

## Configuration of Kenya's Children's Television Drama

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### *Abstract*

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*Children's film is an artistic genre in its own right with its distinctive character and utility in the society. **Machachari** is a local television drama that is centred on children. This episodic film, while revolving around slum children and their hustles and survival jaunts in the hard-edged lives of their surroundings, juxtaposes the ghetto children with their well-to-do friends. Just one year since this sitcom was first aired on a Kenyan Television station, Machachari recently won three awards: it was voted "Kenya's Teenagers' TV drama Soap of choice". The TV drama also won "New Show Award" and one of the characters won the "Male Actor Award". In the **Kalasha** awards held in September 2011, the equivalent of a Kenyan Oscar, one of the child characters, Baha, won the best actor award. In cognizance of the popularity of this sitcom and in appreciation of its palpable foregrounding of child characters, this study interrogates this very popular sitcom with a view to establishing whether the presentation of the child character with regard to behaviour patterns and theme conforms to true childhood as affirmed by three psychological theorists: cognitively, as prescribed by Jean Piaget; emotionally as outlined by Erik Erikson and lastly, whether the child characters' conduct is the product of interactive influences, both congenital and experiential as delineated by Robert Sears. Discourse analysis is also employed to determine the communicative import of the utterances of the child characters while appraising their plausibility in illuminating particularities of children's mental processes and personalities within their milieu.*

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### *The Plot*

Just like other story forms, children's drama too has a plot with a beginning, middle and end. **Machachari**, written by Naomi Kamau, is a television drama that juxtaposes children from two different backgrounds. Almasi and his sister Joy emanate from an affluent family. Bahati (Baha), Govi and Stella derive from lowly milieu. The drama is heightened by the friendship of these children in spite of the polarities of their upbringing.

As an episodic television drama, the plot of **Machachari** is different in every subsequent episode. However, all plots usually revolve around majorly four children: Baha, Govi, Almasi and Joy. At some instances, the screenwriter foregrounds Fatso, a heavily built child who is considered the Estate's bully, or Stella, a slum lass.

In **Machachari**, all the major six children may be considered lead characters and indeed each episode spotlights more on one or two of the six children. In this TV drama, veritably, adults are the supporting cast or secondary characters. In this respect there is Baha's and Govi's father and mother and Almasi's and Joy's mother. The latter's father seems totally absent, implicitly busy making money.

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Couched in this absence is the castigation of moneyed parents who think that giving their children a good life is more important than being there to accord their constant counsel. The impoverished are not in such a quandary. Baha and Govi's parents are ever present, the harsh life notwithstanding.

Other key adult characters in *Machachari* include MaDVD; a youthful enterprising adult who vends cheap film DVDs and has also rented a public toilet in the slum for which he charges every visiting slum dweller. Another grown-up character is Sophia, house help to Almasi's family and girlfriend to MaDVD. In many instances, the screenwriter incorporates a sub-plot involving MaDVD and Sophia alongside the children's plot(s). The ups and downs of MaDVD's and Sophia's relationship provide a lot of humour and suspense in equal measure. The last central adult is certainly Mzee Kobe; a gardener in Almasi's home.

In terms of plot, the screenwriter has ensured that the plots in one episode do not exceed two and are definitely not overloaded. We shall sample two episodes to illustrate this point.

In one episode, the drama commences with Almasi being reproached and smacked by his mother for committing a plethora of misdemeanours. One of Almasi's offences is that of carrying his cellphone to school. The mother has also found out that Almasi has opened a *facebook* account. The matriarch also discovers that hidden underneath the pictures of pop musicians hanging on the walls in Almasi's room, are photos of skimpily dressed women. Almasi's mother is disappointed that despite all the endeavours by her and husband to give their children a good life, Almasi has the temerity to betray his parents. Joy tries to stop her mother from thrashing Almasi. Soon after, Almasi walks off to his room, sits all alone, tears rolling from his eyes. Joy visits but she is sent away. Joy secretly calls one of her mother's sisters, Auntie Caro, to come over and intervene. Certainly, Auntie Caro visits and is able to mediate between mother and son by advising that while Almasi ought to apologize to his mother, the latter also needs to understand that her son has now reached the adolescent stage where children are tempted to try various things and therefore need a lot of direction. Almasi writes an apology letter to his mother and also endeavours to apologize verbally. Mother and son reconcile and hug as the episode ends.

This is indeed the main plot. Nevertheless, there is a secondary plot that involves Baha and Govi. The duo's father is trying to do some wood work.

Like normal children, the two boys would like to imitate what their father is doing, and their father allows them to give a helping hand. At one point the father asks Baha to hold some two woods together so that he (father) can join them with a nail. Unfortunately the hammer hits Baha's finger. He is not hurt much such that in the father's absence, he now wants to behave the erudite carpenter, claiming to have the expertise to tighten and repair their neighbour's (Stella's) door whose hinges are loose. He removes all the hinges, planning to fix them properly tightly. When he tries to fasten the hinges, he realizes that it is more complicated than he imagined. Then the children get wind of their father approaching just when they are struggling to fasten the door. Hastily, they put up the door with unfastened hinges to give their father the impression that nothing was the matter. Indeed, when their father appears, they pretend that they were actually not doing anything. Subsequently, in a humorous childlike mien that almost betrays the tomfoolery that they have been up to, they ask their father what kinds of nails were suitable for door hinges. However, their naughtiness comes to the fore when Stella's mother, materializes and heads straight to her house without suspecting that the door is merely suspended. Trying to push the door open, the door falls.

The foregoing highlights the simplicity of the plot(s) of **Machachari**.

In another episode, a similar ensemble kind of mode is employed. There are two distinct plots starring the two camps of children separately. Indeed, the plots are not interlinked in any way.

However, the plots parallel each other and without a doubt complement each other in terms of communicating the overall and specific themes. On the one hand, Baha and his brother Govi are late to school. As a consequence, they are disciplined; frog-jumped in the open field.

In the process of executing the punishment, Baha loses his father's digital watch which he had carried to school without his father's permission. His teacher stumbles upon the watch in the field much later after the pupils had gone back to class. Not knowing which pupil the watch belongs to, the teacher keeps it in his office.

When Baha finds out that his father's watch is not in his pocket, he is thrown into a panic mode; he suspects fellow pupils. The suspicion engenders an altercation with the pupil that he suspects. The teacher intervenes when he finds the two fighting. Bahati cannot concentrate in class. Later, the teacher calls the two to his office, seeking to know the genesis of the altercation. Baha is afraid to say that he lost his father's watch. Nevertheless, he later mentions a lost watch. When his teacher shows him the watch he had found in the field, Baha confirms that that was the watch he lost and informs the teacher that his brother Govi could corroborate the veracity of his claims. However, suspecting that the child might ask his brother to lie, the teacher asks the pupil who was involved in a fight with Baha to call Govi while Baha remains in the office.

When Govi comes, he confirms about the watch but in childlike innocence, he candidly apprises the teacher that the watch in fact belonged to the father and that Baha took it without the father's consent. At this juncture, Govi is unaware of the difficulty he is putting his brother in, for the teacher declares that the father must come for the watch personally. The episode ends on a note of suspense with cornered Baha very apprehensive.

In the second plot, Almasi and Joy too have problems getting to school since the taxi driver who habitually drops them to and from school has not come on time on this particular day. The house help, Sophia, makes arrangements with her boyfriend MaDVD for alternative means to get the children to school. The alternative arrangement turns out to be a contraption, a ramshackled, old taxi belonging to MaDVD's friend, which stalls the moment it reaches the gate to the house. When the children enter the car with Sophia, who has a part-time job at a hair salon, the vehicle does not move. The driver tries on the ignition several times but the vehicle does not start. The car has to be pushed and all the vehicle occupants have to lend a hand in this regard. While the egotistical affluent adults might have declined to push the vehicle, Almasi and Joy help push the car. In due course, the vehicle moves but only until it reaches the salon and Sophia alights. Right then, it comes to a standstill once more. Now the problem is no longer mechanical. The driver says that it has run out of fuel. The children choose to walk to school from that point.

In the evening, the rickety car drops the children back home but it is apparent that the children are unhappy about the taxi ordeal. Joy is markedly morose. Fearing that the children might inform their mother that they were late to school, Sophia astutely sets up a table full of snacks and Ice cream. The Ice cream, which evidently is the children's favourite, acts as some form of inducement since the house help had been warned by the children's mother that the children should never be allowed to take Ice Cream before supper. Indeed, Almasi asks why on that particular day they are allowed to have a generous helping of Ice cream before supper, contrary to the well known rules. Sophia responds by saying that there are always exceptions to the rule; that on that day, she wanted the children to have fun. Definitely, the strategy works and Sophia is able to win over the kids. We do not expect them to report her. The delight on their faces is palpable.

The simplicity of the plots of the two episodes is quite obvious. Certainly, a child would easily decipher the story line. Plots meant for child viewers ought to be generally simple. Also, whereas story forms meant for adult consumption may have innumerable plots and sub-plots, story forms for children usually have a single plot. Apart from the themes of **Machachari**, which visibly appeal to children, the unfussiness of the plot veritably also contributes to the popularity of the television drama among children.

Certainly, numerous subplots or an overloaded plot like what one finds in the telenovela **Shades of Sin** would extremely tax a child's mind as he seeks to follow the story. In fact, it is very easy for a child to lose interest in such a program that has more than five stories going on all at the same time. Indeed, unlike other Mexican telenovelas meant for adults if not people aged over sixteen years old, which Kenyan children follow and may be heard narrating to each other even in primary schools, **Shades of Sin** hardly engrossed children in spite of starring a mulatto child, Ryan. A good children's TV screen play ought to have not more than two stories.

In the process of re-writing the draft, should the screenwriter find out that there are too many stories within the draft, s/he should decide which two stories s/he would prefer and jettison or set aside the rest for another TV episode.

A story line that takes a couple of hours or more would also strain the minds of children. It is in this regard that children's programmes meant for 2-7 year olds, who belong to the pre-operational stage, seldom exceed 30 minutes. This is because no matter how entertaining the programme is, the concentration span of such children is quite low. For 7 – 12 year olds who belong to the concrete operational stage (Piaget 1950), going beyond one hour may be strenuous unless it is utter entertainment with no story line. **Machachari**, just like other children programmes or family drama such as **Sesame Street**, **Smart Guy**, **Everybody Hates Chris**, **That's so Raven** and others, takes an average of twenty five (25) minutes per episode. Undeniably, even the length of this TV drama allows space enough to allow concentration on not more than a couple of effects. In most cases, since the plots involving the affluent and underprivileged children would be presented in juxtaposition, then, definitely the ultimate effect is single. The totality of this effect is the central objective to which every detail in the story is supposed to subordinate. For instance, in one episode where the slum catches fire and the house belonging to Stella's family is affected to an extent that Stella's family lose some of its belongings, the totality of the effect is in demonstrating the children's care for each other no matter their diverse upbringing. It is children in both camps who alert their parents to the plight of their friend and push for support from their parents towards their affected friend.

### ***Child Character Portrayal***

On the psychological makeup of a child, F. Guerald states:

This is the age of innocence..., the age when hatred is unknown, when nothing can cause distress; the golden age of human life. The age which defies Hell, the age when life is so easy and death holds no terrors, the age to which the heavens are open. (Aries: 1962, p.107)

The screenwriter / director of **Machachari** has presented children who are children in every sense of the word. For instance, in the first episode selected for this study, while Almasi is berated by his mother for carrying a phone to school and opening a *facebook* account, the lad did not have bad intentions. In his naiveté, the boy simply did what he saw children of his age do. Similarly, when Baha offers to repair Stella's door, he is sincere in his intentions even though eventually he only aggravates the awful state of the door. Childhood has indeed been delineated in this regard as apprenticeship to society; a phase when the individual learns about the total adult environment that he has been born into and when he prepares himself for his own place within it (Tucker,1977). Just as apprenticeship entails

ineptness and thus training in order to gain knowledge, so has the child such as Bahati been presented as ignorant, a disciple who should look up to the master. And in due course, it is the viewer's expectation that Baha will be acquainted with the technology of fixing doors.

When Almasi hibernates in his room after the scolding and whipping by the mother, his sister Joy visits to console him. But in childish exasperation, Almasi sends her away. Joy's reaction to being shooed away by her own brother when she meant well is the very insignia of childlikeness.

She innocently asks in a dreadfully poignant childlike tone: "I'm I not your sister?" The naiveté of Govi is also evident when in the second episode he notifies the teacher that the watch that was in Baha's possession essentially belonged to the father and that Baha had taken it without the father's approval. While saying this, Govi does not aim at putting his brother in problems. In another episode, Stella is at the centre of the enactments and she seems to have a problem which she does not want to share with anyone. She avoids her friends and even tells her mother that she (her mother) does not love her. She prefers walking alone; keeps to herself. At one point, Baha and Govi spot her and the former tries to talk to her in a bid to try to understand her abrupt transformation.

In spite of his good intentions; Baha is shoved hard by the grumpy Stella until he falls. Baha does not give up and continues pursuing Stella, hoping that his persistence might help to ultimately bring the truth to the fore; but he is punched by Stella. Such is the innocence of the child Baha who does not understand why his noble overtures should be rebuffed in such a callous manner by Stella who at age twelve is in the age bracket (age 12 – 20) characterized by a sense of identity and role confusion (Erickson, E.H, 1980). Indeed, having experienced menstruation for the first time, Stella is ignorant about the whole experience and thinks that something terrible is happening to her. This is the genesis of her grouchiness. Also, children of both genders aged between nine and twelve years:

Can be devils and saints, tender and sadistic in the same minute... Their behavior is instinctive, impulsive, and they can be ruthlessly selfish... They long to be grown up and, within appropriate limits, can be highly responsible people. They love and hate whole-heartedly, but deeply. (Alington 1970: 29)

The foregoing examples underscore the psychic comportment of a child. Many societies postulate that the child is mentally dark (ignorant, thus requiring some enlightening) or unformed (empty, thus requiring some filling). Greeks seem to have been most attentive to the 'unformed' qualities. Owing to a child's 'unformedness', Greeks appreciated children as 'mouldable'; thus capable of being drilled equally well in mind and body: "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree" (Bell and Harper: 1977,p.14). Greeks believed that children were green; that their knowledge must be acquired. This *tabula rasa* view of the child is typified in philosopher Epictetus' words: "For what is a child? Ignorance? What is a child? Want of instruction. For where a child has knowledge, he is not worse than we are" (Ibid, p.14). Greeks assumed that the child-like ignorance made the child not only impressionable but also gullible. Greeks thus underscored the need for children to be instructed on what may uplift them. It is in this regard that the adults in Machachari, parents and neighbours alike, play the crucial role of modeling the children. As Bell and Harper (1977) aver:

... Most of the child's characteristics are brought about by the behaviour of parents. It has been plausible to conceptualize the human parent as the initial agent of culture and the infant or child as the object of acculturation, because the human infant seems so motorically helpless in comparison with the young of other species.( p.53)

Since a child's behaviour reflects his/her upbringing, Baha's and Govi's parents on one side and Almasi and Joy's parents on the other side ensure that they are not damaged in their social standing by their children's action.

From the twelfth to the seventeenth century, leaders of religious reformations, perceiving the child's soul as frail and corruptible, moved to protect the young.

These leaders elevated the status of children to a higher level of importance in the public eye and strove to bring about changes in the family in general and the education of children in particular. Among the Greeks, all the greatest law-givers and philosophers devoted significant attention to the training and education of the young. The ideal objective of the training was cultural rather than practical or vocational. The aim of the education was to develop the child's moral character for his future participation in the life of the community (Beck: 1964).

The Greeks even created in their households a special position for the *Paidagogus*, a person whose primary role was to protect and oversee the moral environment of the young children. Children among the Greek were treasured not only as a link to the future but as family members just for themselves.

In **Machachari**, it is not just the parents who are involved in ensuring that the children behave properly; the whole community is involved. Indeed, that was the essence of bringing up a child in an African traditional set up where a child was seen to belong to the whole community. Subsequently, neighbours such as MaDVD are seen manifold times giving counsel to the children. It is in the same regard that Mzee Kobe; the gardener, Sophia; the house help, the school teachers and many other adults in the community can be observed occasionally advising or helping the children in many regards.

The screenwriter / director has ensured that in spite of the character flaws of the adult characters such as Stella's alcoholic mother, when it comes to their interactions and dealings with the children, they inspire virtue. Where the moulders demonstrate vice, the screenwriter of **Machachari** ensures that the child in the family does not become a puppetry marionette; a passive recipient of whatever kind of 'moulding'. The children in **Machachari** are not always acquiescent or obsequious to press-ganging by their parents to do things against their will. The screenwriter / director accords them minds of their own. It is in this regard that Stella occasionally disagrees with her mother.

**Machachari** presents two categories of children who cope so well despite their social economic disparities. Certainly, children are not born with ethnic biases. The child at first has no reserves. He does not have the foggiest idea about pride or even humility. A child is also devoid of other excitements and afflictions of self-consciousness. Blights in grown-ups just like strengths, are acquired in childhood, more so, through the child's models: "They give him the pushes or pulls which most importantly affect his total personality" (Goodman 1964, p.207).

The case of the children from two socio-economic disparities in **Machachari** is analogous to Abu's and Thomas's in Jean Van de Velde's film **Wit Licht** (White Light). Abu is a black Ugandan child while Thomas is a white child of an expatriate working in Uganda. Leaving among blacks, Thomas is eager to mingle with them. He scorns English imperialism. Indeed, in his childlike rebellion, he implicatively endeavours to challenge the English hegemony in all regards. As a child, he looks at the black boy, Abu, as his mirror image. He does not see the colour black in Abu but a fellow child, an alter ego. The two love and enjoy each other's company in many regards. They play football and ***play station*** together in spite of Abu's ignorance about the latter game. While at the beginning, Thomas's parents are apprehensive about the friendship between the two lads, later they too learn to view black people as fellow humans worth respect and honour. Thomas's lack of racial prejudice is evident when his friend is abducted and forced into the bush as a child soldier. He is very concerned about the predicament of his friend in the bush and urges his father to look for him.

The child thus acquires ethnic or class consciousness through association with the models, that is, through adult influence. Certainly, manifestations of class and ethnic consciousness or what we generally call group consciousness do not appear in children until shortly after the age of puberty.

This explains why some screenwriters / directors such as the one whose work is under study here focus on this age of early adolescence (Almasi and Stella have recently reached this stage) since it is the age of *awareness*, the age of questioning. The questioning and awareness exhibited veritably tells us the kind of socialization the children underwent. Parents as prime models can therefore socialize the child to have a positive attitude towards other human beings any differences disregarding, or can make a child loathe another group for no good reason. We do not see a representation of prejudice by children against other children in Machachari except in the initial stages where Fatso, christened “bully wa mtaa” (the estate bully), also a child of a well-to-do family, who at first is delineated as an epitome of bigotry and class pride, was uncomfortable with the children from the slum.

Such a comportment by a child is presented by the screenwriter / director of Machachari as a form of psychological abuse. In the later episodes, Fatso is transformed when he comes to realize that he cannot rationalize his antipathy towards the hillbilly boys.

### *Humour and Play Vis a Vis a Child's Character*

Humour and laughter are central thoughts in children. Children themselves exhibit humour and laughter and therefore enjoy and are in fact best taught through these. Like other children, the children in Machachari enjoy pretending to be adults. In doing so, they generate a lot of humour. For example, in the first episode, Baha believes that he can actually repair Stella's house after having watched his father doing some woodwork. The disaster that follows his experimentation is hilarious. In the second episode, humour pervades both plots.

Govi's innocent confession to the teacher that the watch that Baha lost actually belonged to his father, and that he had not sought his father's permission, is amusing. So is the second plot with the ordeals entailing the wobbly taxi that ferries Almasi and Joy to and from school after the regular taxi man fails to report. The palpable child-like exasperation on Almasi's and Joy's faces when the rickety taxi keeps on stalling for various mechanical reasons or otherwise, is veritably entertaining. In another episode, at a time when the land is dry and the rains have been long in coming, MaDVD ushers his relatives' cows to Almasi's homestead to graze. While Sophia is infuriated and worried that should Almasi's mother come in and find the unwelcome guests and animals in her compound, Sophia's services as house help may be terminated tout de suite, to the six urban children, getting a chance to play with the animals is a rare opportunity. The excitement of Almasi, Joy and Fatso at ushering in the animals to the homestead is overwhelming.

Suddenly Almasi's mother's car is hooting at the gate. Sophia is worried. What follows is a rib-cracking episode when the mother's car enters the garage. Swiftly, the cows are ushered out of the compound without Almasi's mother having any inkling of the drama taking place right under her nose. She is only able to catch the children frantically closing the gate after all the cattle have left. Could this be the time the gate is being closed well after she had already driven in? Probably, that could be one of the questions ringing in her head. That she could be so deceived without raising suspicion is really extremely pleasurable. The element of surprise that is crucial to all films is also aptly employed.

Another humorous incident is similar to the one enunciated above. However, this one involves a rabbit. Joy is given a rabbit by the 'ghetto' (read – slum) children but it is obvious that her mother would not entertain the idea of keeping a rabbit in the home. Hence, the rabbit has to survive without Joy's mother's knowledge. The children's endeavours to ensure that the existence of the rabbit remains a guarded secret while at the same time ascertaining that the rabbit is well taken care of, are a source of laughter. The rabbit is threatened on three fronts: on the one hand Sophia whines that it makes the house dirty by urinating anywhere, carelessly. She therefore wants the rabbit taken back to the ghettoes. On the second front is MaDVD. When he discovers the existence of the rabbit, he is eager to turn it into a meal; an idea that scares Joy to the extreme.

On the third front is Joy's mother who would definitely oppose the idea of keeping the rabbit. As a child, Joy does not fathom why the three adults do not appreciate nor have any sympathy for the little animal. Indeed, children are:

...animists, ritualists, anthropomorphic. Their world is half magical. Animate objects have personalities, the inanimate may come to life any moment. Anything may be menacing and so may have to be pacified or influenced and therefore imitated, or made one with yourself and so brought within your power. This is 'sympathetic magic'... (Alington 1970:12)

In **Machachari**, humour is not only elicited by the antics of the children. Since the programme primarily targets children first, the screenwriter / director has endeavoured to employ adults who also provoke laughter. One such character is MaDVD, voted by Kenyan teenagers as the best Kenyan television drama actor in 2010. Since children enjoy and indeed exhibit humour, it is easy to figure out why MaDVD was voted the best actor. MaDVD displays humour in both his actions and talk. For example, in the episode involving MaDVD's relatives' cows earlier mentioned, it is MaDVD who tells his relatives, who happen to be Maasai morans (the Maasai were fervent pastoralists traditionally) that he can get pasture at his friend's place.

Even though Sophia is opposed to the idea right from the onset and tells him so on phone, MaDVD hilariously insists that there is nothing wrong with the idea and that even Almasi's mother would not be happy to see poor animals die of hunger when there was so much pasture in her compound.

In another episode, MaDVD desires to make an impression on his girlfriend Sophia who plans to visit his house for the very first time. But he is worried that Sophia might be repulsed to realize that he actually resided in a dingy shack in a slum.

In his disquietude, he expresses his fears to the children – Baha and Govi. He surrenders to the situation and goes to pick up Sophia in order to show her his house. On the other hand, without telling him, the children offer to assist him. They secretly take their mother's table clothes which they use to cover MaDVD's poor 'furniture' which is mostly made up of a carton boxes. The children even carry their own black and white 14 inch TV to MaDVD's house to help him impress his lover the more. In reality, through figurative activities, children face up to their delights and worries, and by facing up to them, situate them in controllable outlook. In this episode too, in trying to help their adult friend, Baha, Govi and Stella are trying to play adult. Children take pleasure in pretending to be adults. Children obtain immense satisfaction from emulating and identifying themselves with the adults, and playing out grown-up themes.

The surprise on MaDVD's face when he comes to the house with Sophia is delightful. In a flash, surrender mutates into self-confidence; indeed, buoyancy that almost borders on haughtiness. He paces around the single room in contentment. Even Sophia is impressed. The dwelling may be a hovel but it is neat and orderly. On the side, Baha and Govi reel in suppressed glee for having caused such a pleasant stir. All is well for a while until MaDVD makes a mistake of slouching onto one of the covered boxes thinking that it was a real sofa. He finds himself crashing onto the floor. While the incident greatly embarrasses MaDVD before his girlfriend, it evokes laughter in both the children (Baha and Govi) and the audience.

Veritably, MaDVD is one adult who plays the crucial role of providing comic relief in the television drama. Most of the time, he is just funny. What are even more laughable are the kind of acts he puts up either to placate the owner of the public toilet that he runs commercially in the slums or to convince the vegetable or pastry vendors to lend him some provisions on credit. MaDVD's daily endeavours certainly engender mirth, yet his actions are not fanciful, outrageous or clownish.

In **Machachari**, in most cases humour with regard to the children goes hand in hand with play. The filmmaker has endeavoured to ensure that forms of play, without a doubt, humorous play, pervade the episodes. Playing is characteristic of children and indeed the affirmation that man is a playing animal is seen in childhood.

In one episode, the children are playing hide and seek in the vicinity of Almasi's family's expansive compound. In another incident, the children are swimming or playing football. In two consecutive episodes, children from both socio-economic classes have been sponsored by Almasi's parents for a trip at the Kenyan coast.

Both episodes focus on the childlike voyages and escapades of not only the children but also the adults accompanying them such as Mzee Kobe. The expeditions engender a lot of humour as the adventurers, adults and children alike, all seem to have descended to the same level and in throwing care to the wind, aim to have fun as much as possible.

### ***Subject Matter in Children's TV Drama***

Subject matter for children's television drama must be chosen with care. The screenplay should be about the "child world": either centered on childhood or dealing with issues from a child's angle of vision. It is doubtful that a work of art for that matter that centers on wife-inheritance, or giving birth (Alembi 2003), drugs, alcohol, death, graphic violence and sex, would be of interest to a child, unless the child is already coarse due to regrettable nurturing. If such subjects have to be tackled in a children's screenplay, then they must be dealt with sensitively and from a child's perspective. As much as children will in real life sometimes be forced to deal with the demise of a relative, inadvertently watch scalawag human beings raining blows on each other, they must not be perpetually reminded and in a gory manner that life is after all very temporary or just depraved. We may end up nurturing a whole generation of degenerates and cynics. On no account should drugs, alcohol or thievery be glamorized in a child's television drama. Such topics can only be infused in a children's screenplay if it is unmistakable that absorbing the former two or stealing someone else's property leads to the character's downfall; thus pointing out the perils of engaging in such behaviour.

On violence, it would surely be depraved, certainly reprehensibly decadent to make a child to act the role of a serial killer in a film. When that happens, there should be a clear rationale as to the root of the child character's debasement. This is what we see in the film **Wit Licht (White Light)** that juxtaposes the lives that an African and European child undergo while majoring on reflecting the plight of child soldiers in Uganda during the reign of the diabolic ruler Idi Amin. Abu is one such child soldier. Abu's child-like innocence is stolen when he is kidnapped by a rebel outfit and obligated to serve as a child soldier after being forced to execute his own father. However, the film ends on a good note. Abu is able to regain some aspects of his childhood.

For a child viewer, it is worse when a serial killer becomes the focal character in the children's film:

...it matters that it is the protagonist who is violent. It is natural when viewing any kind of narrative entertainment to identify oneself with the protagonist. An adult may identify with a violent character while watching a program without wanting to *be* him, but for children this is often a difficult distinction. The problem is compounded when ...the protagonist is presented as heroic and glamorous. (Buchanan, M, 1999, 4)

Thus, themes for children Television drama ought to be down to earth, simple themes. Indeed, **Machachari** does not immerse into complicated psychological dramas or wars.

The simplicity of the themes tallies with the child-like character. Some of the themes explored include: hope, compassion / charity, benevolence, friendship, solidarity, adventure / exploration, trickery, fantasy, forgiveness, flexibility, peace, sincerity, simplicity, typicality; among others.

On the theme of typicality, childhood has been reflected by the screenwriter / director of the film text under study as an emblem of naturalness, sincerity, unaffectedness and unpretentiousness. Children do not hide their feelings. The children in Machachari have no qualms stating exactly what they feel at any point. Unlike adults such as MaDVD and Sophia who despite being thoroughly in love with each other, are ever at variance and in the process hiding their true feelings for each other, children are candid with themselves.

The filmmaker of Machachari wishes everybody were sincere with their emotions like a child. It is only then that humans would live with calmness and gladness in their hearts. When Stella's mother, a woman who is ever in a combative mode is cheerful, this is taken as a positive step towards childlike naturalism.

When Baha thinks of his school, he is more concerned with the joy he gets from the environment such as playing with his classmates than with the learning process. Because of some teacher's jocular nature and moderation, the teaching is also a source of happiness to the child.

To the screenwriter, Naomi Kamau, child-like naturalness is a symbol of freedom, of merriment. Because poor children seem to have more liberty than bourgeoisie children, the former are presented as being able to exercise their rights more. For example, the poor children can exercise their right to play and thus learn in play. Baha and Govi are able to sneak out more often to visit their wealthy friends than the latter can do. The former also have the freedom to explore their environment.

Another theme presented in the Machachari through the child characters is the theme of tolerance. Attendant to this theme, the child's social significance coupled with his innate thoughts, feelings and conduct have been employed symbolically to express the authors' optimism for an ameliorated Kenya and the world generally.

The relationship between Bahati, Almasi, Govi, Joy, Stella and Fatso in Machachari is a reflection of hope for a class tolerant society. This is indeed the essence of childhood. A child's affection knows no bounds, be it class-oriented, gender-oriented, religious or based on ethnic disparities.

On the latter, it will be noted that the screenwriter carefully chooses names that are neutral. Names like Bahati, Almasi, and Govi, cannot be pigeonholed to any one Kenyan community. It will also be noted that the same applies to the names of adult characters such as 'Mzee Kobe' and 'MaDVD'. It will also be noted that names such as Sofia (or Sophia), Bahati and Almasi and indeed most other names such as Mzee Kobe and Govi, cannot be cubbyholed to any particular religion. Unlike adults who may discriminate and intimidate each other based on gender, the six children; four boys and two girls work in harmony. Stella does not feel disadvantaged or inferior to her male friends and neighbours - Baha and Govi. On the other hand, little Joy, Almasi's sister is at home in the company of elder brother Almasi and his burly friend, Fatso. Subsequently, Naomi Kamau is urging the human race to embrace child-like friendliness – to appreciate and integrate with all kinds of human species without discrimination. Ms. Kamau's moral stand is that human beings are equal irrespective of class, ethnic orientation and religion. She sees class, religious and ethnic intolerance as the root of the disharmony pervading the world.

The television drama is therefore evocative having been inaugurated barely one and a half years after Kenya as a country experienced its worst ethnic clash following the disputed 2007 presidential elections.

By contrasting the views of adults such as Almasi's mother, Baha's father and mother on matters of class, Naomi Kamau employs the six children to demonstrate that unless sentiments of class and tribal superiority are discarded, the problems in the world would never be solved. It is definitely noble, universal human values which determine the friendship between the children from the two divergent social classes. As we earlier noted, children are not born with racial prejudices but rather imbibe them from adults. It is therefore appropriate that Kamau employs children who are still psychologically ductile rather than intransigent adults to champion the fight for human emancipation from the prison of class and ethnic bigotry.

It is significant that the key characters are either mostly in the pre-adolescent or adolescent stages rather than the younger child. At the time of writing this treatise, Stella and Almasi are grappling with the challenges of adolescence.

Stella has just experienced menstruation for the first time while Almasi has an eye for beautiful women, whose pictures he hides underneath pictures of his favourite musicians. The choice of children aged between age eight and twelve is deliberate.

This is because, unlike the younger child, the pre-adolescent and adolescent can introspect and reflect upon their own mental and personality traits. Characterized by the capacity to construct ideals or contrary to fact situations, such children also:

Can conceive of ideal families, religions and societies and when he compares these with his own family, religion and society, he often finds the latter wanting. Much of adolescent rebellion against adult society derives from this new capacity to construct ideal structures. (Elkind: 1970, p.79)

This statement explains why Baha, Govi, Almasi and Stella act the way they do – free-willed and occasionally rebellious. The children's sporadic rejection of their parent's advice regarding who to fraternize with is thus a concomitant of their own psychological make-up. As adolescents, while looking up to their parents for direction, the children see many alternatives to parental directives. They are not always willing to accept parental alternatives without explanations. In puberty, one:

Wants to know not only where a parent stands but also why and is ready to debate the virtues of the parental alternatives over that chosen by him and his peers. (ibid, p. 77)

Compassion on the part of the children is seen in the way they commiserate in each other's predicament. Subsequently, Almasi and Joy use their savings to buy their ghetto friends new school uniform. They also sneak out food (read – meat) to their friends and in exchange, their friends also send them the kind of food that they take in the ghettos such as beans.

It is amazing how one may think s/he is giving his / her children the best only to find out that the children envy what the parent may consider inferior. That is the paradox of childhood. When Stella's house burns down, the children's compassion is palpable - they take their own garments to Stella and are able to mobilize help from their own parents towards Stella's family. When Baha's father loses his job, Almasi and Joy are able to persuade their wealthy mother to find him another job. Such is the kindness of children.

### ***Language***

While film is multi-medial but may subsist entirely on visual imagery, verbal language is also key in film.

Language has been a controversial issue in art generally. Should we aspire at some universality or just aim at particularity? Should we embrace both so that we employ language that takes care of particularities while remaining universal at the same time?

Whereas many film or literary artists globally have ensured that they employ the English language in a manner that captures linguistic particularities and yet remain comprehensible globally, many 'serious' African artists have chosen to deny the social dialects of place and time by using language that is artificial in many regards in as far as characters' dialogue is concerned. Many African films in English are good examples of 'bad' films in this regard. One African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o avers that the languages of African art cannot be discussed expressively outside the circumstances of the social forces which have made it both an issue and a problem requiring a resolution (Wa Thiong'o: 1986).

However, countless African artists are still disappointing in the blatant penchant for a cosmopolitan linguistic approach that renders the issue of context immaterial.

The yearning by some African film makers for linguistic cosmopolitanism in all regards in order to seek some kind of universal art is a disservice to the vision, philosophy and psychology of Africa. It is traitorous to the linguistic affluence of our own oratory. Unlike the West Africans who pride in their own dialects and idiolects of the English language, when many Kenyan film makers employ foreign tongues in the enunciation of their works, their overriding aspiration is at a syntactic density that equals or outclasses the language owners' syntactic rigmarole. Kenyan television dramas in this regard abound right from **Family Affairs** in the 1980s to the ongoing **Changes**, **Makutano Junction** and **Tabasamu**. Examples are numerous. However, with growing awareness among local film makers and growing interest to pursue film making professionally, many exceptions do exist – **Beba Beba**, **Tahidi High**, **Mali**, **Shuga**, among others.

**Machachari** is also an exception. The film maker has endeavoured to remain true to not only the language of the two social classes reflected but also the linguistic behaviour of her child subjects. Believably, while the children of the well-to-do, Almasi, Joy and Fatso also occasionally code-switch from English to Kiswahili, they prefer English most of the times. However, their kind of English is not exaggerated, it is the kind expected of their age and class in Kenya. When the three children code switch to 'Kiswahili', they mouth their own slang version but which is easier to decipher than the kind we hear from the three children from the ghetto – Baha, Govi and Stella. The latter three mostly speak not Kiswahili but *Sheng* a Kenyan Slang that agglutinates several local languages with Kiswahili as the foundation language. Undeniably, that is the kind of language spoken not only in Kenyan ghettos but also in most Kenyan urban centres currently. While for many, the language is consciously employed depending on the context, for some slum dwellers, it is the only language they know. In such a case, the slang graduates into a Creole. Whereas, Baha goes to primary school, he seems to have been influenced so much by the hybrid language that he has problems even writing a composition in school in good English. But the boy has no qualms communicating in terrible English.

It is no longer *Sheng* but just bad English. For instance, when he is asked by his teacher why he was fighting a fellow pupil, he remarks:

I fikirid that he is the one who took the watch. I want to sema...  
(*I thought that he is the one who took the watch. I want to say...*)

Here, the child is so unabashed in his poor English; just throwing care to the wind and choosing to be true to himself.

At other instances, influenced by the likes of MaDVD, Baha and Govi employ a complex kind of *Sheng* that entails speaking backwards. The use of hybrid language in whatever regard is also a key source of humour in **Machachari**. The episode where Baha is forced by his teacher to read aloud a composition that he (Baha) had written in *Sheng* is rib-cracking. The same applies to Govi taunting his brother "amechapwa na dame" (he has been walloped by a girl) when Baha is smacked by Stella. As Wesonga (2011) rightly notes:

One thing that becomes apparent during the teenage years is the quest by the youth to be independent of the rest of the society. This sort of identification takes in part linguistic identification. Teenagers tend to set themselves apart by adopting modes of expression that are distinctly their own. It is even justifiable to say that teenage modes of expression represent a kind of reaction by the youth against the established norms and conduct. (82)

Nollywood (Nigerian) films offer us examples of how a foreign language can be indigenized beautifully for plausibility. Indeed, Nigerian movies have been acclaimed for knocking over established systems of grammar and traversing linguistic norms in order to communicate the West African experiences credibly.

Similarly, in ***Machachari***, in addition to contributing to credible characterization, “the use of *Sheng* also helps the production achieve the objective of addressing, more specifically, the target audience...” (Wesonga 2011:89); indeed, a youthful if not urbanized Kenyan audience.

### ***Music***

In film, music belongs to nondiegetic sound. Most nondiegetic sound has no significant sequential association with the story. However, “occasionally the filmmaker may use a type of nondiegetic sound that does have a defined temporal relationship to the story” (D. Bordwell and K. Thompson 2004:375). While music is employed sparingly in ***Machachari***, whenever it is utilized, it not only entertains but also emphasizes the narrative development. Indeed, the song by the children that begins the programme, humorously recounts the various roles that the children play in the television drama.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter, we have observed that the plot for children’s television drama ought to be simple. In such simplicity also the plot would readily communicate the core concerns unlike plots for adult viewers which may be convoluted and taxing in trying to gauge what the message might be. Also, the filmmaker should endeavour to resolve the conflict in every episode as much as possible to gratify the child’s expectation for possibility. A dangling draft might satisfy an adult but definitely not a child. On child character portrayal, we have noted that no matter how brainy or forthright a child is, the filmmaker should ensure that in the prescriptions of Piaget, Erikson and Sears he/she remains a child – behaves, thinks and talks like a child. A know-all child or one who talks like an adult would never be considered a strong character but a horrible one. Themes for children’s television drama must be selected cautiously. Such themes must be familiar to and / or comprehensible by a child. Art is not only a product of the society; it is also a force in the society. The power that children’s art controls can therefore be used aptly to shape and instill good attitudes, since art works on the emotions. Humour and fantasy elements (read – possibility) are fundamental in communicating to children.

Context is also a key issue in children’s television drama. The enactments ought to be based on the familiar. A television drama based on snake-gods, cooking of felines, cannibalism and transsexual gender identity will without doubt be as inappropriate and revolting to an African child as scatological (toilet) humour. The result will be a child who is out of joint with his/her own environment.

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**Filmography**

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Gatero, J.	<u>Tabasamu</u>
Gosling, A	<u>Makutano Junction</u>
Kamau, N.	<u>Machachari</u>
Lauten, C.	<u>That's So Raven</u>
Mahlatsi, T.	<u>Shuga</u>
Rock, C.	<u>Everbody Hates Chris</u>
Saraceni, D	<u>Shades of Sin</u>
Stone, J.	<u>Sesame Street</u>
Wambugu, K.	<u>Mali</u>
Wamuyu, C.	<u>Tahidi High</u>
Young, R.	<u>Smart Guy</u>