

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AGENCY IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS WITHIN PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL CONTEXTS.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the representation of female agency in Nollywood films within the framework of patriarchal cultural contexts in Nigerian society. Nollywood, as one of Africa's most influential film industries, functioned as both a mirror and a moulder of social values, gender ideologies, and cultural practices. Within this context, the portrayal of women in film often reflected the tensions between traditional patriarchal expectations and emerging forms of female autonomy, resistance, and self-definition. The study investigated how female characters were constructed, negotiated, and positioned in relation to systems of male dominance, family structures, cultural norms, and societal expectations. It explored whether Nollywood reinforced patriarchal stereotypes that depicted women as submissive, dependent, and domesticated, or whether it created spaces for women to assert independence, challenge oppression, and redefine their social roles. Using feminist film theory and gender representation theory as analytical frameworks, the study critically analysed Nollywood film as a case study to interrogate the visual, narrative, and ideological strategies through which female agency was articulated. It paid particular attention to themes such as marriage, motherhood, sexuality, economic independence, leadership, resistance, and social mobility. The study argued that while many Nollywood films continued to reproduce patriarchal assumptions, a growing body of films also portrayed women as active agents of change, capable of negotiating power and reshaping cultural meanings. Ultimately, the research contributed to ongoing scholarly discussions on gender, cinema, and African cultural production by highlighting the complex ways Nollywood both constrained and empowered female subjectivity in contemporary Nigerian society.

INTRODUCTION

Film is one of the most powerful cultural media through which societies imagine themselves, preserve values, and debate social realities. Beyond entertainment, film helps to shape public attitudes about identity, morality, gender, class, power, and belonging. In Nigeria, Nollywood has evolved into one of the most influential film industries in the world, not only for its high production volume but also for its profound connection to everyday Nigerian life. Nollywood films regularly engage themes such as marriage, family, religion, class conflict, social mobility, tradition, and gender relations. As a result, the industry has become an important cultural space for examining how women are represented and how female identity is constructed within a society still largely shaped by patriarchal norms. One of the most important issues in Nollywood scholarship is the representation of women, especially the question of whether female characters are granted meaningful agency or whether they remain confined to restrictive stereotypes. Female agency, in this context, refers to the ability of women to make decisions, exercise autonomy, negotiate power, resist oppression, and influence the direction of their own lives. In film, agency is not limited to dramatic acts of rebellion. It may also appear in quieter forms, such as strategic endurance, emotional intelligence, economic survival, maternal authority, communal solidarity, and moral resistance. A woman who leaves an abusive marriage, challenges inheritance denial, rejects an arranged marriage, or mobilises other women against injustice may all be read as enacting agency. At the same time, even a woman who remains within oppressive conditions may still display agency if the narrative allows her to think, choose, and shape outcomes rather than simply suffer them.

The issue of female agency becomes very significant when examined within patriarchal cultural contexts. Patriarchy refers to a system of social organisation in which men hold primary authority in the family, community, religion, economy, and politics, while women are often assigned subordinate roles. In many Nigerian cultural contexts, patriarchal values are sustained through customs, kinship systems, inheritance structures, marriage institutions, religious doctrines, and moral expectations that privilege male power and regulate female conduct. Women are frequently expected to embody ideals of obedience, modesty, caregiving, fertility, and domesticity, while deviation from these norms may attract stigma, punishment, or social exclusion. These realities create a complex framework within which Nollywood constructs female characters and dramatises their struggles, aspirations, and acts of resistance.

According to Chinenye Amonyeze, " women's portrayal in Nollywood movies reveals that women have suffered significant negative characterisation as wicked step mothers, prostitutes, gold diggers, etc. Nollywood has often shown women as sex objects, and findings show the mass media could influence audience behaviour through the manner in which genders are depicted on screen"(2). Gender discourse is quite sensitive due to the misconceptions that follow up; therefore, it becomes very pertinent that scholars find an appropriate balance for an unbiased representation of female agency in a patriarchal cultural context. Over the years, Nollywood has played a significant role in shaping how one views the female gender in varying perspectives. However, Nollywood does not present women singularly or statically. Rather, it often offers contradictory portrayals that oscillate between reinforcing and challenging patriarchal norms. In many earlier and mainstream narratives, women are represented through familiar stereotypes such as the submissive wife, the suffering mother, the barren woman, the wicked mother-in-law, the seductive threat, or the morally suspect "modern woman." Such portrayals tend to reduce female identity to narrow cultural scripts and often punish women who depart from expected gender roles. Feminist film criticism has long argued that cinema frequently positions women as objects of visual and ideological control rather than as fully realised subjects. Laura Mulvey's influential concept of the "male gaze," for instance, demonstrates how mainstream film traditions often render women as passive objects of spectacle while men remain active agents within narrative structures (Mulvey). Although Mulvey's theory emerged from the analysis of classical Western cinema, its central insight remains useful for interrogating the visual and narrative politics of gender in Nollywood, especially where women are aestheticised, silenced, eroticized, or subordinated to male-centred plots.

The representation of female agency in Nollywood is therefore best understood as a site of ideological struggle. Representation is never neutral; it is a process through which meaning is produced and circulated. Stuart Hall argues that representation is central to the production of culture because it is through language, images, and symbols that social realities are constructed and interpreted (Hall). Applied to Nollywood, this means that the portrayal of women is not simply a reflection of Nigerian society but also a cultural act that participates in shaping public understandings of femininity, womanhood, power, and legitimacy. When a female character is consistently framed as valuable only in relation to marriage, childbirth, or male approval, the film reinforces patriarchal ideology. Conversely, when a film depicts a woman as capable of independent thought, collective resistance, professional achievement, or moral authority beyond male validation, it opens up alternative imaginaries of female subjectivity.

This tension is especially important in African feminist discourse, where scholars have often cautioned against importing Western feminist assumptions uncritically into African contexts. African feminist thinkers such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi have emphasised that the realities of African women must be understood within specific historical, communal, and cultural conditions. Ogundipe-Leslie's concept of STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) insists on centring women within broader African social transformation rather than defining feminist struggles solely through Euro-American paradigms (AWID). Similarly, Ogunyemi's articulation of African womanism highlights complementarity, negotiation, motherhood, community, and culturally grounded resistance as important dimensions of African women's experiences (Smithsonian Institution). These theoretical perspectives are especially relevant to Nollywood because female agency in Nigerian films is often not expressed as radical individualism alone, but as relational, communal, strategic, and culturally mediated power. A woman may not always overthrow patriarchy directly; she may instead negotiate it through kinship, motherhood, economic resilience, collective action, or moral authority.

FEMALE AGENCY AS A THEORETICAL AND CINEMATIC CONCEPT

Female agency is a foundational concept in gender studies, film studies, and cultural criticism, particularly in discussions that examine how women are represented within systems of power. Broadly understood, agency refers to the capacity of an individual to act independently, make choices, and influence social, personal, or political outcomes within the structures that shape their lives. When applied to women in cinema, female agency concerns the extent to which female characters are constructed not merely as passive figures or symbolic presences, but as active subjects who possess intention, autonomy, voice, and the ability to shape narrative development. In this sense, female agency is not simply about whether women appear in a film; rather, it is about whether they act meaningfully, make consequential decisions, and resist or negotiate the social constraints placed upon them. The concept of agency is particularly important because feminist scholarship has long argued that women have historically been marginalised in dominant representational systems. Traditional cinematic narratives, especially those shaped by patriarchal ideology, often privilege male subjectivity while relegating women to secondary roles as objects of desire, emotional support systems, moral symbols, or catalysts for male action. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" remains one of the most influential interventions in this regard. Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema frequently positions women as objects of visual pleasure and spectacle, thereby subordinating them within a narrative economy organised around masculine desire and control

(Mulvey 11). In such a framework, women are "looked at" rather than fully empowered to "act," and their presence often serves the development of male-centred plots rather than their own autonomous trajectories. Although Mulvey's analysis emerges from classical Hollywood cinema, its insights remain relevant to broader global film traditions, including African and Nollywood cinema, where women are sometimes aestheticised, moralised, or narratively constrained by patriarchal assumptions.

However, the concept of female agency in film extends beyond the critique of objectification. Contemporary feminist film theory increasingly emphasises the need to examine women not only as objects of representation but also as subjects capable of enacting resistance, self-definition, and narrative disruption. This means that a female character may exercise agency not only through dramatic rebellion but also through subtler forms of decision-making, strategic silence, emotional intelligence, economic initiative, or communal solidarity. Judith Butler's understanding of gender as performative is useful here because it suggests that gendered identities are not fixed essences but socially repeated acts that can be reworked, resisted, or destabilised through performance (Butler 25). In cinematic terms, this implies that female agency may emerge when a woman's actions disrupt expected gender performances—when she refuses submissiveness, questions domestic roles, rejects imposed identities, or creatively negotiates the social scripts assigned to her. Thus, agency in film should not be limited to overt confrontation; it may also reside in nuanced acts of negotiation within restrictive conditions.

In cultural studies, agency must also be understood in relation to representation. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is especially important because it shifts attention from the idea that media merely "reflect" reality to the recognition that media actively construct meaning. Hall argues that representation is the process through which meaning is produced and exchanged through language, signs, and images within a culture (Hall 15). Therefore, the representation of female agency in film is not neutral. The ways women are framed visually, the kinds of dialogue they are given, the narrative consequences of their decisions, and the moral judgments attached to their actions all contribute to the cultural meanings of womanhood and power. A female character may appear central to a story yet still lack agency if her choices are consistently invalidated, punished, or subordinated to male authority. Conversely, even a character operating within oppressive social structures may possess agency if the film allows her decisions to alter the course of events, articulate subjectivity, or challenge ideological expectations. Hall's intervention is crucial because it helps us understand that female agency is not only a question of character behaviour but also of how the film itself encodes and legitimises women's actions.

Within feminist and sociological discourse, agency is rarely treated as absolute freedom. Rather, it is often understood as something exercised within and against social structures. Lois McNay, in her critical engagement with feminist theories of subjectivity and power, argues that agency should be viewed as socially embedded rather than abstractly autonomous; women act within historically specific conditions shaped by institutions, norms, and inequalities (McNay 4–6). This is especially relevant to cinematic analysis because female characters are often situated within structures such as family, marriage, religion, class, and tradition, all of which constrain or enable their actions. Consequently, female agency in film is best understood not as unrestricted self-determination but as the capacity to negotiate power under conditions of limitation. This approach is particularly valuable in African contexts, where women's agency may be expressed not through liberal individualism alone but through relational, communal, or culturally mediated forms of influence.

African feminist thought offers especially important theoretical correctives to universalised Western notions of agency. Scholars such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie insist that African women's struggles must be understood within the social and historical realities of colonialism, community, kinship, and local gender systems. Ogunyemi's concept of African womanism foregrounds complementarity, motherhood, family, and community while still insisting on women's dignity, self-worth, and resistance to oppression (Ogunyemi 64–66). Similarly, Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) emphasises the need to situate women within broader social transformation rather than isolate them within imported feminist binaries (Ogundipe-Leslie 229). These frameworks are highly relevant to the study of female agency in Nollywood because many Nigerian films portray women whose power is not always articulated through direct individual rebellion but through strategic endurance, maternal authority, market participation, religious influence, or collective female solidarity. In such contexts, a woman's ability to preserve her dignity, protect her children, influence communal decisions, or subvert oppressive customs may constitute meaningful agency even if it does not resemble Western liberal models of emancipation.

In film studies, female agency is also inseparable from questions of narrative centrality and character function. A female character can be visually prominent yet narratively passive, or socially constrained yet narratively decisive. Therefore, analysing agency requires attention to whether the woman drives the plot, makes choices that carry consequences, transforms the social environment around her, or remains a symbolic extension of male desires and

conflicts. Teresa de Lauretis argues that cinema is a technology of gender because it participates in the social production of gendered subjectivities through representational codes and narrative structures (de Lauretis 2–3). This perspective suggests that female agency is not merely a thematic concern but a formal and ideological one: films do not just show women; they produce ideas about what women can do, what forms of behaviour are permissible, and what kinds of power are imaginable for female subjects. Thus, to discuss female agency in Nollywood or any cinematic tradition, one must consider not only the actions of female characters but also the broader representational logic that frames those actions as legitimate, dangerous, heroic, deviant, or transformative.

Furthermore, the notion of agency in cinema must account for ambivalence. Many films portray women who appear strong on the surface but whose power is narratively contained by punishment, sacrifice, or moral domestication. A woman may be depicted as assertive, economically independent, or intellectually capable, yet the narrative may eventually discipline her by rewarding submission, marriage, motherhood, or reconciliation with patriarchal order. This tension is central to feminist media analysis because it reveals how cinema can simultaneously gesture toward empowerment while preserving dominant ideologies. Bell hooks, in her critique of visual culture and representation, reminds us that the politics of looking and being seen are deeply implicated in structures of race, gender, and power, and that the question is not simply whether women are visible but how their visibility is controlled and interpreted (hooks 115–16). In this light, female agency should be assessed critically: a film that gives a woman screen time is not necessarily a film that grants her subjectivity or freedom. What matters is whether the woman's presence is narratively, ideologically, and emotionally validated as an active force rather than merely a representational token.

PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL CONTEXTS IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Patriarchy remains one of the most significant social structures shaping gender relations in Nigerian society. Broadly defined, patriarchy refers to a system of social organisation in which men occupy positions of primary authority in the family, community, political institutions, religious spaces, and economic structures, while women are often assigned subordinate or dependent roles. Feminist scholars have consistently argued that patriarchy is not merely a matter of individual male dominance but a deeply embedded ideological and institutional arrangement that normalises gender inequality through laws, customs, values, and social expectations. Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). This definition is particularly useful in the Nigerian context, where patriarchal relations are not always overtly coercive but are often woven into everyday life through cultural traditions, family structures, religious beliefs, and communal norms that regulate women's bodies, labour, mobility, and social legitimacy.

In Nigeria, patriarchy is historically and culturally reinforced through kinship systems, inheritance customs, marriage institutions, and the symbolic authority accorded to men as heads of households and custodians of lineage. Across many ethnic and regional contexts, male authority is normalised within both traditional and modern institutions. Fathers, husbands, male elders, chiefs, and religious leaders are frequently regarded as legitimate decision-makers, while women are expected to embody ideals of obedience, modesty, respectability, sacrifice, and domestic responsibility. This does not mean that Nigerian women have no influence; indeed, women often exercise substantial power within markets, families, religious networks, and informal social systems. However, such influence is frequently mediated through patriarchal structures that define the limits of acceptable female conduct. Consequently, women's social power often exists in tension with institutional subordination, making the Nigerian context particularly important for examining how agency is negotiated rather than simply possessed.

One of the most visible arenas in which patriarchy operates in Nigeria is the institution of marriage. Marriage in many Nigerian communities is not merely a personal union between two individuals; it is a social and cultural institution that links families, lineages, property, and communal honour. As such, women's identities are often deeply tied to their marital status, and expectations surrounding marriage frequently position women as wives, reproducers, caregivers, and preservers of family respectability. Scholars of African gender relations have noted that marriage often functions as a key site through which women are disciplined into culturally approved roles, even when it also offers them social recognition and economic security (Amadiume 7–8). Within patriarchal frameworks, a woman may be valued primarily for her capacity to marry "well," bear children, especially male children, maintain the home, and submit to her husband's authority. Where these expectations are unmet, women may face stigma, emotional abuse, or social exclusion. The cultural pressure surrounding marriage makes it a recurring site of conflict in Nollywood, where female characters are often judged according to their conformity to domestic ideals.

Motherhood is another crucial dimension of patriarchal culture in Nigeria. While motherhood is often revered and celebrated as a source of dignity, continuity, and communal respect, it can also become a mechanism through which women's worth is narrowly defined. A woman who becomes a mother, particularly of sons, may gain symbolic status and moral authority. Yet, the same cultural system may marginalise women who are childless, infertile, unmarried, or unable to meet reproductive expectations. Ifi Amadiume's work on African gender systems demonstrates that motherhood in many African contexts can be both empowering and restrictive, functioning as a site of authority while also binding women to specific gendered expectations (Amadiume 102–04). In Nigeria, the social pressure to prove fertility and maintain maternal identity often intersects with patriarchal values that treat women's bodies as reproductive resources for the family and lineage. Consequently, female characters in Nollywood are frequently represented in relation to fertility crises, maternal sacrifice, or the burdens of proving their legitimacy through childbirth, especially within marriage.

Patriarchal cultural contexts in Nigeria are also sustained through inheritance practices and property relations. In many communities, customary laws and kinship traditions historically privileged male heirs in matters of land ownership, lineage continuity, and family property. Although legal reforms and constitutional protections have increasingly challenged discriminatory practices, social realities often remain uneven. Women, especially widows and daughters, may still encounter exclusion from inheritance, dispossession after the death of a husband, or pressure to surrender claims in favour of male relatives. Such practices reveal the extent to which patriarchy is tied not only to symbolic authority but also to material power. The denial of inheritance rights is particularly significant because it transforms women's dependence into a structural condition, limiting economic autonomy and reinforcing their vulnerability within both domestic and communal spaces. This issue is highly relevant to Nollywood narratives, where widows, daughters, and wives are frequently portrayed battling male relatives, in-laws, or community elders over property, legitimacy, and survival.

Religion also plays a major role in reinforcing and, at times, contesting patriarchal norms in Nigerian society. Nigeria's religious landscape, shaped by Christianity, Islam, and the indigenous belief system, has immense influence on social values and gender expectations. Religious discourse often provides moral legitimacy for ideas about female modesty, submission, domestic responsibility, and sexual regulation. Women are frequently encouraged to embody virtues such as patience, humility, endurance, and self-sacrifice, while men are positioned as spiritual heads of the home or guardians of moral order. At the same time, women also derive forms of authority and solidarity through religious participation, prayer networks, church associations, and spiritual leadership in informal spaces. Oyeronke Oyewumi has argued that gender as a social organising principle in African societies must be approached carefully, since colonial and Western frameworks often overdetermine gender in ways that obscure local complexities (Oyewumi xi–xii). Her intervention reminds scholars that while patriarchy is real and influential, its manifestations are historically mediated and cannot always be read through Eurocentric assumptions alone. In Nigeria, religion may simultaneously discipline women and provide them with moral language, communal support, or symbolic capital for challenging injustice. This duality is often dramatised in Nollywood, where religious women are portrayed both as constrained by doctrine and empowered by faith.

Another important dimension of patriarchy in Nigeria is the social regulation of female sexuality and respectability. Women are often subject to stricter moral scrutiny than men in matters relating to dress, desire, fidelity, reproductive choices, and public behaviour. A man's social transgressions may be normalised or forgiven more easily, whereas a woman who is perceived as sexually assertive, unmarried beyond a certain age, divorced, childless, or economically independent may be judged as deviant, arrogant, or morally suspect. This double standard is central to patriarchal ideology because it disciplines women into respectability while preserving male privilege. Such regulation is not merely interpersonal; it is encoded in proverbs, customs, gossip networks, family expectations, and community sanctions that collectively define the "good woman" as one who remains modest, self-sacrificing, and socially compliant. These cultural scripts profoundly shape the types of female characters that appear in Nollywood, especially in films where the "good wife" is rewarded and the "rebellious" or "modern" woman is punished or morally corrected.

Nevertheless, it is important not to reduce Nigerian women to passive victims of patriarchy. African feminist scholarship has repeatedly emphasised that women in African societies have long developed complex strategies for navigating, resisting, and transforming patriarchal structures. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argues that African women's struggles must be understood in relation to broader social, economic, and political systems, not merely through simplistic notions of victimhood (Ogundipe-Leslie 30–31). Her concept of STIWANISM insists that women must be included in the process of social transformation and that feminist analysis in Africa must account for local realities, communal obligations, and structural inequalities. Similarly, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's articulation of African womanism foregrounds the importance of family, community, and cultural rootedness while still recognising women's need for dignity, autonomy, and resistance to oppression (Ogunyemi 63–66).

These frameworks are especially useful because they illuminate how Nigerian women may exercise power not only through open defiance but also through negotiation, economic resilience, maternal authority, collective organisation, and strategic participation in communal life.

THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN NOLLYWOOD CINEMA

The representation of women in Nollywood cinema has undergone a significant transformation since the industry's emergence in the early 1990s. As one of the most prolific film industries in the world, Nollywood has consistently served as a cultural barometer through which Nigerian society narrates its anxieties, aspirations, moral values, and social contradictions. Because gender is central to many of these narratives, the depiction of women has remained one of the most visible and contested features of Nollywood storytelling. From the era of direct-to-video melodramas to the more aesthetically polished and globally circulated productions of contemporary "New Nollywood," female characters have been represented in ways that both reproduce and challenge patriarchal ideologies. The evolution of female representation in Nollywood, therefore, reflects not only shifts in cinematic style and industrial practice but also broader transformations in Nigerian social life, feminist consciousness, and cultural negotiations around gender.

Early Nollywood, especially the direct-to-video boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, was characterised by melodramatic storytelling, moral didacticism, and strong emphasis on domestic, spiritual, and familial conflict. In this period, female characters were often central to the narrative but not always empowered within it. Women frequently appeared as symbolic carriers of moral disorder, domestic tension, spiritual danger, or sacrificial suffering. Popular tropes included the submissive wife, the barren woman, the wicked stepmother, the jealous co-wife, the manipulative seductress, the gold-digger, the suffering mother, and the spiritually endangered woman. These archetypes often reduced women to narrow narrative functions that reinforced patriarchal expectations about femininity, sexuality, and social conduct. As Onookome Okome observes, Nollywood's early narratives were often driven by moral panic and social anxieties, with women occupying highly visible but ideologically regulated roles within stories of family crisis, wealth, corruption, and spiritual warfare (Okome 4–5). Thus, while women were undeniably present, their presence was frequently structured by representational codes that positioned them as either moral exemplars or moral threats.

One of the defining features of early Nollywood female representation was the tension between visibility and control. Women often dominated screen time and emotional intensity, yet the narratives surrounding them were frequently organised to discipline female desire, ambition, or autonomy. A woman who sought wealth, sexual independence, or social power outside approved norms was likely to be framed as dangerous, spiritually compromised, or morally unstable. This tendency aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal cinema, which argue that female visibility does not necessarily translate into female agency. Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" remains useful here because it helps explain how women can be central to cinematic spectacle while still being subordinated to ideological structures that regulate their meaning (Mulvey 11–13). In Nollywood, the "bad woman" was often highly visible, dramatically compelling, and narratively memorable, yet her visibility was usually accompanied by punishment, repentance, or eventual containment. In this way, early Nollywood simultaneously foregrounded women and constrained them within moralistic frameworks that preserved patriarchal order.

At the same time, it would be reductive to view early Nollywood as entirely devoid of complex female subjectivity. Even within melodramatic and moralising formats, some films presented women as resilient survivors, economic contributors, or emotional anchors of the family. The market woman, the long-suffering mother, and the spiritually steadfast wife often embodied forms of strength that were culturally legible, even if not framed as overtly feminist. Jonathan Haynes argues that Nollywood should be read not simply as crude popular culture but as a significant social text that encodes the lived contradictions of African modernity, including shifting gender roles and domestic tensions (Haynes 1–3). From this perspective, even stereotypical representations may reveal deeper social anxieties about women's changing place in the home, the economy, and the public sphere. The suffering wife, for instance, may function not only as a patriarchal ideal of endurance but also as a figure through whom audiences recognise the injustices of domestic violence, neglect, or emotional abandonment. Thus, the early phase of Nollywood often contained seeds of critique even within conservative representational frameworks.

As Nollywood evolved into what is commonly called "New Nollywood," beginning roughly in the late 2000s and gaining stronger momentum in the 2010s, female representation began to shift in more visible ways. Industrial changes such as higher production values, cinema releases, international festival circulation, and the rise of streaming platforms contributed to new forms of storytelling and broader thematic experimentation. This period also coincided with growing urbanisation, increased female participation in professional sectors, and heightened

public discourse around gender, sexuality, and women's rights in Nigeria. Consequently, contemporary Nollywood began to produce more diverse and layered female characters who were not solely confined to domestic or moral archetypes. Women increasingly appeared as lawyers, entrepreneurs, politicians, journalists, activists, creatives, and complex protagonists whose inner lives, ambitions, and contradictions shaped the direction of the narrative.

The rise of women-centred narratives is one of the most significant developments in contemporary Nollywood. Rather than existing primarily as wives, mothers, lovers, or antagonists in male-driven stories, women in newer Nollywood films are more frequently positioned as narrative agents in their own right. This shift reflects a broader transformation in how female subjectivity is imagined on screen. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is particularly relevant here because it reminds us that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active site where meaning is produced and contested (Hall 15–17). As contemporary Nollywood grants women greater narrative centrality, it also opens space for renegotiating cultural meanings around womanhood, power, and autonomy. Female characters are increasingly allowed to be flawed, ambitious, vulnerable, intelligent, resistant, and morally complex without being reduced to singular stereotypes. This does not mean that patriarchal structures disappear from the films; rather, it means that women's experiences of negotiating those structures become more nuanced and narratively significant.

A key aspect of this evolution is the movement from female stereotype to female subjectivity. In earlier films, women were often framed according to what they represented for the family or moral order: fertility, temptation, suffering, or disorder. In contemporary films, however, there is greater interest in what women want, what they fear, what they remember, and how they make decisions. Teresa de Lauretis's concept of cinema as a "technology of gender" is helpful because it emphasises that film participates in producing gendered subjectivities through narrative and visual structures (de Lauretis 2–3). In the context of Nollywood, this means that the shift toward more psychologically and socially complex female characters is not merely a change in plot but a transformation in how gender itself is cinematically constructed. Women are no longer always represented only as functions of patriarchal morality; they increasingly appear as thinking subjects whose choices, dilemmas, and actions carry ideological and emotional weight.

Another important factor in the evolution of female representation is the growing visibility of women behind the camera. The emergence and sustained influence of female filmmakers such as Mildred Okwo, Kemi Adetiba, Bolanle Austen-Peters, and Jade Osiberu have contributed to more expansive and varied representations of women in Nigerian cinema. While it would be simplistic to assume that female directors automatically produce feminist texts, their presence in the industry has undeniably broadened the thematic and representational possibilities available to female characters. Women filmmakers have often shown greater willingness to explore issues such as domestic abuse, female friendship, motherhood, sexuality, career ambition, social stigma, and women's political or historical agency in more layered ways. Their work has also contributed to the normalisation of female-centred storytelling that does not require male narratives as its primary anchor.

FEMALE AGENCY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF PATRIARCHAL POWER IN NOLLYWOOD FILMS

The representation of female agency in Nollywood is most productively understood not as a simple binary between oppression and liberation, but as a complex process of negotiation within patriarchal structures. In many Nigerian films, women do not always exercise power through direct rebellion or complete autonomy; rather, they often act within the constraints of family, marriage, religion, custom, class, and communal expectation. This makes the concept of negotiated agency particularly useful for analysing Nollywood. Negotiated agency refers to how women assert influence, make decisions, resist domination, and shape outcomes even when the social order limits their freedom. In this framework, a woman's silence may be strategic rather than submissive, endurance may be tactical rather than passive, and compliance may conceal subtle forms of subversion. Such a reading is essential in the Nigerian context, where patriarchal power is often embedded in cultural institutions rather than merely enacted through individual male characters. As a result, Nollywood frequently dramatises women's struggles not as absolute emancipation, but as ongoing acts of survival, resistance, adaptation, and transformation within male-dominated systems.

Patriarchal power in Nollywood is often represented through institutions rather than isolated personalities. Fathers, husbands, male elders, kings, pastors, in-laws, and community leaders frequently serve as the visible faces of authority, but the deeper source of power lies in the cultural norms that legitimise their control. Marriage, inheritance, fertility, respectability, and religion become the key arenas through which women are disciplined. A woman may be pressured to remain in an abusive marriage because family honour is prioritised over her safety; a widow may be denied access to property because custom privileges male lineage; a daughter may be compelled to accept an arranged marriage because obedience is framed as virtue; or a professional woman may be portrayed

as incomplete unless she ultimately submits to marriage and motherhood. These recurring narrative structures show that patriarchal power in Nollywood is not merely personal but systemic. Sylvia Walby's theorisation of patriarchy as a network of social structures and practices is especially useful here because it emphasises that women's oppression is reproduced across multiple institutions rather than through singular acts of male dominance (Walby 20–21). Nollywood mirrors this reality by repeatedly situating female characters in conflicts where the struggle is not only against men but against socially sanctioned codes of gendered legitimacy.

Within these constraints, Nollywood women often exercise agency through domestic negotiation. The domestic sphere, traditionally coded as the site of female confinement, frequently becomes the first arena in which women test, challenge, or reconfigure patriarchal power. A wife may quietly control household finances, influence her husband's decisions through emotional intelligence, or protect her children from oppressive family structures. A mother may use her moral authority to mediate disputes, preserve the dignity of the household, or resist harmful traditions imposed on her daughters. Although such actions may appear limited when measured against liberal feminist ideals of overt independence, they represent culturally significant forms of power in contexts where confrontation may be dangerous or socially prohibited. African feminist scholarship has consistently argued that women's agency in African societies often takes relational and communal forms rather than purely individualistic ones. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's concept of African womanism, for instance, recognises that women's struggles are often negotiated within the family and community rather than entirely outside them, emphasising complementarity and strategic engagement while still resisting oppression (Ogunyemi 64–66). This insight is especially relevant to Nollywood, where female power is often dramatised through subtle domestic interventions rather than dramatic acts of departure.

Economic agency is another major way Nollywood portrays women negotiating patriarchal power. In many films, women's ability to earn income, manage businesses, participate in markets, or sustain their families materially becomes a crucial source of autonomy and self-definition. The market woman, the trader, the entrepreneur, and the professional woman are recurring figures in Nollywood because they embody the tension between economic empowerment and cultural expectation. Economic independence often gives women leverage within marriage, family, and community, yet it can also trigger patriarchal backlash when it is perceived as threatening male authority. A financially successful woman may be accused of disrespect, emotional coldness, or moral compromise; she may be required to downplay her success to remain socially acceptable. This ambivalence reveals how economic agency in Nollywood is both celebrated and disciplined. bell hooks reminds us that representation must be read critically because structures of domination often absorb visible forms of empowerment while subtly reasserting control over their meaning (Hooks 115–16). In Nollywood, therefore, a woman's access to money or professional success does not automatically translate into full freedom; rather, it becomes one site where patriarchal power is negotiated, contested, and sometimes recontained.

Marriage remains perhaps the most persistent narrative site for the negotiation of female agency in Nollywood. Because marriage is culturally coded as both a personal aspiration and a marker of female respectability, many films situate women's struggles within the emotional and social demands of conjugal life. A wife may be expected to endure infidelity, infertility blame, domestic violence, or emotional neglect to preserve family honour. Yet Nollywood increasingly presents women who question these expectations. Some female characters leave abusive marriages, challenge polygamous arrangements, confront manipulative in-laws, or refuse to define their worth solely through their husbands. Others remain within marriage but renegotiate its terms by asserting financial control, demanding emotional reciprocity, or resisting silence. This reflects what Lois McNay describes as agency under conditions of constraint: women act not outside structure, but through the fractured spaces available within it (McNay 4–6). Nollywood's marital narratives often reveal that even where the institution remains patriarchal, women are not merely static victims; they are active interpreters of the rules, and sometimes their choices reshape the emotional and moral direction of the story.

Motherhood also functions as a complex mode of female agency in Nollywood. In patriarchal cultural contexts, motherhood is often treated as a woman's primary source of legitimacy, yet Nollywood frequently complicates this role by showing how maternal identity can be both empowering and restrictive. Mothers may command respect, mediate family conflict, preserve lineage, and wield moral influence over children and husbands. At the same time, women who are unable or unwilling to perform culturally idealised motherhood may be stigmatised, blamed, or rendered socially incomplete. This tension makes motherhood a crucial site of negotiated power. Ifi Amadiume's work is instructive here because it demonstrates that motherhood in African contexts can function as both a source of authority and a mechanism of social regulation (Amadiume 102–04). Nollywood often reflects this duality: the mother may be celebrated as the emotional and moral centre of the family, yet that same role may trap her within endless sacrifice and self-erasure. Thus, female agency in such narratives may emerge when a

mother transforms care into moral authority, uses maternal status to resist injustice, or redefines motherhood beyond patriarchal expectations.

Beyond domestic and familial spaces, Nollywood increasingly represents female agency through collective resistance and public action. This is especially visible in films that foreground women as political actors, community organisers, or historical agents. Rather than isolating female power as purely personal or emotional, these narratives depict women as capable of mobilising others, challenging institutions, and confronting communal forms of injustice. Films such as *Adunni: Ogidan Binrin* and *Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti* are particularly useful examples because they dramatise women's resistance not only against individual men but against larger structures of traditional and political authority. In these films, female agency becomes collective rather than merely individual; women form solidarities, organise dissent, and intervene in public life. This resonates strongly with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's *STIWANISM*, which insists that African women must be understood as participants in broader processes of social transformation rather than only as private victims of domestic patriarchy (Ogundipe-Leslie 30–31). Nollywood's turn toward stories of female-led protest, communal resistance, and public leadership signals an important expansion in how women's power is imagined on screen.

Another important dimension of female agency in Nollywood is survival as resistance. Not all women in these films confront patriarchy through visible confrontation or collective revolt. In many narratives, the mere act of enduring, adapting, and preserving selfhood within hostile conditions becomes a significant form of agency. A woman navigating widowhood, single motherhood, poverty, or social stigma may not overturn the system, but her refusal to collapse under its pressure can still function as a meaningful assertion of subjectivity. This is particularly relevant in contemporary urban Nollywood, where women often face intersecting pressures of class, gender, labour precarity, and emotional vulnerability. A character like the protagonist of *Lady* (2026), for example, is compelling not only because she directly resists patriarchy, but because she survives and makes choices in an environment structured by gendered underestimation and economic hardship. Such portrayals broaden the understanding of agency beyond triumphalist models of empowerment and instead emphasise resilience, improvisation, and the politics of staying visible within systems designed to marginalise women. However, the negotiation of patriarchal power in Nollywood is often marked by ambivalence. Many films that initially appear to celebrate female independence eventually reabsorb that independence into conventional gender norms. A woman may begin as assertive, professionally successful, or resistant, only to be narratively disciplined through repentance, emotional softening, marriage, or sacrificial motherhood. This pattern reveals the limits of representation within commercial and culturally conservative frameworks. Stuart Hall's theory of representation reminds us that cultural texts are sites of ideological struggle, not transparent reflections of social change (Hall 15–17). Thus, a film can simultaneously challenge and reinforce patriarchy. It may offer viewers the spectacle of a strong female protagonist while still restoring the moral supremacy of domestic submission by the conclusion. This ambivalence is central to Nollywood because it reflects the tensions within Nigerian society itself between tradition and modernity, between feminist aspiration and communal conservatism, between women's expanding social roles and the enduring pressure to remain culturally "acceptable."

NOLLYWOOD AS A SITE OF GENDER CONTESTATION AND CULTURAL REIMAGINATION

Nollywood occupies a uniquely influential position in contemporary African cultural production, not merely as an entertainment industry but as a dynamic site where social values, cultural anxieties, and ideological struggles are continuously staged and negotiated. As one of the most prolific film industries in the world, Nollywood reaches vast audiences within Nigeria, across Africa, and throughout the global African diaspora, making it one of the most powerful contemporary platforms for the circulation of meanings about gender, identity, family, morality, and power. In this sense, Nollywood is not simply a mirror of Nigerian society; it is also an active cultural institution that participates in shaping public consciousness. The representation of women within Nollywood, therefore, carries significance beyond the screen, because cinematic images of female behaviour, desire, resistance, and respectability influence how gender is imagined, debated, and normalised in everyday life. For this reason, Nollywood can be understood as a site of gender contestation—a symbolic arena in which patriarchal norms are reinforced, questioned, revised, and sometimes reimaged.

The idea of gender contestation is especially important in the Nigerian context, where social life is structured by a complex interplay of tradition, religion, colonial legacies, modernity, and global media flows. Women in Nigeria occupy positions that are often marked by contradiction: they are central to family life, local economies, religious communities, and cultural continuity, yet they may still face structural limitations in inheritance, political representation, domestic power, and public authority. Nollywood dramatises these contradictions with remarkable frequency. Female characters are often depicted as indispensable to the survival of the family and the moral order, but they are also subjected to cultural codes that seek to regulate their bodies, voices, sexuality, ambitions, and choices. This tension makes Nollywood especially valuable for feminist and cultural analysis because it reveals

how patriarchal ideology is not static; rather, it is constantly negotiated in response to changing social realities. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is particularly useful here because it insists that meaning is produced through systems of signification and that cultural texts are sites where ideological struggle takes place (Hall 15–17). In Nollywood, gender is not merely portrayed; it is actively constructed, contested, and circulated through narrative, characterisation, visual framing, and moral resolution.

As a site of gender contestation, Nollywood frequently performs a dual ideological function: it can preserve patriarchal norms while simultaneously creating cracks within them. On one level, many films continue to reproduce familiar structures of female containment. Women may still be idealised primarily as wives, mothers, caregivers, or moral guardians, while those who challenge gender expectations are sometimes framed as unstable, selfish, spiritually compromised, or emotionally incomplete. These recurring representational habits demonstrate the endurance of patriarchal narrative codes. Yet on another level, the very act of placing women at the centre of conflict, decision-making, and emotional complexity can open up spaces for alternative meanings. Even when a film appears conservative in its resolution, it may still expose the violence, unfairness, or emotional cost of patriarchal systems in ways that encourage critical reflection. This is why Nollywood should not be read only in terms of whether it is "feminist" or "anti-feminist." Rather, it should be approached as a contradictory cultural form in which progressive and conservative impulses coexist. bell hooks' work on representation is especially relevant because she argues that images are never innocent; they participate in systems of domination, but they can also become spaces of intervention and resistance (hooks 2–4). Nollywood exemplifies this contradiction by repeatedly producing female images that are both disciplined and disruptive.

One of the most important ways Nollywood contributes to cultural reimagination is by expanding the range of female subject positions available on screen. Earlier periods of the industry often relied heavily on archetypes such as the submissive wife, the wicked stepmother, the barren woman, the sacrificial mother, the seductive manipulator, or the spiritually endangered woman. While these figures remain visible, contemporary Nollywood increasingly offers women as lawyers, entrepreneurs, political organisers, artists, journalists, students, activists, queens, widows who resist oppressive rituals, and daughters who challenge inherited traditions. This broadening of representational possibility matters because cinema helps shape what audiences perceive as thinkable or acceptable within their own social worlds. When viewers repeatedly encounter women who speak, decide, organise, refuse, survive, and lead, the cultural imagination itself begins to stretch. Teresa de Lauretis's concept of cinema as a "technology of gender" helps clarify this point: film is not a neutral reflection of gender roles, but an apparatus that produces and circulates gendered meanings and identities (de Lauretis 2–3). Nollywood's shift toward more diverse female roles, therefore, contributes to the slow cultural work of reimagining womanhood beyond the limits of patriarchal convention.

The role of female-centred storytelling is especially significant in this process of reimagination. When women are treated not merely as supporting figures in male narratives but as protagonists with their own desires, conflicts, histories, and political stakes, the structure of meaning changes. The audience is invited to see the world through female experience rather than simply to observe women as objects of moral judgment or emotional service. This narrative repositioning is crucial because it transforms women from symbols into subjects. In the context of Nollywood, this shift has become more visible in films that foreground women's struggles with domestic violence, workplace inequality, widowhood, political exclusion, class vulnerability, reproductive pressure, and historical erasure. These stories do not simply include women; they recenter social analysis around women's lived realities. Such narrative choices create opportunities for empathy, critique, and ideological disruption, especially in societies where women's grievances have often been normalised or silenced.

Another dimension of Nollywood's role in cultural reimagination lies in its negotiation of the relationship between tradition and modernity. Patriarchal power in Nigerian films is often justified through appeals to culture, custom, religion, and family values. However, contemporary Nollywood increasingly interrogates the assumption that tradition must remain unchallenged. Films that depict forced marriage, widowhood rites, inheritance discrimination, political exclusion, or gender-based violence often ask whether inherited practices are truly just or merely normalised through repetition. Importantly, these films do not always reject culture wholesale; rather, they distinguish between culture as living heritage and culture as a mechanism of domination. This distinction is vital in African feminist discourse, which has long resisted the simplistic binary between "Western feminism" and "African tradition." Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's *STIWANISM* (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) is particularly helpful here because it emphasises that the goal is not the destruction of African culture, but its transformation through the inclusion of women's voices, experiences, and interests (Ogundipe-Leslie 30–31). Nollywood often dramatises this struggle precisely: women do not merely abandon culture; they reinterpret it, confront its exclusions, and seek more just forms of belonging within it.

The growing presence of women behind the camera has also intensified Nollywood's potential as a site of gender contestation and cultural reimagination. Female directors, producers, and writers have contributed significantly to the expansion of women's stories in contemporary Nigerian cinema. Their creative interventions have helped shift the industry toward narratives that take women's interiority, vulnerability, ambition, and resistance more seriously. The importance of this industrial change should not be overstated in simplistic terms. Male filmmakers can also produce complex female narratives, and female filmmakers are not automatically feminist, but the diversification of authorship undeniably broadens the ideological possibilities of representation. When more women shape the stories being told, the range of questions being asked often expands as well: What does power feel like from a woman's perspective? What forms of violence are hidden in ordinary domestic life? What happens when women speak back to cultural authority? What historical women have been erased or minimised? These questions are increasingly visible in contemporary Nollywood, especially in films that centre women's experiences as social knowledge rather than mere emotional decoration.

SYNOPSIS AND ANALYSIS OF FUNMILAYO RANSOME-KUTI (2024)

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is a historical biographical film directed by Bolanle Austen-Peters that dramatises the life and activism of Nigerian nationalist, educator, and women's rights advocate Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. The film traces her journey from her early years as one of the first girls to receive formal education in colonial Nigeria to her evolution into one of the most formidable anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal voices in Nigerian history. It explores her marriage to Israel Ransome-Kuti, her educational work, and most importantly, her political awakening and leadership in organising women against unjust taxation, colonial domination, and traditional structures that excluded women from civic participation. The film foregrounds her role in the formation and expansion of the Abeokuta Women's Union, which became a powerful force in resisting both colonial rule and indigenous patriarchal authority. Through this arc, the film presents Funmilayo not simply as a historical figure but as a symbol of female defiance, political consciousness, and collective empowerment within a deeply patriarchal society. The film was released in Nigerian cinemas on 17 May 2024, and contemporary descriptions of the plot emphasise her leadership in the women's revolt against colonial rule and patriarchy in Abeokuta.

Analysis of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (2024) in Relation to Female Agency.

Among recent Nollywood films, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti offers perhaps the clearest and most intellectually rigorous representation of female agency within patriarchal cultural contexts. Unlike many films in which female power is confined to the domestic sphere or expressed through interpersonal negotiation, this film represents agency as historical, political, and collective. Funmilayo is not merely shown as a woman who survives patriarchy; she is represented as a woman who recognises it as a system, mobilises against it, and transforms public life through organised resistance. This is important for your topic because it allows you to move beyond the simplistic idea of a "strong female character" and instead discuss agency as the capacity to challenge institutionalised forms of power.

The film dramatises patriarchal power not only through male characters but through interlocking structures of colonial administration, traditional rulership, and gendered civic exclusion. Men occupy visible positions of authority, but the film makes it clear that the real struggle is against the system that normalises women's silence and political marginalisation. In this regard, the film aligns strongly with Sylvia Walby's notion of patriarchy as a social structure reproduced through institutions rather than merely individual male behaviour. Funmilayo's resistance becomes significant because she confronts these institutions directly: she questions the legitimacy of policies that burden women, exposes the exclusionary nature of governance, and redefines women not as passive subjects of rule but as political actors. Thus, the film presents female agency as an act of public intervention in a social order that denies women equal voice.

Another important dimension of the film is its portrayal of collective female agency. Unlike many mainstream narratives that isolate empowerment within an individual heroine, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti emphasises solidarity, organisation, and community mobilisation. The Abeokuta Women's Union is not treated as background; it is central to the narrative logic of resistance. Women move from private frustration to public action, from domestic burden to political consciousness. This collective structure of agency is particularly valuable for your research because it reflects African feminist frameworks such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM, which insists that women's liberation in African contexts must be understood as part of broader social transformation rather than purely individualised rebellion. The film thereby reimagines women as participants in nation-making, anti-colonial struggle, and cultural renegotiation.

The film also complicates the notion of respectability. Funmilayo is not represented as rebellious simply for spectacle; rather, her defiance is grounded in moral conviction, education, social awareness, and strategic leadership. This matters because Nollywood often punishes outspoken women by coding them as deviant, immoral, or socially destructive. In contrast, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti legitimises female assertiveness. Her speech, organising, and confrontation are framed not as threats to society but as necessary responses to injustice.

This is a crucial representational shift. From the perspective of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the film is not merely telling a historical story; it is actively producing a new cultural meaning of womanhood, one in which leadership, dissent, and political courage are compatible with femininity. In that sense, the film is not just biographical; it is ideological.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of female agency in Nollywood films within patriarchal cultural contexts, with particular reference to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (2024). Through this case study, it becomes evident that contemporary Nollywood is increasingly moving beyond reductive portrayals of women as passive victims, domestic ornaments, or moral symbols, and is instead presenting women as active social actors whose choices, resistance, and leadership shape both narrative outcomes and cultural meaning. The researcher further postulates that female agency in Nollywood is not always represented as absolute liberation from patriarchy; rather, it is often dramatised as a process of negotiation, confrontation, and transformation within systems structured by male authority, cultural tradition, and social expectation.

One of the major findings of this study is that patriarchy in Nollywood is not represented merely through individual male characters but through broader institutional and cultural structures such as traditional rulership, gendered political exclusion, domestic expectations, and communal norms. In Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the woman is situated within the environment where power is normalised through customs, authority systems, and social codes that seek to regulate female voice and participation. However, these films also reveal that such structures are neither total nor unchallengeable. Instead, they portray women as capable of recognising injustice, organising resistance, and intervening meaningfully in both private and public spheres. This confirms that female agency in Nollywood is increasingly represented not simply as endurance but as action, whether through speech, protest, solidarity, leadership, or symbolic defiance.

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