

Middle Ground

Binyavanga Wainaina

What we will become, after the machete line in the sand was drawn early this year, will only reveal itself in the fullness of time. We are, though, the designers of that future.

To me the large choices are stark: we will either use this as a measure of a thing we never want again, and become a more purposeful whole; or we will continue to stumble and splinter and hide our truths from ourselves.

The source of the biggest shame for me was our middle classes. Not once during those months did we take to the streets in huge numbers to say no; to be seen by the world and ourselves to stand for one reasonable Kenya. Instead we resorted to general sneakiness, snide sms', ethnic paranoia, raising money for arms; flapping our arms about haplessly. When the state said we should stay at home, we did, and hoped the wananchi would stop wananchi-ing about.

In this great test of our tensile strength, we failed to hold ourselves together and separate our reasonableness from the unreason and power games of a cynical political class.

I do not think there is a place outside of this continent so endowed with human skills, able to compete anywhere. But unlike a Ghanaian middle class; or a Nigerian one, our commitment to Kenya is self-serving and cynical. We do not really want to 'be involved'. We do not want to be a part of a country of ideas – we see politics are a network for corporate advancement, for feudal connection; for protections and deals.

Most of all, we have refused to grow up.

For the whole of January, I was calling my father every day, and without really realizing it, I was berating him for not doing enough. My father is retired, and worked day and night for 40 years for this country. It dawned on me that it is not just the wazees who are refusing to let go; the vijanas, some of them now 50 years old, refuse to create a vision for a future, and take charge. Civil Kenya is somebody else's job.

So we all sat, glued to the television, and saying Kofi Annan, Kibaki, Raila, please meet. Somehow this all would boil down to them, and then life would go on, because the safcom share issue was being delayed. So when Condoleezas and Ramophosas, and Gracas were threatening, and cajoling – we remained at home.

What we were doing was passing on the responsibility of our country to others.

Already outrage is being forgotten. It is being suggested everywhere that the Post election madness was a sort of anomaly, let us go back to where we were and it will be alright.

As writers, we have said no to this. We have to look at what happened in the full-face. If there is any single reason this all happened, it is because we have refused to see, hear or listen. We are still consuming ethnic stereotypes created by the British when they first allocated work and power based on their ignorant and simplistic ideas. If we have not yet thought our way past 1910, maybe it is time for us to start to consume ideas more. Our media is obsessed with the soap opera of political characters. So Kenya is really just a theatre screen where we watch a few people play drama games on stage, and clap, or

cry or laugh.

All the many many amazing writers and intellectuals who have given their lives and time to think and help us to think are still knocking on the door of our national television screen, while news programs spend endless time talking about why Martha and Uhuru did what.

We have produced two Kwani's this year. More than ever, we feel a sense of purpose to look hard at ourselves. Yes, we can still laugh at our own foibles; but to stop looking is to make our country as a place as base and crude as our politicians tell us it is.

Let me take a small moment here to say to Philip Ochieng that he has my Nobel. More than anybody, he spoke the truth of his heart and mind, and rose about the general pettiness and melodrama. It seemed almost like he has been waiting his whole life to put all he has gathered together for us now. When I was floundering, it seemed like somebody out there believed in Kenya, was properly outraged.

Binyavanga Wainaina is the founding editor of Kwani?. He holds a Caine Prize for African Writing (2002) for his story 'How To Write About Africa,' and is a contributor to such international publications as National Geographic, Vanity Fair, Granta and many more.