NEW FRONTIERS

A Journal in the Humanities
ISSN 2536-6203

Published by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja

Volume 4 (2026), Article 6, https://doi.org/10.70118/NFJH00O6

Reframing Female Identity Through Sexual Objectification Theory: A Critical Re-Theorisation of *Adesuwa*

Ter Akaa
Department of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic, Wannune, Benue State

Kwaghkondo Agber, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts, Yakubu Gowon University, Abuja

Abstract

Sexual objectification operates not merely as interpersonal reduction but as a structural mechanism through which patriarchal systems consolidate authority over female embodiment. While Nollywood scholarship has examined stereotypes, morality, and gender binaries, sustained theoretical engagement with sexual objectification in Nigerian historical epics remains limited. This article argues that Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Adesuwa* transforms objectification from visual appraisal into a crisis of governance. Drawing on Sexual Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts) and extending it through African feminist scholarship (Nnaemeka; Tamale; Ahmed), the study employs qualitative textual and visual analysis to examine how the film constructs the female body as symbolic infrastructure for sovereign legitimacy. The narrative progression from gaze to entitlement, from entitlement to coercion, and from coercion to lethal authority reveals objectification as a political strategy rather than private desire. Crucially, Adesuwa's refusal reframes resistance as ethical intervention within culture, not rebellion against it. Her death, rather than sanctifying sacrifice, exposes the fragility of patriarchal sovereignty and initiates communal reckoning. By reconceptualising objectification as governance failure and memorialisation as counter-power, the film reimagines female dignity within historical cinema. This study advances Nollywood gender scholarship by integrating objectification theory with African feminist thought to illuminate how historical film can convert violation into ethical indictment and cultural accountability.

Keywords: Sexual Objectification, Nollywood, African Feminism, Historical Memory, Patriarchal Governance

Introduction

Sexual objectification persists as one of the most enduring mechanisms through which female identity is narrowed, regulated, and symbolically disciplined across cultures. Feminist theorists have long argued that objectification involves more than aesthetic appreciation; it is the reduction of a person to bodily utility, severing subjectivity from embodiment (Fredrickson and Roberts 175). In visual culture, this

reduction becomes institutionalised through framing, narrative focus, and the privileging of masculine spectatorship. Women are not merely seen; they are evaluated, appraised, and positioned as available for consumption. Such patterns do not operate outside social structures but rather help sustain them. Within patriarchal systems, the objectified female body becomes a stabilising mechanism for male authority. Film, as a dominant narrative medium, plays a crucial role in naturalising or contesting this dynamic.

In Nigerian cinema, popularly known as Nollywood, the politics of female representation has generated sustained scholarly concern. Early critiques focused on stereotypes of the wicked stepmother, the seductress, or the long-suffering wife, observing how these archetypes reinforced gender binaries (Okome, "Women and Power"). More recent scholarship, however, has begun interrogating how gender intersects with neoliberal modernity, religion, and postcolonial identity (Haynes; Dosekun). Yet despite these developments, one notable gap persists: limited sustained theorisation of sexual objectification within Nigerian historical epics. Historical films frequently claim cultural authenticity, invoking tradition as moral authority. In doing so, they risk reproducing patriarchal hierarchies under the guise of heritage.

This article contends that Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Adesuwa* demands deeper theoretical scrutiny precisely because it destabilises that tendency. The film does not merely portray a woman resisting forced marriage; it stages objectification as a political crisis that exposes the fragility of patriarchal sovereignty. Adesuwa's refusal is not framed as deviance but as ethical intervention, thereby unsettling assumptions about tradition and obedience. Unlike narratives that sanctify female sacrifice as virtue, this film interrogates the system that demands such sacrifice. The protagonist's death becomes an indictment rather than a cautionary tale. Through this repositioning, the film transforms personal violation into collective accountability. That transformation warrants careful analysis.

The central research gap addressed here lies in the insufficient integration of Sexual Objectification Theory with African feminist film studies in Nollywood scholarship. While objectification theory has evolved significantly since its formulation in 1997, its application to African historical cinema remains sparse (Calogero; Moradi and Huang). Conversely, African feminist scholarship has robustly critiqued patriarchal authority but has not consistently engaged with objectification as a structured visual economy. This study bridges those domains. It adapts objectification theory to an African historical context while remaining attentive to its Western origins and limitations. In doing so, it models a dialogic theoretical method rather than a transplanted framework.

To clarify its analytical direction, this study pursues the following objectives:

i. To examine how *Adesuwa* constructs sexual objectification not merely as interpersonal reduction but as a mechanism of political governance.
ii. To analyse how cinematic framing, narrative progression, and dialogue transform gaze into entitlement, and entitlement into coercive authority.
iii. To adapt Sexual Objectification Theory within an African feminist framework attentive to historical sovereignty and communal structures.
iv. To assess whether the film reframes female resistance as ethical intervention rather than cultural rebellion.

Guided by these objectives, the article addresses the following research questions:

i. How does *Adesuwa* represent the progression from visual appraisal to sovereign entitlement over the female body?
ii. In what ways does the film's visual grammar (gaze, framing, compositional hierarchy) reinforce or destabilise objectification?

iii. How does Adesuwa's refusal disrupt patriarchal governance structures within the narrative?
iv. Does the film ultimately reinscribe sacrificial femininity, or does it transform objectification into ethical indictment?

This article therefore advances Nollywood gender scholarship by demonstrating that historical cinema can transform sexual objectification into a site of ethical reconstruction. It argues that *Adesuwa* reframes female resistance as cultural ethics, not rebellion; as preservation of dignity, not disruption of order. The film challenges the moral legitimacy of patriarchal authority by revealing its dependence on coercion. Through its narrative structure and symbolic closure, it converts objectified embodiment into communal reckoning. Such a move is significant at a moment when global debates around gender, violence, and representation intensify across media landscapes. The study thus contributes both locally and transnationally to conversations on feminist film analysis.

Literature Review

Sexual Objectification Theory, first articulated by Fredrickson and Roberts, conceptualised objectification as a cultural practice that conditions women to internalise an observer's gaze (175–177). Their foundational work foregrounded psychological consequences such as body shame, anxiety, and diminished cognitive resources. While early applications centred largely on Western advertising and media, the theory has since undergone substantial refinement. Calogero argues that objectification operates across interpersonal and institutional domains, reinforcing systemic inequality rather than isolated prejudice. Similarly, Moradi and Huang's decade review underscores the theory's adaptability across diverse cultural contexts, though they caution against universalist assumptions. Objectification, in contemporary scholarship, is understood as a structural phenomenon embedded in representation, consumption, and power. Recent studies further complicate the landscape by examining how objectification mutates under postfeminist discourse. Gill contends that neoliberal culture repackages sexualisation as empowerment, masking surveillance beneath choice rhetoric. Tiggemann and Zaccardo's analysis of "fitspiration" imagery reveals how strength narratives may still reproduce bodily discipline and evaluation. Daniels et al. extend this insight to digital media, where visibility intensifies commodification. Together, these scholars demonstrate that objectification no longer appears solely as overt sexual display; it often masquerades as agency. This evolution is instructive for analysing historical film, where tradition may serve as similar camouflage. Objectification, whether modernised or traditionalised, remains a regulatory force.

Laura Mulvey's seminal concept of the male gaze remains foundational in feminist film analysis. She argues that classical cinema organises visual pleasure around masculine spectatorship, fragmenting female bodies and aligning narrative power with male protagonists. Though Mulvey's work emerged within Euro-American contexts, its theoretical architecture remains pertinent. Cinematic framing—close-ups, camera angles, and narrative positioning—guides how viewers perceive female characters. When women are constructed primarily as spectacles rather than agents, visual hierarchy reinforces narrative hierarchy. Film thus becomes a technology of looking. However, contemporary feminist film scholars have nuanced Mulvey's formulation by examining how gaze may be contested or reversed. African cinema scholars suggest that local narrative traditions sometimes disrupt passive femininity through communal storytelling structures (Quayson). Yet this disruption is not guaranteed. In Nollywood historical epics, reverence for tradition may inadvertently preserve visual hierarchies. Therefore, interrogating gaze in *Adesuwa* requires attention to whether the camera aligns viewers with Obi Olise's desire or destabilises it. Such analysis moves beyond dialogue into aesthetic structure.

African feminist scholarship insists that gender systems in Africa cannot be fully explained through Western binaries. Oyěwùmí's critique of imposed gender categories highlights the distortions introduced by colonial epistemologies. Nnaemeka proposes "nego-feminism," emphasising negotiation rather than antagonism as a strategy of resistance. Tamale, meanwhile, foregrounds decolonial feminist approaches that interrogate how patriarchy intersects with nationalism and modern statehood. These frameworks collectively caution against portraying African women solely as victims of tradition. They also emphasise the symbolic weight placed on female bodies within communal structures. Sara Ahmed's theorisation of feminist "willfulness" is particularly instructive here. She suggests that women who refuse prescribed roles are often labelled obstinate or destructive, revealing how compliance sustains comfort for others. Such framing resonates strongly with *Adesuwa*, where resistance is construed as disruption. Ahmed's insight enables a reading of Adesuwa's defiance not as rebellion but as ethical insistence. Resistance becomes a form of cultural care rather than cultural betrayal. This reframing deepens theoretical nuance.

Nollywood scholarship has increasingly examined how gender operates within industry transformation. Haynes situates Nollywood within Lagos's urban modernity, noting tensions between commerce and culture. Okome's work on women and power in Nollywood underscores the persistence of moral binaries even as female visibility increases. Ugochukwu argues that historical epics offer potential for re-centering female agency but often remain constrained by patriarchal nostalgia. Akinola's analysis of memory in Nigerian cinema suggests that historical reconstruction is never neutral; it shapes contemporary ethical imagination. These studies collectively demonstrate the ideological stakes of historical representation. Yet despite these advances, sustained engagement with sexual objectification in historical epics remains sparse. Gender analysis often emphasises morality, power, or agency without interrogating how female embodiment itself becomes political currency. This omission is significant. Objectification is not merely thematic; it is structural, embedded in narrative motivation. Without examining how the female body functions within political economy, analysis risks superficiality. This study addresses that oversight directly.

The existing scholarship, though rich, has not sufficiently conceptualised objectification in Nollywood historical cinema as a crisis of governance. Feminist media studies examine sexualisation in advertising and digital culture, while African feminist scholarship critiques patriarchal authority structurally. Yet few analyses integrate these perspectives to examine how historical film dramatizes objectification as sovereign entitlement. *Adesuwa* provides a compelling case because the male antagonist's desire is inseparable from political ambition. His claim over Adesuwa is framed as an extension of power rather than private affection. The narrative therefore positions objectification as governance failure.

This article fills that gap by arguing that *Adesuwa* converts objectification into ethical rupture. It demonstrates that the denial of female subjectivity destabilises communal order rather than preserving it. Through this lens, resistance becomes a defence of culture's moral core. By bridging objectification theory with African feminist analysis, the study advances a more layered approach to Nollywood gender scholarship. It insists that female embodiment in historical cinema is never merely symbolic ornamentation. It is a contested terrain of authority.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual and visual analysis to examine how *Adesuwa* constructs sexual objectification as a political mechanism rather than a purely interpersonal phenomenon. The research adopts an interpretive, theory-informed approach grounded in feminist film analysis and cultural studies. Rather than measuring frequency or audience response, the study prioritises meaning-making

processes embedded within narrative structure, cinematic framing, and character positioning. The objective is not to generalise statistically but to produce theoretically rigorous insight into how representation functions within a specific historical film. Such an approach is consistent with humanities-based scholarship in film studies, where interpretation operates through close reading and conceptual synthesis. The analysis integrates Sexual Objectification Theory with African feminist frameworks as analytical lenses rather than fixed templates. These frameworks guide attention to gaze, embodiment, entitlement, resistance, and sovereignty. However, they are dialogically adapted to the Nigerian historical context, ensuring cultural specificity remains central. This interpretive design allows theoretical expansion while remaining grounded in textual evidence. The study therefore situates itself within critical feminist media methodology.

The primary text analysed is *Adesuwa* (dir. Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 2008), a Nollywood historical epic set within the Benin Kingdom. The analysis focuses on the full narrative arc of the film, with particular emphasis on sequences that structure the progression from visual appraisal to coercive authority. The unit of analysis consists of identifiable narrative moments and cinematic sequences rather than isolated dialogue lines. These include:

- Initial encounter scenes that establish gaze and evaluative looking
- Palace deliberation scenes where entitlement is articulated institutionally
- Confrontation scenes that dramatise refusal and coercion
- The climactic execution sequence
- Posthumous communal response and memorialisation

In addition to dialogue, attention is given to mise-en-scène, camera distance, shot composition, character blocking, and facial expression. This ensures that objectification is examined not only at the level of speech but also through visual grammar. The female body is analysed as both narrative catalyst and symbolic infrastructure. By combining narrative and visual units, the study avoids reducing analysis to thematic summary. The analysis proceeded in three stages.

Stage One: Narrative Mapping.
The film was reviewed multiple times to identify structural progression in the portrayal of objectification. Particular attention was paid to moments where desire transitions into entitlement, and entitlement into coercion. This stage established the analytical arc central to the study's argument.

Stage Two: Visual-Gaze Analysis.
Drawing on Mulvey's framework, scenes were examined for camera alignment, shot duration, fragmentation or wholeness of bodily representation, and spectator positioning. The analysis considered whether the camera reinforced masculine authority or destabilised it through reciprocal framing and assertive subjectivity.

Stage Three: Theoretical Integration.
Findings from narrative and visual examination were interpreted through adapted Sexual Objectification Theory and African feminist scholarship. Rather than imposing theory, the film's internal logic informed theoretical recalibration—particularly regarding objectification as sovereign appropriation and governance strategy. Throughout, analytic memos were used to track recurring motifs such as legitimacy, lineage, dignity, and authority. The interpretive claims are supported by identifiable sequences and dialogue references to ensure transparency of inference.

This study focuses exclusively on textual and cinematic analysis and does not incorporate audience reception, production interviews, or industrial economics. While such dimensions would enrich understanding, the current inquiry prioritises representational structure and ethical framing. The analysis is also limited to a single

historical epic; therefore, conclusions should be understood as theoretically generative rather than universally descriptive of Nollywood. Additionally, while the film contains broader themes of tradition, nationalism, and power, the study isolates sexual objectification as its primary analytical axis. Other intersectional dimensions—such as ethnicity, class, and spirituality—are acknowledged but not exhaustively explored. Future research may expand in these directions. Given that the film culminates in gendered violence, interpretive care is exercised to avoid sensationalising suffering. The analysis foregrounds structural critique rather than spectacle. Female vulnerability is examined as political exposure rather than aesthetic tragedy. This ethical stance aligns with feminist methodological commitments to dignified representation.

Theoretical Deepening: Adaptation, Limits, and Cinematic Authority

Limits of Sexual Objectification Theory in African Contexts

Sexual Objectification Theory, though widely influential, emerged from late twentieth-century Western feminist psychology and therefore reflects particular cultural assumptions about individualism, consumer capitalism, and media saturation (Fredrickson and Roberts 176). Its early applications often focused on advertising, pornography, and commercial television—spaces where commodification is overt. When applied to African historical cinema, however, the terrain shifts considerably. Objectification in such contexts does not always appear through commercial sexualisation but through cultural entitlement embedded in kinship, lineage, and sovereignty. The female body becomes less a commodity for consumption and more a resource for political consolidation. This distinction complicates straightforward theoretical transfer. Adaptation, rather than replication, becomes necessary.

Bonnie Moradi and Yu-Ping Huang caution that cross-cultural application of Objectification Theory requires sensitivity to local gender systems and power configurations (Moradi and Huang 186). In Nigerian historical settings, patriarchal authority is often justified through ancestral legitimacy rather than market logic. Marriage, for instance, functions as diplomatic strategy, inheritance continuity, and symbolic alliance. Therefore, objectification operates not only through visual fragmentation but through institutional absorption of female autonomy. The theory must be recalibrated to account for governance structures where sovereignty, not spectacle, organises control. Without such recalibration, analysis risks imposing Western consumer paradigms onto distinct political formations. African feminist scholarship provides essential correctives in this regard. Oyěwùmí's critique of imposed Western gender categories reminds us that precolonial African societies structured social hierarchies differently from Victorian binaries. Yet contemporary patriarchal practices are shaped by colonial and postcolonial transformations that intensified gender stratification. Tamale's decolonial feminism further insists that imported theoretical frameworks must be dialogically reworked rather than adopted wholesale. In *Adesuwa*, objectification emerges not through commodified sexuality but through sovereign entitlement. Obi Olise does not advertise or display Adesuwa; he claims her as extension of authority. The political dimension of objectification thus becomes central.

This adaptation reveals an important conceptual shift: objectification in *Adesuwa* functions as a mechanism of governance rather than consumer fantasy. The protagonist's body symbolises legitimacy, lineage, and masculine prestige. When Obi Olise asserts ownership, he articulates a political claim disguised as romantic pursuit. Objectification here is not reducible to erotic display; it is an assertion of sovereign control over embodied autonomy. Such framing expands Objectification Theory beyond psychology into political theory. It suggests that female embodiment operates as contested territory within state-like hierarchies. Conceptually, then, *Adesuwa* invites a re-theorisation of objectification as sovereign appropriation. The female body becomes a symbolic infrastructure upon which authority rests. Resistance

destabilises not only desire but legitimacy. By integrating African feminist insights with Objectification Theory, this study demonstrates that objectification in historical African cinema must be understood as a crisis of governance. This theoretical recalibration strengthens analytical precision. It also advances interdisciplinary feminist scholarship.

Operationalising the Male Gaze: Visual Framing and Cinematic Authority

While dialogue and narrative structure reveal ideological tensions, cinematic framing performs subtler work in shaping audience alignment. Laura Mulvey's formulation of the male gaze remains indispensable for examining how camera positioning directs spectatorship ("Visual Pleasure" 11). In classical cinema, women are often fragmented into aesthetic surfaces—faces, torsos, silhouettes—detached from narrative agency. The question for *Adesuwa* is whether the film replicates such fragmentation or destabilises it. Careful examination suggests that the camera frequently resists full eroticisation of the protagonist. Instead of isolating body parts, it frames her within relational contexts—court, palace, confrontation—foregrounding presence over spectacle. Nevertheless, moments of evaluative looking do occur. Obi Olise's initial encounter with Adesuwa is marked by prolonged visual attention, aligning the viewer momentarily with his gaze. The camera lingers, not overtly erotic but unmistakably appraising. This alignment produces discomfort rather than pleasure, as narrative cues frame his admiration as intrusive. Mulvey argues that the gaze structures power by converting women into objects of look rather than bearers of look. Yet *Adesuwa* disrupts this dynamic by granting the protagonist sustained eye contact and assertive posture. She returns the gaze rather than absorbing it silently.

This reciprocal looking destabilises classical visual hierarchy. Adesuwa is not rendered passive spectacle but active respondent. Her facial expressions—resolute, unyielding—counter the softness typically associated with cinematic femininity. The camera frequently captures her in medium shots rather than fragmenting close-ups, preserving bodily wholeness. Such compositional choices subtly resist objectification's visual grammar. The gaze becomes contested terrain rather than unilateral dominance. However, the film does not entirely escape spectacle logic. Adesuwa's beauty remains narratively central, functioning as catalyst for conflict. Even when not visually fragmented, her appearance drives male ambition. This suggests that objectification can persist narratively even when cinematography avoids overt eroticisation. Visual resistance alone cannot dismantle structural reduction. Instead, narrative consequences must also intervene. Conceptually distilled, *Adesuwa* performs what may be termed "gaze destabilisation." The camera initially aligns with masculine appraisal but progressively reorients viewer sympathy toward female subjectivity. By allowing Adesuwa to look back—literally and figuratively—the film disrupts the asymmetry Mulvey identified. The gaze becomes dialogic rather than monologic. This aesthetic choice strengthens the film's ethical argument. Cinematic authority shifts incrementally from possession to presence.

Counter-Reading: Martyrdom, Sacrificial Femininity, and the Risk of Reinscription

Despite its resistant framing, *Adesuwa* risks reinscribing a familiar pattern in feminist media analysis: the centring of female suffering as narrative climax. The protagonist's death, while morally indicting patriarchal violence, also reinforces a long-standing cinematic trope in which women achieve symbolic power only through sacrifice. Judith Butler's reflections on vulnerability remind us that exposure to violence can become romanticised within cultural memory (*The Force of Nonviolence* 45). When female resistance culminates in death, audiences may interpret sacrifice as inevitable cost of autonomy. This risk warrants careful interrogation. Sara Ahmed's notion of the "willful woman" further complicates this terrain. Women who refuse prescribed roles are often characterised as disruptive, stubborn, or socially dangerous (Ahmed 3–5). In *Adesuwa*, resistance leads to lethal retaliation, which might be read as confirmation

that patriarchy ultimately prevails. The protagonist's posthumous vindication does not restore her life; it restores communal order. One might therefore ask whether the narrative affirms resistance only after eliminating the resistant subject. If so, the film could be seen as preserving sacrificial femininity under ethical veneer.

Yet the narrative structure complicates that interpretation. Adesuwa's death does not stabilise patriarchy; it destabilises it. Obi Olise's execution reframes sovereignty itself as corrupt when built on coercion. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics—where power decides who may live and who must die—illuminates this dynamic. Obi Olise's assertion of lethal authority constitutes sovereign overreach. The communal response rejects his claim to death-dealing legitimacy. Thus, violence exposes, rather than validates, patriarchal order. Moreover, the film refuses to sentimentalise Adesuwa's suffering. Her death is abrupt, brutal, and narratively shocking. It is not aestheticised into poetic tragedy but presented as moral rupture. The emphasis shifts quickly from her body to communal outrage. Memory functions not as romanticisation but as indictment. This distinction is subtle yet significant. Conceptually, the counter-reading reveals productive tension. *Adesuwa* walks a delicate line between martyrdom and moral reckoning. While it cannot entirely escape sacrificial tropes, it redirects their symbolic function. Death becomes accusation rather than glorification. In doing so, the film reframes female vulnerability as ethical exposure of sovereign violence. Resistance survives not in body but in narrative transformation.

Film Analysis

From Gaze to Appraisal: The Politics of First Looking

The film's articulation of objectification begins not with overt coercion but with looking. The initial encounter between Obi Olise and Adesuwa is framed as visual arrest. The camera lingers slightly longer than necessary on Adesuwa's composure within a communal setting, allowing her presence to register before dialogue begins. Although the shot does not fragment her body, it nonetheless positions her as an object of evaluative attention. Obi Olise's gaze precedes his speech, signalling that perception operates as prelude to possession. The cinematic rhythm slows in this moment, subtly foregrounding the asymmetry between watcher and watched. This temporal dilation transforms admiration into appraisal. Importantly, the camera briefly aligns with Obi Olise's perspective, creating what Mulvey identifies as spectatorial identification with masculine desire. Yet the alignment is not fully immersive. Adesuwa's posture remains upright and unyielding, and the camera cuts to her face in medium framing rather than isolating sensual detail. This compositional choice complicates voyeuristic pleasure. She is seen, but not dismembered into aesthetic fragments. The gaze, therefore, begins as a visual claim but encounters resistance in framing.

The dialogue that follows reinforces this progression. Obi Olise does not merely praise beauty; he interprets it as destiny. His language suggests inevitability, as though aesthetic appeal confers obligation. This shift from appreciation to entitlement is subtle but decisive. Beauty becomes not attribute but justification. In that rhetorical move, objectification transitions from perception to political projection. The body ceases to belong solely to the subject and begins to function within another's ambition. Conceptually, the scene establishes the first stage of the arc: gaze becomes the foundation upon which entitlement is constructed. The film thereby situates objectification not in vulgar display but in socially legitimised admiration. It is the naturalisation of evaluative looking that prepares the ground for later coercion.

From Appraisal to Entitlement: Institutionalising Desire

Objectification intensifies when private desire migrates into public authority. The palace deliberation scenes provide crucial evidence of this transformation. In these sequences, Obi Olise's interest in Adesuwa is articulated before elders and political

actors. His personal attraction is reframed as strategic marriage, aligning beauty with legitimacy and elevation within the kingdom's hierarchy. The spatial composition of these scenes reinforces this shift. Obi Olise occupies central framing, often elevated or foregrounded, while Adesuwa is discussed rather than present. Her absence in deliberative space visually echoes her exclusion from decision-making power. The language of these exchanges is revealing. Marriage is described as consolidation, continuity, and prestige. Adesuwa's personhood dissolves into lineage utility. Here, objectification operates as instrumentalisation, aligning with Fredrickson and Roberts' identification of reduction to means rather than ends. Yet within the film's historical setting, this instrumentalisation acquires sovereign dimension. Her body becomes symbolic infrastructure for male political mobility.

Cinematically, these scenes avoid overt emotional intensity, instead adopting a measured, procedural tone. The calmness of discussion underscores how objectification is institutional rather than impulsive. No raised voices are required because entitlement is assumed. The camera's relative stillness mirrors the stability of patriarchal consensus. This quiet authority renders coercion unnecessary—at least initially—because the system anticipates compliance. What becomes evident in these moments is that objectification functions smoothly when framed as tradition. The rhetoric of custom masks the conversion of autonomy into alliance. By embedding desire within governance protocol, the film exposes how patriarchal systems normalise appropriation. Objectification thus moves beyond individual obsession into constitutional logic.

From Entitlement to Coercion: The Crisis of Refusal

The narrative's ethical turning point occurs when Adesuwa refuses incorporation. Her rejection interrupts the smooth flow of patriarchal expectation. The confrontation scenes between Adesuwa and Obi Olise are marked by heightened visual tension. The camera shifts from static palace composition to more intimate framing, emphasising proximity and emotional charge. Unlike earlier sequences where she was spoken about, she now speaks directly. Her voice introduces friction into what had appeared orderly. Adesuwa's refusal is articulated calmly rather than hysterically. Her tone destabilises the stereotype of emotional rebellion. She appeals to dignity and consent rather than romantic preference. This rhetorical strategy reframes the conflict as ethical rather than sentimental. The camera frequently positions her at equal eye level with Obi Olise, visually resisting hierarchical dominance. Eye contact becomes counter -gaze. She does not lower her gaze submissively; instead, she sustains it.

However, Obi Olise's response reveals the fragility of entitlement. His speech shifts from persuasion to command. The lexical field transforms—what began as admiration becomes insistence. The spatial distance between them narrows, signalling encroachment. In these moments, the film visualises coercion as escalation rather than eruption. Entitlement, once denied, seeks enforcement. Importantly, the communal silence that follows her refusal signals complicity. Elders hesitate; tradition appears unsure. This hesitation marks the beginning of governance fracture. Objectification ceases to operate invisibly and becomes visible as force. The refusal exposes the coercive scaffolding beneath ritual language. At this stage, the progression from gaze to entitlement culminates in overt assertion of authority.

From Coercion to Sovereign Violence: Necropolitical Assertion

The climactic execution scene constitutes the most explicit manifestation of objectification as governance failure. When Obi Olise orders Adesuwa's death, he transitions from suitor to sovereign executioner. The scene is abrupt and stripped of melodramatic embellishment. The violence is not aestheticised into tragic grandeur; it is delivered with chilling administrative decisiveness. This tonal restraint amplifies the ethical rupture. Visually, the execution isolates Adesuwa momentarily before the

communal response intervenes. The camera does not linger voyeuristically on her body; instead, it shifts rapidly to reaction shots. Faces of shock and outrage dominate the frame. This compositional shift redirects attention from violated body to violated moral order. The spectacle of violence gives way to collective recognition.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics clarifies this moment. Sovereignty asserts itself through the power to determine death. Obi Olise's lethal command attempts to restore legitimacy through elimination of resistance. Yet the narrative outcome reverses his expectation. Rather than stabilising authority, the execution delegitimises it. Violence exposes sovereign overreach. The subsequent communal retaliation reframes the meaning of her death. Authority grounded in coercion collapses under moral scrutiny. The spectacle of execution becomes evidence of corruption rather than confirmation of power. In this sense, the film converts objectification's endpoint—disposability—into catalyst for accountability.

Memorialisation and Ethical Reconstitution

The film's closing emphasis on remembrance completes the arc. Adesuwa's death does not erase her; it installs her within communal consciousness. The shift from spectacle to memory marks a symbolic reversal of objectification's logic. Where objectification reduces subjectivity to utility, memory restores dignity through narrative persistence. Cinematically, the tone softens but does not sentimentalise. There is no romantic glorification of sacrifice. Instead, the community's reaction underscores recognition of injustice. Her name becomes ethical reference point. The narrative refuses to treat her as cautionary example; instead, she functions as indictment of coercive authority. This closure complicates the martyrdom critique. Although her body is destroyed, her subjectivity endures within cultural memory. Objectification's erasure is countered by memorial inscription. The political crisis initiated by gaze culminates in ethical reconstruction. The female body, once instrumentalised, becomes site of communal reckoning.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Adesuwa* transforms sexual objectification from descriptive trope into political crisis. By tracing the progression from gaze to entitlement, from entitlement to coercion, and from coercion to sovereign violence, the film exposes the structural foundations of patriarchal authority. Objectification is not depicted as isolated desire but as governance strategy reliant upon female compliance. When that compliance is withdrawn, legitimacy unravels. The narrative thus reframes female resistance as ethical intervention rather than deviance. In doing so, it challenges assumptions about tradition's moral neutrality.

Importantly, the film's conclusion does not resolve tension through romantic restoration but through communal reckoning. Obi Olise's downfall signals that authority grounded in coercion cannot endure. Adesuwa's memorialisation preserves her subjectivity beyond bodily violation, converting death into indictment. This repositioning complicates martyrdom tropes while maintaining ethical force. Though the film cannot fully escape sacrificial framing, it redirects sacrifice toward systemic critique. Such narrative recalibration elevates its significance within Nollywood.

The theoretical integration undertaken here demonstrates that Sexual Objectification Theory, when dialogically adapted through African feminist scholarship, offers robust analytical insight into Nigerian historical cinema. By reframing objectification as sovereign appropriation and resistance as cultural ethics, the study advances interdisciplinary feminist film analysis. It fills a notable gap in Nollywood scholarship by treating female embodiment as political terrain rather than symbolic ornament. Moreover, it underscores the necessity of examining historical narratives as active participants in contemporary gender debates. Film, far from passive reflection,

emerges as site of ethical negotiation.

Future research might expand this inquiry through comparative analyses of other African historical epics, audience reception studies, or intersectional frameworks addressing class, ethnicity, and spirituality. Additionally, examining how digital-era Nollywood adapts or resists objectification under neoliberal aesthetics would deepen understanding of evolving representation. Such work would further illuminate cinema's capacity to reimagine female identity within postcolonial contexts. *Adesuwa* stands as compelling case study within that broader project. Its narrative suggests that dignity, once articulated, cannot be easily contained.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Akinola, A. O. "Historical Memory and Cinematic Reconstruction in Nollywood." *African Identities*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2021, pp. 512–528. https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2020.1783864.

Butler, Judith. *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. Verso, 2020.

Calogero, Rachel M. "Objectification Theory, Self-Objectification, and Body Image." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2018, pp. 295–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318783541.

Daniels, Elizabeth A., et al. "Media and the Sexualization of Women and Girls." *Current Opinion in Psychology*, vol. 36, 2020, pp. 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.02.001.

Dosekun, Simidele. "Feminism and Postfeminism in Nigeria." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2015, pp. 960–975. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1008747.

Ekwuazi, Hyginus. "Gender and Representation in Contemporary Nollywood." *Nigerian Theatre Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2018, pp. 44–61.

Fredrickson, Barbara L., and Tomi-Ann Roberts. "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1997, pp. 173–206. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x.

Gill, Rosalind. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6, 2017, pp. 606–626. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003.

Haynes, Jonathan. "Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood." *Africa Today*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2016, pp. 95–114. https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.62.2.95.

Imasuen, Lancelot Oduwa, director. *Adesuwa*. Nucraft Media, 2008.

Mbembe, Achille. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

Moradi, Bonnie, and Yu-Ping Huang. "Objectification Theory and Psychology of Women: A Decade of Advances and Future Directions." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2018, pp. 295–309. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684317740929.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. *Negotiating Feminism in Africa: From the Margins to the Center*. Routledge, 2018.

Okome, Onookome. “Women and Power in Nollywood.” *Journal of African Cinemas*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 21–37. https://doi.org/10.1386/jac.9.1.21_1.

Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ́ . *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Segato, Rita Laura. “Patriarchy from Margin to Center: Discipline, Territoriality, and Cruelty in the Apocalyptic Phase of Capital.” *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2016, pp. 615–630. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1152966.

Tamale, Sylvia. *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*. Daraja Press, 2020.

Tiggemann, Marika, and Mia Zaccardo. “‘Strong Is the New Skinny’: A Content Analysis of #Fitspiration Images on Instagram.” *Body Image*, vol. 23, 2018, pp. 100–108. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.11.007.

Ugochukwu, Françoise. “Female Agency in Nigerian Historical Epics.” *Journal of African Media Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2020, pp. 187–203. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00024_1.