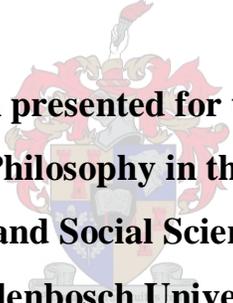


Films by Kenyan Women Directors as National Allegories

by
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Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of
Arts and Social Sciences at
Stellenbosch University**

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own original work; that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated); that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third-party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how selected Kenyan fiction films directed by women filmmakers intervene in national politics. To achieve this, I employ Frederic Jameson's concept of 'national allegory' to understand how within the context of the Kenyan political situation, the private stories of individuals can be read allegorically to refer beyond their immediate circumstances to wider political concerns. Although these films are predominantly realist in narrative form, I propose that reading them as national allegories allows their wider political implications to emerge. The films also draw on local traditions of allegory as a complex didactic form. I critically analyse the films to explore the different allegorical shapes each film takes and how these allegorical shapes, in turn, resonate with the larger national story. I complexify Jameson's theory, which suggests that all third world texts are to be read as national allegories, and demonstrate that they can, in fact, be interpreted at both a realist and allegorical level. The early films *Saikati* and *The Battle of The Sacred Tree* investigate the idea of returning to the past. This discussion contributes to African cinema's 'return to the source' movement, which did not account for the complications women face on their return to the past. I argue that for women, the return is fraught with challenges that must constantly be negotiated and renegotiated. In the next set of more contemporary films, I demonstrate how the daily private lives of the characters illuminate broader social-political concerns. The more overtly allegorical, *Soul Boy*, together with the social realist *Killer Necklace*, *Project Daddy* and *Leo*, highlight the conditions of the marginalized in the society and decry poor governance. Finally, I explore *From a Whisper* and *Something Necessary* that fictionalise real traumatic national events. These two, mix real footage and fictional narrative to provide a path for engagement with broader political implications. I will show how through various imaginations, all the filmmakers transcend their present realities and imagine a more desirable nation. My argument is that although these films can be read as realist films, reading them as national allegories foregrounds the diverse ways Kenyan women filmmakers engage with national politics.

Opsomming

Hierdie verhandeling ondersoek die wyse waarop die Keniaanse fiksie films deur vroue-regisseurs hier ter sprake nasionale politieke kwessies aanspreek. Met verwysing na Frederic Jameson se konsep van ‘national allegory’ ondersoek ek hoe in die konteks van die Keniaanse politieke situasie, die privaat stories van individue allegories geles kan word om te verwys, nie net na die hulle onmiddellike omgewing nie, maar verder ook na wyer politieke kwessies. Alhoewel hierdie films hoofsaaklik in die modus van realisme funksioneer, voer ek wel aan dat om hulle as ‘national allegories’ te lees, verdere politieke implikasies na vore bring. Die films werk ook binne die konteks van lokale tradisies van allegorie as ’n komplekse didaktiese vorm. Dus analiseer ek die films om die verskeie maniere waarop allegorie in elke geval betrek word, asook die wyse waarop hierdie allegoriese vorme tot die breër nasionale storie spreek, te ondersoek. Dit behels onder andere om verdere komplisiteit te verleen aan Jameson se teorie, wat suggereer dat alle derde-wêreldse tekste as ‘national allegories’ geles behoort te word; ek demonstreer dat hierdie films eerder op beide die realistiese én die allegoriese vlakke funksioneer. Die vroeë films, *Saikati* en *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*, ondersoek die idee van ’n terugkeer na die verlede. Hierdie ontleding dra by tot ‘African cinema’ se ‘return to the source’ beweging, wat welliswaar nie die probleme wat spesifiek vir vroue hiermee gepaard sou gaan, aangespreek het nie. Ek voer aan dat sodanige terugkeer vir vroue vol uitdagings is wat immer weer aangespreek en deurdink moet word. Deur middel van die volgende stel films demonstreer ek hoe die daaglikse private lewens van die karakters breër sosio-politiese kwessies belig. Die ooglopend allegoriese *Soul Boy*, asook die sosiaal-realistiese *Killer Necklace*, *Project Daddy* and *Leo*, verskaf ’n blik op die situasie van diegene wat in die samelewing gemarginaliseer is en kritiseer swak staatsbestuur. Ten slotte bespreek ek *From a Whisper* en *Something Necessary* as films wat traumatise nasionale gebeure fiksionaliseer. Albei films betrek dokumentêre beeldmateriaal by ’n fiksionele narratief om sodoende met breër politiese implikasies te handel. Ek wil aandui hoe al hierdie filmmakers op uitlopende verbeeldingsryke wyses verby hul huidige omstandighede kyk om ’n meer wenslike nasie op te roep. Dus, ten spyte van die feit dat al hierdie films wel op die vlak van realisme funksioneer, voer ek aan dat om hulle as allegories te lees die verkeie wyses waarop Keniaanse vroue-filmmakers met nasionale politiek in gesprek tree, na vore bring.

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Dedication

To the affectionate memory of my mother Ketry Kubasu and my mother-in-law Fejenia Ojiambo who were denied the opportunity to dream by the cultural constructions of their time. May their hopes and dreams live on in the generations to come.

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Chapter One: Introduction

‘Public Speaking’ in Kenyan Women’s Films

KENYA: BOX OFFICES OVERWHELMED AS LOCAL FILM HITS SCREEN¹

Kenya has turned away from Hollywood to home with a Maasai country girl as the star of the first feature movie from the nascent film industry in this East African country.

(Nairobi, July 23, 1992. Inter Press Service Feature)

The journey of women’s filmmaking in Kenya formally began after the launch of Anne Mungai’s *Saikati* by the Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Burudi Nabwera. This momentous occasion was witnessed by a packed audience on July 10, 1992 at The Nairobi Cinema. The occasion was celebration of a new phase of independent filmmaking and unusually, in the context of the Kenyan film industry at that time, the film was directed by a woman filmmaker. This dissertation examines selected narrative fiction films² directed by Kenyan women between 1992 and 2013. It offers a reading on how these films use representations of varied personal stories of individuals and events as a way of engaging with national politics. Women first began making their contribution to Kenyan cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the genre of documentary. Jane Murago-Munene, Anne Mungai, Dommie Odote and others established a collection of documentary work. Some of these documentary filmmakers like Mungai and Murago-Munene began exploring the fiction filmmaking world and now work with both genres. In this study, I am however, interested in the shift by women directors to the fictional genre as this permits the expression of not only the real or the present, but also the ways in which new roles and narratives might be imagined. Additionally, fiction films allow their directors to imaginatively give visible

¹ This article delineates the mood of the city following this great event. See – <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/soc.culture.african/glwvmKy6iHk>

² Bill Nichols defines these kind of films as a form of storytelling in which the “stories allow entry into a world similar to the existing world but with freedom from the implications and consequences that occur in real life. This freedom to explore implications and consequences in an imaginative way spells out the ideological and utopian qualities of storytelling”(*Engaging Cinema* 136–37).

shape to specific ideological perspectives. In the period 2000-2010, there was marked increase in the production of fiction films³ on the Kenyan cinematic landscape. These included the debut films of Wanuri Kahiu, Judy Kibinge, Hawa Essuman and others. My study, then, will explore how since 1992's *Saikati*, directed by Anne Mungai, Kenyan women have claimed fiction film as a means of defining themselves and contributing to the narration of the nation.

In order to give an account of this shift, I will critically analyse a sample of films, starting with *Saikati* and Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1995), before turning to Judy Kibinge's *Project Daddy* (2004), *Killer Necklace* (2009) and *Something Necessary* (2013); Wanuri Kahiu's *From a Whisper* (2008); Hawa Essuman's *Soul Boy* (2009) and Jinna Mutune's *Leo* (2012)⁴. These films have a wide range of foci, from highlighting socio-cultural traditions that impede women's progress, to addressing specific socio-political concerns such as divisive ethnicity, poor governance, the exclusion of youth from leadership and economic structures. By featuring diverse settings – rural, urban, the ghetto/slum and the suburb – the films present varied images of Kenya. The films also address an assortment of thematic concerns. At the same time, each filmmaker deploys varying aesthetic devices to project her concerns. Through the production of films, the directors in various ways engage with the past, reflect on the present and express their vision for Kenya.

Like the cinema of most postcolonial societies, that of Kenya is preoccupied with the politics of emancipation and identity. The study will investigate the different ways through which Kenyan women filmmakers negotiate the state, as well as social and cultural histories. A key assumption of this study is that through film, Kenyan women contribute to national narratives by representing certain aspects of past events as well as interrogating various national concerns. Drawing on the

³ Though most of the films were directed by women, a few male directors like Albert Wandago also contributed to this growth.

⁴ Except for Essuman who was born in Germany to Ghanaian parents and raised in Kenya, the directors I have selected have been born and raised in Kenya. Some have studied abroad but returned home to tell Kenyan stories through film. In an interview with Jinna Mutune, Mahugu describes her as one invested in telling some of the untold Kenyan stories (Mahugu). Similarly, Wanuri Kahiu sees herself as an "African Storyteller" (Kahiu); this description would apply equally well to the other filmmakers I discuss.

phrase ‘national allegory’ made famous by Fredric Jameson, I will consider the extent to which these films lend themselves to being read as allegories. (I discuss Jameson’s work in detail later). As the title of this introductory chapter suggests, I want to draw attention to the idea of allegory as a form of public speaking. The word allegory is drawn from the Greek word *allegoreo* which is formed from *allos* (other) and *agoreu* (to speak in the assembly). Allegory therefore, means to speak “other”, concealing the intended message in public (Tambling 6). I use the phrase ‘public speaking’ in two ways: first, I argue that the screen is the platform (a public place) from which filmmakers speak and secondly, they speak of the public (relating to national matters). Thus, I will investigate the films’ “other” intention by searching for and interpreting the clues that reveal the hidden ways through which they speak to broader cultural and political contexts.

Women’s Filmmaking in Kenya: An Overview

Although the presence of women in African filmmaking is documented and acknowledged, much more research is required. Scholars like Lizelle Bisschoff and Lindiwe Dovey are conscious that a further study into African filmmaking is required, with special focus on the rise in film production by women in Kenya and other East African countries (Bisschoff 251; Dovey 22). Dovey in her study on the rise of African women’s filmmaking states that “studies are needed to explain [...] the interesting fact that women are at the forefront of the contemporary rebirth in filmmaking in Kenya” (22). My research observes that Dovey and Bisschoff’s claims are still valid. Only a few of these films have received critical attention post-2012.⁵ This can be attributed to the failure to recognize the input of women in Kenyan film. Consequently, this negligence has resulted in the visible lack of attention to these films, thus a failure to tap into the insights they present.

⁵ The most recent article and book chapter are Giruzzi’s and Savio’s. My search for secondary material on the films in this study reveals that it remains scant and far apart. See - Giruzzi, Clara. “A Feminist Approach to Contemporary Female Kenyan Cinema: Women and Nation in *From a Whisper* (Kahiu, 2008) and *Something Necessary* (Kibinge, 2013).” *Journal of African Cinemas*, vol. 7, no. 2, Oct. 2015, pp. 79–96. Savio, Jim. “A Slum in Nairobi, A Suicide Note and Seven Transgendered Princesses: Mythology as Pedagogy in the Modern World.” *Mythmaking across Boundaries*, edited by Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem, 1 edition, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, pp. 182–92.

Filmmaking provides a space for women to challenge the status quo and at the same time attempt to imagine a more just society. Filmmaking can therefore, become a valuable tool for the transformation of the world the directors inhabit. I will investigate how the films studied engage with the cultural and political contexts in interesting and diverse ways (compared to other forms such as documentaries). It is notable that there is a shift in thematic priorities as the study moves from the earlier films which focused on female agency and highlighted conditions that affected women, such as early marriages and domestic violence, to the latter films, which focus on wider national issues such as crime, ethnicity, national pain, leadership and the youth agenda. These films by women directors are interesting not only for their thematic focus, but also because of the way in which they use the medium of film to convey a political vision or message.

The films' mode of representation seems to shift between the realist and the allegorical. I have chosen the films for their representativeness in various aspects: they address various themes, the choice of characters and settings reflect the numerous "nations" within the larger nation, and the period within which the selected films were produced enables a broader view of the progression of the nation. Additionally, the films are selected works of six directors who represent varied approaches to filmmaking. At the commencement of this research project in 2016, *Something Necessary*, released in 2013 was the most recent fiction film produced by a woman director in Kenya.

This rise of women's filmmaking is significant for its contribution to gender discourses on the emergence of women's voices previously subdued by patriarchal structures. Frank Ukadike observes that African women filmmakers face "the challenge of regaining for women the power of self-determination and self-representation" (102). This study extends Ukadike's suggestion by examining, not only how the filmmakers navigate gendered issues, but also how they delve into the challenges of the nation. In Kenya, this rise was propelled by among other factors, the call to use various channels of communication to uplift the standards of women. This strategy, among others, was identified in the 1985 third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi. As indicated "Under the section Equality, paragraphs 206, 207 and 208 of subsection C titled *Measures for the implementation of the basic strategies at the national level* [the area of communication] set out to

improve the tainted image of women by giving them maximum public visibility through the mass media under the ambit of Communications; wherein lies filmmaking” (Okioma and Mugubi 53, original emphasis). Most of this “communication” to address the plight of women was realised in the earlier years using the documentary medium. Anne Mungai focused on “short and medium length documentaries on a number of issues dealing with women, health, youth, religion, agriculture and education” (Cham 99). Some of Mungai’s documentaries were *Wekesa at Crossroads* (1986), *Productive Farmlands* (1990) and *Faith* (1991) among other productions. Esther Adagala produced *Women in Health* in 1994. Other notable documentary directors of this era are Dommie Yambo-Odotte, Njeri Karago and Mary Otuka, to list a few. This opportunity served as an entry point for women into the film industry and gave them the impetus to try other modes such as docu-dramas and fiction films.

The dawn of women’s activism for space in the political arena was another contributing factor in the rebirth of filmmaking in Kenya. Wunyabari Maloba opines that “[t]he response of Kenyan women to economic and social injustices has been complicated by historical and ideological factors. So too has been their agitation for liberation” (83). Some of these obstacles were cultural and traditional beliefs about the roles of women, lack of resources and a political culture that did not include them. These obstacles began crumbling in 1991 as women’s activism for political and human rights gained momentum. There seemed to be a rallying call for women to take up political leadership positions. As a result, their political journey began formally in 1992 at the National Women’s Convention (Kabira and Kimani 843). Interestingly, around this same time, Kenyan women began embracing fiction films as a medium of responding to socio-economic injustices – as a tool to exercise their self-imposed duty to teach and to reclaim female agency.

The majority of women in this study are independent filmmakers. This affords them some measure of freedom to engage their creativity and personal style. Rachael Diang’a observes that “[d]ue to the collapse of the Film Corporation that led to independent filmmaking, the filmmakers freely

decided what their films were centered on” (18-19). The Kenya Film Corporation⁶ collapsed in 1995 amidst internal wrangling of its officials. Other factors were cheaper modes of production and, in some cases, increased availability of funding from non-governmental organisations and other private institutions. Manthia Diawara presents this independence as liberating in two ways. He writes, “[t]he relative freedom that the independent directors acquire being their own producers enables them to make popular films that are not burdened by didactic and propagandistic precepts imposed by the government” (119) and, secondly, “[i]t is the artistic freedom that enables them to go beyond the documentary tradition fostered by the GFIC⁷ and to look to popular culture as a source of fictional inspiration” (119). At this juncture in Kenya’s filmmaking history, film content was strictly controlled, partly because the government continued to propagate the ideologies inherited from the colonial government and, secondly, because the government owned the institutions of media and communication (Mukora 37). Inevitably, then, without funding and private production houses, the focus was on government ideals.

Even so, while no longer subject to the particular agendas of the government, many women filmmakers retain a didactic impulse in their films. Florence Sippala observes that Kibinge’s fiction filmmaking has “[p]ackaged its didactic content in a way that endears the film[s] to the public” (19). This comment points to fiction film as a medium that allows the filmmaker creative liberty to effectively present their message in ways that the documentary may not permit. For instance, the films address the subject of ethnic tensions in the nation through fictional stories in which the characters present divisive ethnicity as one among many facets of the complex narratives of their lives. This approach demonstrates how fiction films allow the filmmakers to manipulate storylines and characters for a particular effect. On the other hand, the extent to which documentary directors can manipulate the realities they present is limited. Fiction offers a useful mode that can enable filmmakers to mediate the social, historical, cultural, political and economic forces in a persuasive, yet not directly didactic way.

⁶ The Kenya Film Corporation was established in 1968. It was a government agency tasked with the promotion and growth of the film industry in Kenya and was responsible for film distribution.

⁷ GFIC stands for Ghana Film Industry Corporation. Diawara refers to the status of the Ghanaian Film Industry which he compares to the situation of filmmaking in Kenya and Tanzania. “Unlike Kenya and Tanzania, where film production is in the hands of the government, Ghanaian cinema is not limited to the productions of GFIC, GBC [Ghana Broadcasting Corporation] and NAFTI [National Film and Television Institute]” (119).

As part of the nation (here the ‘nation’ is understood as a physical and spatial construct, in the sense of a nation-state with national borders, as well as an ideological construct), women’s voices must be heard to enable what Bhabha refers to as an “*international dimension both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries in-between nations and peoples*” (4). How the women filmmakers document Kenya enables what Anne McClintock refers to as “bringing into historical visibility women’s active, cultural and political participation in the national formations” (63). McClintock argues against the propagation of a ‘masculinist’ nationalism that excludes women from cultural spaces and political discourses. The filmmakers in this study approach nation building from a postcolonial perspective. In this way, films resist dominant ideologies of their time and afford the women visibility and voice in the national space. Elleke Boehmer corroborates Bhabha and McClintock’s ideas. She states that “[i]n writing, as many postcolonial women critics have by now recognized, women express their own reality, unsettle male focused (and other exclusionary) narratives, and so question received notions of national character and experience” (94). As this study will show, the films question the exclusion of youth and women from politics, divisive ethnicity that negatively impacts women and children in time of conflict, among other issues.

In addition to the films under consideration explicitly taking up women’s perspectives and representing their lives, all of them tell the nation’s narratives through the voices and from perspectives of the “*mwananchi*.”⁸ The choices employed by the directors in the characterisation and casting enable us to hear specific concerns of the nation, in often moving ways. Illustrative of this approach is Kibinge’s *Killer Necklace*, in which she explores the issue of the nexus between youth unemployment and crime in the nation. The juxtaposition of the victim’s and the perpetrator’s narratives in Kibinge’s *Something Necessary*, enables us to ask questions about ethnic tensions and post-election violence. The characterisation of people from different social classes enables a wide commentary on the state of the nation.

⁸ *Mwananchi* literally means a child of the land or citizen. Popularly used in Kenya to refer to a class of citizens' usually middle class and below. This term does not include leaders and the elite.

Demonstrably, the films under consideration engage with national events and concerns. In their active role as participants in national construction, the filmmakers take up public discourse. Kahi's *From a Whisper*, for example, takes the viewer back to the moment in 1998, when Kenya was hit by the terrorist bombing of the United States embassy in Nairobi, the worst terrorist attack experienced in the country's history. She revisits the tragedy through the eyes of two characters who both lost a close relative and friend in the bombing. Kahi delineates this painful history in personal terms, enabling a reflection on the causes and aftermath of a national tragedy. Similarly, Kibinge also takes up another historical event – the postelection violence of 2007/2008. After Moi's 24-year rule, Kenya elected its third president in 2002, an event that was considered a significant milestone for the country's democratic growth. Unfortunately, the next election plunged the nation into a chaotic state. Discontent over election results marred the 2007 elections and led to post-election violence of a magnitude never experienced before. Kibinge's *Something Necessary* recovers and rearticulates an important aspect of this Kenyan popular memory to preserve an event that shook the nation to its core. On the other hand, Essuman's *Soul Boy* employs elements of magical realism to present to the viewers the stark reality of slum life in Kenya while, at the same time, subtly commenting on the leadership of the nation. Both films interrogate the question of ethnic tensions in Kenya that have lingered on since colonial days. As illustrated, woman filmmakers document the changing customs, traditions, politics and economic influences impacting her and her nation.

National Allegory, African Cinema, Third Cinema and African Feminism: Establishing a Context

Particularly significant for my study is the idea of “national allegory” which Jameson brought into focus in 1986. Although his formulation of allegory as being a third world mode of representation and his claim that all third world texts are allegories of the nation (69) provoked controversy, on which I'll say more directly, I believe his approach of “national allegory” can be valuable for discussing texts that address national politics, even though they may not seem to do so at first

glance. These films are particularly interesting for exploring the concept of national allegory because, though some of them were produced a long time after Jameson's article, they are still engaged with national questions. Because I adopt national allegory as an interpretive tool to illuminate the films' contribution to the narratives of the nation, various approaches to allegory as a device will be useful to this research.

These films tell stories that can be enjoyed from their first level of meaning, although another look at them reveals that they simultaneously hint at other things, events, places or people. In his authoritative work on allegory, Angus Fletcher observes that even when narratives make good sense at the surface level, they sometimes lend themselves to "secondary reading" in order to generate a "secondary meaning" (7). Fletcher writes: "this literal surface suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention, and while it can, as it were, get along without interpretation, it becomes much richer and more interesting if given interpretation" (7). This study aims to read and reread the selected films in this manner, especially looking at the connection between the private and the public, interrogating ways in which the filmmakers weave the stories of the private individuals as a reflection on the complex macrocosm of the nation.

A close look at the way *Soul Boy*, for example, portrays the family demonstrates a conscious use of the story of a private family to voice the concerns of the nation. This is made possible through a reading that employs the nation-as-family metaphor. In this mode, the literal families serve as representations of the nation. The individual characters in *Soul Boy* embody some of the more extensive socio-political problems facing Kenyan people. Grace Musila rightly observes that contemporary African writers "have revisited the familial space as a site of experiences which inevitably surfaces important insights into national and socio-political terrains" (349). Examples such as these, then, give Jameson's observations some credence. He argues:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (69)

Jameson views national allegory as a mode that runs through narratives in post-colonial literature. He argues that the concerns of the nation underpin all artistic texts from the Third World. His observation is that the experience of colonialism and imperialism awakens a sense of a collective identity amongst people from the Third World. Thus, creative artists engage with the “embattled situation” their nations find themselves in. Unlike Third World texts that project a political dimension, Jameson suggests that the public and private spheres in literature from the West are radically split because of a deep cultural conviction that the two spheres do not intersect. Therefore, in Third World literature according to Jameson, even what appears to be private, such as individual stories, are to be seen as investments in the revelation of the political. The value of Jameson’s work for me is that his classification of these texts suggests “specific perspectives for research and [...] convey a sense of the interest and the value of these clearly neglected literatures for people formed by the values and stereotypes of a first-world culture” (68). According to Jameson, this stereotyping makes it difficult for some western readers to see the import of the texts; they view them as “conventional and naïve” (66). On the contrary, for a competent reader, the texts evoke “freshness of information and social interest” (shared amongst those conversant with the cultural and political context) (66). I argue that in part, his conceptualisation brings to light the postcolonial writers’ social role. From Africa, Jameson gives examples of Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong’o as writers who found themselves in a difficult place as bearers of “a passion for change and social regeneration which has not yet found its agents” (81). It makes sense, therefore, that this burden of agency is passed on to their characters, who then become allegories of the nation. Jameson applies his idea to Sembene’s novel *Xala*, reading it as a national allegory of Senegal. He argues that through a satiric portrayal of corrupt leaders, *Xala* is “explicitly marked as the failure of the independence movement to develop into a general social revolution” (81). Notwithstanding its significance, his formulation caused controversy for its seemingly sweeping generalisations.

His concept has been criticised most eloquently by Aijaz Ahmad. Some of the contentious issues arising from Jameson’s conceptualisation of ‘third world literature’ as raised by Ahmad are: the limitation of third world texts by identifying them in relation to oppressive systems unlike those of the first and second world (6); the “national allegory” as the primary form of narration in the

third world (8); the homogenisation of the third world category by submerging it within a singular experience; and the description of third world texts as “non-canonical”(15). Ahmad is correct in pointing out Jameson’s essentialisation of and generalisations about third-world texts. However, despite the justness of this criticism, Jameson’s account does help to elucidate those instances where the text seems tangibly to function on an allegorical level. Besides, his specific focus on ‘national allegories’ provides a formulation that suggests a productive way to read films or texts whose private stories express national dimensions.

Several scholars (Imre Szeman and Susan Andrade among others) have responded to Ahmad’s claim. These scholars acknowledge that though some of his criticisms are perceptive, they make Jameson’s work appear to be utterly unproductive. However, as many texts from the Third World reveal, their authors are interested in representing the concerns of the national body, even when they seem to tell individual stories. Both Szeman and Andrade are of the opinion that most of Jameson’s critics have deliberately misunderstood him (Szeman 804; Andrade 25). In *The Nation Writ Small* (2011), Andrade suggests that critics of Jameson should rather focus on why and how Jameson makes his conclusions. She describes how some of Africa’s early female novelists engaged with national politics through allegory challenging the notion that since women’s writing focused on the family, they were apolitical unlike their male counterparts.

Responding to Ahmad, she states that “Ahmad forgets: that nationalism did, and in some cases still does, haunt the imagination of writers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and therefore offers one way, and an important way, to thematise literary history” (27). Andrade’s observation is accurate if we consider post-independence literature from different African countries, in which themes that focus on post-independence disillusionment take a central place. These writers reflect on, for example, the impoverished state of their nations and seek to re-imagine these nations. Allegory became a useful vehicle employed by these writers to convey their messages. Andrade further proposes an engagement with Jameson’s conceptualization that acknowledges the value of his “contribution to the developing literary histories of formerly colonized zones” (27). Jameson’s ideas offer one way of classifying literature from the Third World that demonstrates the writers’

social and political commitment. This suggests that national allegory was taken up as a strategy by some postcolonial writers initially as a way of exposing and rejecting unacceptable imperial myths and codes about Africa and in later years as a way of representing postcolonial disillusionment. Though Andrade disagrees with Jameson's idea that all private stories should be read as exclusive allegories of the public, she finds value in the reading practices suggested by Jameson – that is, to read the private stories from the Third World as possibly (not exclusively) pointing to the bigger stories of the nation (Andrade 28–29).

While the debate between Jameson's defenders and detractors is not readily resolved, I nevertheless propose that the concept of national allegory is useful when deployed in relation to the Kenyan films I have selected for consideration. The films themselves already demonstrate an engagement with public agenda which then offers new perspectives on different socio-political concerns. My research is concerned with the basic question which Jameson raises – what is the relationship between cultural forms and nationalism? He presents a model that enables interrogation of the close relationship between the films and the nation. Andrade finds Jameson's work useful for “the symptomatic reading practices that a full engagement with his notion of the dialectic involves” (29). This suggests that Jameson's idea offers us one way of looking at texts that use the stories and lives of ordinary people to reflect on the nation. The key indicators of such texts being the nation and the lives of the characters which when closely examined reveal that the predicaments of the characters in these texts can best be understood from the national point of view.

What is disturbing about Jameson's claim is the sweeping nature of his assertion, and the high-handed way in which he expresses his opinion. The way in which he compares western and third world allegories seems to contain an implied judgement. He notes that, “in distinction to the unconscious allegories of our own cultural texts, third world allegories are conscious and overt” (79). As is will become clear from my own reading of the films, this overly general claim is inaccurate. That notwithstanding, the significance of Jameson's work for me is the mapping process he provides, which delineates a reading strategy for my research. In summary, this process

in my case entails identifying allegorical resonances in the film, reading these in primarily political and social terms and assuming the role of the filmmakers as being that of cultural shapers and transformers of history (Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” 71,76).

One can argue that Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o left a rich legacy of allegorical writing, which later writers and filmmakers seem to draw on. James Ogude observes that “Ngugi in trying to fulfil the demands of a historical novel and the demands of rewriting and giving an interpretation of Kenyan history, has tended to fall back on the allegorical mode and popular forms in his representation” (44). Ogude’s observation suggests that writing about the nation at times presents challenges to authors who are invested in representing various socio-political concerns which in themselves are abstract ideas. Thus, allegory makes it possible for them to give shape to these ideas. Such texts include Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*, Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*, Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* and Nuruddin Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib*. These texts attest to the value of allegory as a mode of representation and prove that, indeed, one can categorise several third-world texts as national allegories.

Imre Szeman has also observed that the criticisms of Jameson’s ideas, though productive in some ways, in others “tended to obscure and misconstrue a sophisticated attempt to make sense of the relationship of literature and politics in the decolonizing world” (804). Instead of focusing on the weakness of the concept, he suggests that “Jameson’s ‘general’ theory of third world literary productions offers a way of conceptualizing the relationship of literature to politics (and politics to literature) that goes beyond the most common (and common sense) understanding of the relations between these terms” (804). Put differently, Szeman suggests that Jameson’s theory invites readers to engage with literature in this way. His conceptualisation suggests that whereas literature in its basic terms refers to artistic material (a fictional world) and politics refers to activities related to governing a country (real world), these seemingly separate worlds should not be seen as separate, but rather as worlds that weave in and out of each other. Jameson argues that national allegories support ‘cultural revolution’ as advanced by scholars like Frantz Fanon. He

observes that Fanon's idea of 'cultural revolution' arises from 'subalternity' caused by domination especially that experienced by the formerly colonised. In these conditions then, the creative work of third-world intellectuals become political acts (Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" 76).

Film theorist Teshome H. Gabriel writes in *Third Cinema in The Third World* that "[t]he principal characteristic of third cinema is not so much where it is made or even who makes it, but rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays. Third cinema is that of the third world which stands in opposition to imperialism and class opposition in all their ramifications and manifestations" (2). Gabriel's ideas are informed by Solanas and Gettino, the Latin American advocates of "Third Cinema," which distinguished itself from the "First Cinema" of the United States film industry and the "Second Cinema" of Europe. Third Cinema is an oppositional cinema that struggles against the hegemony of Hollywood cinema. The struggle includes giving an account of reality and history, and its link to national culture. He also draws upon the work of Frantz Fanon, especially the analysis of the genealogy of Third World culture. In *Questions of Third Cinema*, Gabriel divides "third world" film culture into three phases: "The first phase in which foreign images are impressed in an alienating fashion on the audience, to the second and third phases in which recognition of "consciousness of oneself" serves as the essential antecedent for national and, more significantly, international consciousness" (31). Gabriel's third phase, whose major theme is the "[l]ives and struggles of Third World peoples" (33), resonates with the narratives of the films in this study, which concern themselves with the daily lives of the Kenyan people

A similarity between Third World film and national allegory is the idea of film as an "ideological tool" (34). Gabriel argues that in the third phase of Third World films "one element of the style [...] is an ideological point-of-view instead of that of a character as in dominant Western conventions" (34). This is reminiscent of Jameson's suggestion that in the third world the writer/intellectual is in one way or another a political intellectual. Jameson in fact refers to the cultural intellectual as a political militant, which corresponds to the combativeness associated with the third phase of Gabriel's account of Third World films (33). Both Third World films and national

allegory aim to promote particular ideas and beliefs that challenge the prevailing socio-economic and political structures. For Jameson, the process of film analysis must consider “the political context of daily life with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the filmmaker must work” (“Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture” 846). Fundamentally, this means that all films contain political elements, which it is the work of interpretation to reveal.

Kenya’s film production was slow to take off and, therefore, the representation of the nation in fiction films becomes notable in the period in which women’s filmmaking emerged. During this time, Kenya experienced a significant change in the political scene, beginning in the early 1990s and continuing into the 2000s, as democratisation marked a new shift in the political sphere. Ismail Xavier observes that during “times of intense political debate, film production becomes politicized” (355). With reference to the rise of African Cinema in the 1960s and early 1970s as a time of such debate, he argues that this phenomenon made “[t]hird- [w]orld film culture a new source of allegorical strategies of representation” (355). These films highlight the political conditions of their time. A notable example is Sembene’s *Xala* (1974), whose film concerns include, among other things, a critique of the conditions of capitalism that create a wide gap between the rich and the poor. Allegory allows postcolonial writers and filmmakers to challenge imperial myths about Africa and to negotiate the tension between the promise of hope that came with independence and the disillusionment that comes from betrayal by their own leaders.

This study concerns itself with the relationship of the films and the nation, and more specifically the close relationship film scholar and theoretician Ismail Xavier (1999) has identified between “private lives” and “public destinies” (335). My research finds national allegory evident in the work of the filmmakers I am investigating, who are all interested in raising social and political concerns. Allegory prompts readers or viewers to examine the wider cultural and political implications of the films. My study also draws on the work of film study critics such as Xavier and Nancy Virtue, who both see films as consciously or unconsciously reflecting the life of the nation from which they emerge. Virtue argues that “in order to engage in allegorical interpretation, one

need not claim intentionality on the part of the author” (130). What Virtue points to is that some films present themselves as overtly allegorical, while others that are not obviously allegorical can be read as such through “critical approaches that see all films as potentially allegorical” (130). Virtue adopts this kind of theoretical perspective in her reading of Jacques Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, in which she compares “the unrealizable love of Guy and Genevieve, the film’s young lovers” to the “tension between the colonial model in France and a more forward-looking model based on liberal principles of a free-market exchange enterprise” (32). This example and others in her work demonstrate how the personal in the film engages with the “larger and national historical picture of France” (32). Similarly, in line with Jameson’s claim, Xavier proposes that:

[a]longside intentional allegories there are also “unconscious” allegories, where the intervention of a “competent reader” is indispensable. Recognizing an allegorical dimension in a text requires the ability to perceive homologies, and national allegories require the understanding of private lives as public destinies. (335)

The bulk of the films I consider here are predominantly works of social realism, conveying reflections of everyday reality. At the same time, as I will show, they can be read as national allegories. Of the eight films, *Soul Boy* and *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* are self-consciously allegorical. The rest require what Xavier would call “competent reading.” My knowledge of the socio-political context from which these films emerge affords me the competence to read these films as national allegories. I am familiar with some of the allegorical codes that manifest in the films which perhaps not all audiences can perceive. I also engage with the work of various scholars regarding the specifically Kenyan socio-political concerns arising from the films to help me unravel their allegorical dimensions. The films tell multiple stories of the nation through the individual stories of characters, whether in the village or the city. Interpreting such stories productively requires a kind of reading that recognises that the private and the public are interrelated. Therefore, as I engage with these films, my point of departure is that in Jameson’s terms (echoed by Xavier and Virtue), all these films are ‘national allegories’ and in each case, the private lives of some of the characters within them serve as allegories of the “embattled situation of the public [...] culture and society” (69) of Kenya.

This leads me to an interesting observation by Florence Stratton regarding Jameson's formulation of "national allegory." Stratton argues that Jameson's "characterization of third-world texts can be seen to work to exclude women's literary expression" (10). Her argument arises from the fact that at the time of writing her radical and exciting book, *African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), her observation was that African women writers had been excluded in the African literary tradition and as such women's writing was not considered worthy enough to earn a place in the African literary tradition. She cites, among other authors, Eustace Palmer's and David Cook's work on African fiction as examples of these exclusionary tendencies.⁹ That being the case, Stratton concludes that because women's writing was not given the same recognition as men's writing, it could not be read as national allegory. The most disturbing part of her critique is her suggestion that "women would be less concerned than men, at least for some of whom nationalism did become an urgent ideological preoccupation, with representing 'the embattled situation of public [...] culture' than with portraying the anti-national experience of their gender" (10). Her line of thinking is informed by the binary line between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, in which writing of women that does not engage with revolutions or other such overt political campaigns was seen to be apolitical. This study disproves this claim and shows that while women use their artistic enterprise to raise gender concerns, often with reference to a particular set of domestic or family circumstances, they speak to the wider political concerns as well.

As I have already mentioned, most of these films can be viewed quite simply as realist films. At a realist level, they tell meaningful narratives that do not necessarily require any further allegorical interpretation. It is worthwhile, therefore, to give a brief background to the tension between realism and allegory. From the seventeenth century, allegory began to receive hostile criticism. It was described as "an artificial fabulous metaphor, external and arbitrary in contrast to symbol" (Madsen 121–22). The cultural shift then moved from allegory as a symbolic mode to other modes such as empiricism, historiography and realism, among others. This movement was caused in part by the "dissolution of the system of aristocratic patronage which had supplied learned readers who knew how to read arcane allegories and emblems, [...] and arguments for a plain style of writing

⁹ Stratton observes that "Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* refers only once to a woman writer [and] women are notably absent from David Cook's *African Literature: A critical View*" (1).

(Kelley 2). Proponents of realism viewed this mode as opposed to allegory. According to these thinkers, realistic representations did not require further interpretation because they already presented a world akin to the real world. As realism became the dominant nineteenth-century mode of writing, the question of whether allegory can exist at all within realist works arose (Tambling 86; Kelley 217). Theresa Kelley argues that there are moments when “realist values become blurred, and allegory’s raids on the verisimilar occur” [and] “realism gives way” (218). Within the framework of a realist narrative, one character that appears strikingly different is seen in *Killer Necklace*, where Kibinge employs him as a figure of the grotesque to accentuate the film’s theme of avarice. The actions of this figure, which include mysteriously reproducing a replica of the film’s central object of desire, a gold necklace on display in a Nairobi shop window, shift the story from Mbugua’s personal trials to something more abstract and general. Kelley also suggests that allegory presents itself in realist material “as an ideal principle that exceeds the realist charter” (217). What she refers to are concepts that cannot be represented, such as avarice or pain. Since my study assumes that all the films function as national allegories, one of my key tasks is to focus attention on the clues within the narratives that give the evidently realist films their allegorical tenor.

Because the films are heavily invested in the exploration of gender issues, this research will also draw on feminist film theory. Feminist film theory explores various ways in which feminist criticism has thrown light on the representation of women in film and makes clear the contributions of women filmmakers to cinema and other discourses on gender. This study will adopt “the text-oriented approach,”¹⁰ a feminist theory approach elucidated by Karen Hollinger (17-19). This method will enable me to ascertain the functions of the cinematic codes appropriated in the films and the meanings they evoke, while at the same time examining female subjectivity. A text-oriented approach focuses on reading the cinematic codes to enable a reasonably accurate understanding of specific contexts; for the purposes of this study – the Kenyan context. The text-oriented approach relates to African feminism since its focus on the meanings drawn from a text

¹⁰ Karen Hollinger classifies the critical methodologies that dominate the history of feminist film theory into three critical stances: “[t]he images of women approach (8); cinefeminism (9) and the move to cultural studies” (17). The cultural studies approach is divided into “audience studies and reception theory” and “the text-oriented” approach (17-19).

affords us an opportunity to read the films while bearing in mind African traditions and culture, as well as the political and economic environment that shape the lives of African women.

African feminism is a branch of feminism that addresses the unique experiences of African women. It aims to deal with African women's gender issues by employing strategies that are culturally specific to them. Obioma Nnaemeka (1998) observes in *Sisterhood Feminisms and Power from Africa to the Diaspora* that "the dilemma facing African feminists who are working for change is having to choose between conducting their struggles in such a way as to suit definitions of 'feminist struggles' and understanding or respecting their environment and carrying out their struggles in such a way as to achieve desired results" (18). African feminism has proved useful in enabling the research to carry out a contextual study of African women's films. A crucial contribution to the emerging work on African Feminism and film is the special issue *African Feminist Engagements with Film* published in 2012. This special issue lays the groundwork for a specifically feminist approach to film in Africa by filmmakers, critics and film scholars. Particularly useful for my study is the contribution by Abena Busia's article, "Women and the Dynamics of Representation: Of Cooking, Cars and Gendered Culture" which engages with questions of representation such as "[h]ow hard is it to create an industry which projects the complexity of the way in which we live our lives from a humane, ethical standpoint?" (113). Busia argues that films must not simply offer simple answers to the issues that women face, but rather offer images that demonstrate an engagement with a fiercer kind of truth (113). Such a commitment can be seen in the way the women filmmakers I have selected use film as a medium to challenge and change social conventions. In addition to the films under consideration explicitly taking up women's issues, the study views the women filmmakers as adopting a feminist consciousness in two ways: by highlighting issues affecting women in Kenya and by bringing their individual points of view to their creative work. Wanjiru Kinyanjui, for instance, draws our attention to the feminist sensibilities espoused by the filmmakers in this study. She explains her vision of positive womanhood as follows:

Strong images would give her more confidence to stop believing that she needs to be like this or like that, depending on societal beliefs and notions. I like her image when she is shown to be of an independent mind, when she is not a passive being who is too busy following false tracks laid down for her by others who are more interested in “keeping her in her place.” One should give her the opportunity to define where her place is! And cinema, because it allows us to travel in a projected world of the possible, not necessarily the present reality, is a great opportunity!

(Wanjiru Kinyanjui, interview with Beti Ellerson)

Reading these films from an African feminist perspective emphasizes the conditions faced by Kenyan women, foregrounds the challenges they face in trying to reshape their roles in society and highlights the particular form of agency that the film makers grant their protagonists. These films also imagine alternative conceptions of female subjecthood as they take up the role of identity shapers and cultural producers inscribing themselves within the broader body of national culture.

Focusing specifically on African film, Diawara provides a slightly different set of categories. He divides African film output into the following categories: “[s]ocial realist narratives, which focus on current sociocultural issues” (141), “[c]olonial confrontation – films of historical confrontation that put into conflict Africans and their European colonizers” (152), and “[t]he return to the source,” whose aim is “to prove the existence of a dynamic African history and culture before the European colonization” (160). The “return to the source” framework is particularly useful for my study in Chapter Two. The films in this chapter seem to align themselves with this movement by the ways they see value in returning to the pre-colonial pasts to draw from it. In Chapter Two, I interrogate this theory, which is closely aligned to Gabriel’s second phase (the remembrance phase), giving the necessary attention to the issues of gender somewhat elided in Gabriel’s and Diawara’s work. I show the complexity of the idea of the return for women. Although Gabriel and Diawara differ in specific terminology, they both suggest a movement toward the past. Though the films may not fit neatly into the categories as laid out, these attempts at film classification aid in explaining, predicting and understanding the nature of the films in this study.

Through content and textual analysis of the selected films, this study hopes to interrogate the means employed by Kenyan women in narrating the nation. The central activity will be an examination of the films' depiction of the nation and how the female directors express their vision to their societies. I will evaluate the films by grouping them according to the major themes and allegorical strategies they exhibit. I will interrogate the settings, popular cultural references foregrounded by the characters and their actions and how these then become the material out of which national allegories are developed. Joanne Hershfield points to allegory as a proficient method of interpretation. She writes "allegory also refers to a way of reading a film in which the viewer understands the story as a metaphor of a historical or contemporary event or process" (177). This interrogation enables regard for the relationship between "formal structures of meaning' and "social structures of meaning."¹¹ The concept of national allegory provides the means to approach the relationship between the films' narratives and the nation. African feminism, Third Cinema and African cinema theories allow me to extend Jameson's concept to an investigation of contemporary Kenyan women's film.

Chapter Layout

This thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapters Two to Four are lengthy analytical chapters which address the manifestation of allegory from a broadly formal, stylistic and thematic perspective. The films are allocated to their respective chapters based on a sympathy in thematic concerns. Within each chapter, the discussion is organised into sections that focus on various concerns evident within the films. The closing chapter summarises the study's key findings and arguments.

Each chapter begins with an "establishing shot," a term which I use here in an admittedly figurative way rather than in its habitual cinematographic sense. McGregor Lewis defines this shot as a core shot, which opens a scene and tells the audience where or when the next scene will take place

¹¹ According to Hershfield "[f]ormal structures of meaning are those that are produced through narrative and other cinematic practices such as editing, composition and the design of *mise-en-scène*, for example. Social structures of meaning are ideological, discursive, and specific to a particular social, historical and political context" (183).

(McGregor). I borrow the term and its function to open both the analytical chapters and the conclusion. This section opens with a critical shot from one of the films under discussion in that chapter. I briefly analyse these shots as a way of setting the scene for the chapter discussion; to establish a context for the discussion arising from the films themselves. I end each chapter with a concluding discussion in which I briefly analyse an image to recap the ideas discussed in that chapter.

Chapter Two examines the two ground-breaking fiction films, *Saikati* and *The Battle of a Sacred Tree*. As postcolonial filmmakers, Mungai and Kinyanjui are concerned with redefining African identity, history and culture, and Kenyan filmmaking. I examine the modes employed to achieve these goals, reading the predominant modes beyond their aesthetic value and considering how these might encourage an allegorical reading, particularly so in *Battle*. These films also focus on gender issues; their protagonists are female characters who demonstrate the condition of some women in Kenya. Here, I argue that because the various issues affecting women do not have a form, except insofar as they are embodied in situations and characters, the main characters become allegorical figures that give shape to those issues. The chapter is divided into two sections framed around Diawara's concept of "the return to the source". The first section explores how the films demonstrate potential value in 'a return' to precolonial traditions. The second section problematises the "the return to the source" by demonstrating how these two films complicate the idea of such a "return" for women. It investigates how women navigate between tradition and modernity in the face of constant shifts between these two binaries.

The next chapter takes *Soul Boy*, which is overtly allegorical, as its focal text, while making references to aspects of *Project Daddy*, *Killer Necklace* and *Leo*. My task here is to demonstrate how the films draw on various allegorical referents to address national concerns. I examine how the films' narratives located within domestic spaces removed from the public and the national are allegories of the nation. To do this, I employ the nation-as-family metaphor. I, therefore, read *Soul Boy's* main character's family as a microcosm of the nation. Additionally, I highlight how characters, spaces and things are susceptible to allegorical interpretation. The chapter is divided into four sections, starting with a focus on the nation-as-family metaphor – which reveals the state of the nation under poor leadership. I then demonstrate how the films hint at an alternative vision

of good leadership. The last two sections analyse the slums within the films as allegorical spaces and the necklaces in *Killer Necklace* as emblems, respectively.

The last analytical chapter focuses on *From a Whisper* and *Something Necessary*, which centre on national pain. Both films represent a moment of terror and grief in the nation. I examine how, while narrating the painful events in the nation, the films bring broader national concerns to the fore. I show here how the formless character of national pain finds structure in allegory. Like in the other chapters, characters become allegorical characters who represent victims or perpetrators of violence. The chapter is divided into three sections; the first one demonstrates how the filmmakers use archival footage to activate allegory in these films that represent real events. The next one investigates the films' representation of perpetrators, arguing that the lines between perpetrator and victim are blurred as one of the perpetrators is characterised as a victim. The last section focuses on some of the specific ways violence affects women.

The closing chapter of this dissertation is a reflection on the contribution of Kenyan women's filmmaking to national discourses. The chapter starts with a key scene from one of the films to summarise my reading strategy. I then go on to highlight what key findings emerge when the films are read as national allegories. I also point to the different elements that activate allegory in each chapter. Additionally, I demonstrate the value of this research insofar as it expands Jameson's conceptualisation of national allegory, arguing that although I have read these films as national allegories, they are not limited to that singular mode and may be read as realist films, depending on the viewers' reading environment. I close the chapter by briefly looking at the current status of women's filmmaking in Kenya and pointing to possible future research.

Interestingly, the newspaper article with which this chapter began denotes the audience's thirst for local content. Further on in the article, the writer observes that for weeks, the cinemas were full of audiences ready to see familiar places, experiences, and stories presented by fellow Kenyans:

Since its premiere, *Saikati* has been an unparalleled box-office success at Nairobi Cinema theatre. Cinema goers in the Kenyan capital welcome the full-length film as a departure from what the West has to offer, relating to an African setting and culture.

(Nairobi, July 23, 1992. Inter Press Service Feature)

This recognition and assertion of the local is the major achievement of both *Saikati* and *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*, to which I now turn. The films explore the rural environment and highlight both the possible value that can be drawn from the past and some of challenges women encounter on their return.

Chapter Two

“Do Women Talk Like That?”

Establishing Shot



Image 1. Mumbi and her Father discuss her return (*Battle*)

Father: Didn't he pay bride price?

Mumbi: But he thinks he paid for me like he'd buy a goat?

Father: What? How you talk? Do women talk like that?

Mumbi: Sorry, Papa but Mwangi thinks I'm his goat. Even a goat has it better

Father: You modern women have no patience at all

(The Battle of the Sacred Tree – film subtitles)

This scene appears early in *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*, after Mumbi has just returned from the city to her father's home. Kinyanjui uses a medium long shot to enable the viewer take in the details of the setting. In the background, a young girl feeds a goat. The kerosene lamp hanging from the roof, the type of chairs they sit on and the tea plantation behind the trees in the background establishes the rural setting. The two are in the foreground, and the audience can engage with their emotions as well as observe their body language. Here, one can see the old man's anger at what he thinks is the impact of modernity on women and Mumbi's expression of frustration with a life in which she feels devalued and trapped. Their side by side sitting position, however, encourages dialogue and negotiation. At this level, the film complicates the conflict between tradition and modernity by suggesting that in fact, the tension can be navigated through dialogue. Mumbi wears a dress made from what is globally known as "African" fabric. Ironically, this kind of fabric originates from "Dutch colonial companies [that attempted] to mechanically reproduce a handmade Javanese batik cloth" (Sylvanus). This hints at the problematics of defining what is considered modern or traditional and the controversy around who names constructs cultures. The choice of costume for Mumbi, a "modern" woman, might be to assert her desire to be identified as a woman from Githunguri. Her father wears a modern suit which can be considered out of tune for a traditional healer, such as he. Both wear watches, another marker of modernity. Their clothes tell of the blurred lines between modernity and tradition, concepts which are complicated further by their clashing opinions on marriage and womanhood. Image 1, at a glance, appears to be an everyday realist illustration of a father and daughter in conversation, but their dialogue evokes an allegorical invitation, awakened by their invocation of a pre-colonial and colonial historical backdrop.

Introduction

This chapter lays the foundation for the succeeding chapters by examining the nature and scope of the first two fiction films by women. Anne Mungai's *Saikati* (1992) and Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1995) lay the ground for later Kenyan women's cinema. Though these two ground-breaking films lean toward the social realist mode, I will adopt allegory as a form of interpretation. This process is known as allegoresis. As literary critic Dirk Obbink aptly puts it, "[a]llegoresis is a kind of reading that looks for knowledge" (17). Whereas one might choose to watch these films for pleasure, reading them allegorically enables me to view them for the rich and

powerful commentary they provide that moves beyond the world in which they are set. As I mention in the introduction, Jameson suggests that the stories of the individual characters in third world literature should be read as national allegories of the embattled situation former colonial subjects find themselves in (69). Examined from this perspective, the realist characters of the film become allegorical figures speaking of events or ideas beyond their overt social and psychological situation. Additionally, *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* subtly moves from realism into the allegorical mode through its integration of the sacred mugumo tree, a cultural icon that embodies the culture, politics and religion of the Gikuyu community.

Like most films produced in the immediate post-independent Africa, these two films focus on the search for an African identity which had been stripped off by colonialists. Such films revisit the past and serve as a form of protest against the negative images of Africans on screen. Film scholar, Dominica Dipio argues that this protest was against the stereotypical and reductive images of an Africa without individuality (11). Dipio observes that African cinema reflects a “conscious identity” in the sense that the films are sensitive to how Africans have been misrepresented in the past; thus, they deliberately attempt to reclaim their image. This chapter will examine the films’ investment in the notion of returning to the source by identifying the films’ “narrative and iconographic sources” and examining “the meaning that those narrative paradigms and traditional imagery acquire when incorporated to film,” and will demonstrate the link between the past and the present, that is, how the filmmakers “raise questions about the present using the past” (Xavier 354). According to Xavier, to decipher what the narrative style and imagery employed in a film’s particular political moment allude to, film analysis should consider the time in which the film situates itself. Such an understanding enables us to address similar issues in the present by drawing from the past.

My central argument is that while the films highlight a need to revisit the past to draw strength from it, this return is complicated by the patriarchal elements that highlight the tension that is inherent in the idea of returning, especially for women. Some of the questions that the idea of returning presents are: What must one return to? How far must one return and what will one find on one’s return? As postcolonial women filmmakers, Anne Mungai and Wanjiru Kinyanjui face

the challenge of advocating for a reconnection with the past as a form of resisting the impact of colonialism, while at the same time denouncing structures and practices from this past that are oppressive to women.

Before moving further into the approach that the chapter takes to explore the idea of the return, I begin with a few remarks on these pioneer female fiction filmmakers and the historic moment from which they emerge. Anne Mungai and Wanjiru Kinyanjui command a special place in Kenya's film industry. Mungai's *Saikati* (1992) and Kinyanjui's *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (1995) were the first two fiction films directed by women in Kenya. *Saikati* revitalised local production in the Kenyan film industry which had experienced a period of inactivity since the production of Sao Gambia's *Kolormask* in 1985. The two films were produced and are set in post-independent Kenya, close to thirty years after independence. The post-independence period saw previously colonised nations producing literature that sought to interrogate the colonial experience and to (re)define their own national and cultural identities. The filmmakers joined their literary counterparts in their endeavour to express a sense of cultural awareness as they captured local experiences. The films began to offer the African audience films they could relate to, showing their daily experiences, and as Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes, African cinema enabled Africans to see images of "people speaking their own language and working out problems in their own language" (95). Before this awakening, films produced by foreign nationals focused on themes of nature and wildlife and were intended for a white audience (Okioma and Mugubi 51). Ngugi further argues that "in giving visibility to the invisible or voice to the silent, African cinema has to do it in such a way that the marriage of form and content creates a delightful harmony" (93). Thus, the filmmakers make deliberate choices in the selection of themes, aesthetics and language to reach their audience.

As part of the re-evaluation of the colonial and pre-colonial past, the condition of women in Africa was a dominant theme in African cinema. Ferid Boughedir cites the theme of women's plight as one of the common themes in African cinema in the period spanning the time from the 70s to the 90s. The films, he observes, sought to highlight and decry the unjust conditions faced by women (111). The films he refers to were mostly directed by men. This might be due to the fact that the

leading women filmmakers did not produce as many films as their male counterparts (Dovey 22). For example, after *Sambizanga* (1972), there is no record of any other film produced by Angola's Sarah Maldoror, director of the first fiction film by an African woman (*Sambizanga*).

Both *Saikati* and *Battle* were produced at a time when both government and non-governmental organisations were initiating programs to empower women socially, economically and politically. Remarkably, the film industry was impacted by this move as women took up film directing, consequently creating a platform for films that focus on women's empowerment, among other national concerns. This emergence is directly linked to the 1985 World Conference on Women, which identified communication as a means to uplift the living standards of women (Okioma and Mugubi 53). While the themes continue to shift as the times change, women's filmmaking continues to focus on the new challenges women face. As a way of making their contribution to nation-building and adding their voice to the discourses around the plight of women, a crop of female filmmakers began to rise.

Apart from *Saikati* and *Battle*, other Kenyan films of the 90s also focused on the marginalisation of women. The discriminatory conditions women face is attributed to both colonial and precolonial patriarchal discourses. However, in some pre-colonial societies, gender relations were flexible, and a few societies like the Gikuyu society had matriarchal social systems. Marciana Were observes that "the matriarchal social systems which favoured female political leadership [were] suppressed by patrimony" (4). Both colonial and postcolonial socio-political structures aggravated the condition of the Kenyan woman. Though Were's focus is on the political sphere, it sheds light on how the culture of male dominance impinges on female well-being. Consequently, both male and female filmmakers in Kenya used film to highlight the disadvantaged position of women, alongside depicting tensions in marital relations. A recurring theme was that of a young girl who had to drop out of school because of a marriage arranged by a guardian. The girl then finds a way

to escape and through resilience pursues her chosen career ¹². This theme first appeared in Mungai's *Saikati* and was taken up in later films such as Albert Wandago's *Naliaka is Going* (2003) and Jane Murago-Munene's *The Price of a Daughter* (2003).

To contextualise the period in which these two films emerge, I briefly highlight the phases of filmmaking in Kenya as delineated by Wanjiru Mukora in her master's thesis (28–45). Mukora presents a history of filmmaking in Kenya in which she classifies the films according to the socio-political moment from which they emerge. The first phase covers filmmaking during the colonial era. In this period, cinema and other cultural products were not a priority, the focus was given to economic activities such as agriculture. Films produced in this phase focused on teaching Africans how to behave. They also offered directives on how to grow cash crops and how to manage health issues. The second phase marks the post-independence period till the early 80s. The new government continued with the production of informational and educational films. The major highlight of this phase was the formation of a television and video training school, Kenya Institute of Mass Communication. Its primary focus was the production of tourist films aimed at selling Kenya's tourist destinations. Despite the gain of having a film training school, "government's poor financial support of the film industry precipitated the impoverished status of film production" (Mukora 39). Lack of financial support from the government contributed to the slow growth of film production in Kenya. However, the institute still trained numerous audio-visual professionals, Anne Mungai among them. This crop of filmmakers formed the foundation of a Kenyan national cinema. The boost in the film industry gave rise to the third phase of filmmaking in Kenya. This phase was concerned with the conflicts of tradition and modernity and with contesting the distorted images of Africans that characterised the first and second waves of filmmaking.

Each filmmaker seems to have entered the field with a clear idea of her role as a filmmaker. Kinyanjui was a writer, poet and radio journalist before joining the filmmaking world in 1987. She

¹² I discuss the notion of resilience in more detail in my article on Kibinge's *Something Necessary*. See Ojiambo, Jacqueline. "Representing Violation in Film: A Study on Resilience in Judy Kibinge's *Something Necessary*." *Agenda*, Sept. 2017, pp. 1–9.

holds a Master's degree in English and German Literature and trained at the German Film and Television School in Berlin (Diawara, *African Film* 290). Kinyanjui sees herself as a cultural worker. She explains that "historical distortions have made Africans lose confidence in themselves" and her role, therefore, is to correct the "negative image we have of ourselves" (Ellerson 155). This can clearly be recognised in her film *Battle*, where the characters engage with each other to reaffirm their identity and culture. As I will discuss further on, a group of characters in the film challenge the misrepresentation of African identity. Thus, as a cultural worker, Kinyanjui demonstrates how Kenyan filmmakers have used film to create identities by circulating positive images of African people.

Mungai, on the other hand, focuses on the struggles of women in the postcolonial world. She specifically focuses on the education of the girl child, early marriages, and prostitution. *Saikati* is inspired by Mungai's personal struggle to get an education. Mungai says that one of her aims in *Saikati* was to show positive images of African women, images that counter those that project women as either "helpless or prostitutes" (Barasa). Both films align their content with "the production of images of Africa that challenge (neo-) colonial, patriarchal narratives on the one hand, and patriarchal traditionalism on the other" (Von Ruckteschell vii). Von Ruckteschell views this as a core focus for African women who "continue to assert spaces for self-expression and self-determinism" (vii). Accordingly, this chapter and the subsequent ones demonstrate how Kenyan women filmmakers redefine female subjectivity.

Saikati is the story of a Maasai girl, named Saikati who refuses to marry the chief's son. Her uncle sees this proposal as an opportunity for the family to enrich themselves using Saikati's bride price. Saikati is opposed to this plan and is keen to pursue her education and become a doctor. She fears that her uncle would force her to marry the chief's son, and she convinces her mother to allow her to go to the city with her cousin Monica, who promises to find her a job. However, Saikati realises that Monica is a prostitute who wants to introduce her to the trade. Monica sets up a meeting to pair up Saikati with her client's friend, Alex, but Saikati refuses to join Monica's trade and chooses to return to her village in the Mara. When Alex inquires why Saikati is keen on returning to the Mara rather than remain in the city, Saikati explains that she came to the city because "she was

running away from things” (*Saikati*). On returning to the village, she finds that the chief’s son has married someone else and she goes on to pursue her studies. In *Saikati’s* sequel, *Saikati the Enkabaani* (1998), Saikati beats all odds to become a medical doctor.

Like Saikati, Mumbi is also “running away from things” (*Saikati*). *The Battle of the Sacred Tree* (hereafter referred to as *Battle*), opens with Mumbi, the protagonist wailing and cursing as she packs up her bags to return to her village in Githunguri. Mumbi, who can no longer put up with an abusive and adulterous husband, resolves to begin a new life in her rural home, Githunguri. Most of the villagers do not understand why a woman married to a wealthy man with a home in the city would leave that life to come and settle in the village. Mumbi ends up working as a barmaid to raise school fees for her daughter. She is judged harshly by the Christian Union members for leaving her husband and for working in the bar. Yet, Kinyanjui does not settle for a simple binary between the embattled individual and the socially empowered majority. The Christian women who conform to traditional and morally sanctioned expectations of them appear to be socially successful in the village compared to Mumbi who meets disapproval on many fronts. Yet these women are depicted as unhappy in their marriages and are frowned upon by the rest of the community for their stand on tradition. Mumbi who seems to be finally free has her own struggles. For example, is she really economically or socially empowered working as barmaid? The film presents to us such contradictions, demonstrating that tradition and modernity are not fixed, but are contingent on many factors.

At the time of the production of these films, African cinema scholars such as Diawara and Gabriel were tracing the recurrent themes in African cinema. Diawara’s *African Cinema Politics and Culture*, published in 1992, covers African cinema from 1968-1989. A similar focus is seen in Gabriel’s “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” which was published in 1989. Because of the slow production of films in Kenya, some of the conceptualisations discussed by Diawara and Gabriel still emerged in the films produced in Kenya after these publications. Observed through the lens of Diawara’s classification, *Battle* and *Saikati* oscillate between the social realist narratives and the ‘return to the source’ narratives. Some of the tenets of the social realist narrative that characterise these films are that they “draw on contemporary experiences,

have women as heroes [and they] oppose tradition to modernity” (141). Diawara observes that filmmakers choose the ‘return to the source’ genre for the following reasons: “to be less overt with the political message in order to avoid censorship, to search for precolonial African traditions that can contribute to the solution of contemporary problems and search for a new film language” (160). Diawara’s ‘return to the source’ approach is closely related to one of the aspects of Gabriel’s “remembrance phase.” Gabriel observes that within this phase filmmakers focus on returning to “the Third World’s source of strength, i.e. culture and history,” and their thematic concerns interrogate the “clash between rural and urban life, traditional versus modern value systems, folklore and mythology” (37). In some ways, as I will demonstrate, the films seem to align themselves with these classifications. *Battle* highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity and shows what values from a traditional past can be beneficial to the society in contemporary times. Similarly, in *Saikati*, Saikati rejects an arranged marriage, a practice from the past, yet, she finds that traditional values of morality, such as virtuousness approved by her mother, would enable her to achieve her goal.

This study reveals that for Saikati and the other female characters, the courage to “speak” in a society where women previously had no voice becomes a means of resistance. I draw the title of this chapter, “Do Women Talk Like That?” from the scene that opens this chapter. This tendency for patriarchy to question women’s speech is reiterated in a later scene in *Battle*. In this scene, a husband asks his wife: “Since when did women start talking to their husbands in that tone of voice?” This repetitive questioning of women’s speech emphasises how patriarchal structures seek to silence or control women by diminishing their voices. In the first scene, Mumbi’s father asks the question as an expression of his anger and shock at Mumbi’s questioning and complaining about her husband’s violent nature. His shock implies two things: Firstly, that Mumbi should not talk back to him (a man/father) and secondly, she should not express disdain for her husband (a fellow man). He expects that she should not question his suggestion that she returns to her husband and should defer to him, regardless of his abusive nature. The father’s reaction arises from patriarchal institutions that condition men to expect submission from women. It attests to the way repressive patriarchal discourse prescribes, limits and restricts women, thus policing even their speech. Women, therefore, have to continuously wrestle to find a voice and a place of significance

within their communities. Accordingly, I find the question of women's speech foregrounded in the title of this opening analysis chapter well suited to the chapter's purpose of reflecting on a defining moment in the history of Kenyan women's filmmaking – a moment when women filmmakers began to embrace film as a medium for them to speak and to also create worlds in which their female characters gain voices and become subjects.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I examine how the filmmakers reassess and interrogate the past. I will begin by situating the films within the Third Cinema and African cinema framework, after which I will demonstrate how *Battle* attempts to affirm and reclaim aspects of pre-colonial cultures. The legacy of colonialism left the colonial subjects in some ways stripped of their identity. What had been their way of life was disrupted and new cultures imposed on them. Christianity, in particular, imposed a new way of life that rejected existing forms of worship and other traditions. After colonialism, the former colonial subjects began to rediscover and reconstruct their identity by revisiting their pre-colonial past and drawing from their culture and history. Of the two films, *Battle* resonates more with the 'return to the source' genre and will be my focus in this section. Even so, *Saikati* supplements *Battle* in its interrogation of the problematic aspects of tradition. I suggest here that the movement of the characters from one subject position to another (running away from things and running towards others) becomes a trope for the anxiety that postcolonial subjects experienced due to biculturalism. The experience and development of the characters along their journeys serve to illuminate the challenges women face. Also, the section engages with the subtle ways Kinyanjui draws on the past to make comment on some socio-political issues of the film's present.

The second section extends the preceding discussion by drawing attention to how the female protagonists negotiate their "return." I focus here on the complexity of going back to one's roots, which for women is exacerbated by their gender. Apart from negotiating the oppression of colonialism, they must also face persistent patriarchal dominance from within their communities. In this section, I argue that the films problematise the 'return to the source genre', which does not articulate the question of gender. The 'return to the source' genre, as elucidated by Diawara, does not consider what a return might mean for women. Diawara identifies Gaston Kabore's *Wend*

Kuuni (1982) as an example of a 'return to the source' film. He explains that the film fits in this category for the way it portrays the Mossi Empire in its splendour and for showing that African women were fighting for their rights even in pre-colonial Africa (*African Cinema* 160). His example only highlights that women's protest started before colonialism. However, the rest of his discussion does not specifically consider what women should do about the oppressive aspects from the past which still manifest in the present day. Diawara has correctly pointed to the fact that women "at the source" were already protesting for fair treatment. How can contemporary women, then "return to the source?" Mungai and Kinyanjui through the realist mode, present the day to day world of women's lives in the rural area. *Saikati* affords us also a tiny segment of what city life struggles for women are. The realist characters become representatives of other women in their position. The project of negotiating the past for women is embodied in *Saikati* and *Mumbi*; they become allegorical figures that construct alternative womanhood. Thus, allegory supports the 'return to the source' mode in these films. The films assert a different kind of allegory that offers a new set of codes for women. The films show that culture and tradition are fluid and so one cannot adhere to everything that is traditional or embrace all that is modern. They envision a community where culture/s are negotiated continuously and re-negotiated between tradition and modernity. *Saikati* and *Mumbi* are transported from the level of awareness of the predicaments they face in certain cultures to a place of emancipation.

Returning to The Source

Third Cinema is a cinema of resistance whose focus is on political issues of emerging nations and its ideals were embraced by many filmmakers of the 70s to the 90s. Gabriel outlines the function of Third Cinema as a "guardian of popular memory" (53-64). Third Cinema became a guardian of popular memory in regions where the focus of the battle extended from the struggle for the liberation of the people of the Third World to include the conflicts they faced on the cultural front (Gabriel 55). The need for the latter battle may have been caused by the observation that official historical records did not include some aspects of a peoples' history. Third Cinema, therefore, deliberately draws on traditional memories as one way of preserving history and culture from erasure. Gabriel observes that filmmaking in Third Cinema is a collective process between the

film, the society and popular memory. Thus in Gabriel's words, Third Cinema aims to "delve into the past, not only to reconstruct, but also to redefine and to redeem what the official versions of history have overlooked (57). He further states that Third Cinema "serves not only to rescue memories, but rather, and more significantly, to give history a push and popular memory a future" (64). In the development of *Battle*, we observe the kind of 'push' Gabriel is referring to; *Battle* is imbued with references to the cosmology of the Gikuyu and constant reminders by Mzee of life in the past. *Battle* epitomises the condition of African communities after colonialism and dramatises imminent erasure of history. I propose that the film serves as a guardian of popular memory through its investment in keeping a record of precolonial history and demonstrating the struggle of communities in search of a lost identity.

The moment from which these films emerge (1992 and 1995) and their place, both in the history of filmmaking in Kenya and the national history, seems to have demanded a cultural revolution. This revolution is characterised by the filmmakers' desire to reject some of the new cultures imposed on them by their colonial experience, by drawing positive elements from the past and rejecting oppressive elements. Szeman observes that third world texts tend to speak more directly to and of the national situation compared to the West because of the need for cultural revolution. He argues that the cultural space which lies between the psychological (referring to the trauma of sub-alternity) and the political is where "the habits that are the residue of the colonialism can be addressed and potentially overcome" (810). The early filmmakers aimed to change the social, political and cultural values through their filmmaking. Before this shift, "cinema was a foreign product" (Diang'a 2). Diang'a observes that Kenyans could not afford to make their own films and neither could most of the population access the Western productions. Though Kenya gained independence 25 years before *Saikati's* production, filmmaking as a means of contributing to cultural revolution was slow to take off, mainly due to financial constraints.

Kenyan filmmakers slowly began producing films with the meagre funds they had and sometimes received partial funding from non-governmental organisations. To produce *Saikati*, Mungai, for example, took up the scriptwriting, directing and editing and a brief acting role (as a guest in the Nairobi hotel). She also engaged students and equipment from the Kenya Institute of Mass

Communications in the project. With non-monetary support from private entities such as airlines and hotels and a script development fund from the Frederik Ebert Foundation, the film became a reality. Many filmmakers experienced similar challenges, but their tenacity to produce films and the trickling funds from non-governmental organisations helped to resuscitate the film industry. Though the lack of funds hampered the quality of production, this did not stop the pioneer filmmakers from taking up the challenge to highlight pressing concerns of their time.

The films demonstrate that allegory is a productive means through which national concerns can be foregrounded. On the Kenyan literary landscape, writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o had already set a precedent for the allegorical form. Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) for example, interrogate the reconciliation between tradition and modernity and the possible rebirth of the nation (Ogude 109; Mwangi 70). There is a possibility that since some of the filmmakers studied in the Kenyan education system where Ngugi's fictional works constantly feature in the school curriculum, the filmmakers are in some ways already exposed to the allegorical form and, therefore, may consciously or unconsciously appropriate it. The elements from oral tradition such as the Gikuyu origin myth, reference to Mount Kenya and the mugumo tree, which feature in *Battle*, also appear in some of Ngugi's works. In this section, I read the elements and characters that lend themselves to an allegorical reading, demonstrating how the film's Third World Cinema approach supports my reading of the films as national allegories. Taking a Third Cinema approach, *Battle* focuses on social action: the Githunguri people take action to protect their culture and history. They find themselves in what Jameson refers to as an "embattled situation", which can be read as an allegory of early post-independent Kenya. Since for the most part, the films lean toward the realist mode, I will take a cue from Jameson and examine the "political logic" (846) ingrained in the films.

Closely aligned to Third Cinema's focus on social action and cultural revolution is Stephen Slemon's notion of post-colonial allegory. His ideas are useful in understanding how allegory is helping to change received ideas of history (158). Slemon argues that the common goal of post-colonial writing is to:

proceed beyond a “determinist view of history” by revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a concept, and in doing so to articulate “new codes of recognition” within which those acts of resistance, those unrealised intentions, and those re-orderings of consciousness that “history” has rendered silent or invisible can be recognised as shaping forces in a culture’s tradition. (Slemon, “2. Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History” 159)

Slemon finds that allegory becomes a useful tool for challenging the negative representation of the formerly colonised. These writers thus, produce textual counter-discourses to contest imperial myths and codes. *Battle* revises the given history through the way some characters ask subversive questions regarding the negative things said about their community’s precolonial way of life. The film re-appropriates a cultural symbol and validates knowledge such as those found in oral narratives and traditional medicines that are in danger of becoming extinct. *Saikati*, on the other hand, interrogates and rejects pre-colonial cultures that are oppressive to women, as well as the kind of freedom that ‘modernity’ offers and questions what other options are available to them. *Saikati* and *Battle* take up history as “a way of reflecting on and coming to terms with, the many crises and challenges confronting contemporary African societies as well as the future”(Cham 49). Aligning themselves as guardians of popular memory, the films focus on three points: an attempt to show the negative effects of colonialism, an effort to redeem the value of pre-colonial African cultures and an endeavour to transcend coloniality.

To reject the negative image of Africa produced by colonial discourses, *Battle*, through oral narratives by Mzee, presents positive images of a pre-colonial world predicated on a traditionally sacred ontology. This image of the sacred ontology is intended to demonstrate that as much as colonial powers and emerging elite did not consider African forms of religion worth preserving, communities had developed forms of religion. This traditional ontology among the Gikuyu meant, for instance, that they believed in Ngai (the Gikuyu God), whom they worshipped on selected sacred sites like sacred trees and mountains. *Battle*’s overarching plot draws from Gikuyu myths that view this tree as a sacred site. Their worship entailed, among other rituals, offering prescribed sacrifices to Ngai. The legitimacy of indigenous religion can be seen not only from the sense of identity and belonging it affords the people, but also in the way it is central, purposeful and consequential in the daily lives of the community.

The film suggests that colonialism's efforts to wipe out this history disrupted the identity of the Gikuyu. The drama of *Battle* is characterised by a clash between those who support the destruction of the mugumo tree and those opposed to it. The battle between the two groups highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. The Christian women who view themselves as modern and civilised embark on a project to destroy what they see as primitive. The ending of the film is laced with humour as the women go out in the night to try and bring down the tree. The film concludes its narrative through the resolution of this conflict. The tree is said to have defended itself from the women by disrupting their mission through a safari ant attack that sends them running back to their homes. Kinyanjui suggests here that cultural values embodied in the mugumo should be preserved. In the film's denouement, the community members gather around the tree, fascinated by its perceived strength. She uses a didactic approach from an oral tale structure of a moral story in which those who go against prescribed norms are punished. Such stories were used to educate children about the moral codes that regulate society. In addition, through these stories, children interacted with the beliefs and history of the community.



Image 2. The mugumo tree (*Battle*)

In *Battle*, the main iconographic source is the mugumo tree (illustrated in Image 2), whose value to the community is revealed through the oral tales and the daily conversations of the characters. Oral tales constitute the folklore passed on across generations. Mumbi and her daughter illustrate such a teaching moment in the film, Mumbi shows her daughter the mugumo tree and tells her its value and place in the society. This conversation takes place on their way home from church when Mumbi stops to look at the giant mugumo tree. The discussion poses an interesting juxtaposition – both the tree (traditional) and the church (a colonial marker of civilisation) are places of worship and Mumbi finds no problem with them co-existing despite the differences in modes of worship they imply. This act of imparting knowledge of the historical and symbolic meaning of the mugumo tree to Thoni, represents the value of sustaining this aspect of culture.

The narratives about the mugumo tree take the viewer back to the pre-colonial days. The various rituals associated with the tree express the political power, religion and identity of the Gikuyu (Karangi 117). Given the mugumo's centrality, it serves as an apt metonym for Kenyan cultures. On that premise, I propose that *Battle* is not just a story of the Githunguri community, but a portrait of a moment in post-independent Kenya, whose implications can be extended beyond one particular community. Keyan Tomaselli defines culture as a resource through which “the colonised would remake their common sense humanity, diminished and distorted by the colonial experience” (3). The plot of *Battle* resonates with Tomaselli's idea as seen in the way the filmmaker uses the metaphor of a battle to show the effect of Christianisation on former colonies. The Christian women, having adopted a new set of beliefs, would like to see “pagan” forms of culture eradicated. The women represent loyalists of western culture in the form of religion. When Mumbi finds one of these women trying to convince people to turn away from their ‘dark past’, she reminds her that she used to worship at the tree before renouncing their Gikuyu religious beliefs. Mumbi's retort implies that since this woman no longer finds value in a religion which she espoused before, she should not deny others a choice. The women's position is strongly contested by another character in the film who suggests that it is not sound biblical teaching for trees to be destroyed. What he is asking us to think about is the significance of the mugumo tree, pointing us to the reality that what

is at stake here is not the tree, but what it represents. The tree here clearly becomes allegorical for its embodiment of the values and history of the Gikuyu people.

Its allegorical import stems from the way it shifts from being a simple tree to a carrier of wider implications. The mugumo tree becomes a site from which Kinyanjui tries to resolve the tension between the history of the masses as they know it, the received history and the history they want to make. As Gabriel reminds us, popular memory is not “a retreat to some great tradition nor a flight to some imagined ‘ivory tower’ [...] rather it is a ‘look back to the future’, necessarily dissident and partisan, wedded to constant change” (54). The situation in Githunguri is lop-sided since the Christian women do not want to accommodate any other beliefs, yet nobody dissuades them from practising their faith. As much as the other characters are opposed to the mugumo tree being cut down, they do not interfere in the women’s group’s affairs. The film suggests that in the contemporary times one should indeed look to the past, not in a state of fixity, but open to changes and revisions. This is exemplified in the character of Mumbi who seems to embrace both worlds and the Christian young man who finds no problem with the tree. In the competing and confusing opinions about traditional religious beliefs in the film, culture is invoked to bring clarity to the issue. Those members of the community who fight for the tree not to be destroyed draw from knowledge about these beliefs passed across generations and win the battle in the end.

Given the prominent place of the mugumo tree in this film, I propose that the title of the film *Battle of the Sacred Tree*, should not be read only on the primary level of its meaning which refers to the mugumo tree within the Gikuyu/Kikuyu¹³ culture. It should instead be read at a secondary level that would enable an understanding—to see the value of its message through a wider lens. Read this way the “battle” refers to what should be a continual struggle by African communities to “mobilise the bulwark of what was left of traditional cultural forms and rituals to preserve their pre-colonial identities, traditions and dignity”(Tomaselli 3). Gabriel argues that the work of Third Cinema includes a “battle” to “recover popular memory and to activate it” (55). The mugumo tree

¹³ The words Gikuyu/Kikuyu refer to the largest ethnic group in Kenya. I use the two words interchangeably as used by the characters or scholarly works that I cite.

represents the myriad cultural forms and rituals that might be used to tackle challenges facing Africa. This is an apt figure if we consider what it stands for – Karangi observes that:

Mugumo conceals and reveals; it conceals a labyrinth of Gikuyu traditional, social, political and religious texts and rituals. At the same time, the sacred tree reveals the way the world of the Gikuyu people is culturally configured with its complexities and contradictions. (129)

Karangi's observation that the tree conceals the socio-political aspects of the Gikuyu gives credence to my argument that given the place and function of the mugumo in the Gikuyu community, the battle is an allegory of Kenya. It is an allegory of the nation because in its emblematic status, it signifies more than what we can see in its form as a tree. The Gikuyu tribe as a collective was like a nation with its own system of government and so, if we take the Githunguri community (a smaller administrative unit of the larger nation) as a microcosm of Kenya, the battle is a call against wilful forgetting and erasure of national histories. The destruction of such cultural symbols would lead to what Mumbi refers to in the film as "putting an end to history." Mumbi's comment is significant because it reveals the allegorical intent of the film, pointing us to the real 'battle' Kinyanjui is alluding to. Mumbi's concern is that the destruction of the tree would mark the end of all that it represented—a community's way of life. When symbols such as mugumo are forgotten and their value not passed on to future generations, then the history of the community will come to an end. What Mumbi is referring to here can be best likened to the functions of critical parts of a tree. We can draw an analogy between the roots of a tree and the history and culture of a people. The roots give life to the tree; absorbing water and minerals from the soil, they serve as an anchor to the tree and store extra food for future use. In the same way, history and culture anchor us and give us a sense of identity and belonging. The film presents a scenario where the history (roots) of the Gikuyu embodied in the mugumo tree is threatened. Culture has a vital role in fostering a community's sense of identity and in offering guidance or solutions to contemporary crises.

The filmmaker, thus, privileges this cultural symbol, an effect that shows its place in the community. The mugumo was considered sacred, a place of worship where the community communed with their God. Karangi observes that the mugumo tree "is above all the symbol of power, life and fertility" [and] "it represents the sacred continuity of the Gikuyu, spiritual, cosmic

and physical world” (117). Taking a Third World Cinema stylistic approach, the mugumo tree is given prominence in the film, through long takes, wide-angle shots and panning shots. These kinds of shots invite the audience to study the entire landscape and take in the details. Gabriel observes that the long take enables the viewer to appreciate the “sense of time and rhythm of life”, while the wide-angle shots reveal the “sense of community and how people fit in nature” (44-45). A close look at *Battle* demonstrates that most of the people of Githunguri have a relationship with the tree; the rituals around it and its historical link to their forefathers enables a sense of community and oneness with nature. This sense of community is at risk as the battle against the tree threatens the community with cultural dislocation.

To further illustrate how *Battle* draws on the past, I examine how Kinyanjui borrows from repositories of oral tradition. Kinyanjui uses these narratives to show the enduring value of traditional knowledge and to give a context and background to the film’s narrative. Mumbi’s father, Mzee, takes the place of a griot; he takes up his position as an elder in the society to share history with Thoni and her friend. He is the embodiment of traditional values and skills, reminding us of the value of the older people as reservoirs of knowledge and history. The three narratives he recounts centre on the value of the mugumo tree to the Kikuyu community. Mzee’s role and the tales he shares illustrate how in the past, tales of rituals, taboos, and customs regarding the tree were passed on to the younger generation to instil in them the need to reverence sacred places. The first story is as follows:

Our ancestors were Gikuyu and Mumbi. They only had daughters, so they made a sacrifice under the mugumo tree and prayed for bridegrooms. The next day they found the young men there. Sacrifices were not made by children but by priests and old people, like me. Usually, the sacrifice consisted of a ram and beer.

This summarised version of how the Gikuyu tribe came to be is used to reinforce the idea that before the colonial days, Africans had a spiritual order predicated on traditional cosmology. This myth was transmitted orally from generation to generation. It gives the community a sense of belonging and affirms their Gikuyu identity. In this religious myth of origin, there is already a mention of ways of worship and the mugumo tree as a sacred site.

This myth also signals to the audience the role of Mumbi in the film. Mumbi's name is precisely that of the Gikuyu's founding mother. As Mzee narrates this story, Thoni foregrounds this identity through her interjection at the mention of the name Mumbi. She is surprised and excited at this similarity. Her response prompts a discerning viewer to interrogate the use of this cultural icon to give meaning to the film. The founding mother's identity from the past is reconstituted in the present through the character of Mumbi. The founders of the community exemplified the manner in which Gikuyu people ought to conduct their affairs. Looked at in this way, Mumbi represents hope for the community and is the keeper of the history of the community. Mumbi lives up to her name as she marshals the community to save the mugumo.



Image 3. The camera lingers over the landscape (*Battle*)

Additionally, the creation myth establishes a connection between the people and the place. The films revere nature and give it much space and time, what Gabriel observes as an “insistence on spatial representation rather than temporal manipulation” (33). This, he explains, is a stylistic tendency of the second phase of Third Cinema. In this phase, the filmmakers' main theme is an engagement with their culture and history. The landscape in these films is often framed as an important character. Similarly, Melissa Thackway has observed of sub-Saharan francophone films that “the human community is also taken to be an inseparable part of the immediate surrounding

environment” (51). The shots in both *Battle* and *Saikati* accord as much importance to the landscape as to the characters. In many instances, the camera will linger over streams, livestock, skies or landscapes after the characters have left the scene (Image 3). Yet, while some of the scenes in *Saikati* align with Thackway’s and Gabriel’s proposition, others make it appear like a marketing tool for the hotels, airlines and parks. *Saikati* treats the audience to the endless plains, stunning vistas and abundant wildlife of the Mara. I find *Saikati*’s extended focus on the Mara problematic for its potential to distract the audience’s focus from its central theme on the plight of the girl child to the allure of Maasai Mara. In this respect, then, the film abandons a proper Third World Cinema perspective because it shifts its attention away from the focus of the lives and struggles of the Third World people. These kinds of shots do not serve the intended purpose of connecting the people and the place; they now shift to exoticism.

Mzee tells the children the second narrative which references the Gikuyu God (Ngai) as being in control of nature and the creator of the universe. Thoni and her friend, Wambui marvel at Mzee’s rendition of Gikuyu beliefs as he sits with them on the grass and narrates this story.

Mzee: When God visited us, he used to live on Mount Kenya as he created its whiteness.

Sometimes he stays on other mountains like Kilimambogo and Nyandarua,
understood?

Thoni: He can’t be seen how do we know he is around?

Mzee: He sends us thunder and lightning, when he is angry, then, he is fighting his
enemies. If we are disobedient, he denies us rain. If he is pleased with us, then
everything grows lusciously.

This account suggests that nature is a gift from God and is not to be abused, and that the spiritual and physical are related. As explained by Mzee, Ngai controlled the Gikuyu universe, such that when the climate was suitable for planting, the community believed that they were in harmony with Ngai, and when there was drought, it was an indicator that they had angered the creator. Stories about mountains and sacred trees as God’s abode serve as reminders to communities to respect the environment and use it sustainably. The function of the mountains as Ngai’s home “concretizes the belief with a physical presence that defies time” (Ogude 89). The permanence of the mountain signifies the enduring nature of Ngai and the belief system associated with him. The

mugumo tree, which is also an important monument, might be easier to destroy. However, the community believed that its destruction would cause harm to the community.



Image 4. Mzee and Mama Njenga share stories from the past (*Battle*)

The third oral form takes the shape of anecdotes told to Mumbi and the children. Mzee and Mama Njenga sit with Mumbi and the children around a fire and tell stories of the consequences arising from sacrilegious treatment of the mugumo. The use of the *mise-en-scène* is effective as it mirrors the tradition of creating a sense of intimacy between storytellers and their audience; often people sat together at the end of the day and shared stories. The first one is about a man whose whole family died after he ate the sacrificial meat left by a worshipper under the sacred tree. Indeed, anyone else who ate the meat somehow met their death. The second is a story about a man who cut off a branch from the tree. Though he was taken to court, the colonial chief (his friend) excused him from paying the fine. Consequently, there was drought in the land. Despite being excused by the chief, he still had to sacrifice a goat and beer to appease Ngai so that it would rain. The function of oral narrative here is to keep in circulation the myths that held the tree in reverence, thus preserving the tree and the history of the community.

This narration raises an instructive question which draws attention to the issue of the lack of inclusion of local knowledge in the Kenyan educational system. Thoni's friend asks in surprise, "why are we not taught these things at school?" Nwanosike and Onyije argue that "the European nations used their strong powers to introduce a system of education that was so foreign, whose aim was to ensure that African nations were subjugated and exploited" (41). Similarly, Francis Nyamnjoh has argued that "the values acquired during the colonial era that teach the superiority of the coloniser set the tone for the imbibing of knowledge and continue to dominate education and life in postcolonial Africa" (131). The introduction of foreign knowledge systems privileged the foreign over the local, therefore leading to the eventual omission of local knowledges. There have been ongoing debates about the decolonisation of the Kenyan education system over the years (Ogot and Ochieng; Alamin). These debates argue for the integration of indigenous knowledge within the school curriculum so that the knowledge dispensed reflects a community's specific way of making meaning of its world. *Battle* has the potential to contribute to conversations around safeguarding traditional knowledge on environmentalism, local history and herbal medicine (discussed further on).

The film seems to suggest that local knowledge should be part of the school curriculum. *Battle* shows a situation where, rather than teach the children their histories or cultural values, the focus is on privileging foreign knowledge. In the scene in Thoni's classroom, the teacher instructs her students on how to sing the traditional English nursery rhyme, "London Bridge is falling down ...," after which the song plays every time the school scene is shown. The repetition of the song registers the limiting nature of post-colonial education. The children can sing "London Bridge is falling down..." yet they do not seem to know some key aspects of the culture they encounter in their everyday life. This situation resonates with what Ngugi wa Thiong'o has referred to as "colonial alienation" of the colonial child—a condition which continues to affect the postcolonial child as demonstrated by *Battle*. He observes of the colonial child, "[t]here was often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world which was the language of his schooling and the language of his immediate environment in the family and the community" (Thiong'o 1135). The teaching of such rhymes is part of what Ngugi sees as opportunities to alienate the child

further. Ngugi posits that “alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always at the centre of the universe” (1135). He suggests that the focus on faraway lands in this curriculum detaches the children from their present environment. Ngugi’s statement demonstrates the need for curricular to be relevant to local needs. Through this song, the film raises a contradiction; while the children sing about a bridge falling in London, the mugumo in their own community is in danger of being felled. When thought about this way, the use of the song is satirical. It shows the unreasonable aspects of the Kenya school curriculum. The children, the future generation, are at the risk of losing touch with their heritage if the tree is destroyed. Additionally, the film implies that the separation of the children from their cultures would contribute to the eventual erasure of their cultures because there would be no one to pass the very culture to the next generation.

One more example of traditional knowledge that can be preserved is Mzee’s traditional medicine, made from the herbs and shrubs he collects around the mugumo tree. The Christian women are against the indigenous healing methods which they refer to as superstitious and primitive. The film cuts back and forth between a meeting of the women and Mzee’s healing session. In the meeting, the chair reads aloud contents of a letter to the chief requesting him to abolish evil, which includes Mzee’s medicine; meanwhile, in the healing scene, Mzee successfully cures his patient’s ailing stomach and explains that nature has given all that we require for healing. This cross-cutting approach achieves a vivid contrast between the women’s judgement of the medicine and the success of the treatment. Initially, the patient is disgusted at the taste of the herbal concoction, even sceptical about the treatment. Once healed, he says he will consult Mzee again. Bulenga’s explanation that his father is also a traditional healer supports the validity of traditional medicine. The destruction of trees such as the mugumo tree would hurt the traditional medicine industry whose main ingredients come from barks of trees and herbs that thrive in the shade of such trees. The stories about how communities lived in a sustainable relationship with their environment could be used to contribute to the discourses around the global environmental crisis.

The other function of the oral narratives is to show the folly of the Christian women who wage a battle against the tree on the basis that their faith views the cultural practices around the tree as

paganism. Their prejudice is questioned thrice in the film. The first question is raised by the young Christian man who points them back to the very set of beliefs they claim to uphold by saying, “there is nowhere in the bible about trees being unholy.” The young man’s argument points to the allegorical function of the tree which I explained earlier. Another man says that he does not want to go against the forestry department which requires them to conserve trees. Lastly, the young man whose project is researching African indigenous religions is a mockery of the women’s efforts to eradicate traditional forms of religion. He demonstrates that while they are busy finding ways of eradicating indigenous religions, there is a renewed interest in them from the younger generation. The women insist that the tree is evil and belongs to a shameful past and want to coerce everyone else into seeing the tree as pagan. The reactions of the three men illustrate how members of the community rebut the women’s faith perception of the tree. This way, the imprudence of devaluing cultural symbols is highlighted.

Mumbi employs a similar oppositional strategy when she confronts one of the Christian women who says that the tree belonged to the dark past when they walked naked. This woman illustrates how the colonialist diminished the image of their subjects by making them believe that they came from a dark place. The capitalisation on the idea that Africans walked naked is part of the colonial discourse that portrays Africa as wild. It stems from the perpetuation of the myth of the dark continent which aimed at depicting Africans as barbaric and hailed the colonial master as possessing a superior culture that would ‘civilise’ the ‘backward’ Africans. Though in the past there may be parts of the world where humans had no form of clothing, this was not specific to the Gikuyu. Angered by this claim, Mumbi challenges that myth by saying that they did not walk naked but had skins to cover their nakedness. Jomo Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya* lists tanning as one of the industries that the Gikuyu engaged in. The main purpose for tanning the skin was for the supply of articles of clothing (90). When we consider Kenyatta’s claim against the women’s belief we see the effect of colonial lies; these lies were spread till their real history became blurred. Thus, the film depicts the Christian women as supporters of colonialist ways of thinking. They seem to have absolute trust in the myths about Africa’s dark past.

The function of the women's group in the film is two-fold. First, they embody citizens opposed to the idea of return because of the process of acculturation. Secondly, their representation sheds light on the culture of women's self-help groups, which are popular both in the rural and urban centres in Kenya. The purpose of these groups is usually to offer social support and financial support to the members. When Mumbi returns to the village, the group seems to be her only option for becoming financially independent. This opportunity is denied to her because she does not qualify; she has walked out of her abusive marriage and has chosen to work in the bar, choices that were frowned upon in the 90s. There is, however, no evidence that the group is actively generating any income since, throughout the film their focus is on opposing anything they deem unchristian: the sacred tree, the Happy bar, and Mzee's traditional medicine.

The women's group demonstrates the effect of colonialism in stripping people's culture and imposing on them a new set of beliefs. The Christian Union women, disengaged from the ways of their people, are shown to be against indigenous forms of worship and medicine. They dramatise the effect of dislocation and socio-cultural change brought about by colonialism. Jomo Kenyatta observes that, "[t]he missionaries endeavoured to rescue the depraved souls of the Africans from the eternal fire; they set out to uproot the African, body and soul, from his old customs and beliefs and put him in a class by himself, with all his tribal traditions shattered and his institutions trampled upon" (273–74). The Christian Union women represent those who followed the coloniser's culture without questioning whether it suited them. The women reflect the ongoing erosion of tradition as a legacy of colonialism.

On an allegorical level, the group reflects disillusionment and gender oppression in women organisations such as Kenya's largest women's movement, Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO). Audiences familiar with the politics of MYWO will recognise the similarities between the film's Kanyore Christian women's group (see Image 5) and MYWO. The first three words of the organization's name in Swahili translate to "women's progress." The organisation was formed in the 1950s by European women to promote the advancement of African women (Wipper 99). Critics of the organisation hold that over the years it became aligned to the ruling political party which resulted in MYWO's acceptance of the status quo and thus, did not

actively focus on women's advancement, its core mission. The focus on titles and positions demonstrated by the Christian women's group leaders is like that seen in MYWO. When the Kanyore Christian women's group is deregistered, its officials refuse to join the larger women's group. The MYWO branches are structured parallel to the country's administrative system so, its branches start from the village group to the district group until the national level. A similar structure is shown in the organisation of the women's groups in the film. The treasurer, for example, tells her husband that she will not move to the larger association because she will lose her position. The real nature of these women is depicted through Shiku, the housemaid of the "president" of the group. Shiku, who becomes Mumbi's informant tells her; "all they do is talk, talk, talk, they never generate any income. All they do is dream." The way these women treat Shiku and Mumbi reveal that the union does exactly opposite of what it should through its marginalisation of other women.



Image 5. Kanyore Women's group meeting (*Battle*)

Just like MYWO furthered the ruling party's agenda, the women are seen to be so steeped in their Christian beliefs that they appear to be belated agents of the colonialist's civilising mission. Similarly, the affiliation of MYWO to the ruling party was a strategy to garner support from women by acting as patron to the organisation and supporting some of their projects. To keep the women from questioning poor governance in a male-dominated state, their focus was narrowed to

“improving childcare, domestic care, handicrafts, agricultural techniques, and literacy and engaging in sports (Wipper 100). In an interesting change of approach by the filmmaker, the women here do not seem to be involved in any of the projects such as those listed above, but use the language of the coloniser to evangelise the community. Due to the coloniser’s Christian doctrinal influence, the women take a stand that the tree is the source of their problems. As illustrated, one of them says: “This tree is the ruin of our attempt at getting civilised, the ruin of our Christian community” (*Battle*). The women’s hatred for the cultural practices they deem sinful is also expressed through the songs they sing in condemnation of “evil things.” This stance parodies the way MYWO continued to sing praises for the ruling party, even when things were wrong with Moi’s dictatorial leadership. The film on one level mocks those who shun traditional beliefs and oppose them irrationally, while on another level condemns those who blindly support repressive rule in post-colonial Africa.

To demonstrate the folly of the women’s ideas, the film employs rhetorical questions or statements from the other characters. *Battle* characterises this group of women as absurd in their relentless efforts to garner support to cut the tree. They manage to get just a few signatures but most of their requests are turned down. These responses underscore the director’s vision regarding the treatment of cultural artefacts. For example, Mama Njenga asks one of them;

Why should God plant an evil mugumo tree?

Or is it you who planted it?

In the first part of the question, Mama Njenga attributes the presence of the mugumo tree to a higher power and here, she returns to the Gikuyu myth about the place of the tree. Because the women did not plant the tree and it is believed that the mugumo trees were ancient shrines, the second question suggests that they have no right to destroy it. If we think of the mugumo tree’s signification as an embodiment of a people’s history, then the latter question suggests that the women or anyone else interested in erasing a people’s culture have no authority to do so. These questions are aimed at raising consciousness in the audience about the usefulness of questioning beliefs that circulate with the aim of marginalising African cultures. Some of the characters question the women’s perception of the tree as pagan. While from their Christian perspective it may seem to be pagan, the point here is the idea of wanting to impose their faith on the rest of the

community. The debate about the pagan nature of the tree is further put to the test when the young Christian man says that the Bible was not against any tree.

Such questions and counter-assertions highlight the clash of beliefs in a community that is no longer homogenous. This intervention emphasises Homi Bhabha's argument that "[h]ybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of colonialist disavowal, so that other "denied" knowledges enter upon the discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition" (1176). Bhabha views hybridity as an "articulation of displacement and dislocation" which enables the identification of the "cultural as the disposal of power"(1177). Bhabha argues that while the effect of dislocation on colonial subjects cannot be denied, they can use culture as a source of power to question the authority of the coloniser. Illustrative of this is how Mumbi, for example, goes to church with her daughter and yet resists the Christian women's attempt to destroy the tree. In other words, hybridity is not simply a matter of merging two cultures, but also a form of resistance where the knowledges or beliefs that are elevated above the others are investigated. In this case, the women's firm belief that the tree and the herbal medicine are evil are challenged through questions raised by the characters and through the oral narratives. The function of this kind of investigation through questioning is ultimately to interrogate Christianity's civilising mission. The film, through the characters, investigates the colonial discriminatory practices that othered traditional forms of religion.

In a comic scene towards the end of the film, the women decide to chop down the tree themselves, having failed to get enough support from the community. The tree is so huge that it would have needed more axes and hands to fell it down, but the five women assume that they can chop it down. As they attempt to chop it, several natural forces startle them. These include the unexpected clap of thunder and flash of lightning, the eerie sounds of an owl and, eventually, the safari ants that crawl on their bodies. The safari ant attack sends them scampering for safety. Mumbi's exaggerated re-telling of this event at the bar further heightens the satire as the men laugh and join in the ridicule of these women. She says, "they were dancing naked around the tree instead of cutting it." This is also an ironic play on stereotypical perceptions of pagan worship. In this scene, the women are not naked, but they are shaking the ants off their bodies and reducing any extra

layers of clothing. The irony is that these women who are so incensed about the tree are the ones “dancing naked around the tree”, as though they are unknowingly performing an act of the very ‘pagan’ worship they are against. The film closes in the bar with an announcement to the rest of the bar patrons by Immaculate’s husband that she had promised to abandon the Kanyore Union and join the Gumba Union. Immaculate thus concedes that the women had lost the battle. Her husband says, “it is the end of the absurd project.” The term absurd registers the futility of the women’s battle against the tree.



Image 6. The chief in his office (*Battle*)

The constant interaction between the women and the chief allows for an exploration of his role in the community. The chief in *Battle* is the figure of political authority in the film; he is the one expected to mediate the battle. The first time the audience meets the chief, he is seated in his office, smoking a cigarette with his feet on the table. This act is the exact opposite of what one would expect of a uniformed government official. He browses the newspaper as his secretary reads a letter from the women to him. He comes across as dispassionate about any official matters, least

of all the women's concerns. The women keep trying to convince him to take their side, but he avoids them for a while and finally refuses to let them have their way. He initially cannot face the women or take a stand against the tree. The Christian women believe that it is the chief's Christian duty to authorise that the tree be felled. Again here Kinyanjui employs another opposition tactic by demonstrating that the women's expectations for support from the chief is misguided. The film alludes to one of the roles of chiefs stipulated in the Chief's Act, which is "regulating the cutting of timber and prohibiting the wasteful destruction of trees" (Laws of Kenya, Cap 128 C14-7). Contrary to what the women expect, it is his official duty as the government's representative not to cut down the tree.

In the pre-colonial societies, the government structure was different from what we see in the film. In that period, the affairs of the community were presided over by the council of elders (Kenyatta 185; Tignor 341). In order to show the connection between the film's chief and the colonial chief, let me give a brief background on the history of chiefs in Kenya. In the colonial days, chiefs were appointed by the colonial powers to act on behalf of the imperial nations. They were employed to ensure law and order were maintained. Robert Tignor argues that the "creation of chiefs where there had been none before caused a decisive break from the precolonial past" (340). Jomo Kenyatta delineates the Gikuyu system of government which was in the hands of councils of elders chosen from the community (188). He further observes that the colonial government, "supported by appointed chiefs, and even what is called "indirect rule," are incompatible with the democratic spirit of the Gikuyu people" (Kenyatta 196). The chief system which disrupted the pre-colonial political traditions of Africa was carried over to post-independent Kenya.¹⁴

The film hints at the image of the colonial chief through the anecdote shared by Mzee. This brief story gives very minimal detail which signals the 'not said' suggesting 'otherness'; it is this brevity of information that facilitates an allegorical link to the colonial chief, enabling the viewer to look

¹⁴ This raises an interesting paradox about the legacy of Jomo Kenyatta. While in his book he suggests that chiefs were installed to support colonial agendas and disrupted the political set-up when he became the first president of Kenya and had the power to change things he did not do so. He drew on the coloniser's political structure which he had earlier referred to as undemocratic.

back to the impact of colonial disregard for traditional values on the community. The colonial chief of Mzee's story is said to have let his friend, who had committed an act of sacrilege against the tree, go unpunished. The expectation was that the culprit should have served some form of punishment. This anecdote sheds light on the role of the colonial chiefs in the erosion of values. In the pre-colonial days, the elders were the judges and keepers of the law and, therefore, ensured that the community's values were upheld. In this new government structure, the colonial master set his own rules and laws, disregarding the traditional laws of his subjects. Though the mention of the colonial chief in the anecdote is quite subtle, this as an invitation to read the character of the film's chief allegorically. The position of the chief is a remnant of what denotes disruption of the pre-colonial forms of government.

Kinyanjui takes a comical approach to comment on the present leadership scenario by drawing on the stereotypical image of the chief. Stereotypes are common ingredients of allegory because through them, according to Xavier, a social group finds its embodiment in a single image deliberately composed to confirm that stereotype (341). The chief can be read as a personification of incompetent leadership in the national allegory provided in *Battle*. My reading strategy "depends heavily upon the context of reading itself" (341). In this sense, the allegory stems from the similarity of the chief in the film to what has been said or written about chiefs in Kenya. The chief in the film is never seen to do productive work. His depiction epitomises non-performing government officers in the country. He hides from the women when they come to see him and drinks beer during working hours. His behaviour resonates with Terence Ranger's observation that "the invented traditions which were introduced to Africans were those of governance and not production" (228). The chief is concerned about his title and position, but does nothing productive. This attitude is evident when he appears shocked at the announcement in the bar by Shiku that Kanyore women's group had been dissolved. He says "I would be the first to know, after all, I am the chief around here." This turn of events, I propose is the filmmaker's way of showing his inefficiency. The chief wants to assert his power but seems powerless at the same time. Kinyanjui through the chief's depiction, invokes memories of chiefs who make headlines in the local media for laziness, being accomplices to crime and other forms of abuse of their office (Waithera; Shiloli and Sang).

In this section, I have drawn attention to how *Battle* employs a range of elements such as the mugumo tree, the notion of a battle, folktales and subversive questions that encouraged an allegorical reading. I have, therefore, argued here that *Battle* is a national allegory of Kenya – it reveals a nation at the risk of losing its cultural heritage. As a guardian of popular memory, the film has ‘returned to the source’ to document cultural histories and shown possible valuable outcomes of such a project. These might include alternative healing methods, a reminder to revere the environment and recovering a sense of identity. That notwithstanding, the return is particularly challenging for women.

Problematising the “return to the source”

The return-to-the-source films as I have established, focus on drawing from African cultural traditions. The films highlight African traditions that can be meaningful today. Diawara suggests that this genre is characterised by a director’s approach to tradition. He argues that the directors’ “intent is on positing religion where anthropologists only see idolatry, history where there is primitivism, and humanism where they see savage act” (*African Cinema* 160). The value of such a project should not be underrated by any means, as it serves an important purpose in reclaiming traditional beliefs that have been condemned in the name of modernity. However, there is a complication in that, in some precolonial societies, there existed practices which were indeed, in Diawara’s terms, ‘primitive’ or ‘acts of savagery’. How, then, do directors navigate this conundrum? For women, especially, a return is fraught with challenges. Nigerian feminist critic Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie sums the position of Nigerian women (which could be true for other African women) as follows:

It is multi-faceted and contradictory when it is not totally false or misleading. The male dominated society reacts in the usual fashion by denying that there is any oppression of women in Africa, glorifying an unknown pre-colonial past where our African mothers were totally happy [...]. (133)

Ogundipe’s remarks highlight that in patriarchal societies which valorised male superiority, the subordination of women was naturalised to the extent that the oppression of women in its multiple

forms was accepted as a way of life. In this section, I argue that Mungai and Kinyanjui subscribe to the ‘return to the source’ movement, but only insofar as this movement allows a re-evaluation of pre-colonial traditions that are oppressive and hinder women’s progress in contemporary Africa. To do this, I argue that the challenges that arise from ‘the source’ that limit women are raised to character status – they become allegories embodied in Mumbi and Saikati. Read allegorically, they illustrate the gender politics within patriarchal structures that hinder women from self-determination. Mumbi and Saikati represent challenges such as forced early marriages for young girls or oppressive marriages that cannot be represented otherwise. As they navigate life at their points of return, they illustrate the filmmakers’ vision for women in Kenya. This section proceeds to examine how the filmmakers question the idea of the return for women.

One of the ways the films try to engage with the idea of the return is through a depiction of the city juxtaposed to the rural. An attempt is made to show the rural, which represents ‘the source’, as the place to thrive. Though Saikati and Mumbi seem to experience a sense of freedom in the rural space, the films struggle to represent this because, in reality, both spaces are limiting to women and the return is not easy for these women. Taking a third world cinematic approach, the films, through long takes and wide shots, portray the rural as a vast place. Gabriel has explained that “the sense of spatial orientation in cinema in the Third World arises out of the experience of an ‘endless’ world of the large Third World mass” (33). ‘Endless’ refers to two things: the first is the varied life experiences of the majority of the Third world population, which comprises the lower middle class and below. This style is exemplified in *Battle* which dramatises the lives and struggles of the rural Githunguri community, rather than the urban and in *Saikati* the struggles of a rural girl to free herself from a repressive culture. Secondly, it refers to the vast geographical expanse that was home to the third world masses. Gabriel links the long takes and wide shots characteristic of these films to the longing for the “the vastness of nature.” This focus is meant to reflect the way of life of these communities in the past – where spaces seemed endless and continuous, demonstrating a sense of oneness among the people.

This idyllic environment is disappearing with the growth of cities filled with modern buildings and, consequently, limited space. I argue that this “longing for vastness” could represent a desire

to be free from imposed constraints. The city, a marker of modernity, is contrasted to the rural topology in *Saikati*. Monica's cramped living quarters denote her constricted life. The scenes of Monica and Saikati walking around the city are characterised by short takes, which are contrasted to the long takes of the scenes in the rural Mara. This contrast partially supports the theme of return, demonstrating that 'the source' (the village) offers more opportunities for women compared to the city. Of course, this simple correlation can be contested. However, what the filmmakers hope to achieve is to consider "the source" and the opportunities for growth therein if one properly negotiates it. The city's depiction denotes how modernity promises opportunities for wealth and success, but one soon finds that these can be illusory.

Both films depict the city as a place where women are oppressed. In *Battle*, Mumbi is physically abused by her husband; in *Saikati*, Monica is taken advantage of by the father of her child who abandons them. Yet, the rural topology also has its own predicaments, since it is the space where patriarchal cultures are enforced the most and young girls are at risk of forced early marriage. Women like Mumbi are expected to stay in abusive marriages and the places they can find work are limited. Thus, the films place these two places side by side as places that have the potential to destroy. Yet, it is in the rural space that the two women find a measure of freedom. By portraying both the city and the rural as restrictive to women's progress, the filmmakers complicate commonplace assumptions that pit one against the other. The city with its markers of comfort such as the pleasures Mumbi's husband promises her – cars, buying her clothes from overseas and the offer to get whatever she needed – is a place assumed to be equal to progress. The film interrogates this assumption by depicting Mumbi's husband, who might seem progressive on other fronts, as retrogressive. He exhibits a patriarchal mindset through his violent treatment of Mumbi. Though the village offers her a fresh start she has to go against the expected norms of the village to get her freedom. Both the city and the rural have to be negotiated. For instance, Monica is imprisoned and entangled in the city and is unable to extricate herself from its tentacles. Mumbi and Saikati refuse to be trapped by the city's enchantments and choose to return to the village. They, however, still have to negotiate life on diverse fronts to survive. This complication depicts that for women to find a sense of freedom, they must navigate around the remnants from the past and take advantage of aspects of contemporary society that facilitate their sense of empowerment.

Saikati's engagement with the past takes a different approach compared to *Battle*. *Saikati* contains "documentary" moments; a feature common to films whose "narrative touches on, and becomes a vehicle for educational or sociological issues, highlighting films functional role" (Thackway 53). The film focuses on creating awareness about the plight of the girl-child endangered by forced early marriages and the girl's role in extricating herself from such circumstances. While the film celebrates the Maasai culture and tradition through the presentation of many of its various forms such as the manyatta (traditional house), the beautiful Maasai attire and various cultural performances such as dances, bride price negotiations and a wedding ceremony, it nevertheless highlights a form of culture that inhibits the progress of women. Saikati's widowed mother is portrayed as helpless and dependent on her brother-in-law's decisions or direction about what happens in her household. She pleads with Saikati to marry the Chief's son so that they are not evicted from the home by her brother-in-law. In this culture, even when the male head dies, the patriarchal structures ensure that there is another male head. These kinds of customs and practices ensure that women remain relegated to the homestead. While the marginalised condition of the girl child has changed considerably for the better since the production of this film, girls' education is still cut short by early marriages in patriarchal communities, especially in parts of Kenya such as Samburu that still clearly outline gender roles and assign domestic chores to women (Kieti). Through a personal resolve to seek an alternative life, Saikati manages to escape the forced marriage. Moreover, she seeks to acquire an education that would enable her navigate a different future.

It is not surprising that most of the films in this study will engage with the subject of marriage because marriage is central to many cultures in Africa. Marriage is regarded as a privileged status for women and their identity is formed by their marital status. It is not uncommon for married women in parts of Kenya to be identified as 'wife of (husband name)' rather than by their names. The films take a predominantly realist approach to foreground the realities of women concerning marriage. They show that power relations between men and women are unequal in marriage. At the same time, the fictional mode allows the filmmakers to problematise and rewrite various

aspects of marriage. To begin this discussion, I will show how the films imagine and query the dowry negotiations stage, which is the first step in the marital process in many African societies.

Saikati reveals a society in which the girl-child is predestined to be married. In this case she has no role to play in selecting a suitor, neither does she have the option of marrying at a time when she feels ready, nor does she have the option to choose to be single. It is a society where women's choices are limited from the outset. For example, Saikati's uncle finds in the Chief's son a suitable suitor for her and an opportunity to enrich himself from her bride price. He does not care about her pursuit of education or other wishes. Through this representation, *Saikati* subtly begins a conversation around women's objectification and devaluation in terms of what value, monetary or otherwise they can bring to the male heads of their families. Dipio argues that the practice of bride price payment has "turned into a collusion between the patriarchal heads of families for selfish motives"(91). Whereas Saikati foils her uncle's plan to enrich himself by running to the city, the circumstances are different for Mumbi who is almost entrapped in a violent marriage because her family received bride price for her.

In Mumbi's culture, if a woman walked out of her marriage, her parents would have to reimburse her husband the value of her bride price. Mumbi's father seeks to protect his interests at the expense of his daughter's happiness. In the scene that opened this chapter, he raises the issue of bride price as a reason for her to return to Mwangi. When Mumbi refuses to return, he reminds her that women do not speak or argue with men. His reference to Mumbi as "women," shows that he no longer sees Mumbi as his daughter, but as part of a collective group of persons who are expected to behave in a prescribed manner. He, therefore, wishes to perpetuate the workings of a patriarchal society by ensuring Mumbi returns to her husband and he keeps the bride price. Women are shown to facilitate patriarchal tendencies that devalue women as seen in Mama Njenga's attempt to castigate Mumbi for refusing to return. Similarly, in *Saikati*, Saikati's mother is initially used by the uncle to plead with Saikati to accept the proposal. In both films, these women have a sudden change of heart and take sides with the protesting woman only when she insists on having her way. The intense exchange between Mumbi, Mama Njenga, her father and Mwangi at a sitting to persuade Mumbi to return to her marriage illustrates this.

Father: You two have to talk.

Mumbi: I have nothing to say.

Mama Njenga: Mwangi paid the bride price, and you have nothing to say?

Mumbi: Return his property!

Mama Njenga: No, you have to return.

Mumbi: I will not be treated like a goat.

Father: How can you talk like that? Before grown men!

Kinyanjui's exposition of the issue of bride price makes the audience question the practice of bride price and the motives behind it. One can also see a sense of entitlement in Mumbi's husband in the scene where he says he can beat his wife anytime he wants to. Kinyanjui suggests that the practice of bride price should be checked for the ways it affects women negatively. As Mwangi exemplifies, those who pay it feel they have a right to treat women in whatever manner they please because in a certain sense have "bought" them. Mumbi's refusal to be treated like a goat reveals her frustration at being dehumanised to the level of a goat; first Mwangi beats her like an animal and secondly, he thinks he owns her as one would own an animal. Mumbi denounces this practice by refusing to stay in her marriage and boldly asking her father to reimburse Mwangi his bride price.

A common thread in the films is the inscription of alternative womanhood. In Tom Odhiambo's definition of alternative womanhood, the female subject is depicted as an agent in the historical process that shapes her identity and experiences ("Writing Alternative Womanhood in Kenya in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*" 235). The films represent a similar definition of alternative womanhood in women such as Mumbi and Saikati who resolve to take charge of their lives and free themselves from institutions that seek to deny them autonomy. Saikati is juxtaposed to her mother who fears the consequences of going against tradition. Her mother represents a womanhood that is subservient to the male order. Saikati's mother embodies the past while Saikati embodies the present and the future. Her mother's position and demeanour show the outcome of a

community that is oppressive to its women, while Saikati in the present shows the urgent need for change. Her hopes and dreams signify a possible future.

The films show marriage as an institution in which women struggle to find space to allow them some freedom. Saikati's arranged early marriage would deny her education as a transformative tool for women. For Mumbi, her marital issues, characterised by violence, can only be solved by her divorce. Her marriage to Mwangi represents a traditional African marriage and her friendship with Bulenga offers an opportunity for a new marriage, this time on Mumbi's terms. Mumbi's redefinition of the marital institution is shown through this conversation with Bulenga.

Bulenga: We will be married as soon as you are divorced and then have many children and then as the Europeans say be happily ever after and then you won't have to work in the bar. My princess!

Mumbi: First of all, I am not anybody's princess, and secondly, I can work anywhere I want and thirdly, you can have your many children yourself.

This verbal exchange that takes place in an idyllic setting by a stream delineates some points concerning gender relations and marriage. The refusal by Mumbi to be referred to as "my princess" indicates two things. The first is that women do not need to get their worth from anyone else. Secondly, the possessive pronoun "my" indicates that Bulenga wants to own her and opens up the possibility for him to treat her as he pleased. This had been the case in Mumbi's earlier marriage where Mwangi believed he could physically abuse her at will. Mumbi thus begins a journey towards a world where domination over others is no longer the norm. She also asserts her right to take up any form of employment she deemed meaningful. Employment as bar maid is the only option available for her to earn income and educate her daughter, an opportunity she embraces despite ridicule from her father and other women. Finally, she suggests that childbearing is a woman's choice and should not be used to paralyse women. Brenda Cooper argues that in Africa, mothering and nurturing of children is glorified and reaffirmed as the primary defining characteristic of women (77). Cooper argues that it is problematic to use the role of motherhood to incapacitate women and restrict their potential to childbearing and nurturing. Thus, the film successfully attempts a revision of societal perceptions of love and marriage and provides a model of marriage where women are not confined to restricted environments or roles.

The films further demonstrate that the institution of marriage can be exited so that women like Mumbi, whose marriages are places of anguish rather than pleasure, can disengage from such institutions. In the past, marriage was meant to be for life. The society did not support divorce, leading to the stigmatisation of divorced women. Mumbi's choice to pursue a divorce shocks Bulenga and Mahinda who, surprised at her decision, ask, "why?" to which Mumbi responds "why not?" Through this rhetorical question, Mumbi uses an oppositional technique to foreground the importance of questioning accepted norms and practices. Their surprise registers the rarity of divorce in the 90s. While the legal structures to support divorce were in place, most women opted to stay in a marriage out of fear of judgement from the society and further wrath from their husbands. On the morning of the visit to the lawyer, Mumbi expresses fear that her husband would kill her. Encouraged by Mama Njenga, she pursues the divorce. The staging of this choice serves to show the courage required to resist oppressive societal norms and the possibility of personal emancipation. Thus, the film rewrites marriage from being a permanent bond to one which can be exited in cases of patriarchal oppression. The divorce frees Mumbi to determine the course of her life without threats from her husband.

Mumbi's new place of work opens ways to understand how patriarchy subjugates women. Though it is a public place, it operates along its own set of binaries and exclusions to maintain a dominant male order. In "Gender, Feminist Theory and Post-Colonial (Women's) Writing" African feminist Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi investigates how African postcolonial women writers reconstitute and reconstruct multiple identities of women in their writing (275). She argues that "different groups of marginalised women can create spaces and social locations for themselves within the dominant culture." (273). Although at the moment in Kenyan history depicted in the film, the bar is an exclusively male space, Mumbi manages to convert it into a space for her to interact with men as an equal. Though she is a barmaid, she sits with them and joins in their conversations, often questioning their patriarchal ideologies.

The Happy Bar offers a space where the community gathers outside of domestic and work spaces as well as outside the social norms that underscore those spaces. The bar is integral to the Kenyan cultural imaginary. *Battle's* Happy Bar presents a sharp contrast to the bars featured in films such

as Kibinge's *Project Daddy*, and *Something Necessary* that will be discussed in later chapters. The later films depict the bar as a more inclusive space. The difference is in the way the Happy Bar is populated by men where Mumbi and Shiku are the only women. The bar offers a site for engaging with competing tensions surrounding the events happening in the Githunguri community and is also a space where the gender power dynamics are challenged.

Battle displaces the moral code that shows as heroic those who conform to socially accepted moral codes in favour of women who are socially marginalised like Mumbi, a woman who walks away from her marriage and works in a place perceived to be immoral. Unlike the Christian women who are subject to the authority of their husbands, Mumbi is a powerful voice in the bar. Her agency is illustrated in the scene where she urges the men not to sign the petition against the tree. In this scene, she makes a threat to prohibit anyone who supports the women from entering the bar. Ultimately, the Christian women are ridiculed in the battle against the tree, while Mumbi becomes triumphant in her efforts to rally support for the tree.

The juxtaposition of the bar space and the domestic space is revelatory. The name of the bar indicates what the bar brings to those who frequent it. Apart from one occasion when Mumbi's husband storms into the bar and picks a fight with Bulenga, the Happy Bar is a space filled with good cheer. On the other hand, Kinyanjui's depiction of home spaces and marital life is quite pessimistic. There is hardly a scene where marriage life is characterised by joy. Most of the domestic spaces represented in the film are places where the men and women are at odds with each other. The conflict in these homes arises from an opposing set of beliefs; the women think the bar and the tree are evil, while the men do not hold the same view. The scene in the treasurer's house demonstrates this:

Husband: What do you women want to prove and to whom? Why on earth don't you join the bigger union as you have been told?

Treasurer: You don't understand, I won't abandon my office I am the group treasurer there. We are needed here.

Husband: By whom? All you women do is strive against the bar and the tree.

Treasurer: You need us, you men are all becoming drunkards, and you spend all your money there. It's a waste.

Husband: That's not true we are not drunkards. And since when did women start talking to their husbands and masters in that tone of voice. Ai! Times have changed.

This exchange is accompanied by facial expressions of disgust from both the wife and the husband. I propose that Kinyanjui uses these two spaces to show how the home can be a restrictive space for women.



Image 7. An oppressive domestic space, husband shouts at his wife and son (*Battle*)

The domestic spaces the film represents are mostly those of the Christian women. The women manage the domestic affairs, while the men work outside the home and have an alternate space, the Happy Bar to unwind. Mumbi is expected to run a home and not work in the bar and she is, therefore, condemned by her father, husband and the Christian women for transgressing the oppressive social norms. The Christian women are shown to be at the service of the husbands when at home. The men in these homes see themselves as “masters” over their wives, as stated by the

treasurer's husband. The film is replete with traces of this male attitude of superiority, evident in the way Mumbi's husband treats her, and in the Chief who says his wife stands at attention when he says something. Moreover, one of the Christian women is not allowed to join the other women in their plan to cut the tree; her husband instead sends his son to make an excuse on her behalf. This patriarchal power fosters a relationship of superiority and subordination between men and women. The home space is then shown as a place where women have no liberty over their movements. The husbands of the Christian women position themselves within the workings of a patriarchal society that gives them power over their wives and the women submit to the dictates of patriarchy by never challenging their husbands. At times one is drawn to sympathise with them for the way they have internalised societal expectations of marriage. These women seem to be marginalised in their homes, a condition that might explain why they seem to be happier in the 'social location' where they gather for meetings, a space where they can speak, sit and be served by Shiku and seek for power and ambition. As discussed earlier, women navigate marginalisation by creating spaces and social locations where they take the margins to centre (273). I contend that the filmmaker uses the homes of these Christian women to show the constricting life Mumbi is running away from.

Mumbi chooses to leave her home, where 'home' for a married woman in the Gikuyu customary context refers to an institution she sets up once she is married. As a mature woman, Mumbi is expected to leave her parents' house and set up her own home. So, Mumbi's divorce from Mwangi means she is no longer attached to a domestic space that she can call her home. Her father's home, where she returns after leaving Mwangi, is not viewed as her own. These ideas about home are loaded with gender-related definitions of 'home', demonstrating how the theory of the meaning of home is a complex multi-dimensional construct. What is culturally understood to be Mumbi's home was characterised by violence and pain. Her husband felt he had the right to treat her any way he wanted, since he provided for her and had paid the stipulated bride price. Only when she leaves this home does she find the freedom that she so desires. When Mwangi returns to persuade her to go back, he tells his father in law, "I want to take her home," further cementing the idea that home for women should be through attachment to a man. Though she faces constant ridicule from

other members of the community, Mumbi chooses to define herself outside of this patriarchal structure and thus rejects hegemonic ideas of marriage.

Mumbi inscribes herself in a space set apart for men. One wonders how this space became a space for men when anthropological records show that men and women brewed beer jointly and drank at feasts together in the pre-colonial days (Kenyatta 55,152-153). Perhaps it stems from patriarchal ideologies that define spaces where women can be accommodated; these beliefs mark the bar as a place out of bounds for women, except those who work there. The discrepancy between Kenyatta's description of the inclusive relationship of men and women around alcohol brewing and beer drinking and the exclusive bar space shown in the film might reflect how people create their own new traditions in this case, excluding women from certain spaces. This resonates with Ranger's idea of "invented traditions":

The invented traditions imported from Europe not only provided whites with models of command but also offered many Africans models of "modern" behaviour. The invented traditions of African societies – whether invented by the Europeans or by Africans themselves in response – distorted the past but became in themselves realities through which a good deal of colonial encounter was expressed. (212)

The Happy Bar is a classic example of Ranger's idea of invented traditions which continue in present-day Kenya. Muthaiga Country Club, one of the oldest private members' clubs in Kenya, founded in the colonial times, still has one bar exclusively for men and none strictly for women (Manson; Harman). For a long time, women were also not allowed to join such clubs in their own right. Only in the past two decades was this membership rule revised. One can see in this bar space a case where the men adopt invented traditions from Europe, which then distort the community's past and become accepted as the norm. Thus, the men create boundaries and police them through female interdiction. Mumbi's father is disappointed that his daughter would choose to work in a bar and is concerned about what people will say. Her husband is equally angered at this turn of events and Bulenga suggests that when he marries her, she will not have to work in the bar, implying that he will rescue her from her pitiful state. Yet, Mumbi thrives in the bar and relates to Bulenga and the other men on her own terms. She, therefore, counters Bulenga's desire to own or control her when she says that she will work wherever she wants.

Mumbi's choice of working in a bar earns her the label, 'prostitute'. When Mumbi's husband angrily goes to look for her in the bar, he asks Bulenga and Mahinda: "Where is that prostitute?" The Christian women also refer to her as such. Both films attempt to venture into this murky subject of prostitution. Highlighting this subject that is usually treated as immoral is a bold step on the part of the filmmakers, given the time the films were produced. In the early 90s, Kenyan society was still very conservative. Although prostitution has been part of the society, there is a sense of shame around it and thus, it has a kind of taboo status. That notwithstanding, prostitution featured in the Kenyan popular fiction of the 70s and 80s, such as Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* (1976) and Charles Mangua's *Son of Woman* (1971) and *Son of Woman in Mombasa* (1986). David Yenjela's reading of these novels finds that prostitution characterised the life of urban outcasts, for whom this was a means of survival (187). Prostitution remains illegal in Kenya and in the past was not overtly spoken about due to prevailing moral codes and tradition. Prostitution is, therefore, part of the social imaginaries that the films engage with. Kinyanjui alludes to the societal attitudes towards prostitution through Mumbi. Mumbi is not shown to be a prostitute, but the Christian women's assumption that she could be one has her treated with contempt by these women. Women like Mumbi, a purported prostitute, cannot be admitted into the Christian union which was her initial hope of finding meaningful employment. To these women, Mumbi's walking away from her husband's authority meant she was free to mingle with men freely. Her choice to work in the bar further aggravates the situation. Prostitutes were and are still viewed as deviants in the society.



Image 8. Monica introduces Saikati to Alex and Hamish (*Saikati*)

Yet, as Mungai shows us, it is difficult to understand and define prostitution because, on the one hand, her portrayal of Saikati's preference to pursue education over this 'employment' demonstrates that women do have a choice in the matter. On the other hand, Monica is depicted as a victim of the patriarchal structures that benefit from prostitution. Monica claims that she has no other way to fend for herself and her child. In Monica, we see the difficulty of pinning down why she engages in prostitution. Timothy Gilfoyle underscores the difficulties researchers on prostitution face while trying to understand the prostitute. He argues that "the prostitute remains an elusive historical character [and] one searches in vain for an exemplifying individual or narrative that personifies the complexity of the prostitute's world (138). The audience sees Mungai's difficulty; while wanting to highlight the fact that women have the opportunity to make prudent choices, she shows that one chooses prostitution as a means of survival. Sheila Petty reads the different choices Saikati and Monica make as the means through which Mungai "acknowledges the economic imperatives that lead women to consider such a way of life as a strategy for survival while questioning the price paid in personal degradation for such security" (85).

In recent years, public debates call for prostitution to be legalised so that prostitutes would be able to exercise their rights to freedom and work in a safe environment (Momanyi; Nyagah). In an interview with Cham, Mungai explains why she includes the delicate subject in her film:

Many people don't really want to talk about it, but it is a reality for many women, and we cannot shy away from looking at it. It exists, and it affects many women. People look at these women and simply dismiss them as prostitutes without even bothering to ask how and why they became prostitutes. Nobody cares about the problems they have, and some of them are really very nice girls from good backgrounds. So, I wanted to bring this aspect out, and not just show women in prostitution or how prostitution is no good, but, more importantly, probe the factors that push women into prostitution. (Cham and Mungai 100)

Mungai uses Monica to allow the re-imagination and re-examination of the conditions and views held by the society about prostitutes. Monica explains her plight to Saikati, blaming her choice on unemployment and failed promises by men:

I'm not to blame if men make themselves indispensable, and then they disappear. Take for example, Melissa's father. He was nice. We had all the fun. He promised me heaven. I was still in college. And when he realised I was pregnant, he disappeared. I tried to look for a job, but no one could offer me one unless I gave them my pay. Then one day I met this man who was kind, sympathetic and we decided to have a good time. And then in the morning, I found a five hundred Kenya shilling note. I couldn't decide whether I should take it or not. And then I remembered Melissa and so I took it. That is how I started a relationship with Hamish. (*Saikati*)

As much as Mungai portrays Monica as a victim driven into prostitution by the harsh economic realities, she does not approve of prostitution. Instead, she insinuates that women have other options through Saikati's choice to return to the Mara rather than remain with Alex. In most studies of the prostitute in African literature, the prostitute is projected as an agent for moral decay in the society. The films, however, invite us to consider her plight especially in the face of harsh moral judgement. Mungai wants to demonstrate that prostitution is enabled by a type of patriarchy which reduces Monica to a sexual object. Melissa's father disappears the moment he realises Monica is expectant; he no longer has interest in her. Through this depiction, Mungai wants us to reject social institutions that make prostitution the only viable option for young, unemployed women.

In the preceding section, *Battle* and *Saikati* envision a more liberating future for women by highlighting the past, drawing from it where it is productive and creating an alternative universe to counter the oppressive one. The filmmakers offer alternative futures through the choices the

characters make, some of which were outrightly defiant in the context of the societal norms of the early 90s. As mentioned earlier, Nichols notes that “stories allow entry into a world similar to the existing world but with freedom from the implications and consequences that occur in real life. This freedom to explore implications and consequences in an imaginative way spells out the ideological and utopian qualities of storytelling” (136–37). Thus, subjects such as prostitution and divorce which were initially frowned upon are discussed. Saikati and Mumbi are allegorical figures who demonstrate the challenges women face in the space between modernity and tradition.

Conclusion



Image 9. Mumbi warns the men against supporting the action against the tree (*Battle*)

This image of Mumbi in the bar authoritatively asking the men not to support the tree cutting project portrays a marked change in her personal growth. Compared to the image that opened this chapter in which she is still trying to fit in Githunguri, unsure of what her life in this setting would be, here we see her as one who has carved out a place for herself. In this image she draws the

attention of the men by her self-assured composure as she makes the announcement; the seated men raise their heads to look at her, her standing position in contrast to theirs. This position, coupled with her serious tone of voice, gives the impression that she commands the most influence in this scene. Mumbi's break from the conventions of Githunguri society contributes to her being a happier, more socially powerful woman.

This chapter has focused on questions of the 'return to the source' for women. The films are invested in highlighting the difficulty for contemporary women caught in between tradition and modernity. I have found that *Kinyanjui* focuses on reclaiming the positive aspects of the past and revising negative images of the past, while *Mungai* highlights negative aspects of culture that impede the advancement of women. *Battle* readily lends itself to an allegorical reading; it uses the mugumo tree and orality to reveal the inner meaning of the narrative and subtly points a discerning Kenyan audience to the allegorical. I read *Githunguri* as a microcosm of the nation. *Battle* decries the loss of vision seen in Kenya's women's movements that renders them ineffective and the negative work ethic of public officers. *Saikati*'s allegory is found in the way her life story gives shape to the public story of the plight of the disempowered girl child in Kenya. Both *Saikati* and *Mumbi* are allegories of the condition of oppressed women in Kenya and envision alternate womanhood. The filmmakers project the characters in ways that signal the possibility of transcending cultural controls that curtail personal freedom in order to survive in a changing postcolonial Kenya.

Reading these films through the 'return to the source' model brings to light the need for constant evaluation and redefinition of African cinema theories. What emerges is that the 'return to the source' genre does not consider the challenges women who choose to 'return' face. I should point out here, that the films Diawara uses to illustrate this genre are all directed by men. Though many African male directors have offered positive representations of women, the absence of female directed films in his study demonstrates the consequences of this exclusion. I am aware that at the time of Diawara's publication there were very few films by women compared to their male counterparts, but my point is that this absence had implications for his conceptualisation because

the experiences of female postcolonial subjects as screened through women's lenses were missing. The emergence of filmmakers like Anne Mungai and Wanjiru Kinyanjui, thus, affords us the opportunity to contribute to these theories. Mungai and Kinyanjui seem to have established a strong foundation for women's filmmaking in Kenya as evidenced by diverse thematic and stylistic approaches in the later productions, which I discuss in the following chapters.

Chapter Three

Private Lives as Public Destinies

Establishing Shot



Image 10. Doubleness – Nyawawa's feet (*Soul Boy*)

In search of the restoration of his father's soul, Abila musters the courage to face the much dreaded Nyawawa. Eerie sounds and low-key lighting create a sense of apprehension. As he approaches her in the dark room, a long shot and spotlight on Nyawawa enable Abila and the audience to have a full view of her. Briefly, the camera presents a close-up of her feet revealing a hoofed foot, thus, foregrounding the fantastic. As Abila moves towards her, she asks him to stop, warning him that in doing so he would suffer (perhaps the same fate the other men have met). Frightened he asks, "Are you Akinyi?" to which Nyawawa responds, "I am many things." What follows is an argument between the two about the possibility of the young Abila saving his father's soul. Finally, Nyawawa relents and gives

the conditions upon which Abila's father's soul would be saved. Quick cross cuts that keep shifting between the position of Nyawawa and Abila convey a sense of nervous energy and unpredictability as Nyawawa lists the seven tasks that Abila must accomplish to save his father's soul. This approach to editing also creates a feeling of confusion in the viewer, which matches the psychological state of Abila. Perplexed, Abila tells Nyawawa that he does not understand the meaning of the things she says to him.

This still (Image 10) is taken from the scene described above, a scene imbued with ambiguities. By means of Nyawawa's representation and the eerie atmospheric visuals, the filmmaker manages to let the fantastical encroach upon realism. From the outset, Nyawawa refuses to be identified, will not reveal who she is and claims to be many things. Her speech is marked by riddles which Abila and the audience need to resolve. The revelation of her hoof is striking for the way it reinforces the ambivalent. The camera shifts from Abila's terrified face to a seated Nyawawa's face and then moves to her lower body revealing her feet. It lingers on the close-up of her feet, long enough for the audience to see the hoofed foot which she moves slightly and a bone cracking sound is heard. This image of two different limbs aptly conveys the two modes of existence pointing, I would argue, to two levels of meaning.

Soul Boy's Nyawawa is drawn from the nyawawa myth¹⁵ of Western Kenya. The myth commonly exists in oral form and has many variants. The most common version is that the nyawawa are inhabitants of Lake Victoria; evil spirits imprisoned in the dark waters. Occasionally, when too much water evaporates in the heat, they escape on warm clouds of air drifting away from the lake and make their way through the surrounding foothills. The spirits are said to be harmful if allowed entry into a home. Their presence is identified by howling sounds that cannot be attributed to any living being. To drive the spirits away, the locals bang pots and pans. The version adopted by the film's script is the one that had been picked up by the residents of Kibera, to explain the bodies of dead men found in the Nairobi Dam which is close to the slum.

¹⁵ *Soul Boy's* Nyawawa is a character with mostly human features except for her hoofed feet. The nyawawa, on the other hand, refers to the collective spirits that roam around Lake Victoria. I use 'Nyawawa' with capital N to refer to the character in the film and 'the nyawawa' to refer to the spirits.

The scene that opens this chapter recalls Fletcher's notion of "a peculiar doubleness of intention" that characterises allegorical narratives (7). In the film, this "doubleness" finds expression in the curious figure of Nyawawa, an almost human character who nevertheless invokes another level of reality. The inclusion of Nyawawa opens a space for a reading of the film which goes beyond the realist narrative. The idea of being "many things" and the reference to "another world" echoes Fletcher's concept of "doubleness," which is another way to conceptualise allegory. Fletcher argues that while most texts make good sense on the literal level, this level at times suggests a need for further reading. A keen reader need only be alert to the signposts that signal the allegorical. Replete with allegorical indices, *Soul Boy* begs to be examined beyond its social realist level. Examined from the basic nature of allegory, the film "says one thing," but also, I would argue, "means another" (Fletcher 2).

Introduction

Taking the demonstrably allegorical *Soul Boy* as the key text, this chapter examines how in the hands of the filmmakers, personal stories are connected to larger social processes. The analysis will investigate how the films under consideration are located within domestic spaces, removed from the public and the national and yet function as allegories of the nation. The other films, Judy Kibinge's *Killer Necklace* and *Project Daddy* and Jinna Mutune's *Leo*, tend toward the social realist mode and are not self-evidently allegorical. Nonetheless, as I intend to demonstrate, they may likewise function as national allegories as they have more to say about their broader cultural and political context. Despite being focused on the individual lives of the characters, the films dismantle the dichotomous relationship between the private and the public. A reading of the characters, things, and settings from an allegorical perspective reveal that they refer to abstract concerns about the nation. Consequently, their engagement with national concerns fits neatly in Jameson's category of "national allegories" in which "the story of the private individual destiny" (69) can be read as an allegory for broader social and political concerns in Kenya.

I draw the title of this chapter from Xavier's observation (mentioned in my introduction) that "[r]ecognizing an allegorical dimension of a text requires the ability to perceive homologies, and

national allegories require the understanding of private lives as representative of public destinies”(335). Similarly, Andrade, whose focus is on women’s writing, argues that “reading allegorically allows one to elucidate new meanings in the domestic sphere of life and in intimate relations between people [...] the domestic [...] offers as sharp an analytic perspective on collectivity and national action as does the arena of political action” (1). She suggests that the public-private divide that has shaped our understanding of women’s writing makes us blind to the political nature of their works, and that we that we need to begin reading women’s texts for “the complex, hesitant and often ambivalent mix of political and cultural expression” (Andrade 10). In other words, the domestic and national are inextricable. Hence, reading a text allegorically allows us to see how the characters and setting represent the condition and destiny of the nation as imagined by the filmmakers. The purpose of my investigation in this chapter is to consider how the structure of the films “lend [themselves] to a secondary reading” (Fletcher 7). By so doing, I will be uncovering how an allegorical reading of these films unravels the political logic beneath the outer narrative layer of the film. Jameson in “Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture” has referred to this political logic as the basic material a filmmaker has to work with (846). In his analysis of *Dog Day Afternoon* as a political film, he observes that while the filmmaker may not intentionally include political content in his film, his day to day experiences inform the choice of content for the film. Therefore, while I am interested in the intentional political allegory at work in some of these films, I will also show how an allegorical reading may surface non-intentional political implications.

This chapter is divided into four sections based on the different allegorical tropes that manifest in the films. The first section explores the nation as family metaphor. McClintock has argued that “[n]ations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space” (63). She considers the family as a metaphor for the nation and explains that the family trope “offers a natural figure for sanctioning social *hierarchy* within a putative organic unity of *interests*” (63). *Soul Boy* illustrates the employment of this metaphor. It is the story of a young Abila and his family. The film is set in the Kibera slum in Nairobi where Abila and his family live. They are caught in a precarious state when Abila finds his father looking sick and desperate. The family risks losing their father who is charged with the responsibility of providing, protecting and caring

for his wife and child. Ironically, the film portrays the father as an irresponsible man who is given to alcoholism, and on one of his drinking sprees he ends up with Nyawawa and loses his soul. The film revolves around Abila's journey to save his father's soul. This fictional story of Abila's family attempts to imagine Kenya and its underprivileged and how their impoverished state is linked to poor leadership. Thus, I read Abila's father as a representation of the leaders of the nation and Abila and his mother as victims of poor governance.

I propose that because this metaphor is commonly taken up by politicians, local audiences can easily identify *Soul Boy's* allegorical underpinnings. The conceptualisation of the postcolonial as gendered has resulted in titles such as "father of the nation" (Mbembe 17). Giving the example of Cameroon's President Ahmadou Ahidjo who led the nation from 1960-1982, Mbembe argues that these leaders developed personality cults around them as means of exercising state power. This metaphor has also been perpetuated through public reference¹⁶ to the Kenyan president as the father of the nation. The father of the nation trope flourished as musicians and national choirs sang praises to the father of the nation.¹⁷ Thus, the media in Kenya reinforced the idea of a father of the nation and privileged a narrative of national unity centred on the family unit. Former Presidents Kenyatta and Moi were addressed as fathers of the nation, while the first ladies of Kenya are usually referred to as mothers of the nation. The narrative of the father of the nation heightened in the 90s with songs that refer to Kenya as mother and father and were played on airwaves, especially during the period around national celebrations. These songs are in the form of loyalty pledges. One of the earliest productions was the popular *Kenya mama yangu, baba yangu* (Kenya, my mother, my father) song by Muungano National Choir. The theme of the nation as mother/father continues to be taken up by later musicians.¹⁸ These performances are symptomatic of the embeddedness of

16 The reference to the president as father of the nation is mostly made by his political associates and other government officials during public gatherings. Thus, cementing the notion of state paternity.

17 Baba Moi song praises the former president, the singers say the trust, support and love the father of the nation. by Les Mangelepa. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocQ-5wXu77Eit>.

Tawala Kenya Tawala Kenya by Thomas Wasonga. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBENblitZ6Y>. This song praises retired president Moi's leadership and urge him to steer the nation forward. He is referred to as Father in both.

18 Kenya nchi yangu by Kakai Kilonzi https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6gqz4_nV5E&t=85s.

Like the earlier Muungano choir song the chorus repeatedly makes mention of Kenya as mother and father. The other verses range from a prayer for the nation to a warning to would-be traitors of the nation.

the idea of the nation as family in the minds of citizens. However, ‘the nation as family’ ideology has been abused by national leaders who use it to exercise their power for personal interests.

The metaphor of the nation as family can be said to impose upon citizens certain claims and constraints derived from the family organisation. Family members are, for example, expected to live peaceably with each other. Thus, national leaders draw on it to foster the idea that the nation is “one family.” This “national family” should, therefore, remain united for the sake of a “peaceful family.” Unity and peace building mean not disturbing the status quo and this creates an enabling environment for misgovernance because questioning their misconduct will be construed to be disturbing an otherwise “peaceful” environment. Additionally, the shared borders of home/nation, for example, are often assumed rather than demonstrable. Whereas there is one boundary as a border which demarcates a nation/home from its neighbours, when it comes to socio-cultural and economic borders within a nation, for example, these are disparate and thus create more borders than units. Therefore, if put under closer scrutiny, the trope cannot easily be applied. The trope of the nation as a family is more ideological than feasibly practical. Drawing on an already popular mode of thought – nation as family – I argue that the films discussed here revisit the domestic space to foreground important insights on the Kenyan socio-political sphere. Despite its problematic nature the ‘nation as family’ metaphor becomes a useful tool for allegorical analysis because it is drawn from a specific national context (in which the national leader is viewed as the father of nation). Yet, in some ways, the films trouble the idea of a one-nation family through their depictions of the great divide between the rich and the poor and their engagement with the ethnic tensions in the country.

After demonstrating how the public and private lives interpenetrate, in the second section I will examine how the films envision an alternative nation. Here I analyse how *Soul Boy* draws on the magical realist mode. By using the nyawawa myth and the reference to a ‘lost soul’, the film suggests another mode of existence. Here Nyawawa offers, I propose, a possible model of generational succession and highlights the attributes of good leadership. The supernatural is invoked in the film to establish the grave condition in which the subjects of the nation find themselves. I will approach the notion of ‘the soul’ from an African philosophical point in which

the soul of the nation is intertwined with that of its leaders (I will take this up in the first section). Thus, an allegorical reading of the film suggests that the poor state of the nation, represented by a lost soul, can only be salvaged by unparalleled effort. Because dealing with the supernatural requires special understanding, the path to this understanding can be equated to a great deal of commitment and that would have to go into changing what seems to be a hopeless situation. There being no other way around the crisis, Nyawawa becomes the only way to address the troubles of the nation; she is employed to demonstrate the exigency of the matter. Nyawawa points to the failings and weaknesses of the leaders of the nation as the cause of the poor state of affairs in the nation. On Abila's insistence, Nyawawa gives the terms upon which his father and by extension the soul of the nation can be restored. This calls to mind myths' function of creating alternate worlds or possible futures. Laurence Coupe argues that "myth carries with it a promise of another mode of existence entirely, to be realised beyond the present time and place" (8). The tasks Nyawawa gives Abila are indicative of how things should work in an alternate world. Most of these tasks are focused on the fight for justice and equality for all people.

The third section engages with the more overtly realist details of the films. *Killer Necklace*, *Leo* and *Soul Boy* are all invested in the thematisation of life in the slums. Gabriel has argued that class antagonism is a recurrent theme in Third Cinema. He writes that it is "a cinema that is committed to a direct and aggressive opposition to oppression. Its purpose will be validated only if it integrates its objectives with the aspirations, values, struggles and social needs of the oppressed classes" (15). One of the ways the films under consideration do this is by foregrounding the slum: their protagonists all live in the slum and a considerable focus is given to demonstrating their daily struggles. Beyond looking at the difficulties of navigating life in the slum, I argue that the attention given to the slum in these films is a political act. By prominently positioning the slums in the films, the filmmakers provide an exposition of the individual struggles of the oppressed classes. This allows the audience to re-examine and question what has been normalised. The slum has become an accepted part of the city's landscape. This normalisation then frees the government from improving the living conditions of slum dwellers. Jameson refers to this kind of expository narrative process as one in which "narrative is employed as a powerful instrument for the experimental exploration of reality and illusion, an exploration which, however, unlike some older

realisms, presupposes a certain prior ‘personal knowledge’” (70). In these terms, prior knowledge or experience of something enables the viewer to appreciate its depth better when they encounter it in a text. In line with Jameson’s idea, visually foregrounding the slums as the films do, recalls questions about class divisions and the non-commitment of government to programmes such as the slum housing upgrade. These issues constitute the prior knowledge a Kenyan audience would have about the slums. Allegory here then becomes a mode through which “the text speaks to its context” (Szeman 808). Jeremy Tambling has argued that due to the multiple meanings that can be drawn when reading a city, “[a]llegory becomes appropriate where the question of how to read, and the necessity of doing so, becomes prominent” (101). Reading the slum allegorically will entail looking at it as more than a setting by considering the politics around space and place that are awakened by such an examination.

The last section examines allegorical emblems. Commonly, emblems are viewed as a combination of word and picture or as objects used to represent particular people, groups or ideas. Peter Daly extends these definitions by highlighting the allegorical function of emblems. He argues that “an emblem may be regarded as a *miniature form of allegory* in the basic sense that the emblem contains a *res picta* that means more than it represents; it is a *res significans* and it receives an interpretation and or application in the emblem itself” (389, emphasis in original). *Res picta* alludes to what the emblem portrays and *res significans* to its meaning and implication. Unlike in written texts, in film, the visual image is presented without the textual component. In some cases, there may be commentary in place of the textual component, while in others there may be no commentary on the emblems. I employ Daly’s suggestion of looking at emblematic images as forms of allegory to investigate how the necklaces in *Killer Necklace* serve as allegorical emblems. Examining them as “riddles – that require to be interpreted” (Tambling 63), I make connections between the necklaces and wider social events.

The “Family as Nation” Metaphor

The protagonists of *Soul Boy*, *Leo*, *Project Daddy* and *Killer Necklace* are either adolescents or young adults. Other key characters in the films also fall in the youth category. This section examines how *Soul Boy* references the “family as nation” metaphor through a focus on generational succession. As suggested in the preceding section, representing the nation as a family is a familiar metaphor, as is the notion of the president as a kind of father to the nation. In Kenya, the latter certainly characterises the socio-political sphere. Its counterpart, the mother Africa trope, has been explored extensively in African literature to various ends. For example, Nuruddin Farah in *From a Crooked Rib*, Mongo Beti in *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness* and Wole Soyinka in *Season of Anomy* configure the nation as female subjects. Similarly, the father of the nation trope has also been used in texts that articulate the male head of the family as a metaphor for the predominantly male leaders of the nation. The family lineage continues as the older members of the family pass on the mantle to the younger generation, who then pass it on to the next generation, and so forth. Drawing on the “family as nation” metaphor, this section concerns itself with the representation of the youth who feature predominately in Kenyan fictional films directed by women. To do this, I will consider what the role of the youth in the nation family might be while bringing to light mis-governance of the nation in the hands of the fathers of the nation.

There are various definitions of youth. For example, the 2010 Kenya Constitution defines youth as being in the 18-35 age bracket. The United Nations, on the other hand, defines youth as persons aged 15-24. This study takes up the definition of youth to mean persons in the 15-30 age bracket; this is the definition held by the National Youth Policy (2006) of Kenya. The range of characters who represent the youth in the films might be seen to fall in this age bracket. More importantly, they dramatise some of the issues identified in this policy as deterrents to the well-being of youth in Kenya. According to the policy, some of these are: unemployment, health-related issues such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, crime and deviant behaviour (Government 3). In popular discourses, youth as a social category takes on symbolic meanings such as “hope of the nation” or “leaders of tomorrow.” These symbols stem from their youthfulness which is often characterised by vigour and potential to carry on as the older generation’s physical strength

diminishes. I will examine how the filmmakers portray youth as the hope of the nation and how that depiction enables an interrogation of Kenya's political regime, its actions and policies. The films put at the centre of their texts characters associated with hope for a better nation and demonstrate through these characters what such hope may be. In some cases, the films demonstrate how the social, economic and political structures make it impossible for the youth to thrive.

I will begin by examining *Soul Boy's* adoption of a "coming of age" oral narrative as an allegorical tool. As Gabriel has indicated, "[t]he stories of African tradition are built of layers upon layers, of figures, of metaphors and analogies, of sly references to political and social events and institutions" (x). *Soul Boy*, which was produced for international distribution, works on two levels. For an international audience, *Soul Boy* may offer the exciting adventure its tagline promises: "A lost Father. A dedicated Son. A magical journey" (*Soul Boy*). This audience would also enjoy the perspectives it provides on a particular world. For most of these viewers, the magical journey may, however, lack the allegorical resonances to be discussed in this chapter. On a second level, for a keen national audience, it acquires allegorical significance by borrowing the style of a local oral narrative, incorporating a known mythical figure and constantly referring to another world. These stylistic devices invite the viewers to unveil the possible underlying meanings of the films. Similarly, Xavier observes that "[a] variety of films from different countries provide interesting examples of the use of myth or traditional storylines to give shape to an experience lived in the present or even the future" (353). By drawing on the "coming of age model", *Soul Boy* facilitates its allegorical import and thus, becomes a commentary on the past and present Kenyan leadership situation. It also imagines a hopeful future for the nation by presenting the model as a potential solution. The filmmaker adopts this strategy in the narrative to situate the film within an African context and to offer the Kenyan audience a model of a process of generational succession familiar to them.

Mshai Mwangola eloquently presents an analysis of Kenyan traditional societies in which the older generations prepared the youth for leadership and handed over leadership to them as they took on eldership (139). Her study traces the evolution of a youth discourse that demands a reconfiguring

of roles and responsibilities in the Kenyan political sphere. Mwangola contends that in the traditional societies, the youth had to prove themselves as being ready to take up leadership positions (139). She goes on to delineate the plot of oral narratives that were directed to youth as follows:

An analysis of many oral narratives specifically directed to the youth revolves around a test where the hero, whether female or male, is faced with a choice of some kind. The protagonists in such cases find themselves in a situation where the security of the society or their family is threatened by some outside force, for example, some natural disaster or enemy, who could be supernatural or human [...] In many cases, these heroines/heroes have to challenge some kind of illegitimate authority, such as those imposed by brute strength, in the successful pursuit of their objectives. (139)

Abila's story exhibits many of the characteristics of the "coming of age" tale explicated by Mwangola. As the hero of the film, he is faced with the difficult choice of either helplessly watching his father lose his soul or face Nyawawa whose wrath is well known in Kibera. Nyawawa is said to take the souls of the men who are drawn to her; she strangles and then drags them into the dam. Abila's family is threatened by Nyawawa having taken his father's soul. If Abila's father's fate ends up being like that of the other men whose dead bodies were found in the dam, his family is at risk of losing their home and the father's business, which is in rent arrears. Early in the film, Abila struggles to understand his father's irrational answers:

Abila: Are you ill?

Father: I am not here, this isn't me.

Abila: What happened?

Father: They took my soul.

The use of the child¹⁹ protagonist enables us to question things we would otherwise take for granted. His naïve questions about his father's lost soul serve to reinforce the two worlds of the film, hinting at the need for an allegorical interpretation. When his father says, "they have taken me," he begins to ask questions that point us to look beyond the ordinary. Who has taken the

¹⁹ Though I categorise Abila as a youth, he exhibits some childlike characteristics because he is in the space between childhood and adulthood. This can be seen in his limited understanding of some of the situations around him.

father? Why? And if he has been taken, why do we see him? Through Abila's eyes, we see the anguish of a child about to lose his father; his terror is juxtaposed to his mother's apathy. His panic drives him to urgently take on the task of saving his father's soul.



Image 11. A worried Abila tries to make sense of his father's condition (*Soul Boy*)



Image 12. Abila's delirious father (*Soul Boy*)

The words, "I am not here, this isn't me," signify his existence in another world which once again reiterates the film's allegorical intent. Abila's father is in a delirious state as he confesses that Nyawawa has taken him. The enfeebled father recalls Sembene Ousmane's film, *Xala* (1976). Sembene portrays the postcolonial elite through the trope of impotence. In *Xala* El Hadji's "Xala" (impotence) implies political impotence and is used to ridicule the destructive power of the African elite. Though the intent is not satirical in this case, Essuman's depiction of Abila's father draws

from images within the African film repertoire. The father's narrative becomes an allegorical narrative of the loss of power of the political leaders. In his weak state, he cannot fulfil his duties as a parent or husband. He is shown in the film as unable to rise and open his shop. I read this as indicative of the disempowerment of fathers of the nation, caused by their own self-destructive tendencies. This, therefore, means the nation family is faced with a leadership crisis as their leader can no longer take up his position.

For Abila to restore his father's soul, Nyawawa gives him the challenge to accomplish seven tasks (I return to these tasks in the next section). He sets off on a journey to complete the tasks, a journey that develops the "coming of age" theme while, at the same time, serving as a structuring device for the film. Abila successfully accomplishes the tasks, and when he returns home, finds his father doing his usual business as if nothing had transpired the previous day. At an allegorical level, the successful completion of the tasks might figuratively suggest the potential role of the youth in taking up leadership of the nation. However, there is a slight twist in the narrative here; Abila does not take up the leadership of his family. He, instead, restores his father's 'soul'. This signifies that while the film envisions a better future, the current state of the nation still requires attention. By doing so, the filmmaker separates the allegorical world from the real world. This is what makes the "coming of age" tale a model for good governance, while at the same time decrying gerontocracy and mis-governance.

At the time of *Soul Boy's* release, Kenya's third president Mwai Kibaki was serving his second term after a flawed general election. Before this, Kibaki had held ministerial positions in both Kenyatta and Moi's governments. Writing about this period in Kenya's political history, Daniel Forti and Grace Maina observe that there have been intergenerational tensions between the youth and elders. Kenya's youth was a marginalised constituency within the political arena. They write, "[t]he relationship between these generations has often been marked by one generation using the next to further their stay in politics – as politically eligible youth widely touted as "Young Turks" were rendered powerless and kept in the service of their respective elders" (Maina and Forti 58).

Kenya's political history may be characterised as largely gerontocratic²⁰ with a slight shift starting in 2002. Thus, *Soul Boy* might be considered to respond to the need for ongoing discussions on political involvement of the youth.

Kenyan political leaders often employ the trite phrase: “the youth are the leaders of tomorrow” usually as a kind of political ploy to appeal to the youth public. Yet, as Mwangola and Maina have pointed out, the question has always been, “when will tomorrow come?” (Mwangola 129; Maina and Forti 77). This question refers to the concern about when the youth will be given the space to take up political positions. The scholars mentioned above observe that there seems to be a desire from the older generation to hold on to power, resulting in few positions available for the youth. At the onset Nyawawa, seems to doubt the capability of Abila to save his father's soul. She says: “it will take another man to save him.” Abila's successful accomplishment of the tasks as directed by Nyawawa demonstrates that perhaps, given a chance, the youth, with guidance and mentorship can help restore the nation to order.

Mwangola disavows the domination of political parties and other instruments of power by the elderly. She argues that this tradition was in part brought about by colonial rule in Kenya. She writes that “[t]he imposition of colonial rule in Kenya resulted in the systematic erosion of all forms of democracy. The colonial authorities operated from the assumption that all African forms of governance were primitive at best and non-existent at worst” (141). Mwangola goes on to show how the pre-colonial systems of government embraced generational politics in which “youth were prepared for the responsibilities of leadership [...]. In adulthood, it assumes the leadership of the nation [...] finally taking on in elderhood the ultimate socio-political authority overseeing the smooth running of the nation” (133). Unfortunately, due to lack of proper structures within political parties, the youth are not offered room to develop their leadership skills and the country lacks leaders who are willing to attain the ultimate level of elderhood and social authority. Thus,

²⁰ See Daniel Forti and Grace Maina “The Danger of Marginalisation: An analysis of Kenyan youth and their integration into political socio-economic life.” They detail the challenges of youth and explain gerontocracy as one of them. “For long periods of time the youth, have constituted a powerless counter-public to the hegemony of the elders who dominated the state, political parties and other instruments of power.” (58)

generational succession is impeded by leaders who attain leadership status and then hold on to it. This crisis has brought about an outcry from the youth themselves and non-governmental organisations such as The Youth Agenda Kenya.

The youth agenda is formulated around the drive of the youth to have direct involvement in national matters. There have been campaigns in Kenya beginning from the 1990s onward, aimed at empowering youth to take up political leadership positions. For example, at 39, Uhuru was the youngest presidential nominee and was seen as a representative of the youth. President Moi rallied behind Uhuru Kenyatta as his successor in the 2002 general elections. Uhuru lost to Mwai Kibaki in that election and, in a sense, the youth lost again. Apart from his age, his party of choice, Kenya African National Union (KANU), had served its time and Kenya desperately needed a change after KANU's 24-year rule under Moi. The complex and varied reasons for his loss notwithstanding, this further revealed that the electorate was not ready to support a younger candidate and the gerontocrats were not ready to share power with the youth. At 52, Kenyatta eventually became Kenya's youngest president in 2013. Mwangola observes that "[t]he period 1990-2005 has brought to the fore an aggressive youth discourse that has rejected prevailing perceptions of youth and demanded a reconfiguring of the social roles and responsibilities of this category" (130). Mwangola's observations are important because they help contextualise the film's focus on Abila and his father's soul.

The youth's desire to be involved in national matters stems from their perception that the older generation has failed them. In my reading of the film, I contend that Abila's father represents the older generation of leaders. Nyawawa says she has seen Abila's father's "darkness, failings, fears and weaknesses." Abila's father's alcoholism and poor choices lead him to Nyawawa who takes his soul. This implies that his family risks losing him. In addition, he has rent arrears for their house which also houses his small business. The 'weaknesses' of the father, read allegorically, could refer beyond the immediate situation to a reflection on poor governance of national leaders. "Fears" are portrayed through some of the tasks assigned to Abila such as "fighting a new world order," which may be indicative of some of the challenges the older generation of leaders has failed

to confront. “Darkness” may relate to a lack of moral strength that leads to poor judgement a trait which Nyawawa explains comes from one’s state of heart. This resonates with a lack of concern for the lowly as demonstrated by the poor state of the slum. In assigning Abila the task of saving his father’s soul, Essuman suggests that perhaps the youth may be the hope of the nation because of their ability to bring new vigour and fresh insights into the political and economic spheres of the nation.

Abila is the embodiment of the realisation of this hope. In the execution of some of the tasks, he develops attributes of good leadership. Abila’s father, on the other hand is depicted as overwhelmed by the loss of his soul and is, consequently unable to help himself. Nyawawa views him as cowardly: “*baba ni mwoga sana, lakini kijana wake ni shujaa*” [the father is very fearful, but his son is brave] (subtitles provided by the filmmaker). Nyawawa makes this statement when Abila insists that he is ready to take on the challenge of saving his father’s soul. As illustrated, Nyawawa remarks that Abila’s father is too cowardly to confront his failings and to redeem his own soul. The camera focuses on Abila’s almost teary eyes as he gazes at Nyawawa, who, moved by his gaze, gives in. Contrary to the earlier descriptions of Nyawawa given so far in the film, here she is shown to be sympathetic. His teary eyes register both the fear of losing his dad and the magnitude of the task ahead of him.

The filmmaker uses the metaphor of a soul to register the state of the nation and its leadership. The term “soul” takes up different meanings depending on which context it is interpreted from. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines soul as “the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life” (“Soul”). According to this definition, the soul is what makes up a person, causing him or her to act in certain ways. The soul might also refer to the nation itself. This idea of looking after the “soul of the community” is also seen in some African societies like the Yoruba of Nigeria, where the priests were entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the community’s soul (Mbiti 188). In such societies, the chief priests or priestesses were also regarded as mother or father of their communities and as such “the people regarded them as symbols of their country’s existence, prosperity and continuity” (189). Looked at from this point,

the soul of the leader and the soul of the nation are intertwined, thus demanding a high level of responsibility from a nation's leaders. One can see here the allegorical significance of the failure of Abila's father who does not guard his own soul to fulfil his responsibility for taking care of his family. The father's precarious state is a metaphor for a state characterised by poor governance and the risk of destitution for the nation family. The soul less father is representative of soul less leaders (fathers of the nation) who threaten to let the integrity of the national family disintegrate.

Abila's father's transgressions are revealed through flashbacks playing in Abila's mind. The flashbacks reveal that the father was once a responsible referee and spent time with Abila. At some point he slid into drunkenness. This is shown through quick cuts in which Abila is supporting him out of the bar. Abila's mother response to the state of the husband is inaction. This reaction is an indicator of the hopelessness she sees in her husband's weaknesses. Abila's mother sees her husband's wretchedness as the norm and is not compelled to take any action. She says, "he lost his soul a long time ago," to mean that he had made it a habit to live a reckless life. Based on his past behaviour, she has become accustomed to his hopeless inebriation and relapse to the drunken state. Her resigned stance further reveals the grim situation her family is in. This dismal situation overrides the mood of the film. Just as Abila's father through his irresponsibility nearly costs his family the loss of their home due to rent arrears, the national 'fathers' mismanage the country, evidenced by the corruption, social injustices and social segregation seen in the film. This family becomes an index—a reflection of the state of Kenya under poor governance.

This section has demonstrated how Essuman's *Soul Boy*, through the family nation metaphor, brings to the fore the impact of poor leadership on the nation. The "family as nation trope", "coming of age" tale structure, repeated references to another world and the idea of a lost soul fuse together to support the allegorical structure of the film. Accordingly, the film suggests that the youth have potential to be better leaders for the nation. The film achieves this through a stark juxtaposition of a brave son and a cowardly father. As illustrated, the older generation of leaders is depicted as unable to confront issues such as bad governance and corruption, whereas the son is portrayed as willing and courageous enough to take on the challenge to save the nation. This is

partly because of a degree of selflessness on the part of the son and the fear of a volatile future characterised by fatherlessness. The next section examines how the film suggests a different kind of leadership that might offer its citizens better governance.

Reimagining the Nation

Soul Boy's impulse is not pessimist, but employs magical realism to chart alternative perspectives of good governance. Nyawawa envisions an alternative nation where leaders govern with boldness, integrity, justice, humanity and the inclusion of women in its governance. The film demonstrates such a possibility through the tasks assigned to Abila by Nyawawa. I will begin by explaining the nyawawa myth and then offer a detailed analysis of the characterisation of Nyawawa and how magical realism works in the film. Next, I explicate the tasks assigned to Abila and finally use *Soul Boy* and *Project Daddy* to show how Kibinge and Essuman decry divisive ethnicity in the nation.

The figuration of Nyawawa as a human with an animal hoof points towards the “other speech” of allegory. The representation in the film is closely linked to the nyawawa myth that circulates in the Kenyan social imaginary. Paul Geissler and Ruth Prince record a variant which says that nyawawa are spirits from unknown clans who often come from the hills to return to the lake which is thought to be the home of all spirits (169). As the spirits pass, people can hear voices calling names of both the living and the dead; the living are not supposed to respond lest the spirits lure them to the lake or afflict them with chicken pox. Geissler and Prince have conducted anthropological research in Western Kenya, focusing on the everyday practices and their effects on the growth of children in a time of death caused by the HIV epidemic. Their research points to a community’s way of life, and the significant role played by belief in/and participation between the living and the dead and immaterial beings such as spirits.

Kibera is the largest slum in Kenya and is home to people from various communities. Some of its inhabitants are rural-urban migrants who move to the city in search of employment or a “better” life. The film’s employment of the nyawawa myth demonstrates the interplay between myth and urbanity. So, the film shows how myths move as internal borders are crossed and stories shared. Additionally, the advancement of technology such as print and online media also contributes to the development of myths. Stories of the nyawawa in the media create awareness of myths and in some ways, may lead to the belief or uptake of such a myth. The scriptwriter, Billy Kahora does not reside within the slum nor is he from the Luo community from which the myth is drawn yet, he draws creative inspiration from it (Kahora). He, thus, utilises the familiar stories from the community in which the script is set to narrate a community through their own narratives. Thus, through appropriation, *Soul Boy* draws from the Lake Victoria myth which found its way into Kibera and creates another Kibera version of the nyawawa myth.

Nyawawa is depicted to have an abode, a shanty similar to the other residents of Kibera. This imagination of the physical location of Nyawawa as residing among the people is symbolic of the connection between traditional beliefs and urbanity. The film’s characters who are shown to come from different parts of Kenya seem to believe in the existence of Nyawawa. This demonstrates how myths, which are shared through stories, foster a unifying myth among the Kibera residents. This belief in Nyawawa is depicted as a conceivable socio-cultural reality among the Kibera residents. Nyawawa is a female human being (the ordinary), but with a hooved foot (the extraordinary). Her hooved foot, coupled with her supernatural power over men, are magical realist elements. The inclusion of Nyawawa in the film shifts the audience into the magical realm, yet, the filmmaker does not ignore reality. Films that employ the magical realist mode integrate the fantastic so that the audience does not perceive them as contradictory. It is then clear that the narrative operates on two levels. As mentioned earlier, Nyawawa refers to herself as “many things” and tells Abila that she speaks of “another world.” It is significant that she makes this proclamation the first time the audience meets her; here the film announces to its audience from the very outset to relate to her as an embodiment of multiple meanings. Laurence Coupe observes that “[a]llegorical tales are those which in effect announce or are made to announce, their own

intention: to say *this* in terms of *that*” (105). Magical realism thus supports the allegorical tenor in the film by providing a pathway between two worlds – the present and the imagined.

Christopher Warnes defines magical realism as “a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence” (3). Thus, in the film, the Kibera residents, adults and youngsters alike are aware of the existence of Nyawawa and are terrified by her power. On his search for Nyawawa, Abila meets a man who had been employed by his dad as a watchman. The man confirms that Abila’s father had been with Nyawawa the previous night. Abila responds that his father had told him that Nyawawa did not exist and that the whole idea was a hoax. The narrative depicts Abila as confused about his father’s prior stand on the existence of Nyawawa and the present situation where his father confesses that Nyawawa had taken his soul. The guard laughs at Abila’s naivety and explains the reality of Nyawawa, referring to her as the longest shadow. This description of Nyawawa emphasises her mysteriousness. In the ensuing debate among Abila’s friends, Shiku (the girl-child guide²¹ and Abila’s friend) brings up another narrative about who Nyawawa is: the reincarnated Akinyi who was Shiku’s former caregiver and who had committed suicide after being jilted by her boyfriend. Given Nyawawa’s multiple identities, first as Akinyi and then as Nyawawa, Nyawawa can be said to be the shadow of Akinyi. Akinyi’s story further illustrates Nyawawa’s ‘humanity’.

Abila’s meandering search for Nyawawa puzzles him and ultimately, he realizes that she is incomprehensible. Abila’s bewilderment is illustrated in his friend’s casual reply to his enquiry on the whereabouts of Nyawawa: “Nyawawa are many; which do you want?” Nyawawa sees herself as many things; when asked by Abila if she is Akinyi, she replies, “I am many things.” These two statements by Abila’s friend and Nyawawa invite engagement with the function of the mythical creature Nyawawa. The mysterious nature of Nyawawa in the film is like that of the mythical figure of the nyawawa from Lake Victoria who, like other spirits are defined by Mbiti as “invisible,

²¹ Following the conventions of the *bildungsroman* (closely related to the “coming of age” tale) the filmmaker assigns the hero a guide to help them on their journey (Sánchez 41; Rody 52).

ubiquitous and unpredictable” (81). Nyawawa is presented to the audience as a perplexing figure. All the more since the characters in *Soul Boy* all have disparate ideas about who she is. The nyawawa from the Luo mythology are said to be spirits of the dead. They, therefore, could range from the identity of a child, adult, male or female among others. The audience is left to grapple with the question of who Nyawawa is and what the many things she claims to be are.

Nyawawa is first presented to the audience in the scene in which Abila musters the courage to face her. She wears a long blue robe, so the audience can only see her face, hands and feet. Her hoofed foot and the idea of Nyawawa as a reincarnated being are the “irreducible elements” characteristic of magical realism; those things as Faris puts it, which “we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe” (7). Tales of humans with animal features are also common in written and oral Kenyan folklore. Although Nyawawa is mostly anthropomorphic, the single therianthropic element is her hoof. Through her single animal feature, the film shifts into the mode of magical realism. Additionally, her costume (robe) is popular in magical realist narratives – her robe connotes the magical and/or spiritual. She wears a robe like magical realist characters such as wizards and witches. Christian priests and Muslim faithful also wear robes. The blue colour of her robe is significant; it is the colour of the sky and water. In this case, drawing from the Lake Victoria myth, she is linked to the lake. Her bare foot is also common among characters with supernatural power, who sometimes are said to draw magic or power from their connection to nature (through the ground).

The film’s version of the myth exhibits similarities and dissimilarities from the Luo myth, thus acquiring its unique mythical shape and form. The mythic is brought to life by the connection to the nyawawa of the lake. The film’s uptake of the myth resonates with Julia Sanders observation that “myth is continuously evoked, altered, and reworked, across cultures, and across generations” (64). As mentioned earlier, Nyawawa is said to be Akinyi who drowned herself in the dam. The drowning incident draws from the belief that the nyawawa spirits are spirits of the dead which reside in the lake. The film also mirrors the idea of spirits dragging people to the lake. Nyawawa’s victims in the film are reported to be found dead in the dam. The differences are that in the film,

the otherwise formless spirits take on a character that is partly spirit and mostly human and the possibility exists of human engagement and negotiation with Nyawawa as exhibited through Abila's encounter with her.

Nyawawa holds the key to retrieving Abila's father's soul, as she is believed to have power over men. In defence of herself against the accusation that she took the souls of men, Nyawawa places the burden of the responsibility of the loss of their souls on the men. She describes men as weak and dishonest and claims that their own folly and vices bring them to her. Her accusation implies that they receive from her punishment for their depraved souls. Nyawawa is allegorically given agency akin to that of a priestess who presides over the soul of the nation. Transformed from the victim who committed suicide, she is given a powerful voice and becomes the harbinger of justice. Through her death, she transcends the ordinary world and now gains supernatural power. Although Nyawawa can be read as a vengeful female spirit, the sensitivity with which the director portrays her transforms her victimhood into retributive womanhood, instead of portraying her as a succubus. Nyawawa can restore the lost soul of the nation by giving power to a new crop of leaders and setting the terms (the seven tasks) upon which the soul would be restored. As I will discuss further on, through her mediation, Abila redeems his father's lost soul, a process which signifies that a new nation governed by conscientiousness can only be realised through change.

This alternative world can only be made possible through a purging process. Nyawawa inflicts the punishment and prescribes the purification process. She asks Abila to look for the sun as an indicator of how and when to accomplish each task. The mention of the sun and its function in the film evokes an aura of divinity. The sun possesses an ethereal quality in most myths and pantheons. It can be interpreted as an agent of destruction and purification, connected to the idea of the purging of sin and punishment. At the same time, it has the power to give new life through light and illumination. Nyawawa explains to Abila that his father's darkness will be swallowed up by the light and his soul would then be restored. A metaphorical engagement with the idea of sunlight or sunrise suggests the beginning of a new era implying that what is required to deal with the old sinful state of Abila's father as representative of national leaders is a form of cleansing or renewal.

The residents of Kibera seem to have a deep belief in the power of Nyawawa. Perhaps this fear would make them listen to her call to confront the fears, darkness and failings exhibited by Abila's father. Wendy Faris, in another context, observes that in fiction, magical realism enables "countering public terror with private faith in the face of otherwise hopeless situations" (184). Isabel Allende has argued that

[i]t is the spiritual and emotional aspect that in literature is called magical realism; it appears with different forms of expression, in all the underdeveloped world. When we live in permanent contact with all forms of violence and misery, we have to look for explanations and find hope in the supernatural. Reality is so brutal that we need the protection of a magical or spiritual world. (qtd. in Faris 184-185).

While Allende suggests that magical realism is used to demonstrate the search for meaning, hope and protection, the film also shows how it highlights the poor state of the nation and suggests that hope would come from a change in the governance of the nation. This change is envisioned through the tasks laid out for the new crop of new leaders. The seven herculean tasks Abila has to complete are verbalised by Nyawawa as follows: "slip into someone else's skin and inhabit it in the presence of others, pay someone else's debt without stealing, help a sinner in trouble without judging them, fight against a new world order, use your wits to save someone else, discover an unknown place and know the difference and finally confront the monstrous snake you fear." The bulk of the film revolves around Abila performing these tasks within a day and the pace of the movie is intense as Abila moves from task to task. The tasks recall mythological tropes (shape-shifting and snakes), religious and moral tasks (paying someone else's debt and saving a sinner), tasks that shape ideology (fighting a new world order), the use of wit rather than force to win battles and even whimsical and child-like feats such as adventuring to find the unknown and the keenness of spirit to know the difference. In as much as some of the tasks do not readily lend themselves to an allegorical reading, they illustrate the moral, intellectual and ideological hurdles that the new crop of Kenya's leaders need to deal with for the good of the nation.

Each task assigned to Abila has a corresponding symbol of the sun that serves as an indication to Abila that he should take on a task. Equally important, it is a guidepost that points Abila to where the task should be done. For example, the symbol on his aunt's dress hints that the task is related to the place she is going to. Drawing on the properties of light and heat from the sun (discussed above), it is a fitting symbol for the restoration of Abila's father's soul and its use here is a reminder that the purpose of each task is to save the father's or the nation's soul. Abila finds these signs in the everyday motions of life in Kibera; on a TV aerial, the landlord's agent's t-shirt, his aunt's dress, the wheel of a sewing machine and as a logo on cartons. The linkage of the sun to separate tasks, I propose, is not only a sign to Abila, but also an indicator of the film's central themes to a discerning reader. The systematic placement of the signs denotes how the notion of the sun links to the real world; how we move from the fantasy world of Nyawawa to the real issues in Kibera. For example, the design of the sun on the landlord's agent's t-shirt leads him to discover the rent arrears' notice. The portrayal of the landlord and his "thug" (Abila refers to him as such), as they menacingly approach Abila's house, tells of the kind of relationship slum dwellers have with their landlords who sometimes use violent means to evict their tenants.

The first sign leads Abila to a community education project. The project's focus is on HIV awareness and seeks to educate the youth about HIV. As mentioned earlier, HIV/AIDS has been considered a threat to youth in Kenya and one of the strategies taken by both government and non-government actors has been to engage the public in education on the causes, risks and prevention of HIV. The training session in the film is carried out through an improvised performance on an elevated podium in the slum. As Abila and Shiku approach the crowd, the camera focuses on the stage where a man is arguing about whose responsibility it is to educate his children about HIV/AIDS. The facilitator calls Abila and Shiku to perform a role-play on the responsibilities of mothers and fathers. Abila, ironically, acts as a father who does not want to take responsibility for his family. In this scenario, the father is blamed for not taking an active role in raising his children. Shiku, on the other hand, represents women and argues against the patriarchal views held by men, suggesting that the burden of raising children should not be left to women only (I elaborate on Shiku's role in the film further on). By accepting to participate in the role play, Abila takes on his first challenge, "slip into someone else's skin and inhabit it in front of others." As he does this, he

takes on the allegorical role of his father, thus, the representation of the nation's failed leaders and negative masculinity. Ironically, this may be connected to the larger private story of Abila's father's irresponsibility on the one hand. On the other hand, it may signify taking on the mantle from the older generation. Yet, when he leaves the stage, he leaves the skin and what it represents (poor governance by the fathers of the nation). However, he still symbolically takes the mantle as he goes on to demonstrate better leadership. In this performance, Abila replays a male attitude of dominance over women which demonstrates the effect of socialisation on the youth. Shiku challenges his line of thinking, leaving him speechless and the crowd bursts out in laughter. After this act on a public platform, Abila accuses Shiku of making him a laughing stock. Shiku replies that the crowd was laughing because of his father's private lifestyle. The laughter of the crowd is used to expose and critique the irresponsibility of the leadership depicted by Abila's arguments as he enacts his father's position.

The second and third tasks relate to moral integrity. Drawing from a "coming of age" tale, these two tasks focus on Abila's psychological and moral growth. His third challenge requires him to "save a sinner without judging him." In an action-packed moment in the film, Abila and Shiku encounter a phone thief being chased by an angry crowd. The two assist him to hide and point his assailants to the opposite direction, thus saving the man from mob justice. Afraid of being found with the phone, the thief gives it to Abila who sees this as a solution to his family's rent arrears and plans to sell the phone. Shiku strongly dissuades him from doing so (a woman, in this case, represents the moral centre of the film). Shiku's insistence enables him to pass the integrity test linked to his second task – "pay your debts without stealing from another." As an embodiment of future leadership, he is expected to be a man of integrity and to use wisdom in matters of justice.

The fourth task is for Abila to fight a new world order. To achieve this task, Abila secretly follows his aunt to Karen where she earns wages as a domestic worker in a white family's home. Later in the day, his aunt asks him to help her set the table. Abila figures out how to do it without ever having done it before. The new world order appears to be a fight against the still continuous process of gendered labour division and class divisions. Abila thus helps his aunt, a woman close to him,

to fulfil her paid domestic roles and ideologically challenges the gendered division of labour. In the new world order, there are racial, class and gender divides which Abila confronts when he fits into that order without prior knowledge of how things work there. Abila also takes on the task of saving someone using his wits. When Emmy chokes on her food and her parents are at a loss on what to do, Abila steps in and saves her life. This deed earns him the money to pay his father's rent without stealing from someone, as instructed by Nyawawa. As shown in my analysis above, *Soul Boy's* use of magical realism makes it the most deliberately allegorical of the films. The troubling racial and class divides illustrated above is not explored by the filmmaker in this instance, but I return to racial and class divides further on in my discussion of the portrayal of the slum in *Soul Boy*.

On an allegorical level, the film suggests that to change the soul of the nation is a herculean feat in itself. The whimsical task assigned to Abila to find an unknown place could be read as either the change he has to make within himself or the space where he is led and helped by women. Women fulfil the function of both guide and moral centre in the form of Shiku, as well as the distributors of justice in the guise of Nyawawa. Reimagining the nation, as allegorically suggested by the filmmaker, would require the youth to listen, learn and be guided by others. Hence, the important role of women in national politics is demonstrated in the film by Nyawawa and Shiku.

While in some respects Nyawawa may fit the description of a femme fatale, what is significant about her is that her characterisation exceeds and resists categorisation. The Oxford dictionary defines a femme fatale as “an attractive and seductive woman, especially one who ultimately causes distress to a man who becomes involved with her” (“Femme Fatale”). Elisabeth Bronfen dissuades us from “reading the femme fatale as a stereotype of feminine evil, as a symptom of male anxiety, or as a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference” (114). Bronfen argues that this kind of reading treats the character as an illusory emanation of others, rather than reading her as the “subject of her narrative.” I will, therefore, follow Bronfen and read the stand Nyawawa takes when she refuses to take the blame for the lost souls of the men drawn to her as something we should take seriously. This way of reading then gives her feminine agency; she becomes a

modern heroine who restores the soul of Abila's father, read here as intertwined with the soul of the nation.

Though the film does not dramatise her femme fatale role, one can tell from the description given by Abila's friends and Abila's former guard that she is cruel and ruthless to the men who desire her. The guard tells Abila that his father was dragged close to the river by Nyawawa and he remains in a state of stupefaction which Abila refers to as ghostly. This reference to a ghost is the film's self-conscious way of emphasising the connection between the Luo myth which refers to the spirits of the dead and the film's appropriated myth of Nyawawa. Abila's father confesses that he does not exist and is not there, yet, we can see him. That notwithstanding, Nyawawa's incarnation is ambivalent because as vicious as she is described to be by the other characters, she is also non-violent and supportive of Abila's mission.

Nyawawa as a femme fatale, according to the film, arises from Akinyi's pain from a broken relationship. Akinyi, whose suicidal death denies her a narrative voice, regains it in her reincarnation as Nyawawa. The reason surrounding her death is linked to patriarchal values that encourage men to treat women as they please. Thus, when Nyawawa tells Abila that men are "weak and unfaithful," she is referring to her lover who left her and men like Abila's father who are unfaithful to their wives. Through her reincarnation, the authority of the male is challenged. Within a patriarchal framework, Nyawawa might be seen as dangerous, one who bewitches men and controls them through their sexual desire. Nyawawa resists this claim that suggests she is a prostitute by resting the blame on the choices the men make. She contests the traditional male stereotypical image of the prostituted woman as degenerate and immoral, thus, raising questions about the moral judgement that views the prostitute as deviant while overlooking the "irresponsibility" or "weakness" of the men as the film puts it. Nyawawa demonstrates a contestation of the continued dominance of masculinity in the Kenyan social imaginary. The filmmaker's creation of Nyawawa encourages a reflection on the gendered aspects of power in a patrilineal society.

The films imagine a nation where women are not in the margins, but right at the heart of national politics. After his friends warn him of the dangers Nyawawa presents, it is Shiku who encourages him to face Nyawawa “like a man.” Here Shiku implies that he has to be strong and courageous – suggesting a more positive masculinity compared to his father’s. She accompanies him to Nyawawa’s shack, but waits outside and helps him to accomplish some of the tasks assigned to him. The films suggest a political leadership that is gender inclusive. This is demonstrated by the way Shiku, from the outset, is given a critical place in the restoration of the father’s or the nation’s soul. Shiku and Abila work side by side on this journey; they have a few arguments here and there, but demonstrate mutual respect. Following the promulgation of a new constitution in Kenya, more women are present in Kenya’s political leadership sphere, but they still face opposition, and the numbers still reflect a gender imbalance. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) records that though there were significant political gains for women in the 2017 general elections, the numbers remain low, “women hold 172 of the 1883 elected seats in Kenya, up from 145 after the 2013 election” (National Democratic Institute and Federation of Women Lawyers Kenya). Though Nyawawa lives on the edge of the slum and is shown to be an unassimilable element, she is given agency in the film. This is demonstrated through the aspects of her power that reflect a feminist agenda discussed above. Additionally, the role Shiku plays in the film offers a commentary on the inclusivity of women in governing the nation.



Image 13. Shiku takes Abila to Nyawawa's shack (*Soul Boy*)

Equally important is the issue of ethnicity raised in these films. Besides the youth being depicted as the hope of the nation in matters of leadership, they are portrayed as being less inclined to ethnic intolerance. Kibinge and Essuman reflect on the ethnic tensions in Kenya, often depicting them negatively. In *Project Daddy* and *Soul Boy*, the youth are depicted to possess the capacity to overcome ethnic barriers through a change of attitude as compared to the older generation like Mumbi's father in *Project Daddy*. In *Soul Boy*, the nameless former employee of Abila's father asks Abila if he was not stopped from speaking to him, suggesting that Abila should not have anything to do with him because of ethnic difference. Similarly, Abila's friends ask what the Kikuyu girl is doing with him. The fact that Abila's friends refer to her as the "Kikuyu girl" rather than using her name shows the level of entrenchment into ethnic divisions that exist in Kenya. The women who work with Abila's mother invite him to eat a piece of arrowroot which they say tastes like fish. Another lady speaks in Luo, saying that the Luo have now become like the Kikuyu by eating foods associated with the Kikuyu. These are of course stereotypes that arise from cultural practices that have been modified with the passing of time. The Luo tribe of Kenya resides around Lake Victoria and, therefore, fish is a staple item in their meals, while the Kikuyu reside in the highlands and until recently were said not to eat fish. The women, thus, use the cultural aspect of food to poke fun at different ethnic groups. The fact that both the older generation and younger generations in the film are preoccupied with ethnic identities shows how many Kenyans are

steeped in this culture. It might appear that the films are reproducing this ethnic divisions and perpetuating ethnic stereotypes, but as I show, they do not just replay this reality, but demonstrate a resistance to ethnic divisions, especially by the youth.

In *Project Daddy*, the question of ethnicity is foregrounded through Fred and Mumbi's relationship and the reaction of her family to Fred's proposal. In this film, Kibinge explores love, class, domestic violence and ethnicity. *Project Daddy* is the story of Mumbi and Fred. In love and ready to get married, they discover that Mumbi's parents do not approve of Fred as a suitable match for her due to his ethnicity and perceived economic status. Mumbi's parents are wealthy; Fred, on the other hand, was educated through financial support from Mumbi's father. The two choose to go ahead and marry, but their relationship does not succeed. Depressed, Mumbi tries alcohol, church, and a self-help club to try and get out of her depression. When these fails, she decides to focus on looking for a suitable man to father the child she desperately wants. She dates several men but does not find the right one. Eventually, she and Fred get back together and she conceives. Here the film shows that even a private matter like falling in love has wider political implications since the two individuals are members of a large collectivity whose ideologies impact the lives of individuals. The film ends on a happy note, with the two declaring their love for each other. The fact that they end up together is the film's way of gesturing towards a reality in which ethnicity need not determine individual destiny. The allegorical in *Project Daddy* is evoked through use of semiotic cultural or historical codes that can be recuperated by reference to one's own system of cultural or historical recognition. These codes may not mean more than their literal meaning to an audience unfamiliar with the socio-cultural politics of Kenya. As Stephen Slemon has argued, "[i]n allegory, signs are interpreted as modalities of preceding signs which are already deeply embedded in a specific cultural thematics, and they work to transform free-floating objects into positively identified and 'known' units of knowledge" ("Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/ Post-Colonial Writing" 7). Thus, the use of specific cultural phrases and invocation of historical figures recall earlier events or ask us to read back so that we can extrapolate their meaning.

This conversation below between Fred and Mumbi's family is an illustration of how these cultural codes function in the film:

Mumbi's Father: You are not going to marry a Luo

Fred: You used to treat me like a son

Mumbi's Father: So, you thought I might welcome you as a son-in-law?

Fred: Ask me what I don't know

Mumbi's Father: Alright, how will you pay for the dowry?

How many fish make a goat?

Shiru: (Protracted laughter) How many fish boats make a Pick-Up?

Mumbi's Father: You are not going to marry a *Kihii* [uncircumcised male]

Fred: I did not come here to be insulted by a Mt. Kenya Mafioso. I asked for your daughter's hand in marriage. You people are all thieves with your *mbesha*, *mbesha* (money, money)

This highly dramatic moment demonstrates how the troubled love relationship of Fred and Mumbi highlights the adversarial relations between the Kikuyu and the Luo. The filmmaker uses cultural referents from popular discourse to engage with the issue of ethnicity. To fully understand this scene, we need to interpret these embedded references. These references are: Mumbi's father's declaration that his daughter would not marry a Luo (using the derogatory term *kihii*), the jokes about the different forms of enterprise that the Kikuyu and Luo engage and finally, Fred's reference to Mount Kenya Mafioso. Historian Elisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo's record of the emergence of ethnic tensions, with specific reference to the Kikuyu and the Luo, offers useful insights regarding tribalism as a lived experience. Both *Soul Boy's* and *Project Daddy's* representation of ethnicity refer to these two tribes.

Mumbi's father's declaration that his daughter would not marry a *kihii* points to the political "othering" of the Luo. This declaration excludes Fred from any possibility of being a potential suitor to Mumbi. Fred's rejection is based on the assumption that he is uncircumcised. Circumcision, a rite of passage among the Kikuyu, was not a required rite of passage for the Luo.

Atieno-Odhiambo explains that this exclusion was propagated by Jomo Kenyatta in the 1960s and became part of the political discourse, pointing out that “the Luos were regularly referred to as *kinyamu giiki* or *kihii giiki* – little animals or little boys (242). This othering was meant to exclude them from politics by presenting them as children not old enough to lead. This ethnic stereotyping continues in present-day Kenya; Musila observes that during political campaigns in 2007 “Odinga [a Luo] was derogatively infantilised as a ‘boy,’” which was “used to both insult and undermine Odinga’s bid for presidency” (5). Ethnic intolerance then fuels violence sometimes to magnitudes such as those of the post-election violence in 2008. The films take up this subject to critique ethnic intolerance as will be shown in this analysis.

Project Daddy does this by opposing Mumbi’s father’s beliefs and offering a counter narrative. First, the restoration of Mumbi and Fred’s relationship and the conception of their child undermines the notion of the *kihii*, which implies immaturity and, thus, the inability to father. Fathering may be synonymous to leading in the Kenyan context where presidents assume paternal authority. Secondly, Mumbi’s outright defiance of her father is a way of influencing young people’s outlook on ethnicity, pointing to the rejection of ways of thinking that divide rather than unite. Kibinge here indicates that young people may succeed to let go of ethnic stereotypes and tensions where it has been difficult for the elders.

Additionally, the term Mt. Kenya Mafioso is brought up by Fred when he angrily walks out on Mumbi’s family after realising that they were not going to stop insulting him, let alone give him Mumbi’s hand in marriage. The expression “Mt Kenya Mafioso” alludes to the popular belief that Kikuyus regard wealth as more important than anything else and the stereotype that Kikuyus are all thieves. “Mt. Kenya Mafioso” refers to the elite from the Kikuyu community, widely believed to be the powerful forces that decide who rules the country and set the national agenda. This began in the early 1960s when, as Atieno-Odhiambo writes, “Kenyatta mobilised the Kikuyu elite around him and linked up with local and international allies in Capitalism” (241). Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president and Jaromogi Odinga, his vice president, differed for ideological reasons, with Kenyatta choosing to support the Anglo-Kikuyu alliance and Odinga advocating for the common

man. The politicisation of ethnicity raises the following oppositional debates: “ethnicity and representation; ethnicity and equitable resource allocation; ethnicity and popular participation and legitimacy; and ethnicity and class conflict” (Atieno-Odhiambo 241). These debates demonstrate how divisive ethnicity creates polarisation between those who belong and those who do not – a reality which can be checked against how various ethnic groups fare when assessed against the stated markers of subjectivity.

The issues of ethnicity and equitable resource allocation and ethnicity and class conflict play out in the relationship between Mumbi’s family and Otieno’s family. Atieno-Odhiambo asserts that “[t]he popular social models of the industrious Kikuyu and the lazy Luo were the results of colonial productions of knowledge; they have continued to inform the constant creation and re-creation of ethnic categories in the post-colony” (231). The fish, fisherman, fishing boat – indexical of poverty– are juxtaposed with the pickup truck which represents industry and wealth. Though the fishing industry in Kenya is considered one of the major agricultural industries, most of the Kenyan fishermen are small-scale fishermen. The neo-liberal and capitalistic structures determine the prices of fish which in many cases is low, leaving most fisherman impoverished. The film engages with the ethnic tensions between the Kikuyu and Luo, but contests social models that further ethnic division. Fred runs a successful garage and his bank balance attests to his wealth. Through such a depiction. Kibinge contests the idea that Luos are lazy and the association of the informal business sector with poverty. In a moment of situational irony, Shiru and her father make jokes about Fred’s ability to take care of Mumbi although, unbeknownst to them, he is more successful than they think. The film satirises them by depicting their money-grubbing way of thinking as narrow.

In addition to the cultural referents discussed above, I want to highlight an allusion to another historical moment in Kenya. In the opening scene of *Project Daddy*, Mumbi confronts her father on his silence about her relationship with Fred. This conversation brings out another key point in the discussion of ethnicity. This scene shows her father’s position on the choice of a suitable suitor:

Mumbi: Dad, why do you pretend he doesn’t exist?

Mumbi’s father: Like who doesn’t exist?

Mumbi: Fred

Mumbi's Mother: A lawyer or doctor might be more suitable

Mumbi's father: A Kikuyu lawyer or doctor

Mumbi: Here we go again, you are so tribalistic

Mumbi's father: No, realistic. You saw what happened to Wambui Otieno. History has

(The conversation is interrupted by a phone call, and the scene closes there)

This abrupt closing of this scene mid-sentence is aimed to allow the viewer to reflect on the subject of Wambui Otieno and the history her name represents. The invocation of Wambui Otieno in this conversation is an important signifier because it highlights the history of the adversarial Luo-Kikuyu relationship. It is significant because it refers to an actual event; the battle between Wambui and her husband's clansmen over the right to bury him. This occurrence was highly politicised and "was interpreted as a contest between the Luo and Kikuyu" (Quayson 589). Wambui, a Kikuyu who was a Mau Mau activist, politician and businesswoman was married to S.M Otieno from the Luo ethnic group. A prominent criminal lawyer, Otieno died in December 1987. His death sparked a national debate arising from Wambui's claim that her husband had orally expressed a wish to be buried on a farm he owned on the outskirts of Nairobi. His tribesmen insisted that being a Luo, he had to be interred as tradition dictated which meant he be buried on ancestral land in Nyanza province, about 400 kilometres from the city. The legal battle lasted six months with the first court hearing ruling in favour of Wambui. After an appeal from the clan, this judgment was reversed and later, the Court of Appeal granted the Luo their wishes. This legal tussle became labelled as the S.M Otieno burial saga due to the publicity it drew and the conversations around gender and ethnicity that it generated. The reference to this case by Mumbi's father in *Project Daddy* shows how the court's decision fuelled further ethnic tensions between the Luo and the Kikuyu. Because this was a high-profile case, it had presented an opportunity for the nation to look beyond ethnicity and consider, for example, an individual's right to determine where he would be buried. Unfortunately, it supported patriarchal dominance over women by implying that Wambui had no right in a matter that affected her as the widow. The S.M Otieno case is used to warn Mumbi about what might happen to her if she married Fred. Notwithstanding

the stereotype, Mumbi's father views the Luo community's lack of consideration of Wambui's rights as a widow as proof of the difficulties inherent in inter-ethnic relationships.

The filmmakers see the youth as agents of change on the issue of ethnicity. Abila's friendship with Shiku (Kikuyu girl) points to a desire for there to be no ethnic barriers. Abila and Shiku are least bothered by their ethnicity and do not let it stand in the way of their friendship. Abila wonders why his dad's former worker maintains that Abila's father fired him because of his ethnic roots. Invoking the Mt. Kenya reference also used in *Project Daddy*, the man suggests that he lost his job because he is from the Mt. Kenya region. Abila and Shiku's collaboration is characterised by respect for each other's opinions, a commitment to the task of saving his father's soul and mutual understanding. This results in the successful accomplishment of the tasks by Abila and Shiku, suggesting that inter-ethnic alliances can in fact be beneficial, if not indispensable to the nation. Mumbi's outright defiance of her father is a way of influencing young people's outlook on ethnicity, pointing to the rejection of modes of thinking that divide instead of uniting.

The depiction of magical realism in *Soul Boy* in this section demonstrates how the film goes beyond its realist world (a poorly governed nation) and offers insights into what an alternative political environment might be. Demonstrating through Abila's tasks that restoring good leadership is not an easy task, it embraces an imagined political system that elevates humanity. This system acknowledges and includes women and youth who have been previously marginalised in the political sphere. In *Soul Boy*, Nyawawa and Shiku are abstracted figures that raise concerns about women's marginal place in the society. Allegory encroaches on the realist narrative in *Project Daddy* by employing the historical figure of Wambui Otieno to highlight how patriarchal tendencies so pervade social and legal structures such that the law in Otieno's case seemed to favour the customary laws set by patriarchy. *Project Daddy* also employs popular cultural codes which are verbalised by the characters. These can be understood by a discerning Kenyan audience as pointing to ethnic tensions in the nation. Furthermore, the allegorical figures of Fred and Mumbi exceed the reality at hand and effectively denounce beliefs that further ethnic divisions.

Allegorical Spaces

Drawing on the power of affect, *Leo*, *Soul Boy* and *Killer Necklace* offer detailed and powerful portraits of slum life in contemporary Nairobi. Silvia Loeffler explains that “[t]he character of buildings and the economic realities of an area are all factors that can colour our perception and experience of a place. The rhythms of a city, along with its smells and sounds create emotional impulses, ranging from a sense of wellbeing to repulsion” (Loeffler 30). The way the slums are depicted in the films accurately fits their description as “neglected parts of cities where housing and living conditions are appallingly poor” (Cities Alliance 1999). The films demand of the audience empathy for the existential struggles of Kenya’s urban underclass. The subject of slums in Africa and other parts of the world has been a prominent and contentious topic of study across disciplines due to the alarming rate at which slums are growing in contemporary spaces. For, example, *The Challenge of Slums*, the UN-HABITAT’s groundbreaking report published in 2003, offers a detailed examination of the status of slums around the world. While highlighting the plight of the slum dweller, it interrogates public policies geared at slum upgrading and insists that it will take political will and prioritisation of slum concerns to change the slum environment (4). Likewise, urban theorist Mike Davis’s *Planet of the Slum* offers vivid descriptions of the world’s densely populated slums. He attributes this growth to processes such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, slum removal and various other related legacies. The disturbing reality of the slum has also found its way in many written and visual texts. Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004) portrays the violence and poverty in Lagos, Nigeria and how Elvis, the protagonist, navigates life in the ghetto. Noviolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (2013) is about Darling and her friends who end up in a slum called Shantytown after their homes are brought down by the government. The cinematic landscape also provides a powerful and provocative take on the ubiquity of slums in contemporary African city spaces. Most notable in Kenyan cinema is David Gitonga’s *Nairobi Half Life* (2012) which aims to portray the other half of Nairobi: slums, back streets and a gang culture which are normally relegated to the periphery in national discourses. Similar to *Killer Necklace*, but unlike the other films in this discussion, *Nairobi Half Life*’s key focus is on how social inequalities fuel violence in the city.

The films reveal the clearly marked demarcation between the slum and the suburbs in urban Kenya. The unfortunate social and economic conditions which characterise the slum are juxtaposed with cases of affluence and material comforts enjoyed by a few. In *Killer Necklace*, the youth who live in the slum aspire to amass wealth and live like the rich. To some of them, crime is the only way to attain this life. *Killer Necklace* is the story of Mbugua, an accounting student who lives with his grandmother in the slum. We learn early in the film that his older brother lost his life during a criminal activity. Jonah, the gang leader who prides himself in being the king of the ghetto, wants Mbugua to abandon his studies and join the gang. Mbugua finds it difficult to accept this offer for fear of losing his life like his brother did. Mbugua has a girlfriend (Muthoni) whom he believes to be the daughter of a rich man in the suburbs. Burdened with the responsibility of taking care of his ailing grandmother, the need to please Muthoni, and the taunts of the King of the ghetto, Mbugua accepts to take up a “job” that involves mugging an elderly lady. This job provides money to buy the gold necklace and medicine for his grandmother. However, when he goes to deliver the necklace, Mbugua discovers that the mansion owner is making sexual advances on Muthoni, so he drops the necklace on the floor and leaves. Obviously angry at the mansion owner, he returns in the night with a gun to shoot him. As he peeps through the window, he sees Muthoni working in the kitchen, serving the couple and being reprimanded for taking too long to attend the woman’s calls. As the man makes a toast to his wife, he refers to his children in Australia and through Mbugua’s point of view, the audience slowly notice that Muthoni is not in the family photos. It becomes clear to Mbugua that Muthoni has deceived him. A fight ensues between Muthoni and the lady of the house for the necklace which had just been presented to her by her husband as a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gift. Confused at the turn of events, Mbugua leaves the mansion with Jonah’s words playing in his mind: “Members of parliament, Cabinet ministers, lawyers...all thieves.” At this point, Mbugua makes up his mind to commit to the gang and drives off with Jonah.

Jinna Mutune’s *Leo* concerns the slum, to a certain degree. Its protagonist is 12-year-old Leo who is consumed by the desire to be a superhero; he spends his time drawing pictures of who he imagines his superhero would be. Leo believes that he must save lives to be a superhero. When his cousin and friend Serah dies, he is pained and depressed because he could not save her from her

cruel stepmother. Leo acquires a scholarship in an “academy”; however, he is not settled and still wants to be a superhero. The film also follows the lives of the other two men in Leo’s life: Sirinkai, Leo’s father, who pushes Leo to excel in his academics and Fela, to whom Leo looks up as a model of how to become a man. Leo admires Fela’s flashy lifestyle; the nice house and several cars in contrast to his father’s house in the slum. Fela loathes his dad, whom he sees as a failure, while Sirinkai does not approve of Fela’s “mysterious” sources of income. This is a constant source of contention between the two. Like *Killer Necklace*’s Jonah and Mbugua, Fela is engaged in criminal activities. Whereas Jonah and Mbugua still live in the slum, Fela hates the slum and has moved out to a better residence. Later in the film, we learn that Fela sells drugs, helps people to acquire public land illegally and seems to run an illegal car business. After one of his land deals turns sour, he goes to a local den where he takes some illicit brew that has him hospitalised. Feeling a sense of hopelessness, Fela frees himself from all support equipment in the hospital and dies.

While the films I examine are fictional, the settings are real places that have a life of their own. They tell real stories about the realities of everyday life for the underprivileged in Kenya. Realism and allegory in this case intertwine and move in and out of each other. Bad governance and poor city planning as concepts do not have an explicit or visible form and, therefore, are geographically embodied in the images of the slum. The slum is open to many interpretations, the images speak of, for example, the politics of space and power in the city. Rather than have the characters engage in conversations about the spaces, the filmmakers choose to let the audience see more of the slum than hear about it from the characters. This strategy allows the directors to address the subject of the slum in a non-didactic and open-ended way. Frederick Cooper asks:

Who shapes the city, in what image, by what means, and against what resistance. [The struggles are] not so much the dramatic confrontations of strikes, riots, and revolt, but the daily struggles over the details of life in the workplace, the marketplace, and the residence [which affect] the transformation of ideology and culture, the forging of vast spatial systems in which people carried out their efforts at survival, advancement and struggle. (10)

Cooper suggests that reading the city from the everyday struggles of its inhabitants – like the films allow us to do through their investment in their portrayal of slum life – is useful because it demonstrates how the neo-liberal power structures intersect in the city to the disservice of the less

privileged. The filmmakers shape the city through the image of the slum, thus exploring the real struggles of the underclass.

Nichols has argued that, “[a]lthough it may seem to be merely the backdrop for the action, the natural or built environment is not simply documented in films but can also carry metaphorical meanings” (37). Nichols shows that these spaces form part of a filmmaker’s tools for fulfilling a film’s “expressive, persuasive, or poetic purpose” (37). He further argues that “[t]hey provide a visible stand-in for what cannot be shown (power, dominance, hierarchy, and so on)” (37). Fletcher has observed of Zane Grey’s work that, “instead of the allegorical riddle, a surface texture of sublime scenic description is the carrier of thematic meaning” (6). In his reading of this Western genre, Fletcher argues that the beautiful scenery is not merely a backdrop, showing that, in fact, even the text’s heroes act “in harmony or with violent opposition to that scenic tapestry” (7). This reading demonstrates the possible allegorical function of a setting, a function that can be transposed to other contexts. This example shows that allegory does not confine itself to language, but manifests itself in different ways. Illustrative of this is the slum scene in *Killer Necklace*, where Mbugua walks to his grandmother’s room, feeling frustrated with life. The atmosphere is characterised by a bleak mood (dark, smoky, low lighting and pensive music), which is in keeping with Mbugua’s miserable state just before he decides to join the criminal world. He stands in the dark alley outside his grandmother’s room and tears roll down his cheeks. Kibinge makes use of the slum to explore Mbugua’s struggles to fit into both his private and public world.

One of the early scholars to read places allegorically was French poet Charles Baudelaire, who presents Paris as an allegory since the changes of the city over time primarily reminded him of what those places used to be in the past. “Paris changes! But nothing in my melancholy has moved. New palaces, scaffolding blocks, old neighbourhoods, all for me becomes allegory, and my dear memories are more than heavy than rocks” (Charles Baudelaire, qtd. in Tambling, 106). Tambling interprets Baudelaire’s views as follows: “every aspect of this new Paris is also to be read as an allegory, a commentary on what has been destroyed” (106). Thus, for Baudelaire, the new palaces or old neighbourhoods to him are signifiers of more than what one can see from their current state;

they become allegories of the destruction of an earlier moment in the history of Paris. In line with the kind of reading Baudelaire proposes, material objects such as the shacks we see in Kibera become commentaries on the failure of the postcolonial Kenyan state to solve the perennial predicament of its underprivileged.

Tom Odhiambo explains how the City of Nairobi is symbolic of “Kenya’s own modernity and progress,” observing that the city has provided “a rich backdrop for all forms of cultural and artistic production” due to the city’s position as the centre of business and government. Odhiambo’s essay focuses on the fiction of the immediate post-independence period; he examines how the fiction that emerges from the urban landscape provides a platform upon “[...] which new ideas and practices around masculinity can be observed. He argues that “[t]he anxieties, fears, worries, hopes and dreams” of the characters in the fiction highlight the challenges that resulted from the transition from “the colonial experience and entering the era of freedom and independence” (44). Odhiambo’s reading of the city implies a link between a state of deprivation (the characters he studies are males who mostly live in the slum) and the tendency of some of them to engage in crime as a means of survival. Further on, I discuss how crime manifests in the films as an effect of social polarisation.

More recently, Viola Shafik has explored the possibility of reading locations allegorically in her study of the representation of the shantytown in Egyptian film. Her study demonstrates how a film can “shift the shanty into the heart of the national condition and how; it becomes an allegory of the nation” (Shafik 97). She shows that to achieve this, *Hina Maysara*’s protagonist’s flaws and the shanty’s poor conditions are one and the same thing. Given that the film is shot on location, Shafik observes that “the slums cannot hide the fact that the informal housing phenomenon is linked to uncontrolled growth, fast urbanisation and failed government planning” (97). A similar kind of reading can be applied to the films under consideration. This application presents an opportunity for me to examine the films for what insights they give us into the development of the nation and to ask what the depiction of the slums in the film symptomatise.

One of the areas of focus of Third Cinema is addressing issues of oppression. Gabriel writes: “Its purposes will be validated only if it integrates with the aspirations, values, struggles and social needs of the oppressed classes” (15). In line with the tenets of Third Cinema, *Soul Boy*, *Leo* and *Killer Necklace* foreground the divide between rich and poor by drawing stark lines of opposition by means of juxtaposition. This exposition is aimed at social change. By highlighting the slum, the films expose the crisis of the slum community through the varied ways they depict the despair and deprivation characteristic of the slum. Reading the films from a Third Cinema approach, I engage with the slums in the films to investigate the layers of narrative beneath the images of the slum.

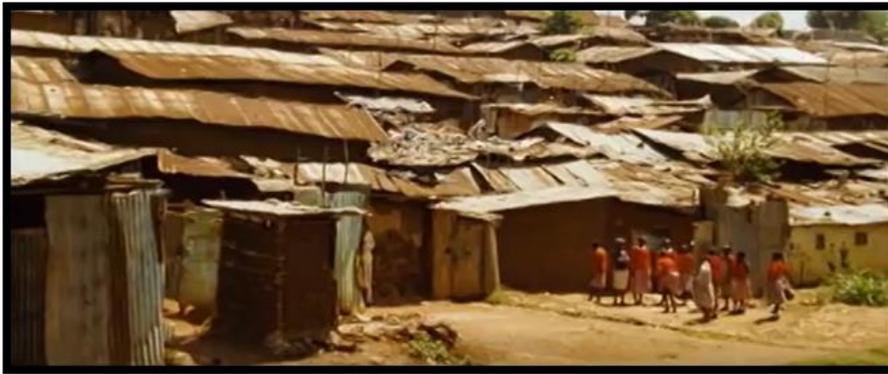


Image 14. Sprawling Kibera Slums (*Soul Boy*)



Image 15. A road passing through a slum (*Killer Necklace*)

The films offer realistic and unromantic images of the slum, for example, Abila's cramped living conditions, Nyawawa's shack, the alleys and the masses. The choice of Kibera as the main setting of *Soul Boy* goes beyond just a place where the narrative takes place. On a literal level, Kibera is where Abila and his family live. Kibera is characterised by poor housing, lack of sanitation and drainage that result in deplorable social and environmental conditions for its residents. The families in Kibera, like Abila's, live in shacks and are tenants with no rights. His family is at risk of being evicted as a rent arrears' demand notice is placed on his father's kiosk which doubles as their house. In *Killer Necklace*, a similar state of affairs is presented to us. The living spaces of the slums are characterised by harsh low-key lighting and smoke, creating a bleak mood representative of the despair experienced by those who live there.

Soul Boy and *Killer Necklace* offer an opportunity for the viewer to take an interest in Kibera and the other slums. The audience spend the day with Abila, taking in the sights and sounds of Kibera and experiencing its dramas. The sound of gunshots creates suspense in the film and soon, the film moves to the scene where a large crowd is milling around the victim of a shooting. No words are spoken in this scene and one is left to imagine what could have caused the shooting. The next encounter is an angry mob chasing the phone thief, armed with stones in their hands ready to execute street justice. Abila and his friends are also depicted playing by the railway line, unperturbed by the heap of rubbish next to them. The filmmaker constantly focuses on the seemingly endless rows of shacks made of mud or rusty iron sheets and the piles of rubbish. This *mise-en-scène* provides objective and visible indices of the characters' lives and their struggle to navigate slum life. The director's objective is to show how much still has to be done after more than forty years of independence at the time of *Soul Boy*'s release.



Image 16. Muthoni's employer's mansion (*Killer Necklace*)

Presenting other dimensions of the social spectrum, *Killer Necklace* opens with the image of a beautiful mansion and its immaculate gardens, while *Leo* presents Nairobi's Central Business District, characterised by its skyscrapers. These skyscrapers represent the modern metropolis and can be considered as markers of national progress. The positioning of these images before the slum scenes mirrors the images that are commonly circulated as representations of the city. Postcards that capture Nairobi city, for example, will focus on the Central Business District and not the slum. The films use these images to set up a comparison between the two representations of the city as they go on to reveal the neglected part of the city as well. The films allow us to take a long look at the conditions the slum dwellers live in. The characters, thus, become living examples of the fact that the commercialisation and industrialisation of the city do not guarantee social and economic freedom to the majority of its inhabitants.

On an allegorical level, the setting signifies more. Kibera and the other unnamed slums in these films, thus, function as secondary objects of narration. The slums reflect the state of the nation, Kibera's disappointment in post-independence promises and question public policy. As portraits of a nation that has barely implemented its slum upgrading programmes, the slums bear witness to poor planning, mismanagement of the economy and class divisions. Under Moi's watch,

politicians and slumlords were allocated public land meant for road construction; Kibaki's government then came up with plans to "restore order," which sanctioned the demolishing of the houses on public land leaving "more than one third million tenants and squatters" stranded (Davis 101). Such incidents show that instead of developing the slums, the focus for the leadership has been on how they can profit from the slums. To own a property in the slum, one requires political connections and politicians take advantage of the housing insecurity faced by the poor to mobilise voters using empty promises of a better future for them (Klopp and Paller). By foregrounding the slum, the films critique the government for this failure.

A 2002 aerial map of Nairobi revealed that more than half of the population lived in 18 per cent of the city's residential areas (Davis 95). The film reveals uneven development in the city through the glaring juxtaposition of Kibera's overcrowded shanties against the huge mansions set in a large garden in Karen. They depict this injustice by contrasting Leo's house to Edmund Junior's house in *Leo* and Mbugua's shack against the mansion where Muthoni works in *Killer Necklace*. Alongside the urban inequality visible through the space allocation, the distance between the two worlds further reveals the politics of space and place. This is the interaction between power, politics and policy which then determine who gets what space and what their place in society might be. Both *Soul Boy* and *Killer Necklace* depict the distance from the slum to the suburb as being a long one. The distance between the two places is more than simply spatial or geographical; the long drive allows the audience to appreciate the disparities between the two worlds. Through this depiction, the film evokes the great economic divide between the rich and the poor, slum and suburb and increasing social polarisation. Karen (where Abila's aunt works), for example, is largely known for its European population and is named after Karen Blixen, author of the colonial memoir, *Out of Africa*. It also depicts the nature of social relationships, with the rich developing separate territories where they feel safe and where they can manage their affairs away from people they feel are a threat to them.

The issue of space and place raises an element of exclusion due to the cultural othering in which a group of people judges others negatively. A common perception of the slum dweller is that of lazy dependents. This is apparent in Jomo Kenyatta's reference "to the lowest income groups as 'ragai',

loosely translated to mean ‘lazy’ or ‘useless’, thereby showing a lack of understanding about the significance of the growing number of Africans who were making a valuable contribution to the economy by their innovative micro-enterprises” (Macharia 229). The films articulate a shift from this perception by depicting most of the slum dwellers as hardworking people. Abila’s mother is a tailor, his aunt goes to work in Karen and we see a few small enterprises within the slum. Leo’s father works as a driver and his mother is also a tailor. Just like any other citizens, they make a living for their families, albeit in difficult circumstances. This offers alternative images compared to those formed by the popular discourse of criminality, encroachment and dependency linked to the slum dweller. *Soul Boy* carefully balances the different scenes so as not to give a single story about who the people in the slum are. The cinematic representation of the inhabitants of the slum is diverse. We encounter a mobile phone thief at the mercy of an angry crowd, a dead criminal suspect, Abila and his friends at play and the women at work – these people and events are included in the film to create a semblance of life in Kibera.



Image 17. Bullies in the academy wash ‘dirt’ (*Leo*)

Slum dwellers are alienated by the upper social classes who judge and treat them as ‘dirt’. After Leo excels in his exams, he wins a scholarship to join an upper-class academy where he encounters class segregation. The boys refer to him as ‘dirt’ and treat Leo as such. One of the boys says, “slum belongs to dirt, what do we do to dirt?” Another boy responds: “we spit on it or trample on it.” The boys then force Edmund to spit on Leo and also pour a bucket of water on him as if to wash off

the 'dirt'. This cruel conduct reveals the position of the slum dweller as the "other." The use of the idioms "spit on" and "trample on" is to show contempt for the slum dweller and remind him that he is a lesser citizen. People that live in the slum are referred to as "dirty," not so much because of the condition of their living quarters or bodies, but because of the value placed on them as lesser citizens. *Soul Boy* contests this idea by presenting Abila's mother and the other women at her workplace as well-groomed. The idea that slum-dwellers are a filthy lot may have arisen from the racial segregation policy that was enforced by the colonial masters who, according to Achola, came up with the policy to protect themselves from infection. He writes: "In Nairobi, the Kenyan Capital, Africans were identified as sources of contagion (as were Indians) and treated as such by European officials." Achola further opines "that causes for the prevalence of disease amongst urban African population was the racially skewed allocation of land, infrastructure and resources" (190). This resonates with Bhabha's observation that the objective of colonial discourse was "to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (70). This suspicion of Africans as being contagious is implied in *Soul Boy* when the white lady Abila's aunt works for asks him to shower as soon as she sets her eyes on him. Achola's argument shows that the colonialists made the urban African more prone to disease by zoning the city such that the African quarters were overpopulated and underdeveloped. This culture is continued even after independence by those in power and with the financial means. To defend their own class privileges, postcolonial elites "inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of colonial segregated cities" (Davis 96). As a result, this segregation marginalises a part of the society which then seeks to challenge the conditions, individuals and institutions that contribute to their social exclusion.

The characters who represent many unemployed Kenyans who live in the slum challenge poor leadership by questioning the corrupt means through which these leaders acquire wealth. They indirectly allude to corruption as one of the reasons why there might not be a way out of the slum for many of its inhabitants. The normalisation of corruption is highlighted as theft from the poor. The funds which might have been used to improve their living conditions or create opportunities for employment are lost in corruption schemes. *Killer Necklace* and *Leo* highlight how corruption

is an institutionalised culture.²² The films project corruption as a vice that starts from leadership – Jonah, the king of the ghetto, says:

[m]embers of parliament, ministers in their helicopters, lawyers in their Mercedes Benz, accountants and especially accountants they are all thieves, when the rich and educated steal it's called business when the poor man steals he is called a thief. (*Killer Necklace*)

His words point to the affluent lifestyle of those who have stolen from the poor. These same words replay in Mbugua's mind when he leaves the mansion, feeling cheated by Muthoni and by the system that does not provide an opportunity for him to find an alternate means of earning an income. As Jonah's words play in his mind, a sense of hopelessness pervades him. If members of parliament and ministers are all thieves, there is little hope of getting anywhere without breaking the rules. At that point, he decides to join Jonah in his criminal activities. The film suggests that Mbugua's pitiable life before his criminality is reflective of social injustices against the poor and his engagement in crime a means of accessing economic resources and the opportunity denied him. Jonah refers to his criminal ways as a form of tax collection. He says, "I collect poor man's tax." I propose that the notion of poor man's tax is to ridicule the state for taxing the poor and not doing enough for them. Just like the government collects tax which is embezzled by state operatives, some of the underprivileged choose to use the same means (theft) to compensate themselves (poor man's tax) for what they have been denied (public services such as water and other sanitary services). Jonah refers to the bank cashier as the first lady of the ghetto, meaning he as the crime leader is the president or king of the ghetto. This "government" perpetuates theft as they emulate the national and/or county governments. Just like the bribery that takes place in the corridors of government offices, Mbugua bribes the gardener so that he can allow him to visit his girlfriend in a home where he is not allowed to enter. Each time Mbugua visits the mansion, the gardener increases the bribe.

²² Kenya has an Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. Previous bodies with the same mandate were Kenya Anti-Corruption Authority which became Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission. They are tasked with preventing and combating corruption and economic crime in Kenya. See <http://www.eacc.go.ke/default.asp?pageid=3>. This points to the gravity of the issue of crime in Kenya.

Jonah justifies his criminal ways by arguing that he is only doing what he needs to do to survive in the difficult living conditions that he and other slum residents find themselves in. He imitates those in power and sees them as thieves passing off as businessmen. While this is a counter-productive way of addressing socio-political injustices, Jonah sees it as a way out of the slum. This is projected in the film when he resolutely tells Mbugua that if he did not become his right-hand man, he would crawl back to the slum and die like a slum rat. Jonah's reference to the politicians and elite as thieves exposes and ridicules their corrupt nature.

In *Leo*, corruption is illustrated through Fela's involvement in the acquisition of public land. Fela helps his rich friend acquire a public sports field. The term "land grabbing" was coined by Kenyans in reference to the illegal acquisition of public land. Highly connected individuals acquire this land and use it for private development. Jacqueline Klopp elucidates that political leadership turns to public land as a "patronage resource and instrument to maintain control" (7). Land grabbing in Kenya has been contested and brought into public scrutiny by activists who resist irregular allocation of land. In the film, such contestation is evident when Sirinkai mobilises the community to fight against this purchase and the playing field in question is saved. This protest portrays the slum not only as a place where people are downtrodden, but where they begin to empower themselves by resisting corruption through activism.

The films also interrogate the correlation between marginalisation of youth and crime. Mbugua's marginalisation is demonstrated in *Killer Necklace* through his depiction as needy and helpless. The tears that flow down his cheeks as he approaches the dark house he shares with his grandmother evoke sympathy from the audience and intensify the depiction of his frustration. Despite this state, Mbugua has an optimistic outlook towards life, hanging on to the belief that he can study and get employed and earn an honest living. Jonah, on the other hand, disagrees with this notion, claiming that it would not work out since even those whom Mbugua thinks are successful are thieves. Mbugua eventually resolves to join the criminal world when he discovers that the person he thought to be his girlfriend's father is her employer who is interested in having an affair with her. This is aggravated by the discovery that his girlfriend Muthoni has lied to him

about her status in the mansion. Initially, Mbugua takes up the assignment to mug Bessie as a once-off errand. He still has faith that things will work out, only to discover that he is entangled in a web of deceit. Set against Mbugua's earlier hesitation to join the criminal world, his change of heart suggests a relation between his desperation to survive and the government's exclusion of youth from socio-economic opportunities and resources. Forti and Maina describe the government's social contract with the youth as "a state in which the sovereign avails security in the sense of both physical security and the opportunity to survive" (56). They further argue that economic inequalities are among the major causes of crime among the youth. Odhiambo's study on the representation of youth delinquency in Kenyan fiction echoes Forti and Maina's argument. Odhiambo argues that "crime and violence easily become attractive and often preferred methods of accessing livelihoods for marginalized social categories such as the youth" (5). Fela, Jonah and Mbugua dramatise how crime and violence within this social category are "strategies to access the networks of relationships and structures that determine the distribution of economic wealth" (Odhiambo 5). Elsewhere, Odhiambo argues that the youth's engagement in crime and violence is "not merely as a means to access material goods, but it is also deployed as a challenge to the regimes of law and order and the authority of the state" (134). He argues that this is "an attempt by socio-economically deprived and disadvantaged young men and women to re-assert themselves within the structures of social and economic privilege in Kenya" (134). This claim as dramatised by Jonah shows that the slum serves as a stage for the filmmakers to represent how the marginalised navigate what is demonstrated to be a difficult terrain. Reading the slum allegorically has enabled me to see beyond Jonah's engagement in crime. In this way, it points to the failures of the government and, therefore, allows me to view his actions as a form of protest against corruption. It also reveals a desire among disadvantaged youth to belong to a place of privilege using the same means some politicians and elites use to acquire wealth.

Although it may be true that meaningfully engaging youth and creating employment opportunities for them could be one of the solutions to curtail crime among them, *Killer Necklace* shows that the solution is not as simple as just creating employment. It shows that crime is a complex subject and the youth may engage in it for varied reasons. The queen of the ghetto, as Jonah endearingly refers to his otherwise unnamed female accomplice, problematises the popular belief that youth join

crime rings due to unemployment. This lady has a job as a bank teller; she uses her position in the bank to facilitate Jonah's felonious activities. She gives him client information which he uses to plan for the robbing of Bessie's money. Her engagement in crime is purely a matter of personal choice. About the post-colony, Achille Mbembe argues that as corruption, desire and struggle for power trickle down, "the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology" (29). Jonah and the queen of the ghetto join this madness and are driven by a "quest for grandeur" which then makes "vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence" (29). Crime gives the queen of the ghetto a position of power and an imagined status of royalty which her employment cannot offer. Muthoni, on the other hand, desires to live like the people in the mansion and so, while her mistress is away, she soaks herself in her mistress's bathtub and offers Mbugua wine while demonstrating her knowledge of various types of wine. The films' take up the theme of greed to expose and critique the elite's absurd quest for splendour and how this quest results in a chaotic society where violence and crime are perpetuated.

The preceding analysis has shown that even with films that are demonstrably realist in orientation, one can still read the films allegorically. What emerges is that within the realist narrative, the representation of characters and of the setting exceeds their realist mode. An allegorical reading shows that the characters seem to point to the "abstract and general more than the concrete and individual," thus, demonstrating their engagement with the public sphere (Kelley 220). This mode of reading has enabled me to see beyond these realist narratives, which then presents tangible ways the individual stories of the characters intertwine with public life. The image of the slum and the lives of the characters have offered a critique of the unequal structure of the society. The films reveal how the underprivileged remain in a state of want, at times turning to crime as a means of survival and also challenging the regimes of the law

Allegorical Emblems

This section aims to pursue an allegorical interpretation of the four prominent necklaces in *Killer Necklace*. As highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, emblems are things that may present themselves as images that represent abstract concepts such as moral truths. Therefore, abstract ideas are projected through images and the actions of the characters in relations to these images. The allegorical nature of these emblems comes from their ability to refer to ideas beyond their literal purpose. Daly has argued that “an emblem can be regarded as a *mode of thought* combining thing or word with meaning as an art form combining visual image and textual components”(383). Adopting a similar mode of thought, the necklaces here then become the “thing” or *res picta* (image). The following analysis will surface their “meaning” or *res significans* (implications).



Image 18. Mbugua and Muthoni admire a gold necklace on display. (*Killer Necklace*)

In *Killer Necklace*, for example, Kibinge gives form to the theme of avarice in humankind. In the necklaces, she finds a shape and image for the concept of avarice and social injustice. While the title *Killer Necklace* refers to one necklace, there are four prominent necklaces in this film. Three of the necklaces are similar, while the other is very different. The film uses the necklaces as emblems. These necklaces are attached to larger narratives and, therefore, appear as material objects. They however, also signify something beyond themselves. Tambling notes that emblems are a form of allegory “in which either the picture needs supplementing by the text, or the word

and image each modifies, pluralizes or contradicts the other's message" (65). Illustrative of this is the way Kibinge contradicts the usual meaning of the necklace; where a necklace such as the gold one (Image 18) that Muthoni desires is a sign of value and worth, the film undercuts its usual significance by showing it as fake and as violent twice. A close reading of the relationship of the characters to these necklaces, as I will show, point us to their emblematic nature.

The title itself takes on an emblematic character as the necklace is assigned the ability to kill or destroy. The necklace has less meaning in itself than as an allegorical referent for the potential destructiveness of avarice and unchecked desire as suggested by the attributive adjective "killer" before the word necklace. Having been introduced to the idea of a necklace in the title, necklaces become recurring elements of the plot structure in this film. The term necklace brings together very different kinds of necklaces in the film and the film makes a connection to wider issues based on these very different things described by the term. The first one is the expensive gold necklace that Mbugua strives to buy for Muthoni to prove his love for her. The second one is the pearl necklace that we see in the crime den, lying among the stolen items. Jonah uses the necklace to coerce Mbugua into taking part in the robbery assignment by menacingly pretending to strangle him with it. The next time we see this necklace, the queen of the ghetto has worn it to work; the camera zooms in on the necklace as the old lady compliments her on it. The necklace here identifies her as a complicit "killer" of the lady. She is responsible for divulging the lady's account details and movement in and out of the bank to Jonah who organises her mugging. The third one is the imitation of the gold necklace sold to Mbugua in the pub, at a lower price than the one displayed in the shop. The fourth one is the tyre that is used to set the street preacher on fire. The necklaces in *Killer Necklace* are turning points in the film that steer the film into the next action. On one level, the emblems (necklaces) may function as plot points for the films, yet, beneath them lie "riddles" that need to be solved.

The most common purpose of necklaces is as an adornment worn on the neck voluntarily and on special occasions. The first necklace in the film represents the things consumer-driven societies yearn for – mansions, cars, jewellery and so forth. Necklaces are also signs of status and value. In

Killer Necklace, Muthoni desires to belong to the upper class of society which is determined by the amount of wealth one has. Her desire for the necklace is such that she does not care about Mbugua's financial position as a student. All she wants is for Mbugua to prove his love for her by buying her the expensive gold necklace. Mbugua, consumed by his desire to get the gold necklace for Muthoni, is enticed by a hawker to find a gold piece at a lower price. Unknown to Mbugua, the hawker had overheard Jonah asking him how he would ever afford the necklace if he did not join the criminal world. For a moment, the film shifts to the grotesque. This is established through the mood of the moment and use of a man of short stature employed as the figure of the grotesque. The hawker leads Mbugua to a man who can sell him the gold necklace at a cheap price. The mise-en-scène maintains a naturalistic approach as low key lighting that comes through a window with holes creating a shadowy effect. The pub is busy with pool players on one side, several drinkers, a man dancing and people moving about. Mbugua finally meets the man who is seated at a large round table, surrounded by some intoxicated men and women. As Mbugua approaches him, he jumps onto a seat, makes an animal sound and sniffs at Mbugua. Then he jumps onto the table, contorts his eyes and mouth and tells Mbugua's that he can smell Mbugua's lovesickness and that he has the cure for it. Through an extreme close-up, we see his facial expressions and his wizard hat which evokes an aura of mystery around him. His animalistic gestures such as the sounds he makes and the sniffing enhance the grotesque. The cuts alternate between close-ups of the man's face and Mbugua's puzzled face as the man produces a necklace that matches the one Muthoni wants and begins his recital about gold. Mbugua uses the money he was given by Jonah to buy medicine for his sick grandmother to buy the necklace. He soon realises it is fake as it leaves residues of gold colour on his fingers. The dwarfed man leaves the scene running and laughing cheekily at Mbugua's gullibility. I contend that the body and actions of this grotesque figure are readable texts which demonstrate society's deviance from the social norms that promote a harmonious society. He is human, but behaves like an animal, thus deviating from what society expects of him. His behaviour is an outer sign of his inner deceitful nature.

Killer Necklace uses the necklaces to develop the theme of greed for things of value and how cunning people take advantage of these desires to deceive others. Images 18 and 19 are from two different scenes, but both focus on one object: a gold necklace for Muthoni. In the first image, the

couple is engaged in a normal activity, admiring a necklace in the display window. In the second image, this seemingly innocent desire has degenerated into an obsession that leads Mbugua into the hands of two conmen. The hawker and the conman represent the twisted and distorted world Mbugua inhabits, not only in that moment, but beyond, as is revealed in the film's unfolding. This distorted world is filled with the characters who maintain false impressions both in the private realms (Mbugua and Muthoni's relationship) and in the public realms (the politicians and business leaders said to be thieves). Their heartless and conniving acts lead Mbugua to the trap in which he loses his money. This scene marks the beginning of Mbugua's gradual descent into the criminal world.



Image 19. Mbugua and the dwarfish man (*Killer Necklace*)

The film further develops this theme through this recitation by the dwarf:

GOLD! It blinds and fulfils your desire

Wars have been fought for it

Nations built because of it

Kingdoms have disagreed forever over it

Humans have been sold for it

The gold refers on one level to representations of items such as the gold necklace. It may also serve as a metaphor for valuable items that people yearn for. On the one hand, the speaker points to the

ways it can be a cause of destruction and on the other hand, it is a means by which one can fulfil his or her desires. Mbugua is so blinded by his love for Muthoni and a desire to please her such that he does not notice her deceptive nature. His ambition of becoming part of life in the mansion also drives him to search for that necklace. Mbugua's desire for her is, in fact, a desire for the wealth she represents, thus, in a sense, she is also like the fake gold necklace. The blinding refers to the irrationality that sets in and causes people to take risks, as seen in Mbugua's acceptance of Jonah's proposal. It also suggests looking beneath the surface of the supposed gold akin to the idiom "all that glitters is not gold" (which could be said of the fake necklace).

The fake necklace is a metaphor for these pretenses. *Killer Necklace* explores the themes of greed and desire that drive humans to do unimaginable things as signified by the poem's reference to war and slavery. Economic agents determine the value of things, making the price of gold and all that it represents unattainable for some, yet such commodities are marketed as symbols of prestige and luxury. Their symbolic value creates a constant longing among those who do not have "gold" to look for means to get it. Sometimes the desire leads them to use unscrupulous means to get those things they long for. The characters in the film are preoccupied with presenting themselves as who they wish they were. Muthoni makes Mbugua believe that she is part of the family that lives in the mansion. To impress Muthoni, Mbugua borrows Jonah's jacket and shoes and postures as though Jonah's car is a cab hired for his use. The husband in the mansion lies to his wife, claiming that he bought her Muthoni's gold necklace for their wedding anniversary. Thus, the fake necklace is effectively emblematic of pretence which manifests itself in the film because of the secret agendas evidenced in these relationships.

The adjective "killer" from the title signifies the destructive nature of the gold necklace. The gold necklace negatively touches the lives of many characters in the film. This necklace destroys Mbugua's life since his desire for it drives him to commit a crime, abandon his values and risk his life. The film's denouement suggests that no one is worth having the gold necklace. When Muthoni sees the husband present it to his wife, she runs to the seated lady and fights to snatch it from her employer. Her action gives a new meaning to the words she spoke the first time she saw the

necklace: “I would die to have that necklace.” Ironically, those who die in the film are not in pursuit of the necklace – they are innocent people going about their everyday business. The innocent deaths signify the far-reaching consequences of greed. The futility of the desire to buy, give or own the necklace demonstrates how the system of values generated by shrewd economic agents creates a greedy society in which people destroy each other in search of material gain.

The stolen pearl necklace takes on a new meaning when Jonah inverts it from its normal use and uses it as a weapon to threaten Mbugua into joining the gang. He places the pearl necklace around Mbugua like a noose. This takes place soon after a highly emotional scene in which Mbugua walks to his home and stands outside with tears rolling down his cheeks. When he enters the house, he tells his grandmother that he is sicker than she is. This scene illustrates the sense of helplessness that he feels. Jonah’s act of choking Mbugua with the necklace corresponds to the way Mbugua’s frustrations seemingly choke him, almost taking his life away. With no means of survival, he is choked by the burden of taking care of an ailing grandmother and the pressure to join the criminal world. Mbugua has to find a way to navigate the threats that hound him so that he can survive in the city. His frustration leads him to join Jonah in the world of crime. Alternatively, one might suggest that what chokes him is precisely the hope of quick advancement.

Another form of the necklace is the tyre – used by the street justice perpetrators to mete out justice to street offenders. The tyre lynching or “necklacing” was a common practice in Nairobi in the 1990s and is still practised occasionally in the country. Necklacing entails placing a tyre around a victim’s neck, filling it with petrol and setting it ablaze. Angry crowds employ this form of mob-justice to punish alleged criminals. The street scene reimagines life on a street in Nairobi’s Central Business District. The street is abuzz with activity as street preachers, street children, street entertainers and other people go about their duties. In this street scene, Mbugua robs Bessie of her money. Bessie’s screams for help land him in trouble and the angry mob descends on him. The mob surrounds him and place a tyre around his neck and are about to set him on fire, when, in a sudden twist of events, the preacher who comes to condemn the murder attracts the mob’s anger and is set ablaze in Mbugua’s stead. The burning of the street preacher instead of Mbugua

interrogates the street court's sense of justice since an innocent man is murdered while the criminal goes free. Thus, mob justice is depicted as haphazard and ineffective. The critical question which the film raises and leaves unanswered is: why do people resort to mob justice?



Image 20. Street preacher murdered (*Killer Necklace*)

Kenyan humourist Wahome Mutahi in *How to Be a Kenyan* included an essay on the practice of “necklacing” titled, “A necklace that fits all sizes.” Mutahi’s piece satirises the “necklacing” custom and talks about what Kenyans need to do to avoid being lynched. Mutahi highlights the injustice of the street penal code by giving a true account of a man who was saved by the timely appearance of the police. Mutahi writes that “[h]ad anybody else tried to ruin the show, there was a chance that the mob would have turned on him and accused him of being an accomplice in the crime that the man was supposed to have committed. An accomplice gets equal punishment with the first” (64). The film renders the street scene in a fashion that closely matches Mutahi’s description of how the events unfold on Kenyan streets. The crowd in the film treats the preacher like the ‘accomplice’ Mutahi refers to. The emergence of this vice in creative work provides a platform for further scrutiny into this unabated crime.

Robert McKee, commenting on Wahome’s piece, states that the inclusion of the subject of necklacing in a collection that touches on Kenyan identity indicates that lynching in Kenya had become so common that it became part of the national culture (5). McKee sees humorous treatment of lynching as a violation of human rights ethos. To an extent, McKee is correct, but the question that remains is what the intended message behind the humour is. Unlike Wahome, Kibinge

highlights mob justice as a form of violence without subjecting the issue to humorous treatment. Her depiction of the crime challenges any easy affiliations on the part of the audience. Thus, she raises questions such as: why does the crowd set the preacher ablaze instead of chasing after the thief? What does mob justice reveal about both perpetrators and bystanders? While street justice should not be encouraged by any means, popular media holds that it reflects the larger justice system. The public's perception of a failed police system and justice system encourages people to take the law in their own hands, thus registering a crisis of authority as people do not look to the powers that be for justice. The absence of police presence and a lack of faith in the police and justice system are identified as causes (Krininger). The film's blend of two visually dissimilar items into one object (necklace) that entails different implications further emphasises the unjust nature of street justice.

To offer a commentary on the destructive nature of covetousness in the society, *Killer Necklace* has drawn on the double meaning of "necklace" within the Kenyan social imaginary. The film points to how this vice not only destroys those involved in it, but also affects the larger society. Kibinge links Mbugua's hope of quick advancement, emblematised in the gold necklace – to the destruction of the street preacher. The difference in structure between a tyre and a necklace – a person voluntarily wears a necklace which does not harm them, whereas sometimes innocent people (like the street preacher) are forcefully "necklaced" – leads to an emergent ironic reading when the tyre (heavy and rough) and the necklace (light and beautiful) are juxtaposed. In the end, Mbugua's greed is shown to not only potentially put him at risk as he joins the criminal world, but also points to the risks posed to the lives of innocent people, such as Bessie who is knocked by a car as she tries to get her money back from Mbugua and the street preacher who is murdered.

Conclusion

The films I have discussed in this chapter may be positioned as part of political theatre in Kenya. MSC Okolo suggests that “imaginative writers can offer critical appraisal of the existing political situation and in this way can mold or redirect the actions of society, its beliefs and values [therefore] influencing people’s perception about politics and about the best means of effecting political change” (1). The mission of these films is to highlight state agents’ mismanagement and societal complicity, factors that hamper advancement towards a society where values such as human rights, democracy, justice and accountability are upheld.

The preceding analysis has shown the diverse and interesting ways Kibinge, Essuman and Mutune address national concerns. I have demonstrated that in doing so, they often draw on the resources of allegory. This goes particularly for Essuman, whose *Soul Boy* establishes its allegory overtly through its use of magical realism. She uses an allegorical figure borrowed from present-day oral narratives and supports the magical realist narrative with a “coming of age” tale. *Soul Boy*’s focus has been on the issue of youth engagement in leadership. The film depicts the youth as the hope of the nation and suggests that perhaps, they can make the change required in achieving, for example, good governance and the much-needed ethnic tolerance. *Project Daddy* joins *Soul Boy* in the discussion of the divisive ethnicity in the nation. Unlike *Soul Boy* which raises this issue in a more direct and realist manner, *Project Daddy* uses cultural codes which are already rooted in the Kenyan society. *Killer Necklace*, *Leo* and *Soul Boy* are linked together by their focus on the slum. The slum becomes an embodiment of inefficient city management and further exposes the challenges of the underprivileged while revealing how the vulgarity of state power repeats itself within this social category. *Killer Necklace* emblematises the necklaces in the film; the necklaces are used to show the structural or causal connection between materialism and critique mob injustice.

These films, which were produced more than 5 years after *Saikati* and *Battle*, demonstrate a marked difference in both style and thematic focus. Whereas *Battle* and *Saikati* focus on the idea of returning to the past as a source of strength, the films of this chapter are invested in the

leadership crises in the nation, marginalisation of the poor and ethnicity. Though both chapters demonstrate national allegories, these allegories take very different shapes. *Soul Boy* and *Battle*, both overtly allegorical, draw on stylistic and structural influences from traditional narrative styles. Across the films, some realist characters encourage allegorical reading because of the way they are used to represent similar groups of people. Of course, the passage of time and different directors account for the differences. Nevertheless, the films are united in their overall focus on gender-related concerns and in the consistency with which they articulate the larger national picture of Kenya. It is worth taking note of *Soul Boy*'s closing scene as an illustration of how the "national" remains the key focus of these films.

Abila: You are well!

Father: Ah! I was overcome by yesterday's hangover.

Abila's father's startling, yet unsettling response is a perfectly crafted conclusion of a carefully woven allegorical film. The delirious father of the film's opening is now normal and collected. This moment demonstrates the tension between the realist and allegorical narratives. The two forms of narrative resist conflation; though entwined, they keep their individual properties. Although the realist character here is being used to embody and personify abstractions, he is unaware of his allegorical function and, therefore, he dismisses what the audience views as a grave situation by reducing his previous condition to a hangover. Contrary to what a keen audience who can link his predicament to wider socio-political concerns expect, his life goes on as before. For a moment, the film returns the audience from the magical realist world to the real world. I propose that here the film separates its constructed possible world from the film's present reality. The reality of the nation's debased status is embodied in Abila's family's status against a backdrop of the slum. In an interesting ending, the film's final visual (Image 21) returns us to the figure of Nyawawa



Image 21. Nyawawa looks at the camera momentarily before the closure of the film (*Soul Boy*)

After the church scene in which Abila and Shiku's family worship, the camera shifts to a long shot of the Kibera slum characterised by a continuous, haphazard metal sheeting. It then slowly zooms into an opening of one of the shacks, revealing a standing Nyawawa right in the slum. The foreground is the torn cardboard and corrugated iron which remind us of the poor city planning, poverty and marginalisation embodied in the slum. She momentarily looks straight into the camera and then walks into the darkness of the slum, disappearing as the screen fades into black. This engaging and compelling moment, where it feels as though Nyawawa is looking at the audience to assert her presence and power is juxtaposed with Abila's father's dismissive attitude. Her look implies a warning – that the audience should not be tricked into simply accepting the resolution of the previous scene. The scene is the ending of one story, but the audience needs to read the deeper story, which is the story of the nation that extends beyond the film to the lives of the audience. If we go by the final image that represents squalor, that story is not as pleasant as the former one. While reality reasserts itself in Abila's household, I argue that the film reiterates its allegorical import through this closing visual. The private story of the individual recedes to the background as the film emphasises the public destiny of the nation. The allegorical is so powerful it cannot be contained; its message about the nation embodied in Nyawawa are to remain in the mind of the audience.

The next set of films continue to address some of the national issues discussed here such as divisive ethnicity, corruption and marginalisation of youth. However, they approach these themes from different angles. These films represent real historical events and, therefore, address the nation more

directly than the films discussed so far. While the films in this chapter employ varied allegorical elements, the films I discuss in the next chapter skilfully use actual footage to activate their allegorical intention and try to represent the collective through individuals. Like all the films in this dissertation, *Something Necessary* and *From a Whisper* give special attention to issues that affect women – this time with a focus on the effects of violence on women.

Chapter Four

Narrating National Pain

Establishing Shot



Image 22. Darkness looms over the city (*From a Whisper*)



Image 23. Gloomy Skies (*From a Whisper*)

Ai ya ya ya

Ai ya ya ya

Ai ya ya ya

O yo yo yo

O yo yo yo

O yo yo yo

Mama yo

Mama yo

Mama yo

In a three-minute sequence, *From a Whisper* opens with this song of lament. Quick cuts move us between the scene of a family driving off, a group of men also leaving and taking the same route and Nairobi's skyscrapers and dark clouds. The bird's-eye-view shot of the city shows Moi Avenue, where the American Embassy was located at the time of the 1998 bombing in Kenya. This opening shot establishes a context of everyday modern city life: Government buildings such as the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA) in the foreground, a hotel further down the street, people going about their daily business and heavy traffic. The sequence ends with the two cars adjacent to each other in a traffic jam; a little girl in the family car looks at one of the men in the van and shows him her drawing. Dark clouds hang over the city; the mood is sombre. The perspective which cannot be associated with any particular character, posits the camera as a kind of distant witness conveying a sense of powerlessness about an impending situation. The audience is also thrown into this state of powerlessness and anticipation. In this moment the filmmaker establishes that this is not her story, but the story of the victims and she seems to suggest that she is approaching the representation of this event with respect and utmost care. The opening's low-key lighting, coupled with the sorrowful hum in the background accentuates a sense of foreboding.

Introduction

The repeated lines of the opening song are expressions of lament that signify pain and sorrow. The filmmaker's choice to start the film with this song is important because it prepares the audience for a story of suffering without divulging the details. This non-diegetic music creates the atmosphere and serves a commentary function in the film. The expression "mama yo" in the Kenyan context is a desperate plea either "for" or "to" a mother. It might mean weeping over the loss of a mother or it might be a plea for help from a mother, drawing from her role as nurturer or giver of life. Later in the film, the significance of this song comes to light as one of the key characters loses her mother in the bomb blast. This death is a key reference in the film's exploration of loss. At other times, "mama yo" is simply an expression of shock from a startling event. *From a Whisper* (2008) and *Something Necessary* (2013) show the painful effects of violence on the national body. Both films are about the violent dismemberment of the family, with a particular focus on the impact upon women. The two films are memorials of these painful events. This being the case, the song can be seen to live up to this memorial function of the films, especially if we view the nation as "motherland." This focus recalls one of the strands of the Mother Africa trope in which the woman "serves as an index of the state" (Stratton 41). (I will revisit this trope later in this chapter). Thus, the films decry violence through the demonstration of the suffering of the characters and offer possible ways to heal this pain.

The thematic focus of this chapter is the cinematic confrontation of national pain and the articulation of national crisis. It is concerned with the social, cultural and political function of two films that revisit painful historical events. Though the films represent historical events, they go beyond a mere replaying of those events to interrogating their broader socio-cultural and political contexts. One of the more intriguing examples of this lies in the way the films also stretch the definition of victims by allowing an exploration of perpetrators as victims. I also focus on how the films address the specific forms of violence experienced by women such as rape, disenfranchisement and the effect of violence or terrorism on the family and the nation.

These films, even more than the other films I have discussed, stress the realism in their narratives. But they can also be read allegorically as referring beyond the individual lives described to the

wider life of the nation. I argue that because national pain cannot be assigned a discrete identity, it cannot be represented. Therefore, the film's main characters, Anne, Joseph, Tamani and Abu become allegorical figures for representing national pain. Thus, national pain gets embodied in the films' major characters. The films struggle to represent national pain by attempting to tell the stories of individuals that resonate beyond their individual stories. The characters become exemplary figures for all citizens of the nation or for the nation. National pain arises from the intensity of shocking events such as terrorist attacks, post-election violence, massacres and other such brutal acts. As much as the physical pain is felt by those directly affected by the violence, the rest of the nation may collectively suffer various forms of distress. Such disquietude comes from discomfort such as the lack of food supply due to, for example, road blockages, living in a suspended state or the fear of being attacked. Those who inflict such pain may often be driven by a desire to use violence to make certain political statements. For instance, the 2007/8 post-election violence, in part, arose from "ethnic disputes relating to land going back to colonial times" (Kagwanja and Southall 259). As a way of coming to terms with this pain, the films reflect and document the nature and consequences of violence in the nation while, at the same time, an allegorical reading of the films reveal the macro- and micro-politics surrounding the violence.

On 7th August 1998, a bomb exploded outside the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, demolishing the Ufundi House building and extensively damaging the Cooperative Bank building and the US Embassy building itself. This bombing was the worst Kenya had experienced at that point in time. The extensive damage and the high number of fatalities that attended it, had not been witnessed before. The bomb blast left 200 people dead and thousands injured. Before this, in 1975, 30 people had been killed in a bus attack in Nairobi and in 1980 another bombing at the Norfolk hotel had claimed 20 lives (Mogire and Agade 474). But Wanuri Kahiu's film, *From a Whisper* memorialises the 1998 al-Qaeda attack. The film opens with the scene in which Tamani's family is headed to the city. This upper-middle-class family is planning a holiday to Kenya's coast, unaware of how the impending danger will alter their lives. The film tells the story of this attack through following its effect on one family whose path is also made to intersect with that of the terrorists before the blast. It also follows the lives of some of those planning the explosion and the friendship between one of these and a local police officer. The use of actual footage, the filmmaker's constant allusions to the actual event, gestures towards this realist film's secondary

level of meaning; its attempt to find a narrative to express the broader national pain and to give some meaning to this violent act.

Judy Kibinge's *Something Necessary* (2013) is the story of Anne and her son Kitur – victims of the 2007 post-election violence – and Joseph, one of the perpetrators of the violence. In the opening scene, we see many people running with machetes or pangas, others burning buildings, wounded people helplessly waiting for help and police firing gunshots. After this scene, the film narrows our focus to the parallel stories of the protagonists, Anne and Joseph. Their lives relay the effects of the violence at a more personal level. The embodiment of both physical and sexual violence in Anne's character shows the reality of the violence. Anne lost her husband, her property was destroyed and she and her son spent a long time in the hospital recovering from their injuries. The focus on Joseph as a perpetrator demonstrates the trauma that arises from committing atrocities and highlights the question of social responsibility. Joseph is troubled by his involvement in the violence and seeks to reform.

The two films adopt a fragmented, non-linear narrative structure which creates a sense of disruption between scenes. Their sequences are non-chronological with the narrative alternating between the stories of Tamani, Abu and Fareed in *From a Whisper* and in *Something Necessary*, between the stories of Anne and Joseph, often switching between the film's past and its present. Clara Giruzzi suggests that the non-chronological representation of events in *From a Whisper* "follows the confusion of Tamani, [who] is in denial of her mother's death" (87). This confusion is evident in Tamani's search as she seems to be disinterested in anything else apart from her art, which she hopes will provide clues to finding her mother. Tamani's artwork can be said to be an avenue that helps her process her trauma. The fragmented plots in both films convey the traumatised states of mind of the major characters. Ann Kaplan observes from her study of trauma memoirs that the memoirist's "memories are not always in chronological order: they are fragments, pieces, that weave back and forth different phases [of their pasts]" (65). With that in mind then, the filmmakers seem to invest in reflecting this aspect of a traumatised mind. This mode of representation has been noted to be one of the most effective ways that films and videos that represent trauma take. Janet Walker states that effective trauma films are "those that figure the

traumatic past as meaningful yet as fragmentary, virtually unspeakable [...]” (809). The seeming confusion in the narration of these films, I argue, points to both the dislocation in time caused by a traumatic event and the difficulty of making an individual story tell the wider national narrative.

The films position themselves in relation to the historical moments from which they emerge. Kahi and Kibinge attempt to represent certain aspects of these two events which, given the scale of violence that characterised them, qualify them as national tragedies. The post-election violence which erupted among ethnic groups due to discontent about the December 2007 presidential election results claimed about 1500 lives and left 600,000 displaced in Kenya over the course of two months. This was far worse than any violence witnessed in the nation’s history. Comparatively,²³ in 1992, 1500 people died, and 300,000 were displaced, while in 1997, 2000 died and 400,000 were displaced. Given that these figures were recorded over a more extended period, the 2007 election violence remains the most shocking.

Tragedies such as these often leave the members of a nation traumatised and grappling with questions such as: What happened to us? How did it come to this? Who did it and why did they do it? Arthur Neal has observed that “national trauma is shared collectively and frequently has a cohesive effect, as individuals gather in small and intimate groups to reflect on the tragedy and its consequences” (4). Such a group can be seen in *Something Necessary* in the scene where a group of men at a hardware store discuss the violence, wondering at Anne’s courage to rebuild her farm and speculating that her farm may be attacked again. The discussion registers the tensions and fears arising from the violence, while highlighting Anne’s courage. Another moment of collective response to the violence is demonstrated where Kibinge represents the commission of enquiry hearing: the audience within the hearing session is shown to be contemplative and empathetic as they listen to witnesses narrate the various forms of atrocities they experienced.

²³ The figures relate to pre- and post-election violence witnessed during general election years every 5 years (Rawlence and Albin-Lackay).

The shock arising from national pain has a way of inspiring a sense of togetherness and, for a while, every other national issue seems to be put on hold as the nation reacts to the loss at hand. Historian Daniel Branch points to the effect of ‘national pain’ on a nation through his description of the reaction of some Kenyans to the bomb blast. Branch records that in 1998, just before the bomb blast, there had been inter-ethnic clashes and raids following discontent over the 1997 elections. These clashes, he notes, came to a halt immediately after the bomb blast occurred. Branch further opines that the “events of the morning of 7th August 1998 led to a tragic moment of national unity” and “Kenyans temporarily set their own bitter divisions to one side as the country came together in grief and outrage” (230). In recognition of this pain, the Kenyan government announced an official five-day mourning period for victims and flags were lowered to half-mast.

As a way of coming to terms with shocking events such as the bomb blast and the post-election violence, different creative minds memorialise such events in diverse ways. By so doing, cultural art forms offer their audience or readers occasion to contemplate the effect of the atrocities experienced, while reflecting on the causes of the violence. This resonates with the words of the fictional commission of inquiry facilitator, who in *Something Necessary* says to her audience: “Until we Kenyans understand what happened and why we did what we did to each other, we cannot move forward.” The films offer the audience an opportunity to go beyond the initial shock to something more incisive and reflective. The films, as I will show, explore means of working towards reconciliation; for instance, the characters make demands of the commission to exercise justice by questioning the motives of the commission and not just accepting empty promises, as has been the case in the past.²⁴ When the audience of the film’s re-enacted Commission casts doubt on whether the commission will be of any value, their representative interjects by saying “shutting down won’t help either, this journey to recovery must begin somewhere.” This observation suggests a possible way out of the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that have been a characteristic aftermath of violence.

²⁴ There have been several commissions of enquiry set up to investigate and give recommendations about various national issues in Kenya. Unfortunately, many of these recommendations are never used to solve the nation’s problems (Kibii). This has generated a lack of interest in the work of commissions. Members of the public often view these commissions as waste of state resources.

Kahiu and Kibinge contribute to nation-building through the creation of these films that serve as cinematic memorials of these historic events. The directors, as part of the broader community of victims, view themselves as contributors to the process of reconstruction and remembrance. In an interview with Smart Monkey TV, Kibinge states that the film is “a record of a time we’ve been through as a nation, an everlasting testament” (SmartMonkeyTV). The use of the collective pronoun “we” registers Kibinge’s identification with the larger nation. She further states that it “was a hard film to make,” which reveals her own difficulty in remembering the painful events and the skill required to represent national narratives of pain. Given Jason Crouthamel’s point which speaks to the difficulty filmmakers face when dealing with traumatic national events, Kibinge stands out as a conscientious filmmaker. Crouthamel has argued that filmmakers need to find a balance between creating a “cinematic site where individuals can explore traumatic experiences [and at the same time ensure that] images and memories [do] not become simplified or appropriated to serve collective national or political agendas (87). Maurice Halbwachs, one of the pioneers in the study of collective memory has argued that although it is individuals and not groups or institutions who remember, they are located in a specific social context and, therefore, they remember their past in that context (22). The filmmakers’ role of preserving memory is demonstrative of Halbwach’s idea in the sense that while they may not have directly been affected by these events, they do the work of memory as part of those who suffered collective pain within the Kenyan nation. The memory of the post-election violence and the bomb blast is maintained through the piecing together of emblems within the films, alongside the narratives of the protagonists. It preserves the events surrounding the violence and opens the possibility for us to enquire how Kenyans got to a place of conflict so that hopefully, in the words of Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana, we are not “condemned to repeat” (133) those experiences.

At the end of the film’s closing sequence, Kahiu dedicates *From a Whisper* to

The people who lost their lives
as a result of the attack on the US Embassy in Kenya and Tanzania
And the families and friends who survive them.

This dedication runs while the song of mourning heard at the beginning is replayed. I view this as a way of mourning those lives. Notably too, Kibinge refers to *Something Necessary* as “an everlasting testament” (SmartMonkeyTV). Both films have a memorial function; they serve as

monuments to the memory of the atrocities and their casualties. In part, this accounts for the use of archival footage such as television and radio broadcasts that help to preserve the memory of the events. This memory is also kept alive by shooting sections of the film in the same locations where the painful events happened. Thus, the memories of the events are geographically embodied. The representation of the bomb blast, for example, takes place at the very site where it happened and the filmmaker merges the original television footage with the fictional to recall that scene. Further, to cement this memorial function, *From a Whisper* ends with Tamani and her father at the August 7th Memorial Park where Abu had planted paper love hearts all over the park gardens with the names of those who died in the attack.

At the heart of this chapter is an illustration of what happens to allegory when used as a mode of interpretation in films that represent reality. Jameson warns us against reading national allegories in the rather simple fashion of one-thing-equals-another, as this is “a one dimensional view of this signifying process” (73). He notes that the kind of allegory that he refers to as national allegory is “profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia” (73). Bearing that in mind, as allegory opens up the films to multiple interpretations, it also presents itself in diverse forms while employing various means. In the following section of the analysis, I structure the chapter into three sections which explore the ways these two films, although functioning entirely adequately at the level of realism, nevertheless evoke allegory. The first section examines the claims to authenticity brought forward by Kahiu and Kibinge. The second section focuses on the perpetrator as a victim and the final section explores the representation of gendered violence in the films.

In the first section, I will examine the relationship between realism and allegory by looking at the strategies employed in the films to present historical events. My discussion works around the question: how do seemingly realist films become allegorical? The most striking strategy is the interplay between the fictive segments and the real footage. Through stylistic and structural analysis of the films, I argue that the allegorical impulse revealed in these films is, for the most part, “built into” the films rather than “read into” the films. I have expounded on how allegory, through the interplay between the fictive and the real, enables the films, firstly, to bring to the

surface a particular view of the existing order of things in the nation and secondly, to offer a critique of those issues.

The second section examines how the films imagine the figure of the perpetrator and blur the perpetrator-victim binary. Both films propose a changed orientation towards the other, enabling us to reflect on questions such as: Who are perpetrators? Why do they engage in violent acts? Such questions may help us understand them and open up the possibility of understanding their victimhood as one of the ways society can come to terms with the violence. The last section gives a contextual background to the post-election violence, with a focus on women's struggles. *Something Necessary* foregrounds women's struggles in times of conflict. This section addresses historical issues that surfaced when the nation was engulfed in violence; such as the women and land question and ethnic divisions as a trigger of violence. Also, I explore how the taboo subjects of rape and abortion are represented as a critique of the social position or vulnerability of women and specifically the criminalisation of abortion

Claims to Authenticity: Allegory in an Interplay between the Fictive and the Real

Despite having actual events as their points of reference, both *From a Whisper* and *Something Necessary* would have to be characterised as fiction films. Unlike documentary films which address the historical or real world itself, fiction allows the filmmaker to construct a world closely aligned to reality while giving it a particular shape and meaning. Stated within the opening and closing credits of these films are the assertions that the films are based on real events. This assertion is geared towards positioning the films as credible renderings of the 2007/8 post-election violence and the 1998 bomb blast. Thus, both filmmakers make notable efforts to preserve the past within the films. On the one hand, their investment in the real enables the films to memorialise the events and, on the other, the fictive allows the films to engage with socio-political concerns. Through an investment in realist techniques, the filmmaker can manipulate the characters and events to make his or her fictive world real and as a result, persuasively convey the film's message. The characters, for example, allow the filmmaker to intervene in the immediate and broader national events. Kahiu

and Kibinge do this by narrowing down what might have been observed by some from a distance as a general event involving many people, to the personal stories of carefully selected characters. This realist dimension when read allegorically becomes representative of a broader national reality. Nichols proposes that fictional “narratives can give imaginative form to how real social conflicts and contradictions that trouble a given culture might find resolution” (*Engaging Cinema* 136). In the case of *Something Necessary*, for example, the complex issue of society’s attitude toward perpetrators is brought to light. As I will show later, the character Joseph allows us to explore untold stories of perpetrator victimhood; stories such as this one relate to the conflict, but have not been accounted for in mainstream media or official reports.

Other ways in which the filmmakers merge the fictive with the real is through the creation of narratives. The fictional personal stories of Tamani and Anne and the other characters, although limited by what they can represent of the atrocities in a feature-length film, are still able to give form to individual suffering while at the same time allowing a reflection on the national trauma as embedded in socio-political conditions which go beyond the violence. If we carefully examine Anne’s pain in *Something Necessary*, for example, it appears too much for one person to bear: she is widowed, injured and hospitalised for a long time, conceives from rape, her son is hospitalised longer than she is and she has to rebuild her farm amidst threats from her brother in law. If we looked at her experiences only through the realist mode, we will not see, for example, the political aspects of her abortion or her threat to strip in front of her brother in law. It becomes a more fruitful study when we begin to re-read each of those experiences, seeing through them to the other things they signal beyond the bearer of the experience. Allegory offers a useful tool for the interpretation of these narratives in that it allows us to see beneath the surface. Siegfried Kracauer contends that “what films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness” (6). He highlights the psychological and emotional power of film, arguing that this is a result of the fact that films are “never the product of an individual [and] films address themselves, and appeal to the anonymous multitude” (Kracauer 6). Arguably, one might extend the implications of Kracauer’s claim to suggest that filmmakers reflect the underlying mood of the nation and the issues raised are an outward projection of hidden mental processes. For example, through *Something Necessary*’s Chepsoi, the audience gets a sense of the discontent in the nation around

the land issue when he emphatically declares that the fight over their land will not end until they get it back. Based on our individual and collective experiences as a nation, for example, an incident in the film may trigger a connection to current or past events not necessarily related to the surface meaning of the film. My interest is not only in the representation of pain, but also in the ways the films reflect the “inner life of the nation” as it relates to this pain and its representation (Kracauer 7).

While I will engage with strategies employed by the filmmaker to project a sense of the real, traumatic events such as those discussed here can never be accurately replayed. I acknowledge that while realism gives the films some verisimilitude, the relationship between realism and truth is complicated. The victims experienced the events differently depending on their various individual circumstances at that time and thus, one form of representation may not reflect all forms of individual suffering. The testimonies of post-election victims, for example, differed with regard to the way the attacks happened depending on the victim’s physical location at the time or their ethnicity. This demonstrates the insurmountable task of representation, especially of events of such magnitude. Even so, Nichols argues that a realist film may “[exaggerate] and [distort] everyday reality to make its point, but this does not mean it lacks social merit or social significance” (182). Nichols suggests that filmmakers owe their audience some responsibility to not deviate from the basic facts. Films that narrate pain also need to demonstrate a degree of sensitivity to and respect for the victims and many others affected by various forms of atrocities. As much as Kibinge and Kahiui assert that their films are fictional representations of real events, their acknowledgement of the adoption of the use of fictive strategies to tell this truth does not free them from contestation about whether the films stay faithful to these events.

Something Necessary’s opening credits state, “[t]he characters in this film are purely fictional. The story is not.” *From a Whisper*’s cover jacket identifies the film as “a heartfelt drama based on the real events surrounding the al-Qaeda attack on the US Embassy in 1998 in Kenya.” In making this kind of statement, the filmmakers form a contract with the audience to tell the truth, while giving themselves room to “enlarge and intensify” the world they create (Corrigan and White 258). Thus, the filmmakers, by creative means, find ways of merging the fictive and the non-fictive to represent

reality by piecing together available facts. Among other strategies, Kibinge and Kahi merge archival footage from television and radio broadcasts with the fictive to give the films their authenticity. To some extent, the veracity of the fictive elements become less important if the historical facts remain unaltered and can even add nuance to history and memory.

As a counterpoint to the personal stories in the film, the archival material provides a commentary on some of the larger processes at work in the nation. Central to this section is the way in which fictional and real footage merge, an interplay through which the films declare their allegorical intention. If we return to Jameson's proposition that allegory is "profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia"(73), we observe that the films move from the fictional mode to documentary-like moments in an attempt to assert a claim to the real. These moments, compared to the fictional aspects of the film, can be regarded as more immediately and directly related to the real events because they are recordings of the actual events as they unfolded. The archival footage activates the allegorical mode by situating the personal stories within the wider story of the national tragedy, reminding the viewer that these fictional stories are fragments of a much larger story. Peter Morey suggests that national allegory is not expressed by an individual text or character, rather is "accretional, cumulative and continually being created and worked out"(76). Thus, *From a Whisper* and *Something Necessary* use various narrative techniques that enable allegorical expression, in this case the use of actual footage. The footage itself is diverse in subject and character and is used to make concrete the socio-cultural and political concerns of the film. They are placed in strategic places in the film and have a reiterative function, reminding the viewer that the personal story we are following is in fact representative of something broader.



Image 24. Actual footage of 1998 bomb blast (*From a Whisper*)

In *From a Whisper*, the fictive merges with the real during the bomb blast scene. The actual footage heightens the film's authenticity, thus intensifying the film's impact on the audience. In this scene, Tamani and her father sit in their car, waiting for her mother to return, when suddenly there is a loud blast. A lengthy chaotic scene follows this blast. Tamani's father joins the mayhem as he looks for his wife. Very subtly and seamlessly, the actual footage merges with the fictional; initially it is in the background and Tamani's father is frantically running in the foreground. Slowly the editing shifts our focus from the father to the footage only (Image 24) for close to two minutes before returning to alternating between the two modes of representation. The lengthy presentation of the footage demonstrates Kahi's commitment to preserving the integrity of the film's historical moment; she allows this unadorned footage to speak for itself. Consequently, it serves to heighten an empathetic bond between the audience and the characters. In this sequence, the buildings are collapsing. People are running in all directions. Survivors are extricating themselves out of the rubble and casualties are lying on the ground. The filmmaker uses continuity editing to cohere the scene to achieve a unified semblance of the real event. A smoky, foggy, hazy effect creates a deathly atmosphere. This scene powerfully captures the essence of the film's allegorical moment. I propose that, on the one hand, the husband's search for his wife and Tamani's frightened face looking out of the car window highlights the personal story of a family whose lives have suddenly been shattered by the blast. On the other hand, the footage foregrounds the allegorical dimension of this story; it is the national story of Kenya under terrorist attack which consequently unveils wider socio-political concerns. This is the point in the film which might be seen as the moment

when the real event and its representation coincide, with the former claiming priority. I argue that the moments where the film's actors become part of the footage are the moments where the film repurposes the archival footage to open up a path to the film's allegorical intention.

Something Necessary employs five broadcasts to capture different moments from the post-election violence. The characters engage with a few of the broadcasts in different ways, but are never part of the broadcasts. This is unlike in *From a Whisper* where the footage is not presented in broadcast form and some characters appear to be part of the footage. *Something Necessary* opens with television footage of the violence for close to two minutes. This sequence displays images of buildings burning, people running in search of safety, police officers firing gunshots, men carrying machetes and voices shouting "kill! kill!" (Image 25). These images situate the film in its historical moment, right from the outset of the film. Unlike the next four broadcasts which are seen or heard through the character's point of view, these ones are not attributed to any character which may be the filmmaker's way of giving them prominence in their own right as historical records. The significance of this to my reading is that it announces the film's allegorical intent right before introducing the fictional story. In a way, this suggests to a keen viewer that the film should be read as a national allegory. The next telecast airs in the hospital where Anne and her son are admitted. This is a clip on the challenges victims faced while settling in internally displaced people's camps. The following television clip shows Raila Odinga and former president, Mwai Kibaki shaking hands after signing a peace accord. The radio broadcast that follows announces a call for the public to assist in giving the commission of inquiry information to be used in its investigations. Like the previous broadcast, the last piece is a call for information which airs reruns of images from the violence. In each instance, the broadcasts shift us from the fictional to the allegorical and I read each broadcast as an extension of the film from the personal story of the characters to broader political implications.



Image 25 Men wielding pangas Nation Television Network clip in (*Something Necessary*)

The broadcasts showing the efforts of the commission of inquiry highlight the usefulness of the commission and trigger the history of various commissions in Kenya. They serve a complementary function, supporting the film's fictional commission of inquiry. The value of the commission is highlighted through Anne's experience. The commission served as the official body tasked to make inquiry into the post-election violence and whose findings serve as important historical records. During Anne's first-time visits to a Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence²⁵ (CIPEV) open-air tent, she is unable to summon the courage to share her story. She stands in the queue for a little while and then walks away. Finally, Anne gets the courage to testify at one of these meetings. Though hard for her, this moment is significant in two ways: the first is that it is "something necessary" for Anne to do as part of the healing process—sharing her story helps her come to terms with her trauma. The second is that it endorses the important function of the commission. Despite the misgivings some of the characters have about the commission, it provides a platform for "understanding why we did what we did to each other" (*Something Necessary*) and offers the victims a place to share their experiences.

Something Necessary portrays the attitude of the public to the commission of enquiry as suspicious. The characters in the film do not have faith in the commission. This may be due to the history of numerous commissions of enquiry such as the Ndungu Land Commission (2003) and the Akiwumi

²⁵ After the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya, a Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence (*CIPEV*) was set up and tasked to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the violence, the conduct of state security agencies in their handling of it, and to make recommendations concerning these and other matters (Government Report) .

Commission of Inquiry on Tribal Clashes (1998) whose recommendations have never been implemented. An example more related to this study is the CIPEV which was mandated by the National Accord and Reconciliation Agreement to investigate the facts and circumstances that led to the violence. One of its core tasks was to “make recommendations concerning measures to be taken to prevent, control and eradicate similar violence in the future; bring to justice those responsible for criminal acts; eradicate impunity and promote national reconciliation” (21-22). CIPEV made its recommendations, which Transparency International Kenya has since audited to review the status of implementation. The audit’s findings are that there were some constitutional changes made in 2010, but there is still much to be done (Transparency International Kenya). The pending issues include a demonstration by the government that it is keen on reducing the impunity evident within government structures. Additionally, the audit reveals a lack of effort by the government in social engineering to deal with the issues of ethnic chauvinism. Transparency International Kenya asserts that it will take a sustained commitment from the government for the recommendations to be fully implemented. Yet, the characters in the film view the commission as a public relations act to show the citizens that something was being done about the violence and a tool for the politicians involved to avoid the International Criminal Court. One of the unnamed characters in the film, during an awareness campaign about the commission says: “Let me ask you, will the commission give us back our land? Will it resurrect our relatives? First, resettle those who are stuck in the camps [...]” Some of these characters walk out of the hall. Their questions and actions imply that the citizens are not interested in a window-dressing exercise and wish that the real issues be dealt with. Their reactions also demonstrate a lack of hope in the process.



Image 26: Internally displaced people's camp (*Something Necessary*)



Image 27. Old woman weeps over the loss of her home, broadcast in the hospital scene (*Something Necessary*)

The broadcast of the old woman crying over the loss of her home (Image 27) is overtly allegorical. This broadcast calls the viewers' attention to some of the problems that the nation is grappling with. For example, the positioning of the broadcast showing the old woman crying in the internally displaced peoples' camp at the point when Anne is struggling to wheel herself to her son's ward, signals to the viewer that the story is not simply Anne's story, but a national one. In this moment, Anne is situated in the national violence as she watches a television clip of what she represents. The old woman's story and Anne's story are linked to each other. Anne's story allows us to attend to precise details of the effect of the violence, while the older woman's story works as an exposition not only of her loss, but what this signifies when it is viewed as a national problem. This broadcast can be connected to the larger issue of displacement and land ownership. The message of the broadcast is buttressed by a comment by one of the characters in a scene at the commission who

says: “go and re-settle the displaced people in the camps first.” The message demonstrates that apart from gathering at commissions, more should be done to help victims of the violence re-settle. The pain and anguish of the old woman are evocative of national pain. She is a representation of the estimated 600,000 people who found themselves homeless during the violence.

The broadcasts and footage are also emblematic because they form pieces of history. As discussed in the previous chapter, emblems lend themselves to allegorical reading since they contain images that “mean more than they represent” (Daly 358). Thus, the audience can see beyond the telecast by connecting the images to broader social, economic and political concerns. Film scholar and critic Michelle Langford (2006) has described emblems as “scattered pieces of history” (126). Investigating the allegorical images in the cinema of German film director Werner Schroeter, Langford argues that by taking what fragments we can from a film, we can make meaning by connecting those fragments with our knowledge and history. Though united by their focus on the violence, each broadcast highlights not only a different aspect of the post-election violence, but also varied national histories connected to this violence.



Image 28. President Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga handshake after peace accord
(*Something Necessary*)

By way of illustration, the image of Kibaki and Raila shaking hands provides a fitting allegorical emblem. This public handshake between the two rivals signalled a stop to the violence after the brokerage of a peace deal by the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Koffi Annan. The gesture’s intended meaning was to mark the peace accord that brought relief from the violence

to the Kenyan people. However, it is also emblematic of glossing over the real causes of the post-election violence. While the agreement between the two was critical in stopping the violence, it raised many questions about the sincerity of the two parties and their inattention to several divisive issues (Branch 2012; Horowitz 2008; Kagwanja and Southall 2009). Otuma Ongalo's newspaper article has referred to this handshake as a "grand deception" (Ongalo). His position is backed by the tensions between the two rivals and the wrangles within the coalition government. In the film, the gang members are upset at this turn of events because for them the main reason for fighting was not about Kibaki or Raila, but over historical injustices related to land distribution.

The film highlights how the unresolved question of land in the Rift Valley remains at the core of the recurrent cycles of pre and post-election violence in Kenya through the figure of Chepsoi. My reading of the 'handshake' broadcast proposes two allegorical elements; that of historical injustices glossed over by the intended meaning of the gesture and Chepsoi as an allegorical figure of disappointed youth. Chepsoi is portrayed as the ruthless gang leader of the perpetrators in *Something Necessary*. His callous treatment of the more likeable Joseph makes the audience loathe him. He undermines Joseph's remorse, waylays him and takes his earnings, keeps sending the other gang members to harass Joseph and finally organises his murder. Chepsoi is an allegorical figure of angry, disillusioned youth. These youths are angered by the state of affairs in the nation – a nation where youth have no opportunities for employment and suffer the result of previous unjust leadership decisions. These youth desire to see a better nation, a nation that offers them hope of a better livelihood. Unfortunately, this yearning for change at times makes them vulnerable. Their vulnerability exposes them to callous leaders who employ them to fuel violence in exchange for payment and the promise of a better future. Additionally, Chepsoi points to the allegorical import of the "handshake" broadcast shown above. He exemplifies a wider national issue. Chepsoi violently reacts to the "handshake" broadcast and in a moment of fury he says:

Why are these people shaking their hands as if nothing happened? This is bullshit! What the hell! Let me tell you we are not fighting because of those two. We are fighting because of our soil, our soil. Left to us by our forefathers. They have stolen our land now they have stolen the election. We will fight for it to death.

This response alludes to the unresolved historical injustices related to land issues in Kenya. Chepsoi and the gang act as some of the Kalenjin who strongly feel that the Kikuyu took their land. The issue is raised when he says, “they stole our land and now they have stolen the election,” meaning the Kikuyu, represented by Mwai Kibaki, whose election win is contested. The link between the theft of land and election theft is connected to Raila’s loss. Raila symbolised new leadership and a promise for change. The hope was that if Raila won the election, there would be change in the nation. This hope included the possibility of employment for the youth and perhaps resolution to historical injustices such as the land issue. Chepsoi’s reaction points to the fact that it was more than just election results, but that there were, in fact, simmering tensions that had not been dealt with over the years. The CIPEV report cites the land issue as one of the leading causes of the violence.

While a substantial amount of time and taxpayer’s money have been invested in investigations on the land issue in Kenya, there seems to be a lack of political will from the government to get to the bottom of the matter. Karuti Kanyinga who has published extensively on the land issues in Kenya, observes that settlement schemes and the land purchase contributed to ethno-political conflicts that date back to the 1960s. Kanyinga’s work traces Kenya’s politics of land rights in the former white highlands from the 1960s to 2008. His findings are that “the land reform program in Kenya has not been sensitive to inter-ethnic relations nor has the 2008 political settlement that led to the formation of a coalition government addressed the land question” (341). Kanyinga’s notion foregrounds inter-ethnic tension which is useful in discussing the unresolved land issue. This tension is portrayed in the film by Chepsoi and his mates’ threat to fight to death for their land, and to date this unresolved land issue remains volatile.

The preceding section has shown how the interplay between fiction and reality sets allegory in motion. The actual footage facilitates an allegorical extension of the personal stories in the film and gives these stories a wider resonance. In this way, it enables an intervention in the nation’s social-political sphere. The footage is built into the film at strategic points and reiterates the film’s allegorical intent. The fictive world allows the filmmakers to reimagine real events and develop central themes persuasively. One such theme is the focus on perpetrators, which I discuss in the next section. There has been little or no representation of the perpetrator in the official reports, let

alone an exploration of the possibility of perpetrators being regarded as victims. The films' engagement with the figure of the perpetrator affords us a platform to examine national violence in its entirety.

Blurring the Lines: Perpetrators as Victims

Within the wider community, perpetrators and their atrocities are shunned and they are often vilified. Therefore, the thought of perpetrators as victims may be repulsive and might be viewed as undermining the status of those aggrieved. Yet as Kibinge and Kahi depict or imagine, there is need to examine the burden of the perpetrator. The films focus on the perpetrators thus, enables the audience to take note of the minute details of their lives. A close examination of the circumstances that lead Joseph to his status as a perpetrator raises several socio-political concerns. Through Joseph, we see the difficult circumstances youth find themselves in, which sometimes lead them to engage in violent acts. His depiction enables us to see a perpetrator's experience and allegory allows us to find a form through which the complex nature of "perpetratorhood" can be understood. Thus, Joseph and the other perpetrators become allegorical figures that embody among other issues, the precarity that some perpetrators face. In this discussion, I will focus more on *Something Necessary* because it is more emphatic in presenting this theme. *Something Necessary* juxtaposes one of the victims, Anne, against one of the perpetrators, Joseph. Through this juxtaposition, the figure of the perpetrator is given consideration. The film restores the identity by giving two of them names: Joseph and Chepsoi. The other characters in the film often refer to the perpetrators as "they" or "those people," distancing themselves from the enemy—a position that mirrors that of the larger Kenyan society. *Something Necessary* also allows us to see why they are involved in the violence through an elaborate scene highlighted in the preceding section in which Chepsoi explains why they are fighting and why they will continue to fight.

Something Necessary reflects on what should be the starting point of a reworking of the social categories of victim and perpetrator. The question of the recognition of perpetrator's remorse plays out in the only scene where Anne speaks to Joseph. Anne had previously seen a figure run off in

the night after hanging a swing on a tree in her yard. In this very tense moment of partial recognition, the scene reiterates the theme of recognition of the perpetrator's guilt and remorse.

Anne: Young man it's you!

Joseph: (Looks down, briefly looks at her and looks down again)

Anne: You are the one who fixed my little boy's swing

Joseph: (Runs off)

Anne: Young man?



Image 29. An encounter between Anne and Joseph (*Something Necessary*)

Joseph is never able to speak to Anne, neither does he ever look at her. His reaction is an indication of his remorse and trauma. The suspense is heightened through dramatic irony when Anne says to Joseph “it’s you!” The audience (who unlike Anne already knows Joseph’s role as perpetrator), wonders precisely what she is referring to. Has Anne identified one of the perpetrators of the violence that she and her family experienced? The audience soon realises she is referring to the swing erected for her son by Joseph. Throughout the film, Anne never speaks about the perpetrators and does not in any way point to a knowledge of them. For Joseph, this recognition works paradoxically; his is a failed recognition in that he thinks Anne can identify his guilt, while she recognises him for the kindness of his penitent deeds. This moment illustrates what might be a possibility for a new start for offenders who are remorseful. For Anne, it is an apt recognition of

one who has shown her kindness although she does not recognise the significance of the act. Joseph's hasty departure indicates either fear or shame from his guilt. Through this depiction, Kibinge enables the audience to empathise with him, despite the dramatic irony to which the situation subjects Anne. This presents a complexity which might present itself as emotional ambivalence in the audience. Joseph's remorse and kindness is foregrounded here, a strategy Kibinge employs in her attempt to portray Joseph as a victim.

Additionally, the scene discussed above demonstrates the interesting relationship between Anne and Joseph. The two are connected, not only through the violence one commits against the other, but also by their traumatised states. Whereas in Kahi's film the relationship between victim and perpetrator is developed through those connected to them, in Kibinge's film, their relationship is more direct. Joseph is haunted by his involvement in the violent acts. Burdened by his guilt, Joseph is often seen in deep thought. He seeks various ways to erase the memory of what happened. Joseph seems to be so angry at himself that he violently burns the clothes he wore on the night of his crime. Joseph's change in temperament surprises his mother who has no idea why her son seems to be acting strangely. He eventually deserts the gang and begins to show empathy for Anne. As penance for his wrongdoing, Joseph is secretly putting up Kitur's swing and erecting a fence around Anne's property when he overhears that the violence may erupt again. Though this fence may not be an effective deterrent if violence broke out, the act of putting up the fence demonstrates Joseph's penance and care for Anne. It also shows a commitment to transform from perpetrator to a more responsible citizen and further, signifies the possibility of perpetrators becoming positive agents of change. Indeed, when Anne sees the fence, she interprets it as a sign that choosing to rebuild her farm is the right thing to do, even though Cheronno sees it as a trap. Their conflicting interpretations help to articulate the tension between hope and fear during the violence and its aftermath. Anne and Joseph are linked together by their experiences of the violence and each deal with their trauma in different ways.

The depiction of Joseph's trauma and remorse, read against the backdrop of the careless attitude of the other gang members, draws attention to his victimhood. It is not a common thing for the trauma of perpetrators to be recognised. The focus is usually on their immoral acts and how these

then traumatise the victims. Thus, it is hardly surprising that trauma theory scholars focus on victims, while tacitly repressing the trauma of the victim's other. Film scholar Raya Morag is one of the few scholars to explicate the perpetrator trauma paradigm. Her work on Israeli Cinema addresses the shift of the traumatic perspective from focusing on the Palestinians to the Israeli soldiers as depicted in Israeli documentary and short cinema (92-93). Morag proposes "a new direction in cinema studies to deal with national traumas, one that for the first time recognises a shift from trauma suffered by victims to that suffered by perpetrators" (3). Though Joseph is portrayed as traumatised by his involvement in the atrocities, my focus is more on his victimhood. On a literal level, Joseph is portrayed as a young man suffering the consequences of his involvement in the violence. On an allegorical level, his story begins to signify more. References to other actors beyond the film referred to as "big bosses" and the gang's reaction to actual television footage of political leaders which I discussed earlier, trigger the allegorical. Consequently, he is shown to be driven to violence by prior victimisation. I use Morag's conceptualisation of perpetrator trauma as a starting point that enables me to extend her discussion of perpetrator trauma which covers a broad range of perpetrators, to a more focused examination of perpetrators who in some cases can be considered as victims. Careful consideration of Joseph's trauma enables an understanding of his victimhood. Kibinge explains that her observation of the silence around perpetrators and the possible burden of guilt that some of them may carry informed her writing of Joseph (Smart Monkey TV). Her remarks reflect on societal attitudes towards perpetrators. In most cases, they are alienated and not given any room for rehabilitation. Kibinge's claim resonates with Morag's idea of perpetrators being treated as "unwelcome ghosts' whose posttraumatic account stands as a profound challenge and hurdle for the society at whose behest s/he was sent" (4). Morag's focus on the shift from victim to perpetrator trauma is useful in helping to understand the character of Joseph and in highlighting the nature of the society in which he lives. The film attends to the often ignored or forgotten narratives of the perpetrators who are as important to the history of violation as are the victims of the violence. Morag shows how three major categories emerged in the late 1990s during the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which she describes as follows:

First each category – victim, perpetrator, bystander, beneficiary – was examined independently of others. Second, the main categories (victim/perpetrator) were considered hetero- rather than homogenous; that is, the differentiation was made between institutional perpetrators, sectoral

perpetrators, victims by proxy, secondary victims and so on. Third and consequently, the victim/perpetrator binarism was broken, opening the possibility for interchange between the two categories. (97)

Important to this discussion is the clearly marked provision for every category to be examined and the inclusion of the perpetrator in these divisions. This inclusion attests to the possible value of giving the perpetrator a safe space to be heard. The dismantling of the victim/perpetrator binary forces us to face the figure of the traumatised remorseful perpetrator. Kibinge's investment in the presentation of the perpetrator as a victim situates the film within the third category. The society in which Joseph lives, however, does not allow him to be both a victim and a perpetrator, as it seems to perceive the perpetrator-victim binary as supreme. This suggests the peripheral place Joseph finds himself in; a place where nobody cares for his victimhood and desire to reform. This recalls Judith Butler's notion of precarity according to which the precariat risk not qualifying as subjects of recognition (Butler np). Butler defines precarity as "that politically induced notion in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler np). Joseph exemplifies this state by his predicament. Though he was used by the politicians and is remorseful, no one would understand his desire to reform. Joseph ends up in this grim situation because of poverty, which then makes him vulnerable to abuse by politicians and eventually, loses his life.

To some extent, the films depict the perpetrators as victims of larger machinations. Joseph's victimhood arises from his vulnerability as an unemployed, needy youth—an important factor in his choice to join the gang. Fareed is a victim of a wave of Islamic fundamentalism that invokes the language of violence as a holy service. My argument is that the films imagine the perpetrators as vulnerable youths who are failed by their leaders – religious, political or otherwise. These leaders employ them to decimate their opponents. Unfortunately, social and legal structures fail to consider the perpetrator's victimhood by leaning more on individual responsibility. Concerning South Africa's apartheid human rights violations, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela argues that the law fails by focusing "too heavily on particular individual crimes" (60), rather than considering "the question of structural and systemic crimes – the surrounding ideological and political philosophy" (61). She contends that as much as apartheid's politicians denied supporting illegal acts of violence, they never called for investigations of these crimes, nor did they "regard the liberation

aspirations of the blacks with any seriousness” (61). Though the issues of contention within the South African context and Kenyan context are different, her argument highlights how politicians support violence by turning a blind eye and never calling for investigations. In some cases, the leaders are the architects or tacit supporters of the very same violence. In this case then, youth such as Joseph employed by politicians, end up as victims through loss of life. In other cases, if they are apprehended, they take responsibility for crimes organised by people in power who take advantage of their susceptibility. Consequently, perpetrator-victims are created. These fictional characters are allegorical representations of youth in Kenya who are similarly without hope and at times become victims of a particular kind of politics.



Image 30. A troubled Fareed the night before the attack (*From a Whisper*)

Drawing on the fictional mode to narrate these real events allows the filmmaker to connect the perpetrator and victim in ways that enable the viewer to see the intricate web of relationships that arise beyond the two categories. These connections lead us to a place of ambivalence where we are not sure whether to sympathise with or feel contempt for the perpetrators. At the same time, we find ourselves empathising with both the victims and some of the perpetrators for the vulnerability some of these relationships expose them to. This is in some cases intensified by dramatic irony, as seen in the connection between Tamani and Fareed. In the opening scene of *From a Whisper*, the connection between Fareed and the then younger Tamani begins. Their cars are side by side in the traffic on the morning of the attack. None of them will ever be aware of this connection. Fareed’s involvement in terrorist action alters Tamani’s life. Later, we see how Abu,

who is linked to Fareed, helps Tamani solve the mystery of her missing mother. Tamani is portrayed as a restless soul who spends most of her time searching and hoping to find her mother, whom she believes got lost during the bomb blast. She invests her energies in her paintings, the dominant motif in her art pieces being heart or love symbols. Her high hopes are founded on her father's promise that they would do all it takes to find her mother. Her search ends when her new-found friend Abu gives her evidence to prove that her mother died. Abu, a security officer at the Memorial Park first meets Tamani after a report from the guards about her incessant hanging of artwork and spray painting the walls of the Memorial Park. Abu gets interested in Tamani's story and the two forge a friendship which is solidified through their loss: Tamani has lost her mother, and Abu has lost his friend, Fareed. The two share a form of victimhood that arises from losing a loved one in the bomb blast. The only difference is that Tamani's mother is a victim while Fareed is the perpetrator. Abu is pained by the decision his friend takes to be involved in terrorist activities.



Image 31. Tamani and Abu at her workspace (*From a Whisper*)

Unlike *From a Whisper* where the relationship between perpetrator and victim is quite entangled, *Something Necessary* presents this relationship as direct. The juxtaposition of Joseph (perpetrator) and Anne (victim) enables the audience to closely examine their relationship. As Joseph begins to empathise with Anne and further details around his life unfold, the lines between perpetrator and victim begin to blur. Joseph voices his feelings of guilt in the scene in the crime den where Chepsoi hands the youth money from the “big bosses”— those who hired the young people to commit

atrocities on their behalf. It is widely believed that these big bosses were often “politicians and business leaders” (CIPEV viii). The money in question is payment for committing acts of violence. Unlike Joseph, Chepsoi and the other gang members exhibit no remorse, seeing no moral or legal wrong in their actions. Their stance is due to the firm belief that their forefathers’ land was stolen and they must fight for it. To Chepsoi, the violence is a way of agitating for what he believes is his right. For unemployed youth like Chepsoi, the money serves as a further incentive that drives them to be more resolute about the fight. For the politicians, it is a selfish way of ensuring that the youth are committed to these acts of violence. The politician becomes the ultimate beneficiary. Joseph hesitantly takes his money and appears troubled. When the gang members notice Joseph’s unsureness, they demand an explanation. He confesses that he is troubled by what they have done to Anne and her family. At this point, he is warned against trying to abandon the group and is made to drink to an unspecified liquid as an oath to show solidarity with the gang. He comes across as a young man lured into crime without understanding what the consequences would be. Despite the warning, Joseph courageously deserts the group, even though he is helpless and hopeless to rebuild his life.

An allegorical reading of Joseph’s story enables a shift from his individual story to the broader story of marginalised youth in Kenya. Tom Odhiambo eloquently defines the state of hopelessness exhibited by youth in Kenya as “[t]he state of permanent uncertainty about the future, the improbability of ever getting employment, of ever satisfying one’s immediate needs and of ever planning for the future [which] causes a sense of hopelessness for many young men and women” (“Juvenile Delinquency and Violence in the Fiction of Three Kenyan Writers” 139). Odhiambo’s reading of three Kenyan novels points to a causal relationship between the state of despair among youth and their engagement in crime. Furthermore, Raymond Muhula observes that the participation of the youth in the post-election violence can be linked to their exclusion from politics and their lack of being engaged in productive activities (91). Chepsoi and the gang are a representation of these vulnerable youths who become easy prey to anyone who pays them to commit acts of violence. Security analyst Abdullahi Halakhe in his paper on election violence notes that “politicians, including government officials” turned to the youth to help them execute their eviction strategies (7). The youths were employed to use violence to evict people who were deemed opponents of the parties in question or who did not belong to specific ethnic communities.

This was caused by the claim by certain ethnic groups that they had been historically marginalised with regard to allocation of natural resources, especially land (CIPEV 23). Kagwanja and Southall observe that “Kikuyu youths and associated Mungiki militias, reacting to the killings and displacement of their kith and kin in ODM²⁶ strongholds, engaged in reprisal attacks in Nairobi and parts of the Rift Valley and Central Kenya against the Luo, Luhya and Kalenjin groups, the ODM’s ethnic support base” (260). After Mwai Kibaki was declared the winner of the presidential candidate race, ODM supporters resorted to violence, presumably due to frustration arising from a loss of hope. Raila Odinga had been heralded as the beacon of hope that would free them from historical injustices.

The involvement of politicians and business elite in the violence is brought into view through allegory in the film, particularly their mobilisation of youth along ethnic lines. I suggest that the “big bosses” failed the Kenyan youth in two ways: first, they did not honour their social contract to the youth and secondly, they turned them into victims by causing them to perform horrendous acts that they would rather not directly participate in. Thus, the youth became doubly victimised. Daniel Forti and Grace Maina argue that the state’s social contract to the youth should be characterised by “a state in which the sovereign avails security in the sense of both physical security and the opportunity to survive” (57). Joseph’s hopelessness stems from his inability to progress in life. He obtains a good grade in high school, but he cannot forge ahead due to his inability to raise university fees. Joseph has limited opportunity to live a dignified life. His search for employment shows how difficult it is to find employment in Kenya. *Something Necessary* offers a critique of a Kenyan society that continues to marginalise and exclude the youth from socio-economic opportunities. Seemingly, out of no choice of their own, youth such as Joseph become what Butler has referred to as the precariat of our times.

Butler argues that “social and political institutions are designed to minimise conditions of precarity, especially within the nation state” (np). Her argument corresponds to Forti and Maina’s idea of the state’s social contract to its youth which I discussed earlier. In the film, Joseph’s case shows political institutions as agents of precarity. Butler’s focus is on the link between the

²⁶ ODM is the abbreviated form for the political party Orange Democratic Movement. In the 2007 election, Raila Odinga was the party’s presidential candidate.

performativity of gender and precarity. She argues that “precarity is [the] rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless” (np). Joseph exemplifies the precarity of the poor; he is easily lured into participating in violence in exchange for money to survive his unemployment and consequent economic deprivation. Joseph’s situation resonates with the wider situation of poor Kenyan youth who, according to CIPEV, were used to commit atrocities due to “the increasing problem of a growing population of poor, unemployed and youth, educated and uneducated who agree to join militias and gangs” (23). Joseph’s fate brings us back to Morag who urges us to move beyond viewing the perpetrator simply as the undesirable other (4). This challenge enables us to recognise their precarity and it is in that recognition that we begin to see and hopefully question the machinations that produce the precariat.

Morag has argued that a study of perpetrator trauma forces us to face “new epistemological challenges” (99). One of the ways it presents this epistemic crisis is by forcing us to reconsider the notion of the perpetrator as an “unwanted ghost” (Morag 4). Consideration of the perpetrator as a victim enables us to ask the question: How do we deal with the guilt and subsequent desire to reform that the perpetrator demonstrates? The film does not offer any simple answers, but draws our attention to the gaps that exist between the victim, perpetrator-victim and perpetrator categories. It suggests that we should perhaps narrow these gaps as one of the ways of healing the rift in the social order. During and after the violence in Kenya, there was no opportunity offered to perpetrators to turn themselves in. The call was for them to be identified and brought to justice. This kind of approach made it difficult for there to be a chance for confession, forgiveness and healing for those willing to take that path. Joseph demonstrates the willingness to reform, but is unable to rebuild his life due to constant threats by the other members of the gang. His situation is aggravated by the fact that he cannot seek protection from anyone. When he leaves them and finds temporary employment elsewhere, they waylay him, beat him up and rob him of his day’s earnings. Though he feels a sense of self-loathing, he is unable to seek help. When his girlfriend Chebet asks him to report Chepsoi and his cronies to the Commission, he tells her: “What will I tell them? What they did, I also did.” Not only does this statement serve as an admission of guilt and culpability, but it is also an expression of fear of what would happen to him if he gave himself to the authorities. Furthermore, it demonstrates a lack of faith in the ability of the legal system to give him a fair trial or understand his victimhood.

Finally, when the gang realises that no amount of threat will deter Joseph from his determination to disassociate himself with the group, they brutally murder him (Image 32) and dump his body outside his mother's house. Unfortunately, the likes of Joseph are not counted among the estimated 1,500 who died during the post-election violence. Society has condemned them to be the offender without taking into consideration how part of society has driven them to commit those offences. As Butler has argued, "precarious life characterises such lives who do not qualify as recognisable, readable or grievable" (np). The reports on the post-election violence only go as far as mentioning that the violence was caused by youth who had been incited by politicians. The larger focus of the reports is on the victims and witness narration of what happened. The film makes Joseph and others like him (through an allegorical reference) "readable" and offer an opportunity to stop and consider these victims who have no place in the official history of the post-election violence. As his mother bitterly mourns his death (Image 33), Joseph, representative of cases of perpetration by coercion, becomes "grievable" and the audience is compelled to grieve with his mother for the loss of a young man, perhaps her only hope.



Image 32. Joseph is brutally murdered (*Something Necessary*)



Image 33. Joseph's mother mourns her son (*Something Necessary*)

Unlike Joseph, Fareed, one of the bombers in *From a Whisper* is shown to hold strong beliefs about the important spiritual task he takes as a servant of Mohammed. Subscribing to anti-western, specifically anti-American beliefs, Fareed embodies Islamic fundamentalism. Fareed goes on to execute the attack wearing a thobe and ghutra, men's Islamic clothing worn especially during religious functions. The film shows that at very short notice he accepts to be a suicide bomber, taking his life alongside those of other innocent people. Despite his strong beliefs, Fareed is shown to be troubled through his pensive facial expression and his constant preoccupation with his prayer beads. His trauma is also alluded to at the end of the film when Abu expresses his empathy toward him. Abu says that thinking about Fareed's "pain, weakness and frustration" makes him believe that forgiving Fareed is the best thing to do. The reference to "frustration" suggests that his involvement with terrorism may have been due to other underlying issues which are not specified in the film. "Weakness" refers to the lack of moral strength on Fareed's part. This is demonstrated by his refusal to abandon the fundamentalists' plan to bomb the Embassy even after Abu tries to prove to him that its ideals conflict with Islamic teaching. His unwillingness to change his position and lack of opportunity to show remorse may make it difficult for some of the audience to empathise with him.

Several studies link youth involvements in terrorist activities to unemployment, poverty, marginalisation and ignorance of religious teachings opposed to violence (Watheka, Burdette, Onuoha). While there is disagreement about the direct connection between poverty and terrorism, Onuoha aptly summarises the issue, writing that “though employment and poverty are not direct causes of youth radicalisation [...] privation and other frustrating conditions of life render youth highly vulnerable to manipulation strategies by extremist ideologues” (6). Joseph demonstrates the fate of many youths whom society has failed by not creating proper support structures to enable them lead meaningful lives. Sirrku Hellsten’s study on the involvement of the youth in terrorism emphasises that “the government needs to give attention to the youth by increasing opportunities for education, employment and political participation” (7). If there is no support for marginalised youth, terrorism or violence become a tempting and attractive option, especially when it offers them a sense of higher purpose as demonstrated by Fareed’s strong convictions.

Ehteshami has defined “Islamic Fundamentalism” as “a diverse set of competing political opinions held within the Muslim community” (179). Some of these opinions are brought out in the film by Fareed who explains to Abu that “true Muslims” are expected to fight idolaters. Abu, on the other hand, has a completely different set of beliefs, even though the two worship at the same mosque. The film suggests that fundamentalism arises from ideologies of a set group of people and not from the teachings of the Quran. As an example, Fareed explains that Muslims have lost their faith due to Western influence and that fellow Muslims are called to fight against the evil deeds meted against them by Western countries. He claims that America is receiving its due justice in what he refers to as a “blessed raid” (the bomb blast attack). The folly of this kind of thinking is that, among other things, it does not consider the lives of innocent Kenyans who die in the process. The film questions the inhumanity of a religiously motivated raid that has no consideration for life. Fareed is so steeped in his beliefs that Abu is unsuccessful in all his attempts to dissuade him.



Image 34. Abu and Fareed worshipping together in the mosque (*From a Whisper*)

Through the characterisation of Abu, Kahiui strives to offer a counter-narrative to the kind of fundamentalist ideologies put forward by Fareed. The film also seeks to guard against the homogenisation of all Muslims as fundamentalists. Employing juxtaposition, she uses Abu to question Fareed's justification for his involvement in terror attacks and, by so doing, she prevents the circulation of stereotypes in which all Muslims are treated as the evil 'other'. Such treatment creates tension among different groups and may be used to further terrorism rather than prevent it. Abu counters Fareed's statements by referring to the Quran to prove to him that his beliefs are fallacies:

Fareed: I am the chosen; I have given my soul to God.

Abu: The holy book says if you kill innocent people you are as good as having killed everyone and if you save an innocent soul you have saved humankind.

Fareed: My death was prophesied even before my birth. My family and friends will be blessed to the 7th generation. The strong must fight for their faith. I am not as weak in faith as you are.

Abu: Why should other people die on behalf of others? If the faithful and strong offer themselves up to die what is the value in leaving only the weak and faithless in this world?

By pointing Fareed back to Islam's central text, Abu contests Fareed's claim that he was taking a path ordained by the Prophet Muhammed. Abu shows that scripture prohibits the taking of

innocent lives. Thus, the film suggests that the enemy is the group behind the attack, al-Qaeda, and not Islam.

From a Whisper extends the definition of the perpetrator to include those that are complicit. The film demonstrates how complicity enables terrorism. Kahiu suggests that corruption and insensitivity to the warning signs surrounding possible attacks make the nation an easy target. The film shows how one of the bombers takes photos of the target zone to facilitate planning of the attack. The security guard notices him and is seen confronting him and grabbing his camera from him. Suddenly, the terrorist squeezes something into the guard's hand and he drives off with Fareed in Abu's car. Earlier, the same man had placed money in his passport on the bus as he crossed the border to bribe the policeman who was verifying the authenticity of the passengers' travel documents. On a literal level, the characters engaging in corruption show how greed can put a nation at risk; on another level, the audience can relate beyond that moment to the systemic corruption in the country. Read allegorically, these acts of corruption show the breakdown of systems in the society where those responsible for the security of the citizens become a threat to internal security. The police officer who receives the bribe at the border represents government officials who place selfish interests ahead of national interests. A detailed study of the terror attack by the Matthew Ridgeway Centre for Security Studies reveals the laxity of both the Kenyan and the U.S. governments in putting up measures to prevent the attack (Champagne et al. 2-3). The study states that "[a]l-Qaeda exploited weakness in the U.S. foreign policy in East Africa and was able to manipulate local conditions" (2). Furthermore, this study finds that corruption and poorly guarded borders facilitated easy entry into the country (Champagne et al 10).

Though Abu is portrayed as a diligent security officer in many ways, he is also shown to miss numerous opportunities where he could have taken Fareed to task about his suspicious movements. On one occasion, he meets the supervisor of the attack leaving the restaurant after meeting with Fareed. When Abu looks at him, the man averts his gaze and walks away. Casually he asks the waitress, "what kind of people are you allowing into your restaurant?" This indicates his suspicion of the man whose face we never see and whose back is usually turned towards the camera (except for the one time we see his face partly as he removes his fake moustache). These act as signifiers

of malign secretiveness on the part of the attackers. In another instance, he follows Fareed to the house where the planning and strategising for the embassy attack takes place. He also sees the man photographing the building, but does nothing about it. In the early morning hours, Fareed goes to pray with Abu and to warn him against going to the city that morning. Through their conversation, we learn that Abu is aware that Fareed is planning an attack. He tries to dissuade Fareed, who in turn knocks him down and leaves him unconscious. By the time he comes around, it is too late for him to prevent the attack from happening. Abu here can be seen to be complicit for his slowness to act, especially in his position as a security officer. Among the key al-Qaeda operatives in the bombing of 1998 was a man called Abu Anas al -Libi. The naming of the security officer Abu evokes his complicity and further blurs boundaries between the victim, bystander, perpetrator and accomplice.

Integral to the discussion of the perpetrator as a victim is Kibinge's suggestion of who she considers to be the "real" perpetrators. She suggests that it is not the vulnerable youth such as Joseph, but the politicians.²⁷ The contextual information presented at the opening of *Something Necessary* unflinchingly points to the politicians as the answerable offenders:

Kenya 2007

Following the results of disputed presidential elections, widespread violence erupted. Gangs of unemployed youth incited by *politicians* took to the streets all over the country.

The characters in this film are purely fiction: The story is not. (my emphasis)

Kibinge's observation is confirmed by the Waki Commission's report on the post-election violence in its discussion of the role of civil servants, the police, politicians and the public and in its chapter on "impunity" (CIPEV 444). CIPEV adopts the definition of impunity given in the Set of principles for the protection and promotion of human rights through action to combat impunity:

²⁷ It is widely believed that Kenya's current President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto indirectly participated in the violence. The two were charged, together with others, at the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. The charges against them were, however, dropped for lack of sufficient evidence (AFP; Bowcott and Correspondent)

The impossibility, de jure or de facto, of bringing the perpetrators of violations to account whether in criminal, civil, administrative or disciplinary proceedings – since they are not subject to any inquiry that might lead to their being accused, arrested, tried and, if found guilty, sentenced to appropriate penalties, and to making reparations to their victims. (qtd in CIPEV 444)

The report also notes that “there is, of course, a symbiotic relationship between the politicians and their supporters which continues to fuel impunity. Politicians rely on their supporters to enforce impunity while their supporters, who are the executors of the violence, get protection from their political godfathers. This interference normally comes in the form of “orders from above” (459). This set-up makes it difficult for those who fuel violence to be brought to justice; a condition that explains why every election year is characterised by pre- and post-election violence and thus, the cycle of impunity continues. The government and politicians become part of the complicity due to their failure to create an environment where youth can be positively engaged and by inciting youth to participate in violence. Politicians do not follow legislated electoral procedures and there is a lack of integrity, even within the electoral commission. This makes it easy for political leaders to tamper with the election process. The resulting lack of faith in the electoral process then gives rise, in turn, to post-election violence. The cycle continues to create perpetrators, victims and perpetrator-victims.

The films implicitly ask its viewers: Should we, then, have any relationship with or responsibility for those who commit atrocities? While Joseph’s embodiment of the perpetrator figure effectively appeals to our empathy, his death tells a lot about the attitude of the society in which he lives. It is a society that offers perpetrators no chance to be reintegrated into the society. Following Morag, Nichols has proposed that these kinds of films are part of an effort to get beyond trauma and guilt. He suggests that: “Such an effort involves hearing the confession of the perpetrator, assigning responsibility at every level, and finding a way to reintegrate the traumatised perpetrator back into the social fabric that produced him or her” (“Waltzing with Bashir” 84). Allowing the perpetrator room to be heard may provide testimonies essential to the investigative process and support the structures of justice to apprehend those responsible.

The preceding analysis has demonstrated how the two films attempt to blur the perpetrator-victim binary. Through an allegorical intervention, my study has revealed that the perpetrators in the films are lured to commit cruel acts under the guise of broader justifiable tasks. The films seem to suggest that society should not only condemn the individual perpetrators, but question the wider machinations that mobilise the youth for selfish gains. Whereas *Something Necessary* focuses more on the involvement of politicians and marginalisation of youth as contributors to violence, *From a Whisper* stretches the definition of the perpetrator to include those who enable violence through their complicity. The films use individual stories to indicate structural problems and invite the viewers to consider alternative possibilities. The individual stories of the perpetrators demonstrate the complex nature of perpetrator-hood and seem to suggest a differentiated approach in the consideration of the perpetrator.

Representing Gendered Violence

Besides the other central messages discussed above, the films give special attention to the effect of violence on women. They both have female protagonists who are doubly affected by violence due to their gender. Compared to *From a Whisper*, *Something Necessary* gives more emphasis on the gendered nature of violence. *From a Whisper* reveals women's victimhood through the death of Tamani's mother and consequently, Tamani's struggles to come to terms with that loss into her teenage years. In this section, I will narrow my focus to how the gendered issues raised by *Something Necessary's* Anne, enable an intervention in broader gender concerns. Different from Tamani, Anne's age and experience allow for an in-depth exploration into the challenges women face during conflict. There are no female perpetrators shown in either of the films. Instead, both films explicitly represent women's abuse at the hands of men committing violence under the guise of a cause.

The most gender-specific form of violence highlighted in *Something Necessary* is rape. Like several female writers, Kibinge brings to the fore sexual atrocities committed during the post-election violence. Illustrative of this trend are Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1996) and *The Stone Virgins* (2002), Seffi Ata's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Chimamanda Adichie's

Half of a Yellow Sun (2006). Obioma Nnaemeka's research on the depiction of sexuality in various texts on the Biafran war observes that, "[i]n contrast to male writers who focus on consensual sex and raise moral questions about the promiscuity of girls during the war, women writers foreground painful and graphic depictions of sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war" (255). Feminist scholar Pumla Gqola writes that "[r]ape is the communication of patriarchal power, reigning in, enforcing submission and punishing defiance" (21). Rape theorist Susan Brownmiller had earlier observed that "[t]he body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor's trooping of the colours. The act that is played out upon her is a message passed out between men – vivid proof for one and loss and defeat for the other" (14). Metaphors such as "battlefield" and "parade ground" show the dehumanising aspect of rape; the woman is no longer human, but a terrain used by rapists to demonstrate their conquest.

Zoe Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne note that while, "[f]or second-wave feminism, the primary objective was to put rape on the agenda in an effort to prevent it from occurring, now what is at stake is not just whether we speak about rape or not, but *how* we speak about rape and to what end" (3). To put it differently, Thompson and Gunne are referring to the sensitivity and respect required in writing or filming rape and to engaging with rape with a more purposive approach, thus, raising a meaningful discussion on the subject. Considering Thompson and Gunne's observation, my analysis of *Something Necessary* shows that apart from just demonstrating that one of the forms of violations against women during the post-election violence was rape, Kibinge raises the issue of the complexities that surround rape, among them the pregnancy arising from this brutal act.

Something Necessary voices the unspeakable through the inclusion of both a rape scene and the abortion that follows. Anne never speaks of these two events. This might be attributed to the trauma caused by the pain and torture inflicted on her. Anne lacks the language to speak about her pain. The intensity is such that she is rendered mute when it comes to the subject. Anne's hesitation to speak about her rape can also be associated with the stigma attached to sexual violence in Kenya. Kibinge foregrounds the rape and abortion through film as a visual medium of speech. She thus, challenges the negative myths that encourage silence around sexual violence by highlighting Anne's private story as an event that relates to the affairs of the nation. She employs verbal silence

in both the rape and abortion scenes to allow the audience to bear witness and contemplate these two events.

Both the CIPEV and Human Rights Watch in “I Just Sit and Wait to Die” | Reparations for Survivors of Kenya’s 2007-2008 Post-Election Sexual Violence report (for brevity I will refer to it as HRWSVR) attest to the presence of sexual assault during the post-election violence. Their agents conducted interviews with victims whose painful tales of rape, including gang rape and genital mutilation are included in their reports. CIPEV estimates that at least 900 cases of sexual violence took place. The actual number is not known due to the possible deaths of some of the victims and also the fear of reporting due to the stigma attached to sexual violence. Quoting CIPEV, the HRWSVR notes that “[w]omen and girls were raped as part of a broad pattern of violations against communities and was used to punish a particular ethnic group, instil terror, retaliate against them or cause them to flee from a location” (25).

In Anne’s case, her body became a battlefield on which ethnic supremacy wars were fought. The aggrieved group represented by the gang members communicated to those they wanted to evict that they had power over them. The humiliating and dehumanising nature of rape was used to warn the spouses of the violated women and other females, especially from the targeted ethnic groups. The message was that those communities were not valued, did not belong, were lesser beings and could, therefore, be defiled. Hence, rape was used to prove to them their alien status. This situation corresponds to what scholars have referred to as strategic rape theory. Jonathan Gottschall explains rape during war as follows: “like bombs, bullets or propaganda – that a military can use to accomplish its strategic objectives, rape is a tactic executed by soldiers in the service of larger strategic objectives” (131). Raping women becomes a means of retaliation between the warring factions.

Before turning to the film’s representation of rape, it is necessary to locate Anne’s sexual violation within the broader system of patriarchal oppression. Male attitudes toward rape and women are revealed in the film through the sarcasm and derision that meets Joseph’s confession of guilt.

Chepsoi: (To Joseph) If there is any issue speak it now

Joseph: (head bowed)

Chepsoi: And when men are talking they look up, don't be shy like a girl, look up man

Joseph: I am still haunted by what we did that night

(the rest of the gang laughs)

Chepsoi: What's wrong with you, it's as if you've never seen a naked woman before!

[...]

Chepsoi: Go back to your mother, foolish dog!

As it emerges in this conversation, the gang member's mockery of Joseph's remorse suggests that they are not remorseful about the rape. Their references to girls as shy, pointing to naked women as sexual objects and the ultimate dismissal of Joseph by sending him to his mother, reflect the celebration of male dominance over women. This scene captures some of the perverted thought processes of the rapists within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, one characterised by a conflation of sexual prowess and dominance. Consequently, Joseph's remorse results in his effeminisation (shy girl) and infantilisation (sent back to his mother). At one end of the hegemonic gender spectrum, men are seen to be powerful sexual subjects and at the other, women are portrayed as weak sexual objects that men can use for their pleasure. Rape, in this case, is one way some men exercise their authority over women and this scene could be read as reinscribing male domination and female subjugation. This resonates with what rape theorists see as a dilemma feminism has to confront in the representation rape (Gunne and Thompson 16–17). Gunne and Thompson argue for a shift of blame from survivors of sexual violence to the perpetrator, without giving the perpetrator voice and agency. Kibinge's focus on representing perpetrator-hood complicates this claim because she contrasts Chepsoi with Joseph, with Chepsoi coming across as proud and unremorseful. Though Kibinge endeavours to represent rape with utmost care, she faces a predicament, in that, while it is essential to situate rape in its specific cultural circumstance with the aim of showing how those circumstances enable both vulnerability and exploitation (Roynon 39), others argue against privileging a "male language of pride" (Morrison qtd in Roynon 39).

Joseph's characterisation, I argue, settles this anxiety. Kibinge does this by complicating the rape discussion through his remorse and victimhood. The perpetrator-as-victim perspective compels a kind of recognition that films do not tend to grant rapists. A further analysis of the above scene reveals how "communication of patriarchal power" (Gqola 21) also has negative consequences for

men. The film proposes that some rapists may not have been willing participants, but rather victims of peer pressure. Joseph's eventual murder by the gang members demonstrates that "under patriarchy, men who refuse the culture of violence in which they are told to participate blindly may live with precarity and life-threatening consequences" (Ojiambo 6). Through Joseph's portrayal, the film attempts to construct an alternative kind of masculinity—one that is positive, acknowledges wrong and is willing to break off from the practices associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Having given this contextual background on the rape, I now move to examine how the film portrays of rape. Anne silently deals with the issue of her rape and abortion and, although she speaks at the commission, she does not verbalise these two experiences. Within a Kenyan context, Anne's stigma may be due to the circulation of stereotypes such as "[d]ressing a certain way or being seen visibly drunk invites rape" (Gqola 149), which shift the blame to women. These narratives create women as objects of shame, rather than victims. Unlike other forms of physical violence, rape may not leave bruises or broken limbs, but deep, unseen wounds. Thus, it is difficult for women to seek justice because apart from the burden of the violation, they must contend with the burden of proof. This, together with taboos on speaking about sexual matters, contribute to rape victims choosing the path of silence.

The rape scene in the film is revealed as a memory or flashback. As Anne lies in her hospital bed recovering from the injuries of the attack, she is disturbed by flashbacks of events that took place on the night the gang invaded her home. Tanya Horeck has observed that "portraying rape via flashback demonstrates how trauma returns and imposes itself upon the subject..." (105). This trauma is seen in the film through the way Anne is startled and horrified by what seems like a nightmare, although it is a memory of what happened. The scene illustrated in image 35 is presented among other quick cuts through which the director presents the chaotic nature of the moment. In this scene, Anne is calling out Steve's name while pinned on the ground by two men, one lying on her side. The audience becomes witness to Anne's rape, momentarily. I contend that by employing multiple quick cuts, Kibinge preserves the dignity of the raped woman embodied by Anne. She avoids presenting an explicit scene which would risk turning the rape into a spectacle which, in turn, would bring into play ethical questions about the representation of violation, such

as the effect of such representation on victims and the audience. Critics have argued that the representation of violation should not minimise the pain of the victim by leaning towards sensualisation or the eroticisation of sexual violence (Adorno 131).



Image 35. Rape scene (*Something Necessary*)

Following the rape, Anne discovers that she has conceived and takes a decision to abort. The prolonged scene in which Anne performs her own abortion is disturbing for the ways in which she displays excruciating pain, the wincing, the different poses she takes as she goes through pain and finally, the gushing out of blood when the abortion finally happens. Here Kibinge's representation of the event is less spare and the scene may well be termed as "unwatchable." Asbjorn Gronstad, author of *Screening the Unwatchable*, has defined the "unwatchable" not only as "images and filmic segments so shocking, painful or simply tedious as to be almost impossible to watch" (10). Instead, he argues that it is a deliberate kind of cinema whose aim is "to trounce visual pleasure and shake the spectators into a deeper awareness of things of a political, ethical, cultural, aesthetic or epistemological nature" (10). It is important to note here that the term "unwatchable" relates to the disconcerting nature of a film, rather than to its visual properties. I find Gronstad's latter definition of "unwatchable" useful to this study, due to its proximity to allegory's "peculiar doubleness of intention" (Fletcher 7). As Gronstad writes, the function of the "unwatchable" is to get the viewer to a place of "deeper awareness," which resonates with the idea of looking beyond the surface to draw hidden meanings. Gronstad argues that sometimes this is an aesthetic choice which aims to encourage the audience to ask why the filmmaker would choose to screen what can

be termed “unwatchable”. Viewed from a place of “deeper awareness” which is close to allegory’s ability to articulate the meanings embedded in aesthetic modes, the film goes beyond a simple reflection of everyday realities and questions the constraints under which women live. Kibinge’s portrayal of Anne’s abortion demonstrates the complexity of a subject that might otherwise be easily sensationalised. Anne had no control over her conception and yet cannot get properly sanctioned medical help. As a nurse, she is aware of the risks associated with this procedure. Indeed, her awareness about the potential dangers is implied when she calls her sister and, without disclosing her intended action, asks for assurance that the sister would take care of Kitur if anything happened to her. Aware of this risk, she would rather go through the process than be burdened with an unplanned pregnancy. Through this scene, the film invites the audience to look beyond the act of abortion and consider the state of women’s reproductive rights in Kenya.

Something Necessary rejects lack of moral freedom and self-determination around women’s reproductive rights in Kenya. I concur with Robin Steedman’s observation in his review of the film that, “[b]y presenting Anne’s decision to terminate her pregnancy as a personal one, contrary to both socio-religious norms and Kenyan law, the film takes a decidedly feminist stance on the issues of abortion and sexual violence” (288). Susan Hunt argues that “[a]bortion is an embodied site where the histories of technology, moral and legal sanctions, access to healthcare, and patterns of therapeutic resort can meet new histories of subjectivity” (303). Thus, Hunt suggests that representations of abortion should be read beyond the act of abortion itself. I employ this kind of reading here as a means of examining wider implications of Anne’s abortion. The way she treats her abortion is a realistic representation of a likely scenario, since in Kenya the law would not allow her to ask the doctor who confirms her pregnancy to terminate it. She deals with it in secret, yet, even so, the act of publicly displaying (through the film) the abortion in a country where abortion is illegal demonstrates how fictional films can imagine an alternate reality. The film suggests, through its presentation of Anne’s abortion, that women should choose whether they want to carry a pregnancy to term or not. Anne’s circumstances show that in some cases, it is necessary for women to have the opportunity to make that decision and get medical help. Much as abortion and rape are on the rise, they are still viewed as taboo subjects in Kenya. Thus, these subjects hardly feature in films. This recalls Linda Williams notion of “on/scenity,” described as “the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies and

pleasure that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off scene” (“Proliferating Pornography On/ Scene” 3). Williams coins the term on/scenity by drawing on the Latin meaning of obscenity to relate to public representations of diverse forms of sexuality. The Latin meaning of obscene is “off stage” – she argues that on/scenity is “the more conflicted term with which we can mark the tension between the speakable and unspeakable which animates so much of our contemporary discourses on sexuality” (“ Proliferating Pornography On/Scene” 4). Williams uses the term “on/scenity” to describe the way in which previously taboo subjects, particularly sex, have become insistently visible through the industry of pornography, specifically “in the new public/private realms of home video and the Internet” (Williams, “On/Scenity: She Knows It When She Sees It”). For Williams, the value of such representation is “not the story of the scandal of pornography but really the story of – for better or worse – the democratization of it and the criticism that becomes possible with this democratization” (Williams, “On/Scenity: She Knows It When She Sees It”). Graphic depiction makes possible a critical and analytical engagement with the topic. Although abortion represents a very different kind of taboo, one which has never held the representational fascination of sex, bringing it onscreen could in a similar way work against the silence that surrounds it. The act of abortion in *Something Necessary* not only highlights the issue but allows for an evaluation of the problem based on how it is depicted. Notable here is the idea of the existing tension between the speakable and unspeakable, which Kibinge effectively demonstrates by using what might be deemed as “disturbing images,” rather than voice. These seemingly “disturbing images” are meant to disrupt the status quo. By giving them prominence within the film, these “disturbing images” show how the complex issue of abortion is not being given the attention it deserves in Kenyan society.

In the Kenyan context, abortion is not permitted by law, except when a medical professional approves it as a medical emergency. Because of its illegal status, it is a subject not openly discussed and women procure abortions in backstreet clinics at great risk. By bringing to light the issue of abortion which is mostly frowned upon, Kibinge exploits the opportunity the film offers to explore what Elizabeth Grosz puts forward as “[d]ifferent ways of knowing, different kinds of discourse, new methods and aspirations for language and knowledge need to be explored if women are to overcome their restrictive containment in patriarchal representation” (126). Anne makes it a personal choice; she does not consult anyone on whether she should do it, nor does she seek

anyone's help in performing it. Anne refuses to carry a child of rape to term. This indicates a breaking away from expected societal norms. Given the risks associated with abortion, Anne's action is a trenchant critique of the fact that abortion is stigmatised and criminalised in Kenya. Thus, Kibinge, through the characterisation of Anne, upsets dominant moral codes imposed on women without consideration of the individual circumstances' women find themselves in. Arguably, no other filmmaker on the Kenyan film scene has featured the subject of abortion as explicitly as Kibinge does in *Something Necessary*. The French post-structural feminist Luce Irigaray contends:

When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few 'prejudices'; they upset the whole set of values – economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language in that these are monopolised by men only. They question the very foundation of our social and cultural order; the organisation of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system. (qtd. in Grosz 126)

Something Necessary shows how filmmakers can use the cinematic medium, through fictional characters to, as Irigaray writes, "challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language" (qtd in Grosz 126). Kibinge's presentation confronts Kenyan law on abortion which is too unbending because it does not legally reflect the sometimes complicated circumstances that cause women to seek abortions. The film becomes a site where the filmmaker can intervene in a complex matter which is hardly discussed. In *Urban Legends, Colonial Myths: Popular Culture and Literature in East Africa* Ogude and Nyairo highlight an important function of popular culture. They note that:

Popular literature and narratives are excellent sites for understanding complex issues of power, especially in authoritarian societies where many people lack access to forums of political debate [and] because popular literature and culture, more often than not, take place outside the watchful eyes of officialdom and statecraft they have become the privileged domain through which the unspoken and repressed, often sensitive moral issues of the society, are voiced. (1-2)

Since popular cultural products depend on existing cultural and social narratives to create an effect of the real, *Something Necessary* represents and reimagines the sensitive issue of abortion, making an important contribution to the urgent yet repressed issue of women's reproductive rights.

Kibinge mirrors the silent suffering of women who secretly risk their lives while undergoing abortions through the silent dramatisation of Anne's abortion process. The audience watches for nearly three minutes the minutiae of what can be referred to as illegal abortion in the Kenyan context. During this time, Anne wrestles in silence.

Silence is used in this scene to allow for an emotional impact to the viewer and fosters a connection between the audience and the events on screen. Both the rape and abortion are surrounded by a lack of speech as one would ordinarily think of it. That said, the film's visual properties enable the filmmaker to speak about them. Unlike in the rape scene where the unspeakable act is transposed through another mode – flashback that manifests in dream form – the abortion is directly presented to us. Deb Margolin has suggested that “in order to bear witness to something there needs to be a silence around the object, an ability to hear, to think and to see” (96). Silence characterises the film's abortion sequence. The audience watches the abortion in its entirety through shifts between medium and long shots. Anne swallows the tablets and then her agony begins: she holds onto her stomach, leans on the bathroom door, soon after sits on the bed, leans on the wall next to the bed, crouches, after which she lies on the bed clutching the pillow. She finally sits on the bathtub facing and supporting herself against the wall. All these movements are accompanied by grimacing, wincing and, at times, groaning. The abortion (a private act) which asserts Anne's right to self-determination is represented here (publicly) to address a political issue. The abortion can be said to be understandable given Anne's situation, a widow left with nothing beginning to rebuild her life. As Asante Mtenje observes, abortion in cases of rape that result in pregnancy is a “decisive act of biological self-care in comparison to [a raped woman's] lack of sexual volition” (189). The film portrays abortion as a necessary step to regaining control of her life and shaping her destiny



Image 36. Abortion sequence (*Something Necessary*)



Image 37. Abortion sequence (*Something Necessary*)

Not only is the abortion a way for Anne to deal with the trauma that comes from the rape, but it is also a subversive act. This is the way she chooses to deal with the trauma of carrying, bearing and eventually having to raise a child born out of an act of violation. Joyce Nyairo and Catherine Muhoma refer to these births as “violent births” (418). Their study points to previous cycles of violence in Kenya and how affected communities still struggle “with the complexities of identities and relationships arising from these ‘violent births’” (418). Anne ensures that she does not experience a “violent birth,” which would then create an “invisible victim”— a term used in the HRWSV report to refer to children born out of rape during the violence. The report observes that these children face stigma, physical and verbal abuse. They are “invisible” because discourses on assistance to victims of post-election violence do not include them. Anne’s choice can be read as a way of stopping the cycle of victimhood. Her abortion, therefore, resists and counteracts the rapists’ intentions. The issues of reproductive autonomy and abortion raised in *Something*

Necessary are linked to medical, legal, moral and socio-cultural debates. *Something Necessary* also registers that though there may be emergency contraception available for rape victims, such services may not be accessible when rape happens during a conflict.

Beyond the abortion speaking to gender-related concerns, it can also be examined in allegorical terms. Approaching the film from the Mother Africa trope in which nations or continents are feminised, Anne becomes the embodiment of the nation which is abused and violated by those in power. In view of the contentions around the use of Mother Africa/Mother of the Nation trope, I will tread cautiously here. What several feminist scholars find problematic is the way the expressions Mother Africa and Mother of the Nation suggests a place of significance for women, and yet disempower them by reducing women to reproductive bodies devoid of political and personal subjectivity. Elleke Boehmer, for example, argues that “[f]igures of the mothers of the nation are everywhere emblazoned, therefore, but the presence of the women in the nation has in many cases been officially marginalised and ignored” (91). Kenya, for instance, has made significant strides in women’s empowerment, such as the provisions made in the new constitution to facilitate the increase in the representation of women in parliament and other government bodies and yet, the political representation of women is still low (Women Political leadership, 2). Stratton has argued that the Mother Africa trope in the hands of male writers enables “post-colonial male domination [...] and the romanticization and idealization of motherhood [as] a means of masking women’s subordination in society”(172). Andrade takes this discussion further by examining how female writers configure the nation. Her analysis finds that female writers such as Djébar Assia “have been at the forefront of exploring the writing of feminine allegories, both claiming and undoing the figure of woman as sign of the nation” (167). Andrade finds that Stratton’s work “assumes that there is a single correct way of representing women” and also fails to acknowledge that “literature is a cultural product, an act of representation with mediation at its heart” (14). This means that representing women as victimised or abused does more than just depicting them as weak; it also highlights the condition of some women and if represented well, can serve as an intervention in their circumstances. Following Andrade, I argue that the metaphor of woman as a sign of the nation in *Something Necessary* is both claimed and revised to give women agency. Firstly, I suggest that Anne can be read as an allegorical embodiment of a nation which is abused and violated by those in power and by its legacy of inter-ethnic strife and gendered violence

suffered under patriarchy. Her rape goes beyond the act itself. It is figurative of the wider political and social injustices. Here, her private life connects with the public life of the nation, bringing to the fore the political dimension of the film. By way of parallelism, the film brings to our attention the state of the nation; Anne's defilement corresponds to the destruction and bloodshed on the land during the post-election violence. Secondly, this allegorical reading then allows for a *détournement* of the trope. Motherhood is made a matter of choice as Anne claims agency. Anne's abortion challenges the ideology of motherhood which implies that "Mother is Supreme" (Stratton 90). Anne, already a mother to Kitur by choice, rejects forced motherhood.

Another aspect of gendered violence that Kibinge raises is the threat of dispossession that women faced after the violence. Women and children were at great risk of being displaced from their homes. Studies have shown that a high number of women and children were dispossessed during the conflict. Those whose husbands died and did not have title deeds to their land were bound to experience difficulties in the process of resettlement.²⁸ This difficulty is due to discriminatory property rights and customary laws. In a society where women are already marginalised within the existing land and property rights, their situation is aggravated when they are widowed. Apart from the destruction of her farm and other assets and the loss of a spouse, Anne is shown to be at risk of losing her land. Anne's brother-in-law Lesit tries to dissuade her from returning to her "Haven," claiming that it would stir up bad memories for her and her son and cunningly offers to give her a flat in exchange for her farm. Finally, invoking a patriarchal stand, he says that it is not right for a woman to run the farm on her own. In another instance, when Anne seeks Lesit's help to get her son back from her family, he ignores her plea and raises the land issue. This shows that his interest in Anne and Kitur's welfare was a ploy to cover up his agenda to disinherit her. When Anne refuses to sell her land to him, he argues that the land is his birthright, bringing to the fore customary laws which confer control of land to men. This claim also suggests that women have no rights and demonstrates patriarchal modes of thought that regard women as lesser citizens. Angered by the stand he takes, Anne faces him and speaks to him in Kikuyu, at which point he berates her for "kikuyuness" His reference to her "kikuyuness" bears on the politics of exclusion, suggesting that

²⁸ See Federation of Women Lawyers-Kenya (FIDA), Report on Women's Land and Property Rights in Kenya: Promoting Gender Equality (2009).

she did not belong to his community. Anne, then, embodies the doubly marginalised woman; first based on gender and secondly, due to her ethnicity.



Image 38. Anne confronts Lesit on the land issue (*Something Necessary*)

The questions of ethnicity that manifest here reiterate the previous chapter's discussion on ethnic intolerance. This issue which Kibinge and Essuman raised obstinately resurfaces here, but this time alludes to the catastrophic impact of ethnic tensions in the nation. In the previous chapter, ethnicity was raised as a constraining factor in the relationships of the film's fictional characters. The films resolved the issue by imagining worlds where the youth rejected ethnic divisions. Kibinge here revisits divisive ethnicity which she had raised as a threat to positive nationhood in *Project Daddy* (2004). *Something Necessary* (2013) speaks back to the 2004 film, pointing to the opportunity films have in positively transforming audiences if shared widely.²⁹ It is widely accepted that ethnic divisions were part of what fuelled the post-election violence. Ethnic mobilisation plays a key role in the Kenyan political sphere as seen in the way political leaders use ethnicity to gain support from their communities during elections. Political parties have ethnic leanings where certain major tribes form the majority membership within those parties. Ethnic

²⁹ Although marketing and distribution of films remain a big challenge for filmmakers in Kenya, the existence of these films demonstrates their potential to be transformative agents of the society. See Opar, Josephine. "Kenya's Film Distribution Problem." *This Is Africa Lifestyle*, 19 June 2014, <https://thisisafrika.me/lifestyle/kenyas-film-distribution-problem/>.

tensions are shown in the film during the scene in which Anne and Lesit argue about his desire to buy Anne's land through trickery. Gathoni, Anne's sister, constantly sees the Kalenjin as the evil "other" and is always suspicious of the Kalenjin community into which her sister Anne has married. When Lesit buries Anne's husband without Anne's knowledge, she remarks, "what kind of people are these?" Gathoni demonstrates how ethno-centric prejudices become deeply rooted when ethnic divisions are allowed to flourish. While acknowledging that ethnicity was a factor in the violence, Kibinge is careful to avoid developing stereotypes. This is important because one way of facilitating healing after violence is to refrain from the perpetuation of good-versus-evil narratives that continue the cycle of violence. Carolyn Yoder writes against simplistic analysis of causes of pain and trauma because this results in "equally simplistic solutions [such as] if evil people or groups are the cause, then the solution is to separate ourselves from them, somehow get rid of them or even kill them" (41). Kibinge carefully balances her characters to avoid perpetuating good-versus-evil narratives. She invests in the realist narrative and develops complex characters as a way of intervening in the national narrative which wants and relies on simplified characters and categories. Here, realist detail is used to complicate the national narrative. To achieve this, she creates characters who offer alternative narratives about their communities, for example, Cheronno, the kind and empathetic nurse who takes care of Anne and Kitur in hospital. Cheronno, a Kalenjin, is shown to serve Anne and her son without prejudice. Cheronno's positioning points to the fact that it was not communities at war, but individuals. Also, to avoid associating the violence with only the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu tribes, Kibinge weaves stories about people from other communities, like Atieno, the Luo hairdresser who lost her brother in the violence.



Image 39. Anne threatens to strip off her clothes (*Something Necessary*)

Notwithstanding these depictions of victimisation, Kibinge, through Anne, imagines a womanhood of resistance. Lesit does not cow Anne because she rejects his claim to the land and, in a moment of frustration, threatens to strip naked. To a viewer familiar with the history of women's resistance movement in Kenya, the notion of a woman publicly "stripping naked" conjures images of the mothers of political prisoners who, in 1992, camped in Uhuru Park to plead for the release of their sons. Three of these women stripped naked in response to excessive force used by policemen while trying to evict them from the park. Women undressing in public is a form of protest and, within the Kenyan context, is considered a curse on men.³⁰ Seen through this lens, Anne's threat becomes an outcry against the patriarchal, socio-political systems that endorse land laws which fail to protect women and their children.

Conclusion

I conclude by looking at how the films go beyond preserving the memory of the past, by envisioning a peaceful future. Richard Kearney opines that through a recreation of events that happened in the past, audiences or readers can reflect on their own lives and possibly make changes. Kearney refers to this process as "a way to give a future to the past" (46). I wish to employ his expression to show how the films are not only invested in representing the past, but also in sharing a vision of the future. After the scene in which the bomb blast is represented, Kahiu uses the film score in *From a Whisper* to share her vision of the kind of society Kenya should be. Through song, her aspirations are relayed to the audience. The songs are in Kiswahili, Kenya's national language. The choice of the language locates the film within a Kenyan setting and can be understood by a wider Kenyan audience, who in many cases understand Kiswahili. One of the songs that repeatedly plays after the bomb blast scene is "Zingatia" ("take into consideration"). The song is written and performed by Lavotsi. The song alludes to biblical proverbs and Swahili proverbs whose opening lines call a son or child to attention. This beginning prompts the listener to stop and take a keen interest in the lines that follow. Through this, she calls on the audience to

³⁰ See Grace Musila's analysis of the stripping act by the mothers of political prisoners. Musila, Grace. "Phallogracies and Gynocratic Transgressions: Gender, State Power and Kenyan Public Life." *Africa Insight*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2009.

listen to what she has to say; she takes the role of an elder or a wise person and gives counsel to the audience. This song is also a call to forgiveness in which the filmmaker advocates for peaceful dialogue rather than revenge.

Upendo ndio utatudumisha	Love is what will sustain us
Umoja mwanangu weka nia	Strive for Unity
Ubinafsi si njia ya kupitia	Selfishness is not the right path to take
Mwanangu sikia	Listen, my child,

The speaker of the song asks the audience to hold fast to her words: “Listen, my child.” She exhorts the nation to embrace love as a force that would strengthen, unity as a virtue to fight for and to shun individualism and selfishness. These three elements are almost similar to the fundamental tenets of the Nyayo philosophy of former president Moi: peace, love and unity. Kahi draws from the familiar Nyayo philosophy, perhaps as a way of picking up fragments from the past that could be useful in building a cohesive nation. From this song, one envisions a country where love, unity and collective existence are the pillars of the nation. She sees this as the glue that would hold the nation from internal division. Tamani’s artwork complements the theme of love; her pieces are centred around the love motif symbolised by the heart shape.

According to Gabriel Kimani, “Zingatia” “ushers in a sequence of reconciliation” (138). In the scene that follows, Abu and Tamani explore the subject of forgiveness. Through their conversation at the end of the film, Kahi suggests that one way to deal with trauma is by choosing to forgive. He encourages Tamani to forgive her father and dwell on the now, rather than the past. He uses himself as an example:

Abu: It’s all I want to do, forgive Fareed.

Tamani: After all he did?

Abu: I can never understand why he did it. Why he could use Islam to justify violence. I don’t know if I will be able to forgive him completely. But little by little, I will get to forgive him completely.

While acknowledging that it is not an easy process, Abu says he is convinced that forgiveness could make a difference. *Something Necessary's* tagline expresses a similar idea by its adoption of the popular phrase “Forgive but never Forget.” Fostering the memory of the violence helps to draw lessons that may prevent future violence, while to forgive means not being taken over by vengeful thinking which results in a repetition of violence. Both films carry a pacifist message which Clara Girruzi attributes to a feminine sensibility. Her analysis of the two films discussed here, which she reads from an African feminist approach, shows how the two filmmakers’ “engagement with” the politics of the nation “still nurtures the compromise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society” (Nnaemeka qtd in Girruzi 90).

However, the filmmakers are careful not to cheapen forgiveness or peaceful dialogue. Joseph, though portrayed as a victim, still faces the consequences of his personal decision to join the gang. Similarly, Abu’s pleading with Fareed not to bomb the embassy earns him a beating that knocks him out. Madikizela has observed that “forgiveness is a choice the victim makes to let go of the bitterness” and “is not meant to relieve the victimisers of their guilt, to make things easy for them” (97). She warns against “prescribing forgiveness” impetuously, as this “cheapens the process” and adds to the “burden of the victims” (97).

Apart from forgiveness, both films advocate for resilience as a means to forge ahead. Hardship, on all fronts, marks Anne’s journey of rebuilding her home. Her brother-in-law assists her, only with the sinister motive of fraudulently taking her land from her. The savings co-operative at her workplace will not lend her money. Her sister has no faith in her ability to rebuild the farm on her own and onlookers fear for her life. Out of personal resolve, she begins to piece her life back together. *Something Necessary* ends in an upbeat mood with the happy reunion of Anne and Kitur at their rebuilt home, after being separated for some time.



Image 40. Fresh beginnings, Tamani and her father reconciled (*From a Whisper*)

In contrast to *Something Necessary's* upbeat ending, *From a Whisper's* denouement returns us to the sombre mood of the film's opening. The camera once again treats the memory of the victims delicately, keeping a respectful distance. In image 40, the objective camera establishes the entire scene: a wide, high angle view of the August 7th Memorial Park. In the foreground are Tamani's paintings, behind them, the audience can see Tamani and her father embracing at the memorial stone. I propose that the two are represented as being very small compared to the memorial stone to convey their relative insignificance compared to what the memorial stone represents. The memorial stone that bears the names of the victims from the blast occupies a central place in this image, reiterating that this story is the narrative of the casualties. In the distance is a busy Nairobi street with cars in traffic. Tamani and her father resolve to start afresh after their bitter exchange over the non-disclosure of her mother's death. In this final scene, the mourning song that is heard at the beginning is replayed while Tamani and her father contemplate her mother's loss together. The repetition of this song at the bomb blast memorial site at the end of the film serves to reinforce the primary focus of the film – the pain and impact of the national disaster. The slow, contemplative pace of this scene might be said to commemorate those who lost their lives. In doing so, the film underscores the function of the space in which the scene is shot. The memorial park is a place of remembrance at the site where the destroyed American Embassy used to stand. The park

has various programmes and initiatives aimed at educating the public on the consequences of terrorism.

This chapter has established how fictional filmic renditions of real painful personal stories read allegorically provide a way of seeing their wider national significance. One of the most effective strategies employed is the deliberate merging of actual footage with the fictive stories. This approach has enabled a discussion of the broader issues in the nation such as how some leaders perpetuate violence for self-gain, at the expense of vulnerable youth. At the same time, it pointed to historical land injustices that trigger the appalling cycles of pre- and post-election violence that characterise general elections in Kenya. Additionally, the fictive characters become allegorical embodiments of abstract issues that do not have a form, such as rape, abortion and precarity, hence giving them a shape that allows reflection. *Something Necessary* features various forms of violence experienced by women during the violence. The film further demonstrates how Anne rises from victimhood through a choice to rebuild her life, while resolutely bringing to the fore frowned upon subjects of rape and abortion. Both films focus on the “undesirable” perpetrator, forcing us to examine how our lack of consideration of the perpetrator as victimised or traumatised hinders a possible route to retribution, forgiveness and healing.

These two films, drawn from past events, are in some ways obviously national allegories. They have employed archival footage to unmistakably announce their allegorical intention. These images are culturally readable iconographical sources which support the fictional elements of the narrative. As my discussion has shown; rather than just preserve the memory of the past, as national allegories, the films have supplemented this historical past by extending the discussion to include socio-political concerns that reflect not only on the time from which they arise, but also provide commentaries on the present moment.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Reflections on Women's Myriad Voices in Kenyan Cinema

Establishing Shot



Image 41. Abila and Shiku performing a skit in the film (*Soul Boy*)

Father (in skit): Get out of my sight, what is the doctor telling me? HIV? HIV he says. This is the end of me, now what will these children do? This can't be my fault. This is their mother's fault. I have done all I can, but they won't listen. One of the reasons is that their mother doesn't talk to them. I don't want to defend myself. There are plenty of other men here. I want a *man* to come up and defend me. Young man (points to Abila) come on! Let's see if we can solve this problem. Come on up here. *Speak as your father.*

(Abila gets onto the podium)

Mother (in skit): Was this child born only to its mother. Wasn't there a father too? Let's call a girl 'up here too, so *she can support all women.* You there! (points to Shiku). So, go on "*mother*" (Shiku) and tell this "*father*" (Abila) that the children aren't only yours.

(*Soul Boy* - my emphasis)

In closing, I briefly return to this scene from *Soul Boy*, which effectively sums up the nature and function of the films in this study. Here, Abila takes on the first of his seven tasks; that of slipping into someone else's skin and taking up their responsibilities in front of others. Abila acts as a representative of 'fathers' and Shiku represents 'mothers.' The four people on the stage are representatives of two generations, the older and the younger generation in Kenya. We could say that the older generation embodies the past and the present and the youthful Shiku and Abila embody the future. It is interesting that the scene itself encapsulates an embedded narrative projected through a skit within the film. One way to interpret this scene is to take the skit as a metacommentary that instructs the audience how they should read the film. In this scene, Abila and Shiku are literally – that is, in the diegesis itself – converted into representative figures and this representative function is foregrounded through the other characters' statements. The older man asks Abila to defend him and to *speaking as his father*, while the older woman asks Shiku to *support all women*. Additionally, the way these roles are described reflects the way this film goes on to present the subjects in question. When Abila is asked to *speaking as his father* he reiterates the film's depiction of his father as irresponsible. Shiku's task to *support all women* is in line with her allegorical role – in which she demonstrates a possible future where men and women are equal partners in national governance. She confidently opposes Abila's arguments and points to his irresponsibility. Abila proposes that women's roles are limited to the domestic sphere and men's roles outside the home, with men's work being more important than that of women. The facility with which he takes on this role suggests how patriarchal tendencies are played out in homes, leading to their normalization and reproduction. The skit itself is instructive in that it recognises that in the search for solutions to national problems, it is important to consider the multiple voices in the nation. The father in the skit admits to his helplessness and asks a *man* to help him resolve his family's crisis, but the lady reminds him that the problem can only be solved if all key players are involved. This family, hit by HIV, can be read as exemplary of many members of the nation. Thus, the film suggests that women and youth ought to be key players in national matters. Like the podium on which Abila and Shiku momentarily perform, the study finds that the films in this study provide a platform for Kenyan women filmmakers to speak diversely. They do this by representing the multiplicity of voices in the nation through their engagement of a range of characters who speak to various concerns about women and the nation.

This dissertation has explored selected fiction films directed by Kenyan women and has demonstrated how filmmaking has opened up a space for women to conceptualise and narrate new stories about women and the nation. The films I have read affirm the role of women filmmakers as cultural producers. Annette Mbaye D'erneville explains that taking up this role "allow[s] women to express themselves, to be witnesses to their era and to reflect a realistic image of Africa in their own lives" (qtd. in Ellerson 48–49). My focus has been on how these films, which are invested in representing reality, allow for an exploration of the many meanings in them. The films selected focus on national concerns; thus, I have read them as national allegories and demonstrated that by analysing them in this manner, one can gain access to both their explicit and implicit

concerns. The wider allegorical resonances, for example, relate to the particular forms through which patriarchal power finds expression in the Kenyan context. In building on the scant written work on Kenyan women's films, I interrogated the selected films and realised that in reading them as national allegories, they reveal a sharp commentary on national politics.

Although Jameson's concept of 'national allegory' has provided a useful mapping process for reading these films as national allegories, my reading of the films reveals that his formulation is perhaps too narrow. Jameson suggests that the relationship between the private and the public spheres in third-world texts differs from that of first-world texts mainly because of the radical split between those two spheres in the first world. A situation which, he argues, has emanated from the West's capitalist culture (69). He, therefore, posits that the third world's tendency to project political concerns through private stories of individuals is 'alien' to first-world readers. Jameson argues that "it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts *alien* to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading" (69, my emphasis). Jameson's point has been criticised before for its generalisations and the analysis in this research also finds it problematic in two ways: one is the limitation of third-world texts to the national allegory mode and secondly, homogenising the first world's reading habits.

What has emerged from my reading is that these texts can, in fact, work on two or more levels and, therefore, cease to be 'alien' to other readers. In other words, they are not exclusively national allegories. Although I do argue that the films I study function as national allegories, they take a realist approach and can be rewardingly viewed as realist films. They feature certain aspects of real experiences and it is these realist or material aspects that are drawn on to construct alternative meanings. The co-existence of realism and allegory generates some tension as the two modes encroach into each other's territory. This tension which is inherent in the films, complicates Jameson's claims which seem to devalue the realist narrative. A close examination shows that some of the realist characters, events, things or places in these films lean towards allegory. One can see in these elements or characters an inclination towards "otherness" (Nyawawa is a human with an animal hoof) and contradiction (Abila's father claims to be in another world, yet the next day he is unaware of that experience). This points to the possibility that they are representations

of abstract ideas beyond themselves. Take Essuman's *Soul Boy*, for example, do the strategies employed encourage reading for realism? Or allegory? The representative strategies employed might present moments of contradiction in the viewers' minds. I argue that the films can be read as any of these modes based on what prior contextual knowledge a reader has. Realism presents the everyday and, in turn, the everyday always functions as a sign of 'other' domains. While I acknowledge the films' realist approach, I found it productive to read them as national allegories because allegory makes it possible for one to see in the films' realist details, agents for possibilities that exceed their realities. My study has, therefore, established a more complex reading of national allegory that does not limit texts to one mode of representation – that of allegory – but allows the reader room for flexible interpretation, dependent on their reading environment.

Reading these films as national allegories entailed pursuing clues in them that invite an allegorical reading. The study finds that the films achieve their allegorical status through the strategic use of emblems and cultural codes. Some of the films also draw on traditional oral literature forms. Those that represent real events activate the allegorical through the interplay between documentary reality and fiction. Additionally, across the films, characters are used to concretise abstract ideas or to serve as embodiments of similar categories of people. These allegorical markers demonstrate that allegory can be a feature of any film and can be realised in various ways, depending on the relationship between a film and its audience. Further, some of these allegorical materials serve a stylistic function, giving the films a distinct Kenyan flavour. Striking examples of these are the mugumo tree, Nyawawa and Gikuyu folktales.

An inevitable limitation I find is that given the fact that one should have some contextual background to effect this kind of reading, some audiences may miss out on some aspects of the films' humour or even vital details around its themes. Katherine Sugg argues that "allegory is a communicative mode that necessarily produces an array of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of those who recognise and understand the allegorical encoding and those for whom that code and its referents are not intelligible" (xiii). Sugg sees this as an important factor of allegorical reading because it is that prior knowledge that situates the texts politically. Having said that, 'outsiders' can still enjoy the films' rich allegorical material at the level of the realist narrative without having to search for deeper meanings. This points to two of the important contributions of this study: firstly, because

it has situated these films in their political, social and cultural contexts, the study will help future scholars or audiences of these films to appreciate them in relation to those contexts. Secondly, the study has shown that films that are national allegories are not necessarily limited to one mode but can accommodate other reading strategies.

As this study has shown, allegory readily lends itself to a gender critique of the status quo. Even so, one should acknowledge that the use of the female as an allegorical figure always entails the risk of idealising, thus denying them their actual qualities. Worse still, it may exploit their sexuality and depict them as victims, thus justifying and reinforcing the abuse of women (Tambling 170; Stratton 51–55; Ogude 119–22). Ogude's reading of Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood* illustrates this abuse. He argues that though depicted as a woman of "power and strength, Wanja is still objectified by Ngugi and often portrayed as having that irresistible charm that is needed to seduce men" (117). I find it remarkable that the directors handled with great caution the adoption of women as allegorical figures in these films. They are cautious not to detract from the gains they envision for women by highlighting women's plight and then, recuperating women from places of shame. Illustrative of this is *Soul Boy's* recouping of Nyawawa from suicidal victimhood and from prostitution to the one who facilitates the restoration of the nation. Additionally, *Something Necessary's* Anne from post-election victimhood to one who challenges the status quo by voicing the silenced issues around women's reproductive rights in Kenya. Though not the focus of this study, in some ways my findings suggest that allegory has been handled by women in a way quite different from men.

What I find most compelling about the nature of allegory is the way it allows multiple avenues for interpretation. *Something Necessary's* Anne illustrates this possibility. Reading her character allegorically enlarges her capabilities such that she seems to take on responsibility for other women too. She becomes a representation of many other women who have suffered the effects of the post-election violence. Besides that, the subjects of rape, abortion and women's land rights that the film raises through Anne stretch beyond the violence to broader issues that affect women. Still, she can read as an allegory of the nation if we employ the woman as an index of the state of the nation; a sub-trope of the Mother Africa trope, which is here usefully détourned. These interpretations do not in any way detract from the first layer of the narrative, but make it more productive and

complex in so far as Anne's characterisation encapsulates many meanings. Moreover, the film points to the suitability of allegory as a means of representing multiple concerns surrounding nationhood. Like other creative minds from the moment in which this film emerges, *Something Necessary* seeks to intervene in the politics of its day. The film wants to address state malpractice, give presence to silenced groups in the nation, give voice to women's struggles and such other issues. As mentioned in the introduction, allegorical figures loom larger than ordinary humans because they embody more than a single film or any other text can hold.

While some critics find allegory to be reductive, this dissertation proposes that this need not be the case and that it may, in fact, be enhancing. Fiction author, Simon Dillon argues that reading texts as allegories against the author's intentions reduces them to a single message or lesson (Dillon). Similarly, Derek Attridge suggests that allegory "deals with the already known, whereas literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response" (64). The results of this study prove that what Attridge attributes to 'literature', as a matter of fact, can be ascribed to allegory. Dillon and Attridge's sense of allegory is that which arises from defining allegory in the simple sense of having one secondary meaning: the traditional way of claiming that one thing or event or person can only represent one other thing. Instead, the kind of allegorical interpretation employed in this study is one that opens up the allegorical elements of the films into multiple interpretations, without disregarding the realist dimensions of the text.

This dissertation opened the analytical chapters with a question Mzee asks Mumbi in Wanjiru Kinyanjui's *The Battle of The Sacred Tree*: "Do women talk like that?" As the preceding chapters have shown, the women have resolved to speak in multiple voices. Fictional filmmaking is a powerful tool that affords the directors opportunity to imagine different ways of being female and of seeing their nation. They have thus, created alternative images of women which allowed them (filmmakers and characters) to intervene in national politics, thus "reshaping national cultures in a way that is more hospitable to women's presence" (Boehmer 12). All the films have given their female characters agency, questioning received notions of, for example, womanhood and motherhood. Judy Kibinge's film has raised the issue of rape and abortion. Her representation of these two subjects, especially abortion, which is proscribed in Kenyan public discourse, proves

how women's filmmaking becomes a "radically political act – that of appropriating the right to represent oneself and one's concerns on the screen" (Thackway 147). Hawa Essuman has called for the inclusion of women in national politics.

Kinyanjui suggests through *Mumbi* that women refuse to be treated like animals at the hands of abusive husbands and want to navigate their lives on their own terms. Anne Mungai brings to light cultural practices that impede women's ability to progress in contemporary Africa. The films employ a range of female and male characters to convey their various messages. The broad range includes youth, mature men and women from various stations in life and from the rural and urban landscapes. Moreover, the directors themselves draw from their diverse experiences and training. Thus, each film adopts a different style, demonstrating that women speak in multiple voices. Each filmmaker has raised distinct concerns arising from different contexts and employs various means in her filmmaking to raise several issues. Nonetheless, they share some commonalities. They see women as key figures in the transformation of society. These women decisively reject ideas that are oppressive to women and other marginalised groups. This recalls Kinyanjui's argument about the medium of cinema. She observes, "it allows us to travel in a projected world of the possible, not necessarily the present reality" (Kinyanjui interview with Ellerson). Her observation captures how these filmmakers embrace film's opportunity to push beyond their present worlds to possible new worlds.

I commenced this study by examining the first two Kenyan fiction films produced by women filmmakers: *Saikati* and *The Battle of The Sacred Tree*. *Saikati* serves a critical function in this study enabling the study to trace the path Kenyan women's filmmaking has taken. This journey began with one film produced with the help of students and meagre funding to award-winning films such as *From a Whisper*, which secured four awards at African Movie Academy Awards in 2009 and *Soul Boy*, which won the best edited film award from the same academy in 2011. Indeed, looked at from this humble beginning, filmmaking in Kenya has come a long way. Given the demonstrable presence of allegorical elements in the later films and even the near-contemporary *Battle*, it is interesting to find *Saikati* being quite resolutely realist in its orientation. This inaugural film's plot structure is a straightforward narrative focused on the issue of early girl child marriages as an impediment to girls' chances to acquire formal education and consequently, an improved

future in contemporary society. Unlike the other films in this study in which one finds various allegorical elements, *Saikati* only employs characters as allegories of abstract ideas. Conversely, *Battle* contains several cultural referents that support the emblematic mugumo tree. These include folktales and anecdotes told by Mzee.

Chapter Two focused on the question of the former colonial subject's identity, the issue of suppressed women's voices and the tension between modernity and tradition. These themes resonate with those of other early African films, such as Gaston Kabore's *Wend Kuuni* (1982) and Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Tilai* (1990). Many films of this period align themselves with Diawara's "return to the source movement," which among other functions, reconsiders African traditions to investigate if they might solve some of today's problems. *Battle* and *Saikati* attempt to fit in this movement and in so doing, problematise it because it does not consider the challenges women face on their return. The films show that for contemporary women, the return is complicated by oppressive patriarchal structures. Additionally, they interrogate the tension between tradition and modernity, demonstrating that it is a complex matter. Both films show that this tension should not be seen as a simple binary opposition, but as a continuum instead. The films show that in contemporary Africa, tradition and modernity exist in tandem. The chapter finds that women are not interested in a past or a present that disempowers them, but in creating a hybrid world where they can be self-determining. *Saikati* and *Battle* show that traditions have to be continuously re-interpreted and reassessed. Thus, the two films transcend the tradition-versus-modernity binary and reveal the complex workings of contemporary society. This transcending shows that the only way for women to navigate life's complexities is by continually re-evaluating and renegotiating socio-cultural practices.

Chapter Three shows how, in Susan Andrade's words, "the sphere of the familial [is] the orchestrating unit that overshadows and plays out national dramas" (205). *Soul Boy* overtly establishes its allegorical intention through magical realism which is invoked through the figure of Nyawawa. This is complemented by a plot structure that draws on the coming-of-age tale. *Soul Boy* addresses the question of national leadership through its employment of the nation-as-family metaphor. In this case, a family that represents the nation finds itself in a precarious situation due to the irresponsible habits of the father. *Soul Boy* demonstrates the poor state of the nation (at the

brink of collapse) under poor leadership. That being the case, the film imagines a more positive society with accountable leaders who include women and the youth. Additionally, the stubborn issue of divisive ethnicity which pervades Kenyan history comes up in *Soul Boy* and *Project Daddy*. The latter film, I have demonstrated, points to ethnic tensions in the nation by employing cultural referents and alluding to the controversial case of a prominent female politician, Wambui Otieno. *Soul Boy*, on the other hand, is more direct in its depiction of the subject. Questions of ethnicity arise in the day to day conversations of the residents of Kibera. Taking a different approach, *Killer Necklace* features an interesting allegorical element: the emblem. Here, the many necklaces in the narrative represent more than one might at first assume. They point to social injustices such as the link between the marginalisation of youth and crime and develop the film's theme of avarice. I found it interesting that the not much talked about subject of street lynching (necklacing) found its way into the film. Victims of lynching elicit mixed reactions since they are assumed to be offenders. The inclusion of a victim of street injustice reveals a pattern in Kibinge's filmmaking. If compared to the lynched street preacher to *Something Necessary's* Joseph (Chapter 4), Kibinge displays sensibility towards those who are victimised by society. Kibinge offers a place where they can be re-examined and depicts them as victims rather than offenders. Returning to the films in this chapter, *Soul Boy*, *Killer Necklace* and *Leo* enable an allegorical reading of the slum. The slums are replete with many signs which demand interpretation and thus, shift from being simple settings to commentaries on several socio-political issues. Typical of social realism, the films highlight current socio-cultural issues and tend to focus on "marginalized groups that are pushed in the shadows by the elites of tradition and modernity" (Diawara, *African Cinema* 141). In these films, one notices an interest in the exposition of marginalisation of the poor through the juxtaposition of the slums with the leafy suburbs. The slums embody the plight of the less fortunate and reveal poor city planning. Additionally, some of the youthful characters who live in the slum are shown to turn to crime as a means of survival. They are a disillusioned lot who point to grand theft and corruption by politicians and other elite of the society. Some of them try to emulate the lavish life led by the politicians and engage in crime for survival and as a means to protest what they see as theft from the poor by those in power. Ato Quayson's observation of what he refers to as urban folktales captures the essence of this chapter. He argues that "[e]ven though urban folktales are not exclusively about relations within the public sphere the characters in them are often presented as exhibiting responses to what lies 'outside' the domestic sphere, whether this

outside is the urban landscape itself, the state or the globalized world” (51). These films, therefore, as part of the Kenyan popular culture are urban stories or folktales that draw on contemporary experiences of people in the city. Their private narratives have implications for the wider society as they reveal the effects of poor governance.

The last analytical chapter examines films somewhat dissimilar from the previous ones; though they are fictional, they represent actual catastrophic events. Because they represent real events of pain, loss and death, the two films exude an air of melancholy. *From a Whisper* tends towards melancholia more than *Something Necessary* does. *From a Whisper*'s opening evokes this sad mood heightened by choice of music and shadowy lighting. The camera, for the most part, treats its subject with veneration, keeping its distance through long takes. This approach has a similar effect on the viewer and one feels compelled to keep a distance to avoid intruding on the subjects of the narrative. *Something Necessary*, on the other hand, throws the viewer right into the violence by starting with footage from that historic moment. It reveals police trying to deal with fires and violent men wielding stones and machetes. The insistence by the filmmakers that these films are fictional renditions of real events makes one feel inclined to focus more on their realist mode. This highlights the tension between realism and allegory. Though realist, their fictional mode allows the filmmaker to explore matters beyond the actual event. However, on many occasions, the allegorical exposition is in some ways related to the event. I demonstrated how these films which replay real events, evoke allegory through the interaction between fiction and actual footage from the archives. Apart from their allegorical function, they situate the films in the exact moment from which they arise. The footage extends the fictional story by taking its reader to the national event. As such, it activates the allegorical dimension of the film. Nevertheless, the footage also supports the use of characters as allegorical figures because once we situate them in their historical moment, it becomes easier to relate them to what they represent. In *Something Necessary*, one of the television broadcasts becomes emblematic for its connection to a historic moment. The television broadcast of Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga's peace deal handshake, gestures beyond the film and enables the filmmaker to raise historical issues about land injustices, while at the same time alluding to the fact that the leaders glossed over the real issues that fuelled the violence.

As mentioned earlier, the characters discussed in this chapter embody abstract ideas that carry affect, such as pain and distress. These characters are not allegorical because they represent victims and perpetrators of the atrocities, but because they signify socio-political concerns beyond them. Injustices such as rape, uprootedness and precarity, among others are formless and have no discrete identity and, therefore, the characters become allegories of these ideas. An instance of this can be seen in how the films highlight an aspect of the violence not given much attention – that of the perpetrator. Both films hold the view that, in some cases, perpetrators are victims of a particular kind of politics. *Something Necessary*, through the moving story of a character burdened with guilt, demonstrates an overt investment in this theme. Both films suggest that in looking at the perpetrators of the violence, the focus should go beyond those who commit the violent acts to those who facilitate their actions. *From a Whisper* shows how complicity contributes to the perpetration of violence, by demonstrating how a culture of corruption facilitates terrorism, from the police at the borders to the security guards at buildings. The chapter closed with an analysis of the gendered nature of violence which revealed rape and displacement of women as major challenges. Consequently, this discussion enabled a wider interrogation of women's reproductive rights and their lack of access to and control over property.

Evident of the filmmakers' fundamental interest in gender issues is Wanuri Kahiu's latest addition to the collection of Kenyan women's fiction films. *Rafiki* (2018) has already made history as the first Kenyan film to feature at the Cannes Film Festival. Unfortunately, its success has not been received well at home. The Kenya Film Classification Board (KCFB) banned *Rafiki* from being distributed in Kenya due to its lesbian content. The board claims that the film contravenes Kenyan laws and the 'dominant values' of Kenyans. *Rafiki* is based on the award-winning short story "Jambula Tree" by Monica Arac de Nyeko. It is the coming of age story of two girls, Kena and Ziki, who must navigate the hostile environment they find themselves in (Kahiu, "Rafiki"). Kahiu's production illustrates the commitment of women filmmakers to question the dominant moral codes and statutory laws that seek to constrain women. The banning of the film helps expose the very content it intends to censure. First, the filmmaker is denied the right to express (on screen) her views on the marginalisation of those that are "othered" due to their sexual orientation and secondly, the characters who embody the concerns of others facing similar denigration from social and political structures are silenced. The fate of *Rafiki*, therefore, shows that while the women

filmmakers are willing to use their platform to intervene in the socio-political sphere, they must, like the female characters in the films, keep re-negotiating for their voices to be heard. The establishing shot at the beginning of this chapter exposes this reality. When the older female character on stage realises the debate is about to be male-centred, she insists that women's voices must be included in national conversations.

Although extensive research has gone into this dissertation, it does not claim to present a comprehensive account of Kenyan film. Its scope was limited to selected fiction films directed by Kenyan women between 1992-2013. It did not, for example, consider short films, fiction films directed by women after 2013 or fiction films directed by men. This opens up an exciting opportunity for me and other researchers. I am curious to know, for example, what differences may surface concerning allegorical materials in a comparative study of fiction films directed by men read against those directed by women. Alternatively, one might examine how differently the various allegorical elements that may arise are used in the films not studied. The opening establishing shot has demonstrated how a study such as this one enables one to see the possibilities in allegory as a form. The shot highlights a kind of allegory that draws on local stories, not only to reflect on national matters, but also to suggest possible ways of responding to the film. It draws attention to its didactic element but at the same time not being narrowly prescriptive. It subtly announces how the film should be interpreted, yet the story can still be enjoyed at its realist level. Overall, the process of discovering each strand of allegory in this study has been exciting and rewarding.

Filmography

- From a Whisper*. Directed by. Wanuri Kahiu, Prod. Kuxi Ghai, 2008.
- Killer Necklace*. Directed by. Judy Kibinge, Prod. Appie Matere, 2009.
- Kolormask*. Directed by. Sao Gamba, Prod. KIMC, 1985.
- Leo*. Directed by. Jinna Mutune, Prod. Chris Kirubi et al.2012.
- Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*. Directed by Jacques Demy, Prod.Mag Bodard,1964.
- Nairobi Half Life*. Directed by. David Gitonga, Prod. Sarika Lakhani, Tom Tywker and Ginger Wilson, 2012.
- Naliaka is Going*. Directed by. Albert Wandago, Prod. Alwan Communications. 2003.
- Project Daddy*. Directed by. Judy Kibinge, Prod Njeri Karago. 2004.
- Rafiki*. Directed by. Wanuri Kahiu, Prod. Steven Markovitz, 2018.
- Saikati*. Directed by. Anne Mungai, Prod.Ane Mungai,1992.
- Saikati the Enkabaani*. Directed by. Anne Munga, Prod.Ane Mungai,1999.
- Sambizanga*. Directed by. Sarah Maldoror, Prod. Sarah Maldoror,1973.
- Something Necessary*. Directed by. Judy Kibinge, Prod. Tom Tykwer et al, 2013.
- The Battle of the Sacred Tree*. Directed by. Wanjiru Kinyanjui, Prod. Kristov Brandli,1995.
- The Price of a Daughter*. Directed by.Jane Murago- Munene, Prod. Jane Murago, 2003.
- Tilai*. Directed by. Idrissa Ouédraogo, Prod. Idrissa Ouédraogo,1990.
- Wend Kuuni*. Directed by. Gaston J-M Kabore, Prod. Gaston Kabore, 1982.
- Xala*. Directed by Ousmane Sembéne, Prod. Ousmane Sembené,1975.

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