

Delineation of National Healing and Conflict Resolution in Film: A Case Study of Kenya

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Abstract

Most socio-political films in Kenya in the last decade manifest manifold shades of violence. By juxtaposing two films (Wale Watu and Pieces for Peace) that reflect the scenario in Kenya in December 2007 and early 2008 subsequent to bungled elections held on 27th December 2007, films that exhibit obvious physical violence, against two other films (Benta and Nairobi Half Life), which explore every day violence in metropolises characterized by capitalistic inequalities, this paper aims at evolving a practical framework for the evaluation of how dramatic craftsmanship of the theme of violence in the four selected films operates to interpret the Kenyan social, cultural, economic and political experiences. A framework of this nature will provide us with grounds upon which we can make objective deductions and substantive statements about Kenyan Films in this regard. The paper succinctly examines the external and internal processes operating in the characters in the given film texts and the strategies the authors employ to bring out these internal processes. Such an analysis is crucial in the evaluation of the relationship between an aspect of form; character, and content in the Kenyan film. The paper looks at characters in the four selected films from a socio-political perspective. In this regard, the paper looks at the film makers as committed artists, guided by the belief that any committed art is inseparable from political and social realities in its function. This paper looks at the film makers' use of film as a vehicle of evaluating society and for enunciating their visions for their societies.

Introduction

Summary of Plot in the Four Films

Wale Watu is a film by Cajetan Boy. This feature film was inspired by the post election chaos that followed the disputed 2007 elections in Kenya. The plot of Wale Watu orbits around two youths, Paul and Mercy. Coming from different, indeed, historically antagonistic ethnic communities (Mercy is a Kikuyu and Paul is a Luo), the two are in love and plan to get married. Whereas their parents have no qualms about the relationship and indeed live in harmony, the outcome of the elections marks a turning point. Chaos ensues, the two communities turn against each other. Paul's father's hospital is set on fire by furious Kikuyu youths, precipitating the demise of Paul's paternal uncle, Mark, who is burnt to death inside the hospital set ablaze. Paul's sister Safari escapes death narrowly but with severe injuries. Among the Kikuyu youths gone amok is Mercy's brother, Robert. And when the truism that Paul's Fiancée's brother was one of the youths who participated in killing Paul's uncle comes to the fore, Paul's and Mercy's wedding plans are thrown into disarray. Tension is palpable everywhere.

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Villagers eager to save their skins and property scurry in all corners, hauling whatever of their properties they can carry and run fearfully to indefinite locales. It comes to the fore that the anarchy was not spontaneous but instigated by a local politician who made the villagers believe that Paul's father, a medical doctor, and his tribesmen, had used their financial might and connections to powers-that-be, to take the villager's lands, jobs, and women; and therefore deserved to be driven out of their village.

In the melee, Robert, Mercy's brother, working at the behest of the politician, is inadvertently shot by a poisoned arrow as the hopping mad youths carry out their tribal mission. Injured, Robert is forsaken by his own 'army' of exasperated youths. When the rabble-rousing politician recognizes Robert writhing in pain, he also chooses to pay no attention to the latter, disdainfully trampling him and walking on as if nothing had happened. The irony is that the last person one would have expected to rescue Robert is the very person he had had wronged – Paul's father; whose brother Robert's gang had exterminate. However, while trying to help Robert, the gang comes for Paul's father. It is at this point that Mercy's father intervenes. He is able to reason with the irate youths and make them see the foolishness of leasing their lives and souls to politicians whose only interest is self aggrandizement. Whilst the fracas occasioned by the antipathy between the Kikuyu and Luo persists, Mercy and Paul remain steadfast in their love and are not swayed.

Pieces for Peace is a film by Robby Bresson. Just like *Wale Watu*, *Pieces for peace* was inspired by the 2007 post election bloodshed in Kenya. *Pieces for Peace* is the story of two brothers - James and Stanley. The duo grew up among people of a different ethnic community, their father, Mr. Makwere, having bought land far away from his ancestral home. Upon the demise of their father marries a younger woman from the host community. During the post election insurgency, James, Stanley and their father find themselves amidst a clash of rebellious youths and the police. In the melee, the three are callously thrashed by anti-riot policemen. In the process, Mr. Makwere suffers a serious gash on his brow, which leads to his hospitalization. In the meantime, the tribal chaos escalates and in the mayhem, Mr. Makwere's house and Stanley's hardware shop, indeed, the latter's focal source of revenue and sustenance, are razed to the ground. Subsequently, father and sons (Mr. Makwere and his brood) seek sanctuary in an Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camp.

Whereas enunciated above is the main plot of *Pieces for Peace*, the movie has a subplot centering on the theme of love similar to that of Paul and Mercy in *Wale Watu*. Whereas in *Wale Watu*, the man in love is Luo, in *Pieces for Peace*, the man, Rono, hails from the Kalenjin Community. However, the ladies in both relationships (Mercy in *Wale Watu* and Wairimu in *Pieces for Peace*) are Kikuyu.

Luos and Kalenjins were on the same political side during the 2007 elections and indeed, the clash between Kalenjins and Kikuyus was more devastating than that between Luos and Kikuyus because in the wake of gaining independence in 1963, a huge section of Kikuyus had been settled in what was considered to be Kalenjin land in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya. Originally, Kikuyus, the most populous ethnic community in Kenya (estimated at twenty two percent of the total population), occupied only the Central province. However, Central province could not sustain the growing Kikuyu population, leading to migration to the neighbouring Rift Valley which had tracts of unoccupied arable land. A huge population was officially settled there by the first President of the Country, the late Jomo Kenyatta; a Kikuyu. It is claimed that the opinion of the Kalenjin commoners was not sought in this relocation, a pact having been made between President Kenyatta and his vice President, Moi, who hailed from the Kalenjin community. The result was that the two communities were forever at logger heads and the ugly head of the antipathy between the two communities and the tension obtaining was evinced repeatedly during subsequent presidential elections since the beginning of the multi-partism in 1991.

The scenario above puts into perspective the delicate relationship between Wairimu and Rono. Wairimu's father bought land among the Kalenjin. The two care for each other, are engaged and plan to marry. Wairimu is heavy with child. The results of the disputed elections are announced at time when

Rono's parents had gone to Wairimu's home to give dowry. It is here that they are confronted by weapon-wielding raucous Kalenjin youths baying for blood of people from the Kikuyu community. The youths are also out to stop the dowry ceremony, maintaining that Rono cannot marry Wairimu given that she hails from the opposing (read – 'wrong' tribe). The rowdy youths attack Wairimu's home and set it on fire.

Wairimu's family has no option but to look for shelter and protection in an IDP (internally displaced people) camp. The film concludes with the birth of Wairimu and Rono's child; which epitomizes a new beginning for Kenya.

Cajetan Boy's *Benta* is a film about the ordeals of an orphaned girl by the named Benta. We are told of how her family members lost all their parents property to relatives upon the demise of their parents in a ghastly accident caused a drunken driver. Subsequently, life changes drastically and Benta has to look for a job to cater for not only herself but also her siblings. A child, she becomes a provider to her younger siblings. Benta is employed as a house help at the Fulanis; a family that treats her like vermin. Members of the Fulani family exploit her for their own self aggrandizement. Benta's life is a series of dehumanizing experiences under callous employers who exploit her labour while denying her even the slightest share of basic rights. Her pregnancy is a direct result of sexual exploitation by the man of the house whose wife on the other hand overworks and underfeeds her while exposing her to working conditions unfit for any human being let alone a girl of his age.

Not only in her labour is Benta not appreciated but she is nagged constantly by both Mrs. Fulani and her daughter Sheana. She is made to feel that she is nearer to being a brute than a human being. She is virtually made to eat leftovers while her masters eat their fill and sleep in luxury. At the same time, she is denied interaction with other human beings around her. However, she is kept going by the love she receives from one member of the son of the family, Dedan who helps her grow mentally. As she becomes emboldened and aware of her rights, Benta reports Mr. Fulani to the police for defiling and impregnating her. The movie concludes with the arrest of Mr. Fulani.

Nairobi Half Life

Nairobi Half Life is the story of a young man, Mwas, in a rural village, who has big dreams. Mwas envisions that his dreams can only come to fruition in a Metropolis like Nairobi. However, his folks are opposed to his idea of traveling to Nairobi to look for a job. To Mwas' mother and father, the city is up to no good. According to her mother, Nairobi is "where poverty, disease and the devil live". And from his father's perspective: "Nairobi has the worst people... Nairobi is rotten". However, Mwas' mother yields to his demands and gives him her blessings and bus fare. Mwas has been promised a job by both Jose and Daddy M. The latter gives him some merchandise – car stereos - to deliver to Mr. Khanji, an Indian electronics trader in the city. On reaching Nairobi, Mwas' hopes are dimmed as soon as he disembarks at the Machakos country bus station. A gang of hoodlums accosts him and rob him of all his money and the merchandise. Walking aimlessly in the city on the same day, he is mistaken for a hawker by the city council guards and is arrested. At the central police station, he meets a hard-edged gang leader, Otis, who bullies him on arrival at the cell by making him a toilet full of human faeces on the floor. That notwithstanding, Mwas and Otis strike a rapport and on Mwas' release the next day, Otis helps him get a menial job at some backstreet food kiosk near the city centre. When Otis is released soon after, Mwas is introduced to his gang and initiated into crime. Otis gang specializes in stealing vehicles accessories, especially car lights, side mirrors and wheels. For all the trouble, they get a pittance in exchange from a cold-blooded Spare parts dealer. Soon after, courtesy of Ringo, a more sophisticated gang leader, Otis gang graduates into stealing vehicles. Later, a ruckus arises due to the small money the gang got in exchange for stealing cars. The furor develops into a gruesome brawl between Ringo's and oti's gangs, resulting in the death of Ringo.

The police come into the scene and apprehend the gang. A corrupt officer Mutua asks to confine members of Otis gang separately with ill motives as Otis narrates:

Nairobi is full of unsolved crimes. The cops have to round up some guys from time to time to fool the public.....They'll kill us and use our bodies as evidence for something we didn't do. They'll claim we killed in a shoot-out.

After one of the gang members is executed, the remaining four work out a plan to attack the two police men when they come to execute the next one. In the confusion, they are able to besiege one officer and get his gun. They manage to kill both officers not knowing that two more officers are waiting outside the building. When they attempt to run away, there is exchange of fire and all the gang members except Mwas are shot dead. Mwas manages to run into the crowded city and the film ends with Mwas just making it to the Phoenix theatre fifteen minutes before a play in which he was part of the cast begins. In the play, Mwas plays the role of a burglar. The irony is that while in the drama of real life he was able to outsmart the police, in the play he is caught in the act and the play ends with Mwas being shot at by a Police man.

Parallels between Post Election Violence and Everyday Violence

Many people mistake violence as aggressive physical action probably because direct violence is the most visual form. However, violence goes beyond physical paradigms and can take many other forms including: psychological, verbal, emotional, social, economic, sexual as well as cultural, structural and symbolic violence. Indeed, any form of intimidation even if it be by text messages or an angry look or raised voice, constitutes psychological violence, while name-calling, put downs and sarcasm are forms of verbal abuse. Abusing another person in a way that humiliates, degrades and demeans the victim, with the intention of deflating his / her confidence is veritably a form of emotional violence. And since humans are essentially social animals, isolation of other humans from social networks or the humiliation of another person in public would constitute social abuse. Violence is therefore a complex and far-reaching concept.

Physical violence is palpable in all the four films as illustrated in the summary. In *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Piece*, we noted physical violence between two antagonistic ethnic groups. In the former, youths from the host community attack the Makweres and burn the old man's house and his son's hardware shop. In the latter film, the unwarranted burning of Paul's father's hospital and killing of Mark, illustrates this kind of violence. In these kinds of physical violence(s), there is lack of consideration for physical comfort of fellow human beings to permanent damage or death. In *Benta*, Physical violence is evinced in the mistreatment of the house help at Phillip Fulani's home. Benta is not only overworked to the extent that she has to wake up in the middle of the night to serve the night-loving man of the house; she even has to receive Sheana's phone calls on her behalf. Ultimately, Benta is physically assaulted and raped by Mr. Fulani. In *Nairobi Half Life*, there are two agents of physical violence: the gangs who unleash violence to their better-off victims when they rob them of their phones, jewelry, car accessories and cars; and the police who senselessly brutalize and even kill members of the gangs without really caring about the sanctity of their victims lives.

Whether ethnic, class, or duty-oriented, acts of physical violence in all the four films are presented as unwarranted; engendered by lack of understanding between the groups. All groups either hold un-rationalized odium for each other or view the other with suspicion.

Violence Vis a Vis Socio-economic Status in the Selected Films: the Socio-psychological concomitants

Fear is a key constituent of violence and is habitually the most potent way a perpetrator reins in his / her victim. Besides wielding terror-inducing weapons, fear may be produced by looks, gestures or any behaviour which may be employed to frighten and render the other person powerless. Timorous middle-class people or people from ethnic communities that feel threatened, pervade the selected films. Fearful because of their very status or ethnicity that makes them vulnerable to attacks by the hill-billies of the society or hate mongers of another community. This is evident in all the four films.

In *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Peace*, it is mostly the wealthy and middle class flourishing in host communities that suffer most owing to their noticeable opulence manifest in terms of visible investments such as business premises. Paul's father's hospital that is razed to the ground is but an example of the violence and loss the middle class experiences. While in these two films it is both tribe and class that makes the middle class vulnerable, in *Nairobi Half Life*, it is the question of status that makes the affluent susceptible to violent attacks from the poor. In the latter case, 'tribe' is purely socio-economic – the rich versus the poor.

The ethnic community of both the victim and victimizer is immaterial in this case. Indeed, Otis' gang is composed of youths from different ethnic communities as their names suggest – Otis (Luo), Mwas, short for Mwangi (Kikuyu), Kyallo (Kamba). Otis' gang robs the haves of their phones, cash, cars' accessories and even cash. The fear on the woman who is robbed off a phone by Otis is palpable when she realizes that her endeavour to get back the phone will be in vain in view of the confidence and fearlessness of her attacker who, while running away, at some moment stops and stares at her menacingly. This fear is not a preserve of the so-called 'weaker' gender. The gang is able to scare off a man who found them stealing headlights from his car. After running away with the stolen parts with the man in hot pursuit, to avoid trouble they turn and start pursuing the car owner instead with shouts of 'thief'. Indeed, the fear on the man's face is evident and he runs for his dear life. While what exactly happened to him is not captured on screen, we are told by the gang that the man fell victim to mob justice. The victim becomes the villain. Also, in a play within the film, acted at the Phoenix players, in which Mwas acts as a burglar, the fear on the owner of the house when he stumbles on the two burglars right in his house is overt

Whereas the well-to-do are majorly the victims of violence in *Nairobi Half Life*, they are not totally absolved from blaim.

In Marxist perspective, the rich are viewed as either perpetrators or beneficiaries of Structural violence; the type of violence that is embedded into systems. The inequalities within societies and between societies engender tensions which further aggression if not resolved. Restricting access to rights and possibilities based on factors such as gender, health, skin color or ethnic community, religion, sexual orientation and other considerations are also forms of structural violence. In Mona Ombogo's *Unseen, Unsung, Unforgotten*, Mr. Karani fires Baraka from his job after Baraka tests HIV positive. That Baraka is a committed worker is immaterial. In the same film, Neema is dropped from a women's group committee when she is found to be HIV positive. Her HIV status even affects her children's interrelations in the community since they are ostracized and shunned at school by both fellow pupils and the teachers.

In Cajetan Boy's *Benta*, the lead character, an orphan girl, is mistreated when she is employed at the Fulanis as a house-help. Child labour is a form of violence and is certainly an area where the physical and intellectual size of a child has been made capital of to fleece and molest the child. The violence that Benta experiences from this wealthy family that has no regard for her kind ranges from physical (rape) to emotional (daily insults). Benta is not granted any rest by the Fulanis. She had to be seen to be busy all the time. Resting is procrastination and procrastination is a thief of time. The conditions of poverty and underdevelopment continue to drive children to go and work.

Because labour is available at a cheaper price from these desperate and an ignorant lot, maximum extraction of surplus value is attainable. The fate of Benta reflects that of the girl-child in the developing world. Indeed, since the ancient times, man has taken advantage of the child's size to use and abuse the child for self-aggrandizement. Religious stories and ancient myths also echo the theme of a child's physical defenselessness.

Romus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome, were abandoned as babies, found and brought up by a wolf.

In the bible, Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son to God and he does not even bother to tell the child. The child's opinion is irrelevant. It is God's intervention that saves the child's soul. Likewise, Punic religions in 800-150 B.C. demanded the sacrifice of children of the noble to the gods. When threatened by rival power in Sicily, the Carthagians slew five hundred children of the nobility. While it is argued that Filicide as an act of ritual sacrifice, was practiced by many primitive societies because the child was seen as a symbol of extra-ordinary powerful forces, this kind of ritual reduced the child to a mere object. In offering infants as sacrifices the ancient Carthagians believed that these children were to the gods their most precious possessions. A child thus was actually seen as some kind of property. And thanks to his anatomical and cerebral size, he or she was incapable of rebelling against or defying a parental or a guardian's decision. Langer (1973) asserts that apart from the sacrificed children, illegitimate, sickly and deformed babies were also exterminated in ancient Greece.

Langer avers: "There can be no doubt whatsoever that infanticide was practiced in the ancient world to an extent that chills the blood of contemporary historians" (p.353)

With regard to the films discussed in this paper, the smallness of the child ought to be juxtaposed with the financial smallness of the lowest in the society. In *Nairobi Half Life*, the lowly are represented by: Otis', Dingo's and Daddy's gangs and the youthful prostitutes such as Amina who hawk their bodies for as little as fifty shillings. The lowest class in *Nairobi Half Life* are victims of not only physical and emotional violence from the likes of police Officer Mutua, they are also victims of Cultural violence similar to what persons from a minority group in a community go through in the films *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Peace*: entrenched stories glorifying and normalizing the stereotyping, discrimination and even maltreatment of a particular group. In *Wale Watu* (those people), each side of the divide alludes to the other as 'those people' simply because they speak a different language and practice different cultural practices. The stereotyping, stories and ideas of how the 'other' people are, engender perceptions that limit our possibilities to consider the others as our equals or even as humans, because they tell us that it has always been like this and will always have to be like it is.

All the ethnic groups in all the selected have stereotypes of each other. In *Wale Watu* and *Pieces for Peace*, at the heart of the ethnic clashes is the question of perception. One group (Luo) perceives the other (Kikuyu) as egocentric and reeling in superiority complex to the extent that it would only support its own for the highest office in the land. On the other hand, Kikuyus are said to perceive Luos as inept because of their ancestral genesis and community's cultural norms (such as lack of circumcising men). To some Kikuyus, uncircumcised men are incapable of leading the country. Indeed, this kind of ethnic antipathy and distrust is not only a form of social and emotional violence, it is also a type of neo-racism. Ethnicity and class disparities have influenced human relations since time immemorial. Black Africans, though belonging to the same race, have not escaped the jaundiced eye and unjustness of tribal and class relations. The nature of the ethnic-related or class-related cultural patterns to which individuals are exposed veritably determines what kind of people they would be both as young persons and adults. Where ethnic prejudice prevails, ethnicity and class cannot be sundered. They are usually one side of the same coin (Baker: 1975). Ethnic relations are but group power contests where types of humanity jostle for power to control and power to make or influence decisions affecting the society: "In Kenya, people think that political power from someone of your community will benefit you" (The Standard daily, April 1, 2013, XTRA, pg 4).

Marxism perceives this form of ‘-ism’ as a part of the bourgeoisie ideology designed especially to legitimize the fleecing of one people by the other. In other words, tribalism just like racism is but a capitalistic device for dividing a people into two or more antagonistic segments for better control.

To be able to succeed in this endeavour, the ‘philosophers of hate’ engage in tribal myths to vindicate the abhorrent status quo. In Kenya, such myths, derived from traditional times have been used to perpetuate biases where: a group is termed cattle rustlers;

others considered lazy to the extent they would wait for a ripe mango to fall from a tree rather than climb the tree; another people are lumped as nomadic herders who would excel in a watch man’s job; others are labeled congenital thieves; and the like. For instance, when the lead character goes to the Indian trader to report to him that he had been robbed of the car stereos he had been given by Daddy M to deliver to him, the trader, in anger, hollers thus: “Wee Kikuyu yote mwizi sana” (You kikuyus are all thieves).

Indeed, owing to such prejudices, the participatory role of societal members in a tribal society is indeed circumscribed by one name and the tribal tongue he / she can mouth. There is no room for power contests based on equality. Power contests in any society usually occur within the major institutions or structures of society (political, economic, and social). In a tribal establishment, while a given group may not be officially prohibited, it is frustrated from pursuing its goal through or within these structures. In a way, this is the brain, the *raison d’être* for violence, making it acceptable. People from certain communities are not treated equal, because they are considered inferior to others; the poor such as Otis’ gang have neither true freedom nor access to society institutions and rights because they are considered a threat to society. Mwas’ arrest for just looking poor (read – like a hawker) and subsequent incarceration and molestation, is a clear illustration of the fetters a poor person has to surmount in his daily dealings. If the poor get beaten or killed as is the case of Otis’ gang in the hands of officer Mutua, one is considered to have provoked the victimizer even when the victim was very innocent. Hence, the victim mostly ends up looking like the perpetrator. According to Erich Fromm:

The cry for law and order which is raised in the name of stopping violence can in itself be an expression of violence. It can be, and often is, rooted in the wish to use force to suppress unpopular opinions or attitudes. ‘Law and order’ is an emotionally charged slogan which often speaks against minority violence, while the mood behind it may be just as violent as that which it claims to fight.

But perhaps the poor man’s ‘pocket size’ contributes more to the position the lowly are bestowed in a society. The most basic physical fact about the lowly is that they are small in a world where those in authority over him will have financial ‘height’(read – might). It means that in terms of financial strength alone, the rich person has it in his power to impose his will on the poor rather than vice-versa and this has almost always been the case. Poverty has been viewed as an epitome of weakness and infirmity of both mind and soul. This has been the more reason for not holding the poor in high esteem.

The poor like Mwas (*Nairobi Half Life*) and Robert (*Wale Watu*) have been mistreated all over the world mostly because of their financial weakness. In *Nairobi Half Life*, after using Robert to fight his so called opponents (people from the other community), the politician ignores him when he is shot and injured. This goes on to show how rich people only want to use the poor for their selfish gain.

Cultural violence is in many ways the basis and legitimization of the other forms of violence and since it lives in our brains, it is especially hard to see and to get rid of. Waya, the spare parts dealer in Nairobi’s *Half Life* finds it okay to seriously underpay the gang for the merchandise they deliver through very perilous ventures. In *Benta*, Philip, the man of the house; a married man, finds it in order to demand for sexual favours from his house help Benta.

He rapes her repeatedly, resulting in an unplanned pregnancy. Philip Fulani believes that he actually rescued Benta from not only starvation but also savagery. The child's onus is therefore to reciprocate this kindness by being a 'responsible' (read – a puppetry marionette and sex object) servant.

Conclusion

In this paper, illustrating from four Kenyan films, I have juxtaposed the violence that was perpetrated in Kenya subsequent to the botched elections in 2007 against the day to day forms of violence perpetrated between humans to create a balanced opposition. Ultimately, we have shown that there is a lot to compare between the particular post-poll violence(s) and the everyday violence. Tribal, class or gender chauvinism or pride and lack of understanding are the curses that engender physical or emotional violence. Class chauvinism or violence from the poor to the affluent or from a minority tribe to the majority as seen in *Nairobi Half Life* and *Wale Watu* is in most cases a defense mechanism. In the former film, Otis' gang members have to unleash violence against police Mutua in order to save their skin. In whatever form it manifests itself, violence accrues out of desperation, chauvinism, distrust and suspicion. In whatever form, violence is injurious to its victims. The solution implied in *Wale Watu* is for people from different ethnic community to get to know each other. Mercy and Paul are not swayed by the hatred between their communities. They have come over their insecurities and fortified their love. *Nairobi Half Life* suggests a breaking of the socio-economic wall so that the two halves can co-exist. The socio-economic gap that separates the two classes ought to be narrowed or else the violence(s) engendered by this disposition will continue to flourish since "...the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (Schaff, 1973, p.270).

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