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Challenging Stereotypes in Nigerian Films: A Case Study of Gumzak's *Maula*

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Abstract

Nigeria's population of approximately 220 million people is diverse in terms of ethno-cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. Regrettably, this diversity often leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes and misconceptions among the citizens. With a booming entertainment industry, Nigerian films from northern and southern regions often ignite discussions and debates on delicate topics like religion, ethnicity, identity and gender, invariably peddling certain stereotypes. For example, Muslim-Hausa women are oppressed, and men are often featured as randy 'sugar daddies', wife-beaters, illiterate gatemen, beggars, and so on. Begging is especially shown to be entrenched in the Muslim-Hausa culture and, customarily, their dominant religion of Islam for a reason. Under the facade of *Almajirci*, as a practice of sending children from far and near to towns and cities to supposedly study the Qur'an, many Muslim-Hausa children and even adults roam the streets of Nigerian cities and towns pleading for food and money. The Kannywood movie *Maula* (Begging, 2016, dir. Ali Gumzak) challenges this dominant narrative by presenting a subtle counter-narrative. The article uses New Historicism as a framework for assessing the 'message' of the film.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Kannywood, Nollywood, Propaganda, Representation

Introduction

The relationship between art and propaganda is very symbiotic, if not seamless. Beydoun and Ayoub (2015) point out that "Art and propaganda share an intimate relationship". Art has been recognised as an effective tool for social change by scholars, politicians, activists, and various other individuals worldwide. As a result, from Beijing to Berlin, Lagos to Los Angeles, Mumbai to Mombasa and beyond, the potential of art has been harnessed to support numerous campaigns to bring about positive change in societies. Similarly, Marks (24) asserts that "cinema invents histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of *official* histories" [emphasis added]. There is, however, a considerable challenge. Therefore, Beydoun and Ayoub (2015) caution that "art has the potential to incite, particularly when the villains in a box-office hit are flatly constructed, maliciously misrepresented…".

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Indeed, several filmmakers deploy their artistry in projecting and propagating their ethno-regional, religious and racial-oriented perception of the culture, religion, race and ethnicity) of other groups to their audience in what Edward Said (1978) describes as “Othering" while glorifying their own. Said’s thesis, according to Zukogi (3), “demonstrates the means by which cultures constitute and re-constitute themselves and maintain their hegemony over other subcultures.” The film *Maula* is analysed as a subtle counter-narrative by Hausa filmmakers to challenge and correct the stereotypical portrayal of Hausa people in southern Nigerian Nollywood cinema and mainstream popular culture.

Generally, it can be quite tricky to come across a movie that is entirely devoid of any political messaging or propaganda. Throughout history, the media has been a potent force in promoting and marketing propaganda worldwide. What makes this possible and easy is what Jephthah (30) points out that “almost everybody can understand the language of film and its universal appeal”. The film possesses a communicative force that can either stir up intense emotions or provide a relaxing escape with its ability to create dreams and illusions in the minds of its audience regardless of their level of education or exposure. Dubbed the “Father of African Cinema”, Ousmane Sembène initially worked as a writer. However, he later transitioned to filmmaking as he believed that people could understand the universal language of film more readily than the written word.

The rise of social media and video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube and Vimeo, along with globalisation, has significantly enhanced the ease and reach of sharing different types of content. Messages conveyed through films and other media can – and, indeed, do – reach every corner of the world. Propaganda, irrespective of being favourable or unfavourable, possesses the potential to transcend its immediate or intended audience and propagate widely.

Hollywood and Bollywood Examples

Over the years, the media has been fertile ground for constructing and reconstructing identity using “identity-construct kits” Adamu (3). However, the construction sometimes leads to visual misrepresentation of identities. Shildrick (24), while drawing upon the work of Todd (1995), suggests that through this way, viewers are essentially encouraged “to think and see in terms of various binary distinctions between "them" and "us". The binaries could be between races, religions, civilisations, etc. For instance, black people used to be, and still are, portrayed in many early (and current) Hollywood films like D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (US, 1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (George Cukor, 1939) as an embodiment of everything wrong. Shaheen (2014), in his ground-breaking documentary titled “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People”, concludes that the most maligned and attacked groups in Hollywood films today are

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Arabs and Muslims. Other Muslims of Turkish and Pakistani origins, among others, are often not spared as well in several Hollywood films.

Similar stereotyped stories have been spun in Indian Bollywood for over half a century. In "Fragmenting the Nation: Images of Terrorism in Indian Popular Cinema", Chakravarty (1993), as cited in Hjort and MacKenzie (2000), analyses famous Indian filmmakers' growing interest over the past two decades in producing cinematic representations of terrorism. By using their rivalry with their neighbour, Pakistan, in film after film, too many to name, the suspected terrorists are almost always from there. The most recent example, *Fighter* (dir. Siddharth Anand), was released in January 2014.Slowly but surely, the propaganda is successfully sold, for the media, particularly film, knows no boundary. Once a particular representation is thematised, sustained and repeated, it finally registers with the audience. It is not a wonder, therefore, that the identity of a Muslim has become synonymous with that of a terrorist and Islam with terrorism beyond the US and India, the birthplace of Hollywood and Bollywood, respectively.

The representation mentioned above, damaging as it is, is common and familiar on the Hollywood and Bollywood screens today. Films like *True Lies* (1994, dir. James Cameron), *American Sniper* (2014, dir. Clint Eastwood), and *Baby* (2015, dir. Neeraj Pandey) paint Muslims in a dark light. In response to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, movies like My Name is Khan (2010, dir. Karan Johar) starring Indian megastar Shah Rukh Khan offered a counter-narrative. Filmmakers traditionally tell stories and then offer contrasting accounts of them.

Nigeria's Case: Nollywood and Kannywood

The Nigerian film industry has become a hotly contested space where cineastes engage in a tug-of-war over the practice of othering and counter-othering. The industry is fraught with tensions around the issues of identity, inclusion and exclusion, and cultural representation. These dynamics have created a complex and nuanced landscape worthy of academic attention. Kaplan (661) suggests that "A nation has to develop its own cinematography, its own film language, by relying on its own visual culture, narrative traditions, and capacity for artistic experiments". Nevertheless, much more than India or perhaps any other country with a seemingly national film industry, Nigeria's inability to establish a cohesive visual culture and language can be traced back to the turbulent dynamics of its internal politics. This lack of unity not only hinders effective communication but also impedes the nation's progress towards a shared identity. The heterogeneity and the raging contention between the country's diverse ethnic groups led to the creation of the likes of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Afenifere/Yoruba Nation, Niger Delta Avengers, and even the Islamist insurgent group, Boko Haram, among other separatist movements, that

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instigate violence and constantly lampoon everyone else from other religions, regions and ethnicities, the "Other".

Nigeria boasts of two prominent film industries: Nollywood and Kannywood. On the one hand, Nollywood, situated in the southern part of the country, produces movies that often highlight Christian and Western-inspired themes predominantly in English or other widely spoken Nigerian languages, except for Hausa. Adamu (19) believes that Nollywood "is a realist cinema based on African realities" and, of course, Nigerian realities. On the other hand, Kannywood films are a popular form of entertainment in Northern Nigeria. They are known for their exclusive use of the Hausa language and Islamic themes. While some of these films accurately reflect the teachings of Islam, others may deviate from the religion's principles. Despite this, Kannywood films continue to attract a large audience and have become an essential cultural phenomenon in the region and other Hausa-speaking parts of the world.

Hausa people, known as Hausawa, have been cast in diverse roles in Nollywood films for many years, such as in *Faithful Betrayal* (dir. Ikechukwu Onyeka, 2008), *Holy Law* (dir. Kingsteam, 2000), *Oga Alhaji* (dir. Tony Iyke Ezendigbo, 2013). However, in many films, they are portrayed as subordinates or simpletons, rarely as serious-minded characters. In a world of affluent, cultured and educated southern people such as Yorubas or Igbos, a Hausa man may be seen as a simplistic guardsman with broken English, a foolish cobbler, a beggar, a corrupt politician with a bulging stomach using heavily accented English, or even a lascivious sugar daddy who chases female undergraduates. To borrow from Zukogi (2014), the message is that be it implicit or explicit, the Southerner is the 'self' – and the Northerner is the 'Other'. Again, to adapt Marks's (05) words, the (mis)representation is sometimes "narratively thin but emotionally full."

Kannywood films, too, could do better in this regard. Some films arguably propagate subtle forms of marginalisation through their depictions of Southerners and even Northern minorities. These portrayals often fall short of accuracy and can be considered a travesty. Such misrepresentations can further alienate and ostracise these groups, creating a sense of otherness and reinforcing negative stereotypes. Zukogi concludes thus:

> In some of these films the style is comic and the tone un-serious, but the social meanings are quite evident. To generalise: the Gbagyi [*Dan Gwari*] is constantly portrayed as a heathen who eats pork and gleefully drinks his local gin and is dull in his social interactions and poor in his mastery of the dominant language, Hausa; the Igbo is the quintessential Shylock, one who is mean and grasping in business and money matters; the Yoruba, for his part, plays the clown, the talkative, rambling character who repeatedly interferes in matters that do not concern him. The playful

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> comedy does not disguise the deep-seated portrayal of characters with an inherent cultural deficit when compared to the superior values of the dominant Hausa culture. (2014:06)

There is, however, a slight improvement in the portrayal of the 'Other' in Hausa motion pictures in recent years. Kannywood and Nollywood collaborated and produced films like *Wata Shari'ar* (dir. by Yakubu Muhammad, 2013), *Maja* (dir. Sadiq N. Mafia, 2012), *Karangiya* (dir. Kenneth Gyang, 2012), *Hajiya Babba* (dir. Abdulmumini Ilyasu, 2015), in which stars like the late Rabilu Musa (Dan Ibro), Nkem Owoh (Osofia), John Okafor (Mr Ibu), Jim Iyke, Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita Iheme (Ake and Pawpaw), among others, are featured. More recent similar productions include *Jalil* (2020, dir. Kelly D. Lenka), *Voiceless* (2020, dir. Robert O. Peters) and *The Milkmaid* (2020, dir. Desmond Ovbiagele).

The *Arewa 24*, *Farin Wata*, among other channels, broadcast a few, though well-received and very famous, series such as *Dadin Kowa* and its sequels, *Zarki, Kwana Casa'in, 'Yan Zamani,* etc. In these novel series and serials, the portrayal of the "other and sub-cultures" is generally positive. The dramas go beyond the usual conventions of the feature film genre and strive to tackle socio-political issues that are often overlooked. Through their thought-provoking plots and relatable characters, these dramas shed light on the complexities of different cultures and religions in the country and emphasise the importance of fostering mutual respect and understanding. Ultimately, their overarching goal is to promote peace and harmony in the region.

Theoretical Framework

This article analyses the film *Maula* through the lens of New Historicism theory in cultural studies. Stephen Greenblatt, who coined the term "new historicism", describes the most significant features of the new historicist method of interpretation of a text in his essay, 'Resonance and Wonder', thus:

> New Historicist critics have tried to understand the intersecting circumstances not as a stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed, but as a dense network of evolving and often contradictory social forces. The idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto which literary interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both in history and our own. (Greenblatt (170)

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Abrams and Harpham (244) further describe how new historicists deal with the text (a film, in this context) where they "attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and so of its later critical interpretations and evaluations". Abrams and Harpham (ibid.:246) explain further how a text (film) is not considered nor studied in isolation but as something thoroughly "embedded" in its context and constantly interacts and interchanges with other components inside the network of institutions, beliefs, and cultural power relationships, practices and products. Dobie (182) also describes the new historicist approach to literary interpretation as Abrams and Harpham above. She adds that "…interpretation involves acknowledging all the social concerns that surround a text—the customs, institutions, and social practices it depicts, as well as those that are part of the author's life".

Cinema is closely connected to culture, like a computer to its screen. Therefore, the Frankfurt School invented the term "culture industries" in the 1930s to refer to film industries (see Miller and Stam 2004). According to Kellner (in ibid. 202), they coined it to "signify the process…of mass-produced culture and the commercial imperatives". Prince (in ibid.88) also notes that "culture-bound attitudes do indeed inflect the content of film narratives, along with their stylistic visualisation, at the point of production and, again, through the inferences viewers draw from those narratives". Also, cinema has always maintained a "symbiotic relationship with ideology" (ibid.:89), and by extension, with religion. It has been a trend in Kannywood, even today, to some extent, as noted by Ibrahim (2016). Therefore, *Maula* may be best analysed using the New Historicism theory to decipher its underlying message, metaphors and more.

The Film, *Maula*

As is the case in many countries worldwide, Nigerians often move from one region to another or even beyond the country's borders for various reasons. In recent years, people from the northern regions of Nigeria, mostly Hausa and Muslims, have been migrating to the southern states, especially Lagos - the country's commercial capital - in search of better opportunities. Unfortunately, many resort to begging on the streets due to a lack of education and highly needed skills. They are unqualified for white-collar jobs or any other lucrative employment. However, some individuals have found success in menial jobs or even begging, to the point of acquiring cars, houses, and other valuable assets back in the North. The film *Maula*, set in the North, offers a critical perspective on this practice through depicting a couple's story.

Muntari is an auto-rickshaw driver in Nigeria, where these vehicles are commonly known as *Keke Napep* or *A Daidaita Sahu*. Unfortunately, his wife, Salamatu, is not content with their modest life and constantly criticises him for their financial situation. To make matters worse, her mother-in-law, Lami, is a greedy street beggar who supports Salamatu's desire for wealth. Muntari

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disapproves of his mother's begging and often tries to persuade her to stop, but his pleas fall on deaf ears. Despite the challenges of supporting his family, studying, and caring for his mother, Muntari works hard to make ends meet.

Lami is always fighting with her co-beggars over the share of the alms given to them. One day, a car hits her while she is rushing to collect alms from another motorist. She eventually dies in humiliation and regret. A few days after the death, the rain beats Salamatu and her newborn baby while coming back from one of her uninvited visits to the house of a wealthy couple. The baby also dies at the hospital due to delayed medical attention, which is caused by a failure to settle the treatment bills.

Salamatu brazenly insults Muntari, accuses him of negligence and killing his mother and their only baby, and forces him to divorce her. However, unknown to her, he had to sell their only means of survival, the auto-rickshaw, very cheaply to pay the hospital bills. After the divorce, Salamatu leaves him and ventures into begging. Muntari, feeling forlorn, packs up his bag to leave his house. He enters his late mother's room to take a few more stuff when he comes upon a large cache of money she hid under her mattress. The beggars own abundant wealth, some even losing count of their numerous commercial buses and cars. Stories of such individuals are genuine and well-known in many northern Nigerian states, including Kano. Therefore, the film writers may have been inspired by them.

Years later, Muntari completes his studies, gets married again, and joins politics. He soon becomes a government official. During a state visit to a camp where arrested beggars are quarantined, Muntari sees his ex-wife, Salamatu, with a child she had out of wedlock. In a mournful mood and crying, she expresses regret for everything she has done and apologises profusely. She follows him home and begs his new wife to allow her to stay there as she has nowhere else to go and no one to take care of them. The film ends on this note.

Viewing Against the Grail: Hausa Woman on and off the Screen

Kannywood is a unique film industry because it has almost always clashed with the state's powerful religious and cultural establishment since 2001. Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 brought an unprecedented change to the northern region's socio-political and religious sphere. Twelve of the nineteen northern states, including Kano, of course, implemented Shari'ah between 2000 and 2001. Krings (2005), Ibrahim (2018) and Adamu (2015), among others, claim that since the establishment of Shari'ah as a legal code, filmmaking remains one of the practices most affected under the law. The Kano state government established a censorship board in March 2001. The board has repeatedly banned and negotiated film practices in conjunction with the dominant religious establishments. Some Kannywood producers, directors, and artists have been arrested

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and prosecuted for various charges. Haynes (2007: 5) concludes that today, it is common knowledge that Kannywood is "locked in tense negotiations with various cultural authorities about what is permissible."

Much of the conflict revolves around the depiction of women and their relationship with male actors in films. Therefore, some critics may not welcome films such as *Maula*, notwithstanding its apparent effort to counter-narrate and correct what many people consider a sweeping misrepresentation of the Muslim-Hausa culture. Larkin (1997) argues that the Muslim-Hausa society is legendary for its age-old practice of purdah. Moreover, many critics of Kannywood (See Ibrahim, 2018 & Ibrahim, 2021) question the identity of the popular Hausa women on the screen – in both films and many serials and series produced under the umbrella of Kannywood. Some go to the extent of condemning Muslim women preachers for violating the teachings of their religion, something they claim to uphold and propagate. Therefore, until now, there is no consensus among the hegemonic Islamic scholars on the legality or acceptability of a woman engaging in any business beyond the walls of her husband's house. Many among those scholars consider acting onstage and/or on camera by not only a Hausa woman but any Muslim woman, *haram* (forbidden), as that entails exposing her beauty to non-*mahram* (men other than one's father, brother, son or nephew). As per this school of thought, a woman's entire body is *awr*ā (nudity) except her face and palms.

For this "dominant interpretation of *awr*ā and purdah system in northern Nigeria" (Ibrahim 136), many people bitterly criticise any Hausa woman who engages in film, Kannywood or not. According to the April 2000 edition of the Kano-based film magazine *Tauraruwa*, a particular observer contends that:

> Whenever you mention [the] Hausa home video, it is assumed these are videos made by the ethnic Hausa**...**The ethnic tribes that overrun the Hausa home video industry include Kanuri, Igbos and most significant of all, the Yoruba ... About 42% of the Hausa home video producers and artistes are of Yoruba extraction, 10% are Kanuri, 8% are Igbos ... Only about 40% are true ethnic Hausa. (Adamu 13)

The central argument of this article is, nonetheless, not whether these films are made by the true ethnic Hausa or by what Ekwuazi (64) calls the "acculturated Hausanized Muslim and non-Muslim non-ethnic Hausa"; instead, it is about the characters' symbolic, represented, constructed, and reconstructed identity, which, unarguably, remains Hausa. It is indisputable that every individual, irrespective of their place of birth, religion, or cultural background, can be identified as a member of the Hausa community. This recognition is based on the belief that the Hausa people share a common set of values, customs, and traditions that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

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Hence, despite their diverse backgrounds, the ethnicity of the actors in *Maula* can be accurately identified as Hausa.

Women's oppression in the North?

For several reasons attributed to culture, religion and convention, women are often disadvantaged and seen as inferior to men in many societies worldwide, not only Hausa's (*see* Butler 2002; Simone de Beauvoir 1997; Allen & Sheldon, 1986). That is why they are almost always not in the centre of affairs. As Western feminists like de Beauvoir would say, they are subordinates to men. This assertion is supported by Bartky (1990), Azare (2000), and Umar (2004), who conclude that women are not encouraged to develop qualities of independence, initiative and assertiveness because these qualities are believed to be anti-feminine. Acting is such a quality that it is thought to be only suitable for men. Umar further notes that

> …women may be inwardly more independent and analytical, [but the] societal socialisation process, especially in northern Nigeria, discourages the development and expression of these qualities. Instead, they are subjected to archaic and rigid conceptions of feminity and thus denied the opportunity to develop an independent mind. Their thoughts are rather reshaped into believing that their life starts and ends as domestic beings. This eventually misleads them to only think of marrying a rich husband who can cater for their needs. (284)

This does not validate the portrayal of women as beggars on the street in the film under study, nor the misconception aligned to the religion or even the culture regarding the place of women in society. Islamic history shows that the Prophet's first wife, Khadija Bint Abubakar, was a successful businesswoman who employed Prophet Muhammad before his messengership and their subsequent marriage. His other wives were also engaged in one business or another, and most were great scholars, particularly his favourite wife, Aisha Bint Abubakar (RA). The famous daughter of Usman Bn Fodio, Nana Asma'u, was also a prolific Muslim scholar, poet, historian, and educator in ancient Hausa land (see Boyl & Mack 2013). In essence, Muslim women can seek knowledge and do business without any religious restrictions.

Culturally, idleness is also criticised in the Hausa setting. For this reason, several traditional singers and Muslim clerics[1] mock and criticise women who choose to remain idle – without any job or

[1] A lecture titled "Dear mothers take good care of yourselves: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VD95KGKR7s (accessed on 13.04.2024)

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engaging in gainful business they could do while in their husbands' homes. The celebrated water drumming singer, Barmani Choge, using what Adamu (2008) calls "calabash-orchestra", sang an epic operetta, *Sakarai Ba Ta Da Wayo,* in which she admonishes Hausa women to engage in one or another occupation or trade. Adamu further explains the meaning and the central idea of the song, thus:

> *Sakarai* is a Hausa word meaning a useless person who seems mentally deficient. Thus, not only is the woman in the operetta a useless person (because she has no specific occupation or trade), she is also not wise ("ba ta da wayo"), reinforcing her mental deficiency; because she would otherwise have been engaged in a useful trade (05).

In a nutshell, docility is never encouraged among Hausa womenfolk. The film *Maula* suggests that the beggars, including Salamatu, Lami, and others, do not beg solely because of abject poverty. On a related note, Usman (2016) in Bhadmus (25) points out that "as a wife, a woman is expected to rely on her husband for everything", but Salamatu does not. Clearly, by going against this rule of 'wife-hood', she invites the wrath of karma; she loses her baby, self-respect and dignity. Muntari's mother, too, is responsible for her own tragic, unceremonious death.

From another angle, *Maula* offers yet another rare depiction of a mother-in-law in Hausa society. "The general belief is that mother-in-law is devilish and wicked; it is, therefore, normal to find mother-in-law at loggerheads with daughters-in-law" (Usman 2012, in Yerima and Aliyu 242). There is, however, a strong alliance between Salamatu and Lami, though the former is a niece to the latter. The mother-in-law motivates and teaches the daughter-in-law the art of begging. This is no surprise, however, because the thematic concern is not their relationship but their desire for begging and the consequence of their action and inaction.

Through the character of Muntari, the commonly held perception of Hausa husbands being reckless, irrational, and physically abusive towards their wives is effectively challenged. In contrast, his wife, Salamatu, abuses him. She even goes to the extent of declaring he is "a bastard, conceived in and born out of the womb of Lami ", his mother, who had just been reposed four days ago. She dares him to divorce her if he is a legitimate son (Part 2; 31-32mins). This is a common phrase used by Hausa women who are seeking divorce. He does not raise a finger to beat her; he

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only divorces her once, not thrice, which would have ended their marriage per mainstream Islamic ruling on divorce. She thanks God for 'freeing' her from the shackles of his poverty-riddled and miserable life. Muntari is an ideal husband, while she is portrayed as an evil, bitchy wife.

One notable aspect of the film is the absence of the typical song and dance performance often featured in most Hausa movies, especially during the period the film was released. Although the film's theme song is original, it was slightly adapted to the rhythm and tone of the traditional song 'Maula' – from which the film got its title. The choice of the word "maula" instead of its synonym "bara" to mean "begging" may also be deliberate. The former has a more traditional appeal than the latter. Thus, as a deliberate propagandist movie, "Maula" as a title is arguably more befitting; it demonstrates to the audience that although begging may be seen as something entrenched in the Hausa-Muslim culture, beggars are often motivated by greed and lack of contentment.

Conclusion

Kannywood founders often argue that theirs is a film industry established on the bedrock of social concern. Thus, they supposedly made films to respond to imported foreign films, mainly from India, Hong Kong and the US, which bore and bring "alien" cultures to the Muslim-Hausa viewers. Nollywood's purported misrepresentation is yet another challenge to the Kannywood filmmakers. *Maula* is, therefore, such a propagandist weapon deployed to defy not only the stereotypical depiction of Hausa people in those southern Nigerian films and other socio-political fora in the country but also to correct other home-grown misconceptions.

The attempt made by this film is not entirely flawed, although it is not perfect. The film not only condemns the act of begging and the portrayal of women as oppressed but also challenges the belief that Hausa people are commonly depicted as wife-beaters and other stereotypical roles often seen in southern Nigerian films. It further shifts all the blame to the individual beggars, who are only not content with what they have or are slothful to engage in one or another trade or occupation. Likewise, beating one's wife, for the character of Muntari refuses to raise his fingers in the name of beating his cantankerous wife.

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