

Challenging the Status Quo: A Feminist Reading of Shirley Frimpong-Manso's *Life and Living It*

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Introduction

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st Century, the media have become a catalyst for different kinds of social transformation across the globe. In today's world, old and new media combine as a site of influence, control and innovation; the primary means through which information essential to the working of most social institutions is transmitted. The media provide multiple fora for public debates, spaces in which "various groups and institutions struggle over ideologies and the definition and construction of social reality", thus making them a major site for the definition of meaning, a place where the changing culture and values of society and groups are constructed, and reproduced, or changed (Levy & Gurevitch, 1994; Line, 1993; McQuail, 1994).

Ghanaian films, like films elsewhere, are key sites where gender identities are constructed and contested on a regular basis. Some argue that images of women are often depicted in such a way that the exploitation and marginalisation of women is reinforced. The images we consider here range from negative through neutral to positive. Contemporary films are largely governed by what Ukadike (2003:140) has termed "the logic of the popular" where the mundane takes on a representational importance. Working in a male-dominated industry located in a patriarchal society, filmmakers tend to reproduce dominant ideologies within this logic of the popular. Many popular films draw on melodramatic elements where good and bad are interlocked in countless conflicts, followed by a moralising denouement. As such female characters tend to come to disastrous ends. In the neutral category, women are granted equality, progress and power, yet these strides have a price; perhaps because women's "waywardness" threatens the socio-political status quo. Women in this mode usually challenge the hierarchical gender *status quo*. At the other extreme women are constantly

portrayed in limited domestic roles that reinforce society's perceptions and limit women's prospects. We are of the view that if films were to foreground the full range of contributions women are making and capable of making to self and society, then societal perceptions of them would be broadened, a view shared by many critics (Ellerson 2000:6). As things stand, the onus rests on women filmmakers to intervene and create perceptions that challenge the *status quo* and counter male dominated representations.

Across the African continent, research and scholarship has shown that over the years African women filmmakers such as Safi Faye (Senegal), Anne Mungai (Kenya), Flora M'mbugu-Shelling (Tanzania), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe), Fanta Regina Nacro (Burkina Faso), Anne-Laure Folly (Togo), Ngozi Onwurah (Nigeria), Salem Mekuria (Ethiopia), Moufida Tlatli (Tunisia), Assia Djebar (Algeria), and Wanjiru Kinyanjui (Kenya) have created new cinematic aesthetics and creatively refashioned representations of women within their respective countries. In Ghana, however, the evolution of women's filmmaking merits a great deal more attention than it currently receives in mainstream film scholarship. A number of questions arise in thinking about women filmmakers in Ghana. For example: how have Ghanaian women filmmakers engaged with feminism? To what extent have they explored the trajectories of African feminist ideas in their works? How do they portray women? Do they share any recurring motifs? What challenges have they faced in bringing a wider range of women, their lives and experiences to the screen? These are pressing and valid questions that we are exploring in our work. In this article, however, we offer an African feminist reading of one of Ghana's most successful contemporary filmmakers, Shirley Frimpong-Manso, and analyse how she represents women in her debut commercial film, *Life and Living It*. We've decided to focus on this film because it foregrounds male characters while adopting a feminist perspective, which sets it apart from many female-themed films that abound in the commercial film industry in West Africa.

Women in Filmmaking in Ghana

Women filmmakers in Ghana, as in other parts of the world, are in the minority. This state of affairs can be located within the larger context of African women in cinema. In her work *Sisters of the Screen: Women of Africa on Film, Video and Television*, Beti Ellerson observes that the evolution of African women filmmaking practice in the 1960s and 1970s was sporadic. She notes that in

subsequent decades there was a gradual increase in women's visibility on the cinema landscape (2000: 3). This observation serves as an important reference point because even though Ghana's engagement in filmmaking dates back to the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) of the 1940s, women were not involved for another two decades. Records show that the first Ghanaian woman to be involved in film production was the renowned dramatist and scholar, Efua T. Sutherland, who in collaboration with the US television network, ABC, made the television documentary *Araba: the Village Story* in 1967. In the film, Sutherland documents her Atwia Experimental Community Project, which has been recognised globally as a pace-setting model for the popular Theatre for Development¹ program (Ellerson 2000; Anyidoho 2000).

After Sutherland, Ghanaian women's involvement in filmmaking as producers and directors only became apparent in the early 1990s with the development of video feature film in the country. The works of Aveh (2010), Garritano (2008), Meyer (1999, 2010), and Sutherland-Addy (2000) are instructive on the emergence of the video film phenomenon in the late 1980s, as well as the contexts from which the video films are produced and consumed. Moving from a state funded industry to a more commercial and independent video film industry provided a springboard for a number of independent filmmakers including women. Over the years women producers such as Hajia Hawa Meizon²; Nana Ama Boateng³; Cecilia Oppon-Badu⁴; Naana Mensah⁵; and Akofa Edjeani Asiedu⁶ have joined the local video industry, as have a growing number of directors: Veronica Quashi-Nai⁷, Afi Yakubu⁸, Vera Mensah Bediako⁹, Josephine Anim¹⁰ and Grace Omaboe.¹¹ In addition to this, there are filmmakers who have directed and as well as produced video features. This category includes: Veronica Cudjoe¹², Nana Akua Frimpomaa¹³ and Shirley Frimpong-Manso.¹⁴ These women have begun to make an impact that is worth exploring from a feminist perspective. Frimpong-Manso, in particular, demands attention, because unlike many other commercial female filmmakers, she endeavours to inject a feminist perspective in her films. The difference between her and most of the other female filmmakers we have mentioned in this paragraph is that she takes on the challenge of slipping a feminist message into a commercial art form within a West African commercial film context that thrives, overwhelmingly, on stereotypes. Thus, in this paper, we focus on the manifestations of Shirley Frimpong-Manso's feminist sensibility in her interventions with the media and how she inscribes these in *Life and Living It*.

Shirley Frimpong-Manso and Feminism

Frimpong-Manso's media work has always been feminist-oriented, reflecting a locally-grounded gender awareness that continues to be very much in evidence in some of her later works as a filmmaker. Programs she hosted on radio, like *The Battle of the Sexes* and *Afrakoma*¹⁵, were designed to redefine and assist the contemporary Ghanaian woman with gender struggles and tensions in society. Her involvement in organising the prestigious *Miss Ghana Pageant* (not necessarily a 'feminist' project) for five consecutive years was devoted to encouraging Ghanaian beauty queens to embark on national projects, and help improve the lives of marginalised groups in society, notably women and children. This work reflects her particular vision for women's self-determination and her commitment to helping women rediscover themselves and embrace new identities. Through her creative work, it can be argued that she also subscribes to the agendas of promoting gender equality, social and economic justice and taking on broader struggles for freedom of both women and men as articulated by many African feminists.

In addition, Frimpong-Manso has sought to create a distinct feminine space on commercial media through hosting television programs such as, *Personality Kitchen* and *Different Shades of Blue* where she highlighted gender issues that were hitherto rarely seen on screen. In interviews Frimpong-Manso describes how while growing up in Ghana, the images of women she saw on screen were that of witches and *juju*. Aware of many alternative images and stories that were not being told, she has made it her mission to produce these alternative images and tell her own stories.¹⁶ Most of her films manifest this vision.

Frimpong-Manso graduated as a film director in 2003 at the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) in Accra. She is the Chief Executive Officer of Sparrow Productions Limited, a media production company she established and has managed since 2003. Women characters who are dynamic, active and articulate populate her narratives. She released her first feature film, *Life and Living It* in 2007, and since then has been making features consistently. She won the Africa Movies Academy Awards (AAMA), Best Director Award in 2010 for the production of *The Perfect Picture*. Her film, *A Sting in a Tale*, also won her the AAMA, Best Sound Track Award in 2010 and Audience Favourite-Narrative Feature Award at the 18th Pan African Film Festival (PAFF) in Los Angeles.

Shirley Frimpong-Manso has been described as a feminist mainly because she has had the courage to explore alternative conceptions of women's identities. In one interview she states: "I have been called a bit of a feminist ... I would like to promote the cause of women, especially African women and so you will see that some of my movies, you know, are into that direction. I am trying to make a point"¹⁷ Given such a statement, it is worth asking the question: To what extent does *Life and Living It* engage with African feminist ideas? And how do these work to redefine shifting identities in the cosmopolitan setting of the movie?

African Feminism as an Analytic Framework

Petty (1995) has pointed out that it would be inappropriate to uncritically use Western feminist film theory as the basis for examining the depiction of women's contemporary social position in Africa. She suggests that an African feminist framework that is sensitive to local contexts provides a more effective tool for analysing African women's cinema (Petty 1995). Accordingly, this paper adopts African feminism as an analytical framework for examining Frimpong-Manso's first feature film, *Life and Living It*.

To talk about 'African feminism' is not to suggest that there is a single, coherent body of knowledge that distinctively and intellectually addresses the subject matter. Indeed, African feminist writers such as Adeleye-Fayemi (2000) and Wolpe (1998) have respectively pointed out the lack of conceptual clarity and the difficulty in presenting a coherent state of feminist scholarship in Africa. Yet as Mapedzahama (2008: 117) notes, "though feminist concerns cannot be generalised across the African continent, fundamental commonalities exist to justify the case for 'African feminism'". Nnaemeka (2003: 361) points out that there is a, "pluralism of (African feminisms) that captures the fluidity and dynamism of the different cultural imperialism[s], historical forces, and localised realities conditioning women's lives". Sylvester (1995: 953) has also observed that Steady's much earlier depiction of African feminism suggests that African women, irrespective of where they are located, have "enough elements of context in common to form a standpoint fundamentally different from any that Western feminists construct." Despite the diversity of feminist thought in Africa, there are some shared values and debates that can be referred to in analysing the feminist influence in African films. It is worth noting, however, that two broad strands can be delineated within African feminist discourse: a

liberal, more popular strand espoused by feminists such as Nnaemeka, and a more radical strand advocated by feminists such as McFadden. While McFadden (2003) is referred to briefly in the discussion on female sexuality/sexual liberation, the bulk of the analysis and discussion in this paper draws from the liberal strand of African feminist discourse.

Priorities set within the framework of African feminist ideology, according to Harrow, are largely concerned with the promotion of gender equality and social and economic justice (1999: 225). Nnaemeka suggests that African feminist thought is rooted within the realities of African environments and African worldviews (1998: 9), and we acknowledge that there are many 'African environments and African worldviews which are especially relevant when considering local filmmaking. Ama Ata Aidoo also emphasises that "African women struggling both on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the wider community [are] very much a part of our heritage" (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997: 10). In other words, African feminists express their own ideas and struggles for women's freedom within African societies.

Feminism in Africa manifests itself through its own specificities and precepts. It addresses issues as they relate to the lives of African women and their situation. Within the liberal strand, the concept characteristically respects the conventional notion of motherhood or women's biological and social roles as mothers, though it questions obligatory motherhood (Davies 1990) and urges women to define themselves beyond motherhood and becoming wives (Arndt 2002: 72). Equally relevant is challenging patriarchy through negotiation, compromise, inclusiveness, and collaboration. Consequently, gender equality and power are seen in a continuum of sharing, interdependence and complementarities where men are involved in the process of advancing women's independence. The liberal strand of African feminism believes in accessing power "not in the absolute but in relative terms, in terms of power-sharing and power ebb and flow" (Nnaemeka 1998: 11). It is not opposed to African men but challenges them to be critical of the cultural practices and structures that oppress women. This indicates that a strong strand within African feminism operates within a cultural and ideological framework that values men and gender difference. It also suggests that many African women who identify as feminists have no interest in being like men or setting themselves against men; even though they seek equality they appreciate the "intersections of difference" (Arndt 2002: 59). This, therefore, is

a liberal position insofar as it seeks equal rights for both African women and men in the existing society¹⁸. *Life and Living It* opens up an important space for exploring these more liberal, and popular conceptions.

To examine *Life and Living It*, we consider the above-mentioned articulations of African feminism to interrogate the text and to identify and analyse themes that flow out of it. In so doing, we also acknowledge and apply what has been termed “autobiographical investment” – our own location and experience within the Ghanaian cultural context. In line with the autobiographical investment approach, we use our experiences of gender and gendered issues within the Ghanaian cultural setting as an additional tool/lens to make sense of the narrative and the text. This combined approach helps us to analyse images of the women we meet in *Life and Living It*, and tease out manifestations of Frimpong-Manso’s feminist sensibilities. It also allows a simultaneous recognition of social structures that constrain marginalised groups, in this case women, as well as the alternative ways of appropriating their agency and resistance to dominant forms, identities and values (Kellner, n.d.). Such a methodological approach helps us examine the ways in which Frimpong-Manso uses the medium of film to negotiate women’s identities.

Life and Living It

The film chronicles the lives of four male friends: Kente, Jerry Klevator, Ray Austin, Ato Yawson and the women in their lives, as the latter pursue gender equality and social and economic independence. The camera guides the audience through some of the intricacies of adult life in an urban, elite society in Ghana. Kente, an up-and-coming musician who is also a bar manager, faces the possibility of losing his son, Eric, to his former partner, Erica Darko, and her new husband, Frank Baafi, a lawyer. To defend his rights to his son, Kente secures the services of Leticia Morgan, a young, intelligent, female lawyer. Meanwhile, his friend, Jerry Klevator, a medical surgeon, is still attracted to Karen Yawson, a woman he once dated but who is now married to their friend, Ato Yawson, an advertising manager. Though Karen is a trained nurse, Ato has decided she should stay at home till she gets pregnant and they have a baby. Jerry senses Karen’s frustration and informs her about the recruitment of senior nursing officers at the hospital where he works. Karen decides to apply and gets the job; at which point Ato’s insecurities about his wife pursuing a career come to the fore.

In another thread of the narrative, Ray Austin, one of the four friends, is a dance trainer who pursues older, wealthy, married women, 'sugar mummies', who tend to be generous to him. When Frances Bonsu, one of his sugar mummies, gets a divorce from her husband in the hope of having a committed relationship with him, Ray decides to quit the relationship because he does not 'do commitments'. Instead, he is attracted to Leila Klevor, Jerry's younger, unmarried sister, who is also not ready for a serious relationship. Ray ends up in the hospital after Jerry punches him when he finds out Leila has spent the night at his house. Ato also picks a fight with Jerry when he finds him and Karen engaged in what he calls, 'some lovers' talk'.

Eventually, after a series of mistaken assumptions, intimacies are renewed and new relationships develop. Jerry realises there is nothing going on between Leila and Ray and so he reconciles with him. Ato learns that there is nothing between Karen and Jerry and asks for forgiveness. Kente wins custody of his son, Eric, and falls in love with Leticia Morgan, his lawyer. The narrative ends with all the friends celebrating Kente's victory in the custody case with champagne. At first glance the film comes across as a story about love triangles and relationships. However, a close reading reveals how it subtly challenges entrenched societal conventions, and advocates alternative roles and identities for women, and also men. To a certain extent, *Life and Living It* can be seen as a 'modernist critique' of the 'traditional' assumptions and temptations that are reflected in, and reflective of, gender relations in contemporary urban Africa.

The Professional Woman and Cultural/Societal Conventions

Life and Living It exhibits an African feminist awareness by presenting alternative roles and identities for women, while utilising societal conventions to portray acceptable behaviour. The film's middle-class setting gives stature to female characters portrayed as professional, career women. While celebrating the professional woman as positive, Frimpong-Manso also prescribes and proscribes behaviour that goes with such roles. Right from the beginning of the film Frimpong-Manso shows her awareness of the power struggles that often exist between men and women in the domestic spheres of a Ghanaian environment. In examining these struggles, she critiques the structures that oppress both men and women. The first notion the film interrogates is the common belief that higher education qualifications and economic

independence for women make them rebellious and corrupt, especially in relation to the domestic sphere.

The first female character the viewer is introduced to is Erica. Characterised as a successful career woman, complete with husband, son, house help, big house and car, she represents urban elite women. However, the first impression one gets of her is not positive. Erica behaves improperly, by local standards. When the film opens, Erica walks in sharply dressed for work and sees Kente playing with Eric, their son:

Erica: What the hell is this?

Kente: Oh, I was just asking him what he wanted for his birthday.,

Erica: I'm bloody late for work.

In the middle of this conversation she berates her house help for letting Kente into the house. These actions demonstrate that Erica is a powerful woman.

In the same opening scene, Erica's husband, Frank Baafi, discovers her talking to Kente. He looks at them both in an almost sheepish way, and says to her: 'You coming?' He then gives her a kiss and heads off. Frank Baafi's behaviour demands analysis. In a Ghanaian context the fact that Frank steers clear of the encounter between Erica and Kente suggests that he understands that his wife is capable of taking care of herself. He doesn't have to intervene to 'protect' her. Such a reading fits well into African feminism's view that women can take care of their own affairs and should be treated as equal to men. An alternative, perhaps more plausible reading is that Erica is such a domineering character that Frank knows not to interfere in her business. This latter reading is borne out in a later scene when Erica explicitly orders Frank to tell his subordinate at work, Leticia Morgan, to stop working on the child custody case that she, Erica, is involved in with Kente.

Erica's spiteful behaviour is explored in a scene in which she confronts Kente after she has been served with a letter indicating that Kente wants to defend his rights to his son. The confrontation is captured in the following dialogue:

Erica: (Angrily) You bastard! You think you can scare me into giving you my son?

Kente: He's my son too.

Erica: That's what your stupid little mind tells you.

Kente: Are you saying that Eric is not my son?

Erica: Why don't you figure it out?

Kente: (Amused) You're such a liar. Look, let's not get into this only-mothers-can-tell stuff, we've gone beyond that. You must take me for a real big fool. I will get my son if it's the last thing I do.

Erica: Look, you're not going to win Kente. Your pathetic low life can't possibly make any Judge put the care of a child in your hands. Children are naturally given to their mothers. And in my case I have what it takes to look after him. And what do you have? Nothing! Nothing because that's exactly what you will have after you've dragged your filthy ass through court. Nothing, because I will make sure you never see him again; don't push me.

The narrative resolution of the custody issue later on, suggests that the filmmaker does not condone such aggressive behaviour. Hence, in redefining new identities for women the film is cautious. The characterisation condones the social norms that render it unacceptable for a woman to speak to a man in such a manner, no matter what his status or offence. Moreover, her choice of diction places her as deviant (i.e. she is a 'bad feminist' or 'bad woman') and, therefore, punishable. Frimpong-Manso seems to be making the point that the struggle for African women's rights is not analogous to disrespecting men or dominating them. The liberal strand of African feminism advocates power sharing. In Erica's case this seems to imply that both parents should have equal rights to a child; a point of view Erica obviously disagrees with. In exploring the dichotomy of unequal gender power relations, the film explicitly favours equal power sharing between men and women, rather than shifting power away from men to women. The film makes it clear that not all professional women are as arrogant and obnoxious as Erica, but its narrative resolution sees her punished through the loss of her child, and works as a cautionary tale.

After his experience with Erica, Kente believes all professional women are like her. To change this prejudice, Leticia is presented as a foil to Erica. Through Leticia Frimpong-Manso celebrates the positive aspects of female professionalism, achievement and good conduct. At their first meeting Kente is rude to Leticia because her professional 'look' reminds him of Erica. The film sets Kente on an educational journey of transformation. By choosing such a path for Kente, Frimpong-Manso seems to be suggesting that men

are capable of giving up their prejudices; an assumption implicit in the broad African feminist commitment to working with men to solve gender and societal issues. Hence, Leticia, a competent lawyer who believes in social justice, does not allow personal matters to get in the way of her job. Despite his hostility to her, she succeeds in defending Kente's rights to his son. She does this by showing that Erica, is not, in fact, the type of 'responsible African mother' she would have everyone believe. Leticia proves Erica has abandoned her six-year-old daughter from a previous relationship, because the girl is handicapped. In the end Erica's loss of her son demonstrates Frimpong-Manso's disapproval of 'mothers' who abandon their disabled children, and her endorsement of the notion of complementarity.

Frimpong-Manso challenges the status quo by sending a clear message that gender-specific roles can be transformed. Not only does she signal that men have the potential to be the primary carers of their children, she also suggests that the legal system in Ghana is prepared to challenge the accepted cultural norm of making the care of a child a woman's sole preserve. Leticia's role symbolises the non-absolutist orientation of African feminism that power can be shared (Nnaemeka, 1998). Leticia's role also sits well with Ama Ata Aidoo's claim that African women have a history of struggling on behalf of themselves and the wider community. For Kente and his friends who celebrate his success in winning custody of his son, can be seen as microcosm of the wider community.

Within the framework of African feminist thought, Leticia's role can be interpreted as one of tutoring both men and women. In maintaining her professionalism by agreeing to represent Kente in the custody case, she teaches the female audience that women can behave according to strict, ethical standards in the struggle for social justice, irrespective of the gender involved. The lessons for the male audience are even more obvious and apt: it is through Leticia's actions that Kente learns that not all professional women are self-centred and arrogant. African feminist analysis suggests that changing men's attitudes towards women is a key to women's empowerment (Mikell, 1997: 1-5). This approach is underscored by the filmmaker's portrayal of Leticia and Kente. Through them we see the principle of complementarity at play with men and women working together to achieve social and economic justice for all in society.

Alternative Roles/Identities for Women and a Complementary Role for Men

Frimpong-Manso delineates new identities for women through critical examination of the complex negotiations of gender relations. Even though there is every indication in the film that some women have broken down barriers, it appears that there are some women who still remain within prescribed roles. Karen, for example, is a trained nurse, but she does not object to Ato's insistence on her staying at home until they have a child. Initially, she believes she is lucky to be a stay-at-home wife while her husband works. However, when she gets bored and finally decides to go back to work, she faces tough opposition from her husband. It would appear that Ato hides his insecurities behind the excuse of wanting a baby to maintain his patriarchal position and to prevent Karen from pursuing a career. He claims that at work an unscrupulous man could lure Karen to do things against her will. He also claims that Karen's pursuit of a career will make it more difficult to have a baby. Such claims, seen through the African feminist lens, can at best be described as patriarchal and condescending as they fly in the face of gender equality. The film narrative reassures the viewer that Karen is not that gullible. Here, the tenet of complementarity between the sexes, comes into play again. If women can be potential partners in solving men's problems, men can be partners in ensuring independence for women. Thanks to Jerry, Karen decides to apply for the job at the hospital. Kente then helps Ato understand Karen's need for a career. After learning his lessons from Leticia, Kente is in a better position to educate Ato and allay his fears. In line with the African feminist motif, the onus falls on Karen to change her own situation and end her frustrations and loneliness at home. Karen achieves equality through determination and negotiation. Ato does not openly object to her attending the interview, but after he learns of her success he feels uncomfortable. Karen then negotiates, pushing Ato to accept her decision. She reminds him of all the sacrifices she has made for him and tells him that she wants him to support her dreams. Ato, finally aware of his wife's need, puts away his pride and gets over his fear. Karen pursues her nursing career and attains social and economic independence. As she excels, she finally conceives a child. One could argue that Frimpong Manso's message is that women are able to have successful careers, fruitful relationships, and become mothers – women can have it all. Femininity and feminism are not mutually

exclusive. Karen therefore embodies the contemporary Ghanaian woman who not only occupies her prescribed gender position as a wife and mother but also assumes new identities hitherto unchartered.

Female Sexuality

The way in which Frimpong-Manso explores women's sexuality in *Life and Living It* is worthy of attention; especially in the light of McFadden's observation that African women's sexual and erotic inclinations have been systematically suppressed, leading to a "muting of feminist sexual memory and instinct" (2003:1). Throughout the film, Frimpong-Manso's women, whether married or not, are portrayed as sexually active and uninhibited in exploring their sexuality. Thus, Karen, for example, can make sexual advances to her husband, even when he is late for work. Fiona and Frances, though married, also seem unrestrained in exploring their sexuality with Ray. Fiona even tries to convince him to come with her to California, so that they can continue their relationship. McFadden (2003) has argued that African women's sexual expression is a fundamental right and the film seems to echo this by empowering women to explore their sexuality and challenging the "vigilant cultural surveillance" that seeks to silence their "feminist sexual instinct" (McFadden, 2003:1).

Yet, on another level, one can argue that there are also tensions within the film, which can lead to multiple readings where women's sexual freedoms are concerned. While Karen explores her sexuality within the confines of her marital relationship, Fiona and Frances both do so outside their marital union, with the same young man, Ray. The fact that they both end up rejected could imply that marital infidelity comes at a price. This suggests Frimpong-Manso's support for the institution of marriage and heterosexual monogamy. Karen has to deal with her attraction to her ex-boyfriend, Jerry, and Ato with the advances of Susan, his secretary. Even though the film suggests Karen and Jerry dated before she got married to Ato and they are still attracted to each other, her present status as a married woman who loves her husband, prevents them from pursuing their desires. In a similar vein, Ato resists the temptation to have an affair with his secretary, contesting the prevalent stereotype of African men as perpetual predators. The film thus challenges the status quo while setting clear limits to sexual freedom.

Life and Living It further explores yet another complex heterosexual gender relationship between an older married woman and younger single man. Within the Ghanaian cultural context, the 'norm' has been that older men go in for younger women. By doing the exact opposite, the film subverts patriarchal domination in this sphere of relationships. Frances is a forty-eight-year old, wealthy woman who runs her own business and likes to date younger single men because she believes, "they are more agreeably refreshing." She is tough, educated, and intelligent. She has travelled extensively and speaks English, French, and a little Portuguese and Spanish, in addition to several indigenous Ghanaian languages. Although she is already married to a young man she pursues Ray and buys him a car. Frances' friend, Abena, hints that such behaviour may be Frances' way of controlling everything in her life.

Culturally, Frances's situation is complicated because in this kind of relationship there is often a conflict between seniority and patriarchy, especially when an older woman has what it takes to provide for the man. Ray would like to believe he is merely providing sexual services for Frances; services she can no longer receive from her 'tired ass husband'. As a result, when Frances divorces, hoping for more romantic intimacy with Ray, he ends the relationship under the pretext that he does not want to get 'close and personal'. Jerry describes Ray as someone who 'shuffles women like coins'. Nonetheless, Ray discovers that 'it is better to love and lose, than never to love at all,' and he eventually tries to get Frances back. However, it is too late ; Frances doesn't want him any more. In a symbolically darkly lit scene that evokes the end of their relationship, Ray returns to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation. At one level, Frances' rejection of Ray can be interpreted as that of a woman who indeed has control over her life, just as African feminism would have it. And yet it can also be seen as an acknowledgement of the complications surrounding her relationship choice, in a Ghanaian socio-cultural milieu.

The finale of *Life and Living It* is exhilarating: Leticia and Kente commit to living a life of affection and respect, as do Karen and Ato. The film signs-off with 'women initiated kisses'. Karen and Ato kiss, and then, Leticia and Kente. In the context of Ghanaian culture, these 'women initiated kisses' can be interpreted as both a celebration of women's sexual assertiveness and the relaxation of the stranglehold of cultural surveillance that would ordinarily not allow a woman to initiate a kiss in public. The kissing couples, serenaded by the popping and toasting of champagne in honour of Kente's three year

old son, Eric, and his new family, provide the audience with a happy ending in which everyone has played a crucial role in balancing the gender struggles for better coexistence.

Conclusion

Based on our analyses, we have argued that Frimpong-Manso challenges the *status quo* of gender relationships usually portrayed in commercial African feature films in more ways than one. First of all, she manages to slip feminist messages into a film environment that is rife with stereotypical images of women. In so doing, she makes a strong case for the possibility of communicating feminist positions in African commercial filmmaking. Secondly, through the complex, entertaining narrative she creates, she invites the audience to participate in gender-sensitive critique of ‘culturally embedded’ social practices. Such an invitation to engage critically in a collective debate is crucial to social transformation. Thirdly, *Life and Living It* explores the lives of assertive women who encourage men to give up their prejudices about women and accept gender equality. Through her creative endeavour, Frimpong-Manso proscribes certain behaviours on the part of both women and men, and in doing so teaches both genders some valuable lessons.

Endnotes

1. The Theatre for Development is a community outreach program that uses the medium of drama/theatre to educate and motivate communities into collective action in addressing social problems and projecting values for societal development. It is offered as a specialized area of study at School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana.
2. Hajia H. Meizongo wrote and produced *Indecent Favour* (1998). She has written other stories that have been produced by other filmmakers.
3. Nana Ama Boateng wrote and produced *A Mother's Revenge* (1994).
4. Cecilia Oppon-Badu produced *Supi (The Real Woman to Woman)*, 1996).
5. Naana Mensah produced *Cry for Love* (1999).
6. Akofa Edjeani Asiedu produced *Fools in love* (2005), but she is an established actress in the Ghanaian video film industry. She also co-produced, *I Sing of a Well* (2009).
7. Veronica Quashi has *Twin Lovers* (1995), *Tears of Joy* (1996), *Come Back Lucy* (1996), *Shadows from the Past I and II* (2000), *Victim of Love* (1997), *A Stab in the Dark* (1999), *A Stab in the Dark II* (2000), *Ripples* (2000), *Ripples II* (2000), *A Call at Midnight* (2001), *No Easy Target* (2001), *The Third Night* (2002), *Rage* (2003), *Forbidden Fruit* (2004), *Remnants* (mini-series 6 episodes 2007/2008)

- and *Otilia* (2011) to her credit as a director. She, together with Samuel Nai, wrote the screenplays for *Come Back Lucy*, *A Call at Night*, *No Easy Target*, and *The Third Night*.
8. Afi Yakubu did *Bondage* (1994).
 9. Vera Mensah Bediako directed *Broken Hearts I & II* (1998), *Choice*, *Ramatu*, and *Bells for Sale*.
 10. Josephine Anim has directed *Victims* (1998) and *Victims II* (1999).
 11. Grace Omaboe directed *It's Too Late* (1995).
 12. Veronica Cudjoe produced and directed *Suzzy I* (1992) and *Suzzy II* (1993).
 13. Nana Akua Frimpomaa produced *Heated Emotions* (1998) and shared directing credits with C.C. Mills Robertson.
 14. Shirley Frimpong-Manso has written, produced and directed *Life and Living It* (2007), *Scorned* (2008), *Perfect Picture* (2009), *A Sting in a Tale* (2009), *Check Mate* (2010), *Six Hours to Christmas* (2010), and eight chapters of the *Adams Apple* films (2011-2012).
 15. *Afrakoma* was a radio program which allowed women resource persons to address everyday issues confronting women in the Ghanaian society.
 16. She mentioned this in an interview on BBC. It is available at: <<http://www.ghanacelebrities.com/2010/12/25/bbc%E2%80%99s-interview-with-shirley-frimpong-manso-was-aired-yesterday-did-you-miss-it-listen-to-it-here-now>>.
 17. She made this statement in an interview on Ghana Television posted on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhT0753DNzo&list=UUXCJqRZwwue4prL6URLdFNQ&index=6&feature=plcp> [accessed 21/02/2012].
 18. This 'liberal' feminism is in contrast to the more radical/transformational feminisms articulated by many of the contributors to this journal (*Feminist Africa*) and flagged in the journal's editorial policy. Some feminists for example, are interested in ending patriarchy and thus radically transforming gender roles.

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