



Vitimbi as a Commentary of Kenya's Socio-Political Experiences

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Abstract

The essay analyses *Vitimbi* (1975-2014), a theatre text aired on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. Using the family as its setting, the text wittingly accounts the socio-political realities of everyday life in post-colonial Kenya. In the main, the essay interrogates how the producer of *Vitimbi* uses the family to image socio-political issues in post-independence Kenya. The focus is on how the producer uses the family conflicts and interactions as an allegory of the post-colonial nation-state. The artistic use of the family allows me to examine Mzee Ojwang's family as a microcosm of the large society. The producer realizes this task by inextricably knitting familial and patriarchal structures on one hand with social, economic and political experiences on the other against a backdrop of Kenya's history. The essay therefore problematizes characterisation within the domestic setting to establish how characters are used to address political nuances.



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Introduction

The years immediately after Kenya's independence bore witness to an emergence of repression by the government. To ensure total loyalty, the state censored any content perceived to subvert the regime's policies. Of all censored material, theatre suffered the most as seen in the banning of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I will marry when I want*. However, regardless of the government censorship and the hostile political environment especially in relation to theatre, *Vitimbi* flourished to carve itself a niche on KBC television and to its audience. It is therefore within such a socio-political milieu that I interrogate how *Vitimbi* survived on a state broadcaster without being censored yet the government ensured that most of the KBC content dealt with government policies and dissemination of information. The following questions then arise from such a political paranoiac situation: how possible could *Vitimbi* avoid addressing the socio-political experiences of the day given KBC's mandate? Is it possible for the artist to run away from depicting the experiences of his/her people in the production of theatre?

Yet, based on the knowledge that art is a reflection and a product of society as observed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981), *Vitimbi* cannot fail to reflect that very society that has given it the raw material. *Vitimbi's* ability to reflect reality confirms Emenyonu's observation that "an African literary artist must have a stake in the serious political and social issues of his times and people. He cannot create in a vacuum if his works must have relevance, authenticity and acceptance" (1991, p. 35). Emenyonu's observation forms the basis on which I interpret *Vitimbi* in relation to the experiences in contemporary society and Kenya in particular.

This essay examines how socio-political issues are imaged through familial interactions in *Vitimbi*. I situate the action in *Vitimbi* at the intersection of domestic intrigues and post-independence experiences in Kenya. In this way, I grapple with how the family in *Vitimbi* is a microcosm of post-independence states and how masculine authority, as embodied in the father figure (Mzee Ojwang), is comparable to manifestations of domination and political leadership. As a microcosm of society, I analyse *Vitimbi* as an allegory of postcolonial states with Kenya as a referent. The interpretation of *Vitimbi* allegorically is premised on Jameson's argument that the "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic-necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory [and that] the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situations of the Third World culture and society" (1986, p. 69). In this regard, the essay examines how the family experiences in *Vitimbi* is employed to investigate the socio-political conditions that shape and dictate the thematic issues advanced.

The Artistic Setting

In a study of this nature, it is imperative to examine the relationship between the government and art, especially theatre before conceptualizing the family and the father figure in *Vitimbi* and

in Kenya's historical terrain. The overview of the government and art gives a microscopic picture of the socio-political milieu that informed the production and performance of *Vitimbi*. Consequently, it allows me to interrogate why *Vitimbi*'s producers chose the domestic setting as opposed to other conventional spaces such as the Kenya National Theatre or Kamiriithu as was the case for Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Vitimbi was first produced when Kenyans were struggling for freedom under President Daniel Arap Moi's repressive regime. Ligaga (2008) observes that among the people targeted were opposition politicians, academicians, literary scholars, student leaders and outspoken church leaders such as Bishop Andrew Muge (p. 11). This scenario was worsened by the country's social, economic and political turbulence which exacerbated an increase in the government's intolerance of its critics. Cognizant of the government's hostility toward art, and Street's argument that "artistic creativity depends upon freedom of expression to which state interference is antithetical" (1997, p. 77), I point out that *Vitimbi*'s performance within the domestic setting was deliberate to mask the serious undertones over and above the social concerns therein so that the government could not easily relate the issues advanced to what was happening in the country then.

As already mentioned, the relationship between the Kenyan government and artists was strained because of the government's unbalanced nature and hostility toward artistic works. The state created a stifling environment for artists to operate as it monitored and harassed those perceived to be anti-government or critical of the state. The government's determination to censor and mute art in Kenya is evident in the silencing of critical creative voices such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Censorship in most post-colonial societies manifest itself in various forms. Censorship, according to Kress (1998), is realized through acts such as forbearance from speech, absence of mention, obscurity, secrecy and omission. Kress's observation lays credence to Kenya's socio-political scenario. This is because the Kenyan government was paranoid of dissent and art especially theatre because of its ability to raise people's awareness about government failures. To deal with pockets of resistance and opposition, the government set up mechanisms of monitoring literary productions to ensure that only government friendly creative works flourished while the radical ones were banned. Despite the government of Kenya's skewed monitoring and control of artistic output, popular cultural productions such as *Vitimbi* flourished and grew in numbers under the direct watchful eyes of state censorship machinations.

Fabian (1988) succinctly points out that in situations of collective oppression and in contexts where overt criticism and dissenting voices are not accommodated, popular cultural productions become important channels of expression in "creating collective freedom precisely where individual freedom is denied or limited" (p. 19). *Vitimbi* was first produced in a repressive regime in Kenya, a regime that was out to silence any material that could raise

people's awareness to socio-political injustices. I point out that *Vitimbi* survived censorship because of its nature as a popular cultural product. This in turn provided a safe haven for the producer to anchor the socio-political experiences since it appears "apolitical". This could be one of the reasons why it was allowed television airwaves on a state broadcaster in the disguise that it was "harmless" in as far as the government was concerned. This raises the following questions: Why did the producer of *Vitimbi* resort to the domestic space in addressing socio-political experiences? How possible is it to relate the happenings in the domestic space to the happenings of the nation-state? The answers to these questions become the preoccupation in this essay.

It is within this hostile political environment that *Vitimbi's* producer succeeded in addressing the common people's experiences through the privacy of the family. *Vitimbi's* domestic space therefore provides a sanctuary of freedom which projects the text as only entertaining the audience by advancing familial themes. The domestic setting masked political themes making the government pass it as a "trouble free" text in comparison to subversive literary productions such as Imbuga's *Betrayal in the city* (1978). In the first and second regimes under Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi respectively, artists and the population at large were not free to speak about a number of issues. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was one of the literary artists that encountered the silencing mechanisms of the government. The artistic silencing took the form of detentions and banning of his literary texts. On the banning of *Mother sing for me*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o boldly responded by pointing out that the government's action of "attacking the theatre of Kamiriithu, one can now definitely say that the whole cultural repression was not an accident or an isolated mistake by some over-zealous philistines in the provincial administration, but the deliberate, thought-out action by a *paranoic government* [emphasis mine]" (*Women in cultural*, p. 136).

The government had perceived the live performance of *I Will Marry when I Want* (1982) as a threat to its authority resulting in the closure of Kamiriithu Cultural Centre in 1967 where the play had been performed. Ligaga confirms the government's fears by pointing out that *I Will Marry when I Want* (1982) was a direct "attack on Kenyatta's government [particularly on the government's] treatment of the working class or peasants" (p. 14). It is worth noting that *I will marry when I want* painstakingly explores how the common people in contemporary Kenya were betrayed by the political leadership after the colonizer. The citizenry had hoped for freedom and a share of the "fruits" of independence once they got independence.

However, what happened was the reinforcing of colonial oppressive apparatus under their own African leaders. Bjorkman (1989) argues that the government's fear of the performance of Ngugi's text at Kamiriithu was informed by the fact that it could make majority of the population, who Ngugi refers to as peasants, revolt against the status quo thereby disorienting the power equilibrium. The banning of the performance of Ngugi's text

raises philosophical interrogation of power with government's fear on one hand, and the peasant's agency on the other hand thereby depicting power as short lived. The government's fear is a demonstration that power is elusive and fragile in as far as who has it and how it can be sustained by those who wield it. It is this fragility of power that make those who have ability to exercise it struggle to guard it at all cost. However, Foucault deconstructs the belief that power is embodied in a single entity especially the political office by arguing that power manifest itself in different ways. He succinctly points out that:

Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments (pp. 109-110).

The above quotation demonstrates that oppressed have the power to change the status quo and it is because of this fact that the government was uncomfortable with the performance of *I will Marry when I want*. Therefore, the banning of drama texts considered revolutionary was an attempt to muzzle any form of conscious raising tools hence inhibiting people's seizure of power.

The closure of *Kamiirithu* was aimed at muting theatre so that people are not aware of political immoralities flourishing at the time. *Kamirithu* was a public space as such the government gaze hang over it. However, *Vitimbi's* action is staged within the domestic space. The domestic space is vital in this context as it is apolitical since the cardinal role of the family is to inculcate desired morals in its members. The domestic space therefore allowed the producer to engage with the lived experiences of the people away from the government's censorship apparatus. It is important to point out that KBC as a state broadcaster was under the government's watch to ensure that it only deals with its mandate of advancing government's policies and educational programmes but not anything that opposes it. In this regard, the producer had to operate within this framework.

It is also important to restate that the artist's task is to mirror society. In this way, the producer of *Vitimbi* could not run away from this function but anchor the same in a manner that would not land him on the wrong side of government. This strategy ensured *Vitimbi's* continued production and its long stay on KBC television airwaves. Related to the domestic space is artistic setting. The term setting has been defined variously by scholars. For instance, Brown (2004) defines theatre setting as:

The many spaces, venues, and locations where art's experiences take place, and is used intentionally to broaden the discussion beyond conventional arts facilities.

Settings may be formal or informal, temporary or permanent, public or private, and physical or virtual. In the broadest sense, “setting” is a sort of meeting ground between artist and audience—a place both parties occupy for a finite period of time to exchange ideas and create meaning (Par. 4).

What stands out in this definition is the fact that setting in theatre is not only limited to space but a number of other elements that embellish the interpretation of a theatre text. My examination of setting in this essay transcends time and place to focus on space and the implications the same has on the interpretation of *Vitimbi*. This is particularly important as it aids in examining Kenya’s post-independence experiences against the happenings in the family.

On setting and meaning in theatre, Kehinde (2008) observes that meaning in theatre is contextual and a function of the situation in which it is anchored. In order to analyze *Vitimbi*, there is need to examine the social environment that informed its production. The analysis of *Vitimbi* within the situated and historical conditions is invaluable in relating and interrogating post-independence experiences in Kenya. The producer of *Vitimbi* artistically uses the family as a locale within which micro and macro conflicts are played out, interrogated and subverted. All this is neatly encapsulated within familial power relations witnessed in Mzee Ojwang’s household under his headship as the father and husband. The domestic space therefore suffices as a rich ground for anchoring society since the family is an organic social unity from which other social structures spring. The section that follows below examines the happenings in *Vitimbi* by relating them to socio-political experiences in contemporary Kenya. The discussion below proceeds from the premise that *Vitimbi* is an allegory of the Kenyan state.

The Family in *Vitimbi* and the Political State

This section examines the relationship between the family and the state. I appropriate the happenings in the family to the happenings at the state level. In this way, the family is read as an allegory of the state. Allegory, according to Abrahams (1998) is defined as:

A narrative fiction in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are continued[sic] to make coherent sense on the “literal” or primary level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events. (p. 4)

Based on the definition above, an allegory can be said to be a literary device that refers to a situation or an item that relates its meaning or interpretation to another that is not similar in physical appearance. I argue that *Vitimbi* uses the family and the gendered relationships within the family to comment about the postcolonial African states. I start by discussing the family

and the position of the father by illustrating the authority he has in the family and how the same is comparable to political leadership and authority.

Visser (2005) defines the family as the “primary social unit in any community; the individual’s opening into the wider social network” (p. 5). The family is the first locus for individual development and the nucleus upon which society gets its citizenry and upon which other institutions such as political state and religious institutions are established and maintained. As an institution, the family is essential in realizing a healthy and sound citizenry since the state needs the family for its socio-political, cultural and economic stability. Ouma (2007) observes that “the family’s role in socializing its members stands out as key to linking the family with the larger socio-economic and cultural life” (p. 78). A healthy family can only be realized if the family’s leadership is endowed with the capability to ensure that family needs are adequately met. The sound leadership in the family in turn guarantees that children grow to become law abiding citizens and morally upright individuals.

A healthy family, just like the state, has rules and regulations that guide its members. It is also where its members become aware of their position as they grow. As such, order and social classes that later define state and political discourses originate from the family. This justifies the reading of the family in *Vitimbi* allegorically since within the familial space, concerns of the individual family members and the political state are articulated. The family in *Vitimbi* is presented as a contested space characterized by different forms of resistance, imposed silence, intimidation, interplay of power based on social hierarchies, familial struggles and gendered roles. For instance, Mama Kayai and Kabu come after Mzee Ojwang in terms of their position in the family respectively.

The hierarchies in the family are realized through the African socialization which reinforces the father as the head of the family. In this way, the father becomes the sole decision maker in all matters that concern his family. Therefore, the social hierarchies in Mzee Ojwang’s family sets parameters on how individual family members relate. Mzee Ojwang occupies the most revered position in the household hence becomes the head at best the leader, while the rest of the family members are his subordinates/subjects. On the position of the father in the family, Rich (1976) points out that:

The power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure-or through tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour-men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male. (pp. 57-58)

Rich’s observation above captures the pronounced disparity of social hierarchies that exist in the family. Though the above emphasizes subordination in terms of male-female relations, the same can be appropriated to other forms of subordination in the society. The relegation of

family members in terms of the position they occupy is not only in terms of familial bonds but encompasses major institutions of society as observed earlier on in this section. On her part, McClintock avers that:

The subordination of a wife to a husband, and child to adult occurs as a natural order in the society. As such other forms of social hierarchy could be conceptualised in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature (1993, p. 64)

The view of other social hierarchies as illustrated in the quotation above is informed by the fact that power relations that “shape social, political, economic and cultural life prevent some members of the family from participating fully in all areas of their lives, whether it’s in the home, or in the public arena” (Terri Barnes, 1999).

I compare Mzee Ojwang to post-colonial African leaders and that the domination and eventual subordination of his family members is a reflection of how the post-colonial political states subordinate and marginalize the people they purport to lead. As such, the undertakings and shortcomings of the state may as well be played out in the family drama as depicted in *Vitimbi*. However, I point out that the family’s relationship with the state is complex than just envisaging the family as a representation and reflection of the state. Therefore, the examination of the happenings in the familial space in this essay is done in relation to the explicit happenings at the level of the state by highlighting the way these events transcend simplistic manifestation of either institution. On the interconnection of the family and the society at large, Bhabha points out that:

In the stirrings of the unhomey, another world becomes visible. It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomey is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the-home-in-the-world. (p. 141)

Bhabha’s argument above provides a way of understanding not only a dynamic and interactive but also equal and reciprocal relationship between the home and the outer society. The social, political, economic and cultural happenings in the outer society is felt in the home, yet the domestic space does not remain merely acted-upon and shaped by the larger world; rather, I argue that it responds to the “intricate invasions” that Bhabha mentions in the excerpt above.

Fanon (1986) emphasizes the significance of psychological reading of familial relationships into national power, by pointing out that “[f]or the individual, the authority of the state is a reproduction of the authority of the family by which he was shaped in his childhood [...] He perceives the present in terms of the past” (p. 143). Fanon’s observation links the authority of the state as reproducing power dynamics similar to those experienced within the realm of the family, and also as a means of understanding portrayals of state struggle and national division as it maps onto the struggles and divisions that occur within the family.

Thus, familial power struggles in *Vitimbi* is emblematic of the effect of political happenings upon those experiencing state upheaval. This is because Mzee Ojwang’s behavior resonates with the political underpinnings in post-colonial dictatorial regimes and Kenya in particular. Wilhelm observes that “in the figure of the father, the authoritarian state has its representative in every family so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power (As qtd in Patience Alden, 1991, p. 74).

Musila (2013) emphasizes the significance of family in the post-colony by pointing out that “artists revisit the familial space as a site of experiences which inevitably provide important insights into the murky national socio-political terrains” (p. 349). The conflicts witnessed in *Vitimbi* are symbolic of conflicts experienced at state level. The producer uses the experiences of Mzee Ojwang’s family under the leadership of Ojwang as a metaphor for the brutalities, failures, betrayals and excesses of political leadership and its effect on the general well-being of the ordinary citizenry. I read the family as a metaphor because the family is not just a passive recipient of the external happenings but as a part of those happenings. Though the family may be remote from the happenings in the political arena, the action in *Vitimbi* demonstrate that the same family has been used to reflect society. Etherton and Crow (1980) point out that:

[Theatre] plays must take the part of the local people. They should reflect life from the viewpoint of the [viewers] themselves; and they should not avoid articulating criticism of government policy which is inadequate. Thus, although they may initially set out to be less than political in their aims, these plays may end up as the most politically active of all African theatre. (pp. 57-8)

Just like *Vitimbi*, the quotation above shows that artistic work cannot run away from addressing the happenings in the society since it cannot operate in a vacuum devoid of societal experiences. Despite *Vitimbi*’s performance oscillating between the confines of the home to the hotel, the text interrogates critical issues such as domination, leadership, misuse of power and gender inequality. In this way, Mzee Ojwang’s family serves as a miniature of the state. Mzee Ojwang struggles to demonstrate that he is the head of his family and that his wife

and daughter should obey his decisions. He uses a number of ways to ensure that the authority and control he has over his family is firmly retained in the father figure.

This is demonstrated through *Mpenzi* (lover) episode of *Vitimbi*. This episode features Mzee Ojwang, Mama Kayai, Kabu, Ziporah (Mzee Ojwang's mistress), and Hotel employees (Mwala and Mogaka). The action in this episode begins in Ziporah's house in the morning and it appears Ojwang had spent a night there. Ojwang is still in bed when the action begins. Ziporah has prepared fruit juice for Ojwang and herself. She later calls Mzee Ojwang to join her for breakfast. In this episode, Ziporah is heard referring to Mzee Ojwang as "my sweetie." Mzee Ojwang comes in, wearing a red T-Shirt and a white short. He finds it hard to see as he is not wearing his spectacles. As a result, he sits on the floor instead of the chair next to him. Ziporah helps him to sit on the chair by reminding him that he should not worry as she is his eyes. Ziporah is seen feeding Mzee Ojwang as a sign of their romance. To show his love for Ziporah, Ojwang does grand shopping for her.

On the other hand, at Mama Kayai's house, Mama Kayai is worried as she is convinced that Mzee Ojwang is lost. She has searched for Ojwang everywhere in the city even in the mortuaries to no avail. At this time, she has called in Mwala and Mogaka to help her in the search. However, both Mwala and Mogaka are aware of where Ojwang is but do not tell Mama Kayai. Mzee Ojwang has bribed them to keep his romantic affair with Ziporah a secret from Mama Kayai. We also learn that Mama Kayai does not have cooking gas in her house since she does not have the money to refill the cylinder.

In the same episode, Mwala (Ojwang's employee at the hotel) has been secretly admiring Ziporah and he seizes the opportunity when he is sent by Ojwang to take money to Ziporah. He lies to Ziporah that he is the one who has been helping Ojwang with money. As a result, Ziporah falls to his lies and they start an affair. When Ojwang learns of Mwala's and Ziporah's intimate affair, he ends his relationship with Ziporah and sacks Mwala from the hotel. Later on in the episode, Ziporah realises that she is pregnant. However, because of having an affair with both Ojwang and Mwala, she is unable to identify the father to her unborn child as both Mwala and Ojwang deny responsibility. The episode ends with Ziporah having gone to Ojwang's house and refuses to leave claiming that Ojwang has to take responsibility of the luggage (pregnancy) she is carrying.

The action in *Mpenzi* negates Mzee Ojwang's stature as the father and head of his household. We expect that as a father, his family and not his concubine should be his first priority. Mzee Ojwang's family is a perfect example of what can be said to be a modern type of nuclear family with the father, mother and child. Despite this, the family seems not to be united as would be the case. In this regard, Mzee Ojwang's show of manhood and authority in his family is caricatured. Based on this, one can tell that Mzee Ojwang's portraiture is an indication of a performance of masculinity but an interrogation of what truly makes one a man. This is because Mzee Ojwang is a contradiction in himself: on one hand, he wants to

show how manly he is in terms of being the head of his family and on the other, he negates the same through his actions gullibility that requires the input of Mama Kayai to restore order. In this way, he comes out as a caricature of what a man is supposed to be, especially in Africa.

Mzee Ojwang's disposition is a performance of being a man pegged on his socialization but not as an inherit endowment. Since Mzee Ojwang wants to show that he is a man, he has to act what society expects of him as a man. In depicting Ojwang in this manner, the producer satirizes and deconstructs the ideological construction of a man by society. Ojwang is at best comparable to Naipaul's male characters in *Miguel Street* (1959) who engage in outrageous activities to prove that they are "man among we men." However, beyond this socialisation and struggle to act being a man, Mzee Ojwang is hollow and devoid of the values that define him as the head of his household. His struggle to demonstrate that he is in control of his family is subverted through his constant blatant mistakes and gullibility.

In the *Mpenzi* episode, Mzee Ojwang is depicted as a typical macho man who betrays Mama Kayai by having a romantic relationship with Ziporah. However, what is interesting is that the same is not allowed for women who society expects to remain pure and chaste while being chased. The producer demonstrates through romantic relationships in *Vitimbi* that infidelity is one of the causes for women marginalization in the society. This is because such relationships are biased in that most men seem to have been socialized into using, exploiting and dumping women without any remorse. The producer symbolically uses Ojwang to satirize men who are promiscuous and in so doing, the producer contributes to the growing satirization of male infidelity as portrayed in some of the African artistic texts and production. For instance, Mzee Ojwang can be compared to Honorable Chief Nanga in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1988); or even Boss in Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the city* (1978). All the characters mentioned in the above texts hold revered positions in the society yet they betray the people they are supposed to lead both in their families and at state level. I therefore read Mzee Ojwang's sexual escapades as a revelation of the shaping effects of socio-political experiences upon home, family and the population at large. Kehinde (2008) points out that male uncontrolled sexual prowess "signify the overwhelming disparity between the dominant, privileged exploiter-class and the exploited" (p. 234) in the post-colony.

Mzee Ojwang behaves like an adolescent boy full of romantic fantasy kind of love. Both Ojwang and Ziporah are seen holding hands in similar manner as young lovers. To ultimately steal Ziporah's heart, Mzee Ojwang does impressive shopping for her yet the viewer knows that Mama Kayai does not have cooking gas in the house. The lack of basic utilities such as cooking gas in Mama Kayai's house is a pointer to a failed leadership by the father figure who is supposed to adequately provide for his family. The fact that Ojwang shops for Ziporah implies lack of priority by those mandated to take care of the welfare of those they lead. I point out that Ojwang's infidelity neatly relates with post-colonial African leadership that has

failed its people. The absence of gas as a basic commodity in Ojwang's household signifies a non-performing leadership and economy. This as seen through Ojwang due to a leadership that is unresponsive and selfish to its dependant's welfare.

Lack of food supply and gas in Mama Kayai's house hinders her from cooking for her family. Food in most African communities is treasured as it is during meal time that people commune, socialize and even discuss matters relating to society. However, the very essential commodity is threatened as there is lack of appropriate tools to realize it. As such, the familial bond is affected. This foreshadows the death of familial bond as a result of individualistic and selfish character of Mzee Ojwang.

Mzee Ojwang's betrayal of his family members at this point is comparable to different manifestations of betrayals such as political, religious, and cultural that characterize the contemporary society. It is important, therefore, to emphasize that domestic betrayals are imbued with a multiplicity of interpretations as they go beyond ordinary betrayal. Ojwang's betrayals are emblematic of betrayals at the political level where those who hold political positions have failed in their cardinal role of servant leadership and as individuals of high moral integrity. Instead, such leaders have subverted this fundamental responsibility given to them by the electorate.

Mama Kayai's predicament is symbolic of the hopelessness and pain experienced by people who are let down by their leaders. Mzee Ojwang's failure to meet his family's psychological, social and economic needs reflects social realities in post-colonial societies where leaders fail to perform. In addition, the impact of Ojwang's failed leadership and responsibility in his family has far reaching implications in the life of those he purports to lead. For instance, Mama Kayai is psychologically disturbed when Mzee Ojwang disappears for some time. Her psychological turmoil is thus captured when she explains to Mogaka and Mwala that "it seems Mzee is lost and it's the reason I have called you here." This scenario undermines what we would expect of Ojwang as the head of his family.

When Mzee Ojwang eventually shows up and finds Mogaka in the house, he is scared because to him, Mogaka is likely to have told Mama Kayai about Ojwang's whereabouts. In this episode, both Mogaka and Mwala know where Mzee Ojwang is yet they do not tell Mama Kayai. It is therefore on this knowledge that Mzee Ojwang suspects Mogaka. When Mzee Ojwang arrives home, he finds Mama Kayai complaining about Mogaka and his behavior. In this instance, Mogaka had been asked to take home- Zipora's house- the filled gas cylinder, but because of communication breakdown, Mogaka takes it to Mama Kayai's house. Mama Kayai is happy because her cylinder had run out of gas. This does not go down well with Mzee Ojwang as his secret affair is on the verge of being exposed. He totally denies having met Mogaka that day. The manner in which Mzee Ojwang vehemently denies to have bought gas is very hilarious given his age. Consider the following conversation between Mzee Ojwang, Mama Kayai and Mogaka:

Kiswahili

Mama Kayai: Sasa Mzee Ojwang wewe unafikiria naweza ongea peke yangu, nashangaa na maneno ya wafanya kazi wetu, mara Mwala mara Mogaka. Mogaka kwanza ndiye anisumbua sana.

Mzee Ojwang: Wanakusumbulia nini?

Mama Kayai: Mogaka si yuko hapa ndani.

Mzee Ojwang: Anafanya nini na anatakikana kuwa kazini?

Mogaka: Aaa Mzee, unauliza na sinimeleta ile ulinituma

Mzee Ojwang: Nini? Nani? Wapi? Mimi nishaonana na wewe leo?

Mogaka: Hayaa, si ndio umenituma nilete mtungi wa gesi.

Mzee Ojwang: Ulikuwa wa colour gani? Wewe uko na ubaya wa akili yako? Mimi tumeonana na wewe wapi?

Mogaka: Kwani Mzee umefanya shopping mingi mpaka unachoka akili anasahau

English translation

Mama Kayai: (Responding to Mzee Ojwang). Do you think I can talk alone? Am confused because of what our employees tell me especially Mwala and Mogaka. By the way, Mogaka makes my life hard.

Mzee Ojwang: Why?

Mama Kayai: Mogaka is here.

Mzee Ojwang: (Appears uncomfortable). What is he doing here? Is he not supposed to be at the hotel? (Mogaka returns from the kitchen where he had taken the gas cylinder)

Mogaka: Aaa Mzee, why are you asking? I came to deliver what you had sent me to.

Mzee Ojwang: (Feigning ignorance) What? Who? Where? Have we seen each other today?

Mogaka: Hayaa, yes, we have seen each other. You sent me to bring cooking gas.

Mzee Ojwang: Which colour? Is there something wrong with your head? Have we seen each other today?

Mogaka: You mean that grand shopping has made you forget that you sent me here?

The conversation above presents Mzee Ojwang as a liar and as somebody who cannot stand to face truth. To cover up his lies, he asks Mogaka if there is something wrong with his head yet we know that it is Mzee Ojwang's head that has something wrong. If someone's head has a problem then the person is sick and it is exactly what can be said of Mzee Ojwang. As an old man, Mzee Ojwang is not supposed to engage in scandalous undertakings as seen in his behavior, especially denying to have sent Mogaka to take home the gas cylinder.

I read the “head sickness” that Mzee Ojwang alludes to as a mental disease similar to madness. A mad person is considered to do things that are contrary to the norm. In most cases mad people are not taken serious because of their incapability to behave the “normal” way. However, in most post-colonial states, madness has been used as a label to mask the truth especially if such states are bent on silencing people. Anyone who speaks in a repressive regime where truth is unwelcome is termed mad. The madness label has come to be used in tyrannical regimes to refer to people who speak the truth fearlessly in the face of the dictator. In this way, they are not in the strict sense of the word “mad” but their action and speech in a socio-political environment where people are cowed can only be done by those who are mad otherwise how can one face the oppressor and tell him off? The head sickness that Mzee Ojwang alludes to could be read as Mogaka’s ability to speak truth. In this way, Mzee Ojwang referring to Mogaka as mad allows him to run away from truth in the face of Mama Kayai.

Madness as a literary technique is not unique to *Vitimbi* as a number of literary artists have employed it in their literary works. These include mad characters such as Bukuru in Ndibe’s *Arrows of rain* (2004), and Jusper in Imbuga’s *Betrayal in the city* (1978). However, the significance of madness lies in the ability of the character to say the truth without distorting it as would be for a “sane” person. In this way, people’s sickness is a result of the failed promises that independence in post-colonial states in Africa has not realized. The happenings in Mzee Ojwang’s family is a case of failed sound leadership in the face of hard economic times. Therefore, Mogaka’s supposed sickness of the head is a manifestation of a capitalistic state which at most reveals itself in the form of sickness.

Secondly, the head sickness can be read differently in as far as Ojwang is concerned. I point out that it is ironical for Ojwang to say that Mogaka has “head sickness.” To the contrary, it is Ojwang who has “head sickness.” As an old man, doing what he is doing is absurd. Ojwang’s behavior at this point is compared to other forms of leadership such as political governance where leaders fail to take responsibility of their actions and blame it on others. In the quotation above, Mzee Ojwang is enraged to a point of stuttering. One is forced to ask why the rage if indeed he “did not” send Mogaka as he claims? However, the rage is meant to intimidate Mogaka into not exposing him. As an old man, Mzee Ojwang is expected to be wise and prudent in his judgment. However, we see that he cannot make any wise decision since all along he has been modeling what masculinity has made available to him.

Mzee Ojwang’s struggle to run away from the fact that he indeed sent Mogaka to deliver gas and that Mogaka took it to a wrong house is telling. Mzee Ojwang’s flagrant denial and character of the untrustworthy husband is underlined by the fact that he runs away from responsibility. In this way, Ojwang breaks away from the responsibilities of being husband and father. He does not only betray his family’s trust but even his employees who depend on him. At the state level, political elites in Africa have faced similar dilemmas in trying to explain to

the electorate their failures. This is because political leaders have not lived up to the spirit that led to independence. As such, the citizenry, who bank their trust and hope in the leaders just as Mama Kayai, are betrayed.

In addition to the foregoing discussion, the changing socio-economic realities in contemporary Kenya is a contributing factor in the behavior of characters in *Vitimbi*. The demands of contemporary society explain why Ziporah does not care about Ojwang's age as long as he provides for her needs. Consider the following conversation between Mwala and Ziporah:

Kiswahili

Mwala: *(Anatoa wallet kwa mfuko na kuchukua pesa, Zipora anavutiwa na zile pesa na hasira yake inapungua) unapendeleanga nini maishani mwako. Hii pesa nilikuwa naenda kununua suti yangu ya krismasi.*

Zipora: *Ngoja, Mzee Ojwang hajakutuma leo? Na suti gani ya krismasi inanunuliwa Julai?*

Mwala: *Hajanituma, unajua mimi hununua mapema ndio zisipande bei. Yako utanunua gani (Nagawa vile pesa itatumika. Eflu tatu ni ya suti yake, elfu moja ni ya soksi, na elfu mbili ya T-shirt. Anampa Zipora pesa zilizobaki akimwambia ni ya kununua soda. Zipora anafurahi sana, anachukua pesa ya mwala na kuweka kwa zindiria yake). Unajua ukiweka hapo inamaanisha tumefika?*

Zipora: *Kufika wapi?*

Mwala: *Unajua huyu Mzee ako na bibi?*

Zipora: *Ndio. Mimi sina shida mradi mahitaji yangu imeshughulikiwa*

English translation

Mwala: *(Gets his wallet and starts placing money on the table, Ziporah is enticed with the money she is less annoyed once she sees money) Tell me anything you have ever wished to have in your life. I was going to buy my Christmas suit with this money.*

Ziporah: *Hold on, have you been sent by Mzee Ojwang? And by the way, which Christmas suit is bought in July?*

Mwala: *He has not sent me. I buy my Christmas suit in July before the price is hiked. What will you buy? I am distributing how the money will be used. Three thousand for my suit, one thousand for socks, and two thousand for a T-shirt. (He gives the remaining money to Ziporah to buy soda. Ziporah is very happy, she picks all the money and keeps it in her bra). You know, when you keep the money there, it means we have reached.*

Ziporah: *Reached where?*

Mwala: *Do you know Mzee has a wife?*

Ziporah: *Yes. I have no problem with that so long as all my needs are taken care of.*

The dialogue above shows that Ziporah's survival is the most important thing and that is exactly what she is up to in as far as her relationship with Mzee Ojwang is concerned. Ziporah's relationship with both Ojwang and Mwala mirrors Africa's economic dependence on the super powers who regardless of the injustices they have met on developing nations, the developing nations still look up to them for assistance.

Ziporah's relationship with Ojwang demonstrates the hopelessness of the masses in their struggle for survival with a minority rich in contemporary society. Ziporah's lack of caution in using her body sums up the height of human exploitation in post-independence era for monetary gains. Ziporah's behaviour results from hard socio-economic times that force people to engage in anything to survive. She does not care about Ojwang's age (approximately over 70 years, while Ziporah could be in her early twenties) so long as he can cater for her needs.

The producer uses Ziporah's situation to comment on the impact of poverty, post-independence disloyalty and the dehumanization of the masses by the dominant groups in the embodiment of Ojwang. I read Ziporah as a symbol of suffering and bear survival of subjects in tyrannical regimes who hope that some change will happen. She represents the citizenry in post-colonial African states betrayed by their imposing leaders who exploit them and finally destroy them. When we first encounter Ziporah and Mzee Ojwang, the picture presented raises a lot of questions. There is a gap between the two in terms of age difference-Ziporah is a very young lady compared to Ojwang, and that the relationship appears mechanical. One can easily tell that Mzee Ojwang has an upper hand over Ziporah since he has the money-power.

The society in which Ziporah, Mwala and Ojwang live is a capitalistic society where money matters. Just like Mzee Ojwang, Mwala decides to try his luck with Ziporah and the only bait he has is money. Once Ziporah sees Mwala's money, she is trapped and she severs her relationship with Ojwang. It can therefore be pointed out that both Ojwang and Mwala are out to gratify their male ego but nothing important lies in their relationship with Ziporah. For instance, the moment Ojwang and Mwala realize that Ziporah is pregnant, they refuse to take responsibility:

Kiswahili

Mzee Ojwang: (Kwa Ziporah) Unafanya nini hapa?

Zipora: Nimekuletea mzigo wako.

Mzee Ojwang: Mzigo gani na iko wapi? Fanya hivi, hebu wewe toka! Hapa sio kwako.

Zipora: Niko nayo kwani unaniharakisha nini? (Akicheka) sasa kuanzia leo hapa ni kwangu na sitoki hapa. Nimekwambia hii mzigo sitoki nayo hapa.

Mzee Ojwang: Na basi si uache hapa na utoke uende

Zipora: Siku ile uliacha kwangu, ulitaka nikuletee hadi hapa. Sasa mimi na huu mzigo hatutoki hapa.

Mzee Ojwang: Mzigo inatokea wapi na siione na inatokea wapi?

Zipora: (Akionyesha tumbo yake) mzigo, ndio hiyo

Mzee Ojwang: Hata hauna haya. Hii mzigo ni ya Mwala na sio yangu

Mwala: Eee mzigo ya nani? (anajaribu kuondoka) mimi mtaniona nje

Mzee Ojwang: (Anashika Mwala) nje ya wapi? Wewe na hiyo mzigo wako toka muende nayo.

English Translation

Mzee Ojwang: (To Ziporah) What are you doing here?

Ziporah: I have brought your luggage.

Mzee Ojwang: Which luggage and where is it? Leave! This is not your house.

Ziporah: I have it here, why are you in a hurry? (Laughing) From today, this is my house and am not leaving. I have your luggage and am not leaving with it.

Mzee Ojwang: Then why can't you leave it here?

Ziporah: When you left it at my house it was indicative that you wanted it brought here. Therefore, the luggage and I are not leaving.

Mzee Ojwang: Where is this luggage and where is it coming from?

Ziporah (Pointing at her tummy): This is the luggage.

Mzee Ojwang: You ain't even ashamed? That is Mwala's luggage not mine.

Mwala: Eee whose luggage? (tries to leave) see me outside.

Mzee Ojwang: (Gets hold of Mwala) which outside? You and your luggage leave....

The term "luggage" as used in the dialogue above is a euphemism for pregnancy that Ziporah is carrying. However, the situation is complicated because both Mwala and Mzee Ojwang had intimacy with Ziporah and is the reason both are not taking responsibility. This is because Ziporah was a woman on the side to satisfy the two men and be abandoned. She is therefore reduced to a mere source of sex to those with authority and money. Sexual escapades is not only a case of pleasure but also an avenue through which the dominant class perform power. Mbembe (2001) succinctly points out that the:

Pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatised, with sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, etc. The un-conditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one of the pillars upholding the reproduction of the phallographic system. (p. 9)

The quotation above shows that male sexual adventure is a demonstration of male domination over women. Ojwang's relationship with Ziporah is not based on equality but is a relationship of domination and subordination. Ziporah's situation is a pointer to the deep seated oppression of women who are only available for the service of men. In this way, Ziporah's pregnancy is interrogated since she had a relationship with both Mzee Ojwang and Mwala. The producer uses Ziporah's pregnancy to comment on the moral degeneration in the society. In this way, the producer satirizes Ziporah's unorthodox ways of using her body for economic survival. The hard economic times in contemporary society has resulted in an unstoppable pursuit for money. This has resulted into a situation with complete disregard of any moral or social considerations in the drive to satisfy individual desires. In this regard, Ziporah has to live in deprivation and must try to secure her livelihood through immoral acts and endurance as seen in the excerpt above.

Ziporah's relationship with Ojwang and Mwala is based on deceit. There is no way Ziporah's pregnancy could be by both Ojwang and Mwala. In addition, Ojwang's and Mwala's refusal to accept their possible responsibility of fathering the child demonstrates how brutal the masculine power is. It is pertinent to point out that a child is usually considered the hope for the future. Yet the two men are not ready to accept that fact to salvage that future that is being threatened. In a way, this denial images the destruction of the future that society would wish to have. This situation offers no potential element of regeneration of the state if the likes of Ojwang are to thrive in their wayward behaviour. The actions of both Ojwang and Mwala therefore paint a picture of a society marred by greed, exploitation and failure from which there is no apparent way of escape.

Society frowns upon and stigmatizes women such as Ziporah. This is because as observed by Christine Obbo, she does not conform to social expectations of a good woman confined to a home. Such women are usually relegated to the margin of society and 'othered.' The term "othering" according to De Beauvoir means relegating a group to the least favoured position by the powerful majority. She further points out that it is the idea of "othering" which brings about domination. In this way, a group is "othered" in the manner that they do not have qualities, power or even social status similar to those who consider themselves much better than the "other." In this regard, Ziporah belongs to the category of the "other" since she does not fit into the traditional fold of a woman.

The social stratification and ideology of othering therefore justifies male domination. The stratification in turn forms the foundation upon which masculinity and domination is exercised in the society as people are segregated based on social standing. Since Ziporah belongs to the minority group of people-concubines, she is marginalized and treated with a lot of disdain. The presence of Ziporah challenges societal morality as she interrogates and subverts what the society regards as a good woman. With such societal outlook, Ziporah exists as a voiceless and marginalized individual. This could be the reason both Ojwang and

Mwala run away from the responsibility of taking care of Ziporah's child. This is a strong indictment of the status quo and a pointer to the fact that those who have power such as Ojwang are morally bankrupt.

However, the producer seems to suggest that both the exploiter and exploited, the leader and the led have a fair share of the blame. This is well captured through Ziporah, Mzee Ojwang and Mwala. Through the trio, the producer advocates for collective responsibility for both the leader and the led since Ziporah's inability to exactly identify the father to her unborn child, suffering and humiliation is a result of her affair with both Ojwang and Mwala whom she only accepted to sexually entertain because of the money factor but not love. This is the producer's wakeup call for the citizenry to reject anything that is likely to put anyone into any form of marginal position.

Moreover, *Vitimbi's* producer seems to suggest the need for the 'oppressed' to take charge of their situation and stop exploitation by the dominant group. In this text, I consider Ziporah as belonging to the oppressed group. This is because her relationship with both Mwala and Ojwang is based on who has money hence the possibility of her assuming unequal position in the relationship. However, despite the society's misconception that a woman especially a concubine occupies the marginal position, we see Ziporah subverting this when she goes to Mzee Ojwang's house to face the tormentor. This makes Mzee Ojwang uncomfortable as he frantically tries to ask Ziporah to leave. Ziporah's entry into Mzee Ojwang's house is seizure of her agency against exploiters.

Ziporah's presence in Ojwang's house disorients him, especially the fact that Mama Kayai is likely to return any time. This is contrary to the picture that Ojwang had exhibited all through as having power and authority. Ojwang's discomfiture at Ziporah's presence and her reluctance to leave symbolises that Ziporah has taken some of the powers that Ojwang had been enjoying and she seems more powerful. In addition, Ziporah challenges the existence of a general culture of exploitation and intimidation that has permeated the entire socio-political consciousness to an extent that it seems 'ok' for those who indulge it.

It is also important to emphasize that under such settings, there is a tendency for the oppressed and society to yearn for power that is only encapsulated in the leader. This is well captured in Achebe's *A Man of the people* (1988) by Odili while at Nanga's Bori house. He surveys the house taking in all the affluence around and concludes that if he was made a minister for one day, he would remain one forever. This is how envious and enticing power is. Those who have the power struggle by all means to keep it to themselves while those who do not have power such as Odili admire and envy it and at the same time struggle to have part of it. This is exactly what Mwala does when he snatches Ziporah from Ojwang. In this instance, Ziporah is depicted as an object upon which power is contested and exercised between Ojwang and Mwala.

Additionally, Ziporah has been employed in *Vitimbi* to demonstrate social and political degeneration in African states. *Vitimbi's* producer utilizes Ziporah to speak out against social, political and economic injustices in Africa. Ziporah becomes a 'loaded' medium for socio-political protest and commentary in situations where silencing is the norm. To this end, a woman's body is metaphorical. A woman is considered a mother of the nation-state since she gives life and children to the nation. Therefore, a woman is an important resource that should be taken good care of and respected. In fact, Mwala refers to Ziporah's curves as "resources". Consider the following conversation between Mwala and Ziporah:

Kiswahili

Zipora: *Ala, kwani uko na kifafa? Amka. Kwani wewe ni mgonjwa?*

Mwala: *Hapana, kwani unamaanisha hiyo raslimali yote ilikuwa ya Mzee?*

Zipora: *Raslimali gani?*

Mwala: *Environmental. (Mwala anampapaza Zipora huku akiwa amesimama juu ya kiti juu ya ufupi)*

English translation

(Mwala caresses Zipora downwards; he tells Zipora that she has nice hips and thighs. He tells her to turn so he can measure her hips, upon touching her hips, Mwala collapses)

Ziporah: *Ala! Do you have epilepsy? Stand up. Are you sick?*

Mwala: *No, You mean all those resources belonged to Mzee?*

Ziporah: *Which resources?*

Mwala: *Environmental. (Mwala kisses Zipora while standing on the chair because of his height)*

In the dialogue above, Ziporah's hips and curves are referred to as "resources". Mwala's proclamation of a woman's body as a resource is an affirmation of how women are defined according to their sexuality and reduced to consumable items. What stands out in this excerpt is perhaps what Outa (2009) refers to as "the relationship of power, manifesting itself in ways other than the preferred reading... of oppressor vs. oppressed" (p. 352).

Regardless of this, I stress that Mwala's outburst negates the misconception that women have always been at the receiving end of male grandeur. Ziporah's feminine curves are powerful statements and tools. With her body, she is able to zombify her tormentors. Mwala collapses not because he is epileptic but because of the thought of how such nice "things" could pass him. Ziporah's body therefore is power being sought by those who want to possess it such as Ojwang and Mwala.

Mwala's "false epileptic attack", due to Ziporah's body curves, captures male-female relations and how the same is played out. Mwala's behaviour concurs with Makuchi's (1997)

argument that male exploitation of women's bodies reduces women to mere "reproductive receptacles or as instruments of sexual pleasure for men" (p. 151). On the issue of sexuality and objectification, Kant (1969) observes that humanity and love can only be exercised within monogamous marriages and any other sexual expedition outside this is a case of objectifying the other person with the intent of selfish gain. He avers that:

Sexual love makes of the loved person an Object of appetite; as soon as that appetite has been stilled, the person is cast aside as one casts away a lemon which has been sucked dry ... [Sexual love] taken by itself is a degradation of human nature ... as an Object of appetite for another, a person becomes a thing and can be treated and used as such by every one. (*Lectures*, p. 163)

The quotation above captures Ziporah's situation since in the eyes of Mwala she is a resource, something to be used for the benefit of the other. In this way, Ziporah is not equal to both Ojwang and Mwala since she is a "consumable." Ziporah cannot therefore demand for equality and humane treatment from both Mzee Ojwang and Mwala. On the issue of equality, Kant (1996) observes that the relation of the partners in a marriage is a relation of *equality* of possession, equality ... in their possession of each other as persons and that in polygamy, the person who surrenders herself gains only a part of the man who gets her completely, and therefore makes herself into a mere thing' (p. 63). To a great extent, this is true of Ziporah as her relationship with both Ojwang and Mwala is based on predatory mentality with each of them just satisfying the immediate need-Ojwang sexual prowess while Ziporah the financial gains.

However, the quotation above has wider implications in the reading of the state in contemporary society. If conceptualised in terms of such pronouns as "she", then Ziporah is symbolic of the state since most states are referred to in feminine terms. Therefore as a metaphor of the nation she stands for, the term "resources" refers to the natural resources being ravenously raped, grabbed and exploited by those who are mandated to shepherd them. Accordingly, if we read Ziporah against the mother Africa trope advanced by Negritude proponents such as Leopold Senghor, it can be said that Ziporah is used metaphorically to comment on the exploitation of resources by postcolonial African political leaders. Florence Stratton's observation on the contradictions in the reading of mother Africa trope is significant in understanding the position of women characters in *Vitimbi*.

Stratton (1994) points out that mother Africa trope is symbolic of male potency/power and sexual/political allegory in which women's experiences are transformed into male supremacy. Stratton further points out that mother Africa trope only exploits the male-female power relations of domination and subordination where women's oppression is equated to Africa's situation. Based on this, I argue that Ziporah's body is a metaphor of rich

national resource only accessed by those with both economic and political power- the dominant class. This in turn reinforces the existence of oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. The producer therefore utilizes the character of Ziporah to speak out against social, political and economic injustices in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The essay examined how the family serves as a microcosm of the state and how the authority of the father is allegorical of the post-colonial heads of state. The analysis of the literal-family and the state reveals overlap in terms of power dichotomies and how they are played out. The essay used the conflicts witnessed in the family as a form of struggle by the subordinated to subvert the dominant social order. The discussion established contradictions and complexities encapsulated in the domestic space- a place that is supposed to have warmth, love and care and as a place characterized by a number of conflicts. The disintegration of family values and the political state in post-independence Africa and Kenya in particular offers critical re-evaluations of power relations and their inferential readings of the political nation. My discussion has demonstrated creation of counter narratives and strategies by the ruled- the family members and the state.

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