

# The Figuring Of Bumpy Romantic Love Terrains In Kenya's Internet Memes

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## Abstract

*Love and relationships have always been fundamental facets of human life since to love, be loved and subsist in a stable romantic, loving and fulfilling relationship is a universal need for every human being. Unfortunately, this sociological need could be confronted with frustrating circumstances that derail its attainment. Literary texts, both canonical and popular from across the world, have always contested with uneven terrains that characterize romantic love relationships in varying shades. This paper attempts to demonstrate how techno-digital spaces such as social media have provided platforms through which modern artists create oeuvres that canvass popular social didactics. Equally, the paper assesses artistic imaging of romantic love intrigues in Kenya's jocular digital popular art forms namely internet memes as mediated in WhatsApp and Facebook. The study adopts a qualitative research design in assessing memetic figuring of heartbreaks in romantic love relationships and in unravelling some of the reasons for heartbreaks in love relationships as well as how internet memes normalize such breakups and heartbreaks. Relief, Superiority and Incongruity Humour theories as well as Cultural Criticism govern the discussions. The paper finds that despite their humorous facade, internet memes just like mainstream literature canvass popular social issues that are proximal to humankind.*

**Key words:** Cultural criticism, figuring, humour theories internet memes, social didactics

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## I. Introduction

Matters love and relationships across traditional African societies were guided by varied but stringent social mores. In most of these societies, it was expected that love between a man and a woman would grow and be nurtured in courtship for a given period of time before marriage could take place (Achebe, 2019). During this time, the pair would get to know more about each other and if both became certain that they could start a family together, marriage would take place. In some communities, such seamless order ensured that almost all men and women got their mates. For instance, Margaret Ogola in her novel *The River and the Source* avers that it was unheard of to hear a woman living alone, meaning all would be married off and even if her husband died, an inheritor would promptly fill the lacuna (Ogola, 1994). However, with modern trends, lifestyles and realities, there has been incursion on the hitherto smooth social structure that guided love affairs. For instance, (Frederiksen, 2000) observes that in modern Kenya, older generations come late into love relationships geared towards marriage unlike before when they would be involved throughout the process, a thing that reflects socio-cultural transition and instability in the institution of marriage.

Dieckmann (1986) posits that stages of love and courtship present individuals such as youth with something new that can be frightening at times. Heartbreaks have become a norm in love relationship in recent times. For instance, The Star on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2022 carried a story detailing this entrenched practice in modern dating scenes, a trend the writer associated with the easy way people are currently getting into love relationships (Kimega, 2022). Literary texts have always reflected the vicissitudes of romantic relationships that are normally precursors to the establishment and sustenance of a family. Likewise, internet memes, which are popular art forms, have adroitly relayed different feelings and emotions resulting from love relationships that end without consent from both players.

Broadly, popular culture reflects and stabilizes values (Mertz, 1976). Narrowing down to the main occupation of this study, memes (which are forms of popular culture) are cultural artefacts that contain cultural and social attributes and serve to reimage the society (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). These attributes imply that memes provide information about the culture that informs the item while the social attributes of memes imply that they provide information about social behaviour of those who produce the items. This crucially underscores the need to probe the cultural milieu of internet memes in order to fully grasp their social implication.

In the main, this study utilized Cultural Criticism and Humour theories in conducting a literary reification of jocular popular art forms in WhatsApp and Facebook. Cultural Criticism originates from Cultural Studies, a broad approach which according to Sardar & Loon (1999) “is used to describe and study a whole range of practices” (p. 6) including but not limited to literary criticism. This approach analyses cultural texts on the background of their underlying contexts; historical, social, political or economic and has foundations in the ideas of Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall among others.

Raymond Williams in his book, *The Long Revolution* (1961), fronts three definitions of culture, all of which ground Cultural Criticism as a theoretical approach. He first perceives culture as a state or process of human perfection with regard to certain complete or universal values. To this end, an analysis of culture would involve “the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values which can be seen to compose a timeless order or to have permanent reference to the universal human condition” (p. 57). Richard Hoggart, stands out as the father of Cultural Studies following his seminal work, *The Uses of Literacy* published in 1957. This work laid the foundations for British Cultural Studies even as the author celebrates the culture of working class people through appreciating their popular culture. The major assumption in this work is that popular papers, magazines and various commercially driven mass communication outlets targeted the working class. Finally, Hall (1980) traces the emergence of Cultural Studies in the mid 1950s. He regards culture as something that “is threaded through all social practices, and is the sum of their inter-relationship” (p.60). He goes on to define the theory of culture as “the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life “p.60). A cultural analysis should be committed to examining relationship between such elements in order to understand any cultural material comprehensively.

The three dominant Theories of Humour are Superiority (disparagement), Incongruity, and Relief theories. Superiority theory of humour is attributed to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes; Incongruity to Cicero, Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard and Relief to Spencer and Freud (Monroe, 1967; Morreall, 1987a). Superiority theory focuses on the comparative aspect of human nature where an individual's self-esteem is boosted by the awareness that others are inferior or inadequate in comparison to him or her (Wicker et al., 1980). Laughter and humour is caused when the inferior is introduced and there is sudden realization and feelings of our superiority over other people or things (Albert, 1951; Kulker, 2007).

The other theory of humour anchoring this study is Incongruity theory. Human beings perceive the world to be governed by rational chains of causes and justification. Therefore, when situations fail to conform to rational conceptualization of the world, incongruity occurs. Incongruity theory holds that humour is caused when two conflicting ideas that violate our expectations are introduced. The conflicting ideas go against the expected norm, introduce surprises and unconventional matter hence making people laugh. Carrell (2008) defines Incongruity theory as one that is concerned with the stimulus where the audience is left to “identify, perceive and resolve the incongruity already present in a text” (p. 312). From this postulation, it can be conjectured that Incongruity humour occurs when something ludicrous, exaggerated or absurd confront people.

Relief theory follows Freud (1974) psychoanalytic analysis of the relationship between jokes and the unconscious. Accordingly, he argues that laughter marks the release of nervous energy that was intended for a psychological task but became unnecessary when the task was abandoned. Freud goes on to argue that people normally repress emotions to do with sexual desire and hostility hence most jokes are about sex and or hostility. Accordingly, when a joke is told, people bypass the internal censor and give vent to their repressed sexual or hostile emotions. In a nutshell, the thrust of Relief theory is that human beings have pent-up energy that originates from repressed internal inhibitions and aggressive impulses. The theory emphasizes the liberating function of humour with laughter acting as a discharge of surplus energy hence alleviating psychic tension (Kulker, 2007).

### **Heartbreaks in Love Relationships**

Lately, heartbreaks have become a common norm in love relationship. Internet memes have captured and relayed varying shades of heartbreaks resulting from severed love relationships as imaged in the two memes below.



Figure 1  
**Figures 1 and 2: Typical Heartbreak and Breakup Situations.**



In figure 1 an emotional man, while indulging in alcohol, tells a drinking mate that his girlfriend has made claims that he can only disturb her peace of mind. He asks the waiter to bring more beers. In a rejoinder, the drinking mate shares a related experience by recounting how a lover of his claimed that the bedbugs on his bed ate her better than he did. He also asks for two more beer. In figure 2, a vendor of Mukombero (A Libido-boosting herb that grows in parts of former Western Province of Kenya) asks an invisible young man who apparently wants to buy the herbs to confirm whether indeed people out there are calling him a one minute man. This is followed by laughter emoji.

The literal deduction from the first man's confession in figure 1 is that he was a bother or nuisance to the lady in question hence the breakup. However, confession from the second man that bedbugs 'ate' his girlfriend better than him explicitly exposes the connotative purview of the entire meme. The item's catch words are 'mkula' (ate her), 'akili' (mind), and 'kunguni' (bedbugs). In the contemporary socio-cultural Kenyan context, the Swahili word 'Mkula' connotes a man having sex with a woman. Thus, employment of the word by the two men lays bare the fact that the ladies are dissatisfied with bedroom performance of their partners hence the breakup. The expression "kitu naeza mkula tu ni akili" by the first man sexually connotes that the man is simply a bother to his girlfriend owing to his poor bedroom performance. Similarly the second man's bedroom performance is underrated since the way the bedbugs 'ate her' (sucked her blood) is comparatively better than how the man makes love with the woman in question.

The cause and ramifications for the breakup in figure 1 is underscored in figure 2. The item adopts proverbial proposition-completion technique through the mutually dependent caption and imagery. Immediately after the caption talking of a young man being referred to as a one minute man, we are presented with the image of a man carrying Mukombero cuttings. 'A one-minute man' is a Kenyan popular expression which metaphorically references men who do not last long during sex hence earning them contempt from their sexual partners and giving them low self-esteem. The euphemistic yet sexually connotative expressions in these memes punctuate humour and other aesthetic appeal in the item as well as ignite critical gender power relations.

The foregoing discussions point out that sexual dysfunction in men is a major cause for break-ups. According to Connell (1995), bodily performance is central in the construction of masculinity and that an underperforming man points at a vulnerable masculinity. This way, the above two items incite masculinity politics in gender relations. Additionally, sex matters, expected sexual performance of men and sexual desires of women are normally shrouded in varying myths and secrecy in most societies (Arnfred, 2004; Rokach, 2020). In an attempt to demystify this subject, Jennifer Makumbi in her novel *Kintu* provides rare insight into the subject by capturing a scene where married men freely talk about sex as they advise Baale, a young man who is just about to get married.

The image of a man carrying Mukombero cuttings serves as a visual metaphor that completes the meme's caption and provides panacea for the cultural and biological deficiency in the young man just as the men in Makumbi's *Kintu* inform Baale that sexual underperformance or impotency is normal in men and there is cure for such deficiencies. The presence of shops in the background augments the fact that the man is selling the herb to the young man he is directly addressing. The two memes also manifest memetic intertextuality. Inarguably, item 2 is premeditated in item 1, which exposes biological and cultural hegemonic masculinity deficiency, which causes the break-ups. The heart-breaks in figure 1 trigger the action in figure 2 where

practical solution to the problem of low-libido is being sought so that the man can subscribe to sexual masculinity standards exerted on him by the society.

Another cause of heartbreak in love affairs is figured in the item below:



**Figure 3: Heartbreak from 'Eaten Fare'**

In this meme, a black man sobbingly tells a white drinking mate, "My brother, imagine I sent someone fare. She is now calling me telling me they got an accident and none of them survived." All the while, the white man indifferently listens on while receiving alcohol from the emotionally distraught man.

Fare 'eating' has frequently been memed with disgruntled men lamenting failure of ladies to turn up for planned dates despite sending the exaggerated amounts of money the ladies ask for popularly known as fare. In the item above, such a man while in a drinking spree confesses to having been tricked to send fare by a lady who never turned up but went on to invent flimsy excuse for not making it. Usually, fare is 'eaten' by a stranger met through virtual dating platforms with the individuals involved living cities or towns apart (Nyanchwani, 2021). Men in good faith send fare hoping to facilitate the travelling of the lady in question but sometimes they end up realizing they have been cheated after the girl fails to turn up, after the phone is switched off or once the girl starts inventing excuses for not being able to make it. Majority of men have been victims of this modern swindling syndicate by ladies though they do not open up. Memes that image such situations therefore reflect typical intrigues in the dating setups where such swindling is the order of the day. This meme is anchored on Relief theory of humour where the speaker expresses suppressed hostility towards a slippery lover. Consequently, it provides outlets through which other men swindled in similar scenarios can open up and ventilate their injured egos.

The present day culture of material exploitation of men by women is stressed by (Haram, 2004) who conjectures that women's sexuality is not just for personal sexual satisfaction but for economic gain in capitalist societies whose economy is largely dominated by men. Thus, although Ngugi wa Thiong'o presents us with scenarios of poor women being sexually exploited by rich men in texts such as *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, relationships that Ogude (1999) regards as being characterized by hypocrisy, sexual exploitation and objectification of women, the meme above represents women who cunningly subvert sexual domination by men. That way, they are able to reap economic benefits from men without having to yield their sexuality to the men.

The choice of dark and brown-skinned men in the item is by design. This juxtaposition creates contrast that sheds light on virtual dating phenomena in Africa and Kenya in particular. Through this juxtaposition, African versus western cultural ideals in romantic relationships is divulged. The confession of romantic and dating woes by a black man to a white man exposes Western versus African cultural superiority and inferiority dialectics. This is achieved through visual-textual incongruities where a dark-skinned African confesses his dating ordeal to a white man, instead of confessing to a fellow African. These incongruities, in effect, deride African men for being easily deluded in virtual dating which is foreign to Africa, while insinuating that whites are immune to such follies. That way, the meme paints whites as culturally superior to Africans with regard to when it comes to dating practices.

The other ironical import in the item is that apart from thoughtlessly sending fare, the duped man seems not to decipher an illogical excuse given by the lady who claims that they all perished in a road accident. In addition, the heartbroken and grieving African is the one serving alcohol to an emotionally detached white man. These ironical twists points at the black man's intellectual paucity and the propensity of the West to exploit any

exploitable situation in Africa for own benefit. The fact that the white man does not respond to the heartbroken man nor express any emotions towards the man's ordeal points at the West's general indifference to Africa's societal woes. While a heartbreak caused by 'eating fare' is short-lived since there was never a strong bond in the relationship in the first place, the meme intimates materialism in love relationships as well as untamed sexual urges in men.

Sexual incompatibility is another cause for breakups, with the phenomena cutting across partners in heterosexual relationships. According to Mark et al. (2013), sexual compatibility in heterosexual relationships contributes to relationship and sexual satisfactions. Memetic art forms have exposed and nuanced reasons for incompatibility in sexual partners. In the figures below, sexual incompatibility across the gender is a precursor for breakups and heartbreaks in romantic relationships.



Figure 5



Figure 6

**Figure 5 and 6: Sexual Incompatibilities**

In figure 5, sexual incompatibility is decried by a man who claims that his wife has very wide private parts. From the item, the woman has been rejected and returned to her parents by her husband due to sexual incompatibility. This allegation has not been received kindly as seen in the shocked and distressed faces of the women. The caption below the meme represents other male voices that approve the man's action. It insinuates that such problems could be bedeviling marriages but victims have shied from expressing themselves or taking action. This subject is explored in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, (1958) where Amatokuwu alleges sexual incompatibility as the reason why he does not have intimacy with Nnu Ego any longer. To support the claim that she no longer appeals him, Amatokuwu tells her, "You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones" (p.30). Although the underlying reason for sexually neglecting Nnu Ego is because he has married another woman to bear him children after her failure to do so, his statement exposes similar sexual incompatibility challenges that this meme delineates.

Figure 6 presents a man who has over-sized private parts. From the caption, he seems not to understand why his girlfriend refuses to pick his calls after visiting only once. However, the image of a protruding manhood exposes what the problem could be. The meme's undertones of incompatibility that necessitates the lady to shun the man can be further be construed in Chinua Achebe novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The narrator provides scanty reason as to why Ekwefi leaves Anene, her husband of two years to be married by Okonkwo. According to Uko (2011), leaving her marriage marks the beginning of her self-redefinition through sexuality, although this subject is exhaustively pursued in the novel. Similarly, by ignoring the man's phone calls, the lady has commenced the process of reclaiming her sexuality from the huge phallus.

The juxtaposition of text and image in the second item functions like dramatic pauses in an oral performance where the performer pauses to let the audience internalize and judge the performance. In the present scenario, this pause comes after the caption hence effectively taking the reader to the visual realm of the meme with the image providing cue to the man's bewilderment. The audience needs to relate the caption and the image for completion and accurate comprehension of the meme. This is because the image is the cryptic solution to the riddle-like question raised in the caption. Once this connection is made, the audience deciphers that the man's sexual partner is not ready for another sexual escapade with him owing to his huge phallus.

The humour generated when biological and sexual-cultural connections are made between the caption and image is explicable within Superiority and Incongruity theories of humour. The audience laughs when it discovers oddity or incongruity in the man's manhood. The audience may also laugh because it is not like the

man hence invulnerable to such heartbreak. Beyond these humour aesthetics, critical masculine-feminine dialectics are feasible. Since the penis biologically represent masculinity and the lack of it, femininity (Connell, 1995), the lady is not just refusing sexual intimacy with the man but is rebelling his domineering masculinity that is typified in the huge phallus.

Apart from discernible thematic intertextuality in the two items, they also exhibit memetic gender equilibrium. This memetic balance emphasizes that sexual incompatibility and deformity is not a one-gender problem only. Notably, the pre-existing love affairs in both cases are already jinxed since the affected partners cannot withstand disproportionate sexual organs. Through the items, the memmer who is representing the contemporary society somehow responds to Spivak's (1985) question whether the subaltern can speak. The subaltern in these memes' contexts are individuals facing existential sexual incompatibilities as well as those to whom irredeemable actions are taken. In the first meme, the affected man takes action by sending his wife back to her parents while women retaliate by publicly expressing shock and distress at the man's infamous action. In the second item, the woman's refusal to pick the man's phone call is a way of resisting a sexually unequilibrated relationship.

### Memetic Normalization of Breakups and Heartbreaks

Memetic discourses have reflected tendencies to normalize breakups and heartbreaks in love relationship as shown below.



Figure 7



Figure 8

### Figures 7 and 8: Normalization of Breakups

In figure 7, the speaker normalizes romantic breakups by claiming “Even in the bible they said you will separate.” He proceeds to justify this by quoting Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 30 which says: “You will be engaged to a young woman-but someone else will marry her.” On the other hand, figure 8 presents an emotionally disturbed boy after the first breakup and another composed boy who seems unperturbed after the 12<sup>th</sup> breakup.

Most probably, a jealous speaker in figure 7 sanctions relationships' breakups by alluding to the bible. Generally, Deuteronomy chapter 28 spells out the consequences of disobeying God's commandments by Israelites. However, the memmer overtly uses the verse to rationalize breakups which are common occurrences in the modern society. By alluding to the bible, the memmer hopes to make a strong argument to vouchsafe for the trend. The item's humorous tinge is explicable in Relief theory of humour since it exposes threat of romantic relationships from hostile parties. While the verse's usage in the meme is contextually inappropriate, its use anticipates and normalizes breakups in love relationship. This is achieved by stretching the interpretation of the bible to make the claim that such turns of events are sanctioned by God.

The breakup norm in the first item is vividly imaged in figure 8 where the young man has been hardened by several breakups such that the 12<sup>th</sup> breakup meets a person who appears least disturbed. After the first breakup, the young man is emotionally distressed as evident in the disconsolate facial expression and the thoughtful chin-held posture. However, after the 12<sup>th</sup> breakup, we are presented with a picture of a young man whose emotional detachment is accentuated by a relaxed sitting posture and a collected facial expression. Although backgrounds to these breakups are not provided, the items delineate a deeply entrenched and normalized trend in contemporary dating scenes. Since dating upheavals is a contemporary concern to young people, the memmer employs celebrity imagery of Nigerian actors namely Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita Ireme to accentuate this modern trend.

Celebrity figures form media spectacles that represent the basic values of the society and influence how the audience embraces the culture that they propagate (Kellner, 2005). In Kenya, *The Standard* on December 30<sup>th</sup> 2022 carried a story headlined “Celebrity break-ups of 2022” where the reporter exposes failed marital and romantic affairs involving celebs. In one of the recounted breakups, a lady asks those she dated in 2021 to pick their certificates from her and goes on to declare that year 2022 intake was ongoing (Koko, 2022). The use of celebrity figures technique in the meme above underscores the entrenchment of breakups in modern dating experiences. Since celebs are powerful social influencers, using their imagery is activist in nature. Borrowing from cultural criticism that culturally mediated texts are replete with power systems which can influence an individual (Hall, 2001), this study argues that the exploited celebrity culture in figure 8 radiates influential power which apart from mirroring and normalizing break-ups in romantic affairs also promotes them.

Other memes image post-break-up efforts to salvage relationships, revenge or attempted revenge after things go south in such relationships. For instance, cases of marital and love related violence and tragedies which are triggered by unbearable feelings of betrayal with the victim deciding to take far-reaching or harmful actions after learning of their partner's unfaithfulness has extensively been imaged in memetic repertoires.

## II. Conclusion

Indubitably, internet memes are digitally mediated popular forms of expressions that reflect a lot about a people. The extensive sharing of these art forms in social media platforms implies their high approval rate by their subscribers. These media sites as well as the jocular texts resonate with ‘spaces’ which Barber's (1997) argues grant people with sites through which people understand themselves as part of the world and at the same time enabling them deal with their own private issues. Through modern digital surfaces and resultant creative oeuvres such as internet memes, the modern Kenyan artist ventilates issues that are private and proximal to them such as intrigues in romantic love relationships.

The study has established that internet memes are imbued with an array of stylo-aesthetic motifs that invoke pleasure and delight hence relieving pressure from their consumers just as canonical literary texts do. Crucially, underneath the surface playful humorous aesthetics that punctuate memetic discourses, lies deep and incisive creative use of language resulting into rich stylistic modulations. Conversely, these stylo-aesthetic motifs have greatly enhanced discussions of heartbreaks and breakups in romantic love relationships and normalization of the same in memetic discourses.

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