

Nigerian Popular Culture and Female Representation in the Digital Era: Reading *Phone Swap* (2012)

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Abstract

The representation of women in popular culture has become one of the most significant forms of socialization in the digital era. Such representation is what becomes a practical model to men and women alike on what constitutes the acceptable versions of the feminine or its gender aspirations. The stylistic devaluation of feminine capabilities is one prevailing factor which underpins the Nigerian popular culture to be methodologically different in its relation to men and women. This paper examines aspects of the Nigerian popular culture by critically analysing *Phone Swap* (2012), and exposing its representation of women in the digital era, using feminist film theory. This study is significant as it unravels aspects of female representations in the Nigerian popular cinema, using the case study of *Phone Swap* (2012). By so doing, the filmic text is x-rayed as popular culture with especial emphasis on its handling of gender representation, through a qualitative research methodology in analytical approach. This film is contextualised as a new-Nollywood film with commercial appeal. It is found that the filmmaker Kunle Afolayan portrays most female characters in subjugated frame that socio-culturally positions them to be lesser than their *other*.

Keywords: *Nollywood, video film, digital era, feminism, gender presentation, popular culture, phone swap.*

Introduction

Phone Swap (2012) is a commercial Nigerian romance comedy (Romcom) which was conceived through the instance of an anonymous advertising agency. The goal was to fashion a movie that would have close affinity with the teeming youths of ages fifteen to forty-five (15-45). This explains the enormous popularity of the film immediately after its initial premiere at the EXPO hall, Eko Hotels and Suites, Lagos, and nationwide release on 30th March, 2012. It was funded by Globacom a leading telecommunication network which later withdrew its support as a result of disagreements on the cast of Hafeez Oyetoro aka Saka who was an Etisalat (a rival telecommunication company) ambassador (Okon, 2012).



Plate 1: Anamorphic widescreen in *Phone Swap*.

This film by Kunle Afolayan is believed to fall under the rubrics of New-Nollywood films as a result of its improved cinematography and stylistics. It displays a unique frame dimension and shape with an anamorphic widescreen ratio of 2.35:1 (**Plate 1**). This makes the screen a band or strip which emphasizes horizontal compositions in order to create significant visual effects. In Western convention, “the format was initially associated with genres of spectacle in which sweeping settings were important” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010, pp. 189-190). One disadvantage of this aspect ratio lies in its distractive abilities. It has the abilities to distract the eyes off the middle of the frame thereby focusing more on the objects to the sides. As a technical method of overcoming this, filmmakers (like Kunle Afolayan) position images slightly to the left or right to create linear perspective towards the emphasis (Plate 1).

The film is set in the Nigeria of 2012 which was agog with experimentations in evolving technological mobile gadgets. The popular aspects and usage of mobile phones in Nigeria had just started to wax stronger less than a decade after approval by Olusegun Obasanjo led federal government. The availability of phones, even to the low-income earners, groundnut hawkers and those who depend on others for sustenance, made the mobile handset paraphernalia for all. Its attendant popular aspects like virtual reality games and social media became the symbol of youth values and culture. People started to be valued based on the sophistication of their mobile phones, and those who could not meet up with acquiring trendy editions of such phones were adjudged unfashionable. Thus, youths did everything within their reach to move away from “groping in the archaic.”

Furthermore, the popularity of mobile phones blazed along other trends like fashion. So, the younger generation used the mobile phone vis-à-vis a good-look. Fashion designing became a lucrative entrepreneurial venture many delved into. It is mostly on these stylistic elements that *Phone Swap* develops its humour and ideology.

This study utilizes the qualitative research methodology in an analytical approach. Methods of data analysis, according to Jensen, involve diverse operations of “categorizing, segmenting, and interpreting the evidence or dataset” (2002, p. 258). The analytical

approach is used in analysing the representation of women in Nigerian popular culture, using purposively selected *Phone Swap* (2012) as case study.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on the feminist theory, which examines the representation of women in media and the underlying power dynamics. Feminism, over the years, has been used to describe “a movement that is cultural, economic, or political and advocates for women’s equal rights and protection” (Harrison & Boyd, 2018, pp.12-13). However, feminism extends to include sociological theories that focus on gender differences in addition to the advocacy for gender equality and protection of women’s rights and interests.

Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminist theory hence examines how systems of power and oppression interact. “The theory sheds light on social trends, problems, and issues that are often overlooked or misidentified by a society which was historically shaped by the dominant male perspective” (Crossman, 2018). It seeks to analyse women's social experiences with gender subordination, oppression, and inequality, and proposes solutions to address gender-specific discrimination.

In *Phone Swap*, the representation of female characters, reflects common gender stereotypes. Applying feminist theory to *Phone Swap* reveals several ways in which the film perpetuates gender stereotypes. This aligns with feminist critiques of media that highlight how popular culture can perpetuate gender inequalities and shape audience perceptions.


Reading *Phone Swap*

The entire film breaks fairly into several sequences. All can be grouped into ten (10) well photographed segments including the opening and end credits. Two sub-plots progress the narrative in a wholly conventional way. Below is the overall plot segmentation:

Opening credits

1. Introduction of two main characters in two sub-plots and their motivations.
2. Akin and Mary arrive at their places of work.
3. Akin and Mary break up with their separate romantic partners.
4. Akin and Mary accidentally swap phones at Lagos airport.
5. The parallel stories merge as Mary and Akin work to help each other.
6. Mary goes to Kike’s house while Akin finds himself at Mary’s family house.
7. Dawn: Akin follows Mary’s father to his maize farm.
8. Cynthia’s in-laws arrive for a reconciliatory meeting.
9. Simultaneous night parties at Abuja and Owerri.
10. Combats: Akin wrestles Tony, Mary fights Gina.

End credits



In memory of Sam Loco Efe
(1941-2011)

Plate 2: Credit sequence dedicates *Phone Swap* in memory of Sam Loco Efe.

As the opening credits roll, a title dedicates the movie to Sam Loco Efe (1941-2011) who died as an intended cast (**Plate 2**). The first sequence reveals the major characters Akin and Mary, the ideals they hold and the narrative's formal technique of dual plots. The sequence opens with a montage establishing the motivations of the sub-plots. As the camera pans, we see the lush apartment of Akin (Wale Ojo) and an alternating shot of the lesser interior of Mary's (Nse Ikpe-Etim) house. Akin is with Gina (Lydia Forson) who we later learn to be his girlfriend. The alarm clock chimes at 6:00am in the houses of the lead characters. Akin on his part wakes up without letting the alarm clock sound out, but Mary silences her alarm phone and sleeps a little more. Shortly, Mary's phone startles her again; she looks at the screen, exclaims and hurries downstairs to fetch water. Her neighbour provides further expositions by asking after her boyfriend Tony and thanking her for the beautiful clothes she (Mary) made for her on her birthday.

A very popular element of Nigerian culture is presented in this opening sequence as Mary's neighbour talks in pidgin English and goes further to ask for her wedding date. This is particularly a Nigerian scenario where family and friends put pressures on the female the moment she is observed to be in a romantic relationship. However, Mary like every other Nigerian girl replies "soon" to calm the impatience. Her phone rings again as we learn that the customer she made clothes for is already at the shop for pick up. On her way out, a crosscut reveals her father (Chika Okpala) working on an industrial village maize farm. He speaks with her on the phone in Igbo language that there is fire on the mountain as her sister Cynthia is at it again. He complains of low airtime as Mary promises to call him back later.

A cut reframes them talking again over the phone as Mary walks the street conversing from an earpiece. According to her father, Mary's sister Cynthia is involved in a marital brawl as she admits to pulling her husband's phallus. This is serious as Cynthia's in-laws will be coming over the weekend to resolve the problem. As a result, the presence of Mary will be needed in the village meeting as she is a soothing balm for the family and she alone has her sister's ears. She is however not left unquestioned of her marriage plans since the father is aware of her romantic affair with Tony. But in a popular cunning move, Mary claims to barely hear her father anymore due to bad signal. She hangs up, climbs a motor cycle which zooms off as the scene cuts to segment 2.

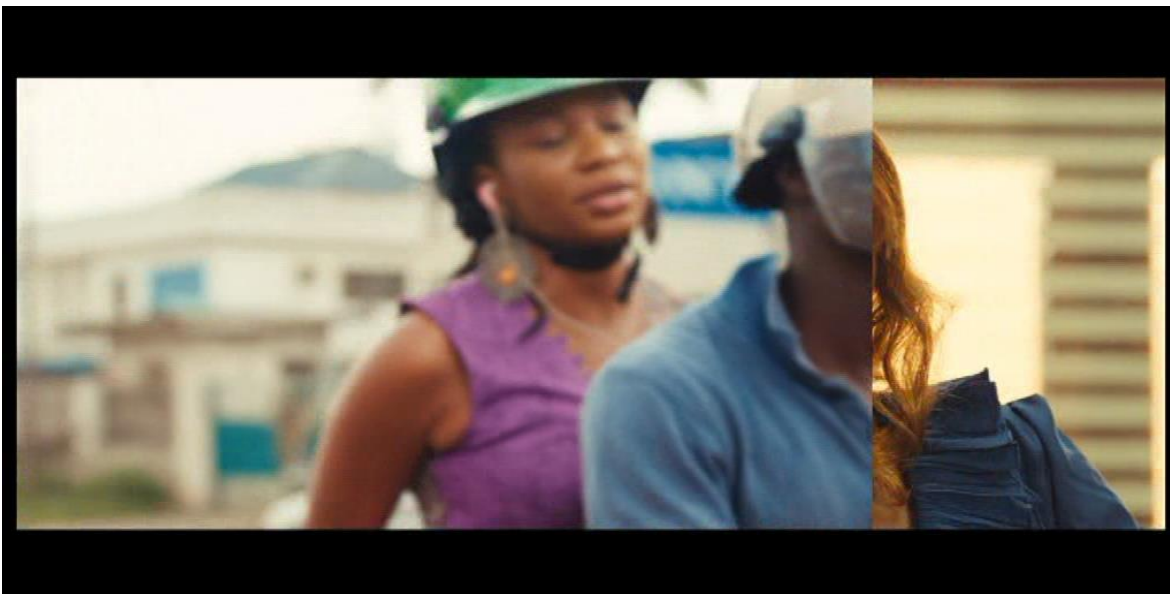


Plate 3: A wipe joins the shot of Mary with the shot of Alexis in *Phone Swap*.

In contrast, Akin is on an executive ride to work as he confirms from his assistant Alex if every preparation for his official trip is in place. We and Akin hear from Alex (Hafeez Oyetoro) that everything is in place except the details of the venue for the company's retreat. This suggests that Akin is left in the dark on this. A wipe crosscuts to Mary still on the moving bike assuring her boss Alexis that the expensive dress of one hundred thousand naira will not be ruined before delivery (**Plate 3**). Another crosscut brings back Akin on the phone with his mother (Joke Silva) who insists that it is high time Akin visited her with his fiancée, but Akin dismisses her on the grounds that he is too busy preparing to become the youngest CEO of his company. Kunle Afolayan uses a fast-motion technique in this scene to highlight the filial bond between Akin and his mother as they are able to detect via phone conversation, visual eyes rolled at each other.

On arrival to the office, Akin paces past all front desk staff who greet him without response. His annoyance is that his assistant Alex divulged his business telephone line and romance status to his mother Kike. As a panacea for sack, Alex is employed to unravel the venue for the retreat which has been hidden from Akin by his boss whom he plots to overthrow. This Alex accepts and achieves with great delight as the frame cuts to reveal Mary and her boss Alexis pleased at the dress designed by Mary. To the client, Alexis claims she made the dress as common with most fashion entrepreneurs in Nigeria who enter the fashion business without expertise in tailoring, thereby functioning as middle-men between customers and designers.

In segment 3, Akin returns home to find his house rearranged by his drunken Ghanaian girlfriend Gina. He cannot seem to hide his dismay at this as he sends her packing and retrieves the house keys from her. On the other end, Mary drives her boyfriend Tony out of her house upon discovery that he is married. This leaves her heartbroken to the point of gaining empathy from her whimsical boss Alexis who agrees to sponsor her trip by air to Owerri in order not to ruin the next dress in hand. In this sequence (segment 4), Akin and Mary simultaneously arrive at Lagos airport for their onward trips to Abuja and Owerri respectively. With the use of staging and performance, Mary is portrayed as an airport novice who seems quite confused on the way forward, causing her to bump into Akin. This unexpected action and reaction result in their oblivious exchange of phones. Shortly

afterwards, Mary's colleague uses Alexis' phone to wish Mary a safe trip to Owerri via text messaging. As the message arrives bearing Alex, Akin who is holding the phone thinks his assistant has uncovered fresh details to the retreat. He quickly forfeits his ticket to Abuja and hurries to buy another ticket to Owerri. Mary in her ignorance and confusion obtains a ticket for Abuja flight. This sends them opposite destinations as Akin now boards to Owerri and Mary to Abuja. Aboard the different planes, they realize the mistake but are disallowed from leaving. In a display of popular Nigerian in-flight situation, Akin is branded a terrorist by other passengers for demanding to exit the flight. As a result, he follows the plane to Owerri and unsuccessfully requests for a connecting flight to Abuja.

From this point of the narration (segment 5), the sub-plots merge, thereby becoming a comparison in analogous environments; Mary and Akin work for each other to achieve their set objectives. Causal, temporal and spatial information are supplied by mise-en-scene through the smooth use of parallelism. As events unfold, Akin is at the heart of Owerri city with Mary's phone ringing incessantly. Mary's sister Cynthia (Ada Ameh) is a police officer who is the one dialling the number of her sister. Coincidentally, she spots a stranger Akin with Mary's phone and orders for his arrest for the possession of stolen phone. In this scene, the lens shifts focus to create emphasis on Cynthia's facial expressions and her suspicions by blurring the images of Akin and the Globacom recharge card seller in the frame.

As Mary arrives Kike's (Akin's mother's) house in segment 6, she is quickly received with excitement as Akin's "special girlfriend" and so could not be allowed to explain what has happened. Cynthia discovers the truth from Mary and takes Akin to their father's house to stay for free. In the house, the camera cranes round Akin who stands to behold the low-grade compound. Another use of framing distance to highlight mood is the next shot which shows Mary on the dining with Kike unable to use cutlery to slice her chicken wings. This tires her out to the extent of drawing Kike's attention as she (Kike) comes to the rescue by leading Mary to use their hands for the protein. She invites Mary to join her for an all-female party the next day where fashion will highly be discussed. In a parallel shot, Akin is served Akpu (pounded cassava) and bitter leave soup with goat lungs and stock fish. He is mocked for requesting to use a cutlery, so he tries out his hands as the rest of the family cheer him.

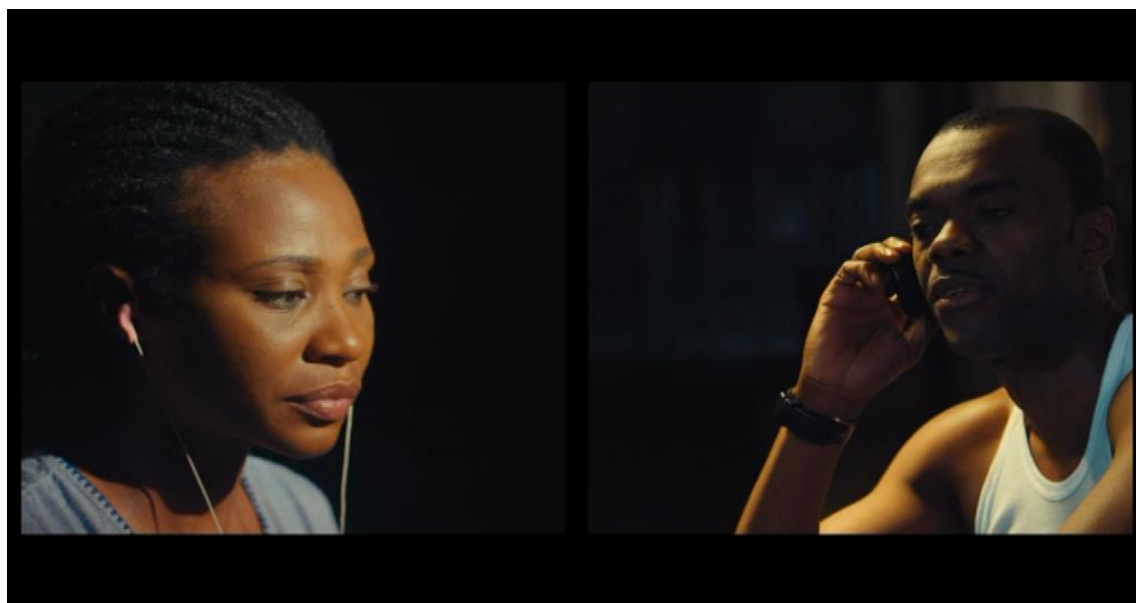


Plate 4: Mary and Akin share latest gossip in split-screen conversation.

At night, Akin is unable to find sleep and comfort; he chooses to lie outside with mosquitoes which we can audibly hear through diegetic sounds. Mary calls to know how Akin is faring, as they are both visible on the frame through a collage technique (**Plate 4**). Mary, now a little more excited, laughs at Akin's grievances. Akin instructs her to help him deliver a memory card from his phone personally to his company's chairman and tell him that Akin is being unfortunately detained. According to Akin, Mary should buy a corporate dress for this assignment which he promises to refund as soon as possible. Mary retaliates by asking him to talk to Cynthia on her behalf. The reason according to Mary is that Cynthia likes Akin a lot and would listen to him.

As they hang up in disagreement, a cut shows Tony leaving his wife and children in bed and calls Mary's phone. Akin picks up to hear the romantic words of Tony uttered in English and Igbo. He replies Tony that it is too late to call and that he is Mary's new friend. On the flip side, Mary is unable to sleep, so she is cajoled to join Kike drink some liquor alfresco. At dawn, it is revealed that Akin managed to sleep outside and Mary and Kike slept under the tree outside after much drink. This serves as a leit-motif to the bohemian life of Kike which is exactly why Akin distances himself from bonding with her.

Significant of rural life, Akin is dragged to the corn farm of Mary's father as an indirect way of proving his strength (segment 7). Afterwards, he sends a sum of one hundred thousand naira to Mary through an advertised feature known as GLO-TEXT. When he returns, Mary's uneducated twin brothers try to engage him on what he does for a living. His accentuated response overwhelms the illiterates who claim their profession is "business." The narrative moves to Mary shopping for suits. Gina, the estranged lover of Akin phones, Mary picks up and as expected, this results in interrogations. As Mary hangs up, a cut reframes her dressed in suit as she hurries to the meeting. Her first encounter is Akin's rival boss who leads her to the meeting. She is introduced to a lady and few men who refer to Akin as a backstabber.

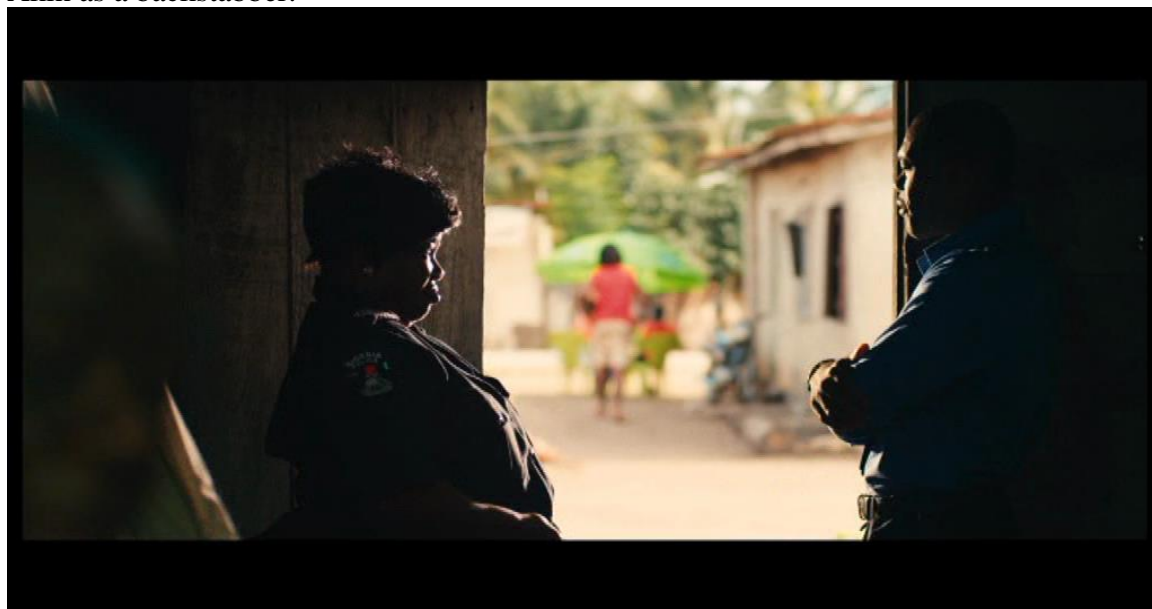


Plate 5: A shot of Cynthia's father blurred on extreme left with Cynthia and Akin balanced on the sides leaving the door visible in the middle.

A long shot reveals the in-laws of Cynthia coming in for the meeting (segment 8). As Cynthia is about to step out fully kitted in police uniform, Akin intercepts her to play the advisory role Mary asked him to. A blurred lens keeps Cynthia's father by the left side of

the frame overhearing the counselling session (**Plate 5**). Akin appeals to Cynthia to be calm and humble to keep her home for the sake of her children. She submits, changes her outfit and kneels down as the meeting begins.

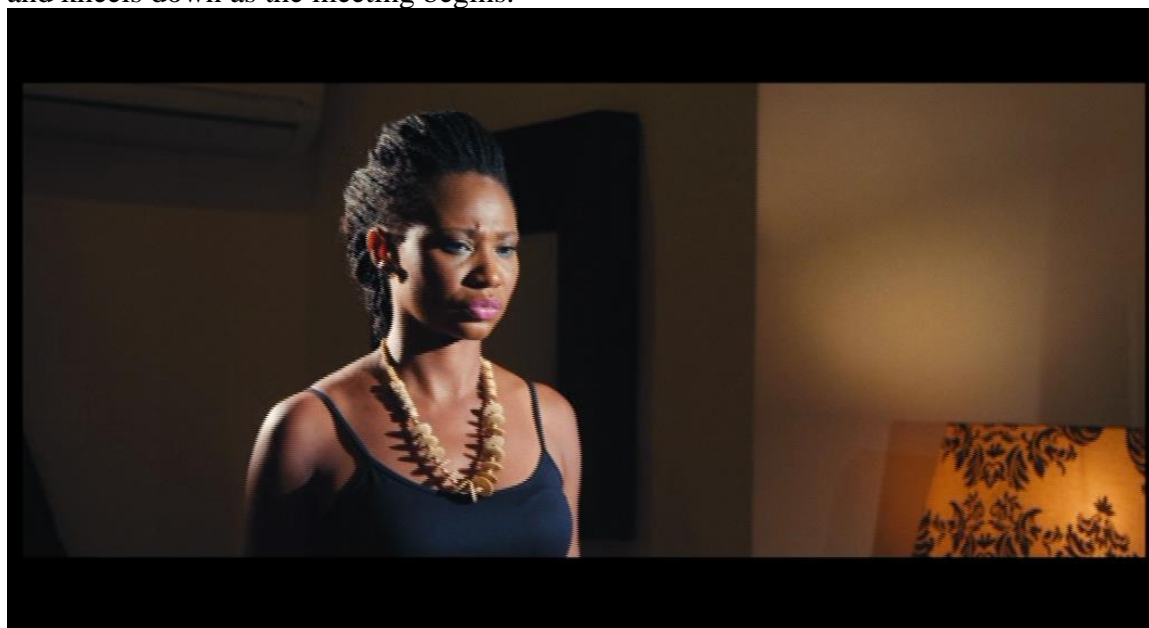


Plate 6: The eyeliner on Mary makes the upper edges of her eyes stand out. Note also the somewhat fierce curve of the eyebrows, accentuating her frown and frustration.

In segment 9, Mary is shown on a mirror shot confused on what exactly to wear for the highly anticipated ladies' night at Kike's house. She tries out several options, but ends up wearing the customer's attire that earned her flight sponsorship from Alexis (**Plate 6**). At the point Kike markets her to her friends, she sees the owner of the dress. In frustration, she tries to flee but ends up inside the swimming pool. When she manages to come out, disappointment becomes appointment as the woman offers her greater opportunities.

In Owerri, Akin is in a party with Mary's expanded family. He is offered palm wine by Mary's father who asks him if he (Akin) likes Mary. His response triggers love for Mary as he excuses himself from the gathering to converse with Mary. In the process of digging dip on each other's phone, they agree to be lovers. A high angle shot exposes Akin's weakness at romance and the camera cranes over the roof top while he is in deep thought.

In Abuja (segment 10), Mary attends the retreat on behalf of Akin while a cut reveals Akin in the background enjoying palm wine in the scene, while Mary's twin brothers fantasize on music stardom. A reframe shows Tony coming down from the motorcycle to engage Akin in a combat. Alternating shots also reveal Gina in a fierce fight with Mary far in Abuja. In the end, Akin and Mary appear victorious as the two stalkers (Tony and Gina) leave them alone in silent endorsement of their romantic bond. A significant use of stylistic element in this sequence is a low angle shot of Cynthia shooting to the air to end the fight between Akin and Tony encircled by onlookers (**Plate 7**). A low angle shot is perhaps one way of establishing the powers of a character. Thus, for the first time in the narrative, a female character demonstrates supremacy good enough to bring about social stability.



Plate 7: Low angle shot of Cynthia establishing her authority in *Phone Swap*.

As Mary manages to clean herself up, Kike surprisingly shows up at the retreat. The new development is that she is now the Chairman of the company. She acquired the company's shares in order to permanently bring Akin closer to her as panacea for her past delinquency of driving her husband away and breaking up with the family. In the plot's dénouement, Mary calls Alexis to inform her that the dress was ruined and that she is resigning her job with the fashion house; she reunites with Akin outside Lagos airport where their paths first crossed; and the end credits roll while they drive out of the frame on a Range Rover Sports SUV.

Male Dominance versus Female Subjugation

Phone Swap has been highly commended by critics for its innovative formal techniques and stylistic conventions. Although it is a *comedy* of romance, a dominant ideology reigns supreme throughout the film. That is the ideology of male supremacy. Kunle Afolayan in this comedy unwittingly presents male dominating characters to the damage of the female personalities. From the characters of Akin, Tony, Mary's father to Mary's twin brothers, the "man" is portrayed not just in the literal sense of the word, but in the psychoanalytic sense also. Akin breaks up his sexual relationship with Gina on the grounds that she strikingly rearranged his sitting room and got drunk while anticipating a romantic night with him. Also, Akin thinks he is so strong and independent that he is deeply convinced he will overthrow his female boss. Even while entering the office, he ignores everyone's greetings. He claims to Mary that he is the better one when Mary contemplates how he is happy without a single friend. His response to Mary is inherently ideological:

Akin (to Mary): Listen, someone like you can't understand. You want to be friends with the whole world that is why you will always be someone else's tailor. You can't take the initiative You can't live for your family; you have to live for yourself.

This ideological viewpoint further explains why he unforgivingly gives his mom Kike so much distance in punishment for her past mistakes of sending his father away and abandoning the family. The representation of Mary as emotional and dependent contrasts sharply with the portrayal of Akin as strong and career-focused. This dichotomy reflects

traditional gender norms that undermine women's capabilities and reinforce male dominance.

Mary's father on his part is presented as an epitome of masculinity. In spite of his age, he goes to the farm every morning with the belief that hard work is the true test of manhood. Even when Akin is unwilling to follow him to the farm, he insists. Also, he insists that Akin must drink the palm wine he offers him because there is no better drink. His domineering drive pays off as we later see Akin in the background accustomed to drinking palm wine from a jug. Furthermore, he exacts patriarchal control by condemning Cynthia's defiant acts as barbaric and forewarns Mary not to emulate Cynthia. His nature manifests in his twin sons who exhibit this habit by trying to force Akin to eat the breakfast of bread dipped in custard.

Tony as well proves his strength by travelling all the way from Lagos to Owerri just to fight for his illicit affection for Mary. Mary on her part is not permitted to end a relationship controlled by a man like Tony no matter the reason, not even on the grounds of deceit and extra marital affairs. Thus, even after being warned by Mary never to reach out to her again, he abandons his family late in the night to claim what he thinks is his birthright. This unconscious ideological framing of the male characters stylistically positions the females in the film form as weak, incapacitated and devoid of any expertise needed to drive positive change in the society. The prime tool for this social conditioning is the economic mind-set of the female. Afolayan the filmmaker conditions the female characters to the extent that no one is completely independent socially, economically and emotionally. This stylistic devaluation of feminine capabilities underpins popular culture to be methodologically different in its relationship to men and women. Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman posit that "negative or stereotypical representation has political consequences: it reflects and reinforces the marginality of minority groups. Thus it follows that the political empowerment of subordinate groups in society—youth; women; ... —depends to some degree on changing representations" (2018, p. 89). As a way of analogy, let us close up on the female characters in the order of first appearance.

Mary, the protagonist of this comedy is arguably the strongest of all the female characters as we shall see. In her very first appearance, the filmic apparatus shows her unable to rise up from bed at the time she set for herself. Akin is shown to awake even before the clock chimes completely; but Mary is shown to snooze her alarm a little more. This comparative framing presents Mary as weak and undetermined in life to the extent of knowing what to do (in this case waking up early) and still not being able to do it. When she finally gets up, the frame presents her in a different manner from Akin. According to feminist theory, such depictions contribute to a broader cultural narrative that suggests women are less capable and ambitious than men. Contrasting Mary's and Akin's morning routines means that the film effectively portrays a hierarchy in which male characteristics such as punctuality and determination are esteemed over female traits that might be perceived as laziness or indecisiveness. This portrayal aligns with feminist criticisms of the media, which often use visual storytelling to perpetuate societal gender norms. These portrayals can significantly impact audience perceptions. When films consistently depict women as less capable or less driven than men, they reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Audiences may internalize these portrayals, affecting their views on gender roles in real life.

Akin is seen doing routine exercises and brushing, Mary is seen hurrying to fetch water from the tap downstairs only to be confronted with questions that nature leaves her with no answers. Her neighbour inquires to know when she will be getting married even when it is a known fact that the African tradition only empowers the man to engender such processes. As she prepares and ventures out, she is confronted again with conversations that should only get her anxious for the rest of the day. Her boss is on her neck to quickly deliver a dress she designed while her father pressures her to return to Owerri from Lagos because her sister has disgraced the family. Under such ill-timed pressures, people seldom succeed. This explains why she ends up so disorganized at the airport that she bumps into unsuspecting Akin. The societal expectation for Mary to marry, emphasized by her neighbour's intrusive question, and the compounded pressures from her boss and father, reflect the patriarchal structures that limit women's autonomy. These combined pressures contribute to Mary's disorganized state at the airport, symbolizing how societal expectations and gendered responsibilities impact women's ability to succeed.

As the narrative develops, Alexis lies to the customer that she personally designed the dress thereby stripping Mary off her victory in tailoring. This psychological dethronement is also manifest in the scene in which Mary surprises her boyfriend Tony with a shirt she designed for him before his real marital status is exposed. Instead of appreciating her skill and demonstration of love, Tony hurriedly expresses his dismay at the gift, even though he had shown likeness to a similar shirt few days past. The effect of this is that Mary is made to feel incompetent of actualizing her aspirations. This further exemplifies the psychological pressures women face in their personal relationships. Tony's reaction not only belittles Mary's skills and efforts but also reflects the societal tendency to devalue women's contributions and emotional labour. This scene underscores how patriarchal expectations can make women feel incompetent and undervalued, impacting their self-esteem and aspirations. This weakness is heightened by the filmic apparatus when she finally arrives Abuja instead of Owerri. She is shown so helpless that she bursts into tears while talking on phone with Akin the man who accidentally swapped phones with her. As a result of this, Akin makes mockery of her before offering to help her. This highlights the extent to which *Phone Swap* demotes the female and empowers the man in social relation. It also reflects and reinforces male dominance and female dependency. Feminist theory often critiques such narratives for perpetuating stereotypes that women are inherently in need of male rescue and help, thus maintaining a power imbalance.

In Kike's house, Mary is shown again on phone call with Akin who enumerates his shortcomings in Owerri. Despite the fact that Mary suffers similar fate, she continually apologizes to Akin to the extent that Akin tells her to stop saying sorry because it makes her weak. At the end of their conversation, Akin dictates what Mary will wear to assist him solve his personal problems. This exasperates Mary but does not in any way change the order. Furthermore, the warning Mary issues to Tony on their last night together has no influence on the narrative as Tony is seen leaving his legal family to speak with Mary on the phone as though nothing ever happened to their illicit love relationship. As the scene cuts to Abuja, Mary is seen in another demonstration of weakness. She could not refuse the alcoholic wine Kike offers her, so she unprecedentedly gets drunk and ends up sleeping outside with Kike. The effect of this is that she is once again unable to bring about positive change in the society. Even the powers earlier bestowed on her as the only soothing balm of her family makes no meaning. Her ability to drive change is rendered ineffective by the filmic technique which rather sends her the wrong way; to a place her puny efforts will be

once again futile. Hence, these narrative and cinematic choices collectively illustrate how *Phone Swap* reinforces traditional gender roles and diminishes female agency.



Plate 8: Gina photographed drunk and rolling a cigarette. Her appearance is that of a nymphomaniac.

The next female character Gina is likewise portrayed in a negative light. Gina is the girlfriend of Akin who calls the relationship quits on the grounds that she rearranged his sitting room. In the course of the film, Gina is framed as an erotic object made for the sexual pleasure of Akin and the visual pleasure of male spectators (**Plate 8**). Thus, the motivation of her character in the film's diegesis is to invite *scopophilia* and promote *narcissism*. This advances Laura Mulvey's argument that popular cinema produces and reproduces the 'male gaze' and manipulates visual pleasure.

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle; . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey, 2011, p. 719).

At the beginning of the film, her voice is heard telling Akin that he went too far, a sexual innuendo which becomes open as she tries to arouse Akin for another round of sex. In the scene where Akin sends her away after two years of dating, she is presented as a sex toy who only stays at home and prepares her body for Akin. This explains her motivation for rearranging the house in the first place. In her unconscious, rearranging the room will bring hysteria and a more pleasurable sexual experience. However, rather than being applauded for this, she is hastily dismissed by Akin like a piece of rag.

Kike (Akin's mother) is apologetic all through the film for her past mistakes. Before the film opens, she had left her husband and family without any reason. She also tells Mary that her husband vilified her for drinking excessively and yet the conventions surrounding the diegesis positions her as unable to help herself. Thus, she resorts to fate and tries to buy over Akin's company in order to win him over. In the end, the film does not clarify whether or not Akin forgave and accepted her back. She as well as the rest women is portrayed as weak

and dissolute. She is shown to demonstrate good character only when driven to it by dire necessity.



Plate 9: A reestablishing shot of the conflict resolution meeting for Cynthia and her in-laws. Note Akin standing by the side of Cynthia (on screen right).

Finally, Cynthia is presented to have an intransigent attitude that needs to be put in endless check. This explains why Mary asks her dad what wrong Cynthia did “again”. In the meeting sequence, Akin stands by the side as an object of male power erect to suppress any female rebellion (**Plate 9**). She is constantly reminded of her children as encouragement for good conduct. She only accepts to be orderly in the meeting when Akin reminds her of her children. Besides this, she gets easily agitated and ready to destroy her home.

Conclusion

In *Phone Swap* conclusively, the prolific filmmaker Kunle Afolayan weaves together several stylistic elements to present a film representative of the class struggle, power quest, fashion trend, youth culture and ethnic diversity in contemporary Nigeria. The ideological outlook of Nigeria as a nation is investigated through circumstances presented before the two major characters Akin (Wale Ojo) and Mary (Nse Ikpe-Etim) who hail from distant regions of the country. Like Muyiwa Aluko’s *North East* (2016) which is built around the romantic travails of two culturally different partners –Hadiza Ahmed (Ini Dima-Okojie) and Emeka Okafor (OC Ukeje), leading to their eventual inter-tribal and multi-religious marriage in modern Nigeria; *Phone Swap* centres on these two major characters (Akin and Mary) to encompass the romance and fate that lead them to eventually hook-up. These characters are presented in parallel unsatisfying relationships with Gina and Tony respectively, opposing social classes and ethnicities they need to overcome to attain rest. The fights between Akin versus Tony and Gina versus Mary signify the struggle necessary for obtaining one’s ultimate desires in life. Kike’s acquisition of the majority share in the company is an indication that women too, can rise to prominence. Finally, the powerful Cynthia kneels down before the elders during the conflict resolution scene as a sign of respect for constituted authority. Family is everything. This is what Kunle Afolayan ultimately leads the audience to believe. But as this paper argues; that may not be all. It is the varying ways in which gender representations are made in cinematic ideology that present us with “ideals.”

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