

# FILM REVIEW

**Kwabena Gyansah, dir. *Azali*.** 2018. 90 minutes. Dagbaani and Twi (with English subtitles). Ghana. Ananse Entertainment. No price reported.

*Azali* (2018), directed by Kwabena Gyansah, was Ghana's first nomination for Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Motion Picture Academy Awards (Oscars) in 2019. The subject of the rural-urban drift by youth has been examined in many films, dating back to the pre-independence film *Boy Kumasenu* (1952), directed by Sean Graham with the Gold Coast Film Unit. Along with the rural-urban movement of youth, another engaging subject often addressed by modern films is the *kayayei* phenomenon. There have been several attempts at socio-economic interventions to curb the forced marriages of young girls to older men, without much success. This film explores the root causes, with poverty and deprivation being at the core, along with abuses such as rape, beatings, lynching, drugs usage, prostitution, and criminal gang activities. All of these factors have led to frequent instances of teenage girls trying to escape these forced marriages, especially in Northern Ghana.

This film vividly captures the sense of squalor and filth as it tracks the daily activities of the characters Amina (Asana Alhassan) and Seidu (Mohammed Hafiz). We are presented with efforts by the city dwellers to live normally through social activities such as games, singing, and dancing. Amina demonstrates a sense of awareness and the desire to leave, while all others seem resigned to their fate. In the film, Rukaya (Akofa Edjeani) refuses to allow her daughter Amina to become the fourth wife of the old man Baba, and instead she gives Amina away to a woman who claims she will put her to work, but instead it turns out to that she is involved in a child trafficking syndicate. The scheme is intercepted by security forces, and the rescued children are sent to a holding center. It is here that Amina meets Seidu, and a planned escape leads them to the capital city of Accra. Seidu finds employment working for Boss (Peter Ritchie), unloading arriving food trucks. Amina ends up in the custody of a woman who puts young girls to work as head porters (popularly called *kayayei*), carrying goods at the market for a fee. Amina, unable to make the required daily revenue demanded by the woman, is lured into prostitution with the promise of a higher income. One

day, while she is visiting Seidu, Amina is raped by Boss, and she becomes pregnant. Amina refuses an abortion and continues the *kayayei* work for survival.

Meanwhile, Amina's uncle Akatok (Adjetey Anang) travels to Accra searching for her, assisted by an old friend. After several days, he locates the heavily pregnant Amina in the market, but he also sees Boss, whose real name is Razak. Akatok reveals to Amina that Razak, shockingly, is her biological father, who abandoned Rukaya and fled to the South when she got pregnant. Akatok takes Amina back north, where she is happily received by the family. Amina soon delivers a child whose identity has to be kept secret because of the unacceptable incestuous relationship.

It is interesting to note that Rukaya herself refused marriage to an older man and ended up pregnant and a single mother. Amina's fate will be worse, as a single mother with a child whose father cannot be identified. The title "Azali," which translates as "fate," resonates throughout the film, with fate refusing to smile on the characters and raising several unanswered questions. Should Rukaya have allowed Amina to be married off to an older man at the start? What options did Amina have? There are no twists and turns in the story, apart from the surprise at the end with the revelation of Razak's identity. Stories of runaway teenage girls from the north and what they go through in the south as they strive to earn a living abound in the Ghanaian media landscape and have been retold over and over.

Whatever *Azali* may lack with regard to story is made up in cinematography, visual effects, sound, and acting. The superb aerial shots coupled with clear night scenes give the film a high visual appeal. The opening aerial shots as the credits roll are attention-grabbing and quickly pull the viewer in. The establishing shots of key settings were expertly presented. Editing complements the cinematography very well, a few continuity lapses notwithstanding. The English subtitling also suffers from some grammatical errors, which takes away some of the shine from the film. The sound is crisp, and so is the scoring which enhances the effects.

Adjetey Anang (who plays Akatok) and Akofa Edjeani (who plays Rukaya) are non-Dagbaani speakers, and so we get a hint of the challenges they had to overcome to play their roles. In an interview with Anang, he revealed that they had to live in the community for a period to pick up the native accent and body language that match the scenarios depicted in the script. And they pulled it off successfully. Asana Alhassan (Amina) is very impressive as a first-time actress. Her transition from a young schoolgirl at the beginning of the film to a teenage prostitute, with characteristic make-up and later heavily pregnant, and with all the various mood swings throughout the film, require considerable acting skills. The brutal rape scene was also very convincing. For his first full-length film, director Kwamena Gyansah deserves commendation. It cannot be denied that *Azali* did indeed earn a place for Ghana on the global cinematic landscape.

M. Africanus Aveh   
*University of Ghana*  
*Legon, Ghana*  
*maveh@ug.edu.gh*

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.40