



The Gender Agenda in Kenyan Children's Feature Films: An Analysis of the Role of the Child Character in Exploring Gender Issues

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Abstract

The gender agenda has featured substantially in creative works from Africa and particularly Kenya. Although film is considered a new form of creative expression in Africa, compared to the west, it has not been excluded in exploring gender issues. While the gender discussion has prominently featured adults, the Kenyan film has gone a step further and explored gender on a different level. Gender has been explored from the point of view of the child and employed the child character as a suitable medium. Kenyan filmmakers by employing the child character on the subject of gender seem to suggest that engendering of any member of the society begins in childhood and progresses into adulthood. This is a unique aspect about the Kenyan film yet has not been critically examined. This paper therefore examines the child character and the exploration of gender in Kenyan films about children to ascertain the significance of the child character in exploring gender issues in society. It focuses on three selected films that extensively explore the engendering of children namely: *Subira*, *Malika* and *Becoming A Girl*. The films mainly focus on the engendering of the girl child by the society and that this happens in childhood. They also employ the girl child as a character in exploring the issue of gender. Examination of the child character will be guided by the Sociological theory of film and the Formalist film theory. The structure of the paper is as follows: A background on the gender issue in creative works, theoretical perspectives on gender, analysis of Kenyan children's films on gender and conclusions on the use of the child character in exploring gender.



1.0 Introduction

The Kenyan film industry has experienced substantive growth in terms of the number of films produced by Kenyans that narrate Kenyan experiences in a Kenyan setting. Kenyan filmmakers have explored various channels through which they have told their film stories. One of the areas that Kenyan filmmakers have explored is the use of the child character as a medium of expression. A key feature noted in the films produced after the year 2000, is the increased use of the of the child character. The child character has been employed as the main character and the person from whose point of view the film stories about the Kenyan society have been delineated. Although the child character has served as an effective medium of expression, critical analyses on the Kenyan film have failed to recognise or ignored the role of child character as a narrator and the bearer of the film's message. The child character as an image that represents issues in the Kenyan society needs to be critically examined. This paper therefore, examines the role of the child character in interrogating issues, some that have affected both children and adults or the Kenyan society at large. It focuses majorly on the film messages child characters have been employed to deliver.

2.0 Film as a Medium

Although there exist other mediums of communication that have been used effectively to deliver messages in the society, filmmakers have sought to use film as an ideal medium of expression. Their choice may be attributed to the views of Rabiger (2003). According to Rabiger (2003), we cannot underestimate the power of film in the 21st Century. He observes that film has surpassed all other mediums in its power to express issues in society and is incomparable:

Cinema at the start of the 21st Century is indisputably the great art form of our time, the preferred forum for mass entertainment, and a major conduit for ideas and expression. Occupying a status formerly monopolized by the novel...the screen is now where dreams of every shape, hue and meaning leap into the public mind- crossing language and cultural barriers to excite hearts and minds as art must and as no medium has ever done before (pp. 3).

Rabiger (2003) makes an important observation about the use of film. He notes that film is 'a major conduit of ideas and expression'. Thus, filmmakers employ film as a suitable medium through which they explore concerns about their societies. Societal concerns form the backbone of film stories. While film audiences have enjoyed watching films as a form of entertainment, they have also been exposed to the needs and anxieties of their society in a relaxed manner.

3.0 The Child Narrator

Children have been qualified as good narrators. Storytelling abilities in children are noted to be visible as early as at the moment of birth. According to Spaulding (2011), children undergo their first experience of telling stories when they announce their arrival at birth. Gottschall (2012) projects that storytelling is a universal activity and all children irrespective of their race, gender, religion and culture, tell stories of different kinds. Storytelling is central to the lives of children and it is through it that they are able to define their worldview. Children also engage in storytelling as a natural activity that is automatic and in suppressible. The recognition that children can tell stories of all kinds at different phases of their lives is what has driven filmmakers to employ them as film narrators. Phillips (2000) and Blum (2001) are among the scholars that have underscored the significance of film characters in telling a variety of stories, and that film characters are a conscious choice of the filmmaker dependent on their role(s) in the film. Film characters include children. Child characters have also been employed purposefully. Andrews (2000) notes that child characters enable the filmmaker to tell a story from child's point of view. Besides, child characters can also be employed to narrate childhood experiences as well as issues affecting adults. Cunningham (2006) observes that child characters can be used to present images that project innocence, dependence, vulnerability and a right to happiness. In addition, they can also express emotions of fear, anger, jealousy, generosity and love. Lury (2010) suggests that children can also be employed to represent child desires, struggles and trials. The child character apart from representing children and childhood, also offers a filmmaker a better position from which to interrogate issues concerning adults. According to Tapper (2002), contentious issues expressed from a child's point of view tend to be well received with little or no conflict at all, as opposed to an adult addressing the same issue. Tapper (2002) notes:

The child stands as an affective figure for the domestic and intimate, or as a plastic symbol of ...unrealized features, corruption, mortality, uncanny threats in different narrative contexts...They promote a privatization and personalization of structural determinants and a mass consciousness in the audience. Their personal troubles tend not to remain personal: they mark audience awareness of itself as a class reconstituting social differences in the audience into a new polarity of collective experience (p. 237).

The view that the image of a child 'stands as an affective figure' insinuates that the child serves as a suitable medium to deal with issues in society because of his/her potential to influence the attitudes, feelings or emotions of the audience. The tendency of the audience to sympathise with the child character and believe what they are saying is greater than that of an adult in the same position. The choice of the child as main character is also dependent on the idea that children are significant members of the any society. Fonda (2001) opines that children characterize the society they belong to and

therefore their presence is a representation of what happens in that particular society. It is from this perspective that filmmakers have employed the child character in order to deal with issues affecting the Kenyan society. Thus, the choice of the child character by Kenyan filmmakers seems to adhere with the views of Tapper (2002). The child character is seen to 'promote a mass consciousness in the (Kenyan) audience' about Kenyan experiences. The choice of the child character by Kenyan filmmakers can also be perceived as conscious and purposeful in delineating Kenyan experiences of both children and adults.

4.0 The Child Character and the Gender Agenda

Discussions on gender have tended to focus more on women than men. Perhaps because the term gender has been misconstrued in some cases to refer to women. Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin (2000) allude to this when they posit 'The term gender can be used as more acceptable shorthand for 'women' and that 'women are more frequently seen to have or embrace gender – men just are' (P. 236). However, they are quick to also mention that both men and women are just as 'gendered' as each other, because the social categorization system affects both of them. From their views, it is evident that although the term 'gender' has been associated more with women. According to Holmes (2007), gender refers to socially produced differences between being feminine and being masculine. Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin (2009) observe that;

Gender is theorized as an unnatural social categorization system, which prioritizes, and emphasizes, gender difference. Categories of masculinity and femininity are not seen as naturally resulting from biological difference between 'male' and 'female' bodies, but as social products, resulting from society' (P. 236).

Similarly, Connell (2009) defines gender as 'the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring productive distinctions between bodies into social processes (P. 11). From these definitions, it is apparent that the term gender focuses on biological differences, which are further emphasized by the society. Thus, the society plays a major role in determining the gender of any individual in a particular society. James & James (2012) observe that the focus on gender has not excluded children. Children are also affected since they are considered members of every society and that issues affecting a society affect them too. James & James (2012) note:

Distinguishing between boy children and girl children is a key feature of everyday social practices in most societies. At the moment of birth, biological sex differences are noted and ascriptions of the child as male or female follow. The way in which such maleness and femaleness are understood and experienced constitutes 'gender' in society (P. 59).

The involvement of society in gender issues is certainly notable and immense in gendering of children. The identification of a child's gender at such an early age shows how much the issue of gender is taken seriously in every society. The gender issue does not stop at birth but continues and is emphasized as the child grows. James & James (2012) note that 'gender is not an established social identity but a dynamic practice built and shaped by ongoing interactions' (P. 60). The 'ongoing interactions' involve a process of socialization where the children are either taught about gender or they learn through observation. They imitate what others in the society do particularly adults, who are of their gender. The socialization process has been deemed important in gendering children in society. According to UNICEF (2007), no society has escaped from gender socialization because it begins at birth and is a process that involves the learning of cultural roles according to one's sex. Boys and girls are treated differently by members of their own environment and learn the differences about boys and girls. The differentiation socialization process is influenced by parental and societal expectations from boys and girls, their selection of gender-specific toys and/or giving gender based assignments. The following poem further illustrates how the differentiation process is demonstrated at birth and how the society plays a major role in the gendering of children.

When a Son is Born by Anonymous

When a son is born
He is cradled in the bed
He is clothed in robes
Given a jade scepter as a toy
His lusty cries portend his vigour
He shall wear bright, red knee-caps,
Shall be the lord of a hereditary house.
When a daughter is born,
She is clothed in swaddling-bands,
Given a loom-whorl as toy,
She only takes care of food and drink,
And not cause trouble to her parents.

The boy child and the girl child are dressed differently based on their sex and what is expected of them in future. The boy is clothed in robes while the girl is clothed in swaddling-bands. The boy is given a sceptre as a toy while the girl is given a loom-whorl as a toy. The boy is nurtured and envisioned as a future leader of his home while the girl's place is in the kitchen to ensure meals are made and served. Thus, the differentiation process is experienced in all societies and influenced by their ethnic, cultural and religious values. According to James & James (2012):

The gendering of a childhood occurs in and across a wide variety of social settings and media, ranging from every day social practices at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood, through to the representations of gender channelled through media of different kinds (P. 60).

The Kenyan film has been used as a medium through which gender issues and particularly the gendering of children has been addressed. This phenomenon is apparent in children's feature films. Images of children who have undergone gender role socialization are evident. The gender issue in children's film can be evaluated from a theoretical perspective that examines gender as a social construct and film as a social product. This means that gender cannot be discussed independent of the society that the child character belongs to and one that produces the film. Jenks (1996), Norman (2004) and Sorin (2005) among other scholars, posit that the society determines who should be referred to as a child. Abrams, Bell & Udris (2001), Buckland (2008) and Sutherland and Feltey (2010) project that films are social products and that through them we are able to learn a society's values and beliefs as well as deal with their problems and anxieties. Sutherland and Feltey (2010) proposes a paradigm of four themes that guide a sociological reading of film. These are identity, interaction, inequality, and institutions. Focus is made on how interaction and institutions have been employed to explore the gender issue. Sutherland and Feltey (2010) also note that films 'speak' to us and expose the filmmakers concerns and the various techniques they employ to deliver their messages. This means that although the society may play a major part in influencing the content of a film, film techniques are also valuable in ensuring the content is effectively delivered. According to Bordell and Thompson (2008) it is important to understand film form in order to effectively interpret the message in a film. Film techniques have been employed to foreground Child characters in the Kenyan film. This has been done mainly through; the medium and close-up shot, setting, costume and sound. The formalist film theory is thus considered suitable in analyzing the above mentioned elements in the selected films and how they have enhanced the image of the child character in exploring the gender issue. Thus, the Sociological theory of film and the Formalist film theory are employed in examining the role of the child character in exploring gender issues in the selected Kenyan feature films.

5.0 The gender agenda in selected Kenyan feature films

This paper focuses on the examination of gender issues in selected feature films that have employed child characters in key positions. These include: *Subira*, *Malika* and *Becoming a girl*. In *Subira* the film begins with images of Lamu town at dawn and introduces Subira at the ocean at that particular time. There is also a voice over of a young girl, whom we later identify as Subira. From the onset of the film, Subira is identified as the main character and the narrator of the film story. In the voice over, Subira contemplates what the ocean has in store for her. She loves the ocean and playing in its waters. She often

sneaks from home to go play in the ocean with Babu and other children. When sent to fetch water at the well, she detours to go play and also watch other children play in the ocean. This experience gives her a lot of pleasure. However, this is contrary to what the mother expects of Subira and desires she should be. Subira's mother expects Subira to behave like other girls her age and rebukes her whenever she goes out to play. Subira experiences gender socialization at home and the environment in which she lives. Gender socialization is instituted by the mother and supported by the mother's friends as well as some young girls in her neighbourhood. Subira's mother denies her the childhood pleasure of play. Subira is imprisoned in the house and sadly watches other children play at the ocean through the window. The reason Subira's mother imprisons her is to teach her how to be a girl and eventually a woman, by teaching her chores performed by women in the home. The insinuation is that a woman's place is in the home and particularly in the kitchen. Subira is taught how to grind flour using a traditional grinding stone. She is also taught how to pound pepper and spices using a pestle. These are a representation of the many other roles performed by women. The mother patiently trains Subira and even gives her pieces of advice as they work together. Subira does the chores but there is no enthusiasm in what she does. She only enjoys play.

Subira is also exposed to fetching water from the well and carrying it on her head. Young girls her age are seen going to the well faithfully and fetching water. Unfortunately, when Subira is sent to the well, she abandons her duty to go play at the ocean. When her behaviour is reported to the mother by the other girls, the mother is disappointed and goes to the ocean to reprimand Subira and take her back home. When Subira experiences her menses, the mother gets excited because that is a sign of maturity. She expects Subira to change her behaviour and behave like a woman. Subira is discouraged from playing in the ocean and playing with Babu. Girls her age are expected to be at home to help their mothers with house chores. The change is also symbolized by the way her dressing changes. She is dressed in a *buibui*, an official dress for women in her culture and religion. In the Muslim religion, women are not expected to wear clothing that exposes their body parts. Moreso, girls after experiencing menses are considered potential brides and therefore conceal their bodies and face from being admired by men. Subira's mother's friends get excited when Subira experiences menses and join the mother to celebrate Subira's maturity. Subira undergoes a special ceremony where her old clothes are discarded and she is dressed in a *buibui*. The dressing is done by both the mother and her friends.

The film *Subira* demonstrates the role of the society in gendering children. Subira's mother, her friends and the young girls constitute the system that works hard to ensure that Subira takes on roles and behaviour expected of girls her age in the society. Both Subira's mother's friends and the young girls watch on Subira and report to the mother. They take it as their responsibility to ensure that Subira adheres to what she is expected to do. When Subira fails to do what is expected of her, they talk about it. Subira's mother's disappointment is not only expressed by her but by the group of women and

girls that surround her. Gender socialization is thus seen as a duty performed by the whole society. The success of an individual denotes the success of the society. The film also explores the important role the home and environment play in gender socialization of a child. At the end of the film Subira goes back to play in the ocean. The grandmother supports her in doing what gives her pleasure but not in what the society expects of her. Gendering of a child is depicted as a process that is dependent on the individual. While some children may conform to societal expectations immediately, for some the process may take time. In Subira's case, she does not conform to everything immediately. The only thing that she immediately conforms to, is the dressing. When she goes to play at the ocean, she does not change her clothing but goes in the water in her *buibui*. Subira is socialized in the manner in which girls are expected to behave when they attain maturity. Play is considered immature behaviour and she is discouraged from it. She is also trained in chores expected of women like preparing food and fetching water. Gender socialization also involves adopting dressing associated with women. When a girl experiences menses she is no longer considered a child but a mature person and qualifies to be called a woman and this case dress in a *buibui*. Subira is a voice of children who face challenges in adhering to gender roles and behaviour. Subira's experience is not a smooth process. It is one that leads to pain and conflicts, particularly with the mother. According to Connell (2009), this kind of experience is not unique. He notes:

This business of becoming a gendered person follows many different paths, involves many tensions and ambiguities, and sometimes produces unstable results (P. 5).

It is evident in Subira's case that instead of adhering to the expectations of the society, she instead revolts because of the pressure from the mother. Her rebellious behaviour is supported by the grandmother, who encourages her to do what she pleases. In *Becoming A Girl*, the film begins with an establishing shot that shows different kinds of toys strewn all over the sitting room floor of Wanja's house. The toys are of different kinds of colours and appealing to children. This scene is later followed by a scene where Wanja and the brother are presented singing and jumping as they go round the toys. When wanja's mother walks into the sitting room she expresses disappointment. She is not happy with the untidy room and the games Wanja is engaged in with the brother. It is at this point that Wanja's mother informs her of her turning ten and that she has to change the toys she plays with and her dressing. *Becoming A Girl* like the title suggests, the film explores the experiences of a girl in search of what defines a girl/girlhood. Wanja is the main character and the girl who earnestly seeks to know what is expected of her as a girl. Wanja has just turned ten years and is informed by the mother that at ten years she is expected to behave like a girl. The mother's explanation seems unsatisfactory and leaves Wanja with a lot of doubts. Wanja first seeks advice from Butchie, a long-time friend although older than her. Butchie teaches her how to sit like a girl. Since Butchie is a man,

Wanjawonders how he knew how girls sit. However, Butchie explains that childhood is a stage everybody undergoes. This insinuates that Butchie must have learnt how girls sit at ten, from girls around him at that particular age. Butchie also teaches Wanja how girls walk by demonstrating. Wanja likes it and when she is done with Butchie she walks away enthusiastically, the way girls should walk. After Wanja goes round seeking to understand what to do and how to behave at ten, she finally goes back home to the mother. The mother demonstrates to Wanja what is expected of her. From the film, it is evident that there are certain expectations of girls when they turn ten. They are no longer considered children but transiting from childhood to adulthood. There are several ways in which Wanja's mother enforces this perception. Wanja's mother picks up a wrapped object from the floor. It is difficult to tell what the object is until she is halfway in unwrapping the object. We discover that it is a doll that Wanja had wrapped in a bandage. Wanja had expressed dislike of the doll and had even shaved its hair. The mother insists that she should no longer play with the train circuit and other toys because they are meant for boys. Dolls are meant for girls and that she ought to play with her doll. This is a gendered perspective. Scarlett (2005) suggests that:

Gender has a profound influence on play. Very early on there are expectations with regard to how girls, as compared with boys, should play, expectations placed not only by adults but also by children themselves (P.14).

Wanja's mother does not allow her the freedom to choose the toys she should play with but selects what she thinks is suitable for her with regard to her age and gender. To enforce the issue of age and gender, Wanja's mother discourages her from wearing trousers and a cape that give her a 'boyish' appearance. She buys Wanja a new dress and teaches Wanja how to comb out her hair. She begins by showing Wanja how it is done in front of a mirror. She also buys Wanja a set of earrings which we see Wanja wearing. When Wanja is completely dressed she looks at herself in the mirror and loves herself. She gets excited at her new look. The film ends in a tone that suggests that Wanja accepts her new look as a girl. Unlike Subira, Wanja is curious about her expected new status and after she is told what to do, she immediately conforms. She changes her walking style and dressing. She also begins to love her doll. In the closing scene of the film, when Wanja's brother requests Wanja to teach him how to walk like a boy, Wanja teaches him what she had learnt, how to walk like a girl. This is evidence that Wanja adheres to societal expectations of her as a girl. Gender socialization in *Becoming A Girl* is explored on two levels: play and dressing. The filmmaker demonstrates that children can be gendered through the choice of toys they use in play and the kind of clothing they wear. In Wanja's case, it is insinuated that dolls are for girls while trains are play toys for boys. Gender socialization is instituted by Wanja's mother. However, the film explores the fact that by offering advice to Wanja on what entails being a girl, both Butchie and Mama Mboga act as channels through which gender is instituted. While the home is seen as having majorly

influenced the gendering of Wanja, the social environment also contributes. Thus, the film *Becoming A Girl* explores gender as a state of becoming in children as stated by Connell (2009) that:

Ideas on gender-appropriate behaviour are constantly being circulated, not only by legislators but also by parents ... Being a man or woman, then is not a predetermined state. It is a becoming, a condition actively under construction (P. 8).

Another film that explores gendering of children is *Malika*. In *Malika*, the film indirectly explores gender socialization and how both the home and the social environment influence socialization of children into gender roles. The film explores the experiences of a young girl in the hands of her aunt, who acts as her guardian, after her mother dies. Malika like other children dreams of going to school. This is apparent in the way she persists on going to a nearby school despite the numerous times she is driven away by the watchman. She does not give up. She sometimes goes into the school through a broken part of the school fence. She does not quickly forget whatever she learns and always enthusiastically shares with her grandmother. The saddest bit is that even the grandmother does not support her vision but instead discourages her about going to school. Although the aunt claims that she cannot afford to take Malika to school, Malika's male cousin goes to school. Malika remains at home as the aunt's helper. Malika is made to take care of her aunt's child while the aunt goes to work. Malika upon discovering that the grandmother and the aunt are seemingly not interested in her desire to go to school, she reaches out to a female teacher in the school who is committed to assisting her. The teacher appeals to the headteacher to allow her get admitted to the school. The teacher buys her school uniform but unfortunately Malika cannot go to school because the aunt delivers another child. At the end of the film, Malika is presented as a disillusioned child whose dream of going to school is completely shattered. In the closing scene of the film, the sound track makes an appeal for children to be taken to school.

Malika's fate is generated by traditional beliefs on the role of the girl child in the society. The grandmother serves as the symbol of traditional perspectives. She discourages Malika from going to school because she has to help the aunt with the child as well as take care of her. She reasons that if Malika went to school then the aunt would not have anybody to take care of her and the aunt's child. She seems to insinuate that the reason the aunt adopted Malika was to have her assist her in the home. Education is not given a priority even when the aunt is well aware that the reason she cannot get a well-paying job is her lack of education. Most probably she never went to school but learnt house chores associated with women. Thus, she can only get a job as a house-help and earn a meagre salary. This is evident from their standard of living. Malika lives with the aunt in a slum area, in mud-walled houses. The aunt cannot afford a large house and she is forced to rent a separate room for Malika's grandmother. By denying Malika an

opportunity to go to school, the cycle is likely to continue, where Malika may end up earning a living in future like the aunt; through employment as a house-help. Malika's aunt also shares in the traditional view of the girl child being initiated into roles performed by women and the boy child given education. This is the reason her son goes to school while Malika remains at home babysitting. Malika is indirectly socialized into the gender role of babysitting. The responsibility of taking care of children has always been associated with women. This is the reason why Malika's male cousin is not assigned the duty of taking care of the baby sister. In some scene, he is seen passing the baby to Malika while he goes to play. Malika is forced to play with the baby on her lap. The fact that she is a child and deserves to play is overlooked by the aunt. Malika also moves around with the aunt's child on her back. Malika is a child taking care of another child. Malika is denied the opportunity to enjoy childhood.

The association of nursing care with women is also explored. Malika is mandated to take care of her sick grandmother. She watches over her and ensures she has eaten. At some point before the grandmother dies, she is unable to eat, and gives the food to Malika. Malika declines to take it because she understands that the aunt needs to eat to be strong. In fact, she really encourages the aunt to eat. Malika also steals food stuff from kiosks on her way to her aunt's house when she realizes they have no food. She cares and reasons that taking what one needs is not stealing. She cares about her family and does not want them to go hungry. Apparently, it is the same stolen food that the aunt gives her to take to the grandmother. The woman as the person entrusted with the duty of ensuring that her family is fed, is highlighted. Malika as a child character is the voice of children who suffer and are deprived of childhood opportunities because of their gender. The denial of education to girls lies in the belief that the place of the woman is in the home and in performing house chores. An important insight here, is that while such beliefs need to be fought by women, and give women education in order to empower them and change their social status, instead it is the women who have been major propagators of the idea. The suggestion by Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin (2009) that 'women are most frequently seen to embody gender' suffices. The impact of cultural beliefs on how women view themselves is also explored. This implies that the society has a major influence on gender socialization of children.

6.0 Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, it is evident that Kenyan filmmakers purposefully selected child characters. The child characters were selected as a suitable medium of expression. Discussions on gender have tended to focus on adults and ignored the child as a gendered individual. By employing children as major characters, the films demonstrate that children too can serve as a medium through which gender issues can be explored. The films also demonstrate that gender has its beginnings in childhood. Gender identification occurs in childhood and is nurtured and reinforced. Once a child discovers his/her gender in childhood he/she adheres to it even in adulthood. Children are

engendered through various channels which include: the selection of toys, games, and dressing. Children adopt gender based on what the society exposes them to. Thus, the environment and society the child lives in determines the gender roles and behaviour they ascribe to. By presenting gender issues from the point of view of a child, Kenyan filmmakers empower the child character and renders them a position of agency. The child character is given a voice through which gender issues can be interrogated. Through the child character other children faced with gender related challenges can be identified and get assisted. The child character in the Kenyan film also serves as an avenue through which gender issues can be exposed to other children. Children watching other children of the same gender perform gender based roles and activities may be motivated to do the same. Child can act as role models to other children in embracing gender roles, behaviours and attitudes. The child character thus serves as a medium through which gender issues in the Kenyan society are successfully explored.

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