

## Film As Social Commentary And Metaphor: A Study Of Kemi Adetiba's King Of Boys

Adeleye Oluwadarasimi

### Abstract

This article looks into the concept of social commentary and seeks to find a connotation of Films as viable tools for social commentary, with a focus on the Nigerian film industry and an in-depth study into *King of Boys*, a 2018 film directed by Kemi Adetiba. This qualitative study work primarily utilizes library resources to understudy the concept of social commentary and the use of metaphor, a literary device to explore the complexities of a fictional contemporary Nigerian society that the film showcases. Through the ruthless protagonist, Alhaja Eniola Salami, *King of Boys* exposes the manipulative tactics employed by political cabals in the running of a state, and how gender discrimination plays a part in politics. In the end, this article fathoms how the film confronts societal issues, critiques its society, and how it makes commentaries on politics, power dynamics, corruption, and traditional gender roles amongst others.

**Keywords:** Film, metaphor, social commentary, king of boys.

### 1. Introduction

The Nigerian film industry, often called Nollywood, has gained international recognition over the years for many reasons, including but not limited to the interesting & captivating stories that the films showcase and the growth in marketing and distribution channels. Production and distribution of Nollywood films have gone through a huge transformation which has now helped position it for global audiences' consumption. According to Miller (2016) in his book titled *Nollywood Central: the Nigerian Videofilm Industry*, Nollywood transitioned from the old production technology of VHS to more modern and sophisticated technologies, though late, and this transition has brought it to par with one of the biggest film industries in the world and it still has the prospects of matching up with America's Hollywood someday.

Nollywood is gradually carving a social commentary niche as many films released lately have been consistently exploring various social issues relevant to not just Nigerian audiences but also other African audiences (Tsika, 2015). Kemi Adetiba's 2018 film, *King of Boys*, stands out as a major



example in this niche, because it carefully utilized its powerful storytelling to look into the complexities of contemporary Nigerian society, by creating a fictional setting of influential cabals running a state from the background thereby using the state affairs to their benefits and to achieve personal desires.

*King of Boys* seems to go beyond the realm of mere entertainment by employing a masterful blend of social commentary and metaphorical language. The film dissects the pervasive issues of politics, gender issues, and corruption in Nigeria, exposing the manipulative tactics employed by those who wield power and influence (Ademiju, 2019). Through the vibrant protagonist, Alhaja Eniola Salami, Kemi Adetiba paints a stark picture of a system plagued by bribery, intimidation, and the weaponization of wealth to undermine democratic processes (Ifatimehin, 2019). However, *King of Boys* goes beyond a straightforward story, because its narrative is enriched by a tapestry of metaphors that add depth and symbolism, inviting viewers to engage with the film's message on a very deep level. If the film's metaphors and literary innuendos are analysed, one can see that there is a nuanced social commentary that sheds light on the anxieties surrounding power dynamics, the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles, and the cyclical nature of violence in contemporary Nigeria.

While the film's narrative appears pregnant with socially relevant metaphors, this researcher intends to view this film work of Kemi Adetiba intrinsically and contextually, because there aren't many academic analyses on how Nigerian films have been making strides on social commentaries and the potential of social commentary to drive positive social change. This researcher shall look into Kemi Adetiba's *King of Boys* (2018) from the lens of film as social commentary and how the use of metaphor; a literal device, has helped in achieving the purpose of exposing the complexities of corruption and gender roles in contemporary Nigeria without putting the film in the line of institutional sanctions.

*King of Boys* seems to have received popular acclaim, and academic analysis of its social commentary and metaphorical language appears valuable. This article showcases how Nollywood films can be powerful tools for social commentary, criticism, or tools to drive social change. This qualitative research relies mainly on a primary source of information due to lack of access to the filmmaker for structured interviews. However, in examining the content of *King of Boys* and library materials, this article intends to discover how filmmakers use their creative narrative and literary

devices to address complex issues like corruption and gender roles. This contribution, if achieved will add to the ongoing discussion about the evolving nature, popularity, societal value, and significance of Nollywood films.

## 2. Social Commentary Films

One can deduce that the phrase, social commentary, refers to anything said or written about society. However, for a study of this kind, there is the need for contextual definition, hence the look into Azahari & Ismail (2013) who says that social commentary refers to the use of storytelling elements to address social issues, critique societal norms, and spark conversations about change.

Social commentary as explained by Adelani (2016: 22) is,

The act of employing rhetorical ways to provide commentary on social, political or economic issues in any country or specific society. This may be done with the idea of implementing or promoting change by informing the general public about a given problem and appealing to people's sense of justice. It is also a form of criticism that lays focus on contemporary social issues.

A social commentator therefore refers to any individual who engages in social commentary for a definite course. Political commentary on the other hand as explained in a study advisory article of Maryville University (2022) refers to the dissemination of detailed information on topical political trends and specific activities of the government. Such reports are usually borne out of intentional research and analysis of political trends, policies, and social reforms. It can now be said that filmmakers such as Kemi Adetiba can employ a variety of techniques to deliver social commentary, from overt portrayals to subtle metaphors.

Film, with its captivating ability to weave narratives and stir emotions, has long served as a potent platform for social commentary (Ifatimehin, 2019). Filmmakers can utilize a variety of techniques, from blatant portrayals to subtle metaphors, to address pressing social issues, challenge societal norms, and spark conversations about change. This exploration resonates with audiences on a deep level, fostering awareness and prompting introspection.

Just as (Adeyemi, 2020) believes that: Different genres of film can incorporate social commentary to either just critique or drive for positive change in society, some documentary films happen to



have been made to unvarnish perspectives of social reality and frequently call for change or the exposure of injustices. Director Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004) and Mr. Bryan Fogel's *Icarus* (2017) both revealed significant doping scandals in international sports and humorously yet exposed the risks associated with the fast-food sector. A more nuanced approach is provided by satire and dark comedy. Films like the 2019 Korean film *Parasite*, which highlights the harsh reality of wealth inequality and class strife, do so with a sharp sense of humour and incisive social criticism. In a similar vein, Boots Riley's Black-American set film - *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) uses absurdist comedy to address racial and corporate exploitation issues. Science fiction films can be effective mediums for social criticism as well. Discussions on the value of freedom and dissent are prompted by dystopian stories like The *Hunger Games* series (2012–2015), which explore themes of totalitarian control and revolt thereby metaphorizing governments in North Korea subtly.

Also, like the *Hunger Games* TV series, some films from across the world appear to be engaged with issues that are not particularly relevant to their specific cultural contexts, but often resonate with universal themes. Iranian cinema, for example, is known for its bold critiques of social and political repression, as seen in films like *A Separation* (2011). South Korean cinema often grapples with rapid modernization and societal inequalities, as evident in films like *Burning* (2018). Nollywood, the vibrant film industry of Nigeria, on the other hand, stands out for its unique blend of entertainment and local social commentary. Nollywood films address a wide range of issues, from corruption and poverty to gender roles and religious tensions. Other films like the late Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013) tackle historical injustices like the Nigerian Civil War, while Kemi Adetiba & Niyi Akinmolayan's *The Wedding Party 1&2* comically explored the complexities of family, cultures, and uniqueness of inter-tribal relationships & differences; all of which only passes on the commentary of the uniqueness and unity of Nigerians even in their diversity.

Samuel (2019) believes that social commentary films have the power to spark very controversial conversations, raise awareness, and even inspire real actions. This is an evident stance as films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) ignited discussions about racial tensions in the United States, while Steven Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* (2000) which was set in the US' bustling state of California carefully brought the familiar issue of social injustice which plagued the American system at the time to the forefront without actively stepping on toes that could bring up sanctions.

Bala (2019) opines that the marriage of film and social commentary is a very powerful one and they may not be inseparable going forward. This researcher also notes that this ‘marriage of film and social commentary’ holds a mirror of the society and reflects it back into the eyes of the society to spur something actionable in the positive direction just as ‘Drama’ was initially defined to be by Aristotle in *The poetics*. Today, social commentary films are the creative activism tools that challenge the society’s status quo, prompt critical reflection, and ultimately, move the society towards a positive future.

### 3. Analysis of King of Boys

The 2018 Nigerian film *King of Boys* succinctly tackles the idea of a violent quest for power. The movie presents power as a violent and corrupt place, with characters using bribery, murder, and other illegal means to get and hold onto power. The movie also highlights the need for respect and loyalty in preserving authority, as people use violence to get revenge on those who betray them. The portrayal of power dynamics in the film reflects broader social and political issues in Nigeria, such as corruption and gender inequality. The film also reinforces cultural norms and values surrounding power dynamics, largely portraying power as a male domain with women playing secondary roles.

*King of Boys*, produced by the famous siblings, Kemi Adetiba & Remi Adetiba, explores the theme of quest for power through a complex and multi-layered narrative structure. Upon its release on Netflix platform on October 20th 2018, it is noted that the film features a large ensemble cast of characters which the filmmakers have created as a pseudo-representation of specific political and social icons in Lagos Nigeria. Each of these characters is presented with their distinct motivations, ambitions, and agendas. The plot of the film is driven by the power struggles and conflicts that arise between these characters as they vie for control over the political and criminal underworld of Lagos.

At the centre of the film is Eniola Salami, a powerful businesswoman and political figure who is known as the "*King of Boys*." Eniola's story is one of ambition, violence, and betrayal, as she rises to power through a combination of cunning, ruthlessness, and loyalty. Eniola's quest for power is complicated by the fact that she is a woman operating in a male-dominated world, and she must constantly navigate the challenges and prejudices that come with that. Eniola Salami who would go on to face the tough tussles of power retention became a fierce figure after succeeding an ailing

Alhaji, to whom she was just a bed mistress and drug pusher, as the street king or ‘*King of Boys*’ as better said in the film’s place setting; Lagos state. She sits at the head and controls a symbolic table in a den of other kings, lower in cadre. This table is a subtle metaphor for the gathering of the political cabals of Lagos state who are in charge and are the controlling forces of many social liabilities such as trade, illegal businesses, installation, and control of the top political class such as the Governors and lawmakers. Onwards, this table shall be referred to as the ‘Table’.

Ade Tiger is another strong character, whose presence in the film is vital to the success of the story. He serves as Eniola Salami’s personal bodyguard and assistant, with his diligent relationship with the boos, it is safe to say that he is the real definition and embodiment of loyalty. In the spate of troubles, chaos, and violence for Eniola Salami (old), it was evident that only the strong could stay to wither the storm, fear and betrayal became most glaring and expected from all the allies and guards of Eniola Salami, but Ade tiger stood firm and gallant in defence of his boss, he even says in the film that “no matter the circumstance, I will always be right here to serve and protect you. If there is the need, I will be willing to lay down my life for you Oba (King)” (mins: 1hr, 50mins). At the end of the film, when the ‘Table’ of the kings got desecrated after the attempted coup of Makanaki, Eniola Salami had to vacate the premises and jet out of the country to allow raised dust during the chaos to calm down. In her absence, Ade Tiger would go on to control all the affairs that the street king; Eniola Salami, tended to in Lagos onwards.

Makanaki, fondly called Akorede by Eniola Salami, is presented as a rebellious character who was initially a loyal aide to the *King of Boys*; Eniola Salami. He becomes the principal antagonist to the hero when he suddenly becomes too confident in his militia strength and street influence after he had been admitted to the kings’ ‘Table’, his spiritual reinforcements which would make him an immortal being amongst many other things are the boosters of his confidence and ego. He challenges Eniola’s values as the King at the head of the table and presents himself as a better-fit *King of Boys*. To the amazement of the other lords at the table and the help of his confidant at the ‘Table’; Odogwu Malay, he pays a huge amount of money to buy their support over and he launches a violent coup to usurp the top seat upon Eniola Salami’s resistance. He is the major catalyst to the story’s conflict and he has to find all means to ensure that the task he has begun, ends victoriously for him, because his defeat would spell greater doom for him and his allies and he would forever be remembered as a traitor.

The film also explores the themes of loyalty, trust, and betrayal through all of the principal characters including Eniola Salami, Ade Tiger, Makanaki, Odogwu Malay, Pastor, Kemi, and many others. Eniola's power is built on a network of loyal followers and supporters, but she must constantly be on guard against betrayal and disloyalty. The film's narrative structure reinforces this theme, as it is largely linear and expository, but has a few instances of the sequence being distorted to shift back and forth in time to reveal the complex relationships and alliances that exist between the characters. Another important theme in the film is the corrupting influence of power. The film portrays power as a domain that is inherently corrupt and violent, with characters engaging in murder, bribery, and other criminal activities to gain and maintain control. The film also highlights the role of gender in power dynamics, portraying power as a male domain with women playing secondary roles.

*King of Boys* tells its story largely in a linear plot sequence. The film follows the three-act structures and five-act structures of sequential arrangements of storyline, as we have the initial exposition of the characters from the onset and proceed to understand each of the main character's motivations, ambitions, and drives. This delves into the realisation of the conflicts and ultimately, the denouement. We can also save for a few instances where the main cast, Sola Sobowale, who plays the role of Eniola Salami (old) remembers some of her youthful ordeal and actions, in the exposition of how she climbed up the socio-political ladder in the polity of Lagos. These memories are brought to glare with the use of flashbacks into the actions of Toni Tones, the female actor who played the role of the younger Eniola Salami. However, some of the flashbacks are diffused into the presence with some scenic show of surreality, whereby the older Eniola Salami would be pictured as though she is visibly seeing her past right in front of her and she would even pass on comments as if she is speaking with her younger self. This, as seen in minutes 35, 48, and 1hr:12mins, by this researcher is subjectively a beautiful visualisation of mental hallucination which is bound to occur to anyone in a state of distress.

It appears safe to say that *King of Boys* reveals a complex and nuanced exploration of the theme of the quest for power. The film's multi-layered narrative structure, complex characters, and thematic depth make it a powerful commentary on the social and political issues facing Nigeria today.

## 4. Conclusion

There is a clear pathway to understanding this research paradigm's attempt at social commentary, having insinuated in the course of this study that *King of Boys* has put up a fictional representation of Lagos; The commercial and most vibrant state in Nigeria, and that the mighty 'Table' in the fictional set is a metaphor for the desk of the 'decision-makers' in the polity of Lagos, Nigeria. It is hence observed that Kemi Adetiba's direction of *King of Boys* stands out as a powerful example of Nollywood's ability to engage social issues, make exposes, and at the same time provide delightful entertainment to the viewers. With this unflinching portrayal of dirty politics, corruption, issues of gender roles, and its use of vivid metaphors, this film offers a nuanced commentary on contemporary Nigerian society and so makes an indelible footprint that other Nollywood filmmakers can step on to make more and more social commentary films.

*King of Boys* exposes the manipulative tactics employed by those in power, highlighting the cyclical nature of politics, corruption and its stranglehold on Nigerian democracy. Furthermore, the film challenges traditional gender roles thereby putting a woman, Eniola Salami, as a brave individual who decides to step into shoes that were considered specially for men only. Thereby showcasing some peculiar complexities that women face in a patriarchal society while also raising questions, with the death of Salami's daughter, about the grave costs of wielding such mighty power. The film's rich blend of metaphors adds depth and symbolism, inviting viewers to engage with its message on a deeper level.

This article concludes on the note that a Nollywood film, has successfully exposed certain social issues which include the anxieties surrounding political power and gender discrimination on the limitations placed on women, and the urgent need for change in Nigeria. This powerful film cements the place of Nollywood as a significant voice making social commentaries and can contribute immensely to driving positive change in Nigeria.



## 5. References

Adelani, O. (2016). *Handbook on Social Journalism*. Lagos: Elegant books.

Ademiju, S. (2019). Nollywood and the quest for global presence. *Journal of African Cinemas*, 11(1), 69-86.

Adeyemi, A. (2020). The rebirth of Nollywood. *African Studies Quarterly*, 18(1), 51-60.

Ajibade, B., & Williams, B. (2012). Producing cheaply, selling quickly: The Un-Hollywood. Production Paradigm of Nollywood Video Films. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(5), 203-209.

Azahari, M., & Ismail, A. (2013). Social commentary on photographic images. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 91(1), 185-191.

Azeez, A. (2019). *From informality to history and evolution of Nollywood: A look at early and late influences*. Nollywood in Global Perspective. Ed. Bala A. Musa. Palgrave Macmillan, 3-24.

Bala, M. (2019). *Nollywood and the globalization of prosocial entertainment*. Nollywood in Global Perspective. Ed. Bala A. Musa. Palgrave Macmillan, 127-146.

Ifatimehin, O. (2019). *The Nigerian cinema: Gender and sexuality in Nigerian Motion Pictures*. British Film Institute.

Jade, L. (2016). *Nollywood central : The Nigerian videofilm industry*. British Film Institute.

Noah, A. (2015). *Nollywood stars : Media and migration in West Africa and the Diaspora*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Samuel, G., & Joe, D. (2019). *A historical study of the Nigerian film industry and its challenges*. *NDUÑODE*, 16(1), 170-183.



## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER?**

Oluwadarasimi, A. (2025). Film As Social Commentary And Metaphor: A Study Of Kemi Adetiba's King Of Boys. *International Humanities Studies*, 11(1), 1-10.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR?**

Adeleye Oluwadarasimi, Film Maker, MSc Film Production. School of Media and Communication. PAN-ATLANTIC University, Lagos, Nigeria. Email: [oluwadarasimiadeleye@gmail.com](mailto:oluwadarasimiadeleye@gmail.com), [mojeed.adeleye@pau.edu.ng](mailto:mojeed.adeleye@pau.edu.ng)