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Representation(S) of Women in Kenyan Drama :A Study of Selected Kenyan Dramas.

Abstract

This paper examines the dramaturgies used in the representation of the female gender in Kenyan drama. The study stemmed from the need to interrogate how Kenyan playwrights represent women in drama as one way of demonstrating women's empowerment in society. It examined Denis Kyalo's *The Hunter is Back* (2010),Njoki Gitumbi's *A New Dawn* (2012).On methodology, the researcher adopted a qualitative research design. The two plays were purposively sampled. A textual exegesis was conducted from a close-reading and content analysis as its method of data collection and analysis. Primary texts were read to provide data for analysis supported by secondary sources. The study leaned on Feminist literary theories, particularly gynocritism and Gayatri Spivak's view on subalternity and how subaltern experiences diminish the position of women in society. Postcolonial theories, particularly by Edward Said and Homi K Bhabha, were also used to explore issues and challenges of female re-presentation.

Keywords: Drammartugies, Subeltern

Introduction

This paper sought to analyse the representation of women in selected plays in Kenyan Drama. These objectives were informed by the fact that some earlier literary studies have highlighted different, sometimes contradictory, patterns of how women are portrayed in various waves of what may be considered to be feminist modes. For instance, while some studies project women as resilient actors in their varied contexts, others, such as Obbe (1990), tend to play on dominant gender stereotypes that perceive African women as not only weak, but also unpopular, dependent and disrespectful. This study departs from such notions since they are constructed by

patriarchal logics to oppress women; they place women at lower socio-cultural rungs in the society, thus reinforcing the injustice of gender inequality. Since women seek new identities with changing times, there is need to reexamine outdated gender views to capture changes in dominant trends, which is partly why the current study was conducted.

Objectives

i) To identify representation of female characters in Kenyan dramas.

ii) Examine how the selected playwrights use drama to represent women.

Literature Review.

Outa (2001, 344) has put it, “Theatre is not just a mirror-like reality” but a form of communication that calls for uttermost attention and keen interpretation. It is for this reason that it becomes important to re-examine the re-enactment of the women’s lives, expressions and experiences with the aim of setting up a basis for explaining what playwrights achieve through various representations of characters and situations, especially those involving women. The main argument here, therefore, is that playwrights’ works may be reduced to certain salient structural and aesthetic patterns that may be associated with the fundamental messages highlighted in dramatic constructions. Outa (2001, 345) refers to these patterns as “constitutive elements in the "dramaturgy"; the aesthetic and conceptual choices employed by playwrights, that can more meaningfully—or additionally explain—the different responses”. Indeed such aesthetic and conceptual elements are conceived with the playwright conscious of the import and portrayal he/she wants to impress on the reader/audience.

Rutere(2010),in his book *Women and Patriarchal Power in the Selected Works of Ngugi Wa Thion’go* observes that, women battles against patriarchal power is historical and cuts across

all cultures(11).This implies that representation of women is both historically and culturally because patriarchy is one of the factors that affect representation. This study agrees with Rutere that patriarchy is both historical and culturally.

In order to fully appreciate characters and their qualities, Bachrach (2014), in his dissertation titled *The Mirror up to Nature: A Theatrical Experiment in the Dramaturgy of Gender*, fronts three key elements of representation to be examined keenly, namely: the actions of the characters, their motivations and their relationships with other characters on the stage (5). Indeed, these three elements are critical in the appreciation of characters in the texts under study. Further, Bachrach seems to agree with Proehl (1997) (quoted in Austin (1998, 2) and Leigh (2012, 11) who identifies (individual) "attributes" of a character as one of the three most important aspects of dramaturgy. The other two are "role" and "function". It may indeed not be difficult to relate the three aspects with "characterization", "ideology" and "aesthetics", respectively. In keeping within the purview of the present chapter, however, which is to examine the impact of the various character attributes playwrights have underscored, this discussion carries on under three archetypical character types that keep surfacing in the four texts under consideration.

This paper, therefore, analyses representation of women in Kenyan drama from two entry points: first, to identify representation of female characters in Kenyan dramas and second to examine how the selected playwrights use drama to represent women.

Methodology

The study was based on a comparative research design as advanced by Wagemann, Claudius and Schneider (2010). This is so because comparative research design aims at gathering information that illuminates relationships, patterns and links between variables and then the

researcher reports the findings. As such, comparative research design involves the analysis and interpretation of data. This research design is important when collecting information on social issues affecting society. Hence, it fitted the current study, which sought to comparatively investigate the dramaturgies of female representations in some of the recent plays authored in Kenya. The comparison was governed by two main paradigms: first, it identified and analysed the representation of female characters in Kenyan dramas and, second, it examined how the selected playwrights used drama to represent women. Further, in the analyses and interpretation of the findings, a simultaneous analytical approach was used to allow a comparison of issues in the selected plays for the study at the same time.

Findings

Representation of Women in Space

A common practice among different literary artists – whether seemingly sympathetic of women or not – has been to portray women as actors within different spatial contexts. Such portrayals have tended to be embedded within them certain ideological and cultural nuances that communicate what individual artists or their communities think about the relevance or value of women in those communities.

One common projection is of women as home keepers who derive some modicum of authority and agentic power while acting within domestic spaces – as wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters. The question of how exactly these fraternal and filial gendered relationships ultimately appear in literature, and the implications of such appearances, is the task that the following section of this thesis attempts to answer.

2.2.1 Woman as Domestic Workers

One of the most compelling analyses of gender roles and expectations of women in 19th Century Europe and North America relates to the concept widely understood as the cult of domesticity, which required that women be paragons of sexual virtue and purity, pious, submissive to their husbands and respectful to God, and only active in domestic spaces (Lisa & Southgate, 2011)

The plays under study somewhat adopt the same template by showing both the rampant associations of women with the domestic spaces, and the impact of such associations with the socio-economic deprivation of women. The significance of this gendered variegation in representation is captured, for instance, in the way such spatial allocations have become the controlling idea in Kyalo's *The Hunter is Back*, where even the stage directions signal domestic work as the plight of economically and culturally marginalized women – who constitute the majority. Thus, the figure of Naomi that the reader encounters in the stage directions is:

> Naomi emerges from the bigger hut with a basinful of unwashed calabashes, plates, spoons, etc. She places her load atop the wooden rack, disappears into the hut and brings out more kitchen paraphernalia. Her sulky facial expression exaggerates her middle age. She wears a loose-fitting flowery blouse and a flowing skirt that was once black but is now faded. Her badly cracked feet are clearly visible in the mismatched pair of sandals that she is wearing. Presently, she occupies herself with cleaning dishes. To compensate for her loneliness, her loud thoughts float into the air. (pp. 1-2)

The Naomi that the reader sees, and one around who the playwright structures his ideas, is a woman who has been wretched by poverty and neglect, and one whose emotional state is

undermined by a well of regrets. This close association of women with domesticity, with household chores, and with absent and improvident men, is a common motif in the plays under study. They all show the extent to which women's push to peripheral social spaces.

A New Dawn reveals that Kenyan women operate in the domestic sphere. The society has given women roles associated with reproduction. In this regard, recurrent concerns in the drama under study include a focus on women who struggle in their marriages, experiencing discrimination, while nursing the desire to change. The study also observes that women are portrayed in homes as they take care of children and domestic chores. The issue of gender stereotypes regarding social roles is brought out in *A New Dawn*. Veronica – Jeremiah's partner – is expected to conform to gendered roles of a home keeper, prepare and serve food promptly, and when there is a slight delay, it causes a complaint from her partner Nehemiah. The play shows that such gender expectations are widespread because even Jeremiah – Nehemia's friend – also complains about the delay. But this expectation is part of the larger impositions on women as home keepers, and sometimes working with little help from their male counterparts. Indeed, the domestic tension between Veronica and Nehemia revolves around the latter's expectations that his partner would take up her roles without question (p. 36).

The play also re-enacts the societal tendency to re-create and extend these stereotypes by masculinizing achievements. Nehemia is shown to take a lot of pride in the fact that his child, Numa, has excelled in his secondary school examinations, and that Numa has been admitted to university to study the prestigious degree in medicine. And while celebrating Numa's good performance, Nehemia is somewhat indifferent to the unfair gender roles within the home, where his daughter Serah has to do all the house chores while her brother – Johnny – studies. The play

dramatizes gender inequalities even within the domestic spaces, which is perhaps the playwright's way of arguing that despite the changes in time, the girl-child and the female gender generally continues to encounter barriers to their mobility right from the home spaces.

That these barriers impede the women's relevance and success even in the public sphere is seen in the fact that ultimately, few women access opportunities of achieving leadership positions in public. This is because traditional socialization of young societal members equips them with attitudinal lenses that belittle women's leadership potential. This is possibly why, despite her efforts to demonstrate great leadership skills, voters decline to support Mama Nuru, a character in *A New Dawn* – appropriately named to symbolize enlightenment – when she seeks an elective position. Although she articulates her campaign manifesto clearly and even rhetorically (p. 52), the voters are somewhat unconvinced because of the many years of exposure to gender stereotypes that posit women as incapable of leadership. In other words, the long standing hierarchisation of gender make it difficult for the voters to see the leadership potential in a woman, for no other reason except her biological difference that apparently render her incapable of leadership.

That this erroneous perception is rampant is seen in the fact that Francis Imbuga, an established Kenyan playwright, similarly grapples with the question of gender stereotypes and their impact on societal dynamics. Thus, *The Green Cross of Kafira* also shows that leadership belongs to men. However Mama Mugei forms the Gender Party of Kafira, which brings about the revolution that is needed in Kafira. The revolution she brings is so real and everyone is excited about the new party. However, Mama Mungei faces a lot of opposition, she is even detained but when the party succeeds, it is the husband who takes over leadership. When a woman is able to take over leadership, most men still cannot accept it as real. That is why when Rita manages to get

the people out of the problems they were facing in Chamaland, the same people attribute Rita's achievement to what is a supposedly masculine brain in a female head. This means that for this community, it is not just a matter of leadership in mainstream political domains that women should be excluded from. Even within the spaces traditionally ascribed to women, their performance of leadership roles should ideally be within traditionally acceptable limits, or else credit is given to an invisible male influence.

Yet, it is not accurate to limit this view to the current texts alone; the farthest the study can go in this regard is to argue that the texts capture a domestic manifestation of what could well be a universal phenomenon. This is a challenge that earlier feminist scholars identified and theorised. For instance, Kate Millett argues that gender differences are "essentially cultural, rather than biological bases" that result from differential treatment (1971, 28–9), thereby introducing the variable of cultural relativism in the manifestation and interpretation of gender inequalities at the actual level of daily interactions as well as at the symbolic level of discursive representation. This is why Millet further holds that "the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (Millett 1971, 31) are critical influencers on overall gender perceptions and subsequent interpretations. Feminine and masculine gender-norms, however, are problematic in that gendered behaviour conveniently fits with and reinforces women's subordination so that women are socialised into subordinate social roles: they learn to be passive, ignorant, docile, emotional helpmeets for men (Millett 1971,p.26). However, since these roles are simply learned, they can still be reconfigured to can create more equal societies by 'unlearning' social roles. That is, feminists should aim to diminish the influence of socialisation.

Social learning theorists hold that a huge array of different influences socialise individuals as either women or men. This being the case, it is extremely difficult to counter gender socialisation. For instance, parents often unconsciously treat their female and male children differently. When parents have been asked to describe their 24-*hour* old infants, they have done so using gender-stereotypic language: boys are described as strong, alert and coordinated and girls as tiny, soft and delicate. Parents' treatment of their infants further reflects these descriptions whether they are aware of this or not (Renzetti & Curran 1992, 32). Some socialization is more overt: children are often dressed in gender stereotypical clothes and colours (boys are dressed in blue, girls in pink) and parents tend to buy their children gender stereotypical toys. They also (intentionally or not) tend to reinforce certain 'appropriate' behaviours. While the precise form of gender socialization has changed since the onset of second-wave feminism, even today girls are discouraged from playing sports like football or from playing 'rough and tumble' games and are more likely than boys to be given dolls or cooking toys to play with; boys are told not to 'cry like a baby' and are more likely to be given masculine toys like trucks and guns (Kimmel 2000, 122–126).This is clearly illustrated in the texts under the study.

According to social learning theorists, children are also influenced by what they observe in the world around them. This, again, makes countering gender socialisation difficult. For one, children's books have portrayed males and females in blatantly stereotypical ways: for instance, males as adventurers and leaders, and females as helpers and followers. One way to address gender stereotyping in children's books has been to portray females in independent roles and males as non-aggressive and nurturing (Renzetti & Curran 1992, 35). Some publishers have attempted an alternative approach by making their characters, for instance, gender-neutral animals or genderless imaginary creatures (like TV's Teletubbies). However, parents reading books with gender-neutral

or genderless characters often undermine the publishers' efforts by reading them to their children in ways that depict the characters as either feminine or masculine. According to Renzetti and Curran, parents labelled the overwhelming majority of gender-neutral characters masculine whereas those characters that fit feminine gender stereotypes (for instance, by being helpful and caring) were labelled feminine (1992, 35). Socialising influences like these are still thought to send implicit messages regarding how females and males should act and are expected to act shaping us into feminine and masculine persons. This assertion is supports the fact that women are viewed as domestic workers. All these are seen in the plays under study, including *A New Dawn* where socially ascribed roles for girls confine them in the domestic spaces where they do household chores, while boys are encouraged to focus beyond the homes and explore other opportunities elsewhere.

In Kyallo's *The Hunter is Back*, the scene opens with Naomi Rita's aunt washing dishes and doing other household chores. Rita her niece is also seen bringing water and she has to walk for ten kilometers to get the water (Kyalo, pg. 9). Rita also takes care of their sick mother, Taabu, from a very young age. Naomi says the work of their mother was just to look for food and cook while the father was busy looking for tradition brew: "That's triviality. Remember our father spent three quarters of his life crisscrossing the village in his endless search for traditional brew. He would then return in the dead of night and demand for food from mama." (Kyalo, pg. 4) This excerpt demonstrates the relative freedoms that are accorded to men and women: while men can occupy and dominate both the domestic and public spaces at will, women are restricted to the domestic spaces alone. Yet, such spatial allocations also have economic implications because admission to public spaces also mean access to opportunities for economic accumulation or, in the case of some men, impoverishment through reckless consumption of alcohol. In all, Kyalo's play

demonstrates the complexities surrounding gender, spatial access and domination and their overall intertwinement with economic dynamics of the day.

It is also evident in the plays under study that women in domestic spheres sometimes are depicted as sacrificial lambs and exposed to retrogressive cultural practices such as early marriages that, in effect, deprive girls of opportunities for self-advancement. In Kyalo's *The Hunter is Back*, Naomi tells Maneno: "Papa married both of us off when we were barely fifteen" (p. 5). This statement demonstrates a common view of women as vessels for economic advancement for men (fathers) who biologically 'own' them, and as sexual objects for pleasure and procreation for other men (husbands) who acquire them in marriage. Whichever way one looks at it, the agency of women is compromised whether in domestic or public spheres.

This is also a critical point because all the plays studied here portray these cultural domestication with disapproval rather than endorsement and, for Imbuga's *The Green Cross of Kafira* – he goes ahead to demonstrate that women neither need to be confined in domestic spaces, nor should they be perceived in sexual terms alone. Therefore, this thesis argues that while there is a tendency to view women as beings whose functionality should be limited to domestic spaces, women can also achieve greater success in public spheres as leaders and change mobilisers.

This is the case in Kyalo's play where Rita, a previously disadvantaged girl overcomes many challenges to prosper in social and material terms and who eventually rises to be the Chief in her village (p. 66). What is critical also is that even as she takes over leadership in her village, Rita demonstrates a social conscientiousness that places her on the same plane as anyone, man or woman:

> Rita: Thank you very much. I feel honoured that my people unanimously agree to make me their Chief. […] I will lead from the front in the war against bribery, as it is a major roadblock to service delivery and economic stability. I assure you that I shall champion the battle against disease, against drug abuse and also against demeaning practices such as wife inheritance and child labour. (p. 66)

Yet, it is crucial that Kyalo ensures that the liberation of women characters from domestic confinements comes via an initial excursion into, and conquest of the outer space. Rita has to break free of chains of domesticity and flee to the city, where she fashions her life according to her own plans and without the strictures of culture or masculine whims, and only return when her personal achievements have placed her beyond the reach of patriarchal cultural injunctions. In this regard, she somewhat compares with Mama Mgei in Imbuga's play studied for this thesis: both women demonstrate that womanhood need not be a reason for their otherwise inexplicable confinement in the domestic space and socio-economic limitations. The playwrights studied for this thesis seem to bear a singular message in terms of gender and spatial occupation: women's biological uniqueness may well be immutable, but their social roles are not. The plays also show that these spaces can accommodate different forms of ideological positions as far as gender socialization goes. But what about biological differences and how they impact on portrayal of women? The next section of this thesis attempts to answer this question.

2.2.2 Women as Objects of Sexual Gratification for Men

One of the most disturbing portrayals of a 'good woman' in some African societies is that of one who submissive to the husband's whims and sexually available for his needs, regardless of the prevailing circumstances. In fact, the whole preoccupation with marriage as an honourable feat for women is premised on the presumption that it is within marriage that women can perform their

sexual duties to men and society in a proper and acceptable manner. Many postcolonial critics of a feminist slant, such as Ann-Laura Stoler, whose books *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002) and *Race and the Education of Desire* (1995) interrogate the ways in which postcolonial preoccupations with notions of racial purity actually entailed determining and controlling which men could sexually access women. In Africa, recent concerns with masculinities have shown that many men retain a sense of sexual entitlement to women; in other words, many think that women must concede to such men's sexual desires just because the men are men while the women are women. It is this presumption that we see some of the playwrights under study engaging with in the characterization of men and women. In Kyalo's play, this preconception is captured in the playwright's deployment of zoological and botanical metaphors to refer to Rita, a child-bride who has "been auctioned for marriage to Mzee Tumbo" (p. 30) and who is equated to a wild animal that should be hunted and brought home for a man's consumption. In the play, Tumbo's explanation to Chief Sivu is also packaged in these metaphors: "as he [the hunter] walked home, he saw a fresh fleshy fruit dangling on a tree by the wayside. His heart throbbed with life, for he had at last seen something with which to quench his thirst" (p. 28). This sexually suggestive language acquires its effect on the basis of a cognitive resonance between Chief Sivu and Tumbo, who are cast in the play as gatekeepers of political-administrative and cultural-patriarchal power, respectively, and who feel threatened by the rise of feminine vocal expressiveness that they put down to the stupidity and disrespect of women. This is why when retelling Tumbo his encounter with the articulate Rita, Chief Sivu says of Rita: "She is just but another stupid girl. […] I will ensure that she doesn't get away with treating me with such disrespect" (p. 31).

In this episode, the playwright dramatizes a self-reflexive irony because currently, it is the men who behave in relatively silly and ill-mannered way by failing to see that the young women

whose bodies they think they are entitled to are young, the age of the men's daughters, and who are determined to forge into a future of opportunities. Yet, because of a conspiracy between biology and patriarchy, the men do not always see this point, even when such men occupy positions of influence such as leadership. This is the case in Gitumbi's *A New Dawn*, where the political activist Nehemiah tries to seduce a school girl and in the process actually ends up molesting her through indecent touches:

> Nehemiah: (*Disappointed by the girl's failure to recognize his intentions)* Aah! You must stop the formalities! An intelligent and beautiful girl like you is allowed to get a little cosy with Mheshimiwa, right?
>
> School Girl: *(Confused, lost for what to say)* I … ah, eh … yes … no …
>
> Nehemiah: *(Walks up to her, runs his finger over her face, then holds her face delicately by the chin, looks at her lustfully)* Come on, dear, relax. You know you are a beautiful women?
>
> School Girl: *(Taken aback, holding seat stiffly by both hands)* I, eh, ah … came to see you about my school fees, Sir."
>
> Nehemiah: *(Impatiently)* I know, I know, and I can give you that and much more if you prove to be a really nice girl, eh … *(winks at her, at the same time, he is stroking her face)* (p. 85)

Although the playwright uses some dramatic strategies to distance himself from such ideas, and indeed to critique them, he nonetheless captures what is a rampant animalization and commodification of the woman as an animal to be hunted down or a fruit to be plucked by men and eaten. In this regard, the grammar of commodification portrays the woman's body as a cultural text on which masculine desires and anxieties are inscribed. It is perhaps for this reason that some

feminist critics such as Catharine MacKinnon consider the theory of gender as a theory of sexuality involving unequal engagements and entanglements of femininity and masculinity. Masculinity is defined as sexual dominance, femininity as sexual submissiveness: genders are "created through the eroticization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance / submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex" (MacKinnon 1989, 113).

Yet, perhaps due to differences in socialization and other factors, the texts that are inscribed on women's bodies convey different, and sometimes contradictory narratives. On the one hand, playwrights such as Kyalo exploit the tropes of troubled masculinities to demonstrate the rampant animalization and commodification of women as through imagery of birds and fruits, while Gitumbi shows that even respectable men in society do not necessarily avoid the ill manners of having the ungovernable desire to sexually use and abuse female bodies, even when such bodies belong to girls already disadvantaged by age and material deprivation. On the other hand, Imbuga in *The Green Cross of Kafira* demonstrates that even when women somehow manage to grow to maturity and therefore escape the groping figures of men such as Gitumbi's Nehemiah, the women are still perceived as better off in the domestic spaces – where they fulfill their sexual roles properly – and not in public domains where they are viewed as a threat to the prevailing pro-patriarchy power structures. In other words, the playwrights seem to suggest that the outright sexualisation of the young woman's body somewhat changes innuendo and implication when the women grows older, but the perception of women as dispensers of sex for the men remains all across.

This is the reason that the current thesis earlier acknowledged that men-women relationships in many societies and their reflections in literature are troublesome and complicated. On the one hand, men dominate the public sphere and deploy socio-cultural institutions such as patriarchy to ensure that women do not threaten male dominance in political and economic power.

On the other hand, however, the same men need women and their bodies for their own socio-cultural validation – seen in subscription to societal notions of normalcy or achievement when measured by metrics such as heteronormative marriage and fatherhood.

It this background that provides a basis for many instances of sexual transgressions for men who go to great lengths to dominate women through numerous sexual liaisons, sometimes in total disregard for social norms. The perception of women as sexual objects occupies this space, where some men, for instance, use power disequilibrium's to have their way with women's bodies. But why exactly they do this is possibly because of a related and equally fallacious perception of women as emotionally frail beings.

2.2.3 Women and Perceived Weaknesses

Patriarchal societies generally perceive women as weak, an idea that was first recorded in Victorian England. Although it is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to pinpoint where or how this perception began, what is clear is that this perception has been used to justify actual and symbolic women's domination by their male counterparts. The society has gone ahead to create a binary principle of male/ female. As a result of this, Foucault Michel (1980) argues that "people have become part of ontologically and epistemologically constructed set of names and labels such as female characterizes one to be weak." Hughes Kathryn (2014) captures general depictions of women in the world, and argues that women are redefined physically and intellectually as the "weaker sex."

The plays under study also problematize this notion of women-as-weaker sex where multiple meanings of strength and weakness are captured, sometimes with approval, and on other

occasions with scorn. In Kyalo's *The Hunter is Back*, the notion of women as the weaker sex does not take a linear portrayal, even though most women are socialized to take the light roles in the society. But, as this thesis suggests above, this preoccupation with of women with lighter chores is not necessarily because the women are weak, but because they are compelled to do so by an insecure patriarchal and masculine order. In Chamaland, an imaginary community in the text, the playwright presents a society that is characterized by patriarchy, gender imbalance, and male chauvinism. Women in this society are shown as weak subjects, oppressed by their men and therefore disadvantaged in the society. This can be seen through the character of the protagonist, Rita, who is shown to be very vulnerable in the hands of Mzee Tumbo, a wealthy village man in Chamaland. Rita gets emotional as she tries to resist the overtures of Mzee Tumbo to whom she has been betrothed against her will. In her dialogue with Chief Sivu to whom she has gone for help, Rita's weakness emerges:

> Sivu: *(Aside)* The paradox of the chick exposing her breasts to the kite. *(He pulls Rita to an upright position by her shoulders. Then, loudly)* My daughter, what brings you here?
>
> Rita: *(Amid sobs)* My lord, they are after my life.
>
> Sivu: They? Who are they? And what do they want? And why?
>
> Rita: It is them. Ngumi and Tumbo.
>
> Sivu: What do they want?
>
> Rita: The two of them are beasts! Let God deal with them the way he dealt with the filthy Sodom and Gomorrah…….
>
> Rita: I have been auctioned for marriage to mzee Tumbo. (p. 30)

Although the section portrays an emotional Rita pleading for assistance from the Chief, the weakness in Rita derives from political and administrative authority of Chief Suva rather than his masculine power. It is Rita's recognition of the state authority vested in Chief Suva, rather than the Chief's patriarchal or masculine power, that she cares for. This means that what may on the surface appear to be deference to masculine or cultural power is actually respect for state administrative structures which do not translate to an emotional weakness on the part of Rita. It also means that the notion of male authority over women appears to gain currency only when it is embedded in administrative fronts.

Similarly, Gitumbi's play shows how power inequalities between men and women can be misconstrued to mean women are emotionally weak, where such weakness actually points at unfair distribution and outright abuse of power. In the scene earlier cited where the politician lusts after a school girl who has come to request for financial assistance towards her school fees, it is financial poverty that exposes the young girl to emotional and sexual harassment because the girl operates from point of economic – rather than emotional – weakness.

The perception of weakness extends to the cultural socialization that casts women in a position of 'incapacity' as far as discharging public responsibilities go. In *The Green Cross of Kafira*, women are either excluded or displaced from leadership positions because of a prevalent notion that they are so weak that they cannot offer the required or expected political leadership. This is despite the fact that some women still brave the attitudinal barriers to offer themselves for elective positions, even though they are aware that they have to overcome the gender stereotypes pitted against them and try and win electoral victory. This is the situation that Mama Mgei in Imbuga's play deals with and, although she does not win the position that she seeks, she nonetheless demonstrates a strength in character that is more than what the cynical men have. This

point is critical considering that it is Mama Mgei's husband who also rides on her back to acquire leadership, yet it was the lady who had organised the political party as the vehicle for her ambition to serve the public.

All these dynamics demonstrate that while biological fact of womanhood has been used to construct unfavorable gender roles for women, the strength of character of women is in their consistent rejection of the patriarchal views of them. The rejection, as seen in Mama Mgei's political mobilisation skills in Imbuga's play, and Rita in Kyalo's, all suggest that while weakness may be a human trait, it is not necessarily specific to women. This emerges from the playwrights strategic use of distancing irony – where they seen to rehash the gender stereotypes that capture women as weak only to demonstrate their strength – and characterization where men and women characters are presented to demonstrate that each of them can either be strong or weak depending on the strength of their respective value systems rather than on gender.

This point also emerges in the playwrights' refusal to romanticize women. Instead, the artists demonstrate the reality that some women indeed have human frailties that, unfortunately, coincide with and tend to affirm some of the gender stereotypes against women. For instance, in *The Hunter is Back*, the character of Maneno is juxtaposed with that of Naomi, the protagonist. And while both are women, Maneno is shown to embrace and even dramatize some of the abhorrent behaviour associated with women, including petty jealousy. When Maneno is "inherited" after the death of her husband, her co-wife plots to assault Maneno out of jealousy, vowing that "I will teach the witch a lesson" (Kyalo, p. 6) The unnamed co-wife's declaration is important for two reasons, both related to the question of gender stereotypes. First, the woman's failure to recognise that both her Maneno and herself are casualties of an oppressive and exploitative patriarchal regime that dehumanizes women reinforces the stereotype of women as

querulous, petty enemies of themselves. Second, the co-wife's reference to Maneno co-wife as a 'witch' also buttresses the traditional anti-women stereotype that casts women as malicious believers in, and practitioners of negative powers. Either way, the playwright demonstrates that while it is not entirely correct to view women as weak, some of them do have weaknesses that derive from selfishness and an inability to understand the real issues that account for their marginalization.

This raises the question of what role tradition plays in women's interactions in the contexts of perceived and real gender-weaknesses. The institutions of culture, and more specifically patriarchal cultures, prevail upon women to live by socially acceptable standards which in many cases mean upholding the privileges of patriarchy. Women are submissive to patriarchy, which makes them to obey and submit to what men construct as a tradition, as seen in the example of Maneno in Kyalo's play. Maneno naively presumes that what her father does is right because it is sanctioned by tradition:

Maneno: I thought that is what tradition prescribes. That fathers should get husbands for their daughters. (p. 5) And a little later, in answer to Naomi's question regarding why Maneno remains in a sham marriage Maneno says:

Maneno: Yes and no. (Shifting her stare to the ground) You know when my husband died, *I had little choice* other than to be inherited by his younger brother. Since then the tigress in his other wife has given me no peace at all. For the last one month, she has been threatening to beat me up. Yesterday she announced to all and sundry that I was behind her deteriorating relationship with her husband. "I will teach the witch a lesson," so she told everybody. *I now know not where to go*." (p. 6, emphasis added)

A critical point here is that owing to the structures of patriarchal socialization, women feel they "have little choice", and that they "know not where to go". These twin feelings of lack of choice and entrapment all point the reality that in this play, women are portrayed as an oppressed lot and, other than the rare occasions when they can commiserate with each other on their shared predicament, they are stuck in the rut of patriarchy and culture.

The concern with oppression and the structural silencing of women is the major theme of Gayatri Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" This essay, though somewhat dated and situated in a different moral and political economies, remains nonetheless relevant to this thesis because it explores questions of how individual or group subjectivity can be undermined by ideological and historical structures that can and do often impede self-expression. The normalization of patriarchal logics in cultural socialization of women, and the recreation of the same logics have the net effect of silencing women because they are psychologically attuned to view any divergent thought as an aberration from the norm. The playwrights under study seem to be aware of this dynamic, and so they have devised strategies that both acknowledge the prevalence and normalization of women's silence and silencing mechanisms on the one hand, while creating discursive and symbolic spaces in which exemplary women can emerge, acquire a voice, and thrive as independent-minded communal and opinion leaders in society. So we have Taabu, Rita's mother in Kyalo's play, who represents the older generation of women who would acquiesce to every whim and caprice of their husbands. This image of a woman as a silent almost-human being is dramatically captured in Wambui Mwangi's essay, "Silence is a Woman" (2013). Mwangi writes,

> The usual gloss of 'mutumia' is that Gikuyu womanhood is a reserved dignity and composed serenity. This gloss is unsurprisingly the one enforced and circulated by

> patriarchal and misogynist cultural interpreters. The natural condition of a women is to dwell in silence, to persevere mutely, and to communicate speechlessly. Silence becomes a woman. Silence is what a woman, in be-coming a woman, becomes. Silence is becoming in a woman because silence is the be-coming of a woman. A woman is silent. The presence of a woman is the presence of silence. Silence is a woman.

Yet, in the plays under study, the image of the woman as silence is problematized when the playwrights contrast the less-achieving silent women – such as Taabu in Kyalo's play and Veronica in Gitumbi's – and the high-achieving vocal women, such as Rita in Kyalo's *The Hunter*. In this sense, Rita is cast as a symbol of both the younger generation of women that asks questions and demands answers, and of the possibilities self-fulfillment that are available to everybody, regardless of gender, who may assert themselves.

What is clear and critical for us is that regardless of whether the women speak up or keep quiet, there is the necessary and inescapable call for endurance that all women embody. In this regard, Dipio (1998) argues that early male writers represent women as tenacious. While concurring with her, the current study observes that women's endurance is not a feature of early writings only; even in modern societies, women's endurance is seen in marriage and places of work. For example Kadesa, a character in Imbuga's *The Return of Mgofu*, is shown to be a resilient character who does not give up in life despite her repeated bouts of mental illness / that afflicts the wider society. During the first bout, many people leave their places and when they come back, most of them are so disillusioned. However, Kadesa does not show similar signs of disillusionment, instead she demonstrates a sense of hope when she establishes a shrine known as 'Farewell to Ogres' (2011, pg. 11).

However, in *In the Green Cross of Kafira* by the same playwright, women are not allowed to celebrate any achievements. After the women manage to form the Gender Party of Kafira, everyone becomes excited. The media carries various stories about the registration of a new political party. Following the revelations, there were spontaneous street celebrations throughout Kafira. The following day the Registrar of Political Parties, Arasa, is summoned and summarily dismissed from her job for registering the Gender Party of Kafira (2013, pg. 40), which is a statement about the lack of support from officialdom, or even its own anxieties about the prospects of an empowered womenfolk. The seeming preoccupation with the notion of endurance seems to be the playwrights' ways of enforcing the themes of suffering and oppression, silencing and marginalization of women. It is unsurprising that some women in the plays under study should then embark on quests for new identities that should herald new experiences and possible opportunities.

2.2.4 Women as Victims of *Zombified* (Fe) Male Tormentors.

One recurrent dramatic strategy of representation in the texts selected for the present study is that of setting leading women characters up against antagonistic forces, whether male or female, but preferably against the former, that are determined to curtail and derail women's freedoms, bludgeon their sense of reality and ability to express it, as well as shut down women's gut nature and emotions. Be that as it may, it has, nonetheless, been argued that the dramaturgies of power are often dialectical and rarely what it appears to be on the surface. It may therefore be ill advised and counterproductive to plainly portray women as hopelessly powerless and in need of external efforts empowering them. One more productive projection is of women's powerlessness conversely producing the effect of portraying those who selfishly benefit from their labors, or otherwise counteract such efforts, in ogre-like light. In a scenario such as this,

women's power indeed lies in their apparent weakness. Foucault (1994—quoted in Outa 2001) captures fluid nature of power, thus:

> Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments, (Foucault 1994: 109-110)

The question of how exactly, in the plays selected for the present study, the seeming weakness translates to power and, ultimately, liberation is the task that the following section of this thesis seeks to answer.

One major implication of the apparent confusion and meaninglessness that reigns supreme among female characters is the alienating force of patriarchy. The effects of deranged chauvinism are evident in the portrayal of women as frustrated and not in charge of their own affairs and emotions. In Kyalo's *The Hunter is Back,* for instance, central female character exist in a state of perpetual confusion and misery, an intricate pattern that uncovers the alienating power of male chauvinism. The playwright paints the dehumanizing situation in which Naomi exists thus:

> …Human activity in this hut is witnessed through the clattering of pans, cutlery, etc. An old wooden dishrack, whose one of the four supporting poles is broken, stands lamely by the entrance of the bigger hut. A withering hedge encloses the homestead. The stillness in the environment is overemphasized by the sing-song noises of birds nesting in the nearby bushes. Naomi emerges from the bigger hut with a basinful of unwashed calabashes, plates, spoons, etc. She puts her load atop the wooden rack and, disappears into the hut and brings out more kitchen paraphernalia. Her sulky facial expression exaggerates

her middle age. She is wearing a loose-fitting flowery blouse and a flowing skirt that was once black but is now faded. Her badly cracked feet are clearly visible in the mismatched pair of sandals that she is wearing. (1-2)

Naomi's grim picture is that of an overwhelmed hopeless woman to whom life has lost almost all its colour and glory. In her ensuing conversation with her equally tormented sister Maneno, who is introduced to the audience as "a rumour-monger and singer", Naomi's deep seated frustration is further revealed in the easy verbal fights she almost unconsciously picks with her sister and niece, her anger clearly misdirected to equally hapless victims:

Naomi: swinging around to face Maneno, who stands arms akimbo. Maneno's tired look coupled With her scanty dressing clearly indicates that she has had a nasty night.

Maneno what brings you to your sister's house at such an unlikely hour? Don't tell me that they have chased you out again. Not now…

Maneno: taking two steps towards Naomi. Perhaps I am far better off. I would rather be running at seven in the morning than talking to myself like a mad person. (2-3)

It is indeed revealed later that Maneno may have actually been running away from her co-wife. She reports:

Maneno: Yes and no. <u>shifting her stare to the ground.</u> You know when my husband died, I had Little choice other than to be inherited by his younger brother. Since then the tigress in His other wife has given me no peace at all. For the last one month she has been threatening to beat me up. Yesterday she announced to all and sundry that I was behind her deteriorating relationship with her husband. "I will teach that witch a lesson," so she told everybody. I now know not where to go. (7)

As they quarrel and chase each other around, one gets an impression that the kind of spell patriarchy has cast on the women has indeed left them spinning and helpless. Even such women as Rita's mother who seem to have had a lucky break from the chagrins of male chauvinism have no way of escaping the ultimate destiny that awaits all women. She narrates her fate to her daughter:

Taabu: When I bore you…there was nothing I could give. I had no husband, I had no food to feed you. I was forced to go to the streets to look for money. At first, I thought luck was on my

side, but little did I know I was digging my own grave. ….then I met him. He pretended

to be nice to me…. It was during one of these visits that he introduced me to drugs….

Then, one day he did it…he took advantage of my drunkenness and raped me. (52)

This depicts the problems that women face.

It may be evident from the foregoing discussion that the one of the purposes of the dramaturgies of representation employed by playwrights whose works have been selected for study is to portray women as victims of men who are determined to keep them inferior. It then becomes apparent why patriarchal systems are evil and need to be done away with. In some instances women participate, albeit unconsciously, in this elaborate scheme aimed at undermining women's progress until they emerge from their stupor and acquire a new conscience .Rutere (2010) in *Women and patriarchal Power in the Selected novels of Ngugi Wa Thion'go* supports 'women initiatives to have gender awareness in order to enable them live meaningful lives and indicts patriarchy because it frustrates women's efforts to work and live abundantly in Post-colonial Kenya. (22). In the section that follows, the study looks at the dramaturgies that the playwrights have employed to bring women to a new level of consciousness.

Conclusion

This paper sought to critique the representation of women in the plays under study. The paper was inspired by the truism that 'woman' and 'gender' both as markers of identity and as analytical categories in discursive engagements are social constructs created consciously or unconsciously by cultural norms, in which women and men are expected, coerced, or persuaded to conform to the societal expectations of their corresponding gender. In some of the plays studied, this study shows that society creates words to stereotypically label human females as woman, emotional, irrational, weak, stupid, and powerless and submissive. Specifically, Gitumbi's *A New Dawn* portrays some women as evil and others as angels in the house, while other plays selected for this study also dramatise a prejudicial ecomony of wickedness associated with women. Such portrayals, we argue, often provide dubious justification for the continued systemic and individual marginalization, oppression, or muting of women in a patriarchal societal order. While acknowledging this, the playwrights, notably Imbuga and Gitumbi, carry the message that these inequalities need to change. The playwrights thus create female characters who disrupt male dominance in the domains of political and religious leadership, academia and judicial institutions. The exemplary women do not accept how the society views them; they rebel against the tradition and start to challenge men. These women believe they are assertive, daring, strong and capable. They venture in male's worlds and believe that their destined places are not only at home, but also beyond. They are radical and believe that they are equally important to men; they redefine themselves as they go through their biological, socio-cultural, political and other experiences, some of which we discussed in the next paper.

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