



Tunde Kelani's *The Narrow Path*: An Approach to Feminist Discourse

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Abstract

Nigerian Home Videos and Films have become a colossal imprint entity that dictates the pace for African films. Many film producers, no doubt, have contributed immensely to this tremendous growth. However, one towering figure who has contributed significantly to this phenomenal image of Nigerian film industry is Tunde Kelani. TK, as he is popularly called, has affected positively the content, language and pictures of Nigerian Film Industry. Many of TK's films have been critically examined and analyzed along the line of language, lexis and mood and style but the feminist angle to his works has not been thoroughly explored. Hence, the significance of this paper. Tunde Kelani has shown through his films that he is unapologetically a feminist through the treatment and roles he gives to women in his films such as *Arugba*, *Maami*, *The Narrow Path* and others. Unlike some other Nollywood film producers, TK has adorned women with pride, honour and gait, though, he equally lampoons and discredits exuberance and negative attitudes. His film, *The Narrow Path* which is the object of the current research is exceptionally crafted and is one of his best in the promotion of feminist views, moral values, etiquette, cultural balance and nemesis. This paper discusses how all the above items are portrayed in the film. It is our opinion that filmmakers, in Africa, especially in Nigeria should take a cue from the innovations and trends in TK's films in order to further enhance the positive image of African films.

Keywords: Feminist Discourse, Rape, Tunde Kelani, *The Narrow Path*.

Introduction

The Nigerian film industry has become a unique cinematographic enterprise in the way it proliferates works that radiate socio-cultural values that deconstructs the imperial misrepresentation of the country's cultural ethos. Nigerian film producers have tapped adequately from the avalanche of cultural, social, economic, and political developments in the country from the ancient to the modern or contemporary time. This has no doubt, given the country lots of economic and cultural breakthrough and more importantly putting the country's name on the world map in the film/entertainment industry. Haynes and Okome, commenting on Nigerian video films industry declare that "nowhere else in Africa has a domestic market for audio-visual entertainment been captured so successfully (21)".

One name that has become a household name in the Nigerian film industry is Tunde Kelani, with the company's name, Mainframe Productions. Most of the films he produces are mainly in the Yoruba language but often sub-titled in English to fascinate wider audience, thereby extending the boundary of edutainment beyond the Yoruba race. His films tap so much from the Yoruba cultural artifacts that they have been observed by Klein (21) to "open the portals to the past" by leading us on an excursus "deeply into a collective source of cultural wisdom to discover and play with Yorùbá history, knowledge, and aesthetics." Beyond entertainment which is the major pre-occupation of his films, the moral lessons inherent in them are wisely, pointedly and unequivocally treated to the benefit of his audience. Many of Nigerian films have portrayed women disparately. They have been portrayed as emotional, irrational, inferior genders, jobless, prostitutes and second class. Most of such films treat women with contempt and ignominy, not minding their improved image in this century. This negative portrayal of women is not only limited to the films, but also expressed in other aspects of the media. McQueen (144,145) succinctly captures this scenario by writing that "women are symbolically annihilated by the media through absence, condemnation and trivialization ... what all content analysis has in common is a concern that women are not being portrayed accurately, that representations of women in the media do not reflect real women and their roles in contemporary society". With reference to Nigerian films, Anyanwu (87), corroborates this negative portrayal of women by declaring that, "women are either depicted as catalysts to misfortune or portrayed as victims of the male folk who use them for rituals or as playthings, usually with the collaboration of some greedy and well connected women". In fact, there are scores of video films that "endow" women with negative attributes. Few of them are: *Hot Pants and Wet Pants* produced by Finemas Concept Productions, *Lima* produced by Okiki Films and Music Productions, *Silent Betrayal* produced by Infinity Merchants Nig. Ltd. and many others (Adeseke, 123-142).

As a professional and dogged auteur, Tunde Kelani stands out prominently in his treatment of women by using his films to emancipate and liberate women from all forms of oppression and intimidation. Adeduntan (1) corroborates this fact by establishing TK's films as constituting an alternative to Africa's androcentric mainstream. His film *The Narrow Path* buttresses this fact. It condemns rape in totality and places premium on girls keeping their virginity until their wedding night. This film also treats cultural issues as well as the democratic way of choosing husbands. The crux of this paper is to extol the style and ideological leaning of Tunde Kelani, that is, the way he crafts the story and pictures of *The Narrow Path* to exude protection for women and speak for the recognition of their role in our society, especially as it relates to peace making.

Tunde Kelani as a Feminist Auteur

To label Tunde Kelani a feminist auteur is to identify the one who deifies his female characters. With a reputation of using his camera "to document social events and cultural milieus" yet "critiquing old traditions and indigenous praxes that do not fit our contemporary modernity" as identified by Soetan (45), TK represents a revolution against certain patriarchal perspectives that often manifest through films since they are artistic representations of the society from which their crux is derived.

Kelani is worthy of this appellation with his notable films like *Arugba*, *Maami*, and of course, *The Narrow Path* which serves as the raw material for this paper. Feminist auteurs treat women related issues in their film with utmost respect and regard for the women-folk. Furthermore, they not only give women positive roles in their films, they also do not denigrate the women folk in any way. However, this does not mean that they pamper women when moral lessons are to

be treated. Klein, infact, describes TK as the Èsù of Nigerian cinema; suggesting that his films help to police and keep in check possible excesses of their viewers (22). He, like other feminist auteurs understand the chemistry and make up of women that for the discerning ones among them, they take corrections when such is offered in a subtle way and not through coercion. Feminist autuers do not show shots that down play the women folk by showing their private parts or nudity in their films. For example, in *The Narrow Path*, the shot goes off when the act of rape is about to take place within the audience glance. For some auteurs, the rape must take place and this, either intentionally or unintentionally has encouraged rape among the youths and adults. Tunde Kelani stands tall in the treatment he gives to women in all his films.

Gender Sensitivity in the Context of Tunde Kelani

Feminist discourse provides a rigorous, extensive and educative exposition and discussion on feminism. It interrogates the definitions, types, ideological postulations and the why and how of feminism. Feminism has its root in the word “Femina”, meaning “woman”. Therefore, feminism means “an ideology of women and any body of social philosophy about women” (Ogundipe-Lashie, 547). Feminism is a “generalized, wide-ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from a woman-centered perspective” (Longermann and Niebrugge, 450). It is an ideology that is geared towards the liberation of women from the shackles of male chauvinism, oppression, molestation and persecution. Longermann and Niebrugge further state that feminism is conceived from two angles which are, “first, the starting point of all its investigations is the situation (or in the situations) and experience of women in society. Secondly, it seeks to describe the social world from the disadvantage point of women” (450). This ideology creates room for discourse on the matters that put women-related issues to the front burner. Womanism as coined by Alice Walker involves an effort

by “African women to be fully involved as equal partners, in both the struggle for the freedom and fulfillment of African people in the face of racism, colonialism, and oppression and the worldwide struggle by women against social, cultural and political marginalization” (Killan and Rowe, 96).

African women suffer lots of injustice, opposition, oppression, humiliation and persecution from men. Some of these include polygyny, female genital mutilation, forced maternity, child marriage, oppression of barren women, rape, prostitution, and so many others. One major issue treated in *The Narrow Path* is rape. Rape is any injury inflicted by man on woman that is targeted as dehumanizing or subjugating her. Such injuries include rape in its real sense, that is, to forcefully have canal knowledge of another person without her consent, sexual harassment, sexual molestation, forced marriage, psychological assault and others (Adeseke, 12). It is quite unfortunate that despite the fact that the Nigerian population is said to have more females than males, this unkind and gruesome attitude prevails in our society, sometimes without reprimanding the culprit. Tunde Kelani’s treatment of rape in *The Narrow Path* shows that there are consequences for both the raped and the rapist.

The Treatment of Rape in *The Narrow Path*

The Narrow Path is one of Tunde Kelani’s films. The film revolves around Awero (Sola Adeeko), a young, dashing, beautiful girl from Orita village. Her beauty attracts suitors from Orita, her village and surrounding villages such as Aku and Agbede. Seeking her hands in marriage results in altercations among suitors, especially between Odejimi (Seyi Fasuyi) and Lapade (Ayo Badmus). Awero becomes confused on who to choose among Odejimi, Lapade and her childhood friend, Dauda (Segun Adefila) who spoils her with lots of gifts. After much thought, she finally chooses Odejimi. Shortly after this, Dauda lures her into the bush and rapes her. Dauda refuses to toe the path of honour by properly demanding

for Awero's hands in marriage and succeeds in bringing the "honourable" Awero to dishonor. Later, Odejimi pays the bride price and the marriage takes place. On the wedding day, Odejimi realizes that Awero is not a virgin which is a far cry from the societal stance. Despite her appeals, Odejimi refuses to cover up the shameful act. Consequently, Awero packs her belongings back to her parent's house. She refuses to mention the name of the rapist and accepts to dance naked in the market square because that is the punishment for losing her virginity before the wedding day. For bringing such disgrace and humiliating experience on the people of Agbede, Odejimi decides to retaliate by waging war against Orita village. As warriors set to engage in warfare, Awero leads women from different villages with leaves in their hands to the war front to sue for peace. She offers herself to be killed first before the warriors start killing themselves. This move or step brings the war to an end. She later goes through the cleansing rites for the abomination of not losing her virginity to her husband but to a rapist. The film shows the ideal on the issue of virginity as well as the aftermath for both the rapist and the victim.

Rape, which is the act of forcing sexual intercourse upon another person without consent, is treated in the film, *The Narrow Path*, as a decadent behaviour that must be discouraged. In the film, Dauda, a young man who has been influenced by negative attitudes of youths in Lagos, uses materials things like Saturday night powder, Saturday morning powder, mirror and other items to induce Awero for a clandestine affair. Dauda does not have respect for women or sex. He has been indulging in illicit sex in Lagos, therefore loses touch with the importance of virginity to the girl on her wedding night. He says about how sex is contracted in Lagos thus: "If you want to have sex with a lady, you just tell her, hey baby, I love you, you want to play love, let's play love, that's all". Obviously, he sees sex as a casual affair or fun and not as rituals. This rape act is intentional. The dialogue that ensues before the rape happens shows that Dauda intentionally

lures Awero into the bush to rape her there by dashing the trust Awero reposes in him:

Awero: I told you I don't like this type of play.

Dauda: What is wrong with kissing? Listen, they do it in all those American movies and that is how city girls say, Thank you.

Awero: No, no Dauda. Let's go back, we are too far away from ...

Dauda: Don't you trust me? I won't hurt you...

It is even at this point of reassuring Awero that Dauda rapes her and she weeps uncontrollably after the inglorious act. This leads to the loss of Awero's virginity and at that moment, a cloud of shame gathers round her as she becomes a broken pot. The rape happens shortly after Odejimi's parents pay the bride price. Awero, fully aware of the consequences of losing her virginity, becomes worried and has sleepless nights. She realizes the shame that the incident will bring on her, her family, her friends and her village. This makes her rain curses on Dauda for this wicked and violent act. The dialogue between Dauda and Awero during the curse is worthy of quoting here:

Awero: Dauda, wherever you may be tonight, I curse you. God will send poison into your blood. You will live to see the happiest day of your life but when that day comes, you will go blind in both eyes for this thing you have done to me. For this shame you have rub on my face and the faces of my parents. You will die a slow, painful death. They will put your body on the biggest crossroad of the city, 200 cars will grind your bones into the earth. It will be so with you, Dauda except I did anything bad to you before you put me into this pit of shame.

Dauda: (*Appears on the mirror he gave to Awero*)Awero, your curses are empty because you have a hand in it too. Why were you always following me and only me to the bush? Did you ever see Odejimi or Lapade alone? At least or following them to the bush?

Awero:But I trusted you Dauda. We were children together before you left the village. We played games together in the village square and in the little bushes on our way to the farm.

Dauda:Those are children games, Awero and you know it. When I started playing with you like a man and rubbing your shoulder, why didn't you slap me? Didn't you beg me to put my lips into your mouth and to show you what the city girls call kissing? All your curses can do me nothing, Awero, that's the truth.

From the above dialogue, it is obvious that Awero follows Dauda into the bush based on trust and the relationship that existed between them since childhood. This is a great lesson for girls and women to be wary of trusting friends, especially friends they have not seen for a while. People change and circumstances vary from time to time. Gentle guys today might become drug barons and ritualists tomorrow. Many women and children have been raped and molested by those they trust so much. Dauda exploits this opportunity and violently rapes Awero. The film shows Dauda as a rough, rugged and violent young man, who has learnt the ways of the unruly and ill-behaved young city boys. The experience of Dauda shows that there is recompense anyone who violates girls or women either through rape or violence. This is true of Dauda because shortly after the rape incident, he quickly runs to Lagos where he is caught with some Lagos boys smoking Indian hemp and the Court sentences him to three years imprisonment. Though he sends Abigail to convey his sincere apology to Awero but unfortunately, the sacrilegious act has been committed. Rape is an abominable act that demands for a healing process,

especially for the victim. The film ends with the healing process to cleanse Awero of all evil entanglements as well as erasing the curses this may bring on the two communities. One striking thing about the film is that the real act of rape is not shown but the audience sees how Dauda roughly handles Awero and sees the aftermath of the ignoble act. This is unlike some African, especially Nigerian movie producers, who in their attempt to ape the western movie producers imbibe naturalism and show rape molestations scenes raw. This undoubtedly, might have led to the increase in rape incidents in Africa. After all, what an individual sees and hears has more impact on him or her more than anything else.

Travails of Victims of Rape

Awero suffers in all ramifications after the rape incident. She suffers psychological pains, loss of self worth, shame, sleeplessness, loss of pride, trauma and sometimes lunacy. This is evident in some of her dialogues quoted below:

Awero: Try to understand me, maami, whoever I name is responsible for this will deny it and the entire village will believe him since I have no witness and *the shame and blame will still be on me not the man*. It is not Lapade. What I am saying is this: the elders will order him to marry me but they can't force him and if I don't want to marry him because I don't love him. Even if I marry him, *I would have already dented your name in the village. I will dance naked for them everyday for one year if they want me but they will never get a word from me. When the village gets tired of seeing my nakedness they will either kill me or let me be. Am I not naked already? Is my shame not open for everybody to see? If I name the man, will it remove my shame or cover my nakedness?*

Awero: How do I live through this? Everybody sings songs of honour to me right now *but by the end of this night at Agbede village, the door of my shame will be open. Oh God!* (Emphasis mine).

The experience of Awero is not far from the experiences of other victims of rape. Awero's behaviour here can be explained via Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS). RTS is the psychological theory first initiated by Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom in 1974. As Wikipedia puts it:

RTS is a cluster of psychological and physical signs, symptoms and reactions common to most rape victims immediately following a rape, but which can also occur for months or years afterwards. The symptoms of RTS and post-traumatic stress overlap ... a person who has been raped will generally experience high levels of distress immediately afterward. (Rape Trauma Syndrome <http://en.m.wikipedia.org>).

From the foregoing, a rape victim will experience distress. It is therefore not out of place to suggest that the likely incongruence in Awero's thought process is as a result of her traumatic experience. Worse still, Awero does not have shoulders to rest upon in the society as she refuses to divulge the identity of the rapist. As rampant as rape is in Africa, Nigeria in particular, rape victims die in silence, either because they have been threatened by the rapist not to speak out or they fear the disrepute the incident will cause them and their families. Such victims cannot live their dreams. They eventually become shadows of themselves.

The act of rape brings shame, dent and stigma to the victim and the family of the victim. The ill-treatment Odejimi gives to the family of Awero that visit Agbede for a truce on the matter shows this clearly:

Odejimi: One of you said you will make her dance naked and I ask you, what happens after that? You'll find the man who did it and then force him to marry Awero or you'll come back here and beg me, I Odejimi, the son of Ogundele Amerinwolu to continue as a husband to a woman who has danced naked in the village square. While our shameless in-laws think about the answer to my three questions, my reply is ready. (*Brings out ashes, sprinkles it on the three men – to shame them*) (Emphasis mine).

The family of Awero leaves Agbede village square in shame and disgrace.

Abigail's Protest against Inhuman Treatment

Another issue relating to the treatment of women in the film is the way Abigail reacts to the oppression, dehumanization and intimidation of the palm wine seller when Sanitary Inspectors seize the woman's kegs of wine claiming that it has flies and it is sour. Abigail stands for the woman and speaks boldly against the inhuman treatment she receives from the Inspectors. The villagers have always been harassed by these sanitary inspectors and tax collectors. Her resolute stance against these oppressors earns her accolades among the village women for which they treat her to a party of songs and dances to show their appreciation for rescuing them from the hands of their adversaries.

Women's Peace Keeping Achievements

African women have track records of peace-keeping achievements in their local communities and beyond. Even in the face of daunting challenges, they still hold their peace and make needed sacrifices to ensure that peaceful environment and peaceful co-existence among communities are achieved.

The Narrow Path is a very good example of the efforts of women at maintaining peace. The abomination committed by Dauda in raping Awero

contaminates the land and brews war between Orita and Agbede villages. As the warriors are about to begin the assault, Awero leads women of the communities to the war front, with leaves in their hands signifying they are suing for peace, to assuage the warriors. She presents herself to be killed first. She says:

Awero: I speak the words of my mothers and sisters to you today, to you men who are about to die and possibly take some of us women and children with you. My words to you are simple. Here I am, I beg you not to shed any blood in my name. Kill me first.

This statement douses the high tension and one after the other, the warriors drop their weapons. Odejimi who spearheads the war is the first to drop his gun. This may signify his total forgiveness for Awero and he, probably may take her back as his wife. This is not shown in the film, just a possibility. Awero's statement shows the consequences of wars in many African countries on men, women, and children and simply offers herself to die in their place. This is a statement that shows her readiness to sacrifice her life in order to restore order and peace. It shows the extent to which African women can go to achieve peace in their different communities. No wonder then that the film is dedicated to:

All African women who are often marginalized, play peace-keeping roles in traditional communities.

The Choice of Husband

The happenings in *The Narrow Path* raise fundamental questions about certain lapses in Yoruba marriage procedure. For instance, the use of intermediary by families to ask for the hands of Awero in marriage is not only appropriate but cultural and African but gives rooms for amendment. It shows respect for the wishes of both families. This is a cultural aspect of marriage procedure in Yoruba land. Once the man sees a girl he likes, an intermediary is employed by the man's

family to intermediate between the two families. Part of the intermediary's term of reference, is to ascertain if the girl is a good girl and if the parents are well spoken of, unlike today, when the couples would have settled all matters and only invite their parents to attend their introduction and wedding. Most parents meet their in-laws for the first time few weeks to the introduction or wedding.

It is both appropriate and honourable for young girls to be allowed to choose their marriage mates. This is the case with Awero whom the father called to choose among the two suitors, Odejimi and Lapade. After thinking seriously about it, she chooses Odejimi and the father agrees with her. This is unlike what happens in our society today where girls are like pawns in the hands of their parents who impose husbands on them probably due to the wealth of the other family or due to a long standing friendship that both parents want to continue through the marriage of their children. In other words, Awero's father does not interfere in any way in her choice of husband. This is to ensure that Awero's joy, feelings, emotions and self worth are not mortgaged for selfish interest.

Conclusion

The paper has carried out a feminist interpretation of Tunde Kelani's *The Narrow Path*, thereby confirming that TK is a feminist considering the treatment he gives to the women folk in the film. The assertion that TK is a feminist is evident in the roles he gives to women and how he portrays them in his other films such as *Arugba*, *Maami*, *The Narrow Path* and others. Unlike some other Nollywood film producers, TK has adorned women with pride, honour and gait, though, he equally lampoons and discredits exuberance and negative attitudes. His film, *The Narrow Path* which is exceptionally crafted and one of his best in the promotion and treatment of feminist views, moral values, etiquette, cultural balance and nemesis has been hand-picked for analysis. The work shows clearly how he repudiates rape and reveals the agony it imposes on the victim, her family and community. It is our

hope that other African film producers, particularly Nigerian film producers, will take a cue from this and imitate the good example of TK in the treatment of women issues in their films with much consideration and feeling.

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