

Female Characters' Resistance to Masculine Stereotypes in Asenath Odaga's Selected Novels

Moses Okea Siger¹, Dr. Kesero Tunai² and Dr. Jane Bwonya³

¹Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Rongo University,
P.O.BOX 103-40404, Rongo, Kenya

Email: moseokea@gmail.com

²Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Rongo University,
P.O.BOX 103-40404, Rongo, Kenya

Email: kestunai@yahoo.com

³Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Rongo University,
P.O.BOX 103-40404, Rongo, Kenya

Email: janebwonya99@yahoo.com

¹ (Corresponding Author)

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Abstract

Female characters are often depicted as fighting and struggling for their gender space in the writings of African especially in East Africa. Asenath Odaga projects how women have risen up against the societal boundaries that have always elevated the man at the expense of the woman. In *Between the Years* (1987) and *Endless Road* (1995) we seek to examine how women have resisted cultural stereotypes as well as masculinity that is as a result of patriarchal leaning of the society. Women resist all the negative representations in the two texts that manifest themselves through objectification and otherization.

Keywords: Masculine, Stereotype, Resistance.

1. Masculine Projection of the Female Person

1.1. Introduction

This paper examines the position of the woman from the masculine and more often male chauvinistic stance. In essence, men seem to construct and shape women characters as lesser beings in the selected novels in an attempt to demean and despise the female person.

1.1. The Female Body as an Avenue for Male Gratification

One of the most conspicuous concerns of Asenath Odaga in *Between the Years* and *Endless Road* is the manner in which male characters relate with the female body. Salmarie's virginity in *Endless Road* is a source of strength for her. She says, "I argued and tried to convince him that I had never made love with any man..." (Odaga, 1995, p. 66). Salmarie is upbeat because of being a virgin. Virginity in this case is fundamental, not to the woman but to a man. Salmarie is happy that her husband is elated by the news and this implies that virginity is more useful to the man and women are only custodians of what men desire. Salmarie makes it known to us that Dino, her husband had sexual challenges but once he overcame them, "my virginity became my passport to his heart" (Odaga, 1995, p. 70). Cooper and Nylander (2010) argue that any female person without the experience of vaginal-penile heterosexual penetrative sex is a virgin. This is the case with Salmarie because she is at this point yet to engage any man in sexual vaginal intercourse.

Salmarie has thus preserved herself and upheld sexual sanctity for her future husband. Her case is well articulated by Molla *et al.*, (2008) who posit that virginity is maintained by both girls and boys for marital purposes. Salmarie has therefore kept herself pure because she wants to experience sex only after she has gotten married to Dino. She resonates with purity of marriage seen to be directed by high regard for the marriage institution. Kyalo (2012) opines that the traditional marriage system of entering into marital bliss when one has not engaged in sex gives the proper flavour for a stable marriage. This is thus Salmarie's notion because she wants to establish a healthy marriage with her husband. She takes her virginity seriously. Harrison (2008) argues for the place of virginity in the African societies by placing high social value on it, because virginity has a historical and material basis and derives from culturally embedded notions of respect. Salmarie resists early sexual escapades with Dino initially as she doesn't entertain the thoughts and really fate is on her side as Dino proceeds to the North Eastern part of Kenya for his postgraduate research and he becomes incommunicado for a long period of time. It is worth noting that they first engage in intimacy while in Sweden as a couple and Dino is indeed elated that he is the first man in her sexual life.

On another occasion, the marital woes between Salmarie and Dino escalate and they no longer feel the urge for sexual intimacy. But Dino, in his quest for sexual gratification is reported to at some point throwing lusty looks at Salmarie. Sex in this case is interpreted as a tool of oppression as explained by Salmarie who is candid in saying she “wasn’t going to fall into that trap” (Odaga, 1995, p. 84) and that she could do without sex. The woman’s body here is objectified and seen only as an object of pleasure for the man. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) postulate that women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others.

The ‘others’ in this case are men like Dino whose lustful looks at his wife are sexually suggestive and he wants her in bed to satisfy himself. He negates the individual self of his wife and at this specific time only sees her as a sex object. Bartky (1990) argues that sexual objectification occurs when a woman’s body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is primarily viewed as a physical object of male sexual desire. This is precisely how Dino views her wife’s body by cunningly luring her to bed.

The near- rape incident that would have been meted on Salmarie at the height of political elections presents yet another case of objectification of the female body. The rape alludes to the vagina as a man’s avenue for sexual gratification. Rape therefore is more male- centered as it entails pleasure for the man and pain for the woman. The vagina is thus used by men to access the inner part of the woman in order to subdue and conquer her. One of the abductors sent to kidnap Salmarie wishes not only to carry out the duty but also to rape her. Salmarie reports that “one of them had an ulterior motive, his own agenda! He was planning to rape me!” (Odaga, 1995, p. 108). Salmarie resists the planned rape by one of the goons by remaining studiously silent in her house without moving so that no attention is raised on her presence. Circumstances also favoured her because she had by sheer luck arrived earlier than usual, through a wicket at the back of her house. This trick threw her assailants off the track and they could not trace her. Out of this frustration they left the balcony of her house. Salmarie quickly wrote a fax message to her brother informing him of a car and three people who had been at her house. The brother came to fetch her and they painfully learned that the gate watchman had naively and unknowingly collaborated with her would- be kidnappers.

The woman’s body is further manifested as an avenue for male pleasure when, after a bruising political battle, Salmarie is advised by a female friend to welcome her husband to bed and celebrate her political victory. This is a warped way of thinking that has been engendered in the patriarchal society and has consequently been adopted even by females. In this way, sex is seen as a tension reducing tool and a mode of fostering marital reunion after tumultuous bitter marriage between Salmarie and her husband. The friend wants Salmarie to submit sexually to her husband. According to MacKinnon (1989), “men have been conditioned to find women’s subordination sexy, and women have been conditioned to find a particular male version of female sexuality as erotic – one in which they are defined from a male point of view” (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 140). Sexual intercourse would thus be an avenue for the man to access his wife’s innermost part to attain the long desired gratification that had been denied for so long a time. This is a warped patriarchal ideology that Salmarie almost succumbs to and she reminds her female friend that she is now a one man’s woman although she has now acquired a new lover—politics. She resists the trap by only reconciling with the husband as they retire to their matrimonial bed without any intimacy. Xu (2007) opines that gynocriticism came about as an opposition to Freudian Psychoanalysis view of male phallus supremacy. He says, “phallic prejudice itself creates a female consciousness that demands a critique, and that prejudice against the female incites the noesis that gets attributed to

the female.” (Xu,2007, p.3). It is on the background of such gynocritical stand that Odaga instigates Salmarie to resist intimacy at this level. In fact, the celebration belongs to her and therefore it would be preposterous for her to enjoy lovemaking with Dino when she has won over him in the political contest and this is where resistance comes in.

In *Between the Years* (1987), Ralo brings Apon, the protagonist of the novel a girl. This is part of the grand scheme by the society to have Apon start to seriously consider getting married. The society is worried that a man who has attained Western education can end up being useless if he does not get a woman by his side. While Apon’s interest is somewhere else: studying the society afresh, Ralo tells him to first relax and enjoy life. For Ralo, Apon worries too much for the society which he may not have much control over. Ralo says to Apon, “for the moment, you only need to relax and enjoy yourself. In order to make this possible, I have brought a special guest, a girl to entertain you. She’s waiting for you in your *simba*” (Odaga, 1987, p. 15).

Ralo thus has the typical idea that a woman should gratify a man sexually and it is appalling that the girl is not consulted to ascertain whether she is in agreement of the planned sex or not. The woman here is a sex object who must succumb to the whims of a man and lay there to satisfy him. The girl is expected to offer sexual services to quell the thirst of a man regardless of whether she herself is in need of sex. Ralo’s labelling of the girl as “a special guest” alludes to a sexist remark because she is only special in so far as sex matters are concerned. Ralo has only presented the girl, at least for this first time, for a conjugal visit to Apon. Ralo’s determination is also sexist considering the effort it takes him to present a girl for sexual intercourse. Ralo has completely objectified the girl.

This is supported by Nussbaum who defines objectification as “... the seeing and/or treating of someone as an object ... treating one thing as another: One is treating *as an object*, what really is not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 251). MacKinnon (1987) and Dworkin (2000) are concerned that patriarchal societies treat women as mere instruments for the purposes of men. MacKinnon (ibid) says that women “exist to the *end* of male pleasure” (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 173).

This *end* is what Ralo wants to achieve by presenting a girl to Apon for sexual gratification. Dworkin similarly observes that:

The whole world outside man himself is viewed as the object world ... Man uses objects – women, children, animals, sensate beings called objects as a matter of course – to fell his own power and presence...A man must function as the human centre of a chattel-oriented sensibility, surrounded by objects to be used so he can experience his own power and pleasure (Dworkin, 1989, p. 104)

Ralo then can be seen as exercising his masculine power over the girl by organizing a sexual spree in order to subdue her. To begin with, there is the question of distance. The girl is not from Apon’s immediate neighborhood and this portrays Ralo as a man who tasked his shoulders to ensure the girl is delivered to Apon’s *Simba*. Ralo stresses that, “I’ve fetched the girl from her home all the way across the river” (Odaga, 1987, p. 15) which in essence is his confirmation that the task took him a great effort. The other aspect of Ralo’s determination is the timing of his delivery. He brings the girl early in the morning ostensibly because of the fear of being seen with the youngest daughter of Mwalimu Musa on the village paths. The second reason is because it would be easier to sneak the girl into Apon’s *Simba* without Apon’s extended family having to witness. The handling of this scenario is a masculine stereotype because of the way the girl is treated as a sexual object for

male gratification. She at this instance passes as a passive character who is being remote- controlled by men. Chauvinism is more espoused by Ralo, nobody in the first place has requested him to deliver a girl for sexual services.

Indeed, Apon asks, "...what shall I do with her? You should have sought my opinion before you brought her along" (Odaga, 1987, p. 16) and then adds almost resignedly, "her coming is inopportune now since there are so many people who call in all day long to meet and talk to me" (Odaga, 1987, p. 16). This response irks Ralo who thinks Apon that is being irrational and even goes ahead to accuse Westernization for Apon's behaviour. Ralo hits back at the unenthusiastic reception he gets and speaks curtly to Apon, "I see some harm has been done to your outlook on our social ways. You have become a Whiteman" (Odaga, 1987, p. 17). Apon admits that he has lost touch with local women but Ralo retorts, "Do you mean to tell me you won't know what to do with a woman? Did the white man castrate you?" (Odaga, 1987, p. 17). With such utterances and from the patriarchal background that encourages premarital sex in his society, it is clear that Ralo is keen to have Apon sleep with Seruya, the girl he brought but Apon is hesitant. This pits the two men into two opposing camps which sets out Ralo as an outright pervert who only thinks women are only meant for sex even without their consent. Interestingly, Apon in this instance, though being himself a man, in some way opposes such a stereotype and tactically departs from the idea of having sex with Seruya.

On a flip side, Apon later on presents the same masculine projections to the women when he seems to enjoy the fact that he broke Seruya's virginity. He is delighted by this achievement which means it matters most to the man. Apon cements the patriarchal myth that Seruya is his personal property. It is then therefore, a deduction of logic that a man conquers the woman's body through sex. Apon has thus used his conquering of Seruya sexually as a way of silencing her and using that to control her. Almost enthusiastically, he tells Seruya that, "You couldn't deny I was the first man ever to go to bed with you last night" (Odaga, 1987, p. 144). Apon therefore uses the "last night's encounter to possess Seruya and just like an object, tells her, "You are mine" (Odaga, 1987, p. 144). This braggadocious tendency by Apon reduces Seruya's self-worth and "she began to weep. The man had trapped her and she had played easily into his hands. She felt confused and humiliated ... she felt depressed and hungry. She wept on (Odaga, 1987, p. 144).

Seruya's frustration can be explained by Kyalo (2012) who argues that sex before marriage is abhorred by the woman because it steals her virginity and destroys the future marriage. This is the realization that strikes Seruya after her premarital sex with Apon. She feels defrauded of her pride and this explains why she cries with a lot of bitterness. Apon on the other end portrays a sense of inflated hubris ostensibly because he is man and thinks he can wield power over the woman using sex. Apon is not concerned with remaining a virgin before marriage because male virginity matters less. Carpenter (2005) notes that women's virginity holds a greater social value than men's because it is perceived and portrayed as a gift given to the bridegroom on the wedding day. In this case, for Seruya, since she has already engaged in premarital sex, she can no longer gift her future husband her virginity because she will not be having one at the time of being officially married.

After her sexual escapade with Apon, Seruya wonders how her parents will view her. She is much aware how frustrated they will be to learn that she has already slept with a man who is not yet her husband. She is both a religious and cultural person and thus has high regard for virginity. Olson and Garcia-Moreno (2017) note that virginity is valued by almost all religious sectors and cultures of the world. Seruya's religion and culture is no exception and she feels disappointed at herself and

has to live with the guilt of failing her parents by not remaining morally upright. Naula, Owor and Gulere (2018) argue that a virgin bride is an honour to her parents and a prize to her husband. Seruya has lost both of these virtues and has now to live with a low self-esteem.

This section has analyzed the female body as an avenue for male gratification detailing how patriarchy has relegated the female body as an object for sexual pleasure. The selected novels have demonstrated the author's view against this misrepresentation through the characters of Salmarie and Seruya. Gynocriticism as a theory is of the opinion that objectification plays a central role in reducing women to what is referred as the sex class and this is the aim of our study that shows resistance to such kind of stereotypical representation. Asenath Odaga's view on objectification is derived from the main protagonists in the text, through Apon, who although is a male, Odaga resists all kinds of objectification for instance when Ralo insists that he must have intimacy with Seruya in *Between the Years* and Salmarie also in *Endless Road* resists another woman's advice that she must be intimate with Dino in order to celebrate her political victory. Corrigan (2013) in a review of *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar notes that their celebration of resistance of women writers and their heroines forms our depictions on objectification or sexual degradation of women and this is the idea behind gynocriticism, resistance to sexual oppression.

1.2. Patriarchy and 'otherization': The woman as the other

Andrade (1998) asserts that the basic concern of women's literature was "critiques of local patriarchies" and the creation of "domestic tale of women's emancipation from local patriarchy" (Andrade, 1998, p. 203). Otherness of gender has been portrayed in the two novels. The male characters are largely at the centre while the women are pushed to the periphery. It is the men who construct the identity of the women reducing them to lesser human beings. Men view themselves as the real human beings resulting into the binary construct of the self and the other. The role ascribed to women in the two texts is that of inferior duties such as cooking while the men are thought intelligent to handle serious societal issues such as political leadership. Staszak talks of otherization as:

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other) by stigmatizing a difference—a discrimination. To state it naively, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. Thus, biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness (Staszak, 2008, p. 2)

Of interest thus is 'otherness' of gender in the selected novels to decipher how masculinities portray the feminine gender and the counteractive discourse postulated by women to dismantle how they have been constructed.

McDowell (1992) argues that "the opposition of 'self' to 'other', and all those analogous to it, relate hierarchically and reproduce the more fundamental opposition between male and female" (McDowell, p. 59). On her part Beauvoir puts forth her well known thesis that man is the "Subject, he is the Absolute" while the woman she is "the Other" (Beauvoir, 1993, p. 15). However, Beauvoir is quick to qualify this statement not as hers but as a man's perspective of the woman to ensure that the woman subordinates to him and accepts herself as inferior. Beauvoir sums up that "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" (Beauvoir, 1993, p.15). This then becomes a man's deliberate attempt to otherize the woman and push her into the peripheries.

Gough (1975) opines that “even in hunting and gathering societies, it seems that women are always in some sense the ‘second sex’ with greater or lesser subordination to men” (Gough, 1975, p. 187). The supposition of being a ‘second sex’ is what Odaga’s female characters struggle to deconstruct in their quest to defeat the stereotypical views of the woman by man.

Patriarchy as a form of otherization sets in from the onset in Odaga’s *Endless Road* when Salmarie, the major female character in the novel encounters Dino. Their meeting has permeations of patriarchal inclinations whereby Dino seems to be overly assertive and dominant to Salmarie even when it is their first formal meeting. Salmarie narrates this first encounter thus:

As I emerged from the gate, I saw a dark blue saloon car approaching our home. And I chuckled to myself, wondering which one of my brothers or sisters had bought such a beautiful car. As I hurried along the narrow path running parallel to the rough country motorway, the car which was speeding towards our home, came to a stop so close to me, that it almost threw me off balance. I yelled and jumped into the grass along the road. And as you can imagine, I was furious with whoever the driver was (Odaga, 1995, p. 5).

The driver of the car was Dino. His manner of handling the automobile illustrates his egoistic masculinity and an inflated hubris. His behaviour can be understood as emanating from patriarchal leaning because he deliberately drives carelessly to scare a seemingly feeble woman, Salmarie. His virility is a show of his might and dominance over the feminine gender which he can treat any way he feels. Dino tries to cover up his recklessness by telling Salmarie that all that fiasco was a joke and Salmarie dismisses such an insinuation as joking “so dangerously with life!” (Odaga, 1995, p. 7). Salmarie is opposed to this form of self-entitlement by Dino who thinks that all the other road users are not aware of their rights as pedestrians and motorists. In this case Dino’s behavior otherizes Salmarie as weaker female being who is just reduced to a bystander. Salmarie resists this otherization by invoking traffic law that is against crazy motorists who exhibit madness and that they should not be allowed on the road.

In another example and in a wishful thinking, and due to Salmarie’s astuteness, her parents wish she were a boy just like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe wishes that Ezinma was a boy since he is so much endeared to masculine qualities. Such thoughts intimate to the position of the male child vis- a- vis the female one. Salmarie’s society is thus more appreciative of the male gender and Salmarie’s worth is reduced as she was “bound to get married and move away with her husband” (Odaga, 1995, p. 13). As such, girls are seen as having no role to play in taking care of their parents at their old age. This is otherization at play as the female person is pushed to peripheral roles of playing a wife while the boy child remains at the centre of the mainstream discourse and is tasked with roles that are deemed difficult and masculine. In order to counter this otherization Salmarie began to view herself with a lot of seriousness as someone in a vulnerable position since she had so many people much older than her whom she would have to look after in their old age. This made her responsible and caring. Almost every end of the month, she went home to visit her parents and to find out how they were doing. She also made sure she got in touch with her brothers and sisters and knew how each of them was doing.

In addition, Salmarie’s society is also swift to draw conclusion of her possible pregnancy simply because her marital customs are rushed with great speed. The woman’s body is thus constructed through patriarchal lenses and judged harshly if pregnant before marriage while the male body responsible for such pregnancy does not feature with such a sexist discourse. Salmarie reports that,

“people as usual gloated at me, seeking to ascertain whether or not I was pregnant; most girls get married hurriedly when they are pregnant” (Odaga, 1995, p. 23). The pressure is so much on Salmarie to be pregnant yet the society is so silent on Dino who is supposed to be responsible for such insinuations. Strangely we learn later that Dino has an affliction that interferes with his fertility. This is otherization at play. Salmarie’s mother opposes this act of otherization by answering back a relative who seems to poke her nose into Salmarie’s affairs. She calmly tells the relative to ask Salmarie herself since she was present and available to answer such questions. By doing so the query suffers a natural death.

Moreover, in Salmarie’s society, a woman to be married is seen as an object to be possessed by the husband. After the customary marital rituals, she makes it known that she was to be a “bride sent through the post, a parcel bride” (Odaga, 1995, p. 42) just like her mother before her. This by implication means that women are objectified and their worth downgraded to the standard of a parcel, an inanimate thing that relies on the sender and the recipient. Salmarie’s voice is muted here in terms of her decisions and just like her mother she is made into a commodity. However, this sort of otherization is countered when Salmarie says that unlike her mother before she had the advantage of having known Dino for a longer period than her mother had known her father. Her mother further buttresses her ideology of being a stronger woman by advising her that as an adult and a grown person, she should just learn to look at life objectively and take decisions some of which might be difficult to execute or stick to, in other words she had to be determined. From the elaborate conversation with her mother she got the courage, renewed strength and determination to go to Europe to marry Dino.

Furthermore, in a flashback narrative technique, Odaga is adequate in supplying us with the information of the dismay and shock visited upon by Salmarie’s mother when she went to join her husband in Tanzania as a young “postal bride” (Odaga, 1995, p. 42). The husband at that time kept another woman. Salmarie’s mother had a “rude shock one morning when she learnt that her new husband had another woman: A Tanzanian woman with whom he had two children...” (Odaga, 1995, p. 45). On her daughter’s further probe, Mrs. Moro sums up that “men have been known to use and dump women whenever it was their convenience” (Odaga, 1995, p. 47). This “polygamous” nature of her husband draws to the perception of men about women. Ryan and Jetha (2010) believe that a man is at liberty to have as many women as he wishes because in any case, they are equal to his any other material possession. Damaris resists this kind of arrangement because she has not been consulted. She objected by saying that she couldn’t stay as a second wife. She was not a scum to his guiles to have a harem. She was a Christian and so she requested for a ticket back home and she was ready to board a steamship leaving for Kenya. Apon in *Between the Years* engages in a relationship with Jane Mbura at the expense of his marriage to Seruya. Seruya resists this strange happening by retaliating in equal measure and she does this by rekindling her former love life with Tim who was her boyfriend while in college.

Equally important, in matter’s bride price, the woman is not directly entitled to whatever material possession is given to her family by her husband to be. Such possessions are treasures of her parents and other relatives. As is the case in Odaga’s *Endless Road*, Kadro, Salmarie’s brother is a beneficiary of his sister’s bride price and can be seen driving around a “new Mercedes Benz Dino had given them as part of my bride wealth” (Odaga, 1995, p. 53). This appears to be an atrocity to Salmarie since she is otherized and her input is ignored and her father takes cognisance of this by countering her frustration. He praises her by invoking the spirits of her grandmother Ajienda who

was said to be brave and an upright woman with a big heart for loving and that she never accepted defeat. Ajienda was said to be hardworking and as a result accumulated a lot of wealth in the form of cattle, sheep, goats and granaries and other crops.

In another angle, soon after Salmarie joins her husband in Europe, trouble begins the very same night. Dino is suspicious of his new wife and argues that “all women I have known have proved untrustworthy. Why should I think you are any better”? (Odaga, 1995, p.60) Dino’s statement is stereotypical because he has associated mistrust with all women and seems to borrow from the metanarrative of the garden of Eden where Eve, the symbol for all women is portrayed as callous and treacherous. Dino in a quick turn of events wants to cancel the marriage more to the chagrin of Salmarie who is left in utter disbelief. The attitude of Dino in this instance is that of masculinity where a man thinks he is the sole decision maker and a woman should take whatever decision made by a man without question. In his society therefore, women are only enactors of decisions and not team players in decision making circles.

Dino’s psychological construction of women can be perceived to emanate from his two previous intimate relationships with his two wives; the first wife, was a drug addict, and ran away on his wedding night. He reported her disappearance to the police and searched for her everywhere. After a fortnight, her decomposed body was found in one of her friend’s flat with a suicide note. His other wife, July, the Kenyan woman, was young and naïve. She married him, but kept on having affairs with her white boyfriends. He discovered this and asked for a divorce. These circumstances left his ego broken and “consequently he had developed a negative attitude towards life in general, but specifically towards women...” (Odaga, 1995, p. 65).

As a result of the above fore goings, infertility in Salmarie’s society is construed to be solely a female problem irrespective of Dino’s failure to rise to the occasion and therefore only a woman is blamed in case there are issues of barrenness in a family. Salmarie is however enthralled that fate is on her side as she bears Dino enough children and says that, “my people always blame childlessness on a wife. Most negative occurrences are blamed on a woman ever since the time of Adam and Eve!” (Odaga, 1995, p. 79). Naturally and through concerted efforts Salmarie circumvents this stereotype by being able to bring forth children into the family through traditional interventions.

Above all material possession is quite another matter that has been used by men in Salmarie’s society to push women to the margins. Salmarie herself owns a house that to an extent threatens the position of Dino, her husband. At the height of the bruising political battle, and in order to subdue Salmarie, Dino threatens to kick her out of the house. Although the house in question is legally Salmarie’s, Dino, simply because of being a man feels he has exclusive right over the house even when he did not purchase it. He intimidates Salmarie and warns her not to be autonomous simply because she owns a house. Salmarie, feeling completely intimidated tells us that “Dino was a man and as such he could twist matters and have me thrown out of this house. Most lawyers and those who made decisions on such issues were men ...” (Odaga, 1995, p. 95). In order to counter this masculine threat Salmarie invokes her constitutional rights of protection. She is going to get a lawyer to write to him to get a court injunction to deter and bar him from coming anywhere near her. She spells out her own conditions that she is to demand half of all that he possesses and she would be ruthless. It would be a total break and a total divorce: an irreversible decision. However, this does not come to reality since Dino does not proceed with his threat since he is humiliated at the polls and therefore he develops cold feet. Simone de Beavour (1949) sets the record straight by

observing that a woman must resist being treated as the “other”. She notes that a woman must resist all the so called privileges from the male gender at all costs. Beavour continues to say that women cannot grow through privileges from men and that they must chart their own way. She notes:

To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a party to the deal – this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste. Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance (Beavour,1949, p.4)

Asenath Odaga presents Salmarie as charting the way-forward by resorting to the law in order to protect her material possession. Her only protection is enshrined in the constitution of the country and this provides our own resistance to masculine oppression, that a woman must rely on the man to own property. Gynocriticism being a child of the wider feminism theory draws a lot from Virginia Woolf question in *A Room of One's Own* and second wave of feminism. She asks:

“What had our mothers been doing the that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo” (Woolf,1988, p.10).

The pertinent question that Asenath Odaga answer from the above quote is that her heroines must be proactive and be agents of change. They should own their possessions legally as they are living in a democratic society that observes human rights and this is what Salmarie does. This is resistance to masculine stereotype that women cannot own wealth. Pourgharib observes that... “Virginia Woolf argued that women’s experience could be the basis for transformative social change...” (Pourghaba,2008, p.54).

In the same manner Seruya in *Between the Years* (1987) is caught at crossroads when she cannot make an independent decision about her future academic path. Her father, Mwalimu Musa wants her to study medicine overseas whereas her passion is in the teaching profession. She is thus trapped in her father’s controlling masculinity. In her confession, she tells Apon that:

I’d like to study science subjects, but I must admit that at times I’m confused and unsure whether I should go abroad or not...You see, it’s all my father’s idea. He wants me to become a doctor. Maybe I’ll have to go to please him. (Odaga, 1987, p. 20)

While her passion is to become a teacher, Apisi thinks she has no choice but to please her father. Such a feminine resignation to a man’s whims is a confirmation that the woman here is otherized and her decision making voice muted. Eckstein posits that:

“in dichotomous configurations like speech/silence and centre/margins, speech is constructed as a male dominion while silence is assigned to the female, the central and livable space is reserved for man whereas woman is driven to the suffocating spacelessness of the margins” (Eckstein, 1997, p. 32).

Seruya’s voicelessness in matters concerning her career therefore “suffocates” her speech and she cannot talk her mind out in order to reason with her father who is an embodiment of male dominion. The dominant view by her father has to be executed at the expense of her wish. The woman has to do what a man wants and in so doing, forgo her own happiness, live in misery only

for the joy of a man. But Apon, who appears to be the voice of reason is quick to diffuse masculine stereotypes. He tells Apisi that:

If teaching is your choice, then you should go ahead and train as a teacher. You should not allow your father to force you into going against your wishes...This I have always felt is one of the mistakes parents make when they refuse to allow their children a free choice. (Odaga, 1987, p. 20)

Apon is indeed an intermediary to quell masculine extremism. He comes at the aid of women like Apisi to show them that they are just as equal to men and that they too can make their independent decisions and choose their own destiny. Apon therefore revamps the feminine quest for self-happiness and heightens the position of women in the society. At the end, Apisi defeats her father's masculinity by finding her way into the teaching profession. This is a way of subverting her father's pattern of thoughts and thus rebelling against the stereotype that she cannot make up her mind independently ostensibly because she is a woman. By subverting, the status quo, Apisi finally gets her much desired happiness in the teaching profession. In this way, "the subaltern categories break the silences imposed on them and retrieve their voice by formulating subversive signification system of their own, converting silence itself into a signifier" (Eckstein, 1996, p. 32).

On the same ground of decision making, Seruya is caught unawares by the customs which technically make her married to Apon. Seruya, it appears is tricked into marrying Apon through the cunning acts of her aunt, Angelina who deliberately leaves her at Apon's house promising to return to fetch her. Odaga informs us that:

Aunt Angelina didn't show up in the morning, but it was Seruya's turn to make a fuss. She demanded to be taken to her aunt's house. She wouldn't eat her breakfast. Apon grew weary of her insistence, watching her mischievously as he hungrily ate his breakfast, then he calmly dropped the pending bombshell. (Odaga, 1987, p. 143)

To her surprise, Apon tells her, "Let me put your mind at ease. You won't be returning to your aunt's house anymore, because according to our customs you became my wife last night" (Odaga, 1987, p. 143). This makes Seruya feel trapped and she protests to Apon thus, "You are joking. Nobody observes those archaic customs anymore. How many women have spent a night in this house and the following day walked away to their own places?" (Odaga, 1987, p. 143). This protestation shows Seruya's disdain for what she ostensibly terms as backward and retrogressive culture that only favours a man who makes a decision on behalf of a woman. She is not ready therefore to partake in a matrimony whose decision was made without her voice being heard. Although she succumbs to the marriage, we realize that her aunt, Angelina, wins the battle for her to be married due to the dictates of patriarchy in her society. Seruya in this instance goes against her aunt and Apon who connive to have her married without her consent by protesting.

The examples given above on otherization and the resistance from the main female characters, Salmarie and Seruya, only serve to achieve the main goal of gynocriticism which is to move women from the state of subordination to independence, from criticizing the other to criticizing the self and furthermore, contributing to the establishment and development of the female aesthetics; therefore, moving from the margin to the centre. Elaine Showalter refers to these sort of resistance to masculine stereotypes as unique experience that are common to women and not linear representation of male aspects from tradition. She observes:

The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the new visible world of female culture (Showalter, 1985, p. 131).

Asenath Odaga's representation of the female characters resisting the various forms of objectification in our case provides the platform for the female characters to free themselves from the linear absolutes of male literary of historical oppression in the society as it is seen in other literary works. When this is achieved in female writings then Showalter refers to it as the new free world.

4.1.3 Conclusion

This paper has examined the aspects of how the men view the woman's body as well as patriarchal otherization of the woman's self. The men push the female characters to the margins of the society in order to demean and reduce their worth. All this is in a bid for the male characters to assert themselves as dominant and powerful figures who wield power over the woman. While the woman is expected to submit to the male dominance, this paper has attempted to critic how the female characters subvert hegemonic masculinities and gender stereotypes.

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