Seeing Colours: Race in Nollywood Films

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Abstract
Since the discourses of love, betrayal, unbridled and destructive ambition that in 1992 gave the industry its first blockbuster, Living in Bondage, Nollywood, criticized in the literature for simplistic plots, is no longer shy to take on complex and controversial subjects. Racial difference is among the subjects the industry has been turning its attention to recently. But the Nigerian film maker cannot be said to have nothing to go on in this direction. In fact, Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and its much copied theme of conflict between tradition and modernity, is among the earliest representations of difference in the contemporary Nigerian popular culture. Some Nollywood producers have, however, moved away from this famous trope to offer a more contemporary take on the subject which takes into account the current reality of the relations between Nigerians and the ‘other’ living among them. So, how does the popular culture industry, Nollywood, represent difference in today’s Nigeria? This article answers the above question and more through an analysis of three Nollywood’s feature films: White Hunters, John Bull My Son and Brain Masters. It employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as well as historical analysis and identifies binary opposition and stereotype as dominant strategies used by the makers of the three feature films in representing ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’. The article argues that as discourses of racial difference, while the three feature films may have made some efforts at reversing some stereotypes of the black race, they have mostly, however, managed to domesticate, reinforce and legitimate dominant racist images of Africa and African people circulating in western popular culture.

Key Words: representation, race, difference, stereotype, Nollywood films, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction
Representation, we learn, is a social practice. Whether they are more than a century old in the business film of production like Hollywood or are only a few decades old as is the case with Nigeria’s Nollywood, major film industries around the world have evolved and conventionalised recognizable ways of representing people, objects, events, themes or any subject on which the film maker may choose to focus his camera’s lens.

Representation is also primarily about meaning making. From literature we equally find various explanations regarding how meaning is made and where it resides. There are three approaches in accounting for meaning in representation or for explaining where meaning comes from. The reflective or mimetic approach, for instance, argues that language or film, in this case, functions like a mirror by reflecting, imitating or mirroring the truth that is already in existence. The intentional approach, on the other hand, holds that meaning resides with the author of the creative output or the film maker (as we stay a bit longer with this illustration). Put differently, the film maker, through his art, imposes his own particular view or meaning on the world. The constructionist or constructivist approach is of the view that meaning can neither be ultimately determined by the things in the world nor by the author or film maker; rather meaning is constructed using signs and concepts in the material world (Hall 2003, p.25).

In his theory of language and meaning, de Saussure (in Hall 2003) also argued that meaning is relational. We, for instance, can only know what white means when we look at that particular colour in relation to other colours or place it on the same grid with its opposite number, black. In relation to visual communication and discourses of race, this implies that in order to productively discuss the way the ‘white’ race is represented in Nollywood productions, it is important to pay attention to not only the way ‘white’ but also the way the ‘black’ race is represented. As Hall (2003, p.235) put it, ‘meaning depends on the difference between opposites.’
Although it is a common but controversial way of making meaning in popular texts because of the way they use few features to generalize to the whole group, stereotypes have become a handy label deployed by film makers in representing real world of people such as social groups. And while film makers can and in many cases do resort to them, the worry in the use of stereotypes, as Taylor and Willis (2002, p. 41) remind us, is that ‘those who gain no further knowledge about the group represented, limited and potentially damaging assumptions remain intact and unquestioned.’ In addition, the media, it is important to keep in mind, are ‘potentially powerful agents of socialization and social change – presenting models, conferring status, suggesting appropriate behaviours, encouraging stereotypes’ (Adewoye et al. 2014, p.108). Take the media representations of women as a case in point. Nigerian women, critical feminist scholars Adewoye et al. (2014) insist, have been subjected to degrading stereotyped portrayal in the media, the result of which is that women are ‘consistently exploited, abused and trivialized particularly in the spheres of advertising and motion pictures’ (p.103).

Adewoye and colleagues may have singled out the media forms, motion pictures and advertising, for criticism, and exploitation, trivialization and abuse as forms stereotyped representation of women. However, other critics (see Mitchell 2011, Dietz 1998, Beasley & Standley 2002, Traudt 2005) have argued that stereotyping women in the media cuts across all forms of media of communication – print journalism, music, advertising, even video games and cartoons and can take other forms such as objectification and underrepresentation.

But it is particularly the audio-visual media, television and motion pictures that are the worst offenders in this regard. Harper (2000, p.1) observed that ‘sex-role stereotyping is deeply woven into the fabric of television programming…’, a medium the author described as sexist. In the same work Harper (p.1) further elaborated on how sex-role and sex-trait stereotyping works in television through:

… it (television) reinforces prejudice sex-role stereotypes. These would include the idea that women are supposed to look very pretty, be domestic, have children and then look after them while the man goes out to work, and these kinds of things…Sex-trait stereotypes include the idea that women are more emotional than men, easily flustered, fearful and anxious and other such notions.

Some studies (Abiola 2013; Amobi & Sunday 2012; Prinsloo 2011; Ukata 2010a; Ukata 2010b; Duru 2008; Okunna 1996) have also focused on stereotype portrayal of women in Nollywood film productions. Abiola (2013, p.1) is of the opinion that there is a cultural dimension to the stereotype depictions of women in films. Amobi and Sunday (2012, p.4) identify an aspect of this as consisting in portraying women as:

…lower or lesser beings. Boys and/or men are portrayed as active, aggressive and sexually aggressive persons while women are portrayed as quaint, passive, pretty and incompetent beings.

Okunna (1996, p.1) was particularly worried that such images of women in films are ‘capable of negatively influencing the perception of women among the large audience of Nigerian films.’ For Prinsloo (2011, p.11) the stereotype representation of women in films has the potential of naturalizing patriarchal assumptions about women.

Objectification is one form of stereotype representation of women in films, as Azeez (2010) has observed. Portraying women as sex objects in the media is nothing new, though, as Valdés (2011, p.2) sees the practice as ‘an intricate part of our society.’ With particular reference to the world’s three most prolific and popular film industries films: Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood, Adewoye et al. (2014, p.105) made the following observation:

A critical analysis of the contents of most of the films coming out from the three leading film industries in the world – Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood – clearly reveals the frequent portrayal of women as sex symbols and looking glasses, subtly portrayed to satisfy the erotic gaze or desire of a man. By this frequency of their portrayal as sex objects, women have become systematically and symbolically stereotyped as “homo-erotica” – that is, species of human beings with only sexual values.

The concern in employing stereotypes in the representation of a social group, race, etc, does not just lie in the potentially common associations that such labels are apt to create in audiences about the social group or race in question. In the case of the female gender, objectification de-emphasizes their other attributes. In other words, laying undue emphasis on their sexual attractiveness reduces the woman’s personality to that of a mere sex object thus aggregated other components of her humanity under a single label.
Representation is also about power. The social group that has the means to construct knowledge about others not only possesses power to represent other social groups; that group also appears to have the right argument. With regard to this power to represent, Nigerian films, Azeez (2010, p.200) has pointed out, “position women at the bottom of the power hierarchy in a way that reinforces their domination and suppression.” Using the Nollywood production, August Meeting, Duru (2008, p.74) paints this vivid picture about how power works through representation:

The film portrays men as belonging at the top of the social hierarchy. The men are dominant both in their marriages and in their community. Victor blames his wife for the loss of their son, and as a result he packs his wife’s belongings and sends her back to her parents. Evidently, his dominant position entitles him to throw his wife out and terminate the marriage on his own terms. In the community, men are responsible for maintaining the social order. They have the power to take decisions and regulate the affairs of the community.

This power to restore the social order which Nollywood films seem to reserve exclusively for men is responsible for the unwavering moral gaze that is fixed on the woman in films. Azeez (2010) has in the same study argued that Nigerian films tend to portray women “as evil; people who are wicked, vindictive and unfaithful.” Equally, Adewoye et al., (2014, p.103) citing Okunna (2000, 1996) report that women are usually represented as wayward and of low moral standing, materialistic, lazy, subservient to and dependent on men, causes of family problems, fit for domestic rather than professional and career roles etc.”. Using specific television programmes, Abiola (2013, p.2) provides further insight on this portrayal of women as moral weaklings, people who are always on the wrong side of the moral law:

…women in much of the film industry are framed within a limiting ‘good/bad’ woman paradigm, with the ‘bad woman’ motif resting on the image of the woman-witch. The lack of nuance in the representation of women is a reflection of Nigerian society’s inclination towards shame and condemnation in its moral policing. What television programmes like the popular drama Superstory, or the hugely popular Yoruba-language human interest shows L’Abe Orun (Under the Sky) and now-discontinued Nkan Mbe (Strange Things Abound) that uncover witch covens and instances of sorcery have in common, is stunning moral clarity in the adherence to religiously-derived edicts of good behaviour.

The above author also argues that this is the reason society is ‘quicker to flatten her [the woman’s] personhood and judge her than it would the man at her side (Abiola 2013, p. 2).” In other words, because she has been made the custodian of the social moral order through representation, women are more easily judged morally guilty than men both in the fictional and real social world.

Gender stereotyping in the media, as earlier noted, also takes the form of underrepresentation, in terms of number. Numerical underrepresentation of women in films and other communications tends to present a misleading picture of the numerical strength of women in the society in relation to men. With reference to studies of the American media landscape Harper (2000, p.2) noted:

...women are outnumbered by men on television, by varying amounts...when men and women are present in roughly equal numbers in society, and if anything there are slightly more women. And the statistics make it sound even worse – up to 85 percent of characters on children’s television are male, and in general drama men can outnumber women by three or four to one...a mere fifteen percent of lead roles in action-adventure programmes were female.

The misleading picture this paints, according to the above author, is that ‘there are less women in the world [and] that it is only really men who are capable of taking a lead and being the ‘hero’ (p.2). Basing her argument, in part, on the 1991census where, according to statistics, 49.92% of the population were women, Ms. Christina Anyanwu, a notable Nigerian journalist and publisher/editor-in-chief of the defunct TSM (The Sunday Magazine), was of the view that the way women are represented in the media fails to match their actual numerical strength in the society:
A content analysis of mainstream media in Nigeria reveals one dominant orientation: Women are largely seen and not heard. Their faces adorn newspapers. However, on important national and international issues, they fade out. Even when the news is about them, the story only gains real prominence if there is a male authority figure or newsmaker on the scene. Ask any editor in Lagos, the media centre of Nigeria, and he will argue his paper is issue-oriented, keen on serious news, and gender-blind. That would tend to suggest that whatever makes news gets covered, whoever is involved gets heard. But the reality is that it is not quite so. The definition of news, what makes news, real marketable news in Nigeria inevitably excludes a sizeable chunk of the population, especially women. But from politics to economy, technology, commerce and industry to crime, very few women’s voices are heard in the mainstream media (Anyanwu, 2001, p.4).

Besides films, underrepresentation of women is a general trend in media professional bodies or organizations. In their study of gender representation in communication education and practice in Nigeria, Asong and Batta (2011) discovered that women were underrepresented in five communication professional bodies: the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE), Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) and Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON). Of the total membership of these bodies, 23,444 or 67.23% were men as against 11,428 representing 32.77% who were women. The authors also found that women constituted 32% of the NUJ membership as against 68% male membership. For the NGE, women accounted for 22.16% as against 77.84% male membership. Similarly, women made up only 40% of the membership of the NIPR as against men’s 60% membership. The picture got bleaker with NPAN which has just 3 women or 11.11% as owner of print media in the country as against 24 male representing 88.81% who own media houses. Finally, in APCON, women made up 17.46% of the membership as against men’s 82.54%. And this is despite the fact that female constituted a majority (60.09%) of the students of communication-related disciplines across 28 universities surveyed.

Though the negative representation of women in Nigerian films has, in the main, been attributed to the prevailing patriarchal disposition of this society (Adewoye et al., 2014; Azeez, 2010), there is the argument that such a representation tends to be at variance with concrete social reality. Abiola (2013, p.3) believes that the “images of the ‘sexy’, the economically independent young woman and the woman witch remain out of sync with the social realities we live.” Equally, there is the concern that the way a social group as women is represented in the media could have far-reaching effects on the self-perception of such a group, the way they are perceived by the rest of the society and their general wellbeing. A media form like film, it is feared, could create and/or reinforce cultural structures that could keep women a disadvantaged, marginalised and oppressed group. For instance, with reference to success in sports, Lopiano (2007, p.4) observes that media coverage is critical to how much sportswomen thrive in their careers:

The media shapes the public’s perceptions of the accomplishments of women playing sports and whether women in general can be strong, confident and highly skilled. The media also shapes the dreams and aspirations of girls. Boys grow up watching television, bombarded by heroic and confident images of themselves playing sports and being revered for their accomplishments. They know they are expected to play sports and are encouraged to do so by everyone around them. Girls do not receive these messages. Television carriage is also a critical ingredient for the success of professional women’s sports and competitive professional sport salaries and purses. If women’s pro sports cannot tap into big advertising dollars, athlete salaries and purses will continue to be depressed and the financial success of women’s pro leagues and tours will be more difficult to achieve.

Brock (2009) who examined the images of women in Nigerian films in the aspects of sexual objectification, social constructions of gender, modernity, religion/morality, beauty and love which he compare to the reality of life for women in the country found that “the imagery of women in media significantly impacts how viewers perceive women in Nigeria” and that the “images which are being portrayed result from the influences in Nigerian society” (Brock, p.1).
As the entertainment factory that is Nollywood continues to churn out films, the issue of how race, gender or any other social group is represented will continue to attract the attention of cultural analysts. It is this analysis of how race is portrayed in three Nollywood films that the rest of this article takes up.

**White Hunters: a story of the hunter and the hunted**

Produced in 2010 by Simony Productions, *White Hunters* is the story of young Nigerian women who are determined to date and marry only ‘white’ men. For these ‘white’ hunters, it makes no difference the man’s age and the country of origin as long as the man, the target, is ‘white.’ Women who have mastered the game such as Tabitha (played by Ini Edo) can, with little effort, string along two or more relatively young ‘white’ men and coolly contract a bigamous marriage with none of her dupes being any the wiser. Less successful and unlucky ones such as Pamela and Peggy, played by Mercy Johnson and Funke Akindele respectively need to work very hard indeed with sometimes nothing much to show for all the hard work. Mercy Johnson’s character could only manage a geriatric British while Funke Akindele’s character made do with a garlic-eating Indian and a stingy Chinese. Such is the desperation of the women to snag a ‘white’ man that they stop at nothing: scheming, cat fights, ritual sacrifices; any weapon is easily deployed in this warfare and no price is considered too high. Pamela, for instance, buries a baby alive on the orders of a dibia (witch doctor) for power to be irresistible to ‘white’ men. For the women, this is a sacrifice well worth making as the reward is not only the real or imagined luxurious lifestyle but also membership of an exclusive club of women who are dating or married to ‘white’ men. But the day of reckoning comes sooner than later for the these desperate ‘white’ hunters: Tabitha’s bigamy is exposed and she lost both men; Pamela goes sex mad and jumps every strange man she sees while Peggy succumbs to a strange, debilitating flesh-eating disease that destroys her two feet.

**Poor ’black’/affluent ‘white’ binary in the Nigerian popular culture: origin and history**

As race is the key theme which the text *White Hunters* portrays, it is important to ask and answer questions regarding the varied ways knowledge about the ‘black’ and ‘white’ races is constructed as well as how the relationship between both races is depicted in a hugely popular cultural form like Nollywood films. A good starting point is, perhaps, to look at how race is understood in the text. In classifying the human races, *White Hunters* adopts a binary that sees the human race as either ‘black’ or ‘white’. This simplistic categorization of the races in the film also captures the way the subject is generally understood by the average Nigerian. Only two races exist: ‘black’ and ‘white.’ The movie’s soundtrack by Shedrach John captures this prevalent view of race in Nigeria: *It doesn’t matter where he comes from, he could be English, American, even Indian, an Asian; just as long as his skin is white, it is okay.* To these attributes of ‘whiteness’ one can also add curly or straight hair.

For these ‘white’ hunters who want nothing to do with ‘black’ men, ‘white’ race also equals riches untold and marrying one, but especially if they work for a multinational oil company, represents a gateway to a luxurious lifestyle and an escape route from poverty. In contemporary Nigeria, it is easy to explain the association of ‘whitemen’ and luxurious lifestyle. In the country’s history, it was colonialism along with the spread of Christianity that brought about increased contact between the Nigerian and the ‘white’ race. Prior to this period, the ‘whiteman’ was mainly a stuff of myth for most people in the country particularly people in the land-locked areas. In those days also, trade and commerce had meant that coastal dwellers had more dealings and therefore more contact with the ‘whiteman.’ Though the trans-Saharan trade routes ensured a much earlier contact between the Nigerian and the outside world, that contact, however, was mainly between the Moslems of Northern Nigeria and Arabs of North Africa. With the introduction of colonialism and Christianity, what was once a relationship at a distance between the Nigerian and the ‘white’ race became much closer as ‘whites’ working as colonial administrators, missionaries, business people, embassy staffers etc, began to live among the Nigerian population. The association of ‘white’ race and affluence is due in part to this erasure of distance between the races.

In the colonial Nigeria, the colonial masters lived in big mansions and had their every need catered to by the Nigerian domestic both men and women. For the Nigerian man more used to being served by his wife and children in his own home and the Nigerian woman who would most probably see her husband as a lord and master ruling his household with an iron fist, the job of yardman, cook, driver and other forms of menial work, which were the capacity in which the Nigerian was largely employed, changed irrevocably the relationship of the sexes in the country. For the Nigerian man, the demeaning jobs, the economic emasculation, marked the beginning of the symbolic castration of his manhood in the eyes of his woman. ‘White’ men, who could be Lebanese, Indians, British etc, were treated as lords and masters of the Nigerian. There was also more likelihood of the Nigerian be discriminated against if he applied for a loan or a job in
International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Reviews Vol.5 No.1, February, 2015; p.1 – 12, (ISSN: 2276-8645)

his own country while Indians, Lebanese or the British (the 'whites') would have no such problem, (see Awolowo, 1967).

Nigeria may have gained independence more than five decades since but the practice of favouring the 'whiteman' at the expense of the Nigerian in the economic sphere, in particular, is still very much alive and well. Award of contracts to the 'whiteman' to execute certain federal or even state government projects, where expertise is sometimes easily available locally, is a touchy issue. The rich 'whiteman' and poor 'blackman' association which this practice helps to sustain in the popular imagination and by extension popular discourses is further seen in the situation where the 'whites' that work on construction such projects as roads and bridges are chauffeur-driven around in air-conditioned cars by the Nigerian men. For the 'black' drivers for whom driving a new or 'clean' car (as such cars are popularly called in Nigeria) might lull into a false sense of importance, the reality check comes soon enough, at the end of the work day, when they leave the company car behind and retire to the servants' quarters, trudge home or take the bus.

As regards association of the 'whiteman' and oil company wealth in contemporary Nigerian popular culture, following the discovery and exploitation of fossil fuel in commercial quantity, plus the general expansion of the economy, 'whitemen' of diverse nationalities now come to Nigeria for varied reasons that can be work-related, business or casual visit. Some 'whites' have equally made Nigeria their second, if not, permanent home. But it is the 'white' men who work for multi-national oil companies that are the targets of the 'black' women in the film. A non-Nigerian may not fully understand the significance of oil companies in the constructions of real or fictional accounts about the country. An oil company, for the unemployed in the country, is the ultimate employer and to actually work for one, a dream come true. Even for the employed at both federal and state levels not forgetting most private companies that have yet to implement minimum wages recommended by the central government, low wages and runaway inflation have combined to transform oil companies into an El Dorado. An ordinary gateman in an oil company is believed to earn more than a university professor. If this is the case, one can only imagine what the highly skilled expats earn! A chance of working for an oil company or of knowing one who does is, therefore, a passport to a good life and salaries that are second only to those paid to Nigerian politicians or A-list footballers who play for rich European premiership sides. Underlie the actions of black women in the film? who pursue 'white' men, appear to make between skin colour and affluence, obvious more contemporary fact, this association of the 'white' skin with wealth appears to have a historical dimension. The subject that draws on the notion of skin colour

Beyond the Nigerian angle in the account of the association of 'white' skin and wealth, Mcclintock’s (in Hall 2003) historical analysis of Pears soap advertisements provides an insight on the conception of skin colour in the 18th century England which appears to underlie the actions of the 'black' women who hunt for 'whitemen' in the film, White Hunters. Apart from being a feature of the 'benighted races marked by God’s disfavour’ (Hall 2003, p.281), a sun-darkened skin marked one off as someone who laboured outdoors for a living as opposed to the elite’s alabaster white skin, a feature of a class that did not have to earn a living by working under the sun and with their hands. Skin colour was thus used as a marker of difference and of class and privilege. In Nigeria, the situation in which ‘white’ skin has come to be associated with working in air-conditioned offices, being driven around in air-conditioned cars and living in air-conditioned houses as opposed to the ‘black’ domestic that work outdoors as gardeners and general handy people, the picture contains all the basic elements in the above author’s analysis of wealth and skin colour.

In other words, the ‘white’ hunters’ idea of race is pretty much along this same line and their reason for despising black men and disdaining the black women who date and marry them are not too far removed from this idea of a link between wealth and the colour of the skin. Beyond this dimension, the discourses of racial difference in the text cross with another: sexuality.

'Black’ sextop/wealthy ‘white’ man

White Hunters taps into a common white fantasy and stereotype about 'black’ women’s sexuality. From the early encounter between Europe and West Africa and its aftermath that was the slave trade and slavery to European colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century and the migration of black Africans to Europe and North America after WW11 (Hall ibid, p.239), ‘whites’ have been known to be obsessed with the sexuality of the black race. Anatomical differences between the 'blacks’ and the ‘whites’ such as the size of the penis in men and buttocks in women are popular in this analysis of difference. One such well documented early example is the nineteenth century case of the ‘black’ African woman, Saartje Baartman, nicknamed the Hottentot Venus, whose body in life was objectified and displayed in theatres across such European capitals as London and Paris by ‘white’ men for their visual/sexual pleasure and in death reduced to an exotic mass of sex organs to be taken apart, catalogued and graphically illustrated and analyzed by 'white’ men under the cover of scientific research. Saartje Baartman’s backside had also provided a large
part of this erotic pleasure for the mainly ‘white’ male audiences in these theatres in Europe. *White Hunters* also plugs into this stereotype of the ‘black’ woman’s sexuality. For the ‘black’ women in *White Hunters*, none of whom is engaged in any form of paid employment, there is not much else on their minds except landing a ‘white’ man. And so for the visual pleasure of the prize catch, the ‘white’ man, these same features in black woman’s sexuality are deliberately emphasized in the film. Thus we see these women perched precariously on their stiletto heels and spilling out of their cleavage-baring, skimpy and tight-fitting clothes, all symbolizing their sexiness and availability. And, in fact, with the women, it is sex on the tap; it can happen anywhere: backseat of a car, hotel rooms, living room sofas etc. There are possible explanations of the source of this image of the oversexed, lascivious and eager-for-it black woman in the text. One is the stereotype in the nineteenth century pro-slavery racialized discourse on Africa popular among American and European slave-owning classes. Citing Fredrickson (1987) on the subject, Hall (2003, p.243) writes: ‘Africa was and always had been seen as a scene of… licentiousness.’ Nigerian popular cultural producers have appropriated this racist conception of Africa and projected it unto African cities. Thus from the colonial era when cities first emerged in Nigeria and then went on to become a subject of representation in popular culture (see Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana*) to the present day Nigeria, the city has become synonymous with scenes of debauchery characterized by near total freedom from restraint and constraint of any sort. The same picture is then contrasted with the rural village which is depicted as a scene of innocence and the last bastion of the traditional African values. In popular discourses, the great store that is set by female virginity symbolizes this purity. In the *White Hunters*, this pure/corrupt binary is seen encoded in the characters of the country girl, Elsie and the city girl Pamela. Elsie in the story has come from the village to the city to visit her childhood friend, Pamela, whom city living has turned into a whore and a desperate hunter of ‘white’ men.

**White Hunters and the question of power**

The way power operates through the text, *White Hunters*, also makes clear the two-sided dimension of representation and stereotyping. As Taylor and Willis (2002, p.43) remind us with reference to this ambivalent side of stereotyping: …subordinate groups are not the only ones to be stereotyped; those who hold the reins of power in society are also subjected to representations of themselves which have been decided upon by others… Power is not the exclusive preserve of one race, power circulates instead, in other words. Hall (2003, p.261) makes a similar observation in relation to power and its operation while also suggesting a more helpful way of conceiving the idea of power:

...power cannot be captured by thinking exclusively in terms of force or coercion: power also seduces, solicits, induces, wins consent. It cannot be thought of in terms of one group having a monopoly of power, simply radiating power downwards on a subordinate group by an exercise of simple domination from above. It includes the dominant and the dominated within its circuits.

And so in *White Hunters* fictional characters from neither the ‘white’ or ‘black’ race have it their own way all the time. The ‘black’ women in the film are not entirely helpless or exploited, for instance. In fact, in Tabitha’s lack of deference to her ‘white’ boyfriends, the absence of any silly sentimentality and the practical business-like approach she brings to her relationships, in her sole objective which is to exploit her ‘white’ men for her material and sexual pleasure, one sees features comparable to the 1970s North American black film genre that Hall (2003) described as ‘revenge’ films. The importance of these films for African American audiences lies, as (Hall, p. 271) explains, in the fact that the ‘playing field is levelled’ and ‘black’ heroes triumph over ‘Whitey’ and they ‘get away with it.’ This is no longer the colonial but the independent Nigeria, after all, and Tabitha is well aware that power dynamics have shifted quite a bit. Aware of her power, Tabitha is, therefore, not the stereotype overawed black woman who gawks at and is tongue-tied before the god-like ‘white’ man; she is an assertive free spirit. We hear her tell Balack, her fiancée, who has just proposed to have their wedding in Germany, that if he reneges on his promise, she will ‘dump his arse and board the next flight back to Nigeria.’ Tabitha does not only contract a bigamous marriage with two ‘white’ men, she is also having an affair with a third. She makes her ‘white’ husband carry her shopping basket on his head, drives different cars, owns beautiful houses and all the while her white men pick up the bills. Even when Tabitha’s duplicity she is discovered, all that the thoroughly used Balack could do is to make the impotent threat: ‘you’ll be hearing from my lawyers very soon.’ Tabitha’s fictional character could have easily been a character from one of the North American revenge films by African Americans that Hall talked about, the reverse of the old stereotype of the ever deferential negro woman who is forever mindful not to upset the applecart and endanger her source of bread and butter.

Contrary also to the representation of the ‘white’ man who is invulnerable to the power of black magic, ‘white’ men in this film are very much so. Together with the black women who hunt them for their financial
power, ‘whites’ succumb to the power of the dibia or the sorcerer. Thus, Peggy could, through black magic, switch her target’s love from his wife to herself. Thereafter, the spell-bound ‘white’ man drives out his wife and becomes Peggy’s personal zombie: handing over to her large sums of money or postponing crucial work-related overseas trips because Peggy simply tells him not to travel. In a scene reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night Dream, the fictional character, O’Brien, finds himself helplessly in love with a woman he is seeing for the first time in his life. Elsie, the character O’Brien falls for, has just applied Pamela’s medical power on her face at the same time that O’Brien rings the door bell. And just as the dibia has predicted that the powder has the power to cause the first ‘white’ man she sets eyes on to fall for her, as Elsie opens the door, O’Brien stands no chance. He falls violently in love with Elsie he has hardly looked at before and he will do also anything to marry her: hands over to Elsie a key to brand new car, the deed to a property he has purchased for her, and other ludicrous actions the power of black magic subjects O’Brien to. Direct opposite of earlier representation of the ‘white’ race in the Nigerian popular culture in which the ‘whiteman’ would most probably be depicted as ignorant of African cultures and traditions (see Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God), this infantilization and rendering impotent the power (financial and cognitive) of the ‘white’ man is quite novel and a turn-around in the popular discourses of the ‘white’ race. The ‘white’ man here is symbolically stripped of even the power of the choice of who to marry. And the black magic never loses its power either. O’Brien marries the country girl, Elsie, whose presence he has barely acknowledged before then though he sees her all time in Pamela’s house. It is therefore most unproductive to see fictional characters as Tabitha’s exclusively through the narrow lens some feminist film scholars whose works were reviewed above (see Adewoye et al 2014; Abiola 2013; Azeez 2010) have been focusing on Nollywood films in their analyses of representation of gender in such films.

**John Bull My Son: a story of inter-racial sexual relationship**

In John Bull My Son, the producer takes on the theme of inter-sexual relationship between the ‘black’ and ‘white’ races. Pius, the servant, played by the popular actor, Chinedu Ikedieze, is seduced by his ‘white’ employer. She falls pregnant; something she has tried to achieve unsuccessfully for five years with her husband. Nine months later she gives birth to a black baby. Her husband shocked at the sight of the baby challenges his wife: ‘how could this have happened, a black baby, impossible.’ Disclaiming paternity, the ‘white’ husband abandons mother and baby in hospital. So starts the difficult relationship between father and son. Meanwhile, the issue of Pius has to be settled. The servant has become, for Mr. and Mrs. Philips, (the ‘white’ couple played by Asians) a constant reminder as the wife’s adultery and of Mr. Philips’ inadequacy as a man. Pius framed and accused of stealing, is sentenced to serve time at the Kirikiri maximum security prison. Meanwhile the baby, John, played by Osita Iheme, another popular Nollywood actor, has grown to become a handful: stealing, forcing his father at gunpoint to hand over to him large sums of money and the rest. He does not understand why his father hates him so much while with his mother he can get away with murder. John runs away from home. Meanwhile, Pius completes his time in prison and a chance meeting brings him and John together. Pius only discovers he is John’s biological father when he goes back to settle scores with his former employers in John’s company.

**John Bull My Son and the sub-text of Gollywogs and lily ‘white’ woman**

As a racist discourse of the consequences of ‘racial pollution’, John Bull My Son could have been produced by an early nineteenth century anti-abolitionist white slave owner and film maker. It taps into the well-known, deep-seated fear of white people regarding interbreeding and racial pollution (Hall, 1997, p.243). While these days the uppity black man who has sex with the ‘white’ boss’ wife may not be one calculated to create a moral panic or be reason enough for lynching black men in the American Deep South, this fear of miscegenation that is seen to be the result of the transgression of racial boundaries expressed in the text has not completely disappeared with ‘white’ people everywhere. The black teenager Stephen Lawrence’s high profile killing in the 1990s in the UK and other racially motivated attacks on blacks remain a stark reminder that racist ideologies are not easily dislodged. Lawrence had died at the hands of a group of ‘white’ boys because he was seen with a ‘white’ girl.

In portraying the house servant’s relationship with the mistress of the house the film producer appeared have done little else than recycle and legitimate more subtle and persistent racist ideology manifest in racist language and images that are used to demean and stereotype ‘black’ man in the western media. We see a dimension of this when Mrs. Philips orders Pius: ‘be a good boy and get me a drink.’ This practice of treating an adult ‘black’ man as a child or the infantilization and symbolic castration of black man dates back to the era of plantation slavery in the United States. Referring to a grown ‘black’ man as ‘boy’ was a way through which the ‘white slave master exercised his authority over the black male slave’ as well as a means
of literally and symbolically ‘depriving him of all the attributes of responsibility, paternal and familial authority’ (Hall 2003, p.263). And so the mistress of the house may have pursued Pius to the servant quarters with the sole purpose of ‘getting laid’; she is at the same time not ready to accord the servant the status of a man. Pius is fitted only to be a servant and a penis.

In depicting the character of the ‘black’ boy, John, the film maker only managed to turn him into a poster child for the evils of miscegenation. This is simply because on to this character is encoded some of the usual qualities racist ‘white’ writers mainly associate with the character of the ‘black’ man: lying, stubborn, uncivilized and ungrateful savage on whom the kind ministrations and ‘civilizing’ influence of a close relationship with a civilised race will always be wasted. John can only reward the woman, who has chosen to raise him at the expense of her comfortable marriage to a husband from her own race, with lies and stealing. And all this when John does not even possess the most important redeeming quality which makes children born under the same circumstances less of a bitter pill to swallow for the white parent: no visible physical evidence that a racial dilution occurred; John is 100% ‘black’ African and a midget to boot like his father! What is the source of the regime of representation that could have informed the use of the two midgets in the text as Mrs. Philips’ object of sexual interest and maternal love. One possible source could easily have been the 1927 racist illustration by Lawson Wood which he titled ‘A girl and her Golliwog.’ The same message about race in Lawson’s illustration relating to a girl caring for her ugly dark-faced golliwog is implicit in some scenes in the film: a maternally inclined and loving ‘white’ woman, faced with an uncertain future yet determinedly cuddling closely to her bosom an extremely ugly ‘black’ baby for whom even a biological mother will be pushed to evince love.

‘The other stereotype of the ‘black’ man which even the normally non-reticent Mrs. Philips is shy articulating is the size of the ‘black’ man’s manhood. In their pre-coital conversation, she tells Pius she hears ‘black’ men are good bed.’ This stereotype of the ‘black’ man with a huge ‘black penis’ is one that the ‘whites’ have for long been fixated on. In his analysis of popular images in the British media, Hall (2003) used the image of the British athlete Lindford Christie to illustrate this ‘white’ fascination or obsession with the size of the ‘black’ man’s sex organs. Some British tabloid press had, on the day after Christie won a gold medal in the 100 metre race at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games emphasized, not this landmark achievement by Christie, but had focused instead on his manhood which they described as ‘lunchbox.’ Hall (p.231) identified and traced one early source of this ‘white’ fixation with the ‘black’ man’s penis size to the French writer, Michael Cournot who had written that ‘Four negroes with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral.’ And so while Mrs. Philips in the text could have had a real desire for a baby, this desire cannot be totally separated from this issue of ‘white’ fixation with black sexuality. One could support this position by arguing that Mrs. Philips could well have sought out other ‘white’ male expatriates to do the job. Also, the assessing look to which Mr. Philips subjects the housekeeper as he goes about his chores and which becomes more penetrating after the master of the house learns that the house servant and a midget into the bargain had fathered their baby, a feat he had been incapable of accomplishing himself, is not unconnected with this general penis-size envy the ‘white’ are thought to harbour toward the ‘black’ man.

Brain Masters: The story
Produced in 2006 by P. Collins & Associates Ltd, Brain Masters 1&2, is the story of a single Nigerian man, Martins, an economic migrant to the United States of America and one of the thousands of young ‘black’ Africans who have gone west in search of better opportunities. With no proper papers Martins takes the same route that many young ‘black’ men in his position resort to in order to survive in the west: marry an older ‘white’ woman. With his fraudulent younger brothers back home (played by Iheme and Ikedieze) making money and stealing. And all the time not ready to accord the servant the status of a man. Pius is fitted only to be a servant and a penis.

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The powerful cougar and the neutered gigolo

Martins’ and Nancy’s relationship is a study in power asymmetry. Safe and secure in the knowledge that her country, the United States of America, represents, for mostly young male economic migrants from ‘Third World’ countries, the idea of paradise on earth, Nancy does not need to exert too much energy to win any argument with Martins. She knows she will never be short of eager young males, who faced with uncertain economic future in a strange country, will marry women twice their age just to survive. The couple’s arguments invariably revolve around the issue of the money Martins is sending home. Nancy’s cold and emotionless demeanour when these arguments erupt is born out of that confident knowledge that she is the one who wields the real power in the relationship.

As a discourse of racial power, Brain Masters is a story of total dependency and total power. Nancy’s power over Martins is total. Martins has neither a work permit nor the right to open a bank account. As an emasculated gigolo, not even the sexual prowess for which his race is legendary could buy him any kind of leverage with his wife. Martins, therefore, has to sue for peace after each argument session or vent his frustrations and impotent rage by swearing. The following conversation between husband and wife (after a telephone call from Martins’ brothers in Nigeria) is an example of the pattern that much of the couple’s discussions take:

Martins’ dishonest younger brothers have not made life any easier for him by their constant demands for more money. The brothers have, in fact, been swindling him, a fact Martins never quite managed to figure out for himself while still in the USA. It is not until he comes back home to Nigeria and his village that he is confronted by proof of his brothers’ dishonesty: his healthy mother who comes out to greet him and who obviously is very far from death’s door contrary to what the fraudulent twins have led him to believe. Nancy, who from the outset, is sceptical about Martins’ mother being sick in the hospital, is proved right. Thus, the film maker plays into one of the diehard stereotypes of the intelligent ‘white’ and the big but stupid ‘black’ man. And so Martins may be a grown ‘black’ man but he also still an uninformed child needs to be guided by his ‘white’ wife as he is clearly incapable of intelligent reasoning.

Conclusion

The Nigerian film maker, like his counterparts in major film industries around the world, may never completely avoid the occasional reliance on stereotypes in constructing popular knowledge about the races. Notwithstanding, the Nollywood film maker who is conscious of the politics of representation, can, in representing the races, adopt some strategies through which he will counter or reverse these ready-to-use images from the racialised regime of representation in western media. One such possible strategy, reverse racial stereotype, which as already noted, is encoded in Tabitha’s character. Tabitha, instead of being the exploited, is the exploiter and she gets away with it too. Nollywood film maker could equally adopt the same strategy in representing the ‘black man.’ Rather than the subordinate and servile role of houseboy or the economically disempowered gigolo who, to get by in the west, contracts an emasculating relationship with aging ‘white’ women as seen in Pius’ and Martins’ characters respectively, the playing fields could be leveled and the roles reversed. It will be an interesting change to see a poor ‘white’ man who is a gigolo as well, for example. This way, the power imbalance in favour of the ‘white’ race in popular representation of the races, will become increasingly undermined if not entirely overturned. Peggy in White Hunters has discovered to her shock and acute disappointment that her ‘white’ man, her Chinese date, could only pay for his own meal on their date and has been totally oblivious of Peggy’s agitated search through her bag to get together sufficient money to pay for her own meal. While it is not strange for friends or even dates to go Dutch in the western cultures, Peggy’s date’s total oblivion to her situation is contrary to her expectation that ‘whitemen’ have tons of money which they will only be too happy to spend on sexy ‘black’ women. By adopting these strategies, the Nollywood film maker will be engaged in the struggle over meaning or the politics of representation. Equally, Nollywood film makers, like their African American counterparts of the 1960s and ‘70s, will be creating their own revenge film genre while giving their ‘black’ audiences in Nigeria and elsewhere a more contemporary popular discourse of race.
References


