ADDRESSING CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES AROUND FOSTERING THROUGH FILMS. A STUDY OF SELECT NOLLYWOOD FILMS

Nwofor, Stella Uchenna
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
su.nwofor-molokwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Child fostering is an age long socio-cultural practice in West Africa which has remained beneficial to individuals, families and the communities at large. It has served as a medium of strengthening family/friendship ties and also as an alternative plan to lessen the burdens of child care for low income families. In recent times, this practice has been greatly demonized, having being associated with child migration, as well as all forms of child abuse and molestation. In Nigeria today, this has remained a very topical issue, as cases of abuse of the rights of the child are being reported by the media frequently as an integral part of child fostering. Consequently, this practice is been discouraged and is almost phasing out. This study aimed at examining two Nollywood films in order to evaluate the various dimensions and outcomes of fostering, paying closer attention to the functional indices as regards the media treatment of this critical social issue and its overall effects on the people's perception and attitude. Applying the qualitative research method, using the purposive sampling technique, these films were selected and content analyzed. Using Ervin Goffman's Theory of Framing in media studies for critical interrogation of the issues, findings revealed that there are two narratives- the positive and negative outcomes of fostering. However, the positive outcomes outweigh the negative outcomes; nevertheless, the media has paid more attention to the promotion of the negative narratives, thus creating an unconscious sense of paranoia in the masses.

Keywords: Child, development, Film, Nollywood

Introduction

Childhood is a crucial stage in the life of every individual because it is a period of absolute dependence, socialization and training. As described by the United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), it is "the time for children to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an

extended community of caring adults (1). Though, specially characterized by rapid mental, physical, emotional and social development of the child, vulnerabilities to negative influences abound. According to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,

> Rearing, training and nurturing must be in the forefront of every affair concerning the child. His specific right to education, to survival and development, freedom of association and peaceful assembly of thought, conscience and religion, privacy, movement subject to parental control etc. have been entrenched to dignify and empower the child even if under aged. (112)

In order to harness their full potentials, children need to grow and thrive in a safe, nurturing and inclusive environment. The Care for Child Development (CCD) observed that "many children do not reach their full human potentials because they live in very poor families in developing countries. They do not receive adequate nutrition, care and early opportunities to learn" (1). This negates the Child Rights Act of 2003 which mandates that every child has a right to survival and development, movement, freedom from discrimination, health, parental care, protection and maintenance, education, freedom of conscience and religion and so on.

Across all ages, cultures and societies, frantic efforts are always being made to improve on possible ways to facilitate and improve on every facet of child development; owing largely to the rapidly evolving nature of children as well as the delicate nature of their being. These efforts are rooted in the belief that the future of humanity lies in their hands and is determined by how well they are prepared for it. As Canice Nwosu puts it, "the child is the future of the nation, the bedrock of a nation's potential growth; therefore, his rights, survival and proper development must be adequately guaranteed by the wind of change" (48). In preserving its existence, every community and its people adapt themselves to their clime and adopt ways that suit them. In many African cultures, child development has remained a communal enterprise. Both the biological parents and the entire community played significant roles in the training of every child. Most modern African societies developed out of their communal living. Communities pulled resources together to train bright pupils whose parents were not financially capable; successful traders, artisans, academics, clergies, etc were known to statutorily take up fostering roles. Overtime, as

communities became too big, this practice significantly declined as families and knit kin became cycles of a child's upbringing. In West Africa, the undeniable legacy of communality is fostering. Ifeyinwa Mbakogu describes this socio-cultural norm as a strategy which ensured "social protection that balances care and support for families with limited resources, experiencing unforeseen setbacks; or requiring household support" (1). This phenomenon allowed for broader and more socially aware youths and it fostered interconnectivity among a people. A Nigerian adage in local parlance says '*ijeawele, onye aghana nwanne ya*' loosely translates to, 'in the journey of life, no one should neglect his kin.' This adage isn't just a saying that, it was strongly, and still is a working philosophy, almost assuming one cultural practice that could have sufficed as a people's nature. This adage found its root in a practice: communal living. But population growth, evolutionary development of urban cities, expansion of traditional trades and technological advancement invariably gave birth to migration, the need for employment opportunities, need for domestic supports, and most importantly, the conscious development of a viable economic model that could sustain a people's egalitarianism. Hence, fostering became an all-purpose solution to the many challenges that social and human developments created.

In recent times, child fostering has manifested in diverse forms. Apart from its function as a medium of socialization, extending kinship ties, apprenticeship and education alliances, the most prevalent is domestic fostering. Okunola and Ikuomola, declares that fostering, "has taken a new dimension in present day urban areas of west Africa where many working families take children as domestic servants, maids and baby tenders in exchange for their maintenance, training and token wages" (497). This; in most cases exposes the victims to harmful working conditions and maltreatments that rob them of their childhood. Typically, most child domestic workers are presumably subjected to work for very long hours and are deprived of the basic luxuries of life. In some cases, they function as housekeepers, nannies and cooks at the same time. Afolabi Muyiwa posits that, "most housemaids do not attend any school. While their age mates, peers and colleagues are in school, they are at home working in a household that is not their own" (3). Therefore, they are being marginalised and dehumanized. She further explains that;

> Apart from missing formal education, these housemaids also lack
> the requisite parental   training and tutelage which children of

their age receive from their parents. House maids often leave their parents at a period when they should be learning moral values, etiquette, and norms of society from their parents at home. They therefore grow up as unbalanced, innately deficient youth. Housemaids are also exposed to such crimes as sexual abuse, rape, maltreatment, oppression, etc. (3).

On the contrary, many cases of fostering had recorded success stories. The working class found help in mutually beneficial relationships through fostering; expanding business owners trained apprentices through fostering; clergies funded pupils' education and helped them achieve their aspirations through fostering; disadvantaged village children got private scholarships to urban schools, sometimes overseas, through fostering, etc. Many successful business moguls in the Eastern part of Nigeria today are products of fostering. As is tenable with most African families, every member of the family makes contributions to the collective sustenance of the family: Parents provide for the family, older children babysit, prepare meals, and often, children exclusively do house chores (sweeping the house, doing dishes, laundry, etc.). According to Okunola R. and Ikuomola A., "children are significant aspects of the African family vis-a-vis work which is seen as an integral part of their growing up" (494). The invaluable contributions of children are seen as part of the way they are practically trained and equipped for life as adults. Fostering is an all-inclusive practical act of child raising, different from role modelling or mentoring that could sometimes be limited to words.

Child fostering however has been conceived from two different perspectives. The first school of thought sees it as detrimental to the child's development and wellbeing. According to Abutima, Theophilus, "children are at greater risk when they are separated from their families due to the assumption that the needs, interest and right of children are best guaranteed within the confines of an institutionalised family or under the surveillance of parents"(6). In support of this, Jan and Irma proclaim that, "learning to cope with numerous hardships and anxieties created by settling into a new environment can create psychological distress with long-term consequences also for physical health and mortality" (814) Conversely, the other school of thought believe that the family is not always a safe haven for the protection of the child. This is because, "there are instances where children are deprived and maltreated in familial settings" (6). Unlike the popular narrative, some children are exposed to unpleasant domestic treatments at home due to

poverty and the family's economic disposition. Such children are exposed to different kinds of menial jobs such as hawking, street begging, car washing, and shoe shinning in order to support their families. These jobs oftentimes, does not afford them the opportunity to be in school and even expose them to dangers and abuses such as rape, accidents and untimely death, thereby, making the choice of fostering a better option in the best interest of the child.

In contemporary cities in Nigeria, there are increasing number of Police cases bothering on domestic and child abuse. These cases have multiple dimensions to them: while fewer cases of parental child abuse are reported, there is a disturbing surge in foster relationships abuses. Alarming gory images of brutality, body parts dismembering, life threatening injuries, and occasionally, inhumane tortures that lead to death of minors (presumably fosterlings) have variously been circulated in both traditional and the new media. As the system of fostering in traditional societies relied heavily on moral codes, verbal agreement and often, no written contractual, legally-binding or enforceable deal, some individuals exploited it. Reports heard and read are that of cruel treatment of minors by their caregivers. Also, there were few cases of fosterlings conniving with criminals to harm, defraud or destroy their benefactors.

Each new case in the media often triggers public outcry, pressuring law enforcement agencies into action, but soon, another case would take centre stage, diverting attention. Now systematically, fostering is gradually being negated. These unfortunate scenarios are captured, exaggerated and regularly presented in Nollywood movies, often as the new normal about fostering. Unfortunately, these negative narratives have provided unending story lines for movie producers. The audiences have gradually become used to these reports and the endless number of films they have inspired; prompting debates on what should or could be done to reduce these abuses and if possible, stop them. This task needs understanding, in-depth exposition on: what really is fostering and its variants; what could be responsible for the increasing spate of violence against children, who adults ought naturally to help nurture, how was the practice in the past and how did we get to this phase? The negative presentations have led to calls and campaigns for the abolition of fostering, not examining the rationale behind sudden demonization of a once noble practice. Bathing is pivotal to babies' healthy living; clean warm water is traditionally used after which a clean baby is preserved and the resulting dirty water is discarded.

However, situations sometimes arise that compare with discarding a precious baby with the dirty water it was washed with. One of such situations is the negation of fostering because of its abuse by some people. As one of the most reliable agents of social change in many societies, films are regularly made and released to achieve predetermined ends. This then necessitates the question: what ends inform movies that overtly negates fostering as a certain path to evil as presented in some of these films? The Nigerian movie industry (Nollywood) constantly releases movies around fostering and domestic issues with many of the themes bothering on the negativity of the act of fostering. With a good knowledge of the media and public perception building, this work sets out to examine effects of what is presented and how it could be measured.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the theory of framing in media studies as propounded by Ervin Goffman in 1974. Framing is a communicative tool used to prioritize issues and make the audience think about their effects. It is based on the idea of how the media base an issue within a particular field of meaning which plays an important role in people's decision making procedure. This concept was first posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972, who defined Psychological frames as a "spatial and temporary bounding of set of interactive messages" (197). According to Olasunkanmi Arowolo, the media framing theory suggests "that how something is presented to the audience (called the frame), influences the choice people make about how to process the information" (1). Goffman's work on Frame analysis is simply an insight into the management of impressions and images.

Framing focus on how media draws the public's eye to specific topics-setting agenda and taking a step further to create a frame, through which the audience will comprehend such information. Mass media actively set the frames of reference that viewers or readers use to interpret and discuss public events. Media frames according o Gamson and Modigliani is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events... (143) . It contrasts the concept of rational choice theory which states that people always try to make the most rational choices open to them. Frames are pointers that direct the audience meaning making system and in effect, hijack the sensibilities of the audience as to what to think about a particular issue and the degree of importance to attach to the images or frames

presented. Media frames usually suggest meanings through selective representations. As described by Ardevol- Abreu, "frames draw attention to some aspects of reality at the expense of others..." (424).

Filmmakers as agents of meaning creation, utilizes this theory in the treatment of societal issues to put forward perspectives which they want to explore and emphasize on, thus, having control over the audience's perception, judgement and feelings. They choose between the alternatives of telling the negative or positive dimensions in order to suit their purpose.

Nollywood And Social Change

The role of mass media for social change cannot be over-emphasized. In this era of digitization and the advancement of technology, mass media has reduced the world to a global village making information transmission possible within a split second. Through the means of the traditional and new media, the projection and addressing of bugging issues in the society has been made easier. It has paved way for more social awareness and radical changes in the social-cultural, political, economic and religious outlook. The media by way of operation has a way of casting a spell on its audience, thus, influencing their perceptions. According to Virginia paul, Priyanka Singh and Sunita John, "consciously or unconsciously, people are often influenced by mass media, such as persuading the media to use a particular product or indirectly persuade to support a particular political ideology or political "(34). The media has the power to shape and model the mind and conscience of the people through the conscious and continuous presentation of a particular dimension to a particular issue thus, framing their minds as their understanding changes. In the Stanley Baran's opinion,

The media so fully saturate our everyday lives that we are often unconscious of their presence, not to mention their influence. Media informs us, entertains us, delights us, annoys us. They move our emotions, challenge our intellects, insult our intelligence. Media often reduce us to mere commodities for sale to the highest bidder. Media help us; they shape our realities. (4)

Film as a sociological art has been proved as one of the most powerful medium of mass media through which audience's perception on a particular societal issue can be influenced, reshaped and redirected. According to Thompson Kristin and David Bordwell;

Nobody needs to be convinced that films have been one of the most influential media for over one hundred years. Not only can you recall your most exciting or tearful moments at the movies, you can also probably remember moments in ordinary life when you tried to be as graceful, as selfless, as tough or as compassionate as those larger than life figures on the screen. The way we dress and cut our hair, the way we talk and act, the things we believe or doubt- all these aspects of our lives are shaped by films.(1)

This explains that through films, filmmakers create indelible impressions on the minds of their audience, either to provoke them to action or dissuade them. Nollywood has enjoyed this priviledge in the last few decade and according to Emmanuel Ebekue has "unsuspectingly created standards and influence how Nigerian view themselves and how they are viewed in Diaspora" (265). In support of this view, Tracie Utoh- Ezeajugh and Ekene Anija observes that, "Nigerian filmmakers often make movies, with themes that are very educative and entertaining bearing in mind that films are essential means of societal transformation; the film medium readily volunteers itself as a platform for the investigation of human conflicts that recur in various societies" (3). The Nigerian film industry has regularly in addressing societal issues, made creative impressions and ideological expressions in the hearts of their viewers and it is against this backdrop that this study seeks to evaluate its role in influencing the overall perception of fostering amongst the Nigerian Populace.

Entrust: a Synopsis

This is a short film by Stanley Aguzie, based on a true life story of a young girl, Perpetual. Her poor widowed mother in search of a better life; entrusts her into the care of a young couple- distant cousin; who resides in the city and has promised to train her daughter up to the university education level. On the contrary, she suffered all sorts of molestations and maltreatments and was literally turned into an over laboured full time servant. The couple refused to send her to school. Her situation worsens as the man of the house constantly raped her until she became pregnant. In her devastation, her aunty, accused her of lying against her husband and branded her a 'witch'. Perpetual finds herself on the streets and this exposed her to more vulnerabilities. A young man offered to accommodate her with the intentions to sell her baby upon delivery. Her discovery of the man's evil prompted her

sudden escape from the man's house but was hit by a hit and run driver.

My Destiny; a Synopsis

This film by Okechukwu Onyenso chronicles the life of a young boy, Ugochukwu, who lost his parents to the wickedness of his uncle and his wife. He suffered in the hands of his uncle and escaped death by food poisoning on several occasions. He was subjected to all manner of hard labour and maltreatments that made life unbearable for him. In one of the sites where he worked as a labourer, the business mogul spotted him as a humble and hard worker and opted to help him. Against his uncle's wish, Ugochukwu left the village with Okeosisi to Onitsha, where he served him as an apprentice for seven years. Due to his loyalty and hardwork, Okeosisi, took him as a son and later settled him with a big shop. This made his uncle and family to respect and envy him.

Discussion of case studies

The two films discussed above exemplify the various outcomes of child fostering. Fostering is a veritable platform for mutually beneficial relationships where both foster parents (who enjoy domestic assistance and help) and a fosterling (who enjoys nurture and care to grow) exist in a symbiotic partnership. In both cases, it is evident that people explore the option of fostering as the only way to alleviate the problem of poverty and child training. It is worthy to note that, no mother wants her child to be trained by another but unforeseen circumstances compel families to opt for this option.

In the case of the protagonist in the film Entrust, the filmmaker actually purposed to vehemently oppose the practice of fostering by painting a clear picture that demonizes it. Judging from the storyline, her mother was deceived into releasing her child to a relative with the hope for a better standard of living for her child and the family. Perpetual's experience in the house of her guardians turned out very traumatic. She was denied access to the fundamental rights of a child which includes quality education, freedom of expression, protection from abuse, health, play and recreation. She was subjected to a hard life which robbed her of her childhood as well as inflicted psychological and physical wounds. The scenario painted in this film was such that presented child fostering as detrimental to child development. The film ended abruptly

when the girl died and this will surely devastate every viewer hence, giving them a negative perspective of fostering.

On the other hand, the second film paints a picture of the positive outcomes of fostering. From the storyline, Ugochukwu, would have amounted to a nobody in life, save for the intervention of Okeosisi. This notion is in line with the dictates of the child Right's Act 2003, which insists that every action towards the child should be in the best interest of the child and his welfare. This goes to say that, the practice of fostering can be exploited and sustained since it still remains a leeway for some children to attain their destiny. Ugochukwu's future was sharpened in the house of his master. A life in his village could have amounted to his untimely death or an unfulfilled destiny. Fostering was portrayed in a positive light as an alternative option to child rearing and development.

In summary, it is true that fostering has been variously abused by both foster parents and fosterlings. There is need for the media to focus and promote the positive narrative which has a ripple effect of engineering the audience's perspectives on fostering. Also, they should also demonise deviant, divergent and unknown traits in children and adults which have made fostering misrepresented and misunderstood.

Conclusion

Nollywood has made conscious efforts in criticizing the practice of fostering by rolling out films which associated this phenomenon with child abuse, child labour, molestation and all, with fewer considerations on the positive outcomes. This treatment undoubtedly could be part of the reasons why the subject of fostering is being negated and abhorred in recent times. As part of the limitations to this study, it was very difficult to find Nollywood films that promoted the positive outcomes of fostering. This has created the impression that filmmakers mainly project the side of the story that interests them and not reality. This is part of the dangers of a single story which according to Chimamanda Adichie, creates stereotypes. This study thus, recommends that filmmakers should balance their narratives in the treatment of this subject in order not to mislead the masses who are greatly influenced by their perspectives.

Works Cited

Abutima, Theophilus. Independent Child Migration and Education Nexus In Sub- Sahara Africa. MOOP2017 Conference Paper.

Afolabi, Muyiwa. Underaged House Maids and The Problems Of Educating Them In The South-Western Part Of Nigeria

Aguzie, Stanley. mDir. Entrust. Stanley Aguzie productions.2016.

Arowolo, Olasunkanmi. Understanding Framing Theory. (2017). https//www.researchgate.net/pub.

"A Legal Prognosis of Child Labour Under the Child Right Act" Labour Law Review .Vol.2, No.2.(2008): 110-122.

Bateson, Gregory. Steps to an Ecology Of Mind: Collected Essays In Athropology, Psychology, Evolution and Epistemology. San Francisco: CA: Chandler, 1972.

Care For Child Development. Improving the Care of Young children. "Unicef" (Oct. 2019). https//www.unicef.org.2345

Childhood Under Threat, The State of The World's Children. (2005). Unicef.org/SOWC05/English...

Ebekue, Emmanuel. "Negative representations Of Masculinity in Nollywood: A Reading Of Ikechukwu Onyeka's MR and MRS." International Review of Humanities Studies. (2019):264-271.

Goffman, Ervin. Frame Analysis: An Essay On The Organisation Of Experience. Boston: NorthEastern University Press, 1974.

Nwosu, Canice. "The Changing Nigeria Family and the Rights Of the Child in Bassey Ubong's Freeworld Square." Applause: Journal of Theatre and Media Studies. (2006): 31-49.

Okunola, R.A and Ikuomola, A.D. Child Labour in Fostering Practices. A Study of Surulere Local Government Area Lagos State, Nigeria. The Social sciences, 5:493-506

Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. Film History: An Introduction. Newyork: Mc-Graw hill, 2003.

Utoh- Ezeajugh, Tracie and Anijah, Ekene. "Gender Domination and Domestic Violence in Nigerian Video Films: A Paradigmatic Appraisal." Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities. (2017): 1-25.

Virginia Paul, Priyanka Singh and Sunita, John. "Role of Mass Media In Social Awareness" International Journal Of Humanities and Social sciences. Vol.1.No.1. (2013): 34-38.