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Sexuality and Social Institutions with a Focus on Religion, Beliefs and Marriage

Marriage and Sexuality in the
Indigenous Kenyan Film

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Introduction

Todd Kappelman in his *Film and the Christian* cites views of some early Christian leaders and theologians like Alcuin,² Tertullian³ and Paul the apostle. These leaders raise objections against the entertainment arts, which are in every aspect similar to film.⁴ These arts are seen to be detrimental to the Christian faith. In place of the entertainer, the reader of the Word of God should be listened to.⁵ This assertion supposes that the reading of the word is informative hence more important for nurturing the young (not only in age but also in spiritual matters and in marriage). Kappelman observes that “Christians have a right and a responsibility to make sure that entertainment and art are not used in a manner that is damaging to their spiritual welfare.” Going by Kappelman’s remarks, marriage, a social institution ordained by God is one of the Christian values that deserve an uplifting portrayal in film. But this is not usually so since one of the major features of film as a creative art is that it provides a picture of reality. Film’s portrayal of marriage as a collapsing institution is a critical pointer to some oversight in our approach to the institution. It beats logic to sit back enjoy viewing what is beautiful when the objectionable reality lies right beneath it.

In a study of film marriages as portrayed in Hollywood cinema, Nick Aretakis reveals the painful realities that lie beneath the otherwise ‘perfect’ marriages. In his paper, “Till the Credits Do Us Part: Marriage, Hollywood Style”, Aretakis ‘listens’ to the married couples’ complaints and tensions emanating from their marriages. Adultery becomes a common occurrence while hurting perseverance and divorce are the only options for these couples. For the couples who choose the former (though temporarily,) they live in hatred and abuse. Although Aretakis’ study focuses on portrayal of marriage (and its bi-product, marital sexuality) in Hollywood films, he poses a challenging question: “Would other films [like the Kenyan film] featuring marriage as a theme do any better?”⁷

In an attempt to answer Aretakis’ question, this study sets out to examine whether the Kenyan filmmaker has different ways of expressing sex and marriage through their films. The paper analyses Sao Gamba’s *Kolormask* (1986), Ingolo wa Keya’s *The Married Bachelor* (1997), Judy Kibinge’s *Dangerous Affair* (2002) and Jane Munene’s *Behind Closed Doors* (2004). These films have been purposely selected for this study for two main reasons: first, dates of their production spread over three decades. This enables the paper to capture a representative portrayal of sexuality and marriage in each of the last three decades. Second, these films are specifically selected because of the nature of the conflicts in the films, and the fact that the conflicts heighten with regard to marital problems. It is at these points (of conflict) that decisions significant to the films’ story-lines are made.

Synopses of the Films

Kolormask (1986) is a film made with Africa and specifically Kenya in mind. It is set in post-independent Kenya. Dr John Litodo, a Kenyan and his British wife, Eliza Litodo have been married for well over ten years. They live in Nairobi with their teenage children, Toby and Susan. Eliza realises that John is not the same

man she married. She cannot understand why he no longer 'respects' her feelings and decisions. She expected John to continue despising the African culture as he did back in London, where they met. John on the other hand finds Eliza too domineering. John's respect for his people's culture cannot allow him to give in to Eliza's demands. In this clash of interests, marital sex declines and in its place adultery flourishes. Divorce if not murder is the end result.

The Married Bachelor (1997) begins with a collapsed marriage. Denis' vicious quarrel with his late wife Matilda, drove her to hang herself.⁸ The film tells the story of the aftermath of this quarrel and subsequent death of Matilda. Matilda's death marks the end of happiness in the family of Agala, Denis' father. After Matilda's death, Denis is left with a son Yona, whom he abandons in the village as Denis works (as a lecturer) in Nairobi. Yona's circumcision ceremony fails to be performed fully because his father is too busy with his students in Nairobi. Because of this, Yona falls ill for his rugs have not been burnt.⁹ Agala takes the sick boy to Nairobi so that Denis can burn the rugs for the boy to heal. On instructing Denis on how to go about burning the rugs, Agala suffers a fatal heart attack. The film depicts Agala's death and Yona's illness as some of the most severe consequences of Denis' and Matilda's marital misunderstandings.

In *Dangerous Affair* (2002), irresponsible sexual behaviour in marriage is explored. Kui, a successful banker has just returned from New York and is eager to settle down in marriage and raise a family. She falls in love with Murags, a notorious womanizer who for once thinks of getting into a serious relationship with a woman. Things move very fast and within a very short time marriage preparations are underway. Just before the wedding, Murags meets his former girlfriend, Rose who deserted him seven years ago. Rose has just relocated from Mombasa to Nairobi. Although she is now a married mother of two, her relationship with Murags rekindles, disrupting everything. Murags marries Kui against his will. An extra-marital affair ensues and heartbreaks are followed by divorces.

Behind Closed Doors (2002) is yet another local film in which marital ties are loosened. The film brings into focus what a middle class family, headed by Mr and Mrs Jabali, goes through. Quarrels and wife beating is the order of the day in this family. This seriously distresses Mrs Jabali and her two children. One fateful evening, Mr Jabali's girlfriend rejects him in preference for another man. Mr Jabali's anger finds a timely vent when he reaches home only to find his wife and children evacuating their home. We see a final and brutal wife beating scene that sends Mrs Jabali into a coma. She is hospitalised. On recovering she files for a divorce, which she wins and starts a new life. The impact of this violent life is seen on the children, who suffer both psychologically and physically.

In the four films above, marriages have collapsed while extra-marital affairs seem to be the only alternative. The latter apparently provides a source of pleasure, understanding, companionship and love. The films direct the viewer's attention to the failure of marriage as a social institution.

The fall of marriage seems to be of concern to both male and female filmmakers. *Kolormask* and *The married Bachelor* are films produced by men while *Dangerous Affair* and *Behind Closed Doors* are works of women. The similarity with which they handle marital problems is more than a coincidence. It is a pointer to the fact

that abuse of marriage has become of great concern to both men and women in the society. Blame for the collapse of marriage is placed upon both husbands and wives. *Kolormask* strongly blames Eliza in favour of John. *The married Bachelor* blames Denis, who also admits his role in the death of his wife. *Dangerous affair* condemns both husband and wife. To make the story more plausible, two couples are brought into focus. This way, we see Rose and Murags as the irresponsible wife and husband respectively.¹⁰ Discussing marriage and its failure as presented in the films, it is necessary that we pay some attention to the approaches to marriage as portrayed in the four films.

Pre-marital Beliefs and Expectations

In the four films we see a collection of people with unrealised dreams. Marriage is approached with lots of expectations and the couples hope to get only the best from marriage. Kui in *Dangerous Affair* provides a perfect example. She brushes aside any negative (though sincere) comments on her planned marriage. Brenda, her close friend warns her severally, “the man [she is marrying] is a dog.” Kui insists that Murags has changed and he “really adores” her. At Kui’s farewell party, a married friend tells Kui that she needs to have a good ‘concealer’ in preparation for when she gets beaten up when she finally marries Murags. Brenda offers a quick warning to this: “Bad advice!” However, the heartbreak that Kui experiences later is as painful as a beating.

Eliza in *Kolormask* marries John expecting him to continue undermining the African culture and treating her in a special way. She thought married life would be as lovely as life was when she had just met John in London. This is why she keeps reminiscing on how well their relationship was when they were in London.

Shock Treatment

At a point in the various marriages portrayed, at least a spouse in each of the films realises that the person s/he married has undergone some tremendous transformation. They find their lives patched up with that of a ‘total stranger’. A partner may (seem to) provide exactly what the other hoped to get in marriage until the marriage actually takes place. After marriage, individual preferences become differences. That is when the common question, “what went wrong?” is posed. Eliza wonders,

John you were such a beautiful lover! And the nights, Ah! But now look at you. Lying there in bed like a log. Just like a piece of dead wood. When I think of those early days in London --- they were so sweet and John, so handsome and strong, black and beautiful. What happened on the road? What happened to our love?

(Eliza in *Kolormask*)

To Denis in *The Married Bachelor*, the fact that Matilda had had a still-birth long before their marriage is unbearable. His perception of Matilda changes. When he recognises his wife’s hidden secretive nature, he ignites a quarrel that leads to Matilda’s death.

Interestingly, some of the films provide the viewer with the opportunity to witness the two separate views of the same situation. *Kolormask* for instance, provides both John’s position and Eliza’s side of the story. This helps to underscore the extent of the misunderstanding that exists within the marriage. For John and Eliza

it is an extremely painful case of no understanding at all. As Eliza's thoughts (see previous quote) cross her mind, John also wonders,

What is wrong with this woman. I really have tried my best. Yet the more I try, the more we drift apart. Why is Eliza so blind? Remember Eliza, Just remember. A white cat is not more intelligent than a black one....

(John in *Kolormask*)

Marital and Extra-marital Sexual Behaviours

The questions asked and complaints raised above are usually preceded by a change in marital sexual behaviour. Loss of sexual attraction is common to Jimmy and Rose, Kui and Murags, Eliza and John, Mr and Mrs Jabali. In *Kolormask*, *Dangerous Affair* and *Behind Closed Doors*, we see explicit scenes of adulterous sex and romance. But we do not see this between the officially married couples.

Absence of sexual attraction leads to extra-marital affairs. Ironically these affairs are well highlighted in such a way that they seem to be the only options left.

John gets himself a "spare wheel" while Eliza gets into a relationship with Tom Johnson, a fellow British living in Kenya. The good moments these pairs share outside wedlock is stressed in *Kolormask*. *The Married Bachelor* positions Denis as a man whose attraction to the city is controlled by the wishes of his 'come-we-stay' girlfriend, Hilda. Although *Dangerous Affair* puts a lot of emphasis on the courtship of Murags and Kui, We hardly see any romance a few days after their wedding. In the same way, we do not see any attraction between Jimmy and Rose. Things have become so bad that the two no longer say much to each other. Rose communicates non-verbally with Jimmy using the message on her T-shirt.¹¹

The secret meetings and romance between Rose and Murags are however dwelt on throughout the film. *Behind Closed Doors* contrasts the loving Jabali (when he is with his girlfriend) to the violent and inhuman Jabali (when he is with his wife and children).

Conclusion

As we have seen, all the marriages in focus end up dissolved. Sexual behaviour and denigration of the other spouse seems to be the last overt sign that time has come for a dissolution of the marriage. We see that extra marital sex has taken over the position of sex in marriage; it now provides love and companionship, procreation, and assigns status. On the other hand, marriage has become a residence of enmity and indifference. Perhaps it is high time marriage got re-defined and its parameters re-drawn.

One may conclude that the films are frank representations of what takes place in real life marriage situations. Like the Hollywood film, portrayal of sex and the family unit is no better in the indigenous Kenyan film. We can see that over the past three decades, the Kenyan film has not changed its depiction of marriage and sexuality. I believe that need arises for open discussions on possible ways of salvaging marriage from its apparent destruction. More effort should be channelled towards pre-marital counselling rather than allowing marital problems force us to the marriage counsellors. Continuous in-marriage guidance should be sought even when there are no marital misunderstandings between married couples. These can be done through seminars or workshops organised by other social institutions like the church.

Since filmmakers and other creative artists play such important roles in highlighting societal problems (as we have seen in the above films), perhaps, they can also be called upon to come up with creative works that not only identify problems but also give possible solutions.

Notes

² An influential Christian leader of the ninth century AD who was extremely concerned by the worldliness he observed in the church.

³ The father of Latin theology, writing in the third century AD.

⁴ Fictional narratives were at the centre of this criticism. Sipalla (2004) views film as visualised narrative, reducing the much debated (and still debatable) gap between film and narrative to almost none. Since the society is becoming more visually inclined, cinematic images tend to create stronger impact and clearer memories than the written narratives.

⁵ The individual views can be seen in Todd Kappelman's *Film and Christianity*.

⁷ See Nick Aretakis' "Till the Credits Do Us Part: Marriage, Hollywood Style"

<http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2000-07-10-hollywoodmarriage.shtml>. (viewed June 22, 2005

⁸ Past tense is used here since the quarrel took place before the film begins. We are only told about it in flashbacks.

⁹ In some communities in Kenya, circumcision is only complete when an appended mini-ceremony of burning of the initiate's rugs is carried out a few days after the circumcision. It is only the initiate's father who is allowed to burn his son's rugs.

¹⁰ Kibinge focuses on two separate marriages so that we can get both an adulterous wife in Rose in her marriage to Jimmy, and an unfaithful husband in Kui and Murags' marriage. The film takes a new turn from the other three cases in which only one spouse's view or account is highlighted.

¹¹ Rose comes back from work one evening in a bad mood. She is not going to talk to Jimmy. She decides to wear a T-shirt with the message - LEAVE ME ALONE. She believes this should communicate her feelings. On the contrary, Jimmy teases her until she has to utter the same words verbally.

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