

Jadesola Osiberu's *Isoken*: A Filmic Postulation for Feminism

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Abstract

While other media of mass communication such as Television, Radio and Print have to contend, largely, with the expectations of informing, educating and entertaining, film ascends over all these to find a niche in "expressing". Film, therefore, can set out for the singular purpose of expression. This study intends to analytically expose those indicators and determinants of feminism locked in within the film content of *Isoken*, a 2017 Nollywood movie produced and directed by Jadesola Osiberu. These components should lend evidence to the central argument in this paper that this particular film displays a strong tendency towards feminist sentiments.

The Feminism Theory is, aptly, adopted to buttress the standpoint here. A theoretical study, it utilizes the qualitative research approach, relying on personal analysis and interpretation of the film. It found that a good number of elements exist within the film content to suggest that *ISOKEN* leans sufficiently towards feminism. These include *Isoken*'s defiance of communal and family values, the predominantly female cast as well as the brazen usurpation of certain privileged roles that the Nigeria society had hitherto reserved for men, amongst others.

The study concludes that both the scriptwriter and the director have succeeded in focusing on the female gender and putting forward female related issues. Wittingly or unwittingly, they have also ended up producing a film that is clearly within the sphere of feminism. Thus, this paper has added to the activity level in that particular aspect of knowledge, whilst also increasing available stock.

Keywords: feminism, film content, gender, narrative, protest

1. Introduction

It has been observed that film-making carries with it a huge responsibility. Film is distinctly able to serve as a medium for personal and communal expression. The responsibility for this expression rests squarely on the scriptwriter and the director. Ayakoroma, (2008) could not agree more:

Of all the mass media of communication, film has the most universal appeal and impact. Films act as a very potent socialization medium that shapes the ideas, styles, attitudes and cultures of nations in the sense that it is a giant mirror which reflect the values and ideals of a given society. In effect, much as box office successes are important, ethical responsibilities must also be in the balance- (2008:77).

The film "*Isoken*" has been produced primarily as a piece of entertainment. Over and above that, the film also comes across as an attempt to express discontent a particular aspect of today's reality. The film shows traces of sympathy for the feminist movement. This work will assert that whether or not "*Isoken*" was intended as a feminist film, it actually makes out as one. This is as a result of elements and sequences captured in words and images that point in the direction of feminism.

The work is laid out from a befitting abstract, through this introduction, to a literature review, methodology and narrative. These are followed by a section that is dedicated to findings and discussion, where the feminist elements are listed and discussed. A short conclusion follows whilst effectively bringing the article to end.

The problem of this study has been the need to bring out the traces of feminist sentiments in the film *Isoken*, sufficient for it to be classified as a feminist film. The objectives of this study are easily discernible from the observed problem. Research questions for this work are subsumed in the three sets of hypotheses presented hereunder:

1. Ho: "Isoken" does not put forward the female gender and female- related issues.
H1: "Isoken" puts forward the female gender and female- related issues.
2. Ho1: "Isoken" does not celebrate equality of the male and female genders.
H2: Isoken celebrates equality of male and female genders.
3. Ho3: "Isoken" is not a bold, unapologetic stance for feminism.
H3: "Isoken" is a bold and unapologetic stance for feminism.

2. Literature Review

Feminist Theory and Feminism

The feminist theory seeks to understand the concept of gender inequality in general and how societal practices as well as negligence work against the best interest of women and woman hood. By omission or commission, society has failed to offer an equal platform for males and females within it. This theory is committed to advocacy in favour of women who have not been fairly treated by the society since recorded history (Itsewah & Usman, 2017). Simply put, feminism either strongly or subtly challenges male dominance of the social, political, cultural, educational and, for this purpose, cinematographic world.

Feminism has thus succeeded in galvanizing the consciousness of women towards their perceived oppression and subjugation by the society at large. Women who are disposed to protesting against such societal mindsets have organized themselves into feminist groups of varying ideologies as well as methodologies. This movement which began in Europe and North America, gradually found its way into the African continent. Educated middle class women such as the late Miriam Makeba and the immediate past president of Liberia- Mrs. Sirleaf have not only positioned womanhood on a higher and firmer pedestal, they have also brought female related issues and challenges to the attention of the world. Penetration of feminism in Africa, however, appears sluggish owing to a number of reasons which include traditions, customs, culture and nuance. These have been planted in African women, both educated and illiterate. As a result, these women accept male dominance and bias as natural and even God- designed. (Odi, 2014). This position is also adopted by Olokodana,(2014) who goes ahead to assert that the biological architecture of women combines with social factors to limit women. As a result, unlike their male counterparts, women are quite unable to perform certain roles within the family and in the larger community. Such realities have left the Nigerian woman dehumanized, thereby holding her down in her subordinate position, (Ugwu, 2014). The reality of inequality against women and, sometimes, subjugation bothering on enslavement is there for all to see. These factors justify the emergence of feminism and, subsequently, the feminist theory. However, although those in the vanguard of female emancipation share a level of understanding of what women's rights and women oppression represents, they differ on what women's liberation is about. Feminism has its tenets and principles; there are certain common characteristics that readily, identify feminism (Ashton, 1995).

All representations of feminism agree that existing relations between the sexes favour the male gender, to the detriment of the female gender. This is deemed as wrong and should be corrected. The age long mindset that views a lot of things as natural, normal and desirable by societies, stand strongly challenged by feminism. Feminist ideas and thoughts challenge the entire history of humanity and society for thriving on inequity. It raises fundamental problems that are eagerly seeking for explanation and solution.

Also, beyond ideas, feminism seeks to transform relations between males and females as a means to enabling all people to fulfill the fullness of human potential. To this degree, feminism goes beyond ideas and words, but inspires action to change the current status of things. Additionally, the feminist proposal for change is almost always resisted by the prevailing mindset. This resistance both varies and differs from society to society. Feminism asks valid questions on the ontology of knowledge. Is a certain piece of knowledge inferior because it emanates from a woman for examples? As far as feminism is concerned, the fact remains that men enjoy rights that women are denied of, and this is clear for all to see. This may graduate in volume and intensity from society to society, but it is present and glaring. Feminism may vary in style and ideology, but all versions of feminism aim at re-arranging the balance of rights and privileges among it the sexes. Ultimately, this should give women greater control over their own bodies as well as lives.

Again, Aston (1995) proceeds to categorize feminist thoughts and practices. According to him, Liberal Feminism is seen when groups of women organize themselves and fight for improved living standards, education, health, housing, work and legal rights. Liberal feminism does not challenge non-feminist understanding of the causes of inequality. It acknowledges the fact that women are grossly discriminated against on account of their gender. Both politically and theoretically, this version of feminism differs from the others in the sense that its approach is not radical.

Marxist Feminism embraces Marxist theory and politics, but questions its adequacy. Marxist feminists find nothing wrong with socialism, especially as it engenders improved material conditions for women. However, they believe that it

fell short of liberating women from the control of men. Therefore, this movement believes in levels of radicalism, especially when the situation calls for it. Marxist feminism rejects the universal application of radical feminist analysis.

Radical Feminism, on the other hand, makes no pretext about using radical means and techniques to achieve its set goals. This version launches a frontal attack on the entirety of our male-dominated society. Adherents of radical feminism see their roles as a fierce and unending war against existing mindsets and stereotypes which have placed domination as well as control in the hands of men. The good old Western saying that a woman's place is in the home, or that women are at the service of men are met with hostility on a continuing basis. This movement is committed to dismantling the institutions of our patriarchal societies. In doing this, it hopes that women will be set free from the confinement and restrictions that they have been made to suffer right through the ages.

Both Azuike (2003), and Odi (2014), attempted to identify elements of feminism in Nigeria. According to the former, a low level of feminism exists in Nigeria. However, he continues, most feminists fail to openly identify with feminism for fear of societal reprisal and stigmatization. The latter concurs, adding that issues of marginalization, subordination and subjugation of women exist in Nigeria while observing that the voices currently speaking up for the empowerment of women ought to be louder and stronger. Yerima, (2008) is not too far away from this team. He, however, chooses to focus on female gender marginalization as shown in the lowly role played by women in plays and films against the glorious ones that appear to be reserved for the men.

The feminist film ideology places film-making in the hands of women who are then tasked with the responsibility of making films that are directly relevant and peculiar to feminine ideas, thoughts, issues and situations. These seem to have been given little or no attention over the years due to the dynamics of our patriarchal society. (Shalom- Israel, 2017). This position bears more association with Ashton's concept and definition of radical feminism. Feminism in film can also manifest at the levels of liberal feminism and Marxist feminism. Having said this, the liberal feminist film may not be made by a woman and may choose subtler modes of expression as well as presentation. If we choose to stick to Ashton's paradigm, then the Marxist feminist film would be somewhere between the other two types.

In strong sympathy with the feminist sentiment, Anyanwu (2003) paints a picture of the apparent disregard for feminine rights through casting and characterization in Nigerian video films. In his view, the nascent video film industry in Nigeria was expected to correct earlier injustices to womankind.

It is however disappointing to know that a great percentage of home videos produced in Nigeria portrays women as evil, witches, husband poisoners, greedy, prostitutes etc, as well as being prone to all the other vices that anybody can imagine. Even when they are portrayed as the epitome of love and understanding, they still end up as victims of their men who use them for rituals in order to make money. – (2003:84)

One is of the strong conviction that Anyanwu's intention in the foretasted was to show that men do not consider women to be good and that is why women are made to play dishonorable roles in video films. Unwittingly, it appears, he also presents men as dishonorable; so much so that they kill their wives for money making rituals. If this is the impression that Anyanwu (2003) leaves us with, then neither the Nigerian men nor their women are good models. Since neither gender is redeemable, why defend only the women?

Beyond this, it is pertinent to discuss and review a few cases of feminism in the Nigerian film-making industry. Mahood Alli-Balogun's film "Tango with Me" is certainly one that attempts to tell a poignant story through a woman's perspective. The film portrays predominantly feminine challenges and worries but these problems are ably tackled by the protagonist (Lola), acted by Genevieve Nnaji.

Another film, "Mr. & Mrs" also displays strong traces of feminism. The heroine (Susan) is played by Nse-ikpe Etim. Her husband could only see in her a cook, sex slave and house keeper despite the fact that she is a lawyer by profession. Susan chooses to stand up for her rights and the marriage comes to the brink of collapse. The marriage is eventually saved through her wisdom and manipulation of her husband. As a film, Mr & Mrs. gives a strong, loud voice to the woman. Having suffered travails, Susan decides to take action against the unpleasant condition in which she found herself.

The multiple award-winning film by Chineze Anyaeh, titled "Ije: The Journey" offers another example. Feminism in this particular instance is quite aggressive and radical. It can also be argued that the two female avengers played by Omotola and Genevieve found themselves with no option than to go for the jugular. These two sisters, who are the joint protagonists, rise against violence and gang rape, amongst other injustices unleashed by men who seemed to relish their dastardly acts.

"Isoken, financed by the Bank of Industry and released June 16, 2017 has also found a place amongst those Nollywood films that can be rated as feminist, to varying degrees. Traces of the feminist film can be found in this movie, from the beginning to the end. This paper is committed to identifying and documenting these.

3. Methodology

A proper understanding of this film will entail viewing it over and over in order to discern causal attributes and identify elements of relevance. This is, therefore, an observation study carried out by the researcher/ author. The methodology adopted here is clearly qualitative and non-numeric. It is also a case study in the sense that it works on just one material, rather than more.

Data, results and findings are presented as well as analysed in words. Both source and data are secondary in nature. Through a good understanding of the narrative and cinematographic slant, aspects and components that lend credence to the central argument in this paper are isolated. These are then built into the discussion in a manner that strengthens the stance of the author.

At the same time, this paper presents as a theoretical study. Here, the Feminism Theory which undergirds the work is reviewed, analysed and related to the entire body of work represented in this article. The film "Isoken" is the main source of data which are subsequently juxtaposed with the adopted theory. Relationships are ascertained, after which inferences are then drawn.

Isoken: Narrative and Commentary

With a 107 minutes running time, Isoken is without doubt a full length feature film. It is presented as a romantic comedy for two reasons. Firstly, the story and the management of its elements are not sad and heavy as one may find in a typical tragedy; rather these things are forged to create a light and amusing scenario. Whether the elements of comedy have been adequately or effectively handled by the scriptwriter and the director falls outside the purview of this paper.

In the film, one is brought face to face, yet again, with the deep sentiments of a patriarchal society where women must be goaded or forced into marriage once they cross the age of thirty. Men, on the other hand, can take their time, up till their mid- forties, the society understands.

The popular Akpan Umokong family of Nkpat Enin local Government Area of Akara Ibom state is blessed with six beautiful and intelligent daughters. These girls grow up, gain good education and become professionals as well as technocrats. As time passes, these laides grow up to find themselves in their thirties and forties. However, something is terribly wrong, at least, according to the parochial mindset of our patriarchal society. Jane, Betty, Lillan, Grace, Isoken and Love are all over thirty; in fact Jane is already only two years away from her fiftieth birthday. Sadly, these gorgeous and well-educated ladies are still single. As one often finds in this clime, the family (nuclear and extended) is very worried.

This emotion appears to take a leap when, against all expectations, Isoken's younger sister gets married. Mama Isoken (played by Tina Mba) teams up with her sister on a mission to marry off Isoken (Dakore Akande) as quickly as possible. They hastily hatch a plan to match- make her with a most eligible bachelor. Enter-Osaze, played by Joseph Benjamin, a well educated and successful young man of Edo extraction. Mama Isoken's plan appears to be working out, driven by the craftiness of Isoken's auntie. Things are designed so that Isoken and Osaze meet at the former's junior sister's wedding. So they do and a date ensues almost immediately. The script seems to be playing out; after all, Isoken is beautiful, educated, independent and successful- an ideal bride for the handsome, urbane, successful young man from a good family. A spanner it seems, is about to be thrown into the wheel of this relationship, as Isoken soon meets Kelvin (Marc Rhys), a mere photojournalist and an average Caucasian who happens to be in Nigeria on a temporary visit. Unlike Osaze, Kelvin is not given to pretension, neither does he play the patronizer. He is just himself, appearing most of the time in simple casual Nigerian attires. Kelvin takes Isoken out to simple everyday places, even daring to take rides in the proletarian Marwa tricycles instead of investing in expensive, cozy transportation. By contrast, Osaze is rich and wants to impress; he takes Isoken out to dainty and exotic places, including boat rides. Unknown to either Mama Isoken or Osaze's mother, Isoken is not the type of lady to be impressed by such contrived magnificence. Of course, the average Nigerian lady in her place would readily show preference for Osaze in place of Kelvin. When the families find out about Isoken and Kelvin, they fight hard to discourage the relationship. This appeared to be working out when on Isoken's birthday three boyfriends show up, each bearing his own gift. Osaze smartly presents an engagement ring while on his knees, and asks Isoken to marry him.

Urged on relentlessly and vociferous by her friends Agnes (Funke Akindele), Kukwa (Lydia Forson) and Joke (Damilola Adegbite), Isoken accepts to marry Osaze. Kelvin attempts to dissuade her but comes against a brick wall. Things get into a state of frenzy, as the plan for Isoken's wedding to Osaze is activated. However, this progression is suddenly aborted right on the edge of the wedding. Isoken calls off the wedding, thereby, showing herself to be different from the normal stock of the Nigerian woman. Few, if any Nigeria lady would call off such a perfect wedding to a perfect gentleman. As a matter of fact, only men dare to do such things and they do frequently too, especially in this part of the world. Here Isoken's character is strong enough to dare the man and indeed the society.

As expected, both Isoken's family and Osaze's family are devastated. A last minute attempt is made to get Isoken to change her mind. This meeting was another disaster because she not only insults the gathering, but even threatens them. She disparagingly walks out on the meeting stating that she was going to find Kelvin because her heart truly lies with him. Isoken soon reunites with Kelvin as her family members are forced to accept the decision, despite every wish and attempt to have it otherwise.

4. Findings and Discussion

A film that shows a tendency for feminism can do so overtly or subtly. It can identify perceived injustices and deal with them. Or, it can present subtle biases, stereotypes and negative mindsets, leaving the audience to judge and take necessary action. The film *Isoken* is without argument a presentation in the feminist mode. From the beginning of the film to the end of it, causal phenomena and content reveal that this is a strong pitch for the female gender. Let us analyse a few specific sequences that lend credence to this reality.

This movie is tilted towards the women folk, particularly the contemporary educated and independent middle class in Nigeria. The angst, protest and discontent of this class is effectively profiled in *Isoken*. As a matter of fact, this movie is about *Isoken* and, by extension, today's women. *Isoken* is a powerful female character who breaks all the rules and calls existing practices to question. If one divides the plot of this film into thirty seven sequences and movements, *Isoken* can be seen in all of them.

In scene one, *Isoken*'s junior sister's wedding takes place. We move on to scene two where we see the newly wedded bride and her friends trying to catch up on things after the wedding ceremony. Scene three is the restaurant; *Osaze* courts *Isoken* and tries hard to impress. Kelvin and *Isoken* are seen engaged in a private conversation which takes place in the laundry room; this happens in scene four. *Isoken* is apparently seeing two men and the viewer is led to compare and contrast the two boyfriends. The fifth scene takes place in *Isoken*'s family dining room, with the usual family chatter at meal time.

Isoken's cozy bedroom personality is contrasted with her office setting in scenes six and seven. *Isoken* and a group of friends are seen lounging in the next scene, while she is alone with *Osaze* in his apartment, in scene nine. The tenth scene takes them, this time, to *Isoken*'s family house. In scene eleven, *Isoken* changes partners. She appears on the roadside with her second boyfriend-Kelvin. We are again taken to *Isoken*'s work place in the following scene, and onto a long telephone conversation with her friend-Koko in scene thirteen.

In the next sequence, a police car intercepts Kelvin who is seen driving within the city. *Isoken* is with him in the car and the matter is settled amicably. This is followed by another telephone conversation between *Isoken* and Kelvin. Then we see the lovers in the kitchen. Thereafter, there is the car park activity in scene seventeen, while *Oriki* and friends spend some time together in the next sequence. *Isoken* is not to be left out of this meeting of friends. She is alone in her bedroom in scene nineteen even as she admires herself in the mirror and daydreams.

Determined to really impress *Isoken*, *Osaze* takes her out on a boat ride in scene twenty, while *Isoken*'s family and her aunt hold a conversation in the living room in the next sequence. Then there is the cut away to the art gallery and then the night scene on the bridge. The film then brings *Isoken* and *Osaze* together again in a private setting. In scene twenty five, they visit the restaurant again; then the action moves to *Isoken*'s mother as she pays her friend a visit in the latter's shop. There is another restaurant scene, after which we see *Isoken* and her friends, then the naming ceremony of *Joke*'s child, then the film returns to the bridge.

News of *Isoken*'s planned wedding to *Osaze* is all over the place. In scene thirty two *Isoken* and her father talk things over. *Osaze* then makes another impressive move by taking *Isoken* out to a five star hotel on the island. In the next scene, *Isoken* is seen in her wedding dress as she prepares for the event. In a swift move, she calls off the wedding. Her family members summon her to the living room with a view to dissuading her, but she stands on her decision. Unable to stop her, the family joins her as she heads for Kelvin's send off party in scene thirty six. She declares her true love for Kelvin and the film effectively comes to an end. The thirty seventh and final scene is the wedding of a mutual friend-Chuks.

It can be seen that *Isoken* looms over this film like a larger-than-life figure, from the beginning to the end. She appears in every sequence and movement, carrying with her protest and discontent on behalf of the women folk that she represents. This focus on *Isoken* which is also a focus on all that she represents, means that the film is primarily about women and women-related issues. As a result, the film *Isoken* displays a tendency towards feminism.

In the same vein, the sheer number of females engaged in the casting of roles for the actors used to realize this film speaks volumes. Less than 30% of the entire actors used to realize this film are males. This reality is substantiated by the following list: *Isoken*, her sisters, junior sister's mother-in-law, female dancers, bride's friends, bride's female family members and relations. Others include *Isoken*'s friends, *Isoken*'s mother, *Isoken*'s aunty, *Osaze*'s mother,

colleagues in Isoken's office, neighbours and passersby. Not to be left out here are well-wishers at the wedding, attendants and waitresses, girls at the club and workers in the laundry. These are females from diverse backgrounds, playing a variety of roles whilst portraying the status and conditions of the Nigerian women. Collectively, these women give a voice to issues that concern women, while at the same drowning male-related issues. This is feminism.

Isoken and her friends live life on the fast lane and do not pretend to be "good girls". This reflects in their dressing, make up, words and actions. During the sequence where Isoken and her three friends prepare themselves before the wedding, all the ladies were somewhat unreserved in their discussion and mannerisms. Sex, romance and other such issues were freely discussed.

In the sequence where Isoken is seen celebrating her birthday, three different boyfriends come to visit her; each of the men with his gift. Of the three, Osaze presents an engagement ring which Isoken accepts, urged on by her friends. She subconsciously agrees to marry Osaze. Her decision to brazenly drop two men and choose one is not in tandem with African and Nigerian ethos. In familiar settings, the man would flagrantly announce his decision to many one out of many many consorts; leaving the ones not chosen ones to sulk and grieve. This scene turns the roles around, making Isoken the brave woman who dares to rubbish her boyfriends openly, selecting one over the others. Her indulgence in open multiple-dating is also strange in these parts. This behaviour is a privilege for the men, but here again Isoken ascends to that privileged pedestal that culture and history had hitherto reserved for the men. This is feminism.

In another sequence, Isoken calls off her intended marriage, just as it was about to start. In a few minutes, she looks Osaze in the eyes and informs him that her earlier acceptance was a huge mistake. The engagement ring is quickly handed over in a strong feminist fashion. Men are the ones who are known to call off or cancel weddings in this part of the world. This time, however, a lady shows the men how to do it. If this does not point in the direction of feminism, one wonders what does.

Upon learning that Isoken has cancelled her planned wedding to Osaze, the family members are scandalised. Isoken is invited and attempts made to get her to return to Osaze and consummate the marriage. Defiantly and arrogantly, she affirms that her decision is final. She announces her preference for one her boyfriends- Kelvin, the white English man. She actually walks out on the family. Completely beaten by Isoken, members scramble after her and eventually follow her to see Kelvin. This is nothing but feminism playing out.

With these instances and occurrences which constitute a good body of evidence, let us revisit the hypotheses of the study and ascertain the true position of things. Null Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 which assume that the film *Isoken* is not laden with attributes and tenets of feminism are rejected. On the other hand, Alternate Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 which assume that Isoken portrays a distinct tendency towards feminism are affirmed, sustained and accepted.

Finally, the issues and themes projected in this film are essentially those that African women are associated with. Family and societal unease when a woman is well into her 30s and still single remains a challenge. Harassment by family members represented here by Isoken's mother and auntie adds to the pain. All this is pursuant to a feminist agenda and supports both the feminist theory, as well as feminism. Isoken is, indeed, a filmic postulation for feminism and feminist sentiments.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, let us recall that this study set out to prove that the film *Isoken* is one that is made in the feminist mode. At this point, one can confidently, assert that this film tends towards feminism. There is ample proof to show that this film puts forward the female gender as well as female-related issues; Isoken celebrates the equality of the male and female genders; and the film presents a bold, unapologetic argument in favour of women. Indeed, it is a filmic cache for feminism, whether or not it was so intended from the perspectives of both the scriptwriter and the film director.

The film has succeeded in challenging and, in fact, rejecting certain mindsets as well as practices which tend to favour the male gender in Nigeria. Such stereotypes are fuelled by history, culture, customs, traditions and religion. They represent tools of subjugation, dominance and subordination that patriarchal societies embrace, to the detriment of the female gender. It is only fair and proper that societies pursue female rights, privileges and interests with the same zeal with which male issues are handled. A fair and equitable world is undoubtedly better than one that is hinged on bias, inequality and injustice.

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