

Deepening Spirit-Spouse Concept through Plot Structure and Characterisation in Daniel Oriahi's "Sylvia"

Imoh Sunday Obot, PhD.

Department of Performing Arts and Music

Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

Email- *imohobot2000@gmail.com*

08033835185

Abstract

The spiritual spouse is a long-debated concept often relegated to myth and fables. Although this concept is present in several cultures across the African continent, the Nigerian film industry, also known as Nollywood, has not given it the desired thematic prominence in recent times. This posturing affects the regularity in terms of scholarly engagement with the issues. However, the emergence of Sylvia in 2018 has brought a renewed interest in the spirit-spouse relations. It is against this backdrop that this paper subjects the movie Sylvia to critical examination to ascertain the plot structure and the aesthetics of characterisation as used in the movie to achieve a perfect blend of fiction, myth, and reality in the scenes. Critical film analysis was used as a method of data gathering, and psychoanalysis was a theoretical framework, respectively. The paper found that aesthetic characterisation enhanced the plot structure, which helped the film achieve a realistic rendition of real and surreal characters, thus blurring the lines between both worlds, and enhancing believability.

Keywords: *Aesthetic Characterisation, Nollywood films, Symbolism, Psychoanalysis, Realism*

Introduction

One might have thought that, of all the social, economic, cultural, religious, political, and economic issues affecting Nigerians, spirit wife/husband matters would be at the back of the list, if they ever made the list of worries. To imagine that a 21st-century feature film, of good digital quality and current film techniques, can give prominence to the subject matter is doubtful. However, in 2018, an award-winning Nollywood blockbuster movie, Sylvia, emerged with a spirit spouse narrative enmeshed in 21st-century colourations. Spirit-spouse ideology is not new in the cultural terrain of the Nigerian people. It has existed for several decades, generating several debates to the point of attracting patronage from the Nollywood movie industry (*Izaga, Sakobi, Karishika, End of the Wicked, Married to a Witch, Witches, Mark of the Beast, Sylvia, The Maid*, etc.). However, a good number of these Nollywood movies that thematise spirit-spouse relations lack good plot structure, visual aesthetics, and believability in terms of characterisation. These shortfalls, inadvertently, blurred the lines in

terms of narratives that perceive the spirit spouse as a concept beyond mere cultural and religious myth.

Contrastively, the movie *Sylvia* seems to have changed that narrative by reconciling the spirit spouse concept as a reality by leveraging a strong plot structure and characterisation (Haynes, 2014). Extant works on aesthetic characterisation in Nollywood movies, especially those leaning towards spirit-spouse, seem scant. Therefore, this paper examines the Nollywood movie *Sylvia* to establish the plot structure and the aesthetics of characterisation as used in the movie, which led to a realistic blend between fiction, myth, and reality in the scenes. Critical film analysis was deployed as a methodology, and psychoanalysis served as the theoretical framework. The essence of this study is to deepen the spiritual-spouse concept through plot appropriation and aesthetic characterisation.

Conceptual Clarifications

Although we may not have a generally acceptable definition of film, to a large extent, many agree that it is a powerful means of communication. What makes film a great and infectious medium is encapsulated in the statement of Emmy Idegú (2014), "...that motion picture tries to do is to make people see, hear, and feel the motion picture. Emmy Idegú calls it a total experience of the audio-visual medium.

Going further, Enahora (1989), explains that "film is a means of socialisation, i.e. the process and experience that help the individual to become sensitive to the expectations of other members of the society, their values and culture". The point to underscore in this statement is "a means of socialisation," which is to help people understand other members of the society, irrespective of their cultural, religious, and social background. This also means that film is essential for the understanding of people's culture, tradition, beliefs, or worldview. Invariably, films open up new vistas explaining certain realities, or explicates actions that may, or may not, align with rationality. The present study takes a look at how films explicate the concept of spirit-spouse.

It is important to note that spirit-spouse related films either help viewers to understand or misunderstand the concept. The argument is that before the advent of *Sylvia*, Nollywood movies treated spirit-spouse as fables with unrealistic scenes. Whereas, in *Sylvia*, there are elements of the new Nollywood approach or practices that help to blur the lines of misconceptions, and situate the narrative in the present reality. Hitherto, the conceptualisation of spirit-spouse in the African culture has been that of surreal and spiritist engagements. But in many climes in Nigeria, traditions and belief systems, especially in the Southwest, uphold their

existence. Perhaps, the assertion of Ekuazi (1978:7) that “the film is a reflection of self-consciousness and self-expression of the people”.

It is noteworthy to state that the concept of spirit-spouse has cultural, religious, and economic inclinations across different climes. But in general terms, it is regarded as known or unknown conjugal relations between an individual (male or female) and with spiritual entity. A plethora of such relationships are unknown to the human partner as he or she experiences the spiritual spouse in dreams. Carnal sex is often reported in this relationship, often without consent from the human partner. In known cases, benefits exist for both partners (human and spiritual) such as protection, powers, wealth, and emotional stability (Jimoh, 2017). It is imperative to note that the aforementioned benefits are what make the human partner lose interest in other suitors and stay married to the spiritual husband or wife. It has been reported that in some cases, children are involved (Jimoh, 2017).

The love affair may, however, be illicit or based on proper conduct of marriage between them, as shall be seen later. In either case, some women (not all) who are involved in such an affair face similar problems faced by those believed to have a spirit husband in the Yorùbá traditional belief.

Manifestations may be through dreams and sexual encounters. Several problems come with a spirit-spouse. For women who have spirit relations (husband), they can hardly get human suitors to marry because the spiritual partner frustrates those suitors. These women can be barren or find it difficult to marry. It is believed that spiritual spouses are extremely jealous and can harm any human who tries to play with their physical partners. In some cases, they are said to manifest physically and cause havoc. It is also stated that a spirit spouse does not leave except through deliverance or exorcism. In the African society, the spirit husband is more pronounced than the spirit wife. However, in *Sylvia*, the phenomenon is a spirit husband. Phenomenally, the spirit wife is known to be deadlier and more jealous. They can either destroy the one they have a relationship with or any other woman who comes near the man.

The emergence of the spirit-spouse relation in Nollywood movies in Nigeria began with the movie *Hot Cash*, also known as *Willie Willie*. It was regularly aired on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in the 80s (Bellanaija.com, 2018). Essentially, the depiction of *Willie Willie* was somewhat indigenous; a spirit/ghost with long hair in a flowing white garment. It made a great impact in Nigeria, perhaps because it was the first indigenous horror television programme. The plot captured a young boy named Willie, who was sacrificed at a tender age for money rituals. The spirit of the young boy came back for revenge. Many described the

series as a Nigerian version of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, a 1984 American horror film written and directed by Wes Craven. Since the emergence of “Hot Cash”, several indigenous movies have ghost/spirit-spouse relationships have been released (Franklin, 2018). A good number of the storylines have focused on the human and spiritual relationship that has led to acts of vengeance against individuals and society at large.

Plot Structure and Aesthetics of Characterisation

There is hardly a good film without an excellent plot structure. Interestingly, this is essential because a well-crafted plot structure enhances a logically progressive story, which keeps the audience actively engaged and creates a satisfying and meaningful experience. Many agree that plot structure refers to the organised sequence of events in a story. The plot must be organised in a sequence to enhance a smooth unfolding of the events in the story. The keyword here is “organisation”. This could imply that a creative artist (writer, director, etc.) could deploy exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution in order to achieve a fascinating and appealing narrative. In the absence of an organised plot structure in film, for instance, it can be bereft of strong motivations and conflicts, leading to a less engaging story (Card, 2003). Characterisation is the arrangement of characters to bring out the beauty and believability of a story (Lodge, 1992). This is further achievable by some design elements, often referred to as audio-aesthetic (Obot & Obasuyi, 2021). For instance, the use of lighting, colour, costume, make-up, scenery, and special effects can enhance plot structure effectively. Auditory elements such as sound effects, music, dialogue, and monologue help channel plot structure and characterisation in the right direction to achieve the best audio-visual narrative. A weak understanding of a character's motivations and inner struggles can make movie viewers miss out on the emotional weight of a story. In cases where a character's personality or actions shift inconsistently throughout the story due to poor characterisation, a lack of interest arising from confusion can ensue. There are instances where movie audiences struggle to understand or believe in a character, and distraction is imminent. Global film industries such as Hollywood, Bollywood, etc. (Basu, 2010) have mastered the art of plot structure and aesthetic characterisation, especially in respect of horror movies, science fiction, and crime movies. However, other emerging film industries, especially those in Africa, still grapple with these issues. Nevertheless, the “New Nollywood” seems to have gradually changed the narrative by deploying surreal aesthetics in a more convincing proportion (Ferguson, 2008). An example of these achievements is observed in the film under review.

Psychoanalysis as Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalysis is deployed to explain the link between the spiritual spouse relationship and mental health. This is predicated on the fact that the movies also addressed issues of mental disorders. The making of the film was to say that mental disorders can be a product of an unhealthy fallout or interference from the external world. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is a theory of personality development and mental illness that focuses on the unconscious mind. Freud believed that unconscious drives, thoughts, and memories influence human behaviour. The theory is made up of three key concepts, namely: the id, ego, and superego. These are the three parts of the mind that make up a person's personality. The *id* is unconscious, the *ego* operates in the conscious mind, and the superego operates both consciously and unconsciously.

***Sylvia*: The Summary**

Sylvia is a Nollywood film that explores the concept of a "spirit-spouse," a common folklore in Nigerian culture. It is a suspenseful story of the supernatural context with weird fiction, fantasy, horror, and psychological suspense. Thematically, it carries stints of obsession, romance, love, and betrayal. Written by Vanessa Kanu and directed by Daniel Oriahi. The movie is about a lifelong imaginary love relationship between Richard and Sylvia, which soured when Richard abandoned Sylvia, his imaginary lover, to marry Gbemi, the woman he met at a restaurant and fell in love with. Sylvia became enraged because of Richard's traitorous act. Richard presumed Sylvia to be an object of his dream world, despite getting all the help that took him to the top of his career from her. Because of this, Sylvia made a physical manifestation, and the conflict that ensued led to the death of Richard's pregnant wife (Gbemi) and Obaru, his best friend. Eventually, Richard ended up in a psychiatric home as a result of losing family and career. That Richard ended up in the psychiatric facility because of the perceived vengeful act of Sylvia reawakened the consciousness that mental disorder can have a direct or indirect correlation with supernatural causes.

Further Plot Analysis

Plot analysis is a careful reading of a film to tease out the sequence of events in a film story and explain certain meanings and context. A closed reading of the film revealed a five-act plot framework: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Exposition: The exposition deals with the introductory part of the film. In this part, a surreal representation of the relationship between Richard and Sylvia in the infant stage was shown. The essence of this

exposition was to foreground the fact that a spirit spouse relationship can exist before both parties come into the world. At some point in the movie, Sylvia told Richard, “I have loved you from the day you were born”. The picture below shows Richard and Sylvia side by side in a field in a surreal (dream) world. The picture reveals infant intimacy between both characters, as well as the insignia of their bond, which is the Hibiscus flower. The essence of the red Hibiscus can be understood from the concept of symbolism. The red hibiscus was used as the key to the portal between the two worlds (the real and the surreal).



Figure 1 shows Sylvia and Richard in a dream world conversing. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi’s Sylvia (2018)

Figure 1 above reveals school homework that Richard usually takes to Sylvia to help him solve. It is noteworthy to state that the relationship that Richard had with Sylvia was such that of benefits. This is in line with the assertion of Jimoh (2017) that there are benefits accruable to known cases of spiritual spouse. Richard was in the know about the surreal relations he had with Sylvia, and he had everything about his life challenges sorted out by her. There was virtually nothing he wanted that she could not provide or resolve. For instance, his school homework was easily done by Sylvia, especially mathematics, which Richard feared the most. This trend continued till Richard became a grown-up man creative designer working with a reputable advertising firm. With her constant assistance, he became one of the celebrated staff members in his workplace (Tosin, 2020).

Rising action: The rising action here begins when Richard and Sylvia have grown into adults and Richard meets a lady called Gbemi, and falls in love with her at first sight. When he relayed the feeling he has for Gbemi, Sylvia was infuriated and straight away told him that she wants

him all to herself. Richard's mind was made up to move on since he felt that Sylvia was not real.

The idea that Sylvia was not real was a major setback in their relationship. It was at this point that Sylvia told Richard succinctly that she had always loved him and wanted no other woman to come closer to him. She reiterated that her jealousy made her kill his mother to have him all to herself. The picture below is the Gbemi, the girl that Richard fell in love with and got married to without the consent of Sylvia.



Figure 2 shows Gbemi, staring at Richard the first time they met at a restaurant. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's *Sylvia* (2018)

However, the love story between Richard and Sylvia turned sour when Richard married Gbemi. This event led to Sylvia's transition into the real world: a onetime naïve, innocent, beautiful Sylvia transformed into a wicked, cruel, and mean lady.



Figure 3 shows Sylvia manifesting as a lady in the physical world. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's *Sylvia* (2018)

This marked the climax of the film. Sylvia emerged in the physical world as Cynthia and became Richard's friend's fiancée, Obaru. Sylvia was much more infuriated when she found out that Richard's wife was pregnant. She warmed her way into Gbemi and Obaru's worlds. That gave room for various manipulations that led to Richard killing Gbemi, his pregnant wife, and Obaru, his best friend.



Figure 4 shows Richard with a knife after killing his pregnant wife, thinking it was Sylvia. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's *Sylvia* (2018)

After this incident, Sylvia appeared as a police officer and made up a story to show that Richard had a mental disorder. This narrative was to send Richard to the psychiatric home instead of jail.



Figure 5 shows Richard in a psychiatric home. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's *Sylvia* (2018)

However, Sylvia was never going to give up on Richard; she gave him a second chance by sending a hibiscus flower to Richard in the mental home through a nurse.



Figure 6 shows a nurse at the psychiatric home with a red hibiscus sent from Sylvia to Richard as a symbol of a second chance. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's *Sylvia* (2018)

Apparently, after Richard's actions and the eventual remand in a psychiatric home, a falling action ensued. The hope of his having his life back in society began to shake and become uncertain. With the veracity of Richards's actions, there was hardly any room for a second chance. However, Sylvia's attempt to get Richard back became the falling action. The resolution became apparent when Richard rejected the second chance by Sylvia and decided that it was best to remain in the Psychiatric home rather than go back to a spirit-spouse relationship.

Enhancement of Spirit-Spouse Representation through Aesthetic Characterisation

This paper interrogates how aesthetic characterisation was deployed to achieve a believable transition between the dream state of Richard and the actual manifestation of Sylvia and the accompanying consequences as a result of the vengeful escapades of Sylvia. Among the Nollywood movies portraying spirit-spouse, *Sylvia* has been adjudged the best horror thriller of the new Nollywood. This analysis is in line with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. Based on Freud's contextualization, dreams are the disguised expression of wish fulfillments. Humans dream and cannot avoid it. This can be categorised into the 'id', just like sexual desires, anger expression, or hunger. The film began with Richard and Sylvia spending time together in a dream. And to demarcate the two realms, the hibiscus flower was used as a point of connection. This was to depict a point of transition between the real and the surreal hemispheres. The environment is rendered in black and white mode, which was depicted in Figure 1.

Freud emphasised the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping our personality and behaviour. The movie did not show any point where Richard had real-life friends. He was unconsciously overwhelmed by the relationship with Sylvia. Class assignments were undertaken by Sylvia. Being that Richard related every bit of his real-life activities to her, and all her interventions scaled through effortlessly and flawlessly. The hibiscus flower was given to Richard by Sylvia, and it is only through that means that they can meet without any hitches. The movie showed Sylvia as all-knowing and capable of solving all the challenges that he brought to her.

Based on Freud's belief that many mental illnesses are a result of a person's inability to accept reality, it could be stated that Richard had the opportunity of seeing Sylvia as a reality after all, she had solutions to his physical challenges, even from the dream state. This assumption was perhaps the reason why Richard decided to opt for a real woman. The ability of the filmmakers to manage the transition was a result of costume, makeup, and environment. The environment was an open and wide expanse of savanna land without any form of human presence. This was able to capture a different world. And the mysterious appearance of Richard, more as a stranger to that world, was an obvious technique that worked the magic. The use of the red hibiscus flower as a spiritual link between Richard and Sylvia was essential. Sylvia would give him one to tether him to her world and enable him to return. The moment he drops the flower under his pillow, he unwittingly tethers her to his world.



Figure 7 shows Sylvia handing a red Hibiscus flower to Richard. A screenshot from Daniel Oriahi's Sylvia (2018)

Conclusion

The film *Sylvia* has deepened the concept of spirit-spouse through aesthetic characterisation, deploying realistic representation to bring a myth-like or surrealistic situation into a somewhat

21st-century reality, with such a leaning that many cannot doubt or refute. Aesthetic characterisation built the plot from exposition to resolution with a realistic essence, leaving little room for fictitious elements by relying on fluid character development and progressive aesthetic unbundling of the lines between the real and the surreal climes. Inevitably, the film brought to the fore issues that may have dissipated doubts and myths surrounding the spirit-spouse relationship in the African culture. Thus, aesthetic characterisation is recommended for films that require a smooth transition from one realm to the other.

Reference

- Basu, A. (2010). *Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-televsual Aesthetic*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. [CrossRefhttps://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Bollywood+in+the+Age+of+New+Media:+The+Geo-televsual+Aesthetic&author=Basu+Anastup&publication+year=2010](https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Bollywood+in+the+Age+of+New+Media:+The+Geo-televsual+Aesthetic&author=Basu+Anastup&publication+year=2010)
- bellanaija.com (2018). Nollywood Week in Paris! Ini Dima-Okojie & Udoka Oyeka attend the premiere of 'Sylvia'. Retrieved 7th February, 2025 from <https://www.bellanaija.com/2018/05/nollywood-week-paris-ini-dima-okojie-udoka-oyeka-attend-premiere-sylvia/>
- Card, O. S. (2003). *Character and Viewpoint*. Writer's Digest Books.
- Enahora, A. (1989). African Council on Communication Education. *Film Makers and Film Making in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects*. Africa Media Review, Vol. 3(3). Pp.98-109
- Enahora, A. (1989). African Council on Communication Education. *Film Makers and Film Making in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects*. Africa Media Review, Vol. 3(3). Pp.98-109
- Ferguson, J. 2008. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. [Google Scholar](#)
- Franklin, U. (2018). Sylvia. Retrieved 7th February 2025 from <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/entertainment/movies/pulse-blogger-movie-review-sylvia-2024080100592970915>
- Haynes, J. (2014). "New Nollywood": Kunle Afolayan." *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 5 (2): 53–73. [CrossRefGoogle Scholar](#)
- Jimoh, S. L. (2017). A Comparative Discourse on Yorùbá Concept of Spirit- Husband and Muslim Exorcists' Belief in Intermarriage Between Jinn and Man. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies, (IJOURELS)* Vol 7(1), pp.51-66. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijrs.v7i1.4>
- Jimoh, S. L. (2017). A Comparative Discourse on Yorùbá Concept of Spirit- Husband and Muslim Exorcists' Belief in Intermarriage Between Jinn and Man. *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies, (IJOURELS)* Vol 7(1), pp.51-66. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijrs.v7i1.4>
- Lodge, D. (1992). *The Art of Fiction*. Penguin
- Obot, I. S. (2020). The Role of Social Media in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Nigeria. *Journal of the Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria (ACUJOH)*. Vol. 3 (1): 164 - 174
- [Tosin, O.](#) (2020). The Story of Sylvia, the Spiritual Wife. Retrieved 7th February, 2025 from <https://ebytpr.medium.com/the-story-of-sylvia-the-modern-day-spiritual-wife-7f41bc272d58>