Gender and/in film reading: A comparative analysis of male and female readings of *Ties that Bind*

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Abstract:
Critical discourses on African women's representations in commercial video films by African women suggest that despite profit-driven conditions, female filmmakers often advance a plethora of women's images that seek to buck gender stereotypes and present women's issues expressed through authentic female voices and perspectives. While these observations have been made within feminist studies, how the different genders – male and female audiences – respond to representations of women by women in the commercial African video films have rarely been addressed. Using *Ties that Bind,* a film written and directed by the female Ghanaian-American independent filmmaker Leila Djansi as our textual case, we examine the ways males and females interpret gender issues in women's film. We present a comparative analysis of how Ghanaian male and female audience focus groups interpret representations of women and women's issues in the said film. *Ties that Bind* offers an avenue through which to investigate men and women's views on female filmmakers' portrayals of women's peculiar experiences and to address the lacuna in the literature. Drawing partly on Hall's (2006) encoding and decoding theory and Fish's (1980) theory of interpretive communities as theoretical frameworks, we analyse data collected from a male and a female focus group interview to determine how the images are read, and whether there are any noticeable differences. We argue that both groups in their construction of meanings decoded that women across classes, educational, and professional backgrounds are burdened by traditional/societal expectations of them in the family. We conclude that the male participants demonstrated their awareness of and concern for the difficulties faced by women in the Ghanaian society and found some aspects of women's

lives as portrayed in the film instructive. Female participants, on the other hand, identified with the representations of the experiences of women in the film and felt inspired by their courage and actions to free themselves from the burdens of life imposed on them by societal expectations. Ultimately, our analysis shows that audiences produce nuanced readings and actively make meanings that reinforce their values and beliefs, whiles revealing that the audiences are aware of the changing sociocultural mores that improve women's lives.

Keywords: Ghanaian women's film, Ghanaian diaspora film, audience reading, encoding/decoding, interpretive communities, male/female focus groups

Introduction

The rise and evolution of popular video production and distribution in Ghana and Nigeria[1] is viewed as one of the most important and exciting developments in African cultural production in recent history (Garritano, 2013; Haynes, 2007). The video industries in both countries revolutionised the cultural landscape which was rarely accessible to local audiences, and independent filmmakers including women who were largely separated from the established state cultural institutions. Filmmakers working in the preceding celluloid industries were often dependent on funding sources and circulating networks located in the global North, resulting in African films remaining unknown to African audiences (Garritano, 2013; Haynes, 2016; Sama, 1996; Ukadike, 2003). These notwithstanding, the dramatic boom of the popular video culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s succeeded in redefining African cinema, enabling full participation of women, and sustaining a new African audience who hitherto were aficionados of Kung Fu, Hollywood and Indian films (Ukadike, 2000, 2003). Studies examining women's place and engagements in the video culture suggest there have been a relatively increasing visibility of female filmmakers both at home and in the diaspora (Ellerson, 2018; Okome, 2000, 2007; Osei Owusu, 2015; Ukata, 2010; Ukadike, 2003). For instance, there is a cohort of Ghanaian and diaspora women filmmakers who are not only actively engaging to save the industry but are also using films to bring to bear their unique perspectives on issues affecting women.

In spite of a few notable exceptions (Giwa-Isekeije, 2013), there is overwhelming evidence from research on representations of women in African (particularly Ghanaian and Nigerian video films) that, women are often marginalised, essentialised and presented in stereotypical roles in most male-directed films (Abah, 2008; Agbese, 2010; Anyanwu, 2003; Chari, 2008; Evwierhoma, 2008; Garritano, 2013, 2000; Haynes, 2016; Müller, 2014; Okafor, 2018; Okome, 2012, 2004, 2000; Okunna, 1996; Ugor, 2013; Ukata, 2010). Given this reality, one important interest that has occupied scholarship has been the ways in which female filmmakers showcase women and issues that affect them. Despite a few exceptions (Okafor, 2018; Ukata, 2010), critical discourses on African women's representations in the commercial video films by some African women suggest that despite profit-driven

conditions and other challenges, female filmmakers often advance a plethora of women's images that seek to buck gender stereotypes and present women's issues expressed through authentic female voices and perspectives (Bisschoff & Van de Peer, 2020; Ellerson, 2018; Garritano, 2013; Kwansah-Aidoo & Osei Owusu, 2012; Osei Owusu, 2015; Kwansah-Aidoo & Osei Owusu, 2017; Ukadike, 2003). While these observations have been made within feminist studies, how the different genders – male and female audiences – respond to representations of women by women in the commercial African video films has rarely been addressed. *Ties that Bind* offers an avenue to investigate men and women's views on female filmmakers' portrayals of women's peculiar experiences and to address this lacuna in the literature.

There is a growing body of scholarship on particularly Nollywood audiences, with several examining the huge audience and the popularity of Nollywood videos in Africa and the diaspora; identifying and explaining the ways the films are perceived and responded to; how the films appeal to different audiences located in various places; and how they influence audiences (Adejunmobi, 2010; Aveh, 2014; Becker, 2013; Bryce, 2013; Cartelli, 2007; Dipio, 2014; Ekuwazi, 2014; Esan, 2008; Haynes, 2008; Obiaya, 2010; Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya & Osunkunleet, 2017; Pype, 2013; Santanera, 2013; Tomaselli, 2014). The viewing contexts have also been investigated where some audiences in places such as Kenya (Waliaula, 2014), Tanzania (Krings, 2010, 2013), and Democratic Republic of the Congo (Bouchard, 2010) are said to experience the films through commentaries and oral performances. Examining the sites of consumption and how they shape the meanings that local audiences bring to Nollywood films has also been of interest (Okome, 2007). A recent study, for example, investigated how cinema-going audiences engage with a Nollywood film in specific cine-plexes, and their meaning-making habits (Agina, 2019).

In terms of audience reception of female representation, a survey of the field reveals that apart from a few studies (see for example, Azeez, 2010, 2013; Okunna, 1996) which focus on male-directed videos, readings of women's images so far examined have been expressed through critical analysis and reviews by scholars and critics. This approach, to borrow from Ambler (2001), tends 'to privilege the film scholar-critic as the arbiter of film meaning and effectively dismisses the audience as irrelevant or assumes its passive reception of a film's putative message' (p. 84). No prior research accessed has examined audience readings and interpretations of African women's representations put forward by local or diaspora Ghanaian women directors. This study helps to fill this gap, by investigating male and female focus group audiences' understanding of representations of women, drawing from the encoding and decoding theory and the theory of interpretive communities to offer insights into interpretations they bring to women's experiences in *Ties that Bind* (2011) by the Ghanaian-American filmmaker, Leila Djansi. Specifically, the findings reveal that both groups in their construction of meanings decoded that woman across classes, educational, and professional backgrounds are burdened by traditional expectations of them in the family. We conclude that the male participants demonstrated their awareness of and concern for the difficulties faced by women in the Ghanaian society and found some

aspects of women's lives as portrayed in the film instructive, even though they had mixed reactions to the representations. Female participants, on the other hand, identified with the representations of the experiences of women in the film and felt inspired by their courage and actions to free themselves from the burdens of life imposed on them by societal expectations, thus finding the representations largely progressive.

Conceptual Framework: Encoding/Decoding and Interpretive Communities

The encoding/decoding theory (Hall, 2006) was adopted together with the theory of interpretive communities (Fish, 1980) to provide conceptual grounding for the study. The encoding and decoding theory is premised on the view that 'there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code' (Hall, 2006, p. 140). It recognises that media producers embed particular codes in media texts and accounts for ways in which audiences actively interpret those codes while allowing for the exploration of the moments and circumstances that make audiences interpret and respond to the codes in distinctive ways (Hammer & Kellner, 2009). The theory of interpretive communities, on the other hand, shifts the focus away from meaning inscribed by cultural producers and asserts that meaning of codes created in a text resides in the interpreter and that the interpretive strategies engaged in the reading process shape the meaning derived (Fish, 1980). In the context of this paper, the encoding and decoding theory's notion of audiences as active creators of meaning of texts and the theory of interpretive communities' emphasis on the fact that the ways audiences understand a text help create meaning are significant. Together, they provide useful lenses that help to determine influential factors and the ways male and female focus groups interpret women and women's issues in Djansi's *Ties that Bind*.

The encoding and decoding theory views texts as constituting complex organised codes and signs which the audience must unpack to determine their signification. According to Hall (2006), the codes are the means by which dominant cultural order of power and hegemonic ideologies are organised in a text (Hall, 2006). The dominant meanings encoded are not fixed and as such they do not involve an 'overall determining logic' that allows the audience to always 'decipher the so-called meaning' as intended (Hall, 1994, p. 254). In discussing the complicated nature of the communicative exchange between the encoder/decoder, Hall identifies possible reading positions in the process of the producer/encoder production and audience/decoder reproduction of culture. First, according to Hall (2006), there is a *dominant position or preferred reading* where the viewer accepts in straight and full the preferred meaning encoded or the ideological intentions of the text. The second reading code Hall identifies is a *negotiated position* where the audience fully understands what has been predominantly defined or signified. The audience in this situation questions or modifies segments of the text based on their own position and interest, and partly accepts the validity of the preferred meanings the text promotes. The third code is an *oppositional code*, which is when the audience understands the intended message, but rather chooses to dismiss and oppose the message outright and entirely (Hall, 2006; also see Bobo, 1994; Rojek, 2009).

Understanding audiences' reading of a text in the context of the intensions of the encoder has been identified as conceptually problematic because as Morley (1992) suggests, there is a recurrent difficulty in determining 'preferred reading' especially when it is applied in the study of audiences' perceptions of fictional or feature films (p. 114). It is also challenging to establish the 'preferred encoded meaning without engaging in a process of decoding first' (Ott & Mack, 2010, p. 227). In this paper therefore our decoded readings informed by our interview with the filmmaker are considered as preferred meanings and the male and female focus groups' readings are treated as distinctive meanings that align to preferred, negotiated or oppositional readings.

Hall (2006) asserts that meaning is not determined solely from the text, but also with the reader depending on several factors. It is generated through the interaction of the codes inscribed in the text with the codes inhabited by the audience (Morley, 1992). The process of encoding, thus, happens in a social and political context where the cultural producer is influenced by dominant ideologies, industrial codes, intertextual and cultural knowledge and his or her own store of experiences. Similarly, as suggested by Hall (2006), Bobo (1994) and Hammer and Kellner (2009), audiences' experiences and history, their prior media and cultural knowledge as well as their position in the social structure in relation to, for instance, their race, age, gender, class/socioeconomic status, sexuality and sexual preferences, nationality, culture and ethnicity, and other factors such as dominant or oppressive forms of identities will often mediate their construction of meaning. Indeed, each viewer occupies multiple social positions and even though relatively each social position has its own explanatory power on the meaning the viewer creates, multiple social positions combined differently also exert significant effect on audiences' reading practices (Kim, 2004). In addition, the context and circumstances within which the moment of exposure and engagement with the text takes place also inform the way the audiences produce meaning from a text (Hall, 2006). Hall's understanding of how audiences' social positions impact on their construction of meaning and the notion of multiplicity of interpretations are useful in recognising factors that influence the perceptions of male and female focus groups and the range of interpretations they bring to female representations and women's issues in *Ties that Bind*.

According to the theory of interpretive communities, meaning is found primarily in the interpretive strategies that audience members possess as they engage with a text. The strategies put to use in the reading process direct the interpreter to read the text in a particular way. As the theory shows, the interpretive strategies of the audience exist prior to the act of reading, and they manifest themselves through the meanings that audiences attach to the text in question. Fish (1980) argues that meaning is constituted in the interpretive act. Readers come to a text with certain perspectives and assumptions, hence their interpretive activities become the focus which are regarded as '*having* meaning' and constituting the properties of meaning that readers assign to a text (Fish, 1980, p. 158). Audiences' interpretive principles permit them to see or pay attention to an aspect of the text demarcating meaning, even though meaning may be attributed to the intention of the

text (Fish, 1980). From this perspective, Fish (1980) contends that whatever the reader recognises is 'made noticeable … by an interpretive strategy' (p. 166). This results from the knowledge that audiences' disposition constitutes a set of interpretive strategies, which, when implemented become 'the shape of the reading, and because they are the shape of the reading, they give texts their shape' (Fish, 1980, p. 168).

The interpretive communities that readers belong to, their experiences and cultural environments also shape how they produce meaning from a text. Thus, interpretive strategies are inherent in the interpretive communities that constitute them (Ott & Mack, 2010). In a sense, the interpretive operations performed on a text 'have their source' in the interpretive communities they are products of (Fish, 1980, p. 14). On one hand, groups may read a text in similar ways because they belong to the same interpretive communities, and they share similar social views, positions and experiences. They may share knowledge of the same geographical location where they live and might tap into their historical experiences to produce meaning of a text. On the other hand, readers from different interpretive communities who share different experiences may recognise those acts and put into execution the different strategies they possess and produce different meanings. Fish (1980) asserts that both the stability and variety in reading are functions of the interpretive strategies in use at a particular time in the reading process. A basic view of the theory of interpretive communities is that all the readings are equally valid. Added to these, is the notion that interpretive communities and strategies 'grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another' and while their alignments are temporary, 'they are always there, providing just enough stability' for interpretation to take place (Fish, 1980, pp. 171-172). The underlying position is that interpretive strategies are not natural, but learned and those strategies can be forgotten, overlooked, suppressed, replaced, complicated or favoured. In the context of this paper, male and female focus groups are regarded as belonging to particular interpretive communities possessing particular interpretive strategies that give shape to their interpretations of women and women's issues in *Ties that Bind*. The male and female focus groups are also considered as constituting temporary interpretive communities and interpretive strategies as participants listen and reflect on what others share and respond from complementary and contrasting perspectives. Irrespective of the particular interpretive communities that focus group participants belong to and the particular interpretive strategies they possess that give shape to their interpretations of women and women's issues in *Ties that Bind,* our position in this paper is that the readings of participants, would be treated as aligning to *preferred*, *negotiated* or *oppositional* readings (Hall, 2006).

Method: Sampling and Focus Group Discussions
The focus group discussion method was adopted for data collection in order to gather group opinions and facilitate understanding of how Ghanaian male and female audiences interpret female representations (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Liamputtong (2011) has noted that the focus group method is useful for exploring what, how and why people think about issues in

the ways they do. Thus, it is a rich way to know people's perceptions, opinions and understanding of culture in an interactive context. Moreover, it allows the utilisation of information that represents group-level perspectives and highlights collective understanding, consensus and disagreements (Gunter, 2000). Indeed, focus group participants do not only come from similar backgrounds to share their perspectives on a given topic, but they listen to each other's responses and make additional comments beyond their own original ideas (Patton, 2014). Participants do not necessarily have to agree or disagree. The object is to collect high-quality data where participants consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Patton, 2014) as they interpret the representation of women and women's issues in *Ties that Bind*.

Criterion sampling was used in selecting participants, and the basis for inclusion was people who had a shared common interest in watching and talking about films and were ready to participate in the study. Participants were recruited by using advertising flyers which were distributed at the Efua Sutherland Drama Studio[2] and American Corner LECIAD (Legon Centre for International Affairs and Diplomacy)[3] both located at the University of Ghana, Legon campus in Accra, Ghana. These sites located on the University campus were selected to recruit participants who we believed were part of the film's educated target audience to whom the film's dominant message, framed in transnational feminist discourses[4], is directed. Those who showed interest and made commitments to take part in the study were invited. All the participants were well educated from the university community. The female group was made up of students, lecturers and researchers, while the male group consisted of same, plus a national service person. The women ranged in age from 20 – 56 years while the men ranged from 20 – 54 years, with varied marital and parental statuses. Participants were all Ghanaians but with varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In terms of religious backgrounds, they were predominantly Christians while one male participant was a Muslim. A few participants had travelled, lived and schooled outside Ghana, but they all had lived in the country for most of their lives.

In total, there were two focus groups – one male and one female, and each group comprised seven participants. The film was screened at American Corner LECIAD, University of Ghana. The venue was selected for convenience because it had a multi-purpose space with a place for exhibiting and viewing films and screening equipment were readily available. Prior to the commencement of the screening, the purpose of the study and the participants' role in it was thoroughly explained. After this initial explanation, the film was projected onto a big screen for both male and female participants together after which the male and female focus group discussions were held separately, though simultaneously at the same venue. For homogeneity, a male and a female facilitator moderated the male and female focus group discussions, respectively. Making the group facilitators gender-specific to each group did not raise any issues as the discussions were moderated using a series of the same open-ended questions[5] primarily seeking to interrogate participants' understanding of the ways the film represents women and women's issues. During the focus group interviews, it became apparent that participants from both groups had previously

either seen the film or heard of it; however, it was not clear how what they had previously seen or heard influenced their readings because there was little reference made to that effect.

The analytical approach employed to unpack the interpretations by the focus groups was thematic analysis. The male and female interviews were recorded and transcribed, and we looked for themes in the conversations. Thematic analysis of focus group discussions seeks to identify, analyse, and report patterns/themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To analyse themes in focus group data, Macnaghten and Myers (2004) suggest that attention is paid to what participants said in order to identify key issues. To make sense of the themes from the transcripts and to identify keyways in which the themes were interpreted, attention was paid to what was said primarily focusing on individual and collective opinions, consensus, negotiated, and unpopular interpretations within and across both groups. This approach enabled us to comprehend shared and dialectical individual and group responses to Djansi's treatment of gender issues in *Ties that Bind*. It is worth noting that pseudonyms were assigned to participants; and due to the small sample size, the findings are in no way exhaustive or considered to be representative of the larger Ghanaian audience for such films.

In the next section, we provide a brief background of the filmmaker and the context in which she produced and distributed the film, *Ties that Bind*. We also provide a summary of the film and detail the possible emergent dominant meanings awaiting audience responses and an indication of how we arrived at them.

Leila Djansi and *Ties that Bind*

Leila Djansi is one of Ghanaian-diaspora women filmmakers whose films are transnational in terms of their 'production context' (Hjort, 2010), but clearly displays what Naficy (2001) calls 'ethnic consciousness' in diasporic films, through tackling issues relevant to Ghanaian women in the homeland (p. 14). Her body of work consists of those with narratives set in the Ghanaian environment such as *Grass between my Lips* (2008), *I Sing of a Well* (2009), *Sinking Sands* (2010), *Ties that Bind* (2011), *A Northern Affair* (2014), *Poisoned Bait* (2015), *Like Cotton Twines* (2016), and *40 & Single* (2018). There are also those, with narratives centring on diasporic characters which include *Ebbe* (2012), *And Then There was You* (2013), *Where Children Play* (2015), and *Miss Havisham Effect* (2019).

Given her position as director, scriptwriter, producer, and founder of the Los Angeles motion picture company, Turning Point Productions as well as her liminal position as an independent Ghanaian diaspora filmmaker, Djansi's Ghanaian-based productions keep within the interstitial character of diasporic filmmaking and operate at the intersection of the local and global cinematic cultures (Naficy, 2001, p. 46). Ellerson (2017), suggests that African diaspora women's social location and positionality in the West, forge their accessibility to economic privileges and funding (p. 287). This is true for Djansi because after her debut feature, *I Sing of a Well*, her films have largely been produced with foreign investment. *Ties that Bind* was funded by a foreign investor which allowed the filmmaker to

film with a highly skilled technical crew from both the United States and Ghana enabling her to maintain high production values compared to many locally produced movies in the country. With high professional standards, the film was distributed by Image Entertainment of RLG Entertainment based in the United States, and M-NET bought the rights to broadcast it on Africa Magic. Though it had a limited theatrical release in Ghana, DVDs have been available for home viewing.

Djansi has a penchant for creating awareness and bringing women's rights issues to the fore through her films. She uses what Thackway (2003) describes as a socially and morally responsible style to examine African women's issues from their personal, social, domestic, and professional experiences while critiquing forces that oppress them. Like several of Djansi's films, *Ties that Bind*'s dominant message is targeted at educated audiences including Ghanaians who are familiar with transnational feminist discourses that shape the film's central message, which is that, women's particular total liberation is essential for their growth. It is important to state that while the primary focus of this study was to understand the ways male and female audiences read women's issues in films, as stated earlier the dominant message in *Ties that Bind* and its target audience informed our selection of the film and why we organised our focus groups with educated Ghanaians.

Summary of *Ties that Bind*

Ties that Bind is set in Kroboland in Ghana, and it tells the story of three Ghanaian women – Buki, a medical doctor, Adobea and Maa Dede, housewives, and Theresa, an African American university professor. The women share friendship and a common pain of 'losing a child or children'. Buki has had two miscarriages and fears that should she agree to marry her fiancé Lucas and unable to bear children, his family will brand her a witch. Adobea is a voiceless village wife suffering from lung cancer and is married to a man who shows little interest in her well-being, though she has lost six children and pregnant with the seventh. Theresa relocated to Ghana to teach anthropology after she gave custody of her daughter to her ex-husband, Marcus because of drug abuse and postpartum depression. Maa Dede attempts to protect her family and therefore shields her HIV positive husband after he rapes their daughter, but she later courageously withdraws her support to allow justice to take its course. In the end, Buki, Adobea and Theresa hold onto hope because like Maa Dede, they find the courage to confront their challenges. Buki marries Lucas, Adobea gets support from the women and her husband when she loses her seventh pregnancy and undergoes treatment for the cancer. Theresa adopts a refugee girl and decides to travel to the United States to seek shared custody of her daughter.

Emerging Dominant Meanings

Drawing on our own knowledge and understanding of what constitutes Ghanaian culture, as well as several personal interviews[6] we have had with Leila Djansi, we argue that *Ties that Bind* is in a dialogic relationship with Ghanaian society, and particularly the experiences of

women in the said society. It dramatizes women's lived realities and experiences regardless of their social, economic, or educational status – experiences that bind them including womanhood, obligatory motherhood, enforced silence, fears, female bonding, interdependence, and gender complementarity.

The film speaks to and produces ideas about the struggle against the muting of women's voices in the Ghanaian society which is a key issue that gender activists are tackling in their fight for gender equality (see the Women's Manifesto for Ghana, 2004). From our interactions with both the text and its creator and drawing on our understanding of what constitutes Ghanaian culture, we propose that the emergent dominant meaning of the film awaiting audience response is to criticise the cultural suppression of Ghanaian and by extension African women's voices and to reveal how this suppression impacts on several areas of their lives. Another dominant meaning relates to the celebration of women who locate their voices for liberation which may serve as inspiration for the struggle for gender equality.

Traditionally, to be submissive and silent, according to Kolawole (2004), are considered 'culturally correct' (p. 263) and this is portrayed in the film through Adobea. From our knowledge of what constitutes Ghanaian culture, even though Adobea is heavily pregnant and sick, she undertakes her domestic duties in pain and without complaint because every African woman is socialised to understand that it is her duty to carry out domestic chores including cooking, fetching water and cleaning (Dolphyne, 1991). The filmmaker acknowledges Adobea's tenacious attitude to her domestic duties as expected of women but criticises her muteness when she is unable to speak to her husband about her health challenges and when she submits to her mother-in-law's suppression in her matrimonial home. The film eloquently produces the idea that patriarchal practices which inscribe authority in the man and his family, economic dependence, interiorisation of enforced silence, and lack of basic health literacy cause women to comply and suffer at the peril of their lives. By allowing Buki to educate and re-socialise Adobea on the essence of having a voice where she transitions from silence to utilising her voice and decides to train to become a nurse, the filmmaker demonstrates that education and re-socialisation do not only enable women to utilise their voices but allow them to develop themselves and contribute to their communities.

It is important to mention that in the Ghanaian society, woman's suppression is more pronounced in the domestic space than outside the home. Women in the public space do not experience the same level of suppression as in the domestic space. Adobea comfortably expresses her views anytime she is in the company of Buki, and even defends Buki when the village folks warn her against the 'haunted clinic'. Juxtaposing Adobea's voice outside her marital home with her silence within the domestic space can be viewed as the filmmaker's way of critiquing the structures and strictures[7], which condition women to succumb to enforced silence, particularly in the domestic space.

The film further explores the traditional social norms that suppress women's voices regarding conversations around sex and sexual issues. Machera (2004) argues that it is

unnerving and considered vulgar for African women to have conversations around sex and sexuality. Moreover, rape and incest for a long time were regarded disgraceful and consequently unspeakable (Davies, 1995). These explain why, even though Maa Dede exudes control in the domestic space and beyond due to her husband's drunkenness and joblessness, she fails to speak out when the HIV-infected husband rapes their six-year-old daughter, Dede. In our view, it could be argued that Maa Dede also refuses to speak about the issue because traditionally a woman is expected to remain in marriage for the sake of her children regardless of the circumstance (see Dolphyne, 1991), and traditionally, one is not expected to wash her dirty linen in public. These are tensions that put constraints on women where cultural norms get in the way of family and moral obligations.

To overcome these constraints, the film makes a significant point by suggesting that patriarchal societies are evolving and as such women must redefine their roles and responsibilities. Maa Dede in the end locates her agency by voicing out her disgust about her husband's abominable behaviour and hands him over to the police. It would seem women's strict adherence to socially sanctioned behaviours in today's human-rights centred development era are outdated or misconstrued. Adobea's husband's reaction to her muteness adds more meaning to this understanding when he tells Buki he expects Adobea to be able to talk to him about her health issues. In view of these, the film projects the idea that female emancipation rests on women to unlearn old ways and re-socialise themselves to claim their liberation.

Ties that Bind further raises another kind of 'silence' which is often read as positive since it is borne out of personal decision rather than external oppressive forces (see Davies, 1995). This is represented in the characters of Buki and Theresa when they choose to remain silent about their individual challenges even though they are independent and vocal in every sense. One may also argue that their silence is because of personal struggles which they overcome through friendship. Theresa does not tell Buki about her child until later when she is comfortable to talk about her. Even though Buki does not disclose her miscarriages to Lucas because of fear and pride which Adobea points out to her, she tells him after gathering courage and inspiration from the experiences of her friends – Adobea and Theresa. Adobea tells Buki about the death of her six children only after Buki demonstrates enough concern and opens up to her. Through Buki, Theresa and Adobea's characters, the film accounts for personal decisions to remain silent over personal issues, which are not directly enforced by society. As the film reflects, such private issues are not easily divulged; people disclose to others after they have formed positive friendships and developed self-assurance and trust (Davies, 1995). The filmmaker uses the friendship that develops among the women to depict female empowerment, tolerance, openness, interdependence, respect, and strength in diversity – attributes that are considered to enhance women's progress as they work together (see Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). In this regard, another dominant reading from the film that we would proffer is that there is strength in friendship and unity (in a/the group)[8] and that together, a lot can be achieved, particularly in women's personal struggles and collective battles against societal encumbrances.

Another key issue the film addresses is the idea that a woman's value in society resides in her ability to bear children and sustain their lives.[9] Children are viewed as significant in the African social structure since they ensure continuity and safeguard the relationship that exists among ancestors, the living and the unborn (Steady, 1981). Motherhood, therefore, can either be a source of oppression or empowerment for African women (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Nnaemeka, 1997). The filmmaker presents this value criterion imposed on women as problematic and demonstrates the burden it places on them regarding childbearing regardless of their socio-economic status. In the Ghanaian context, a woman's fertility is often compared to that of 'Asaase Yaa' or 'mother earth' – the goddess of the earth because the land is conceived of, as that which gives and supports life (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003, p. 392). For this reason, women who are not able to bear or sustain the lives of their children are stigmatised or seen as not useful. This is why Adobea's mother-in-law branded her a witch, and with two miscarriages Buki was afraid her future mother-in- law would do the same to her. Beside stigmatisation, the expectation to bear children and sustain them force women to entertain fear and resign themselves to the fact that they are failures and useless as we see with Buki and Adobea respectively. Having given these explanations, it should be noted that in order for the land to produce or sustain life it must be cared for. Traditionally, the principle of reciprocity is embedded in Ghanaians' understanding of the relationship between humans and the land (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2003). The filmmaker appropriates this idea where she allows Buki and Adobea's husband to provide medical and emotional support to Adobea and enables Lucas to comfort and assure Buki of his support.

Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) claims that African woman's burden associated with childbearing are as a result of combinations of other interrelated issues; and for example, Steady (1981) explains that high infant mortality is due to poor medical services especially in rural Africa. In the film, babies and mothers lose their lives due to the absence of health facilities and skilled medical professionals. Maternal, prenatal, and neonatal care are major concerns in most communities particularly in rural Africa. Much as some women had their babies delivered safely like Maa Dede and the woman Buki delivered of her baby at the Holy Fire Temple, there were many whose pregnancies and childbirth turned out differently as seen in Adobea's case. Addressing the inadequacies in the health system could be viewed as the filmmaker's way of pointing out the needless blame placed on women in relation to difficulties in childbirth and infant mortality. This is also the filmmaker's way of drawing attention to the systemic failures that tend to cause women to be viewed as worthless, as well as her conscious call to have such issues addressed in a society that puts importance on childbirth and family sustenance. In addition to lack of medical facilities and skilled medical professionals, the filmmaker creates awareness and demonstrates that mothers or expectant mothers deal with medical conditions that may or may not be addressed or managed by medical experts. Buki had two miscarriages despite her medical expertise, and Theresa experienced postpartum depression despite the expertise in the United States where she lived. Much as this paper is interested in identifying how male and female focus

group participants interpret the text, the interpretations offered here, are some of the possible emergent readings, that is, preferred readings (Hall, 2006), we believe await audiences as they engage with and make sense of the filmmaker's representations of women and women's issues in *Ties that Bind*.

Audience Readings: Findings and Discussion

In this section, the findings from the male and female focus group discussions on the representation of women and women's issues in the film are reported and discussed. In order to show not only the similarities, but also the contrasting interpretations they bring to the representation of women and issues affecting them, the findings are reported and discussed concurrently. The overarching themes emerging from both focus groups' perceptions of the representation of women and women's issues which are in themselves regarded as part of their interpretations (Fish, 1980) are: 'the burden of sociocultural expectations on women,' 'lack of health facilities and postpartum depression,' gender complementarity,' and female support and bonding'. Female audiences often perceive many of the male-directed films as unrealistic of women's lived experiences (Azeez, 2010; Okunna, 1996). However, as the discussion will reveal, both male and female participants perceived *Ties that Bind* as constructing ideas about the realities of Ghanaian women. Both groups in their construction of meanings decoded that women across classes, educational, and professional backgrounds are burdened by traditional expectations of them in the family. They did not merely offer interpretations that stemmed from their knowledge and cultural background as Ghanaians; their discussions amounted to producing and participating in dominant discourses about 'Ghanaian culture' and women's experiences in the statements they made. In other words, their speech itself represented a duality – on one hand describing and representing 'Ghanaian culture', and on the other, constructing and reproducing same culture through the discursive process.

The Burden of Sociocultural Expectations on Women

Across the male and female groups, the participants acknowledged that through the film it is evident that certain Ghanaian sociocultural practices and expectations often burden women. Members of both groups proceeded to put into action 'similar interpretive strategies' (Fish, 1980, p. 169). Drawing on their ideas about oppressive social practices against women in Ghana, they recognised that the film criticises the sociocultural practice which situates the validation of womanhood in women's ability to be seen but not heard and their ability to bear children. Kolawole (2004) explains that in African traditional practice, 'it is … unwomanly to be vocal, loud and assertive; it is even an abnormality that gives off an offensive odour …' (p. 256). Participants from both groups named and discussed the image of the muted woman focusing on Adobea and Maa Dede's characters, though with mixed readings. The female group identified the two women to be representations of *the silenced* woman in Ghanaian and African societies while constructing ideas about the

burden women in such positions carry, and the fact that there are many of such women in society, of which they are included. The following quotes regarding their description of Adobea's silence are instructive:

> Adobea couldn't voice out her opinions because of her compliance to tradition just like a woman here in Ghana. You don't just get up and say what it is that you feel. I found her to be compliant. (Agyeiwa)

> Yes, she (Adobea) makes us aware that most women in African societies have become so compliant. It's so obvious that we are not comfortable with the situation, but we've accepted it because of what society has made us to believe. (Samantha)

As they listened and shared their views, the female participants decoded meaning, in line with the preferred reading of the film (Hall, 2006) that suggested that Adobea represents the Ghanaian woman who is forced to tolerate her mother-in-law's mistreatment and endure pain after losing her children and suffering from lung cancer because she must conform to traditional norms that expects her to be silent and unassertive irrespective of her struggles. This understanding is based on the sociocultural belief that a woman is dignified by her silence, an experience the participants dislike but can relate to as Ghanaian educated women. Given the female participants' interpretations, we would argue that their readings are in line with the film's dominant African feminist critique of women's enforced silence. Kolawole (2004) suggests that African feminism rejects the ideology of women's voicelessness and views it as a major obstacle to African women's empowerment. The female participants did not just criticise women's enforced voicelessness as oppressive, but they actively engaged the discourse about the practice registering their constraints. Given the target audience of the film and their presumed familiarity with transnational feminist discourses, it can be argued that the filmmaker expected audience alignment with the preferred reading as stated earlier (Hall, 2006) and to subsequently engage in discussions informed by such.

The male participants, on the other hand, focused on lack of education and internalised sociocultural practices as the cause of her silence – conditions which are considered to reinforce African women's social disabilities (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1993; Muhanguzi, 2020). The following are some sample quotes:

> I want to also believe that women are so passive in this case. If you look at Adobea, she had a lot of problems and not until Buki voiced out her problems then she had to also pour out her problems by talking about the blood in her vomit and sending her to the cemetery and showing her … I mean the graves. (Peter)

> The culture made her timid, but she was able to tell the friend (Buki) which was good. I also think she was frustrated by losing six children. … And yeah, like you said she was passive, but shared all those frustrations when the doctor friend, Buki came to talk to her. (Kwadjo)

As the above quotations suggest, members of the male group agreed on the fact that socialisation, loss of children, and lack of education caused Adobea to be silent and timid and that she spoke about her problems, shared her pain, and took Buki to the graveside where her six children were buried only after Buki shared her own problems with her and schooled her to be assertive. While the male readings were shaped by the plot sequence of the film text (Hall, 2006), it appears they criticised Adobea for her passive attitude and identified her position as a rural woman and not so educated compared to Buki as the reasons for her voicelessness. This decoding aligns with Hall's (2006) 'negotiated' meaning which 'contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements' (p. 172). Based on our interaction with the filmmaker and feminist reading of the film, we noted earlier that Adobea was silent because of social expectations, and she did not speak about her problems until Buki opened-up to her because as Davies (1995) suggests people divulge their personal issues to others after they have formed friendship and developed trust. The male group rather used her less educated status and stress of losing children to explain her silence. Thus, even though there is 'some degree of reciprocity' between our decoded meaning and that of the male group, their located reasons contradict our projected preferred decoding of Adobea's silence (Hall, 2006, p. 172). In this case, we would argue that since the male participants were men, they could not relate directly to Adobea's experiences and therefore even though they named socialisation as a cause of her silence, they recognised that her own reaction reenforced her imposed voicelessness.

Reacting to the representation of Maa Dede's silence, the female participants regarded her actions as a personal choice influenced by the value society places on family stability when she refused to speak about the rape and report her HIV positive husband for raping their young daughter, Dede. Given the fact there are views that a successful family woman is the one who keeps her family together, without criticising her actions, the female participants felt Maa Dede 'knew exactly what she had to do but was holding on for the sake of her family'; and 'she wanted to keep her family and to keep her family she had to remain married. They also felt: 'stigmatisation will become part of her (Dede's) life when she grows up and people will point at her saying, "that's the daughter whose father raped her. She has HIV"'. Moreover, the male group produced meaning drawing on their prior knowledge of social practices to explain Maa Dede's actions. The following quotation illustrates this view best: 'people will say this is the woman whose husband has got AIDS, or this is the woman whose husband has raped the child. Those things still happen in our society'. Even though as we indicated earlier, within traditional societies there is often a resounding silence around sexual issues which hamper open discussion particularly for women (Loosli, 2004; Machera, 2004), the female and male participants felt Maa Dede remained silent about the rape

offence because of stigmatisation, family and marriage sustenance since keeping one's family and marriage intact is a valuable practice in the Ghanaian society. The male group further suggested that Maa Dede did not want to face the question of 'who will provide for the family?' This reading was not expressed by the female group.

We argue that the male reading is oppositional since they identified meaning 'within some alternative framework of reference' (Hall, 2006, p. 173). Fish (1980) has argued that what readers acknowledge in a text are made noticeable by an interpretive strategy. Their reading is situated in their shared gendered membership of their focus group interpretive community (Fish, 1980) because of the traditional view that the man is responsible for providing financial support for his family. Our argument is supported by the fact that throughout his screen appearance, Maa Dede's husband was sick and jobless. Despite this 'different succession of interpretive acts', both the male and female groups put into execution similar interpretive strategies believing in women's empowerment (Fish, 1980, p. 169). Consequently, they saw the film to be promoting justice for women and particularly children because for the male group, 'the movie goes ahead to show that keeping the family does not supersede the law'; and for the female group, 'she (Maa Dede) saw the light and threw his ring on him, and the police took him away'. These readings concur with the dominant meaning we identified in the film, and they are derived from the participants' desire to see the advancement of justice for women and children.

About decoding the depiction of women's uttermost achievement based on their ability to procreate, both groups articulated ideas about the practice and conceded that it puts pressure on women, again in consonance with the preferred reading (Hall, 2006) but distinguished between externally imposed and self-imposed oppression. Nnaemeka (1997) points out that the institutional construct of motherhood in Africa limits women's choices and can be oppressive. The male participants, on one hand, acknowledged that the film portrays the idea that 'women are vulnerable when they don't have children, and when they have too, there are problems'. The female participants, on the other hand, indicated that a woman who is unable to have children or sustain the lives of her children is stigmatised and may lack support in her old age. They further explained: 'It (the film) revealed that society puts so much pressure on *us* and that we also put pressure on *ourselves* to have children'; and 'children look after their parents in old age'. In addition, drawing on an article she had read earlier, one female participant noted:

> But one area of the movie that I really liked was when Adobea tried to relate the fertility of the land to the fertility of her womb. I did a course in Gender Studies last semester and we read an article that in the African setting the fertility of women is compared to that of the land. So, if the land is not fertile then it is seen as not very useful and that is what women mostly in Africa are portrayed to be. You are just seen as a child producing machine, so it's like as women we should be able to bring forth children. (Agyeiwa)

Kwansah-Aidoo's (2003) observation that, in the Ghanaian cultural setting the land, referred to as 'Asaase Yaa' is conceived of as the goddess of fertility and 'mother earth', that which gives and sustains life is relevant here (p. 392). When land is unable to give and sustain life, it is considered barren and worthless. The film's representation of Adobea's inability to sustain the lives of the six children and a pregnancy she had lost, meant that she was comparable to barren land; that which was unable to give and sustain life. And, for this reason, her mother-in-law mistreated her and called her a witch. The female group agreed that the film's comparison between women and the land does not only show that women are burdened, but also emphasises why like the land, women are obliged to bear children and ensure they survive. It would seem that as much as the female participants disliked the pressure put on women as represented in the film, they believed that, like the land, a woman's fertility is important because children ensure the continuity of family lineage, they provide social status, and they provide support for parents in their old age. Morley (1999) suggests that discourses that readers inhabit, position them to produce specific readings. The interpretations show that the male participants produced meaning influenced by their observation of what they perceived to be women's realities, while the female group inhabited a discourse directed by experiential and intertextual knowledge and sociocultural beliefs and practices, they considered to be part of the Ghanaian woman's experiences. In other words, as Fish (1980) will concur, the interpretive strategies they used and the way they related to the issues of women's fertility were framed by the experiences they believed are constituted in the Ghanaian sociocultural context. This is one way in which it can be argued that, while there was a 'degree of understanding' between the film's encoded message and the participants' decoded readings (Hall, 2006, p. 166), the film enabled the male and female focus groups to participate in the dominant discourse around women's fertility and the challenges associated with it in the Ghanaian context. And by so doing, it can be argued that participants' understanding represented the duality mentioned earlier – on one hand describing and representing 'Ghanaian culture', while on the other, constructing and reproducing same culture through the discursive process.

Regarding women's self-imposed burden as represented in the film, both groups acknowledged that even though women are socialised to have children, women also have personal desires to bear children which the female group members related to and which is in alignment with the preferred reading (Hall, 2006). Both groups felt Buki's fears of not being able to have children due to prior miscarriages emerge because of social obligation. However, they felt Buki and Adobea's burdens were also self-imposed because as one male participant put it: 'Most women within our society know that if you don't have children, it is a problem because of the labelling and all that and so there is an inner desire to bear children'. Essentially, the male participants again in line with the preferred reading, produced ideas about the film's portrayal of how the emotional pressure encountered by women from different strata of life, connects to their internal yearning to fulfil social expectations and to attain the social status associated with motherhood. As they submitted, the female participants constructed meaning, again in tandem with the film's preferred

reading, with the understanding that socialisation naturally makes 'women cherish the children that come from within,' and they saw Buki in that situation:

> She was insecure with all her book knowledge because of fears of how her [would be] husband's family will treat her if she could not have children. So, even as educated as we are, we still see it that way, that we must get married and have children. Education doesn't seem to erase in us that need of society's expectation that we get married and have children. (Akua)

Fish's (1980) assertion that interpretive strategies of the audience exist prior to the act of decoding, and they manifest themselves through the meanings they attach to a text is useful here. Based on the film, it seems the female group understood that the way Ghanaian women are socialised influence their (including theirs) desire to bear children. In addition, it appears their understanding of the film suggests that whether educated or uneducated, women carry certain similar burdens since they share in the value of childbearing. Hall (2006) has argued that decoded readings '"have an effect" … which permits the meanings signified in the discourse to be transposed into practice or consciousness' and acquire a social use value (pp. 165-66). Since the female participants who were not yet married produced meaning that stemmed from their own socialisation to have children, we would argue that the decoded meanings rather affirmed the value they hold for children and their own desires to bear some in future. Having linked their own situation with that of the characters and settled on a note of affirmation, we would further argue that the female participants produced interpretations situated in discourses around motherhood as a source of liberation and advanced social status (see Nnaemeka, 1997; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997), decoding which align with the filmmaker's encoded message.

Lack of Health Facilities and Postpartum Depression

The male and female focus groups identified the representations of lack of health facilities and the reality of postpartum depression as additional forces that compound the difficulties women face in the society. This is in consonance with the film's preferred reading. However, in the process of decoding this message, the different gender groups emphasised different aspects of the film even though their readings intersected. The male participants framed their understanding of the film's depiction of child mortality caused by lack of health facilities and personnel as nationwide problems. The sample quotes below provide an insight:

> A typical problem is child mortality, which is even a national issue. The women lived in a place where there is no clinic. They were using the church as a place where they will go and give birth and there is no trained midwife or medical staff. I know as a pregnant woman you should go for pre/post-natal care and that sort of stuff, but you saw the woman [Adobea] take in herbs when she

> was pregnant, and she was sick too. … There was no doctor to advise them.
> (Peter)

> Yeah, there was no doctor? Adobea's story happens. People give birth and
> they die, and they are maltreated by their families and they are called witches
> … (Terry)

The male group decoded the film within the dominant reading deducing that lack of health facilities and personnel are major causes of child mortality which often leaves women childless, inviting social condemnation of childlessness and taking away motherhood prestige. Oyewùmí (2003) notes that the mother is the fulcrum around which the African family is organised consequently imposing on her enormous obligation while bestowing upon her honour. By this logic and what they usually saw in the society, the submissions by the male focus group suggest that Adobea's mother-in-law mistreated and called her a witch[10] because she lost her children which were also as a result of the fact that a functional health facility and professional health workers were not available to attend to her.

The female group, on the other hand, focused on the film's depiction of child mortality using the search for a solution through 'spiritual' means. They expressed a sense of frustration when in the film women in the village were seeking a religious solution to a medical issue. They commented on the fact that women visited the Holy Fire Temple to have their babies delivered despite always losing their lives or that of their babies. The following quotation is illuminating:

> Maa Dede said a lot of women and babies died in the village. As women we
> seek the face of God when things happen instead of sometimes being real
> about the situation. I am very certain the woman who delivered the baby in
> the church … it could have happened that she would have died if the doctor
> (Buki) hadn't gone there because she had to give her injections and things … I
> don't doubt the ability of God. I don't doubt miracles. That's not what I am
> saying. (Helena)

Two reasons may be adduced for the variation in emphasis among the respective gender groups in the discussion of the challenges associated with childbirth as presented in the film. First, one may argue that the female group, being women themselves, may possibly have first-hand intimate knowledge and/or experience of this particular issue, or perhaps similar situations in which women in particular have sought religious solutions to issues that required medical or some other intervention/solution rather than a religious one. Consequently, being privy to such knowledge and experience, the female participants came to the discussion with deeper knowledge and understanding, resulting in their exhibition of frustration with the particular occurrence in the film – women in the village seeking a religious solution to a medical issue. The second, and linked to the first, might be the fact

that the male group, without the privilege of such intimate knowledge resorted to and relied on available and more mainstream discourses that abound in the wider societal setting in discussing said issue.

While expressing frustration, the female group felt the film's proposed solution is exemplified in Buki's actions when she employs her medical knowledge to deliver the church woman of her baby at the Temple.[11] For the male group, they also identified that the film promotes the value of doctors: 'The doctor (Buki) cared for her friend (Adobea) and that's why she found out her baby had died in her womb. A lot of women die just like that'. Readers are regarded as coming to a text with certain perspectives, assumptions, and experiences and those interpretive activities constitute the properties of meaning they assign to a text (Fish, 1980). The interpretations from both groups were firmly rooted in the participants' ideas of what constitutes the realities of the larger Ghanaian society and their access to various discourses around maternal and child mortality, lack of medical infrastructure in Ghana and potential ways of addressing the problem. By decoding the film's message regarding lack of health personnel and infrastructure and how those intersect with child mortality, the readings could be viewed to align with the film's dominant message. As we pointed out earlier, showing the inadequacies in the health system could be viewed as the filmmaker's way of unveiling the needless blame placed on women in relation to difficulties in childbirth and infant mortality in Ghana.

The male and female groups focused on different aspects of the film to discuss another challenge associated with motherhood. The representation of postpartum depression and its effects on mothers stood out for both groups. The findings suggest that some members in the female group were *au fait* with postnatal 'baby blues' and thought postpartum depression and childhood trauma made Theresa abandon her daughter to avoid harming her in the United States. They further decoded that those health-related issues clouded her maternal instincts. One participant strongly identified with Theresa's character and suggested that there are women in Ghanaian society including herself, with similar experiences and are not instinctively maternal. Her submission is worth quoting at length:

> Obviously, there are different perspectives that are being presented in the film on motherhood. This is because I think the African American [Theresa], for example, is a mother but has run away from that motherhood role and from her child. So, she has voluntarily chosen to be childless, but then she explains that it is because of her background and her postnatal depression. So, it's almost like having a child is not really the answer and not necessarily the end of everything because here is a woman who is not instinctively maternal; … sometimes personally I am not instinctively maternal. I mean, I have children and I love them, no doubt about that, but I am not one of those women who want children around me all the time. I want space. When I say this, my children get worried, but there were times that I would lock my door

and they don't come in. I mean that also should be acceptable. We are all not
the same. (Adjoa)

It is instructive that some of the female group members agreed that it should be acceptable
to choose not to have a child. One participant who was young submitted: 'Yes, I would need
space too. I should be accepted for that'. Thus, having interpreted the message with the
understanding that postpartum depression transcends national boundaries and actively
engaged personal experience, and that of other women to produce meaning, other
participants accepted that the film's representation raises awareness for society to have
realistic expectations of women. This reading can be situated in the view that interpretive
strategies expand and diminish, and their alignments are temporary since readers can move
from one to another (Fish, 1980). It would seem the young female participants who had
earlier consented to the idea of having children of their own in the future to satisfy self and
attain social prestige, shifted in their views in this interpretation. In view of this reading, we
would argue that the moment of engagement and discussion context, which Hall (2006)
identifies, enhanced the female participants' understanding and realisation of the changes
they supported and believed the filmmaker is envisaging for society and women, thus
aligning with the film's dominant intentions.

Much as the effect of postpartum depression is portrayed through the African-
American character, Theresa, the male participants like the female group related the
depiction to Ghana, but believed that the film's encoded message was to shed light on the
lack of education on the condition in the country. The younger participants saw the film's
representation as 'quite revealing' since they did not know much about the condition until
watching the film and engaging in the focus group discussion. Thus, the moment of
engagement with the text (Hall, 2006) and temporary interpretive community (Fish, 1980)
formed during the group discussion granted them the opportunity to rather learn about it.
The older male participants engaged the film's dominant message of postpartum depression
in mothers and produced ideas about the effects of the condition (anxiety, feeling of
resentment etc.) in Ghanaian women, and the way they are treated because of lack of
education.

> I think to some extent women down here experience postpartum depression.
> We have not given much attention to it. A woman may be going through so
> much stress where she may want to kill her child, but if you don't understand
> it, it will be very easy to call her a witch. When someone sees a woman
> attempting to kill her child with a pillow [like it is shown in the movie] he will
> say he caught her red handed. Meanwhile, it is depression. If they put her out
> there, they will stone her to death. So, I can say the film reveals a lot of things
> that affect women that we don't know. (Peter)

It could be argued that, for the male group, the representation of postpartum depression is the filmmaker's way of creating awareness of the condition among its Ghanaian audiences thereby making the film instructive, as far as the portrayal of some aspects of women's lives is concerned.

Even though the interpretations by male and female participants on postpartum depression were shaped through different lenses – experience and observation, a pattern of 'consistency and similarity of perspectives' can be identified (Morley, 1999, p. 270). In all decoded meanings, one gets the impression that the interest of the participants was that society transforms in the way it treats particularly mothers – a concern they suggested is at the heart of the film and which we concur falls in line with the film's dominant message.

Gender Complementarity

Communal living and gender complementarity are considered integral in African societies (Tamale, 2020). *Ties that Bind* produces ideas about the notion of gender complementarity and represents it as a means to lessen women's oppression and resolve gender inequality and conflict. The participants in both groups intimated that the depiction of Adobea's experience of mistreatment by her mother-in-law[12] is the filmmaker's efforts to disapprove of such practices. The quotes below from the female and male groups are useful:

> But I think she [the filmmaker] was criticising it because in the end the man stood up against his mother. If she had let the man keep quiet, then we would have thought she is saying this is okay. But she certainly wasn't saying it was okay for the mother-in-law to come in. (Adjoa)

> For him [Adobea's husband] to have gone against his mother to defend his wife was an act of him being just and reasonable, in the sense that in her [Adobea] condition she didn't merit such a treatment. (Kojo)

These readings could be interpreted to mean that the participants tapped into their moral principles to articulate their understanding and condemn the abusive mother-in-law. Consequently, they were pleased the film corrected it through gender complementarity. Hall's (2006) assertion that decoded meanings 'have an effect' is relevant here (p. 165). On one hand, the female group's discussion seemed to have placed emphasis on victory for wives because Adobea's husband defended his wife against his mother: 'Although he did wrong and I hate that (Adobea's husband's delay in defending her), at a point he sacked the mother for Adobea to be free'. The male participants, on the other hand, highlighted the bravery and justice in his actions because as one participant noted:

> In our traditional society you are supposed to give reverence to people older than you, especially your parents. And so, for him to have gone against that particular rule to defend the wife was an act of he being just. (Bob)

Both groups viewed the representation as the filmmaker's way of appropriating social justice and criticising the abuse of motherhood privileges that work to the detriment of other women and subvert the so-called status quo by reinventing male and female roles to challenge the structures which oppress women. Even though the overall response to the mistreatment was one of resentment, the readings were gender specific. For the female group, it was 'emancipatory' because the film's resistance is 'directed at forces of oppression' against women (Kellner, 2009, p. 17). For the male group, it was inspirational because they identified with the agent of resistance. This would mean the 'social order' they recognised in the text reinforced their value and belief in men playing a vital role in women's emancipation (Hall, 2006, p. 141). The gender specificity of, and difference in the readings can be attributed to the fact that in this instance, the different groups represented different aspects of the issue at stake – mothers-in-law's mistreatment of their sons' wives. The women identified with the 'oppressed' and thus read 'emancipation', while the men representing the 'oppressor' but exhibiting a keen awareness of the injustice in the practice, read 'inspiration' to identify with the forces of resistance.

Paying further attention to gender complementarity, the participants from both groups also identified the importance of support in relationships (including marriage) through the portrayals of Buki and her fiancé, Lucas. The following quotes illustrate this point:

> Buki is highly educated and empowered. She is an achiever, but she is a bit extreme. She is too self-sufficient. She doesn't think she needs him (Lucas), but nobody is an Island. Even when he gave her tickets, she said she will pay him back. That kind of self-sufficiency, I think it's a bit extreme. (Lucy)

> That statement, 'I will pay you back'. Her economic status was making her think she has more power. Yes, she has everything that you can give to her. So, I think one thing Adobea said, 'it is okay not to be in control all the time'. I think it was one perfect statement in the movie. (Gabriel)

Both groups recognised Buki to be overly independent which in a sense meant over-confident and self-possessed, a reading that is shaped by their 'disposition' to be humble and vulnerable (Fish, 1980, p.168). They approved of her being a medical doctor who sacrifices to provide health care for the villagers; however, they denounced her utterances and actions in relation to her relationship with her fiancé. Both groups' readings suggest they felt Buki did not treat Lucas appropriately. (Re)producing ideas about the cultural practice where a woman does not offer to repay her fiancé or husband for a gift she receives, the female participants criticised Buki for offering to reimburse Lucas when he gave her tickets for a theatre performance. This reading was available to the male participants; and they further felt Buki was not only disrespectful to Africans, but also to

African men when she said: 'Lucas, you're an African man. What is love? Do we love in Africa?' They felt Lucas throughout the film and in that moment was only assuring her of his support as they navigated their challenges, hence, he did not deserve to be scorned. In spite of these distinctive interpretations, some male participants were particularly struck by the fact that: 'the doctor (Buki) was faithful … unlike some of them going about contracting diseases and stuff like that', making reference to a common trope and stereotypical images found in other video films (see Ugor, 2013).

Significantly, both groups' attitude towards Lucas' unflinching support for Buki offered a distinct lens to understand the gendered readings they brought to the film. In view of the narrative's romantic conclusion where Lucas marries Buki, the female participants described Lucas as the 'best guy a woman would love to marry', 'he is a very supportive partner', 'Lucas is a nice gentleman', and 'Lucas epitomises love for me. He's just the man, the real man'. These interpretations mostly shared by the participants who were yet to marry illustrate their personal preference for such men and provide a window into the type of men they would like in the future. Consequently, it was not surprising when the male participants suggested the portrayal of such supportive male character symbolises the filmmaker's[13] perception of the ideal man:

> Owing to the fact that this particular movie happens to be by a woman, I wasn't surprised. They tend to create their perception of the ideal kind of man – handsome, rich, big, tall, loving, supportive'. The women want someone like that. (Sly)

It may appear the 'interpretive strategies' reinforced the female participants' desires and the male participants' perceptions of women (Fish, 1980). While the filmmaker produced popular ideas of the 'ideal lover', and both groups appear to have engaged popular discourses about the 'ideal husband or fiancé', the female participants' decoded meanings seem to reaffirm the perceptions the male participants have of women.

Female Support and Bonding

The popular assertion around relationships among women is often expressed in the old cliché, 'women are their own worst enemies' (Anyidoho, 2020, p. 2). Nnaemeka (2005) contends that woman-to-woman relations are critical for their growth. Female support and bonding were recurring themes that emerged in both the male and female focus group discussions. Even though, there were subtle differences, the male participants produced interpretations similar to that of the female participants in that they recognised that the female characters in the film shared a significant bond where they voluntarily supported one another. The following quotes support this view:

> There was this sense of support for each other … When Buki went to the village at first, the neighbour [Maa Dede] went to help her to clean up her

place. Adobea also went to help … You know Buki cared for Adobea and even the American woman [Theresa] went to the hospital to support Buki and Adobea … At the village she [Theresa] also advised Buki and they helped the neighbour when her daughter was raped … Buki and the American lady [Theresa] risked their lives when they followed the neighbour [Maa Dede] to where her husband was being lynched and Adobea did the most important thing. She called the police. (Terry)

There is the issue of sisterhood and you see that image right clearly when the three friends came together and they were lying side-by-side and they started singing, 'This Little Light of Mine', and they saw the light of the ghost … Throughout they worked together sort of, and it was almost like a relay. Theresa was in a vulnerable state and she was comforted by the detective; and then Buki went to help Adobea and then she herself was in need and Theresa came to help her. So, it's like they all helped each other. (Adjoa)

Participants from the groups perceived all the women to be supportive of each other and society. Their readings suggest that the support the women received from one another helped them to succeed. In a sense, while the male group articulated ideas about the expression of humanity among the women, the female group emphasised the women's expression of sisterhood. Much as gender identity account for the nuances in the readings, the decoded meanings align with the filmmaker's encoded message to promote the idea that as humans, women can advance their collective interest when they work together, that female friendship and bonding can foster women's agency and be made to serve women to liberate themselves.

Despite the above readings, the groups displayed some key differences. On one hand, the male participants commended the women for teaching and inspiring each other. They identified that in the process of supporting each other, one woman was courageous, particularly during the scene where they confronted the 'ghost' in the clinic.

When they were going to find the ghost, I wasn't surprised to see that the American woman (Theresa) was leading the other women because most of the time we see it in movies. Are we always to justify that they are adventurous? And funny enough our women were second. Must it be like that all the time? (Kojo)

The male group identified Theresa, the African American, as the most courageous because she led the women to discover that the supposed ghost is a homeless refugee girl. Perhaps drawing partially from their understanding of postcolonial discourse, they saw unequal power relations among the women and therefore criticised the filmmaker for following a colonial mentality of cultural inferiority where they perceived the Ghanaian women to have

been projected as less brave than the 'outsider' – the African American woman. It is worthwhile to mention that while anti-colonial discourse argues for the need to resist Western superiority, the male group decoded this oppositional reading producing ideas less about the shared black experience and identity between the Ghanaian women and the African American woman, and more about Western imperialism which for them geographically included 'African America'. This reading pushes against the filmmaker's implied ideology where she projects different and similar experiences of Ghanaian and diaspora female characters, but not racial hierarchy nor 'the white saviour' concept because Theresa was not white. Hall (2006) asserts that 'there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to "pre-fer" but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence' (p. 170). The reading is significant because it suggests that in this case, gender was not a determining factor in how the audience members made sense of women's representations in the film. Their identity as Ghanaians and by extension Africans located on the continent took precedence and shaped the way they decoded the images of women.

The female participants, on the other hand, rather recognised all the women to be courageous, a reading that we believe falls in line with the dominant meaning that the filmmaker sought to portray. The following lengthy quote is instructive:

> Looking at all the women, I'm feeling so proud to be a woman because they show that we are strong … look at each of them and what they went through. In the end, they all found their feet. They were still able to stand and forge their way through. It [the movie] just depicts us as superheroes. Someway somehow, we can deal with it no matter how hard it is. It can be losing seven children, it can be not seeing my daughter for 12 years, it can be me knowing that I love the man and I'm still saying I am staying away from him because I am not too sure. Whatever it is we know that in the end, we are just going to stand strong and come out of it one way or the other. (Helena)

In the context of social suppression and all the life challenges that Buki, Adobea, Theresa and Maa Dede go through, the female focus group did not only commend and find the women's attitude and actions impressive, but also articulated a sense of appreciation for the fact that their heroisms are representative of women's experiences in the society and reassuring for all women including themselves. They seemed delighted to have witnessed that in the film.

Most of the participants from both groups executed 'a repertoire of [similar] strategies' about humanity and acknowledged that all the female characters had their individual challenges, but their difficulties did not stop them from helping one another (Fish, 1980, p 171). Moreover, they believed the characters learned from each other's experiences to overcome individual challenges and become better people. Considering this, the female participants agreed that 'women are strong when they work together, learn from each

other, understand and accept each other'. This reading concurs with African feminist thought which recognises that true liberation for women begins with themselves and their perception of one another (Davies, 1990). It is in this context that the female participants found the characters to be heroines and identified with their heroic qualities. What is interesting here is the way the reading from the female group is framed; it appears the decoding is interpreted through their gender and probably feminist-inclined positions and through an inspirational framework. Their interpretive principles on women's progress constituted the properties of meaning they assigned to their understanding of female bonding in the film (Fish, 1980).

Conclusion

As the discussion has shown and in line with the dominant messages projected, both male and female focus groups were convinced in their views that *Ties that Bind* in its representation of women produced ideas about Ghanaian women's experiences and realities. The findings reveal that both groups in their construction of meanings decoded that women across classes, educational, and professional backgrounds are burdened by traditional expectations of them, especially in the family. The study set out to identify the possible differences in ways gender informed male and female focus groups' readings. However, it is evident that the participants' interpretations, besides gender, were mediated by other intervening factors that included educational background, ideas about Ghanaian culture, age, moral principles, feminist ideologies, postcolonial sentiment, intertextual knowledge, and location as Ghanaians and by extension, Africans.

There were similarities and differences in the ways both groups made sense of the representations. The female participants largely produced meanings that aligned with the filmmaker's intended ideologies. They felt the decision to present not-so-perfect female characters – women with strengths and weaknesses – allowed the female filmmaker to lay bare various causes of women's plight for collective redress. While they found several of the depictions of women's experiences relatable, they participated in criticising sociocultural practices that oppressed women and emphasised that the film advocates for society to have realistic expectations of women. Thus, constructing meanings that aligned with the filmmaker's dominant message which appropriates justice and female agency that overcomes oppressive practices and promotes strong female bonding and interdependence among women and men to spearhead social change. On the other hand, the male participants constructed mixed readings which included *dominant*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* meanings where like the female group they criticised sociocultural forces that subjugate women, but in addition criticised women's passive attitude as responsible for their oppression. They felt the film's portrayals of women created awareness of women's struggles and experiences to its Ghanaian audiences and further thought it promoted justice for women and children.

While the female group viewed the representations of women and women's issues in *Ties that Bind* as progressive, the male group largely saw them as progressive albeit with

aspects not-so-progressive. It should be noted that these findings are contrary to what Azeez (2010) and Okunna (1996) found in the male-directed Nigerian video films where audiences perceived female representations as negative and capable of influencing the perception of women in the larger society.

In view of our findings, we conclude that the male participants demonstrated their awareness of and concern for the difficulties faced by women in the Ghanaian society and found some aspects of women's lives as portrayed in the film instructive. Female participants, on the other hand, identified with the representations of the experiences of women in the film and felt inspired by their courage and actions to free themselves from the burdens of life imposed on them by societal expectations, thus finding the representations largely progressive. Ultimately, our analysis, while supporting the notion that audiences produce nuanced readings and actively make meanings that reinforce their values and beliefs, also reveals that audiences are aware of the changing sociocultural mores that liberate women and bring improvement to their lives.

It is worth noting that a case could be made that our discussions and conclusions about 'Ghanaian culture' must be tampered. This is due to the fact that, given the diasporic background of the filmmaker as explained earlier, and the film's high production values compared to most locally produced movies in Ghana, and also its limited circulation, an argument can probably be made that the film's dominant message is directed toward Ghanaians who are well-educated and perhaps familiar with transnational feminist discourses. And indeed, our focus group participants may well fall into this category of educated Ghanaians. This group, it can also be argued, may by extension, have access to cultural (and perhaps economic) capital not available to some, if not many Ghanaians. Nonetheless, we would argue that their discussions and (re)productions of 'Ghanaian culture' can still be viewed as authentic and largely representative, albeit (re)presented through educated eyes. This is because 'Ghanaian culture', like any other culture has core strands that are shared by majority due to having attained a certain definiteness of applying form and a relative permanence, and those are the aspects that have been referred to here. To that extent then, even though the study does not include groups or individuals from different classes or educational backgrounds, or even from outside Ghana, we would still contend that the responses we recorded, although limited in terms of group (re)presentation, to a large extent reflect ideologies that we have identified as 'Ghanaian' in this study.

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Appendix: Interview Guide for Focus Group Sessions

1) What do you think are some of the ways that women are portrayed in the film you have just seen?

2) What in your view, are some of the issues about women are raised in the film and by the film?

3) Are there any ways in which you can say you relate to the images in the film? If so how? If not, please explain.

4) Is there in your view, any relationship between your perception and interpretation of the images in the film and the way in which you see women in contemporary Ghana? Please explain your response, either way.

5) As a female or male participant, what are your perceptions and interpretations of the way women are represented in the film?

6) Do you think your identity as a man or woman has influenced your interpretation of the images and issues raised in the film? How (if any)?

7) What other factors have influenced the ways you have interpreted the images and issues in the film?

8) Of all that you have discussed is there anything you would like to add?

Notes:

[1] The Nigerian film industry is also referred to as Nollywood.

[2] The Efua Sutherland Drama Studio (located at the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana) – as the name suggests was named after the renowned Ghanaian dramatist and the first Ghanaian woman to make a film. Much as the studio is used as a performance space for theatre programs, films are screened weekly for the University community and public.

[3] American Corner (AC) at the Legon Centre for International Affairs (LECIA) is an arm of the US Embassy Public Affairs Section of the Embassy in Accra, Ghana, which aims to provide a much more open environment for the Ghanaian public and the University community to access information on the United States. It is also a place where workshops, book readings, and film shows are organised for students and the public. It was therefore considered a suitable place to contact potential participants who were interested in a wide range of things including film. The focus group discussion was also hosted there.

[4] Transnational feminist discourse recognises that there are distinct conceptions of gender equality and freedom for various women.

[5] See Appendix for the interview guide.

[6] Between December 2012 and June 2020, we have had several interviews with Djansi on her filmmaking practices, thematic preoccupations, gender representations, and diasporic and ethnic sensibilities in her works.

[7] Djansi revealed this in a personal interview on 4 March 2014.

[8] In traditional Ghanaian society and culture, as Kwansah-Aidoo (2002) has noted, 'group life, particularly reciprocal relationships, is cherished in all ethnic groups and is supported by various maxims and proverbs' (p.155).

[9] Culturally, womanhood is validated through a woman's ability to bear children, and Djansi disclosed in an interview that *Ties that Bind* is loosely based on her own mother's experiences.

[10] In traditional Ghanaian society, it is not uncommon to attribute inexplicable phenomena to witchcraft, and in particular inability to bear children or sustain the lives of children born. It is considered a given that a woman would have children and keep them alive so that they can cater for their parents in their old age. Consequently, it is inconceivable to many that, that which is taken for granted and seen as natural, would not happen. So, without any tangible explanation, witchcraft on the part of the woman, or sometimes another family member, usually a female, becomes the avenue through which some people try to make sense of something they find incomprehensible.

[11] In our view, the filmmaker's solution can be seen in two ways: (1), as a critique of the tendency by some Ghanaians, even when educated, to seek religious solutions to problems that can otherwise be resolved in more scientific ways, and (2) as a demonstration of how medical science can help provide solutions to some of these regular and seemingly inexplicable occurrences within the society, thus doing away with some of the superstitious beliefs surrounding such happenings.

[12] Mothers-in-law in most of Nollywood videos are often projected as vindictive, manipulative, troublesome, jealous, and wicked (see Agbese, 2010).

[13] It is worth mentioning that the participants made these comments because they were aware the filmmaker is yet to be married.