KENYAN COMEDY: TRANSMOGRIFYING STEREOTYPES AND FASHIONING A 'KENYANNESS' OF AESTHETIC ESCAPISM

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Table of contents

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Sande munononо; Ndiyabonga!

Abstract

Despite the proliferation of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy, little research exists to show the two intersect to shape a peculiar notion of 'Kenyanness'. Indeed, Kenyan comedy, besides reproducing and playing on the quotidian and the historical, is heavily invested with ethnic and gender stereotypes that reflect the Kenyan milieu as it intersects with the global. This comedy is oftentimes seen by some critics as detrimental to Kenyan society because it supposedly shapes and reinforces ethnic and/or gender relations in the country. However, this study contends that Kenyan comedy is open to multiple interpretations and meaning contestations that are not necessarily clear to the comedians and audiences due to the asymmetry that abounds between the production and consumption ends of the comedy's spectrum. The comedy is therefore ambivalent. This research seeks to demonstrate that Kenyan comedy—as a form of entertainment and critique of society—does not seek to fix and reify Kenyan identities. Instead, the comedy frees these identities from the presumed vice-hold, constricting world of stereotypes by disrupting the linearity of the stereotypes, thereby unsettling the hierarchical structure of hegemonic ideology embedded in them through postmodern humour: a form of humour amenable to postmodern sensibilities. To this end, the comedy offers Kenyans momentary escape into a comedic utopia, through which, they address pertinent issues affecting their nationhood, even as they endeavor to fashion a 'Kenyanness' of aesthetic escapism that is celebratory of the country's rich socio-cultural diversity. The study employs Jörg Schweinitz's (2011) stereotype theory and the postpositivist realist theory of identity in its study of stand-up, scripted episodic and topical comedy as transposed on to YouTube. Specifically, the thesis considers: the *Churchill Show* (2012 – 2022) that aired on NTV; 2012–2022; *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* (2014–2021) on KTN/NTV; *Auntie Boss* (2016–2021) on NTV; *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trending Trend Talkers* (2014–).

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Comedic humour as an aesthetics of escapism

While the title of this thesis points to the study of comedy as conceived and produced in Kenya, even exclusively by Kenyans, the investigation, ultimately, is as much about comedy as it is about humour since the two are so entwined, with the major difference being that comedy is performative; humour textual, and therefore "socially communicative" (Wilkie xvi). Whereas comedy might be inherently funny, humour needs not necessarily be so, as funniness is the subjective response that texts affect in an individual (Holm 19). In short, funniness is to an individual as humour is to the text, with comedy being the performance betwixt. Thus, funniness could be frivolous, but humour is often penetratively serious, especially when satirically toned. As Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones and Ethan Thompson contend, much as:

> [s]ome [critics] do not *want* humor to have any substance, preferring to regard it as a zone of escape from real world problems that require pensive stroking of the chin, not laughter [..,] a closer look at humor reveals a form that is always quintessentially about that which it seems to be an escape from, and hence a form that is always already analytical, critical, and rational, albeit to varying degrees. (8; italics in the original)

That is to say, humour is not trivial; neither is it an escape from society's pressing issues. Instead, it is revelatory and critical of that which it appears to evade, perhaps in an ostensibly escapist—yet serious—manner as chapter four demonstrates. Oftentimes through the evocation of laughter, humour lucidly exposes and critiques societal maladies, institutional flaws and individuals' follies and foibles, pointing to curative measures in hilarious ways. Nicholas Holm agrees: "Despite some appearances to the contrary, humour is not trivial, nor a passing fancy, and though it may appear to be of less importance than the tragic, the serious, the sombre and the grave, nothing could be further from the truth" (7). Holm stresses the centrality of humour to "the constitution and understanding of contemporary society [such that] if we are to intervene effectively in the power struggles of the twenty-first century mediascape, it is necessary that we appreciate both [its] potential and limitations […] as a cultural form as it emerges at this particular location and time" (15).

Conceiving the humour to be studied in this project as postmodern, I employ Holm's theorization of postmodern humour; a form that is amenable to the sensibilities of postmodernism, and which Holm argues manifests itself in three modes: humour of discomfort, provocative

humour and absurd humour. Postmodern humour, as Holm notes, is a "useful shorthand for distinguishing emergent modes from more traditional modes of humour that persist in the current moment" (195). According to Blair Scott Franklyn, following on Martin Heidegger, postmodern humour "reflects the experience of being '*thrown*' into postmodernity [as it] responds to and references the fears, fixations, frameworks and technologies which underpin our postmodern existence" (2; italics in the original). In my analysis, I characterize parody and satire as modes of postmodern humour as I find them aesthetically versatile at confronting Kenyans' *throwness* into postmodernity.

Importantly, like the majority of critics he cites, Holm sees "in humour a critical and liberatory political project that most often takes the form of a socially desirable dissent from authoritarian or dominating structures of power" (27).

> Often understood as a benign and desirable site of affect, humour is frequently tied to the expectations of liberal democratic society, taken up as a measure of social tolerance and self-critique, and declared an indispensable attribute of the reasonable subject of liberal society. Accordingly, humour has been largely characterized as a positive and critical force inherently compatible with the demands of democratic politics: within the liberal moment, it has been dominantly conceived of as a site of subversion, liberation and a free play of affect wherein the self can critically appraise the political conditions of its existence. (Holm 28)

Therefore, humour is progressive to the extent that it is insurrectionary, perceptive, charitable, critical and potentially inherently transformational. It liberates "the people" by "challeng[ing] oppression in a non-confrontational manner" (38–39). Humour "challenges social norms and upsets hierarchies and traditions" (39), and that is why it is "a desirable and productive force, which [….] is […] conceived in terms of boundary-breaking, order-challenging, and carnivalesque freedom" (Holm 39). Yet humour on its own may not be able to do all these since it is existent in every facet of human interaction. For this research, consequently, humour is studied in relation to comedy where it is employed as a textual aesthetics in context.

Owaahh.com, a website that tells stories of intrigue that border on the bizarre, records that *Churchill Show*, Kenya's premier stand-up comedy variety, is always sold out in spite of what it considers unfunny humour and trite content. This is rather intriguing. As Holm already informed us, funniness is the subjective response that texts affect in an individual (19). Furthermore, comedy seems to be inherently funny, or else it would not merit the tag. Granted, the content of *Churchill Show* might be trite, but since the show has survived for rather too long—rebranding over the

years—it seems safe to contend that Kenyans find it funny and its content relatable, and that is why it is often sold out. Moreover, the website cannot arguably purport to have a monopoly on the metrics for what is un/funny. Even so, Kenya has been moving toward middle class. Among other comedy shows, consequently, *Churchill show* has turned out to be one platform to which Kenyans turn to relax from busy weeklong schedules, take their families out and perhaps vent out their frustrations. These comprise the paying audience that attends the live performances. Then, there are audiences that follow the show as aired on television in homes and entertainment joints. Therefore, Owaah.com's claims can only hold if the site adduced evidence from audience research. Nonetheless, typecasting can breed monotony, and monotony hardly inspires interest. As chapter two argues, *Churchill Show* is not only saturated with stereotypes, but it is also in itself a *stereotype* comprising recycled formats (and/or content). Such recycling is likely to dampen enthusiasm amongst the show's regular audience.

That notwithstanding, what seems to escape the website, for this research, is that people tend to escape into entertainment halls in tough times (Paul 173). William Paul, while developing a theory on what he calls an aesthetics of escapism, references the Great Depression screwball films in which "characters seemed free to operate irresponsibly in a period that seemed to call for more sober behaviour" (173). I read Kenyan comedy in a similar vein, contending that Kenyan comedians seem—or are seen—to behave in a comparable manner, serving their audiences escapism in grave times, whose anxieties they nevertheless address albeit cannily.

Acknowledging that romantic comedies are essentially escapist, Paul is optimistic that we can still value such works by looking at escapism more positively in order to "see in the utopian aspirations […] a fuller engagement with the world than might be apparent at first glance" (274). This engagement engenders an "*aesthetics of escapism* and with it a way of evaluating romantic comedies as *something other than pleasant diversions from serious concerns*" (274; italics mine). Thus, besides disinvesting 'escapism' of the negative connotation of being antithetical to 'realism', Paul suggests that escapism "of necessity *inscribes* a reality" (276; italics in the original). For us to understand 'escapism', he argues, we must know what it is we are escaping from and to. For this thesis, therefore, answers to these questions should provide a window to the fantastical world that Kenyan comedy references. That is to mean, the conditions the comedy seems to escape from, as is with Paul's case, "are a product of its time, and in these specifics, we can locate the reality the escapism references, the social order that its comic utopia seeks to counter" (276).

Accordingly, I conceive of the escapism in Kenyan comedy as a narrative mode that—in the words of Paul—"enables us to look so closely at [Kenyan society's] contending social forces, riven and irreconcilable in reality, most likely, but made whole by the conventional comic move towards social integration" (289) that has proven elusive for over half a century. Yet, an aesthetics of escapism is not sufficient to unravel how Kenyan comedy attempts to transform or re-vision stereotypes. The stereotypes need more optics if they are to be better apprehended.

Jörg Schweinitz contends that stereotype is a "heterogeneous phenomenon" that cuts across numerous disciplines in which it assumes different meanings ranging from "prejudiced and socially widespread ideas about foreigners" through "linguistic formulas that take the form of standardized expressions" to "standardized images and even naturalized recurrent patterns of narration" (3). As such, in linguistics, literary theory and art history, the concept breaks with the logic with which it is associated in social psychology—where it connotes prejudiced attitudes about groups and their members—to focus on standardizations in speech, text and expression (15). In linguistics, for instance, "the stereotype is 'naturally' allied with the study of the idiom" (15) while in literary theory, these phrases entail a "style factor" and eventually transmute into clichés, embodying a boilerplate, crystallized effect (Michael Riffaterre, cited. in Schweinitz 16).

Subsequently, my study of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy proceeds from this range of meanings. I would argue that stereotypes cannot just be domiciled in social psychology where—as abstractions—they suppress information and remain poor mis/representations of their depictions. At any rate, as subroutines to complex caches of knowledge that are automatically summoned to variable situations, stereotypes have been detached from their original contexts, where they "developed and [perhaps] functioned smoothly—automatically and adequately—[and are now] experienced as problematic, as a phenomenon of loss and distortion" (Schweinitz 38). Inasmuch as they are governed by 'common sense', becoming unquestionable, stereotypes are not the rigid patterns they might seem to be. According to Schweinitz, stereotypes are "often based entirely on projected attributions to objects not part of an individual's immediate realm of experience," and they are "produced by cyclically organized representations of the imaginary," critically negating dynamics of reality, which is why they are susceptible to questioning (36). Simply put, stereotypes are not grounded in reality. They are fantastical (unfounded generalizations about characteristics of a people) as they are second-hand knowledge, handed down from generation to generation. As such, they occasion a disjuncture between reality and the

image they cast—often an unempirical generalization of characteristics of a people. Thus, they distort intra- and intergroup knowledge. Accordingly, they are not wholly embraced by their objects. Instead, they are held at a critical distance, becoming ambivalent and suspicious as they are susceptible to manipulation and easily become carriers of ideology—which makes them contestable.

While investigating how comedians play on all the above meanings of stereotype, I argue that the comedians mock the fantastical grounding of stereotypes even as they indulge the stereotyped, who oftentimes include themselves. Sometimes they affirm the stereotypes in "a defiant 'This is the way we are, the way we always have been and the way we always will be!'" (Davies 33). Oftentimes, the comedians disavow the stereotypes by way of abjection, especially in stand-up performances. According to John Limon, besides its denotative meaning, abjection—following on Julia Kristeva's work—implies "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable" (4). For self-deprecating comedians then, the stereotypes put them in a predicament from which they would like to, but cannot escape. Hence, they play the role as ascribed by the stereotype since "[a]bjection is self-typecasting" (4). Yet, 'to abject' also means 'to cast off/out or reject'. The abjection is, therefore, ambiguous and ambivalent, because "[t]o 'stand up' abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection […], stand-up is a way of standing up the inevitability of return" (4–5). In other words, a stand-up comic while casting off stereotypes, affirms them concurrently because their act is a way of rejecting ascriptions whose repeatability cannot be avoided.

In consequence, I interrogate how this double-edged play on the stereotypes not only pans out in Kenyan comedy but also impacts Kenyan identities in their dynamicity. Thus, I anchor my investigation in the postpositivist realist theory of identity—which as Lorraine S. Gilpin aptly sums up—is premised on four tenets: "*(1) identities are both constructed and real, (2) identities are mediated through cognitive and social processes, (3) knowledge garnered in the context of oppression should be afforded epistemic privilege, and (4) the power of individual and collective agency should be part of discussions of identity*" (10; italics in the original).

Throughout this study, therefore, I strive to show that identities—fluid as they are—are credible and have real socio-political consequences since they "refer […] outward, to causally significant features of the social world", and this is what makes them real (Mohanty "The Epistemic Status"

55). Hence, inasmuch as the identities could be inherited or chosen and are not fixed and homogeneous, they cannot be just dismissed as arbitrary and inconsequential. They must be taken seriously—if not respected—because they influence experiences. Additionally, I aim to show that these identities are theory-dependent and/or engendered in that "humans can develop reliable knowledge about their world and about how and where they fit into the world" (Moya "Reclaiming Identity" 12). Such knowledge relates to "public meanings—choices and evaluations […] and [one's] objective social location" (Mohanty "The Epistemic Status" 30).

Satya P. Mohanty, the originator of the postpositivist theory of identity, derives his notion of theory-mediated knowledge from the philosopher and feminist theorist, Naomi Scheman, who while "[w]riting from an explicitly anti-individualist perspective on such things as emotions and feelings, […] explains how the notion of our emotions as our 'inner' possessions is fundamentally misleading" (Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status 33). According to Scheman—as Mohanty deduces, our emotions are never

> fully formed […] waiting to be released or expressed *in the context of the group*. Rather, the emotion becomes what it is through the mediation of the social and emotional environment that the […] group provides. Part of what constitutes this environment is an *alternative narrative or account of the individual's relationship with the world, and these alternative accounts are unavoidably theoretical*. (Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status" 33–34; italics mine)[1]

Thus, the alternative accounts that are socially-produced by one's experience in the 'groupist' world constitute theory. The group in itself is a result of a theoretical orientation. Therefore, the group to which one belongs constitutes their objective social location that affords them knowledge that a non-member (of that group and location) cannot access. This is what constitutes *epistemic privilege*. Therefore, the oppressed and marginalized such as the house helps focalized in chapter three—for instance—are better positioned to understand their circumstances, and it is not surprising that they develop the means, and make conscious and concerted efforts to liberate themselves from constraints that their social location imposes on them. Their feelings and emotions are hence paramount because they are political. As Mohanty aptly puts it, following on Scheman, "our emotions provide evidence of the extent to which even our deepest personal

[1] Scheman references a consciousness-raising feminist group that one Alice joins that makes her "come[…] to experience her anger by reinterpreting her old feelings of depression, guilt, and so on, but she does so unavoidably with the aid of theory, *an alternative, socially produced construction of herself and the world*" (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 35; italics mine).

experiences are socially constructed, mediated by visions and values that are 'political' in nature, that refer outward to the world beyond the individual" (34).

Inevitably, then, my personal experience as a black Kenyan Maragoli male and budding scholar outside of the power-bloc in the Kenyan socio-political milieu is as informative as it is political, and is on occasion called upon to make sense of Kenyan identities as exhibited in the comedy and the humour inherent therein. I agree with Mohanty that experience in postpositivist re/conceptualization "refers very simply to the variety of ways humans process information" (Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status" 32). It is my conviction, therefore, that my emic interpretations—theoretically-mediated and socially engendered—will be proper and appropriate while remaining alive to the fact that they could as well as be erroneous. In any case, postrealists acknowledge the fallibility of their truth claims and are "open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information" (Moya "Reclaiming Identity" 13).

Consequently, following on Mohanty, I argue that "[r]elations between our knowledge and participation in the external world and such criteria like truth, objectivity, and rationality" need critical re-examination in order to "expose the social [and ideological] interests at work in the reading" (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 116) and circulation of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy. For this reason, this research is unavoidably political to the extent that it aims at interrogating "the uses to which [stereotypes] are put, exploring the connections between social institutions and [comedic] texts, between groups of people understood collectively in terms of gender, sexuality, class [and ethnicity] on the one hand, and discourses about cultural meanings and values, on the other" (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 116) in plural Kenya.

As a political ideal, plurality demands 'methodological' strategies of negotiations between our histories in order that we recover our commonality. As Mohanty elucidates, plurality requires

> the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values [and] material resources. It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but we cannot afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and indeed hierarchically organized – that is, we cannot afford to have entirely different histories, [seeing] ourselves as living – and having lived – in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces. (*Literary Theory* 130)

Philosophically, therefore, from the stage of comedy, come and go shared terms of engagement, 'ideas and space/s', which help us "situate and specify difference, understand where its deepest resources might originate," and from there "act purposefully [through] agency and basic

rationality" to re/interpret stereotypes and dismantle the fantastical and ideological othering that comes with them (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 138–39).

For that reason, this thesis explores stereotypes in Kenyan comedy with a view of re/interpreting them as basically human agentic practices that "are open to analysis (and comparative evaluation) in terms of motives, meanings, and larger goals," which must be afforded a history to open them to intelligibility concerning their values (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 140) within the space called Kenya. As a result, our plurality, which defines our commonality shall get enriched since our different choices and practices shall be better understood. The reason behind this is that otherness is not insular or merely contiguous, but "a complex historical phenomenon, available to us only through hermeneutical comparison and specification. Mere difference leads […] to a sentimental charity, for there is nothing in its logic which necessitates our attention to the other" (141) within a "context-sensitive," rather than a "highly idealized" reason (Mohanty, *Literary Theory* 142).

With its larger goal being a tolerant plural Kenyanness, this thesis, like Mohanty in his formulation of the postpositivist theory of identity, does not aim at urging unanimity in its propositions; for this would call for repetition of acts of hegemony and attendant manipulation. Instead, it endeavours to be a theoretical and epistemological inquiry that generates a "complex form of cooperative social practice open to revision and change"; because the objectivity accruing therefrom "includes the possibility of error, self-correction, and improvement" (*Literary Theory* 147). As it were, "objectivity is a social achievement rather than an impossible dream of purity and transcendence; it is based on our evolving understanding of the sources and causes of various kinds of error [which are based, understood and limited as grounded] in social practice" (*Literary Theory* 147). This is why an epistemological understanding of the consequences of our social location is crucial in the apprehension of the social bases of knowledge. As a people, "whether we get it right or wrong, our social locations [ultimately] enable us inhabit certain kinds of understanding" (*Literary Theory* 148), which enterprise is subject to continuous improvement through persistent enquiry.

In sum, I explore how Kenyan comedy fashions a notion of 'Kenyanness' of aesthetic escapism by attempting to transmogrify stereotyped Kenyan socio-cultural identities in momentary comedic escape from unpleasant socio-cultural and politico-economic realities to comedic utopian bliss. Such an exploration, I hope, should unravel how subtly Kenyan comedy and humour, while easing

tensions by exhibiting the pleasures intrinsic to comedy and humour, also, in the words of Olympus G. Ejue (20), "showcases critical reflections of values, socio-cultural mobilization and the promotion of positive images and general consciousness" of a communion of Kenyan nationhood.

Subsequently, this chapter begins by documenting African popular culture before spelling out my rationale for studying comedy. After examining comedy and popular culture's definitional and study convergences, the chapter briefly explores forms of comedy (relevant to the thesis that are later taken up in the subsequent chapters) before surveying comedy in Africa. It then explores Kenyan mediatized comedy and its relation to the country's nationhood. Thereafter, the chapter proceeds to interrogate 'Kenyanness' and stereotypes. Finally, it reviews existent literature on Kenyan comedy vis-à-vis stereotypes, and provides an outline of the succeeding chapters.

1.2 African popular culture: popular, yet an unwieldy field?

The proliferation of cultural products on the African continent, a rekindled interest in popular oral forms, everyday praxis and the ex/changes that come with globalization make African popular culture a fertile ground for intellectual inquiry. George Ogola argues that "[t]he realm of popular culture provides us a window through which to witness change differently, to learn about alternative narrations and histories and to revise some of the problematic generic frames that characterize the reading of the African [continent]" (vii). Therefore, sites of cultural production and consumption become critical in apprehending the continent's people in their development and interaction with the global. Ogola, citing James Scott (1990), further argues that these sites are embedded with 'hidden transcripts' that can help one understand the continent's historical trajectory, "its contradictions, how the informal and formal interpenetrate, how tensions and continuities between the past and the present are reconciled and how the local and international collide but also collude in the making of new cultures and practices that reveal the character of the [African] becoming" (ix).

According to Karin Barber, popular art forms condense experience, and through their expressiveness make "[t]exts generate 'surplus' meanings that go beyond, and may subvert, the purported intentions of the work […,] pick[ing] up subterranean currents of thought that society itself may be unaware of [while] giving us a window onto something already fully present," through which "consciousness is articulated and communicated" ("Popular Arts" 4). Popular cultural art forms are therefore not only the voice of 'the people' reflecting society's socio-cultural

and political realities, but also productive sites that afford populaces new possibilities and archive their desires. Yet, popular and significant as it seems, popular culture is not easy to pin down to a watertight definition.

Barber sees popular culture as "a product of the everyday life [;] the unofficial, the non-canonical […] culture of 'ordinary people': […]; not the people in power" (*A History* 1). She seems to have arrived at such a 'definition' of the popular after the word 'popular' complicated her initial definition in her influential 1987 article, "Popular Arts in Africa", which seemed to suggest that the popular is "what the people do—whether in the villages or cities, whether in oral performance or global media, whether in the seventeenth century or in the twenty-first" (Foreword xiv).

Even so, aligning the word with "the less privileged majority" (Foreword xiv) seemed not to solve the complexity owing to her contention that 'popular' bears the inescapable "strong evaluative charge [of being] negative to some, positive to others: meretricious trash or authentic expressions of resistance to oppression." This, then, compelled her to take 'popular' to mean the "'intermediate classes'" (xiv), which meaning she appears to 'refine' into the above definition. Nonetheless, Barber realizes that welding 'the people' to class distinctions is still just as problematic since these classes are fluid. As such:

> The culture participated in by privileged sections of society, no less than popular culture, has been volatile and shot through with cross-currents; not a mere clone of metropolitan models, but 'groping toward alternative forms of cultural and political expression' […], a process which has often involved incorporating popular materials rather than holding them at arm's length. And conversely, forms initiated by elites [are] often taken up by non- elites and popularised. (*A History* 10)

In the face of (global) media proliferation, Barber has since revised her initial definition, and she now concludes that: "[p]opular culture […] is a site in which people understand themselves as part of a global order which nonetheless, in significant ways, operates to marginalize them and their 'local' experience" (Forward xviii). In other words, inasmuch as people make sense of themselves through popular expressions that constitute the exchanges on the world stage, the same global trends still consign them to their peripheral specificities, localizing them—paradoxically. Such marginalization notwithstanding, the people's popular cultural productions are an admixture of their quotidian local and the global—or simply, the glocal.

Stephanie Newell and Onokoome Okome reference Barber's "Popular Arts in Africa" (1987) and largely agree with her postulations. They seem to dwell more on what the forms are and do

than on what popular culture really is. They posit that African popular forms are majorly urban, dynamic, and improvisational, and comprise resourceful rejoinders to local and global cultural flows. Thus, the forms are as diverse in content as they are conflictual in function: conservative, progressive, retrogressive and even violent (8). Importantly, the forms help in the understanding of the collective epistemes inherent therein (Newell and Okome 9).

In their edited volume, *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, Newell and Okome have a number of Africanist scholars from whom they glimpse insightful conceptions of what encompasses the 'popular' in Africa. To some like Tsitsi Jaji and Miriam Maranga-Musonye, the 'popular' comprises the "*locally produced* urban material and discourse", brought forth either by the elite or non-elite, and "does not preclude the local consumption of 'global' art forms and commodities" (Introduction 17–18; italics in the original). For these scholars, who also include Ranka Primorac and Grace A. Musila, the authentically popular comprise the imported as well as the locally produced while to others such as Moradewun Adejunmobi and Eiman Abbas H. El-Nour, the popular consists of "cultural products and performances" of the 'ordinary' people. To Uta Reuster-Jahn and Christopher Warnes, the 'popular' "refers to mass-produced art forms" (18) while for Joseph Oduro-Frimpong, the field of the popular constitutes "artisanal and small-scale productions" (18). For some more, like Innocentia Jabulisile Mhlambi—Musila too, "popular elements and currents can be identified in elite-produced, and elite-controlled, art forms" (18).

Following this conceptual diversity, then, Newell and Okome conclude:

> popular art cannot be regarded any longer by scholars as the vehicle for a singular, albeit emergent, class consciousness, nor do discussions of African popular art forms need to revolve around the extent to which producers are participants in global processes of capitalist consumption or, conversely, as resistant local appropriators of worldwide materials. (18).

Importantly, Newell and Okome are cognizant of the vitality and responsiveness of African popular art forms as "the means by which individuals and groups can participate in processes of 'debating and negotiating norms and values'" (18). Moreover, they acknowledge that "popular arts are expressive and communicative, pleasurable and memorable, but crucially, crafted or intentionally created" (19), which implies the arts are neither accidental nor ends in themselves. They are functional and significant to societies that produce (and consume) them, especially insofar as determining and preserving their customs and regulating their conduct.

To Augustine Agwuele and Toyin Falola, popular culture "signifies a mass-produced form of behavior that emerges from the lives and imaginations of subalterns and that—from the perspective of the intelligentsias and social elites—has the potential to endanger the gains of the Renaissance" (3). That is, popular culture is a form of conduct exercised by the subordinate/d in society, which conduct is seen as inimical to high culture. Agwuele and Falola revert to Barber's 1987 work in order to signal popular culture's "conflicts, assumptions and problems" (3) when applied to Africa. Nonetheless, the two propose that popular cultural practices:

> index the very existential quests and aspirations of the subjects; they are cogent and pertinent, and hence they involve a large number of people who are brought together in a way previously unattested and who are agents actively vested in the conservation and furtherance of their heritage, their way of being and doing things. (3)

In short, Agwuele and Falola agree with Barber, Newell and Okome insofar as the composition and function of African popular cultural forms in a globalized era. That is, the forms are authentic agentic expressions of the people's aspirations to the extent of not only fuelling the practitioners' enthusiasm, but also attracting the attention of elites and the intelligentsia. Thus, popular cultural forms are as transgressive of hegemony as they are socio-political. The field is therefore not without politics within the academy, where it is "presented as a form of syncretism and an emergent consciousness" (Agwuele and Falola 6), a conception attributable to Barber (1987) that Agwuele and Falola dispute, just as Newell and Okome above, contending that "Africans, like any other people, have always been fully conscious" (Agwuele and Falola 7–8). In other words, the conceptualization of popular culture as a field of study is not universally agreed upon in scholarship. Whereas Barber sees it as combinatory of the urban (in which the global is admixed) and the rural, and an evolving awareness, other scholars feel that popular culture is not new to Africans who have always been totally responsive to it.

Hetty ter Haar further affirms that consciousness in Africa preceded the emergence of African popular culture as per Barber (17). Adjoining the contestations of popular culture to those of 'culture' itself, ter Haar contends that popular culture is idiosyncratically conceptualized (19). He argues that popular culture has become too wide and needs to be delimited with a bias to aestheticism. That is, popular productions should be admissible to the category 'popular culture' only if they engender "works of art" (29) critical to society, which prescription aligns with Kimani Njogu's:

> [Art] can contribute in the affirmation or negation of beliefs, attitudes and values. This essential human experience gives us the window through which we can see ourselves and the world around us. In the era of globalization, the artist sees more than his/her immediate environment. Equally, the consumption of the artist's creative product transcends the immediate context and may consequently affect others based elsewhere. (1)

Nonetheless, ter Haar's editors—Agwuele and Falola—argue that "[a]ll (African) cultures are popular cultures, popular because they encompass all spectra within the community of practice and popular because all their manifestations are contemporary; they are the deeds, the ways, not of Africans in the past but of Africans now" (Agwuele and Falola 6). Agwuele and Falola vouch for this conception following on Anthony Woodbury, who argues that "culture and language are not things, but ways" (quoted in Agwuele and Falola 6). As "*ways*, more so than disembodied *things*, [they] imply collective human agency. *Things* can […] simply be lost or replaced over time; while *ways* are actively shaped, reshaped, and remade by their human practitioners'" (6; italics in the original). "Premised on this," Agwuele and Falola conclude, "there is arguably no gestalt African culture that is subject to death; the fear of the attrition of African cultures is nonetheless all too real to some and consequently has in some cases generated governmental actions to forestall this possibility" (Agwuele and Falola 6–7).[2]

Undoubtedly, then, as Lynda Gichanda Spencer, Dina Ligaga and Grace A. Musila contend, "[t]he debate on the definition of the 'popular' remains an open one with multiple interpretations and categories [, which] contestation in itself gestures towards popular culture's inclination for ambiguity and slipperiness." For that reason:

> popular imaginaries […] mean the range of cultural productions, platforms, and interactions between consumers and producers – which are often interchangeable – that capture the material, the affective, as inflected and refracted in different texts, contexts and platforms. As such, it is a dynamic culture that speaks to ordinary people's concerns, desires, challenges and triumphs. (3)

In short, the variety of popular cultural forms in Africa and the various uses to which they are put, notwithstanding, their agency is inescapable; which is why Spencer, Ligaga and Musila agree with other scholars of the 'undisciplined and transgressive' discipline that "popular cultural art forms

[2] What Agwuele and Falola seem not to acknowledge is that the same actions have been initiated to hasten the death of just as many African cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and marrying off of underage girls. Perhaps what remains in question is whether or not such practices are/were 'popular'.

convene valuable platforms for working through questions of everyday life, as well as imaginative future mapping of desires and aspirations" (Spencer, Ligaga and Musila 3).

Spencer, Ligaga and Musila's postulation points to Ogola's contention that the 'popular' is "a blend of voices and interests" that transcends the so-called underclass because of the fluidity of class configurations in countries like Kenya (Ogola 25). In the same vein, the notion of 'the people' is just as amorphous, which makes Ogola caution us to avoid seeing the 'popular' as "necessarily radical and revolutionary" (28). The 'popular', Ogola advises, should subsequently be "approached as an analytical category comprising multiple narratives even if it is largely shaped by an oppositional cultural and political aesthetic" (29).

In consequence, the study of popular culture, as Ibe Ogbobuike Ibe argues, should be more pragmatic: "a present impression always happening in the now" as opposed to in the past (175). While acknowledging the diversity of descriptions that complicate the conceptualization, and therefore, the definition of popular culture as "based on the comparative that is attached to it at a given time", Ibe advises that its study "requires a mindset that can accommodate the complexities and even contradictions that frame the concept following the paradoxical nature of popular culture; as what constitutes its richness also renders it a rather unwieldy subject" (175–76). So often then, popular culture is refractory and its susceptibility to critique as "an inferior commodity made for the hoipolloi" renders it even more difficult to "define independently without a reference to its absent *other* – folk culture or high culture" (Ibe 193; italics in the original).

Accordingly, Ibe adopts the British cultural studies approach, and concludes:

> popular culture is the authentic culture of the people. As a result, it ought to be explored in the positive; as the unique expression of a people's collective dream and aspiration. The hallmark of change which symbolises popular culture is exponentially evanescent, and as a result, a more practical approach is to see popular culture as traversing contemporary specialities, and as a present impression always happening in the now. (193)

This conceptualization is clearly aligned to Stuart Hall's,[3] which Nadine Dolby agrees with: "popular culture is […] a site of struggle, a place for the negotiation of race, gender, nation, and other identities and for the play of power" (33). It is "a site that is an important locus of public debate and of individual and community agency" (33). Popular culture as a product of this arena

[3] Stuart Hall, the foremost scholar in the British Academy, sees popular culture as "one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged; it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where is secured" (1981: 239, as quoted in Dolby 33).

of socio-political contestations is, therefore, not flaccidly submitted to by its consumers, but vigorously engaged with and put to productive use, especially with regard to fashioning identities. This view is consistent with Charles Kebaya's—with regard to the marginalized: "popular art forms provide spaces for the underrepresented to articulate their concerns, express their displeasure, present the unsaid, and negotiate meanings of issues affecting their everyday lives" (Kebaya 28).

To me, popular culture, then, is the cherishably accepted performative and agentic way of life of the people that manifests not necessarily their primeval but processual interrelatedness to and/or intercourse with the world, often but not exclusively, through media technologies. By the people, I mean, the ordinary folk yes, but ordinariness does not essentialize the people as being 'the lowly'. It implies people as a collective, a community that occasionally sheds off class distinctions to immerse itself in their cherished performed artistic forms. I provide the rationale for studying comedy (and humour) in the following pages.

1.3 Illuminating humanity's irrationality: Rationale

> My career in comedy has been motivated and inspired by the delight I've taken in understanding what I think of as the foolishness of the human condition. Somehow, I knew if the laughs were there and the subject of the comedy was important to the audience, that audience would be motivated to engage in what was called water cooler conversation at work the following week. Triggering such discussion, as opposed to just making people laugh, is what the best comedy seeks to do. People think in conversations and find things in themselves that they didn't know were there. It's a learning process—a deeply human familial kind of learning process. (Lear xi)

Such perceptiveness from Norman Milton Lear—one of America's finest screenwriters and producers of comedy—partly inspired this study.[4] Comic laughter is not self-serving. Oftentimes, it is meant to prick human conscience so as to engender heuristically didactic debates. Certainly, comedy, in and of itself, can change neither behaviour nor the world. However, it can sieve real issues out of what proliferates in a community by going beyond the surface to dig up and concretize the salient. It can influence those in power to act in order to bring about impactful change (Chatoo and Feldman 4). To this end, Kenyan comedy picks up stereotypes from society and makes issues

[4] Some of Lear's creations include *All in the Family* (1971 – 79), *Sanford and Son* (1972 – 1977), *The Jeffersons* (1975 – 85), *Maude* (1972 – 78), *The Little Rascals* (1977) and *Live in Front of a Studio Audience* (since 2019).

out of them. As Simon Critchley argues elsewhere, "[a] true joke […], suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal, and we laugh in a physiological squeal of transient delight" (10). Accordingly, the comedian helps in seeing the commonplace through different perspectives that widen the audience's worldview, illuminating the otherwise ordinary and banal. In the process, 'truths' otherwise hidden in plain sight are uncovered, problematized and interrogated. Comedy thus functions not merely as a vent for psychic energy, but as a transformational art form.

Comedy's wide reach in the current technology-ridden and driven mediascape has "the power to shape and demonstrate a massive audience marketplace for diverse comedic voices that overtly take on social […] issues" (Chatoo and Feldman 6). Such power and reach are important in the debates that shape Kenyan identities and the factors that feed into them. It therefore becomes paramount to see how Kenyans participate in such conversations on live television broadcasts of topical comedy in real time. Moreover, Kenyans' interactions on YouTube, which transcend the ephemeralness of television are just as significant to these debates. Accordingly, live television, YouTube and other streaming platforms supply a unique "new watercooler-moment entertainment" that Chattoo and Feldman rightly claim has the inherent "ability to cut through media clutter and reach incongruous, or unexpected, audiences due to its resonance with particular themes and discourses circulating in the culture and its attention to issues of social importance" (6). In other words, the commentaries that Kenyans bring to the comedy on interactive media are informative as they are enriching to the country's socio-cultural and political debates.

Therefore, "[a]***s a far-reaching projector of cultural values and narratives, contemporary mediated comedy can serve as a site of cultural resistance***" (Chatoo and Feldman 6; bold italics in the original). This assertion is coterminous with the wide reach of mediated comedy, which aligns with popular culture as an arena where hegemony is resisted through counter-narratives, especially in the current digital media-saturated era where the line between producers and consumers is blurred. Hitherto unheard voices in Kenya—such as emerged during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic period, and continue to be amplified to-date—potentially stir significant debates and influence attitudes, values and beliefs.[5] As these voices "assert their cultural identities

[5] With the banning of social gatherings following the intensification of the pandemic, a new crop of comedians emerged on social media to fill the void left by seasoned stand-up artists (in live performances). These new voices included, among others, Mama Otis and Flaqo (Erastus Otieno) and Elsa Majimbo.

and call out oppressive power dynamics" (Chatoo and Feldman 8), there is the potential that socio-cultural accommodation is championed, taboos broken, stereotypes challenged, tolerance fostered, and the much elusive ethnic inclusivity cultivated.

In the present digital era where the fourth wall[6] is not only broken but also dissolved, comedians are more emboldened to speak truth to power, as it were, as they are cheered on by an equally emboldened, informed and engaged audience that is more than eager to push socio-political boundaries. Such creator-consumer interactions seem to correspond with Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf's claim that "[c]*omedy is one of the most important ways a culture talks to itself and about itself*" (4; italics in the original). By itself, then, comedy provides a platform from which citizens can debate values and beliefs, question their intra-group and inter-group attitudes and values, and subsequently dialogue with and reformulate their culture/s. So, comedy is not just the voice of the people, but also a productive site that accords them new possibilities of renewal and rebirth. Accordingly, the comedy archives their real and imagined pasts, shapes their present fantasies and desires and projects better futures by allaying their fears and demystifying their anxieties. Such dialogue and reformulation seem pronounced in satirical news that "is well documented as a source of political and civic information – and an undisputed audience hit, with millions of views and shares" (Chattoo and Feldman 9).

Academic research on comedy in Kenya (and Africa) is only burgeoning. Although much has been written about the *Churchill Show* (Ndonye 2015, Ndonye, Bartoo and Khaemba 2015, Githatu and Chai 2015, Michieka and Muaka 2016, Otieno 2022 and Kasembeli 2022), there is a little research on *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* such as supplied by Rombo (2016). None however, exists on *Auntie Boss*, *The Trending Trend Talkers* and *The Wicked Edition*. Thus, my research not only enriches the growing corpus of knowledge on the *Churchill Show*, but also amalgamates such a body in a comprehensive study that has not been done before. Additionally, the study contributes new knowledge particularly within the emerging field of postmodern humour. Furthermore, much of the scholarship on the *Churchill Show* (Ndonye 2015, Ndonye, Bartoo and Khaemba 2015) pigeonholes stereotypes to the socio-psychological. None approaches the show from the optics such as employed herein. In other words, my research demonstrates that stereotypes in Kenyan comedy can be transmogrified to productively speak to the problem of

[6] The imaginary invisible wall at the front of the stage in an auditorium, through which the audience sees the action in the world of a staged performance.

national identity in Kenya by way of addressing socio-cultural and politico-economic issues pertinent to the country in the guise of 'just for laughs'. The study therefore opens new ways of studying comedy (and humour) just as it stretches horizons of looking at stereotypes prevalent therein. Such knowledge cannot begin to take shape without an examination of comedy and popular culture's convergences as the following sub-section shows.

1.4 Comedy: a conundrum congenial as popular culture?

The study of comedy (as a form of popular culture) is not without challenges. In the West, for example, if comedy has not suffered neglect, it has been deemed as undeserving of serious study or not treated to sustained staid scrutiny (see Neal and Krutnik 1990, Horton 1992, Mundy and White 2012, Kamm and Neumann 2016). This does not mean that comedy has not elicited many a study. In fact, like popular culture, as Ian Wilkie points out, interest in the study of (literary) comedy has grown exponentially in recent years, especially in the twenty-first century (xii). However, these studies pale in comparison to those on tragedy.

Thus, steadily, the study of comedy, like that of popular culture, is coming of age as "a self-contained entity" (xii). Yet, much as comedy has for millennia attracted scholarly interest, with its "formalization […] as a form of dramatic art in the fifth century BC Athenian festivals" (xii), it has not completely self-extricated from its lowly ranking (to tragedy) because of its associations with laughter, appeal to the 'lowly' as well as "early associations with the revelry, drink and debauchery that emerged from subversive rituals and rites" (Wilkie xii).

Such associations, I contend, conjoin comedy with popular culture: both are commonly seen as 'unwieldy', and thereby often dismissed as inferior and un-meriting of sustained serious academic scrutiny. Additionally, both are performatively affective; hence capable of exciting emotions through action. As such, comedy and (or as) popular culture have (has) the potential to deeply penetrate human conscience and provoke action. Moreover, both are associated with subversion. In particular, comedy is rooted in the carnivalesque and is consequently seen as inimical to high culture. Comedy's degradation is further exacerbated by its association with 'play', which can hardly be disentangled from coquettishness (Wilkie xiv), with those who dabble in it being taken for caregivers (xv). In other words, comedy is perceived as a preserve of the childish or those who can lower themselves to the level of children so as keep them humoured. It is therefore seen as

unserious. Worse, since the performer and audience of comedy are supposed "to be 'in on the game'", the audience accedes to:

> highly manufactured, manipulative conventions, designed (often solely) with a specific view to making it laugh. Paradoxically perhaps, in the doing of it, comic play is not recognisable by the audience as being 'real' or 'true' but must simultaneously still 'ring true' in order to register as being properly funny. (Wilkie xv)

Otherwise expressed, the comedic play equates to 'acting' and 'pretense' on the part of the audience, who play along to fit in the game. Like popular culture, then, because of this "negotiated mode of playfulness at its core, defining comedy becomes even more difficult to pin down" (Wilkie xv). Furthermore, the ridiculous and ludicrous that characterize the/a comedic play are difficult to subject to rigorous analysis as rules of such analysis are challenging to formulate. Such a challenge notwithstanding, comedy can be studied, as it is in this disquisition. One only needs to pay closer attention to what is said in jest and ground their study in theories that help make sense of the laughter that is often provoked.

What is more, comedy, like popular culture, tends to be defined in relation to the 'other', with comedy's being tragedy; popular culture's 'high culture'. As N.J. Lowe observes, the evolution of comedy since Antiquity has been complex:

> comedy was a much less conservative genre, capable of transforming itself several times over into something unrecognizably different from its ancestral form, and it was not until the early Hellenistic period that the subject matter and conventions of comedy reached the kind of stability that had been reached in tragedy some 130 years earlier. (Lowe 15)

To-date, comedy does not appear to have stabilized despite having recognizable forms. The instability is compounded by the modern genre mutations as the genre attempts to keep afloat with postmodern trends.

Comedy's 'problems' of definition are further aggravated by its conflation with humour, which— as E.B White once observed—"can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind'" (quoted in Wilkie xv). Wilkie argues that such a deduction not only points to "the difficulties of critiquing humour", but also requires that "analyses of the phenomenon should also themselves, perforce, *be* funny" (xv; italics in the original). Encouragingly, Wilkie concedes, such a conception makes room for humour (and comedy) to merit serious study. To appropriate Jürgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann's words:

> Typically oscillating between appreciation and denigration, affirmation and subversion, […] TV comedy plays a significant role in the formation, dissemination and reflection of cultural values, structures of identification and notions of difference: concepts of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sex, family, work and domesticity find a most intriguing and provocative expression in TV comedies. (Jürgen Kamm and Birgit Neumann 1)

Alternatively expressed, comedy is typically ambivalent in addressing topics and themes of concern to the source community; hence, the exploration of comedy and its forms below. Nonetheless, comedy's significance in shaping socio-cultural standards that influence identities cannot be underestimated. This assessment accords with that of popular culture, which is why this dissertation studies comedy as a form of popular culture germane to shaping the 'Kenyanness' herein envisioned.

1.5 Comedy and its forms

Although comedy poses definitional hurdles, it is not entirely undefinable, with attempts at defining it dating back—in Western culture—to Plato and Aristotle. It "emanated from the theatre, informally at first in ancient world representations of 'ritual [and] revolt'" (Wilkie xii), which implies that comedy is performative, imitative of rites—often with irony— and rebellious of the status quo and/or hegemony. As Chris Ritchie, the founding and executive editor of the journal, *Comedy Studies*, contends:

> Plato saw laughter as a mix of pain and pleasure and jokes as containing a leveling quality that could reduce the status of the powerful; Aristotle described comedy as an educative force for social good. It is between these two polarities that the debates over the function of comedy have been strung: those who see a subversive negative quality in comedy and those who see a positive subversive quality. (3)

Henceforth, attempts at definition of comedy are circumscribed by these views, which somewhat explains the current limbo even within the modern discipline of cultural studies. With Plato ostensibly against the representation of the noble and gods "as overcome by laughter", he "saw how comedy and laughter could undermine the rulers of his Republic." To Plato, it was "undignified to show people who lack self-awareness, [and worse,] the pleasure of comedy arises from the discomfort of others" (Ritchie 3). In other words, comedy was indecorous as it was embarrassing. For Aristotle,

> Comedy is an imitation of baser men. These are characterized not by every kind of vice but specifically by the ridiculous, which is a subdivision of the category of deformity. What

> we mean by 'the ridiculous' is some error or ugliness that is painless and has no harmful effects. (quoted in Neal and Krutnik 66)

This definition is instructive in that, as Ritchie extrapolates, "[c]omic characters transgress etiquettes, and although somehow 'less' than us are still like us, which is why we relate to them, and comedy, like slapstick, is not real" (3). Comedy, then, at the very base remains mimetic as opposed to realistic, revealing and laughing at human and societal flaws; and because the laughter that often results is subjective, comedy's motivations are hard to determine.

But, is laughter—or its elicitation—an essential or definitive element of comedy? Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik turn to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: "*comedy*, n. Stage-play of light, amusing and often satirical character, chiefly representing everyday life, & with happy ending (cf. TRAGEDY) (11)". As the two film studies scholars extrapolate, laughter is not overtly stated as a definitive element of the definition "though 'amusing' is perhaps an obvious synonym for it" (11). Thus, the defining characteristics of comedy are spelt out. However, the definition of comedy is still dogged with insufficiency. 'Chiefly', for instance, does not imply that the representation is exclusively 'everyday life' and of the 'lowly'. It could be historical as well as of the gentry as Neal and Krutnik demonstrate with reference to a number of Shakespearean comedies. Additionally, Neal and Krutnik still find 'a happy ending' as "a crucial, but partial convention" (12) as it is only applicable to narrative comedy as opposed to the non-narrative forms which rely on the generation of laughter to qualify as comedy (14). As such, the insufficiency of the definition is revelatory of "the limitations both of neoclassical theory, and of the criterion of a happy ending" (14).

Still, definitions rooted in theatrical theories such as these are all Aristotelian in one way or another, only "reworked and refined" to suit prevalent circumstances (Neal and Krutnik 14). As such, they remain just as insufficient and discriminatory insofar as the criteria of narrative/non-narrative forms and generation of laughter/happy ending. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham's definition is an apt example:

> comedy is a fictional work in which the materials are selected and managed primarily in order to interest and amuse us: the characters and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel confident that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters. (48)

Abrams and Harpman try to accommodate as many criteria as they possibly can so that their definition can cater to as many forms as possible, both silent/physical and sound. What is salient

is their 'clever' retention of a happy ending, narrative form and amusement value of the genre. Pertinent too are comedy's concerns with the superficial, and the unthreatening quality of its outcome. In consequence, comedy emerges as basically an act in amusement that remains harmless and painless. Aristotelian as it is in essence, perhaps the definition can work for the majority of forms, but not all owing to "the heterogeneity of forms and conventions comedy can involve" (Neal and Krutnik 15). In any case, not all comedy—satire, for instance—necessarily needs to be funny, assuming funny is a loose synonym for amusing (see Gray, Jones and Thompson 59; and Lowe 9). As such, Neal and Krutnik conclude, much as the criterion of happy ending/laughter and that of narrative/non-narrative may coincide in neoclassical theory, they remain "reasonably distinct."

> Moreover, they do not always, in practice, correspond with or accompany one another. For while the criterion of laughter can apply only to narrative forms, and while non-narrative forms only qualify as comedy because of the criterion of laughter, the symmetry between the different forms and the different criteria is incomplete: the criterion of laughter is not, like the criterion of a happy ending, restricted to one type of form; it can apply to narratives, as well as to non-narrative forms like double-acts and stand-up routines. (15)

Therefore, futile as it is to arrive at a single and sufficient definition, so it must be to seamlessly classify comedy into watertight forms. That is why Neal and Krutnik acknowledge the genre's "immense variety and range of […] forms [,] which is probably greater than that of any other genre" (10). In consequence, I neither proffer a definition of my own nor attempt an exhaustive coverage of the genre and its forms. Instead, I hereunder offer snapshots into forms of television comedy that resonate with my thesis as taken up in the subsequent chapters. While doing so, I fully agree with Jason Mittell that unlike genres in film and literature, definitional approaches to genre cannot sufficiently cater to television genres, which are quite hard to discipline (5).

1.5.1 Standing up abjection; abjecting fetishes: Stand-up comedy

Oliver Double describes the stand-up form as "'a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh'" (quoted in Wilkie xvi). Modern stand-up, which Wilkie deems as approximating "perhaps to the purest form of comic performance", "did not appear until World War I at the earliest" (xvi).[7] Stand-up comedy as an

[7] Although Double traces the appearance of 'stand-up comedian' to one Finlay Dunn to as early as 1917 in a column in the 10 November *Yorkshire Evening Post*, the term refers to an earlier phase of Dunn's career, implying that it

art form, then, is performed before a live audience, in a variety of venues—both indoor and outdoor—with minimal, if any, props with the aim of affecting laughter. Besides jokes, witticisms, wisecracks and occasional gags, the performance might include funny autobiographical or biographical anecdotes that encompass social commentary. According to Wilkie, besides merely generating laughter, "stand-up encourages critical thinking about how comedy makes its meanings and how those messages are received" (xvi). Such understanding of comedy is significant because the stand-up under study is read as geared towards critical thinking with regard to Kenyan nationhood.

As Caty Borum Chatoo and Lauren Feldman point out, following on Ian Brodie, the audience is paramount to stand-up. Seen as a "form of talk" by Brodie, stand-up, "implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking. When it is mediated through broadcasting and recording, an audience present to the performer is included in that mediation" (Chatoo and Feldman 70). Stand-up is hence bi-directional as opposed to unidirectional, with comedians building a rapport with the audience that allows them "to push boundaries" and break taboos (70). Auto/biographical disclosures speak to inequalities and have the potential to challenge stereotypes and the prejudice that goes with them. In so doing, they are likely to stir conversations that could effect socio-cultural change. Such conversations seem the direction that stand-up comedy aims to provoke in chapter two as the performers attempt to stand up stereotypes and help the stereotyped abject fetishes.

1.5.2 Once b/eaten, lies fly: Sketch comedy

Tracing its origins to the "movements for equality and social justice in the United States" in "the late 1950s and 1960s", Chattoo and Feldman argue that sketch comedy, while relying on improvisation, "allowed comedians of the time not only to entertain, but […] to take on divisive and socially critical issues, such as racial justice and the war" (73). In sketch, they postulate, "an ensemble of theatrical comics rehearses and performs brief scenario-based vignettes generally based on contemporary issues" which are motivated by activism and social consciousness (73). The format has not shed off this ethos to this day. Further,

might well have been in use much earlier (2). It is not clear, however, as to whether Dunn's performances were in the form of stand-up as we know it today or related to music as he was a pianist, performing in concert parties (3).

> sketch is a nimble format that allows comics to construct humorous situations and satirical narratives around a seemingly endless range of identities, issues, and events. Unlike scripted comedies that must sustain an episode or season-long story arc, or standup that is necessarily rooted in the personal perspective of the comic, the structure of sketch gives it freedom to take up myriad social and political topics. (Chattoo and Feldman 73)

Otherwise put, sketch comedy is flexible enough to allow experimentation with socially charged—even controversial—issues without having to sustain long, endless narrative trajectories. It is therefore quite a versatile form, and the brevity of its videos, for instance, allows for sharing among peers and the like-minded, thereby aiding in ease of spreadability that stretches the potential for a mass reach, and with it, a large-scale socio-cultural impact. As Chattoo and Feldman stress, sketch comedy can be more politically salient than other forms "because it can reenact real political events […], reinterpreting the actual words and actions of politicians to highlight their absurdity" (74). In my syntax, sketch comedy—as explored in chapter three—exposes injustices visited on the subordinated who cannot allow themselves to be b/eaten all the time, as it were. In consequence, the lies upon which the injustices are founded crumble.

1.5.3 Topical comedy: the people's pugilist

According to Russell Leslie Peterson, "[n]ews informs, yes, but it also spins and sensationalizes. Comedy trivializes, but it also offers catharsis and, occasionally insight. Topical comedy, in short, is not simply an inadequate substitute for the news; for good and for ill, it adds something of its own to our understanding of current news" (3–4). As a result, legacy news is not necessarily a reliable source of objective news. It can exaggerate to advance bias. Whereas comedy often applies understatement to the same facts, it does so in such a way as to offer not only relief from the facts' (often) devastating effects, but also to provide deeper insight. Comedy is therefore, on occasion, more perceptive than the news it spins off as it nuances it anew. Much as topical comedy is humorous, the humour is not an end in itself. It often, though not always, serves political purposes, and effectively so.

Topical comedy is most prevalent in satirical news, or what Gray, Jones and Thompson call *Satire TV*, which "often says what the press is too timid to say, proving itself a more critical interrogator of politicians at times and a more effective mouthpiece of the people's displeasure with those in power, including the press itself" (4). The form's basic formula involves:

> a funny host who comments on news and issues of the day while incorporating various combinations of TV news clip montages, politician sound bites, correspondent features, interviews, and field segments […]. Using parody, […] the [satirical] shows' hosts adopt the pretenses of a TV news anchor in order to ridicule multiple layers of institutional hypocrisy—including news media framing of and official responses to political events—while championing the interests of marginalized groups. (Gray, Jones and Thompson 63)

Entertainingly penetrative, topical comedy gives the people marginalized by power and power's agents—such as the press itself—the voice to critique the workings of power and its misdeeds in attempts to engender a fair and just society. At the forefront of this retributive critique is the 'false' newscaster as supported by his fellow pundits. Chapter four looks at how the humour of topical comedy in *The Wicked Edition with Dr. King'ori* and *The Trending Trend Talkers* offers a critique by dissecting mainstream news.

1.6 Comedy in Africa: the grass thatch for stowing thrones?

As a popular art form, comedy appears to have always existed in African cultures in the form of joke-performance (Chukwumah. Introduction. *Joke Performance* 3). According to Ignatius Chukwumah, a professor of African literature and popular culture, "in traditional Africa, the joke has to be performatively rendered in spoken terms, accessed in the immediacy of verbalisation, and rendered by an individual qualifying as the joke-performer" (3). Orally rendered, jokes are culture-specific, with their performance involving four parts: "player, player's text, the play's setting and the play's viewers", respectively corresponding to "the joke-performer, the joke-performed, the joke-performance setting, and the joke-performance viewers" (4). Simply put, joke-performance is ideally dramatic and theatrical; a kind of spectacle. Yet, this is not necessarily the case any longer as media technologies and the Internet continue to revolutionize joke-performance on the continent. This revolution was made starker at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic that curtailed public gatherings and greatly impacted human sociality.

It is this fragmentation of the traditional joke-performance that Chukwumah argues has resulted in a new joke-performance on the continent: the 'comicast' as he dubs it, with the term being a blend of the comic and the broadcast. The comicast presents "the most fluid settings, where recorded videos can be organised, edited, added to, configured, and disfigured and simulated, and computer applications are infused to achieve the most humorous joke-performance ever" (Introduction to *Joke-Performance* 9). The videos are uploaded on the Internet or stored on

electronic devices to complete the broadcasting. Arguably, this is the form of comedy that most proliferates today on the Internet as it does not require the unity of the above four parts as identified by Chukwumah. Indeed, the comicast has for over a decade now joined stand-up comedy and street performance on the Nigerian cultural scene to make up a new form of popular culture (Chukwumah "Reinforcing gendered scripts" 176). It seems reasonable to assume that the same is true on the whole continent as the Internet continues to flourish.

This is not to mean that traditional popular cultural forms of the comic tone have died out. On the contrary, they are still thriving as ever before. A good example is the "kin-based joking relationships such as those among members of the same clan or family [which are extended to the] inter-tribal level" (Chilala and Kapau 38). Cheela Chilala and Humphrey M. Kapau single out the *chimbuya* as practised between the Tonga and Lozi of Zambia as an enduring example of 'inter-tribe' joking. Referring to 'inter-tribal' joking, the term is not limited to the Tonga and Lozi. It is widespread in Southern Africa (45). Even so, such a practice, Chilala and Kapau argue, "is not confined to Bantu groups of East, Central, and Southern Africa. It is also found, for example, among some West African non-Bantu ethnic groups" (40). The practice, whatever name it takes—*utani* in Tanzania or *maseyano* among the Maragoli peoples of western Kenya—could be seen as encompassing most parts of the continent, and it is not without socio-cultural functions: reconciliatory and peace-building, among others (38). Moreover, the practice "enhances and encourages comradeship between members of ethnic groups that practice it" (44). Significantly, such joking has a licence akin to the carnivalesque (40), and its performance "may be likened to a case of acting out roles of jokers on stage, except that this theatre of jokers is on a grand scale" Chilala and Kapau 46).

The carnivalesque analogy takes us back to the definition of comedy as performative play, in which participants actively partake in "highly manufactured, manipulative conventions" that are carnivalesque in tone (Wilkie xv). As Chukwumah writes of the nine-day annual Okumeshi festival in Nigeria that set women and girls free to praise as well as satirize male virility via song, it is evident that Africa had its share of the carnivalesque in which women were freed from societal conventions that have, traditionally, kept their conduct, feelings and attitudes towards men and the phallus in check (Introduction to *Sexual Humour* xix). Marginalized, such moments provided women the space to vent and could be seen as subversive of the status quo. Such carnivalesque moments are spread all over Africa if the continent's representations in Chukwumah's 2022 edited

volume, *Sexual Humour in Africa Gender, Jokes, and Societal Change*, are any measure. As he notes, the sex humour moments are no longer confined to given periods and occasions; they proliferate the Internet and social media, becoming an everyday serving (Introduction to *Sexual Humour* xix). The performance of such humour is as ideological as it is revelatory of gender power matrices. Yet, it reinforces stereotypes even as it is liberates, however momentarily (xxiv).

With the study of comedy in Africa rooted in the Western world, it follows that any classification of the same on the continent is bound to be Western-oriented. For this reason, any attempt to ground it in the African cosmos is certainly challenging. Thus, the problems that have bedeviled the genre in the Western academy are, in some ways, more pronounced in the African one. There is, however, a growing body of scholarship on the genre attempting to keep pace with the exponential growth of comedy in Africa.

In order to offer a meaningful survey of the art form on the continent, it seems paramount to begin at the level of classification, which is influenced by the kinds of publications the scholarship appears in. The most recent volumes are *Sexual Humour in Africa: Gender, Jokes, and Societal Change* (2022) and *Joke-Performance in Africa: Mode, Media and Meaning* (2018) both edited by Ignatius Chukwumah. As can be gleaned from the titles, the scholarship seems to fall under humour and 'joke-performance'. *Sexual Humour* focuses on the tabooed yet cannily indulged in sex jokes and humour in various cultural forms, ranging from the literary to the performative and on the Internet. The jokes and humour perform various functions: conservative and oppressive as well as progressive to existent gender relations. *Joke-Performance* details the performance of jokes and the humour contained therein in various modes across media. The jokes range from the visual through the theatrical to the literary and the comedic. In Newell and Okome's *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (2014), there is a section titled 'The place of humour' where stand-up comedy and *mchongoano*[8] appear. From these, it appears that comedy in Africa is not only taken as popular culture or so Moradewun Adejunmobi confirms with regard to stand-up (175), but boils down to humour.

Such classification accords with N.J. Lowe's contention that comedy "covers all formally marked varieties of *performed humour*, whether scripted or improvised, group or solo, in any medium: theatre, film, television, radio, stand-up, and various hybrids and mutations of these" (1;

[8] A form of verbal duel popular with Kenyan children and teens through which they trade in jocular insults against each other. (See Wangari Mwai, Charles Kebaya and David Kimongo 133; Maranga-Musonye 2014).

italics in the original). Takuo Iwata, too, seems to agree that comedy in Africa equals humour with differences at the performance levels:

> African society is replete with comedy or humor, from the daily lives of people, to national politics, to the entertainment business. Comedy and humor are human acts intended to allow other people to laugh by and through action, idea, performance, or/and words. The difference is that comedy is a more professional act than humor, which is not necessarily performed professionally by targeting an audience. (4)

Wilkie's contention—that in the Anglo-American world comedy connotes stand-up (xvi)—is instructive as the same appears to be the case in Francophone Africa if Iwata's exploration of the genre's evolution in Africa is any measure. For Iwata, much as comedy is reflective of the continent's socio-political trajectory, it "is an intentional (professional) act to make audiences laugh" (2). The act is therefore specialized and executed by experts as "an entertainment activity" (4). The genre is emergent on the continent and steadily growing as an entertainment industry, joining the league of music and film (Iwata 2). While seemingly equating comedy with laughter, Iwata is cognizant of the power of comedy to critique the powerful (2).

Although the industry is still nascent, there are attempts at professionalization with international comedy events regularly punctuating the calendar (Iwata 11). The case is not any different in Anglophone West Africa, with Nigeria and Ghana taking the lead. Much as the Internet continues to revolutionize comedy in Africa, collaborations between Franco- and Anglo-phone are hampered by the colonial language barrier (12). While the industry is male-dominated, comediennes continue to make steady in-roads, although Iwata observes that their comedy is less political (14).

As a type of popular culture, Adejunmobi argues, stand-up's humour provides resistance to oppressive state practices through parody (175–76). Heavily mediated, stand-up takes various forms that include performances of the self in terms of occupation, deprecation and marginality. Although the comedy is not without "[v]erbal, ethnic, and gender stereotypes [that] are recounted without irony", it still critiques prevalent ills in society such as corruption, underperformance and/or incompetence in political office as well as the "absurdities of life in a postcolonial state" (Adejunmobi 185–86). Stand-up comedy has the potential to galvanize the citizenry into civic action through shaping life-bettering common opinion (22). Alternatively put, comedy as "an antidote to stressed out societies" is a vehicle for change through socio-political critique (Adejunmobi 30–31).

That being the case, comedy on the continent seems challenging to define and classify since it is largely reliant on the Western academy, whose practices cannot adequately address the phenomenon that is largely equated to humour that is culture-specific. As such, comedy in Africa could analogically be seen as the grass thatch on which not to stow (Western) thrones.[9]

1.7 Kenyan mediatized comedy and nationhood: the theatrical table?

Performances and quality of mediatized comedy in Kenya are on the rise, with YouTube taking centre stage, especially during the covid-19 pandemic that restricted public gatherings and largely impacted live stand-up comedy performances. Consequently, many comedians took to online platforms to keep their trade going (see Wabende 2021). Televisual comedies did not die out, though; they were transformed. *Churchill Show*, for instance, transformed itself into a pseudo auto/biographical platform, writing the stories of its cast among other Kenyans, prominent and/or otherwise.

Nonetheless, the numerous comedic shows that proliferate Kenya's myriad television stations range from the purely hilarious slapstick to the scathingly satirical—in vernacular as well as English and Kiswahili, even Sheng—courtesy of the liberalization of the mediascape in the 1990s. The website Owaahh.com describes the mid-1990s as the most productive in terms of both comedy events and as a "training ground for second generation of Kenyan comedians and the numerous ones who ended up on radio" (n.p). The *Redykyulass* trio of Nyambane (Tonny Mong'are), KJ (John Kiarie) and Mdomo Baggy (Tony Njuguna) was the epitome of this development, producing perhaps the most audacious make-believe comedy, mimicking then president Daniel Toroitich arap Moi and his government officials. Later, the trio went on to mimic Moi's successor, Mwai Kibaki, and his wife, Lucy. Owaahh.com notes how Moi himself exhilarated in the comedy, with Kibaki becoming the country's "accidental comedian who used everything, including insult comedy, to make his audiences roar with laughter once he cleared with the written speech" (n.p). According to Owaahh.com, Kibaki, "the president and the national comic", was not good for an industry that had been spurred by Moi's two-and-a-half decades of tyranny (n.p).

[9] The analogy, whose moral is: people who live in grass houses should not stow thrones, is drawn from Kim Binsted and Graeme Ritchie (276). It is mimetic (dealt with in chapter four) of 'People who live in glass houses should not throw stones'.

Perhaps this is true as tyranny does not condone open dissent, and people often have to find creative alternatives such as theatre, music, poetry and fiction to covertly critique and undermine it. Kenyans were not an exception during this era when much of anti-government talk was conducted in whispers. It is unsurprising that Wahome Mutahi's weekly newspaper column, *Whispers*, emerged in 1983 when Moi was tightening his grip on power after the 1982 failed attempted coup against his regime, and gained prominence in the 1990s; thus, "embodying […] the politically subversive" (Ogola 4).[10] Casting his immediate family into the fictional as Ogola observes, Mutahi through allegory and ironical and/or satirical humour shone a critical light on national politics, affording popular media "a new space for social and political reflection, and direction" (6). As Ogola records, through *Whispers*, Mutahi laughed at literally anything except God. In the Bakhtinian sense, authority and the commonplace were exposed to laughter and ridicule. In Ogola's own words, "*Whispers* was a public space where Kenya's postcolonial existential anxieties were constantly interrogated" (1). Whereas *Whispers* was not comedy as such, it was comical in its humorous critique of the country's political class and its excesses. "In *Whispers* people could heartily laugh at authority, and at themselves, but ultimately reflect on the reasons for their laughter. By providing such a space for self-reflection and for the critique of society, […] the Kenyan newspaper became an important site of cultural production relevant to understanding Kenya's political transition in the 1980s–1990s" (Ogola 3).

In other words, alternative critical discourses thrived across media in the late 19th through the early 20th centuries to-date. Ogola contends, with the demise of Mutahi in 2003, "Kenyan television stations developed 'products' similar to *Whispers*. Local comedy acts such as 'Reddykyulas', 'Tru Klass', XYZ, among others, gradually relaced the Western sitcom on Kenyan TV stations. These groups' pet topics include[d] the themes around familiar social and political issues, narrated with ironic humour à la *Whispers*" (174). The proliferation of such programmes could be why Mingqing Yuan and Yuning Shen posit that comedy thrived in the country in the early 2000s (2). They particularly cite the appearance of *The XYZ Show* on *Nation Television* (*NTV*) in 2009. The show was a unique satirical comedy in the form of motion cartoons aiming jabs at the political class. Remmy Shiundu Baraza claims the show compensated for the inadequacies of stand-up comics in addressing socio-politically salient issues:

[10] (Paul) Wahome Mutahi (1954 – 2003) was one of Kenya's foremost novelists, playwrights, thespians and journalists of the Moi era who used their creative armoury to subvert the tyrannical regime.

> The humour generated […] a coping strategy for Kenyans faced with domineering state power in a country ravaged by socio-economic exclusions, impunity, horrendous acts of corruption, insecurity, extrajudicial killings, land grabbing, unemployment, violence, famine, unprecedented drought, arbitrary arrests, strikes, political mistrust and political betrayal. In a country such as Kenya where the postcolonial subject continues to endure these infinite oppressive experiences, humour blends with reality as a socio-political liberalization option. (26)

By contrast, RaShell Peck critiques the show for the manner in which it buttresses the Mzee masculinity pervasive in Kenyan society through parodying and satirizing political power and its wielders.[11] She argues that it reinforces power's exclusion and maintains the status quo (149). Ogola, following on Michael Schatzberg and Mamadou Diof, agrees that in African states, traditions are often re/invented in order to legitimize domination. The attendant post/colonial fictions and fables "entail a range of state-sanctioned and state invented ideological myths, motifs, histories, memories and imagery but which find resonance within subject populations" (96). Thus, Jomo Kenyatta was called 'Mzee', just as Daniel Moi was referred to as 'the father of the nation'. The same titles were extended to Kibaki, and it was not uncommon to hear Uhuru referred to as the father of the nation, young/er as he was, by people old enough to be his parents. What is significant though, is the bravery the *XYZ Show* exhibited in taking a stab at the country's top political leadership.

Concerning *Redykyulass*, Kimingichi Wabende observes that the show was as daring in its satire of the political class as it was impactful on the development of Kenyan comedy, acting as a form of training ground for budding comedians. The show would produce Churchill (Daniel Ndambuki), Kenya's leading light in the development of stand-up comedy and host of the *Churchill Show* focalized in chapter two. Entertaining as it was, *Redykyulass* offered a bit of social critique, but was obviously not radical comedy as Moi would not have permitted it. Nonetheless, the fact that *Redykyulass* was permitted to exist in the form it did, narrowed "the hierarchical gap" (Musila, *Democrazy* 114) between state power and the ordinary citizen, opening the former to scrutiny by the former. As Musila convincingly argues,

> By slowly wearing out this hegemonic distance, which is reinforced by convention and taboo, humour enables us to wean ourselves off accepted convention and in a sense jolts us out of passive acceptance of the status quo or a lethargic resignation to social evil, enabling us to see them anew and reflect on them. In the process it not only unmasks power, but renders it naked; thus enabling us to finger its body with derisive familiarity. (114)

[11]Mzee is Kiswahili for family patriarch, which extends to the political arena as the national venerable leader.

Thus, *Redykyulass* was permitted because it was 'harmless' play on the person and government of Moi. It is little surprising that Moi would invite them "to perform at state functions and actually joined them in laughing at *his* portraitures" (117; italics in the original). The flipside, however, is that *Redykyulass* broached taboo, and soon people could, though cautiously, discuss the hitherto unspoken about Moi and his ministers. *The Daily Nation*'s long serving cartoonist, Gado (Godfrey Mwampemba), whose work Musila focusses on is reported to have called Moi a dictator (*Democrazy* 114). Humour, therefore, has the potential to stretch, even rip, boundaries. As Musila writes, "the comic tradition in Kenya made a significant contribution to the gradual realization that the Moi regime was not as invincible as it purported to be" (115).

Although it might appear, then, that mediated comedy thrived during the tyrannical days of Daniel Moi, it had been in existence during the colonial times. Tracing the history of mediated comedy in Kenya to as early as 1946, to the duo of Kipanga and Omar Suleiman, Owaahh.com makes quite a forceful account of the evolution of comedy in the country. According to the site, Reuters dispatch 'Eurocentrically' labeled Kipanga Athumani as the country's first national comic. However, as Owaahh.com notes, comedy had always flourished among all the nations of what would eventually become Kenya (n.p). Nonetheless, Kipanga's "work among inmates during the State of Emergency in the 1950s" so impressed the colonial authorities that they "taped his shows [and] replayed them in rehabilitation camps both as entertainment and as part of the rehabilitation processes" (n.p). What the site seems not to point out is that the colonial administration 'ordered recordings' of Kipanga's caricatures of the Mau Mau fighters so as to quell the rebellion. (Kipanga n.p). Therefore, whereas it appears appropriate to call Kipanga the father of mediated comedy in Kenya, his comedy was no doubt not good for destabilizing the status quo. Instead, it was meant to perpetuate it. Kipanga's art speaks to the ambivalence of humour. Humour "serves both as a *means* of social control and *resistance* to that social control" (Musila *Democrazy* 112). It would, then, appear that Kipanga's state-sanctioned humour was used as a means of socio-political control to keep the Mau Mau rebellion from flaring thereby threatening to displace the colonial administration. Kipanga, also seems to have been using humour as a safety valve in the Freudian psychoanalytic frame in the temporal time the administration allowed to broach tabooed subjects. In other words, Kipanga used the comedic space to release his (community's) suppressed feelings

and sentiments about colonial rule. In the detention camps, Kipanga's humour must have been used to ridicule the detained as social deviants. In Musila's words,

> the one overriding factor is social control. In both instances, it would appear that the status quo is eventually restored, in that [using humour as a safety valve] serves a preventive purpose, by safely diffusing these aggressive energies, in the temporary and socially sanctioned space of humour, while [using humour a critique of deviance] is remedial in so far as it attempts to correct these transgressive tendencies. Both cases seem to suggest that humour actually serves to reinstate dominant socio-political conventions and inhibitions, by only affording participants a temporary release from these 'taboo' inhibitions, within the 'sanitized', socially sanctioned context of the comic space. (*Democrazy* 113–14)

As Owaa.com records, Kipanga's caricatures of "the hottest issues of his day" appealed to both settlers and natives. This undoubtedly resonates with Ogola's contention mentioned above, that state-sanctioned ideologies engender support within the dominated populations. It could, therefore, be argued that just like the colonial state used comedy to lessen tension among inmates and ease their resistance to its torturous regime (Kipanga n.p), so does the postcolonial state allow, perhaps even 'coerce', comedians to be funny without touching on politically thorny issues of the day so as to buy them into maintaining the status quo.

That said, together with Omari Suleiman (alias Mzee Pembe), under the management of Peter Colmore, Kipanga "conducted the first Kenyan comedy tour [with the exception of] the Northern Frontier, then technically not a part of Kenya" (Owaahh.com n.p). They took improvisational comedy to radio (African Broadcasting Services) under Colman's stewardship where they never used scripts (Owaah.com n.p). It is this improvisational-cum-sketch comedy that survives to this day in the form of shows like *Vioja Mahakamani* and *Vitimbi*[12] on Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). Musila attributes such shows' survival through the Nyayo dictatorship to their lack of political critique ("The Redykyulass Generation's" 284). Norah Mose describes these two age-old programmes as dramedy—a fusion of drama and comedy—having debuted on Kenyan screens in 1964 (94). Dramedy continues to flourish in today's period of the media boom, perhaps because it is not critically biting to the country's political elite. It therefore emerges that Kenyan mediated comedy has been quite prolific since the 1940s. Churchill's countrywide tours are hence a continuation of an old tradition. Nevertheless, other stars would follow in the footsteps of

[12]Respectively, court drama and socio-cultural skit in Kiswahili.

Kipanga and Suleiman, keeping the industry alive. Kipanga and Mzee Pembe passed on in 1985 and 2012 respectively.

Among stylistic devices that Mose argues actors are compelled to use to keep the dramedies' entertainment afloat are "imitation[s] of accents of […] communities" (94), which Kipanga used way before in his day. According to Owaahh.com, these "accents and tribal jokes" (n.p) are indicative of something critical of Kenyan society. In the site's words, "[c]omedy allows us to laugh at our deeper insecurities and problems, and perhaps *our lack of a national identity is our biggest one*. But there's a national identity, one that we haven't defined properly yet. One that has influenced our music, art, and funny enough, our political ideology" (n.p; italics mine).

In other words, Kenyan society is founded on morass. Its sense of national identity is lacking, but not entirely: it is, if at all, ill-defined as it is prevalent in Kenya's other cultural productions. Intriguingly, this sense of national identity seems nothing to inspire pride in Kenyans as a people. Unfortunately, it is this kind of nebulous sense of national identity that has inspired the Kenyan way of doing politics, with the so-called 'tribal' card trumping all else. Perhaps Kenya is indeed still *tribal*, having failed to lift itself from the colonial abyss of 'tribal fragmentation' since the British left in 1963. Unsurprisingly, Owaahh.com points out that after the 2007/2008 post-election skirmishes, "the government asked comedians and comics to cut down on tribal stereotypes and caricatures" "as if jokes had been the problem" (n.p), and some critics fell for this obviously untenable scapegoating (as I show further on).

Kenya up to and until the disputed 2007 presidential elections was a relatively stable country, often described as an island of peace in the relatively volatile region. Save for Tanzania, all Kenya's neighbours have experienced political turmoil, with some resulting in military coups and others descending into outright civil war. However, as Charles Hornsby observes, Kenya's ostensible stability is artificial as it is cosmetically sustained. He argues: "Kenya is […] less a *stable* state than a *brittle* state: resistant to change, but liable to fragment if social pressure exceeds the tolerance of its inflexible shell. For a while, in January 2008, it seemed that this shell might fracture completely" (7; italics in the original). In other words, Kenya is fragile because it is an entity conveniently held together to sustain the interests of its socio-political and economic elite—and their international partners—who seem to care little about the majority among whom they

perpetuate ethnic divisions. This fragility was exposed in January 2008 following the disputed presidential elections that pitted then incumbent Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga.[13]

Hornsby rightly observes that Kenyatta "speeded Kenya's move towards the rule of a Kikuyu oligarchy, political and economic decay" (3). Moi's ascension to power following Kenyatta's demise in 1978 did not help Kenya's ethnic polarization, putting the country firmly in the grip of his Kalenjin community. Moi's rule fast solidified into authoritarianism in the wake of the failed attempted coup of 1982 (3). Kibaki too prioritised his community and cabal of close allies and cronies in the sharing out of plum public service jobs and resource allocation, which further deepened the ethnic divisions in a country where only the fittest survive in the struggle for scarce resources, one of which is land that remains so emotive an issue (see Wanyonyi 46–47). Publically however, these leaders preached detribalization that they simultaneously "sabotaged […] by installing ethnic networks as channels for distribution of public resources along lines of 'sub-nationalist privilege'" (Musila "Archives of the Present" 255). It was therefore unsurprising that subterranean historical wounds opened in January 2008, with communities of the contesters turning against each other. As Westen K. Shilaho puts it:

> The 2007–2008 post-election violence was a culmination of unresolved historical issues such as land disputes, inequitable resource distribution, weak institutions and impunity. The violence signaled the perilous trajectory the country had embarked on since independence and called for substantive reform to avert instability during subsequent elections. (22)

The fact that on the opposite sides of the electoral contest were a Kikuyu and a Luo seemed to worsen matters. The socio-cultural and political rivalry between the two communities flared so atrociously that it called to mind the 1969 compulsory oaths at Kenyatta's home in Gatundu to keep the presidency within the community (Shilaho 7, see also Wanyonyi 41). It appeared power could not be allowed to leave the community; it could *never* be transferred to the Luo, a community whose leadership had inspired the oaths.

That the chaos blotted the sociocultural and political fabric of the nation is undeniable. It left at least one thousand two hundred people dead, thousands displaced, many more maimed and hard-earned property laid to waste (Abdi and Dean 2008, Ambala 2016, Wekesa 2010). Significantly,

[13]Respectively members of the Kikuyu and Luo communities that have since independence had an uneasy relationship following the ideological fallout between the country's founding president, Jomo Kenyatta, and his vice-president, Oginga Odinga in 1966 and the subsequent assassination in 1969 of Tom Mboya, Kenya's first economic planning minister—a Luo, who was seen as a front runner to succeed Kenyatta.

the skirmishes called the very fact of being Kenyan into question. As Joyce Nyairo and Johannes Hossfeld indicate, there emerged doubt of the existence of Kenyan nationhood (13). In sum, Kenyans' identity, culture and freedom were up for reflection and critique. Feelings of disenfranchisement to the polity were endemic; hence, disidentification with the Kenyan nation-state. In consequence, Kenyans needed to redefine themselves as one or variegated in their oneness as expressed in their cultural practices and the freedom that goes with such. That freedom included the use of information and entertainment outlets like the media. That is why I am in agreement with Owaahh.com that Kenyans seem to have no (well-defined) sense of identity in spite of it continuing to spawn their artistic and cultural productions that can only be labelled as 'Kenyan'.

Hence, it is not enough to blame only the political class for the 2007/8 blood-letting. Many other players contributed to engineering the chaos, with the media coming a close second, which was evidenced by one of its practitioners being arraigned before the International Criminal Court alongside politicians and other senior government officials for crimes against humanity.[14] The media, as a collective, is not only a source of infotainment; it is the barometer of Kenya's democracy and the citizenry is reliant on it as its watchdog against state excesses, and it can even be a catalyst of socio-political change (Ismail and Dean 320). Therefore, it is telling that the media should be accused of not only abdicating such a high calling but also seen to be "fanning the flames of ethnic hatred, of having become politically co-opted, of marginalizing voices of reason at a time of ethnically polarized politics, and failing to uphold its function as a source of investigation of abuse of power" (Ismail and Dean 321). In other words, the media ought to be objective and balanced, keeping the government in check while foregrounding justice and—if needs be—preach oneness and peaceful co-existence without dancing to the parochial interests of the political class. In any case, media content is significant to notions of national identity, its formation, and sustenance, and propagation (Tully and Tuwei 2016).

1.8 'Kenyanness' and stereotypes: contested constructs

Indeed, the events of 2007/8 called into question the fact of being Kenyan. Saturating the media and talk by ordinary Kenyans since then is the truism: Kenya is our home; we have no other. Politicians and the affluent can relocate abroad if the nation-state fails. The same cannot be said

[14] Joshua arap Sang, a journalist with the Kalenjin vernacular Kass FM was accused of using radio to fuel ethnic hate.

of the wo/man on the street. The latter therefore needed to rethink their love for and identification with their country. They needed to value their compatriots as deserving of brotherly and sisterly communion.

Peter Wafula Wekesa conceives of 'Kenyanness', which he equates with Kenyan nationhood, as "an ethical and philosophical doctrine that aspires or inspires Kenyan people into the love of their country." Wekesa supposes that as a political construct, the doctrine "could form a starting point for the ideology of nationalism, [which] is informed by the fact of a shared identity as well as other attributes including a common descent, language, culture, religion and a territorial boundary" (53). Kenya's citizenry is far from homogenous due to its varied ethnic, class, religious (besides other) socio-cultural categories. Thus, the approach could indeed be tenuous as 'Kenyanness' could be variously understood (Wekesa 54).

Wekesa provides quite a detailed account of the evolution of 'Kenyanness', at whose centre have been efforts to forge a nation following in the colonial footsteps and culminating in the Andersonian conception of an imagined political community (Wekesa 67).[15] As such, at the heart of galvanizing Kenya as an indivisible 'nation' have been state-centric efforts that have rendered 'Kenyanness' problematic. As Wekesa admirably sums up:

> [P]art of the problem with 'Kenyanness' as a concept relates to the misrepresentation, and perhaps more critically, misreading Kenyan history. More often than not our historical record has been influenced by the state whose agenda has been the reaffirmation of the nationalist project. Through state power, officially endorsed histories have tended to be stories of the *status quo* that favour the unique entities of the Kenyan nation as opposed to the manifest multiple realities that exist in the country. In this regard for instance the positive aspects of the inter-ethnic relations are glossed over, conflated within the divisive forces of ethnicity and often projected as undermining the processes of state formation and nation building. (69–70)

In other words, as conceived in many 'official' (even academic) discourses, 'Kenyanness' is narrow and untenable (63), which ties in with my argument that the Kenyan nation-state has been hijacked by the political elite who have failed to craft a nation out of the state. Instead, they have deepened the 'tribal' divisions engendered by the colonisers who left them the arduous task of turning colonies into states and subjects into citizens (Wekesa 68). In the process, they seem to

[15] Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." He elaborates: the community "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6).

have been consumed by the pursuit of their selfish interests that are best served by the maintenance of the status quo in which they thrive at the expense of the largely disenfranchised ordinary citizen. In local lingo, the elite and the country's powerful are 'wenye nchi' (Kiswahili for the owners of the country); the rest, 'wananchi' (mere citizens). The best way to perpetuate and leverage the class demarcations has been through politicization of socio-cultural identities that the political elite mobilizes to maintain state power (see Shilaho 35, for instance) and stifle the ideal Kenyan spirit of 'we-ness', which I argue for in chapter two. For now, it seems appropriate to briefly explore the concept of the stereotype that the political elite often exploits to deepen ethnic divisions in Kenyan society and keep their stranglehold on state power.

The Kenyan public sphere is littered with stereotypes that beyond providing contested representations of social categories are used as markers of difference, having become "malleable instruments in the game of power" (Ligaga 72), especially during elections that are largely ethnic-driven along the 'mtu wetu' (our person) mantra. Traceable to the colonial period, stereotypes in Kenya are archived in colonial expression, and therefore align with Homi Bhabha's theorization of colonial discourse. According to Bhabha, colonial discourse is dependent on "the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness", demarcating categories for dominance and subordination. Fixity "connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (66). The fixity essentialises groups of people, with no regard to individual member complexity. It aims at preserving the status quo and is dependent on methodical reiteration to ensure that the reductive, derogatory and decadent attributes ascribed to the 'other' hold 'true'.

Fixity thus operates like the stereotype: "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (66). Therefore, stereotypes comprise second-hand knowledge to which one is exposed before the encounter with the object of the ascription. The anxiety with which the characterization has to be repeated seems to signal the insecurity that is inherent in stereotypes. Consequently, for Bhabha:

> the stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits) constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (75; italics in the original)

In other words, the image of the Other is not a true picture of how things are. It is a reductive depiction of what proliferates. Whatever the representation is, it does not hold true because it is invested with mental and emotional efforts to homogenize categories that keep internal differences at bay. As a result, it becomes an image that is constrained and obsessed with by in-groups. That is why it relies on repetition, which we can equate to acculturation, for sustenance.

Naturally, then, Chris Barker conceives of a stereotype as "a vivid but simple representation that reduces persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits and is thus a form of representation that essentializes others through the operation of power" (188). Barker elaborates:

> a stereotype suggests that a given category has inherent and universal characteristics and that furthermore these characteristics represent all that such a person is or can be. A stereotype commonly takes the form of a conventionalized idea constructed according to a rigid formula into a hackneyed image that typecasts people. (188)

In short, stereotypes are prescriptive, inflexible and become the everyday way of repeatedly pigeonholing categories of people as homogenous. As socio-cultural and psychological pillars of discrimination, stereotypes then become models, norms and conventional ways of knowing achieved through socialization.

Yet, as Bhabha reminds us, because stereotyping is discursive, it is necessarily embedded in language, and thus, imbued with (the force of) ambivalence

> that gives the colonial stereotype its currency: ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed. (66; italics in the original)

Simply put, reliant as it is on exaggeration of what can be experientially (even scientifically) or reasonably demonstrated and interpreted, stereotypes are in themselves contradictory; their meanings uncertain; their veracity only likely. That is why they rely on repetition to hold them in place so as to sustain the discrimination they perpetuate. It is this ambivalence that Bhabha insists must be theoretically mapped out in order to effectively make sense of "the *processes of subjectification*" (67; italics in the original).

Bhabha goes on to chart the function of ambivalence by reading Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, a reading I later draw from to map out the function of ambivalence inherent in the stereotypes that clutter Kenyan comedy. For now, suffice to say, in Christie Davies' succinct way:

> the relationship between jokes and stereotypes is problematic, for many of those who

> invent and enjoy the jokes do not believe in the stereotypes. This is especially significant where those who are telling the jokes also belong to the group that is the butt of the jokes, for while they clearly know that outsiders hold a negative stereotypical view of them, it would be quite wrong to assume that their liking for the corresponding jokes implies acceptance of the stereotype held by the others. Indeed, the members of the minority may make skilful use of the humorous script as a way of repudiating or *transmogrifying* the stereotype. (32; italics mine)

It is this disavow or transformation of the stereotype that partly inspired this thesis. As Davies intimates, semantically, joke-performance is not transparent vis-à-vis stereotypes. There is ambivalence to it as not all, perhaps even few, joke performers perceive stereotypes to be true representations of their groups as well as others'. It is hard to ascertain whether the comics are avowing or disavowing the depictions in the stereotypes. Even so, stereotypes oscillate between the positive and the negative, with a razor-thin line between them that comics magnify and/or erase for amusement as well as for critique, often subtly. It is therefore not easy to fix meanings of such play. Importantly, comedians could be playing lightheartedly with stereotypes as an adroit means to recanting or altering them. After all, as Walter Lippman, the originator of the term 'stereotype', cautioned:

> if our philosophy tells us that each man is only a small part of the world, that his intelligence catches at best only phases and aspects in a coarse net of ideas, then, when we use our stereotypes, we tend to know that they are *only stereotypes*, to hold them lightly, to modify them gladly. (60; italics mine)

Lippman advises against taking stereotypes seriously. They can be delightfully revised since they do not accurately constitute the depicted. They are attitudinal to the extent that the portrayed constitute only a fragment of the portrayers' worldview. Davies agrees with Lippman. I do too.

1.9 The place of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy: a review of Literature

The extant literature on Kenyan comedy oscillates between condemnatory and laudatory, with the former contending that the comedy is harmful to Kenyan society because it is suffused with ethnic stereotypes. For instance, Michael Mule Ndonye argues that jokes from televised shows are supposedly major determinants of inter-ethnic relations in Kenya. He contends that television amplifies stereotypes, which people take as models of representation. To him, *Churchill Live Show* (which would later rebrand into the *Churchill Show*) acts as an instrument of ethnic stereotyping,

and Kenyans use the stereotyping in relating with members of other ethnic groups (vi). He thus calls for the critical evaluation and regulation of televised comedy that is profoundly reliant on ethnic stereotyping jokes.

Using stereotyping and accumulation theories, Phylis Bartoo and Josephine Khaemba join Ndonye in reiterating the above claims. They blame stereotypes—whose spread they attribute to televised comedy—for Kenya's 2007/8 post-election violence. To them, *Churchill Live Show* entrenches ethnic stereotypes through ethnic jokes. They recommend that the audience be advised to take jokes for what they are: jokes, and urge minimization of ethnic stereotyping in comedy to stem "negative ethnicity in Kenya" (605). Josephine Khaemba Mulindi teams up with Ndonye to better concretize the condemnation of stereotypes in "Ideological undertones in mediatized comedy in the *Churchill Show* of Kenya" (2018). The two scholars claim that "[t]he *Churchill* profiles jokes from cultural, geographical, social, religious and behavioural aspects of society. Such jokes are institutionalized and are reproduced today by television comedians for commercial purposes. However, these jokes do constitute ideologies that inform ethnic relations in Kenya" (267–68). They then argue that audiences take these self- and other-representations seriously, consider them accurate and use them as bases for relating with members of the depicted groups. These representations, Ndonye and Mulindi conclude, "shape cultural values and have the power to do harm" (284).

Whereas it might be true that stereotypes are reinforced through the mass media, I think it is inaccurate to claim that the stereotypes as exhibited in the stand-up variety of the *Churchill Show* shape ethnic relations in Kenya. Attributing the 2007/8 post-election skirmishes to stereotypes seems not only a misrepresentation of facts, but also a misreading of Kenya's history as Wekesa would have it (69). The disputed election only unearthed inter-ethnic hostilities that are a result of inequalities existent in Kenya, especially concerning land and the transfer and planting of 'alien' populations in ancestral lands other than their own, particularly in the Rift Valley. Moreover, there was a segment of the voters in the population that felt cheated of victory in the bungled election (see Branch 2011, particularly chapter 8).

Guided by general theory of verbal humour, Mary M. Githatu and Furahi Chai focus on discursive topics and stylistic devices in *Churchill Live Show*. They observe that topical issues touching on social class, politics, religion, ethnicity and sports are humorously explored. Contrary to the above critics, Githatu and Chai see no harm in such stereotypes, contending that the

stereotypes are relayed via inoffensive humour and other styles, which instead of offending the targets, create solidarity among them (414). Likewise, Martha Michieka and Leonard Muaka assert that stereotypes mark identities, construct boundaries and perform (comedians') personal experiences indexing Kenyanness while laying bare Kenya's diverse ethno-linguistic identities. They find that humour makes light of stereotypes and neutralizes inter-ethnic tensions in the country (559).

These opposed positions indicate that meanings of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy are not self-evident. The optics from which the stereotypes are read determine their meanings and the readers' deductions on their import on the Kenyan socio-cultural fabric. It is therefore untenable to make sweeping generalizations of the place of stereotypes in the comedy and society. Interpretations seem idiosyncratic and cannot therefore be unanimous. Concerning content, for instance, Beneah Shapaya dismisses Kenyan stand-up comedy as merely meant to provoke laughter without inciting the audience's psycho-intellectual faculties. He accuses the audience of being complicit in the propagation of such base humour that appears "stuck in a rut with boy-girl relationship issues and ethnicity being their main focus" (127). He, however, points out that a few comics try to get out of the said rut, only their "performances are not memorable or worthy of in-depth thought" (Shapaya 127). To him, then, stand-up comedy in Kenya is truly escapist. Mingqing Yuan and Shen do not think so. They argue that comedy is Kenya's socio-political barometer, and *Churchill Show* the ultimate representative. The comics' critique of the Kenya-China debt relationship that threatens Kenya's sovereignty is testimony to the idea that comedy is a site of resistance by the subordinated against their rulers. This view corresponds with Musila's study of *Redykyulass*.

Musila makes a case for the youth's contribution to the ongoing reconstruction of what constitutes knowledge in shaping Kenyan civic life while critically engaging with what can be termed the 'geronto-masculine' texture of Kenya. In her work, she seeks to sever the idea of the youth from its prevalent associations with disease, crime and unemployment, song and music. Instead, she argues that *Redykyulass* "contributed towards the unmasking of state power, fracturing of the culture of fear and ultimately popularized a culture of critique of the workings of state power" ("The Redykyulass Generation's" 295). As Wabende observes, *Redykyulass,* too, "did use tribal stereotypes to some extent, [but] their focus was on political class and their obsessions" (48).

Using queer theory, Dorothy O. Rombo explores domestic workers' agency in selected series of *The Real Househelps of Kawangware*. She analyses how the female domestic workers attempt

to survive under precarious circumstances in their interactions with the public and their employers, pressing for better terms and conditions of employment. The women queer conventional gender roles as they emerge from invisibility. Although Rombo claims that the show does not give women voice as much as it helps at attempts to understand their otherwise hidden lives, I contend that substantial agency is afforded them through the disruptions of the normative that the house helps execute. Importantly, her study aptly lends itself to cultural critique of domestic work as a global, multifaceted and exploitative phenomenon. Nonetheless, Rombo sees Kenyan comedy as "socially corrosive," urging that it "requires continued attention" (Rombo 156). She recommends further research on the role of gender and ethnic stereotypes in Kenyan comedy. This study partly answers this call.

Serah Kasembeli reads ambiguity in the humour generated by recourse to stereotypes and "the so-called ethnic jokes" (1). She argues that whereas the humour in the *Churchill Show* is "presented as a celebration of Kenyan multiculturalism and as a counter to […] negative ethnicity", it "inadvertently re-constructs negative stereotypes" (1). As such, it undermines the nation-building project that the show imposes on the citizens (3). This ambivalence strengthens my argument that the reading of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy is not uniform. What is significant in Kasembeli's work, nonetheless, is that she does not deny the show's attempts at unifying the nation after the skirmishes that followed the disputed 2007 presidential elections (5).

1.10 Chapter breakdown

Chapter two explores how the *Churchill Show* constructs a state-nation 'Kenyanness' through a political aesthetics of humour. It argues that humour as an aesthetic form does not just comment on the world from which it derives, but oftentimes has a political bearing meant to either upset or reinforce existent power structures that define that world. Focalized is humour of discomfort.

Chapter three explores how comedy fusions of docusoap and dramedy attempt to empower marginalized and oppressed socio-cultural and economic categories. It examines how postmodern humour endows such categories with agency to renegotiate and refashion class and gender relations. The chapter focuses, respectively, on provocative humour and absurd humour in *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss*.

Chapter four turns to topical comedy in *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trending Trend Talkers* to establish how postmodern humour critiques conventions and/or stereotypes in an attempt to construct a Kenyan transnation. The chapter dwells not so much on the transmogrification of stereotypes but on the transformation of conventions and/or norms that are fast assuming the cloak of stereotypes. It analyses parody and satire, while placing a premium on language and how it is manipulated to deconstruct the (seemingly) given/s.

Chapter five concludes the thesis by recapping what the foregoing chapters have explored and draws deductions accruing therefrom, making recommendations and calling attention to larger issues for future research.

Chapter Two: *The Churchill Show*: Chekesha Wananchi; Taifa Unganisha[16]

In this chapter, I explore how the *Churchill Show* entertains the Kenyan citizens and constructs a state-nation Kenyanness through a political aesthetics of humour. I argue that humour as an aesthetic form is not only a commentary on the everyday and the historical, but also provides a political critique of the Kenyan society that is meant to either disrupt or reinforce existent power structures. I contend that as the comedians electrify audiences, they un/consciously couch their jokes, wisecracks and witticisms in postmodern humour that blurs the boundary between the real and the aesthetic, thereby infusing them with doubt that unsettles notions of perception and knowing that socio-cultural stereotypes seem to have long settled.

I begin by aligning the show with the concept of the stereotype so as to establish that the disruption alluded to above starts right with the destabilization of *stereotype* as a term or concept. I argue that the *Churchill Show* is a stereotype that aggregates stereotypes, albeit in transformed form/s. I then consider the transglossic practices the comics engage in so as to upset regimented language systems of the Kenyan postcolonial state. Finally, I look into how the show constructs a state-nation Kenyanness, with Churchill (Daniel Ndambuki), the eponymous host, acting as an organic intellectual/interpreter, who artistically attempts to mitigate Kenya's socio-cultural and political divisions as wrought by the nation-state's political elite since 1963 when Kenya gained self-rule from the British.[17]

To demonstrate how the show aligns with the concept of the stereotype, I use 'The Bar edition' as the *Churchill Show* archetype. For transglossic language practices, I turn to the 'All White edition'; and Season 7 Episodes 29 and 30 to problematize the tension between the material and the aesthetic realms of postmodern humour, with a special focus on the routines of Nasra Yusuf, YY and Sleepy David, regular comics on the show. As for the state-nation construction of Kenyanness, I consider the 'Moi Day', 'Jamhuri Festival' and 'Nairobi Homecoming' editions for

[16]*Churchill Show'*s theme song implies that the stand-up comedy variety is not only meant to elicit laughter from fellow countrymen (Kiswahili 'chekesha wananchi') but also aims at unifying Kenyans as a nation ('unganisha taifa').

[17] Daniel Ndambuki, uses 'Churchill' as his stage name. To differentiate between him and the show, I use regular font when I refer to the persona and italics for the show.

their portrayal of politicians and espousal of 'Kenyanness'. I give a brief synopsis of every episode before embarking on the analysis.[18]

2.1 "You must have been a beautiful baby …": A stereotype of stereotypes transmogrified

The *Churchill Show* is a general exhibition stand-up comedy variety show that started out in September 2008 as *Churchill Show Live*, and rebranded into *Churchill Show* and *Churchill Show Raw* in 2012. Hosted by Churchill, the show used to be recorded at The Carnival Gardens in Nairobi and toured the country twice a month. In Churchill's absence, the hosting duties fell to MC Jesse or Sleepy David. Sometimes, it was co-hosted by Churchill and either of the two, and/or with voiceovers. The show was produced by Laugh Industry Ltd., and broadcast every Sunday between 8.00 and 9.00 pm East African Time on Kenya's *Nation Television* (*NTV*), after which, it was published on YouTube by either *NTV* or "Churchill Show". In March 2022, the show rebranded into *The Churchill Show Experience* and moved onto *TV47*. Consequently, it became domiciled at Mount Kenya University in Thika—the home of the television station. Not much has changed though, despite this change in venue and platform. The show still begins with the theme song: "Bringing Kenyans back together … Jamii zote pamoja" – (all communities [back] together), which is then followed by the signature that marks the official commencement of the show: "Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for *Churchill Show*!" After this, the host welcomes the first comedian after working the room depending on the theme of the night. Between three and five comedians perform for between five and ten minutes, with commercial breaks punctuating their acts. Totos Corner, a children's segment, comes somewhere mid-way. A prominent and/or other personality is interviewed before a performing artiste brings the show to a close.

In consequence, the *Churchill Show* cannot be confused with any other show on Kenya's mediascape (say, KBC's Comedy Arena, or Thursday Night Live with Dr. Ofweneke on KTN) as its mention calls to mind this archetypal structure. Additionally, such mention conjures images prejudicial to the show and its cast—the same as happens with socio-cultural categories and their respective members. Additionally, since the show is said to be over-reliant on stereotypes, I

[18] Although this thesis studies television comedy shows, it accesses the videos of the shows as published on YouTube by the producers and/or television channels. YouTube is the global video sharing and social media platform that allows individuals and/or organisations to upload their own (television) content (on the platform). In footnotes, I provide hyperlinks to these videos for convenient access.

contend that the *Churchill Show* is a stereotype of aggregated stereotypes but in a transmogrified fashion. In other words, the show has since inception evolved into a formulaic structural pattern, taking on the form of a schema that qualifies it as a *stereotype*. The Bar edition serves to illustrate this.[19] The episode begins with the show's theme song that is followed by the commencement signature. Amid this, Churchill salutes the audience and utters his trademark stage mantra, "Turn to the person […] next to you/whichever side… Give them a 'hi-five'; tell them, you must have been a beautiful baby, even if they don't look like it right now." He works the room by jesting about current affairs, and Luhyas' and coastal people's stereotypes of 'love for ugali' and 'laziness', respectively, before swinging the show into the night's theme: The Bar—the legal profession.

Churchill further works the room by castigating Kenyans for being uncomplimentary of each other's successes. He uses the Luo people's stereotype of grandiosely celebrating their own heroes and heroines to urge Kenyans to appreciate one another. After this, Churchill introduces the first comedian of the night, Njoro, who performs for about five minutes. There is a break, after which Churchill interviews Wesley Korir, the 2012 Boston Marathon winner and member for Cherengany constituency in the 12th parliament. Mammito, a regular comedienne on the show, follows the intervening break, performing for close to seven minutes. A break follows. Professor Hamo, a sensational regular comedian on the variety, conducts Totos Corner. The break following ushers in Jemutai, another regular comedienne, whose performance lasts five minutes. Sudi, a performing Kenyan artiste, concludes the show.

Drawing on Jörg Schweinitz's theorization of the stereotype as outlined in the preceding chapter, I wrestle the concept from social psychology, where it connotes to prejudiced attitudes towards socio-cultural groups. I move it into linguistics, where it assumes the form of idioms: expressions whose meanings can hardly be deduced from their constituent words, such as 'bark up the wrong tree' or 'bark at the moon'. With time, these expressions become localized to given categories of people or speech communities. The continued use of such expressions makes them become rather commonplace to the extent of losing their ingenuity. Subsequently, new members find them and use them just as the old, by way of induction, with no regard to how the expressions came about vis-à-vis the grammatical rules of the language in which they are couched (for instance,

[19] https://youtu.be/prSn73A-isw

'roger that' and 'vee one' in radio communications in the military and aviation, respectively). In literary theory, such expressions pass for one's way of using language; that is, a style distinctive to them. For example, a style peculiar to David Baldacci or Ayi Kwei Armah.[20] Again, with continued use or overuse, the expressions become trite and hackneyed, just as 'dead as a dodo', and therefore must be avoided as the plague, yet still retain some potency despite their commonplaceness.

Thus, the *Churchill Show*—the text—is herein conceived of as a standardized pattern of narration that is so recurrent that it has become a structural schema; which additionally, encompasses its own distinct style that is very familiar to its audience and the public. Over time, it has stabilized into an idiom; and with little change, save for the content, become a cliché—a stereotype. The use of lexeme connections particular to itself and its cast concretizes it further as a stereotype.[21] In other words, the actors' identificatory expressions—like the structure of the *Churchill Show*—were once pleasant phrases that have with continued use lost their creativity and become impoverished. They are now presented as constitutive of the show and the comedians' routines. Besides Churchill, Njoro, Akuku Danger, Jr.; YY; Professor Hamo; Captain Otoyo; MCA Tricky and Jemutai employ lexeme connections. Akuku Danger, Jr., for example, uses "You guys are looking good from down there. Am I looking good from up here? If you know you are a lady and have the cutest smile in the building, can you just tell me 'ah, ah'! To the men, 'aha'! For those who don't know me, my name is Akuku Danger. I come from one of the most polygamous families ever seen. My grandfather had 264 wives. My grandmother is number 42. I am grandchild number 1697, out of a possible 6222. Kwa hivyo kwetu sisi tuko wengi hata kuliko chama ya Wetangula (Therefore, at my place we are more than Wetangula's party)."[22] YY, on his part, uses "What's up! Watu wa Kisii, What's apuu; Watu wa Nyanza, Wha'sh up", (Translation: people of Kisii, what's up; people of Nyanza, what up. The difference is occasioned by pitch and the substitution

[20] David Baldacci, the American novelist, is known for works such The Camel Club series and King and Maxwell series. Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah's notable works include *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *The Healers*. Each has a disntict style.

[21] According to Florian Coulmas, lexeme connections are phrases "conventionally used [by a community of speakers] to say certain things and [which] have been learned by the speakers independently of the grammatical rules of the language" (quoted in Schweinitz 15).

[22]Acentus Ogwela Akuku 'Danger' was one of Kenya's foremost polygamists. He hailed from Ndhiwa, Homa Bay County in Luo Nyanza region of western Kenya. At the time of his death in October 2010, Akuku, nicknamed 'Danger' by peers for his seductive skills, was reported to have left behind 130 widows with over 300 children. Akuku Danger, the comedian, is rumoured to be one of his numerous grandchildren.

of what's with wha'sh, differentiating the Kisii from the Luo people) while Jemutai employs "Jambo! Jambo tena! Wacha nikunywe energizer … jibambe." (Translation: hi! Hi again! Let me drink energizer… enjoy yourself). The sensational Professor Hamo is known for "Njooni kwangu mliolemewa na mizigo, nanyi mtarudi nazo kwa sababu sisi pia tuna zetu. Kwa nini tubebe zenu? (Translation: come to me yee who are heavy laden, and you will go back with your burdens because we too have our own. Why should we bear yours?)… In my book… Mungu ni mwema (God is good)" as MCA Tricky is for "Geukia mwenzako, mwambie tricky sana!" (Translation: Turn to your mate, tell them, 'it's very tricky') and Captain Otoyo: "I have just landed."

Thus, just as the *Churchill Show* and Churchill, these comedians have transmogrified the concept of the stereotype by moving it into the fields of linguistics and literary theory, where it assumes recurrent patterns of narration, standardized images and idioms. These particular expressions mark the comedians out as different from each other and the rest of the comedians in the country, the region and the rest of world. The maxims also call to mind images specific to the comedians as comedic agents/performers. In other words, once the maxims are heard, the audience know who is on stage without necessarily having to look. The lexeme connections have become the comedians' routine formulae of identity, audience interpellation and narrative structuring. For instance, Professor uses "Njooni kwangu mliolemewa na mizigo, nanyi mtarudi nazo kwa sababu sisi pia tuna zetu. Kwa nini tubebe zenu? On entry on stage, "in my book…" to signal his entry into his adopted profession of a university scholar, and "Mungu ni mwema" to exit the stage. Taking the forms of clichés, and carrying 'canned' and crystalized effects, then, these formulas sound banal and unoriginal, just like stereotypes do. Yet, they are the ingenious formulations of the comedians that were once savoury. In Churchill's lingo, they must have been beautiful babies—not anymore.

Yet, the ingenuity of comedians and comediennes on the *Churchill Show* does not stop with such coinage of identitarian maxims. As agents in the business of social construction of identity, the performers employ language in a manner that is particular to them. Such employment is transgressive of the generally accepted normative language use particularly in the public domain and on national television. In short, their language is transglossic with an embedded political transgression that the following sub-section explores.

2.2 "Life ni drama, Kiswahili na English ni grammar; Sheng ndoo lugha ya mama": The Transglossic Language of the *Churchill Show*[23]

Incontrovertibly, language is a system of communication that incorporates the verbal as well as the non-verbal. For effectiveness, it must be mutually intelligible between interlocutors. Accordingly, the *Churchill Show* has a 'language' of its own: the stereotype. That is to mean, beyond and above the conventional conception of language as stated, the *Churchill Show* employs language in such a way as to meet its unique repertoire of identities and dis-identification with other shows and other comedians on the country's comedy scene for its 'infotainment' purposes. In other words, much as the comedians draw on the country's linguistic ecology of polyglotism, they employ an idiomatic language that is distinctive to the show, with a subset that is closely aligned to its comedians in their business of entertaining and informing their audiences.

The host of the *Churchill Show* admirably code switches and mixes English and Kiswahili, spicing them up with doses of Sheng and an occasional blend of Kenya's various vernaculars. The comedians do much the same, although their routines are predominantly in Kiswahili. The Kiswahili is, however, far from that that the country's language policy makers would approve of. The same can be said of the English occasionally employed because comedians imitate, mimic and parody language and speech patterns of not only personalities, but also of various socio-cultural groups and regions from within and without the country's borders with obvious exaggeration for comedic effect. Inasmuch as these language and speech behaviours can be said to manifest Kenyans' bilingual and multilingual practices, they amount to much more. In other words, the language practices on the show point to the comedians' and the country's young people's transglossic dispositions, which, as I show, speak to the transmogrification of stereotypes.

According to OfeLia Garcia, transglossia refers to "the fluid, yet stable, language practices of bilingual and multilingual societies that question traditional descriptions built on national ideologies" (108). The notion, the sociolinguist argues, "has the potential to release ways of speaking of subaltern groups that have been previously fixed within static language identities and hierarchical language arrangements that are constrained by the modern/colonial world system" (108). The *Churchill Show*, I contend, offers a platform on which young Kenyan adults actualize

[23] These words, spoken by Tear Drops—a spoken word artiste— in *Churchill Show* Kericho edition, https://youtu.be/zyOrulb4yGw. 00:17:44-18:00, translated as 'Life is drama, English and Kiswahili grammars and Sheng, the mother tongue' speak to the transglossia in the *Churchill Show.*

such release. While acting in an environment free from stringent rules of language use, the comedians not only imitate speech patterns from various regions and cultures as observed, but also execute them as they are practised by themselves and their kind in their everyday life. The young Kenyans further infuse the language with creativity in order to entertain the nation as well as transcend the gatekeepers' linguistic prescriptions. In short, the comedians transgress the norms as set out in the Kenyan official language policy.

Although Agnes W. Kibui notes that Kenya has not had an elaborate language policy outside the education system, the country's current policy has its roots in the colonial situation and therefore privileges English over Kiswahili and the vernaculars. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya has attempted to rectify this situation to a certain extent by recognizing Kenya as a multilingual nation and in effect making provisions that "address […] the language concerns […] through the acceptance of the three language approach recommended by the UNDP and UNESCO in an effort to forge cohesion and unity" (96). Nonetheless, "English has a hegemonic edge over Kiswahili" (89), and remains the language of instruction beginning at (upper) primary to tertiary levels. Mixing the languages at school level is often punishable and frowned upon in official communication. It could therefore be argued that comedians on the *Churchill Show* transgress this regimentation by translocating their language practices from the streets onto the comedic stage, thereby circumventing official 'censorship' to broadcast the resultant *language* to the nation and the world via the mediation of television and other media technologies, especially YouTube. This translocation is hence ideological. As Chege Githiora writes, ideologies as occasioned by such language practices "index languages or their varieties to socio-economic status and group identities. As such, "[t]hese ideologies can also be used to create and sustain difference and group identity, or redefine existing situations" (1).

Following Garcia, Shaila Sultana; Sender Dovchin; and Alastair Pennycook prefer 'transglossia' to Mikhail Bakhtin's 'heteroglossia' as the concept makes possible the combination of "heteroglossic and transanalytic approaches and […] draws attention to the transgressive ways in which voices operate" (104). The sociolinguists justify their preference with reference to recent translingual research in applied linguistics "that indicates that language is ecologically embedded and interconnected with diverse semiotic resources" (94), which "occur across and within languages" (93). Otherwise expressed, with the advent of globalization and the complexities that

surround language acquisition in bilingual and multilingual societies, it is impractical to look at languages as autonomous systems because cultural contact and language interactions result in "multiple modes of semiotic diffusion", which cannot be adequately analysed under the auspices of code-switching and code-mixing, and hybridity (93).

It is in the same vein that Shaila Sultana and Sender Dovchin argue for the redefinition of heteroglossia as transglossia so as to appropriately account for fluidity and transgression in language. The two scholars suggest that the variation in voices warrants both translocalization and transculturation; which, respectively, entail "drawing on linguistic and cultural resources from multiple locations [and] on multiple cultural resources" (70). With this concept, they contend, speakers "unravel the transgression in voices not so much in linguistic features, but in translocalization, transculturation, and transtextualization (deploying a range of meaning-making practices across languages)" (70). Transglossia, according to them, "underscores the importance of mixing and blending and the way they engender new meanings" (67), which, I contend, is precisely the case in the *Churchill Show*.

To put it simply, the eclectic ways in which language is employed in the *Churchill Show* blur the boundaries between autonomous languages, fusing them into what OfeLia Garcia and Li Wei call translanguaging—"an approach to the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages" (2). In such a scenario, it is impossible to tell where one language ends and another begins. Accordingly, I contend that the *Churchill Show* comedians, who identify themselves with Kenyan society's subaltern—the youth and the disenfranchised—in a bid to be heard, upset hierarchical language practices and the embedded power structures, even as they entertain and inform Kenyans.

To this end, the comedians adopt various voices from multiple socio-cultural and geographic locations while drawing from a wide range of linguistic and cultural resources available to them. What emerges is a linguistic synthesis beyond code-mixing, code-switching and hybridity, in which languages and language practices are mixed and meshed by way of quoted and recycled speech, mimicry and parody and transformed prosody, and employed to—among other ends—implicitly critique the state and fashion the Kenyanness herein imagined. In the process, the

comedians reinforce their various and transgressive voices—which embody multiple speech patterns—with body language, richly clothing their transgressions in a 'just for laughs' frame. Such language practices can only be effectively deciphered through transtexualization: a framework in which texts and signs function in their "historical, local, discursive and interpretive elements of context" (Pennycook 13). This 'double voicing' and 'multiplicity' of speeches—multivocality—is what Bakhtinian heteroglossia is all about as it concerns voices and speech variation rather than languages (Bakhtin 263), which the *Churchill Show* comedians couple with transgressive practices to not only re/capture their various sources but also invariably nuance the phenomena they wish to share with their audiences.

Pennycook identifies five aspects of transtexualization/transtexuality that constitute "a form of social semiotics that may deal with anything from a single sign to an extended text." They include:

> the pretextual history of the sign (which gives a context for its iconic status); the contextual relations in which its use occurs (the physical location, the participants, the indexical pointing to the world); the subtextual meanings according to the discourses within which it operates (the discourses and ideologies that mobilize and are mobilized by the sign); the intertextual echoes by which signs and texts refer to each other (meaning occurs not only in contextual relation but also across texts), and the posttextual interpretations of the actors (the meanings participants read into the sign). (53)

Combined with heteroglossia, transtextualization gives rise to what Sultana, Dovchin and Pennycook call the transglossic framework (2015), which I hereby employ to demonstrate the transglossic language of the *Churchill Show.* I will do so with particular reference to the 'All White edition'.[24] Churchill opens the show by blending a myriad of voices in English and Kiswahili to show the differences in speech patterns of Kenya's social classes, visitors from Seattle, USA and reggae fans. He also does 'Indian-accented English' to *authenticate* his 'derision' of the community's supposed inclination to opening retail shops at every road corner, which he gives as the reason India is not participating in the 2018 soccer world cup.[25] While welcoming the Indians in the audience, whom he terms as "our friends" to the show in a mixture of English and Kiswahili,

[24] www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGMNqNAvMtI&t=272s. 00:01:30-0340

[25] Throughout this thesis, I use 'Indians', firstly, because that is how Kenyans of African descent refer to their compatriots of South Asian extraction. Churchill's usage testifies to this. Secondly, I use the term in the sense in which Sana Aiyar, a historian of modern South Asia, does: a descriptive group category that "includes those immigrants in Kenya whose civilizational homeland gained nationhood as Pakistan at the same time" (20).

Churchill assures them that they will get the jokes as some will be made in 'Indian'. He also dispassionately talks of the ongoing developments in the capital following former US President Barack Obama's expected visit: road constructions, grass growing in two days in some places, other places getting suddenly lit while others remain without water and electricity.

Pre-textually, the reference to Indians as 'friends' points to their immigrant history in Kenya, which sub-textually constructs them as not fully belonging to the nation. Thus, the idea that some jokes will be made in 'Indian' for them is—more than anything else—a show of accommodation as they supposedly cannot understand Kiswahili, the predominant language on the show, which is Kenya's lingua franca and foremost national language. Churchill's 'Indian-accented English', which seems transgressive, not only plays a mediating role between the Kenyan and Indian categories, but is also meant to underpin the othering of the Indians. At the very worst, it suggests that they are incapable of speaking the uninflected standard British English that is the officially sanctioned variety in Kenya. In contextual terms, we 'see' the Indians in the audience without seeing them because much as Churchill addresses them, the camera does not rest on them, which implies that they are rendered invisible in the hall. Unsurprisingly, the show moves on predominantly in Kiswahili, with jokes neither in 'Indian' nor English translation. Indexically, 'Kenyans' interact with Indians as though they were visitors—friends—to the country. The joke is intertextual to the extent that it refers to the FIFA Football world cup that was ongoing in France, at which India was absent. This perception relates to numerous similar socio-cultural texts in circulation in the country that I can attest to from my social location referred to in chapter one.

I now turn to YY's routine as excerpted below to demonstrate more how transglossia works on the *Churchill Show*.[26]

Excerpt 1

Font guide to languages: Kiswahili (bold), English (regular font), Sheng (italics), mixture/meshed (italics bold)

[26] https://youtu.be/FGMNqNAvMtI 00:05:21-08:47. Born Oliver Otieno in 1977 in Homa Bay County, YY is one of Kenya's leading comedy lights who seldom does the so-called tribal jokes. He started his career at Kenyatta University with the university's theatre group during his studentship. He joined the *Churchill Show* in 2013. He is one of the comedians that shone on the silver lining of the Covid-19 pandemic on YouTube with his channel, YY Comedian.

What's up? **Watu wa Kisii**, what's ***apuu***? **Watu wa Nyanza**, ***Wha'sh*** up? When an information is relayed by two different people with the same words, it can lose meaning. For example, a kid in Kileleshwa **akuje ambie mamake**, "Excuse me, mom. **Ah, nikule ile mkate iko kwa kabati? Mamake amwambie, "kula. Baba, kula**." **Mamako akikwambia** the same thing, you have to think twice. "Mom, **nikule ile chapati iko kwa kabati**?" "Heh, kula!"

Now ladies, if you are visiting your boyfriend for the first time, you can always know whether he has a good house or not, even before you go inside. **Vile anakuchukua nje**. **Kijana mwenye ako na** *keja kali*: fully furnished, home theatre, feathery carpet… **Heh, nakwambia**… flat screen TV, fridge. **Heh, anakujanga na** confidence. **Kwanza anakuwanga na haraka anataka mfike kwa nyumba haraka**. **Anatembeanga haraka mpaka anakuwacha nyuma alafu**: "**Wee**, **ni mimi natembea haraka**, **ama ni wee uko na miguu fupi**?" **Anaishi** first floor. **Mkifika** first floor **anajifanya ati alikua anaenda** second floor, **ndiyo umfuate**, **alafu anakwambia**, "I've pranked you. **Ni hapa** first floor." **Lakini mwanaume anashuku** *keja* **yake**, **akipatananga na** *dem*, **anakuwanga ashaajitetea** straight: "**Hiyo nyumba ndoo niliingia juzi**. **Hata sijamaliza kuhama**." **Na unajua, mwanaume mwenye ako na** *keja kali* has a lot to offer. Like, "Are you going to have black coffee or white coffee, chocolate or a soft drink?" Very nice. **Lakini yule mwingine anakuwanga na** juice brand **moja, lakini anaeza** confuse *dem* **mpaka** *dem* **adhani ako na nyingi**: "***Beb***, **utakunywa** juice **ya** orange **ama ya machungwa**?

Ndoo maana wazungu wanatushinda kwa relatioships. Kenyan men, please respect your women. **Unajua wazungu *wamerespect*** decisions **za** *madem* **wao**. For example, **kijamaa mzungu anakunywa maji alafu** *dem* **yake amwambie**, "Babe, stop it. It's not clean; it's not treated. Please stop it!" **Alafu utaskia**, "Pthu, pthu, pthu! Thank you so much for saving my life. I love you." **Ati*uinterrupt* mwanaume Mkenya kitu anafanya**… Very stubborn: "***Beb***, **wacha kukunya hiyo maji. Hiyo maji iko na** worms." "**Hizo worms *ndoo*** proteins."

Unajua wazungu hawananga haraka. Western countries **hawana** *mioto*. You find that people have been dating for many years, they have been married for more than five years, but **bado wanaitana** boyfriend, girlfriend: Jay-Z's girlfriend Beyoncé, Beyoncé's boyfriend Jay-Z; Shakira's boyfriend Piqué, Piqué's girlfriend Shakira. YY's girlfriend, **ako kwa njia**. **Kuja Kenya**! **Wanaume wakenya hawananga adabu**. **Mtu anapatana tu na** *dem* **saa hizi**. **Hata hamjui jina**. **Hapa kwa** show. **Hamjui jina**. **Alafu anafika hapo nje**, *beshte* **yake anamuuliza**, "Bro, **huyo ni nani**." "**Huyu ni** wife!"

Translation

Kisii, Nyanza people; 'What's up?'. A child in Kileleshwa is encouraged to eat the bread in the cupboard while the 'other' (audience) is not. Ladies, you can tell whether your boyfriend, whom you are visiting for the first time, has a good house or not even before getting inside by the way he conducts himself on the way there. The one with a good house is full of confidence and wants you to get there fast. He walks briskly leaving you to trail him, then turns and asks you whether he is walking rather too fast or you have short legs. When you get to the first floor, on which he lives, he pretends to be headed to the second

> so that you hurry to catch up with him; only to tell you that he has pranked you. You are home. The man suspicious of his house upon meeting a lady, plunges straight into excuses: I am not done moving in! The man with a good house has a variety of drinks to offer while the other so much confuses the lady that she imagines he too has a variety: "Babe, will you have orange juice or 'juice of orange'?" That is why whites beat us at relationships. Kenyan men, please respect your women as the whites respect the decisions of their ladies. For example, a white man drinking water that the girlfriend suspects to be contaminated, will stop upon being interrupted and thank the girlfriend for saving his life with 'I love you'. A Kenyan man, so stubborn, will not stop drinking when the girlfriend tells him the water contains worms. Instead, he will quip, "Those worms are proteins." Whites/Westerners do not rush relationships. Partners that have been dating for long or are even married still refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. Come to Kenya! Kenyan men have no discipline. A man meets a girl here, on the show. He doesn't even know her name; yet, upon meeting a friend outside the hall, introduces her as his wife!

In this excerpt, YY double-voices his 'What's up' mantra to differentiate the Kisii and Luo people's articulations, which are anything but English. The Kisii pronunciation is high-pitched and shrill, making the 'up' come out so mangled. It is 'Kisiinized' so to speak. In the Luo one, /s/ is turned into /ʃ/. Typically, the /ʃ/ sound is nonexistent in Dholuo, but because of hypersensitivity, the majority of Luos tend to articulate it in the place of /s/. The result is hilarious. Importantly though, the articulations are contextual in function in that YY indexically points to the real world of the Kisii and Luo articulations of 'what's up'. In other words, his imitations point outward to the real world of the two ethnic categories and their manners of speaking. The same is true of his references to the social class gap between the Kileleshwa family and 'his audience's'. The former is a real upscale suburb in Nairobi, where YY means the child is most definitely pampered, and can eat anytime and anything s/he wants as long as it is available. The parent has no problem encouraging it. For the other child—the audience, food seems scarce; a luxury not to be indulged in at any time they wish to. Men with good houses and those without are also a social reality. The latter have to protect rather fragile egos while the former are eager to show off. Still contextual, is YY's play on the heterogeneous voices and accents of the white partners and their Kenyan counterparts. When the audience gives him an expectant look—concerning where he lies—YY inserts himself into the narrative in an ingenious way: his girlfriend is on the way; meaning, he belongs neither to the rush and disrespectful Kenyan type nor to the West. This is subtextual as he is ideologically ambivalent in the West/Kenyan discourse.

The contrastive relationships in the West and in Kenya are picturesquely inter-textual. Jay-Z and Beyoncé, Piqué and Shakira are not in a rush to call each other husband/wife unlike in Kenya, where a man calls a total stranger he just met at the *Churchill Show* 'wife'. According to YY, that is the height of indiscipline. This amounts to a value judgement, and is post-textual. Moreover, YY seems to root for respect for the institution of marriage: it is rude to label a woman whom one has just met and barely knows as a wife. Ostensibly, YY holds the conduct of relationships in the West in higher regard, which is sub-textual in that it disambiguates the ambivalence pointed out in the preceding paragraph. In addition to advocating for heteronormativity, YY paints male partners in the West as more respectful of their women and urges Kenyan men, rather patronizingly, to emulate them. His attitude is denigrating of the supposed Kenyan situation in exaltation of the West. His Kiswahili is far from standard; hence subtextual since it is transgressive of normative grammar. He seems to exhilarate in this transgression as a kind of release from linguistic circumscription.

Sleepy David,[27] who comes after YY, also employs a number of languages and language varieties, codes, styles and registers well reinforced with body language to re/produce a wide range of meanings of socio-cultural and regional locations. As with the preceding excerpt, his heteroglossic practices embody transtexual references that make the language transglossic. Like YY, David transposes a Westerner, Lil Wayne, into his anecdote of a botched live performance of a local artiste, De' Mathew. De' Mathew tries a Lil Wayne theatric of throwing himself into the audience in his locality of Githurai with devastating ramifications. David dramatizes this with contrasting accents for Lil Wayne's fans in the West and the emcee at the De' Mathew performance. It is, for instance, an American female who says to Lil Wayne, "You dropped your phone." For De' Mathew, it is the emcee who announces the unfortunate turn of events (without the aid of the microphone as it has also been stolen) in Gikuyu-inflected English/Kiswahili. Githurai is in central Kenya. David, in his voice, devoid of the Gikuyu inflection—yet he belongs to the group—warns that there are things that cannot happen in Githurai. Like Churchill before him who pointed at Indians, whom the camera did not focus on, David points into the audience at a white person. We do not see him/her. David raises his phonetics, beginning right with the

[27] https://youtu.be/FGMNqNAvMtI. 00:12:57-14:53. Sleepy David grew up as David Ng'ang'a in Matunda, Uasin Gishu county in a family of five siblings. He ventured into comedy in 2013 while pursuing Film and Theatre Arts at Kenyatta University, joined the *Heart Strings Ensemble* in 2014 before becoming part of *Churchill Raw* that ultimately propelled him to the *Churchill Show.*

Kiswahili word for a white person—'mzungu'—by pulling on the 'u' after 'z' such that it comes out as /u:/. Even the final /u/ sounds like the 'o' in 'go'. He tells the invisible 'mzungu' that home delivery is only practical in 'their' home: the West, but not in Githurai. While executing the call to order for burgers, Sleepy does it in American English for the white and Gikuyu-inflected English/Kiswahili for his uncle.

With heteroglossic dexterity, David represents six people in his act: a Western female Lil Wayne fan, the Gikuyu-accented emcee, a white person at the show, a Western white *Steers* client, his uncle and himself. At the contextual level, there is a white person in the audience, whom David addresses and uses to realize his juxtaposition of the home delivery service in Kenya and in the West, with appropriate accents to indexically point to the two worlds, just as he does for the debacle at the De' Mathew event and Lil Wayne's. Kayole is a downmarket suburb in Nairobi's Eastlands region, which Sleepy David seems to suggest is in dire need of planning to catch up with the West. These contextual realizations bring into focus inter-textual relations of Kenya and the West. The Lil Wayne text speaks to the De' Mathew one just as those of the inter-regional *Steers*' clients intersect. Their differences are glaring.

The intersections are ideologically loaded, and therefore, sub-textual. They are, in a way, akin to those of YY's: sustaining a socio-cultural narrative of elevating the West over the East. The varied 'Englishes' are just as sub-textual. Kenya is not short of 'approximate' and standard British English speakers as David demonstrates by way of his own speech and voice. The language is, however, 'toyed with' both circumstantially and intentionally to show existent and actively functional power relations: social stratification, regional differentiations and the West versus the East. Thus, the language is not just 'Westernized' and 'Kenyanized', but the latter is so variegated as to reflect its heterogeneous 'Kenyanness'. Still, there are things better left to the West although there are lessons to be drawn from there. The De' Mathew incident seems to suggest that Githurai can do better than spoil a would-have-been enriching rendezvous. David's uncle, so-constructed, is not any better. He actualizes the stereotype began at the De' Mathew event that the Gikuyu care little about anything but money, and the means to it is anything but ethical. Yet, it would be naïve to conclude that this is the narrative David is pushing. He is critical: such demeanour is better abandoned. These amount to post-textual references. Besides, David while humoring his audience, constructs a pre-textual reference to the supposed cancellation of the *Steers* home delivery service

in the country. Had his uncle not decided to make business out of the franchise, the service would still be running. Of course, the service is up and running, but only in better planned parts of Nairobi and other urban centers. The fact of the matter is that the service is for a select few. Again, this boils down to the power relations at play previously referred to, making the sentiments certainly sub-textual. In simple terms, these are the ideological discourses that proliferate the media: the West is better planned than the Third World that has a lot of catching up to do.

The following excerpt serves to further concretize transglossic language practices on the *Churchill Show*.

Excerpt 2[28]

> Lupita is the only Kenyan lady with natural hair. **Kuna wenye wako na** natural hair **hapa**? For real? *Aki anani*? **Hizi**? **Na uko na** *dredi*! Lupita *alikam*, **akaenda mbaka Kisumu**. **Na akiwa Kisumu *mahawker* walienda naye huko**. ***Mahawker* tu hawa wetu wa Muthurwa**. I tell you, hawkers that sell nothing. **Wako hapo**: Oscars 150. You see, Oscars 150. Oscars 150. ***Namaanicha*** avocado **na *kashubari***. You know, Lupita is nurtured. What do I mean? Tell your neighbor "Nurtured." Nurtured, **ni mtoto mwenye anaeza** argue **na** *budake*. For example, Lupita **aliambia** *budake*, "I wanna be an actor." And the father was saying like, "Ok, I don't know. You wanna be an actor. It's ok; it's fine. We gonna argue about that. *Watoi* **wa** Westlands **huwa *wana-argue* na** *buda* **zao**… ***wana-argue***! Kayole **huwezi** argue. ***Unaweza-argue* na** *budako*? **Ati**, "Eh *mmzae*, *maze joh,* **mimi naona tusikule** cabbage, **tukule sukuma** coz **ya** heartburn." Immediately, *maze* **anakwambia**, "***Unargue* na mimi**? ***Yaaah***! **Unajaribu** *kunioneshaa***, unaeza** handle landlord, **sindyo**? **Ni uhame**. *Shika keja* **yako**. **Kila mtu na maisha yake**." *Budaangu* ***hunge-argue* na yeye**! You know. My dad... *Budangu* ***haunge-argue* na yeye**. For example, **babangu alikuwa *anasupport*** Manchester. **Sisi wote tulikuwa** Manchester *damu*. You know **mbaka** (ok **Mii ni wa** Arsenal. I'm an arsenal fan) Manchester **ikifunga, tulikua**… We are forced to celebrate: goaaal! because he's watching. **Kuna siku** Arsenal **ishawahi funga na kitu ikanidanganya niruke nayo**: goal! **Nilimpata ameningoja hivi**. "**Irianza rini? Hiyo pepo ya** Arsenal." ***Akatania* mama yangu**, "**Sinasemanga mimi ni** Manshester *damu*. **Hii damu ni ya nani**?"

Translation

Are there any Kenyan ladies, including the dread-locked, with real hair like Lupita? Lupita came and went up to Kisumu. Muthurwa hawkers followed her there to sell nothing but Oscars for Ksh. 150. I mean, avocado and onion and tomato salad! Lupita is nurtured. A nurtured child is the type that can argue with the father. Lupita told the father, "I wanna be an actor." And the father… Westlands children argue with their fathers… They argue! In Kayole, you cannot argue. Can you argue with your father? "Eh, old man, I think we should eat cabbage and not kales because of

[28] https://youtu.be/FGMNqNAvMtI. 00:14:54-17:21.

heartburn." Immediately, the old man tells you, "Are you arguing with me? Yeah, you're trying to show me that you can handle the landlord, right? You have to move out. Go rent your place. Everyone on their own." You couldn't argue with my father. For example, my father used to support Manchester United FC. Consequently, we were all Manchester United diehard fans. I'm an Arsenal FC fan, but whenever Manchester United scored, we were forced to celebrate: goal! because he's watching. There's a day Arsenal scored and something lied to me to jump up in celebration: goal! On coming down, I found him waiting for me like this (gesticulates how). "How did it start? That Arsenal evil spirit." He turned to my mother, "I have always insisted I'm Manchester by blood. Whose blood is this?"

The pre-textual reference is explicitly made to Lupita, the daughter of the second Kisumu county governor, Anyang Nyong'o. She won an Oscar for her supporting role in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* and was voted *People*'s most beautiful woman in 2014 (Jordan and Antoinette, 2014). Sleepy David's exaltation of her as the only Kenyan lady with natural hair is laced with both sub- and post-textual references, which he invokes to castigate Kenyan women for wearing synthetic hair. He demonstrates this contextually by pointing to unnatural hair in the audience and moves quickly to take Lupita to her home county of Kisumu. Sleepy does not linger on the subject of un/natural hair lest he disconcerts his female audience. Nonetheless, his point is succinctly made. Post-textually, the question David seems to be posing is: Why would Kenyan women struggle to wear unnatural hair while one of their own is doing exceedingly well in the US with her natural hair? Contextually, the Oscars that Muthurwa (Nairobi) hawkers sell for Ksh. 150 in Kisumu on accompanying Lupita are nothing but avocado, and onion/tomato salad (kachumbari)—meretricious products, which is still a post-textual castigation of cosmetic beauty as this text ideologically intersects with the unnatural hair one. In other words, the kachumbari on sale, like the synthetic hair, is attractive but with little substance. The accent the hawkers are given is inflected with Gikuyu, thus, speaking to the stereotype earlier referenced.

Again, Sleepy does not dwell much on this. He moves to the social class gulf existent in the country, which is quintessentially sub-textual. Lupita belongs to the higher stratum of society by parentage. She resides in upmarket Westlands. Thus, she is 'nurtured', Sleepy intimates. She can argue with the father in so far as her choices in life. The manner of her speech and career choice tell it all. The language is American English, the career a not-so-conventional one to the ordinary citizen. The language is shared by the father, who is accommodating of her rather odd career choice. Her peers in Kayole, a low-class settlement, have no such luxury. They cannot even escape

the pains of a heartburn by making a choice between cabbage and kale as their fathers have the exclusive say. The fathers are made to seem authoritarian. Yet, are they? Life in Kayole is thus regimented. People do not have the luxury of choice even on life's basics such as food and shelter. Just for raising the suggestion of the choice of what to eat, the youth of a Kayole parent is taken to be questioning the authority of the father, and is harshly advised to move out as s/he is assumed as qualified to afford to pay their own rent. The Kayole family's choices are not only limited insofar as food and shelter. Their language does not stretch beyond Sheng. Whereas Sheng is largely conceived of as a language of the youth; in Kayole, the father and youth speak it indiscriminately to each other. Like the Indian and the white communities mentioned in this episode, the mothers in these two instances are conveniently erased. They have no say in the family decisions, which paints Kenyan society not just as predominantly black African, but also patriarchal.

Still, Sleepy does not linger so long on the Kayole family much as he locates himself in this class of regimented peoples: the same class that YY already identified with the audience. David, an Arsenal fan, and the whole household had no choice but to go by the father's choice/s. The family has to be homogeneously tailored to the father's preferences. No choice dramatizes this absurdity better than the father's team choice: Manchester United, an English team. Inasmuch as the choice speaks to the global flow of goods, and the fanatical following that European football—especially the English Premier League—has gained in the country over the years, it could be argued that Sleepy's choice and his father's have subtextual underpinnings in that they could be seen as Eurocentric, elevating the said English teams and the Premier League over their Kenyan equivalents. So considered, the choices speak to Kenyans' colonial hangover with the English. They always want to identify with things 'English' rather than their own. Manchester United and Arsenal have even become fetishes for which young Kenyans have reportedly taken their own and others' lives while engaged in banter and punditry over them. Sleepy would have used as examples Gor Mahia and AFC Leopards, Kenya's foremost football giants with a rivalry stretching back to their founding in the 1960s. The shadow of the ex-colonial master seems to perpetually trail us decades after attainment of self-rule, and in a way speak to Bhabha's theorization of colonial discourse referenced in chapter one. Sleepy's choices tie in with YY's valorization of the West by the African over him/herself. Perhaps English football, or specifically the English Premier League is a new form of neocolonialism. Be it as it may, football fans are hardly to blame since Kenyan football is not as developed as that in England. Mismanagement and corruption and government

interference far undermine its development. Intriguingly, Sleepy's support of Arsenal is significant enough to make the father question his paternity. The mother is under attack for the son's pastime choices. It is worth noting that David quickly slips from urban Sheng into Gikuyu-inflected Kiswahili for his family set-up such that even the 'ch' in Manchester comes out just as inflected: 'sh'.

The foregoing is revelatory of the language of the *Churchill Show* on the whole. Much as it is heteroglossic to the extent of capturing the variety of speech patterns explored in the respective voices, it is transgressive in that it does not travel the straight and narrow of the country's language policy that advocates for use of languages as autonomous systems in their standard forms. English is the country's foremost official language, Kiswahili the national, though it doubles as official, but ranks lower to English. Sheng is the language of the youth. Because of the bilingual nature of Kenya's public space, English and Kiswahili are often mixed and switched between in conversations. The youthful demographic spices the mixture with Sheng, and it is not infrequent to hear a few words in vernacular, like 'nduthi' which is Gikuyu for motorbike, demographic demarcations notwithstanding. Such language practices speak to translanguaging as already observed, which Githiora asserts, "pays more respect to the inherent fluidity and creativity of multilingual speech codes." This implies that '"language' is a process rather than an accomplished fact or closed system" (1), and so is 'Kenyanness'.

As has been demonstrated, the *Churchill Show* comedians identify with the ordinary citizen. Therefore, they represent Kenya's subaltern, a group that has not much voice and seeks to insert itself into the public space that is regimented by the dominant players: the state, corporations, the middle-aged, elderly and the middle class. Much as they quote, recycle and reproduce speech patterns and voices of the dominant, the jesters bring their own comportments to the stage; and as such, their language practices are far from Standard English, Kiswahili. They use the languages in a manner particular to their needs and mix them anyway, anyhow; thereby, executing a stereotype-unsettling politics. Excerpt 3 further on particularly demonstrates this.

In other words, the comedians draw extensively on the country's translingusistic and transcultural ecology, but mimic and parody the English, Kiswahili and Sheng and vernacular codes in a transgressive fashion, which speaks to a different 'Kenyanness' than that propagated by the state and its language gatekeepers. At the very base, these language practices are meant to elicit

laughter because the *Churchill Show* is; again, at the very base, a platform for stand-up performances. However, when critically examined, the heteroglossic and transtextual language practices manifest a desire to break free from the regimentation of the post-colonial state and its agencies so that a linguistic and cultural freedom is attained and liberally enjoyed. Thus, the language of the *Churchill Show* is transglossic insofar as it combines heteroglossia and transtexuality, and this practice is not just for entertainment but intentionally for the communicative purposes of crafting a national sensibility that is bottom-up as opposed to the top-down engineered by the state.

Nonetheless, the infortaining transglossia is neither revolutionary nor antagonistic to the national ethos of oneness as championed by the political class. That is, the show does not endeavour to endanger Kenya's territorial integrity. Hence, the privileging of Kiswahili is testimony that much as Kenya is a polyglot, Kiswahili in whatever form is the lingua franca of the diverse communities that inhabit the geopolity. Its malleability notwithstanding, the language is fairly comprehensible across all manner of social classes and literacy levels. Kiswahili is truly a language of wider communication. It transcends ethnic (and national) boundaries, making Kenyans identify with one another as one people. Further, the use of Sheng is attestation that the comedy resists narrow ethnic ascriptions, as well as the constricting hegemonies of English and Kiswahili (Nyairo and Ogude 396). It marks out its users as a generation that is in search of home and belonging, keen to borrow and blur ethnic identities and boundaries, while fusing them with cosmopolitan discourses. And if indeed Sheng "best carries the weight of quotidian existence [and] longings for better tomorrows" (Nyairo and Ogude 396), then English and Kiswahili are just grammars that must be transcended and Sheng foregrounded.

Certainly, Kiswahili galvanizes the Kenyan nation and anchors it in East Africa, while Sheng and the vernaculars localize it to its Kenyan specificity, with attendant internal inclusions and exclusions. As Githiora records, "Sheng can be deployed to exclude those who would themselves exclude the Sheng speakers, such as members of the upper socioeconomic status who speak English and little or basic communicative Swahili" (1–2). Alternatively expressed, the 'Kenyanness' projected by the show has to have Kiswahili as its defining language. The use of English attests to post-colonial Kenya and imagines an international public. Yet, to borrow from Ogola, the English is used in a manner reflective of the prevailing speech patterns of hybridization and indigenization (157). Often, the grammar of the language is "reworked and subverted" to undermine its hegemony and to "assert difference" (158). The English is 'Kenyanized'. Nonetheless, employed to varying degrees and purposes, English, Sheng and the vernaculars are invariably problematic. English excludes the 'formally' uneducated; Sheng the old and

unurbanized; while the vernaculars appeal only to their respective speakers. Nonetheless, the use of them all is not only testimony of the country's polyglotism, but also attestation that none—just like nations/ethnicities as the next section shows—ought to be left out if the nation is to achieve oneness-in-difference. Besides, their processual use and/or foregrounding of Sheng is

> a symbolic rebellion against the normative sociolinguistic structures that link high achievement to the mastery of Standard English, or Standard Swahili (*Kiswahili Sanifu*). Therefore some Sheng talk has elements of what are known as 'anti-languages', which exist primarily to create group identity and to assert group difference from dominant group.
>
> (Githiora 2)

Yet, Githiora's research suggests that 'everyone' speaks Sheng, which is to mean the language has ripped the boundaries of its socio-economic restrictions. It is rivaling English and Kiswahili in prominence. This trend poses questions for the Kenyanness herein envisioned, which seem outside the ambit of this thesis.

2.3 'Somalis are dangerous; Kikuyus undesirous of earthly possessions': The Political Aesthetics of the *Churchill Show*

Postmodernity is saturated with media technologies that are disruptive to age-old epistemes, perceptions and the commonsensical. Contemporary humour such as is prevalent on the *Churchill Show* seems compelled to attend to such a conjuncture in order to remain relevant. Thus, the humour can be termed as postmodern, and amenable to the sensibilities of postmodernism, which according to Nicholas Holm is an "often ill-defined and frequently overburdened" critical term that can nonetheless "do particularly pertinent theoretical work in terms of the political aesthetics of contemporary humour as a site of openness, imprecision and reflexivity in relation to formal conventions" (195). Drawing on the commentaries of Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, Holm contends that postmodern humour is marked by postmodernism as a dominant cultural aesthetic that inflects it with "a constant awareness and suspicion of boundaries and structure, and which is articulated in different contexts as a situation of 'hyperreality' wherein the distinction between reality and appearance collapses […] or as an incredulity towards metanarratives,' produced by the flight of 'metaphysical, religious and political certainties'" (195).

Such humour not only makes it difficult to differentiate between the real and the referents thereto, but also holds the two in a tension that seems hard to resolve. As such, the humour makes us encounter the world as we might a text, and a text as we might the world, leading to confusion, anxiety and even reactionary politics (196). Consequently, contemporary modes of humour aestheticize the world by drawing upon the diminishing gap between the virtual and the actual as a setup for incongruity, and in the process further complicate and obscure any clear sense of that distinction.

> Once the world can be understood in the same terms as a text, it becomes possible to deviate and play with the rules and systems of the everyday and their possibly incongruous relations to fictional worlds in a number of ways. These include but are not limited to: the interpretation of the actual world as if it were a fictional world, with the sense of emotional distance such an interpretation might allow; the interpretation of the fictional world as if it were the actual world, with the acute sense of boundaries such an interpretation might allow; and the accompanying sense that anything is now "up for grabs"—that is, anything now is fair game for the defamiliarising and unstable aesthetic logics of humour. (Holm 196)

In other words, the humour nearly collapses the distance between the material and the artistic worlds, making them appear coterminous, and co-extensive in a tense relationship that seems hard for the audience to navigate. The reason is, much as the humour derives from real experiences and/or perceptions, it is constructed in a manner that blurs the boundary between the 'real' and the construction obtaining therefrom, such that we are simultaneously in the real and the aesthetic worlds. Hence, the humour comes through as a mishmash of the two, destabilizing the real and the aesthetic axes. The burden of resolution thus heavily weighs on the audience, who have to defer to "extra-textual codes of social judgement" in which they are implicated (Holm 115).

Although members of the audience laugh, the laughter is inflected with a searing doubt as to whether they are laughing at the real (and themselves) or the comical as jumbled in the text since the incongruous and the target are not clearly differentiated. Holm describes this kind of humour as "uncomfortable" as it is 'without anaesthetic' and is "marked by an unlikely confluence of reality, discomfort and comedy" (89). Often, such is the humour that proliferates the *Churchill Show.* The humour is saturated with doubt because competing frames of reference overlap with each other, with none emerging as the dominant or standard against which a deviation is to be made. The referents of the text and the episteme that structures them are thus destabilized.

Consequently, the taken-for-granted perceptions embedded in stereotypes, for instance, are upset and so is the logic that engendered them because it is subjected to scrutiny amidst the attendant mirth. What materializes in a sustained manner beyond the laughter is undoubtedly uncertainty. As Holm argues, "it is this unsettling of categories that emerges as the political meaning of the aesthetic logic of contemporary humour, and which therefore renders it a political aesthetic form, regardless of what occurs at the level of content" (194).

In this section, subsequently, I not only invoke an aesthetics of escapism to tease out the serious issues addressed on the show in the guise of 'just for laughs', but also call on the postpositivist realist theory to make sense of the pastiche accruing from the blurring of boundaries between the real and the aesthetic. The theory neither essentializes nor dismisses identities, but postulates that they can be both real and constructed, and that understanding them is paramount as they have real life consequences. For this disquisition, such understanding is essential in order that Kenyan stereotype-constructed identities are not reified but transformed and, if needs be, dismantled. The point is, as comedians enact their own or representative experiences and prevalent perceptions, they un/consciously assume or choose (for targets) between real and constructed identities for "complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated" for progressive politics (Moya, "Reclaiming Identity" 9).

This realization is so significant because—as Holm contends—postmodern humour "operating in and across registers of discomfort, absurdity, provocation [has an] immediate connection to the more pressing political and cultural questions" in our everyday existence (179). The politics might not be radically transformative as the humour is not a priori determined as political, but it nonetheless unsettles common perceptions as seemingly settled in and by stereotypes and/or commonsensical understandings of the world by subjecting them to relentless interrogation. It must be noted that 'politics' in this discussion goes beyond the narrow contestation and maintenance of power by the state and the political class. It embraces other socio-cultural domains in which power relations are contested and renegotiated as conceived by Holm following on Jeremy Gilbert (2008). Further, it is necessarily welded to aesthetics—which goes beyond perceptions of beauty, pleasure and even art—to coalesce around the influence that cultural texts have insofar as our engagement with and understanding of the "wider socio-political context" (12). In simple terms, texts such as the humorous do the political work of unsettling our and prevailing sensual, commonsensical and

epistemic perceptions, re/defining and re/distributing them anew as has already been established in the preceding sections with the concepts of the stereotype and transglossia.

Thus, the political nature of the humour can only be unveiled upon examination of specific and contextual humour texts because the humour springs from the material world, and therefore, addresses real issues and real people and their real and constructed categories—race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, region and class—into which they fall, by ascription or otherwise. These categories have ramifications on the distribution of goods and resources and the relationships individuals forge with their fellow human beings because these are embedded in societal structures of power responsible for social liberation and/or oppression (Moya, "Reclaiming Identity" 8). Such a conjuncture is pertinent particularly in Kenya, where ethnicity is not only "a factor in political competition and in the allocation of national resources" (Shilaho 2), but also a determinant in public affairs, where something as basic as the spelling of one's name could easily decide their fate as ethnic identity seems to trump all other identities. With the postulation that "subjectivity or particularity is not antithetical to objective knowledge but constitutive of it," postrealists affirm that "identities are not something to transcend or subvert but something we need to engage with and attend to" (Moya, "Reclaiming Identity" 17). This understanding of subjectivity vis-à-vis objective knowledge will become increasingly clear in the following analysis. For limitations of space, I only give the English translation of the excerpts.

Excerpt 3 (S7Ep30)[29]

> Somalis don't dance in public places. If we try, people start warning each other of imminent danger. I wonder what wrong we committed against you guys. People just have a negative mentality towards Somalis; that Somalis are dangerous. But it is true! 'We are those bad ones'. That's why I keep telling you, if you happen to sit next to a Somali on a matatu, just start a conversation with them. Ask them about the weather; if they think it will rain 'tomorrow'. Emphasize 'tomorrow'. Their response should determine your next move. If they tell you that it can rain… just ensure you have an umbrella. Know you are safe. However, if they tell you, "It can rain now; perhaps at night; it can rain anytime, but who tells you, you'll see tomorrow," alight immediately! It's not safe. By the way, we're good people, but this mentality has limited us on the things we can say in public. For instance, as a comedian, you crack the best of jokes at which the audience cracks up. You exit, excited, saying, 'I killed it!'; 'I have killed.' Recently, I did a show. I gave my all. I went out and made a call: "I've finished KICC! I've killed. People are being collected from under the seats! I'm telling you. There is even one fellow who was crying, pleading with me not to continue. But who am I? I killed that one, so mercilessly." Imagine, I didn't

[29] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1gpWRXkmZM. 00:11:00-14:06.

complete that call. A G4S guard apprehended me and took me to Central police station to finish my story from there.

For an appropriate analysis of this excerpt, some context is necessary. The Somali condition in Kenya is not just stereotypical. It is historical too. Tabea Scharrer writes that since Kenya's independence, Somalis have been characterized as 'ambiguous citizens' because of their lack of integration, and their marginalization within Kenyan society (495). Their ambiguity is aggravated by their confinement to the least developed North Eastern counties of the republic that border Somalia and in Nairobi's Eastleigh area, where they are treated with suspicion as refugees taking away commercial opportunities from 'Kenyans'. The rise of their members into high echelons of government and business, coupled with rising population—which has enhanced their visibility—has worsened matters (502). Over the years they have been subjected to security checks because they are associated with insecurity and terrorism (497). Worse, they are treated as racially and culturally ill-fitting within the republic, and "are seen as not really wanting to belong (on the grounds of the shifta war and terrorism), as being an economic and political threat, and as not bound enough to Kenya due to their cross-border ties" (Scharrer 506).

In this excerpt, therefore, Nasra Yusuf problematizes the material and the aesthetic.[30] Somalis are seldom seen dancing in public. She couples this reality with the stereotype: Somalis are dangerous, which she 'validates' in her first punchline: "Ni ukweli; sisi ni wale wabaya!" (It is true; we are those bad ones)! However, the 'validation' does not use the word, 'dangerous', but 'bad'; infusing it with ambivalence, uncertainty. Moreover, it is not 'sisi ni wabaya' (we are bad), but 'we are those bad ones'. This line is simultaneously confirmatory and distal of the Somali dangerousness; that is, 'those' as opposed to 'these/we'. In Kenya, when someone or a group of people is described as 'that bad' especially by the youthful demographic, it connotes to being 'extremely good'. That is, they are extremely good at whatever they do. That explains why she goes ahead to concretize her point in the conversational rain anecdote and brings it to a conclusion in her second punchline: "But who tells you, you'll see tomorrow?"

[30] Born Nasra Yussuf Ahmed in 1995, Nasra grew up under strict Somali Muslim parents in Mukuru kwa Njenga, an informal settlement in Nairobi. She first appeared on KBC's Comedy Arena in 2017. She took part in the *Ultimate Comic* reality show sponsored by Maisha Magic in partnership with Laugh Industry between 2017 and 2018, where she exited at the semi-finals. She ended up on the *Churchill show* as the first female Somali comic in 2018.

Nasra means, and immediately declares, that they (Somalis) are good people, with the insinuation that they are good at whatever they do—including wreaking havoc because Kenyans have labeled and othered them so. Even in her comic frame, she alienates herself and her people from the audience: *they* (audience) are Kenyans; she (and her people) *are* Somalis, the glaring presence of Somalis in the audience notwithstanding. The words kill/finish, are simultaneously denotative of murderous terror and connotative of superb performance. This humour is shocking as it amounts to avowing a debilitating stereotype by the very stereotyped. To the Somalis in the audience, on whom the camera focuses, it is particularly disconcerting. Some seem to hesitantly join in the laughter because everyone around them is laughing. This is certainly 'uncomfortable humour': "a mode of humour that holds particular powers to discomfort even sympathetic viewers," and bears "an orientation towards the real" (Holm 89).

At 'I killed that one, so mercilessly', all the inhibitions of the discomfited Somalis seem ostensibly gone. They appear to have found a vent in the laughter to expel the "pent-up nervous energy" that had been rapidly accumulating since Nasra began her routine. The text is, therefore, only humorous because it has caused, to borrow Holm's words, the Somalis "feelings of anxiety, horror [and/or] expectation which [have led] to a build-up of psychic stress that [could] not find a proper outlet" (Holm 113). Nonetheless, it is still discomfiting because it implicates the audience through persistent reference to 'reality' as publicly conceived (of Muslim Somalis as killers). As Holm argues, in his theorization, this

> constantly-referenced reality of the text […] directly prevents closure; intensifying the stakes of social deviance by assuring the viewers that these are not merely hypothetical or fictional breaches, but actually occurring deviations, while also undercutting any easy sense of detachment that one might feel watching slapstick or a cartoon. (114)

In other words, the comical frame does not exonerate Somalis from their seemingly given inclination to terror. The relationship between the material and the aesthetic is complicated further as the incongruity is neither clear nor resolved. Even the butt is not clearly marked out: is it the Somalis, the Somali in the rain anecdote or the Kenyan who is supposed to alight immediately, or the Somali-stigmatizing Kenyans; is it Nasra 'killing it', the G4S guard or Kenyans in general? The tension is prolonged and deferred as it were to "the extra-textual world as the final arbiters of interpretation" (Holm 114). That is, the interpretation is left to the text-implicated audience. Tellingly, no one is sure as to how the audience will go about it because implicated as they are,

they are not homogenous. What is clear, however, is that Nasra has infused the stereotype with doubt and thereby not only intensified the politics surrounding the treatment of the Somalis by their fellow compatriots, but also the conduct of her people concerning terrorism. This is where the political salience of identity lies. It is incumbent upon 'Kenyans' to stop the stigmatization by engaging the Somalis or carry on with it and leave the Somalis to excel at whatever they do. Somalis are also asked to interrogate themselves vis-à-vis terror/ism. In the meantime, Nasra is an example that Somalis excel at whatever they do, leaving the audience in stiches as she does with an elephant in the room.

Nasra's aesthetic ingenuity allows her to construct her people through her theory-mediated experience and knowledge. That is, "an alternative, socially produced construction of herself and the world" (Mohanty 35). Such a construction does not in any way make her people and the prejudice they endure a fiction. A credible knowledge of the perceptions of Kenyans about Somalis comes through as Moya would say elsewhere, in "a more dialectical causal theory of reference in which linguistic structures both shape perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world" ("Reclaiming Identity" 12). The Somalia-based Islamist Al Shabaab terror group with links to the Al Qaeda and ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) networks has occasioned untold suffering within Kenyan borders and the larger East African region. Among perpetrators of these heinous acts that take the forms of suicide bombings and random shootings in targeted buildings at innocent civilians, with Christians bearing the greater brunt, are people of Somali ethnicity.

Subsequently, 'Kenyans' see Somalis, the majority of whom identify as Muslim, as 'innately' prone to terror. It is this stereotype that Nasra confronts bluntly, with the hilarity that goes with stand-up comedy. Nasra's experience—or its construction—can be read, in the words of Linda Martín Alcoff, as being acutely aware of how "group identities obscure internal heterogeneity", thereby alerting Kenyans to the fact that no experience is "transparent, [or] theory-neutral" ("Who's Afraid of Identity Politics" 315), much as the final interpretation and/or resolution of the humour heavily falls on the audience. As such, inasmuch as Nasra's aesthetic construction does not absolve her people from the stereotyping, she seems to be raising awareness that not all Somalis are dangerous. Moreover, there is need for the people of Kenya to try to engage them and thereby, likely, be in a position to pick out the dangerous ones so as to take appropriate action, however

and whatever that might entail. In other words, the comedienne affirms the salience of the category, *Somali.* It is real with real consequences and has to be acknowledged, even respected. Thus, Nasra makes comedy do political work as pertains the Somali community's situation in Kenya. In so doing, she problematizes ethnic, religious and national identities from her subject position of a Kenyan, Muslim Somali comedienne.

In consequence, Nasra reveals, in the words of Alcoff and Mohanty, that identities are not people's "mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about [themselves] in [their] world" (6), with which they learn to view the real world. Nasra has been a victim of discriminatory searches on account of her 'Somaliness'.[31] Thus, her belonging to the Somali ethnicity affords her epistemic privilege, validating her knowledge, which she uses to speak to the narrative of 'Kenyans' othering Somalis. Subsequently, she negotiates on their behalf for inclusivity in the Kenyan nation. As Scharrer argues, following on Janet McIntosh, many Kenyan Somalis are willing to claim Kenyanness by appealing to "'a cosmopolitan ideal, a civic nationalism in which all groups invested in the country are equally welcome"' (507)—without any form of a/historical prejudice, I dare add.

Excerpt 4 (Thika Road edition)[32]

> Now, something amazing happened. Baba met Kenya One. Give me that photo. In this country, we're not tribal. It is only politicians who remind us of our tribes when they are vote-hunting. There's no one in Kenya who wakes up in the morning and wishes that they were not their tribe. "Eh, Jehovah, God; Your Majesty, I thank you that I'm a Luo because God, you've really saved my time because I don't have time to bargain." Nobody! Nobody here in Kiambu wakes up and thanks God that they're not a Luhya. They never say, "Thank you God, for creating me a Gikuyu. You opened my eyes, made me a survivor. Jehovah, I'm the kind of person that can sell air to someone. I don't take that lightly. And you deprived me of the desire for earthly things, and gave me the desire for the earth itself: land. Thank you God, you directed me to Kamakis in 1998, where I bought a piece of land for 30 thousand. Jehovah, the likes of Njuguna mocked me for the imprudence. In 2002, you gave us Kibaki, who struck it with the bypass. Its value shot to 2.8 million. Jehovah, there's a plot I've bought in Isiolo. Open Jubilee's eyes to open LAPSSET.[33]

[31] https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-47071136/.

[32] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmd4pqhRXDk. 00:38:59-41:46

[33] Lamu Port and Lamu-Southern Sudan-Ethiopia Transport corridor meant to link Kenya, Southern Sudan and Ethiopia by ports, pipeline, road and railway.

The episode from which this excerpt is taken was recorded on 9 March 2018, the day then President Uhuru Kenyatta met the peoples' president, Raila Odinga. The photograph that Sleepy asks for, shows the two erstwhile *sworn* political rivals shaking hands. Exploiting the event, Sleepy casts doubt on ethnicity, the social construct that has occasioned devastating divisions in the country every presidential electioneering period, where the winner takes it all, usually after whipping up 'tribal emotions' across the country through assembling 'tribal' chiefs, who auction their people to him. Sleepy contends that 'tribal' affiliation/belonging is never a problem until politicians turn it into a monster to garner votes. Simply put, no Kenyan is ashamed of their ethnicity. David demonstrates this by putting on a Luo persona, the ethnicity of Odinga, whom he refers to as 'Baba'—his famed nickname—which connotes to the father of the Luo nation, the whole nation and multi-party democracy. Sleepy observes that no Kenyan thanks God for making them belong to any given ethnic extraction. He employs the Kikuyu category, to which he and Kenyatta, whom he calls 'Kenya One', belong. His diction sets the two apart as did the politics that led to this defining moment. I return to this in the next section.

David then concentrates on stereotypes of his people—the Kikuyu: they are cunning in their obsessive pursuit of money, and they desire no earthly possessions like cars except the earth itself: that is, land, which he gets so dramatic about. However, for all these attributes, no one thanks God that he created them a Kikuyu and not a Luhya, for instance. The implication is that members of any ethnic category did not choose to be born in that category that is so stereotyped. David's ostensible appreciation of Kikuyu cunningness cloaks the stereotype in ambivalence. It is hard to know where he stands vis-à-vis it. Yet, it is not he in the stereotype, but an aesthetic persona. Nonetheless, the persona is simultaneously him and not him. The persona's 1998 'imprudence' hugely paid off to the shame of his fellow Kikuyu detractors, and although he does not thank God for his 'Kikuyuness', he is grateful for Kibaki, who turned his rocky parcel into gold, literally. Perhaps had Kibaki not been Kikuyu, David would not have struck gold. That is why he hopes God makes Jubilee, Kibaki's anointed successor, just as 'wise'.

David, without invalidating the said Kikuyu stereotype, authenticates the pervasive narrative that it is God who anoints leaders, a perception that is often seen as entrenching electoral malpractice in Kenya over the years as the masses tend to be religious. Nonetheless, Sleepy does not insert himself into the anecdote. Rather than identify with the Kikuyu nation, he holds it at an aesthetic distance, infusing the stereotype with doubt, thereby, allotting the burden of interpretation

to the audience just as Nasra did in her routine. David, however, affirms the stereotype that Kikuyus are obsessed with the pursuit of wealth, not in a beguiling manner though, and not as a group, but as individuals, which then shreds the blanket of group homogeneity highlighting intra-group heterogeneity. Every ethnicity has people who exploit opportunities. Thus, David simultaneously unsettles and resettles the stereotype.

Such is the form that many anecdotes on the *Churchill Show* take, oscillating between the real and the aesthetic, with little warning of the transition. The aesthetic narrations account for Kenya's 'real' and 'constructed' identities in a legitimate way because the comedians occupy a multiplicity of social locations: ethnic, national/regional, gender, class, religious and sexuality. These locations give them epistemic privilege that is in itself mediated by their belonging or interactions with the categories that are both real and constructed because they have real ramifications to the construct of Kenyanness. Moreover, the platform of comedy mediates the comedians' accounts, infusing them with a tone of 'just for laughs' (hence, passes for 'theory'), yet enabling them to articulate their values and political visions for the Kenyan nation in a supposedly apolitical manner.

2.4 "Jamii zote pamoja": Constructing a State-Nation 'Kenyanness'

As mentioned earlier, the *Churchill Show* started out in 2008, the year Kenya experienced the worst bloodbath in its most recent history following the disputed 2007 presidential election that exposed the country's ethnic fissures. The international community had to intervene to mediate the conflict, resulting in a grand coalition government.[34] Within a decade, the country went into two further hotly contested elections in 2013 and 2017, with the latter resulting in two presidents: one for the republic; another, the peoples'.[35] It is, therefore, unsurprising that the signature tune of the *Churchill Show* is "bringing Kenyans back together, 'jamii zote pamoja."

[34] The election pitted the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, against his bitterest rival, Raila Odinga. The two would be made to shake hands under international arbitration on 28 February 2008 on the steps of the president's office, Harambee House, with the former retaining the presidency and the latter assuming the premiership. This event restored normalcy in a fractured state of a people divided and communities severed on the basis of political differences and competition steeped in ethnicity.

[35] While Uhuru Kenyatta was sworn in in an elaborate state function on 28 November 2017 at Kasarani Stadium, Nairobi, following the repeat election (boycotted by Odinga) in which he ran against himself garnering 98% of the vote, Raila Odinga was sworn in 'by the people' on 30 January 2018 at Uhuru Park in Nairobi.

After months of acrimonious tension in the country following the 2017 elections, Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga presented to Kenyans a joint memorandum titled 'Building Bridges to a new Kenyan Nation' on 9 March 2018 on the foot of Harambee House—the event referenced in Excerpt 4. The two 'presidents' acknowledged the failure of the country's founding fathers—among them, their biological fathers coincidentally—to forge a united nation galvanized by a culture of inclusivity, appreciative of socio-cultural diversity inherent in ethnicity, religion and the country's geography. They admitted that Kenya lacks national ethos, and that the feelings of patriotism and nationhood among its peoples have failed to transcend the commonality of citizenship (Government of Kenya, 1–4).

I avail myself of this admission by these leaders to argue that the *Churchill Show* is a 'state-nation' construction of 'Kenyanness', which evinces a 'we-feeling' among the people of Kenya. The state-nation ideal, according to Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz and Yogendra Yadav involves

> crafting a sense of belonging (or ''we-feeling'') with respect to the statewide political community, while simultaneously creating institutional safeguards for respecting and protecting politically salient sociocultural diversities. The ''we-feeling'' may take the form of defining a tradition, history, and shared culture in an inclusive manner, with attachment to common symbols of the state, or of inculcating some form of ''constitutional patriotism''. (5)

In other words, the 'Kenyanness' that the *Churchill Show* imagines is a proud feeling of belonging and attachment to, first and foremost, the Kenyan state, then, to a given ethnicity, particular region and specific religion (or lack of) in an all-inclusive manner. Additionally, one should not be discriminated against on account of any of these particularities (or lack of). Similarly, no one should be prejudiced against others of different ethnicities, regions and religions (or lack of) within the confines of the state, but identify with them as a Kenyan collectivity. For example, one can identify themselves as a Kenyan Luhya from western and a Christian or atheist, and should not discriminate against a Kenyan, say, from the coast who is a Muslim or an agnostic, nor against a Kenyan who identifies with no ethnicity, region or religion. While such identifications are vested in the citizenry, the state should provide institutional mechanisms for their respect and protection to the extent that these individuals in their groups of similar identifications can pursue socio-cultural and/or politico-economic agenda which are to their benefit but not injurious to either other groups of different persuasions or the state.

Expectedly, then, the *Churchill Show* is packaged as 'more than just comedy', which implies it transcends comedy's pleasant diversions, allowing Kenyans of diverse identifications to bond as a collectivity. In the process, the show offers insights into Kenya's socio-economic and political trajectory so that an informed, conscious nationhood can ensue; a nationhood that does not resort to ethnic nativity rooted in blood ties and given regions in a manner (potentially) perilous to the collectivity. Consequently, while the *Churchill Show* celebrates this diversity as embodied in the everyday and the historical, it simultaneously plays on stereotypes in mock-signification in order to draw the attention of the political elite to Kenya's socio-cultural and politico-economic predicament.[36] In a way, the numerous political luminaries variously hosted on the show are not just given the opportunity to articulate their visions for the country, but also implicitly asked to abandon stereotyped perceptions that divide and strangle the nation's soul.

Explicitly, the show remains comedic; yet, it is through its comedic aesthetic that the psyche of the nation is politically penetrated and impacted. Johnny Boy, for instance, in the 'Moi Day edition' while drawing on Jabidii's song, 'Shoot Satan', opines that if the devil's seat fell vacant, Kenyan politicians would vie to fill it.[37] He seems to suggest that the Kenyan politician typifies the devil. Following this, I argue that the *Churchill Show* is a popular construction of the state-nation model that attempts to re-unite Kenyans and all Kenya's diverse (ethnic, regional and non/religious) communities as encapsulated in its signature tune through privileging the banal and mundane of the everyday over the authoritative and official policies of the state.

As Kimani Gecau argues, Kenya is guilty of an official error of "creating a homogeneous culture from above" (36), and has therefore failed to embrace socio-cultural diversity. The country has tended "toward exclusions" instead of transforming "nation building [into] the art of extending economic, political, cultural or symbolic boundaries and making diversity appear as a positive good not a basis for 'otherness'" (36). In fact, the preoccupation of the state to impose this kind of fixed identity on the people has resulted in *tribalism* and "strengthened the 'blood and soil' essentialist understanding of identities [shutting out] other ways of constructing oneness." The

[36] Anthony Ilona defines mock signification as "the deliberate, performed process of making derisive meaning." Drawing on the mock drama staged by Hamlet, Ilona argues that the process "is evaluative in its effect [and] as Hamlet himself is noted to say, '"[t]the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King'" (48).
https://youtu.be/KNNSkJnr31s. 00:03:25-06:14. Little is known about Johnny Boy. He made just about 3 appearances on the *Churchill Show.* The full edition in which the excerpt was taken seems no longer available on YouTube.

result has been "serious ethnic conflicts" (29). Gecau observes that such officially sanctioned history "leave[s] out collective history and memory from which a people find their stories and voices to tell who they are" (30). Such histories and memories can only be channeled through the popular arts, in which, Gecau contends:

> the expressions of popular cultures continue insisting on the presence of the people as historical subjects who have certain understandings about their relationships with history, with each other and with the state. These popular forms of expression are also chronicles that mediate popular experience and constitute a very important element in the circulation of ideas and formation of opinion outside the official and mainstream media and channels. The latter are, in fact, often interrogated by the popular discourses. In any case, people do have intellectual and artistic needs and in real life they continue, through their songs, stories and other forms of communication to tell themselves stories of who and what they think they are. At the artistic and aesthetic level, these constitute an imaginative popular vocabulary which provides a subjective aspect in the construction of identities. (30)

The *Churchill Show* offers such an avenue, where a galaxy of comedians recuperates repressed histories and memories to construct an inclusionist 'Kenyanness' cognizant of the people's shared past, a common present and a projected future beneficial to all irrespective of skewed and assumed biological/ethnic essentialisms. Churchill's stage mantra: "Turn to the person […] next to you/whichever side… Give them a 'hi five.' Tell them, 'you must have been a beautiful baby', even if they don't look like it right now," is a trope that marks out his implicit political program, seemingly aimed at attempting to heal a people divided by statist machinations that have roots in the colonial experience and propagated through 'tribal' politics often based on baseless stereotypes that portray some communities as hardworking and fit to lead; others as lazy and unfit to (Atieno-Odhiambo 243, Ligaga 82).

To this end, therefore, I argue that Churchill assumes the role of an organic intellectual/interpreter of the Kenyan nation, who advocates the crafting of a nation out of the Kenyan state from a bottom-up ideal of the state-nation, subliminally countering the divisive top-down nation-state model. According to Antonio Gramsci, an organic intellectual belongs to and is a product of their own social class, whose ideas and aspirations they direct. They "are less distinguished by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class" (3). Churchill represents a class of people commonly referred to as 'mwananchi wa kawaida' (the ordinary citizenry), the "mass base" of non-intellectuals for whom he implicitly mediates with the political class.

In addition to functioning as Gramsci posits, Churchill is an interpreter for this very class, whose particular truth and claims he represents and validates only within its boundaries (See Maleševic 199). Together with his team, Churchill does not legislate, but interprets and translates the goings on in the Kenyan geo-polity (and beyond) for his community in the glare of the whole nation. Although Siniša Maleševic argues that organic interpreters easily become organicistic, for Churchill this seems rather improbable because the Kenyan comedic community does not comprise a single, but a multi-ethnic community much in the mould of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' (6). Hence, he is unlikely to become an ethno-nationalist as did those of the former Yugoslavia, though such a turn around might not be entirely ruled out because of the contradictoriness of popular culture.[38] Moreover, Churchill holds neither a political office nor is he a state ideologue as were Yugoslav organic intellectuals. He does not champion ethnic communitarian and identitarian ideals of the nation-state (see Malešević 202).

The Jamhuri Festival edition suffices to support this argument.[39] The episode coincided with the 2018 Independence Day celebrations. Back-dropped against the national flag coloring various 'cultural' images: Maasai morans, women in traditional regalia, Kenya's world-beating athletes and first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the episode foregrounds Kenyan music, at the forefront of which is 'Unbwogable'.[40] Churchill claims the show is meant to celebrate "Ukenya" (Kenyanness): The Kenyan spirit. Condemning the widespread culture of pilfering public resources by the political class and their accomplices in the civil service, Churchill urges Kenyans to resist the depravity by being more vigilant. This far, the *Churchill Show* exhibits the four characteristics definitive of the state-nation model, which include "a high degree of positive identification with the state; and multiple but complementary [socio-] political identities. The third characteristic is "trust in the state's institutions", which although not as high as it should be, is not entirely lacking. If the looting culture were exorcised as Churchill advocates, such trust would be re/gained. The fourth: "positive support for democracy among all the extremely diverse groups of

[38] Malešević, observes that the post-Yugoslav intelligentsia turned into organicistic interpreters, marking the full metamorphosis of organic intellectuals into organicistic intellectuals, who championed an exclusionist ethno-nationalism, where the "ethnic nation represents a united, integral and indivisible cultural and political entity" (200).
[39] www.youtu.be/R0SoYKivaoE
[40] A song that galvanized Kenyans in the 2002 elections that saw the dethroning of KANU—which had ruled the country since independence—from power (see Nyairo and Ogude 2003). 'Unbwogable' is derived from Dholuo 'bwogo', meaning to beat or defeat, with 'unbwogable' denoting unbeatable. The implication is that the Kenyan spirit or Ukenya/Kenyanness is invincible.

citizens in the country" (Stepan, Juan and Yogendra, xii) pervades the show and the citizenry and is further demonstrated by the range of personalities of diverse political persuasions that have been hosted on the *Churchill Show*.

Significantly, Churchill showcases a group of young girls from Nairobi's Mathare slums, under the mentorship and care of one Moesha Kibibi.[41] Moved, KICC's then chief executive officer offered to donate Ksh. 100,000 to support Kibibi's ingenuity. Then, followed other pledges from Kenya's media and entertainment personalities, and representatives of corporates, among other 'ordinary' Kenyans. Notably, a lady in the audience took the microphone and proposed an impromptu fundraiser (harambee) to aid Kibibi's initiative. A substantial amount was raised in cash and pledges. Safaricom's CEO, the late Bob Collymore, would be inspired by the Kibibi story and offer to sponsor 18 girls on full scholarships in secondary school for five years to mark Safaricom's 18th anniversary.[42]

Following such gestures that do not involve the state, I contend that Churchill largely functions as an organic interpreter/intellectual. Created by his own people/class—the ordinary citizenry and the comedic community of the defunct *Redykyulass*, which pioneered critique of the political class in the 90s (Musila "The Redykyulass Generation's" 295) and which he was a part of—Churchill has created a national platform, with the propping of the capital owners that has put him in "a position to shape and disseminate [his] class ideology [of self-reliance] through [a] philosophy [that is] more in touch with the everyday life of [the people] through existing commonsense", to use Maleševic's words (188).[43]

Thus functioning, Churchill has transcended "the partiality of his occupation [of a trained educationist and entertainer] to engage with some universal issues and problems that concern the

[41] Moesha Kibibi is an ordinary Kenyan, a survivor of child abuse, now a professional dancer and founder of 'Divas Power Initiative', an outfit that aims to empower the girl child through education and talent development. In her mentorship and care are up 2500 girls from all over the country, for whom the state has done nothing by way of support. With the help of the *Churchill Show*'s producer, Ben Kitili, and Churchill himself, Kibibi held a dance competition in Nairobi in 2018 at which 48 girls' dance crews from all over the republic participated.

[42] Safaricom is Kenya's leading mobile telephone provider, established in 2000. The *Churchill Show* has partnered with Safaricom Foundation in a program called 'Safaricom, changing lives', through which numerous lives have been impacted. Its involvement perhaps speaks to popular cultures contradictions (see Fisk 2005, Barber 2007) since Safaricom was accused by the opposition outfit, NASA, of having colluded in the 2017 alleged electoral theft to hand the ruling Jubilee Party another term in office.

[43] Redykyulass was Kenya's premier make-believe comedy show of the late 1990s that according to Musila "contributed towards the unmasking of state power, fracturing of the culture of fear and ultimately popularized a culture of critique of the workings of state power" ("The Redykyulass Generation's" 295).

[Kenyan nation]. In particular, [he] is preoccupied with the questions of 'truth, judgement and taste of the time", to appropriate Maleševic's lingo (188). He is, therefore, the organic intellectual/interpreter for the *bildung* of 'Kenyanness', who allows a plurality of critical voices of the Kenya/n being and becoming. He ostensibly distances himself from tendencies of an organicistic interpreter for 'Kenyanism' or a variety of ethno-centric 'Kenyanness'. Maleševic defines organicistic interpreters as state intellectuals and/or cultural elites who initiate, spearhead and galvanize ethno-national mobilization (185).

In the Nairobi Homecoming edition, which preceded the 2017 general elections, Churchill imagines the country as 'one tribe; Tribe Kenya'.[44] He discloses his decision not to allow the presidential contenders Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, both of whom wanted to be hosted—or so he claims, to appear on the show. Ostensibly, Churchill did not want to be embroiled in the contest. He avails the opportunity to urge Kenyans to let peace prevail during and after the elections. Unfortunately, Churchill seems to capitulate to the 'peace narrative' that Kenyan media always resort to whenever there is (imminent) electoral violence. After the repeat polls of 2017, there emerged a disturbing phrase: 'accept and move on', which seems to entrench the culture of peace without electoral justice in the country. The phrase encourages people to accept electoral results irrespective of the conduct of the polls. Fortunately, Chipukeezy immediately tears into Churchill's capitulation by labeling Kenyans as intelligent people who know what to do at the polls and after.[45] Chipukeezy makes it explicit that politicians are friends and brothers who engage in politics as a game and use it to incite hate among Kenyans for their (politicians') own benefit. Chipukeezy urges the citizenry not to fall prey to the politicians' machinations. It is therefore evident that humour does not spell out its political work beforehand. The politics shines through as the humour takes form at the point of its realization "in relation to its own materiality and mediated existence" (Holm 187). As can be seen, whereas Churchill, —the boss—seems to buttress the status quo while appearing otherwise, his subordinate—Chipukeezy—is keen on disruption (see Holm 189).

[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5JI98mw96M&t=265s

[45] Born and bred in Machakos County as Vincent Mwasia Mutua, Chipkeezy is a comedian and media personality who, at the time of writing, was serving as a director on the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA) board.

Nonetheless, the chokehold the political class has on the Kenyan nation-state cannot be gainsaid. It has over the years hindered the growth of a politics of inclusivity, fairness and equity. Politicians have since the 1960s engineered and sustained 'political tribalism' and ethno-nationalism, which they use to advantage some ethnic communities over others in accessing scarce state resources (see Lonsdale 76 and Muigai 200). Shilaho traces the ethnicization of Kenya to the ideological fallout between Jomo Kenyatta and Jaramogi Odinga, and the assassination of Tom Mboya in the 1960s that he says "was meant to create room for the exclusive access to power and the attendant economic advantages for the Kikuyu" (4). Since then, the stakes of the presidency have been exponentially raised because the occupant's region and people get an unfair access and allocation of the nation's resources. Lonsdale argues that "political tribalism" was preceded by "moral ethnicity" or "ourselves-ing", which during Kenyatta's rule "became the ideology of the state" and sowed seeds of distrust among ethnicities (82). In the same vein, Githu Muigai contends that Kenyatta bequeathed ethnic nationalism to his successors, thus failing to forge a nation out of the state (200). Consequently, whereas Kenyatta 'Kikuyunized' the state, Moi 'Kalenjinized it, with Kibaki and Uhuru 'Kikuyunizing' it further. In fact, it is the state that kills the Kenyan nation (Lonsdale 94).

According to Dina Ligaga, 'tribalism' and ethno-nationalism have created "illusions of difference among Kenyans," which *tribal* logic politicians use to 'divide and rule' Kenyans "much the same way as the colonialists before them. Thus creating resentment and prejudice among Kenyans" (73). This 'divide and rule' ideology is entrenched partly through ethnic stereotypes. I contend that whereas the *Churchill Show* seems suffused with socio-cultural stereotypes, the stereotypes are not meant to essentialize the characteristics inherent thereto to ethnic groups. In any case, ethnic attributes are fluid and dynamic. Therefore, the *Churchill Show* comedians recuperate and re-appropriate socio-cultural stereotypes in jest so that they take the form of mythical/mystifying scripts that they use to offer an alternative nationalist project of the state-nation that has nothing to do with the 'nation building' project of the nation-state's political elite.

Collectively, therefore, in mock-signification, the comedians engage the Kenyan socio-cultural and political reality by reinterpreting and re-narrating the country's events for the benefit of the citizenry by addressing matters of 'truth', which enact non-antagonistic difference. Although the texts are open-ended, they are often 'closed' by Churchill, who veers them into the show's

enterprise of 'bringing Kenyans and Kenya's communities back together'. In other words, on a weekly basis, from the vantage point of comedy, the *Churchill Show* artistes make accessible to the general public Kenya's socio-cultural and political trajectory that is meant to foster oneness-in-difference in a manner that appears as 'just for laughs'.

Aptly, Gilad, a Kenyan musician of Israeli descent, who performs on this episode, terms Churchill his 'shujaa' (hero) because, in Gilad's own words, "everybody in [Kenya], regardless of their tribe, […] religion, [political] opinion [and inclination] watches this show, laughs together, sits together, enjoys together. That's what Kenya's all about," and not the politicians' divisive cacophony. Following this, I deduce that Churchill is the Kenyan people's hero, and their organic intellectual/interpreter. His stage mantra speaks to a people worn out. They are no longer as beautiful as they presumably once were. From a typical comedian to the host, Churchill has transcended comedy's restrictions of merely exciting amusement, and turned the *Churchill Show* into an implicit political programme for the nation's disenfranchised majority. Imbricated with the producer's shibboleth: 'refreshing ideas', the show symbolizes a horizon of values for Kenyanness, echoing the marriage of form and content in literary texts. Anything within the ambit of the show is thus to be read as a river flowing into the ocean of bringing Kenyans and all Kenya's communities back together.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the *Churchill Show,* while entertaining Kenyans, constructs a state-nation 'Kenyanness' through a political aesthetics of humour. The chapter has argued that Churchill, the eponymous host of the show, assumes the role an organic intellectual/interpreter of the Kenyan nation, who advocates the crafting of a nation from a bottom-up ideal of the state-nation, countering the divisive top-down nation-state model propagated by the state. The model manifests a 'we-feeling' among the people of Kenya that incorporates ethnicity, religion and region in an all-inclusive manner.

While focalizing 'uncomfortable' humour, the chapter has claimed that humour holds the aesthetic and the real realms in a tense relationship by imbuing both with doubt, thus, implicating the audience in the reality embedded in the aesthetic. The humour is therefore political as it is

undermining of age-old conceptions such as condensed in stereotypes. Ultimately, the chapter in addition to invoking an aesthetics of escapism, has called on the postpositivist theory of identity in order to examine how Kenyan identities—real and/or constructed—are not reified, but transformed—if not dismantled—in the advancement of a progressive politics enabled by the epistemic privilege afforded comedians by their social locations.

Further, the chapter has drawn on Jörg Schweinitz's theorization of the stereotype to align the *Churchill Show* with the concept of the stereotype, arguing that the show is a stereotype that aggregates stereotypes but in transformed form/s. Read as a text, therefore, the *Churchill Show* has been conceived of as a standardized pattern of narration so recurrent that it has become a structural schema, encompassing its own distinctive style that has overtime stabilized into an idiom and/or cliché. Its actors' identificatory expressions, too, that were once pleasant phrases have with continued use lost their creativity and become impoverished as they have crystalized into routine formulae of identity, audience interpellation and narrative structuring.

The chapter has consequently argued that the *Churchill Show* has a 'language' of its own, its idiom: the stereotype, which is to mean that beyond and above the conventional conception of language as system of communication, the show employs language in a peculiar way so as to meet its infotainment purposes. Thus, the show exhibits transglossic language practices, imagining a Kenyanness desirous to break free from the linguistic regimentation of the post-colonial state and its agencies so as to deepen socio-cultural freedom and liberty.

Chapter Three: Centering the Marginalized; Empowering the Oppressed

3.1 Female agency in *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss*

The preceding chapter explored how the *Churchill Show* while entertaining the nation attempts to re-unite Kenyans and all of Kenya's diverse (ethnic, regional and non/religious) communities as encapsulated in its signature tune of 'bringing Kenyans and Kenya's communities back together' through privileging the banal and mundane of the everyday over the authoritative and official policies of the state. Subsequently, the chapter concluded that the state-nation construction of 'Kenyanness' manifests a 'we-feeling' among the people of Kenya that incorporates ethnicity, religion and region in an all-inclusive manner.

This chapter focuses on the representation of house helps in the often overlooked realm of the private space/s of domestic work to explore socio-structural relations aimed at executing socio-economic transformation. Accordingly, the chapter explores how Kenyan comedy centers house helps, a category hitherto constructed as marginal in Kenyan society, and critiques how the largely oppressed category is empowered. The chapter places special emphasis on female agency in the television series *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* through the use of provocative and absurd humour respectively. It argues that such forms of postmodern humour endow the marginalized and the oppressed with agency to renegotiate and refashion class and gender relations, which is to say, the humour performs a transgressive politics that subverts dominant ideologies, unsettling attendant stereotypes while engendering 'new femininities' and, inevitably, 'new masculinities' through postfeminist and neoliberal ethe.

Firstly, I read both the shows as examples of docusoap and dramedy because the semantics of docusoap are effectively actualized through the syntax of dramedy. In other words, the import or significant meanings of docusoap are well brought out through the structure of dramedy. Secondly, I explore provocative humour in *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* (hereafter *The Real Househelps*) and absurd humour in *Auntie Boss.* Drawing on Angela McRobbie's postulation of "'Girls and Women Are Now Equal"' (xi).[46] I interrogate the ensuing 'new femininities'—and

[46] Angela McRobbie makes this statement in relation to the gender and equality debate in a postfeminist and neoliberal global economy. She argues that "postfeminism actively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, a spent force" ("Notes 4). In other words, (young) women take the gains of Second Wave feminism for granted now that they are said to be 'empowered' "through tropes of imaginary freedom [and] the gender logic of neoliberal governmentality" (Preface xi). Postfeminism and neoliberalism thus undermine feminism, which then implies that this statement is a sarcastic jibe at the proponents of postfeminism. The

'new masculinities'. I tweak McRobbie's axiom in order to read the house helps as (disempowered) 'girls', and (empowered)'women' as their female employers because the former are often referred to as house girls by the latter. I restrict my analysis to selected episodes in seasons 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12 of *Auntie Boss* while making general references to specific incidences and sequences from episodes of *The Real Househelps* relevant to the chapter's enterprise.

Described as "a dramatic & comical series that revolves around the lives of the inhabitants of Kawangware" [47], *The Househelps of Kawangware* is a Protel Studios production that started out on Kenya Television Network (KTN) in 2014 and later moved to Nation Television (NTV), from where it was broadcast between 7.30 and 8.00 pm Eastern Africa Time (EAT) every Wednesday just as it was on KTN. The show ended in mid-2021. It was also published on YouTube from where it was productively engaged with by its audiences. At the time of writing, the show had recorded in excess of 122 million views and 350, 000 subscribers. While remaining aware of its ascribed drama and comedy (dramedy) status, I read it as a docusoap that revolves around the lives of four house helps and their relationships with their employers and friends in Kawangware—a low income suburb in Nairobi.[48] Due to the contact between the Global North and the South, Dina Ligaga argues that the show "presents as a parody of the globally circulated *The Real Housewives* franchise" (Abstract n.p). Thus,

> *TRHK*, rather than focus on flashes of hyper-luxurious lives of the 'wives', focuses on the dramas of survival for low-income individuals located in what appears to be a 'dead-end' location. Yet, this location is thriving with life and drama, drawing the viewer into a world of gossip, drama, crime, and unending (and often failing) plots to make money. (n.p)

I take Ligaga's contention to be credible because, as I argue further on, the house helps tend to buy into the postfeminist sensibility that they (and their employers) can hardly afford (in conformity with neoliberal ethos). They also seem to be pushed into conforming to neoliberal tendencies that their socio-economic constraints can barely allow. Oftentimes, then, they emerge as caricatures of the two ethe. Importantly, though, all their efforts—even pretensions—are meant to improve their lot so that they gain dignity befitting women (of the houses).

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sensibility/culture is yet to dismantle patriarchal structures; hence, the claim 'in capital letters' that "Women and Girls are Now Equal" (to men and boys is hollow.

[47] https://www.youtube.com/c/TRHHOK/about

[48] Dorothy Rombo (2016) characterises the show as docusoap. Its minor characters include Njuguna, a hawker; Detective, a police officer; Michireti, the caretaker; Matilda; Janerose; Shipira; Camila; and Crotus, Camila's ex/husband; Nkirote.

Auntie Boss, on its part, is described as "a drama that delves into the lives of 3 domestic helps and their everyday drama as it revolves around the families they work for."[49] It premiered in 2014 and aired on *NTV* on Tuesday between 7.30 and 8.00 pm, and came to an end on September 16th 2020. Set in a fictional rich locality of Taifa Estate, Loresho Ridge, *Auntie Boss* follows the activities of three house helps and their relationships with their bosses.[50] The house helps include Shiru (Nyce Wanjeri), who works for Vanessa (Grace Muna); Silprosa (Sandra Dacha) who is employed by Mayweather (David Opondoe); and Ndinda (Gloria Owichira), who keeps changing employers. In the next section, I extrapolate how docusoap can be read as dramedy in order to show how female agency is given form in popular entertainment.

3.2 Docusoap as Dramedy: Formulating female agency in popular entertainment

Annette Hill argues that "popular entertainment defies categorization." However, it refers to

> programmes […] that are part of popular factual television. These popular entertainment programmes include interaction between non-professional actors and celebrities, although increasingly non-professional actors are often treated as celebrities in their own right in such programmes. Many of these programmes also contain interactive elements, drawing a studio audience, and viewers at home, directly into a programme, usually as respondents or judges to the activities of the non-professional actors/celebrities. (21)

Thus, these programmes fall into the larger category of Reality TV, which is "a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people. Sometimes called popular factual television, reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama" (Hill 2). It is therefore paramount that a scrutiny of such programmes considers their information and entertainment value. Additionally, the 'realism' that these programmes accords the represented categories and their experiences and the audience's reactions thereto should be accounted for.

The docusoap lies at the intersection of documentary and melodrama. Docusoap is a "reality format that combines observational documentary techniques with serial narrative techniques of soap opera" (Hill 23). Ideally, it is part factual, part fictional; and designed to 'catch real characters

[49] This information was obtained from Showmax before the show was pulled down in early January, 2021. Showmax is an online subscription video on demand service based in South Africa.

[50] Minor characters: Maingi, Vanessa's husband; Lionel, Eric, her suitors; Kyle, her son; other house helps: Rihanna, Njoroge; Cosmas, the watchman; Jonathan, an old university friend of Donovan's; Alloys, the gardener and Kasmart, Shiru's boyfriend.

on camera'. Hill observes, following on Richard Kilborn, that like reality gameshows, docusoaps "encourage participants to 'indulge in gossipy, soap-like forms of interchange' and 'maintain narrative pace and interest' by switching 'the focus of attention from one group of characters to another'" (23). With roots in the 1990s British television, the docusoap lays more "emphasis on entertainment, the importance of personalities who enjoy performing for the camera, […] the intercutting between alternate stories or personalities, [and] a focus on the quotidian" (Bruzzi 120). In other words, prominence is given to the theatrical and the melodramatic about individuals singly and in groups and their everyday as opposed to underlying social issues.

According to Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi, "[t]he contemporary docusoap articulates a postfeminist, neoliberal social field in which relations of class and gender are renegotiated and refashioned. Docusoaps encourage individuals to participate in consumer culture and to regard makeover practices as the route to social success" (269). There seems little consensus on what postfeminism really entails: an "*epistemological break within feminism*", a "*historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism*", a "*backlash against feminism*" (Gill and Scharff 3; italics in the original), or all of these. Whatever it is, this research aims to critique postfeminism as a sensibility. The sensibility, according to Rosalind Gill, comprises:

> the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm'; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked 'resexualization' of women's bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (149)

To Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, following Peck and Tickell (2002) and Rose (1999), neoliberalism is "a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice – no matter how constrained their lives may actually be" (6). Thus, postfeminism and neoliberalism have "a powerful resonance" between them, operating "at at least three levels":

> First, […] both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves. Secondly, it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism. [Thus] postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted

> through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. [Thirdly,] it is *women* who are called on to self-manage, to self-discipline to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. (Gill and Scharff 7; italics in the original)

In my view, such a resonance not only configures female subjectivity, but also endows it with agency. Such force to act is usually in the face of debilitating constraining circumstances. However, the said circumstances—in the grammar of the shows under scrutiny—are almost always disregarded as the agency is enabled by provocative and absurd forms of postmodern humour that make light of them.

According to Gill and Scharff, subjectivity is more prolific (than identity) at understanding how power operates "through the making and remaking of subjectivities and through 'governing the soul'" (8). Governing the soul translates into 'governmentality'—an idea attributable to Michel Foucault—and '"[…] covers a range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom […] use in dealing with each other'" (8). These notions of subjectivity and 'governmentality', Gill and Scharff argue, dislodge self-identity from individuals' positions in the social structure and ground it in the body "as individuals are left alone to establish and maintain values with which to live and make sense of their daily lives" (8). Gill and Scharff note, though, that what is missed in the majority of discourse about governmentality is "the *mentality* part […]– the ways in which these governing practices quite literally 'get inside us' to materialize or constitute our subjectivities" (8). In other words, subjectivity is psychosocial to the extent that it is domiciled inside individuals as opposed to the outside. Subjectivity is what constitutes personality. Consequently, in postfeminist grammar, "women (particularly young women) are often presented as autonomous, agentic and empowered subjects" (9) battling and overcoming structures of domination, inequality and oppression. What results, according to McRobbie, is a celebratory sensibility that, arguably, pits women against each other, with a sweeping assumption that patriarchy has been defeated, and that "'Girls and Women Are Now Equal'" (McRobbie. Preface xi). I avail myself of this deduction to argue that the postfeminist sensibility bought into by the house helps is not so much concentrated in the physical body as in the body of practices they engaged in so as to lift themselves from socio-economic domination by their relatively empowered bosses.

Subsequently, I read *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* as docusoaps because they tell similar stories through similar characters in similar circumstances from similar

locations in slightly different socio-economic settings in which postfeminism and neoliberal tendencies are definitive of female (and male) relations. Read as docusoaps insofar as coupling postfeminism with neoliberal ideals and female agency, therefore, *The Real Househelps* and *Auntie Boss* fit into the other emergent hybrid genre of 'dramedy', especially in their address of the serious (dramatic) matters of class and gender through the structure of comedy.

According to Judith Lancioni, drama-comedy (dramedy) "fosters the weaving together of comic and dramatic elements across storylines, thus creating a highly complex text – a complexity that lends itself to the articulation of ideological discourse" (131). The complexity of the shows are likely to be revealed in the interplay of serious social issues of representation and subjectivity within the syntax of the lighthearted. That is, in the hybrid genre, "recurrent semantic elements of drama such as stock characters, common traits [and] attitudes" are fused with syntactic features of comedy such as "narrative structures [and] the dialectics […] between nature and culture, community and the individual, and the future and the past" (Vande Berg 15). Leah R. Ekdom Vande Berg borrows this fusion from Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to genre in which "[t]he semantic approach […] stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged" (Altman 31). Besides explaining the evolution of new genres such as dramedy, I find Altman's approach productive; and so, adapt it in my analysis of genre study as it solves the dilemma of using the semantic and syntactic approaches in isolation. As he aptly puts it:

> While the semantic approach has little explanatory power, it is applicable to a larger number of films. Conversely, the syntactic approach surrenders broad applicability in return for the ability to isolate a genre's specific meaning-bearing structures. This alternative seemingly leaves the genre analyst in a quandary: choose the semantic view and you give up *explanatory power;* choose the syntactic approach and you do without broad applicability. (Altman 131–32; italics in the original)

Lancioni elaborates elsewhere: "dramedies blend the comic and the serious in different ways; [with] some separat[ing] comic and dramatic storylines, [and] others combining drama and comedy together" (131). For this project consequently, such fusion not only aids the construction of postfeminist texts, but also enables the address of serious socio-economic concerns through humour and/or an aesthetics of escapism.

Significantly, the tenets of docusoap and dramedy permit the configuration of strong and complex female characters endowed with agency to renegotiate and refashion class and gender

relations. Otherwise expressed, the intersection between docusoap and dramedy not only makes postfeminist inquiry in neoliberal terms necessary, but also demands an investigation into how effectively both genres indulge in a sort of 'melodramatic realism' that politicizes the socio-economic categories of class and gender, engendering 'new femininities'—and, inevitably, 'new masculinities'.

3.3 "Nitakukamua maziwa ingine"[51] Provocative humour in *The Real Househelps of Kawangware*

This section explores the conflicts that arise between house helps and their employers in the latter's quest for fair labour practices. I argue that agency is achieved through provocative humour as facilitated by complex characters or rounded protagonists "who are neither thoroughly good nor throughout evil but a rather complex mixture of both and who tend to manifest power, benevolence, courage and resourcefulness in the face of personal […] crises" (Vande Berg 18).

According to Holm, provocative humour is similar to humour of discomfort, but differs from it "in terms of speed, or at least the aesthetic implication of speed" (119). The humour "does not shy away from contentious and offensive topics, nor wink quietly and subtly to knowing members of the audience about double meanings" (121). Rather, its potential to shock and offend is outright as it is "unmistakably and intentionally designed to provoke anger, indignation and outrage" (121). As such, provocative humour is characterized by "a tendency to strike quickly and violently: explosively […] revealing the horror that lurks beneath the banal; erupting suddenly to leave its audience stunned and wondering whether what they witnessed could actually have happened, could have ever been allowed to happen" (Holm 119).

Thus, provocative humour is scandalous insofar as it directly confronts "cultural fault lines and controversial topics" and often intentionally broaches social taboos (Holm 119–20). Consequently, it is commonly understood as "reprehensible and politically regressive" for its "outright rejection of compassion and sensitivity" (121). However, Holm affirms that provocative humour—as he conceives it—is politically progressive contra 'progressive critics' such as Paul Lewis who view

[51] "I will milk you (other) milk" is the punishment that Makena will mete on Truphena if she finds a drop of the milk she has just warmed missing.

provocative humour as belonging to the "'killing jokes'" category.[52] To Lewis, therefore—so concludes Holm—provocative humour is "not just offensive: it is also harmful" (120) and 'tasteless' (122) as it "trivializes important concerns, excuses inexcusable behaviour and attitudes, and encourages audiences to find enjoyment regarding situations and setups which they should rightfully regard as worthy of concern and corrective political action rather than laughter" (Holm 121).

For Holm, provocative humour "acts simultaneously not simply to undermine but also highlight the social sanctity of the subject" (123). It "does not arise from demolishing of social taboos, but rather arises out of a contradictory balancing act between respect and disrespect, rather than simply through the mockery of an agreed upon scapegoat" (123). Thus, the humour does not arise out of insensitivity to disenfranchised groups and/or categories; neither is it callous nor hurtful to "a hypothetical third party" (123). Instead, it offends the audience simultaneously as it amuses them with the aim of transgressing "a set of norms and standards […] unreflexively regard[ed] as unquestionably desirable, dominant, and, above all, normal" (Holm 122). Such norms and standards, for me, comprise—but are not limited to—oppressive labour practices as frozen in and by stereotypes about domestic workers, particularly house helps. For instance, in the episode, 'Meet *The Real Househelps* of Kawangware', the audience is introduced to the main characters: Truphena (Aisha Nour), who works for Makena; Njambi (Bernice Njeri), aka Miss Babes, employed by Mama Boi; Kalekye (Rebecca Mbithe) working at house number 7; and Awiti (Winnie Rubi) at house number 10 for Mama Sharon.[53] The complexity of these characters is enhanced by their tendency to often break the fourth wall, in the form of a soliloquy, aside or stream of consciousness through which they voice their inner thoughts and/or introspection to the audience by speaking directly to the camera. Such introspection qualifies as 'self-reflexive offence', which Holm describes as the vehicle by which the humour "highlights controversial topics, aggravates existing tensions and unsettles fragile social consensus […] by reaching beyond the bounds of the text, and addressing the audience as if it were conducting a direct intervention into factual conversations" (Holm 141). Thus, characters reach out to the audience, sharing with them their inner thoughts which are often—but not always—hidden from their fellow characters

[52] According to Lewis, such humour invalidates jokes because it "locates amusement in insensitive or even cruel broaching of sensitive topics, often in conjunction with violence, which causes emotional pain to disenfranchised or disempowered groups" (quoted in Holm 123).
[53] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JyzZyLmIGH8. 00:02:36-10:18.

as a means of "working through social or political messages within the text" as well as "interact[ing] and offend[ing] against the real and sanctified categories themselves" (Holm 141).[54] Consequently, provocative humour is able to mediate "social, ethical and political issues in such a way as to render the imaginary status of the comic text irrelevant" (141), especially by enlisting the audience as reluctant co-conspirators (Warhol quoted in Havas and Sulimma 11).

Provocative humour is therefore similar to what Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma call 'cringe aesthetics', which is a way of dramedy's politicization of cultural values "via disturbing gendered expectations of mediated femininity" (Havas and Sulimma 15). The aesthetics stems from the basic meaning of cringe, which embodies feelings of embarrassment, awkwardness, disgust, occasioning discomfiture in the viewers who cringe not "*with* but *at* characters" (9; italics in the original) because the latter transgress expected norms of (feminine) behaviour. Such transgression is not in vain, though, as "cringeworthy moments […] expose […] central characters' personal faults or their social environments' shortcomings *as political issues*" (6; italics in the original). Hence, 'cringe' is "a mode of expression tasked with negotiating the tensions between drama and comedy, as well as intersectional relations of identity politics" (Havas and Sulimma 2).

Therefore, by "radiat[ing] out beyond the safe bounds of the text", provocative humour discomforts audiences:

> by the frivolous and flippant address of social taboos that directly intercedes in the expected, and indeed the desired, social order of decorum and respect. The viewership is not witnessing offence in any straightforward sense; they are experiencing it themselves as the improper address of controversial topics produces a form of anxiety that exceeds the immediate reality of the show. (Holm 142)

For me, stereotypes associated with house helps, which often intersect with those of ethnicities, are playfully exaggerated—even parodied—in *The Real Househelps* and *Auntie Boss* in such a way as to elicit anger and outrage from the audience, besides ambivalent/discomfiting laughter.

In the above episode, for instance, Truphena is caught stealthily drinking a little of the milk she has just warmed that she claims to be 'tasting for salt'! Makena is scandalized that salt is put in milk. She then threatens to extract 'other' milk from Truphena if she finds a single drop of the milk missing. Breaking the fourth wall, Makena cringes at how Truphena ate her 15 chapatis one day.

[54] I say 'often' because occasionally the characters affected by such introspection offer immediate responses as if they had been listening in. This happens to be the case in the Makena/Truphena chapati incident below.

Truphena also breaks the fourth wall and introduces herself. She claims that she does oppressive work at Makena's, with little nourishment. Truphena is appalled that Makena lamented about her having eaten her chapatis the other day, which she denies (to the audience), claiming that she only 'tasted' four and a half chapatis, and wonders if that warrants being harangued the whole day. As soon as Makena steps out, Truphena breaks the fourth wall again, dismissing her cleverness while affirming her knowledge of city ways. She then drinks from the cooking pot with a straw (apparently to leave no trace of her misdemeanor). Further, she prays that God gives her a little money to enable her to 'open' a posho (maize meal) mill to save her from hunger. Next, Truphena spikes Makena's juice with sleeping pills so as to access the chapatis.[55] Her behaviour to secure the chapatis is shocking: she wraps one in polythene and attempts to hide it in her bra. But because it is hot, she douses it with cold running tap water, and tucks it under her t-shirt. By all means, outrageous as Truphena's acts are, they seem to validate her claim to oppression: she is an almost starved worker, and seemingly denied chapati, which is often considered as special food only available to poor households on special occasions such as Christmas and New Year, or when there are important visitors. It might, then, appear that Truphena cannot hide her longing for the special meal that is a rarity in the rural area from which she has emigrated. Makena could, on the contrary, be feeling that as a *mere* house help, Truphena is undeserving of such delicacies.

It is significant, nonetheless, to note that Truphena is constructed as belonging to the Luhya peoples of western Kenya who are generally stereotyped as greedy, with an insatiable appetite for ugali (maize meal).[56] It is this construction of the Luhya that is exaggerated, even mocked in this episode through Truphena, but with regard to chapati. Chapatis are quite starchy and it is almost impossible to eat 15 at a go. To consider eating four and a half as 'tasting' is outrageous, just as it is to drink milk directly from the cooking pot (sufuria) with a straw. Yet, this is the mould into which Truphena is boxed to absurdly conform to the Luhya stereotype. In this episode, the Luhya stereotype is coupled with that of house helps: ever eating, including food meant for their charges. The exaggeration of these two stereotypes puts Makena and Truphena in a tense, conflictual relationship as employer and employee, but more significantly as women, or in my vocabulary, as 'woman' and 'girl'.

[55] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmmc5gHrWz4. 00:02:13-05:58, 00:12:05-13:10.
[56] See Rombo 146, Ligaga 2009.

I have given a detailed description of this scene because it sets the stage for the various confrontations between and among characters that drive the sketch plots of *The Real Househelps*. The confrontations are not without a progressive politics though. If the house helps are not fighting over food, or competing against each other for boyfriends and employment/business opportunities, it is for better wages and treatment at work, secure employment, health, among other benefits, with their oppressive employers. Entangled in these confrontations are contestations of gender norms and expectations that together serve to transmogrify stereotypes of class and gender in line with provocative humour as welded with cringe aesthetics. Importantly, these confrontations and contestations are aligned with postfeminist and neoliberal tendencies that engender new femininities and masculinities comprising near-helpless (female) employers, and near-tyrannical employees. In heteronormative relations in *The Real Househelps*, men seem feminized, women masculinized. Rather than being exclusively critiqued, power dynamics are inverted through the politicization of the house helps' weaknesses, which encompass both the personal and the communal (stereotypes). In other words, behaviour that is perceived as the weaknesses of the house helps and/or their communities, for example Truphena's and her community's *greed*, are instrumentalized to wage political battles. It would seem that the personal is indeed political.

Truphena might appear meek and subdued in this episode, but as the show develops, she gains in confidence and Makena's attempts to oppress her seldom go unchallenged, particularly when she has the choice to act rationally and calculatingly with Makena in vulnerable situations. For instance, in 'Saai Njambi ndio anatawala lakini', Truphena—unfazed by Makena's threats to fire her because she (Truphena) is going to get married to Ebenezer—threatens Makena with physical violence if she does not address her by her proper name instead of the pejorative 'wewe' (you).[57] Truphena breaks the fourth wall to validate her valour (against men) to the audience, with the implication that Makena—as a woman—is of little threat to her.

In the episode 'Turu is back like she never left', Truphena invokes the stereotype of greed that she seems to have embraced and personifies to megalomaniacal proportions, with the implication that it is just a stereotype that has little grounding in reality. Consequently, the stereotype ought to be scoffed at, even instrumentalized.[58] When Detective takes advantage of Makena, practically moving into her house for free accommodation, meals and sex, Makena and Truphena connive to

[57] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_djDQJoqWE. 00:04:18-06:00.
[58] https://youtu.be/vJk4Y_P95Bo. 00:01:52-03:20.

turn Truphena's 'love for food' into a tool to kick him out. With Makena's and Detective's eyes closed in grace, Truphena stealthily descends on the food to the disgust and outrage of Detective upon opening his eyes. He is compelled to leave. As a member of the audience, I am equally horrified. Oddly, it is Truphena's 'weakness' and her community's stereotype of (supposed) gluttony that propitiously comes to Makena's rescue, which occurrence accords with Rombo's observation that "ethnic stereotypes [are] the *de facto* means of disruption" of (other) stereotypes and conventions (147).

Nonetheless, the repartee that ensues between Makena and Truphena as the latter walks out on her employer deftly dramatizes provocative humour and the serious political work it can be put to. Truphena stands up to Makena, demeans her to the extent that Makena is left hapless. Makena's pleas to Truphena to stay for at least a day to give her time to find a replacement are all rebuffed. Instead, Truphena reminds her of how she has always threatened to fire her and immediately find her replacement. Truphena can only stay as requested if Makena allows her to bring her 'husband' over. How scandalous this is, not just to Makena but to the audience too. This is not only disrespectful but unfeasible. It defies logic that Truphena thinks that it is in order for her and Ebenezer to be housed in Makena's one bedroomed house as a couple. It is impolite and unworkable as she (Truphena) is the only one allowed lodging at Makena's as a live-in house help. Critically, though, Truphena's outrageous claims speak to the 'equality' between the (house) girl and the woman (of the house). Her choices can afford her such unbounded freedom.

Un/fortunately, Truphena is met with the sad reality that Ebenezer tricked her into a never-to-be 'marriage'.[59] She is forced to go back to Makena's to beg for her job back with a 50% pay cut.[60] She is not equal to Makena after all. Her revenge, however, comes in Ep23 Pt2[61] after chancing on Makena's amorous phone messages to Njuguna,[62] which make Makena vulnerable again. Truphena makes Makena seem so defenseless that her predicament is unlikely to invite laughter but pity. Truphena's provocative language shocks Makena and is surely designed to leave the audience stunned as well. Reading her boss's messages is rude. It violates Makena's right to privacy and blurs the boundary between employer and employee. It is offensive behavior that is certainly designed to provoke indignation.

[59] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wc4-Hfdddo. 00:02:52-05:13, 00:10:10-11:23.
[60] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIJN6hNnMMk&t=473s. 00:03:40-04:41.
[61] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBKzkMGHEoY&t=122s. 00:00:15-01:53.
[62] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XItCyXLpTi0. 00:08:38-10:23.

Nonetheless, Makena can only have herself to blame. She carries herself about as an 'upper' class woman, yet, goes after the low-class members like Njuguna. Unsurprisingly, Michireti goes after her only to be embarrassingly rejected. He scandalizes her concerning her clandestine relationship with Njuguna, forcing her into introspection that she shares with the audience: she has to reinvent herself, or else her charcoal supplier will think that he too has a chance.[63] Such talk of reinvention speaks to a postfeminist sensibility: Makena has to give in to the 'makeover paradigm', self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline as a feminine subject (Gill 2007)—else, she loses her 'elite' position. Truphena's life and being are obviously inhibited, and she needs fair treatment. That is why she becomes agentic in order to better her life by demanding job and 'food' security as well as a salary increment/reinstatement as a "rational, calculating and self-motivating" and free-acting and autonomous subject/ivity (Gill and Scharff 6).

Truphena's blackmail of Makena is therefore politically progressive in that it counters Makena's recourse to threats to fire her as is supposedly the norm. Are house helps not easily available just as they are easily disposable? Ironically, that is not the case here as Makena is in so vulnerable a situation. It is, therefore, understandable she agrees to every demand that Truphena makes. Truphena threatens to forward the 'dirty manners' messages to Makena's friends and father. It is an embarrassment Makena cannot withstand. Nevertheless, the scenario is fantastical. As McRobbie would have it elsewhere, it offers Truphena "imaginary freedom" in the "neoliberal govermentality" fashion (xi). As such, it is merely in conformity with "the changes which have come to characterize the distinctive modalities that comprise flows and luminosities and formations of attention which attend to young women in contemporary sociality", where "the expectation of 'equality' is most intense. In consequence, it gives the impression that "'Girls and Women Are Now Equal'" in capital letters (McRobbie. Preface xi).

Accordingly, this is the illusion given to Truphena. She is only a 'girl' of the household, or *msichana wa nyumba* (as house helps are often referred to in Kenya). Therefore, there is no way Truphena can be equal to Makena, the 'woman' of the household. Granted, her arrogant exit of Makena's employ can be seen to give her a semblance of an edge as it seems to signify a freedom of some kind from Makena's hold. However, her gullibility to Ebenezer speaks to the complexity of the patriarchal hold on economically-dependent women buying into a postfeminist sensibility and neoliberal ethos. Before Truphena leaves, she derides Makena for being unmarried. Blinded

[63] https://youtu.be/rO-o4AsoUyg. 00:08:06-09:29.

by the prospect of marriage and economic 'independence', Truphena fails to realize that Ebenezer is fooling her. It would appear that patriarchy has not been dismantled as post-feminists would have us believe. Women are still in its chokehold, and 'proper' respectability only comes with heterosexual marriage. Consequently, Truphena's return to Makena's reveals the complications of self-reflexive self-mockery, which Holm argues makes it hard to "assign a straightforward political aesthetics to provocative humour [as] it undercuts its own relevance and suitability to act as a forum for sensitive topics even as it enacts it" (143). It also speaks to the contradictions of popular culture.

By all means, Makena and Truphena are unmarried. They both deserve empathy, if not pity, and not mockery in a heteronormative society that valorizes marriage. Ideally, such mockery should not be used in the generation of humour in the first place as 'manlessness', as Truphena calls Makena's condition, is a controversial topic that is rarely, if ever, broached in brazenly amusing fashion. Truphena, in her deriding Makena, seems to draw on what would appear as pre-feminist and patriarchal notions of femininity where fulfilment is only tenable in long-term heterosexual relationships. For her, marriage offers an escape from the marginalized and stigmatized single womanhood. She is just about to become a *woman* by way of marriage while Makena remains a *girl*— a term that was once, perhaps still, "universally used of unmarried women" (Nicholson xiv).

The mockery, therefore, spills beyond the bounds of *The Real Househelps* onto Kenyan society where such notions abound, and it is deemed insensitive to mock unmarried women. It seems normative then to sympathize with Makena rather than Truphena, the obviously underprivileged. Importantly, Makena's seemingly conscious decision to remain single while still enjoying sexual relations with the likes of Njuguna and Detective point to a new woman, or in prevalent lingo, *the difficult woman*, who refuses "to work in normative confines and expectations of what it means to be a 'a good woman' in a heteropatriarchal context" (Ligaga, *Women, Visibility* 127). She is in any case, a free-choosing and calculating agent. Even so, it is absurd for an unmarried woman to mock another. Truphena is thus self-mocking in self-reflection through Makena. It is little surprising that on her return to Makena's employ, Truphena is compelled to reveal the location of her copies of her labour agreement with Makena. Makena sets them alight, destroying the evidence

and consigning Truphena back to her initial status (where she *belongs* as it were), and her exploitation resumes on a grander scale.[64] She becomes an item of ridicule rather than empathy.

Nonetheless, it is intriguing that Truphena—a circumscribed rural immigrant in the city—is emboldened by the promise of marriage. She can therefore afford to be disrespectful in her imaginary freedom. In Kenya, as Rombo rightly records, domestic workers are often rural young women migrants "who engage in live-in domestic service until marriage or a more desirable employment opportunity presents itself" (Holm 143). They are therefore looking to be extricated from domestic work, which continually frames them as desperate and stereotypes them as less educated, rural and ill- or mostly un-informed. Subsequently, the job has them stigmatized and undervalued because they serve others—usually fellow women—in the private spaces of households.

Often, the house help is relegated to the kitchen and the back of the house, where the majority of her 'dirty work'—unpleasant to the front of the house and other respectable spaces—abounds. As such, "house helps, remain invisible, unseen, excluded from family […] as well as […] from national conversations about labor rights" (Rombo 142). They may appear in news segments when they either commit atrocious acts at their posts or are excessively abused and suffer inhuman treatment, especially in the Middle East and particularly in Saudi Arabia, where they are lured perennially with the hope of better wages by unscrupulous recruiting agencies (See also Rombo 142).[65] In *The Real Househelps*, however, house helps are often seen outdoors boldly engaging in labour welfare battles with their bosses. They have been let out of their constraining closets and made to seem equal to their bosses—and even more.

In her imaginary freedom, therefore, Truphena seems to forget, or so Rosaura Sánchez reminds us elsewhere, that "the labour process […] positions one within a given class structure" (34), which positioning is constitutive of "*all* social conjunctures and [is] inseparably connected to every distinctive conflictual difference" (Sánchez 35; italics in the original). Such positioning speaks to socio-cultural and politico-economic structures with their attendant power relations. As such, it is quite certain that the house helps are not equal to their employers. The house helps remain (house) *girls*; the employers, *women* (or 'madams' of the households). They are not and can never be equal.

[64] https://youtu.be/26ySDt-sWaA. 00:03:18-04:41, 00:07:37-10:20.

[65] At the time of writing, the press was awash with reports of Kenyan women serving as house helps in Saudi Arabia either undergoing torture in various forms or murdered, with pleas to the government to help trace their remains and bring them back home for decent interment.

The employers continue to oppress and exploit them, paying them pitiable wages in deplorable work environments. Therefore, the resistance the house helps execute seems to represent what Gill terms as '"hollow defiance'" (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 12).

Nonetheless, the presentation of 'girls' and 'women' as equal in *The Real Househelps* is not just vain humour in. It seems to mark the beginning of a bold step towards centering the hidden battles in domestic space. As Mary Romero, Valarie Preston and Wenona Giles observe elsewhere, this lack of regulation that is exacerbated by the confinement of the work behind employers' closed doors not only excludes domestic workers from national labour legislation, but also denies them "a right to a minimum wage, a ceiling on the maximum hours in a week, social security, pension benefits, access to severance pay, vacation, maternity leave, unemployment insurance, safety guidelines and protection against discrimination" (17). As informal labour (ILO, 1990) that is poorly (if ever) regulated by state/s and accords workers fewer rights than other categories, domestic work certainly ranks lower to every other informal category and is marginal to formal labour, and therefore offers little in terms of vertical social mobility. Domestic workers have to look elsewhere for such.

The Real Househelps therefore centers the difference that proliferates between the employees and their employers: girls and women that is. With this difference comes the use of stereotypes of exclusion and othering, which as Rombo rightly argues, are evident in the multiplicity of house help's names, among which is 'house girl' (143). Of late, other names such as '*housie'* and 'domestic manager' have been adopted to give the category a semblance of 'decency'. Consequently, much as 'she' is part of the household, the *house girl* does not (fully) belong, which status makes 'her' exceedingly vulnerable to oppression, stigmatization and discrimination. In fact, being labeled 'family', treacherously masks her stark exploitation (Rombo 143).

In short, domestic work is marginal to any other in/formal work. Following on Sánchez, what further renders domestic work marginal and subsequently leaves the workers prone to oppression and exploitation is the fact that it is gendered (or sexed) so much so that it is predominantly the province of women and girls. As Silvia Federici argues with specific focus on housework, the work has not only "been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of [their] female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of [their] female character" (16). It is therefore not "recognized as work, because it was

destined to be unwaged" (Federici 16). As such, its wages are pitiably low as it is marginal to 'work' as conventionally known.

Although Awiti also subjugates Makena, it is her interaction with Mama Sharon that is aptly provocative. Awiti, upon escape from prison, storms Mama Sharon's house to regain her position (that has been taken by Matilda) by threatening violence against Mama Sharon.[66] The conversation that ensues between Awiti and Mama Sharon demonstrates the latter's powerlessness as an employer:

> Awiti: Usijali, Mama Sharon. Hatakusumbua tena. (Don't worry, Mama Sharon. She won't disturb you again.)
> Mama Sharon: Lakini mimi ndiyo nimemwandika kazi. (But I am the one who has employed her.)
> Awiti: Yeah, wanakuwanga hivyo. Wanakusumbua, wanakusumbua; mpaka unawaandika kazi. By the way, nimerudi. (Yeah, that's how they are. They nag and nag you till you hire them. By the way, I'm back.)

Mama Sharon can only stare back in shock as Awiti resumes her position. It appears that Awiti has the choice to walk back into Mama Sharon's employ as, whenever and however she pleases. She even scoffs at Mama Sharon's offer to 'rehabilitate' her.[67]

It is while she is in Shipira's employ, however, that Awiti goes overboard. She holds Shipira to ransom for assaulting Nkirote in competition for Crotus.[68] Awiti has the audacity to don the boss's clothes and order her about just as she did with Makena.[69] She even reaches into Shipira's purse and gives herself a salary advance. Awiti literally turns the boss into her servant, making her cook and serve food of her choice.[70] Worse, Awiti orders Shipira to vacate the bedroom to make room for her. Shipira has to sleep in the kitchen on the floor. In the morning while Shipira is asleep, Awiti splashes cold water on her face to wake her up. She acts apologetic while reminding Shipira that she was once treated the same. Shipira has to break the fourth wall: she will never mistreat a house girl (that she once was) again.

Shipira's awakening accords with ideas raised in 'Auntie Boss: All dreams are valid S01E11' in which employers' and employees' roles are reversed. The point seems that oppression has no place in labour relations. If domestic servants had the opportunity, they would equally oppress

[66] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M924h-8_L8. 00:11:25-12:30.
[67] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8agcfc6Bxc. 00:06:10-07:43.
[68] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3h-ICBelU0. 00:08:58-10:03
[69] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtGDD5UIfGI. 00:01:51-052, 00:07:29-08:03.
[70] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQhm9K4dm_8. 00:00:07-01:03, 00:03:05-03:56, 00:05:55-06:41

their bosses. As Paulo Freire argues, oppression dehumanizes the oppressed and breeds violence in the oppressors. It is "the result of an unjust order", which order must be fought by the oppressed to humanize both the oppressed and the oppressor (44). However, oftentimes, the oppressed seem determined to become just as oppressive as the oppressors. Nonetheless, the fights that the house helps engage in to regain their humanity are meant to make the oppressors realize their unfairness. In the circumstances of *The Real Househelps*, the oppressed have no power to turn into oppressors, but through an aesthetics of escapism, the house helps are shown to be capable of tilting the scales against their oppressors as already seen. Oftentimes, their efforts result in softening the imperiousness of the oppressor, which unfortunately, in the words of Freire, results in a "false generosity", which perpetuates injustices against the oppressed (44).

That said, Awiti's actions are both transgressive and progressive. Her bizarre behaviour emboldens her to rally other house helps to stand together, have a voice and fight for their rights. She organizes a protest against their bosses. With her colleagues, Awiti advocates for social, health and other benefits by hinting at trade unionism as the route to social justice and better working conditions. Importantly, as Awiti shows, house helps should lead their own liberation. Inasmuch as *The Real Househelps* is fictional, it offers an invaluable critique of the ways in which government legislation seems unenforceable in the domestic sphere. In other words, the cause of house helps as championed by Awiti, for instance, would be better advanced if the government ensured the enforcement of its regulatory role of setting conditions for decent domestic work.

Intriguingly, Kenya has a legislative framework that protects domestic workers. According to Lawyer Wangu, the rights of domestic workers are protected in *Section 2* of both the *employment Act* and *Labour Relations Act* like any other employee, and a litany of other benefits such as health, pension, housing, off days, maternity and annual leaves, and provision of water and food. Significantly, domestic workers' rights to fair remuneration, reasonable working conditions and right to join or participate in the activities of a trade union are guaranteed under *Article 41 (2) of the Constitution of Kenya (CoK)* (n.p). Domestic workers working hours are regulated to 52 a week. If they work more than the 52 hours, they have to be paid overtime. Most importantly:

> The *Regulation of Wages (General) (Amendment) Order* of 2018, provides for the minimum remuneration of domestic workers based on location. Domestic workers in the cities of **Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa** ought to be paid a minimum of **Kshs. 13,572.90** per month. Those in former municipalities or town councils of **Mavoko, Ruiru and Limuru** ought to be paid a minimum of **Kshs. 12,522.70**, while those in all other areas ought to be paid a minimum of **Kshs. 7,240.95** per month excluding house allowance.

(Lawyer Wangu n.p; emphasis in the original)

There is little evidence that this provision is adhered to. As such, domestic work remains amongst the unregulated and lowest paid of labour categories, with about half of the country's domestic workers earning as little as Ksh. 3500 per month (Owidhi n.p), even less depending on the location, the employer's class and family size (Rombo 144). Although, there are a few exceptions, for example domestic workers in the employ of diplomats, expatriates, senior civil servants and/or business tycoons, domestic workers are generally underpaid. Owidhi places at a paltry 17% the number of domestic workers who earn more than the minimum wage, while those who earn between Kenya shillings seven thousand and ten thousand comprise only 22%. The organization further notes that much as domestic workers are entitled to regular wage increments like other employees, the majority (about 95%) seldom benefit from such provisions. What makes their situation worse is that their agreements are verbal, with the discretion to increase or not an employee's wages lying solely with the employer. The experiences of the house helps in *The Real Househelps* (and *Auntie Boss*) speak to this sad reality.

Fictional as it is, *The Real Househelps* provides no evidence that the house helps are paid the minimum wage as recommended by the government. Seldom are their wages even disclosed. However, Truphena and Njambi are testimony that the house helps are paid extremely exploitative wages: Ksh. 3500 and 5000 respectively. In the course of the show, Truphena's salary rises to a meagre Ksh. 6000. Trade unionism could indeed help address such oppression. The Kenya Union of Domestic, Health, Educational Institutions, Hotels and Allied workers (KUDHEIHA) is the umbrella body that houses domestic workers willing to join. It is the country's lead campaigner for ratification of ILO Convention on domestic work by the government of Kenya. The union is mandated to "organize, represent and secure interests of workers in the hotels; educational institutions; hospitals; domestic services; private homes; and churches and the institutions associated with them" (About us n.p). Among other roles, the union trains its members on laws regarding their work, fights for their rights while advocating for safe and fair labour practices as well as fostering "good industrial relation and harmony between the employers and the employees" (About us n.p). Indeed, if the workers were unionized, they would better bargain for decent terms and conditions of work.[71]

[71] Perhaps the Kenya government and KUDHEIHA ought to borrow from South Africa's enviously robust legislation and regulation of domestic work. According to Adelle Blackett and Thierry Galani Tiemeni, "After contributing

Nonetheless, Truphena and Awiti's conduct towards their employers is subversive and transgressive. As house helps, they are expected to submit to their employers in every aspect. Yet, they flip the script by becoming the *de facto* bosses. This inversion of power politicizes domestic work and employer-employee relations. Even so, the bosses to these house helps, especially Makena and Shipira are just as economically constrained as their employees. They can hardly afford the meagre wages payable to their gravely exploited employees. They are pretenders to class. Therefore, the employers and the employees in The *Real Househelps* are buying into a sensibility they can hardly afford. In postfeminist syntax, then, it is certain that not all women can wilfully perform the sensibility as it "needs a relative degree of disposable income" (Dosekun 15–16). So, it is understandable within the diegesis of the show that the employers are prone to subjugation by their employees, legitimating provocative humour, which in turn helps to transmogrify stereotypes of class.

3.4 "…Every day of my life ni madrama mob"[72]: Absurd humour in *Auntie Boss*

This section continues to explore conflictual relations between house helps and their employers. However, it shifts focus to absurd humour that is there from engendered. It argues that whereas

significantly to the development of new international labour standards on domestic work, South Africa is one of the 22 ILO Members12 that has ratified the ILO Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Domestic workers' basic rights as workers are within the ambit of mainstream labour instruments, including the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (LRA) and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, which improved the protection initially afforded to domestic workers in 1993 by recognizing employment contracts and the particulars of employment and termination, regulating working time, and stipulating minimum leave periods. Domestic workers are entitled to employment discrimination protection, and coverage for skills development and training. Social protection, through unemployment insurance legislation, provides coverage for maternity leave. South African jurisprudence evenextends the scope of legal employment protection to workers with irregular immigration status; this jurisprudence has considerable potential in a sector in which cross-border migrants constitute a sizeable proportion of the workforce. Mostly, the landmark, specific regulatory text embodied in South Africa's Sectoral Determination No. 7 of 2002 on domestic workers, and established under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, was largely expected to introduce and implement labour market transformations into the domestic sector. The framework is embedded in the institutional structure of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), which offers an innovative mechanism that aims to render labour dispute resolution accessible to a range of low wage workers, including domestic workers.20 That institution has the concrete potential to disrupt and contribute to the redress of the asymmetrical relationship between domestic workers and employers, at least incrementally, on a case-by-case basis, as well as shape broader public consciousness" (5–6)

[72] https://youtu.be/OJMrB7gQ6Zk. Sheng for 'Every day of my life is full of drama'. It is part of the show's theme song: "You call me Ms. Mboch. Ukienda zako najiweka boss. Mimi boss. Sina lonely life. Nina happy times; every day of my life ni madrama mob. Usinione sina class. Naishi kama star. Shughuli nyingi kwa hii mtaa; kama love na pia raha." It sums up the show's concerns thus: much as she is disparaged as a maid (mboch), the house help is the self-installed boss, particularly in the absence of the employer. She has no lonely life as might be assumed but happy

the humour is occasioned by acts that are bizarre and offensive to sense and sensibility, it is not without a progressive politics that oftentimes inverts power relations, enabling the interrogation of hegemonic discourses and structures that impede the empowerment of the marginalized and liberation of the oppressed.

According to Holm, absurd humour "arises in the breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability, social function and good sense, and even aesthetic form and narrative consistency" (150). The humour does not necessarily abandon "every day regimes of sense and meaning" (150). Rather, it contravenes acceptable standards of decorum and behaviour, abandoning "less tightly held but more stringently obeyed laws of science and nature, drama and form, deduction and inference" (149). Therefore, it could be seen as not necessarily the humour of unreality and the nonsensical, but that of probability and senselessness, irrationality and/or illogicality that "stretches the boundary of credulity, comprehension and coherence. It is the humour of that which is not expected to happen, indeed *should* not happen (in a formal rather than ethical sense) but does happen regardless" (166; italics in the original). The humour thus "breaks from rules and logics that are typically understood to be true and immutable" (Holm 149), making it humour of the incredible, even falsity and/or untruth.

Whereas in Holm's conception this contravention does not include the moral and ethical, perhaps because he deals exclusively with animated comedy in which only sense is offended, in my case both sense and sensibility are offended since moral and ethical codes are oftentimes broken. As Holm appropriately observes, following on Paul Wells, the cartoon, because of its artifice, enables much more convenient bending and breaking of laws of nature—with the animated text holding less force with its subversions and disruptions of regular conventions than is the case with "straightforward capture and representation of existing external reality" (151) such as is the case in *Auntie Boss*, a mediated real life comedy.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that *Auntie Boss* has a 'generic' resemblance to the medium of cartoons in that its lead characters do behave in cartoon-like manner. In my view, it seems fitting to choose house helps as subjects of absurd humour since they are often characterized in popular media and through stereotypes as simpletons who readily obey their employers without complaint.

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times, with her every day filled with lots of drama. She should not be seen as lacking in class as she lives like a star and has lots of preoccupations in the neighborhood such as the pursuit of love and pleasure.

Such characterization accords with Rombo's apt observation that "[g]ood house helps are those who keep busy and quiet" (144). However, the house helps in *Auntie Boss* are nonconformist, and enact transgression in unrealistic and unbelievable ways. I would contend that their actions conform to 'settled' conceptions as captured in stereotypes about them. Correspondingly, their bosses exercise incredible tolerance towards their 'stupidity'.

Conceptually, the plot and narrative logics of *Auntie Boss* revolve around its theme song, which underscores the neoliberal subject/ivity that the house help is: self-managing, autonomous and disposed to choice in spite of the odds that circumscribe her life. In other words, the house help—also known as auntie—in *Auntie Boss* is not only a boss unto herself, but also acts as a boss to her employer, and like the auntie in the *Real Househelps*—it could be argued—she is 'real' to her calling as the *de facto* house manager who controls everything and everyone in the household.

Additionally, the house help contests her prescribed identity, seeing herself as the 'real' boss, especially when the employer is away. The flipside to this construction, however, is that she is in reality the servant in the boss's presence. Nevertheless, true to the show's theme song, the house help attempts to transcend her ascribed narrow prescription of circumscription, thereby embodying a postfeminist neoliberalism transcendent of external pressures and influence. In other words, as "an active, freely choosing [and] self-reinventing" subject (Gill and Scharff 7), the house help is so individualized as an agent that she disregards the conventional hierarchies of employer-employee and instead fabricates her own reflexive biography, "'becoming the author of […] her own life" (Henderson and Taylor 59). This seamlessly accords with post/modernity's "process of subject formation" of the self that Marnina Gonick fittingly puts thus:

> As a reflexive and self-conscious biography project, the "self" becomes a produced and reflected-upon entity replacing prescribed roles and futures. This process is accompanied by an intensification of […] a "social surge of individualization". Referring paradoxically to both individualism and the obligation "to standardize your own existence" in line with the imperatives of the labour market […] individualization involves an increasing tendency to self-monitor, so that "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves". (190)

That is why, in the logics of docusoap, the house help indulges in gossipy interactions in the neighborhood that keep her distracted from her employer's prescribed roles and attendant attitudes in order to keep the narrative of the show going in soap opera fashion: that is to say, full of sentimentality and melodrama. This is not to mean that she is oblivious of the reality of her constrained life. She is well aware that despite any power she might have or can claim, she is still,

by all means, a house help—a working-class woman—and not her employer's boss. This can be discerned in interactions with fellow house helps, lovers and friends that are revelatory of the power dynamics that obtain between her and her employer, which signal her disenfranchisement in the skewed relationship. She is indeed the boss (of her life) only when her boss is away.

This is an obvious contradiction, yet it well corresponds to the contradictions that go with postfeminism and neoliberalism in the fashioning of one's life as an active freely choosing, rational and calculating self-realized subject who must align herself with "the ethic of autonomous selfhood [that] demands new ways of planning life and approaching predicaments and novel procedures for understanding oneself and acting upon oneself to overcome dissatisfactions, realize one's potential, gain happiness and achieve autonomy" (Gonick 190). Thus, this posturing, as it were, affords the house help a semblance of freedom and happiness that resonates with the demands of the market and pressures of peers in neoliberal and postfeminist times. As I argue further on, such pomposity, inasmuch as it does not liberate the house help from her obvious oppression, it is vital in inverting normative power relations through dramedy's ethos, and thereby addresses serious issues lightheartedly.

Auntie Boss opens with Vanessa, a flight attendant, impatiently waiting for the arrival of a new house help or 'msichana wa kazi' ('the girl who works') from upcountry before she leaves for work. The house help happens to be naïve Shiru, depicted as ignorant and unschooled in city ways. Vanessa gives her a raft of instructions, but she does not clearly explain what needs to be done. For example, one of the instructions is to do the laundry. It appears that amongst the dirty laundry are disposable diapers, which Shiru has apparently never seen. So, she washes the diapers and hangs them to dry on the hedge alongside the (other) laundry.[73] Rihanna, the house help next door, is perplexed and informs her that diapers are disposable nappies. Whereas Shiru's action is incredulous, in her world and that of *Auntie Boss*, it is in order owing to her origins and experience as a rural immigrant. In fact, the episode sets the stage for lots of absurdities that Shiru and the other house helps are to execute as the show unfolds.

Whatever Shiru and her counterparts do is meant to anchor them in city ways even as they strive to improve and write their own biographies in line with the ethos of the docusoap. Often, their actions and utterances veer into the nonsensical and the absurd, calling upon the audience to

[73] See clip in footnote 72.

suspend disbelief by buying into the show's diegesis of dramedy in order that neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities are articulated. To invoke the language of Holm, *Auntie Boss* dabbles "in the realm of the absurd [through] a broad deviation from expected behaviour that strains the limits of credulity and sense, but is played as straight within the show's diegetic world" (154). Otherwise expressed, although the events of the show occasionally break the rules of believability vis-à-vis the viewer's experiential quotidian, the events are credible within the narrative frame of the show, whereby it is the house help who is the *de facto* boss of the household. This transgression serves to politicize the banal of the quotidian in the domestic realm, thus offending sense and sensibility.

The offense of sense, I contend, underscores "the different ways in which [absurd] humour re-interprets life, politics and art" (Holm 151). The reinterpretations are in line with my understanding of an aesthetics of escapism in that they communicate deeper meanings in the manner of 'just for laughs'. I give prominence to Shiru, whose depiction is not only emblematic of absurd humour, but also at the forefront of upsetting employee/employer norms. Shiru's cluelessness leads her into doing and saying the most ludicrous of things that not only shock her boss beyond belief but also certainly stun the audience.

In S10E129B, for instance, Shiru admits to Vanessa some of the misdemeanors she has committed in her (Vanessa's) household: bringing men into the house, giving away Vanessa's old clothes, reading her diary'.[74] Further, Shiru discloses to Vanessa's incredulity that in the diary she read 'only' the bit about Maingi and Vanessa's romantic involvement with multiple men. Shiru's actions contravene the 'unwritten' code of conduct for house helps. Confessing her misbehavior is in complete contravention of good sense as it is self-incriminating.[75] . Indeed, Shiru has hosted the ex-boyfriend, Kamau Smart (Kasmart), in Vanessa's house under Vanessa's own nose. The diminutive Kasmart has slept in Kyle's bed impersonating Kyle, with Shiru all the while acting cleverly to cover up everything.[76] Shiru's behaviour should alarm Vanessa. Yet, all Vanessa does is marvel at Shiru's antics. Silly as they are, the antics are credible in the diegesis of the show: the *auntie boss* is in charge and smarter than her employer who least suspects her deeds until a mishap happens. Therefore, Shiru gets away with the most senseless of mischiefs.

[74] https://youtu.be/kU186CFUvU8. 00:00:06-01:40
[75] As one Josphine opines on YouTube, "But for real. How can someone be this dumb? Moonbeam production took the acting a bit too far."
[76] https://youtu.be/wljL65kqYvc. 00:00:46-05:32

In other words, Shiru is in control of much more of the goings on in Vanessa's household than Vanessa (will ever know): she is indeed the boss, and this not only offends sense but does upset the stereotype that house helps, in general, are ignorant and that Shiru, in particular, is clueless. Intriguingly, Shiru seems to know what is best for Vanessa (and Kyle) more than Vanessa herself does. She believes Shiru and Kyle need a man in the household and subsequently initiates the process of finding her a husband without consulting her. Unbeknownst to Vanessa, Shiru advertises the position and proceeds to conduct auditions in Vanessa's living room.[77] Lionel, a professional actor, seems the ideal man. Shiru proceeds to institute a slimming diet for Vanessa in order that she matches the trim Lionel. To make her scheme work, Shiru scandalizes Lionel before his girlfriend, Sophie, making her leave him.[78] Additionally, Shiru employs absurd pranks to keep every other man away from Vanessa.[79] While at these schemes, Shiru has the audience cleverly recruited as 'knowing' co-conspirators (as happens in *The Real Househelps*) without breaking the fourth wall. Simply put, her actions approximate dramatic irony in that the audience is wittingly privy to her actions and intentions to which her fellow characters are oblivious. Once she has Lionel and Vanessa dating, Shiru monitors and patronizes the relationship, literally steering its direction and pace, always reminding the two that they are indebted to her.[80]

To this end, Shiru's actions offend sense to incredulous levels that reduce her employer to a manipulable object in her own house and relationship with Lionel. She is—to all intents and purposes—the boss, 'panel-beating' Vanessa into the shape she desires. For that reason, contrary to being stereotyped as ignorant, ill-informed and clueless, Shiru is more discerning than her

[77] https://youtu.be/HvmITF97YbI. 00:03:30-03:52, 00:08:54-10:10

[78] https://youtu.be/9gSaVZCmYA0. 00:00:06-03:02. Shiru gets to Lionel's place in the morning while he and Sophie are about to leave for church. She tags Kyle along, and alleges that Lionel is the father. She accuses him of having neglected them. She is even carrying another baby of his. She further alleges that Lionel has seven more children within the neighbourhood, and even an older one in form four. Her aim is to bring in Vanessa whom she hopes that Lionel courts. She leaves her (Vanessa's) picture and her physical address with Lionel for convenient contact.

[79] https://youtu.be/XZb8e20Xc14. 00:02:54-04:08, 00:07:02-08:52, 00:11:25-12:37. Shiru in the company of Kyle sneaks into Lionel's house in the morning to 'steal' some of his clothes and pictures with which to terrorize Vanessa's suitors.

[80] https://youtu.be/s9XnXQ1VD9o. 00:05:02-07:57, 00:10:50-12:40. When Vanessa feels discomfited by Shiru's behaviour of hugging them when Lionel comes knocking, she absurdly points out that she knows she poses a threat to Vanessa's position in the relationship. She, however, reminds Vanessa that Lionel is not her type. She prefers bald, potbellied monied men. No sooner has Shiro left them to their devices to go attend to her chores, than she gets back on hearing they are going out. She has a suggestion on where they should go: a 'kibandasky' – a local cheap eatery. She will not let them go out alone after all her labours of bringing them together. She dashes off to go fetch Kyle so as to accompany them on their date. They dodge her and Kyle, only for her to sneak up to them in the restaurant with the child.

employer, and will do anything to ensure her 'happiness' by partnering her with a single man (of her—Shiru's—own choice!). Implicitly, such actions shield Shiru from being fired, terrible as she is at her job as a house help. Meanwhile, she is kept and exploited on the pretext of being 'good' with Kyle. Importantly though, her conduct is as absurd as it is upsetting to employer-employee norms.

Silprosa and Ndinda behave similarly in their dealings with their bosses, only Silprosa's employer is male. Ndinda will not be rebuked for reporting back to duty late in the night, drunk.[81] She admonishes her boss for taking too long to open the door for her. Ndinda wants to know if the boss has spared her supper. She will not leave the house early in the morning as directed and will, instead, work till the end of month to earn her full pay. In the evening, when the boss raises her voice at her, Ndinda reprimands her, reminding her that she is well versed in contractual matters and will only leave upon termination of her services or notice thereto. She leans back unperturbed and continues enjoying her television programme. When the boss leaves the house, coming back with an apparently tougher reinforcement, Ndinda shoves them off, beats both up and throws them out, slamming the door. She will only allow them back with her pay in hand.[82]

Such power inversions are absurd, much like Shiru's. They comprise what Holm terms as parallel absurdity: "a collection of absurdities that accompany and riff upon a central narrative, but do not compound one another" (158). In the diegesis of the show though, the actions of the house helps do not come off as absurd. They are spawned by the provocative actions of the bosses and therefore address "political and social realities" and are aimed at retributive justice. Importantly, Ndinda and Silprosa's acts destabilize the stereotypical relations between house helps and their bosses, and thereby advance a progressive politics that speaks to positioning and positionality. As Rosaura Sánchez—professor of Latin American and Chicano literature and postpositivist theorist of identity—contends, social positioning occasions an awareness or reflexivity in relation to a particular state of socio-political and economic affairs (38). This positioning is often antagonistic or disjunctive to other positionings and "may lead to complicity or a conciliatory compromise with given social structures and perhaps to a desire to maintain the status quo, or it may lead to transformative practices" (38). This "reflexivity, understanding of, or subjective relation to social location" which she terms positionality "is ideological […] and discursive and may be contingent

[81] https://youtu.be/TOoioGHhv7c. 00:00:45-02:13.
[82] https://youtu.be/hwGy3AVNQlM. 00:01:08-02:37, 00:05:41-06:24, 00:09:2-09:29

upon other factors, other complementary or competing discourses, not specifically implicated by one's social location". It is "a useful diagnostic construct as it enables one to better understand why individuals sharing similar or even the same positioning do not *live* their situation in the same way" (38; italics in the original). Therefore, "[o]ne's positionality is […] conditioned, but not strictly determined, by one's social positioning" (38). It is "always at variance with other positionalities, including one's own on other issues, as one's perspectives are always multiple, contradictory, and, […] constantly in a state of flux, renegotiating themselves in the face of changing realities" (38–39). Sánchez further argues that "discursive insufficiency", that is, the explanatory inadequacy produced by an awareness of contradictions between one's reality and the available (hegemonic) discourses, occasion an interrogation of that reality and the discourses. Several outcomes are possible: "questioning, resignation, accommodation, complicity, or disillusionment" (Sanchez 43). Nearly all these outcomes are manifested in *Auntie Boss*, but it is questioning that seems more productive.

More importantly, contends Sánchez, the cognitive disjuncture between an individual's positioning and positionality is "politically productive" and "can give rise to a critical assessment of hegemonic ideologies" (39). Such a disjuncture between hegemonic discourses and the realities of class (and gender) differences can lead to identification with one's category and disidentification with forces of domination (39). Sánchez defines identification as "a relational and discursive process that is always linked to a group or collectivity that is contained within a particular social space" (40). She contends that conditions for identification are created by "socio-spatial distribution of collectivities" on "the basis of distinctive groupings." Thus, identification is groupist rather than individualist as it "designates individuals as part of a whole." For this matter, discourses of identification are engendered by collectivities of socio-spatial and structural positionings of social actors (Sánchez 40).

Concurrently, identification implies disidentification with another or other collectivities because of inherent contradictions between them. In other words, disidentification equals a non-identification with or a negation of particular social groups or actors. In my case, the moment house helps realize the power imbalances existent between them and their employers, they identify with each other as house helps and disidentify with their bosses. The descriptors 'house help' or 'auntie' are thus imposed from without, ascribed to them as women who serve others in the household. They could choose to identify with it, hence identification from within, or devise their

own. They choose to call themselves *bosses.* All in all, their ability to act begins at an individual level and often morphs into the collective. It thus helps that in *Auntie Boss* (just as in *The Real Househelps*) the majority of the house helps are women. As gendered and sexed workers, therefore, they have an identity that "equips [them] discursively to relate to the world, to make sense of [their] social positioning, [in order] to further [an agential] agenda" (Sánchez 42).

When the house helps in *Auntie Boss* discover that power relations in their relationships with their bosses are skewed to their disadvantage, they begin to critically assess and question the imbalances. In Sánchez's words, "[t]he dialectical connection between positioning and positionality is […] crucial for an understanding of agency" (Sánchez 42). In consequence, coupled with positionality, the house helps desire to transform their circumstances as domestic workers. As Sánchez argues, the interconnectedness of gender and class "conditions agency and shapes social relations, enabling or constraining possibilities" (36). Thus, "it is quite understandable that those positioned in oppressive and/or exploitative locations should seek to improve their situation by whatever means possible" (Sánchez 36). Therefore, inasmuch as the agential actions of the house helps do not necessarily bring about parity with the latter due to the obvious constraints occasioned by underlying socio-structural mechanisms (which are difficult to otherwise order), they are aimed at achieving fairness. To this end, it is unsurprising that the house help in *Auntie Boss* (just as in *The Real Househelps*) seldom conforms to the stereotypical behaviour of submission to the employer. She is subversive as she is inversive of normative power relations.

Yet, her stereotype-transmogrificatory protestations concern class differentiation. Class, as Sánchez argues, "is not merely a "discourse" or a "narrative" but a "concrete social positioning" (36). It comes with power differentials. Much as positioning is relational and in flux as is with Shipira in *The Real Househelps* and as enacted in 'Dreams are valid' as seen above, it seems certain that the experiences of the house helps, though mediated, are representative of the oppression that this category of workers undergoes in the private spaces of households. As such, Silvia Federici argues elsewhere that housework is not a job like any other. It is "the most pervasive manipulation, and the subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class" (16). The meagre wages that the house helps are afforded are merely used to mask the exploitation that their labour entails. Luckily, for the majority of the house helps in *Auntie Boss*, it does not take them long to realize they are unfairly treated at their posts. They soon discover that

they are grossly manipulated, their personhood violated and their labour exploited. In consequence, they institute transgressive action.

Yet, as human beings deserving of dignity, the house helps would want to portray the false, impressionistic image that they are better paid and, hence, accorded decency. Thus, each tries to prove that they are better off than the other. That is why oftentimes they deride one another with regard to their remuneration. What seems lost on them is that they share a similar predicament inasmuch as they may not experience it in the same way. The crux is that whatever the differences that abound in their job experiences, they are all marginalized, oppressed and exploited. Thus, theirs are similar oppressive and exploitative circumstances differently experienced on the margins of society.

Consequently, I contend that house helps are oppressed and exploited not because they are individuals, but because they are domestic workers: members of a marginalized group of labourers. It is their marginal category as domestic workers that attracts or makes them susceptible to marginalization and oppression and the attendant exploitation. As Bridget Anderson argues, in the unequal exchange of domestic labour where the domestic worker is differently constructed—"degraded, dirty", it is 'her' personhood rather than her labour power that the employer attempts to buy (2). Thus degraded, she is marginalized and oppressed, and is therefore compelled to revolt.

Thus, whereas enough of the revolts witnessed in *Auntie Boss* and *The Real Househelps* are fantastical, often with debilitating and undesirous results that least change the plight of the house helps, the transgressions are significant insofar as politicizing the oppressions in the domestic realm for possible public debate and appropriate interventions. Postmodern humour that enables the transgressions thus strengthens the aesthetics of escapism, thereby addressing realistic concerns. Reading the show/s as dramedy should speak to these grave realities in a comical manner that leaves the audiences in stitches, yet awakened to the fact that every Kenyan, irrespective of their station in life, is deserving of fair labour practices.

Besides offending sense, the absurd humour of *Auntie Boss* often offends sensibility. Varshita in her bizarre dealings with Donovan is at the forefront of such offense. Varshita is Donovan's self-declared fiancée, who oftentimes calls herself Mrs. Donovan, and occasionally wants to be addressed so. She has been dating him for seven years (up to season 12). She self-describes as a 'hot Indian goddess' and 'supermodel', whom Donovan is lucky to have, and cannot live without. She lives in a self-delusional bubble that she wishes to bring to everyone's attention as she

luxuriates in the false glamour. She claims to have been all over the world on modelling and pleasure tours, with her image gracing many top world fashion magazine covers. She has achieved none of these feats. Her pretensions are thus ludicrous and laughable. Yet, preposterous as her actions are, they make lots of sense within the frames of docusoap and dramedy. Nonetheless, her pursuit of all the elusive glamour that the actions entail bruises so many hearts (and bodies), with Donovan's suffering the most.

I contend that Varshita embodies incredulous insensitivity in her deluded 'supermodel' lifestyle and pursuit of Donovan's elusive hand in marriage, and in a way conforms to what Holm refers to analogically as 'serial absurdity', which is in contradistinction to 'parallel absurdity'. As Holm writes, serial absurdity occurs "when later absurdities build upon the logic of earlier ones, in such a manner that they compound themselves" (158). The serial absurdity of Varshita's, like that of *South Park*, "draws closer to the historical-philosophical meaning of the absurd as a disavowal of all meaning in the universe given form through the absolute triumph of meaninglessness" (Holm 158).

Therefore, Varshita's world, like that of *South Park,* (at least superficially) comes through as a "bizarre, vicious and disordered place where the concerns and conflicts, fears and desires that give life meaning are revealed to be at their root irrational and meaningless" (Holm 158). I say 'superficially' because that is how the absurdity seems at a cursory glance. Yet a more in-depth analysis reveals that it could have ideologically underlying motivations bearing in mind that Varshita's peculiar actions towards the man she claims to intensely love are not in the least affectionate. Nonetheless, to begin with, Varshita literally 'snatched' Donovan from her best friend; an instance that marks out her actions as offensive of sensibility at the very outset.[83] Whereas Varshita would want everyone to believe that she and Donovan are deeply in love, the fact of the matter is that she is obsessed with him, and her heartless, mean and often atrocious actions are meant to manipulate him.

[83] https://youtu.be/Ax-s73m8-20. 00:00:05-02:15, 00:05:47-08:55. Varshita is hanging out with her friend whom she considers overweight. Donovan has an eye for the friend and approaches their table to take her number after buying them whine that Varshita 'distastes'. Varshita thinks it is her Donovan is after. While Donovan is on a date with the said friend, Varshita sneaks upto them, with a keen eye on Donovan. She begins to stalk him. One morning, Donovan is jogging with the friend when Varshita tricks him into a race, leading him to his house in which she locks Donovan and herself, in effect locking out the friend. This seems to mark the beginning of Donovan's emasculation and lack of agency, or in transgressive vocabulary, his agency. That is to mean, whereas Varshita pigeoholes him to slender women, Donovan chooses the overweight, or in politically incorrect language, the fat woman. Contradictorily, however, Donovan is ultimately tied to the slender woman from whom he seems unable to escape.

Firstly, though, Varshita's actions and utterances comprise serial absurdity. Her senselessly jumbled tale of how Donovan sustained his incapacitating injuries seem taken straight from the fantastical world of movies.[84] It is a tale that she uses to hide the fact that she ran over Donovan (with her car presumably), resulting in the loss of his memory. She 'marries' him in bandanges while he is in the ICU in the name of jogging his memory as advised by the doctor. The hospital stuff incredulous but plays along anyway (S11E135B)[85]. She once faked pregnancy to trick Donovan into marriage (S07E79A)[86], a pregnancy they had to 'carry together', and even practice pushing/'birthing' together. He alone among women (S06E73A).[87] She blames him for breaking up with him, terming him heartless and a backstabber. She wonders who would let go of a hot, loving, kind and gorgeous girlfriend like her. To Varshita, Donavan is not only crazy, but must be mentally sick. After the break up, Varshita comes back under the name of Vartisha, her supposed twin sister (S07E90A)[88] and Sharvita, 'another twin' (as she ridiculously puts it) of the two (S07E90B),[89] thus compounding the absurdity. When Jonathan, Donovan's friend at the university during his studentship days, comes with a package with remedies to Donovan's condition, Varshita jumps at it as her gift. She lies to Jonathan that if Donovan recovered his memory, it could lead to traumatic shock syndrome or even death. She is eager to go partying with him, and together they leave, leaving Donovan alone to his misery.[90] Even the physiotherapist is shocked that Donovan is worse than he was when he left the hospital.[91] Varshita, while gagging and bandaging him the more to the physiotherapist's shock, claims that Donovan is always getting involved in accident after accident. Unfeelingly, she wants to know the level of pain Donovan will experience on a scale of 1–10.[92] She even advises the physiotherapist not to have Donovan exercise a lot as he

[84] https://youtu.be/R3cJmRozzO0. 00:08:38-11:11
[85] https://youtu.be/6yEnpKK4saE. 00:05:19-07:04, 00:11:17-13:34
[86] https://youtu.be/5AO0Oliutp0. 00:00:35:04:58
[87] https://youtu.be/ToLk_4qLtLA. 00:04:07-06:32. All the women are pregnant. First, Donovan will have nothing of the pushing 'nonsense', but capitulates to Varshita's hysterics.
[88] https://youtu.be/1OXhjtvuNrw. 00.05:50-09:02. As Varisha and Varshita's twin sister, Varshita loves Donovan and feels he is her husband too. Donovan reminds 'Vartisha' that he and Varshita were never married. Donovan would like to see her before she is buried, but he won't as Varshita was buried two days ago. India is three days behind Kenya, or so Donovan is reminded. Donovan received over 60 missed calls from her the other night. For wishing to see Varshita one last time, Donovan is presented with her 'ashes' in a bottle.
[89] https://youtu.be/uGstj10wiXs. 00:01:46-04:29. As Vartisha, she knows of the stain in Donovan's bedroom. When Donovan rejects her advances, she says she could just die again, to Donovan's shock. She wants to stay just one night. What Amos finds the car's trunk are Varshita's bags.
[90] https://youtu.be/rqMVXobr8gc. 00:00:30-02:43, 00:06:48-08:33 [check the font]
[91] https://youtu.be/Iw9Qiq9IoH8. 00:02:20-.05:01, 00:07:48-09:22.
[92] https://youtu.be/wljL65kqYvc. 00:02:26-03:43, 00:07:25-08:37

should not walk too soon. While the physiotherapist attends to Donovan, Varshita peeps through the chinks in the door, barges into the room interrupting the therapy, screams at the physiotherapist and throws her out, marking the end of Donovan's physiotherapy sessions. When Donovan is diagnosed with a terminal disease and is said to have only a few weeks to live, Varshita cannot wait for a prescription because there is not much time for him to marry her. Since Donovan will soon be dead, Varshita cannot hide her impatience to inherit his property.[93] She callously hires people to come to the house to plan for Donovan's casket and burial apparel.[94]

This series of absurdities attests to Varshita's vanity, deception and cruelty. They result in Donovan's agony, ceasing to evoke humour as standardly conceived. The absurdity is too excessive and therefore undercuts any underlying explanation at causality. Varshita appears to just torment Donovan for the sake of generating 'bizarre' humour, which, to appropriate Holm's words, makes absurd humour susceptible to "the threat of disintegrating into nonsense – that which literally makes no sense and is therefore beyond meaningful interpretation – by virtue of its defiance of basic, shared social codes of understanding" (166–67). What makes Varshita's antics worse is that they seem to go against any conceivable moral or ethical sense. In fact, they reek of sheer heartlessness. It is unsurprising that some members of the audience express sustained dislike and disdain at her actions. Others opine that the show would be better off without her (and Donovan). Still others confess to forwarding the videos whenever Varshita appears. Just as many reject the plausibility of her (and Donovan's) behaviour.[95] The frustration of such members is understandable because as Holm argues in his formulation:

> Indeed, absurdity often verges close to what could be thought of as 'silliness' and there is always the chance with the absurd mode of humour that—when faced with what can appear as unintelligible juxtapositions and random digressions—some members of the audience will reject the text as meaningless, rather than as comic. This threat of meaninglessness ensures that this mode of humour works in different manner from uncomfortable or offensive humour. *It operates on a more deeply ideological level that addresses not codes of behaviour, but base assumptions about the structural conditions of cultural meaning (and maybe even physical nature of the world*). As a consequence, such humour involves much greater demands upon the audience to commit to a text's particular internal comic-aesthetic logics and fluid sense of causality by which such texts construct their comic meaning. (167; italics mine)

[93] https://youtu.be/VtZKWzbpt3Y. 00:02:54-05:27
[94] https://youtu.be/JKn53RNSrvk. 00:03:55-05:41
[95] See the comments thread at https://youtu.be/VSy1JBDDY7g

In other words, the humour requires much more cognitive effort to comprehend than do the uncomfortable and provocative forms because it appeals more to the intellectual than the affective domain, especially when applied to (mediated) real life comedy, such as *Auntie Boss.* Were the show animated, perhaps such outrage would not be expected as the transgressions such as committed by Varshita would be standard in that world. The outrage of some members of the audience is thus understandable as such absurdity offends sensibility.

However, such members ought to understand—as they are implicitly urged by the more perceptive—in Holm's words, that "the deviation from the formal and narrative rules that define absurdity occurs at the level of the text, rather than the level of character" (Holm 169). Thus, actions like those taken by Varshita constitute an "unrelenting opposition to social, cultural and formal norms [and] function to undermine any sense of textual stability: it transforms both formal conventions and diegetic expectations from rigorous rules to optional guidelines" (Holm 169). Perhaps, if the producers wanted to "reprehend this deviation", as Holm observes in relation to *The Simpsons* and *South Park,* they should have made use of the fourth-wall breaking technique (to offer explanation as happens in *The Real Househelps*).

Be it as it may, *Auntie Boss* foregrounds Varshita as agentic. She inverts power relations in a heteronormative relationship in patriarchal Kenya. Whereas it was Indian men who exploited and dominated Africans in colonial times where they were accorded privilege by the whites, and so, harboured a sub-imperialist and 'civilizational' sentiment towards Africans that fuelled their superior race consciousness (Aiyar 254), here it is Varshita—a woman—who reigns over the black African male in independent Kenya. She is determined to keep him and will not let anyone come close to him. She even wants to marry him at the point of death. As a member of a minority race and marginalized gender, her subduing of Donovan is transgressive of norms. What is even more intriguing is that she conquers Donovan with his own resources, in his own house as a stay-home self-declared fiancée—not wife. She even demands to be paid, given end-year bonuses for staying at home, doing nothing but oppressing Donovan and black male Kenyan servants, and treating everyone black who knocks at Donovan's door as a domestic in search of a job. Worse, when she chooses to exploit them beyond Donovan's house—at her house—or engage them from the bureau, they are not allowed to ride in her car. They have to either run or take public transport and get to the destination before she does. She consigns them to the kitchen, demeans and even bars them from using her toilet, touching any of her stuff and eating any of her delicacies, contrary to which

they are threatened with death. Insensitive as these acts are, they still evoke an absurd sense of humour that keeps the men subjugated.

Yet, her shenanigans to keep the man she is obsessed with—who seems reluctant to marry her— seem to speak to the larger Indian community enterprise to lay claim to their territorial home to whose economic prosperity they greatly contributed with little acknowledgement and for which they have been reduced to the minority and "nonindigenous [status] in perpetuity" (Aiyar 230). The resultant humour thus "operates on a more deeply ideological level that addresses not codes of behaviour, but base assumptions about the structural conditions of cultural meaning" (Holm 167). Consequently, Varshita cannot allow herself to be impregnated without sanctified union in the form of a *proper* marriage. Her absurd conduct appears geared towards securing her and, perhaps, her community's place in the country. To this thesis, therefore, her comportment and zeal for such 'filial attachment' to her territorial home—Kenya— away from her civilizational one—India— seems paramount. It could be argued that the minority and the majority need to merge in the mutual communion of Kenyanness. Perhaps it is time to dismantle the racial ideologies of colonialism in order to foster a Kenyan society that is blind to race; hence, humane, more united, richer and visionary.

Therefore, the significance of Donovan/Varshita transgression cannot be understated. It reveals that there is a generation of Kenyans of African and Indian descent willing and daring to cross the racial line despite resistance from their kin. Varshita turns down her parents' choice from Punjab for Donovan. It could be argued that she is exercising a postfeminist sensibility in neoliberal times that allows such transgression. Yet she cannot do it wholesale for fear of her conservative parents, which is why she has never been open with them on the relationship and therefore, on her mother's visit, forces Donovan to wear Njoroge's clothes to act as her house help in order to keep the relationship under cover. It is intriguing that Donovan capitulates. It would seem that he is manipulable and yet to extricate himself from the closet into which colonial times consigned him and his kind. As such, it is least surprising to see Donovan placed on a spinach and tomato diet to get him into the shape that Varshita wishes. Such comedic rendering notwithstanding, it seems certain that such romantic Afro-Indian relationships as Varshita/Donovan's cannot be practised openly, let alone flourish, unless socio-cultural, structural and ideological changes are instituted and reinforced. In other words, whereas it might be fashionable in postfeminist and neoliberal

times to freely choose a man, it remains a matter of intrigue as to "what [such defiance] does ideologically and performatively" (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 12).

Nonetheless, Varshita and Donovan's endeavour is a significant development towards actualizing such unions. Their sheer attempt at miscegenation seems to attest to the need to dismantle atavistic ideological stances. Still, for such unions to succeed, utmost good faith seems paramount. Nevertheless,

> The absurd mode of humour makes the stability and certainty of textual normality appear fragile and, through force of sheer repetition, absurdity can introduce doubt into the dominant logics of causality and narrative. This process works to stretch the foreseeable limits of comic doubt, such that audiences become more able and willing to interpret more and more extreme deviations from cultural norms as possible sites of humour rather than nonsense. This constantly shifting, autophagic movement of absurdity illustrates how humour can act as an everexpanding and evolving aesthetic logic that constantly pushes against the audience's capacity and desire to make sense of scenarios and narratives that push existing limits of sense: which is to say, absurdity thereby trains audiences to find comic meaning in nonsense which is thereby reinterpreted as absurd humour. (Holm 169–70).

To this end, Varshita's actions feed into the overall diegetic frame of *Auntie Boss,* where the subordinated become and/or act superior, subjugating the normatively superior. Analogically, in democratic terms, then, Varshita is the minority that subordinates the majority, with Donovan acting as her foil. Her postfeminist sensibility and neoliberal inclinations are just absurdly humorous as they are contradictory. She harbours a conservative heteronormativity, which compels her to use a fake pregnancy so as to marry Donovan.

Tellingly, Varshita abhors conception and birthing as they would dent her 'hot' and 'sexy' body, besides apparently offending her racial sensibilities. As a postfeminist subject/ivity, Varshita conceives of femininity as a body property. Hence, in Gill's conception, Varshita is in perpetual "[self-]monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness" (149). Ostensibly, her power derives from her body, which she is determined to exploit to keep Donovan tethered to her. She cannot fathom the appearance of stretch marks on her skin.[96] She is always doing her nails, touching up her make-up, demanding 100 brush strokes to her hair and craving massages. Enough of these conscious efforts at self-improvement are meant to attract and keep Donovan's (male)

[96] https://youtu.be/IFP2jl1RI34. 00:09:05-11:02

gaze, and thereby serve to reassert sexual difference. Therefore, as Gill argues, following on McRobbie, it is "interesting [how women] seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity. They choose, for example, white weddings, downsizing, giving up work or taking their husband's name on marriage" (Gill 162). Varshita is a caricature of such choices, wholly dependent on Donovan as a stay-at-home self-declared fiancée, yet acting as an accomplished glamorous woman, at least on the surface for the whole world to see, in spite of constraining reality. In my vocabulary vis-à-vis McRobbie's axiom (Preface xi), she is just Donovan's *girl* not woman (of the household).

Vanessa might not be as absurd in her appeal (to men) as Varshita, but she does not seem to be capable of doing without them either. Her alleged engagement with up to nine men since Maingi left seems to speak to this. Whereas she might be freely choosing them to please herself, Shiru soon reminds her that she is inadequate without a *permanent* man by her side (just like Varshita). Shiru has to get her jogging in order to match the ever-exercising, trim Lionel. What emerges is an antagonism between feminism and anti-feminism in that whereas women act or want to seem autonomous, free-choosing and empowered, even self-pleasing, they seem to be gliding back to pre-feminist notions by doing everything possible to appeal to men. They exhibit the contradictions that come with postfeminism by objectifying themselves yet wanting to appear as freely desiring sex subjects. Those who seem not to adhere to 'modern' body-monitoring like the 'fat' Janerose and Silprosa are often mocked for their 'unruly' bodies. Awiti and Truphena, however, see their bodies as sources of physical power that they use to terrorize those who cross their paths. Oftentimes, they use their physical strength to turn tables on patriarchy in their conduct within heterosexual relationships. Njuguna lives in perpetual fear of Awiti, and Ebenezer cows at the mere mention of Truphena's name. These women are "deviant because of their refusal to conform" (Ligaga, *Women, Visibility* 35); hence, they upset patriarchal stereotypical femininity. They are "examples of 'stubborn' or 'difficult' women who have refused to take their places of silence" (43).

Nonetheless, the young women in *Auntie Boss* just like those in *The Real Househelps* cannot seem to do without men (of their choice) whom they relentlessly chase after and attempt to tether around them: Awiti, Njuguna; Truphena and Kalekye, Tsipixi; and Camila, Crotus. Yet, these women are presented as though they are "autonomous agents no longer constrained by any

inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (Gill 153). Intriguingly, in their perverse individualism, the young women are not out to make friends but to win, and will therefore seldom act as a collective as they are almost always struggling to outdo each other—be it in entrepreneurial or love pursuits.

Additionally, these women indulge in self-surveillance and discipline as a makeover paradigm, which Gill argues requires women "to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way; second, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts and practising appropriately modified consumption habits" (156). As already seen, Makena feels the need to reinvent when Michireti approaches her now that the whole neighborhood knows that she is seeing Njuguna. Shipira does all she can, taking in Awiti and Truphena's advice, to win Crotus. Camila too wants to make up for her perceived shortfalls to win back Crotus, just as Varshita perpetually maintains attractiveness to keep Donovan and even goes so far as listening to her house help, Njoroge, who has absurd qualifications to offer such counsel: a certificate in psychology from Punjab coupled with vast experience in diverse psychology and five failed marriages. Njoroge's services—Awiti and Truphena's too, unsolicited as they seem, pass for emotional labour, which cannot be quantified and thus goes unpaid, feeding into the pervasive exploitation of the house helps. More importantly, though, this advisory role is a transmogrification of the stereotypes that house helps are ignorant and meant only to be seen, taking orders from the bosses without voicing an opinion or giving 'expert' advice.

Yet once enough of these women enter the ensuing relationships, they want to exert control just as Varshita does. As McRobbie would have it elsewhere, they are not respectful as "the submissive mistress is no more, instead she has been transformed, through the spread of feminist values, into a demanding, and then demented, and life-threatening evil" (*The Aftermath* 36). In *The Real Househelps*, Awiti controls Njuguna; Njambi, Onyi; Truphena, Tsipixi. Even Michireti's rural-based wife, upon visiting him in the city, orders him about like a small child. He has to run errands, or else get corporally punished (167/1).[97] When she discovers that Michireti has been cheating on her with Nkirote and Truphena, she does not turn against the women as is the norm with Kenyan women. Instead, she orders Michireti to equally take care of them (167/2).[98] She has no problem with her kind, but Michireti. Truphena agrees, arguing that if women united, men would not toss

[97] https://youtu.be/qW-RD5Kj8eY. 0009:08-09:56
[98] https://youtu.be/9zcfDNbAVYM. 00:00:06-00:13, 00:01:10-02:05, 00:04:24-04:48, 00:05:36-11:00

them about. The three women physically manhandle Michireti, reminding him of his responsibilities. He has to do laundry to atone for his sins (168/1).[99] In *Auntie Boss*, Vanessa is so much in charge of her marriage to Maingi that she will not get pregnant (again) nor take to ground duties at her place of work just to spend more time with the family, more so with Kyle, as Maingi wants (S4Ep09).

In all these relationships and affairs, the men appear less 'equal' to the girls and women. They merely act as the women's feminized props, which is in contravention of heteronormative standards in a largely patriarchal society such as Kenya. Their conduct seems to point to the girls and women being [more] equal than men. But are they? Maybe they are in the prevailing postfeminist and neoliberal times, or in the ethe that speak to these sensibilities that they seem in a rush to embrace. However, such freedom and the attendant notion of equality is only imaginary (McRobbie. Preface xi). They may appear, and indeed are to an extent, domineering in the conduct of the mentioned relationships, yet they do not own or entirely control the men, which they should not anyway if society is to remain progressive. The men they win and attempt to tether to themselves still play and dump them, which implies that women and girls are still vulnerable to men, with their sexuality often making them reducible to objects of desire under the male gaze and thereby disposing them to sexist attitudes and sexual exploitation. As Rombo rightly observes, "[e]motional and sexual exploitation remain a recurrent problem" (145).

Patriarchy, then, is far from repudiated. The agency executed by the young women as enabled by neoliberal and postfeminist tenets are not enough without the requisite economic empowerment and demolition of structures that sustain it. Nevertheless, since women are no longer lumped together as a homogenously marginalized, disempowered and oppressed group as their experiences—determined by class and labour matrices—vastly vary, *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* well illuminate that 'empowered' women are in charge of their 'disempowered' counterparts whom they grossly exploit to do their 'dirty' work. Perhaps, it is time for such women to interrogate their role in the oppression of their fellow women, who are not as privileged as themselves.

Importantly, though, instead of presenting house helps as complicit with the practices that marginalize and oppress them, *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* center them and endow them with agency to actively resist these debilitating conditions in attempts to empower

[99] https://youtu.be/6nxapcF65Sc. 00:04:48-05:10

themselves. Nonetheless, it seems urgent to interrogate postfeminism and neoliberalism vis-à-vis the liberation and empowerment of women not as individuals but as a collective so as to help dismantle socio-economic structures that impede women's liberation and the empowerment of marginalized labour categories like house helps.

3.5 Conclusion

Society's marginalized and the oppressed make for productive debate and rich knowledge on how they intercourse with the centre in today's post-postmodern world. The focus of *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* on the marginalized and the minoritized, and their initiation of a politics of salience geared towards social transformation serves to insert narratives of domination into the centre of academic debate.

Thus, this chapter set out to explore how the two shows attempt to empower socio-cultural and economic categories hitherto constructed as marginalized in Kenyan society. It has argued that provocative and absurd forms of postmodern humour endow such categories, particularly house helps, with agency to renegotiate and refashion class and gender relations. The renegotiation speaks to a transgressive politics that ostensibly subverts dominant ideologies, inverts power relations and unsettles class and gender stereotypes. Such renegotiations are made possible through the postfeminist and neoliberal ethe of the docusoap and the fusion of drama and comedy (dramedy) that infuse the shows with a sort of 'melodramatic realism' that seems with a caveat though, to declare in 'capital letters' that "Women and Girls Are Now [more] Equal" (than Men). The declaration implies the engendering of 'new femininities' that exhibit a postfeminist sensibility. However, the sensibility is not entirely free of institutional inequalities characterized as it is with a fantastical freedom and empowerment, which least change the status of the 'empowered' house helps specifically. Significantly, such attempts at empowerment though escapist in their aesthetics are significant in speaking to the disavowal of unfair labour practices.

Chapter Four: Topical Comedy

4.1 S/taking Postmodern Humour Higher

The foregoing chapter explored how *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss* while employing provocative and absurd forms of postmodern humour, attempt to empower house helps—a category hitherto constructed as marginal in Kenyan society. It argued that such humour infuses the category with agency to renegotiate and refashion class and gender relations. Further, the chapter contended that much as this agency does not seem to significantly transform the house helps' status/es, it speaks to a progressive politics that subverts dominant ideologies and unsettles class and gender stereotypes. The politics of these shows also engenders 'new femininities'—'new masculinities too—and reshapes employee-employer relations in a way that points to a disavowal of unfair labour practices, and could therefore initiate and invigorate public debate for better terms of service. Such debate could, arguably, incite governmental and other agentic interventions to construct a 'new' notion of Kenyanness in the domestic service sphere.

This chapter continues on a related trajectory by turning to topical comedy in order not to necessarily dwell on how Kenyan comedy attempts to transmogrify stereotypes but to establish how postmodern humour is employed to critique decadence prevalent in Kenyan society. It argues that such depravity—which has become conventional and/or normal—is fast assuming the cloak of 'stereotype' and must be expressly interrogated. Consequently, the chapter focuses on parody and satire as modes of postmodern humour. It foregrounds satire and follows on Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson's contention that "satire not only offers meaningful political critiques but also encourages viewers to play with politics, to examine it, test it, and question it rather than simply consume it as information or 'truth' from authoritative sources" (11). In other words, topical comedy playfully breaks down the news, disinvesting it of journalistic and philosophical jargon, so as to make it easily accessible to the general citizenry. By so doing, the comedy not only entertains its viewership, but also enables it to critically reflect on the news rather than imbibe it as an unquestionable given. Thus, this chapter's primary focus is on language and how it is manipulated to deconstruct the (seemingly) given/s.

The chapter takes Linda Hutcheon's polemic exploration and definition of postmodernism as a touchstone. Hutcheon argues that postmodernism "is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric […] of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization," meaning that "[w]hat all of these words literally do (precisely by their disavowing

prefixes—*dis*, *de*, *in*, *anti*) is incorporate that which they aim to contest" (*A Poetics* 3; italics in the original). Thus, for Hutcheon, "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (3). Otherwise expressed, postmodernism does not necessarily signal an end to on-going debates about cultural goods and their production, dissemination and consumption. Rather, it problematizes them in often contradictory ways. It might even seem to valorize them, only to simultaneously undercut them. Accordingly, "postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political, [with the contradiction] certainly manifest in the postmodern concept of 'the presence of the past'" (4). Therefore, the past is not dispensed with in a manner as to deny it. Instead, it is re-enacted and re-historicized as a politicized present that must be critically interrogated.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the shows as topical comedy, then proceeds to frame the entire chapter's discourse by establishing that the shows are postmodern popular and/or trending spoofs and parodies that are ironically and/or satirically constituted vis-à-vis their anterior texts. After establishing that *The Wicked Edition* with Dr. King'ori (henceforth, *The Wicked Edition*) is a parody of *NTV Weekend Edition*, section two demonstrates that the former 'meats' the latter with humorous sense, which is to mean that *The Wicked Edition* dresses the 'bare bones' of *NTV Weekend Edition* with 'fleshy' humour that is infortaining. My conception of 'meat-ing' is informed by Dr. King'ori's branding of his show on Twitter as: "#TheWickedEdition @WickedEdition, Humour meets Sense." For this thesis, therefore, *The Wicked Edition* 'meats' the 'dry, bony' *NTV Weekend Edition* with humorous sense. After all, as Russell Leslie Peterson contends, topical comedy in its insightful way, "adds something of its own to our understanding of current news" (3–4). The section then establishes that Kenyanness has over time assumed the character of wickedness comprising (conventionalized/normalized) flaws that *The Wicked Edition* satirizes. After briefly explicating the cartoon montage that foregrounds *The Wicked Edition*, the section references episodes 045 and 047 of the programme to shore up the analysis. The final section illuminates how *The Trending Trend Talkers* (hereafter, *The Trend*) employs oppositional irony to internally twist the news items it parodies so as to problematize them to satirical purposes. It concludes by interrogating *The Trend's* use of wordplay and how it is rendered specifically through the phonetic pun and mimesis to imagine and/or image a Kenyan transnation. To demonstrate this, the chapter turns to episodes:

'TTTT: Uhuru, Raila, Ruto sons spend Ksh. 1.16M at a club' and 'TTTT Something about Kales and this leather jacket swag'.

4.2 The shows as topical comedy

The Wicked Edition, which at the time of writing had in excess of 260,000 subscribers on YouTube, is an issue-based comedy show that airs on Fridays on Nation Television (NTV) beginning at 8.30 pm, ending just before prime news at 9.00 pm East African Time (EAT).[100] It started out in 2016 and is hosted by Dr. King'ori. Like the Churchill character for Daniel Ndambuki in chapter two, Dr. King'ori is the stage name for Felix Omondi, a comedian, who assumes the demeanour of a conventional serious-faced, tie-and-jacket anchor behind a news desk back-dropped against Nairobi's central business district. The show comprises three sections, with Dr. King'ori starting off the first with a general peek at the week's intriguing stories before singling out those that border on the absurd and so need satirizing.[101] The second segment is an interview in which (an) expert/s in some field shed/s light on a topic of interest in line with the episode's theme. The last segment, which is not always included, features a beat reporter, Kinyanjui, an ever-evolving voice character, who happens to be Dr. King'ori disguising his voice to mark the difference between the two characters. It has, save for the period during which there were Covid-19-related gathering restrictions, a studio audience that laughs at Dr. King'ori's humour, punctuates the show's beginning and ending, and the breaks in-between with clapping. Intermittently, the audience applauds guests during the interview segment.

The Trend premiered in 2009 with James Smart, a seasoned Kenyan journalist and Cardiff University alumnus—who collaborated with the BBC to create its 'Focus on Africa' programme—as founder and host. It airs on NTV on Friday nights. The first segment, the focus of this treatise, runs between 8 and 9 pm; with the second, a celebrity talk show/interview/chat, running between 10 and 11 pm after the intervening prime news. The show comprises a host and three panellists,

[100] *NTV* (*Nation Television*) is the same channel that aired *Churchill Show*, hosted *Auntie Boss* and onto which *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* migrated from *KTN* (*Kenya Television Network*).

[101] *The Wicked Edition* with Dr. King'ori seems to echo America's *The Daily Show* (with John Stewart/Trevor Noah) that, on a daily basis, takes a satirical peek at the day's top stories. [I]t is part news and part entertainment wrapped in a healthy dose of critique and cynicism" (Goodnow. Introduction xi). As a "a mock news program" so Geoffrey Baym observes (260), the show blends "comedy, late-night entertainment, news and public affairs discussion", just *The Wicked Edition* does on a lesser scale of once every week for at most 30 minutes. Through satire and parody, both shows certainly are as informative as they are entertaining.

one of whom is always a comedian. The host runs through the week's most fascinating news items that border on the ridiculous, before opening them to debate by the panellists. The comedian spices up the debates with humour although s/he is just as incisive and insightful as the other panellists and host. Larry Madowo—a household name in the Kenyan media industry and a 2019–20 Knight-Bagehot Fellow in Economics and Business Journalism at Columbia University—succeeded Smart in December 2012 before handing the mantle to Amina Abdi Rabar in 2017. Rabar hosts the show to-date. I am interested in the episodes hosted by Madowo between 2016 and 2017 before he left NTV in April 2018 to be the BBC News Africa business editor. In 2020, Madowo became the BBC's North America Correspondent before moving to CNN as Nairobi correspondent in May 2021. Two months later, he became the channel's international correspondent for Africa based in Atlanta, Georgia. Madowo's regular panellists included Cindy Ogana, Ciru Muriuki and Anita Nderu, all media personalities; with Njugush and Eddie Butita as regular comedians.

The chapter argues that because topical comedy has a "hand-me-down […] relationship to news" (Peterson 49), *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* are thus conceptualized as 'presents' of re-historicized and politicized pasts (whether immediate and/or remote). That is, the present in '*The Wicked Edition* 'is 'the past' '*NTV Weekend Edition*' re-historicized and politicised while the 'past-made-present' in *The Trend* is the recuperated, politically-and-playfully-toyed-with trending news of the week. The present texts of the shows are, to borrow Hutcheon's phrasing, a "postmodern ironic rethinking of history […] textualized in […] general parodic references to other [texts]" (*A Poetics* 5). Consequently, the texts of the said shows do not mark "a nostalgic return", but rather, "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art [news] and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary of […] forms" (4).

Therefore, my overall contention is that as topical comedy, *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* are moulded as satire television: "something that entertains, yet also makes us think critically, something that hails us as audiences looking for a laugh, yet also as citizens desiring meaningful engagement with public life" (Gray, Jones and Thomson 32). In this regard, the chapter analyses how *The Wicked Edition* parodically reframes '*NTV Weekend Edition*,' using it as a vehicle to satirize Kenyan society, and explores how *The Trend* does much the same by subjecting trending news items to critical interrogation, especially by privileging wordplay, which dismantles what I will argue is the postcolonial institutional and state linguistic regimentation. Taken together, these shows not only provide alternative editorials to topical events and trending news through their

satirical interrogations and deeper analysis but also expose the "artifice and scriptedness" of mainstream news (Day 89).

4.2.1 A spoof is parodic is satiric is trending is postmodern: Framing the Discourse

According to Simon Dentith, a spoof, while retaining a strong sense of its original meaning of a "hoaxing game invented by the comedian Arthur Roberts" has over time become a "demotic synonym for **parody**. Thus, while spoof can certainly mean no more than parody, it can also denote a mocking imitation which is deliberately meant to deceive readers, listeners or viewers" (194; emphasis supplied). A spoof for the purposes of my current discourse, then, could easily take the form of fake news: a buzzword and phenomenon in evolution—hence, invariably defined. The definitions range from "viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports" (Tandoc Jr., Lim and Ling 138) through "articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott and Gentzkow 213); "all things 'inaccurate' [with applications] in contexts that are completely unrelated to mediated communication"; to "news one does not believe in" (Egelhofer and Lecheler 97–98). However, Jana Laura Egelhofer and Sophie Lecheler contend that the term 'fake news' should be restricted to denoting messages and articles that are "*low in facticity*, created with the *intention to deceive*, and [are] presented in a *journalistic format*" (99; italics in the original). In order for 'news' to be labelled as fake, then, it needs to be verifiably low in fact, disinformational and presented as though it were authentic news from an authentic news channel.

A parody, whose Greek roots Dentith acknowledges, for its part, can be conceived of as "the generic term for a range of related cultural practices, all of which are imitative of other cultural forms, with varying degrees of mockery or humour" (193). This definition does not absolve parody from passing for 'fake news'. As Egelhofer and Lecheler observe, "it is also possible that fake news is created for humorous reasons, to entertain, or […] 'to provoke'" (100). Nonetheless, Egelhofer and Lecheler contend that:

> *Political satire* presents factual information in the format of a TV news broadcast and makes deviations from the truth and objectivity known […]. It is neither low in facticity nor created with the intention to deceive. *News parody,* on the other hand, includes nonfactual information presented in the form of news articles […]. It thus deliberately distorts facts for *amusement*, not because it has the intention to deceive. News parody relies on the implicit assumption that the audience knows that the content is not true. (101; italics in the original)

Thus, Egelhofer and Lecheler conclude: "satire and news parody should be excluded from the current understanding of fake news" (101). I take cue from this conclusion because the shows I study, much as they may be imitative of the news genre and are satirical of the news, they are not founded on disinformation and/or misinformation. Additionally, they seem not to be motivated by partisan politics, ideology or financial gain (100). Therefore, the shows do not merit inclusion in the fake news genre, which describes "the deliberate creation of pseudojournalistic disinformation" or the fake news label, which designates "the political instrumentalization of the term to delegitimize news media" (Egelhofer and Lecheler 97). That is, the shows are neither aimed at intentionally deceiving their audiences nor weaponized so as to render given news media/houses and/or programmes incredible.

Dentith argues that parody takes two forms: specific and general, with the former referring to "a specific art-work or piece of writing" and the latter to "a whole manner, style or discourse". Consequently, if a parody can be traced to a particular work as is the case with *The Wicked Edition* in relation to *NTV Weekend Edition,* then I would argue that it is specific. If it cannot (be traced to a particular work) but to a general aesthetic approach to a given discourse (as happens with *The Trend*), then it qualifies as general parody. Dentith further contends that parody forms a range of cultural practices, which could form a continuum that includes "imitation, pastiche, mock-heroic, burlesque, travesty, spoof, and parody itself" (193). All these forms "intervene in different ways in the dialogues, conversations and dissensions that make up human discourse" (x). Therefore, as an "intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced," Dentith goes on, parody is characterized by "deliberate evaluative intonation [ranging from] reverential citation […] to hostile […] to precursor texts" (6). In its appraisal of a specific text or genre (and its forms), in consequence, parody can take the form of either a considered exaltation or form of criticism.

However, in order to be incisively interventionist, Dentith concludes, parody has to be polemical. Hence, "'[p]arody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice'" (9). He justifies the inclusion of 'polemical' in his definition on the grounds that the "word is used to allude to the contentious or 'attacking' mode in which parody can be written, though it is 'relatively' polemical because the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody". Thus, as "*rejoinder*, or mocking response to the word of another [..,] parodies draw on the authority of precursor texts to

attack, satirise, or just playfully to refer to elements of the contemporary world" (9; italics in the original). For that reason, parodies are not neutral. They are otherwise nuanced to achieve specific goals vis-à-vis their anterior texts.

In order to unpack the import of Dentith's ideas on the discourse that my texts present, it seems instructive to consider Hutcheon's conceptions of parody too. To Hutcheon, parody is "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (*A Theory* xii). That is, to differentiate parody from the other forms of cultural practices on the continuum aforementioned, an "ironic and critical dimension of distantiation" is essential (10). Hutcheon's definition does not in any way negate the idea that a parody could be a spoof. Rather, it affirms the contention that 'spoof' is indeed demotic for parody insofar as it is a good-humoured imitation that deliberately downplays parody's critical edge.

Subsequently, the discourses of *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* are, first, spoofs—to the extent that they are engendered by other discourses that they echo. Second, they are perforce parodic in an ironically critical way. The irony, consequently, cues them as either satirical of the texts they echo or as vehicles for satirical ends. For this chapter, however, these spoofs are not just humorous in the 'conventional' way, but quintessentially postmodern to the extent that as "authorized transgressions of conventions" (x), they not only question societal norms and givens, "the common-sensical and the 'natural'" but also problematize culture as a whole (*A Theory* xi).

In Hutcheon's words, "[p]ostmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning […] by leaving overt the contradictions between its self-reflexivity and its historical grounding" (*A Theory* xiii). As such, taken as parodies, or ironized quotations and recycles, even 'rehashings' of other material, the texts under study dwell in the domain of the postmodern insofar as they not only destabilize norms and conventions, but do so by way of "play; all fuelled by a general sense of uncertainty concerning the nature of truth and reality" (Franklyn 98). This domain is prototypically humorous.

Hutcheon's claim that "all cultural practices have an ideological subtext" might seem to contradict my earlier assertion that my study's shows are not ideological. Far from it. Much as the claim seems and is indeed in agreement with postmodern aesthetics, the difference resides in the realization that *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* are neither propagandistic nor instrumentalized

to achieve politically parochial ends. Instead, they are argumentative as they are meant to incite critical reflection on the news reports.

Significantly, as Gray, Jones and Thompson argue, satire has a "viral quality and cult appeal" that is enhanced by postmodernity's "technological apparatus that […] allows [it] to travel beyond the television set almost instantaneously" (4). For *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend,* this virality is enabled by new media platforms, especially YouTube, to which the shows are almost immediately published upon being aired on television. Additionally, *NTV* has an online presence on which the programmes are livestreamed. Its audiences are therefore able to catch the shows live in real time or later. Oftentimes, Kenyans interact with the shows on Twitter and Facebook, amplifying their trending.

4.3 *The Wicked Edition* 'meats' *NTV Weekend Edition* with humorous sense

NTV Weekend Edition is the conventional weekend prime news programme of *Nation Television* (*NTV*). It airs from 9 to 10 pm, Friday to Sunday, covering major events in the country and beyond. I argue that *The Wicked Edition* is a spoof of *NTV Weekend Edition*, beginning at the nominal level as cued by the phraseology. The two appear as one and the same, with the only difference between the 'editions' being 'NTV Weekend' and 'The Wicked'. *The Wicked Edition*, therefore, substitutes 'NTV' with 'The' and plays with 'Weekend' both phonetically and morphologically to engender 'wicked'. In consequence, *The Wicked Edition* is marked out as parodic of *NTV Weekend Edition* to the extent that it is echoic and allusive of the 'valorised' legacy news programme. It could be argued that the name *The Wicked Edition* is a play at the lexico-grammatical level: hence, done out of homage of *NTV Weekend Edition* because both appear on the same channel. Following on Paul Simpson's view of the English proverb that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then, *The Wicked Edition* as "[a] well-taken echo of [*NTV Weekend Edition* is] both stimulating and thought-provoking, and [as] parody in its own terms [,] offer[s] humour without hostility," and so, "it may indeed be […] imitation" offered as flattery in "the sincerest form" (123). As such, it has no motivation whatsoever to be antagonistic to the legacy news programme on the channel it needs for its hosting. After all, as Peterson argues, much as "topical comedy assuredly affects our political discourse, it is dependent upon not only the resources but also the institutional practices (and prejudices) of the news media" (49).

That said, *The Wicked Edition* is not only parodic in its echoing of *NTV Weekend Edition*. It is ironic in that it seems to scoff at the valorised *Weekend Edition* as being 'wicked': evil or morally bad. Yet, 'wicked' could also mean 'mischievous', which informally implies 'slightly bad but in a way that is amusing and/or attractive'. This quality might explain why topical comedy shows are popular with audiences: they are appealing in their comicality/hilarity. That notwithstanding, I can align 'wicked' with the idiom: '(There is) no peace/rest for the wicked,' to imply that 'mischievous' humourists have a lot of work to do to rejuvenate an apparently moribund genre: hard news (Gray, Jones and Thompson 19). In other words, it takes a lot of diligence and ingenuity for Dr. King'ori to nuance *NTV Weekend Edition* anew as a news entertainment programme in the form of *The Wicked Edition*. If not, it would just be as 'drab' as its anterior. Further, because the programme is predominantly used for satirical purposes, the onus rests not only on Dr. King'ori, but on the audience too as "satire is rarely a form of discourse with clear-cut or easily digestible meanings. Satire can be 'work', and therefore it tends to require a level of sophistication that network television infrequently demands of audiences" (Gray, Jones and Thompson 15).

Hutcheon, while referencing literary forms, cites formalists as claiming that old forms are prone to degeneration "into pure convention" if new forms do not develop when old ones become "insufficiently motivated […] through overuse." Inasmuch as Hutcheon disagrees with this claim on account that it implies evolution signals improvement (*A Theory* 36), I argue that when applied to the genre of news in general and to *NTV Weekend Edition* in particular, *The Wicked Edition* seems to indicate that the genre is being called out to innovate or rejuvenate and change if it is to regain seemingly fast disappearing ground. As Gray, Jones and Thompson aptly put it, "parody […] often contributes to the evolution of a genre; when a genre finds its most interesting and popular form(s) in its parodies, said genre is often dying" (19). In my case, such "insufficiently motivated" forms (on their deathbeds) such as *NTV Weekend Edition* relapse into mere convention (or in my vocabulary, fast assume the form of stereotypes) that are in urgent need of transformation; hence, the emergence of re-energized and reinvigorating programmes such as *The Wicked Edition*. Importantly, as Geoffrey Baym has it, following on Dentith,

> [p]arody is a moment of criticism, one that employs exaggeration, often to the point of ludicrousness, to invite its audience to examine, evaluate, and re-situate the genre and its practices. The parody pieces may generate a laugh, but their deeper thrust is subversion, an attack on the conventions and pretentions of television news. (269)

As such, because *The Wicked Edition* sources its material mainly from *NTV Weekend Edition* and dissects it more critically than it is as originally aired, it exposes the mere artifice of conventional news (reporting) as the '"journalists' are only playing the role on TV" (Baym 270). Subsequent to this, in my vocabulary, *The Wicked Edition*, seeks to transmogrify the stereotypes that news reporting has morphed into by "critiqu[ing the] television news for the simplicity of its informational content" (Baym 270).

Therefore, if I take it that *The Wicked Edition* is postmodern insofar as it "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts" (*A Poetics* 3) *NTV Weekend Edition* through forms of word play that approximate punning, then it seems appropriate to argue that the parody is essentially cued as satirical (as already claimed). That is, if I consider *The Wicked Edition* as an imitative version of *NTV Weekend Edition*, it appears plausible, that indeed '"lower-order' linguistic devices can be pressed into service to sustain the textual dynamic of satirical discourse" (Simpson 102). Therefore, in the imitative masthead of *The Wicked Edition*, "the interface between graphology to phonology is exploited through the serendipitous coalescence that is offered by the resources of punning" (102). The graphology of 'Weekend' and 'Wicked' and the phonological alliteration of the /w/ sound in the two words are not only complemented by the beguiling pseudo-assonance of /i:/ and /ɪ/ respectively in 'weekend' and 'wicked', but cemented by the near-rhyming of the two words: /wi:kɛnd/ and /wɪkɪd/, which approximates homophony. The two can thus be read as one and the same if one were to entertain the role of a slip of the tongue, marking out the spoof as an ironic in-text twist of the anterior.

In parodic terms, *NTV Weekend Edition* is the impetus of *The Wicked Edition*. That is, *NTV Weekend Edition* constitutes the source material, at least by name or title for *The Wicked Edition*—although this somewhat extends to the content as well and is illustrative with its inaugural episode—as I show further on. For now, it seems appropriate to explicate how *The Wicked Edition* is indeed parodic in its formulation at the lexico-grammatical level. Following on Simpson (122), *wicked* is both prime and dialectical vis-à-vis *weekend*. This does not imply that Dr. King'ori proclaims his show to be a parody of *NTV Weekend Edition*. No, he does not. It takes general knowledge and stylistic knowledge specific to *NTV Weekend Edition* to come to this deduction. Specifically, the parody is at the aesthetic (or form) and not the content level, which is consonant with the politics of postmodern humour as already seen qua Holm (194).

Thus, as prime, 'wicked' constitutes an echoic dimension to 'weekend' as cued by 'edition', which infuses it with its parodic or spoof quality of *NTV Weekend Edition*. According to Simpson, following on Cathy Emmott (1977), "[t]he prime instantiated in a specifically satirical text functions by echoing some sort of 'other' discourse event, whether that be another text, genre, dialect or register, or even another discursive practice." The dialectic, on the other hand, "is a text-internal […] element which is normally positioned after the prime, although its appearance may sometimes be isochronous" (89). In other words, the prime is inter-textual and functions as an inter-semiotic bridge between texts without explicitly referring to any particular text. The dialectic is intra-textual as occasioned by "a discursive twist or contra-expectation which is injected straightaway into its text-internal organization" (101) through oppositional irony. Oppositional irony signals a "sense of collision or opposition of ideas [by] resid[ing] in breaches or schisms in the processors' knowledge of typical text structures" (95). This knowledge is reinforced by general knowledge (122). For *The Wicked Edition*, the prime and the dialect do not successively follow each other. They are isochronous and the oppositional ideas or movement they instantiate away from *NTV Weekend Edition* "pushes the satiree [the addressee of the satire] towards a resolution, towards a 'new point of view'" (Simpson 196), which in our case, is satirical.

M.D. Fletcher's definition of satire is instructive. According to him, satire is a

> verbal aggression in which *some aspect of historical reality is exposed to ridicule*. It is a mode of aesthetic expression that relates to historical reality, involves at least implied norms against which a target can be exposed as ridiculous, and demands the pre-existence or creation of shared comprehension and evaluation between satirist and audience.
>
> (quoted in Gray, Jones and Thompson 12; italics mine)

This definition explains why I disavow any claim to *The Wicked Edition* being an attack on *NTV Weekend Edition*, which resonates with my earlier assertion that the show is not weaponized to delegitimate any news media/house or programme; in this case, NTV generally and *NTV Weekend Edition* specifically. My disavowal is on the account of 'some historical reality and implied norms being exposed to ridicule'. It follows that, it is not the anterior text in which such reality and norms are borne that is being mocked. Again, the definition aligns with my affirmation following on Holms that the politics of postmodern humour occurs at the form or aesthetic (as opposed to the content) level. More importantly, to appropriate Gray, Jones and Thompson's apt observation, what makes Fletcher's definition salient to my enterprise is the fact that "the verbal *attack* […] in

some way passes *judgment* on the object of that attack, thereby enunciating a perceived breach in societal norms or values" (12; italics in the original).

Therefore, *The Wicked Edition* is essentially a play on the phraseology of *NTV Weekend Edition*, which might be in its homage out of 'sincerest flattery' or fondness (see Simpson 123), and as Hutcheon argues elsewhere, a vehicle to satirize "the vices or follies of humanity, with an eye to their correction" (*A Theory* 54). The play becomes self-evident if I consider that *The Wicked Edition* is imitative of *NTV Weekend Edition*'s set design, beat reporter and anchor-man, who only differs from the conventional anchor in the manner in which he 'spits out' mispronunciations, repeatedly spanks the table, and code-mixes and code-switches between English and Kiswahili, spicing them with an occasional Sheng (especially when he seems to run short of an appropriate English term or means to reinforce his wordplay for comicality).

Granted, "not all parody is satiric," so Gray, Jones and Thompson rightly observe. "However, news parody, parody of political speeches or debates, and parody of other genres of political discourse is often satiric" (18), they conclude. "[M]any parodies are inherently satirical and offer scathing criticism and commentary on politics, media, or society" (Becker 426), which makes satire "an integral part of politics […] wherever there is a reasonably free press or communication outlets" (Phiddian 259), as is the case in Kenya.

Whereas *The Wicked Edition* is not a satirical attack on *NTV Weekend Edition*, this in no way rules it out as a parodic take on the programme (and/or such other programme) for its artifice in news reporting that is devoid of interrogation of the reported that ranges from conventions taken as givens—that include, but are by no means limited to stereotypes—to an assumed objectivity that denies their viewership incisive critique. Moreover, parody is not only "actively critical", but also "attacks a particular text or genre, making fun of how the text or genre operates" (*A Theory* 17); which agrees with the aesthetics of postmodernism. As Hutcheon observes:

> [w]ilfully contradictory, […] postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. It can only problematize […] the "given" or "what goes without saying" in our culture. History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts—these are some of the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as "natural" or unproblematically common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated. (*A Poetics* xiii)

In other words, in an epoch in which reality and truth are indeterminate and capitalism perverse, individuals—popular artists or journalists, for instance—have little choice but to rely on the capitalist systems that subordinate and exploit them to make their voice heard, which is oftentimes critical of the systems themselves (Fiske 1–2). Their voice, however, is constructed as harmless play, as seems the case with *The Wicked Edition*, so as not to offend the systems on which they rely for survival. Dr. King'ori might have gone to YouTube—not that he does not have a presence there—or any other related platform as enough artists have, but there seems to have been no better way to amplify his voice in the Kenyan living room than through some existent television channel. So, all he does is appear to flatter *NTV Weekend Edition* in the form of *The Wicked Edition* and use it as a vehicle to satirize Kenyan society's conventions and norms—which in my vocabulary threaten to morph into stereotypes. Subtly, Dr. King'ori attacks the parodied text, which like the rest of the genre it represents, seems, in the words of Hutcheon, "insufficiently motivated" (*A Theory* 36) and needs urgently to revitalise if it is to stay abreast with current trends. In consequence, the best way to critique its artifice seems, ostensibly, to be through flattery.

The Wicked Edition's first episode: 'The fun side of Kenyan cops', whose material Dr. King'ori sources from a cross-section of television channels in the country speaks to such parody.[102] The episode is a critique of the police establishment that the show suggests is riddled with weaknesses right from the recruitment process to the execution of its mandate, which weaknesses have negatively impacted on the public perception of the force that was then undergoing reforms having been renamed a service in the 2010 constitutional dispensation.[103] The episode thus includes instances of vetting police officers, one of whom can neither define bribery nor deny ever having taken one. The interview section, inspired by an earlier interview taken from *NTV Weekend Edition*, has the police spokesperson shedding light on corruption that the force/service is often condemned for. The beat reporter, Kinyanjui, concludes the episode with a story from a village in Kakamega County, Western Kenya, in which a young man slashed off his testes for having been rejected by a girl.

In the episode, Dr. King'ori ridicules the Kenyan police recruitment requirements that have remained static over time such that they verge on the absurd: the recruits must be tall, have a

[102] https://youtu.be/QLCqpPP-RIc

[103] The Kenya Police with its various departments was seen as a brutal force before it was brought under one command of the Inspector General and renamed the National Police Service to correct the said image.

perfect set of 32 white teeth and strong bones. Inasmuch as Dr. King'ori is not necessarily opposed to these, he questions their rationale, wondering if the establishment should be grounded wholly on such. Dr. King'ori's critique covers a range of other flaws inherent in the establishment: incompetence at communicating in Basic English, senior officers' pretentious and comical American-accented mastery of the same language and ridiculous dressing and buffoonery at a shoot-out operation at which one officer is startled by the sound of a gunshot. Dr. King'ori muses: "What did he expect [at the shoot-out]? Did he train with a silencer or a toy gun?" Dr. King'ori juxtaposes the laughable blind shooting of one police officer at the operation with that of a gorilla—with no training—erratically shooting at no specific target. The result for both is the same: missing (the target). The nine months of training undergone by the recruits and paid for by the Kenyan taxpayer is in vain since the officers are just as 'good' as the untrained gorilla. The point Dr. King'ori seems to be making is that it is unlikely that the cross-section of channels from which he sources his material cared to dissect such an array of incompetence as he does. Their 'news' coverage amounted to nothing more than mere reportage, which casts an aspersion on the commitment of legacy news to anatomize such blatant absurdities in the country's interior security agency.

To dramatize the depravities among Kenya's police, Dr. King'ori interviews the police spokesperson, a Mr. Charles Owino, an officer then mandated to speak for the police wo/men who ostensibly cannot speak for themselves—just as he was interviewed earlier on *NTV Weekend Edition.* Unlike the latter, Dr. King'ori goes further than just focus on, say, the deplorable housing conditions which the *Weekend Edition* emphasized. He interrogates the establishment's endemic corruption, and indicts the government of Kenya for inadequately compensating the officers' often perilous labour. Much as Owino highlights how corruption begins at home, with parents literally bribing their children to keep them content, Dr. King'ori tactically leads him through what Simpson say psychologists call '"garden-path reasoning', which destabilises everything preceding it in order to establish a satirical target" (82). The president of the republic, Dr. King'ori reminds Owino, had recently admitted before cameras that he was setting petty offenders free to create room for the big fish in the country's correctional facilities. Owino is apparently a fish farmer. Fooled, Owino unsuspectingly fishes out his smart phone and shows Dr. King'ori the big fish in one of his ponds, which Dr. King'ori displays for all his viewership to see, ending with the quip that the big fish that the president talked of are in Owino's pond. Inasmuch as Owino seems to get

the joke, what appears lost on him is the veiled attack on the incompetence of the establishment that he speaks for at apprehending the 'big fish' implicated in corruption, beginning with those in his own 'pond': the police service.

What seems to underlie Dr. King'ori's critique is the police's reluctance to reform. The whole establishment is stuck in the conventional—read stereotypical—ways that perhaps worked at its founding instead of adapting to new ones. Dr. King'ori is himself neither a medical doctor nor a doctor of philosophy, but a humourist whose adoption and appropriation of the title is parodic as it is satirical since it speaks of the metaphorical doctor dispensing humorous antidotes to his satirees. It is also an attack of the parodied. On the one hand, adoption of the title denotes what medical doctors do: diagnose and treat humanity's maladies—precisely what Dr. King'ori is trying to do to the Kenyan society. On the other hand, it arguably qualifies him as among the highly titled in society—whom he caricatures—whose incompetence at their specialisations makes them the deserved targets of satirical attacks, with medical doctors being at the forefront in their failure to diagnose societal maladies and offer appropriate remedies.

Therefore, *The Wicked Edition* re-visits the past, historicizing it qua Hutcheon, not in a nostalgic fashion, but in a critical manner. Thus,

> [t]hrough interaction with satire, through the pragmatic need for encoder and decoder to share codes, and through the paradox of its authorized transgression, the parodic appropriation of the past reaches out beyond textual introversion and aesthetic narcissism to address the "text's situation in the world." (*A Theory* 116)

The Wicked Edition, then, in its postmodern way interrogates conventions of, for example, police recruitment requirements and the establishment's modus operandi. They are outmoded and need to be either reformed or discarded altogether. To borrow from Hutcheon again, *The Wicked Edition* "problematizes" the past "by critical reflection" (*A Poetics* 4). Societal decadence and outmoded conventions and norms are up for critique and destabilization through the use of a postmodern humour aesthetics. Institutions too, with the police force/service at the forefront.

4.3.1 Impoverished to be traded with: The 'wickedness' that Kenyanness is

Print images have the ability to powerfully articulate issues. When combined with written text, this ability can be tremendous. It is another matter when the image is a cartoon, for cartoons have the capacity to visually shock, ridicule and offend (Dodds 157). Perhaps no better example

captures the power of cartoons than the Danish cartoon images of Prophet Mohammad of 2005.[104] Closer home, cartoons, especially editorial ones, have been instrumental in providing humorous socio-political critique as evidenced in Musila's work on Gado as compiled in *Democrazy* (2000). While drawing on "various semiotic codes", Musila notes, the humour in Gado's cartoons is nourished on "caricature and grotesquery, irony and the incongruent, hyperbole and ignorance" in order "to encode specific messages and comments" (97). "The cartoon", as Musila records, "is by definition a genre that adopts a comic view in its intervention in socio-political issues" (98). In short, it is of necessity melded to comedy within whose syntax, the cartoon evokes comic and satirical laughter for society's transformation (98). It is my contention, consequently, that subversive as cartoons are, they powerfully inflect popular expression. Thus, the cartoon montage—a part of which is Figure 1 below—that foregrounds *The Wicked Edition*, culminating in Dr. King'ori himself in caricature is significant. I appropriate Simpson's argument that "[c]aricature, as a form of metonymic saturation, involves the distortion of some aspect of human appearance, normally physiognomy, such that this exaggerated body part assumes a prominence sufficient to symbolise the whole being" (129) to argue that the caricatures are emblematic of the 'wickedness' that Kenyanness is, or has become. The montage certainly marks out the show as satirical of Kenyan society and/or its institutions owing to the contention that caricature is a "much favoured satirical device of the political cartoonist" (Simpson 129).

[104] The cartoons published in *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper in Denmark in September 2005 portraying Prophet Mohammad as a terrorist (among other mocking depictions) saw the offices of the publication attacked, sparked demonstrations, protests, diplomatic rows and boycotts against Danish goods in the Muslim world. At least 100 people were killed by the police during the protests that erupted in January 2006 (Kuipers 66).

Figure 1

The montage evidently shows that Kenya is bedeviled by four prominent maladies: 'tribalism'; poor leadership/bad governance; corruption/bribery; and injustice and/or the painfully slow process of dispensing justice, if at all. By dint of media coverage, the malaises seem representative of the myriad socio-economic and political flaws that Dr. King'ori satirizes and calls out Kenyans to not only engage with critically, but rid themselves of.

I contend that in the vocabulary of *The Wicked Edition*, this quartet is what comprises Kenya's 'wickedness'. As already pointed out, 'wicked' is synonymous with 'evil'. However, in the syntax of satire, much as 'wicked' and 'evil' are synonymous, 'wicked' needs not necessarily connote outright evil. Rather, it should, as Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel argue, afford satire the opportunity to expose how it interconnects with folly (115), and by so doing help to "convert civic villainy into disposable laughs" (Steve Almond quoted in McClennen and Maisel 114). Therefore, the kinds of evil that *The Wicked Edition* holds up to scrutiny and laughter are correctable and/or discardable idiocies.

Within the cartoon montage of *The Wicked Edition* (figure 2), for instance, is an image that indicates that beat traffic police officers have just collected a bribe from a vehicle ostensibly flagged down at a roadblock. It appears to be a recurrent operation because a senior officer—by manner of his dress—is seen walking away with a briefcase overstuffed with Kenyan currency, scattering crumbs to be shared among the mesmerized junior officers who must be the primary extortionists. The text that supports this crime points to the Kenya traffic offences and penalties guide 2021 that requires the police to exact an instant fine against the motorist for minor offences such as talking on the phone. Instead, the officers extort a bribe; hence, the substitution of 'fine' with 'miracle' and 'motorists' with 'police'. Simply, operations such as these result in instant monetary miracles for the police.

Figure 2

As already established in episode 001, the police establishment is one defective institution that should be urgently reformed as the outmoded conventions it is stuck in do not only deny more befitting candidates access, but its modus operandi has greatly damaged its public image. Nonetheless, for this section, depravities such as the extortion of bribes from the populace by the police have become conventions that symbolize the wickedness that Kenyanness has become. Interestingly, Dr. King'ori points out that police officers are prone to bribery because they are equally 'bribed' by the government. That is to mean, they are inadequately compensated for their labour, which is a barb indicting the government and the political class. The revelation also speaks to the prevalence of corruption in Kenyan society. It also calls out the government to commensurately remunerate its employees.

Thus, the shortcomings of the police are not only manifold and complex, but also emblematic of the endemic corruption in Kenyan society. As Alex Waweru observes in the comments section on YouTube, the multifarious grammatical errors notwithstanding:

> I still do not know why we complain about bribes to police and that is a personal choice and a cultural choice. you cannot bribe and officer then complain that he took a bribe. Why do we single out police officers yet the rest of the citizens Steal time off work Misuse work materials. Defraud employers Steal from Employers We participate by aiding abetting crime by not reporting, or not participating in due process to ensure criminals are brought to justice Jump Lights while driving. Speed beyond the limit Watch our fellow workers steal and turn a blind eye Maids steal Drivers adulterate fuel and sell fuel belonging to their employer. We as citizens hold in high esteem people we know are thieves and have acquired their riches through fraudulent means because they are family and proceed to accept gifts from them. I could go on. the problem is systemic and cultural we need to stop and also stop pointing fingers.

In other words, corruption does not just start and stop with the law enforcers. It permeates all sectors of society such that it has become a way of life. Kenyans are therefore being hypocritical by blaming the police while ignoring the rampant corruption evident among themselves at all levels of society. They encourage and perpetuate it as well. Such hypocrisy needs to stop because the blame game will not solve the systemic venality. Dr. King'ori's critique is a provocation to Kenyans to self-examine and critique. Importantly, Waweru's critique speaks to Barber's observation that members of the audience "do not just decode what is there in the message – or even 'interpret' it. Often, they bring novel meanings to it. The text is 'out there', fair game for attachment of locally relevant and changing signification" (*A History* 167).

Nonetheless, since Dr. King'ori's critique is on the police, it seems appropriate to turn away from its spokesperson to its head, the Inspector General (IG), to demonstrate that reform could as well begin at the establishment's apex. In 'Police brutality – The Wicked Edition 047'[105]:

> The police are on spot for going rogue. They are accused of killing a six months old baby in the run up to the 2017 general elections and many more senseless atrocities besides. Yet, the IG denies that such cruelties equal to police brutality. He fails to answer very basic questions, evading them instead. The police assault students at the University of Nairobi upon being called on to calm down an alleged riotous situation, but end up mercilessly beating up the students. One officer even lobs a teargas canister into a room full of cowed students to force them out, only to then manhandle them. The Kenyan situation is contrasted with a Canadian one: a mass riot that broke out after a hockey game in June 2015. Contra the Kenyan situation, the Canadian police did not indiscriminately assault everyone at the incident. Instead, they arrested suspects and tracked down hundreds of others years after following review of video footage. As a former General Service Unit (GSU) – the tactical wing of the Kenya police – trainer and expert guest on the episode—Mr. George Musamali—explains, the establishment has abdicated the law as per its training.

Here, it emerges that the police needlessly use excessive force when dealing with civilians, whether the latter pose a threat to them and the so-called public order or not. They are still a force and not a service. Their conduct vindicates Dr. King'ori's sentiments in Episode 001 that the touted reforms were mere public relations stunts. The institution is far from reformed. The persons in charge and the recruits who populate the supposed service have transformed the establishment into a terror unit against the citizens it is supposed to protect. As their ex-trainer illustrates, the young men deployed to quell riotous situations are simply programmed robots aged between 18 and 24

[105] https://youtu.be/VcVdzqOzqYA

who cannot think. They are an excited lot eager to misuse their so-called skills on harmless civilians, on whom they indiscriminately unleash brute force.

Dr. King'ori's contrasting of the Kenyan and Canadian situations is instructive. The Kenyan situation exemplifies barbarity; the Canadian one, civility. Yet, this contrast is far more complex. It speaks to one of the satirist's common tools of trade: the erection of "incongruities and gulfs between an ideal and a real" (Rolfe 60). The Canadian situation is thus the ideal against which the Kenyan reality is measured. The Kenya police can emulate the Canadians for improvement. This might not be so easy though, as the IG cannot answer straightforward questions meant to remedy the conduct of his officers. Instead, as Dr. King'ori puts it, he provides transitions to the next questions. Sarcastically, Dr. King'ori, 'excuses' the IG's conduct: it is not that he failed to answer the questions; he just gave universal answers, some of which Dr. King'ori tests with a high school history paper to illustrate that the IG's answers were a show of pure *genius*:

> Dr. King'ori: Who was the first man to climb Mt. Kenya?
> The IG: We're now at the stage of investigating to know…
> Dr. King'ori: State one feature which was drawn during the Second Lancaster House Conference in 1962.
> The IG: The question is, how did we get there in the first instance?

The bottom line, according to Dr. King'ori, is that the IG did not lie. He just did not tell the truth, which Dr. King'ori proceeds to test with what he calls a super obvious question:

> Dr. King'ori: What's your name, sir?
> The IG: I can't tell you that; that's an operational matter!

Through splicing and juxtaposition, Dr. King'ori ends up painting the 'clever' IG as a buffoon, who—besides failing to take responsibility for his establishment's brutality on often harmless civilians—wants to play smart. Rather than attempt damage control, the IG ends up denting the image of the establishment the more.

Consequently, Dr. King'ori demeans the IG and his establishment. Our laughter at the IG's ridiculousness is aggressive—to borrow Gray, Jones and Thompson's argument while citing Susan Purdie (10). By virtue of his position, the IG wields power over us—the ordinary citizen that Dr. King'ori represents. Through satire, the powerful IG and the police are thus belittled and the resultant "humor is revealed to be something that encourages criticism and reflection about prevailing systems of power, and it can be a discursive tool used by both parties in a struggle between dominant and resistive forces" (Gray, Jones and Thompson 10). In Freudian terms, the

jokes about the institutional person of the IG are tendentious to the effect that they momentarily free us from the police's power (see Gray, Jones and Thompson 12). Through Dr. King'ori's attack/s, we realize that the police are not so powerful and 'clever' after all. In fact, the IG cringes. He seems shamed and probably has realized his tomfoolery and might not only do better but help reform his institution to escape future humiliation (see Davis and Foyle 10).

Further, the buffoonery of the IG trickles down to the anti-riot police on the street, portraying the whole establishment and its modus operandi as absurd. As if assaulting defenseless university students inside their hostels and teargasing them in their rooms is not ridiculous enough, Dr. King'ori proceeds to dramatize that the police and the ordinary citizens speak different languages. While throwing up one's arms in the air means surrender to the latter, to the former it equates to 'malizana nami niende' (finish with me via assault, I leave); a declaration of war against the police; or worse, slighting the government by a sleight of hand. Unsurprisingly, to the police, 'calm down' at the university translated to 'come down', which explains why the police were intent on making the students literally come down from their storied hostels. Dr. King'ori further muses wittily that the 'coming down' of the students had to be done with a little motivation: "clobbering", the only language the police understand.

Through wit and irony, Dr. King'ori spotlights the absurdity of the operations of the police so that they are interrogated. The police's monopoly on violence is questioned. It emerges that such monopoly is abused to bizarre proportions such that the law enforcers are the law breakers, heightening the wickedness that Kenyanness is. In the words of Garry Trudeau, the satire here is powerful as it "punches up, against authority […], the little guy against the powerful. […] holding up the self-satisfied and hypocritical to ridicule" (quoted in Friedman 181). The establishment is lampooned in an attempt to make it conform to democratic ideals that the humour in this section is staked to help achieve.

Whether the police live up to this expectation or not, it seems plausible that satire as a mode of postmodern humour has lived up to its potential for transgression. In Kenyan society, as elsewhere: "[h]umor allows a relatively open space for critique and reflection, one that is rare in many societies. Far from being solely light, frivolous, and wholly apolitical, humour is able to deal powerfully with serious issues of power and politics" (Gray, Jones and Thompson 11). That is why it is imperative to turn to politics to interrogate how satire lampoons the misdemeanours of politicians.

In 'The Wicked Edition 045 – Why Kenyans hate each other'[106]:

> Kenyan members of the legislature are on the spot for hate speech, with one Moses Kuria, arraigned in court for the same offence one too many times. In the interview section, one of Kenya's foremost human rights activists, the Reverend Timothy Njoya, has it that Kenyans do not hate, but only irritate each other. Nyoya equates politicians to terrorists because they carry youths as explosives meant to square it out with each other. He reveals that he was a regular guest of the state during the Moi regime for his championship and defense of human rights—a record 6 times: once for allegedly calling the president a pig in one of his sermons. He comically demonstrates how brutal the regime was in its curtailment of free speech. Sadly, he says the country has only changed its modus operandi since then but the same substance remains: it has the best constitution and institutions in the world, but the worst people in government. Kenyans are impoverished by politicians to be traded with. That is, the poorer Kenyans are, the more valuable they are to politicians as goods of (horse) trading.

According to the clergyman, Kenya's wickedness is championed by politicians who are cheered on by the ordinary citizens, who, ironically, are the victims. The political class is thus being satirized just as the citizenry is. While ensuring youth remain poor and dependent on them and brainwashed, politicians mis/use them as 'weapons of mass destruction'—as the clergyman puts it—against each other and the general populace. As such, the politicians wage a sustained campaign to impoverish citizens so as to trade with them as merchandise at the ballot, which endeavour is achieved through whipping of ethnic emotions whereby ethnicity is weaponized for trade and political war/s as already seen in chapter two. Kenyans are pitted against each other in the name of voting and fighting for the so-called 'their own'. Their poverty—both material and psychic—is strategically engineered by politicians for the latter's selfish gains. As the ordinary citizens wage senseless wars against each other, politicians and their children and kin dine and party together as the next section partly demonstrates.

Sadly, the citizenry continues to elect their 'tribal' kingpins who appoint their 'own' into office in the civil service, disregarding the basic principle of the constitution that the composition of such service should reflect the face of Kenya. Such is the 'normalized', conventional way of doing things that, I argue, has buttressed 'wickedness' as Kenyanness. Such foolery is fast morphing into a stereotype, which I contend *The Wicked Edition* attempts to transmogrify through the satirical 'tribalism' cartoon that it foregrounds in figure 1.

[106] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF3QDNQqccY

What Dr. King'ori subjects to ridicule is the unfortunate realization that the nation is founded on the monstrous evil that is 'tribalism' that has been devolved to the counties. As can be seen from the cartoon, leaders at that level have no shame declaring that only members of their own ethnic extraction qualify for jobs. The point is, Njoya is making is that the youth ought to lead their own and the country's liberation from such wickedness. As Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott point out in reference to Salman Rushdie's tweet in response to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France in 2015, so does Dr. King'ori's art seem to make clear: satire is '"*a force for liberty* […] *against tyranny*"' (30; italics in the original). In a country where leaders are elected on account of the tyranny of the populousness of their ethnic groups, only scathing satire seems the way out of such 'convention'. Such satire is thus "focused specifically on the corruptions and deceits of the rich and powerful, as one that is specifically *political* as well as moral in its concerns—perhaps, indeed in contemporary social milieu that is somewhat uncomfortable with moralism, one that is political *rather than* moral" (Davies and Ilott 30; italics in the original).

The efficacy of the satire here is enhanced by the stature of the interviewee: a clergyman of high moral standing whose love for humanity saw him freely speak to power at a time when few dared. Significantly, he does not moralize. Rather, he speaks of the power of free speech, which ironically, is being abused by the political class to pit Kenyan against Kenyan. Njoya seems to wonder why the youth cannot martial their numbers to do better in such at a time when the country's democratic space has been expanded, with attendant freedoms guaranteed. Instead, the youth have made themselves susceptible to manipulation and abuse. Theirs is an absurdity that needs to be repudiated. If the youth change, then, it seems plausible that the political class will have no one to manipulate and the country will eventually get the leaders it deserves. Once this happens, the law enforcers such as critiqued above will most likely reform as the political class will ethically lead by example. This looks like the direction into which Dr. King'ori is pointing the country. The leadership is corrupt just as the institutions that sustain it—such as the police—because the citizenry condones and encourages the putrefaction. It is wickedness that the citizenry must disavow by spirit and deed, beginning at the ballot.

Importantly, King'ori's satirization of the profligacy of the police and the political class (and its blinded followers) is germane to the extent that it calls out the perpetrators of ethnicised politics. It excludes them from mainstream Kenyan society so as to laugh at and deride their conventionalized misdemeanours. As Giselinde Kuipers aptly points out elsewhere,

> humour in the public sphere should be 'upward' and 'inward'. This is encoded in the role of humourists and satirists: they are at the margins of the public sphere, in the slightly disreputable comic domain from which they aim their jokes and jibes at the centre, at those in power and their accepted truths. The archetype here is the jester who has the freedom (and the duty) to mock the king. (Kuipers 71)

As has been seen, *The Wicked Edition* largely aims its critique at the powerful without necessarily sparing the common citizen. The satire is thus upward as well as inward as Kuipers puts it. As chapter two demonstrated, the barbs at the centre are meant to draw the eye of the king to the country's predicament. Accordingly, the next section explores how *The Trend* continues on this trend by broadening the discursive space.

4.4 *The Trending Trend Talkers:* 'Dialecting' the news, expanding the discursive space

In this section, I foreground the satire emblematic in *The Trend*'s punning-approximating wordplay that inheres in neologisms rich in homophony and mimesis—attributes that underscore the show's postmodern humour. *The Trend* focalizes intriguing news in a fashion that popularizes it by way of anatomizing news items that border on the hilarious and absurd. The programme is subsequently as humorous as it is insightful and critically engaging, especially with the incorporation of Twitter feeds that allows it and its viewership to actively and hyper-mediately interact. The incorporation of twitter occasions a mainstream and social media interface, which speaks to the blurring of boundaries between the two media. Its viewers watch the show as they interact with its hashtags #THETREND and #TTTT. Consequently, *The Trend* exhibits postmodernism insofar as it not only clouds the mainstream/social media boundary, but also dramatizes news reviews and performs talk as spectacle:

> the controversy and the popularity of talk shows is fundamentally rooted in the pleasures of watching and listening to people talking in particular ways and for the most part these are ordinary people who are engaged in colloquial forms of talk. This itself is a remarkable phenomenon in an age fascinated by glamor and by spectacle. (Tolson 3)

Thus, the delight accruing from talk shows has to do with the 'ordinariness' that the talkers cloak themselves in as they perform informal talk. *The Trend* talkers, for instance, draw quite extensively on Kenya's linguistic ecology, with the panelists nearly discarding with all forms of formality, engaging in banter that is escalated by the wisecracks of the comedian in their midst. The host on most occasions follows suit. The informality also manifests through the tweets

channeled in by the audience who often freely ridicule the panel's conduct (grooming, manner of speaking and many more besides). In turn, the panellists and the host do not spare each other in their jibes and ridicule.

What is more, like the American talk show to which Andrew Tolson addresses himself, *The Trend* has a "discursive dynamic to this performance of talk which engages contemporary audiences" (3). It is pleasant to watch the panellists banter just as it is rewarding to listen to the almost instantaneous twitter responses emanating from people on the streets that not only spice up the discussions but also give a feel of attitudes on the 'ground' in real time—much as the read tweets are obviously selected based on the production's biases. '"[L]ife on the ground'" as Barber observes, refers to "[w]hat people see and hear through media feeds into everyday narratives and performances; what people themselves put out on the media [as] drawn from everyday repertoires" (160). In other words, the twitter feeds are syntheses of what people obtain from around them through media outputs, which are from them as a collective anyway, and what the people themselves bring to what the media gathers from near and afar. As Peterson aptly puts it in relation to topical comedy:

> [n]arratives constructed in the press—characterizations and paradigms that coalesce around persons, institutions, and events—exert considerable influence over how the public is likely to think about those same subjects. And given the relay relationship between news and comedy, they also have considerable influence over how comedians are likely to joke about them. (49)

The process is hence cyclical. Nonetheless, while some tweets are read merely for their hilarity, the majority are read in resonance with the night's attendant debate/s.

Unlike *The Wicked Edition,* which has *NTV Weekend Edition* as its echoic exemplar template, *The Trend* echoes the trending news items of the week in a perceptive way that is not a specific spoof as such. Instead, it is a panel news talk show that is parodic, ironic, satirical and postmodern, especially in the way it attempts to recast and nuance the news items, with the panellists dismantling regimented institutional language practices of the Kenyan post-colonial state by literally engaging in spectacular colloquial talk. Whereas *The Wicked Edition* parodies *NTV Weekend Edition*, using it to satirize outmoded conventions (read stereotypes), institutions and society in general, *The Trend* parodies specific news items, thereby making their meanings fluid.

Following on Dentith, therefore, I would like to argue that *The Wicked Edition* constitutes specific parody in so far as it parodies "a specific precursor text", in this case *NTV Weekend*

Edition, while *The Trend* comprises general parody since it is aimed "at a whole body of texts or kind of discourse" (7): news items. Nonetheless, the news items parodied could as well as pass for 'specific precursor texts' just as they do for 'a whole body of texts or kind of discourse'. Here is an example that shows how the parody plays out. In "Corruption fights back, traffic cops vs EACC #TTTT"[107]:

> A man is caught on CCTV cameras stealing mobile phones at a cybercafé; a farmhand is apprehended and denied bail for petty theft; a contender for member of parliament forges a letter from the Swiss embassy to allege his money has been frozen in a Swiss bank courtesy of his political detractors; a fraudster is in police custody for allegedly swindling foreigners of millions on false pretenses. He had been in the news for a lavish wedding that was billed at 15 million Kenya Shillings after a proposal atop Mt. Kenya in a helicopter. Included in the same episode are traffic police officers resisting arrest upon being pounced on by the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) officers for taking bribes from motorists; and a woman being forcefully and roughly bundled into a police vehicle for demanding her balance from a matatu (taxi) conductor; and a cholera outbreak at a health conference at Weston Hotel in Nairobi.

To begin with, the item on the parliamentary contender serves only as a bridge to expose the deep-seated rot in Kenyan society. The aspirant, a Mr. Steve Mbogo, spawns the spoof: 'Steve Muongo', which translates to 'Steve, the liar' (in Kiswahili). It is a parody that wittily lays bare his fraudulent character. Whereas 'Steve' remains unchanged in order to deliberately signal and disambiguate the spoof, 'Mbogo' is tinkered with and turned into both the prime and the dialectic isochronously. 'Muongo' echoes Mbogo as cued by Steve, making it the prime. At the same time, 'Muongo' is occasioned by "a discursive twist or contra-expectation which is injected straightaway into [the] text-internal organization" of 'Mbogo' (see Simpson 101). 'bo' is substituted with ''uon'. The result is an ironic twist, parodying 'Mbogo' and satirically nuancing Steve, the person, as 'muongo': liar.[108]

[107] https://youtu.be/r-hJdgPLFiA.

[108] Steve Mbogo's credibility as a candidate for the parliamentary seat is thus dented. In fact, his con artistry is subjected to relentless ridicule in the ensuing banter. The panelists mockingly counsel him to seek advice from experts and surround himself with thinkers to help him excel at his fraudulent venture/s. He could as well join the NYS. The NYS (National Youth Service) is a semi-autonomous state corporation that specializes in equipping the youth (who voluntarily join) with paramilitary, regimentation and vocational and technical skills. It was at the time involved in a mega financial scandal, in which billions of Kenya shillings were lost. Some of the alleged chief architects and beneficiaries of the scam were running for office (as alluded to by the host) in the 2017 general elections instead of either being prosecuted or serving jail terms. What Njugush implies sarcastically is that the cons should be taken into the NYS fold so as to get trained on how to better steal.

The fourth item in the episode rewords the common saying: pride comes before a fall as 'fraud comes before a fall', substituting 'pride' with 'fraud' to parody the proverb. Thus, the 'Sh15m wedding groom [is] charged with fraud'. The fraudster's flashy wedding was just as fraudulent as the marriage proposal. Panelists Ogana and Muriuki underscore the bride's folly in falling to such fraud without demanding to know the source/s of such wealth and lavishness. The panellists ingeniously continue on the path of integrity and accountability with the insinuation that the bride is a true representation of the Kenyan electorate since she, like the voting public, glorifies money over virtue/integrity and ends up electing fraudsters into office. According to Njugush, the comedian of the night, the wedding caused lots of 'harusinations' among so many people, which is precisely what politicians' often ill-gotten wealth does to Kenyans. It is thus unsurprising that Mbogo seemingly inflates his allegedly frozen funds to 150 million Euros to appear irrefutably affluent. Njugush's 'harusinations' is a neologism that appropriates 'harusi' (Kiswahili for wedding), prefixing it to 'nations', and in effect playing with 'hallucinations'. To wit: Kenyans are easily wedded to such figures, and not only at the ballot.

In addition to ridiculing the groom, the episode exposes not only the gullibility of the bride and Kenyans at large, but also lampoons the lavish lifestyle (nyadhi) of the Luo community, which Ogana—a member—terms as the bane of their community's existence. The groom chose not to invest the money fraudulently obtained but squandered it all in a spectacular proposal and wedding. Ogana, with tongue firmly in cheek, says Otieno did not even hide a portion in some hole. "He went on a cruise in choppers and branded car seats", she goes on; a sad fact that Madowo, also a member of the Luo community, underpins. Certainly, both Ogana and Madowo are calling on their community to change their ways, or, in my syntax, transmogrify the 'nyadhi' stereotype that is all glamour and no substance.

Running through the whole episode is the motif of theft/fraud. The penultimate item has a cholera outbreak at a premier hotel associated with Kenya's first deputy president, a self-confessed Christian man apparently known for theft/fraud. The item, subtitled 'waste-on hotel' (a dialectic play on Weston Hotel) has Njugush musing that if you go to a hotel with 'west/waste' on it, the usual edict of 'food from outside is prohibited' would effectively be inverted to 'food from inside is prohibited', meaning you have to come with your own food—another transformation of conventions. The food from inside is waste, which connotes to faecal matter that is associated with cholera.

Njugush further emphasizes the motif of theft/fraud ingeniously: "The hotel has been grabbing attention of the media for the wrong reasons." Ogana chimes in: the story is 'a-maize-ing' (amazing), which according to Muriuki is a sign, which she articulates as '/si:n/' (with the connotation of 'sin') of things to come. Madowo, caps it all with 'stop running your mouth, ama namna gani, my frien?'' (or what do you think, my friend?): epithets associated with the deputy president. The 'a-maize-ing' story alludes to the deputy president's alleged involvement in a maize scandal that year (Koros n.p). He is also infamous for grabbing land, with the hotel in question said to be sitting on land supposedly fraudulently acquired from the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority (KCAA) (Nyamweya n.p). Significantly, the panellists are able to expose fraud prevalent among ordinary and influential people in Kenyan society. The efficacy of the humour is heightened since it aims at the powerful (see Kaye and Johnson 135), speaking to power in beguiling postmodern ways foregrounded in neologisms and allusions that evade censure and recrimination that could easily attract libel proceedings in the courts of law.

Importantly, the tweets that pour in help reinforce the critical insights envisaged. One prominent feed is from one Jemimah @jemimah_wughanga. It is a video clip that hilariously dramatizes fraud, underscoring the dialectical formulation that indeed 'fraud comes before a fall.' In the clip, a woman is carrying a sheath of papers in a stylishly careful manner. She is just as elegantly groomed and her gait speaks of nothing but perfection. She inadvertently trips on the edge of the road she has just crossed and falls on the sidewalk. The papers scatter all over the place. One affected witness tries to help her up only to have her wig come off her head, exposing a bald-shaven scalp. Her 'fraudulent' façade is exposed, which speaks to the ultimate result of fraud by way of poetic justice: it all gets exposed eventually and all fraudsters fall, literally.

This interplay between televisual and social media transforms *The Trend* from mere banter between the panellists into a dialogue between them and the audience, thereby opening up and expanding the attendant discursive space in an era where media are predatory on as well as complementary to each other. As Lynette Lusike Mukhongo argues following on M. Makinen and M.W. Kuria (2008), "social media tools have fostered participatory and viral media cultures in Kenya, opening up new possibilities for citizens who seek to create and share content globally" (154). Twitter therefore has the advantage of aggregating voices of communities of knowledge and ad hoc groups "into flows of dialog and information" (Murthy quoted in Tully and Ekdale 68). Through the use of hashtags, such communities and impromptu groups "form spaces in which

users can coalesce around topics. Hashtags operate as markers of conversations, bringing disparate comments and commenters together in an interactive space dedicated to the topic of interest" (68), which is precisely what happens at #THETREND and #TTTT. Significantly, this interaction does not stop with these hashtags while *The Trend* airs on NTV. It is continued on YouTube, which interplay fosters participatory civic engagement. I now turn to how word play is rendered on *The Trend* to imagine and/or image a Kenyan transnation.

4.4.1 T/rend(er)ing wordplay: Imagi(ni)ng a Kenyan transnation

In order to concretize how topical comedy stakes and/or takes postmodern humour higher, this final subsection turns to *The Trend*'s trending wordplay and how it is rendered so as to linguistically image and/or imagine a Kenyan transnation. Isabel Ermida argues that "[…] in jokes as in longer humorous discourse […] humor may depend on the way verbal expression is maneuvered and processed" (41). Accordingly,

> [s]uch humor thrives on all levels of linguistic analysis: from sound to morpheme, from word to sentence, from text to context. Whatever the dimension, language can indeed be manipulated, distorted, displaced, and even rendered meaningless, all for the sake of comic effects. (41)

Humour is therefore dependent not only on language, but largely on how the language is exploited and toyed with right from the micro elements of sense-making to the macro, without forgetting references to the discourse surrounding its usage, to achieve funniness. The funniness could result in the language remaining meaningful or not. Whichever extreme—meaningfulness or meaninglessness—is employed, what is paramount in joke-making is the excitement of amusement. Aptly, the humour on *The Trend* depends on the manipulation of language and context.

Importantly, *The Trend*'s panel, while referring to the events that are humorous in themselves already, not only plays with language to make the humour more manifest, but also draws quite extensively on Kenya's linguistic ecology. English, Kiswahili, Sheng and, the panelists' indigenous languages are used with abandon, giving the show a typically Kenyan flavor. As such, besides critiquing news items, the show manifests a Kenyan transnation. Bill Ashcroft defines transnation as "the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. The

transnation is between a way of talking about subjects in their ordinary lives, subjects who live in the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted" (11).

Whereas the migration as manifested on *The Trend* is not (necessarily) geographically beyond the state, it is so in cultural and conceptual terms. Taking NTV as a microcosm of the Kenyan state, therefore, the *migration* manifested on *The Trend* happens within the state but *outside* the state's language boundaries. That is to mean, the panelists transgress the linguistic regimentation of the station of using one language at a time for its bulletins (and other programmes) into merging the languages as a single admixed entity. The country's language ecology is invariably drawn on. This practice mirrors that of ordinary Kenyans in their everyday lives as postcolonial subjects.[109] My argument is that the conventional keeping of English and Kiswahili as separate and pure systems follows the colonial language policy of not contaminating the 'superior' English, which is "a continuation of the cultural and intellectual domination by the West" (Mazrui 36).

I therefore read the extensive drawing on the Kenyan linguistic ecology as a/n un/conscious attempt at freeing the linguistic mind of the country, which is in tandem with the 2000 Asmara Declaration on African languages: "'Colonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages… [that] still haunt independent Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent"' and that "'African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and for the African Renaissance'" (Mazrui 36). The state, Ashcroft argues, "is better described as a set of ongoing practices, discourses, processes, and effects", which, following on Srirupa Roy, is not an object, but "'a publicly articulated discursive and material field'" "reproduced not only by expressions of consent and affirmation but equally expressions of dissent and criticism" (9–10). This is why the fluid migration is not physical but conceptual as it is confined within the geographical boundaries of the Kenyan state but outside the postcolonial state's linguistic regimentation, not only enriching and empowering African languages, especially Kiswahili, but also laying and watering the ground for a form of Kenyan Renaissance.

Thus, *The Trend* as a popular cultural space offers an ideal of what Ashcroft elsewhere calls a "state of exception – an interstitial space in which the border between law and lawlessness vanishes" (7)—where the state's linguistic regimentation "is subject to forms of counter-discourse that operate by dissent, non-compliance and circumvention" (10). On *The Trend*, therefore, the host and his panel in their spectacular performance of talk break as many rules of linguistic

[109] NTV has two nightly news broadcasts: one at seven o'clock in Kiswahili and another in English at nine o'clock).

regimentation as they possibly can to inflect their show as critical infotainment. That is why they mesh many languages together in a mix of formality and informality, which in my grammar, contests the nation-state in order to establish a state-nation otherwise called a Kenyan transnation. Such practices imply a democratization of language practices so as to speak not only to modern democratic ideals, but also the postcolonial enterprise of freeing formerly and/or largely dominated Kenyan languages.

At the core of *The Trend*'s state of exception is wordplay that often proliferates in the manipulation of sound and graphology; or simply put, wordplay that is oftentimes enabled by neologism that is least respecting of language rules and boundaries. At the sound level, as Ermida well articulates, such play could take the forms of homophony, juncture, sound symbolism, assonance, alliteration, rhyme and rhythm, among which "the pun stands out as being quite close to the definition of humor [which i]n the rhetorical tradition […] is called 'paronomasia', meaning 'a form of speech in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings'" (42). For illustration, I turn to 'TTTT: Uhuru, Raila, Ruto sons spend Ksh. 1.16M at a club'[110], which has:

> David Rudisha, the 2016 Rio Olympics champion, in police uniform on Facebook that reveals his full-time job aside from the usual running outfit; men in Kakamega swapping wives because of cheating; a Miss Bungoma pageant being disowned by her county for 'sad' jokes at the national finals in Vihiga; political rivals having a 'peace' lunch at a popular Nairobi eatery; Vihiga county MCAs wasting taxpayers' money on needless trips abroad; leading politicians' sons spending Ksh. 1.16m in one night at a Nairobi club; a flamboyant Nairobi lawyer spending Ksh. 117,000 on lunch with a group of friends; and a crocodile wedding at Mamba village in Mombasa.

Firstly, the homophony is applied on 'cop' and 'cope' in the story of Rudisha. However, the writing on the screen reads, 'Rudisha's pic in police uniform, Internet can't cop', which wittingly elides the final silent 'e' on 'cope' to make it homophonous with 'cop' for police and therefore give the phrase a comical twist with the implication that the picture of the cop caused a sensation the Internet could not cope with. The elision speaks to a kind of 'Kenyan English' in which the two words are pronounced in the same way by nearly all Kenyan indigenous languages speakers as they do not have diphthongs like the one in 'cope'. Consequently, speakers round off the sound to the mono vowel in 'cop'. Further, 'Pic' is not just an informal short form of 'picture'. It also refers, according to the *Concise English Dictionary*, to "a form of entertainment that enacts a story by a

[110] https://youtu.be/Ktad8qLQ4-U

sequence of images giving the illusion of continuous movement." It is therefore a homonym that makes Rudisha's image/s as a cop and runner a pic that the Internet could not cop/e with.

Interestingly, the show pitches Rudisha's full-time job as a 'side hustle' because the majority of Kenyans do not, supposedly, know that he is a police officer, and a chief inspector at that, since he is rarely seen in such regalia. It is perhaps why Butita, the comedian of the night, plays on his name: "Hiyo ni uniform yake, ama atarudisha?" (Is that his uniform or he'll return it—to the owners?). Rudisha is Kiswahili for 'return'. Importantly, much as the panellists exploit the picture to throw barbs at running cops (and soldiers) such as Rudisha who are rarely on duty, they contrast the likes of him with the 'ordinary' police officers that are best known for misdemeanours as shown in *The Wicked Edition.*

Echoic of the police depravity are the Vihiga MCAs who are said to be 'tripping' on their wasteful trips abroad. Much as this is an apt and scathing attack on the MCAs' wastefulness, the criticism is made playfully via the pun on 'trip'. In their trips abroad, the MCAs are tripping: missing steps and falling; stumbling: blundering in making wasteful trips abroad. The play makes 'trip' a homonym wittily employed to ridicule the MCAs dishonourable behaviour.

In the 'mega wife deal [that] crumbles', Butita brings in another 'homonym': 'bibi', with which he plays on the inability of some groups of the Luhya nation to articulate the /b/ sound. They approximate it to /p/, making 'bibi' come out as 'pipi'. According to Butita then, pipi means 'wife' and 'Blue Band' (a popular margarine brand). Butita postulates that one of the men might have been borrowing margarine from the other, but the other mistook it for his wife—hence the wife swap. To deepen the humour, Butita refers to the season as the 'transfer window.' The phrase is polysemous, even homonymic, to the extent that it means wife swaps just as it equates to the period of buying and selling of players in professional sports leagues.

Butita then turns 'Miss Tourism' into another polysemous 'homonymic phrase'. He contends that because her county disowned her for her 'sad jokes', the Miss Tourism ended up missing (out on) the tourism (Na hivyo ndivyo Miss Tourism ame*miss* hiyo tourism). He skilfully comes up with a sentence that when transposed into English reads: 'And that is how Miss Tourism (has) missed (the) tourism', effectively making 'Miss Tourism' the subject of the verb 'miss' whose object is 'tourism'.

One tweep, Emmanuel @Manugauchow, stretches this form of wordplay further with reference to Raila Odinga having lunch with Moses Kuria, the MP for Gatundu South and a man notorious for directing 'tribal' vitriol at the former prime minister. His tweet read: "Politicians wanakula samaki, wananchi wanakulana mangumi." (Politicians eat fish, citizens exchange blows). 'Kula' is a homonym in Kiswahili, denoting 'eat', but such a meaning is easily stretched to many a metaphorical connotation, among which are fighting and coitus.

These examples only amount to what Ermida terms the phonetic pun, which is not without its share of controversy.[111] The phonetic pun is not an end in itself though. It "sustain[s] the textual dynamic of satirical discourse" (Simpson 102). Thus, the examples supplied are critical as they are condemnatory of social ills rampant in Kenyan society—corruption among the political class and the attendant gullibility, stupidity in the citizenry who fight their (politicians') wars as they (politicians) dine together, police depravity, commoditization of women and many more besides. Such ills have become normalized to the extent of becoming stereotypes of the category 'Kenyans'. They are therefore caricatured for disavowal.

Inasmuch as the phonetic pun contributes to the humour prevalent on *The Trend*, it is not the epitome of postmodern humour. What is, in my view, is what Ermida refers to as mimesis. In her own words,

> [h]umor also exploits sound mechanisms which are related to morphology and popular etymology. They consist of distorted, phonetically suggestive forms, which borrow parts of words and attach them to phonetically similar ones through a principle of mimesis. Alternatively, entire words are imported into distorted original forms. This type of linguistic game is usually regarded as pseudo-punning, since the words used are not pure homophones. (45)

Otherwise expressed, the wordplay at the morphological, phonetic and etymological levels—in our case encompasses play on English and Kiswahili as well as proper names, and mainly abounds in graphology on the television screen (as published on YouTube)—twists the original words and/or phrases by reshaping them into new morphemes that speak to the purposes at hand. Such purposes are often humorous, critical, parodic and satirical. I contend that besides deepening postmodern humour, mimesis speaks to an imagined convention-transforming and stereotype-transmogrifying Kenyan transnation.

[111] Ermida documents that the phonetic pun, especially in the form of 'controlled ambiguity', often occasions impatience, uneasiness among other discomfitures as the play is only restricted to sound; hence, signifiers. The signified is/are often disregarded (44–5).

Ermida argues that mimesis is allusive parody in that it “makes use of strategies of phonic-morpholog[y, which] consists of complex witty sayings that exhibit classical or biblical culture by alluding to literary and philosophical phraseology or passages from the Scriptures" (46). In ‘Fraud comes before a fall’, for instance, ‘fraud’ thus mimes ‘pride' both phonetically and morphologically, and as already seen, its humour is intensified by the video clip as tweeted by one Jemimah @jemimah_wughanga, a clip that feeds into the postmodern symbiosis of old and new media. The humorous subtitle ‘Mega wife deal crumbles’ spoofs off the original anterior ‘Kakamega wife swap turns sour', which it mimes, especially at the phonic-morphological ‘mega', an English distortion of ‘Kakamega', which is a place inhabited by part of the Luhya nation in western Kenya. The deal speaks to the sad transformation of women into chattel that can be exchanged and re-exchanged at will without regard to their feelings and dignity. The exchange is certainly an indictment against patriarchy’s subordination of women that perpetuates an unequal society. The women themselves are not spared from criticism either. They ought and indeed can do better that allow themselves to be thus traded.

‘Kukuria meza moja' is a parody of ‘Gatundu South MP honours Raila lunch invite', which it mimes, again, phonic-morphologically. The MP (as already noted) is called Moses Kuria. ‘Kuria', besides meaning ‘eat' in many Kenyan Bantu languages, phonetically and morphologically mimes the Kiswahili verb for ‘eat’, which is ‘kula'. Some Kenyans, especially from the central region, articulate ‘kula' as ‘kura'. Thus, whereas ‘to eat on the same table’ would effectively translate to ‘kulia meza moja' in Kiswahili, *The Trend* crew uses Kuria's surname, which coincides with the misarticulated ‘kulia' to craft the mimetic ‘Kuria meza moja'. Thus, the political enemies dine together, transmogrifying the common, misleading image which the public is led to believe that Kuria, for example, and his political rivals are sworn enemies. In fact, the panellists use the gesture to deride Kenyans' stupidity of falling to the politicians’ pranks and going for each other’s jugulars in defense of the politicians. The more reason Emmanuel’s tweet referred to earlier is apt.

The misleading conventional belief is further debunked by the sons of the publicly warring politicians, who are reported to have spent in excess of one million Kenya shillings on drinks at an exclusive club in one night, most of which they waste on washing hands and, literally, pouring down (the drain). The clip is aptly subtitled, ‘Can you bill-ive' this?, spoofing off ‘Uhuru, Raila, Ruto sons spend Sh1.16m at club'. The ‘bill-ive' is a neologistic parody of ‘believe’, which is mimetic of the over-the-top bill incurred by the politicians’ scions in a country where the majority

languish in poverty, and hence cannot afford such ‘out-of-the-movies’ luxury. Such spending underlines Kenya's socio-economic inequality and the political class and its scions' disregard of the plight of the common taxpayer. The taxpayer who is often sycophantic of the political class is allowed to witness firsthand (through mediatization, though) the larger-than-life opulence of the political class and their progeny and contrast it with their own measly survival. The message seems to be geared towards awakening the Kenyan populace to reconsider their uncritical following and defence of the political class that tramples them underfoot, socio-economically.

Intriguingly, the politicians’ sons seem a fair representation of Kenya’s ethnic composition, with Raila being Luo, Uhuru Kikuyu and Ruto Kalenjin. It is encouraging they intermingle, presumably taking in their fold other ethnicities as friends and associates, which speaks to harmonious coexistence. Importantly, they are said to have spent the unbelievable bill as a unit; thus, disproving the stereotypes that only Luos are extravagant, Kikuyus frugal and Kalenjins rustic (Ligaga, “Ethnic Stereotypes” 78–9). These are individuals least constrained by such typecasting. It could mean that Kenyans from given ethnic extractions only ‘conform’ to such straitjacketing because of physical and socio-economic location. Otherwise, they are just as liberal as anyone else, and therefore conduct themselves according to their individual tastes and preferences irrespective of how their ethnic categories are stereotyped.

In a similar vein, a renowned Nairobi lawyer, Donald Kipkorir—a Kalenjin—treats a group of his friends to some lavish lunch at a Nairobi hotel. It is a pale 10% of the above-mentioned incredible bill but substantial nonetheless, hence, ‘So munch money’ as the mimetic parody. Of course, ‘munch', which denotes ‘eating’ mimes ‘much' that is the programme’s expression of indignation at so much money spent on lunch that was not by any means a luncheon. Contrastively, Madowo—a Luo—claims that he too took two friends to Mathare, one of Nairobi's informal settlement areas, for a Ksh.170 lunch, equating to a paltry 0.01% of the politicians’ sons’ bill. With regards to stereotyping, he further debunks the said Luo stereotype just as Kipkorir does that of the Kalenjin. Madowo himself is arguably not without means. He could have decided to have lived up to the Luo stereotypization. He however consciously seems to have chosen not to in order to not only abject the Luo stereotype, but also—more importantly—underline the wantonness of the political class and the affluent. Least surprising, Butita cannot wait to see such so-called flamboyant Kenyans posting receipts on social media of hospital bills bail outs for the poor and/or boreholes sunk in Kenya's frontier counties to ease their water quandaries. Butita seems to echo

what I termed in the previous section 'the wickedness that Kenyanness is', which is in dire need of repudiation. To this research nonetheless, Madowo's act is benevolent to the extent that it frees him from his community's typecasting. Luos are not necessarily profligate after all. Like anyone else, they can choose to be frugal—not as a community but as individuals.

An analysis of further mimetic jokes from 'TTTT_Something about Kales and this leather jacket swag' will serve to bring this sub-section to a close.[112]

> Lilian Muli, one of Kenya's foremost anchors, is in the limelight for berating a waitress at a Nairobi bar and restaurant; a carpenter and law student applies for the vacant chief justice's position; the president and his deputy launch a flashy new party (Jubilee); the popularity of the brown leather jacket among the Kalenjin peoples is spotlighted; a Jubilee Party billboard is torched in Homa Bay county in Nyanza; the Rio Olympics scandal is critiqued; a Luo man is reported to have stolen sausages at his place of work; a woman convicted of denying her children health care on account of religious beliefs is released to a jubilant reception from her fellow cult members; Kenyan elite churches are reported to have made billions in tithes and offerings in 2015; Mani, a Kenyan of Asian origins' cover song of the national anthem angers Kenyans; the Somalia government bans Kenyan khat (miraa) exports to the country following Meru governor's unsavoury remarks about Somalia in his campaigns and, allegedly, Kenya's closure of the Dadab refugee camp that hosts many a Somali refugee; a mega iPhones theft at the Deputy president's office; and Uber previews future prospects of 'hailing' a chopper.

In this episode, the trending original news items are playfully mimed for critical purposes. The president and his deputy's flashy party launch, which included not only the purchase of a high-end headquarters but also the branding of 47 brand new Prado gas guzzlers, ventures believed to have run into billions, is subtitled 'Jubilee money-festo'. 'Money-festo' mimes 'manifesto' in a parodic and satirical manner meant to critique the party's show of grandeur in what the panellists see as a country riddled with a rising and unsustainable foreign debt and little development to show for the avaricious borrowing. The ruling party's extravagance ties in with that of their sons in the preceding episode. It seems that such spendthrift ways are not localised at the individual level. They are institutional, which speaks to endemic and systemic decadence in the country. In fact, Ogana insinuates that the money involved could be from the public coffers as the leadership and the elite membership are already in office. It simply proceeds from corruption. She is dissuaded that the money was sourced from the leadership's partners, wondering where the partners disappear to when it comes to issues of development. In other words, party manifestos in the

[112] https://youtu.be/bSQQ1XmIqBM Sep 9, 2016, NTV Kenya

country amount to nothing but glitz for the top echelons and a show of the same to the electorate. They are not meant to improve the livelihoods of the citizenry.

Butita supplies a Kiswahili mimesis to crown the criticism of the party's extravagance, which he laces with a swipe at the fledgling democracy that Kenya is. According to him, Jubilee bought the building to avoid paying rent (ndoo wasilipe kodi ya nyumba). 'Kodi' is Kiswahili for rates, or rent. Still, 'kodi' is echoic and therefore phonic-morphologically mimetic of the opposition coalition 'CORD' (Coalition for Reforms and Development) that the president and his deputy competed against at the hotly contested 2013 polls. It is a formation they want to avoid at whatever cost just as they would want to avoid 'kodi' in a country where political competition appears as a matter of life and death, and winning elections equals salvation from taxation. Additionally, in a country where democratic maturity is a mirage, when parties and/coalitions ascend to power, they treat their competitors as sworn enemies, with whom they want nothing to do, and this does not stop with the leadership of the losing side. In the course of their reign/s, Kenyan leaders profile communities through stereotypization, which deepens ethnic polarization that prominently resurfaces every electioneering cycle. Butita's critique and the panel's as a whole is meant to get the nation out of this constricting rut, and that can only be done if stereotypes are rethought, recast and transmogrified, if not disavowed.

'Wasted Mi-Rio-ons' speaks to the Kenya Olympic Committee squandering millions of shillings at the 2016 Rio Olympics, including paying for expensive accommodation and meals on a cruise ship (in excess of 2 million Kenya shillings) that the president was to occupy just in case he decided to show up, which, significantly, he did not. His cabinet secretary ended up spending some of the days paid for on the ship. The solicitor general, the next in rank on the trip, would too when he docked—or so members of the committee confessed to parliament weeks after. The rot is not just institutional. It is the glue and salve that keeps the country's bureaucracy alive, at home and abroad. Abroad is where millions are properly squandered and every loophole sealed to stem discovery and accountability. While the bureaucracy was swimming in millions, athletes—whose backs it was riding roughshod—were evicted from the Olympic village for unpaid bills, forcing them to sleep in the cold. Some went without food. The committee supplied them inadequate kits. Worse, some official is said to have been walking around the city with Ksh. 25m in cash. The mission was an inexcusable mess, and a significant show abroad of Kenya's wickedness.

The *Trend*'s critique of this shameless corruption is backdropped on the parodic 'Rio' in 'Mi-Rio-ns' that echoes Rio de Janeiro, the Olympics hosting city. Besides, it mimes some Kenyans' pronunciation of 'millions' as 'mirrions'. The *Trend*'s brigade spends a considerable amount of time lambasting the committee, and urging Kenyans to awake from their normative forgetful slumber as imposed on them by the country's founding president. As Musila observes, following on Simon Gikandi, Kenyatta bequeathed Kenya the 'forgive and forget' slogan as a foundation upon which to build the country. Kenyans were hence encouraged not to look back (to injustices and scars), but to the future. Thus, "the culture of selective amnesia […] has haunted Project Kenya since independence" (258 "Archives of the Present"). It is the culture that *The Trend* implicitly reminds Kenyans to cast off. That is why the programme revisits such disturbing news items while nuancing them with a postmodern humour aesthetic so as to etch them in the Kenyan psyche. In other words, Kenyans must never be forgetful of past injustices and scars no matter who inflicts them. They must remain vigilant in seeking redress and retributive justice. As Butita further deepens the critical mimesis wittily: 'ship is expensive', which while miming 'cheap is expensive' as well as calling the cruise ship to mind, critiques the easy route of forgetting the past for convenience. It also alludes humorously to some Kenyans' misarticulation of 'cheap' as 'ship' (sheep, that is), which implicitly speaks to the Kikuyu's stereotypization for avarice for money. The stereotype is thus ridiculed. It is not just Kikuyus that are money-minded and thus prone to corruption. All Kenyans, especially those in officialdom, are and easily fall for it.

In short, mimesis complicates *The Trend*'s wordplay, enriching it to extremely rewarding levels. It shows how language can be manipulated in pleasurable ways to speak not only to the country's decay, but also to the ordinary citizenry's transgression of institutional and the state's linguistic straightjacketing. As Mazrui argues, such transgression involves the creation of "a counter-discourse [, which o]ften […] involve[s] a certain degree of linguistic transgression, challenging the social rules and cultural politics that govern language use, that determines who says what to whom, how, when and where" (45). In my syntax, such comedic dismantling of the said regimentation is manifestation that Kenyan comedy transmogrifies conventions surrounding language use in order to fashion a Kenyan transnation. By allowing the banters to draw unreservedly on Kenyan languages, the transnation not only enriches them "rendering them even more potent media tools in the process" (46), but also "empower[s the] languages in a way that

extends their capacity for local cultural resistance against the global hegemony of the imperial center" (47).

In Baym's words, such hegemonic languages "have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations" (262). In turn, local languages are freed and so are the country's otherwise pigeonholed language practices. Whereas many a spectator on YouTube appreciates and perceives satire of *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* as corrective of Kenya's myriad tribulations, others come to the shows to obtain a laugh as they find them purely comedic. This does not necessarily mean that their critical faculty is not incited. It could simply imply that they resort to the 'just for laughs' paradigm that is in resonance with the aesthetics of escapism.

Such transgression, as I have attempted to show, is not limited to language use. It extends to how mimesis potentially impregnates the transgression with agency. That is, the counter-narratives engendered seem to point to home grown remedies to Kenya's 'wretchedness'. Kenya's problems have their origins, or etymology so to speak, in Kenyans' psyche and conduct; abound in their constitution, or morphology as it were; and can be remedied by themselves through the power and manipulation of language. Democratically, Kenyans erect power; they (can) speak to it when it errs; and if it cannot hear them, they can equally dismantle it and erect an alternative that they can sustain as erected through the power of mimetic language as embossed in the humour of their comedy. Kenyans can in the same fashion transmogrify and disavow denigrating stereotypes.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore topical humour in *The Wicked Edition with Dr. King'ori* and *The Trending Trend Talkers*. While treating parody and satire as modes of postmodern humour, the chapter has dwelt not so much on stereotypes but on norms and conventions that are so outmoded as to represent Kenya's wickedness that is fast transforming into a stereotype. It has foregrounded satire on the premise that satire is as political as it is participatory in its evocative and telling criticism of socio-political facets of society. Consequently, the chapter has placed a premium on language and how it is tinkered with to critique society's (seemingly) givens.

Taking Linda Hutcheon's polemic exploration and definition of postmodernism as a touchstone while wedding her ideas on parody to those of Simon Dentith's, the chapter has argued that *The*

Wicked Edition and *The Trending Tend* revisit trending news not in a nostalgic manner but in re-historicized and politicized ways that enable and/or encourage critical reflection. It has analysed how *The Wicked Edition* ironically and parodically reframes *NTV Weekend Edition,* using it as a vehicle to satirize Kenyan society and how *The Trend* does much the same with particular news items, privileging wordplay emblematic in the phonetic pun and mimesis to contest conventions in order to imagine a Kenyan transnation. Further, the chapter has established that the humour of the texts is manifest in irony, parody, satire and wordplay, which amplify incongruity with their respective anterior texts, s/taking postmodern humour higher.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Reflections and Refractions

It is an interesting time to bring this thesis to a close. Kenya has a new political dispensation that did not take the route of the Building Bridges Initiative addressed in chapter two. Raila Odinga, supported by is political foe-turned-brother, Uhuru Kenyatta, was defeated at the ballot, marking the end of the initiative the Supreme Court of Kenya had ruled unconstitutional. Kenyatta's estranged deputy, William Ruto, emerged as the winner in another hotly contested election that was ultimately determined by the Supreme Court. The country will certainly be looking to how historians document the events around Ruto's win in the August 9th, 2022 election—that was rumoured to have been infiltrated by foreign agents, particularly Venezuelans—in which 8 million Kenyans kept away, with a paltry 7.1 million *deciding* the winner and the *losing* 6.9 million sulking.

I began writing this dissertation in 2018, after Kenya had just emerged from a second successive contested election that left the country polarised along ethnic lines, which raised disconcerting concerns about Kenya's nationhood and its citizens' sense of belonging to the polity. Part of my motivation for undertaking this study was to interrogate how popular cultural productions interpret not just election outcomes but also contribute to the shaping of an otherwise elusive cohesive nationhood. One factor that glaringly stood out in extant literature on such productions, especially on television, was the role of stereotypes. This literature centred majorly on the *Churchill Show* in its various formations/and or re/branding. The show was accused of being littered with jokes saturated with ethnic stereotypes that were said to influence inter-ethnic relations in the country (Ndonye vi). The stereotypes as circulated in the show were even blamed for the skirmishes that followed the 2007/8 disputed presidential election, the logic being that the show had helped entrench them in the citizenry's psyche (Ndonye, Bartoo and Khaemba 605). In other words, the show was condemned for contributing to the country's endemic *tribalization*, or what is often called 'negative ethnicity' in politically correct language.

I was thus intrigued and sought to study the show, which as I record in chapter two, started soon after the said 2007/2008 skirmishes and is fashioned as bringing Kenyans and its (severed) communities back together. Consequently, I set to investigate how—on the larger canvass—Kenyan comedy attempts to transmogrify stereotypes and fashion a 'Kenyanness' of aesthetic

escapism. That is, how through the art and structure of comedy young Kenyans are enabled to speak to the germane issues that shape Kenyan nationhood. In the course of my research, I discovered that the study of comedy alone would not be of much help. In consequence, I incorporated analysis of humour. Hence, while the title of my thesis indicates the study of comedy as devised and fashioned in Kenya—even entirely by Kenyans or people living within the country, the ultimate investigation turned out to be as much about comedy as about humour since the two are so entwined, with the major difference being that comedy is performative; humour textual (Wilkie xvi). Otherwise put, humour is actualized through comedy, and the result is not as transparent as might be thought. Subsequently, I have argued that contrary to often popular sentiment that humour is inconsequential, it is not. Neither does it trivialize nor shy away from addressing pertinent socio-political issues. Instead, it excavates, exposes and critiques them—while pointing to curative measures—in an apparently escapist, even fantastical manner. While doing this, humour's major *undoing* seems to be its elicitation of laughter that makes its method hilarious, and in consequence, seemingly *unserious*.

While viewing the humour under scrutiny as postmodern, I relied on Nicholas Holm's theorization of the emergent postmodern humour that manifests as humour of discomfort, provocative humour and absurd humour (195). Holm's conceptualization, I realized, corresponds to Blair Scott Franklyn's formulation of postmodern humour as an aesthetic that references and responds to the uncertainties of the current postmodern times (2). To Holm's three forms of postmodern humour, I added parody and satire (as modes) as I deemed them aesthetically resourceful at apprehending Kenyans' *throwness* into postmodernity. Consequently, I contended that postmodern humour can be politically progressive as it is often insurrectionary in its non-confrontational criticism of oppression and marginalization. Thus, the humour challenges and transforms oppressive norms and hegemonies as it upsets and unsettles stereotypes in which such norms and hegemonies are crystalized. The humour has the potential, therefore, to be liberating and empowering.

Additionally, in order to analyse this amalgam of comedy and humour, I employed William Paul's notion of an aesthetics of escapism to unravel the 'just for laughs' fashion in which the postmodern humour is cloaked. According to Paul, comedy is more than a congenial distraction from society's pressing issues (274). The aesthetics disrobes escapism of negative associations,

inscribing it with a realism that is alive to prevalent socio-political and economic trends (276). My research, consequently, conceived of escapism as a narrative mode that allows the scrutiny and critique of contradictory and contesting issues in Kenyan society that have for decades rendered socio-cultural integration a mirage.

Further, my study relied on Jörg Schweinitz's conception of stereotype in order to effectively re/interpret stereotypes. According to Schweinitz, stereotype encompasses various meanings; hence, breaking with the logic with which it is associated in social psychology—connoting to prejudiced attitudes about groups and their members. Schweinitz contends that in linguistics, literary theory and history, for instance, stereotype focuses on standardizations in speech, text and expression (15). My study of stereotypes in Kenyan comedy subsequently proceeded from this range of meanings with the view that stereotypes cannot just be domiciled in socio-psychology, where—as abstractions—they suppress information and remain poor mis/representations of their depictions.

Accordingly, I contended that stereotypes are not grounded in reality. They are fantastical as they are second-hand knowledge, handed down from one generation to another. As such, they occasion a disjuncture between reality and the image they cast, thereby distorting intra- and inter-group knowledge. For that reason, they are not wholly embraced by their objects. Instead, they are held at a critical distance, becoming ambivalent and suspicious. They are thus susceptible to manipulation and easily become carriers of ideology. It is this ideology in its multiple permutations that I set out to interrogate in this thesis. Consequently, I argued that comedians mock the fantastical grounding of stereotypes even as they draw on them to entertain in a manner that seems to pacify the stereotyped, who oftentimes include themselves. In the process, the comedians affirm the stereotypes; oftentimes disavow them, usually by way of implicitly casting them off.

Since this double-edged play on stereotypes impacts Kenyan identities, I chose to anchor my investigation in the postpositivist realist theory of identity. The theory—as Gilpin succinctly puts it—postulates that such "*identities are both constructed and real,* […] *are mediated through cognitive and social processes,* […] *knowledge garnered in the context of oppression should be afforded epistemic privilege, and* […] *the power of individual and collective agency should be part of discussions of identity*" (10; italics in the original). Consequently, I attempted to show that varied Kenyan identities are both tangible and socially generated. They are made sense of rationally and

aided by the (alternative) accounts that abound in the public and/or groups about one's place in the world. The knowledge accruing therefrom cannot therefore be dismissed as insignificant. It is this knowledge that I have tried to make use in order to show that agency—both collective and individual—and identities travel together in contesting and/or affirming ascriptions (to categories). In view of these, I set out to explore the impact of stereotypes about given Kenyan identities and how they are re/interpreted in and through comedy. In comedic play, then, the ideologies behind the stereotypes were seen to be humorously transgressed and inverted in order to fashion a 'Kenyanness' of aesthetic escapism.

Therefore, in view of the condemnations levelled against the *Churchill Show* and its reliance on ethnic stereotypes, I discovered that postmodernity's prevaricating nature seems to call for a concomitant comic aesthetics. However, supplanting age-old comic frames with the entirely new appears a near-impossibility. For that reason, stereotypes—the staple of comedy—are of necessity infused with doubt and coupled with the everyday and the historical to fabricate postmodern humour that appears to collapse the boundaries between the real and the aesthetic. I concluded, then, that this is precisely what occurs in the *Churchill Show* in order that a programmatic politics of crafting a state-nation Kenyanness accrues. The political aesthetics starts with freeing the concept of the stereotype from its imprisonment in social psychology, where it signifies socio-cultural categories and moving it to the realms of linguistics and literature to connote to recurrent patterns of narration, the idiom and style. Thus, without necessarily dispensing with socio-cultural stereotypes, the *Churchill Show* transforms and nuances them anew such that the show and its entire constitution becomes an aggregation of transmogrified stereotypes. Transglossic language, which challenges the Kenyan postcolonial state regimented language systems, deepens this transmogrification.

Moreover, it emerged that the insistence on the use of socio-cultural stereotypes on the *Churchill Show* is meant to draw the country's political leadership to the predicament of the country; a predicament that needs urgent redress in order that a people divided are re-united, communities severed brought back together with the ultimate goal of contributing towards healing a fractured state so as to fashion a cohesive nation. Hence, the play on stereotypes appears to be a kind of cognitive *re*memory of the past, which is coupled with the memorialization of the everyday and the historical for a culture of tolerance of diversity. The play on stereotypes begins with individuals not only jocularly deriding each other but also deprecating themselves even as they

reference their communities through audience-implicated stereotypes in order that the stereotypes are subjected to scrutiny by the audiences themselves concerning their authenticity and efficacy. To this end, the multiple social locations occupied by the comedians help them to creatively transform Kenyan stereotyped identities into new experiences that they task the audience to interpret by and for themselves.

These multiple memberships make and make over each other, affording the comedians epistemic privilege with which to address a multiplicity of issues with the aim of politically unsettling the taken for granted sensual conceptions, the commonsensical and age-old perceptions within the polity as (predominantly) encapsulated in stereotypes. That is to mean, a negotiation with the Kenyan collective past cannot be imagined, the present meaningfully engaged with and the future pragmatically projected without recourse to stereotypes. Consequently, the anecdotal experiences shared on the *Churchill Show* shift back and forth fusing the present with the past while pointing to the future of the historical collective Kenyan experience. This way, the *Churchill Show* points to new knowledge in every episode, engendering new ways of perceiving and knowing the Kenyan psyche while constructing a tolerant and celebratory 'Kenyanness' ably modulated by Churchill as the organic intellectual/interpreter in the comedic space.

In Kenyan society, exploitation and social injustices are often entrenched by stereotypes of marginality. The experiences of house helps, mediated as they are on the popular platform of comedy, seem to offer credible insights into injustices against and exploitation of women who find themselves in domestic service because of poverty and lack of better opportunities elsewhere. Oftentimes, these women are least educated, and so they are discriminated against and stigmatized. Their trade is thus highly devalued. A cohesive and progressive Kenyanness cannot be realized if such a category is left behind. In consequence, I turned to *The Real Househelps of Kawangware* and *Auntie Boss*, popular television shows that focalize domestic workers. I sought to investigate how these shows attempt to center and empower them.

Essentially, I shifted focus to female agency and interrogated how provocative and absurd humour, respectively, in *The Real Househelps* and *Auntie Boss* enabled this agency. Reading the two shows through the lenses of docusoap and dramedy, I discovered that these forms of postmodern humour enhance an aesthetics of escapism that allows the house helps to buy into a neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility that gives them illusory freedom that does not significantly

change their oppressive circumstances but enables them to renegotiate and refashion class and gender relations. In other words, provocative and absurd humour perform a transgressive politics that subverts ideologies, unsettling attendant stereotypes while engendering 'new femininities' and, inescapably, 'new masculinities' through postfeminist and neoliberal ethe. These ethe, I maintained, enable the construction of complex female characters who spearhead the attendant transgression, engendering near-helpless (female) employers, and near-tyrannical employees, and seemingly feminized men and masculinized women in heteronormative relations. Such presentation seems to mark the beginning of a bold debate towards initiating reforms in domestic work; a realm that is hardly open to trade union scrutiny and governmental regulation. The transgressions engaged in by the female house helps against their predominantly female employers are politically progressive to the extent that they empower the house helps to protest oppression and invoke trade unionism (and governmental action). Perhaps, had trade unionism been fully incorporated in the production of the shows, the house helps' cause would have been better advanced. Maybe the marginalization was cleverly meant to draw its eye. Still, for the house helps' transgressions to bear meaningful fruits, socio-economic structures have to be reengineered.

Conventionally, mainstream televisual and audial news programmes continue to be the most reliable sources of objective and balanced news for the general public in established as well as nascent and wavering democracies such as Kenya. Yet, despite the availability of these, topical comedy programmes that are either parodic or satirical or both are not uncommon in such societies, not to mention the so-called 'fake news'. Of late, in Kenya particularly, there has been an unprecedented explosion of such shows and/or segments on the country's mainstream broadcast channels, which certainly speaks to the popularity of such shows. They not only entertain their audiences but also serve as alternative sources that are arguably more engaging and insightful than the former.

Consequently, I turned to the topical humour in *The Wicked Edition with Dr. King'ori* and *The Trending Trend Talkers* to establish how postmodern humour is employed in critiquing decadence prevalent in Kenyan society. To this end, I dwelt not as much on stereotypes as on norms and/or conventions that represent Kenya's *wickedness*. Treating parody and satire as modes of postmodern humour because they are critical and unsettling of the country's outmoded norms that are fast morphing into stereotypes, I argued that *The Wicked Edition* and *The Trend* are fashioned

as satire TV since they not only entertain the citizenry but also encourage it to critically participate in and contribute to public life. Such participation is further enhanced by the incorporation of Twitter in the interactive live broadcasts of the shows. By privileging wordplay—particularly the phonetic pun and mimesis that deepen postmodern humour—in *The Trend*, I contended, the postcolonial institutional and state linguistic regimentation are dismantled and a Kenyan transnation imagined.

Initially, I was so intrigued by the incorporation of Twitter feeds in the live broadcast of *The Trending Trend Talkers* that I wanted to study how the interface between the televisual medium and the online microblogging site work towards enriching the imagined transnation. The motivation was that Kenyans on Twitter, in addition to toying with language in all manner of ways that are least abiding by the nation's language policy and strict grammars of standard English and Kiswahili, for example, is apt at politicizing and/or upsetting conventions and socio-cultural and politico-economic trends and the attendant import on the construction of a notion of a 'Kenyanness' that is alive to vibrant public discourse and civic engagement. The role of Twitter in this discourse can be explored by future research.

Still on online matters that have given this thesis life through the new media platform of YouTube, it seems inescapable to recall that Covid-19 happened, and almost became the new normal until very recently. To curb the spread of the pandemic, governments and territorial authorities devised means and methods to help curb its spread among their citizens. Mitigating measures such as curfews, lockdowns and quarantines necessitated movement and gathering restrictions that negatively impacted on the globe's socio-political and economic activities in phenomenal ways. Yet, it seems an agreeable truism that such tragic disasters and/or curses on human populations can turn out to be blessings in disguise. This is true of the burgeoning size of content creators who took and continue to take to new media to produce and disseminate socio-cultural material. Among these are comedians.

Kefa M. Otiso rightly observes that "like many other crises in history, the COVID-19 crisis [did] have silver linings or unintended positive consequences including greater creativity and innovation among individuals, organizations, institutions, and nations across the globe" (1). In other words, humans have the capacity to reinvent themselves in their efforts to survive atrocities that history often visits on them, be they natural or man-made, and it is not infrequent that they

immensely benefit. Otiso contends that Kenyans, particularly, both at home and in the diaspora have turned around the "related lockdowns [of the pandemic] to discover, refine, enhance, and market their gifts and talents" (11). Elsa Majimbo, then a journalism student at Strathmore University in Nairobi, became "an Internet sensation since March 2020 [for her] witty and relatable monologues on COVID-19 lockdowns" and its attendant human relations disruption restrictions (11). Indeed, Majimbo emerged as a star on the silver lining of the Covid-19 dark cloud, rising to fame with her short comic videos that were lauded for keeping her fans across the globe mirthful through the restrictions (see Sullivan, Salaudeen 2020). In a metaphorical way, if this claim is any measure, her humour seems to have helped in efforts to flatten the then so much talked about curve of the pandemic, psychologically: serving as a much needed salve and a coping mechanism in the grimness of that time when the pandemic was at its lethal peak.

Even so, as the pandemic ravaged the globe, the *Churchill Show* that largely inspired this research did not close shop much as it depended on live performances that were then mediated by television and subsequently published on YouTube. With neither rebranding nor altering its identity as a stand-up variety, the show reinvented itself into a pseudo auto/biographical platform, telling the stories of, first, its comedians and then other Kenyans—both prominent and otherwise—in its novel 'The Journey Series Edition'. Like Majimbo above, such a development could be mined for invaluable research beneficial to popular cultural studies and the humanities at large.

All in all, Kenyan comedy is still riven with stereotypes. It is not enough to blame this for the country's failure to fashion itself into a cohesive nation. This does not, however, imply that stereotypes are blameless since they are underlain by ideology. The stereotypes, therefore, need to be continually scrutinized and their ideological underpinnings relentlessly interrogated. In its small way, therefore, my research has attempted to demonstrate that these stereotypes can be transformed by being disinvested of socio-psychological imagery and *re*invested with other (positive) meanings that could help fashion (a) cohesive *Kenyanness/s* not just in the aesthetic world of comedy but in the material world of the country, Kenya.

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