



The Filmic Representation of Women: Paradigm Versus Perspective in the Depiction of Women in Funke Akindele's Two Selected Works

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Abstract

Funke Akindele's holistic portrayal of women in *She Must Be Obeyed* and *A Tribe Called Judah* has transcended the biases of just putting women in the limelight given the multifaceted nature women, like men, possess. Subjecting the two films to a close viewing and placing the analysis drawn side by side with the backdrop of the parameters of feminist film theory pushes for evaluating Akindele's ideologies. The study found that Akindele prioritizes perspectives over paradigms in women's image projection in her works, making the works more inclusive in their representation of realities, a shift described as realistic-feminism.

Keywords: Film; Women's image; Paradigm; Perspective; Akindele; Nigerian Cinema



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Introduction

Biases prevent logical reasoning and proper evaluation of any creative work. It gives no space for a true and thorough reflection on a subject-matter. Feminist film theory has provided a guide for a redefinition of women and their representations in film; and good, that it does. It has transformed the womanhood experience (Alola & Alola, 2020). It is a sociological and political movement that advances the rights of women (Jimi et al., 2022). The theory which seeks to demystify the age-long prejudice structured around women in the image film makes of a woman is in itself biased in its selective approach to portraying/reconstructing who a woman is in the cinematic frame. It is deficient in its inability to undertake a holistic portrayal of women on screen. If it did, it would depict a woman in her completeness, and then the theory would have inadvertently moved beyond the premises of its argument and by implication lost its stand.

While it maintains its bearing and uncompromisingly advocates for women, it still must search for unbiased relevance, and appropriateness, within the film medium which, according to Olayiwola (2022), has its overbearing characteristics in the portrayal of reality.

Theoretical Framework: Paradigm Versus Perspective

The framework in which feminist film theory operates casts women in a paradigm (that is, a typical style or fixed pattern that shapes the understanding of the viewers about women), rather than in perspectives which serve as lenses that enable the viewers draw diverse interpretations on women. It just must be a one-sided projection of whom a woman is (independent of a man) and her immeasurable roles in society, otherwise, it is not a feministic approach. Aakash (2024) posited that “feminist film theorists seek to expose and critique the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality” through film which allows people to see things from “different perspectives” (p. 2).

The one-sided approach to films in the creation of feminist characters however denies the viewers the chances of seeing the woman in the narrative in the deserving perspectives in most feminism-inflected works. Similarly, it prevents the viewers from admitting that the woman image before them on the screen, is real – at least, within the concept of our make-belief (that film represents) in its deliberateness to avoid social construction wherein women are subject to men (Doghudge, 2020); and being not real places a disconnect between the audience and the message the film intends to disseminate. The sensitive ones among the viewers may have difficulties locating what they see in the films within the context of what is obtainable in reality.

On the contrary, what is obvious in Funke Akindele’s *She Must Be Obeyed* and *A Tribe Called Judah* is a careful portrayal of female protagonists who are defined by their characters’ dynamics. Much of this will be examined presently. The controversy here would be, whether to admit or not, that the films fit into what can be adjudged feminist films. This also depends on the prism through which the films are studied. The popular opinion indicates that in contemporary society, films that have a feminist undertone usually break away from singularity and simplistic narratives (that support

objectification of women) tilting towards complex portrayals of women; much of which reflect “the growing autonomy and diversity of women in the modern society” (Lei & Azahari, 2024, p. 717).

In the complex portrayals of women, the argument this paper advances is that, rather than narrowing down or limiting the depiction of female characters to just the demystification of the hegemony in films as many earlier studies have shown, feminist filmmakers should give more attention to creating all-round female characters who exhibit more realistic traits. This is to say that the complexity in portraying a female character should rather be in creating the character as an all-round figure. In this ‘all-round figure,’ she would not need to be perfect all through because the real-life experiences the film as a medium represents, women are not perfect. The understanding of complexity and pluralism should break away from just the depiction of a woman or female character who is pious and who is independent of a man’s support in accomplishing her set goals or in survival. That a female character relies on men or institutions built around men, in a film, should not make the story less supportive of female gender power. And that the female character exhibits some levels of imperfections should not make it less convincing that the work reinforces the woman image. What should rather be appealing is, how the woman in the narrative in her multifaceted nature, converts or manipulates all odds (including the ones her very nature poses) and the so-called male chauvinism/patriarchy into an instrumentality of her ascension and triumph in her symbolic role.

Akindele achieves these two qualities in her two works under study. In this, there is a dynamism in Akindele’s female character construction. The perspectives noticeable in such a protagonist’s life make the film more real, relatable, and a lot better than the usual biased attachment to the portrayal and reading of a female character that makes the female individual involved not better than a marionette.

Character Analysis: She Must Be Obeyed Siyanbola: Complexity Beyond Feminist Convention

She (Funke Akindele) also known as Siyanbola in *She Must Be Obeyed* is a victim of the past maltreatment inflicted on her by her mother who has preferential treatment for Siyanbola's younger sister owing to Siyanbola's facial look. Due to a certain health factor, Siyanbola loses some hairs on her head while growing up. Her mother visibly detests her appearance and consequently, the memory of the mother's irritation of her childhood appearance lives with Siyanbola in her adulthood. The undesirable past creates in She a psychological trauma that makes her feel insecure even when she has, by hook and crook, risen to the height of her career in the Nigerian music industry. Everyone She meets, whether male or female becomes her victim. Noticeably, She makes an unhealthy competition with Xcite and Tito who are female artistes just like her. And like Xcite and Tito who have male managers serving them, Siyanbola has a male manager (Cisco) who she has compelled to act in a feminine way. Through the subordinate status of the three men as managers, Funke Akindele creates an impressive all-women structure that underscores the power/relevance of women in society and the contributions of women to the growth of the Nigerian music industry, which is predominantly male.

The three women are the only celebrated artistes in the film with no visibility of any male artiste. Placing the women in the limelight makes the film conform to the offerings of feminism. The 'foregrounding of women's experience has been an important anti-patriarchal strategy, born out of consciousness-raising in feminists' struggles (French, 2007, p. 18). In the same vein Eniola Badmus projects in the film that "It's a big win for women tonight" (10:36 – 01:05:27). However, in the delusion of Siyanbola, she is desperate to be the only known female artiste. And here lies the dynamism in the making of Siyanbola's character considering the conventional portrayal of female characters in feminist films. She strives towards her goal by saying, "I will be the first female in Nigeria to hit the International market" (25:11 – 55:26).

Xcite and Tito: Collaboration and Solidarity

On their own, Tito and Xcite have a preference for collaborative efforts among women in the music industry. The two draw strength in teamwork. Tito acknowledges the support Xcite gives her in her moment of sex video scandal. This is registered when Tito reads a comment from one of her fans on her life show - “God bless Xcite; women supporting women” (37:30 – 55:26). Siyanbola is a lone ranger. Siyanbola is a character that underscores differences/perspectives in women's lifestyles when compared with Tito and Xcite. Funke Akindele does not (for the sake of having a feminist film) reinforce paradigm in depicting the character traits of Tito and Xcite (which are overtly positive) also, in Siyanbola, as many feminist film producers would do. Siyanbola’s ambition brings to the fore, the real-life issue, negative as it may be, in society. And in Siyanbola’s case, viewers would have the impression that she is a victim of her deficient upbringing.



Fig. 1 (Siyanbola celebrating after she successfully set up Tito in *She Must Be Obedient*)

Source: The Film.

Siyanbola is depicted as crafty and someone who knows how to get what she wants. This moment of triumph subverts the traditional passive female representation by the way it is centred visually. Her raised arms and dominant positioning challenge Mulvey's male gaze by presenting her as active agent rather than a passive, objectified recipient of male designs. The feminist complexity

lies in the moral ambiguity that her agency is deployed into seeking the harm of another woman (Tito) in a way that forces the viewers to wonder at the possibility that female empowerment loses feminist value when exercised without a sense of sisterhood support and solidarity. The image thus underscores Akindele's perspective approach by showing women's capacity for ruthlessness alongside their strength, thus rejecting paradigmatic expectations that feminist characters must always put themselves at the task of promoting comradeship and success of other fellow women in their lives. She uses men to carry out her works in consonance with the position of Soetan who like other scholars has rightly observed that emerging feminist auteurs are advancing perspectives in film narratives breaking new grounds outside stereotypes (118).

She uses Henry in setting up Tito. The company she deals with as her public relations is headed also by a man – Collins. Bayo who is her driver is likewise a man. Her ability to manipulate a male-centric society in achieving her mandates as a woman supports feminist ideology. In line with the observations of Badya, the film indicates recent works have shown a new form outside those objectifying women (28). Siyanbola does not appear as someone who seeks a man's support in her general life as against those movies that “clearly show the gender power structure where men are depicted as the stronger sex” (Alzahrani, 2016, p. 534). Though she gets a huge amount of money from a man she has affairs with in buying her status car, it is more of a symbiotic relationship in the sense that, she would offer sex and thereafter, request for the money. Rather than the man using her, she uses the man by fixing an exorbitant price for the sex, which she willingly has with him.

In her case, Tito is also reluctant to push herself on Henry whom she thinks is genuine at the moment she needs a car. She tells Sandra “I don’t want to look like I need favours from any man” (39:28 – 53:48). The film centers the attention of the viewers on the subject matter of independence of women from men by making Sandra question the statement in her reply to the statement “You

don't want favours from any man?" (39:34 – 53:48) to Tito. And to which Tito replies "No, I'm independent" (39:36 – 53:48). The incident in which Tito appears to have been used when Henry has affairs with her cannot still be described as a man defeating a woman because the whole scenario is orchestrated by a woman – Siyanbola. It is still part of the pluralistic portrayal of a woman character in the film. It suggests to the public that - some of the defeats that women experience are in the real sense secretly brought about by women themselves. In essence, it cannot be a man's win. This underscores perspectives in the portrayal of female characters in the film.

Gender Power Dynamics and Male Subordination

In deconstructing the hegemony, the film further portrays men as tools that can be used by women. In one of the studio scenes, Siyanbola tells Adezeh blatantly that she should live with the men who intend to help her. It is what Siyanbola does too – using men to achieve her goals. A similar issue plays out when the elder brother to Adezer (Livi) keeps losing out his sales to a girl who has no intention of marrying him - a scenario that indicates how gullible a man is, to a woman. Going further, in the drunken state of Mama Cruise, she still wins the football match bet that she does with men who are not even drunk. The film depicts how smart a woman is, that, even in her state of semi-unconsciousness and inebriation, she still performs better in a terrain traditionally associated with men. Apart from Ruka who serves as Siyanbola's cook, Etim is also engaged as Siyanbola's kitchen staff which indicates the economic power that women control in the society.

Notably, Siyanbola is as mean to Ruka (a woman) the same way she is, to Etim – the opposite sex. The twist in the making of female characters in the film suggests that Funke Akindele is not vouchsafed to creating feminist films at the expense of the depiction of realities women naturally emanate. This makes the work more engaging. It also suggests that if the film is given a feminist reading, then this has to be with an understanding that the characters thus identified as feminists, and

that makes the film alludes to feminism., To this end, the film has to be studied in perspectives rather than in paradigm. The many traits of life that the identified characters display may not all have to be positive but in their pluralistic portrayal, the feminist thematic preoccupation still surfaces. This appears as something unusual considering the conventional offerings in feminist films.

Jedidah and Collette in *A Tribe Called Judah*

Jedidah (Funke Akindele) in *A Tribe Called Judah* is a victim of circumstances that are beyond her control. In some complicated relationships Jedidah has with men, she has raised five sons she is proud of. The narrative begins in a scene where she reminisces on the incident that makes her father disown her. A man has put Jedidah in the family way and her father considers this as a disgrace to his status being a clergy. Jedidah's mother who is likewise saddened by the unwanted pregnancy still makes an effort to salvage the situation by sending Jedidah to her sister who lives in Kano. The soundtrack establishes the vital and immeasurable roles women play in the lives of their children as the narrative begins. The song goes thus:

Iya ku oro omo/ Mother thank you for the responsibility of nurturing your child

Omo ku itoju mama re/ Mother thank you for the responsibility of nurturing your child

Bokete dagba omu omo re lo ma n mu/ When a giant rat is aged it feeds on its pup's breast milk

Iya wa jeun omo/ Mother you would eat the fruits of your labour

This makes the theme of mother's care to be prevalent in the film. This contrasts the role of a father in a child's upbringing considering Reverend Judah's lack of empathy in the film.

Jedidah: Maternal Strength and Moral Ambiguity

Jedidah is a bold and courageous woman who, regardless of the tough time she has in raising her children as a single parent, runs a viable tricycle transportation business, a business commonly identified with men. She has a man – Joseph, in her employ who serves in a subservient role in the running of her business. This signifies her value as a woman and her contribution to the economy's growth in the community. Jedidah's neighbours also hold her in high esteem as they hail her while she steps out of her apartment just as the film opens. It is not established in the film that she is a perfect individual though. Her character depicts realities anyone who has had to face down huge obstacles in order to survive would have – troubled history, trauma responses, painful memories, and baggage from suboptimal choices made in such a person's past. After praying over her children, she sips some alcoholic drink through which she admits that her prayers are answered and that she is ready for work.

She makes jest of Bisi for declining her offer for a ride and holding trust in her boyfriend whom she expects to pick her. Jedidah remarks that all men are a scam – “Don't you know men are scum” (03:10 – 02:14:08) and Bisi replies “My own is not a scum” (03:11 – 02:14:08). This connects with the scene where she stops Daddy Micheal from beating his wife. The altercation between Jedidah and Linda's husband (Daddy Micheal) goes thus:

Daddy Micheal - Don't you know that when a man is talking, you do not talk as a woman. And if you don't stop talking, I will discipline you like I disciplined my wife.

Jedidah - Discipline who? Igbatori e o buru (when you are not crazy). Real men don't beat their women, they take good care of them. They provide for them. And women respect their men. Look at me very well, the only thing that makes you a man is that one straw and two bags of pure water dangling under your trousers. (05:16 – 02:14:08)

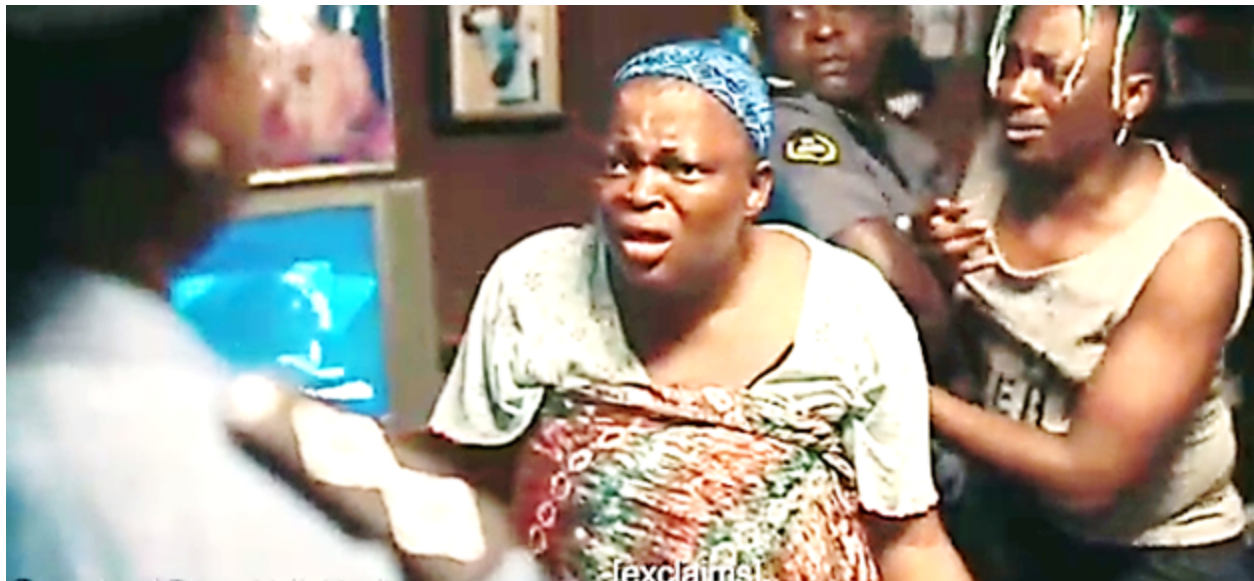


Fig. 2 (Jedidah tries to shield her son Shina from being arrested in *A Tribe Called Judah*)

Source: The Film

Jedidah successfully delivers her fellow woman (Linda) from the assault of Daddy Micheal. This visual representation of maternal intervention corresponds to the idea of "maternal thinking" popularized by Sara Ruddick (1989). It describes care as active, conscious resistance against patriarchal authority and excesses. Jedidah's body physically blocks male institutional power (police), placing her in visual and narrative prominence despite being outnumbered by the enforcers of the law. The image composition challenges gendered law enforcement tropes by refusing to relegate her to the status of an inert, passive bystander, thus bolstering her agency. The image also complicates realistic-feminism's complexity in that her protective power enables and engenders self-destructive behavior in her son, thereby acknowledging that maternal care and strength can coexist with flawed/imperfect judgment. The frame thus refuses sanitized feminist representation in favor of authentic maternal experience under economic pressure. Cooperation among women is later signified in the scene where Testimony acknowledges that Jedidah is a good woman who has the

habit of helping other women succeed. Jedidah has a strong influence on her five sons who arrive at the scene (where Daddy Micheal confronts Jedidah) spontaneously to not only deliver their mother from Daddy Micheal's confrontation but to teach him through retaliation to never again lay hands on a woman.

The film underscores the importance of a mother to her children. It also portrays how a woman leverages the overwhelming presence of men in society to create an ambiance for herself. It starts with a woman supporting her fellow woman against a man. Then it accentuates other men being used by a woman against their fellow male gender. This projects the power and influence that a woman has, in society. All these are topical issues in feminist discourse.

Women Supporting Women: Cooperation and Kinship

To further depict affinity among women, Jedidah consents to Linda returning the money she borrows from her anytime she feels it is convenient for her. Jedidah also assists Mama Caro with the money she seizes from her son (Ejiro) and his girlfriend – Testimony after they fraudulently take alms from unsuspecting people on the street. Mama Caro in turn returns the favour by teaming up with Jedidah to rescue Pere (Jedidah's fourth son) from jungle justice when he is caught stealing.

Jedidah also enjoys some interventions from her mother in raising her children. Jedidah's attitude to parenthood is such that allows the collaboration of her mother though with minimal restrictions. For instance, she disagrees with her mother in having custody of Shina and Pere. In some instances, Jedidah's disposition to issues is awkward. She tells her mother blatantly that there is nothing wrong with the way her children assault Daddy Micheal. Later when her children make an effort to raise money to pay her hospital bills and have to go into robbery in achieving this, Jedidah does not reprove them when she eventually gets to know what her children have done. To some

extent, in the cause of raising her children, she has condoned some behaviour that makes it difficult for her to restrain them in their adulthood.

This weakness and deficiency in Jedidah are common in single parenting in Nigeria. Jedidah exhibiting this shade of imperfection allows viewers to relate her character with realities in society. She is a dynamic individual who has both positive and negative character traits. The different sides of her attitude exposed to the viewers make it possible for her to be read in perspective. That her character is not cast in a paradigm as the case is with some lead female characters in some feminist films makes the narrative distinct.

Collette: The Antagonist Within

Collette is a mean woman who lacks empathy for the workers under her supervision. She is a villain in the film who at two instances obstructs the lifesaving interventions put in place for Jedidah – a fellow woman like herself. First, she sacks Emeka who leaves work when he has an urgent need to attend to her mother's health in the hospital. Also, when Emeka and his siblings resort into robbing his office to raise money for Jedidah's hospital bills, coincidentally, Collette brings in her gang to rob the same office leading to a fatal clash between the two groups. While Jedidah projects communal living among women as many feminist films would portray, Collette is the opposite. The two shades of life among women depicted in the film create a balance that makes the narrative relatable to the happenings in society.

Comparative Analysis: Contrasts and Convergences Contrasting Characterizations: Siyanbola vs. Jedidah

Funke Akindele in the character of Siyanbola is a self-centered woman who has no feelings for the plight of any other person, particularly, women. The success of other women in the music industry is a threat to her. Because of her inferiority complex, she cannot tolerate her domestic staff

– Victoria appears decent in her dressing, she intimidates Daniella (her new media development manager) for speaking in what she describes as American ascent, she refuses to grant Ruka (her dutiful cook) a loan, She swindles Adezah the lady whose voice she lives on, and all of these are in addition to her reckless competition with Xcite and Tito in the music industry. On the other side of the coin, the Funke Akindele in *Jedidah* is a loving woman who seeks the welfare of other people. *Jedidah* offers to give Bisi her neighbour a ride just at the beginning of the narrative. And when Bisi turns it down, *Jedidah* does not pick offense at it. In another development, she goes on to defend Linda whose husband maltreats her. She also supports Mama Caro with some amount of money to enable her to pay for her daughter's exam. The contrast in the characters acted by Akindele in the two works (on the subject matter of cooperation among women which has enjoyed some attention in many feminist films) depicts the differences in the disposition of women in society. Arguably, the two works still fit in as feminist films – this much later will form part of the conclusion of this study.

Leveraging Patriarchy: Different Strategies, Similar Outcomes

The influence *Jedidah* has over her five sons places her in a position to enjoy some level of support in the patriarchal society. All her children can go to any length to run her errands. Through her love and care, *Jedidah* has been able to secure the attention of her sons. And this togetherness between mother and children is sustained throughout the narrative. The film depicts how women manipulate the hegemony to gain prominence.

This (in some way) is similar to *Siyanbola* who through her survival of the fittest instinct and self-reinvention devices a way of subjecting the patriarchal society to her control. This puts her ahead of Bayo who drives her, Etim her cook, Cisco her manager, Henry who does her dirty (criminal) jobs, Collins the head of her media team, and the man who buys her a car. Again, the difference here, is, that *Siyanbola* is negative in the picture of a woman she creates on the screen

whereas Jedidah, to some extent, demonstrates positive value. Funke Akindele demonstrates the opposite sides of a woman in this aspect, too.

Women as Obstacles and Allies

Collette obstructs the interventions Emeka and his siblings make towards keeping their mother alive in *A Tribe Called Judah*. Likewise, Siyanbola makes herself an obstacle to the progress of Xcite and Tito in their career in *She Must Be Obeyed*.

Siyanbola equally ignores her mother at a critical time when her health fails. Through Collette and Siyanbola the two works partly indicate (though unconsciously) the part women play towards women's downfall in society. Interestingly, the two films also show some levels of support women give to themselves. As earlier pointed out, Akindele portrays this by making Xcite and Tito stay together in building their career not minding the fact that the music industry is competitive in nature. Also, in the film, Victoria is decisive in supporting Adezeh to gain her freedom from the oppression of Siyanbola. In the works, Akindele shows the public the perspectives of a woman when it comes to association or relationship. The works also indicate that the attitude of a woman is not static. Women have a dynamic disposition to issues of life.

Therefore, the fact that the two works have some feminist thematic preoccupation does not prevent Akindele from indicating the multifaceted nature of women.

Some female characters in *She Must Be Obeyed* have an edge over men making the film depict how smart women are, compared to men in society. In each case, different issues lead to the triumph of women. Mama Cruise wins over the men in the drinking joint when they bet against her on her position regarding a football match. This appears fair enough since the men willingly accept the challenge. Xcite and Tito also rise to becoming top artistes just through perseverance and hard work.

Also, Siyanbola gets to the climax of her music career through cheating. Though Siyanbola has developed justification for the type of survival instinct she has, this does not remove the fact that her type of disposition to life is opposite to her colleagues' who have become popular like her. What the three have in common is that as women, their success in the music industry symbolize victory over men.

Intelligence and Agency: Women's Edge Over Men

Adezeh's brother whose fiancée keeps outsmarting by taking his grilled turkey also appears gullible. This fiancée's way of life and Siyanbola's have some resemblance and the two stand together in opposite directions to some decency found in Xcite and Tito. These women have demonstrated different attitudes; what is common among them is that they all appear to have an edge over men.

This positions them in the limelight. It creates the impression that women can confidently compete with men in public spaces. This draws attention to Jedidah in *A Tribe Called Judah* where women's resourcefulness is celebrated. However, in woman-to-man encounters, men are not portrayed as gullible to women in *A Tribe Called Judah*. Rather than reaping off Ejiro in the sharing of the proceeds of the alms like Eberé does to Levi in his turkey grilling business in *She Must Be Obeyed*, Testimony gives Ejiro all the money they make. Testimony helps Ejiro get customers for his art drawings. Ejiro testifies that Testimony is his inspiration. Throughout their relationship in the film, Testimony sees herself as complimentary to Ejiro. Even when she is offered some amount from the stolen dollars to compensate her for the rescue intervention during the robbery, she is unwilling to accept the portion. Also, Jedidah whose sons teamed up with her in a struggle to ensure her survival, does not achieve the trust her sons have in her by being crafty but through her showing of genuine mother's love and care. This puts Jedidah (in *A Tribe Called Judah*) in the category of Xcite

and Tito (in *She Must Be Obeyed*) who do not necessarily win over men who are in the circle of their influence by being smart.

Conclusion

From the reading of the two film texts, the study shows that Akindele's drive for the depiction of a true-to-life story appears paramount in her artistry. Though she creates female lead characters in the works under study, her concern for art, pedagogy, and aesthetics appears as a priority and it is under these three, that other motifs such as the struggle/right to secure a positive filmic image for women lie.

Rather than strengthening the paradigm in the notion of cinematic representation of women as it relates to feminism and its offerings, Akindele underscores dynamism in women. This allows the viewers to see Akindele's women in perspective. Arguably, despite Akindele's flexibility in her female gender projections in the two works, the films can still be considered in the genre of feminist works. The overall style of the narratives celebrates women. Ahead other things, the two works project the importance of women in society. The contribution of Akindele to the image of women projected in film is significant because while it breaks the barrier of stereotypes noticeable in many works particularly of those of female film producers on gender issues, it also supports inclusiveness which is the hallmark of creativity and an essentiality in storytelling. In future studies, necessity demands that a niche be created that would embrace films such as the type Akindele's ideologies demonstrate wherein female characters depicted exhibit not just the 'good' traits but also, the other traits that make the story more relatable. The preponderous importance of women in the society shown in the film as against other character traits (negative as they may be) which are relegated to the background is the signifier that such work still alludes to the themes and issues of focus in the mainstream feminist films.

This new category of films will aptly fit into what we now forthwith term realistic-feminism which places a premium on considering shades of life women emanate in real life along the projection of issues identified as feminist's sentiments.

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