

I Am Not Your Role Model: Shades of Feminism and the Curious Case of Akothee

Anyone with a fleeting interest in the arts in Kenya, not familiar with the name, Akothee and does not have an opinion about her, may have missed the subtle manner Akothee is influencing gender and feminism discourse in Kenya. Akothee is no stranger to controversy, and easily qualifies as the Kenyan *une femme terrible* or a typical *bad girl*.

Akothee has cultivated a risqué reputation. In African entertainment circles, she compares to Brenda Fassie, the South African Afro-pop star. Brenda Fassie's raunchy performances, her political commitment to the poor, her open lesbian relationship after marriage and having a son, made her stand out as an outlier. Akothee's fame, or notoriety has been buoyed by two recent highly publicised occurrences: [her public spat with Ezekiel Mutua](#), the Chief Executive Officer of the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB), censor-in-chief of creative expression in Kenya, and her hugely successful relief food and water mobilization efforts aimed at assisting the famine-ravaged communities in Turkana in Northern Kenya. Akothee's public performances offers us an interesting re-reading and re-writing of the perception of not just a creative female performer and the performance arts, but the public image of a modern African woman challenging patriarchal projection of power in all its manifestations.

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To locate the issues of feminism that Akothee brings to the fore, our discussions must move beyond the image broadcast by Mutua, that of a scantily clad atrocious artist, promoting vulgarity and pornography, morally bankrupt, an embarrassment and anathema to African values (whatever those are). We might pose to dissect what Mutua represents; he is a staunch defender of, and flaunts the ignominious Films and Stage Plays Licensing Act that was used in the late

eighties and nineties to stifle political and creative expression in Kenya.

Today, few people will recall that this law was used to shut down Ngugi wa Thiongó's Kamirithu Arts Centre, ban performances of *Maitu Njugira* (Mother Sing for me), *Ngahiika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I Want) and *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The same law was used to stop performances of: *The Fate of a Cockroach* by Tewfik el Hakim, *Shamba la Wanyama*, and adaptation of *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Can't Pay? Won't Pay* by Dario Fo and *Drumbeats on Kerenyaga* by yours truly (Oby Obyerodhyambo). This law was vigorously fought by artists and civil society just as much as the Chief's Act and Preservation of Security Act (Detention Act). Mutua has been at the forefront of supporting increasingly draconian censorship legislation to give power to the Film Classification Board so that free expression is curtailed.

Mutua also fashions himself as a moral crusader allegedly protecting Kenyans from decadence supposedly promoted largely through creative expression; film and music. On the basis of protecting morality and curtailing obscenity, he banned the public viewing of the award winning film, [Rafiki](#) (until the courts intervened) and playing of Diamond Platinum's song [Kwangaru](#). Mutua's hard-line position ruled illegal by the court as contradictory to the constitutionally protected rights and freedoms of expression, association and conscience leads us to question the platform upon which he pontificates. One could argue that his actions smack of male chauvinism, misogyny, sexism and patriarchy and that his conflict with Akothee manifests the deep desire and attempt by patriarchal, sexist, misogynistic and chauvinistic systems to maintain control over women; their bodies and intellect. Akothee's push back represents a refusal to take such patronization lying down.

Ideas of how women should behave, present and conduct themselves in public, interact and relate to others and respond to issues are defined by culture, tradition and religion. Akothee's response to attempts to control and define how she should carry herself is deliberate. Akothee has been confronting patriarchal systemic sexism all her life. The scale of her philanthropic engagement, her use of personal resources to mobilize the public has earned her more credibility than local leaders and traditional disaster relief organizations forming a foreground to reflect on her life.

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cycles: her first born at age fourteen, the second at fifteen, the third at sixteen and the fourth at age seventeen! She lost her second child in infancy due to lack of resources to secure health care for the child.

Esther Akoth Kokeyo was born thirty-six years ago. While in Form 2, aged fourteen, she eloped with a lover and got married. Akothee does not speak about this episode in her life as a victim. Instead, she extols the romantic nature of the misadventure, even though the lover in question committed a crime of marrying an underage girl. After eloping with this man, Akothee moved in with her mother-in-law in Awendo town and in her own words, was reduced to a house-girl. Akothee states this matter-of-fact even though she was a sexually exploited fourteen-year-old girl and a child labourer. Akothee stayed in this household for seven years and bore children in annual cycles: her first born at age fourteen, the second at fifteen, the third at sixteen and the fourth at age seventeen! She lost her second child in infancy due to lack of resources to secure health care for the child. Yet she does not speak about this with any trace of bitterness or anger.

The father of her children proceeded to finish high school and university while she bore him babies. Eventually, he graduated in 2003, and they began a modest life as a married couple. A year after her husband graduated, and at 21 years old with three children, she left her mother-in-law's place and moved to Kanga shopping centre, in Migori County to set up a business selling *omena* (Dagaa) to fund her return to school and cater for the upkeep of her family. In an interview, she says, *"I decided to go clear my fourth form at Kanyasrega secondary school. I would drop the kids at kindergarten before proceeding to school. In the evening I would pick them up from the teacher's house, take them home and go sell my omena for one hour."* Akothee, made a conscious decision to educate herself probably seeking to liberate herself from the control of her educated husband and his mother.

Her husband's fortunes began to change for the better, but by age twenty three the mother of three was kicked out of her marriage for being *"too boring, too hard-headed and un-romantic"*. Her pursuit of academic and financial betterment meant that she no longer fitted within her former husband's traditional ideal or stereotype of a wife; submissive, helpless and non-opinionated.

Not to be deterred, the penniless Akothee moved on to Mombasa to join her

brother in running his taxi business after a stint as a *matatu* driver. The transport business in Kenya remains the preserve of men because the jobs therein are characterized as rowdy, risky, crude and would expose women to intrusive attention from men or even sexual abuse. Akothee went against the gendered grain by taking on this career.

While working as a taxi driver, Akothee began investing the little savings that she had. It was here that she met a man with whom she began a relationship. This relationship led to her relocation to Zurich, Switzerland with this partner and ended up with her fifth conception. The relationship did not last long, and Akothee reveals that contrary to her expectations, the man was only interested in her bearing children and not in marriage. So she left him, and flew back to Kenya. This move marks an interesting transition in Akothee's life. She walked out of a relationship that did not guarantee her marriage - which is what she wanted, but which sought to confine her to a reproductive role. Her act of defiance to being confined to a procreative role, marked a turning point.

After returning to Kenya, Akothee launched her musical career and started making money performing music and dancing. She also began to invest in different sectors. She expanded the taxi business, ventured into tours and safaris, real estate, hotel industry and entertainment. The multiple enterprises that would see her fortunes rise dramatically had begun. Gradually, Akothee gained financial independence and autonomy challenging the notion that women only attain financial independence through affiliation to men, either by marriage or inheritance from fathers and never through hard work and investment.

Not Playing Victim

Akothee consistently refuses to depict herself as a victim of circumstances beyond her control. She reminisces her seduction and elopement at age 14 with a romanticism that could be labelled as naiveté were it not such a regular trait in her character. She does not blame her then husband for luring her into elopement. In fact, she nostalgically recalls how seductive his letters were; written on blue coloured foolscap paper. Even with hindsight, Akothee does not vilify the man. Instead, she accepts that she was going through a rebellious phase in her life taking full ownership for her decisions and the consequences of her choices. Akothee got repeatedly pregnant, but she blames neither her mother-in-law nor her husband. She has repeatedly warned her daughters against falling for

similar tricks from men. *“Men don’t really mean what they whisper in your ears when they need sex, that time they are lost. Let them do the theory, practicals is in your hands”*.

Akothee has been categorical that what she did was stupid and by taking ownership of her mistakes, she empowers herself to use her error of judgment as lessons. She does not privilege her husband and give him power over her. About her husband having ‘abandoned’ his role she says, *“Okello is my sweetheart. He was my first boyfriend. Wherever you are, daddy, we are proud of you. You see, your daughter is at Strathmore...You must come and pat me on the back”*. Her ex-husband is irrelevant as she tells her own story of folly.

The modern African feminist discourse around sexuality decries the power and control that customs and traditions had over the woman’s body, social and sexual norms. In the traditional African reading, there was a high value placed on ‘*real womanhood*’ (read: motherhood) and sexual purity. This led to a high level of policing of a woman’s sexuality by her parents, society and religious institutions. The woman’s reproductive role was privileged above all else. The ability to conceive and bear a child was critical to assuming the status of ‘mother of’ which is the preferred term of respect for a mother. Many traditional societies revered virginity and the loss of virginity on the first night of marriage was apparently a great honour to the bride’s family.

Conversely, if a woman had lost her virginity beforehand, the act brought shame and stigma. A woman’s sexual and reproductive rights are controlled by patriarchal cultural norms and while extramarital sexual relationships are considered normal for men the idea of a woman’s ‘infidelity’ is remains a major infraction. These rights are controlled and negotiated through their relationships with her male relations and her in-laws. Women, thus have very little power to decide and fully express their sexual rights and sexuality.

Modern African feminism has correctly called out this enforced powerlessness as an element of domination, and decried acquiescence to this domination as an implicit acceptance of this power over the women’s body. In the prevalent patriarchal cultures and religions, the sexual and reproductive rights of a women is highly regulated. The issue of abortion for instance is not in women’s hands. The whole question of access to FP (Family Planning) is another illustrative point. Poverty compounds female sexuality and there is a greater loss of control because

money is used as a means to control female sexuality. Thus the manner of her dressing, her presentation and how she expresses sexuality and sensuality must fit within these confines or she is deemed to have crossed the line. This privileging of tradition and culture as well as its agents, parents, fathers, brothers, husbands, in-laws, patriarchal leaders would keep a woman forever in chains fashioned by the perception of what is right, decent and allowed by tradition and culture.

At the height of the brouhaha over a controversial performance, and before the revelation that her parents were indeed present at the show, critics questioned whether she would mount such a 'shameful' performance in front of her father. After it emerged that her father actually supports her art in totality, he received backlash for 'condoning such immorality'.

Akothee's reluctance to accept or blame cultural and traditional institutions for her multiple pregnancies and births, her images of sexuality and her redefining how she relates to her father (who would represent traditional cultural authority) for instance, is a push back to traditionally defined identities for women. Akothee asserts that her father supports her full heartedly. At the height of the brouhaha over a controversial performance, and before the revelation that her parents were indeed present at the show, critics questioned whether she would mount such a 'shameful' performance in front of her father. After it emerged that her father actually supports her art in totality, he received backlash for 'condoning such immorality'. Here again, sexual and body taboo associated with the female body comes up. The argument being that it is inconceivable that a 'decent daughter' could perform in a sexually provocative outfit in the presence of her father.

Akothee relationship with her father serves to re-define cultural norms in a radical way; her interaction with her father clearly re-demarcates the daughter/father and performer/audience dichotomy.

Multiple pregnancies and births resulting from the lack of choice is usually framed as arising from powerlessness, but not in Akothee's case. She has controversially stated that making babies is her hobby, and at one point tweeted that she wanted to 'give her lover' triplets. Akothee's attitude towards child-bearing runs counter intuitive to the idea that by giving birth multiple times a woman's body is exploited. Akothee extends this re-definition to single-

motherhood. Akothee has fashioned herself as a proud single parent calls herself, 'President of Single mothers' re-calibrating the public perception of single motherhood hitherto filled with stigma. Akothee makes no apology for having had children with three different men. The reality is that men who have children with multiple women do not suffer stigma, while women do.

Single mothers have fought for official recognition of their children by the biological fathers, in the case of inheritance and the provision of child support. In March 2019, the High Court ruled that Kenyan children 'born out of wedlock' can now inherit a father's property. This marks a major victory for those who have been seeking equal rights for children of single mothers in a case filed by the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA) and a single mother of two. In Akothee's case, this seems to be the least of her priorities. Akothee's crusade seems to gravitate around normalizing the role of single motherhood and proving that children of single mothers are in no way disadvantaged.

Her unapologetic expression of agency, independence, and self-control of her life as well as her destiny might be the reason that Akothee raises so much opprobrium. The cause of disagreement between her and the archconservatives is her resistance to the ideals of Victorian ethics. The state embodies a subjective cultural norm premised on the idea of a '*decent*' and '*moral*' woman who behaves and dresses in a prescribed manner. Mutua's expressed discomfiture with Akothee's dressing is probably informed by the idea that a woman, mother of grown up girls to wit, should not wear revealing clothes.

The inordinate sexualisation of the female body even when she is a performer as Akothee is, betrays a lopsided sense of morality that reveals gender bias and sexism. It is interesting that even the woman who were defending Akothee's right to dress as she pleased, could only reference non-African music icons as comparisons. Akothee's defenders challenged Mutua to take note of the mode of dressing by performers like Beyoncé, Rihanna, Lady Gaga or Aguilera. There were no African performers mentioned. Globalised culture has not embraced African aesthetics and as a result, the African female performer is inclined to imitate standards set by western cultural icons.

Gender and feminism discourse critique exposes the flaws of the notion held that women sabotage their own upward mobility. The predominant social script states that female envy and jealousy is responsible for women's lot in life, and that cat-

fighting are second nature. The unspoken logic therefore, is that keeping women from advancing is actually good for them, it is self-preserving because it prevents them from cannibalizing each other. Akothee challenges this stereotype in her description of her relationship with her mother-in-law. She has described living under trying circumstances with her mother-in-law for seven years, during which time she even lost a child. However, she does not have a negative word for her mother-in-law.

Akothee's quest for self-identity and freedom from being seen as an appendage of a man, or a culturally defined female identity - a wife, mother, daughter - is at the core of her conflict with those who abrogate to themselves the role of defining the role and place of women. Akothee argues that she is nobody's role model and this can only be read as a rejection of the patriarchal definition of roles for the 'decent' and perfect woman and mother. Since she is the mother of post-teenage daughters she is traditionally supposed to behave as a 'mother-in-law' and set an example to her daughters of how decent women are supposed to behave. This value system is biased against women. Fathers of sons of similar age are not expected to serve as role models to male children who are socially sanctioned to be unruly and mischievous.

Akothee demands freedom that will liberate women from oppressive culturally defined roles. Akothee rejects the sexist desire to control women through the sanction of shame. In 2012 during a performance in Istanbul, [Madonna](#) pulled down her bra and revealed a nipple and flashed her butt. Previously during the 2003 VMAs she had kissed pop stars Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. Madonna performed using Christian and Hindu religious iconography while simulating sex and masturbation on stage. She even got the Vatican threaten to boycott Pepsi products after her highly controversial performance in the soft-drinks ad. Yet Madonna has argued that her performances are actually challenges against male domination. In her own words she says, "*It just fits right in with my own personal zeitgeist of standing up to male authorities*". It is hard to miss the parallels between Akothee and Madonna. Madonna has rallied against sexism while still proving to be highly successful as a performer and financial success.

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At the height of media attention over her net worth, Akothee's manager clarified that contrary to media reports that she was worth 600 million, [the figure was actually 6.2 Billion Kenya Shillings](#). The attainment of financial independence by a woman, is yet another element that puts a woman at odds with sexist ideology. Such a woman has power that challenges patriarchal power structures. In the wake of the recent famine and food shortage in Turkana, Akothee who revealed that she had spent some of her early years in that region and therefore considers it 'home' mobilized resources and delivered emergency food relief to the starving residents while the government dithered and denied the obvious. In typical Akothee fashion, she showed up in Turkana dressed in traditional garb women as if to dare those who have criticised her adornments as non-African and disrespectful. Her image, juxtaposed to that of Nairobi Governor Mike "Sonko" Mbuvi trailed by a commando styled body guard, spoke volumes in regards to empathy and appropriateness. Many on social media posed the rhetorical question whether her philanthropic gesture did not indeed tally with that of a perfect role model.

Akothee has had to deal with those who delegitimize her wealth by attributing the source of her wealth to a male partner - stopping short of declaring her a commercial sex-worker. Akothee herself says, *"I have had to struggle for everything: it's not easy. I get so many burnouts. I didn't just wake up from a sponsors bed with millions of shillings in my bank account. You really have to grab every opportunity with both hands, whether it's an interview, your job or a business."*

The image of helplessness and dependence is so ingrained that any woman showing financial capacity, and as in the case of Akothee and flaunting her wealth is deemed to be un-womanly. A man can flaunt his wealth (as Sonko does) but a woman who has wealth should be humble and at best invisible. Akothee goes against the script because she displays her wealth.

Akothee is not your typical proponent from the mainstream African feminist movement. She does not have a middle class background. She is not an intellectual, nor does she possess academic pedigree. She is not a political figure, neither does she belong to civil society, but if we are to use Naomi Nkealah's definition of African Feminism, Akothee has sought to create a new liberal productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa. Her struggle against entrenched sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, male

chauvinism and moral correctness challenges culture as it affects the perception of woman in Africa. In this regard, Akothee is indeed a role model.