



Looking for That White Knight in Shining Armour

By Mark Karanja



Growing up, *The Bold and The Beautiful* was a must watch for me. Even though it was not advised for viewers under the age of 16, I still watched it. I sometimes had to struggle to stay awake past nine o'clock to watch it, but I was somehow proud of that; I felt that it gave me an edge over my kindergarten counterparts. But at times, I wonder, did this, and other television shows I watched as a child subliminally programme me to prefer white partners over African and black ones?

My earliest recollection of indirect contact with white men was on this show. Ridge, Thorne, and Eric Forrester, two brothers and their father, were so enamoured by the love of one woman - Brooke Logan - that they were willing to lay everything on the line, including their filial ties, for the sake of her love. They were the definition of crazy in love for me before Jay Z and Beyonce sang about it. They expressed their love for the women they loved unashamedly and unabashedly, suffering heartbreak and humiliation, but never abetting in their quest for everlasting love. It was magical to watch this saga unfold on screen, not in the least because it was the men who made absolute fools of themselves in pursuit of true love. It underscored the 'difference' between emotional men and women. An emotional man is 'passionate' whereas an emotional woman is 'hysterical'. These men were surely passionate.

Comparing this to locally produced programmes, it was evident the local fare never stood a chance.

From the slapstick comedy stylings of shows like *Vioja Mahakamani* and *Vitimbi*, I got my preliminary insight into the contrast between African men and those on American shows. For one, the men on *Vioja* and *Vitimbi* seemed to relish lying to their wives, in the process making buffoons of themselves, trying to cover their tracks, and ultimately being discovered to hilarious results. While their intention was to presumably depict a simpler folk with simpler problems, the result was an imprint on a young mind of the untrustworthiness of black men, which was so prominent to their female counterparts that from episode to episode, the ladies on screen sailed from hysteria to hysteria.

As far as programmes verging on serious dramas went, the same pattern held, only these depicted authoritarian who did everything to keep their womenfolk in their place, or lower if they could, while the women constantly tried to find ways to outsmart them. The verdict was in. Kenyan men were unnecessarily bossy and ultimately witless. I mean, if they insinuated that women were lesser than them but still managed to be outsmarted by them at every turn, they must not have been very smart, must they? The aim of these shows, I believe, was to speak to a marginalised generation of women with an aim to subtly empower them to find their own way around patriarchy. But this might have had adverse effects on younger generations such as mine, who were as yet, unable to comprehend the nuances in programming but rather took what was offered at face value.

Regional and international black programming wasn't any better either. Watching the likes of *Egoli* and *Generations* from South Africa, I was exposed to a more violent side of the black/ African man. I knew, as a child in the Kenyan education system, male teachers were certainly more punitive and less understanding than female teachers, and seemed to relish using corporal punishment. The pattern seemed to fit. Black American comedies seemed to patch things up, but only to a certain extent. It seemed, though happy, these depictions of happy black suburban families were constantly on the verge of being broken up by alleged infidelity, sexism and colourism. At a very young age, I knew that my father had a penchant for women. He had several wives and numerous girlfriends. I took this to be the reason why I would go for months, sometimes years, without seeing him. Again, the pattern seemed to fit. So even though I was cognisant of geographical and cultural differences between peoples of colour from Africa and the Diaspora, time and time again, from Nigerian films, to Kenyan and American sitcoms to South African dramas, the patterns were consistent and continually reinforced. This was a community to avoid. But how does one do so when, despite having this knowledge, one still identifies with and shares the same geographical and physical characteristics as the very group he is trying to avoid?

I had even further incentive to distance myself from this seemingly violent group when my sexuality was discovered in my early teens. Teachers both in upper primary and high school, mostly male, made it their mission to make an example of me, taunting me, calling me names, putting me in awkward situations just to prove a simple point - that as far as being a 'real African man' was concerned, I didn't make the cut. But at the time, I had no interest in being a typical African man. I had already had an introduction into the world of 'the real African man' by way of my father, and my mother's colleagues who took advantage of my mother's single status to constantly try and romance her, despite most of them having wives and children of their own. They lied, drank too much, cheated, were the source of anguish for their families, and in the end, died too soon as a result of their reckless lives. Never more than then did I wish to escape, to have my very own white knight to rescue me from all the madness around me.

In my teens, I turned to online dating apps. In high school I'd had a few friends who were more exposed than I was, and who had been experimenting with their sexualities online for years. I, on the other hand, was still struggling to get the hang of using a computer, which I could only access in school or at cyber cafes in my neighbourhood. By this time I had suffered tremendous abuse and relentless attacks from Kenyan men who wished to change my 'problematic' sexuality while secretly

trying to take personal advantage of it. It was enough of a motivation to log onto sites recommended by friends. From television shows, and now the Internet, I understood that there were safer spaces for people like me. And importantly, they all lay outside of Africa, in countries that promised nothing but the Ridges and Thorns of the world in abundance. The dating apps, and later Facebook at its infancy, were a sanctuary.

Whenever I met Kenyan men on these platforms, however, they had a few things in common. They would preface the online dating ritual by emphatically saying they were actually married, or say that their foray into same-sex love affairs was just a passing phase, a rest stop on the way to heteronormative marriage and life. *I'm not a faggot like you but I think you're cute, as long as you can keep this a secret, maybe we can have something.* Needless to say, this was all quite off-putting. The white ones however, were quick to declare their desire, infatuation and love for me. They loved my physical features, my dark skin, my slender body, where their Kenyan counterparts wished I was a little lighter skinned, had curlier hair and was a littler rounder. There was also the issue of my being effeminate. While for the Kenyan men, this was an absolute turn-off in the larger sense, for the white ones this added to my charm. White men declared their intention of finding none other than Mr. Right, shipping him over to their country and settle down. I got to star as Brooke in my very own digital version of the dark, young, bold and beautiful and it was intoxicating.

This was also the time when I got to connect with a few returnees and 'summer bunnies' - Kenyans who had lived abroad - who shared their dating realities with me. The message was clear. If I wished to be treated right by a man, if I wanted pure unadulterated love and devotion, then I needn't waste my time with black men. White men were the way to go. Not long after that, I got my shot. By then, the Kenyan programming sphere had been infiltrated by South American shows, depicting the all sensual, mysteriously handsome, athletic and hot tempered (read as passionate) Latin man who would stop at nothing to get the woman (or man) of his dreams, including sweeping gestures and garish declarations. If the Forresters were crazy in love, then these Latin men added a deliciously heightened, even forbidden level of insanity to the love game. And as it happened, I landed myself a Spaniard. He was not, strictly speaking, Latino (Central/ South American), but a pretty good approximation by my estimation; my friends agreed.

But that is where I began to understand the pathology of the broken man rather than the shortfalls of an entire race. For, while he was indeed European, he had very distinct ideas about his and my place in the world. He was the appointed saviour and I was the appointed impoverished African looking to be rescued. He was a racist bigot, who saw nothing wrong in insulting an entire continent simply based off of the actions of a few individuals he had encountered or heard about in Europe. Even though he sought after me, he insinuated that I was only after the almighty European passport as a way to save myself and my family from wretched poverty, which was apparently consuming Africa, my loved ones included. I voiced my concern with those around me about his behaviour towards me, but again, the message was clear. Even at his worst, he was still better than the best Kenyan around. Was it because of the promise of what he could offer me or just by virtue of his nationality? No one could say, but they held firm in the belief.

Even after the end of said relationship, I was questioned constantly about why I would let such a catch get away. Apparently, trauma suffered while in the relationship was not enough to warrant a breakup. Frankly, I was told, Kenyan women and men stick around suffering a lot more at the hands of their Kenyan or African partners, for a lot less in return. I was aware of the changed perception of me held by others. I was now 'one of those' - The ones that date white men for whatever reason. The 'whatever' being a passport, money or status, none of which I was interested in. But public opinions had changed. Subsequent dating experiences proved that. My Kenyan dates would ask whether I was constantly comparing them to my ex, and then bring up the inevitable sexual innuendo that no man can ever satisfy me as well as an African man can.

My Kenyan dates, like I mentioned earlier, were quick to point out the transient nature of our soon to be liaisons, as they were actively hiding their sexual orientation from their families and the women they hoped to marry. In short, it was 'I've got hoes in different area codes'. I was made to understand that I was one of many to be seen and serviced as often as my dates' schedules and affinity for me allowed, and for this, I had to be grateful. I was also informed that my aesthetic wasn't exactly to their taste, as I leaned more towards the androgynous-looking, overtly sexually deviant, while they were looking for the regular boy-next-door who could pass for straight in a pinch. For this reason, I would never be granted access into their inner sanctums of family and friends. If I wished to proceed, I would be a lone star orbiting them and their lives while simultaneously having nothing to do with them. Even though at the time I had sworn off white men and what I believed to be their potential for craziness, I felt compelled to reconsider the idea of dipping my toe in the interracial dating pool once more.

By this time I was working in the television industry - a hilarious coincidence that I ended up there after my early formative experiences via television - and I noticed a pattern, particularly among my female colleagues. The more successful, well travelled, educated and financially stable they were, the more likely they were to be dating or be married to a white man. In passing conversations, I asked why this was the case, and they recounted the same horror stories that I had experienced. Shameless infidelity and physical violence, jealousy at their success and admiration by other men, deep-seated insecurities, and lack of emotional maturity. The list was as long as the women were different. But the conclusion was the same. The women said they never suffered this level of horror at the hands of their white partners. Granted, white men were far from perfect. There were the odd cheaters, and jealousy was a natural part of life, but for the most part, they were more supportive, loving and entirely faithful, with a policy of absolute honesty which even went to termination of relationships in the event of incompatibility. Never having to guess what their partners were constantly thinking, trying to read in between the lies for half truths in whole lies, was a freeing experience.

I wondered how many of them were shaped by the early images of the white knight and his willingness (more than ability) to move mountains for his fair maiden. Or did it go deeper to our encounters with the men around us and how we watched them interact with us, our mothers and those around them? Did they all have experiences of their fathers cheating on their mothers? Many admitted to this. Did their fathers subjugate their mothers? Another overwhelming yes. Were they themselves victims of violence and abuse at the hands of men around them? Another overwhelming yes. Were their looks or intelligence called to question by the men around them? Another yes.

I think though, that the long enduring image of the white knight, loyal, faithful and honourable, is a notion that is being disabused from the minds of the Kenyan, and I suspect, African Millennials. Africa's new economic boom has seen the surge of western infiltration in certain key sectors. The expat is a mainstay in certain cities, especially Nairobi, where they are found grazing on croissants in top tier coffee houses, lunching at five-star hotels, dancing all night at the latest hotspots and jetting down to the coast every weekend or so to unwind from their incredibly strenuous lives in the city and take some sun. With them has come the advent of dating apps like Grindr catering to an exclusively gay clientele, as well as Tinder and Bumble that are more inclusive in preferences. The expats might arrive bright-eyed and bushy-tailed hoping to embark on their own African romances, and find their own African princes and princesses to ride into the sunset with.

But this dream is typically not long lived. For one, they realise that the demand for those with their complexion and nationalities is high, while supply is low. For every white face you see on a dating app somewhere in Africa, are over twenty locals trying, some desperately, to woo the foreigner. Some quickly enter into relationships with locals that also quickly end on allegations of cheating on the part of the local. And after this earth-shattering experience, the expat is lost to the world. Most

assume a 'take no prisoners' attitude in the dating scene, often having multiple partners and being quite open about it, because they realise, while this might be unacceptable back home, in their host countries, this is not only acceptable but encouraged. Everyone wants a piece. Everyone wants to be seen on the arm of the tall, blonde, blue-eyed stranger while strutting into the club, and as such, is not subject to the demeaning security checks or even worse, being turned back at the door.

The expats soon realise that they are social currency and they use it to their advantage, getting their pick of the most intelligent, attractive, wealthy, socially mobile, well educated urbanites in their host country, where back home people with such attributes honestly wouldn't give him the light of day. It becomes a world of Average Joes dating super models, successful professionals, public figures and personalities while not being expected to be anything other than their regular white/European selves. And even though there have been instances of public outcry, particularly on social media on 'blancos behaving badly', society still continues rewarding them by upholding them as the ideal, what to aspire to. Whites can do no wrong. They are only in the wrong places and the wrong time. Secretly, parents continue to wish their children end up with white men, if only for the social recognition and social mobility their new status would afford them. But that is a story for another day.

The truth of the matter is, despite best intentions on either side of the colour and race divide, we Kenyans were groomed on drastically different imagery as compared to our European and North American counterparts. Much like my Alejandro turned wacko; most of the west was raised on the images of starving African, eyes and stomachs bulging, in need of urgent help. If not hunger, then war and genocide - in Rwanda, Sudan, Somalia... Africa, for all its diversity and relatively rapid growth and development, is condensed to handful of desperate situations, which didn't even last forever.

When Europeans see African migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in those flimsy boats, it confirms that long held assertion by the western imagination that justified historical atrocities of colonialism and slave trade. The African is a savage that needs to be saved from himself. He is responsible for his own hell. He has brought hunger, war and death upon himself and it is up to the west, once again, to rise and save him from himself.

How then does a modern white man, who believes he not a racist by virtue of dating, loving, even marrying a person of colour, then reconcile these images of the disenfranchised African with the reality of present day African Millennials? In my experience - not so well. For while the myth of the white knight still beguiles many in Kenya and the African continent, the complex of absolute salvation hangs heavy on the shoulders of the to-be knights. For every white knight, there surely must be a damsel in distress.

Granted, times are and have changed somewhat. With the push for equality, mass education through the media and the emergence of Africa as a new and formidable world player, the perception of Africa, Africans and people of colour around the globe has began to shift. But what has replaced it is the illusion of fantasy. Africa is where it is now hunger campaigns have since been retired, but they have since been replaced with a dramatic presentation of Africa the beautiful, a land where the sun never sets, with ever welcoming natives, curvaceous, sun baked beauties frolicking on white sandy beaches between intermittent dips in the crystal clear waters. Then you have the highland maidens and their complicated coffee customs, or the southern African topless dancing beauties that are unabashed about their sizeable endowments.

A western man, who wishes to be a part of this new world by falling in love with a person from the continent, falls in love with a holiday package fantasy. Standards of beauty have changed, replacing pale with bronzed skins, such that even the people of Africa have become something to acquire and

possess. We are shiny new toys sold under the banner of exotic, expressive and smouldering sensuality. All the while, the images being presented to the people of Africa are still aspirational. They continue to advertise the west, and all that emanates from it as the ideal, as a goal to achieve. A convergence of both illusions creates a fertile ground for fetishisation rather than understanding.

The white man is no better placed to explain why he is suddenly looking to Africa and peoples of colour as possible romantic liaisons other than the fact that it being advertised as not only permissible but also highly encouraged in order to be a part of globalisation. The attraction for the European is the African and his or her potential. Africa no longer represents savagery, but rather something interesting to experience and acquire. It is the birthplace of the Chimamandas and the Binyavangas of the world. It is an intellectual powerhouse more connected with the present and the future, while the west stagnates and ossifies. It is the land of potential and holds much the same appeal it held hundreds of years ago when the first Europeans 'discovered' its 'undisturbed' 'virgin' land the bounty it held. Is there anything more intoxicating than the notion of salvation and the notion of potential, mixed together in a heady combustion of cultural fusion? And while the Kenyan woman or man seeks to be more accepted in the world via his or her white partner, the white partner seeks to be a part of progress, using his black partner as proof of evolution in a culture in decline.

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