

## A Historical Overview of the Representation of Female Characters in Children's Fiction in Kenya

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### **Abstract**

*Since independence, the Kenyan nation has undergone changes, which are a result of the various developments in the country. Within the premise that literature often mirrors the society, this paper examines the representation of female characters in Kenyan children's literature in selected texts published between the late 1960s and 2008. The analysis done is to determine whether the new spaces and signifiers of development available in the Kenyan nation, like learning institutions and upcoming urban centers, allow women any possible avenues to reinvent and liberate themselves from the traditional patriarchal space which accorded them subordinate roles. The findings demonstrate that despite the increased range of opportunities available to both sexes, gender role stereotypes are still prevalent in the Kenyan society and they still produce negative connotations. More campaigns on women empowerment are therefore needed which will in turn produce children's books that portray balanced gender roles.*

**Key words:** Kenya, children's fiction, female characters, representation, empowerment.

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of gender is one aspect of human society visible in children's books. Thus, notions regarding what are normal and acceptable behaviors for males and females may be reinforced through these books (Heather and Carmen 2011). Children therefore often imitate the readily-available behavioral models that are provided in the books they read. Most often, especially in African children's literature, these models of behavior are stereotyped. Ruterana (2012), for example, shows that most narratives for children in Rwanda have a tendency to represent gender inequality because of the patriarchal structure in Rwanda, which often assigns different roles and identities to males and females. Such representations are not unique to Rwanda but are common in many other African societies, and they have certainly continued to inhibit the possible ambitions that could be found within the female figure.

As early as 1979, Stinton suggested that the idea of older brother climbs a tree, while little sister admires from below should be scrapped from children's literature, because such ideas house harmful attitudes. Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) backs Stinton's argument by pointing out that children's books should be non-sexist so that they can help combat gender bias and therefore provide models that children can learn from. These suppositions suggest that children's books are channels that can be used to empower and give alternative roles and presentation of characters, other than stereotyped roles. Such books can provide an alternative outlook to the girl child and thus assist her to emancipate herself from the pigeonholed position females occupy, especially in many African societies.

This article is a chronological analysis of selected texts, based on the years of publication to gauge whether the developments that have taken place in the Kenyan society over the years have had any influence on the representation of the female character in children's texts. The discussion also hopes to assess whether these changes reflected in the children's texts empower female characters or not.

## **2. The Female Figure in African Culture and Literature**

Many traditional African cultures tended to relegate the woman to lower or subordinate levels because of patriarchal ideologies that often view women as supporting characters in the drama of life. Owomoyela (2001) posits that there are familiar traditional misogyny that engender subordination of women, like preference of male babies to female ones, the exchange of daughters as mere commodities for aggrandizement of their (male) parents and exclusion of female offspring from inheritance. Owomoyela further argues that exploitation of women continues even after marriage in that they act as suppliers of labor in a male dominated economy. In many African societies therefore, attempts by women to acquire power and wealth like men were regarded [by men] as "getting too far" (Obbo 1980, p. 144). More restrictive rules of morality are also often imposed on women compared to men even in contemporary situations.

In a discussion on gender issues in the South African political arena, McClintock (1995) argues that whilst the language of African National Congress (ANC) was inclusive, on the contrary its congress was exclusive and hierarchical and its executive positions were a male preserve. The wives of the male members were allowed to join the ANC as auxiliary members and the women were termed as providers of shelter and entertainment for the members and delegates. Women's work in the congress was therefore approved insofar as it served the male interests and did not threaten the male hierarchy. These observations show that even in societies where debates on female empowerment have existed for some time, women are still held within gender stereotypes of being servers of men.

Literary critics in Africa have extensively examined the place of women in adult literature in order to analyze their portrayal in texts. For instance, Ogunjide-Leslie identifies the representation of the female character in African literature as “the figure of the ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice” (1987, p. 6). She argues that this figure is often conflated with mother Africa, with eternal and abstract beauty and inspiration. The figure of beauty, she reiterates, is usually related to the woman as the passionate and sensual lover, a view that makes women feminine archetypes and objects of sexual desire for men. She shows that most often women are fixed by these stereotypes so that their attempts to transcend this position are questioned. Ogunjide-Leslie’s suppositions are supported by an anthropological study of East African women and their struggle for economic independence, done by Obbo where she argues that “women’s attempts to cope with situations they find themselves in are regarded as a ‘problem’ (by men) and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women’s roles” (1980, p. 143). Such notions that Obbo identifies, limit women’s ability and serve to silence them, making them invisible in circles that have been deemed “exclusive for men”.

Frank (1987) argues that many African novels which for a long time have been male authored define women characters by their relation to figures who hover on the fringes of the plot suckling infants, cooking and plaiting their hair. Other times, Frank shows, female characters in male authored novels fall in specific categories of female stereotypes of girlfriends, goodtime girls, workers or prostitutes. Due to such presentations, Frank posits that women must spurn patriarchy in all its guises and create a safe, sane and supportive world for women. Such stereotypes in male writing are used to confine women in positions where they only perform certain jobs, contributing to women’s invisibility. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*(1986) for example, we come across a masculine society in which women are accorded a very low status; they are subsidiary characters and their good deeds are not recognized. For instance, Okonkwo’s wives are just among his minor achievements. Even when Okonkwo’s daughter (Ezinma) portrays a sense of brightness, Okonkwo always wished she were a boy (see page 44; 45; 122). Thus when Okonkwo goes to exile, Ezinma has to follow her father’s strict orders of not accepting any suitor in Mbanta until they are back to Umuofia. This is in contrast to Okonkwo’s male child, Nwoye, who refuses to follow his father’s strict model of masculinity, and also rebels against the instructions to keep off the Whiteman’s religion. What we discover is that the culture ingrained in women’s minds had conditioned Ezinma to take orders without questions. According to Stratton, Ezinma submits to Okonkwo’s definition of gender, “taking on the role of the tractable, serviceable, and selfless daughter” (1994, p. 30), while Ekwefi (Ezinma’s mother) seems to be content with her condition as a battered woman, seen by her response to Okonkwo’s beatings, and his attempted murder. I agree with Stratton when she reiterates that in *Things Fall Apart*, women are silent in the face of their oppression under Igbo patriarchy because none of the women in this text attempts to rebel against the Igbo tradition, which is oppressive to women in many ways.

Other presentations of the female figure in African literature has been that of the prostitute who corrupts the society and breaks people’s homes; a presentation common in texts by African male writers like Cyprian Ekwensi and David Maillu to mention only two. Stratton (1994) contends that the prostitute metaphor has been used by these male writers to encode women as agents of moral corruption and contamination in the society. These writers, she says, have tended to represent the prostitute as a miserable and an exploited woman whose redemption can only come through her repatriation from her operation grounds in urban centers, back to the village where she belongs. Otherwise, the female figure is usually presented as a goddess who lures men to their death. Such a character is visible in AlechiAmadi’s *The Concubine*(1966), where Ihuoma’s first husband, the next suitor, and finally Ekwueme die because of their love for her. Amadi

provides a myth for these deaths by showing that Ihuoma was a wife of a god (the sea king) who had sworn vengeance on any man who would be attracted to her; making the woman's beauty to become something that men should be wary of.

The stereotyped representation of female characters especially by male writers in Africa has been seen by women writers and critics, as a misconception which should be corrected. Kenyan writer, Grace Ogot attempts to question gender stereotyping in African literature through her text, *The Graduate* where Juanina, a character in this text, says:

...no one should discriminate against girls and think that they should only take courses in home economics, nursing, nursery teaching and secretarial work; while boys are encouraged to study engineering, medicine, and architecture. .... Both boys and girls are needed to build a strong nation (1980, p. 7).

Ogot further acknowledges women's contribution in the Mau Mau liberation struggle by the way they carried food and ammunition to the fighters in the forest. In this text one notices the writer's awareness of the low status the female character occupies both in the society and in literature, and thus she uses characters like Juanina to question this status.

Gender stereotypes are however not exclusive to adult fiction but they are also visible in children's books as mentioned earlier. More specifically, female heroism was seen as not being interesting in Africa, and traditional African oral stories which were often told to children tended to represent women in lower status, or as being less heroic. According to Kenneth L. Donelson and Nilsen (1980), female heroism has been devalued ever since the emergence of hunting oral narratives. The two assert that whenever men returned from hunting they would narrate their adventures of killing dangerous animals to their wives and children. Consequently, these hunting stories ended up as heroic tales. Such tales were exclusively about masculine encounters, because women's role was to give birth, stay at home with their children, and provide an audience for men's stories. This heritage, the two scholars insist, has contributed to "the perception that the heroic adventure is an exclusively male territory, whereas women's activities are marginal and insignificant, with heroines being viewed as doing something unaccustomed of their sex" (1980, p. 285). Children's oral stories in Africa often followed this trajectory of glorying men and boys as heroes while girls and women were too docile to be heroic. Many African oral narratives therefore featured young men carrying out heroic deeds such as rescuing their sisters from giants and ogres or from other dangerous conditions. This characteristic of oral narratives was transferred to written children's fiction because many of these stories begin with the assumption that the hero is male. Lehr points out that the female hero in children's fantasy remains in constant conflict with images of arrogant destructive men (1995, p. 209). Lehr also notes that many children's texts tend to show that "the strong willed, intelligent, self-managing, disobedient female heroes are anomalies" (2001, p. 193). Repeated gender stereotyping written texts contribute to the submerging of women into bottomless pits where they can neither be fully heard nor recognized.

With the foregoing background, it is clear that gender stereotypes are visible in African traditional society, as well as in African adult fiction and African children's fiction. The next section examines whether the selected texts from Kenyan children's fiction suggest any form of empowerment or liberation from the traditional fix, or from the already established stereotyped literary tradition.

### 3. Representation Female Characters in the Selected Children's Texts

#### 3.1 The Early Days of Publishing in Kenya and the Role of the Female Character

The late 1960s in Kenya saw an increased publication of children's books by African writers. These were mainly a record of stories directly borrowed from the oral African tale. Odaga (1985) argues that there was need to write such books in order to diversify the kind of literature that African children were exposed to at school. This is because the earliest written literature for children in Kenya was in form of classics written by European writers for children with a Western upbringing (Odaga1985). One book that sought such diversification was Dahal's *The Orange Thieves* (1969) which is a collection of oral narratives. The first edition of this text was published in 1966 and it is one of the stories that give the book its title. In the story "The orange thieves" (pp. 43-51) five girls go to steal oranges from a farm and they agree to close their eyes as they picked the fruits. All the girls in the group conspire to open their eyes apart from one girl named Muthoni, who ends up picking unripe oranges. This forces her to go back to the farm to pick better oranges, to a rude encounter with Kimakia, the giant – the owner of the farm. The giant however decides not to eat Muthoni as she was too thin to be tasty. But worse still, he decides to make her his wife. When Kimakia brings home two newborn baby boys for food, Muthoni hides them out of sympathy and gives Kimakia two big rats for his supper. The two boys then grow up and kill Kimakia, thus rescuing Muthoni.

While stealing oranges by the girls in this narrative could be read as a bad example for young readers, we cannot fail to recognize the fact that the role of the female character is that of a worker as she is the one responsible for looking for food to feed their siblings in preparation for motherhood roles in future. This story, one could argue, reflects the practices of the specific society where it is drawn from. Obbo (1980) argues that in many East African societies, women were confined to the homes to look after children, cook, work in the fields and in addition, satisfy men's sexual needs, presenting the female as not only a worker but also as weaker. Thus when the girls in this story go off to look for food, they can only steal since they do not have the power to take forcefully, like men, or Kimakia the giant. This presentation of female characters lesser beings than male characters is further emphasized by the fact that Muthoni is saved by boys who are much younger than her.

The fear and risk of girls being eaten or married to giants is also evident in "Cutting the Giant King's Tooth" (pp. 1-7) in the same collection of stories, where giants disguise themselves as men in order to marry young girls. Marriage in these stories seem to be a kind of consumption comparable to real eating because the giants have the choice to either eat the girls or make them wives. The girls are also socialized to be subordinate and are conditioned that they must get married. And thus, when the giants turn themselves into young handsome men, all the girls fall for them, as seen in the story "The Moving House" (pp. 52 – 61). When narrated to children, such narratives served to entrench African patriarchal norms, which often disadvantaged women. Such a presentation calls on readers and critics to listen to Pearson and Pope (1981) who argue that the first task of the female [figure] is to slay dragons that oppress women, and that women must refuse to see themselves as the guilty or inadequate other. Such dragons the two show, are negative myths about women which are internalized through socialization and they result from patriarchal myths and institutions. Barak (1999) also posits that in order to overcome gender inequalities, one has to recognize the qualities that have been assigned to her as a woman by the other and then define one's collective and individual self by working through these qualities, for a binary opposition only exists because of the presence of the other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ndsu.edu/RRCWL/V1/Reading1.html>

Gender based social stratification is also visible in Benjamin Wegesa's *Captured by Raiders* which was first published in 1969. It is a narrative about Nanjala, an eight-year-old girl from the Bukusu community who is captured by Tondo raiders. Women in the two societies occupy a lower position as compared to men, as they are presented like property, to be raided together with animals. Women are also expected to stay at home and serve men. The suffering of women under patriarchy is emphasized by grandma's words to Nanjala that if she is not killed after the attack, she should "[f]ight for the women ... to enable them to throw off the burden they have carried all these years" (p. 15). The writer therefore acknowledges that he is writing within a set up where women are subordinated by the societal practices and he uses the character of Nanjala to suggest resistance to subordinating practices in African communities. Nanjala's resistance comes clear after she settles in Tondoland, when one day she discovers that the old men were planning to marry her off to an old chief as the 26<sup>th</sup> wife and she decides to escape. Although the author in *Captured by Raiders* is male, we can argue that he does not support the practice of having so many women satisfying the whims of a single man, and thus the text becomes a critique of such cultures in Africa. Such a text can also be read as helping young girls to critically examine some of the practices that subordinate women in Africa, especially looking at the time when the text was first published (1969) when patriarchy was still strong in Kenya. Nanjala's courage and Wit in *Captured by Raiders* helps reinforce the argument projected at the beginning of this paper that children's books should be non-sexist so that they can help combat gender bias and therefore provide models [like Nanjala] that children can learn from (Stinton 1979; Lesnik-Oberstein 1994).

### 3.2 The Female Character in Texts Published in Mid – 1980s to the 1990s

Like adult literature in Africa, children's literature in Kenya responded to the changes brought about by colonization in Africa. Such texts include Ngugiwa Thiong'o's two children's books *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* (1986a) and *Njamba Nene's Pistol* (1986b) which are set in the colonial period. In these texts, we discover that Ngugi is biased with reference to women's participation in the Mau Mau war because he focuses on male children, seen through the character of Njamba Nene whom he equips with so much courage that sometimes when he (Njamba Nene) speaks and acts, one doubts the ability of such a young character in children's fiction. For example, in *Njamba Nene's pistol*, Njamba Nene leads a section of people in a screening camp into rebelling against the colonial home guards and the white officers (see page 25-26), which portrays exceptional courage and wisdom from a child of his age. We notice in both *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* and *Njamba Nene's Pistol* that it is only Njamba Nene's mother [Wacu] who somewhat believes in the struggle, otherwise there are no other female characters in the two texts. In fact, all the school children that get lost in the forest in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* are male. While it is possible to have a school with only male children, Ngugi's gender bias is repeated in *Njamba Nene's Pistol* where still we have the female characters represented by mother Wacu. Women in this text are only visible at the screening camp (see illustration on page 19) and their voices are completely muted. Ali Mazrui (2000)<sup>2</sup> notes the absence of heroines in the African literary and political scene and argues that during the struggle against White minority rule [in Africa] most of the "unsung" super-heroes were often women who took great risks although their efforts were mostly unrecognized. In the *Style Magazine* published by the *Standard Newspaper* in Kenya, Wahome (2005) quotes Wambui Otieno-Mbugua who was herself a Mau Mau fighter, lamenting the invisibility of women who took part in the Mau Mau liberation struggle, where she said:

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<sup>2</sup>Daily Nation, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2000.



Women in Mau Mau did so much, yet hardly anything is said about them. I wish I was a teacher to teach all these.... You people read history, some of which is false. Have you ever heard of any woman who was arrested with the Kapenguria Six?<sup>3</sup>

Kapenguria six refers to the people who were arrested and tried at Kapenguria in Kenya after the state of emergency was declared in 1952. These were mainly leaders of the political movements that were formed to agitate for freedom and they included: Kenyatta, Kaggia, Fed Kubai, Kungu Karumba, Achieng Onyango and Paul Ngei. Wambui (quoted in *Style Magazine*) identifies Mama Nyoroka and Sarah Salai, who were arrested with the Kapenguria six, yet no one knows if such characters ever existed because it is only men's stories that were often privileged with regard to the exploits of the Mau Mau. Ngugi seems to have fallen into this trap of silencing women who fought in the Mau Mau war, which can be read not as a purposeful exclusion but as an ingrained masculine perspective which results to such unconscious narration, since the writer is forms part of the society. Having grown up in an African patriarchal culture, writers like Ngugi often tend to reproduce narrative patterns within the ideology that they have internalized.

The emergence of feminism which advocated for the liberation of the female figure from patriarchal tendencies and other forms of subordination in both the traditional and modern society, made literature one of the tools for suggesting these liberating paths. Children's literature in Kenya also started responding to such changes in the society through writing books that gave female characters a fairer representation. The Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) was becoming sensitive, especially on the way traditional oral narratives presented the girl child with poor role models. KOLA therefore started a project to re-write oral narratives aiming at revising the presentation of female characters in children's books. Although this project did not produce many texts, one such text is Isoka's (1995) *The Girl who became Chief*. It is a story of a small girl named Kadogo who manages to save the chief's daughter and the whole village from the troubles of Ang'ala, a notorious man-eating ogre, after all the men in the village are defeated. For this, Kadogo is made the village chief. Using wisdom from her mother, she lures the ogre with beer and afterwards she and the chief's daughter kill the beast. In this story women are represented as empowered beings because it is their wisdom that helps in killing Ang'ala. Although this is just a mere inversion of roles, such a revision of oral narratives for child readers is important in the contemporary society where the girl child must stand up to the contemporary dragons in the society.

### 3.3 The Female Character in Texts Published in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

While the project on empowerment of the girl child through powerful female characters was advertently planned, the truth on the ground was that many writers were still reflecting on their raw daily experiences, which reveal that women empowerment did not take place fully. For instance, Kenya experienced many changes in the 1980s and the 1990s, one of them being establishment of more towns and cities. Subsequently, the accompanying urban problems like prostitution, drunkenness, robbery with violence and disease came into the picture. In addition, evident in both the urban space and the rural areas in the twenty first century Kenya were other social evils like rape and tribal clashes due to the changing moral stance and outlook in life. These changes affected women more adversely than men and they were visible in adult literature as well as children's literature.

*Shida the Street Boy* by Makotsi (2003) is the story of a boy named Shida and it addresses the urban obsessions and fears of the modern city of Nairobi (Kurtz, 1998), including drunkenness, prostitution,

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<sup>3</sup><http://eastandard.net/mags/style/articles.php?articleid=25276>

homosexuality, street life/homelessness, crime, death, orphans and orphanages, and life in the slums. The text shows that despite the coming of modernity and campaigns on women empowerment, the city seems to be a source of more suffering for women. Shida's mother (Byuti) is sent away from home by her father after getting pregnant from a rape by her head teacher, which renders her homeless. She runs away to the city not only in a bid to escape from her father and village scrutiny but also to find peace. In the city she delivers her son and calls her ShidaKazuri, and subsequently joins prostitution to sustain their life. Byuti's father cuts a picture of strict disciplinarian who sticks to the patriarchal understanding of morality. The old man overlooks the fact that his daughter was raped by a man like him and prefers to instead blame Byuti. This narrative shows that despite the infiltration of modern thinking in Kenya, girls in many Kenyan communities are still treated like objects and they are only welcome in their homes in so far as they can adhere to the patriarchal strict moral code which does not give room for reason. Byuti in this story is a type that represents desperate cases of young school girls who get pregnant and their parents are unwilling to take them in. Like Byuti, many such girls are forced to leave school to fend for themselves and their bastard children which makes them even more desperate. This story is read as an example of the many rape cases that young girls experience without anybody attempting to understand why and how they got into such problems or at least, listen to their cases and judge them fairly. The writer in this text seems to question the extent to which women are empowered in the modern set up, at least for the Kenyan case. On the one hand, the school which should be a channel for women empowerment turns out to be a disadvantage to Byuti because the male figure (head teacher) fails to take responsibility as he sees the girl child as an object to satisfy his sexual desires. Byuti's father on the other hand uses his authority to intimidate her without taking time to understand the cause of her condition. Morality in the modern set up seems to be for women only because like in the traditional African society where men operated on a pedestal, modern men not only intimidate the female figure like Byuti's father does, but they also take advantage of them like the head teacher. Thus while consumption in traditional oral narratives like *The Orange Thieves* discussed earlier is in the form of real mulching by the ogre and through marriage, modern consumption is in the form of rape and prostitution as seen in *Shida the Street Boy*. There is no doubt that many women are empowered through access to modern education and protection by law in the modern society, but narratives like *Shida the Street Boy* show that development does not guarantee complete empowerment for the female figure because of modern challenges which continue to disadvantage females more than males.

Another text that is useful in assessing the place of the female figure in the twenty first century is *My Mother's Voice* by Kamundi (2008), published five years after *Shida the Street Boy*. Like Byuti discussed above, Kanana, the narrator in *My Mother's Voice* is raped when their village is attacked by thieves from a neighboring clan in the night who in addition raid all their animals. In both *Shida the Street Boy* and *My Mother's Voice*, the girl child seems to be in danger. Societal morals are declining and men seem to have lost their decency, often using force to satisfy their sexual emotions with young girls and spreading diseases like HIV/Aids to these innocent beings. Unlike in the traditional set up represented in *Captured by Raiders* discussed earlier, where women are raided together with animals, and taken care of by the same men who raid them, things seem to have changed in the twenty first century because women are no longer seen as property but as burdens or objects in the changing economic times. *My mother's Voice* is set within the context of displacement of people from their homes in Kenya after the 2007 national elections, where a lot of killing and raping of women took place. While a general percentage of the Kenyan population was affected by the resultant post-election violence, Kamundi's text shows that women suffered a double tragedy; that of displacement and rape. Human relations seem to be getting worse in the modern day Kenya and Kamundi uses characterization in children's literature to show how these changes affect women, which



he does through the character of Kanana who is raped. Like in the colonial times when the female figure faced a double disadvantage of being colonized and being the lesser person in patriarchal Africa, the modern transformations in the society seem to work to the disadvantage of the female figure.

#### 4. Conclusion

Women in traditional Kenyan society occupied a subordinate position as portrayed through the oral narratives adopted into the written form. Developments like the introduction of modern education, establishment of towns and cities allowed the female figure to get exposed to liberating avenues. However, there is evidence of continuous disadvantage experienced by the girl child which is linked to inheritance of norms from patriarchy and the fact that poverty, immorality and crime are on the rise in the Kenyan society. Thus despite the increased range of career opportunities and lifestyles available to both sexes, gender role stereotypes are still present and still produce negative connotations and consequences, especially for women. From the analysis done in this paper, it is evident that a lot need to be done to empower the girl child so that she can comfortably fit into the challenges of modern development. Such empowerment is what will produce fictional narratives that represent both the male and female characters fairly.

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