

NARRATIVES OF FEMALE AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIAN CINEMA: EXAMINING GENDER AND EDUCATION IN *THE ROYAL HIBISCUS HOTEL* AND *FINDING ME* MOVIES

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Abstract

The powerful influence of filmic representation on the public perception of gender and power has made the representation of women in Nigerian cinema a significant area of scholarly inquiry. This study interrogates Ishaya Bako's *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2017) and Funke Akindele's *Finding Me* (2020) to explore how female protagonists negotiate the intricacies of patriarchy, education, and personal agency by utilizing a CDA approach grounded in the work of Norman Fairclough (1995). Findings reveal that the education of the protagonists is a reflection of social norms and each character's drive toward autonomy. Characters in these films also use education to empower themselves, challenge patriarchy, and gain agency through negotiating family relationships, economic independence, and reinterpreting traditional femininity and leadership. These findings reveal the complexities of Nigerian women's lived experience and the need for more nuanced portrayals of women within Nollywood that reflect the diversity and agency of women in Nigerian society. The study highlighted the intersection of gender and education in these films, emphasizing the potential of media as an active mechanism for women's empowerment. This finding supports research on Nollywood and gender representation and underscores the importance of media in debunking and reconstructing such stereotypical notions about the role women can play and their agency within Nigerian society.

Keywords: Agency, Education, Leadership, Patriarchy and Empowerment

I. Introduction

Nigerian cinema, specifically Nollywood, has become a major cultural force in shaping the public understanding of issues related to identity, culture, and society. One area in which Nollywood has attracted attention is its treatment of women, particularly though not exclusively in relation to depictions of agency and leadership (Amonyeye & Agbo, 2022; Obire & Eginwin, 2025; Okafor 2025; Uchendu, 2023). Film provides a particularly potent site for both creative and political articulation of gender roles and women's agency (Udoh, 2025; Worlu and Harcourt-Whyte, 2025). Nigerian film scholarship has also discussed the representation of women in film, with some arguments that these films reinforce patriarchal ideology and others suggesting that more complex and empowering ideals of femininity are represented. Nollywood films also frequently mirror the power struggle between husband and wife, and traditional gender roles are supported rather than

rejected (Nyamkoh and Ngwa 2021). Gbambu et al (2025) also observes the dominant negative representations of women in Northern Ghanaian film. Yet recently made films have begun to dismantle these stereotypes, presenting more nuanced depictions of women's lives (Martins et al. 2025; Sachar, 2024; Vafa & Yahya, 2024).

Education has also been identified as a pivotal area in which to promote female agency and leadership in a way that could challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality (Chandra, 2025; Koko and Osuji, 2018; Rajvala, 2025). There is, but, still a gap in the literature on the ways in which Nigerian cinema handles the intersection between gender and education in narratives of empowered women.

The films in this study focus on female protagonists whose journeys are impacted by society's expectations and family obligations as they strive to complete their education and achieve their dreams, specifically *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* by Ishaya Bako and *Finding Me* by Funke Akindele. This makes these films particularly timely to explore representations of female agency and leadership in Nigerian film.

Although gender has been previously studied in Nollywood (Nyamkoh & Ngwa 2021, Ofori 2024; Ogunbola, et al. 2024; Olawuyi & Odesola, 2024), very little research exists that addresses the discursive articulation of female agency and leadership via the educational themes in these films specifically. Hence, the relevance of this present study.

1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to explore how female agency and leadership are constructed and represented in 21 century Nigerian film by investigating the ways in which *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* and *Finding Me* deploy educational narratives to either disrupt or uphold the status quo of patriarchy.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. examine how these films' narrative discourses depict female protagonists' search for economic autonomy.
2. analyze how formal education and professional training become instruments through which women assert agency and negotiate domestic and professional conflicts.
3. explore how films redefine or subvert traditional gender roles and cinematic portrayals of leadership within the Nollywood context.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This work is placed in the context of insights made available to the literature on Nollywood through CDA of contemporary films regarding the media's impact on gender attitudes. It also informs policy and advocacy for gender equality by identifying effective narrative strategies for promoting Female leadership.

II. Literature Review

Female agency is rooted in the ability of women to act independently (Akpakpan, 2025; Obioha & Daminabo, 2021). The construction of agency is itself also conditioned by cultural dynamics, especially in postcolonial contexts. Gender, like the concept of leadership, is not static and the world has seen the evolution of both, but female leaders continue to face challenges in male dominated spaces (Kessler, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2023). Education is both a crucial instrument and catalyst of education and a fundamental means for self- discovery and empowerment (Obioha and Daminabo, 2021). It has the potential to break the poverty cycle, to lower inequality and to promote long term development (Mahanta, 2024). Thus, the education of girls and women is viewed as instrumental to gender equality and the attainment of international development objectives (SDG Report, 2025). Media is central to this change and plays an active role in perpetuating societal conceptions of women (Ahmad Dar, 2023).

This evolution in Nollywood's treatment of women's roles has progressed from stereotypes to empowered, resilient women (Ali Ibibi, 2017; Aromona, 2016; Akindare, 2021; Emwinromwankhoe, 2021). As noted by Sanni (2025), one of the functions of media is to establish societal norms and beliefs about the acceptability of women in leadership positions. The portrayal or absence of women in media also has an effect on and can either strengthen or disrupt gender stereotypes, ultimately affecting the formation of women leaders. Nollywood has become a cultural powerhouse for the continent. But, there are gender stereotypes as a result of socio-cultural conceptions of gender (Akanbi, 2025).

The Royal Hibiscus Hotel (2017), directed by Ishaya Bako, also takes up issues of identity, culture and power in contemporary Nigeria, but in a more complex way. Thus, similar to Gbadegesin's (2020) article on Nollywood films and the reconstruction of girl child identity, in which education is also positioned as a mechanism for transformation into a more empowered, less exploited version of the African girl child, this film promotes the idea of education as an empowering

practice. This theme is also reinforced by Ojobo's claim that educational empowerment is a springboard to all other types of empowerment. (2008, p. 93).

Finding Me, in contrast, has more emotional manipulation, toxic masculinity, and societal pressure to maintain a broken marriage for the sake of appearances (Omoruyi, 2025). This film emphasizes an identity quest, a theme that is important for Nollywood films in general (Somi, 2025). Olayiwola (2024) further looks at the heterogeneous roles played by men and women in Western contexts in Nollywood, in a focus on identity that supports the notion of modernity as refiguring images of female gender through popular Nigerian film (p. 128).

The scholarship on *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* and *Finding Me* gives some sense of the ways in which empowerment is being depicted in films from present-day Nigeria. Yet there are still important gaps in understanding the systemic nature of patriarchy and social constructions of gender. Mulvey's (1975) theory of the "male gaze" analyzes the objectification of women in film (Vanbuskirk, 2025). *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* and *Finding Me* disrupt this trend by featuring protagonists whose professional ambitions trump romantic aspirations or passive stand-ins for others, but scholarship has not yet thoroughly analyzed these texts in order to consider their Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) critical projects.

III. Methodology

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Nigerian cinematic discourses on female agency and leadership in Nigerian cinema using textual analysis of specific excerpts from *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* (2017) and *Finding Me* (2020).

Data Sources

The text data analyzed in this study was primarily extracted from the script lines of the two films that were selected for their central focus on female agency and female leadership. The secondary source of data comprised books, journals articles, and internet. Norman's Analysis guided this analysis. Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model: Description (Text), Interpretation (Discourse Practice) and Explanation (Sociocultural Practice).

Rationale for Movies Selection

The Royal Hibiscus Hotel and *Finding Me* were chosen for their contemporaneity and their discussion of issues pertinent to this study.

Data Analysis Procedure

The selected were coded and grouped according to the study's particular aims. Excerpts of *The Royal Hibiscus* and *Finding Me* movies were also tagged as RHH and FM.

IV. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The following section outlines a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the film clips, organized according to the research objectives and Fairclough's dimensions.

Economic Empowerment

This section analyzes the discursive construction (Description) of their economic independence and also interprets (Discourse Practice) these arguments as subverting normative gender roles (Discourse Practice).

Instances are given in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 1 (TRHH): I want to teach young people how to cook and create career for themselves.

Excerpt 2 (FM): I am also making my money.

Excerpt 3 (FM): Congratulations to us... You are the best wife ever, you are the best husband ever.

In excerpt 1 above the modal verb "want to" indicates volition and future action; the object is "Nigerians proud." Opeoluwa's vision discourse: Her professional motivation is a legacy of nationalism and excellence, not a question of domestic survival. It positions her culinary education as a form of public service, a reinterpretation of women's skill that undermines the assumption that it ought to remain private (domestic labor). On top of that, in excerpt 2 the emphasis on "teach", "create career" evokes empowerment and protagonist agency- the traditional role of woman limited to economic opportunity has been redefined. She equally positions herself as an educator and job creator, thus challenging the traditional female role as passive recipient of economic activity. Her international exposure and quality education, therefore, can be understood as transferable cultural capital that she can then use in order to support others. In excerpt 3, the present continuous tense "am making" establishes an independent, active source of income that is in the process of being generated; the variation expressed by the adverb "also" suggests equality or support behind the primary anticipated source of income, which would be the husband. This makes a direct claim of financial independence from her relationship, countering patriarchal arguments of financial dependence. Her successful investment (which is coupled to educational attainment as well as business acumen) interprets education as the "tool for change" to combat traditional dependency. More so in excerpt 4 the use of the reciprocal pronoun "us" as well as the

parallel superlative praise (best wife ever/best husband ever). Success is recognized institutionally, and this mutual acknowledgment of success also subverts male superiority ideologies and constructs the relationship as a successful modern economic and domestic partnership.

Asserting Agency through Educational Capital (Interpretation & Explanation)

This section analyzes how formal education is used to assert agency (Interpretation) and explains how this challenges socio-cultural power relations (Explanation) (RQ2).

Excerpt 4 (TRHH): She is the future owner... trained in London. / Na which member of your family don go London before?

Excerpt 5 (TRHH): Regardless, we are going to be making some changes... Miko, this is my international standard!

Excerpt 6 (FM): Tinuke has two masters “gidigba lekan na, o loko, o lomo omo”, You, ordinary pass. When I see you are serious with yourself then, you can become the CEO.

Excerpt 7 (FM): Kola, I have told you to stop body shaming me... I don't like it.

In excerpt 4 Opeoluwa's mother invokes being “trained in London” (educational capital) as a sign of superiority and authenticity. This affirms that Opeoluwa has a claim to leadership. “Trained in London” becomes a sign of quality and authenticity. International educational experience becomes modern cultural capital, which is made explicit through its privileged status over the local. In this context, it challenges the socio-cultural practice of only allowing male heirs to inherit or lead.

The adverbial “regardless” in excerpt 5 conveys a certainty and finality that overrides the resistance expressed by Miko. The performative authority is found in “international standard”. Opeoluwa draws on her professional training for a source of universal validation that positions her as modern and progressive. This directly confronts Miko's patriarchal resistance and creates new workplace hierarchies dependent on ability rather than gender.

In excerpt 6, the chief Olowoporoko of Olowo Steel Company, who is Atinuke's father, deploys his daughter's education to undermine the male claim, Dotun. Education, still operating under a patriarchal system but more merit based than gender based, is the lever that breaks the pattern of automatic male succession. The performative act of asserting oneself in excerpt 8 comes from directly addressing and stating the limits with, “stop” “I don't like it”. Her refusal to be objectified by her husband is a performative rejection of patriarchal ownership of women's bodies. Her self-

assertion, through her own professional agency, allows her to delineate her boundaries between value and beauty.

Redefining Gender Roles and Leadership

This section addresses the Explanation dimension and how the actions within the films question gender roles and reframe concepts of leadership (RQ3).

Excerpt 7 (TRHH): You should think about settling down.

Excerpt 8 (FM): I am the heir apparent of Olowo steel... If Daddy die now, who will take over? (Dotun)

Excerpt 9 (FM): Fix it by working away from him... Is it until a man beat you to death? (Sarah's advice)

Excerpt 10 (FM): You have to do digital marketing... Yes.

Excerpt 11 (FM): This is lovely. We need to change our style.

The mother's advice is a standard discourse of patriarchal expectation that values marriage over career. The predominance of Opeoluwa's professional aspirations (Excerpt 7) interrupts this troped discourse. Classic discourse of patriarchal expectation, with marriage taking precedence over work. The plot affirms Opeoluwa's decision to prioritize her career over marriage, legitimating women's professional aspirations above the urgency to marry, explaining the sociocultural change. Through the film, the women's questions regarding careers as a priority over the pressure to marry is legitimized within the narrative of the film, offering an explanation for a changed attitude and value structure in society. Dotun's comment in excerpt 8 employs the formal legalistic term "heir apparent" to draw attention to the embedded patriarchal presumption of automatic male succession, with gender as the primary qualification for ascension to leadership. The rhetorical question ("who will take over?") attempts to lend credibility to this assertion by appealing to a sense of crisis in the absence of the male founder. This discourse is positioned in contrast to Atinuke's meritocratic capacity (demonstrated by her several Masters' degrees, Excerpt 6). This narrative explains the breakdown of culturally reproductive practices of primogeniture as a recommendation for leadership based on educational capital and evidence of competency. The film promotes a contemporary business ethics in which executives obtain their status through educational achievement and demonstrated skill rather than hereditary privilege or masculinity. Dotun's expectation is in stark contrast to Atinuke's proactive leadership and superior training

(Excerpt 8). When educated competence contests it, a claim to tradition is framed within the narrative as an illegitimate challenge to which one should respond with a tradition of merit-based succession in the socio-cultural practice.

Sarah's counsel in excerpt 9 then places the woman's physical safety and financial self-sufficiency (working away) ahead of the sanctity of marriage prioritizing self-preservation and physical safety, urging escape from a toxic/abusive relationship. This impactful rhetoric dismisses the familial or societal pressure that women should suffer in toxic relationships to uphold and protect marriage. This guidance puts the emphasis on the individual woman herself, and her autonomy, rather than on her societal obligation to stay in an abusive marriage. This empowering message disavows the narrative that women are to suffer in toxic relationships. It outlines how economic agency is integral to personal safety and freedom Atinuke's directives also showcase her training and her ability to make empowered CEO decisions (Excerpt 10). Her orders (to Anthony, to the guides) are normalized by her competence which inverts expectations of who should be in charge and who should be authoritative and thus her authority as a woman is unquestioned. Atinuke has been educated and has the training necessary to direct a young man. In excerpt 11, the use of the collective pronoun "we" and the imperative to "need to change" indicates some managerial oversight. So Atinuke's instructions are normalized according to managerial know-how.

V. Summary of Findings

Using Fairclough's CDA as a framework, this study finds that the texts of contemporary Nigerian film, such as *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* and *Finding Me*, engage in a transformative discursive practice that is redefining gender and power relations in the Nigerian social imaginary.

The discourse of the films conservatively and consistently deploys meritocracy, professionalism, and outside certification (education) as the rightful foundation for women in leadership positions. This becomes a powerful challenge to two main patriarchal ideological formations: Challenging The narratives' challenge to the idea that ascription by birth determines power in professional and domestic spheres replaces an ascriptive discourse with one based on competence and achievement. Also, the discourse connects financial resources and educational advancement directly to personal and bodily autonomy, female agency thereby shifting from the boardroom to the private space of marriage.

Ultimately, these films serve as sites of ideological struggle that make possible a new Order of Discourse in Nollywood that validates and naturalizes the highly educated, economically independent and self-assertive female leader, an alternative and counter-hegemonic narrative to the solidified patriarchal reproductive ideals.

VI. Conclusion

Using Fairclough's CDA methodology, this study finds that the narratives present in contemporary Nigerian films such as *The Royal Hibiscus Hotel* and *Finding Me* are not merely features of stories about successful women, but that working to represent women as talented and empowered is a significant discursive practice that plays a role in restructuring the gender/power dynamics of the Nigerian social imaginary.

Meritocracy, professionalism, and external certification (education) are used as the rightful foundation for female leadership in the discourse surrounding these films in a systematic fashion. The effect of this is a powerful intervention into two of the primary patriarchal ideological formations:

The narratives dismantle the notion that power in domestic and professional life is determined solely by birthright or gender, replacing it with a discourse rooted in competence and achievement.

The discourse links economic independence and educational attainment directly to personal and bodily autonomy, extending female agency from the public boardroom into the private marital space.

Ultimately, these films are sites of ideological struggle, contributing to a new Order of Discourse in Nollywood that legitimates and naturalizes the highly educated, economically independent, and self-assertive female leader, presenting a counter-hegemonic narrative to entrenched patriarchal norms.

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