

FILM REVIEW

Yaseen Auwal, dir. *Fuska Biyu* (“Double-faced”). 2018. 90 minutes. Hausa, with English subtitles. UK Entertainment. No price reported.

The Kannywood film industry struggles for recognition outside of Nigeria as well as within. The globally better-known Nollywood eclipses the many movies being produced under the auspices of Kannywood, which is largely confined to the northern part of the country. Furthermore, the northern film art swims against the tide of its own culture and, by extension, the dominant religion of its base. It is within this context that Yaseen Auwal directed *Fuska Biyu* (meaning “double-faced”), a highly topical socio-cultural and political critique of the establishment.

Religious and social traditions both demand that parents should run some background check on the prospective husband of their daughter. However, as Nigeria overtook India as the poverty capital of the world in 2018, many low-income families hurried to marry off their daughters without any verification of their prospective husbands. Normally, once a girl reaches a certain age, her parents begin to pressure her to marry. *Fuska Biyu* demonstrates the danger inherent in such an approach by telling the story of a kidnapping kingpin, Ubale aka Django (played by Adam A. Zango), who disguises himself as a lame, local fish seller during the day. Rashida (Amal Umar), an innocent girl, sells food next to Ubale’s stall, and the two fall in love. The gifts Ubale gives Rashida lead her mother to suspect that something is not quite right. However, Rashida’s father insists that his daughter has found a marriageable husband who is fortunately also a Muslim. He realizes his mistake only when it is too late.

The “fish seller” Ubale is a product of a broken home, a typical case in northern Nigeria today. We learn in flashback that he was abandoned by his mother and later by his stepmother. The home disintegrated due to his father’s insistence on taking a second wife, to which Ubale’s mother doggedly objected and for which she eventually left her husband. Much of his childhood is left unnarrated. This depiction is unique in present-day Hausaland, for most Boko Haram members who come from broken families end up at *makarantun allo* (traditional Qur’anic schools) under uncaring *Malams* (teachers). Abubakar Shekau, their extremist leader, was an Almajiri (a student of such a school), his mother told the VOA Hausa. In this story, however, Ubale, became a notorious kidnapper.

In a dramatic turn, Ubale blames corrupt politicians for his situation. It is implied rather than stated that he, along with his gang, operate in Robin Hood style. Not much of this is actually depicted, but in another famous film titled *Gwaska*, with the same actor and similar cast and crew, Ubale robs the wealthy, especially corrupt politicians, to feed the poor. Much of that film mimics Bollywood's *Kick* (directed by Sajid Nadiadwala [2014] and starring Salman Kahn), a familiar pattern found in several Kannywood films. In *Fuska Biyu*, however, Ubale murders innocent, local members of the community who attempt to discover his real identity.

Fuska Biyu treats a current, troubling subject matter daringly. Several directors would avoid making a film like this for fear it would entail condemnation and danger—condemnation because it destabilizes cultural practices such as early marriage and polygyny, and also because it indicts corrupt politicians. Kidnapping is currently a thriving business in northern Nigeria, although it was formerly preponderant in the southern region. But poverty, illiteracy, weak security mechanisms, and generally dysfunctional infrastructure have given impetus to this dreadful trade in the north. Thus, some may fear for their safety to make a film on this topic, just as they avoid producing films about Boko Haram.

Auwal's *Fuska Biyu* is quite unconventional, as it is not based on Kannywood's familiar sub-plot elements of forced marriage and friends' rivalries, and it lacks song and dance sequences. This departure from the usual conventional elements makes it all the more dramatic and novel. Some of the scenes are arguably overdramatized, unconvincing, or utterly unnecessary. Still, the film, as a socio-political critique of contemporary Nigeria, delivers a strong message to both its audience and the powers that be. The audiences are warned against abandoning their responsibilities as heads of a family. Corrupt politicians share the blame, as they get richer by the day while the poor become poorer. This film serves as both a cautionary tale and a morality play, as well as a strong commentary on social ills.

Muhammad Muhsin Ibrahim
 University of Cologne
 Cologne, Germany
 mibrahi3@uni-koeln.de

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.51