

# Ideological Criticism of a Nigerian Video Film, August Meeting: A Feminist Perspective

## Abstract

This paper analyses a Nigerian video film called *August Meeting*. The goal is to reveal the major ideologies presented and analyse the significance of the film in raising women's consciousness. The presented and suggested elements of the film are shown leading to the identification of a patriarchal and hegemonic ideology. While the idea of a women's organisation and women's forum were presented in a negative way, men were portrayed as victims of women's selfishness and greed and ultimately as the masters of women, the final decision makers, and as heroes who saved the community from the evil hands of a women's movement.

The patriarchal ideology of the film is seen in the depiction of women and the production style of the film. The film is undoubtedly produced and directed from men's perspective following its negative representation of women and women's forum. However, this film is analyzed from a feminist perspective, using feminist criticism as a theoretical framework to explore the ideology presented in the film, how it reinforces traditional hegemonic positions, and how women's consciousness can be raised from watching the film.

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## Introduction:

This paper analyses a Nigerian video film called *August Meeting*. Its goal is to reveal major ideologies that are presented in it and analyse the significance of the film in raising women's consciousness. The presented and suggested elements of the film are shown, leading to the identification of a patriarchal and hegemonic ideology. The idea of a women's organisation and women's forum were presented in a negative way. Men were portrayed as victims of women's selfishness and greed and ultimately as the masters of women, the final decision-makers, and as heroes who saved the community from the evil hands of the women's movement. The patriarchal ideology of the film is seen in the depiction of women and the production style of the film. The film is undoubtedly produced and directed from men's perspective following its negative representation of women and a women's forum. However, this film is analyzed from a feminist perspective, using feminist criticism as a theoretical framework to explore the ideology presented in the film, how it reinforces traditional hegemonic positions, and how women's consciousness can be raised from watching the film.

## Feminist criticism

Feminist criticism is useful in ideological criticism. Foss (2009) notes that many feminist scholars view feminism as a means of changing issues of domination that affect women and all individuals. Feminists view the concept of ideology as a means of gender representation that is socially constructed (Hammett, 1997). As a result feminist criticism is used to challenge rhetorical constructions that identified gender as an explanation for domination. Many feminists take interest in analysing the rhetoric used in films and other categories of popular culture because of their tendency to reinforce dominant hegemonic beliefs and to silence marginalised groups such as women. A feminist framework that explores rhetorical construction in popular culture is a "third wave" agenda. Many third wavers are rhetorical critics who use popular culture as a means of negotiating issues of struggle. For example, the work of Merri Lisa Johnson (2007), *Third wave feminism and television: Jane puts it in a*

*box*, critically examines media cultural productions and also highlights the work of some other rhetorical critics such as Carol Siegel, Katherine Frank, Candace Moore, Bobby Nobbe, Lara Stemple, and Leslie Heywood.

The Nigerian video film falls within the realm of popular culture (Haynes & Okome, 1998) and can be analysed from a feminist perspective. The rhetoric of Nigerian video films reveals the ideological positions of the society and the dominations that affect gender representations. As a result, feminist criticism is an applicable method of analysis in discovering the underlying meaning of the rhetoric in the film and making visible the struggle of women. Additionally, feminist criticism also works to give a voice to women where women are negatively represented in a film and their voices suppressed.

The stereotypical portrayal of women in films and the tendency that viewers may subscribe to patriarchal ideology alerts feminists to create a counter rhetoric to challenge or critique the cultural production. Some feminists create independent films and utilise popular culture to challenge or counter dominant ideologies. Thus popular culture is significant in addressing social, political, and cultural issues. Abah (2009), citing Dolby (2006), affirms the significance of popular culture as a forum for addressing issues of race, gender, socio-cultural, and political issues. The argument here is that if film is the medium through which dominant ideology such as patriarchy is disseminated, then alternative ideologies can use the same medium to counter or challenge the dominant ideology. Therefore, Nigerian video film is significant in negotiating gender relations, and in making visible the ideology entrenched in some aspects of the Nigerian society.

However, unlike in the West where feminists are able to offer alternative rhetoric in independent films to counter the negative representations of women, lack of resources and institutional support can handicap Nigerian or other African feminists from offering alternative rhetoric in Nigerian video films. An occasional Nigerian novelist such as Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*, offers an alternative discourse to Nigerian women by transforming the subjugation, powerlessness, and victimisation of Nigerian women to a place of independence, empowerment, and

political consciousness (Nwagbara, 2009). Also there are other visual media that are capable of giving voice to Nigerian women. Nimis (2006) notes that the number of Nigerian women in visual media production such as photography is dramatically increasing.

The work of feminist critics is geared towards making visible theories of domination that are found in today's societies. People's consciousness can be raised through critical analysis of Nigerian video films. Some of the movies reinforce patriarchal and hegemonic positions. At the same time they reveal inhumane practices against women, and as a result lead to a call for social change. Abah (2009) also acknowledges that the content and the popularity of the movies make it an agent for social change. Thus, any film that is characterised by dominant patriarchal ideology lends itself to critique. This paper focuses on analyzing the Nigerian video film *August meeting* from a feminist perspective.

### **The Nigerian film *August Meeting***

The film *August Meeting* (2001) explores some of the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that people have about women's associations and forums in Eastern Nigeria. The story highlights men and women's positions as well as gender role expectations that are found in Nigerian societies. In analysing this film, the portrayal of women and men will be discussed accordingly.

The film tells the story of a women's group from the village of Umuoji in Eastern Nigeria. However, the story focuses on the branch of the Umuoji women's group in the city of Lagos, as they prepare to return to Umuoji village in order to participate in the women's forum/conference called 'August Meeting'. The forum meets once every year, and all Umuoji women groups including the ones abroad are welcome to attend. Election of a new president takes center stage as the women prepare for the *August Meeting*. The film portrays women to be power hungry, selfish, high maintenance, uncaring mothers and wives. In the film, two women, Angela and Amaka campaign to be elected president. Both women would go as far as plotting and causing harm to each other, so as to win

the election. While Angela with the help of a voodoo doctor causes Amaka to become mad, Amaka with the help of the same voodoo doctor causes Angela to become paralysed. Some of the other women in the Lagos branch were having problems with their husbands over the upcoming *August Meeting*, and they were accused of neglecting their responsibilities as mothers and wives. Udoka, for example, pressures her husband to give her money so she could buy clothes for the meeting. The couple fight on several occasions until finally the man decides to steal from his job. He is caught, jailed, and later released. One of the ladies, Blessing, also argues with her husband over money to purchase clothes for the August meeting. She ends up having an affair so as to get the money she needs. A third woman, Ekwutosi, spends the money that she had on clothes, and eventually is unable to pay for surgery which could have saved her son's life. The behaviors of these women and their actions were questioned in the film.

Men were portrayed as victims of women's insatiable desires to indulge in luxury and show off their wealth. Rufus had to go to jail when he was caught stealing so he could give money to his wife, and also to finally have some peace at home. Evans suffers the humiliation of publicly finding out that his wife was cheating on him, and sleeping with his friend so she could get some money to buy clothes and jewelry for the August meeting. Victor suffers the loss of a child which he left in the care of his wife when he traveled. His wife used the money he gave her for their family upkeep while he was away to buy clothes in preparation for the August meeting.

The film also 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 were responsible for maintaining the social order. They had the power to make community decisions and regulate the affairs of the community.

On returning to their village for the August meeting, the women received news that the August meeting will no longer be held because the male

community leaders cancelled the event, as they were unhappy about the controversies surrounding the paralysis and madness of the women candidates. The men also acknowledge that the event was canceled because of claims of women's indulgence in luxury, infidelity, and irresponsibility towards their families. In their position as the dominant group, men stopped their wives from attending the August meeting, and also banned women from holding the event. Even when they eventually allowed the women to hold the event, the community leaders gave the women conditions to which they must adhere. The men demanded that women must wear cheap clothes and jewellery throughout the event and women would not be allowed to show off their husbands' wealth in any shape or form during the event.

### **The ideology of patriarchy**

In order to analyse an artifact for ideological criticism Foss (2009) suggests that the critic identify the presented elements of the artifact, identify the suggested element associated with the presented elements, formulate an ideology, and finally identify the functions carried out by the ideology (p. 214). For the most part, the suggested elements in the film point to the ideology of patriarchy. The negative portrayal of women as subordinates, inferior to men, and the dominance of men in the film, contribute to the formation of this ideology.

The term patriarchy is associated with male dominance and female subordination (Hunnicut, 2009). In patriarchal societies, men are in charge of establishing the social order, and they are situated in dominant position of authority (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004). In most African traditional societies, men's dominance and female subordination are part of the social norm. In these societies, the opinion of men is valued more than that of a woman. Thus, men's status is elevated over that of women in the African social context. Men's domination is clearly seen in the film *August meeting*. The community leaders who make the decision to cancel the August meeting were all men. They used their power to destabilise the affairs of a women's organisation. Mothers were accused of abandoning their family

responsibilities, and choosing the festivities of the August meeting over caring for their children and husband.

Scholars note that women who are aware of social injustices are accused of “destroying the family unit, abandoning children, and subverting intimate relationships with men” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 285). The men in this film are not only in charge of making decisions about the scheduling of the women’s forum but they also hold the power to provide guidelines as to the manner in which the event should be held. The men hold all the power in making the decisions while the women hold no power at all, but have to rely on the men for permission to hold a women’s event and participate in it.

Many critical scholars have assumed that men’s dominance over women places women in a subordinate position and limits women’s expression. Kramarae (1981) notes that men are the dominant group and are responsible for labeling social life, while the women’s system of expression reflects that which is devised by men. Male dominance and control over communication systems in a society have been noted to constrain women’s free expression (p. 3). During the women’s protest in the film, some of the women who tried to speak up were immediately shut down by the men. The men control the communication system and pattern, determining when a woman should speak. By doing so, women are silenced in that they are put in a position that limits their expression.

Traditional African belief suggests that women can be seen rather than be heard (Bramoh, Lekoko, Alade, 2004). At one of the public gatherings in the film, a woman who wanted to express her views was immediately directed to shut her mouth by one of the community leaders: “shut up, we are your husbands and fathers and you can’t claim to know more than us.” The implication of this hegemonic practice is that women are silenced and intimidated. One theory that examines men’s dominance in the social structure and control over the language system is Muted Group Theory (MGT) (Ardener, 1975). MGT asserts that the dominant group in a society determines the communication system and that women are rendered “inarticulate” (p. 21). Also, “those who were not in the male world position, were, as it were, muted” (p. 22). The implication as Shirley Ardener points out is that women and other non-dominant groups

may be silenced due to the modes of expression generated by the dominant group (Ardener, 1975). Thus, the impediments in women’s expression appear to be rooted in patriarchy.

### Hegemonic ideology

Hegemony is a form of social control in which a group dominates through disseminating its ideas within a society. Foss (2009) notes that hegemony is visible where the ideologies of powerful groups are privileged over the ideologies of other groups. Hegemony describes the political, economic, and cultural aspects of social life. Furthermore, hegemony lingers in many aspects of the society and reflects the interest of the groups that control the means of cultural production (Wardell & Fuhrman, 1981). Thus, the representation of women in the film reveals the hegemonic influence within the society.

The film was produced and written by a man, Prince Emeka Ani, and was directed by a man, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen. Out of the 29 crew members listed, 27 were men and 2 were women. Perhaps what is most disturbing is the fact that nearly all of the crew members in the making of this women-oriented film were men. Having established who is responsible for the story, the next question is, of what essence is the message? What is the goal of the producers in telling this story? Clearly, the film takes the tone of a male perspective, suggesting male dominance as an explanation for the presented elements in the film: women’s attempts to gain power are ill-conceived and ill-fated. Men control the Nigerian film industry, and in this case the making of the *August Meeting* film, and consequently the ideology of male domination and superiority and female subordination is privileged in the film.

The various components of the film including the representation and the making of the film reveal that hegemony extends throughout various aspects of the society particularly in cultural productions. Because men are responsible for making the film, their ideologies are dominant in households, marriages, and the community over women’s ideologies. Hegemonic ideology attempts to shape the world for others. It tends to

suggest that some ideas are better than others, and it suppresses alternative ideas and portrays them as abnormal and hazardous. For example, the film portrays men's control of women's activities as the norm and the natural thing to do, and any idea that is contrary to the norm such as women's autonomy and independence is seen as abnormal.

Additionally, ideas that resist dominant ideology are repressed and silenced through rhetorical strategies. The women's protests against the cancellation of the August meeting event were muted by representations of the women as wild, out of control, and irrational. The representation of the women as irrational may provide support for the dominant ideology or it may counter any ideology that is contrary to the dominant ideology. Foss (2009) suggests that in order to maintain its dominant position, hegemonic ideology must be reinforced through rhetorical practices. The continuous privileging of patriarchal ideology in the film demonstrates the reinforcement of the dominant ideology. However, dominant ideology can be countered through alternative rhetoric in media productions. Media provide a platform for African women to challenge patriarchal representations (Sesanti, 2009).

### **Gender inequality**

Also associated with patriarchal ideology is the issue of gender inequality. The film on many instances presents the inequalities that exist in gender relations and in the community at large. The men in the film have more economic power than their wives. Since the men have more money at their disposal, their wives rely on them to provide them with their needs. Many of the difficulties that the Umuoji women encountered during their preparation for the August meeting came as a result of lack of resources. Even the women who seem to have the resources are dependent on their husbands. In fact, it appears that men indirectly control the affairs of the organisation because they finance the women's campaigns and in return ask their wives to honor their wishes. The husbands of Angela and Amaka, the two women who ran for office of the president, gave their wives millions of naira to help them win the election. Both men were hoping that once their wives won the election

and start controlling the organisation's money, they would benefit from it by asking for loans.

The men also strategise for their wives and give them tips on how to win the election. Amaka's husband, Chief Johnson said to his wife: "We cannot allow Chief Festus and his wife to donate more than us. You must win that election by all means and if you need more money let me know, tell me." Conversely, Chief Festus advised his wife, Angela to seek the help of a voodoo doctor so she might win the election. "As a matter of fact you should ask him anything you should take to destabilise Amaka. Angela, this is warfare, and in warfare people die. No sentiment, an enemy is an enemy." In other words, the Umuoji women's organization may be run by women but indirectly controlled by men. One of the suggested elements of the film is men's dominance over women's affairs.

Gender inequality can also be found in the affairs of the community. While the men of Umuoji were portrayed as community leaders, the women were depicted as their subordinates and subjects. The men dominated the decision making in the community of Umuoji, and as a result they were able to cancel an event which the women had been looking forward to attending. Perhaps the series of events would have turned out differently if women were part of the decision making. But in this case, the women were not part of the social hierarchy that controls the social system, and in fact, their choices were limited because they could only take what was offered to them. According to Demaris & Longmore (1993), social and traditional norms enhance gender inequality, by shaping our expectations of gender behavior. The elements presented in the film show a lack of equality when it comes to gender but highlights male privilege in a patriarchal society such as the Umuoji village. According to Stoudt (2009), privilege concerns the structurally associated advantages available to some groups in a society at the disadvantage of others. The gender composition in the making of the film suggests that men are privileged in this case.

## Conclusion

The depiction of women and the storyline may have been different if told from a feminist perspective. Although towards the end of the film it was acknowledged that something good can come out of women's organisations and events, when a completed project such as the community health centre was launched, in balance there were more negative depictions of women. The patriarchal ideology in this film discredits women's work and women's forums.

The suggested elements have antifeminism "written all over them", as men tried to stop women from doing women's work and becoming independent. Patriarchal ideology also reinforces traditional hegemonic positions that emphasise the interest of men over that of women. It also represses the rhetoric of women and classifies men as superior and women as inferior. On the other hand, some feminist critics such as the third wave feminists may argue that the film is capable of raising women's consciousness about social injustice, and gender inequality in the community. Maybe this film will encourage feminists, particularly African feminists, to continue to challenge the ideology of domination and eliminate it.

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