
Sexual Violence and Taboos in *Shanty Town*: Reviewing Censorship through the NFVCB Activities in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The portrayal of violence and the film viewers' exhibition of the manners depicting what they seem to copy from film has made heated arguments to erupt against the functioning of the Nigerian Film Video Censors Board which is expected to screen the indigenous film content and vet the ones imported from abroad to avoid the transposition of antisocial cultures that may become a lifestyle and offset the decorum of cultural position of the nation. This paper uses qualitative research design and library method to evaluate the portrayal of sexual violence and cultural taboos in Nigerian films using Shanty Town as paradigm. The theoretical position is framed on Social Learning Theory. Findings show that strange manners of bestial sexual gratification, murder, dismemberment and sales of human organs are portrayed in the film. The content confirms some social upheavals purported about the killing and selling of human organs to those who demand for them as true social circumstance in the society. Undermining the content by the National Film and Video Censors Board does not imply their ineptitude; it rather reflects their approval of the film medium as a tool for exposure of inimical human practices. The paper concludes that for a film to properly command some aspects of aesthetics, it needs to spice its content with the trending development by embellishing the creative with the rational for appeal. This will encourage patronage; but without intensifying the marketing context, filmmaking might not be interesting. It concludes that the NFVCB does not compromise her activities. Bad and good manners are not determined by entertainment and filmmaking requires some level of violence to keep the medium appealing as an art-form.*

Keywords: *Censorship, Nigerian-film, Sexual-violence, Society, Taboos,*

I. Introduction

The establishment of the National Film and Video Censors Board in Nigeria in 1993 was one of the realistic steps to sift unwanted human attitudes from the commendable ones expected to strengthen the national aim for citizens. Through censorship, it is possible to set a standard for creativity, order and arts elevation from the ordinary to the super ordinary. In the view of Plato, without the introduction of censorship, people will be corrupted by mimesis (drama). Drama (film in this sense) possesses the capacity to engulf the human mind with reflections on the content of the drama and stir actions that may be governed more by emotions than reasoning (12-13). This is the importance of checking, vetting, editing and sifting of what people do or say before they are brought to the public as a piece of information.

A significant social upheaval overbearing Nigeria today is the portrayal of sexual violence and rationalization of practices that the nation proscribes as outright taboos in films. In a film like *Selina Tested*, the subject matter is domestic terrorism and the various human abuses and the deliberate shifting of the ideal cultures of the people of Nigeria are rationalized as aspects of aesthetics. Surprisingly, those attitudes, manners, dictions and idioms deployed in the film are overtly used by both children and grownups in Nigeria presently. In films like *SS 3 Girls* in which students overtly indulge in lesbianism and act as accomplices to antisocial activities, such atmosphere actually surfaces in Nigerian secondary schools presently. For instant, Oluwakemi Adelagun reports the shutting down of a school in Lagos over sex tape scandal thus:

The attention of the Lagos State Government has been drawn to the alleged sexual violence case involving students of Chrisland School... It is pertinent to note that all allegations are being investigated by the relevant ministries.... Ministry of Justice and the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency, Hours after Mr. Franklin broke the news, he posted a video of the mother of the female minor narrating how school concealed the matter from her... They wanted me to know that my daughter whom I left in their care, who they took to Dubai... had a kiss with a boy and the boy also kissed her and they found that they got the kissing thing from *Truth and Dare (Premium Times)*.

The generalization of antisocial act like secondary school students indulging in erotic kiss is blamed on a film because fusion of the male and female lips in the public is not a crime actually in Nigeria but it is abhorrence and detestable. Teenagers and adolescence who sag their pants in public nowadays; the blame is leveled on the foreign movies containing such acts they may have watched. In the society presently, actions portrayed in films “find expression in bragging, scolding, chiding and even instant hit... and extreme verbal threats” (Inegbe and Udofia 59). It is certainly vague to decide if film activities set the agenda for social activities such as sexual violence and the deliberate abuse of norms as realized in Nigeria presently.

More so, many Nigerian films have been portraying the unleashing of unimaginable volley of violence against the weak, the undefended, women and children at home who are ordinary civilians that never prepare to face attack. For instance, *Issakkaba* portrays the hunt of the diabolical, dangerous and corrupt elite who kill people for money and end up sponsoring their funerals; thereby taking the glory of goodness. *Black November* portrays a group’s restiveness over their being exploited which results to their terrorizing the community even to their detriment. In recent films, such narratives are still patronized but what survives is that domestic terrorism scenes are constantly witnessed in the society nowadays. In seeing these terror-filled actions grow to the prominence of the premiering of the film, it actually suggests that the film may have succeeded from the lenses of the National Film and Video Censors Board. In the same vein, despicable manners of having sex found in Nigeria’s home movies may have survived the censorship lenses also.

In the same vein, Plato further acknowledges the prominence of the divine or supernatural in shaping the do’s and the don’ts of a people’s culture (16). In Nigeria, there are cultures that many appear common especially to the Western world but within the nation, a particular gender indulging in it risks a taboo. Recent Nigeria’s films generously portray manslaughter, rape, stealing and desecration of sacred object, women beholding a dreaded mask, human sacrifice, drinking of human blood, witchcraft, lesbianism, gay, dismemberment of human organs and even selling the parts, and many others. It is the place of the censorship body to filter the various actions orchestrated to synergize a film. This may help to instill decorum in the copying and practicing of transposed antisocial practices.

The intermingling of foreign cultures and domestic ones can be possible in many ways; however, the replacement of a healthy culture with a despicable one direct from actions seen in a film would be purported to

have been the influence of the film, which on the other hand is expected to be scrutinized by a legally constituted body in the nation. Nonetheless, this paper focuses on the portrayal of sexual violence and cultural taboos in *Shanty Town* in view of the activities of the NFVCB over the control, protection and preservation of the cultures of Nigerian people.

II. Theoretical Framework

Considering the position and value of information in the contemporary society, there is need to constantly review the viability of deployed tools of communication and the impacts on the society at large. Within this scope, the responsibility of the media, the message and the body responsible for get-keeping activity may be succinctly utilized. In considering the widespread of sex oriented pervasions and aggressiveness in society which are not far from the ones portrayed in films, the need to reassess the social responsibility of the body constituted for the censoring of unwanted content in Nigerian film is necessary. Based on this, this paper is framed on underpinnings of Social Responsibility Theory;

Social responsibility theory emerged as a full moral speculation in the twentieth century in the United States of America. By virtue of this theory, filmmakers, Governmental rules within which ethical positions of a nation over media/film contents are drawn, and the audience, have a role to play for national interest of cultural focus through information. In the Nigerian case, for instance, the censorship board is part of the media contingency; it has a significant role to play in shaping the cultural focus and conventional position of the media of the nation. That means, in the idea of Tripti Malhotra, this theory advocates that “the society expects a particular role which media must play in getting rid of social evils, educating people, criticizing government policies and exposing other wrong doing in the society... the media should be self-regulated codes of conduct, and ethics” (Legalserviceindia.com). As Peter Millett conceives of this theory, a body that filters information or even constructs the information should not be imbued with negativity. It should itself be correctional, reliable, lawful, self-contained and praiseworthy. Its position should be clear to avoid people losing confidence in its verdict.

In the same vein, social responsibility actually focuses on the press; in this case, the press is viewed as the watchdog of the society. In Nigeria, the watchdog for video/film production is the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), as it has a vital role to play in the screening, vetting, promotion and control of film (media) content in Nigeria and the kind of films imported into the nation. According to Seema Hasan,

Social responsibility theory is based on the assumption that media serve essential functions in the society. Therefore, it should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society. These obligations are to be made by setting high professional standards in communication of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance. In accepting and discharging these obligations, the media should be self-regulatory within the framework of law and established institution... (it) should underplay that news which might leads to crime, violence and social tension (170).

It should be the one putting forth the moral stance of the society not the one initiating its weaknesses.

The relevance of social responsibility theory to this paper is that the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) is the constituted body in Nigeria meant to act as the information control and shaper of the ethical position of the society. Without its effect in setting the moral compass for moral balance, issues like domestic violence and social taboos found in films by the audience may be taken to be the tending; therefore, acceptable praiseworthy human practices.

Shanty Town in Focus

Shanty Town is a Nigerian video/film produced in 2022 by Nollywood. It was directed by Dimeji Ajibola, and Produced by Chinenye Nworah. The subject matter is Death in Survival and there are many discursive themes in the film. Some of the are: Sex slavery and death, barbarism and human organs transaction, coital degeneracy, cultural taboos, and sexual violence. The local of the film is contemporary Lagos-Nigeria. The film features Damijo Mofe, Ini Edo, Chidi Mokeme, Regina Daniels and others.

An inferno erupts in the coastal community of the Niger Delta region which claims the lives of many people. Inem and her twin-sister, Amanda are separated. Inem finds herself in the mercy of Scar, the adopted son of Chief, the owner of *Shanty Town*. Inem, Sharewa, Enenwan, Jackie and others domicile in Shanty Town, a secluded brothel governed by armed young men. The quest is for freedom; and each is expected to lay many men as possible to secure her freedom. Jackie has secured her freedom and left but it is discovered through a voiced note that Jackie, like any other freed persons in Shanty Town, does not live again. Inem was sent to exile but she met her twin sister, Amanda, an intelligent detective. Inem opens everything to her before giving up the ghost. Amanda sneaks into Shanty Town as Inem and helps in uncovering the truth that the primary business in Shanty Town is the sales of human parts; that all freed inmates had been butchered and sold, and that Enenwan is an insider. With the help of Sharewa and Femi, Chief's son, Scar, the heartless is brought down but the fume of sexual violence and taboos still linger as a reminder of human wickedness in the society.

Sexual Violence in Shanty Town

Shanty Town focuses on the theme, sexual violence. As the name suggests, sexual violence denotes aggression emanating from the coital union between a man and a woman. Some writers practically bend the violence to be men's viciousness at women. For instance, Ezinne Enwereji mentions that sexual violence erupts in mating games; that it "perpetuates male power, control and dominance over females" (81). This position corroborates the idea that "the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man towards woman, having in direct object the establishment of absolute tyranny over her" (Murphy 68). This means that "sexual violence erupts from mating discrepancies, that as part of domestic necessities, it breeds personal violence" (Crook and Baur 224). This view confines sexual violence to quarrel, discord or disagreement from tender overtures and practices that escalates to aggressiveness.

Sexual violence can be seen in a coercive sexual contract or mating practiced consumed under duress. According to Iweze cited in Dokun Oyeshola, "sexual violence includes intercourse, beating on genitals or inserting objects, forced prostitution... forced sex with others, and forced oral sex, rape, incest, sexual harassment and female genital mutilation" (73). Nwagbo Nnenyelike acknowledges that sexual violence covers virtually all forms of violence at home centering on mutual responses between couples or men and woman. It brings about physical violence, emotional violence and psychological violence in which practices such as rape, and sexual abuse of women (178). When an unwilling person is forced to having sex, it amounts to sexual violence.

Another way of looking at sexual violence is in the use of sex for power, wealth acquisition, and for oppression of others. Looking into the context of deploying sex this way, Crook and Baur posits that "today, women are not the only one to experience sexual coercion" (556). There is a cascading record when it comes to using sex as a weapon for power, wealth acquisition and for suppression. It is women that use sex this way as an instrument of control. Thus, men are also compelled to surrender their ego, dignity and moral stance through sex (Udofia 18). Such spate of aggressiveness forms the major aspect of some Nigerian films presently as portrayed in different shades in *Shanty Town*.

Coerciveness: In *Shanty Town*, the major stake in the city is prostitution. Even when sex is used as a means of livelihood, both men and women are brought to unimaginable nervousness in which the strong oppress the weak. This is portrayed in the film thus:



Forced Sex



Forced Sex

This manner of sexual pleasure has been practiced widely in the society. Men who by any means have financial advantage or elevated status indulge in using coercion to lay women, and themselves begin to strategies defensive techniques which sometimes result to a mortal clash, suffering, regrets and death.

Rape: Another act of sexual violence portrayed in *Shanty Town* is rape. There are many instances of rape in the film. Typical examples are captured in these pictures:



Rape



Rape

This is a reflection of the way man and woman relationship is sometimes bent. It occurs mostly among young men and women. When an unwilling lady bares her mind by refusing to copulate with a man, the man seeks opportunity to force himself on her. In most cases, it may result to a permanent injury, scar, psychological trauma or death. All these are some of the sexual violence portrayed in the film. However, the acts themselves are freely put to practice and are viewed in by families with children in Nigeria.

Social Taboos in *Shanty Town*

Taboos are antisocial practices that are despicable, irrelevant and disgusting to a people in their society. This shows that every society has a set of socially acceptable practices which becomes their value-consensus in which morality is based. Indulging in activities that repels the entire cosmic order is tantamount to a taboo. According to Michael Haralambos, Martin Holborn and Robin Heald, a taboo sets in when “people deviate from the norms and value which socialization tries to instill in them... social controls implanted by family are particularly effective because of taboos which saturate family life... breaking this taboos can create feelings of guilt” (687).

There are practices that are considered as taboos in the Nigerian society. Some may have been practiced in the past but through awareness and outright show of revulsion to them, they are suppressed or severed from existence. Such practices, Elizabeth Isichei mentions “human-sacrifice” (90), John Bosco Ekanem acknowledge killing of human being, desecration of a sacred objects, witchcraft, and sexual contract that upsets

the boundary line and standard of the community; which include polyandry or one woman laying many men, incest and pervasive forms of coital engagement (29-32). According to Patrick Ebewo, in Ika community of the Annang people,

Homogenous African society emphasized the sense of full human dignity being shared by all members in the community. To find someone below the set standards prompted instant ridicule, jeering and pointing of fingers at the culprit. Ridiculing of social misfit was so rampant that in Ika, rapists names, for instance, were shouted every evening for several weeks throughout an entire community. The singular action was an attempt to shame the culprit and to make him lose face in the community. African culture condemns shame, and people are expected to avoid doing things that may bring shame and disgrace to them (16-17).

To further look into Ebewo's analogy of Ika community in Nigeria, taboos are practices that make a person to "lose face, marks one as a misfit and labels one as a social pervert unworthy to be associated with. Such acts like rape, stealing and involving in sexual activities with one whom one is not legally married to do not contribute taboos in the contemporary Nigeria; rather, the way a man and a woman copulate may be repulsive to the culture, the way a person is murdered and the purpose of the murder may repudiate a community; and the ease at which sexual overtures and consummation are appropriated may upset the cultural harmony of a people. Such cultures as portrayed in *Shanty Town* form the subheadings below:

Prostitution: Women collecting money from willing men to lay with them is not a new practice. It existed for decades, and some societies actually legalize it. In Nigeria, prostitution is still muttered as a taboo. A prostitute is seen as a social misfit; but in *Shanty Town*, prostitution is portrayed as a noble career which prostitutes confidently brag about as a way of life. This is portrayed in these images:



Prostitution



Prostitution



Prostitution

Coital Pervasiveness: Having sex does not tinge the ear nor blink the eyes as having the sex in a rather repudiating manner. In *Shanty Town* use of the mouth and anus as sex spot are taboos to the Nigerian culture. Nigerians understand genital to genital not mouth to genital or genital to anus. These aversions are captured in *Shanty Town* thus:



Perverse Sex



Perverse Sex

The presence of these forms of mating technique in a home video is a taboo communicating the transposal of inimical sexual practices that way temper with the healthy processes of copulation between the couple.

Murder and Organs Dismemberment: Killing of human being is a crime in the society punishable by law. In many occasions and for many reasons, people are killed; yet they are secretly lynched and killed except in an open confrontation or a clash where death may be an accident. Killing someone and dismembering the parts is a wicked practice that repels the Nigerian norms. These acts are portrayed thus:



Murder for Sale



Human organs for Sale

Sales of Human Parts: The portrayal of selling of human parts to buyers for whatever reason is shocking. Such cruelty is both repulsive and offensive in Nigeria. To kill a human being, one many attribute to anger, self-defence; but to kill someone and use a cutlass to butcher the remains, dismembering them to auctionable bits is a taboo: *Shanty Town* captures such in this dialogue:

SCAR: Family na forever

JACKIE: You say I don free na. na you even open your mouth talk am.

SCAR: Family na forever (*He collects an axe and begins to hack down Jackie*).

ENENWAN: (*Enenwan brings containers to gather the organs*) You for remain small na. How I go take fine the eyes now?

SCAR: I go Woaz you now. I dey pay you money make you come dey ask question (*Enenwan begins to gather the organs*)...



Killing to Dismember



Human Organs for Sale

It is a reflection of contemporary Nigerian case in which reports of people being killed and dismembered to sell the organs to foreign countries is rampant. One of such instances was reported by David Olatunji thus:

A couple, Taiwo and Salawa Ajalorun, and six others have been arrested by men of the Ogun State Police Command for allegedly selling human parts. The suspects who allegedly killed three persons before they were arrested, reportedly sold human legs for ₦30,000 and a heart for ₦50,000 to their buyers (punchng.com).

In the same vein, *The Guardian Newspaper* reports how Okpegboro Avwerosuo killed his roommate in Sagbama, Bayelsa State, dismembered the body and sold to a clergy in Port Harcourt, who uses human parts for rituals (guardian.org). The practice of killing and butchering people for sell has characterized recent media content in Nigeria. It is a taboo in Nigeria.

Polyandry/Incest: Another sexual habit that is antisocial, constituting media violence in Nigerian films is the culture of many men laying a single woman, and members of the same blood sharing the same sexual partner. The culture of polygamy is understandable and by extension, it does not appear pervasive for a man to go promiscuous as when a lady comfortably has sex with many men. In *Shanty Town*, a single woman sleeps with two brothers and equally takes on the father happily.



First Son lays the same woman



Second Son lays the same woman



Father lays the same woman

Considering the apt portrayal of sexual violence and social taboos in *Shanty Town*, by the way they are portrayed, it is conceived either that such portrayal are more as expose of those vices or a deliberate innovativeness to attract patronage. This brings the relevance of a nation's censor board to the space. In Nigeria, Nollywood is the film industry producing *Shanty Town*; and the NFVCB is functional as an institution in the country.

Censorship of Violence and Taboos: The NFVCB Factors

The NFVCB was created in 1993. It is the body that is primarily concerned with issues of the cultural ethics, social relevance, creativity promotion and balance of ethical issues in film making for the Nigerian society. It was out of the consideration of the cultural positions of the various ethics norms and the collective world of morality position that the body was form in Nigeria (Ogbondah 22). Specifically, the NFVCB is "yet another level of control exercised tactfully by the government... a body that undertakes visual publicity campaigns on behalf of various ministries, department and autonomous bodies" (Hasan 580). According to (nvfcb.gov.ng),

The National Film and Video Censors Board is the regulator body set up by Act No. 85 of 1993 to regulate films and video industry in Nigeria. The board is empowered by law to classify all films and videos whether imported or produced locally. It is also the duty of the board to register all films and video outlets across the country and to keep a register of such registered outlets among other functions... The Board believes very strongly that Nigeria should define her identity, characters, image and influence from the movies global window...

Observing the context of the NFVCB, it is the body politically set up to sift the unwanted contents that does not befit the Nigerian children, Nigerian fathers, and Nigerian mothers to view at home or other places.

Fundamental Human Right Factor: Filmmaking is a profession learned and mastered. It has its perfection and weaknesses. The script writer has a focus which contrast may be the target. The Director and even the producer have their aims with the position of human rights in the creativity and self-expression, the filmmaker may choose to portray what he can make sells and defend his or her position as a full fledge tax payer who should seek all legal avenue to invest in his creativity. Domestic violence and taboos may be the found motif for relevance.

The Market Index and Sales Focus: It is the most trending themes that the audience pays attention to. When a producer makes his market research and discovers what theme can quicken his entrepreneurial target, he may not bother about morality but ecstasy. The portrayal of a hotel where people are murdered and their organs dismembered and frozen for sell is a curious sight. Many people will deliberately pay to see such film. A situation like this may be explainable to the NFVCB as an expose to the act for security alert.

The NFVCB in-Action: As a constituted body without direct governmental force, the Nigerian Video Film Censors Board most times downplays their activities. It appears that the membership of the board is a compensatory appointment. Members choose to act or leave. Besides, there is no fast rule threatening their sanctions or lost of job. More so, there is no standby force to compel members to act.

Legislative Inertia and Patent Insecurity: There is no protection for creative rights in Nigeria. Creative works like films and music are easily pirated and marketed at the detriment of the creator. As the filmmakers' rights are not protected, they themselves explore any route to deliver their product and make the gains including incorporation of sexual violence cultural taboos. They succeed in this by dodging or negotiating for a compromise. That may make antisocial factors to be portrayed without a hitch of censorship.

By negotiating to portray antisocial themes and motifs, the NFVCB who may perceive the content but chooses to let go of the discipline may do so as an act of the "good". Exacting the real force of their office may

make them appear mean and discouraging to creative persons. According to Thomas, good arts give meaning to life; bad arts corrupt and ruin the society. however, without the Nigerian Film Video Censors Board meticulously sifting the creative violence made to show creative pedigree and the ignoble ones enclosed out of ignominy, the essence of drama and film in the society may be defeated. According to Thomas, good arts give meaning to life; bad arts corrupt and ruin the society. “Any art, literature or music which cannot be used actively to teach good morals-acceptable behaviour and the understanding of good and evil should actually be banned...” (8). *Shanty Town* exposes the society to film viewers not film viewers to insignificance to their lives

III. Conclusion

A film is both a social gatherer and an aesthetic factor in the society. For a thoughtful filmmaker to attain a certain height in his creative endeavours he needs to create spectacles that have bearing with the currency of the time. Today’s Nigeria is engulfed with indeterminate ridiculous and rational human practices. Some of the ridiculous is found in sexual practices which a film requiring a good patronage needs to communicate. It may sound disgusting to conceive that human beings have begun defiling the solemnity of human nature in which the death of one’s neighbor used to cast a phlegm of uneasiness to all. Today, that stillness has been lifted. It may be that people actually eat human beings since there are social referents to killing, butchering and labeling of price tags to tasty organs and the insipid ones. A film is a mean of expose; it is not news reportage. The NFVCB does not compromise her job; *Shanty Town* is a factual replay Nigerian society. The better work is to let filmmakers expose this bestiality to save lives and control the cosmos.

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