



Film Review: *Òlòtūrẹ́*

By: Xavier Burke

The Nollywood film *Òlòtūrẹ́* is a poignant social critique of Nigeria which is less like a movie and more so a documentary. The film tells the story of *Òlòtūrẹ́*, a young journalist who goes undercover as a prostitute in Lagos to expose the complex layers and actors of the multi-billion-dollar prostitution and human trafficking rings. She quickly discovers a complex transnational web of violence, transactional sex, corruption, and rape. The mostly female cast of the movie does an excellent job enthralling the viewer in their portrayals of various Nigerian women desperate to make it to the “next level” in Europe, where they think life will be better and their prostitution more lucrative—something easier said than done. What awaits them is a harrowing journey through the underworld of Lagos filled with unbridled exploitation, madams, politicians, people smugglers, and murder.

Executive producer Mo Abdul sought to create not only a visually captivating film that would entertain viewers with its realism but also a call to action. Abdul hoped that Nigerian state and civil society would be compelled to address the societal woes that push so many innocent young women to risk limb and freedom for hopes of a better future abroad—and ultimately disband

the trafficking syndicates. The film is partially inspired and based on a 2014 article by Nigerian journalist Toboure Ovuorie in the Premium Times “INVESTIGATION: Inside Nigeria’s Ruthless Human Trafficking Mafia.” Toboure went undercover as a prostitute in the city of Abuja. The article frames many of the scenes and themes of the film like the deeply entrenched corruption and criminality in elite Nigerian political society that enables prostitution-trafficking rings. Inequality, exploitation of rural less-educated women, the ruthless madams who act as middlemen, the idea of the “next level” (how the girls refer to prostituting in Europe), forced unprotected sex, falsified passports, and even gruesome murder are uncovered during Toboure’s undercover stint.¹

In a key scene at the beginning of the film, Ehi (whose real name, Òlòtūrè, is synonymous with the film’s title) returns to the boarding home where she lives with other prostitutes, and viewers are introduced to the other main protagonist in the film, Linda. She offers an emotionally ruffled and physically bruised Ehi a marijuana joint and says “...take this joint, it will help with the pain.” The pain Linda is referring to is a double-entendre of the physical and emotional pain prostitution takes on the women. Linda is cognizant of the grim reality in which she finds herself. The house the girls live in is a bare wooden structure and their bedroom is nothing more than two small mattress pads strewn on the ground with their belongings on a few raggedy shelves. Linda and Ehi go on to discuss the possibilities of going to Europe through a madam that Linda has been paying periodically for some time.

The next scene shows Linda walking through market stalls to pay the madam who will facilitate her trip to Europe. Unbeknownst to Linda, Ehi follows her and begs the madam to also take her to Europe. Ehi cries that she is desperate to go to Europe to make more money. This scene is key in establishing a power dynamic of patronage. By portraying her tactical weakness to the madam, Ehi is hoping that she will agree to accept her pleas to take her to Europe. This overt

portrayal of tactical weakness, be it true or not, is discussed in Claudia Seymour's *The Myth of International Protection War and Survival in the Congo*. Although the context of the film differs from the realities of the bloody war that has engulfed the Congo for decades, the young women in the film are convinced that life will only improve by finding someone, in this case, the madam, that will take them to "next level".² The snappy madam, who we later learn is named Alero, initially rejects Ehi. Madam Alero loudly berates and shoves Linda away from her stall for exposing her illegal human trafficking work to an unknown and thus untrusted person. The rejection is superficial and serves only to further entrench a power dynamic between Madam Alero and the women. In a later scene, Linda informs Ehi that Madam Alero accepted her plea and invites her to a party with important people that night.

In a later scene, as Ehi and the others enter Madam Alero's car on the way to the party she sets the scene "...anything they [the party goers] want, you give." The party is in a high-rise luxury apartment and amongst the revelry, Madam Alero interrupts a conversation of some chatting men, "leave the politics Sir Phillip" she says as she introduces Ehi to him. Sir Phillip takes an immediate interest in Ehi and the party progresses into an orgy. As the two converse, Sir Phillip tries to drug Ehi's champagne on a secluded balcony. Ehi evades by spilling the champagne on her dress, but after emerging from the bathroom where she devises the plan to fake an illness to escape the sexual advances, he offers her a pill to remedy her fictitious pains. Ehi has no option but to take the pill, and she loses consciousness just as Sir Phillip mounts and rapes her without a condom. At the end of the party, Madam Alero receives a large sum of US dollars and the other women help a still drugged Ehi down the steps and back into the car. The rape of Ehi by a high-ranking politician illustrates the depths of corruption and criminality that enable such trafficking rings to operate with carte blanche in Nigerian society. The powerful scene leaves the viewer to reflect: if even the

“big man” influential politicians are willing participants, then who in society will be the catalyst for change?

Next, Linda’s much younger rural innocent sister, Beauty, arrives by bus to Lagos after Linda calls home to her mother to send for her. Linda’s mother, who notably lives in a reed hut in the bush and does not speak English, is not aware that her daughter is working as a prostitute to send money home nor that Linda plans to take Beauty to Europe via Madam Alero. We see that Linda is an economic migrant that moved to Lagos from an underdeveloped rural area with hopes to build a better future, but with no viable alternative, she turns to prostitution. Beauty is representative of the familial burden carried by economic migrants and especially the many young women who resort to smugglers to reach Europe’s shores.

Later we watch as the women board a bus and are taken to a house on the outskirts of Lagos for training before departing for Europe. Here the women meet violent, verbal, and aggressive smugglers that will take them to Italy. The women receive a quick briefing on the new house rules, falsified passports, and are forced to sign a sham contract that indentures them to their new smugglers. The dubious wording of the obviously unprofessional and therefore nonbinding contract is briefly shown on camera. Ehi, an educated journalist, attempts to read the contract but Madam Alero purposefully forces her to quickly sign and forbids any questions. This scene illustrates how smugglers prey on naive uneducated women who have no objections to signing what they believe is a real legal contract.

Disobeying the new rules, Linda is caught as she makes a phone call to her mother and is ultimately beheaded in front of her sister and all the other women to make a statement about the consequences of disobedience. The women ‘voluntarily’ subject themselves to this treatment, they even *pay* for it, in exchange for passage to Europe. In the book by Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano

Migrant, Refugee, Smuggler Saviour, smugglers are discussed as service providers; albeit violent and with little regard to the wellbeing of their human cargo, smugglers are essentially providing a service to bypass barriers where few legal options are available.³ In this case, the barriers are international migration laws that limit the free movement of people. Traumatized after eye-witnessing Linda's beheading, and realizing that she has finally gone too far, Ehi plans to flee with Beauty when they reach the Benin-Nigeria border. The escape plan backfires when only Beauty escapes and Ehi is knocked unconscious by a smuggler and put back into the bus and taken across the border.

The eventual unintended trafficking of Ehi, an undercover journalist, highlights the need to know when to disengage. When attempting to "do good" one must always know where lie the boundaries for physical safety and mental wellbeing. After being raped by Sir Philipp, the line blurs between work and personal affairs. Òlòtūrè is unable to separate 'Ehi' from herself even at the expense of her physical safety. Fearing for her safety, Emeka, her supervisor at the newspaper tries to remove her from the story but Òlòtūrè emphatically professes that the story is hers and refuses to leave the case. Òlòtūrè's emotions and headstrongness lead to her ultimate demise.

Òlòtūrè is a hauntingly factual portrayal of the horrors of human trafficking. The film's emotional appeal is palpable even to viewers who may know nothing about Nigeria. The film does not shy away from showing sexual assault or shocking violence to theatrically present reality. Corruption, criminality, grinding poverty, and hopes of a better life at "the next level" are driving themes of the film. Ultimately, viewers are offered a glimpse of the desperate lives of Lagos prostitutes, the very humane reasons for their lifestyle choices, and the exorbitant amount of exploitation and violence they endure.

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