

A REVIEW OF KUNLE AFOLAYAN'S *THE FIGURINE* (2010), 122 MINS.  
GOLDEN EFFECTS/HIBUZZ

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Multiple award-winning Nigerian film, *The Figurine* (2010) poses a question to the viewer before the closing credits: "What do you believe?" But the answer to that question is the ideology on which the film rests i.e. Araromire is responsible for the tragic end in Sola (Kunle Afolayan) and Femi's (Ramsey Nouah) lives. Although the question invites the viewer's analysis soon after Femi's confessions, much of what is portrayed in *The Figurine* casts a glaring dominance of the goddess' powers. The closing riddle is a camouflage of the film's real ideology. Featuring brilliant storytelling with the technical elements of filmmaking deployed to a more or less successful degree, *The Figurine* towers above numerous Nollywood productions. The manipulation of the wooden image and the acting are especially commendable, thus making the viewer quick to overlook the occasional drag, sound and lighting problems in Afolayan's second directorial attempt.

At their National Youth Service Commission (NYSC) orientation camp, an endurance trek through the village, Araromire, finds Sola and Femi lagging, the former to accompany his ailing friend. Seeking shelter from an unexpected downpour, they scurry to a previously unidentified hut. There, Sola finds and keeps a wooden sculpture which purportedly alters their lives in a conflict drawn from folklore, education and reality. The outcome jolts the viewer, and remarkably underlines the opening voice-over in which the catastrophic end was foreshadowed. In the beginning, the film appears to have two protagonists – the one who seems to be a hero, Femi, saving Mona (Omoni Oboli) from her troubles and health hazards, but is actually an obsessed lover and the other, Sola, who is an unrepentant playboy and chronic adulterer. It can also be argued that the real protagonist is Sola whereas the antagonist is Femi, but this is a point the viewer arrives at only at the end of the film.

Set in rural and urban areas of Western Nigeria, the two-hour narrative has four acts. The first is the NYSC posting, camp orientation and primary assignment (and perhaps Femi's travel). This segment is significant because the discovery of the image which informs the direction of the narrative is made here. The second is the seven year prosperity period. This act is characterized by business promotions, restoration to health and financial boom. Here also, we encounter Lara's relocation to Sola's house for academic reasons – a major plot point in the story. The third segment deals with the losses and a series of catastrophes, the last of which results in

a journey to return the image. In the final segment or what is more appropriately called the unraveling, revelations of character traits, deeper motivations and confessions occur. The initial and painfully slow pace of the film picks up after half an hour to a faster pace. The camera movements, however, is prolonged for seconds after the point of a scene has been made – a hallmark of Nigerian video films. Although a unique story, *The Figurine* does not build up to suspenseful moments. The only attempt at suspense which occurred when Lara was looking for Junior did not have a corresponding audio effect. Rather, surprises are used to effect significant dramatic moments such as the announcement of the wedding, Sola's murder and Femi's death. Thematic orientation border on betrayals and more importantly, the tradition/modernity dialectics play up too.

The viewer is driven to believe in Araromire's powers. Merely mentioning the name 'Araromire' evoked fear (Femi's father), curiosity (lecturer), obsession (Femi) and indifference, reluctance even conflict (Sola). Several strands of storytelling point to the supposed power of the goddess Araromire and her presence in the lives of three friends. Four instances will suffice. 1) The eerie sound heard on the parade ground. That sound mysteriously led Sola and Femi closer to the image. 2) The repetition of swift turns on the parade ground, in the bush (Femi) and by Lara in the search for Junior. 3) The heavy rain when Araromire's shrine was burnt, when Sola found the image and when both friends went to return it. 4) The parade commander's refusal to help the men return the image and the conversation that ensued. With deliberate or inadvertent camera movements, the film compels the belief that Araromire the goddess is not only powerful, but also present in the lives of those who touch her image. There is a conflict of opposing forces, but clearly, one is the more powerful or the film director chose to make it so. The only incident that discredits Araromire's powers is that Femi does not have the woman of his dreams. There would be no story if he did! But the triple cure of his health problems plus his father's 'miraculous' turn-around from cancer as well as the four points above suppress the lone 'episode' of unrequited love.

Further, Femi's confessions do not provide explanations for their quick rise to success, the loss of a son, material wealth and miscarriage. My arguments do not deny that Sola and Femi could have been lucky or perhaps hardworking. But the fact that Sola was set up as a reckless persona do not support the assumption that, without a change of character, he rose to success. Rather, a more plausible explanation for his 7-year successful career is Araromire. Besides, after Sola receives notices of tax evasion and financial loss, the camera pans to the figurine and back to him. That was a powerful statement on Araromire's invasion. Afolayan himself believes he gave viewers options. Ironically, the unfolding events suggest the opposite.

However, the use of the figurine as prop is the most outstanding quality of the film. The image was worshipped, spoken about, revered, ridiculed, lost, discovered, resculpted, shown in a book, thrown away, burnt, hidden, multiplied, used by one character to frighten another, and it was given 'power' to frighten those who came in

contact with it. And arguably, this is yet unmatched in the collection of Nollywood films available, perhaps a pointer to the direction of the new Nollywood. Incidentally, this further lends credence to my argument on the film's ideology. Afolayan skillfully presents two options – tradition and modernity – but makes one less plausible. His projection of paranoia, and at the same time, the reference to education subjugating superstitious beliefs (which is embodied in Sola) is seen as an unusual technique. Mona's paranoia escalates when Junior passes away. This forces Sola to reconsider his position on Araromire's involvement in the orchestration of events in his life, and so agrees to return the image. From this point, one tragic event leads to another.

Paradoxically, Sola who is the voice of education and modernity (he lives in a beach house, has a swimming pool, plays golf) is always attired in traditional outfits. Femi's inclination to tradition and belief in the folklore is not reflected in his outfit or manners. Mona takes a mid-point with respect to costume. It is from her POV that the viewer's imagination progressively ascribes supernatural powers to tradition wherein education protests, is challenged and finally overthrown. Afolayan brings the education principle back in Femi's confessions and the inexplicable (raised by Linda) is labeled 'coincidence'. After viewing the film with a teenage audience and a graduate class, the consensus reached reflected variations of magical realism. The interest and reception of the film was heightened by its combination of the Yoruba language, Nigerian Pidgin and English language.

Without doubt, *The Figurine* is a delight. Its awards and official selections at international film festivals did not come as a surprise. The film will impress an indigenous or foreign audience because of the visually appealing sites of Osun State, its elevation of art and culture. But filmmakers need to take cognizance of as well as ownership of the subtle and more pronounced ideology of their productions.