

Journal of Development and Communication Studies

Vol.4. No. 2, July 2015-June 2016 ISSN (Online & Print): 2305-7432. <http://www.devcomsjournalmw.org>,  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jdcs.v4i2.6>

---

## Stigma, Compulsory Able-bodiedness, and Queer Existence in Villant Jana's *Alufeyo*: A Crip Theory Analysis

Wesley Macheso, Department of Literature, Mzuzu University, Mzuzu, Malawi.

### Abstract

*This article calls for caution in HIV and AIDS communication by examining Villant Jana's (2014) motion picture, Alufeyo, as a precarious attempt at communicating the dangers of HIV and AIDS and the need for prevention in contemporary Malawian cinema. The study employs critical perspectives that read or interpret the body based on the discrimination it suffers from society due to difference. Employing Robert McRuer's Crip theory and Erving Goffman's Stigma, the paper unmasks negative undertones in the central message of the motion picture to argue that in its elevation of compulsory able-bodiedness and by portraying HIV and AIDS as the ultimate anathema, Alufeyo does more harm than good in HIV and AIDS awareness and management by perpetrating stigma, hopelessness, and despair. This argument rests on the movie's failure to debunk stigma in its use of theories of emotional response and in its employment of the entertainment-education model for behavioural change in HIV and AIDS management and prevention. The paper also faults the movie's failure to present living with HIV and AIDS as normal existence. The lesson drawn from this analysis is that future attempts in HIV and AIDS communication need to be handled with utmost caution to avoid the risk of yielding negative unintended outcomes that may prove to be detrimental in the fight against the stigma that haunts the HIV/AIDS pandemic.*

**Key words:** *Stigma, HIV/AIDS communication, Illness/Disability, Malawian cinema, Alufeyo*

### Introduction

Mian Ahmad Hanan (2009) observes that "in the absence of pharmacological, immunological, and medical interventions, the change in behaviour and attitude of the public may only be considered a possible way for the prevention and cure of HIV/AIDS". Hanan's observation underscores the vital role communication plays in HIV/AIDS prevention and management in that, different modes of communication serve as conduits for disseminating information that may prevent risk behaviour and spread awareness leading to the reduction of social stigma. However this paper posits that, HIV/AIDS communication needs to be approached with utmost caution as precarious attempts at communicating HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness messages may yield negative results bordering on the same stigma as is the case with Villant Jana's (2014) motion picture *Alufeyo*.

Hanan identifies a number of theories and models used in communicating HIV/AIDS awareness messages such as theory of reasoned action, the health belief model, social cognitive theory, theories of emotional response, cultivation theory of mass media, diffusion innovations theory, hierarchy of effects, social marketing, entertainment-education for behavioural change, and the AIDS risk reduction and management model (Hanan, 2009, 130-137). Out of the range of the proposed theories and models in HIV/AIDS communication, Jana's *Alufeyo* largely employs theories of emotional response and the entertainment-education for behavioural change model in its endeavour to contribute towards the fight against HIV/AIDS, mostly among university students and the youth in Malawi.

The entertainment-education for behavioural change model is one of the widely used HIV/AIDS communication strategies in Malawi. Over the years, television and radio drama serials and series such as *Tikuferanji* and *Tinkanena* have been used to disseminate HIV/AIDS awareness messages, although their effectiveness is still subject to research. This model is based on Singh's (2006) assertion that "education is the vaccine against AIDS". Singh argues that the message about AIDS awareness must have informative, educative, and entertaining appeal... to spread the message of AIDS one must sell the message as if they were selling a product (Singh, 2006). On the other hand, theories of emotional response propose that emotional response precedes and conditions cognitive and attitudinal effects. This implies that highly emotional messages in entertainment would be more likely to influence behaviour than messages in low emotional contents (Piotrow et al, 1997, 22). Thus this assumption has seen film makers working with emotive messages in their attempt to spread the message of HIV/AIDS through entertainment. Hanan cites Hollywood movies like *Longtime Companion* (1990), *Philadelphia* (1993), *A Mother's Prayer* (1995), *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story* (1996), and *Gia* (1998), as attempts in educating people regarding issues related to HIV/AIDS through entertainment (Hanan, 2006, 136).

While agreeing with Piotrow et al. (2002) that entertainment-education programs represent an effective and viable weapon in the war against HIV/AIDS by utilizing the popular appeal of entertainment formats to consciously address educational issues, in its analysis of the movie *Alufeyo*, this paper argues that precarious employment of this HIV/AIDS communication model carries the risk of yielding negative unintended consequences in HIV/AIDS awareness and management. By employing relevant critical perspectives on illness and disability in its examination of *Alufeyo*, the article perceives the movie as a precarious attempt at communicating the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the need for prevention among the youth. Employing Robert McRuer's Crip theory and Erving Goffman's Stigma, the paper unmasks negative undertones in the central message of the motion picture to argue that in its elevation of compulsory able-bodiedness and by portraying HIV/AIDS as the ultimate anathema, *Alufeyo* does more harm than good in HIV/AIDS awareness and management in that it perpetrates stigma, hopelessness, and despair. This argument rests on the movie's failure to debunk stigma in its use of theories of emotional response and in its employment of the entertainment-education model for behavioural change in HIV/AIDS management and prevention. The paper also faults the movie's failure to present living with HIV/AIDS as normal existence.

The article adopts queer theories in its analysis of the motion picture following in the footsteps of a number of queer theorists who have "adopted the deconstructive mode of dismantling the key binary oppositions of Western culture, such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and natural/unnatural, by which a spectrum of diverse things are forced into only two categories, and in which the first category is assigned privilege, power, and centrality, while the second is derogated, subordinated, and marginalised" (Abrams, 1999, 225). Reading into

the aforementioned communication strategies for HIV/AIDS messages, the paper contends that living with HIV/AIDS has been rendered “queer” in that HIV positive people are often regarded/presented as the “others” – the abnormal as contrasted from the normal – the medically unfit unlike the medically fit. It is in this “othering” and binary conception of normality and able-bodiedness that stigma is embedded, and the central message in *Alufeyo* falls in this trap since the protagonist is subjected to “varieties of discrimination, which effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. (The “normals”) construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (Goffman, 2000, 15).

Falling under the umbrella body of disability studies, Crip theory and Stigma are crucial in this analysis in that the two theories are mainly concerned with the ways in which the ill/disabled body is subjected and forced to seek cure before it is integrated into mainstream society. Since the chief aim of the paper is to challenge categories of “the self” and “the other” bordering on “corporeal anomalies” as portrayed in Malawian cinema, Crip theory and Stigma become useful deconstructive tools as these are theories that read/interpret the body based on the discrimination it suffers from society due to difference. They are theories that have merit because they are not based on medical practice, but on interpreting the stigma that the “different” body is subjected to. This makes these theories appropriate for studies on the ill body across different geographical and cultural spaces since stigma is not race, cultural, or location exclusive. Those with HIV/AIDS face discrimination all over the world, in different ways and as such, while these theories may have begun in the West, one can test their applicability to other contexts, as a way of drawing attention to novel experiences, and at the same time challenging and expanding these theories.

As Arthur Frank (1995: 10) argues, all narratives of illness and disability are postcolonial since they contest and revise the master narratives of medicine and culture that define the ill/disabled subject. Julie Nack Ngue (2007) observes that “illness and disability are heavily charged words in the context of colonial and postcolonial literatures and nations. While colonial discourse defined its African subjects as ‘always already ill’, the material effects of colonial rule contributed to a number of real somatic and psychological crises, as illustrated by Fanon (1952). And in contemporary Africa and the Caribbean, the confluence of corrupt regimes, poor infrastructures, and lasting debt has contributed to ill health and rampant spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS”. As such, the problem of HIV/AIDS in Malawi, and Africa in general, can be contended as a postcolonial malaise since it has been exacerbated by what Frantz Fanon identifies as conditions of “deplorable stagnation” in the post-colony (Fanon, 1963:151).

However, while HIV/AIDS in Africa is a postcolonial crisis and *Alufeyo* a product of a postcolonial space, the main interest in most postcolonial theorists is in marginalization in so far as it occurs along lines of race and postcolonial relations, as well as the psychological effects of those experiences. As such, postcolonial theory has a shortfall in the sense that there are a number of contemporary issues that it does not address, such as same sex relations, HIV/AIDS, and the environment, to mention but a few. This fact compels the study to seek out other, more established theoretical positions, in reading the ill or disabled body. However, this research is careful not to adopt these positions wholesale, well aware of the differences created by geographical and historical experience.

As anthropologist Patrick Devlieger (2005) rightly observes, “We live in a globalized world. This is a world in which old categories between Us-Them as they could be established in colonial frameworks are blurred. Many of the large differences remain or even become larger, for example economic differences between North and South. But our world is also highly unique because of the vast possibilities of exchange, travel, and especially of information. All of this has important

consequences in our understanding of disability”. As such, despite the fact that the critical perspectives adopted in the study originated from the West, Crip theory and Stigma become relevant in their generic concern with the ill/disabled body outside geography, race, and cultural difference.

### Tracing Images of HIV/AIDS in Malawian Cinema

In his article titled “Factors affecting the growth of the Malawian film industry”, whose focus is on the actual practice of film making in Malawi – asking who, what, and how the films have been created, Mufunanji Magalasi identifies Patrick Njawala’s 26 minute documentary *Iri mu ufa* and Maneno Mtawali’s *The Test* as some of the films addressing issues concerning the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Malawi. According to Magalasi, *Iri mu ufa* tells “the story of HIV/AIDS infection and how it was impossible, just by looking at a person to know that s/he had the disease. The movie explores perceptions about HIV and AIDS, including unprotected sex, urging people to go for testing and know their status. The film used the behavioural change approach, underpinned by social marketing. In using this philosophy, the film identified the problem, which was the growing number of infections coming about because of people’s assumptions about the appearance of an HIV positive person: sickly and very thin” (Magalasi, 2015:24).

Magalasi’s overview of *Iri mu ufa* highlights stigma as one of the crucial issues surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As Erving Goffman (1963, 13) defines it, “stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. A stigma then is a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype”. *Iri mu ufa* reveals that Malawian society has developed certain stereotypes in relation to individuals living with HIV/AIDS. One such stereotype is that HIV positive people must display physical anomalies, or, in other words, are not supposed to be “able-bodied”. As Robert McRuer argues in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006), able-bodiedness is defined vaguely as “soundness of health; ability to work; robustness”. McRuer further contends that “being able-bodied means being capable of the physical exertions required in a particular system of labour... it is here that we can begin to understand the compulsory nature of able-bodiedness: in the emergent industrial capitalist system” (McRuer, 2006, 8). As such, most people infected with HIV/AIDS are discriminated against or given a queer eye because a range of stereotypes believes that they are not able-bodied. Therefore, HIV/AIDS communication is not only supposed to expose this stereotype, but more importantly, communication is supposed to debunk the same in countering stigma.

Magalasi summarises Maneno Mtawali’s *The Test* as a film on HIV/AIDS that “tells the story of two young people who are about to marry but to do so, the young woman’s uncle demands that the man be tested first for HIV. The young man is so afraid of the test that, at one time, he escapes from testing just as the nurse goes into a store room to pick equipment for the process. The idea of being found positive scares him. When he later gets tested and is found HIV negative, he follows the fiancée to her home village where things are sorted out and dowry (lobola) is offered for the hand of the woman” (Magalasi, 2015, 26). As with *Iri mu ufa*, *The Test* also highlights stigma as one of the major issues concerning the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By dreading the test, the young man expresses the fear that he has of losing the opportunity of marrying the woman he loves if he be found to possess a deeply discrediting attribute that is HIV. The uncle’s insistence that the young man should be tested first explains the society’s attitude towards HIV/AIDS and the danger that an HIV positive person supposedly poses to society.

While public sensitization on the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the importance of HIV testing is crucial in the fight against further spread of the disease, effective communication should also

address stigma, but with the aim of debunking it since exposing the problem alone is not enough. The subsequent analysis of *Alufeyo* shows how the movie fails to do this, placing emphasis on the demand for able-bodiedness in the central message of the film and on its failure to present living with HIV/AIDS as normal existence in its tragic portrayal of the disease as the ultimate anathema.

### Villant Jana's *Alufeyo*: A Queer Eye for the Queer Guy

Villant Jana's *Alufeyo* is a fictitious account of the eponymous hero who, hailing from Chamama village in Kasungu district, manages to secure a government scholarship to study at Mzuzu University. In the initial scenes of the movie, Alufeyo proves to be modest, naive, and well disciplined. However, his life changes when he becomes a victim to peer pressure under the influence of his college roommate popularly known as Sparrow. Sparrow introduces Alufeyo to the party life: alcohol, drugs, and women. He loses focus of his goals and forgets the family and fiancée he left in the village in his obsession with this new life. In his carelessness, Alufeyo contracts HIV but he is not aware of his status until he is demanded to undergo HIV testing as one of the requirements for the scholarship that he academically qualifies for. Upon being found HIV positive, Alufeyo is denied the scholarship. He becomes depressed and in his distress commits suicide.

In his review of the movie on the online publication, *Nyasa Times*, Pius Nyondo describes *Alufeyo* as “a typical story of the dangers of bad company and peer pressure among college going students”. He goes further to say that “the movie is about HIV/AIDS awareness. The movie tells oppositely well how big a problem HIV/AIDS has become in Malawi's colleges and universities because of lack of awareness. Brenda, Alufeyo's campus girlfriend infects Alufeyo with HIV which she undoubtedly got from Matola, a business magnet” (Nyondo, 2014). In the review, Nyondo argues that “above all, the movie probably wants viewers to reflect on Alufeyo's suicide. Isn't life, after all, supposed to move on even after one tests HIV positive?” (Nyondo, 2014). What Nyondo overlooks is the negative impact that the movie's tragic ending has with regard to the fate of people living with HIV/AIDS. The movie's negative message is underscored in Alufeyo's thwarted scholarship that he fails to attain because he has HIV. In the end, the thwarted scholarship and the hero's suicide betray the intended message of the importance of abstinence and prevention that the movie tried to send out in that, ironically, the message that stands out is that of HIV/AIDS as the ultimate anathema marred by stigma, hopelessness, and despair.

The movie can be analysed as a precarious attempt at communicating the dangers of HIV/AIDS to the youth in the evident elevation of compulsory able-bodiedness in its central message, which ironically perpetrates the stigma that effective HIV/AIDS communication is supposed to debunk. The scholarship that Alufeyo is denied is discriminating in that it queers HIV/AIDS as a “deeply discrediting attribute”, conforming to Goffman's definition of stigma. Explaining the requirements of the scholarship, the medical practitioner states that “and going through the form, it is abundantly clear that you can only be accepted as medically fit for the scholarship if you are HIV negative” (Jana, 2014). After the examination, the physician tells Alufeyo that “you are HIV positive and therefore we cannot certify your fitness according to the requirements of the scholarship” (Jana, 2014). In this way, the scholarship categorically discriminates HIV positive people, othering them by placing them in the category of the “medically unfit” as contrasted from the “medically fit” – the “undeserving” as contrasted from the “deserving”. Alufeyo becomes a victim of this binary perception of normality. He becomes the queer guy who is given a queer eye by society, denying him opportunities because of his HIV status. The movie's oversight of

such stigma and its failure to challenge such kind of scholarships undermines its intended purpose of communicating effective HIV/AIDS awareness messages to the general public.

Having failed to attain the scholarship, Alufeyo struggles with the reality of living with HIV/AIDS. His dread comes from the fear of stigma evident in his lament before his girlfriend Brenda; “now everybody will know that I have failed to go because I am positive... What do you think will become of me?... How am I going to face the community?... You have killed me!” (Jana, 2014). As Goffman observes, “eventually, the standards that the person has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing” (Goffman, 1963, 18). This shame and dread of stigma lead to Alufeyo’s suicide. The movie fails to communicate effectively about the dangers of HIV/AIDS in that its tragic ending presents the disease as the ultimate anathema. The death of Alufeyo emphasizes hopelessness and despair in the face of HIV/AIDS, which is detrimental in HIV/AIDS awareness and management.

The central message in the movie could have been more effective had it been able to present living with HIV/AIDS as normal existence. Instead of sending out a passive message at the end of the movie in the words, “avoid multiple and concurrent sexual relationships, positive prevention is key, positive living is possible”, the movie would have actively and effectively demonstrated that positive living is possible by investing hope for a bright future in the character of Alufeyo. Instead, community members fail to regard Alufeyo as a normal person by exercising varieties of discrimination that effectively reduce his life chances. The movie fails to present living with HIV/AIDS as normal existence in that, in its precarious attempt to emphasize the dangers of HIV/AIDS by employing theories of emotional response, it fails to provide for Alufeyo those, who Goffman (1963, 31-41) calls “the own and the wise”, to help him deal with stigma, and, by extension, to debunk it.

“The own”, argues Goffman, “Are those who share his stigma. Knowing from their own experience what it is like to have this stigma, some of them can provide the individual with instruction in the tricks of the trade and with a circle of lament to which he can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort feeling at home, at ease, accepted” (Goffman, 1963, 31-32). In *Alufeyo*, an HIV positive student called Norman would have played the role of “the own” for the tragic protagonist. Instead, when he comes with other friends to offer moral support to Alufeyo, they lack seriousness and the victim ends up chasing them out of his room since he believes that their intention is to poke fun at him. For effective communication on the possibility of living normally with HIV/AIDS, the movie should have dedicated seriousness and detailed attention in its attempt to express the power that “the own” have in promoting the life chances of HIV positive people.

Goffman defines “the wise” as “the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other. These can be professionals e.g. doctors, nurses, or an individual who is related through the social structure to the stigmatized individual” (Goffman, 1963, 41). In the movie, the doctor who diagnoses Alufeyo fails to play the role of “the wise” in his failure to make him feel like “an ordinary other”. He lets Alufeyo leave the hospital in confusion – believing that he has ruined his life. Alufeyo’s roommate, Sparrow, also fails to act like “the wise” due to lack of seriousness. He fails to encourage him and to demonstrate to him that there is a possibility of a normal life even with HIV. All this leads to Alufeyo’s suicide. As such, by failing to portray the role

of “the own and the wise” in HIV/AIDS management, the central message in *Alufeyo* does more harm than good in that in its failure to debunk stigma, the movie perpetrates hopelessness and despair in its presentation of HIV/AIDS as the ultimate anathema.

## **Conclusion**

This article has employed relevant critical perspectives on illness and disability to examine Villant Jana’s *Alufeyo* as a precarious attempt at communicating the dangers of HIV/AIDS and the need for prevention among the youth. The central argument in the paper has established that, the movie fails to debunk stigma in its use of theories of emotional response and in its employment of the entertainment-education model for behavioural change in HIV/AIDS management and prevention. By employing Robert McRuer’s Crip theory and Erving Goffman’s Stigma, the paper has unmasked negative undertones in the central message of the motion picture to argue that *Alufeyo* does more harm than good in its precarious attempt at communicating the dangers of HIV/AIDS in that it perpetrates stigma, hopelessness, and despair. The article also faults the movie in its failure to present living with HIV/AIDS as normal existence in its elevation of compulsory able-bodiedness. The lesson drawn from this analysis is that future attempts in HIV/AIDS communication need to be handled with utmost caution to avoid the risk of yielding negative unintended outcomes that may prove to be detrimental in the fight against the stigma that haunts the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

## **Acknowledgement**

The author acknowledges the critical contribution and review made by Dr Ken (Jr) Lipenga, Department of English, Chancellor College, University of Malawi.

## **References**

- Abrams, M.H. (1999)  
*A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Devlieger, P.J. (2005)  
Generating a Cultural Model of Disability. *19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the European Federation of Associations of Teachers of the Deaf (FEAPDA)*. 14-16 October, 2005.
- Fanon, F. 1963)  
*The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Frank, A. W. (1995).  
*The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963)  
*Stigma*. London: Penguin.
- Hanan, M.A. (2009)  
HIV/AIDS Prevention Campaigns: a Critical Analysis. *Canadian Journal of Media Studies*, 5 (1) 129-158.
- Jana, V. (dir.) (2013)  
*Alufeyo*. [film]. Mzuzu: First Wave Pictures.

- Magalasi, M. (2015)  
Factors affecting the growth of the Malawian film industry. *Journal of Development and Communication Studies*, 4(1) 18-32.
- McRuer, R. (2006)  
*Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mtawali, M. (dir.) (2009)  
*The Test* [film]. Blantyre: Pakachere Institute.
- Nack Ngue, J.C. (2007)  
Colonial Discourses of Disability and Normalization in Contemporary Francophone Immigrant Narratives: Bessora's *53 cm* and Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*. *Wagadu Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 4 (Summer 2007).
- Njawala, P. (dir.) (2003)  
*Iri mu ufa*. [film] Blantyre: PSI Malawi.
- Nyondo, P. (2014)  
A review of Mzuni's HIV/AIDS movie *Alufeyo*: Step ahead for Malawi film industry. *Nyasa Times*, 19 June.
- Piotrow, P. T., Kincaid L.W. & Rinehart W. (1997).  
*Health Communication: Lessons from family planning and reproductive health*. Connecticut: Praeger.
- Piotrow, P.T., Meyer, R.C., & Zulu, B.A. (1992).  
AIDS and mass persuasion. In: J. Mann, D.J.M. Tarantola, & T.W. Netter (eds.) *AIDS in the World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 733-759.
- Singh, J. (2006).  
*HIV/AIDS prevention & creating awareness: role of media*. Retrieved on June 11, 2014 from [www.boloji.com/society/086.htm](http://www.boloji.com/society/086.htm).