

Setting as Technique in Kenyan Television Drama: The Case of *Tahidi High*

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, *Film Studies* is an area that has attracted varied attention from scholars in Kenya today. The country has recorded a tremendous increase in film scholarship in the recent past. This upsurge in Film studies goes hand in hand with the efforts of various organizations and institutions to encourage production and study of films in Kenya. For instance, in August 2008, World story Organization (WSO) met with the Kenya Film Commission with a view of discussing the state of the Kenyan film industry and encouraging local and/or indigenous productions in the country. These developments, and many others, affirm the centrality of Film Studies – especially local productions. It is the intention of this paper to make a contribution in Film and Media Studies by interrogating the interplay between setting and characterization in telling the Kenyan story in *Tahidi High*, a locally produced television drama.

Introduction: Setting in the Dramatic Art

Truby (2007) defines setting as the story world of a work of fiction. In this regard, setting encompasses the whole environment surrounding events and experiences in a work of art. This definition covers the social-cultural, political and economic environments of the work. This includes the historical and ideological aspects of the time, and place where the actions and events in a work of art occur. Thus, this paper investigates how the said components of setting have been creatively used in *Tahidi High* to contribute towards the creation of a student image. Setting can also be looked at as social milieu. Donna (1992) gives a description of how social milieu affects the values of characters until setting itself becomes character. This says a lot in the way of the manner in which setting enhances characterization in a work of art and indeed, in the television drama under scrutiny. Using forty two episodes aired on Citizen TV in 2010, this paper seeks to discuss the interplay between setting and characterization.

Home as a Prelude to the School Setting

Idu & Ojedapo (2011) point out the correlation between parental attitude and the discipline of students in school. If their observation is anything to go by, then home setting in *Tahidi High* can be seen as the precursor to school setting. *Tahidi High* is a local television drama in Kenya set in a high-cost secondary school: Tahidi High School. In the first episode, selected for this study, Tahidi High School students are on holiday and it is the last weekend before the official opening of the school to signal the beginning of a new school year. The scene juxtaposes the backgrounds of the Tahidi High School students. On the one hand, it portrays students from affluent families. This is evident when we encounter the first set of students at the basketball

court; a court situated in a rich neighbourhood. Loud RNB music plays from a car parked nearby. The car belongs to Mark's father and has brought by Mark. On the other hand, is a portrayal of students from tough economic backgrounds. Mule represents this category of students. He has been born and bred in Kibera, a low-income residential area in Nairobi. His uncle and guardian, Omosh, is self-employed in the informal 'jua kali' sector. He is set to join Tahidi High School through a scholarship.

As the second episode begins, Mule, in the company of his uncle, is shopping in town as he prepares to go to school. An argument ensues between Mule and his uncle on the quality of shopping and the price of shoes that he needs for school. The argument exposes the Mule's socioeconomic status as compared to the other students seen in scene one. Tension builds in Mule and visible for he is aware that he is going to a school dominated by children from rich families and therefore would like to measure up to their standard. As they move from one shop to another, the scenario does not change. Finally, Mule's uncle dictates that the shopping will be done at *Gikomba*¹. Mule gets frustrated while his uncle gets his way arguing that the money is not sufficient enough to buy all the items that Mule needs. However, it is worth noting that these economic disparities between Mule and the other students are later amplified in school.

It is important to note that the basketball court plays a significant role in this scene. The court brings into the fore the boy-girl relationships manifest in Tahidi High School. The scene further highlights underlying love battles among the girls as each of the girls' keen on protecting her relationship. The four girls present: Shish, Mary, Jean-Joyce and Frankie come to the court dressed in revealing attire to attract the boys. The simmering rivalry between the girls becomes clear when Jean-Joyce, out of jealous, openly tells Frankie that she (Frankie) thinks that every boy in the school is hers. The prevailing situation clearly foregrounds the fact that Tahidi High School, like many other mixed secondary schools in Kenya, is not just an educational centre but also a rendezvous for the boy-girl relationships which are typical of teenagers.

The setting then shifts from the basketball court to the households of Jean-Joyce, Mary and Ray. These households are strategically chosen to clearly show the affluence which the students have found themselves in which eventually dictates their behavior not just at home but also at school. The students have too much freedom and liberty on their hands because of the parents' economic power. The students have the freedom and liberty to choose what to do at their own volition. This situation is clearly played out when the students decide to have a party, head to the supermarket in Mark's father's car and the only items on their shopping list are alcoholic drinks. At their age, it's clear that they have been given too much money than they need. This is a fact if the expensive brands of wine the students buy are anything to go by. For instance, Jean-Joyce's father gives her daughter permission to attend a party with her friends. He in fact drives her to the venue of the party, giving only a maiden order that she must be back by eleven at night. His actions are a clear reflection of the freedom that children from the economically affluent families enjoy. The children's parents being rich and having satisfied their main needs, seem to have decided, consciously or otherwise, that entertainment for their children, even unsupervised, is one among the

important set of the next level of family needs. Perhaps they even believe it is incumbent upon them to satisfy these needs in such profuse ways.

Shift to School: Strategy for Realistic Characterization

The decision to situate the action of the Television Drama in a secondary school is an indication of the producer's desire to not only portray a credible image of secondary school students in their interaction with the opposite sex, but also his (the producer) realization that identity crisis in young people begins in their teen years; a time when they are in secondary school. In view of this, any other setting would not have resulted in the varied socio-economic conflicts, teenage crises and the difference alliances among students, all of which are manifest in *Tahidi High*. In this light, it is therefore important to recognize the relevance of the school setting.

Tahidi High School is situated in an urban area. It is worth noting that the urban setting plays a crucial role in creating a particular setting desired in Television Drama. An urban setting offers the producer with an atmosphere with which students from different socio-economic and cultural background converge and interact. This study has determined that the main reason for using the urban setting is cultural. The urban setting is a melting pot for different cultures. Rather than any other setting, it is selected to demonstrate the case that issues affecting the youth, and those of which they most conflict, are oftentimes far removed from the issues that adults grapple with. One of these issues is ethnicity. As it becomes evidently clear, it is not one of the problems bedeviling students in Tahidi High School. Thus, the urban setting in general, and school setting in particular, have managed to establish one possible reality: school going youth in urban areas are not victims of the ethnic conflicts that are affecting other members of society. This seeming demolition of even the slightest conception that there may be a problem of ethnicity in urban schools could be considered idealistic. It is nevertheless a way of saying that the pertinent issues affecting the youth are unique to them.

Like any other successful Television Drama, *Tahidi High* has proved an effort on the side of the producer to ensure credibility in terms of characterization. Student characters have been realistically portrayed partly because of the urban setting. Sandler (2012) asserts that literary works tell readers a lot about characters because they portray characters in everyday discourse—a possibility in dealing with film or television drama. The urban setting enables an easier imaging of these characters as is evident in the finesse displayed in their language use. Consequently, there are two communication codes identifiable among the students of Tahidi High School. Firstly, a Kiswahili-English slang known as 'Sheng' and secondly, a fusion of Kiswahili and Sheng words into English. In the second code, English is realised more dominantly than Kiswahili and Sheng. In fact, Sheng and Kiswahili words are Englishized (made to sound English) by speakers when they speak a fusion of English and Kiswahili. On the one, the first code, Sheng, is used mostly by students from low socio-economic backgrounds like Mule, and very rarely by those from rich backgrounds. While on the other, the second code, characterized by the fusion of Kiswahili or Sheng into English, is mostly used by students from economically rich backgrounds. The causes and implications of this difference in the choice of language by students will be detailed later in this paper. At this stage, suffice is to say that the two codes of language, which

High for sense is seen as the voice of reason and a positive influence to the students. In relation to the smoking incident, she makes it clear to Teacher Ngatia that he should be held responsible for the students' taking to cigarette smoking. In her criticism, she also clarifies the concept of secondary smoking, which Jean-Joyce is addicted to. The presence of such positive role-models in school is seen to be responsible for the shaping of such characters like Mule. Despite most boys of his age taking to smoking, Mule remains focused on his studies. He has assimilated the positive values that school offers, and this elevates him to a level of high morality integrity from which he gets the vantage point to observe the waywardness in adults like Teacher Ngatia, while appreciating them whenever he sees admirable qualities in them. Few days after Ngatia stops smoking, Mule says "I would just like to tell you that you are looking good. You look healthier, and you are not coughing a lot. Is it true you stopped smoking?" Although Ngatia does not answer him verbally, the satisfied smile and the knowing look he gives Mule are telling signs of one who understands that he has contributed to the moralization of his students.

At this point then we see another important contribution of the school setting. Depending on how it is viewed and used, the school can be both a place for nurturing of positive values in youth and a place where juvenile delinquents can be produced and be eventually spilled into the society. Whenever these two conflicting roles of the school have been contrasted in *Tahidi High*, the episodes have been made to end with an emphasis on the positive values like we in Mule's compliment of Ngatia above. Further, the party which is organized by the students reveals to a large extent the failure in parents. The situation also plays out the failure by parents to take full responsibility of their children, shifting such a noble responsibility to the school. The craze of students being driven mad by beer unfolds while back home. Jean-Joyce's father and Ray's mother wait upon the return of their children from what they think and in Abigail's own words, "just a party". In fact Abigail, Ray's mother, when asked by Jean-Joyce's father, she confesses that her children can take care of themselves perfectly well.

Johnston, L. D. et al (2007) addresses the issue of drug use and abuse. He presents a case in which he observes that peers initiate their friends into drugs, provide the drugs and shape drug-using habits. It especially so in a school setting where we have the naïve and too trusting types. These are those unsuspecting students who think that what is going on is just a party meet the "trickster" youth among the partying students. For example, when Sonny and her friend show up at the party, Mark – on the pretext of giving them soda - mixes alcohol with their soda. The two girls realize that what they have been given by Mark tastes different but they still go on to take it. Worse, after Mark answers them "It tastes different because it is soda. May be you should be taking the other stuff; beer." Moments later, one of the girls is seen with Mark drunk and seemingly ready to give in to more of his trickery. In view of the foregoing, it can be stated that the naïveté noticed among some of the students is an extension of the naïveté of their parents. It is only when it gets very late that Abigail and Jean-Joyce's father get concerned. Ironically, while on their way to search for their children, they both state that they are sure that their children would never touch alcohol. When they are confronted with the truth, what is not lost on the viewers is the trading of blame between the two parents; each parent blaming each other's child for

whatever wrong that may happen to his/her child. The implication here is that most parents find it better to find somebody else to blame for the misconduct of their children. When it is not the teacher to blame, then it is someone else and in this case, another parent. Caught in the middle of this blame game is the teacher. For instance, when teachers Hamida and Macharia get wind of the students' party, they rush there to try and sort out the mess. Coincidentally, they are found at the party by Dr. Mutiso who immediately accuses them of encouraging students to drink in their presence.

Therefore, the school setting provides a perfect ground for Television Drama to demonstrate how parents abdicate their childrearing responsibilities and expect teachers to do everything for their children except financial sustenance. This situation has resulted into an increase in the number of students who have lost direction as is evident in Tahidi High. Lack of parental guidance and attention on social issues affecting children and the failure to track their academics are exemplified in this drama. Implicitly, the children who are left unattended by their parents are calling for their attention in various ways; some of which are disastrous such as failure to perform in school and engaging in misconduct. Responding to one of such cases, Teacher Ngatia gets concerned about Mark's deteriorating performance in school. An inquiry by Ngatia reveals that Mark's father is almost always out of the country on business trips. Consequently, he does not have time to monitor Mark's performance in school. Left on his own, Mark turns out to be a wayward student. For instance, while teacher Hamida is in class, he mimics her mannerisms instead of paying attention to what she is teaching. When he gets caught and is taken to the staffroom for punishment, the following is revealed:

- Ngatia: Your father, what does he say about your performance?
 You used to be number one. How come he doesn't sign
 your report cards these days?
- Mark: My father is always out of the country.

In the face of such parental negligence, the teacher is made to step into the shoes of the parent.

The behavior of students at Tahidi High is a reflection of the society since the school is a microcosm of society. For example, members of the society have chosen to engage in rowdy protests whenever there are conflicts between them and institutions and this is reflected in the student's behavior. Rarely is dialogue, a more rational approach towards resolution of disagreement, employed in resolving disputes. In Tahidi High, a few students who have decided the punishment which is administered to them is too harsh and decide to stage a protest instead of seeking consultation with the school administration. Jean-Joyce starts the idea of the protest and all the students on punishment, except Mule, jump onto the bandwagon. In a similar fashion as members of the public outside school, the protesting students already know that they can use the media to cover their protest. This shows that being keen observers of society, the students have known the ways in which the media can either be used constructively or misused. Without the school as a venue for us to see that this knowledge is with the youths, no other place would have otherwise been more appropriate. The riot ends in the dismissal of several students; the innocent Mule is

audience is able to see that youth, especially teenagers learn better when put in real life situations. This works better rather than adopting the preachy strategy by which teenagers are simply told to be careful. Therefore the school setting succeeds in revealing to the audience that school-going teenagers possess sufficient knowledge on the issue of HIV/AIDS and are keen to use such knowledge to educate others of their age. In retrospect, the viewer is warned that some teenagers may not be as knowledgeable as they may appear to be as regards emerging social issues that affect them. Their rare but surprising ignorance on the issue HIV/AIDS is yet a sign that there are so many other issues about which the school going teenagers are ignorant. Together with this comes the role of education in informing the youth on HIV/AIDS, its effects in society and discouraging stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. For example, Shish leads fellow students in believing, without any proof, that Mose is HIV positive and that he actually infected Lisa with the disease. The students in Mose's class begin segregating him and the viewer begins to see him walking alone. These rumours are later dispelled and amount to misinformation and misconceived judgment which are sometimes prevalent amongst teenagers.

The school with its varied categories of people and children from different socio-economic backgrounds always steps in to educate the teenagers on HIV/AIDS related matters. This is the role that Teacher Meiposi takes up when he insists to the students that one has to be tested twice with the two tests far between to ascertain their HIV status. He also emphasizes to them the importance of knowing one's status. Hence, the setting here plays an important role of putting student characters within circumstances which the audience can fully appreciate their understanding and response to the critical social issue affecting society such as HIV/AIDS.

The School and Politics of Power and Gender Balancing

The students while in school are far from the influence of adults at home. Without the said adult presence and their influence, the minds of these teenagers are free to reflect on matters affecting the social environment in their own way. In this regard, the Tahidi High School students take the lead to show their understanding on the unfolding debate on power relations between men and women in the society. The debate among the students and specifically between male and female students is characterised by the same acrimony and passion that is witnessed in such debates among adults. It is evident that the adult's view of gender in the teenagers' appreciation of this debate, complete with the viewing of the opposite gender as "the other". In fact, the existing good relations between the girls and the boys pale into insignificance once the gender debates pick up.

The climax of the gender debate is realised one morning when students are in their school bus travelling to school. During the debate on leadership, Mule is remarks that women make harsh policies when they ascend to leadership. This, according to Mule, disadvantages and marginalises men. It is debatable whether Mule makes this comment innocently, and merely as his contribution to a discussion on leadership and whether consciously or unconsciously, aims at irritating the girls. Frankie, one of the most influential girls in the school, finds Mule's remark unacceptable hence voices his complaints. Openly irritated, Frankie reacts with passion interpreting Mule to have meant that women can never make good leaders. After her passionate tirade to Mule,

an obviously disappointed Frankie storms off, leaving Mule trying to explain what exactly he meant. From this scenario, a number of issues emerge. Principal among the issues is the gender alignments and inclinations to issues of power regardless of the substance of the argument. Hence, it's clear that cross-sexual alliances and affiliations are disregarded as each individual begins to see their own gender as that which must be defended against subjugation by "the other." The standoff between Mule and Frankie is used by the author(s) specifically to indicate that in gender debates, it often matters not how people of the opposite sex may be close. The near-intimate relationship between the two characters notwithstanding, we see Frankie walk out on him after calling him a chauvinist. The least that would be expected between them is open disagreement in front of other students.

As is evident, for the first time since Mule's arrival in Tahidi High School, he finds himself on the same side with Mark. Mark is a character whose interaction with Mule has never hitherto got better than verbal abuse. Seemingly enjoying the disagreement between Mule and Frankie, and clearly savouring the apparent irritation of the girls, he moves towards Mule and encourages him to engage more in such debates. Besides, Mark's unusual siding with Mule can be read as the ganging up of 'men' against perceived threats from the opposite gender, thus:

Mark: I think it is a topic we need to be discussing every now and then.
I mean, just to spice life up.

Mule: Yeah. And get the women moving away from us.

To understand Frankie's protest, an allusion to the Gikuyu legend of Wangu Wa Makeri is necessary. According to Wanyoike (2002), Wangu wa Makeri was the first Kikuyu female leader and indeed, the first woman chief in colonial Kenya. According to legend, she ruled with an iron fist, much to the chagrin and disadvantage of men. She reduced men's role in the Gikuyu society of old to servitude. Men did women's chores and most times those who failed to carry out their designated responsibilities were whipped by women. Fed up with the status quo, men successfully conspired and made all women pregnant at the same time. When women became indisposed, thus the legend says, men took over and swore to ensure that never would women ever rise to the position of power and influence. Writing in *The influence of folklore on culture and society*, John N.N. (2012) relates that women liked Wangu Wa Makeri because she assisted them whenever they were in trouble with their husbands. According to Kihui Faith (2010) in *Women as Agents of Democratization* feminists have argued that the legend of Wangu Wa Makeri, like others of such kind created in patriarchal setups, is a creation of men that is meant to frustrate efforts by women to take up their deserved position in leadership. Frankie, either consciously or otherwise, seems to be aware of this alleged design by men. Going by her past conduct and personality in the school, she possesses the intelligence and sensibilities to realize oppressive tendencies when she sees them. That furious protest, therefore, is an indication of the length to which enlightened females are prepared to go to enhance their position in society.

Conclusion

This paper set out to show how setting in *Tahidi High* is used as a strategy for imaging student characters in Television Drama. Contributions of home, the wider

urban setting and the specific and school setting in highlighting the personality of students, therefore, have been objects of discussion in this paper. The home setting was briefly examined because it serves as the precursor to the school setting. Thus, this setting is important in helping those who invest in studying at Tahidi High appreciate why students act the way they do at school. The conclusion arising out of this setting is that behaviour at school is modeled on what students do at home. Secondly, the suitability of the chosen setting was attested to with regard to how it has enabled to author(s) of *Tahidi High* succeed in the painting the portrait of student characters. This paper also discussed how the school setting has been used discourse on issues affecting society such as HIV/AIDS and the politics of gender. This involved looking at the students' understanding of HIV/AIDS and their role in creating awareness about the scourge and their concerns in respect to the politics of gender. Finally, efforts were made to show how the school setting is used as a suitable environment to play out the disparities in the socio-economic tensions inherent in the society. Thus, class consciousness is not only the province of the adults but has caught up with the youth and indeed in their tender age and inexperience makes it worse than it is in adults.

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