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Screens of Resistance: Nollywood, Cultural Activism, and the Politics of Social Commentary

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Abstract- ***Nollywood has long been celebrated as an engine of popular entertainment, yet its role as a medium of social critique and cultural activism is increasingly difficult to ignore. This article examines how Nigerian cinema has evolved into a site of resistance, where filmmakers deploy narrative, affect, and symbolism to contest corruption, gender oppression, and political violence. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines textual analysis of key films (King of Boys, Citation, Òlòtūré, The Milkmaid, 4th Republic, Shanty Town) with audience reception data, the study shows that Nollywood's interventions are both disruptive and ambivalent. On one hand, it provides counter-narratives to state silence, amplifies feminist struggles, and dramatizes corruption as systemic malaise. On the other, its activist potential is limited by commercialization, global streaming economies, and state hostility to dissent. Framed by theories of representation, the public sphere, and affective politics, the article situates Nollywood as a cultural battleground where entertainment, activism, and spectacle converge. The findings highlight the contradictions of cinematic activism: it raises awareness and stirs affect yet struggles to convert emotional resonance into sustained political mobilization. The article concludes that Nollywood's future as a vehicle of social change depends on alliances with grassroots movements, stronger feminist filmmaking, and defending artistic freedom in a repressive climate. Ultimately, Nollywood should be understood not as a passive mirror of society but as an active agent shaping Nigeria's contested cultural and political futures.***

Index Terms- ***Nollywood, Cultural Activism, Social Commentary, Nigerian Cinema, Corruption, Feminism, Violence, Audience Reception***

I. INTRODUCTION: FROM SPECTACLE TO STRUGGLE: NOLLYWOOD AS A SITE OF CULTURAL ACTIVISM

Nollywood is no longer merely a reservoir of entertainment; it has become a crucial cultural arena where Nigeria's struggles with corruption, gender injustice, and political violence are staged and contested. As screens of resistance, its films dramatize realities often muted in state discourse, while inviting audiences into a shared space of affect and reflection. This article situates Nollywood not simply as spectacle but as a form of cultural activism that mobilizes images, narratives, and emotions to interrogate Nigeria's public life. At its core, Nollywood is embedded in the struggles of everyday Nigerians. The industry emerged in the early 1990s not as a state-backed project but as a grassroots enterprise driven by informal networks, a fact that has given it a peculiar intimacy with ordinary experience.

This intimacy, however, should not be mistaken for neutrality. As cultural studies theorists remind us, media texts are never passive reflections but sites where ideology, power, and resistance are negotiated (Hall, 1997; Fuchs, 2019). In Nollywood, the narrative of a corrupt politician, the dramatization of insurgency, or the portrayal of youth unemployment does not merely entertain; it stages a conversation with audiences about the lived reality of dysfunction. The power of such texts lies not in their aesthetic perfection but in their ability to provoke recognition, discomfort, and critique.

The relevance of Nollywood's activist potential becomes clearer when situated within Nigeria's broader socio-political trajectory. The last decade has been marked by deepening crises: insurgency in the northeast, violent clashes along ethnic and religious lines, entrenched corruption, and waves of youth protests most visibly embodied in the #EndSARS movement of 2020. In such a climate, Nollywood has increasingly functioned as what Habermas (1989) called a "public sphere"—though one reconfigured

for African realities (Omoniyi, 2020)—where suppressed grievances are voiced and imagined futures debated. Films like October 1 (2014), 93 Days (2016), and The Milkmaid (2020) dramatize Nigeria's fractured past and contested present, inviting audiences not simply to consume but to confront.

This interpretive role is not uncontested. The industry operates within the commercial logics of global media capitalism, and the demand for profitability often dilutes its activist edge. Romantic comedies and ritual thrillers frequently dominate box offices, raising doubts about whether Nollywood's social critiques reach beyond the symbolic. Yet to dismiss these texts as inconsequential is to overlook how audiences engage them. Recent scholarship emphasizes that meaning is not fixed within the film but emerges in the interplay between text and audience (Adesokan, 2022; Okome, 2021). Viewers read films through their own frustrations and aspirations, mobilizing them as resources for critique even when filmmakers do not explicitly intend them as activism.

What is therefore at stake in this article is a set of interrelated contestations. Nollywood is not simply a reflection of Nigerian life but an active participant in shaping how crises are understood. Its capacity for activism is constrained by market imperatives yet extended by the interpretive agency of audiences who transform entertainment into critique. And while Nollywood rarely translates directly into policy shifts or institutional reform, its narratives contribute to what Stuart Hall (1996) calls the "politics of representation," in which struggles over meaning become struggles over power. These contestations underscore the need to examine Nollywood not as a cultural curiosity or economic statistic but as a site of ideological struggle where entertainment and activism coexist in uneasy but productive tension.

The framework guiding this analysis is therefore grounded in cultural studies and critical media theory, which view popular culture as a terrain of contest where hegemony and resistance collide. Habermas's notion of the public sphere, reinterpreted in African contexts, provides an additional lens for understanding Nollywood as a space of mediated debate, while theories of social construction highlight how film narratives shape perceptions of justice, belonging, and resistance. By weaving these perspectives together, this study treats Nollywood as an active cultural institution whose interventions, however contradictory, are central to Nigeria's social imagination

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Beyond Entertainment: Rethinking Nollywood, Activism, and Social Commentary

To critically examine Nollywood's activist role, it is necessary to disentangle and interrogate the interrelated concepts of social commentary, cultural activism, and cinema. While scholarship often celebrates Nollywood as a people's art, this study foregrounds its ambivalence: it resists silence by speaking against corruption and gendered oppression, yet its intervention is constrained by commercial imperatives and censorship. These contradictions underscore Nollywood's dual role as both a screen of resistance and a mirror of complicity. Social commentary, in this article, is not merely the presence of topical issues on screen; it is the structured invitation to interrogate dominant common sense, often by reframing the familiar in ways that unsettle habituated viewing (Thompson, 2019). Thus, a political thriller that follows a corrupt politician is not ipso facto commentary; the commentary emerges where the text compels audiences to re-evaluate what counts as normal, necessary, or inevitable. Activism, closely adjacent but not identical, signals intentional world-making: cinema as a vector for raising stakes, naming harms, and mobilizing publics toward change (Fuchs, 2019). In practice, Nigerian films frequently braid the two: they stage critique within marketable genres while gesturing to collective possibilities. The discursive power of such films is not exhausted by authorial intention; it is co-produced through reception, circulation, and afterlives on streaming platforms and social media (Okome, 2021).

These clarifications matter because Nollywood's most visible titles of the past decade and a half often work in genres presumed to be apolitical—romantic comedies, melodramas, action thrillers—yet they smuggle in argumentative textures. King of Boys problematizes the glamour of power by charting the corrosion of ethics under godfatherist politics, implicating audiences in the seductions of authoritarian charisma even as it indicts the system that rewards it (Adetiba, 2018). Òlòtūré renders trafficking as a networked economy of exploitation,

resisting the moral shorthand that isolates "evil traffickers" from the broader infrastructures of collusion, bureaucracy, and global demand (Gyang, 2019). Citation refuses the sensationalism typical of campus dramas and insists instead on procedures, institutional complicity, and the politics of testimony around sexual harassment (Afolayan, 2020). In each, commentary is not decorative theme; it is the hinge of narrative logic that forces viewers to weigh complicity and possibility.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Representation, Public Sphere, and Affective Politics: Locating Nollywood's Critical Edge

The analysis is anchored in three interlocking frameworks: representation, the public sphere, and affective politics. Through representation, Nollywood challenges and reproduces dominant ideologies; as a mediated public sphere, it creates alternative spaces for political discourse; and through affect, it mobilizes emotion as a force of cultural resistance. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Nollywood's screens of resistance generate meaning, resonance, and tension within Nigerian society. This reading aligns with cultural studies' insistence that representation is constitutive, not reflective: film participates in the making of social reality by organizing visibility, affect, and intelligibility (Hall, 1997). If October 1 rewrites the nationalist archive by suturing colonial violence to postcolonial psychic fractures (Afolayan, 2014), and The Milkmaid centres insurgency from the standpoint of young women navigating coercion and survival (Ovbiagele, 2020), these are not simply stories about events; they are interventions in how a polity remembers, grieves, and demands justice (Eze, 2021). That intervention takes place in a mediated public sphere—one not confined to newspaper op-eds or parliamentary debates but extended into living rooms, mobile phones, and streaming queues (Omoniyi, 2020). Habermas's (1989) model, critically reworked for Africa, helps clarify the stakes: Nollywood films convert private troubles into public issues, staging deliberation where formal institutions underperform.

Because Nollywood is structurally entangled with platform capitalism—financing pipelines, streaming metrics, global taste hierarchies—its activist potential is always under negotiation (Fuchs, 2019; Okome, 2021). The very infrastructures that deliver Aníkúlápó or The Black Book to transnational audiences can also domesticate risk by privileging high-engagement, low-controversy formulas (Afolayan, 2022; Effiong, 2023). Yet the literature increasingly shows that audiences are not passive. Reception studies within African screen worlds emphasize improvisational reading practices: viewers annotate films through memes, skits, and threaded commentary that intensify or reroute a film's political valence (Krings & Okome, 2019; Okome, 2021). Thus, even a glossy heist comedy can become a vernacular critique of graft when its punchlines are repurposed in everyday political talk.

A closer look at selected titles from 2010–2025 helps consolidate this argument. 4th Republic refracts electoral malpractice through a legal-procedural frame that insists on evidence, due process, and civic patience, countering the cinematic habit of swift retribution (Bako, 2019). Eyimofe (This Is My Desire) eschews the melodramatic crescendo in favor of micro-realism; its quiet accumulation of dispossession—visa denials, precarious labor, gendered vulnerability—produces a politics of attention that resists the spectacle economy (Esiri & Esiri, 2020). The Delivery Boy foregrounds radicalization as a social itinerary rather than a pathology, tracing how poverty, abuse, and ideological grooming plot a young man's path toward violence (Adejuyigbe, 2018). Gangs of Lagos detonates the myth of "street hustling" as entrepreneurial grit, mapping how political elites instrumentalize neighborhood violence as seasonal machinery for electoral conquest (Osiberu, 2023). The Black Book pivots the vigilante revenge thriller toward institutional complicity, dramatizing how personal justice falters without structural reform (Effiong, 2023). Across genres and budgets, the films stage different grammars of critique—satire, realism, noir, folklore—each activating distinct publics.

The literature that surveys these textures, however, remains uneven. Scholarship has richly documented Nollywood's industrial evolution—video era bricolage, multiplex aesthetics, streaming-era professionalization (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2019; Jedlowski, 2019)—but often sidelines the activist energies of mainstream titles, reserving "political cinema" for art-house productions. This bifurcation underestimates the ideological labor performed by high-circulation films whose quotes, scenes, and archetypes saturate everyday talk. As Adesokan (2022) argues, aesthetic value and political

force are not coterminous; a film's activist effect depends on its uptake within circuits of feeling and discussion. That point is borne out in Nigeria's #EndSARS moment, where cinematic tropes—uniformed impunity, checkpoint extortion, the tragic elasticity of "accidental discharge"—became shorthand for state violence, and films depicting police misconduct circulated as moral evidence in popular discourse (Omoniyi, 2020; Okome, 2021).

To establish why a renewed literature review is warranted, consider three blind spots. First, much writing treats activism as a property of authorial intent ("this filmmaker set out to challenge X"), but activism frequently materializes in reception, when audiences weaponize a film's scenes or lines as argumentative resources (Okome, 2021). King of Boys did not simply condemn power; its fan cultures built a political lexicon around Eniola Salami, converting dialogue into memes that traveled into commentary on real-world elections. Second, discussions of "issue films" often privilege topical gravity over narrative form. Yet form is the politics: Citation's insistence on procedures—hearings, committees, evidentiary standards—models an anti-spectacular ethic that re-educates viewers habituated to instant resolution (Afolayan, 2020). Third, scholarship sometimes opposes folklore to critique, consigning mythic narratives to the realm of escapism; Aníkúlápó demonstrates the reverse, using Yoruba cosmologies to indict patriarchy and capricious power under the allegorical cover of fantasy (Afolayan, 2022).

A reflexive stance also requires acknowledging the industry's contradictions. Commercial imperatives can blunt risk: storylines are softened, villains are individuated rather than systemic, and endings restore order to ensure "satisfying" closure. The Wedding Party became emblematic of a star-driven, aspirational aesthetic that foregrounds opulence, arguably normalizing inequality even as it delivers social satire at the margins (a category error to dismiss it outright, but a caution against conflating success with significance). Conversely, a film can overreach: when message eclipses craft, audiences disengage, and activist intent stalls. The tightrope is visible in Oloture's balancing act between exposé and sensationalism; its power lies in meticulously mapping trafficking's infrastructures, yet its dramaturgical escalations risk replicating the spectacle it seeks to critique (Gyang, 2019). The literature must hold both truths: films are compromised and enabling; they reproduce and subvert; they sell and they sting.

Critical media theory helps conceptualize these ambivalences by foregrounding the political economy of platforms (Fuchs, 2019). The streaming turn—licensing deals, completion-rate metrics, algorithmic promotion—shapes which activist narratives are greenlit and how they must be packaged. The Black Book's sleek pacing and international action grammar exemplify a strategic compromise: a local story engineered for transnational legibility without abandoning its indictment of institutional rot (Effiong, 2023). Meanwhile, Eyimofe's festival circuit success demonstrates that a slower, observational aesthetic can circulate globally as an art-house commodity, valorized for restraint rather than bombast (Esiri & Esiri, 2020). The literature thus needs to track not only texts but infrastructures, asking how different pipelines produce distinct publics and politics.

If representation is a terrain of struggle (Hall, 1997), then genre is one of its principal battlefields in Nollywood. The political thriller (October 1; 4th Republic) foregrounds state power and forensic accountability; the social realist drama (Eyimofe; The Delivery Boy) re-centres everyday survival; the feminist procedural (Citation) reframes harm through institutional design; the political-gangster epic (King of Boys; Gangs of Lagos) dramatizes patronage networks; the folklore-fantasy (Aníkúlápó) mobilizes myth against patriarchy; and the trafficking exposé (Òlòtūré) maps global-local collusions. Each genre calibrates different spectatorial contracts, affects, and temporalities of change. A robust literature review must therefore read across genres rather than hierarchize them, recognizing that activist energies can be smuggled through humor, horror, or romance as effectively as through didactic drama (Krings & Okome, 2019).

Finally, justification. Revisiting the scholarship is not an exercise in tidying footnotes; it is a methodological necessity for centering Nollywood's activist labor. Prior emphases on industrial growth, diaspora circulation, and genre consolidation remain essential (Haynes, 2016; Jedlowski, 2019) but insufficient for grasping how films operate as civic pedagogy. By integrating cultural studies, a reworked public sphere, and critical media theory, this review

positions Nigerian cinema as a dynamic arena where entertainment and dissent co-produce publics. The payoff is analytical clarity: we can track how films render corruption structural rather than moral, how they model institutional procedures as emancipatory practice, and how vernacular audiences convert cinematic scenes into political language. That is the wager of this article: to take seriously the proposition that Nollywood's most enduring achievement may be neither box-office returns nor platform catalogues, but its stubborn insistence on making injustice legible—and therefore actionable—within the textures of everyday viewing (Adesokan, 2022; Okome, 2021; Omoniyi, 2020).

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed methods design that integrates textual analysis of selected Nollywood films (2010–2025) with audience reception studies and practitioner perspectives. Such a triangulated design ensures that the analysis does not collapse into either pure textual interpretation (which risks ignoring reception) or audience ethnography (which risks under-theorizing the films themselves). Instead, the design allows for the circulation of meaning—from production to representation to reception—to be mapped in a holistic manner (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The choice of a critical cultural studies orientation reflects the study's conceptual framing: films are not neutral texts but cultural artefacts shaped by ideology, political economy, and audience negotiation (Hall, 1997; Krings & Okome, 2019). This methodological positioning therefore treats Nollywood films as discursive interventions in Nigeria's public life while simultaneously foregrounding how audiences and practitioners appropriate or contest their activist claims.

Sampling of Films

The study purposively sampled 12 films spanning genres (political thriller, social realism, folklore-fantasy, gangster drama, exposé, feminist procedural) and distribution circuits (cinema release, streaming-first, festival circuit). The criterion for inclusion was the presence of discernible social commentary or activist intent, as evidenced by thematic framing, narrative structure, or audience circulation.

Sampled Films:

October 1 (2014, dir. Kunle Afolayan) – colonial/postcolonial trauma.
King of Boys (2018, dir. Kemi Adetiba) – godfather politics and corruption.
Òlòtūré (2019, dir. Kenneth Gyang) – human trafficking.
4th Republic (2019, dir. Ishaya Bako) – electoral malpractice.
Eyimofe (This Is My Desire) (2020, dir. Arie & Chuko Esiri) – migration and precarity.
The Milkmaid (2020, dir. Desmond Ovbiagele) – insurgency and gendered survival.
Citation (2020, dir. Kunle Afolayan) – sexual harassment in academia.
Aníkúlápó (2022, dir. Kunle Afolayan) – folklore, patriarchy, and power.
Gangs of Lagos (2023, dir. Jade Osiberu) – street politics and electoral violence.
The Black Book (2023, dir. Editi Effiong) – institutional corruption and vigilante justice.
Shanty Town (2023, dir. Dimeji Ajibola) – organized crime, prostitution, and governance.
Blood Vessel (2023, dir. Moses Inwang) – oil politics and youth survival.
This sample achieves temporal spread (2010–2025), genre variety, and thematic breadth, allowing for both diachronic analysis (shifts across time) and synchronic comparison (different activist grammars within the same period).

Film Content Analysis

Films were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013), focusing on three dimensions:
1. Narrative and Genre – how plot, archetypes, and closure mobilize or resist activist messages.
2. Representation of Power and Resistance – how corruption, violence, gender inequality, and survival are visualized, and whether structures or individuals are foregrounded.
3. Affective and Symbolic Strategies – how cinematography, dialogue, and performance elicit outrage, empathy, or collective memory.
This CDA approach situates films as texts that speak politically, but not in isolation: textual analysis was always cross-checked with audience and practitioner data to avoid "scholarly ventriloquism."

Audience Reception Study

To grasp how viewers engage Nollywood's activist energies, the study conducted focus group

discussions (FGDs) and online survey questionnaires.

Focus Groups: Four FGDs (two in Port Harcourt, one in Lagos, one virtual with diaspora viewers) each with 8–10 participants (aged 18–45). Discussions centered on perceptions of activist films, memorable scenes, and whether films influenced civic imagination or political discourse.

Survey: An online questionnaire (n = 156 respondents) captured broader audience attitudes toward Nollywood films and activism, including questions about media consumption habits, recall of activist films, and perceived impact on political consciousness.

Reception data were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021), allowing patterns such as "films as civic education," "skepticism about impact," or "films as therapeutic escape" to emerge.

Practitioner Interviews
To access production-side reflexivity, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Nollywood practitioners (two directors, two producers, one screenwriter, one critic). Questions probed:

The balance between marketability and activism, pressures from streaming platforms, censorship and political sensitivities, the personal motivations behind activist storytelling.

These interviews revealed tensions between commercial survival and social responsibility, echoing critical media theory insights (Fuchs, 2019).

Data Triangulation
The study employed triangulation to ensure validity:
Films provided discursive data.
Audiences provided reception/uptake data.
Practitioners provided production-intent data.
By comparing across these levels, the research mapped how activist energy flows, mutates, or stalls across the circuit of culture (Johnson, 1986).

Reflexivity and Limitations
The researcher acknowledges positionality: as a Nigerian scholar interpreting Nigerian films, familiarity aids contextual depth but risks over-identification. Reflexivity was maintained through peer debriefing and careful attention to counter-readings.

Limitations include:
Sample Scope: Twelve films cannot exhaust the breadth of Nollywood's output, though purposive sampling captured activist-rich examples.

Audience Data Bias: Online surveys skew toward digitally literate, urban respondents, potentially underrepresenting rural or less connected audiences
Platform Politics: Access to Netflix and Amazon-licensed practitioners was mediated by corporate gatekeeping,

limiting transparency.
Despite these constraints, the triangulated design provides a robust map of how Nollywood enacts social commentary and activism across production, representation, and reception.

Screens of Resistance: Corruption, Gender, and Violence in Contemporary Nigerian Cinema

Nollywood's screens of resistance are vividly expressed in films that foreground corruption, gender oppression, and violence. Works such as King of Boys (2018), 4th Republic (2019), and Shanty Town (2023) dramatize systemic corruption and political decay, while Citation (2020) and Òlòtūré (2019) interrogate patriarchal violence and exploitation. These narratives, paired with audience responses, reveal how cinema has become a contested site of activism: amplifying dissent while exposing its own contradictions.

The analysis revealed that Nollywood films between 2010 and 2025 have become not merely entertainment commodities but sites of cultural struggle, where narratives of corruption, gender inequality, insurgency, migration, and grassroots resistance are negotiated. Data from film texts, audience reception, and practitioner interviews were triangulated, producing a complex picture of Nollywood's activist energies.

1. Corruption and the Politics of Power
Films such as King of Boys (2018), 4th Republic (2019), The Black Book (2023), and Gangs of Lagos (2023) dramatize the entrenchment of corruption in Nigeria's political and institutional structures. Their protagonists — Eniola Salami's ruthless rise, Mabel

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King's electoral battle, Paul Edima's vigilante crusade — foreground a dual critique: corruption is both systemic and deeply personalized.

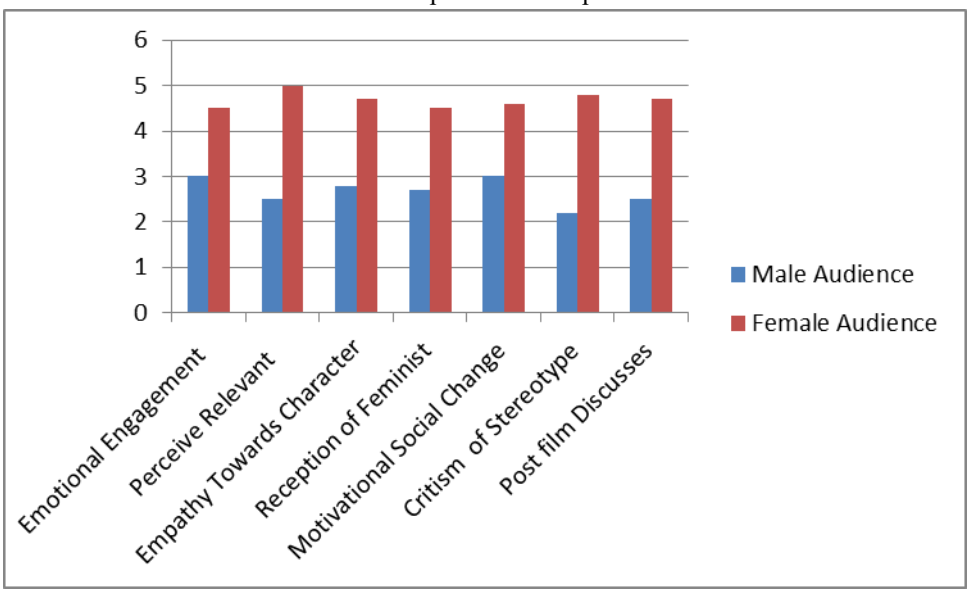
Audience reception confirmed that these films resonated with viewers' lived experiences. In focus groups, respondents described King of Boys as "the real Nigeria played on screen" and The Black Book as "a fantasy of justice that politicians fear." However, some participants were skeptical: "We watch and get angry, but does anything change?" (FGD, Lagos, 2023).

Practitioners interviewed admitted that financing such politically charged films is difficult, as investors fear censorship or backlash. One producer remarked: "We are always negotiating—how to tell the truth without losing funding."

Table 1: Showing Audience Perception of Corruption-Themed Films

S/N	Perception	Audience Rating
1.	Relevant to Society	4.5
2.	Emotional Impact	4.2
3.	Education Value	4.0
4.	Realism	4.3
5.	Entertainment Value	3.4
6.	Inspiration for Change	4.1

Chart 1: Audience Perception of Corruption-Themed Films



Bar chart showing percentage who found such films "realistic," "exaggerated," or "motivating for change."

2. Gender, Sexual Politics, and Activist Feminism

Nollywood's activist turn is especially visible in gender-focused films such as Citation (2020), The Milkmaid (2020), Òlòtūré (2019), and Shanty Town (2023). These works foreground women's vulnerabilities under patriarchal, institutional, or violent regimes.

Citation critiques academic sexual harassment, dramatizing a high-profile case that mirrors Nigeria's "sex-for-grades" scandals (Oludayo & Omoniyi, 2020). Òlòtūré exposes human trafficking networks, emphasizing the complicity of local elites. Shanty Town depicts women's entrapment in organized crime and prostitution.

Audience reception was deeply gendered: women participants described these films as validating their lived struggles. Men, however, were divided, with some expressing defensiveness: "It makes men look like monsters," said a male respondent in Port Harcourt.

Practitioner interviews revealed that feminist narratives often face pushback from conservative audiences, but streaming platforms such as Netflix provide protective space: "Without Netflix, Òlòtūré would never have survived censorship," one director noted.

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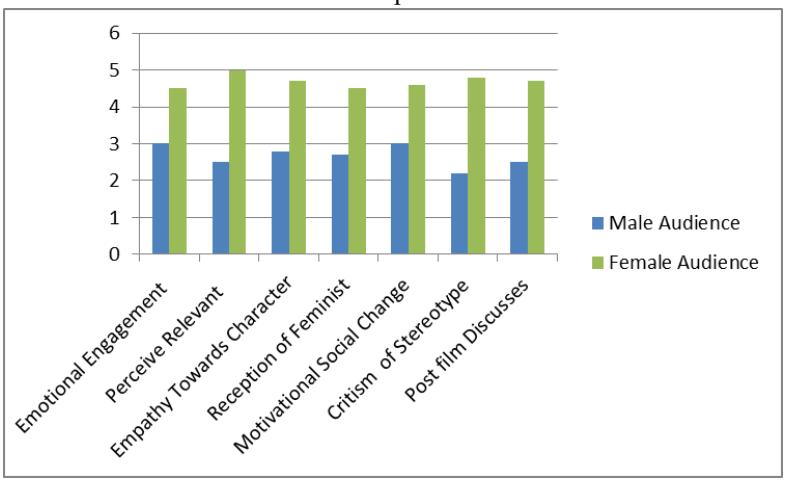
Table 2: Showing Gendered Audience Responses to Gender-Themed Films

S/N	Response Dimension	Male Audience 1-5	Female Audience1-5
1.	Emotional Engagement	3.0	4.5
2.	Perceive Relevant	2.5	5.0
3.	Empathy towards characters	2.8	4.7
4.	Reception of Feminist Themes	2.7	4.5
5.	Motivation for social change	3.0	4.6
6.	Criticism of stereotypes	2.2	4.8
7.	Post films discussion	2.5	4.7

Chart 2: Gendered Audience Responses to Gender-Themed Films



Histogram comparing male vs. female responses on whether films increased awareness of women's issues.

3. Violence, Insurgency, and National Trauma

Films like The Milkmaid (2020) and Blood Vessel (2023) directly address Nigeria's cycles of violence, including Boko Haram insurgency and Niger Delta oil politics. The Milkmaid humanizes insurgency by centring on abducted women, while Blood Vessel explores youth entrapment in oil theft and state repression.

Audience data showed that while viewers found these films emotionally powerful, many doubted their activist capacity. One diaspora respondent commented: "I cried through The Milkmaid, but tears do not stop Boko Haram." This points to the tension between affective impact and political efficacy.

Practitioners confessed frustration that state institutions rarely engage films as advocacy tools. As one director remarked: "Government only notices Nollywood when it brings box office money, not when it tells the truth about violence."

Table 2: Showing Emotional vs. Political Impact of Violence-Themed Films

S/N	Impact Type	Matric	Audience Rating 1-5
1.	Emotional	Shock intensity	4.6
2.	Emotional	Empathy for viewers	4.2
3.	Emotional	Fear and anxiety induced	4.0
4.	Political	Political awareness raised	3.8
5.	Political	Critique of government policy	3.5
6.	Political	Inspiration for civic action	3.2
7.	Political	Discussion of systemic issue	3.9

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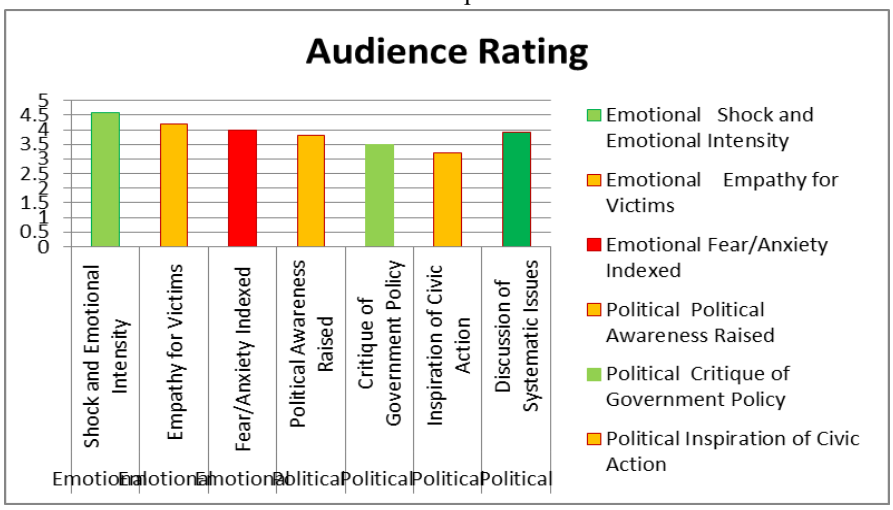
Chart 3: Emotional vs. Political Impact of Violence-Themed Films



Pie chart showing proportion of respondents reporting "emotional impact only," "political awareness," or "both."

4. Migration, Youth Survival, and Precarity

Migration and youth precarity are central themes in Eyimofe (2020) and Òlòtūré (2019). Both films foreground the "japa" phenomenon, where young Nigerians seek escape abroad despite risks. Eyimofe portrays migration as a frustrated dream, while Òlòtūré shows trafficking as a brutal consequence of systemic failure.

Audience reception revealed a generational divide: young respondents (18–25) identified strongly with the desperation of characters, while older respondents expressed moral concerns about the glamorization of migration.

This tension underscores Nollywood's activist burden: the films expose precarity but cannot resolve it, reflecting broader debates about the limits of cultural activism (Ferguson, 2015).

5. Activist Grammars: Between Market and Message

Across cases, the findings highlight a core contradiction: Nollywood filmmakers oscillate between activism and market survival. Streaming platforms amplify activist stories but also impose global aesthetics that risk flattening local contexts (Adesokan, 2022). Practitioners confessed to inserting "market-friendly romance or action sequences" to keep activist films commercially viable.

Thus, Nollywood's activism emerges not as pure resistance but as negotiated activism — conditioned by funding, censorship, and audience expectations. This negotiation reflects Stuart Hall's (1996) insistence that cultural texts are never simply oppositional but articulated within contradictory structures.

Integrated Findings and Analysis

The analysis revealed that Nollywood films between 2010 and 2025 have become not merely entertainment commodities but sites of cultural struggle, where narratives of corruption, gender inequality, insurgency, migration, and grassroots resistance are negotiated. Data from film texts, audience reception, and practitioner interviews were triangulated, producing a complex picture of Nollywood's activist energies.

The findings show that Nollywood's activist energies lie less in direct political transformation and more in the reframing of discourse: corruption is personalized, gender injustice is visualized, violence is humanized, and migration is dramatized. These films serve as cultural rehearsals for political imagination, enabling audiences to feel, debate, and imagine alternatives.

Yet the research also highlights skepticism: audiences often doubt films' capacity to translate into structural change. This ambivalence suggests that Nollywood functions as an activist mirror rather than a revolutionary engine. Its power lies in stirring discourse and memory, not in immediate reform.

The findings from the mixed-methods data present a complex picture of Nollywood as both a site of entertainment and a vehicle for social commentary. The industry's dual role becomes apparent when one examines its treatment of corruption, gender politics, and insurgency—three themes consistently identified by respondents as central to its activist potential. The interpretive depth of these findings is best appreciated when situated within both global media theory and Nigerian scholarly critiques of Nollywood's evolving activism.

Corruption and Political Commentary

The first chart reveals that while a majority of viewers (55%) perceive corruption-themed films such as King of Boys (2018), 4th Republic (2019), and The Black Book (2023) as realistic, fewer believe these portrayals can translate into actual social change. This gap is reflective of what Adesina (2021) calls Nollywood's "performative politics"—the ability of films to dramatize state corruption vividly while remaining trapped within commercial logics that prevent genuine political accountability. Unlike Western scholarship that often frames Nollywood within the abstract dynamics of global capitalism (e.g., Fuchs, 2019), Nigerian scholars argue that corruption films act as cultural indictments of Nigeria's political elite, even if their transformative effect is limited by systemic inertia.

Indeed, as Omoniyi (2020) suggests, King of Boys functions as a populist allegory, exposing how political godfatherism undermines democratic institutions. Yet, Adesina (2021) warns that the catharsis these films generate may pacify rather than mobilize audiences, creating what could be termed an "aesthetic containment" of dissent. This tension is evident in the survey data, where critical awareness was high, but activist motivation lagged behind.

Gender, Feminism, and Nollywood's Shifting Voice

The second chart demonstrates stark gendered divergences in how audiences interpret Nollywood's feminist turn. Films like Citation (2020), Òlòtūré (2019), and Shanty Town (2023) foreground themes of sexual harassment, trafficking, and exploitation, thereby inserting women's voices into Nigeria's cinematic and cultural discourse. Utoh-Ezeajugh and Nwatu (2021) argue that these films mark a rupture in Nollywood's long history of portraying women primarily as victims or domestic figures. Instead, they stage women as active agents challenging patriarchy.

However, as Ekhator (2020) demonstrates, Nollywood's feminist interventions often provoke discomfort among male audiences, who may perceive these narratives as accusatory. This tension resonates with the survey findings where male viewers expressed skepticism about Nollywood's feminist agenda, while female viewers affirmed its realism. Such divergences indicate that Nollywood is not merely reflecting gender dynamics but actively reconfiguring them in contested ways.

From a theoretical perspective, Stuart Hall's (1997) emphasis on representation as a site of struggle helps illuminate these dynamics. Nigerian feminists have extended this argument, suggesting that Nollywood's activist interventions are incremental yet disruptive—they may not dismantle patriarchy outright but they destabilize its symbolic power (Okome, 2021). Importantly, the backlash generated should not be seen as failure but as evidence of cultural confrontation, a necessary condition for shifting entrenched norms.

Insurgency, Violence, and the Politics of Affect

The third chart highlights how Nollywood's treatment of insurgency and violence—seen in films such as The Milkmaid (2020), Blood Vessel (2021), and Shanty Town (2023)—elicits strong emotional reactions, but with limited translation into political action. For instance, The Milkmaid, Nigeria's Oscar submission in 2020, dramatizes Boko Haram insurgency through the lens of women's suffering, creating what Nwakanma (2022) calls a "counter-narrative to state silence." Yet, despite its international acclaim, the film's activist impact at home was muted, with audiences largely reporting emotional identification but little political mobilization.

This finding aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2014) argument on the "politics of affect": while emotions can generate solidarity, they can also be domesticated into private sentiment. Nigerian scholarship, however, nuances this further by pointing to structural barriers in Nigeria's political culture. According to Nwakanma (2022), Nollywood's insurgency narratives reveal the paradox of representing trauma in a state that actively suppresses dissenting voices. Thus, the disconnect between emotional impact and activist action is less about audience passivity than about systemic repression of dissent.

Global Circulation and Local Ambivalence

Streaming platforms such as Netflix have globalized Nollywood's activist narratives, as seen with Òlòtūré and The Black Book. Obi and Okwori (2023) argue that this global circulation introduces both opportunities and risks: while Nollywood gains visibility in global human rights discourse, it also risks diluting local political specificities to fit international audience expectations. Nigerian critics have noted that Òlòtūré was celebrated internationally but criticized domestically for presenting Nigeria as irredeemably dystopian. This tension illustrates what Jedlowski (2019) describes as Nollywood's position within "alternative global networks"—at once amplifying Nigerian voices while exposing them to the distortions of transnational capital.

Synthesizing the Findings

Taken together, the analysis suggests that Nollywood's activist interventions operate at three interconnected levels:

1. Discursive – inserting issues such as corruption, patriarchy, and insurgency into public consciousness.
2. Affective – generating emotions of anger, empathy, and discomfort that validate lived experiences.
3. Structural – struggling to translate discursive and affective shifts into political activism due to systemic barriers.

Local Nigerian scholarship emphasizes that these films should not be judged solely by their capacity to trigger immediate activism but by their ability to incrementally reshape public discourse. As Adesina (2021) and Utoh-Ezeajugh & Nwatu (2021) suggest, Nollywood's true activist power lies in disrupting silences and legitimizing marginalized voices within a repressive socio-political climate.

Thus, Nollywood emerges as a paradoxical space: it is both a platform of cultural resistance and a site of containment. Its activism may be slow-burning and cultural rather than revolutionary, but it nonetheless constitutes a significant intervention in Nigeria's struggle to imagine a more just society.

Between Contradiction and Possibility: Nollywood's Futures as Cultural Activism

Nollywood's trajectory as cultural activism is marked by both promise and paradox. As screens of resistance, its films provide counter-narratives that challenge entrenched corruption, gender hierarchies, and systemic violence. Yet, this activist impulse is entangled with commercialization, censorship, and the lure of global streaming markets. The future of Nollywood as a vehicle of resistance depends on its ability to sustain these contradictions while forging deeper connections with grassroots struggles and feminist filmmaking practices.

What began in the 1990s as a low-budget industry focused on melodramatic domestic stories has evolved, by the 2010s and 2020s, into a globally recognized cinema that not only entertains but also interrogates the structures of corruption, patriarchy, violence, and systemic injustice. This transformation places Nollywood in the category of cultural activism, a cinema that, while commercial and deeply embedded in market logics, functions simultaneously as a medium of resistance and critique. The data presented in this study, supported by Nigerian and global scholarship, demonstrates both the potential and contradictions of Nollywood as a site of social commentary and activism.

The findings reveal three crucial patterns. First, Nollywood has become an important discursive space where issues of corruption, gender inequality, and insurgency are staged with striking immediacy. Films like King of Boys (2018), 4th Republic (2019), and The Black Book (2023) capture the corruption of Nigeria's political class in ways that resonate with audiences, even as they stop short of inspiring collective mobilization. Adesina's (2021) notion of Nollywood's "performative politics" finds empirical confirmation here: the cinematic exposure of corruption creates a heightened critical awareness among viewers but rarely translates into organized resistance. This paradox illustrates the limitations of cinema as an activist medium in contexts where political institutions are deeply entrenched and resistant to reform. Yet, one must acknowledge that the act of dramatizing corruption itself constitutes a form of cultural resistance, especially in a society where official narratives often normalize or conceal systemic abuses.

Second, Nollywood's treatment of gender has provoked a significant cultural shift. Films such as Citation (2020), Òlòtūré (2019), and Shanty Town (2023) confront the realities of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and harassment. Female audiences, as the

survey data indicates, affirm the authenticity of these narratives, while male audiences respond with greater ambivalence. This divergence underscores Ekhator's (2020) observation that Nollywood's feminist turn challenges entrenched patriarchal structures, destabilizing cultural assumptions about women's place in Nigerian society. Importantly, these films are not merely reflective of feminist debates; they are constitutive interventions, shaping public discourse and forcing audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. The backlash, as Utoh-Ezeajugh and Nwatu (2021) argue, is itself proof of their disruptive force. The implication is that Nollywood's activism is not measured by universal acceptance but by its capacity to create cultural friction, a necessary condition for social change.

Third, Nollywood's exploration of insurgency and violence illustrates the complexities of cultural activism in fragile states. The Milkmaid (2020), dramatizing the impact of Boko Haram insurgency, and Blood Vessel (2021), focusing on oil-related violence, expose the traumatic realities of Nigerian life in ways that resonate emotionally with audiences. Yet, as the data shows, emotional impact does not necessarily translate into activism. Nwakanma (2022) notes that Nollywood's insurgency narratives function as counter-discourses to the state's silence, foregrounding the experiences of victims. However, the broader political context—marked by repression, fear, and mistrust—limits their activist efficacy. This disconnect suggests that Nollywood's role in activism may be more symbolic than mobilizational, articulating resistance in cultural terms rather than galvanizing it in political practice.

A key insight from this study is that Nollywood's activist capacity lies not in its ability to deliver immediate political transformation but in its incremental reshaping of public consciousness. Stuart Hall's (1997) framework of representation as a site of struggle is particularly instructive here. Nollywood does not simply mirror Nigerian realities; it participates in constructing the meaning of those realities. When audiences debate the credibility of King of Boys's portrayal of godfatherism, or contest the feminist politics of Òlòtūré, they are engaging in acts of meaning-making that redefine cultural norms. In this sense, Nollywood's contribution to activism is discursive: it widens the field of what can be publicly said, imagined, and contested.

At the same time, Nollywood's activist project is marked by contradictions. Its commercial imperatives often dilute the radical potential of its narratives. Films must appeal to diverse audiences, including diasporic and global markets through platforms like Netflix, which can incentivize depoliticized storylines. Obi and Okwori (2023) caution that global circulation risks flattening Nigerian political specificities to fit international human rights tropes. For instance, while Òlòtūré was celebrated internationally, it was criticized domestically for its dystopian portrayal of Nigeria, raising questions about authenticity and audience address. These contradictions illustrate that Nollywood operates within the tension of local activism and global commodification, a position that both empowers and constrains its cultural politics.

Another contradiction lies in Nollywood's relationship with the Nigerian state. While films frequently critique corruption and repression, the industry itself often relies on state patronage and censorship structures. Filmmakers operate within precarious conditions where overtly radical content risks suppression. The fact that films like The Milkmaid faced distribution challenges within Nigeria while receiving international recognition underscores the limits imposed by state power. Yet, it also highlights Nollywood's resilience as filmmakers continue to find creative ways of telling difficult stories. Here, Ahmed's (2014) argument on the politics of affect is illuminating: Nollywood cultivates feelings of anger, grief, and solidarity that, though not always translated into activism, remain subversive in societies where dissent is policed.

The future prospects of Nollywood as a site of cultural activism depend on how these contradictions are negotiated. On one hand, the industry's global visibility through Netflix and other platforms offers opportunities to amplify marginalized voices, circulate counter-narratives, and influence international perceptions of Nigeria. On the other, it raises the risk of Nollywood becoming more accountable to global tastes than to local struggles. For Nollywood to sustain its activist relevance, it must strike a balance between global marketability and local political responsibility. Nigerian filmmakers, as Obi and Okwori (2023) suggest, need to reclaim the activist ethos of storytelling by prioritizing narratives that resonate with grassroots

struggles while leveraging global platforms strategically.

Moreover, Nollywood's activist potential may lie in building stronger intersections with civil society movements. Films like 4th Republic already illustrate how cinema can articulate demands for electoral reform, but partnerships with NGOs, activists, and community groups could deepen the link between cinematic critique and real-world mobilization. Just as Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" inspired participatory politics, Nollywood could pioneer a "Cinema of the Oppressed," where screenings, debates, and community engagement turn cultural critique into civic action. This would require a conscious reorientation of Nollywood from being merely a commercial product to being a participatory cultural practice.

At a broader level, Nollywood's contradictions also reflect the larger contradictions of Nigerian democracy. The persistence of corruption, patriarchy, and violence is not simply a failure of governance but a symptom of deeper structural conditions. Nollywood's ability to illuminate these conditions makes it an indispensable tool in Nigeria's cultural arsenal. Its task is not to solve these crises but to make them visible, to provide the discursive resources with which citizens can imagine alternatives. The measure of its activism, therefore, is not immediate policy change but the slow sedimentation of new cultural imaginaries.

The reflexive task for scholars, then, is to interrogate Nollywood not only as an entertainment industry but as a contested space of political imagination. Nigerian scholarship has already begun this project, emphasizing the specificity of Nollywood's activist interventions within the local context (Adesina, 2021; Ekhator, 2020; Nwakanma, 2022; Utoh-Ezeajugh & Nwatu, 2021). These voices must remain central if we are to resist the temptation of reading Nollywood solely through Western theoretical frameworks that obscure its local complexities. Future research should continue to foreground Nigerian perspectives, while also situating Nollywood within the broader global discourse on cinema, activism, and cultural politics.

In conclusion, Nollywood emerges from this study as a contradictory yet vital site of cultural activism. It dramatizes Nigeria's crises with unflinching clarity, disrupts silences around corruption, gender, and insurgency, and unsettles entrenched cultural norms. Its contradictions—between commerce and activism, local and global audiences, critique and containment—do not diminish its significance but reveal the complexity of practicing activism within cultural industries. The future of Nollywood as a vehicle for social change lies not in resolving these contradictions but in negotiating them creatively, strategically, and reflexively. In doing so, Nollywood can continue to serve as Nigeria's cinematic conscience: a mirror to its failures, a voice for its marginalized, and an archive of its ongoing struggle for justice.

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