

Beyond the Palace Walls: Awarun and Female Power in Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulápó: Rise of the Spectre*

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"Mo lè se ohunkóhun tí ó wùmí pèlú ẹnikẹni, kòsì ẹnikan tó le bi mi."

["I can do whatever I like with anyone I please and no one dares question me"] - Awarun in *Aníkúlápó*

Abstract: In the majority of African societies, women have historically been restricted by patriarchal systems that define their lives mainly through domesticity and marriage. In "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective," Filomina Steady makes the case that African women frequently experience "triple subjugation through race, class, and gender, compounded by traditional customs that restrict their social mobility and economic independence" (4). The character of Awarun in Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó* (2022) deviates from these conventional limitations, though. By rejecting the marriage plot and retaining control over her sexual desires and financial affairs, Awarun, a wealthy merchant and independent woman, subverts social norms. This paper reads her differently and contends that Awarun's character reimagines female agency in pre-colonial Yoruba society, despite the fact that traditional readings and critics might dismiss her as an unfaithful or morally loose woman. She demonstrates how female authority can exist and flourish outside of traditional spaces of power by operating outside of the palace's hierarchical structure and wielding significant economic and social power through her trading empire. Her deliberate use of money to support Saro's business ventures and her unreserved mastery over her sexual preferences represent female empowerment that goes against conventional notions of African womanhood. Therefore, this paper argues that Afolayan's definition of Awarun as a director presents viewers with a character who embodies power in African cinema through economic independence and personal agency rather than through culture, monarchical inheritance, or marital alliance.

I. Introduction

Aníkúlápó, which Kunle Afolayan released in 2022, received a lot of attention. The reviews were very favorable. Shola-Adido Oladotun in his post on Tribune Online hailed it as "commendable in many ways," likening its scope in terms of ambition and cultural representation (Tribune Online, 2022). A Glover review also praised the film's bold portrayal of polygamy, patriarchy, and supernatural elements as well as saying that Afolayan in the film, "washed Yorubá people's dirty linens in public," an act regarded as both controversial and necessary for truthful cultural storytelling (Glover, 2022.). Critics have also underlined Afolayan's technical prowess and hailed the film as "a beautiful, magnificently compelling, immersive experience, highlighting Afolayan's signature style of intelligent embracing of Africanness in every visible way possible. (Kindred Reviews, 2023; Ibirónké, 2022).

Nonetheless, the tension of this paper is that while most scholarly and critical discourse center on Saro and metaphysical justice in the film, there is minimal academic engagement that have focused on the gender narrative in the film especially in how this paper attempts a deconstructive reading and shifts attention to Awarun, a female character whose agency and autonomy exist outside palace politics and metaphysical spectacle.

Academic debates have interacted with *Aníkúlápó* and its sequel *Rise of the Spectre*, evaluating its cultural, historical, and gendered dimensions. OlagokeIfatimehin (2023) investigates the film as a mimetic representation of Yoruba myth and culture. His study suggests that *Aníkúlápó* borrows from oral traditions and collective memory, but reconfigures myth via a creative, paronomasiac lens. For Ifatimehin, the film should not be judged by its adherence to historical or mythological source material, but by its capacity for internal coherence and interpretive complexity. In a more socially oriented assessment, OsakpolorEmwinromwankhoe (2025) investigates gender representation in *Aníkúlápó*, highlighting how the film follows the Nollywood practice of depicting women through stereotyped and reductive frameworks. He observes that many of the female characters are depicted as vengeful, lethargic, or sexually manipulating images that mirror broader patriarchal narratives in Nigerian society. Emwinromwankhoe finally calls on Nigerian filmmakers to resist

such clichés and produce more nuanced, egalitarian portrayals of women. While these existing studies offer valuable insights, especially regarding the film's use of mythology and its engagement with gender politics, such as the layered cultural aesthetics of the film what Oladipupo Ganiyu alludes to "present[ing] an aspect of Yoruba metaphysics and culture...and in-depth systemic thinking" (Ganiyu, 2022, p. 1), this paper gives a more focused intervention and centers on Awarun, as an emergent form of female authority, who is emotionally self-contained, and resistant to gendered norms. Her space becomes a spatial metaphor for authority beyond the palace, and her character pursues a subversive path of female autonomy.

Awarun, this paper contends, is an archetype of Obioma Nnaemeka's negofeminism, a distinct African feminist concept centered in negotiation, economic autonomy and sexual self-determination. According to this analysis, Awarun is a crucial figure in comprehending how New Nollywood reimagines female authority rather than serving as a counterpoint to Saro, the film's bi protagonist. According to Nnaemeka's theories, African women in patriarchal environments need to be prepared to compromise with patriarchy. In this sense, Awarun is a part of the storyline of the movie since she believes that her economic space and sovereignty can only be achieved through strategic relationships and negotiation. Despite this, people like Akanji try to limit her and categorize her as immoral and unfit to be around, calling her "obinrin to je okunrin" (a woman who devours men 20:22). We understand this derogatory remark about Awarun to be the result of jealousy and males like Akanji's incapacity to control a woman they anticipate will conform and be less independent. This study aims to expand Nollywood gender discourse by focusing on Awarun as a central character. It also proposes a reimagined architecture of female power in African cinema, one that is shaped by material control, sexual independence, and strategic resilience rather than widowhood, marital sacrifice, or metaphysical redemption.

II. Nollywood and Nigerian Film Production

Nigerian cinema and mainstream culture predate the 1960s and may have expanded in various ways over time. But according to Onyenakeya and Osunkunle (2019), the Nollywood period started in earnest in 1992. The Nigerian film industry has grown dramatically since 1992, establishing it as one of the most significant in the world. However, other critics believe that Nollywood is continuously producing films that exalt unfavorable characters, themes, or plots. Stereotyping women is one of these known drawbacks.

According to Onyenakeya and Osunkunle (2019), Nollywood's gender roles for women have not progressed beyond conventional roles, remaining mired in the past with unfavorable gender stereotypes and representations of women based on the prevailing social value of patriarchy. Because of this stance, women are typically represented in strict stereotypes, such as selfless mothers, virtuous wives, seductresses punished for their libido, barren wives, evil mothers-in-law, and so on. This depiction holds true throughout various research. For example, according to Okunna (2002) (quoted in Comrie, 2019, p. 9), women in Nollywood are often portrayed as "subservient, dependent, and fit for domestic roles rather than professional and career roles." Afolayan's films perpetuate this trend by portraying female characters as lazy, cunning, vindictive, or narrowly sexualized, according to Koffi's recent survey on Nollywood portrayals (Koffi, 2024). Additionally, Aronmona (2016) confirms that Nollywood films seem to consistently portray women as unambitious domestic servants, warm and incompetent but cold and competent when vying for the same resource as the dominant group, subjugating the image of women.

Abiodun Olayiwola (2022) supports this viewpoint in a related study, contending that patriarchal codes restrict the agency of women on and off screen. In particular, Nollywood has borne this burden while juggling its own cultural allegiances and financial limitations. The most important conclusion reached by all of these scholars, including (Dutt, 2014; Omoera, Elegbe&Doghudje, 2019; Omoera&Okwuowulu, 2021), is that women have been packaged and portrayed in the media through a variety of stereotypical and discriminatory lenses, such as prostitutes, full-time housewives, witches and destructive folk, subordinates, objects of ritual and exploitation, and models of waywardness. As a result, women in mainstream Nigerian cinema are frequently torn between victimization and moral absolutism: they are either the femme fatale punished for her desire, the obedient wife, or the suffering mother.

However, Chikwurah Destiny Isiguzo (2025) expands on the academic discussion of Nollywood and its cinematic heritage by making a distinction between Old and New Nollywood, a framework that has been previously presented by academics like M. Jonathan Haynes (2016) and Adejunmobi (2015). By doing this, Isiguzo strengthens the theoretical framework pertaining to the development of Nollywood, especially with regard to aesthetic form and ideological content. She highlights how Old Nollywood, which was frequently criticized for its "sloppy aesthetics and techniques" (p.4), mainly depended on stories that portrayed women as sexualized characters or submissive objects of male heroes. She contends that these depictions were indicative of a deeper patriarchal logic ingrained in the industry's early storytelling conventions rather than just representational errors (p. 7). New Nollywood, on the other hand, represents a substantial break from these previous frameworks. As Isiguzo points out, it is distinguished by increased attention to gender politics and

narrative complexity in addition to better production quality and worldwide distribution. According to Adejunmobi (2015), New Nollywood gives female characters more agency and narrative centrality, enabling them to "confront patriarchal forces, make sense of their own lives, and chart their own paths" (p. 39). This viewpoint is consistent with that assertion. In this sense, the New Nollywood movement becomes more than a cinematic upgrade, it represents a cultural and ideological shift that makes space for alternative modes of African womanhood. This conceptual distinction between Old and New Nollywood is critical to my analysis. In charting female characters who are economically empowered, sexually autonomous, and emotionally self-possessed, recent films such as Kemi Adetiba's *King of Boys* (2018), *Queen Amina* (2021), and Funke Akindele's *A Tribe Called Judah* (2024) exemplify this reconfiguration. These films foreground women whose authority are not dependent on traditional patriarchal validation but instead grounded in alternative systems which include commerce, kinship, and personal sovereignty. Within this context, Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulápó* (2022) and its sequel *Rise of the Scepter* present the character of Awarun as representing a new frame of female elevation in Nollywood and provides another significant illustration of how the New Nollywood reimagines the architecture of female power. To this end, while different scholarships have ostensibly identified systemic misogyny in mainstream Nollywood, this paper claims that *Anikulápó* offers a notable counterpoint through Awarun. She is neither palace-bred nor morally defined. Economically independent and sexually autonomous, she defies patriarchal expectations even going far as having multiple lovers, including Saro. She kicks against every attempt by patriarchy to regulate her personhood and sexuality which is somewhat of a cultural risk associated with her independence to the men around her.

III. On *Anikulápó: Rise of the Scepter*

As Adeduntan (2014) asserts, "For much of the twentieth century, researchers studying African culture have portrayed it as a story-telling culture, drawing primarily from a fabulous worldview" (p.34). Adeduntan's assertion gives credence to Afolayan's narrative. Inspired by a story acknowledged to IfayemiElebuibon (this is known only because the film gives that much credit in its pretext) who cites a verse of the Ifa's oracle divination called "Idin'osun", *Anikulapo* tells of a traveler from Gbogban, Saro a weaver of Aso-ofi, who goes from one town to the next in search of new markets for his business. He chances upon Oyo-Ile where a rich merchant and member of the royal court, Awarun, becomes his benefactor. His impressive weaving leads him to the palace of the Oba where he finds love in the youngest wife of the king, Queen Arolake, who sneaks out of the palace to visit him in his hut at night. His benefactor, who also sleeps with him, discovers the sacrilegious relationship between Saro and Arolake, and cautions him of this. Saro denies his sexual misdemeanor with the queen. He continues to see Arolake until the young Princess, who is also in love with Saro, finds them out and reports them to the palace.

The lovers are caught and Saro is beaten to death. The great Akala bird uses its resurrection power to bring Saro back to life. Arolake snatches the power of the mysterious bird, and they make their way to a faraway town to begin their lives anew.

There, the son of the hunter they first meet dies and Arolake seizes the opportunity to present the power of resurrection to Saro who brings the boy back to life. Soon, Saro's fame grew, and he becomes an important man because of his ability to resurrect the dead, earning the nickname *Anikulapo* (he who carries death in his pouch). He marries more wives to compliment his growing ego and arrogance and snatches the opportunity to seek for the hand of the princess in marriage as the price to resurrect the prince who has recently died. Arolake, who now feels neglected and 'useless' empties the gourd of resurrection thus rendering *Anikulapo* powerless, and leaves. The king agrees to his request to give the princess to him as wife, but *Anikulapo* is unable to resurrect the prince because the gourd has now lost its potency. His failure leads to his death, but the great Akala bird returns and resurrects him yet again.

Olagokelfatimehin (2023) in his analysis of the film, consider the mimetic resources of Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* and narrational style as a derivative of history/myth. The film acknowledges its reliance on a story told by IfayemiElebuibon and deploys a narrative voice in reeling out the plot of the film. This voice functions at the same time as that of a narrator who is not affected by the incidents in the film as well as that of the director who superimposes his interpretation of the story above the one that first inspired him through the filmic technicalities of voice-over and motion pictures.

IV. Theoretical Framework

African feminist views have evolved diversity of frameworks to account for the actual experiences of women on the continent, frequently in contradiction to Western liberal or radical feminist theories. Foundational figures such as Filomina Chioma Steady, in her *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981), stressed the communal roles of African women and the interconnectedness of gender roles within traditional African civilizations. IfiAmadiume, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), questioned the Western gender binary

by illustrating how gender and power are often fluid and contextually assigned in Igbo cosmology. Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women* (1997) interrogates the application of Western feminist concepts to African nations, suggesting that gender in Yoruba philosophy, for instance, is not the major axis of social organization. Molará Ogundipe-Leslie, a significant voice in African feminism, established the STIWANISM model—Social Transformation Including Women in Africa—insisting that African feminism must be founded in indigenous realities, socio-economic histories, and cultural settings. She urged for a feminism attuned to the linkages of gender with class, culture, and colonial heritage. Meanwhile, Nnaemeka Obioma advanced nego-feminism, a particularly African feminist ideology focused on negotiation, collaboration, and non-confrontational resistance.

In engaging Kunle Afolayan's *Aníkúlápó*, this study focuses explicitly on Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism as the fundamental theoretical lens. Nnaemeka coined the word in reaction to the complex realities of African women's lives, noting that African feminists have long practiced feminism "with a small f" one anchored in lived experience rather than dogmatic doctrine. According to Nnaemeka (2004), nego-feminism is "the feminism of negotiation; no ego feminism; the feminism that speaks for and with; the feminism that challenges through accommodating and negotiating" (p. 378). It does not reject men or tradition outright but aims to operate via social and cultural systems in smart ways.

Nego-feminism emphasizes relational autonomy and contextual agency, ideas that resonate powerfully in many African communities where familial and communal bonds are paramount. Rather than confrontational or individualistic methods to emancipation, it fosters collaboration, adaptability, and the subtle reorganization of power. As Nnaemeka writes, African women typically "negotiate spaces in ways that allow them to thrive without necessarily threatening the social order, but also without surrendering their agency" (p. 380). Awarun, a character whose economic independence, sexual autonomy, and political nuance make her a figure of power and self-definition, can be examined through this model. The nego-feminist mentality is shown in Awarun's inability to cleanly fit into traditional or domestic duties and her ability to navigate male-dominated places without outright challenging the system. As is typical of many depictions of women in Nollywood films, her journey does not follow the path of revolt via pain. Rather, she negotiates power in her surroundings to exert influence over them. She doesn't completely surrender to patriarchal institutions or look to them for approval.

In conclusion, a reading of Awarun that transcends the dichotomies of oppression and resistance is made possible by nego-feminism. It offers a vocabulary for interpreting her nuanced kind of power, which is strategic, flexible, and grounded in her material and social circumstances rather than passive or combative. By using this lens, the study promotes a reading of *Aníkúlápó* that positions Awarun as an example of African female agency, one who, by being present outside the palace walls, reshapes the parameters of acceptable femininity.

V. Gender, Power, and Space

The importance of Awarun's character cannot be overstated, even if the plot of *Aníkúlápó* centers on the romance and subsequent treachery between Arolake and Saro. As previously said, Saro arrives in the historic town of Oyo as a traveling stranger, a man looking for work and a place to call home. Saro meets Awarun, a seasoned entrepreneur and renowned craftswoman in the Oyo Empire, at this time of emotional and financial instability. Attracted by Saro's young attractiveness, Awarun offers him a job and a method to achieve his goal of becoming a well-known *aso-ofi* (local woven cloth) manufacturer. Eventually, their connection develops into a sexual liaison after becoming both transactional and personal. Saro becomes well-known thanks to Awarun's connections and power, especially when she presents him to the royal court, which hires him to weave (45:30). Awarun serves as a conduit for Saro to acquire social capital and career progress, highlighting her function as a gatekeeper to both elite and labor culture. This moment, albeit being subtle, represents a significant turning point. Awarun's stance and support what Judith A. Byfield (2002), Nina Mba (1982), Bolanle Awe (1992), and A. Kareem-Ojo (2010) has discussed the significance of Yoruba women as political players, economic intermediaries, and gatekeepers of power and market access.

Awarun holds a prominent place at the intersection of gender, space, and economic influence, as demonstrated by Saro's entry into the world of trade and royalty. Awarun functions in and via the royal courtyard, a setting that is usually dominated by men, rather than being restricted to the home. Her house is a place of authority and enterprise rather than just a private residence. Her pottery firm is a prominent economic entity in the city, employing both men and women. In a society that typically makes women invisible or economically dependent, she positions herself as both a producer and a patron, challenging gendered labor norms. "Ore waibabayini a watipaseojowa, a ma pin isewadogbadogba," which translates to "Our friend, this is where we make our daily earnings; we share our work portions equally," is what one of the Awarun employees told Saro. This sums up the fact that Awarun does not treat her employees like slaves or withhold their wages. Her employees, whom she also feeds, view her as being exceedingly giving.

Awarun has a strategic position in an empire, which the movie assumes is the Oyo empire, therefore she is not peripheral in the political ecology of the movie. Awarun's impact on social mobility and resource redistribution, especially for individuals like Saro who come with nothing, is an intervention that goes beyond charity; it is a deliberate act of empowerment that challenges patriarchal norms. Studies of palace-centered urban layouts, lineage-based chieftaincy, and the importance of royal compounds in precolonial city states all demonstrate how power is frequently expressed in Yoruba tradition through spatial control, ancestry, or closeness to the throne (see Smith, 1960; Akinjogbin&Ayandele, 2008, Salami 2006). However, Awarun establishes a different kind of power foundation that is based on social leverage, relational intelligence, and commerce.

In her encounters with Bashorun, Awarun's spatial power and negotiation with patriarchy are also acknowledged. As the highest-ranking officer in the Alaafin's court, Bashorun represented entrenched patriarchy. Awarun isn't scared to challenge him, though. She confronts him openly when he goes too far, especially when he threatens Saro and her children. Her disobedience is political as well as personal (time stamp). She challenges the validity of masculine authority that aims to dominate her home and her body. She makes her voice heard even in the center of Yoruba power, which upends the gendered mechanics of political discourse. Awarun does not lack mother care despite her independence and self-reliance, which are free from patriarchal influence. The dichotomy between the strong lady and the protective mother is rejected in her portrayal. She is both. She reacts with protective wrath rather than passivity when her daughter is in danger. Her persona is made more nuanced by this contradiction, which defies the clichés of the self-effacing mother or the oversexualized entrepreneur. Instead, Awarun is a combination of resistance, love, and power.

All things considered, it is evident that Awarun occupies space in a physical and ideological sense. She is more than just present in Oyo; she negotiates power on her own terms, reorganizes networks of commerce, and controls the flow of labor. Unlike the palace, her home represents change via trade and independence rather than domination via custom.

VI. Sexual Independence and Desire Politics

The conventional frameworks of female identity that link womanhood to marriage, subservience, and reproduction are subverted by Awarun's character. She is seen as a radical character in the New Nollywood film industry because of her refusal to be constrained by these expectations. Awarun's unreserved sexual independence challenges patriarchal dichotomies and the idea that female sexuality needs to be controlled, controlled, or possessed by males. The manner in which male characters try to explain or correct her decisions are the clearest examples of this disobedience. "Awarun has the form of a woman, but she is really a man," says Akanji, a younger man in the hamlet who is Saro's confidant and cautions him against getting involved with her. She adores young men and is a man-eater (25:45).

In addition to attempting to dehumanize Awarun, his disparaging remarks also allude to a societal fear of women who function outside the confines of heteropatriarchal restriction. By suggesting that her sexual aggressiveness makes her "masculine," Akanji skillfully demonstrates how patriarchal cultures frequently mistake female power for abnormality or deviance.

But Awarun doesn't absorb these stories. Rather, she deliberately regains control over her body and choices. Her interactions with men—from Saro and Bashorun to Akano Erin are more carefully planned on her own terms and are never framed in terms of reliance. "Everything I do, no one questions me," she says to Saro. I am free to do anything I want with anybody I choose. Have I asked you to marry me? (35:55) Saro's rejection to limit closeness to established roles is evident in the latter rhetorical question. Awarun refuses to enter into a formal partnership, even when the chance to do so presents itself. She reacts clearly when she finds out that Saro wants to marry her: "I can't marry you... Not like you. Since you are younger, I hope you find a woman who will treat you with dignity, treat you like a king, and bear you children. I'll stand with you and do everything in my power when the time comes (40:55). In this quote, Awarun takes a firm yet persistent stand.

Furthermore, her beliefs are unwavering in the follow-up *Anikulapo: Rise of the Sceptre*. When Bashorun, another important character in the movie and one of her ex-lovers, tries to question her refusal to get married, she reiterates her choice with unmistakable clarity: "I can't marry you." Bashorun suggests that this is because she is financially independent and successful as a merchant, to which Awarun responds positively, saying, "I can't allow or give room to a man who will dictate to me where I will go." Her response emphasizes that her rejection of marriage stems not from contempt but rather from her refusal to cede her autonomy whether it be personal or economic to any patriarchal system. Simone de Beauvoir's description of the heteronormative in *Second Sex*, in which the woman is viewed as the "Other" to the man, is in direct opposition to this answer. She won't compromise her individuality, personhood, or agency. Awarun's choice to forego marriage in spite of cash and emotional investment is a calculated power move rather than a rejection of relationship or compassion. Nnaemeka's logic of negofeminism, which stresses compromise, adaptability, and avoiding viewing feminism as

only resistance, is embodied in this. Instead of completely rejecting relationship or severing herself from men, Awarun renegotiates the parameters of closeness and attachment. Emotional integrity and independence are more important to her than social approval.

By preserving control over her body and rejecting the “marriage plot” as the final goal for female identity, Awarun destabilizes normal womanhood. Her resistance originates from an awareness that freedom and respect cannot be found in institutions that need subordination rather than from resentment or misanthropy. The cultural protocols around desire, age, and autonomy in African cinematic narratives are thus called into question by Awarun's figure. Kunle Afolayan offers a sophisticated, self-defining model of feminine subjectivity through Awarun that is in direct dialogue with indigenous feminist logics.

VII. Conclusion

This essay makes the case that new films are emerging to question and elevate the concept of feminine power, going beyond Nollywood and the oppression of female characters. The figure of Awarun in Afolayan's *Anikulapo: Rise of the Spectre* demystifies the notion of patriarchy subjugating and exploiting African women and redefining their identity through marriage and domesticity. Awarun portrays an African woman who is strong and free from the patriarchal system's tyranny. In *Anikulapo: Rise of the Spectre*, Kunle Afolayan makes the argument that once African women are free from traditional customs and traditions and have access to financial and economic power, they would be liberated from the patriarchal system. This would allow African women to become more independent and freer from the patriarchal society and their sexual desires.

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