

Redemptive Masculinities in Rural Kenya: A Reflection on David Maillu's *Man from Machackos*

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Abstract

The paper examines the challenges of being a “man” in rural Kenya. It is informed by issues of marginalisation of men and the changing faces of masculinities in contemporary Kenya. The marginalisation is caused by the high rates of unemployment, women empowerment, and poverty. These factors have led to shifting gender roles and a new dimension of what it means to be a “man”. The paper’s arguments are based on Kabaji’s (2008) assertion that power plays a major significance in the construction of gender relations among men and women. The paper interrogates the struggle by young men to transit from poverty to empowerment in a harsh rural environment. The key questions the paper will seek to answer are: how do men in the rural areas construct their masculinity? What type of masculinity is prevalent in the rural areas? And how is it different from urban masculinity? The paper adopts Connell’s masculinity theory. It examines the divergent masculinities using Connell’s key concepts of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. The paper also examines the role of the female “Other” in the construction of masculinity.

Keywords: Culture, masculinity, rural, urban, hegemony, subordinate

Introduction

Man from Machackos depicts the life of a young man called Kivindyo, who opts to stay in the village rather than migrate to the city. Kivindyo decides to stay in the village despite many young men migrating to the city to look for employment. The city, the face of modernity and urbanisation promises better prospects, compared to the poverty in the village. Kivindyo home is in Kenya’s upper eastern area called Ukambani that is very arid.

The young man lives in a society that has high expectations of men of his age. He is expected to adopt the traditional expectations of what it means to be a “man” in his current situation that are pegged on hegemonic masculinity. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity equates manliness with power and control. She explains that hegemonic masculinity is associated with toughness, competitiveness, determination, self-sufficiency, aggression, success and subordination of women. Nevertheless, life in the village is very hostile.

The Female “Other” as sight of Masculine Contestation

It is important to understand the relationship between masculinity and femininity. Women have a strong influence on how men construct their masculinity. Mbeleete is one of the motivating factors that drives Kivindyo’s quest for a better life. She is a yardstick to which he measures his masculinity. Kivindyo seeks to find Mbeleete’s approval of whether he is a real man. Lewis (2007) describes the strong influence of femininity on masculinity:

Masculinity has so much to do with men’s relationships to women. There is a sense in which men in society collectively define masculinity for themselves but they are always cognizant of the way women influence the trajectory of their identity, validating it, interrogating it or rebuffing some or all aspects of its practice. In short, women help to shape the general terrain of masculinity at some level. At the level of performativity, therefore, masculinity has as much to do with seeking the approval of men, as it is to do with obtaining the approval of women.(6)

The dominance of men over women is an aspect of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, there is the dominance of men over other men through competition of the female gender. Kivindyo competes for the same girl, Mbeleete, with his former schoolmate, Justus. The competition emanates from an earlier rivalry in school “This was Justus Mwaka’s third attempt to get Mbeleete since the burial of Mbeleete’s father. He had tried twice but had failed to deliver the words he had to her.” (21). It is a competition that is cherished by men. It gauges whose masculinity is stronger. No man wants to be categorised as a subordinate masculinity. Kivindyo is in a similar situation. His rival Justus Mwaka is in a favourable position. He has secured a job in Nairobi while Kivindyo is jobless. Justus new empowerment gives courage to elope with assist him elope with Kivindyo’s girlfriend Mbeleete. This loss completely ruins Kivindyo’s self esteem:

Mbeleete had left him stranded in the jungle of life. He had lost her to Justus. The two had eloped and Justus delivered the message in a note saying “Kivindyo stop following and looking for Mbeleete because you will never see her again in your life. Mbeleete is now my wife and this time, you must accept that I have beaten you fair and square.” Yes it was a well calculated and fatal blow. Kivindyo felt devastated. He pitied himself. He was never prepared

for anything like that. It was the first time in his life that he fought with the thought of suicide. Fate had taken away the only thing that got him inspiration to live on. It was unlike the loss he had experienced when he had failed the army interview. It was something that cut through his soul. (Maillu, 2007: 54)

Kivindyo is psychologically and physically shattered. How can he stand before fellow men when his woman has been snatched by another man because of Kivindyo's inadequacy? Apart from the failure to fulfill the breadwinning role, there is also the perceived loss of virility. Questions are bound to arise about Kivindyo's sexual performance. Connell (1995) explains that masculinity is closely associated with virility, sexuality, potency, fertility and male honour. Kivindyo's honour is under attack. The notion of being perceived as a subordinate masculinity is too painful to bear. Kivindyo's self pity heralds a low turning point in his life. The thought of committing suicide is a sign of disillusionment and failure.

Kivindyo's disappointment is because of symbolically losing his prized masculinity which, as Connell opines, is very much guarded by men; the loss of his woman to a rival man. His state of joblessness puts him at a disadvantaged position. Mbeleete confirms the societal expectations on what "women" expect from men:

She wasn't looking for a man to bear her back to the forest, but one to bear her from the woods to the open. Modern life needed money not mere words. He who loves you with money loves you better than he who loves you with mere words. Kivindyo was asking her to sacrifice her life for him. (Maillu, 2007: 49)

Though the relationship between the two is in the village, Mbeleete's perspective of love has a strong influence from modernity and is a version of urban masculinity. The young man had already planned a future with the woman who had eloped with his friend earlier:

Although Mbeleete was still a school girl doing her form three class, he thought she deserved the promise of something big. Getting a job in the army would open a guaranteed door for their eventful marriage. (Maillu, 2007: 2)

Kivindyo's dreams and aspirations bring to fore the importance of work in the construction of masculinity. A stable job with a good income is security to a man. It enhances his self esteem in relation to the female gender and the society as a whole. However, the ghost of unemployment shrouds his ambitions. Kivindyo fails the interview in his bid to join the armed forces. It really devastates him. Kivindyo's situation and his reaction depicts the challenges of being a man in the society. He is now aware that his status in society will be lowered. After all, he is not man enough to sustain himself, family and girlfriend. Furthermore, the poverty levels in his home further propound the emasculation.

Kivindyo's situation epitomises the large challenge of many youths in many post colonial societies. Morrell cited in Miescher and Lindsey (2003) observes that young people in post-colonial third world countries are numerically the largest, and arguably the most significant political constituency. Unfortunately, they are the group most subject to the scourges of unemployment, most vulnerable to AIDS and most likely to be involved in wars (102). Kivindyo is downcast after missing a job. The job was supposed to propel him from the penury that surrounded him.

The old men like Kivindyo's father, who are the face of the old order and custodians of traditional patriarchal masculinity, strive to direct their sons who are confronted by the new wave of modern masculinity. This new brand of masculinity puts a lot of pressure on young men who do not have resources. Mentorship becomes pertinent to these pessimistic and emasculated young men. Though Kivindyo's father is not employed because of losing a leg, his perception on the role of the man as the head of the family is still intact. The old patriarch still upholds the old traditions, and is of opinion that despite the challenges of modernity, men still need to play their old traditional roles. He strives to make sure that his son asserts this traditional patriarchal masculinity despite not being employed. This is clearly evident in the advice to his son, Kivindyo about the importance of family among the Akamba:

"Now you need a wife." That was that was written on the faces of his parents too is in accordance with the Akamba thinking that only when a man marries, he becomes a full man. He had heard his father repeatedly say: a man and his wife are like twins, and the hiding care of the Mukamba is his family. (Maillu, 2007: 29)

Silberschmidt (1992) also notes that aspects of masculinity that have roots in the pre-colonial are still highly valued in the post-colonial society: the male as the head of the household, decision maker and controller of the wealth (53). The challenge arises when there is no wealth like in Kivindyo's situation. Does the man become less of a man? Kivindyo is aware of this and panics that he might lose Mbeleete, his childhood sweetheart "That was why a job in the army ... was so crucial. Since morning he had been wondering how to keep Mbeleete in his hands" (21).

Seidler (2010) notes that masculinity is constantly reasserted in the continuous denial of femininity or feminine qualities. Hence Kivindyo needs to reassert his "wounded" masculinity to be able to remain mentally and psychologically sound. He is in need of an activity that will help him exercise domination to revitalize his

former self.

Kivindyo opts to set his future foundation in the village. This is a very radical move coming from a young man. He seems to want to go against the odds. Success in the village seems impossible. Kivindyo's decision receives a lot of opposition. Kivindyo's friend turned foe, Justus, who had snatched his girlfriend taunts him. Justus had migrated to the city and is surprised that Kivindyo has decided to stick in the village. Justus is the face of urban masculinity while Kivindyo represents rural masculinity

Nevertheless, despite the pessimism from people like Justus, Kivindyo does not despair. He decides to invest in agriculture. This is a wise decision. That is the best investment in the rural areas. This is because of large tracts of land and a ready urban market. He gets capital from selling trees that he had converted to timber. He also becomes a carpenter and even makes an artificial leg for his disabled father. Nevertheless, Kivindyo's biggest achievement is changing the mindset of rural people that there is nothing productive that would come from the village:

Perhaps the most remarkable thing that happened to Kyevaluki people was their gradual change of attitude about the environment. By the third year, Kivindyo was selling thousands of seedlings ... Kivindyo could no longer believe what was happening and what had become of the hitherto poor Kyevaluki location. Naturally, people expected him to brag for having pioneered such progress. But that was not Kivindyo. Instead, he appeared to enjoy a reclusive life. In a way, he felt somehow uncomfortable frequenting the bustling Kakawa market. (Maillu, 2007: 126/127)

An old man confirms our argument when he comments about Kivindyo's success and laments about the city: Would Kivindyo have made his father the leg if he had gone to the city? That's not a city but a monster. How many parents have been abandoned by their children because the children have been swallowed by the monster... (Maillu, 2007: 102).

Kivindyo's success in the village contradicts the notion that one has to move to the metropolis to succeed. Kivindyo's honesty brought forth by the rural values of honesty also contributes to his success. He picks money belonging to a stranger and returns to the owner:

Mrs Munuka broke into tears when she received the money. Her husband tried to comfort her. "God is great and he uses his great people to save others." When she had got over the storm she asked most seriously "Mr Kivindyo, why did you do this to us?" (Maillu, 2007: 112)"

The husband of the woman who had lost the money is a top government official. The couple is so impressed with the young man's honesty that they decide to support his projects.

When Kivindyo succeeds, the woman who had jilted him, Mbeleete moves back to the village from the city. She returns to the village after her marriage fails. Ironically, she wants Kivindyo to assist her get a job. Mbeleete now admires Kivindyo who is now stable economically:

Mbeleete had finally decided to bring her children home to live with their grandmother while she looked for a job. She had long heard of Kivindyo's office and could have come earlier for registration. But the thought of presenting herself to him would be a great torture ... In spite of the embarrassment, Mbeleete felt so relieved to have met her old boyfriend. He had talked so meekly, so sympathetically that she went home feeling healed somewhat. She took home the fear that because of that old grudge, he may refuse to assist her. (Maillu, 2007: 130/131)

Mbeleete's sudden attraction to the now popular Kivindyo points out the strong relationship between masculinity, femininity and financial security. It also reiterates Lewis (2007) assertion on the importance of work in the construction of masculinity. Lewis argues that men who are not able to provide for their families often feel emasculated. To Mbeleete, Kivindyo now has the qualities of a husband because he can comfortably provide. Kivindyo can comfortably play the breadwinning role. In fact there is a big conflict between Mbeleete and her young sister when the Mbeleete discovers that the latter has become Kivindyo's girlfriend. The Mbeleete that had abandoned the emasculated (subordinate masculinity) Kivindyo for Justus, now fights for the dominant Kivindyo (hegemonic). She abandons Justus in his current subordinate position.

The author seems to be propagating for a rural masculinity that borrows more from modernity, but does not necessarily migration to the city. The author implicitly communicates this through the success of Kivindyo and failure of his rival, Justus. Justus' brand of urban masculinity ends up in a fatalistic state. Justus returns to the village in a sorry state: "The new Justus was recovered from the city human forest in a pathetic condition where he had decided to drink his way to destruction" (147). Justus relocates back to the village and is in fact given a job by Kivindyo.

Kivindyo has internalised the traditional human virtues through the mentorship of the father who emphasizes on the need for one to behave like a true "Mukamba". On the other hand Justus has imbibed a new brand of urban masculinity because of socialisation in a city that completely repudiates traditional values. Justus is heartless and behaves like a sadist whose happiness seems to be pegged on Kivindyo's failure.

Conclusion

The paper affirms through Mbeleete that the female “Other” acts as a sight of contestation among men “affirming and restoring” their masculinities. This is quite evident in the contest between Justus and Kivindyo in competition for Mbeleete’s love. Mbeleete gets attracted to the man who exudes a supposedly hegemonic masculinity among the two rivals. Hegemonic masculinity is an ideal type of masculinity that cannot be completely achieved. The paper also clearly illustrates the importance of work in the construction of masculinity. Kivindyo’s hard work and change of fortune redeems his masculinity from a subordinate to a “hegemonic” state. His status in the society is uplifted. Furthermore, there is the contrast between rural and urban masculinity with the former being advocated as an effective tool for rural youth empowerment. This is clearly illustrated in the contrasting success of Kivindyo and the failure of the city duo of Justus and Mbeleete.

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