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Filial Voice and Plight of Fatherless Sons in Aesthetics of Pain in Films, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022)

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Abstract

The study examined how the filial voice and the plight of fatherless male children are portrayed in Scott Haze's documentary films *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022). In many African traditions, fathers are expected to provide, protect, and give identity to their children, while fatherlessness may expose children to stigma and social vulnerability. *Mully* (2021), directed by Scott Haze, presents the true story of Charles Mully, who was abandoned by his father, while *Family Portrait* (2022), directed by Twiggy Matiwana, portrays Ayize, who is prevented from fulfilling his role as a father because of poverty. Despite the prevalence of fatherlessness, limited research has examined its influence on the lives of male children as represented in African films. The study population comprised 48 characters from the two documentaries, from which 19 major characters were purposively sampled based on their roles and sentiments relevant to the study. Qualitative data were collected using a documentary analysis guide and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that fatherhood entails physical presence, emotional attachment, and general care for the boy child rather than wealth. The study contributes to literary scholarship by highlighting the experiences of fatherless boys and encouraging scholars and writers to produce works that represent their experiences in contemporary African societies.

Key Words: Abandonment, documentary film, Family Portrait, fatherlessness, filial voice.

INTRODUCTION

Fatherless male children, either physically or emotionally, often face ostracism, resulting in emotional instability due to the absence of fathers. Perhaps the rampant increase in fatherlessness can be explained by high societal expectations of fatherhood, which most men cannot live up to. Lewis (2020) in the USA argues that the concept of the fatherless son in patriarchal societies is arguably least talked about because the father figure is most often imagined as an inactive participant in parenting the boy child. Nevertheless, the possibility of a male child potentially being a victim of paternal abandonment, and the long-term effects of fatherlessness have not received as much scholarly attention as the girl child, whose vulnerability has been discussed extensively (Jóhannsson, 2021). Unfortunately, male children from households with absentee fathers often face social stigma and are consequently marginalized, yet the same standards are not applied to widowed households.

Garcia (2022) also observes that most fathers abandon their families because of financial constraints resulting from joblessness. The absence of fathers in the lives of their children has exposed many children to numerous challenges, especially the boy child. This has been noted in the lives of adolescent boys, as discussed by Pittman (2018), who attests that adolescent boys without a father figure in their lives suffer emotional pain. In addition, Walker (2021), confirms that most fatherless sons may indulge in crime to prove themselves as real men and may also end up abusing drugs. Some of these challenges have also been represented by authors in their literary works. Similarly, meanings of fatherhood have been constructed differently in different spaces.

According to Sotvoldiyeva (2025), in Africa, it is believed that the presence of a father figure in a family is a basic component of bringing up decent children, since the boy child may benefit greatly from fathers who serve as role models as they mature into young men. Additionally, most present fathers may never stop imparting wisdom to their sons. Furthermore, in the African setting, fathers are the first persons to be approached when making life decisions. Consequently, the presence of fathers in the family is highly valued in East Africa. Bass argues that when fathers practice being present, children thrive. Several countries view fatherhood from different perspectives. For example, Pleck (2007), writing from Europe and America, found that the persisting dominance of fathers as heads of households could still be felt in most parts of the world. Therefore, for the sake of clarification, Kenya's view will be the focus of the present study.

Much attention has been given to issues surrounding the plight of fatherless girls, corruption, and others, but less attention has been given to contemporary issues such as boys who have been abandoned by their fathers, which has probably created an identity gap. For instance, issues such as fatherhood, the plight of the girl child, corruption, nepotism, misappropriation of government funds, infidelity, and religious enslavement, among others, have been broadly studied by most scholars and presented in the form of dramas and novels by many artists. However, boys' fatherlessness is a concept that is least talked about in the field of literature. The absence of fathers from the lives of their boys has resulted in adverse predicaments for children in terms of growth and development, as well as their social lifestyles, with some of the main contributors being fathers who have decided to neglect their families for reasons that can be elucidated. Basing on the aesthetics of pain in Scott Haze's documentary films, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022), the study was therefore set to examine the filial voice, a perspective tone of expression of the abandoned boy child, and the plight of young male characters who have been abandoned by their fathers, and to give readers, playwrights, and authors an opportunity to focus on the broader picture of fatherlessness and narrow down to the filial voice and plight of fatherless sons, which seem to be on the rise in most contemporary African societies and probably in the world at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kurata et al. (2024) observe that most fathers have abandoned their responsibilities and acted like boys instead of men. Kurata quoted former U.S. President Barack Obama during his 2008 Father's Day speech when Obama stated that "children who grow up without fathers are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime: nine times more likely to drop out of school and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral

problems or run away from home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it." These fatherless children grow without proper identity. They grow without adopting the name of their real fathers, maybe because they don't know them or simply because they don't want to associate with their irresponsible behaviours. Unlike the reviewed literature, which highlighted that men have abandoned their responsibilities, my study used trauma theory and demonstrated how some of these boys end up being discriminated against in the society that causes them trauma.

Ramatsetse and Ross (2023) discovered that fatherlessness has resulted in societal problems, including dangerous coping mechanisms by the abandoned, like crime, prostitution, and violence and that the abandoned women perceived the experience of father absence to have adversely affected their feelings of belonging and sense of identity in society, with some participants having suffered emotional and financial challenges. Poverty and unemployment have made it difficult for men to be able to pay damages or *lobola*. *Lobola* is a South African practice where the groom makes a payment in live cattle or cash to the bride's family before marriage (bride price). As men abandon their wives, they degrade their cultures, which demand payment of dowry for marriage to meet societal thresholds. Therefore, the voice of lamentations and disillusionment bedevils boys when they fail their responsibility. This has been confirmed using the theory of masculinity.

Nathane and Khunou (2021) observed that every man is expected to make a positive contribution to child-rearing, and fathering and mothering is a collective responsibility of all adults in the extended family and community. While social fathers may provide children with human capital and financial capital, which involves imparting values, skills, and traits, they are at times unable to provide the social capital in the form of family ties and connection, which is closely linked to lineage and identity; in other words, biological fathers give the child an identity that is highly valued in African communities. Legitimacy is given to biological connections, and when a biological father is missing in the lives of the children, it results in painful experiences of familial disconnections. In reference to Trauma theory, this may lead to trauma and victimhood among fatherless sons, unlike in my study that demonstrated, through the aesthetics of pain in Scott Haze's Documentary Film, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022), how this leads to fatherlessness.

Owino and Yigezu (2023) explain that fatherlessness is debatably caused by toxic fatherhood, which is viewed as one of the family troubles in contemporary society. This discourse has also been expressed by several researchers who note the intricacy and sometimes overlooked significance of a father's role in the lives of their male children. He observed that the presence of father figures in the lives of their children helps them manage their emotional problems. Additionally, the importance of fathers in the lives of their children and that a father's influence might result in a child facing challenges such as borderline personality disorder, severe hyperactivity, and abnormal emotional problems. My study used the aesthetics of pain in Scott Haze's Documentary Film, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022), to demonstrate how this leads to trauma.

METHODOLOGY

My study adopted a documentary research design with a qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach was adopted because I sought multiple characters' meanings attached to fatherlessness. I sought to understand characters' definitions of their identities and experiences as fatherless sons. The researcher acknowledges that these interpretations are not objective and the resultant meanings are multiple and relative. Thus, the treatment of fatherlessness adopted an interpretive constructivist epistemology.

The textual unit is composed of all the characters in the films, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022). There are twenty-three glaring characters in Mully (2021) and twenty-five in *Family Portrait* (2022), giving a textual unit of forty-eight characters. The researcher purposefully selected texts, the fatherless son and eighteen other major characters, giving a sample size of nineteen major characters from the Kenyan films *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022) because the narrator in *Mully* (2021) is a boy child who is abandoned by his parents, and this narrator serves as the protagonist. It also addresses pertinent issues that

this research intends to discuss. My study intends to focus on the portrayal of absentee fatherhood and put a lot of emphasis on fatherlessness in contemporary African societies. This was conducted through analysing events as portrayed by Mully and other characters in the films *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022).

Data collection was done through a documentary analysis guide. This involved a close critical film analysis of *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022). The document collected data based on gender order of masculinity, societal expectations of fathers, abandonment of the boy child, filial voice, the plight of young male characters, coping mechanisms used by fatherless sons, abstracted fathers and causes of trauma as portrayed in the films. This tool was adequate for gathering intensive secondary data from the films, addressing the objectives of the study and answering all the research questions accurately (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019).

According to Kothari (2014), qualitative research has limitations, such as subjectivity and resource constraints; hence, the methodical application of measures to ensure trustworthiness greatly enhances the precision and reliability of qualitative research. These measures also encourage transparency and critical evaluation by the scholarly community. In my study, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and generalizability were ensured.

Data analysis was done by means of thematic and stylistic analysis. The data were organised in thematic and stylistic clusters and eventually presented as subtopics. The subtopics will be presented and discussed according to the findings from each research question. In the discussion of the objectives of the study, findings will be guided by the theory of Narratology, film theory, theory of masculinity and trauma theory. To avoid plagiarism, all the information obtained from different sources and used in this research was duly acknowledged.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Filial Voice and the Plight of Young Male Characters Who Have Been Abandoned by Their Fathers

The filial voice, as used in the two films, Aesthetics of Pain in Scott Haze's Documentary Film, *Mully* (2021) and *Family Portrait* (2022), further explains the sentiments arising from relationships between abandoned sons and their fathers. It also touches on the feelings or behaviours that the son has towards his father. Plight, on the other hand, is the difficulty and unfortunate circumstances the abandoned son goes through. In this context, it generally describes a desperate predicament, or a hard struggle faced by the abandoned son.

Filial Voice as a Structural Device in *Mully*

Filial voice as a structural device in Mully works on three levels: narrative architecture, thematic contrast, and ethical argument. It is not what characters say, but how the film arranges those voices to shape meaning. It refers to the on-camera and voiceover testimony from Charles Mully's biological children, his wife Esther and the orphaned kids he adopted. The director Scott Haze uses it as a structural device to control how the audience reads Charles's story. Here is how it works on the three levels.

Narrative Architecture: The Counter-Narrative Spine

The film's backbone is Charles Mully's first-person narration. Charles's voice carries the public mission and faith narrative. The family voice carries the domestic cost narrative. Structurally, this is done through interviews and voice-overs placed at pivot points. Right after Charles explains why he gave away his fortune, you cut to his kids saying they felt angry and ignored.

An abandoned boy may also lament in shame, as is explained by Marici et al. (2023), who found that an abandoned child's environment was significantly associated with feelings of shame. Abuse is associated with both guilt and shame, while paternal rejection is associated with guilt. The environment in which children and teenagers develop is associated with how they perceive themselves in relation to others.

In the aesthetics of pain in Scott Haze's Documentary Film, *Mully* (2021), Mully narrates how bad the relationship between himself and his mother was, likewise to his father. Such explanations express how traumatised the abandoned are. My findings agree with Aurelya et al. (2025) that fatherless adolescents exhibit emotional vulnerability. A theme of joblessness

emerged and, in an agony, this is how Mully expressed himself:

> *My father had no job and he used to come home every day totally drunk. I was just a little boy. I did not know what was happening and what was going to happen. He was so cruel to my mother. She screamed for help; nobody was coming. That was my life when I was a young boy.*

The sentiments of Mully show that even though he had a family, the relationship was not one that any boy child could admire. He witnessed his father beat up his mother, and since he was just a child, he observed helplessly! A study by Kucukkaragoz (2025) found that father absence negatively impacts child development in multiple ways. Academically, children from father-absent homes exhibit lower school performance and reduced engagement in STEM fields. Psychologically, they experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and behavioural disorders. Socially, these children struggle with peer relationships and exhibit a higher likelihood of delinquent behaviour. Economically, father absence contributes to poverty, reduced career prospects, and intergenerational financial instability. Health-wise, children from father-absent households face greater risks of malnutrition, obesity, and limited access to healthcare.

After being abandoned, his father finally wrote a letter to him explaining the challenges bedeviling him in the village. Mully read the letter but hesitated to heed the invitation since his relationship with his father was already weak. He went ahead to voice:

> *My dad wrote me a letter, and this letter when I read it, it said; my son, it is a long time since I last saw you and therefore, I would like you to come as my first-born son. Come home there are things of great importance that you need to come and address here.*

Considering Mully's voice, he still had a father, though absent, but once a father, always a father. Therefore, he calmed down, accepted his fate and went home. His father invited him to help him settle debts he had accrued from drinking illicit brews.

Plight of Young Male Characters Subjected to Paternal Abandonment

When a boy child is abandoned, he goes through certain difficulties. Some of which condition them to indulge in immoral activities in order to survive. Getting a decent job without proper education becomes a challenge. Sotvoldiyeva and Xazratullo (2025) discovered that without an appropriate, warm, and loving parental figure, children are likely to develop multiple personality, emotional and psychological difficulties. Ayize, in *Family Portrait* (2022), represents fathers who were once abandoned by their fathers, and therefore he narrates his predicament: "*There are no jobs out there. I would sell my body to feed my family! But I am an artist, I work with my hands. And money is not everything, I show up!*"

From his lamentations, he is trying to be a father to his daughter, Zenzile; however, in the African context, a father showing up is not good enough if he cannot provide basic needs to his child. He continues to display more suffering when he admits to his wife, Nomvula, that: "*I have nothing to give. I don't know where the next meal will come from…you call that a father*" Therefore, being a father entails physical presence, emotional attachment and general care for the child. The findings align with Mao et al. (2020) that parental absence is negatively associated with the development of left-behind children.

Marici et al. (2023) suggest that single-parent families may have lower incomes than families with both parents present. Children may struggle to regulate emotions, which can lead to increased aggressive behaviour and difficulty with social skills. A child may become susceptible to risky behaviours, including early engagement in sexual activities, while sons may experience difficulties in developing a clear sense of gender identity and understanding their social roles. Even though the biological role is filled by another, some of these figures may become temporary and, to some extent, may have the potential to be abusive, and children may be left with a feeling of blame or emptiness as to why their fathers left. Mully a character in aesthetics of pain in Scott Haze's Documentary Film, *Mully* (2021) agonized in his difficulties as an abandoned son. The thought of giving up in life and even taking his life yields a theme of

disillusionment and faith as a coping mechanism. Mully expressed:

> *I thought I don't really deserve to live in this kind of life and I wanted to take away my life because there was no meaning but a young man came and saw me in a desperate situation. He invited me in prayer and fellowship and there was a preacher who was preaching about forgiveness of our sins. I thought, why would I trust this man? The preacher prayed, he said; work hard and by faith there is nothing impossible before God.*

Just like Mully, amidst suffering, it is important to exercise faith in God. Faith is a defence mechanism that kept Mully from taking his own life. This helps in containing fatal emotions. The spiritual aspect in the life of a boy child restores lost hopes and rejuvenates his spirit to keep on facing the challenges with boldness. Mully narrates that life without a father is frustrating. This is confirmed by Mgbodi (2023), who states that the absence of fathers leads to low self-esteem and a lack of connection to the abandoned. He loathes such a lifestyle. It is a life full of wild thoughts. This is revealed by Mully in his documentary film: for a fatherless boy child, when faced with challenges, committing suicide becomes an option. When the father is missing in the life of a boy child, he loses identity. Such a boy cannot afford to appreciate fatherhood since the confidence that comes with the presence of the father around him is gone. Life loses meaning, especially at a point when the father, who acts as a pillar in the life of a boy child, is absent. The only help that the boy child may get can come from a genuine friend, A friend who will act as a brother and a counsellor. Mully gets help from a friend. The following day, after spiritual nourishment, Mully went ahead to find a solution to his difficulties. In his quest for new life, these are his sentiments:

> *The next morning, I walked going to the city of Nairobi to get a new life. I did not have even a single cent in my pocket. It took me about three and half days. I did not finish school so I didn't know what kind of a job I would be able to do. I landed to Nairobi where there are people with Money. Those who have power, those who have jobs but nobody was able to help me.*

Mully, in his statement, reveals that fathers who are responsible do take their sons to school to acquire skills that will eventually help them get employment. Arvidsson (2025) opines that fatherlessness elevates rates of depression, anxiety, academic underperformance, identity fragmentation, and long-term relational dysfunction in children. Additionally, it is worth noting that white-collar jobs are highly valued in the African community. Those who are employed in government sectors or parastatals are respected in society. This is seen when Mully visits such families in order to get menial jobs. Mully says that he did not finish school, and he did not know what kind of job he could be able to do. This is Something that poses a great challenge in his life as a man. This challenge came because of being abandoned by his father at a tender age of six years.

The plight of a fatherless son in Mully is the emotional and social foundation of the whole documentary. The fatherless son faces an emotional plight. Charles Mully's own childhood becomes the lens through which the film explains this mission. Mully was abandoned by his mother and beaten by his father at the age of five. The film opens with his voice recalling this trauma. He experiences rejection, violence and loneliness. There is no adult protection, guidance or identity.

Mully faces a physical predicament. He lives on the streets, scavenging for food and shelter. The documentary uses re –enactments to show him sleeping outdoors and begging. This fatherlessness creates what psychologists call an "attachment wound" – the belief that you are unwanted and unworthy. In Mully, that wound drives his later obsession with giving orphan children what he totally missed during his childhood.

Societal consequences are another plight that fatherless sons face. Without a father, Mully had no clan, no inheritance, no schooling. In Kenyan society, lineage and paternal connection determine social standing. As a result, Mully suffers an identity crisis. He is a "nobody" with no family name to protect him. Mully is also surrounded by poverty since fatherlessness in Mully is linked to illiteracy, street life and vulnerability to exploitation. The film suggests that fatherlessness is not just personal. It is structural.

When fathers are absent, communities lose a generation of boys to the streets.

The psychological impact that shapes adulthood is another plight that fatherless sons face. Mully's fatherlessness becomes the engine of his mission. He says he wants to be the father he never had. The pain of his own childhood becomes purpose. The documentary also shows the cost. His biological children feel neglected because he overcompensates by adopting thousands of fatherless children. The fatherless son becomes a father to many, but risks failing his own family.

In a nutshell, in Mully's documentary film, the predicament of a fatherless son is portrayed as both an individual tragedy and social problem. Through Mully's testimony and re-enactments, the documentary shows how abandonment breeds poverty and identity loss, but also how that same wound can be transformed into a mission of redemption.

On the other hand, family portrait uses Ayize's voice to dramatise how fatherlessness is not only lived but also spoken, silenced, and contested. Rather than a confessional monologue, Ayize's voice emerges through dialogue, social positioning, and narrative tension. The film thus treats voicing fatherlessness as both thematic concern and a structural technique. Ayize's voice is present but repeatedly undermined by other characters. It is observable that Cecelia and the nurse regulate Ayize's access to Zenzile by questioning his financial worth. His attempts to speak as a father are met with doubt. Ayize speaks but his words carry little institutional weight.

The film uses this to show how fatherlessness is not only the physical absence of a man but the erasure of his paternal voice from the family narrative. An absent father makes the family, especially the wife and the children to face a lot of traumas that may last for a longer period of time. Ayize's mother-in-law is a hyper-vigilant mother who rejects any man who does not meet the standard of being a responsible father. Ayize feels challenged in that he is just a painter, and this leads to his rejection by his mother-in-law. Ayize is affected emotionally, and this is another form of abandonment known as emotional abandonment. According to the mother-in-law in the family portrait film, it is about the fear that history might repeat itself. She does not want her daughter, whom she had raised single-handedly, to suffer the same fate caused by deadbeat fathers.

The film shows that when boys are abandoned emotionally, we raise men who are then abandoned again as adults. However, Ayize is out to change this concept of dwelling on riches to make a good father. He is ready to be present and play his role as a father with what he can afford. He wants to change history and would wish not to be like his father, who also abandoned him at a tender age. However, the mother-in-law is challenged by her past and is desperate for stability for her daughter to an extent that she cannot recognise the humbled present form of Ayize as important. She is looking for a stable man to fill the father shaped manhole instead of a man to fill a human shaped one. In this context, Ayize was likely told that love must be earned with money, title or strength. The film reveals that we can heal the abandoned boy child when love is given freely, and we can stop the cycle of pain, trauma and abandonment when we tell abandoned boys that showing up and offering what they can afford is enough.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: In conclusion, the filial voice is that one of pain, longing and embodiment of loss. In Mully, the filial voice is in two faces: young Charles Mully voices abandonment at the age of six years that made him end up in street life, hunger and begging. On the other face, Mully appears as one who has abandoned his family for the sake of rescuing street children and later, he emerges victorious after marshalling wealth good enough to support both his family and home of street children. In family Portrait, Ayize himself embodies the filial voice and plight of fatherless generation. His voice is pleading, anxious and determined to prove worth beyond money. He is out to remain present and offer love, identity, and care regardless of financial ability. Both films therefore conclude that abandonment leaves young male characters with a wounded identity and constant search for paternal validation. Truly, fathers should not abandon their sons.

Recommendations:

1. The study should act as a guide to authors and playwrights who have not considered absentee fatherhood and fatherlessness as a rich area for study. It will also promote the study of literature as a mirror of society.
2. Readers should use the study to analyze the dilemma that face impending fathers as well as comprehending the huddles of fatherlessness.
3. The study should also help both fathers and fatherless boys to understand coping mechanisms and how pertinent issues that bedevil families today in terms of fatherlessness can be settled.

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