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South Eastern Kenya University

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# ENHANCING CREATIVITY FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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## Film and Restoration of Ruined Humanity: Judy Kibinge's *Something Necessary*

Wafula Yenjela  
South Eastern Kenya University

### Abstract

*This paper reads Judy Kibinge's film *Something Necessary* (2013) that engages with the infamous 2007/2008 post-election violence as a creative enterprise in a quest for the restoration of a ruined humanity. The paper argues that the film surmounts Kenya's complex and perilous political matrix by underscoring the power embodied in individual responsibility to redemption of self and, consequently, others, in the midst of state and/ or societal atrocities. It also puts into perspective the 'necessary' 'thing(s)' that the film dwells on by identifying the implied 'things', pondering on why the film finds them unnameable, grappling with how necessary they are. This speaks to social justice, an important sustainable development goal (SDGs) in a country like Kenya. In the political conflict that the film dwells on, the youth were the major agents of atrocities while the underclass children, women, and the elderly members of society were the largest group on the receiving end. The paper points out that even though the film is cognisant of the need for youth economic empowerment to remake them into agents of transformation in their societies through constructive participation in income generating activities rather than their recourse to enforcing political vendettas for their ethnic political personages for a living, it champions social empathy as the most enduring empowerment strategy for the youth in volatile spaces. To this end, the paper highlights the film's depictions of the centrality of human compassion and empathy in rebuilding a better multicultural world. Through portrayals of several youth's positive changes in their moral personae, the film underpins the creative industry's power in fostering a peaceful and prosperous society. Generally, the paper reads Kibinge's *Something Necessary* as prototypical of the creative industry's instrumental capacity to empower the youth both intellectually and morally.*

### Introduction

Writing on the need to invest in stories for teenagers and young adults as he fetes philanthropist William Burt for intervention through the generous Burt Award in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Ghana, Henry Indangasi makes the following profound observations:

...it is as a teenager that we start asking the all-important question: who am I? It is when we are teenagers that our worst socially-induced personality traits can transform us into demons. But it is also as teenagers that our finest feelings solidify into enduring moral values. [...]. The outlines of our moral persona were drawn at that stage in our lives. (2018, 48)

Indangasi's reflections underscore the power of stories in shaping our humanity. This demonstrates the empowering nature of stories young people can identify with in terms of the ages of characters and the struggles involved. Similarly, films as audio-visual stories in which young people are part of the cast resonate with as they influence young people's lives and, by extension, their society.

This paper reads Judy Kibinge's film *Something Necessary* (2013) as a creative enterprise to empower the youth intellectually and morally in spaces where ethnic political scores have adversely ruined their humanity. The film is set in the aftermath of Kenya's infamous 2007/2008 post-election violence that claimed over 1500 lives and rendered almost a million people to Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps. Most of the IDPs permanently lost their homes and landed property. I expound on the historical circumstances of the violence in the subsequent section. Presently, Kibinge's *Something Necessary* focalises a transformative encounter of a perpetrator of atrocities and his victim in the aftermath of the violence. The encounter is a turning-point in the film as it is constructed on remorse and empathy. While other perpetrators of atrocities during the conflict are indifferent to their victims' pathetic situations, a young man by the name Joseph demonstrates his determination to rise above peer/ and gang influence. While in many cases the ideal role model for the youth is one who proactively avoids deviant behaviour, *Something Necessary* presents a practical situation of redemption. Even though Joseph is reactive in his unorthodox quest for a better society, he represents the power embodied in an individual's resolve to foster a better world. When communal empowerment in the sense of political awareness and advocacy for reparation of perceived historical injustices degenerates into commission of injustices, individual empowerment that manifests through one's ability to empathise seems supreme. Thus, the paper reads *Something Necessary* to demonstrate that social empathy is the hallmark of youth empowerment.

### Context

Even though the 2007/2008 post-election violence was sparked by a highly disputed presidential election, the violence had a deeper reach to Kenya's problematic post-independent histories where, upon independence, Jomo Kenyatta

favoured his ethnic community in acquisition of land vacated by white settlers in the Rift Valley. This would lead to ethnic tensions in the region as the Kalenjin feel aggrieved that Jomo Kenyatta's regime deprived them of their ancestral lands. Thus, most of the people who engaged in the violence that engulfed Kenya in that period viewed their actions as attempts to 'right' the perceived historical injustices. The violence further exposed the uses of political power in Kenya: a socio-economic channel for rewarding ethnic political blocks for their support but also to chastise opponent ethnic blocks for their divergent political affiliation. The ethnic political block that finds itself outside political power considers itself doomed as it braces for exclusion, state neglect and victimisation. In such circumstances, voting for parliamentarians and more so the presidency is more of a community's survival mechanism than a mere expression of one's democratic right.

### Review of Available Literature

Jacqueline Ojiambo (2017) reads Judy Kibinge's *Something Necessary* with an emphasis on how Kenyan women filmmakers use film as an avenue to speak about sexual violation, especially gang rape in times of conflict. According to Ojiambo (2017, 56), "[t]he embodying of both physical and sexual violence through Anne's character shows the reality of the violence, while the focus on Joseph as a perpetrator demonstrates the trauma that arises from committing atrocities and highlights the question of social responsibility." Since Ojiambo does not give much attention on the aspect of a perpetrator's social responsibility, this paper provides more insights on the same through a greater framework of social empathy. M. Alex Wagaman (2011, 285) uses a pyramid figure to show individual empathy as the foundation upon which other layers comprising contextual understanding, social responsibility, skill building, and, at the apex, youth empowerment, mutually reinforce each other. These five layers are definitive of social empathy which informs social justice.

The notion of social justice is sometimes best articulated through film. This is because film, as a cultural medium, translates experiences that resonate with the lives of the audience. In many occasions, film becomes a template upon which some members of the audience construct their social lives. In a study of the impact of Nollywood and Latin American telenovelas on a group of selected young women in Eldoret, Kenya, Solomon Waliaula (2018) uses in-depth interviews as well as group discussions to show the narratives of distant places and experiences in the films greatly influenced the social lives of the women over a period of time. Waliaula (2018, 15) writes:

These narratives influence the way they define social identities in a complex way ranging from the stereotypes associated with spectatorship of certain narratives to the perceived relevance of their themes. [Their] identification with and admiration of the [...] telenovelas resonates with a complexity of social experiences in real life, some of which are deeply personal and in this light, metonymic extensions of autobiographies. More importantly perhaps is the women's use of these narratives as reference points against which they engage with and resolve the social tensions in their real lives.

This shows the power of telenovelas in reshaping the social lives of the viewers. While most telenovelas focus on the intricacies of familial and social tensions, Judy Kibinge's *Something Necessary* engages with horrendous memories of one of Kenya's darkest moments. The depictions of perpetrators and their victims in the film would possibly elicit responses similar to those of respondents in Waliaula's study, among its Kenyan audience and other audiences that have experienced violence.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

This paper is anchored in the postcolonial theory, particularly in the idea of the in-between as imagined by Homi Bhabha. To Bhabha (1994, 2), the 'post' in various theories, including postcolonialism, signify "the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion." Here, Bhabha focuses on what he refers to as border lives; lives where categories overlap resulting a subset of various constituent categories. Bhabha (1994, 2) argues: "It is in the emergence of the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference — that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (original emphasis). The negotiation in the in-between foregrounds "competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable." This liminal space presents enables a greater understanding of Kibinge's film *Something Necessary* where a reformed perpetrator abandons what could be deemed as his Kalenjin ethnic community's collective claims to reparation of land deprivations that were facilitated by the Kenyan state in favour of the Kikuyu community at the dawn of independence. Through his 'desertion', the reformed perpetrator of atrocities against the group he had been persuaded to view as the enemy finds himself at conflict with his 'community' as he attempts to forge a community that is beyond fixed categories of Kalenjin/Kikuyu.

### Research Problem

Since the youth in Kenya as well as many parts of Africa play a major role in enforcing atrocities, the nurturing of social empathy, through the creative industry, among them can work as an empowering mechanism to foster a society that embraces diversity despite problematic histories replete with competing ethnic claims to historical injustices. The paper argues that Kibinge's film *Something Necessary* surmounts Kenya's complex and perilous political matrix by underscoring the power embodied in individual responsibility to redemption of self and, consequently, others, in the midst of state and/ or societal atrocities. Through filmic representation of individual empathy which is the foundation of social empathy, the vision of youth empowerment is powerfully articulated.

### Objectives

This paper's objectives are:

- I. To demonstrate that the film as part of the creative industry is an important avenue to youth empowerment.
- II. To demonstrate that social empathy nurtured through redemptive stories of the youth can foster an egalitarian society.

### Findings

There are cases where communal empowerment is at conflict with individual empowerment. According to Christine Mutuku (2011, 31), "empowered people are perceived as being central agents in the development process and the main actors in the improvement of their own welfare." In other words, empowerment is the possession of agency which greatly contributes to transformation of one's worse situation for the better. Yet, Kibinge's *Something Necessary* demonstrates a case where communal agency can deteriorate into commission of atrocities. It is in such situations that individual moral principles must override communal pursuits. The representation of individuals who, despite the risks against their lives, dare to go against detrimental collective pursuits demonstrate the filmmakers' conviction that an alternative society can be fostered. The paper further found out that youth's encounter with adversity can be empowering to their moral faculties. Candace Lind *et al* (2018, 1) show that adversity can foster resilience among the youth. In depicting a young person's participation in post-election violence as his turning-point in the course of his life, and his strong-willed determination to redirect his energies for the better of humanity, Kibinge suggests that Kenyans should learn from the traumatic encounter and take individual responsibility to build a better nation rather than wait for their ethnic communities to embrace diversity.

### Discussion of Main Points

In an evaluation of the significance of music to the developmental needs of adolescents, Dave Miranda (2013, 10) underlines the complex biopsychosocial challenges the young people undergo, and how music works for them as a resort for intellectual as well as emotional nourishment. Similarly, film is imbued with emotional potency that appeals to young people. With increased access to online platforms that have archived films, young people can find lasting influences from films such as Kibinge's *Something Necessary* that can be accessed on YouTube. Since the film stars a young person's quest for redemption after he has committed atrocities, the young people can find a role model from whom they can construct their identities. Indeed, a toxic political atmosphere greatly contributes to the erosion of many a young people's humanity.

In the film, Joseph is haunted by his participation in inflicting injury, death, and destruction of property against his fellow human beings. Even though he acted in a mob and with the blessings of political kingpins of his ethnic group, it later dawns on him that he should take personal responsibility for his actions. His major step towards redemption is when he rejects blood money, *i.e.*, money sent to the youth by politicians to enable them (youth) continue with a violent campaign targeting people of ethnic groups perceived to be of opponent political affiliation. The reason Joseph gives to the gang for rejecting the money is trivialised by them: "I am still haunted by what we did that night," to which Chepsoi, the leader of the gang dismisses thus: "What's wrong with you? It's as if you've never seen a naked woman before?" (Kibinge 2013). To the gang, Joseph's troubled conscience for his portion in arson, gang rape and murder is a demonstration of weak masculinity. Therefore, they chase him away while ridiculing him to return to his mother, a suggestion that he is still a child or feminine.

Joseph's desertion of the gang is also symbolic of his rejection of the gang's cause for waging war against those perceived as enemy ethnic communities. When political attempts are made at national level to restore peace, through a performance of reconciliation when two political rivals shake hands in a press conference, Chepsoi reminds his gang the cause for their war:

We are fighting because of our land! Our soil! Our soil left to us by our forefathers. They have stolen our land and now they have stolen the election! They have taken everything from us. No! I won't have any of it... (Kibinge 2013)

Perhaps Henry Indangasi is one of the foremost scholars to deflate the question of ancestral lands. In his reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, Indangasi (2018, 21) claims that "[e]ven globally, the issue of ancestral lands is dodgy." Indangasi writes that linguistic evidence in the naming of places suggest the original occupants of the so-called ancestral lands while histories of people's migrations also work to unsettle the permanence of such spaces. Furthermore, the film demonstrates another in-between in land ownership and inheritance — the question of intermarriages and resultant multi-ethnic children. Anne Wanjiru, a nurse and protagonist of the film is of Kikuyu extraction married to Steve Sirma, a Kalenjin. Kitur, their child cannot fit in the fixed Kalenjin/Kikuyu categories. Yet, Anne asserts that The Haven, as their farm is known, is Kitur's birth-right.

Therefore, the film demonstrates a youth who triumphs over peer influence as well as perceived communal claims to ancestral lands. Instead of relying on 'blood money', Joseph takes bold steps to search for a job so that he can earn a living through decent humane ways. His decision to flee to Nairobi with his girlfriend, Jebet, can also be read as an attempt sever himself from an unchanging communal identity which is no longer sufficient for his new aspirations in life: to be a cosmopolitan citizen. Unfortunately, Joseph's resolve not to participate in atrocities turn him into a prey hunted down by the gang he deserted, till they finally kill him. The film's weak-point lies in its suggestion that youth's joblessness significantly contributed to Kenya's 2007/2008 post-election violence. Electoral malpractices and domination of the presidency by individuals from one ethnic community cannot be underestimated as factors that foment dangerous ethnic divisions.

## Conclusion

The creative industry is a rich platform from which to empower the youth. This paper focused on a film that represents Kenya's 2007/2008 post-election violence to demonstrate that individual empathy is the foundation of youth empowerment. While much attention has been given to empowering the youth with reproductive skills to avoid pregnancies and STDs (see Hutchinson, Mirzoyants, and Leyton 2018), the need to empower the youth with empathy has been marginalised. This paper underscores the power of nurturing empathy through filmic representations of the youth with emphasis on how they triumph over detrimental peer as well societal practices. The paper demonstrates that the Judy Kibinge's film *Something Necessary* epitomises youth empowerment through portrayals of an imagined youth's acquisition of critical thinking values, *i.e.*, the youth's capability to independently question established/normalised detrimental practices and forge his life on sound values.

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