

**Felicia Arudo YIEKE,  
Egerton University,  
Kenya**

**GRAFFITI: VANDALISM OR EXPRESSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM  
AND INTELLECTUALISM AT UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA?**

**[Under Sub theme: Language and intellectual development in Africa]**

Graffiti has been used for a long time as ways of expression by human beings all over the world in various institutions. Most times, the most sensitive graffiti will be found in walls of public toilets and along narrow corridors, and in a number of cases, the writers of these graffiti will even do so using human faeces. These graffiti will even be found at Universities. The questions thus asked may be as follows; Why graffiti in places considered superior as institutions of Academic excellence and also as places where people are supposed to be “cultured”? What role does graffiti serve? Why specifically will they be found in hidden places such as toilets? Why would the writers use human faeces to do this? What message may a graffiti writer be sending across? If we take graffiti to be vandalism and mischief then have the universities then somehow lost their visions as originally set when they were established when their walls are smeared with graffiti all over? What can we probably learn from the messages on graffiti as issues that may need to be addressed if the Universities have to reclaim their former glory and serve intellectualism and research once more?

At surface level, graffiti may look like harmless writings by mischievous idle people, who are generally seen as destructive. On closer examination, graffiti gives us a different dimension to the whole scenario. This is in consideration of the fact that language can be used as a powerful weapon by the powerful people to oppress and suppress the less powerful. At the same time, the oppressed can use language to try and gain their freedom, in terms of social and intellectual development. Graffiti then comes in here as a very useful weapon for this group of people. They (graffiti) act as avenues through which a minority group, most often in an oppressive situation, use to express their opinions. In most cases, such groups are usually denied other legitimate ways of expressing their opinions in matters that they feel affect them. Minority groups in this case could be university student community, political prisoners, groups which feel that they have been left out in the governance of their country, just to mention a few. At the University there are many issues that need to be addressed, which affect both the social and intellectual well being of students; for example, hardly any constructive research goes on nowadays unless it is based on the natural sciences. The reason always given is lack of funds. Somehow then, the Arts, humanities and social sciences bear the brunt of all these and very little innovation is thus seen in these critical areas. Such are just some of the issues graffiti articulate.

This paper will look at the university student community as an example of a minority group who feel oppressed by both the university authorities and the larger social community as in the state. Data will be collected from the various public universities in Kenya and will rely specifically on those graffiti found in relatively hidden places such as toilets. This graffiti will be subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a useful tool in examining those discourses, which are often taken for granted at surface level. Deeper critical analysis reveals to us what the general public does not

usually know. CDA usually has an emancipatory agenda and rather candidly supports the course of the oppressed group against the oppressor. CDA will thus be used as both theory and method of analysis. These discourses on the walls will be analysed against the backdrop of the political situation in the last ten years or so in the reign of the former president Daniel Arap Moi who was also then the Chancellor of all the public universities in Kenya. This information on the political landscape can be got from archival materials and books in the libraries. It is hoped that this study will be an eye opener to what ails the national Universities from the point of view of the common person, and not the policy makers and managers, thus adopting a bottoms up approach. This in turn may be insight into how we would use language to improve intellectual development in Africa as reflected in the institution of the Universities, to make them once more centres of innovation for African works in the Arts and social science research.