

## **Local Media (Mis) Representation of the Nigerian Woman As a product of the society**

**Endong Floribert**

### **Abstract**

Hinging principally on secondary data and opinions, this paper attempts to show how forces external to the media (notably culture, religion, the law, education and the like) influence the media, output and consequently shape media representation of women in the Nigerian society. It argues that the misrepresentation of women in the Nigerian mass media is more a product of gender-relation among other dynamics in the Nigerian society. Media contents are most often fine-tuned according to societal beliefs and realities so as to appear realistic/believable, appealing to audiences' emotions and ultimately win audiences' consensus. The paper argues and concludes that a more promising approach to the eradication of women stereotyping and misrepresentations in the Nigerian media should therefore not only consider media's androcentric configurations and predispositions, but start from revolutionary social changes in favor of women emancipation in the other ideological state apparatuses (family, education, religion, law among others) which, to a great extent, seriously control the means of mass communication and determine their output.

**Key Words** *Women Emancipation, Media Representation, Femininity, Religious and Cultural Beliefs*

### **Introduction**

In all societies, the media is considered potent force in shaping popular beliefs and perceptions. It has spectacular potential to influence social attitudes positively or negatively. The mass media constitute of one of the cardinal ideology and repressive state apparatuses (together with religious, educational institutions and the law). They enjoy immeasurable powers of socialization, mass mobilization and advocacy. One way in which they shape audience perception and attitude is through the institution of representation. According to O'Sullivan (1996:199), representation is the process of putting into concrete forms (that is different signifiers) an abstract ideological concept. Representation is therefore, construed to be "the social process of making sense within all available signifying systems: speech, writing, print, video, film, tape and so on". The representation of an ideology is most often organized and regulated across the different media of

mass communication and within different discourses. The representation of womanhood or femininity for instance may be represented in both official and authoritative discourses (legislation and educational practices for instance) and non-authoritative ones such as in media, advertising, literature, and others. The media are therefore, constructed as powerful agents of representation in the society.

However, representation is a product of multiform social processes of representing realities or ideological concepts. Through representation, the existing signs of a community are made to stand for their (specific) meanings. Given the fact that the process is associated to the ruling ideology and the fact that there is always a counter ideology, representations are hardly generally endorsed. They are highly dynamic, with respect to time and form. This instability of representations often gives rise to such phenomena as misrepresentations and re-representation (Endong 2012; Dominick 2011; Branston and Stafford 2006). O'Sullivan (1996) corroborates this view with respect to the construction of sex when he contends that, "what is represented as sexual differs from form to form, from time to time; and representations themselves also change. Hence, the concept of representation allows full force to the notion of re-representation; the reworking and bringing into view signifiers for the same signified". It is in line with this that we very often have conflicting, challenged or countered media representations of femininity and as a result, re-representation of womanhood or femininity in most societies, Nigeria being a suitable case study. This paper aims to show how the society – in this case the Nigerian society – affects media content. It precisely seeks to show how social forces – that are external to the Nigerian media – affect media (mis)representation of the Nigerian women.

### **Misrepresentation of Women**

The misrepresentation of women in the media has attracted the attention of scholars. An extensive literature is available on the issue. The media world in Nigeria seems particularly to be one of the areas in which relatively little is achieved so far, as concerns women empowerment and gender-equality. The Nigerian media is guilty of misrepresentation of the woman folk. Most critics view

them as agents working for the consolidation of women stereotyping and her marginalization in the society. This is so as their contents utterly trivialize or relegate women to secondary and inferior positions in the society. Corroborating this point, Chika (2012:144) opines that,

One of the altars where the image of the African woman is sacrificed is that of media, especially the fecund and prolific Nollywood. The media representation tends to depersonalize women and re-enforce traditional prejudices. More so, most of the media images do not reflect the changing attitudes but promote unfounded stereotypes (p.144).

By the negative portrayal of women (as passive, dependent and subservient for instance), the Nigerian mass media re-enforce the stereotyping of women in the society. Abu cited by Chika (2012:145-146) further exemplifies some of these stereotypes. She asserts that “the media sell a negative image of women where the old and wrinkled women becomes the image of a wizard, the gorgeous lady becomes the prostitute and the loving and caring wife becomes daft and unintelligent”. These stereotypes may be viewed as arguable in many respects.

It is undoubtedly perceived that such portrayals of the women in the Nigerian media automatically shape audiences' perception of the women folk and intensifies stereotypes already held as media theoretically have “a powerful effect on people who subconsciously adopt and internalize attitudes, beliefs and values presented graphically or textually” (Ikuomola and Akanji 2001:32). In a study based on the portrayal of women in some Igbo movies, Okunna (2012) concludes, with reference to results of a focus group discussion with female discussants that these negative images are often time considered by audiences as unrealistic. Nevertheless, they affect audiences' perception about women negatively. Most critics who explore gender stereotyping in the media tend to concentrate more on media's influence on societal attitudes and hardly on the reverse – the influence of the society on media misrepresentation of women. Meanwhile, the mass media are generally a product of the society and their

content is, in many respects, a reflection of the society in which they are based (Idowu, 1999: 161).

### **Media (Mis) representation of Women as a Product of Society**

It is often believed that the mass media have their own 'realities' which may differ from the reality in the society. Okunna (2012:32-33), like many other feminist scholars, has in numerous of her publications argued that the images of women portrayed in the Nigerian media are unrealistic and stereotyped. It is argued that psychological phenomenon is responsible for the acceptance/adoption by audiences of these images as a consensual view of the women world, despite their apparent unrealistic nature. Disciples of the cultivation theory associate such an adoption with the persistent exposure of audiences to the mass media messages. However, logic will guide toward thinking about some other reasons. One of these is that mass media messages most often reflect society. Mass media representation are conceived and fine-tuned in a relatively realistic manner and that may very much explain why it appeals to the emotion of the audience in a way as to win their endorsement of the ideologies embedded in the content. Highly fictional movies for instance entertain and use to make 'invented' claims which are unproven in real life. Audiences enjoy the contents of such films but hardly ever believe them as being true for the simple fact that they have a pre-knowledge of the purely fictional nature of the media.

The media – often negative – portrayal of women can, in this respect, be partly attributed to the symbiotic relationship existing between media reality and the society reality. It has often been argued that through their content and structure, the media are a reflection of the society in which they function. One of the deductible implications of this fact is that society directly or indirectly provides the "raw material" (notably technical knowhow (human resources and ideology) for the construction and fine-tuning of media text. They partake, complement or complete a socialization process often commenced by other ideological state apparatuses (religion, education, the law, religion among others). The liberal Pluralist theory for instance presents the media as cultural flora reproducing the collective debate of

society. Curran (2000:10) notes many more perspectives explicating the media-society symbiotic relationship thus:

The main tradition in cultural studies and also, in such theoretically oriented media studies, sees the media primarily as cultural products. Their principal (and indeed often only) source of evidence is the content of media. Thus the media are viewed as an index of shared values in the 'cultural-indicator' approach [...]; as a conduit of dominant ideologies, in the traditional Marxist perspective [...] and as an extension of power structure, in the radical-structuralist tradition [...]. There are also an anthropological tradition which sees the media as expressing the mythic forms, archetypes and symbolic system of society.

To these numerous perspectives, many more can be added. With reference to the Nigerian media, Idowu (1999:97) goes beyond the content analysis of media text to mention human resources (in the media) as a configuration that is likely to reflect society. He concedes that the Nigerian media have often been accused of publishing falsehood, sensational, speculative and fabricated stories. The Nigerian media could be guilty of such accusations, but the problem cannot be separated from that which is created by the country's socio-political set-up. It has often been argued that the Nigerian society is hypocritical and corrupt. Should this be true, however, the media, no matter how saintly they try to be would fall victim and then cannot but reflect the vices of the larger society. The media thus reflect the color of the society.

Given the fact that society provides raw material for media content, the negative portrayal of women in media text (though questionable) is but logical and may not absolutely be viewed as falsehood, or unrealistic. Though relatively true that such practices as selective attention by media gate-keepers and

naturalization tend to manipulate media text in a way as to downplay on the progressive, positive and considerable role of women in the Nigerian society. Though by so doing, the media indirectly advocate for the marginalization and relegation of women to inferior status in the society, it should be noted that the ingredients used in the construction of such a gender biased texts often have a degree of truth. It is this degree of truism which often, partly contributes to its plausible nature. In a study conducted on the portrayal of women in Nigerian video films, Okunna (2012) raises the paradox of the believability of purported unrealistic media text which is chauvinistic in nature. In her discussion, she however, corroborates that, though stereotypical in nature, the negative women portrayals often have a measure of realism. She writes that

Nevertheless, as indicated, [...] there must be Nigerian women who are as depraved and deplorable as the women in the films, thus [a logical tendency of] investing the films with a measure of realism. But the evil women like negative news in the mass media generally are over reported in these films (p.31).

It can therefore, be argued that the believability by audience of such a portrayal of women in media text is not exclusively thanks to heavy viewing (exposure) as the cultivation theory stimulates but is equally due to the relative degree of realism the media texts are invested with. Events depicted in media text often rhyme with audiences' experiences in real life. This triggers believability. As Watson (2003:70) succinctly puts it, "we respond [to media text] according to our differences- cultural, social, educational, professional; according to our age, gender, race and according to our tastes and values". In the same light, Blumer and Hauser (1996) insightfully argue with respect to motion pictures that

It seems quite clear that the variety of influences which motion pictures may exercise arises from the wide

range of themes and patterns of conduct which are shown and the different backgrounds of experience of the observers. Because of their difference in experience, gained mainly from the groups in which they live, persons acquire attitudes which sensitize or immunize them to certain motion picture influence (p.12).

In line with the above mentioned assertion, we may suggest that audiences tend to believe women portrayals that are in accordance with their experience in real life. A viewer who for instance has witnessed a particular pattern of feminine conduct in real life –be it socially deviant or normal – will tend to believe it when shown or reported in the media. The situation is even more accentuated when he or she is under the double influence of his personal experience and other socializing forces as culture, education, religion among others. Therefore, the influence on audiences of negative media portrayals of women has part of its roots in the relative realism invested with the media text.

A number of researchers have prescribed the emergence of an alternative female-dominated media that would counter and correct this negative portrayal (Akiboye 2004; Nwamuo, 2012; Chika 2012; Eya 2005). Okunna (2012:35) opines that “this might well be the best strategy, if not the only one at this state of our development in the Nigerian society to empower women through the media of communication – by getting them to tell their own story from their own perspective”. It may however appear non-strategic to blame the media first for this stereotypical representation of women but more appropriate to turn primordially to society which, as earlier argued, is visibly at the root of the phenomenon. Far from rejecting the responsibility of the media in perpetrating the stereotyping of women and far from doubting the potentials of media to act as a catalyst of women emancipation and positive social changes in the Nigerian society, we advocate for an approach that primordially stresses on the revalorization of women and the amelioration of their status in influential social institutions which though external to the media institution, do control the media. Corroborating this view, Curran (2000:11) insightfully argues that there is a “tacit assumption that

control of the media lies outside the media, in forces and agencies external to it". This gives the impression that "the media are little more than panes of glass through which it is possible to discern the structure of society, its values and innermost tensions, in ways that are wholly unaffected by institutional mediation".

Taking journalism as a case study/example and drawing inspiration from Shlesinger's view of the media-society relationship, Currant (2000:11) adds that "the sociology of journalism is unduly media-centered, and should pay more attention to 'externalist' influence (that is to those outside media organizations)". Mass media representations exploit and hinge on sensitive and serious social realities to ensure the believability by the audience. This may explain why Ikuomola and Akanji (2001:229) highlight media person's usage or the capitalization on popular perceptions as measurement for shaping their content. They assert that "it has been noted that news is not a reporter's view of an event but social, consensual product modeled by a variety of consideration. Thus, it might be possible that the journalist internalize popular perceptions and social stereotypes into their consensual definitions of what is news". Based on this, it may be argued that so long as the image of the woman continue to be negative in the society and with the media being the reflection of society, their portrayal risks continually to fall victim of stereotyping the female folk.

An alternative media text that will be corrective of the chauvinistic one (produced by the male-dominated media) is well to be praised but how realistic and plausible will it be? It appears clear that the chauvinistic text enjoys a relatively considerable degree of acceptability in the Nigerian society. With this, the feminist text may hardly or never secure general consensus if external social institutions (the other ideological state apparatuses) are not made to push women affirmative action. As a form of counter hegemony, the feminist media text runs the risk of being questioned and challenged.

The idea of an alternative feminist media texts may seldom reinforce the conception of media as "contested spaces reflecting the struggle for ascendancy" and reflection of both normative competition and achieved agreement" (Curran 2000:10). In this



way, they hardly stand a chance of being guaranteed of the eradication of women stereotyping. Just like hegemonies, counter-hegemonies need the active support not only of the media, but of all the other ideological state apparatuses to be effective. Watson (2003:18) notes that counter-hegemonies operate best when all the state apparatuses (education, religion, the arts, and media) "are speaking in harmony with one another". This suggests that the advocates of the theory of women affirmative action should consider concentrating on overthrowing patriarchy or anti-feminist/feminine tendencies in other social institutions which to a great extent determine or control media output.

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

This paper has attempted to show that most critics have analyzed the misrepresentation and trivialization of women in the mass media from the angle of the media configuration and predisposition and not from the standpoint of the society. It argued that the media constitute a product of the society in which they operate. Their content is a reflection of society in many respects. Forces external to the media (notably culture, religion, education and the like) influence the media, determine/control media output and consequently shape media representation of women. The paper also argued that the media misrepresentation of women is more a product of gender-relation among other dynamics in the Nigerian society. Media content is more often fine-tuned according to societal beliefs and realities so as to appear realistic, appealing to audiences' emotions and win their consensus. A more promising approach to the eradication of women stereotyping and misrepresentation in the media content should therefore not only consider media's androcentric configurations and predispositions, but start from revolutionary social changes in favor of women emancipation in the other ideological state apparatuses which to a great extent control the media and determine their output.

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