Representation of Popular Culture in Nollywood: A Critical Analysis of Shanty Town (2023)

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Abstract

Popular culture in contemporary Nigerian cinema reflects the interaction between modern social values and traditional cultural expressions. Nollywood, as a leading film industry in Africa, provides a medium through which these cultural exchanges are mediated. This study examines the representation of popular culture in Nollywood through a critical analysis of *Shanty Town* (2023). The study is guided by Popular Culture Theory and Social Representation Theory. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs textual and thematic analysis to identify cultural expressions and their implications for understanding popular culture in Nollywood. Findings reveal that the film presents a vivid picture of social aspiration, crime, and survival, blending glamour with the harshness of urban existence. It also exposes how popular culture both reflects and shapes societal values, showing Nollywood's role in redefining collective identity through visual storytelling. The study concludes that *Shanty Town* serves not only as entertainment but also as a cultural document that mirrors Nigeria's evolving social experience.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Nollywood, Film Representation, *Shanty Town* (2023), Nigerian Cinema.

Introduction

In contemporary Nigeria, Nollywood has emerged as a significant agent of representation, serving as a dominant medium through which indigenous audiences engage with popular culture (Osondu, 2016, p.75). Since its commercialization in 1992 with the release of the blockbuster *Living in Bondage*, Nollywood has been widely celebrated by scholars and industry stakeholders as a groundbreaking opportunity for Nigeria and by extension, Africa, to take ownership of its narrative. This shift has allowed African filmmakers to counter the often "biased" representations of the continent propagated by Western media and literature (Nbete & Ikiroma-Owiye, 2014, p.125). With its vast audience reach and ability to influence social norms, Nollywood serves as both a mirror and a moulder of contemporary Nigerian society.

Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping societal narratives, values, and identity. It reflects the collective experiences, ideologies, and aspirations of a people while also serving as a means of social critique and transformation. According to Ibe, Shaka, and Uwah (2018); film in Nigeria started off imbibing key elements of the indigenous cultural forms amidst being political in nature, however, Nollywood has evolved significantly since its emergence in the early 1990s, transitioning from low-budget home videos to high-quality productions with international appeal. This transformation has been influenced by technological advancements, globalization, and the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix, which has expanded Nollywood's audience base beyond the African continent (Okome, 2014). As a result, Nollywood's narratives have shifted from traditional depictions of folklore and spirituality to more contemporary themes, including crime, corruption, power struggles, and economic disparity. Thus, the dynamics of economic interest and consumption enters into the depiction of these issues in the media; a trend since observed by the Frankfurt School scholars as a fundamental feature of popular culture (Adorno, 1999).

Popular culture functions as more than entertainment; it shapes identity and influences social change. It reflects the interaction between communication media and society, serving as an educative agent of civilization (Ibe, Shaka, & Uwah, 2018, p. 197). Culture is transmitted through both traditional and modern media, with film emerging as one of the most powerful platforms for cultural expression.

Nollywood, therefore, not only entertains but also negotiates cultural values, reinforcing or challenging dominant ideologies in Nigeria. The representation of Africa in film has long been contested. Scholars argue that Western media, through its global dominance, distorts African history and culture to sustain racial hierarchies (Onuzulike, 2009). Nigerian films mirror the nation's cultural realities, its language, fashion, religion, lifestyle, and worldview, and the Nigeria National Film Policy (2001) recognizes film as a vital communication tool for promoting national values. However, while Nollywood often counters Western misrepresentations, it sometimes reproduces them. As Ekwenchi (2015) observes, some Nigerian filmmakers, in attempting to challenge stereotypes, have inadvertently legitimized the same Western images they sought to resist.

Nevertheless, Nollywood remains Africa's first major popular culture phenomenon, enjoying widespread influence and acceptance across the continent (Ekwuazi, 1991). Supporting this perspective, Ugwushi (2015) describes the rise of Nigeria's video film industry as a remarkable cultural movement, emphasizing its role in representing Nigerian identity and shaping African cultural discourse. According to Ugwushi:

> The emergence of the Nigerian video film industry is a cultural phenomenon, and Nigerian movies serve as a representation of Nigerian culture, which has revealed the uniqueness of video films as popular culture that has impacted Nigerian and other African cultures, the viewers, and the continent. They can help to better understand our own lives, the lives of those around us, and even how our society and culture operate. It has provided a platform for Africans to tell their own stories and is perhaps the most organized group that has put Nigerian culture beyond our national boundary (2015, p. 97).

Popular culture is an integral part of society, shaping and reflecting the collective experiences, values, and ideologies of people. It encompasses various forms of creative expression, including music, literature, fashion, and film. Nollywood, as Nigeria's thriving film industry, has played a crucial role in defining and disseminating popular culture both within Africa and globally (Haynes & Okome,

1998). The representation of popular culture in Nollywood films is evident in their themes, character portrayals, fashion, language, music, and depictions of urban and rural life. These elements contribute to the industry's identity and cultural significance.

One of the media's central functions is to shape public knowledge through its content and representations. Films, in particular, play a major role in constructing images and influencing audience perceptions of popular culture. In Nollywood, such representations are often stereotypical and sensationalized, lacking critical depth. This trend has contributed to distorted narratives that shape local and global perceptions of Nigerian society. While Nollywood frequently explores themes such as crime, corruption, and survival, the manner of portrayal often reinforces stereotypes rather than challenging them (Asogwa, Onoja & Ojih, 2015, p. 113).

Nollywood's depictions of urban life, violence, and power dynamics, though rooted in real issues, sometimes glamorize struggle instead of critiquing systemic problems (Omijie, 2015). With the industry's growing international visibility, these portrayals now shape global understandings of Nigerian culture. Consequently, there is a pressing need to examine whether *Shanty Town* (2023) offers a responsible and critical representation of popular culture or perpetuates exaggerated and misleading images of Nigerian urban life. This study, therefore, investigates how popular culture is represented in *Shanty Town* (2023) and the broader implications of such portrayals.

The aim of this study is to critically analyse the representation of popular culture in *Shanty Town (2023).* The specific objectives of this study are:

i. To examine the representation of popular culture in *Shanty Town (2023)*.
ii. To analyse the genre and thematic concerns in *Shanty Town (2023)*.

It enriches scholarship on Nollywood's representation of popular culture through Popular Culture Theory, examining film as a cultural and ideological tool. The study explores how Nollywood reflects and shape's identity, social commentary, and public discourse, while situating it within global media trends. It offers insights for filmmakers on balancing entertainment with authentic cultural

representation and guides policymakers in supporting films that reflect Nigeria's diversity. By addressing globalization and streaming dynamics, it helps stakeholders navigate the balance between local authenticity and global appeal. By analysing *Shanty Town* (2023), the study assesses how Nollywood challenges or reinforces stereotypes and emphasizes African filmmakers' role in shaping narratives. It highlights film's power in influencing cultural perception, social values, and identity, benefiting scholars, practitioners, and audiences alike.

This study focuses on the representation of popular culture in Nollywood, with *Shanty Town* (2023) serving as the primary case study due to its contemporary relevance and global reach. The research adopts Popular Culture Theory to analyse how film functions as a cultural product that reflects and shapes societal values.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on theories of media representation, with particular focus on Popular Culture Theory (Browne, 2006) and Social Representation Theory (Moscovici).

Popular Culture Theory

Popular Culture Theory, as propounded by Ray Browne (2006), conceptualizes popular culture as the ways society expresses itself through everyday artifacts, symbols, and rituals, including film, television, music, literature, and daily practices. Browne defines it as "our total life picture" (p. 7), distinguishing it from high culture, represented by art cinema, classical music, and academic literature.

The theory is divided into functionalist and conflict perspectives. Functionalists view popular culture as a unifying force that fosters social cohesion and collective identity (Valdivia, 2013; Guins & Cruz, 2008, as cited in Yunusa, 2019), while conflict theorists, rooted in Marxist thought, argue that popular culture is shaped by commercial interests and global power structures, often reproducing inequalities and economic exploitation. In Nollywood, Popular Culture Theory illuminates how films engage with local narratives of family, tradition, modernity, and globalization, while reflecting audience participation through social media and streaming platforms. As John Storey (2001) notes, popular culture is mass-

produced for broad consumption, shaping tastes and values in ways that are commercially driven. Nollywood filmmakers operate as cultural entrepreneurs, balancing commercial imperatives with indigenous values, creating accessible narratives that resonate with mass audiences. By combining traditional and modern elements, Nollywood exemplifies popular culture's role in shaping contemporary Nigerian identity. The theory thus provides a crucial lens for analysing how films like *Shanty Town* function as both cultural products and instruments of social reflection, negotiation, and expression.

Social Representation Theory

Social Representation Theory (SRT), developed by Serge Moscovici (1961–2008), examines how collective understanding is formed and shared within society, particularly through media, discourse, and everyday interactions. Representations are both the product and medium of communication, shaping how individuals interpret reality, construct identity, and navigate social life (Duveen, 2000, p. 12). Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation involves power and ideology, influencing how subjects are perceived and how social norms are reinforced or contested. Moscovici (2001) similarly describes social representations as systems of values, ideas, and practices that organize understanding and enable communication within a community.

Applied to Nollywood, SRT provides a lens for analysing how *Shanty Town* (2023) constructs and circulates narratives of crime, corruption, power, and survival as part of Nigerian popular culture. The film mediates dominant cultural ideas, shaping both local and global perceptions of Nigerian society. Through depictions of urban life, socio-economic struggles, and governance, the film participates in producing shared social knowledge, classifying complex realities for audiences (Moscovici, 1973). By examining these representations, the study assesses whether *Shanty Town* offers a balanced reflection of reality or perpetuates stereotypes. SRT thus helps evaluate the film's role in shaping discourse, influencing identity formation, and negotiating cultural meanings within Nollywood and African cinema more broadly.

Concept of Popular Culture

Popular culture encompasses the practices, beliefs, and artifacts widely accepted and consumed by the general public, reflecting and shaping societal values, identity, and everyday life (Storey, 2009). Defining it is complex, as scholars approach it from different perspectives, often contrasting it with high culture, folk culture, or mass culture (Kelly, 2014). Broadly, popular culture is characterized by mass production and consumption, responding dynamically to social, political, and economic changes. Historical shifts, such as the French and Industrial Revolutions, fostered collective cultural identities and expanded the reach of cultural products through mass media (Kelly, 2014).

Popular culture can be viewed through multiple lenses. Quantitatively, it is defined by its widespread engagement, while some perspectives label it as "inferior" to high culture, emphasizing accessibility over intellectual refinement (Storey, 2009; Irele & Oderanti, 2023). The Frankfurt School critiques popular culture as mass-produced and commercially driven, reinforcing dominant ideologies and passive consumption (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). Conversely, scholars like Fiske (1989) argue that audiences actively reinterpret cultural products, using them to express identity and resist hegemonic norms. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony further suggests that popular culture is a site of negotiation, simultaneously reflecting elite influence and grassroots creativity.

In contemporary contexts, globalization and digital media have transformed popular culture, facilitating cultural hybridization while raising concerns about Western cultural dominance and the erosion of local traditions (Storey, 2009). Popular culture functions as a platform for identity formation, enabling individuals to negotiate selfhood and social belonging through engagement with music, fashion, film, and other media (Ibe, Shaka & Uwah, 2018). It is both a product and a process, shaped by industrialization, urbanization, technological advancement, and consumer participation (Kelly, 2021; Barker, 2012).

Popular culture also embodies both tangible and symbolic dimensions, encompassing artifacts such as film, television, music, fashion, and radio, while conveying shared meanings and social norms (Geertz, 1973; Crosman, 2017). It is accessible to broad audiences, requiring minimal cultural capital to produce or

consume, and continuously adapts to societal needs and trends (Parker, 2011). In essence, popular culture represents the "culture of the people" at a specific time and place, reflecting dynamic interactions within society while mediating both collective identity and social change.

Concept of Representation

Representation is a central concept in media and cultural studies, referring to how ideas, people, and events are depicted through language, signs, symbols, and narratives, shaping public perception and social consciousness (Obiora & Uche, 2021, p.224). It is not merely a reflection of reality but a process of selecting and framing aspects of it to convey meaning. Representation is inherently social and cultural, influencing how individuals understand themselves, others, and the world.

Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes that representation is a social practice through which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meaning is not inherent in objects but constructed through language, symbols, and discourse. Representation is tied to power and ideology, as those controlling media production influence how people and cultures are portrayed. In Nollywood, themes such as gender, economic struggles, and political corruption are framed through popular culture, reflecting societal tensions while shaping public discourse. Hall identifies three approaches to representation: reflective (meaning exists independently), intentional (meaning is imposed by the creator), and constructionist (meaning is actively constructed through cultural codes), with the constructionist approach being most widely adopted in media studies (Hall, 1997).

Semiotics is a key component of representation. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure, Hall explains that words, images, and symbols act as signifiers connected to signified concepts, producing meaning within a cultural framework. For example, a red traffic light signifies "stop" not inherently, but through a shared system of social agreement (Hall, 1997, p. 26). Discourse further shapes representation by governing knowledge production and defining authority, influencing how marginalized groups are portrayed and reinforcing social hierarchies (Hall, 1997, p. 47).

Media representations can be realistic, stereotypical, or ideological. Realistic portrayals attempt to mirror reality, while stereotypes simplify or exaggerate traits, often creating biased perceptions. In film, narratives, characters, and settings are shaped by cultural and societal norms, impacting audience understanding of reality. The theory of representation is also linked to Serge Moscovici's concept of social representations, which describes how shared knowledge structures give coherence to beliefs, political ideas, and social practices (Moscovici, 1988, p. 214). Representations make the unfamiliar familiar, enabling societies to classify objects, interpret behaviours, and communicate shared meaning (Moscovici, 1984, p. 24). In Nollywood, representation operates as a mechanism for framing cultural identity, social issues, and national discourse, with films serving as platforms that either reinforce dominant ideologies or challenge stereotypes.

Concept of Culture

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human existence, shaping identities, social interactions, and worldviews. Schoenmakers (2012, p. 1) defines culture as a complex whole encompassing knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and other capabilities acquired by individuals as members of society. This definition underscores culture as both a social construct and a lived experience that evolves over time. A key feature of culture is its symbolic nature, with symbols in language, rituals, and traditions carrying cultural values that guide perception, behaviour, and social cohesion (Schoenmakers, 2012, p. 12).

Etymologically, the term culture derives from the Latin *cultura*, rooted in *colere*, meaning "to dwell," "to protect," or "to honour with worship," highlighting culture's centrality in human life and societal development (Sevil, Tahir, Gürkan, & Aras, 2018). Culture is dynamic and multifaceted, both shaping and being shaped by societal structures, historical contexts, ideologies, values, daily practices, economic systems, and human experiences. This reciprocal relationship ensures that culture evolves continuously while influencing how people live, interact, and understand the world. In essence, culture represents the combination of values, customs, beliefs, and practices that define a society's way of life. It encompasses social habits, communal interactions, and the products of human

activity, reflecting how individuals and groups experience, interpret, and make sense of themselves and their environment (Eagleton, 2005, p. 46).

Concept of Film

Film, also called a movie or motion picture, is a visual medium that tells stories and represents reality. It consists of a sequence of still images projected rapidly to create the illusion of continuous motion, a phenomenon known as persistence of vision (Nwanwene, 2002; Sokomba & Ossai, 2006; Mamer, 2009). Each image, or frame, forms part of a shot, and standard projection rates, typically 24 frames per second, ensure smooth motion perception.

Scholars define film as both an art form and a technical medium. Enwefah (2009) describes it as a sequence of "moving" images arranged to produce the optical illusion of movement, enabling visual storytelling. Oyero, Amodu, and Usaini (2015) emphasize that film combines narrative, sound, and imagery to convey stories, while Collins Online Dictionary (2020) views it as a medium for projecting recorded images to tell stories or represent real-life events. Historically, film originated from photographic film stock, though modern productions increasingly use digital formats (Oloruntola, 2009; Oyero et al., 2015).

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have explored Nollywood's role in reflecting and shaping popular culture. Ibe, Shaka, and Uwah (2018) examined the ideological frameworks in Nollywood films, highlighting the industry's role in reinforcing dominant sociocultural values while occasionally challenging them. Similarly, Asogwa, Onoja, and Ojih (2015) focused on the representation of indigenous culture, noting that Nollywood contributes to cultural preservation but sometimes distorts authentic narratives due to commercialization.

Ekwenchi (2015) investigated racial representation, revealing how post-colonial ideologies influence Nollywood's depiction of identity and its engagement with Western stereotypes. Omijie (2015) highlighted Nollywood's impact on Nigerian youth, showing that exposure to films mediates a negotiation between traditional values and contemporary societal influences. Effiong and Iseyen (2023) examined Nollywood's influence on national identity, emphasizing its dual role in

promoting cultural pride while occasionally reinforcing negative stereotypes through ethical and moral lenses.

Uwah (2017) and Okoye (2019) underscored Nollywood as a mirror of everyday realities, depicting social norms, urban lifestyles, music, fashion, and language, thereby contributing to the mainstreaming of local cultural expressions. Akinyemi and Adebayo (2020) explored the interplay between Nollywood and youth culture, noting that portrayals of wealth, power, and gender shape audience perceptions and aspirations. Onuzulike (2009) examined Nollywood's cultural and technological hybridity, highlighting how the blending of indigenous and global storytelling techniques expands the industry's reach while maintaining cultural relevance.

Gap in the Study

Although extensive research has been conducted on Nollywood's cultural significance and its role in shaping national identity, most existing studies have focused broadly on themes of tradition, gender, and morality without paying sufficient attention to how recent productions portray contemporary popular culture within the context of globalization and streaming media. Studies such as Asogwa, Onoja, and Ojih (2015) and Ibe, Shaka, and Uwah (2018) have examined the preservation and distortion of indigenous culture, while others, including Omijie (2015) and Effiong and Iseyen (2023), explored the influence of film on youth and national identity. However, these works largely address earlier phases of Nollywood and overlook how newer films integrate modern urban realities, technology, and global consumer culture.

Furthermore, limited scholarly attention has been given to recent high-budget productions like *Shanty Town* (2023), which combine cinematic sophistication with transnational distribution through platforms such as Netflix. There is a lack of critical inquiry into how such films negotiate the balance between authentic cultural representation and commercial appeal. Similarly, while previous analyses have discussed Nollywood's ideological tendencies, few have applied Popular Culture Theory and Social Representation Theory together to interpret how film narratives construct and circulate shared meanings about Nigerian society. This study therefore fills the gap by offering a focused critical analysis of *Shanty Town*

(2023) as a contemporary Nollywood text that mirrors and reshapes popular culture.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the representation of popular culture in *Shanty Town* (2023). The focus is on textual and thematic analysis, exploring how the film conveys cultural narratives and influences societal perceptions. Data collection involved repeated viewings of the film to identify key themes, symbols, and cultural representations. Scenes highlighting fashion, language, music, social class, and societal issues were closely analysed. This was complemented by a review of relevant literature on Nollywood, popular culture, and media representation to provide theoretical context. Purposive sampling was used, with the film itself serving as the sample and specific scenes selected for in-depth analysis based on their relevance to popular culture. Primary data were drawn from the film's visual and auditory content, while secondary data were obtained from scholarly sources discussing Nollywood, film theory, and cultural representation.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Major themes such as identity, urbanization, crime, class struggles, and globalization were identified and coded. These themes were then interpreted in relation to existing literature to determine how *Shanty Town* reflects, challenges, or shapes popular cultural norms, offering insights into Nollywood's role in representing contemporary Nigerian society.

Synopsis of Shanty Town

> *Shanty Town* (2023) is a Nigerian crime thriller series jointly created by Xavier Ighorodje and Chichi Nworah, produced under Giant Creative Media. Directed by Dimeji Ajibola, the script was written by Xavier Ighorodje, with cinematography by Jonathan Kovel and editing by Holmes Awa and Dimeji Ajibola. The series was produced by Chinenye Nworah, with Ini Edo and Charles Okonkwo serving as executive producers. Released on Netflix on 20 January 2023, the six-part series feature a star-studded cast

including Chidi Mokeme, Ini Edo, Nse Ikpe-Etim, Richard Mofe-Damijo, Sola Sobowale, and Nancy Isime.

The film is divided into several sequences, categorized into six distinct plot segments from the opening credits to the end credits. The plot segmentation of *Shanty Town (2023)* thus:

C. Opening credits

1. **Flashback of village attack and abduction** – Armed gang invades a rural community, killing men and attempting to rape women. Inem's mother pleads for mercy, while the children try to escape by canoe. Inem is captured, foreshadowing her tragic fate.
2. **Introduction of Jackie and Shanty Town life** – Jackie, a courtesan, believes she has worked hard enough to buy her freedom. She confronts Scar, who objectifies and humiliates her before betraying her.
3. **Inem's return from prison** – Ene collects Inem from prison, reintroducing her into the underworld. Jackie attempts escape but is killed by Scar, demonstrating his ruthless control.
4. **Scar's political entanglements** – Scar is caught between two political giants, Chief Fernandez and Dame Dabola, both of whom manipulate him for their ambitions.
5. **Inem's ordeal and Shalewa's mission** – At the nightclub, Chief Fernandez molests Inem. Meanwhile, Scar coerces Shalewa into seducing Femi Fernandez, setting up her dangerous double life.
6. **Revelation of undercover twin** – It is revealed that the woman posing as Inem is actually her twin sister, working undercover to expose Shanty Town's trafficking of women. This sparks a coalition of women determined to fight back.
7. **Alliance and revolt** – Ene, Inem's twin, and Shalewa join forces to avenge Jackie and reclaim their freedom. They strategize to overthrow Scar's oppressive system.

E. End Credits

Shanty Town (2023) opens with the piercing sound of gunfire, immediately plunging viewers into the violence-ridden Shangisha community in 2004. As

dawn breaks, the tranquillity of morning prayers with Inem, her mother, and her twin siblings is shattered by chaos. The gang leader, Scar, storms a bamboo house filled with women, his intentions swiftly turning to sexual violence. In a desperate act of resistance, Inem's brother strikes Scar with a log, giving the family a fleeting chance to flee. They rush to the river, but tragedy strikes as Inem's brother and twin sister are shot. Only Inem and her mother manage to escape, though danger still looms as Scar's gang intercepts them mid-river.

Eighteen years later, the story shifts to Shanty Town, where Scar has risen to power, running a sprawling criminal empire fuelled by drug trafficking and the exploitation of women. Scar's dominance is celebrated by his crew, and the fear he inspires is evident in every corner of his domain. Meanwhile, Inem, now in detention, asserts her innocence and sanity while the film juxtaposes her plight with the decadence and brutality of Scar's world. Scar's exploitation continues as he manipulates women like Jackie and Shalewa, promising freedom yet perpetuating their servitude. Jackie, after gaining temporary freedom, encourages Shalewa to follow suit, but Scar's calculated cruelty denies her independence, claiming she still "owes" him for past expenses and care. Inem returns to Shanty Town, welcomed by the women, but the community remains fraught with danger. She intervenes when Jagun attempts assault, escalating tensions with Scar. Meanwhile, Jackie's attempt to escape to Epe ends tragically when Scar intercepts and kills her, signalling the lethal control he wields over those who defy him. As Scar's operations continue, political entanglements surface. Chief Fernandez, the corrupt politician behind Scar's empire, is revealed to possess a mystical ring whose power relies on ritualistic sacrifices, further entwining crime and politics.

Inem's true identity as Amanda, an undercover agent, is revealed. She carries a memory card containing Scar's logbook, crucial evidence of the crimes committed within Shanty Town. Her personal stake is made clear: her twin sister Inem was killed, and she cannot abandon the mission. As she navigates the treacherous network of Scar's authority, betrayals are punished with lethal efficiency, exemplified when Jagun is executed for perceived theft. The stakes escalate as Scar delivers Amanda to Chief Fernandez, who brutally tests Scar's loyalty and demonstrates his ruthless control. Inem uncovers the grim truth about the women

who had seemingly earned their freedom, they were killed by Scar and his accomplice, Enewan.

Tensions climax as Scar manipulates Femi, Chief Fernandez's son, using charms to assert control and further his criminal schemes. Inem confronts Enewan, disarming and subduing her in a tense standoff, showcasing the strength and agency of those oppressed within Shanty Town. As Scar continues to exploit and intimidate, Femi is freed from Scar's control, while Amanda coordinates with the police to strike back at the criminal network. The final confrontation sees Scar, gravely wounded, return to Shanty Town only to face the wrath of the women he once oppressed. Led by Enewan and Mummy Tee, they enact vengeance, collectively bringing Scar to a fatal end. Concurrently, Amanda exposes Chief Fernandez's crimes, including drug trafficking, prostitution, and organ harvesting. The climax extends to a high-profile gubernatorial party, where evidence of Fernandez's corruption and sexual crimes is broadcast publicly, leading to his arrest.

The film closes with a somber epilogue: while Chief Fernandez is sentenced to life imprisonment, some threats remain unresolved. Scar's body is never fully recovered, Colorado's whereabouts remain unknown, and the hard-won victory of Shanty Town's women is depicted as temporary, underscoring the fragile nature of justice in a society shaped by corruption, violence, and power.

Examination of the Portrayal of Popular Culture in *Shanty Town (2023)*

Shanty Town (2023) brings Nigerian popular culture to life, using it to tell a story that reflects the everyday realities of urban life. Here, popular culture means the symbols, practices, and styles that people connect with in their daily lives. The film shows this through language, fashion, music, dance, nightlife, political slogans, and even rituals, creating a world that feels familiar to viewers while also encouraging them to think critically about society.

The global popularity of Nigerian films is closely linked to the development of these conventions, which allow filmmakers to produce narratives that are simultaneously familiar and commercially viable. *Shanty Town*, through its representation of drug cartels, sex work, and ritualistic practices, aligns with the

familiar cycles of crime and ritual films that first gained prominence in the early 1990s with films such as *Living in Bondage* (1992). Adhering to and modifying these conventions, the film situates itself within a lineage of genre cinema that prioritizes audience engagement while reflecting the moral and socio-political realities of Nigeria. From a functionalist perspective of Popular Culture Theory, *Shanty Town* fosters shared cultural understanding by dramatizing issues such as poverty, exploitation, gender oppression, political corruption, and survival. These themes are familiar to Nigerian audiences, who recognize the struggles of everyday life mirrored in the film. By depicting the courtesans' search for freedom, the political manipulation of Scar, and the women's eventual revolt, the series highlights both the struggles and resilience that shape collective identity. The film therefore contributes to social cohesion by offering audiences a cultural text through which they can interpret and discuss real-life experiences.

Conversely, from the conflict perspective, *Shanty Town* demonstrates how popular culture is shaped by power and economic interests. Scar's empire of trafficking and exploitation mirrors how cultural production is often driven by forces of domination and control. The portrayal of Chief Fernandez and Governor Dabota underscores how political and economic elites manipulate vulnerable populations for their own benefit. This aligns with the conflict theorists' view that popular culture is not purely organic, but influenced by dominant structures that dictate whose stories are told and how they are circulated.

Language and Slang

Language in *Shanty Town* functions not merely as a tool of communication but as a cultural and ideological marker, situating the narrative within the lived realities of urban Nigeria. One of the clearest reflections of popular culture in *Shanty Town* (2023) is its use of language and slang. Nollywood films often adopt colloquial expressions that mirror the everyday speech of Nigerian communities, and *Shanty Town* is no exception. The dialogue is laced with pidgin English, street slang, and coded phrases that capture the texture of urban life. This linguistic choice does more than provide authenticity; it situates the film within the lived realities of the Nigerian audience who are accustomed to these speech patterns. The film strategically employs code-switching, alternating between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages such as Yoruba and Ibibio. For instance, the

dialogue of street-level hustlers is dominated by Pidgin English and slang, emphasizing their socio-economic marginality, while political and business elites employ formal English interspersed with local idioms, signalling authority, education, and influence.

Through the lens of Social Representation Theory, the film's use of language constructs and transmits shared meanings. Slang terms and coded speech within Shanty Town serve as cultural symbols that communicate solidarity, identity, and resistance among the oppressed. They form part of the collective understanding of survival in harsh environments, reinforcing Moscovici's view that representation helps society make sense of complex realities. The exchange between Shalewa and Scar in Episode 1 provides a striking example:

> **Shalewa:** I want pay for my freedom
> **Scar:** you don dey thief my money
> **Shalewa:** No sir, na Jackie give me money add to the one wey I dey save, we come make am 500,000. Make I take use settle the gbese wey my father dey owe you, so I go fit collect freedom commot shanty town.
> **Scar:** na true say na 500,00 remaining for the money wey your papa dey owe me?.....(brings out a calculator) listen to me, make I play your cassette for you, how much be the food wey una dey chop for Shanty town every day, like 3,000 abi, u go times am by 365, then times am by 2 and a half years, then rent for shanty town, insurance nko, and all the treatment wey ene dey treat you, you go add am, gbo gbo abortion, you do 5 abortion, 1 gonorrhoea and syphilis treatment for you, you think say na free, security nko? Ehh ehh, interest ontop the money wey your papa dey owe me this *(Shanty Town, 2022*, Episode 1: 00:14:36).
> **Shalewa:** hey scar, where I wan see that kind fuck fuck, where I wan see 15 million naira give you
> **Scar:** See all this things wey you get am like this, na me get am (Pointing to her body), the fact that you are breathing alone, na because of scar (*Shanty Town*, 2023).

From Browne's Popular Culture Theory, this use of street-level slang and pidgin reflects the lived realities of Nigerian audiences, making the narrative relatable and engaging. Language here is not ornamental; it grounds the story in everyday life and ensures mass appeal.

> **Chief Fernandez:** Who is that, let me see your face, step into the light let me see your face. (Shalewa reveals her face) How are you? (shalewa still quiet) oh, I see, you don't understand Yoruba, how are you?
> **Shalewa**: I am fine sir
> **Chief Fernandez**: I can see that, our Yoruba people say "one problem serves as the basis of a law", do you know what that means, it means I know what to do because it has happened before…….so I had this pleasurable night wih an enthralling damsel, very beautiful woman, I am sure underneath those clothes you are even more so beautiful, but you are nothing compared to the woman I speak so fondly about, she was like the sun wrapped in the prettiest of clothes like air itself, she took me to the seventh heaven and I stayed there, I stayed…for hours, and then, Boom! She was gone, but not with my heart,mind you, she left with my valuables, loads of my valuable's (walking towards Shalewa)
> *(From behind, a guard loses shalewa zip and exposes her body)*
> **Shalewa:** Sir please I am femi's friend
> **Chief Fernandez**: I know, one of hid play things right, I just want to be sure, you are not one of his thieving playthings (*Shanty Town*, 2023).

Together with Scar's earlier exchanges in pidgin, this scene demonstrates that language in *Shanty Town* functions as a marker of both solidarity and subjugation. Pidgin fosters shared identity among the oppressed, while the polished rhetoric of the elite reinforces dominance. In this way, the film portrays language as a living

element of popular culture—an instrument of connection, manipulation, and power.

> **Inem mother:** Oga abeg I no get anything, na market woman I be **Gang Leader:** You get something to offer me wey go sweet me for body? Something wey I go appreciate, you see this your useless dirty wrapper, you go unwrap am for me, I wan see that contraband (*Shanty Town*,2023).

Language in *Shanty Town* also functions as a social marker. It differentiates between the oppressed and the powerful, the local and the elite. While the courtesans and gang members predominantly use pidgin and slang, political figures like Chief Fernandez and Dame Dabota oscillate between English and indigenous expressions, reflecting both authority and cultural hybridity. This linguistic contrast underscores class divides, highlighting how representation is tied not only to actions but also to speech.

Costume and Fashion in *Shanty Town* (2023)

In *Shanty Town*, costume and fashion serve as powerful visual tools, revealing characters' social identities, aspirations, and ideological stances within the urban landscape of contemporary Nigeria. The film carefully tailors each outfit to reflect a character's personality, social class, and role in the story, giving viewers an intuitive way to understand social hierarchies and personal ambitions.

The costumes of street-level characters, such as Inem and her peers, primarily incorporate affordable, locally sourced clothing, often marked by layered streetwear, hoodies, sneakers, and caps. In contrast, the elite characters, including political operators and businessmen like Chief Fernandez, are clad in tailored suits, traditional agbadas, and high-end fabrics, often accessorized with watches, cufflinks, and designer shoes. Their sartorial choices perform a dual function: symbolizing authority and wealth, while also reinforcing the social divide between Lagos' powerful and the powerless. The film thus situates costume as a marker of power relations, where clothing mediates perception, access, and influence.



Plate 1: Governor Dame's Costume



Plate 2: Enewan's Costume



Plate 3: Mummy Tee's Costumes



Plate 4: Femi Fernandes's and Shalewa's Costume

In contrast, political figures like Governor Dabota are dressed in regal flowing gowns that symbolize affluence and authority. Their costumes project sophistication and cultural legitimacy, reinforcing their dominance in both political and social hierarchies. These choices align with Browne's Popular Culture Theory, as they demonstrate how Nollywood draws on recognizable fashion codes that resonate with viewers' understanding of power and prestige in Nigerian society.

Music

Music is a central cultural element in *Shanty Town* (2023), functioning both as entertainment and as a narrative tool that reinforces themes of survival, power, and resistance. Nollywood, as a producer of popular culture, often integrates music to reflect everyday Nigerian life, and in this series, the soundtrack and diegetic performances play a crucial role in shaping audience engagement. Oscar Brockett (1979) distinguishes theatrical sound into three categories: the actors' voices, music, and realistic noises. In film production, music performs a central role in clarifying meaning, creating atmosphere, and guiding audience interpretation.

Bowskill (1979) also remarks that music can sustain the mood and meaning of a play long after the final word has been spoken. In *Shanty Town* (2023), music performs these very functions, making the film's cultural message accessible and memorable. The music gives the film its threnodic essence. Through the deployment of music in the film, a conscious audience would no doubt come to understand that the film is not only grotesque in temper; it equally has a tragic subject matter which is signified in the sound.

The prominence of Afrobeat also situates the series within wider global flows of culture. Artists such as Wizkid, Davido, Burna Boy, Asake, and Tiwa Savage have projected Nigerian Afrobeat onto the world stage, winning international recognition and shaping youth culture at home (Ajayi, 2023, Ibe & Finikama-Ade, 2025). Their music, though materialistic and commercially oriented rather than revolutionary, embodies the values of consumption, pleasure, and flamboyance that Nigerian youths increasingly emulate (Sam & Ordu, 2023). The nightclub scenes are a vivid demonstration of this practice. Afrobeat and hip-hop performances dominate the space, situating the narrative within the rhythms of contemporary Nigerian urban life. This is not arbitrary: as Akpan (2020) explains, music and visuals must work in synergy to create a unified production. It becomes glaring that music is deployed in films because it appeals to our sense of listening as it creates an appeal which helps us reconcile the technicalities of screening and the act of filming. This will in turn place the audience at a vantage position to appreciate the finesse of production. These genres are themselves products of global and local cultural exchanges, symbolizing the cosmopolitan character of

Nigerian urban culture. The use of popular music in such spaces reflects the mass appeal that John Storey (2001) identifies as a defining feature of popular culture. By employing beats and rhythms familiar to Nigerian and international audiences alike, the film situates itself within global cultural flows while remaining distinctly local.

As noted earlier, it is through music that this atmosphere of fear is sustained and asserted. Another very formidable utilitarian function of music in Nollywood is its moralistic agenda. Every artistic piece usually has didacticism as an important message to the audience. This function of music in Nollywood is not strictly peculiar or particular to religious film. It runs across the other genres.

Music in Nollywood helps to accentuate the sense of realism in films. Life is music and music is life. Mankind relies on memory for existence especially on issues of documentation. Music on the other hand gives man the opportunity of capturing the essence of life in melodious form. Man expresses his joys, pains, anger and triumph in songs; invariably, music in films helps to communicate the realities of existence, it adds plausibility to film, thereby making it look realistic. Music does not function in isolation in the realization of realism in a film, but its sound is amplified for the benefit of the audience. By embedding music into its narrative structure, *Shanty Town* captures these lived realities, making its representation more believable and relatable.

Analysis of the Thematic Concerns in *Shanty Town (2023)*

Shanty Town (2023) examines the interconnected social, political, and economic forces that shape contemporary Nigerian society. The film constructs its narrative around several thematic concerns that reflect the material conditions of urban poverty, institutional corruption, and social resistance. These themes operate not as isolated elements but as interconnected systems that reveal the structural inequalities defining Nigerian urban life.

Gender and Sexual Violence

Shanty Town (2023) foregrounds gender and sexual violence as a central mechanism of oppression, reflecting the intersection of patriarchy, economic exploitation, and political corruption. From the opening sequence, where a gang

leader invades Inem's village and demands sexual gratification from her mother, "you go unwrap am for me, I wan see that contraband" (*Shanty Town*, 2022), the film establishes sexual violence as a tool of domination. The mother's desperate plea reveals the limited agency afforded to women in a context where vulnerability and poverty heighten their exposure to exploitation. This aligns with feminist perspectives that frame gender-based violence as a manifestation of socio-political inequalities (Herouach, 2019).

Within Shanty Town itself, Scar emerges as the embodiment of patriarchal control, reducing women to commodities within his prostitution and trafficking empire. Jackie's bid for freedom illustrates this dynamic: despite completing her obligations, she is harassed and objectified by Scar, who presses her breast while mocking, "My Jackie, my Jackie… just look at this" (*Shanty Town*, 2022). His behaviour highlights how women's bodies are valued primarily for sexual desirability, reinforcing Malinowski's (2020) assertion that patriarchal systems commodify women as objects of male possession.



Plate 5: Scars objectify Jackie

Wealth

A dominant theme in *Shanty Town* is the pursuit of wealth and its attendant social ambitions. Characters such as Inem and her associates embody the desire to transcend socio-economic limitations, often negotiating moral boundaries to

achieve material success. The narrative situates wealth not merely as economic capital but as a marker of social power, influence, and recognition within urban hierarchies. The film interrogates how this pursuit can lead to both empowerment and destruction, echoing a broader societal preoccupation with the materialization of success in a rapidly urbanizing Nigeria.

The nightclub scenes, filled with flamboyant displays of money, reflect the materialistic ethos of contemporary Nigerian youth culture, heavily influenced by Afrobeat and pop stars who flaunt wealth through fashion, jewellery, and luxury lifestyles (Ajayi, 2023; Sam & Ordu, 2023). In line with Popular Culture Theory, the film mirrors cultural practices that originate from the margins but are mass-consumed, reinforcing the centrality of wealth in the aspirations of ordinary Nigerians.

Corruption and Moral Compromise

Closely related to the theme of wealth is the prevalence of corruption and moral compromise. Political actors, businessmen, and even street-level figures navigate a landscape governed by transactional ethics, betrayal, and opportunism. The film uses these narrative elements to critique systemic corruption and to explore how structural inequities shape individual choices. By juxtaposing morally ambiguous actions with their consequences, *Shanty Town* (2023) emphasizes the ethical dilemmas inherent in social mobility, suggesting that ambition without accountability risks societal disintegration.

Stuart Hall's (1997) emphasis on the "politics of representation" is also significant here. The portrayal of elites using rituals, mystical rings, and calculated violence demonstrates how cultural narratives of corruption are constructed and reinforced. These representations connect with audience perceptions of Nigeria's political reality, where corruption is often seen as entrenched and systemic.

Survival and Resilience in Urban Spaces

Another thematic concern is the negotiation of survival within hostile urban environments. The shanty town itself is more than a setting, it functions as a microcosm of socio-economic deprivation, where resource scarcity, crime, and social competition dominate everyday life. Characters' interactions with their

environment illustrate strategies of adaptation, resilience, and self-preservation, highlighting the intersection of personal agency and environmental determinism. The theme of survival underscores the complex human responses to inequality, illustrating both the ingenuity and moral compromises that urban poverty engenders.

As Patience (2023) notes, popular culture often emerges from the margins, representing the experiences of the lower classes rather than elite "high culture." In this sense, *Shanty Town* speaks directly to popular audiences by dramatizing survival strategies within harsh urban realities. From the standpoint of Popular Culture Theory, this reflects Nollywood's capacity to produce relatable cultural materials that resonate with mass audiences while also serving commercial imperatives.

Power and Agency

Power is a dominant motif in the film, symbolized by Scar's dominance, Chief Fernandez's political influence, and the women's eventual uprising. Scar's control is reinforced not only through violence but also through language, music, and spectacle, highlighting how cultural representation can naturalize power relations. Female characters, notably Inem, are depicted as agents of influence, using intelligence, resourcefulness, and negotiation to assert themselves in a male-dominated social hierarchy. The film interrogates patriarchal structures and gendered limitations while simultaneously exploring how women navigate, subvert, or capitalize on these constraints. This thematic strand foregrounds agency, empowerment, and the gendered politics of ambition, contributing to a nuanced exploration of identity and power.

Yet, as the women revolt and reclaim agency, the theme of resistance emerges strongly. This aligns with the conflict perspective of Popular Culture Theory, where cultural products reflect ongoing struggles between domination and emancipation. It also ties into Moscovici's view of social representation, where collective meanings are constantly negotiated and redefined.

Conclusion

Shanty Town (2023) presents a vivid picture of Nigerian popular culture, portraying themes of power, corruption, gender inequality, and social mobility. Through its dialogue, costumes, music, and storyline, the film captures the realities of life in urban Nigeria, where the pursuit of wealth and status often clashes with moral and cultural expectations. The analysis shows that the film uses popular culture to both reflect and question societal behaviour, exposing how people navigate challenges in a changing society. Nollywood, through works like *Shanty Town*, continues to show its ability to tell stories that connect with local experiences while appealing to a wider audience. In all, *Shanty Town* demonstrates how Nigerian films can influence social awareness and preserve cultural identity through the portrayal of everyday realities.

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