to their portrayal of gender relations and feminist notions. Interaction in this context refers to the communication between the characters and the resultant effects they exert upon each other. This aspect is especially relevant because it helps expose patterns of gender discrimination or inequality where enacted through gender interactions, just as it also shows where female characters are portrayed in a manner that challenges or negates the patriarchal status quo. The portrayal of attitudes towards the rights of women is an important thematic category because it allows for the extraction and interpretation of meaning regarding how the narrative touches on the rights of women in the community vis-à-vis their relations with men. This involves aspects of the films that reflect notions of justice, equity and fairness in the way that the rest of society approaches issues relating to women.

### **3.5 Method of Data Analysis**

Through textual analysis of film elements such as visual aesthetics, shots, and framing, this study attempts a holistic understanding of its portrayals of women and feminism. This method of data analysis recognizes the interpretive subjectivity of diverse components of films, to paint the full picture and ensure comprehensive evaluation. Discourse analysis of narrative structure and film aesthetics helps achieve the

objectives of this study, which are preoccupied with uncovering implicit meanings pertaining to feminist thought and gender discrimination in the selected films. This thesis approaches the analysis of the primary sources from a nego-feminist position with the intention to identify the ways in which feminism has evolved in the Nigerian media especially with regard to Igbo culture in two different eras as portrayed in film.

## CHAPTER 4: Analysis

### 4.1 Overview

The following close analysis focuses in depth on two Igbo culture films, *Things Fall Apart* (1987) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013). Since this study is interested in exploring the evolution of feminism in Igbo culture films, its emphasis is on the representation of female characters in terms of roles, behaviors, attitudes and interactions in relation to male characters. The two films are selected because they belong to the Igbo culture film genre and reflect two distinct time periods in Igbo history. While *Things Fall Apart* reveals pre-colonial and colonial Igbo society and its gender politics, *Half of a Yellow Sun* points to the evolving nature of some of the cultural ideologies during the independence struggle that subjugated women. Some factors like education, social status and flexible family structures are examined as important influences on the evolution of feminism. The time periods are significant because evolution cannot occur or be traced in the absence of time. Therefore, to capture the major transformations in the media portrayal of women, two different time periods should be examined.

### 4.2 *Things Fall Apart* (1987)

Adapted from Chinua Achebe's remarkable novel, produced by Peter Igho, and directed by David Orere, the film, like the book, has presented a less-than-savory picture of Igbo women. As previously observed, African feminist literary critics have argued that Achebe's first novel, in a bid to portray pre-colonial Africa as organized and prosperous before British colonialism, ended up relegating women to the background. *Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Okonkwo, an Igbo community leader

and wrestling champion, who is steeped in the traditional patriarchal norms of Igbo society and obsessed with notions of masculinity.

Okonkwo (Pete Edochie) is a principal figure in his village of Umuofia on account of his reputation as a wrestling champion and as a prosperous farmer. Cast as a polygamist in line with the prevailing tradition of the Igbo people, Okonkwo is married to three wives, with eight children. He is depicted as a strong, hard-working, courageous man obsessed with demonstrating his masculinity by abhorring every form of weakness, and by maintaining an authoritarian approach to his relations with his wives and children. His self-image and personality are in part shaped by his zeal to dispel the discredited legacy of his father, Unoka, who was reputedly effeminate, cowardly, and unsuccessful.

The film's plot encapsulates a complex narrative on pre and colonial Igbo culture and the contradictions arising from the colonial onslaught against the community's traditional values, as well as the inherent ironies and tragedies of Okonkwo's battles with his family and community in the midst of the occurring changes. However, the more relevant aspects of the narrative, in the context of this study, center on the depiction of Okonkwo's wives and other female characters, and the extent to which their portrayal provides clues about the film's treatment of themes related to feminism and gender equality.

This film models an unsavory representation of women by giving the impression that Igbo women in precolonial and colonial Nigeria were adjuncts instead of selves. From their body language and the dialogues, which often exclude them, women in the film are perceived in much the same way as their children. Their only contributions are as domestic hands who work long hours on the farm, cook and clean

as well as bear and rear babies, while the weighty matters of leadership and mental strategizing are solely reserved for men.



Figure 1: Okonkwo and family members. SOURCE: Youtube

In the scene pictured above, for instance, Okonkwo breaks the news of his impending departure to battle at Mbaino while his mother, wives and two sons implore him inconsolably to stay for his own safety and for their sakes, to which he responds in his signature arrogant tone. First, to his mother, Adaye, he says, “Should I stay at home and die like a woman?” Then, to his wives, he says, “Mgbeke, Ojiugo, Ekwefi, every one of you have a part to play in this war; you will all cook for our warriors,” after which he takes his son Nwoye away from the group to obviously have a “manly” conversation with him. There is a clear portrayal of gender inequality in the Okonkwo household (evident in the way he is centered in the frame while the women encircle him on the edges, reinforcing his position of authority in the family) throughout the film. Okonkwo’s sons although kneeling, are also centered in the frame close to their father, re-enforcing the erroneous fixation of the Igbo on male children; sons, even though they are babies, are treated with more respect than women in Igbo culture as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. This positioning of women as inferior to men spreads

across every sphere of the Umuofia society depicted in the film and basically offers viewers a skewed view of womanhood whilst over-emphasizing male strength and supremacy. A critical examination of gender relations and behavior in the film reveals the ways in which the state of affairs in Umuofia impacts female characters. Some factors like social status and positions within the family that predispose women to either respect or denigration are examined and juxtaposed with the same situations in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

#### **4.2.1 Representation of Behavior and Gender Interactions.**

Women in *Things Fall Apart* are presented to the viewer as voiceless beings to be seen and not heard. In this distorted representation of women, Shaka found that “characterization 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” (2007, 123). This is seemingly a reflection of the prevailing patriarchal Igbo traditions and cultural values but might be a misleading picture of the reality of gender relations in the era portrayed in the film. Only three female characters are given more agency in the film. The first one is Chielo, who is the priestess of the goddess, Agbala while the others are Okonkwo’s mother, Adaye, and his daughter, Ezinma. The Priestess Chielo’s peculiarity could be as a result of either her state of gender neutrality, being a mouthpiece of the gods and inevitably respected and feared, or because of the proclivity of the Igbo to offer women respect based on the level of their husband’s wealth or societal status. On the other hand, Adaye’s strength is shown in juxtaposition to her husband’s famed weakness. As already mentioned, Okonkwo’s obsession with manliness and power is rooted in his deep fear of ending up like his father Unoka, a handsome musician who would rather play the flute “like a woman” than work the farm or fight in wars like a man.

What comes to mind when we see the character of Adaeze for the first time is a sense of disconnect; in the context of African feminism, the ideal heterosexual family setting is characterized by mutual respect and complementary partnership as opposed to the dominant female who overshadows and emasculates the male. In the shots below, Adaeze towers over her husband, and in the middle shot, he is framed in high angle and is thus disempowered vis-à-vis his wife who is shot in low angle as she yells at him to stop playing the flute and follow her to the farm. Unoka jokingly dances for her instead:

Unoka: how do you like my new dance? Now listen to my new tune

Adaeze: (yanks the flute out of his hands) These acts of yours are the things that make your son Okonkwo ashamed of you. Unoka when are you going to be ashamed of yourself?



Figure 2: Adaeze and Unoka. SOURCE: Youtube

In line with Gerbner's Cultivation theory, this sort of exchange between them leaves an impression on the minds of viewers about Adaeze's character as a bad woman who emasculates her husband at every opportunity. This begs the question of the complicated position of feminism within Igbo films. Apparently, women are either cast in the sidelines or cast in what Shaka and Uchendu described as the "extreme left" (2012, 15) in which signature female characters are either in subservient spaces or are as terrible as can be possibly conceived, such as witches, murderers or prostitutes who prey on innocent male victims for money and other material things to the detriment of the wives or families of those men.

Another example of this extreme representation is the independent activist woman who is a scheming, politicking, demanding, wayward rebel who would do anything, including murder, and use any means, including diabolical, to achieve her aims and ambition. She is usually cast as single, divorced or widowed, but would have a lover on whom she spends money, much the same way men spend money on young girls. This woman is the dread and nightmare of men in patriarchal society. There appears to be no middle way in Nollywood's negative representation of women. If a woman strives to achieve economic independence, or challenges obnoxious traditional policies of patriarchy, she is quickly moved into the frame of the extreme left (Shaka and Uchendu, 2012). This position enhances negative power and encourages viewer disgust. It is in this light that we regard Adaeze, whom, despite her assertiveness before her weak husband, is the picture of meekness before her warrior son, Okonkwo. Negotiating a common ground therefore becomes impossible because it appears that the only way a woman can be a strong character is if she's paired with a weakling like Unoka, whose manhood is often questioned on account of his preference for music and recreation over farming and wrestling. It is also a possibility that strong female

characters, such as Adaye, can only exist as dominant partners in relationships with male characters cast as victims. The resultant effect on the viewer is distrust for the female character instead of admiration. Female characters in the extreme left frame are portrayed to be looked at in terms of disgust, and they almost always meet a horrific end, often to teach a lesson to women in society about the repercussions of not being submissive to men.

The character of Ezinma is on another level because of the position she holds in Okonkwo's heart. Despite her assertiveness, it is worthy of note that whatever agency she enjoys is subject to Okonkwo's approval; an African feminist reading of their interactions reveal that Ezinma is the sort of woman who shines because the dominant male figure in her life lets her. On the extreme left, Okonkwo wishes that she were a boy and his son, Nwoye (who seems to be Unoka-incarnate, drawn to the delicate paths) a girl. This shows that dominant qualities are often not dependent on gender.

From the opening scene where Okonkwo begins the day rebuking Mgbewe, his first wife, for being lazy by his estimation, the major assessment of gender representation in the film seems to rely solely on him. The non-verbal behaviors of the film's central characters, especially of Okonkwo and his wives, also provide vital clues about the stereotypes codified into its overall narrative. In various scenes showing Okonkwo communicating with his wives, the expression on his face is often a combination of arrogance, imperiousness, impatience, and superiority and he occupies the center frame at all times, whereas a sense of dread and subservience is apparent in the countenance and deportment of his wives, with the exception of Ekwefi, portrayed as different because of her position as his favorite wife. In the first scene, Okonkwo soliloquizes about his first wife, Mgbewe: "this woman does not know that I have been very patient with her...How can a man wake up before his wife every morning?" This implies that it is the woman's role to rise earlier than anyone else in the household, to

do chores and attend to other needs of the family. Again, when Okonkwo receives visitors, such as in the scene where Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend and a respected member of the village, comes visiting, his wives disappear into the background. The women's only usefulness on such occasions is to prepare food and drinks for the refreshment of the male visitors, and they are not expected to be present, let alone contribute, when Okonkwo is discussing with his visitors. In this context, the film's depiction of a cultural stereotype portraying women as subordinate to men is not only evident in the outward behaviors exhibited by Okonkwo and his wives, but also in the unspoken sense of expectancy. On the basis of his masculinity, Okonkwo expects dutiful, unquestioning obeisance from his wives, whereas his wives evince an implied recognition and acceptance of such expectancy. His love or lack of it is not at the core of Okonkwo's relationship with his wives but a deep sense of entitlement to one-sided respect and even worship.

An example of this is enacted in a scene where, apparently in a bad mood, Okonkwo wrongly accuses Ekwefi of destroying a banana tree in the family's farm. In what is represented as a seemingly thoughtless display of courage, Ekwefi protests her innocence of the accusation by talking back to Okonkwo, causing him to fly into a rage and beat her mercilessly and even threatening to shoot her with his hunting rifle for having the audacity to talk back to him. The implied meaning in such a depiction points to the behavioral stereotype the film prescribes for women, particularly in relation to dominant male figures in their lives, such as their husbands. Despite being wrongly accused of killing a tree (which was subsequently discovered to be alive), Ekwefi's impulsive action of asserting her innocence and protesting the wrongful accusation was deemed atypical of the female behavioral stereotype. In effect, Okonkwo's rage and violent response to Ekwefi's "aberrant" behavior shows that such behavior is both unacceptable and likely to have grave consequences. This serves to enforce and

perpetuate existing gender stereotypes of male dominance and female subservience, and this theme runs across various scenes depicting patterns of behavior in the film.

Another pattern of behavior evident in the film's representation of gender relations, particularly between Okonkwo and his wives, has to do with the acceptance of certain codes based on the male character's dictates. For example, Okonkwo's wives, with the exception of Ekwefi, seem forbidden from knocking on his door unless he summons them. In one scene where Ekwefi knocks on Okonkwo's door to wake him up, he mutters with thinly disguised irritation, "that must be Ekwefi," only to receive the news of his favorite daughter's severe illness. Again, meaning can be interpreted from this kind of depiction. It suggests that Ekwefi enjoys the privilege (granted by him) to knock on his door or enter his room only because he considers her to be his favorite wife. The other wives, being less favored, are not expected to go to him on their own accord unless he sends for them. This denies the women self-agency in their relations with their husband, suggesting that their volitions are dependent on his will.

In another scene, Okonkwo summons his household and announces his plan to organize a feast in honor of his mother's relatives. He declares that he intends to spare no cost in putting together a lavish feast, indicating his decision to slaughter three of his goats and "every available fowl" in his chicken pen. His first wife, Mgbeke, interjects and tries to ask whether three goats were not too much for the occasion, to which Okonkwo imperiously retorts: "Shut up your mouth, I decide what goes into the feast, not you." Again, this is a good example of the voiceless nature assigned to women in the cultural context against which the film is set. It gives viewers the impression that men, in the patriarchal Igbo culture, do not welcome any attempts by the "subordinate" women in their lives to question their decisions or make any input that might contradict what has already been decided. This imbalance in negotiating agency for men and women is not in line with the objectives of nego-feminism.

#### 4.2.2 Attitudes towards Women's Rights

Violence against women, particularly the domestic kind perpetrated by Okonkwo against his wives, is a common feature of the family narrative in *Things Fall Apart*. On two occasions, Okonkwo's rage culminates in violent action against his second wife, Ekwefi, and his youngest wife, Ojiugo, and the response of the community to Okonkwo's violence against women as depicted in the film is at best one of dismissal, as if a man beating his wife is a trifling matter. In a scene where Ojiugo has gone out to braid her hair without informing Okonkwo beforehand, she returns home to meet a livid Okonkwo, who lashes out at her and severely beats her up, on a day that is meant to be part of Umuofia's sacred Peace Week. The matter is brought before the village priest, who reprimands Okonkwo, not necessarily for his violence against his wife, but for failing to observe the peace mandated for the traditional sacred week. To atone for his transgression, Okonkwo is required to sacrifice a goat and a hen along with paying a fine, and the issue is laid to rest. It is instructive that no mention is made about appeasing the woman who was assaulted. In fact, one of the unnamed elders present at the trial mutters "I don't know why such a trifle matter should come before the Egwugwu (priest's shrine)," suggesting that it is unimportant to address issues of domestic violence against women, or that it is even normal for husbands to beat their errant wives.

Women's adjunct positions and their place as articles of trade and negotiation is evident in the scene where Ogbuefi Udo's wife, Mgboye, is murdered in the neighboring village of Mbaino. Ezeudo describes the perpetrators as "cowards who would prove their manhood by killing a woman." This statement reveals the depth of women's position: even as victims of murder, their killers are taunted for having killed mere women. At first, while the elders of Umuofia are meeting to determine the most suitable course of action against their neighbors, a livid Okonkwo springs up at another

elder's insinuation of dialogue with Mbaino. In a heated monologue, he advocates war and revenge:

Those who are afraid of blood should stay at home and mind their wives and children while those of us who are warriors and true sons of our fathers go to the battlefield and prove our manhood.

A lack of regard for women's rights in the film is evident in the end, when a virgin teenage girl is handed over to Umuofia by Mbaino, as recompense for the murder. The handing over of a virgin girl is part of the terms stipulated by Umuofia to avoid war between the two villages; Mbaino quickly agrees to the terms, partly in dread of Umuofia's fearsome reputation for proficiency in war and magic. When the teenage girl is presented to the elders of Umuofia, they unanimously agree to deliver her to Ogbuefi Udo as a replacement for his dead wife. During the proceedings, one elder remarks: "it is only fair that the maiden should replace Ogbuefi Udo's murdered wife." Unspoken elements in this scene, such as the almost unanimous nodding in agreement by all present at the deliberation, and the implicit sense that justice has been served by summarily handing a girl over to a total stranger against her volition, provides further evidence of the general attitude to women's rights portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*. In effect, by suggesting that the teenage girl is a fair replacement for Ogbuefi Udo's murdered wife, the film implies that in the prevailing Igbo culture, women are at once homogenous, interchangeable, and liable to objectification. This is in addition to their implied lack of voice and prerogative in making important decisions relating to even their own life choices, especially when their choices run against the dominant patriarchal interest.

It becomes obvious, therefore, that the depiction of women in *Things Fall Apart* cannot be reduced to one man's (Okonkwo's) chauvinistic and abusive disposition

towards his wives and other women he interacts with in the society. Instead, the attitudes of the broader community suggest not only an excusal or trivialization of oppressive behavior against women, but, in fact, a condoning or normalization of such conduct based on perceived traditional norms and cultures governing gender relations.

Some of what the film lacks in gender equality is traceable to the era in which it was set and the underlying sexual politics rife in it. Despite being produced in 1987 (a fact that accounts for the picture quality), the film is a portrait of pre-colonial and colonial Igboland. This is understood in terms of setting and space representation. The opening shots confirm the rural setting, apparent from the mud huts with thatched roofs, as well as the traditional attire of men and women and the pomp and ceremony of different traditional events. These serve as beautiful reminders of an idyllic past and evoke a sense of nostalgia in viewers.

### **4.3 Half of a Yellow Sun (2013)**

*Half of a Yellow Sun* was produced by the British filmmaker Andrea Calderwood and written and directed by Biyi Bandele from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning 2006 novel of the same title. *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a love story set against the background of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970 and follows the travails of two sisters of Igbo descent who pursue their love and personal interests in spite of societal expectations. The film is part of the new Nollywood phenomenon which has seen a return from video to cinema. Nigeria's most expensive production to date, the film won the 2014 Golden Dhow in the Zanzibar International Film Festival. However, the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board suspended its release in the country until August 2013, "due not to questions of propriety but to national security concerns" (Akudinobi, 2015, 137). This is attributed to the film's excavation of a traumatic past

through the eyes of the Igbo ethnic group who fought for the sovereign state of Biafra and still continue to decry the marginalization they face within the Nigerian state, decades after the Civil war. Although it is not made by an Igbo director, the film is preoccupied with an Igbo story and sheds considerable light on 1960s Nigeria and the Igbo situation.

The lives of twin sisters Olanna (played by Thandie Newton) and Kainene (Anika Noni Rose) take divergent turns after they complete their education in England and return to Nigeria only to get caught up in the country's war arising from secessionist attempts to establish the break-away Republic of Biafra. The girls get involved in romantic relationships against the backdrop of the unfolding socio-political unrest of that era. While Olanna is romantically involved with (and later married to) a revolutionary pro-secession activist professor named Odenigbo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), Kainene is involved with a white British writer named Richard (Joseph Mawle), who also identifies himself with the Igbo people's secessionist ambitions. While Olanna moves in with Odenigbo (before marriage) and his houseboy, Ugwu (John Boyega), her sister Kainene pursues a career in business and assumes responsibility over the family's interests, at the same time building a passionate relationship with Richard. Both sisters' romantic involvements play out against the background of their individual and collective engagements with the unfolding violence and hardships afflicting Igbo victims of the Nigerian Civil War as they struggled to establish the republic of Biafra as a country of their own. Although the film draws attention to Nigeria's unfortunate civil war and the tragedies arising from it, the relevant aspect of the narrative in the context of this study relates to the battles between the dominant patriarchal system and the resistance against it put up by the twin sisters regarding decisions affecting their personal and family lives.

Beyond the background of the war and all the uncertainties they grapple with, the stark difference between the women of *Things Fall Apart* and the women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals the ways that women and representations of women have evolved in contemporary Nigerian society. The interesting factors to consider with regard to these changes are age (the older characters conform to a different code of gender), education, wealth, class, and the feminist inclination of the author of the novel adapted into film. In the film, we see that, despite the assertive nature of the Ozobia girls and the women in their lives, their lives are made easier by the privileges they enjoy based on their family connection. Their father is a rich industrialist who wines and dines with the high and mighty in the newly independent Nigeria depicted in the film. By extension, his daughters, who have benefitted from his largesse, live glamorous lives, are graduates of elite international universities and are respected in ways that children of poor people can only dream about. From the detailed analysis that follows, it does appear that, as was pointed out above in the analysis of *Things Fall Apart*, respect is often given to women because of a powerful male figure in their lives—in this case, Chief Ozobia. In addition to wealth and class, education plays a major role in the gender relationships in the film: Olanna and Kainene naturally deal with more educated men who are not bound by the same patriarchal codes as other men in that society while uneducated and timid women such as Amala, the young village girl Odenigbo's mother manipulates him into sleeping with, are not accorded the same treatment.

The shots in Figure 3 show the Ozobia twins in juxtaposition to Amala and Odenigbo's mother, whom he refers to as a village woman to validate her dislike for Olanna, her son's educated live-in lover.



Figure 3: Olanna and Kainene, Amala in the middle and Mama on the right. SOURCE: Youtube.

Whereas Mama and Amala are dressed in traditional attire, the Ozobia girls are dressed in western clothes with well-coiffed wigs to portray their education and class. There is also a difference in the carriage and speech of the women, reflecting their differing levels of education.

#### **4.3.1 Representation of Behavior and Gender Interaction**

The plot and general narrative of *Half of a Yellow Sun* recognizes the patriarchal social order that characterized Nigeria's post-colonial society in the build-up to the civil war and beyond. This is reflected in the orientation of male characters such as Chief Ozobia, Olanna and Kainene's father, and his political and business associates, such as the Minister, Chief Okonji, who expect that women should pander to the needs and demands of men regardless of their own interest. It is also reflected in the behavior of older female characters, such as the sisters' mother and Odenigbo's mother, whose notions about standards of female behavior conform to the dominant patriarchal order.



Figure 4: Olanna and Kainene. SOURCE: Youtube

In one of the opening shots, shown in Figure 4, Olanna and Kainene are getting ready for dinner with their family and Chief Okonji, an influential cabinet minister. It is Independence night and as Kainene tells her mother minutes later, “There are a thousand and one soirees in Lagos tonight.” In this shot, Olanna has just concluded her make-up with a dab of nude color to her lips when Kainene asks with a hint of sarcasm, “Are you going to help dad get his contract?” to which Olanna retorts, “What do you mean?” Kainene draws closer and clarifies, “Will you be spreading your legs for the Right Honorable Minister in exchange for daddy's contract?” Olanna simply ignores her with a smug look before their conniving mother interrupts the conversation and urges them to come down: “Hurry up, you two. His Excellency is here...”

At dinner, the Minister’s veiled advances at Olanna, implying that having his way with her would ease the award of a lucrative contract to her father, is curiously met with her parents’ amusing encouragement. Her father obviously sees nothing wrong with his daughter’s beauty fetching him a contract, so he probably set up the dinner to facilitate a liaison between his daughter and the chief, with the implicit approval of her

mother. Olanna turns down the Minister's veiled proposition (disguised as a job offer) by revealing her plans to move to Nsukka to take up a teaching position at the university. The reactions from her parents and the minister speak volumes of their assumption that Olanna would not have her own plans but would instead be ready to bend to their plans for her. Her mother gives her a reprimanding look, which she ignores, and the minister is completely floored as shown in Figure 5, below:



Figure 5: Mrs. Ozobia and the Minister. SOURCE: Youtube

On their way to a party after the scene, Kainene remarks teasingly, “You realize, don't you, that you've just cost daddy the contract...the other bidders probably don't have a beautiful daughter.” To which Olanna replies that their father's ten percent cut was certain despite the night's goings-on. The portrayal of women offered here is instructive. It reflects the way in which the male-dominated, traditionally patriarchal society considers women to be sex objects, trophies, or facilitators of male aggrandizement and gratification. Under this paradigm, being beautiful makes a woman even more likely to be objectified, and perhaps imbues men with a sense of entitlement in their lustful desire to have her, notwithstanding her opinions or preferences. Indeed, it makes little difference to those who favor the status quo whether women are educated or not; if anything, their education only serves to amplify their value as objects of male

gratification and markers of power and prestige. Even as well-educated and enlightened as Olanna is, her father still considers it normal to objectify her as a bargaining chip in his contract negotiations, attempting to impose a man on her irrespective of her wishes or feelings, in furtherance of his own commercial agenda.

It is worthy of mention, however, that the scenario would have had a totally different outcome for Olanna if it had been in the era in which *Things Fall Apart* was set. But her father's wealth, her own education and the amused admiration of the Minister all contribute to the resolution of the scene. This shows that despite the slow pace of change in the patriarchal order, assertiveness in women may not be celebrated but it is admired and in line with nego-feminism, if women can prove their abilities and are willing to stand up for their rights, they will be taken seriously, as opposed to the generation of *Things Fall Apart*, where their voices are completely stifled. The Minister, for instance, finds Olanna's outspokenness admirable and he goes further to inquire about Kainene's own plans. On being told that she would be moving to Port Harcourt to run the family business holdings in the East, Chief Okonji turns to his friend in a congratulatory manner to make a statement that speaks volumes of the different gender currents under study: "Nobody will say that you missed out by having only female children."

Instructively, the mere fact that a man of Chief Ozobia's status has only female children further emphasizes the point of nego-feminism and shows that the film's narrative does not endorse the patriarchal status quo as the norm. While it highlights the ways in which traditional patriarchal culture perceives women and expects women to behave, it also shows the evolution of African women's position within this culture by depicting how Olanna's refusal to do her father's bidding represents a rejection of the prevailing stereotype and a stance against the objectification and oppression of women.

The film also portrays an implied tension between the traditional way of perceiving gender roles and emergent ideas about such roles, especially in terms of the behaviors of the older generation of women as opposed to cosmopolitan and enlightened women, such as Olanna and Kainene. For instance, in Figure 6, below, Mama, as Odenigbo's mother is addressed in the film, comes visiting from the village. She meets Ugwu, the housekeeper, and announces her wish to cook a "proper soup" for her son. Ugwu offers to do the cooking instead, and begs her to rest, having just arrived after a long road trip. Odenigbo's mum counters by asserting:



Figure 6: Ugwu and Mama in the Kitchen. SOURCE:Youtube

"I know you try, but you are only a boy. What does a boy know about real cooking? Does a boy belong in the kitchen?" She looks towards Amala for re-enforcement and she agrees as she always does with whatever Mama says: "You see, Ugwu, a boy does not belong in the kitchen," she concludes almost gleefully. While walking around her son's kitchen, Mama admires the new stove in the corner (as pictured above, left) and of course assumes immediately that it was purchased by Odenigbo. She turns to Amala to gush about her son's lavish spending on expensive gadgets before Ugwu simply informs her, "It belongs to my madam. She brought many things from Lagos".

Mama's old school mentality is that only men earn money and then proceed to provide for the women. On her next visit with Amala while Olanna is in Lagos, Mama's reaction to Ugwu's reference to Olanna as his Madam elicits a hostile reaction and the retort: "She is not your madam, my child. She is only a woman who is living with a man who has not paid her bride price" in a bid to invalidate a woman's choice to a relationship that suits her without being bought like chattel.

Mama's declaration that "a boy does not belong in the kitchen" also implies that only a girl does, and this belief is consistent with the patriarchal stereotype in Igbo culture which apportions roles such as cooking and homemaking to women. While this is only a small and seemingly insignificant portion of the overall narrative, it feeds into a recurrent pattern, one that calls attention to the rigidity of gender stereotypes held by older generations in post-colonial Igbo culture, who still align themselves with the idea of clearly demarcated roles, expectations, behaviors and even privileges for women and men.

The character of Amala (artfully interpreted by Susan Wokoma) is an example of younger women who are still victims of the old patriarchal order on account of their level of education and social status and who cannot fully negotiate their liberties in society. For instance, one wonders what Mama tells her parents before taking her along to Nsukka to try and unseat the "educated witch" (Olanna). She is presented to the viewer as a timid village girl who feels extremely lucky to be under Mama's wings as the older woman's ideal choice of wife for her son. When she first appears in Odenigbo's house at Nsukka, she is shown to be in awe on account of her admiring glances around the kitchen. Although she genuflects in greeting to Olanna, whom she obviously thinks highly of, she is also aware of mama's intentions and seems powerless to do anything about it. In this instance, patriarchy's longstanding strategy of pitting women against each other becomes evident in the character of Mama. Thus, older

women's victimization of younger ones has been a recurring theme in Nollywood also shines through; Mama is cast, at first, as the wicked mother-in-law whose evil machinations will have enduring consequences on other women. By bringing the gullible Amala to her son's house when Olanna is away, plying Odenigbo with palmwine, and with the aid of some diabolism, attempts to get him to have sex with Amala, Mama conforms to the role of the evil woman. When Odenigbo succumbs to her antics and sleeps with Amala, the viewer notices the stark difference between his lovemaking with Olanna, whom he considers an equal partner, and his crass violation of Amala's body which appears more like a drunken rape.



Figure 7: Ugwu's POV of Odenigbo sleeping with Amala. SOURCE: Youtube

The fact that Ugwu witnesses this behind the half-opened door and Odenigbo's choice of the floor all add up to the element of revulsion the viewer constructs from this treatment of a helpless Amala. It is also repulsive to watch Odenigbo blame it all on alcohol and his mother's machinations and for Ugwu to blame it on Mama's witchcraft. The feminist viewer, however, is left with the knowledge that either way it is unfair to Amala, who is obviously a pawn in Mama's game and who feeds Odenigbo's lust in Olanna's absence. When Olanna discovers the affair, Odenigbo swears truthfully that it

was only momentary lust and madness. Although Olanna moves out and goes to her own flat in a bold nego-feminist action, her heartbreak takes her to her uncle's house in Kaduna where she experiences an epiphany as described below. It is noteworthy to mention here that the women in *Things Fall Apart* would not have had the luxury of moving out in a similar situation.

Olanna's Aunt in Kaduna is neither rich nor educated compared to Olanna's mother, but her character, played by Nollywood veteran actor Gloria Anozie, is the picture of a liberated woman. The viewer comprehends the feminist concept of female bonding and consciousness raising by considering the scene in the shots in Figure 8, below:



Figure 8: Olanna and Aunt. SOURCE: Youtube

Renowned feminist legal theorist Catharine Mackinnon (1982) found that consciousness-raising encourages women's gatherings in small groups where the "impact of male dominance is concretely uncovered and through sharing their

experiences collectively, male dominance is analyzed. From the perspective of the experience, it seeks to empower with information and create a conducive environment for women to freely speak” (520-521). For Mackinnon, consciousness-raising is both a political practice and a feminist practice. It is transformative and at the same time perceptive; since social attitudes and material conditions are constitutive of women’s oppression, it is a way of collective knowing, a way of making every woman’s voice important and throwing light on women’s collective lived experience in the absence of men, in order to motivate action. In line with this concept, Olanna’s aunt teaches her some timeless truths that pick the younger woman up and influence her decisions towards self-sufficiency. In the scene from Figure 8, above, Olanna, who is evidently distraught, reveals her skepticism about returning to Nsukka after what had transpired:

Olanna: I think I’m going to postpone my program at Nsukka and stay here in Kano

Aunty: No! Mba! You will go back to Nsukka.

Olanna: I can’t just go back to his house, Aunty!

Aunty: I am not asking you to go back to his house. I said you will go back to Nsukka. Do you not have your own flat and your own job? Odenigbo has done what all men do and inserted his penis into the first hole he could find when you were away. Does that mean somebody died?

While Olanna looks on in awe, her aunt further talks about her own experiences and insecurities early in her marriage before concluding that nothing her husband would ever do would change her life:

Aunty: my life will only change if I want it to change. You must never behave as if your life belongs to a man do you hear me? Your life belongs to you and you alone. Sọọso gi.

Armed with the knowledge she gains from her encounter with Aunty, Olanna radically commits her own act of cheating with Richard to enable her forgive Odenigbo, and they both get back together even though she incurs her sister's wrath—first for deciding to get back with Odenigbo, and secondly for betraying her and sleeping with Richard. However, they eventually work out their differences. Olanna also decides to adopt Amala's baby when the affair results in Amala's unwanted pregnancy. The upside of her senseless act of revenge cheating with her sister's partner is that Odenigbo also has no choice other than to treat the event as momentary madness. This shows the equality in their relationship, a far cry from the norm in Okonkwo's time in *Things Fall Apart*. In that era, for example, it would have been inconceivable for a woman to react by sleeping with another man because her husband or partner cheated first. If any of Okonkwo's wives or any woman in that era had done what Olanna did, such action would have resulted in dire consequences. It is also noteworthy that Amala's pregnancy would have resulted in Odenigbo taking her as a second wife without an explanation to anybody in the era of *Things Fall Apart*.

Therefore, it is clear that women have come a long way from the subservient co-wife who must accept everything a man does. The new nego-feminist Igbo woman portrayed in *Half of a Yellow Sun* can navigate different situations to find suitable solutions to her problems in order to co-exist with the man, unlike the women in *Things Fall Apart*.

#### **4.3.2 Attitudes towards Women's Rights**

The tensions between the old order and the new portrayed in *Half of a yellow Sun* play out largely as a battle for the location of control over women by the significant men in their lives (such as the father) or control by women over their own choices. A key

example of this plays out in scenes depicting Olanna's parents expressing seeming disapproval of her romantic involvement and subsequent marriage to Odenigbo; perhaps because they prefer that she find a man from a wealthy background instead, to complement or accentuate their family status. However, Olanna's uncompromising rejection of her parent's attempts to influence her choice of a partner and her insistence on sticking to Odenigbo touches on the important theme of women's rights in making choices regarding relationships or marriage. For a film set in 1960s Nigeria, at a time when the patriarchal structure of traditional Igbo society meant that parents played an influential role in the spousal choices of their female children particularly, the film's portrayal of daughters rejecting parental interference in their romantic affairs signals a paradigm shift from the status quo. This is perhaps explained by the fact that the novel adapted into the film was originally written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who is a renowned Nigerian author and feminist, and, of course, produced by another woman, British producer Andrea Calderwood.

In the scene where Mama encounters Olanna for the first time during her visit to Odenigbo, she does not conceal her displeasure about their romance, and about her not having become pregnant for Odenigbo in spite of their long cohabitation. In a fit of anger, mama lashes out at Olanna:

They say you did not suck your mother's breasts. Please go and tell those who sent you that you did not see my son... Tell your fellow witches that you did not see him! Do you hear me...? He will not marry an abnormal woman...Only over my dead body!

Mama thinks that Olanna is not a "real" woman or a worthy wife for her son because she has not proven her fertility, and because she does not appear grounded in the traditional ways of doing things in line with Igbo culture. In expressing her disapproval,

Mama questions Olanna's normalcy as a woman, and brands her a witch. Olanna's choice not to get pregnant immediately does not resonate with Mama, who feels that having been with Odenigbo for long enough, she should have no excuse for remaining childless. However, the film portrays Olanna as sticking to her principles and preferences, notwithstanding the ensuing tensions and contradictions, eventually winning Mama over and marrying Odenigbo with her blessings (although Olanna's adoption of Amala's baby and the raging war all around them may have played a great role in Mama's change of heart).

Despite the portrayal of Amala at the outset, and the way that Mama manipulates her into the situation in confirmation of MacKinnon's observation that "[w]omen's sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others" (Sutherland 2005, 119), at the end, Amala becomes a strong woman who is able to make choices for her own life. When Mama drops off the baby at Odenigbo's house, she tells Ugwu that Amala has refused to touch him, and when Odenigbo explains the baby's presence in the house to Olanna, he informs her that Amala is to be married in a short while and her family is willing to raise the child. Olanna, however, chooses to raise the child in a bold move that endears her to viewers. This is because her opting to take the baby is a far cry from the evil stepmother figure that Nollywood has perpetrated for so long. It also enforces the peculiar nature of nego-feminism where women can choose whatever path that brings them happiness, which often involves forgiveness and reconciliation.

Kainene, for her part, also chooses to forgive her sister and her lover, Richard, and learns to accept them both, especially as the war begins and they all find comfort in each other. She continues to run her family's business in Port Harcourt until that city falls to the Nigerian soldiers and she moves closer to her sister and begins running a refugee camp to help the less fortunate people displaced by the war. It is in this

capacity that she fearlessly chooses to go across enemy lines to buy food (although the last trip resulted in her disappearance) for the refugees. The character of Kainene reveals the extent to which the Igbo woman and female character has evolved in society and on screen. Unlike the women in the era of *Things Fall Apart*, who would not even be involved in matters of war, women such as Kainene play vital roles in the war in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Odenigbo's colleague Miss Adebayo (Genevieve Nnaji) is another character that proves that attitudes towards women's rights have actually evolved considerably. In the shots in Figure 9, below, a typical social or intellectual gathering in Okonkwo's time is placed beside the same in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where gender is not the determinant in the evening socializing in Odenigbo's house. While it would have been unthinkable for a woman to sit with the men over palm wine and Kola nuts in Okonkwo's time, Miss Adebayo smokes and drinks as much as the men in her circle. She is portrayed as a vivacious and sassy Yoruba academic who is not afraid of standing toe to toe with her male colleagues. On the night Odenigbo sleeps with Amala, Miss Adebayo actually gets drunk and makes a pass at him before leaving for the night.



Figure 9: Evening gathering in *Things Fall Apart* vs. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. SOURCE:

Youtube

From the shots in Figure 9, above, viewers cultivate the feeling that not only screen resolutions, mode of dressing and picture quality have changed but the overall depiction of men and women on equal playing fields. The two shots show social gatherings in the pre-colonial era of *Things Fall Apart* and a gathering of intellectuals in the post-colonial era of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In the first shot, the gathering reflects the traditional situation of that time when women could not sit and drink with men, while the second shot shows Miss Adebayor enjoying an evening with her colleagues. In the two shots, one shot on video and the other on celluloid, it's clear just how much the times have changed for women and society in general.

## CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Although *Things Fall Apart* (1987) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) represent two very distinct generations of filmmaking in the context of Igbo culture, they both highlight the dominant patriarchal system that underlines traditional Igbo society in the pre and postcolonial eras, respectively. Evidence from both films contain traces of gender discrimination, stereotyping and oppression of women, not only in terms of behavior and interactions, but also in terms of perceptions and general attitudes. However, there are significant differences in the narratives and approaches employed by both films in the way that they portray women and gender issues, and therefore provide considerably different pathways for interpreting their treatment of women vis-à-vis the feminist discourse.

Evidence from *Things Fall Apart* indicates a seeming alignment between the way the media depicts women and the prevailing cultural norms in the society of the period in which the film is set. In other words, the film attempts to present gender issues “as is”—as a snapshot of real life in Igbo society. The overarching representation of female characters in the film is one of submission and subordination, with men clearly assigned to overt and implied positions of dominance. Considering that various researchers have confirmed this to be a true reflection of traditional Igbo norms for generations, the representation of women in *Things Fall Apart* does not appear to be an exaggeration or distortion of reality. Instead, it only confirms the arguments of authors such as Agars (2004), Andy Ofori-Birikorang and Louis Donkor (2014), who acknowledge that gender stereotypes in media portrayals of women do not necessarily originate from the media but arise from paradigms that are already pervasive and deeply entrenched in society. Arguably, *Things Fall Apart* does not attempt to mediate the prevailing beliefs and perceptions about women and gender roles in traditional Igbo society because presenting the characters and structuring the narrative in ways that the

audience can relate to potentially buttresses the authenticity of the overall story. In this context, the film merely mirrors and reinforces what the filmmakers perceive as the cultural reality of women's position within Igbo society.

On the other hand, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, while illuminating the cultural backdrop of oppressive and discriminatory attitudes towards women in Igbo culture, emphasizes the women's empowerment motif that underlines its narrative. Even though the relevant aspects of the film's narrative do not deny that dominant patriarchal structures exist in Igbo culture, which seek to subjugate women and define gender roles, the film emphasizes the growing and increasingly successful resistance against the prevailing patriarchal culture. The tension between the old paradigm and the new feminist way of perceiving gender issues is central to the interpretation of the film's narrative structure from a feminist perspective. While the older characters in the film prefer to perpetuate the patriarchal ideal type of male dominance and societal apportionment of rigid gender roles, the younger and more enlightened characters defiantly reject the prevailing structures and insist on the rights of women to make their own choices and actualize themselves according to their own preferences and abilities. In a sense, *Half of a Yellow Sun* exemplifies description of the media's agenda-setting and activist role, in terms of the ability of the media to create counter-narratives in the bid to expedite cultural evolution or trigger social change (Gurevitch et al. 2005).

Another important element observable in the portrayals of women in *Things Fall Apart* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the differing degrees to which both films indicate the rigidity or flexibility of culture with regard to gender equality and women's role in the society. Aside from allotting spiritual power (i.e. a female deity and her powerful priestess) to women, *Things Fall Apart* does not leave room for much negotiation in the way that society allocates gender roles, expectations, responsibilities, and attitudes. Although the narrative encompasses subdued protests or attempts by

women to challenge their unfair treatment at the hands of men, it suggests that the consequences for such 'deviant' behavior can be dire, especially in the form of domestic violence. This confirms Abdul et al.'s (2012) contention that in societies where a patriarchal culture of male dominance is deeply entrenched, women who openly challenge the status quo face the risk of a backlash.

Conversely, *Half of a Yellow Sun* not only portrays the prevailing patriarchal culture as open to evolution and change, it also presents resistance to gender oppression as an undertaking that poses no meaningful risk and comes with the reward of self-fulfillment. The narrative does not suggest that members of the old generation who prefer a perpetuation of the patriarchal system are determined to maintain the status quo at all costs. Instead, it portrays them as capable of shifting ground and of yielding to the evolutionary trend associated with education and enlightenment, which demands the dismantling of existing structures of gender oppression and denial of women's rights. The changing cultural context within which *Half of a Yellow Sun* was produced, as well as the feminist inclinations of its author, are important considerations in appraising the film's favorable disposition to a paradigm shift in the treatment of women. Besides, with the increased number of well-educated and highly enlightened women in the society in recent decades, the social context within which *Half of a Yellow Sun* was filmed lends support to its narrative in comparison to *Things Fall Apart*. This highlights the crucial intersections between media and society in shaping notions of gender roles and attitudes towards women.

## **5.1 Future Research Directions**

Although this study strives to present alternative perspectives to understanding the evolution of feminism in the Nigerian media using Igbo culture films as reference, there is still need for further research into the attitudes of audience members in patriarchal societies as regards media representations of women as this thesis does not focus on that but instead provides a foundation for future research on audience reception. It has been observed that “The mass media ... tend to reinforce traditional attitudes and often present a degrading and humiliating picture of women which does not at all reflect changing attitudes in society, and especially, the changing roles of the sexes” (Nwankwo, 1996, 77-78). While this thesis has attempted a comparative analysis of women’s representation in film with two films from different eras, the extent of the relationship between media and society remains a researchable subject because the receptivity of audiences to media messages is crucial. Further research is necessary to track the evolution of media messages relating to women’s rights and gender equality by measuring the responses of different segments of the audience to such messages, specifically in cultures where notions of patriarchy and male dominance remain pervasive.

Gaining insight into audience attitudes towards changing depictions of women in media forms such as films can provide useful information about how best to craft narratives that successfully negotiate between the old and new paradigms for understanding the place of women in society. Such research would also help provide clues about how different kinds of film genres, narrative structures, characterizations, and plots may produce different effects in audiences with regard to the evolving portrayals of women.

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