

Interview

**Pradip Biswas**

## **Wanuri Kahiu: Lighthouse of Kenyan Cinema**



For the first time in 79 years, Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu was invited by IFFK, Kerala, to receive the 28th IFFK Life Time Achievement award. This is the benchmark event because the Indian Govt. could not get time to think of Kenyan cinema and its filmmakers. So, credit goes to KSCA, which insightfully considered Kenyan director Wanuri to offer her the prestigious Life Time Achievement award for her significant contribution to Kenyan cinema since its inception. This critic had spent long 5 days with Wanuri and spoke to her about African cinema. This critic spoke to Wanuri Kahiu at length about her role and contribution to Kenyan cinema and fellow women filmmakers. Dorothy Kibinge, the veteran

woman filmmaker of Kenya, was the first woman to win an Oscar for Kenyan cinema.

**PRADIP BISWAS:** Well I need to know how you at the first place like to promote and propel African cinema on the whole plexus. Not only Kenya but other parts of Africa such as Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Tunisia and Mali.

**WANURI KAIHU:** Thanks, you have referred to whole of Africa and African cinema where multifarious filmmakers have worked and won international success. Senegal and Burkina Faso is so special that they have put the African cinema on world map. I am astonished to find that you have larger knowledge about north south part of Africa that speak mainly French.

Q: Ousmane Senebène is the most talked about filmmaker of French Africa; he piloted the unconventional cinema and kept going. Burkina Faso is another small country that also shows sparks in terms of resistance cinema. Med Hondo of Mauritania who took part at IFFI, New Delhi during 80s. They were of same opinion that Francophone cinema is uttermost in the mind of international cinephiles. Reasons are many: I have seen their films and think we need to bind us together for better African cinema on powerful pedestal.

As a woman filmmaker you faced a rough challenge from the Govt. in your film *Rafiki*. Many have dubbed it as a “lesbian” film not morally valid. The film was banned for some months, I gather.

A: It is true *Rafiki*, my first film, was banned: but the truth is that the film is not lesbian as two girlfriends united to have separate and unconventional life-style. It is about life, joy and freedom. There is no element of lesbianism of the kind it was treated by the establishment.

The ban was withdrawn after a good fight and people support.

Q: You said that you are united to fight bureaucracy in any form. And you have done so. Your first film: *From a Whisper* made in 2008 had created a good stir to start with. The film is relevant and in search of un-attainable. The spirit is to elevate and zoom high.

A: Our time for women filmmaker stand out with many a taboo: it is not easy or hunky-dory to make films the way you want to make it present. Our main language in cinema is English. I may say: The significance was not lost on Wanuri Kahiu. “We stood on the red carpet as young African

women and celebrated the film,” she narrated broadly. There hasn't been a space for us and I'm glad that we are creating the space and others are making space as well. It's high time we accommodated other voices.

Q: What are the interior nuances of this film? I have watched the film and wondered what it could be that rattled the establishment!

A: The most striking aspect of *Rafiki* is its eye-popping aesthetic—co-lead Sheila Muniya sports a cascade of pale pink and baby blue dreadlocks, while bolder shades of fuchsia and bubble gum are splashed across the production design. It's fitting that a movie as vibrant as candy should be the global calling card of the emerging genre of AFROBUBBLEGUM. The capital letters are mandatory Wanuri feels.

Q: You have started a new cinema movement like *Cinema Novo* started by great director Glauber Rocha, Brazil. *Afrobubblegum* film movement has been started in Kenyan cinema where women directors take powerful upper hand!! This sounds absolutely new for us as earlier I have not heard of.

A: Let me define the genre coined by herself and her collective as “fun, fierce, and frivolous.” I define it as a combination of the Bechdel Test: It means “there are at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man” with an African Bechdel Test: it means: “Are two or more Africans healthy? Are those same Africans financially stable and not in need of saving? Are they having fun and enjoying life?”. AFROBUBBLEGUM exists in opposition to stereotypical visions of the continent.

Q: Can you talk in brief as to what it indicated in terms of rebellious cinema? A little elaboration is sought.

A: In my 2017 TED talk, I have defined how the genre coined by me.

I like to inform you that Africa is so often portrayed as hurt or dying or sad or broken. We believe that Africa is joyful and full of pride and respect and hope. We want women's empowerment in every aspect of social interest; we need more sensitive approach and resilience Like Sembene, we want to overthrow patriarchal domination in pan-Africa.

Q: Do you have any idea how Souleyman Cisse who broke the barrier by making "Yelin": it means light. This went on to win Golden Palm at Cannes decades back.

A: I regret I heard about it but did not watch the film. But Yelin was a film of great value and inspiration for Kenyan directors. It is true there is a hiatus between Kenyan cinema and Franco-phone cinema; Franco-phone cinema is more powerful in the sense there was French occupation. Many languages are spoken in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Mali even Tunisia. Films like Xala, Ceddo, Wend Kunni and Yelin took the international cinema in 80s and 90s.

Q: You are absolutely right: you have more knowledge and taut reading of the films you have mentioned. It feels good to know from senior film-scholar like you and to be enriched in subject of pan-African cinema. We like to learn more and integrate with the greater whole very soon.

A: I know about women band of filmmakers who earned names; They are Ane Munene-Murago is a Kenyan filmmaker, the

first woman to study film in Kenya. Most of her films have been documentaries, produced through her company Cine Arts, on issues affecting women. In 1976 Munene studied at the government-run Kenya Institute of Mass Communication (KIMC), and was the only woman among KIMC's first year of graduates. Her first documentary, The Tender One (1979), was made with United Nations support as part of the International Year of the Child.

Unbroken Spirit (2011) is a portrait of Monica Wangu Wamwere, the mother of human rights activist Koigi wa Wamwere, who took part alongside Wangari Maathai in the 1992 Mothers' Hunger Strike to release political prisoners. The film was shown at the New York African Film Festival 2012.

Jane Murago-Munene is a former chair of the Kenya National Film Association.[5] She is Executive Director of FEPACI.

Q: Dear friend I have no words to express my gratitude: I have learnt lots of things from you about which I have less knowledge; it is great to be at IFFK; at least I could gather so many facts and achievements about our Kenyan cinema and women filmmakers. I think what you have revealed reflect other narratives of Kenyan filmmakers particularly women director who stand united now; or we strive to achieve from other what we have not learnt so far.

It seems very interesting to know of Afrobubblegum cine movement which is new concept. Are you sure of participation from fellow filmmakers that you have coined? It is a fact, we Indian have less scope to watch Kenyan films or meet filmmakers due to many factors: there is less official film exchange programmes between India and

Kenya. This is a bottleneck for eager cineastes from both countries. I think this blockade has to be broken as borders cannot impede cross-cultural movement which is essential. I remember Ousmane speaking in our IFFI seminar:” sometimes the establishment need clobbering.” This is a benchmark statement for us. Not only Sembene slammed his Govt. but also crabbled the patriarchal tendencies in Senegal. We were struck; Sembene was a Marxist maestro filmmaker from Senegal and made films attacking the patriarchs who made

lives of women of Senegal. His engaging stories are the backbone of Senegalese literature.

A: It is great to hear such narratives from you my friend Pradip; you seem to be veteran most film scholar who not only stood for international for a promotion but also assured to be with us, the fighter directors of pan-African cinema.

*(Photo Courtesy: Manorama Online)*

**Pradip Biswas is a Hony. Member of FIPRESCI.**

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