

Male Perspective of Women in Meja Mwangi's The Last Plague

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Abstract: This paper discusses the perspective of women in three Kenyan literary works over the first decade of this 21st century. In as much as we are in the twenty-first century and gender equality is a concept every society strives to achieve, what role do literary works play in propelling these societies to that end? Given that all writing is shaped by the environment of the narrative - the social environment, economic environment, cultural environment and even the developmental environment, the study assesses how these environments impact on the development of individual characters, especially the woman character who is our main concern in this study. All the works being analyzed were published within the first decade of the twenty-first century, to provide the standing on gender relations as depicted by the authors in their works of literature. The study is guided by Elaine Showalter's Feminist theory which argues that women authors are better placed to analyze female experiences and not male authors whose stereotypic views do not define the woman. This study employs correlational research method relying on library research of primary and secondary materials which included reading and analysis of previous and current materials such as books, journals, articles and magazines. The study relied on purposive sampling where three books were carefully selected after a wide reading of books published in the country. Descriptive analysis was done after a close reading of the selected texts with the intention of answering the questions raised.

Keywords: Cultural environment, developmental environment, economic environment, equality, gender, social environment, society, Women.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many societies' literary works, women are more often than not portrayed as supporting characters. Women characters portray strength but are still unable to overcome subtle oppression because limited roles assigned to them confine them to biological experience. These include child bearing and rearing, house chores and growing of minor crops that are seen as feminine crops. Political and economic achievements, interests and ambitions are left to the male characters. Major female characters in literary texts exhibit feminine characteristics occasionally, no matter how hard they try not to, given the fact that that is how they are socialized in life. Because of societal marginalization, women are bound by endless limitations imposed by societal norms and traditional roles subconsciously and unintentionally. While men are encouraged to exhibit strength and courage, women are confined to exhibit weakness.

The objective of this paper is to take a comparative look at the woman in traditional African community and the African woman in modern literature in order to bring out the extent male perspective of women has a great impact on the woman. This has been established after an analysis of the following Kenyan novels: *The Last Plague*

(MejaMwangi,2005), *Verdict of Death* (Ondukobw' Atebe, 2000) and *Blossoms of the Savannah* (Ole Kulet H. R, 2008) The study looks at the male perspective of women in the selected literary texts. Roles assigned are not only biologically determined but also the socialization of individuals within the family, education system and other socialization environments where that girls and boys are made to behave in a certain way and play certain roles in the community play a role. Society encourages them to live by the cultural norms or be punished. KimaniNjogu and Elizabeth Orchardson-Mazrui (2006:9) state that “the gender roles assigned to men and women are significantly defined-structurally and culturally in ways which create, reinforce and perpetuate relationships of male dominance and female subordination.”

Women characters are aware that patriarchy is responsible for their exclusion from mainstream society and they are fighting hard against this exclusion. With this scenario in mind, this study assesses the reaction of modern women to patriarchal power and its effect on gender relations in the selected novels. The critical analysis of the following selected texts: *The Last Plague* (MejaMwangi, 2005), *Verdict of Death* (Ondukobw' Atebe, 2000) and *Blossoms of the Savannah* (Ole Kulet H. R, 2008) alongside the various trends of feminism will examine whether the feminist movement has changed the way women behave in society and whether the male perspective of women has in anyway been influenced by the feminist movements.

According to Robyn Mcleod(1993) male writers depict women as mothers, wives or whores. In other cases they are depicted as 'good time girls'. They are given minor roles which do not bring them out as strong characters. Hardly do we see male authors glorifying the hardworking woman who has had to take over the roles of her husband. Mcleod's view is echoed in the presentation of the various characters in our selected texts and what the authors say about women. Because this study focuses on male authors, we examine Mcleod's argument alongside the characters in the selected texts.

2. WOMEN AS GOOD-TIME GIRLS

Fonchingong(2006) says that society is changing to the advantage of men. Women, he further says suffer because they continue being objects of admiration and vessels for satisfying men. This is seen in the *The Last Plague*, *The Verdict of Death* and *Blossoms of the Savannah* as the texts epitomize this in one way or another. In *The Verdict of Death*, the study agrees with Mcleod because of the behavior of women. This book looks at two types of good - time girls who are totally different but are rated the same because of the way they behave. Women who work with Morii are brought out as good - time girls.

These are girls one takes out and stays out late with, has sex with and goes for parties. According to Susan, Morii's wife, the women who come for parties hosted by Morii's colleagues for flimsy reasons come shamelessly flaunting their naked bodies as if to attract the attention of the leering men. Any woman seen to be more beautiful is looked at with envy and those poorly dressed are looked at with disgust. We further learn that these women are discussed alongside the various material acquisitions the men collect on their various trips and they brag about it. Susan says, “And in the same breath, the performance in bed of the latest catches who were no more than playthings themselves” (146). Although the women discussed here are employed, and independent the author brings them out as entertainers of men and this means that they are not taken seriously and neither are they respected. The women therefore expose themselves to ridicule from men and the society. The problem is that no one believes that women have a right just as men to have fun as it is argued by the liberal feminists such as Virginia Woolf (1981) in her book *A Room of One's Own*. She talks about the domination of women by men both socially and physically and it is because of this domination that women are unable to realize their creativity. Social constraints such as poverty fuelled by husbands who want to control their money hinder women's abilities to write good literature.

The second group of good - time girls the author talks about is of girls who are also good - time girls but of a different level. These are girls who are of low morals whose intention is to go out with men and apart from having a good time they also get money from the men. The women are dependent on these men for their daily upkeep. According to the novel these kinds of women push men to commit crimes. For example when Osuka is talking about Kyalo he says: “He was generous with money. So you can imagine what a darling he was with the women, most of whom were of low or questionable morals” (80). Osuka is easily recruited into a life of crime because he is introduced to Kyalo's expensive life which he enjoys and gets used to. Kyalo tells him that if he wants to continue to live this kind of life of drinking and sprees with women, he has to work for it and since he is jobless, he joins Kyalo in his criminal activities. His weakness

for good life propels him to a world of crime. Whatever the case, good time girls whether working or not are seen as a dangerous set of women who mess men's lives. Wives are however gauged differently as we shall see below.

In *The Verdict of Death*, a line is drawn between married women and good - time girls to bring out the difference between them. Wives are treated with more respect than the good - time girls. The author uses the voice of a married woman— Susan-- to criticize the good - time girls. Susan feels that, she does not fit in the parties held by her husband's workmates because of the way the women dress, talk and behave. This is confirmed by her husband, Morii, who although he attends these parties and enjoys them immensely, especially if he is in the company that he enjoys like that of Amina, he criticizes the behavior of his friends. The author, although appreciates well dressed women, he is critical of women who flaunt their sexuality to please men. To the men, this is a past time and the women are nothing to them but just girls to have a good time with. The writer also implies that society only notices negativity in a woman. For example, when she exposes her body she is picked out for criticism. The author also notes that wives, even if they are dependent on men, they are more respectable than working, good - time girls. It is stereotypical for one to believe that all women who cannot be respectable.

This can be compared to Fonchingong (2006) description of prostitution in Richard Nturu's poem "The Roses are Withering." He argues that "The society is morally debased and women take centre stage in perpetrating the vice: "At the Centre of every woman is a core of a prostitute" (148). Fonchingong is blaming women for this vice which is rampant in society.

In *The Verdict of Death*, the author critically looks at the behavior of both the male and the female characters. I would argue that he does not take sides but he is able to analyze his characters and point out their shortfalls and their strengths. We note that although he demonizes the good- time girls, he brings out the bad behavior of men who are seen as irresponsible people who waste their youth on frivolous things and have no purpose in life. The begging question is whether there is any difference between the men and women and if not why should women be treated differently. To the author, when people go out partying it is modern and acceptable and people should not be judged badly. He does not differ from MejaMwangi in this aspect as we shall see below.

In *The Last Plague* Uncle Mark and Musa imply that scantily dressed women are supposed to raise a man's spirit. For example when Uncle Mark realizes that his friend Musa is depressed, he tries to look for scantily dressed women in the magazines to show him with a hope of improving his mood. This is also seen when Uncle Mark tries to talk about the dangerous bank robber *WaGuka*, Musa is busy staring at pictures of barely dressed women in the papers as if what Uncle Mark is saying is not important. When captain Speed mentions 'Zanzibar' it excites Uncle Mark. We are told that: "It conjured up the image of bewitchingly attractive women, nubile beauties, with long, black hair and skin the color of dry cocoa beans, dancing under the coconut trees in the moonlight while the stars flared with jealousy" (412).

In *The Verdict of Death* Mutua also brings this out. In his description of Amina to us, he only presents the physical attributes. He starts assessing her from the legs up to the face. We are told; "He swallowed hard as he unashamedly gazed at the firm, ripe, well-formed breasts on her chest.

He observed that the bewitching pointed ends of her nipples proudly pushed against her brand neat white blouse as if crying out to be freed" (42). This observation of Amina on the first encounter is too intimate and not fair to Amina. He ogles at her till she feels disgusted and uncomfortable. A snake is associated with evil and Amina compares his stare to that of a snake. This aptly describes Mutua as we later learn. Comparatively we are given Morii's assessment of Amina and it is not as vulgar as Mutua's: "She was young, not a day over twenty, all beautiful and feminine: tall and curvy all soft and malleable, yet, with not an ounce of fat in her. She was the epitome of beauty—all that an air hostess ought to be" (142). Morii assesses her professionally and he uses polite language which is impersonal as he appreciates her beauty.

From the examples above we can say that to a large extent men see women as mere entertainment and sex objects. In *The Last Plague* Janet brings out her disapproval of such men who see women in this light. When commenting about Musa and Uncle Mark, Janet says that all they think about is how to get inside a woman's skirt and she proceeds to describe them as old lecherous men who have lived all their lives without women. She is disgusted by the fact that they still get excited by a nude female body despite their age. This also comes up in *The Verdict of Death* where we have men leering at women despite the fact that they are workmates. In so much as women dress badly and are seen to be loose, men are

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not spared. Their expectation of women is distastefully selfish. They push women to dress in such way as to satisfy their selfish desires without considering how the society at large will judge women. Women therefore are not near emancipation because their livelihood is still pegged on what men expect of them.

However in *Blossoms of the Savannah* being a culture oriented book, women are brought out differently. This is because in this text the men assess the looks of the girls and not the way they are dressed. The young women are presented as ornaments to be paraded around by their parents and later by their husbands. For example, at Oloisudori's request, Resian is ordered by her father to serve Oloisudori and his friends when they visit. She knows that her father despises her and therefore she is surprised when he forces her to serve his associate whom she has already expressed dislike about. This demand by Ole Kaelo is against the traditional norm as Resian tells us that while at her uncle's home she learnt that a girl child was protected from ogling men. Male guests were served by her aunts and young girls kept out of sight until after the guests had gone away. However in her home, her father goes against the norm for his own selfish gain. He exposes her to ogling men who gloat at her every time she enters the room as if to assess her worth and indeed when they leave the house they tell Oloisudori: "she is the catch of the year" (184). This is an appreciation of her looks and not the person she is. Later on when Oloisudori is told that Resian's ambition is to join the university, he is ready to enroll her after her circumcision as he says that; "It was going to be an added feather to his cap" (191). He is ready to take her to university not because it is a good thing for Resian but he will have a graduate as one of his wives and this will boost his status further.

From the above we can say that authors of the selected texts bring out the male appreciation of beautiful women, but in some cases their assessment of beauty is only skin deep. In this case the female intellect does not seem to matter. In fact what is first noted is a woman's looks before the men probe further. Intelligence is not essential in the case of Resian it is to enhance Oloisudori's self-esteem only.

3. WOMEN SEEN AS PROPERTY

Women and girls are seen as property that can be exploited by male members of the community and they are seen as items to be bought and sold especially to the highest bidder. Scott (2006) says that women were viewed as property within traditional societies which inhibited their freedom and self-determination. In African traditional society boys were valued because it is from them that the family lineage was perpetuated. The girls were only valued when it came to time for dowry. According to Scott, Emecheta argues that although bride price is compensation to the bride's family as reparation for the loss of a productive member, it is exploited by male members in the family.

This scenario is replicated in the selected texts despite the fact that they are books written in the twenty-first century. In the selected texts, men view women and girls as profitable ventures that can be disposed of when need arises. In *Blossoms of the Savannah* when Oloisudori comes to Kaelo's house, his assessment and demand of Resian is like wanting to buy sheep at the market. There is no emotional attachment to his demands since he sees the demand as relieving Ole Kaelo of one of his burdens. Resian feels demeaned by this and is further angered by the fact that her father Ole Kaelo has no qualms on using his daughters as bargaining chip in order to further his business deals. When Ole Kaelo is given a briefcase full of money, his greed surpasses his love and responsibility for his child whom he gives away to a man old enough to be her father. It does not matter what the daughter wants. According to him, he has done Resian a favor by getting her a rich man as a husband.

To most men in the three novels, women are easily accessible especially if they are assured of financial security. This is important because in a patriarchal set up it is the responsibility of the man to look after his wives. That is why in *Blossoms of the Savannah* Oloisudori thinks that by building Resian a well-furnished palace of a house and bringing her expensive gifts is enough to endear her to him. When her father and mother visit Oloisudori and witness the extent of his wealth, they are very impressed and imagine that Resian is very lucky that Oloisudori wants to marry her. Ole Kaelo understands the security of money and does not see the importance of love and that is why he sees it as his responsibility to force Resian to marry Oloisudori. Ole Kaelo feels that it is only a foolish woman who rejects such wealth.

These sentiments are expressed in *The Last Plague* by chief Chupa who tells Janet that he is not poor and can look after her. The stereotypical imagination that woman cannot reject a man who is financially secure is faulted by Janet who is not attracted to chief Chupa or to his property. However he believes that one day he will get Janet no matter how long it takes.

At some point when he realizes that he is not making any headway, he insults her and tells her that she is too old to be wanted by anyone else but him. According to him Janet will suffer the repercussion of rejecting him since her wellbeing depends on him because, as a chief he can make her lose her job. Here the male ego is brought out very well by the author.

Mutua in *The Verdict of Death* exemplifies this when he goes after Amina. He sees her as someone who is shallow and who can be won by material things. When Amina talks about not having a cell phone, he imagines she is indirectly asking for one and therefore when Amina refuses to take one Mutua has bought for her he finds this strange. He expects her to happily fall in his arms with excitement. When he buys her a car he imagines that she will accept his proposal and everything he wants her to do. He even conjures images of what he will do with her once she is his. His description of what he would do is all sexual. The author shows Mutua as somebody who does not really value Amina as a person but an ornament he can use. Mutua's ego does not allow him to accept that Amina is in love with someone else. Even as women are portrayed as the weaker sex, Mutua's reaction brings him out as a weak person who cannot accept defeat. Comparatively Morii's description differs from Mutua's maybe because he has had a chance to interact with Amina and he is genuinely in love with her. Mutua's desperation is brought out when he implicates Morii in a crime he never committed.

In African cultures once dowry has been paid, a woman is owned by a man. In *The Last Plague* this is brought out by Grandmother, who believes that once dowry has been paid for a woman, she is the property of a man and she must stay with her husband. Therefore when Janet tells her to talk to Julie to leave her husband because he wants to marry the wife of his late brother who died of AIDS, Grandmother reminds her that "She is his wife.... Bought and paid for completely. No one can ask her to leave her husband" (55). This is tantamount to living with a time bomb because the woman has been bought. Janet goes through the same thing when Broker comes back to Crossroads. Grandmother reminds her that it is her responsibility to look after Broker; it does not matter that he abandoned the family for ten years. What matters is the fact that she is his wife and she has to welcome him back. The author is critical of this tradition that binds a woman to a man despite the repercussions. Towards the end of the text, after Julie takes an HIV test, she realizes that she has been given a second chance and decides to abstain from sex with a husband who has refused to be tested.

The author of *The Verdict of Death* believes that dowry paid by a man should not subjugate a woman. Morii pays dowry for his two wives Susan and Amina but treats them with a lot of respect. For example, when he wants to marry another wife, he talks to Susan about his intention to marry Amin before entering into mutual agreement with Amina, after which he goes to speak with Amina's parents. This is unlike Oloisudori in *Blossoms of the Savannah* who does not consult his wives when he wants to marry another woman and neither does he seek Resian's consent when he wants to marry her. Oloisudori does not woo Resian but he demands for her hand in marriage. The author is critical of men like Oloisudori who want to suppress women's independence. Resian's show of independence and final success is an indicator of the author's feelings.

From the above we can say that even though these three novels which are set in modern times, women are still looked down upon by men who find it difficult to imagine that women have the ability to be independent. The female characters fight hard against attempts by men to subject them to oppression because of their economic ability. Because of their search for independence from men, the women face a lot of ridicule and even rejection from the society. This is further expressed by the authors of the selected texts as we shall see below.

4. WOMEN AS THE WEAKER SEX

African tradition dictates that a man takes care of his family and provides for the family's every need and it is believed that women are dependents of men therefore on their own they cannot amount to anything. The men are expected to protect and fend for their wives and children while the women have a responsibility to bring up the children and teach them good morals. Therefore a man who fails to do so is usually despised by society. That is why McLeod (1993) says that women are depicted as wives or whores by male authors.

According to Etyang (2011) women are more often than not rescued from deceitful animals like the ogre by men because they are the weaker sex while men have the mental and physical strength. This is also brought out by Elaine Showalter (2006) who says that women who did male things were frowned at. For example, she says that Olive Schreiner "although

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lionized in London after the publication of her book *African Farm*, the men who valued her ideas could not love or desire her as a partner” (384). We therefore see that men liked her ideas however, because of these same ideas; they were uncomfortable with her as a partner. This can also be seen in the selected texts where women are portrayed as people who cannot carry out masculine duties and any woman seen trying to do so is despised by both men and women.

The Last Plague brings this out very well in its portrayal of Janet who goes against the norm when, after being abandoned by her husband, she focuses on the struggles to take care of her children and her grandmother. She takes on the fight against AIDS, a job her grandmother thinks belongs to men and the chief feels it is a useless job because no one uses the condoms Janet is distributing. She is laughed at and ridiculed by men who are thankful that they married real women who do not go against tradition. Many times she is arrested and accused of teaching young children about sex. Her grandmother feels that what she is doing is not a woman’s job and she advises Janet to get married and stop doing a man’s job. This argument by grandmother is proved right when Broker comes along and sells the condoms instead of giving them out free. It shows that people would rather buy condoms from a man than get them free from a woman. We are further informed that men who were too shy to take condoms from Janet were buying them from Big Youth who was a pupil in a nearby school and sometimes Janet’s assistant. Janet also admits that she has enlisted the assistance of Frank in talking to Kata and distributing condoms because he is a man and he will be listened to more than her. Chief Chupa tells Janet that “without me you cannot succeed. You will fail completely. You will never succeed” (78).

When Janet is given a bicycle to help her in her work, the men accuse her of being shameless because she is riding a manly machine—the bicycle. Even the chief believes that a woman should not drive a car or own one unless it is bought by her husband because cars are a prerogative of men. When Broker takes off with a prostitute, Janet goes to work at her father’s petrol station. Unfortunately her father does not appreciate her efforts because she is a woman and this job is for men. The society therefore tries to draw a line between male jobs and female jobs. Women are supposed to take care of homes and children and that is why when Grandmother thinks that Janet is concentrating too much on fighting AIDS she reminds her of her responsibility to her children. However she does not reprimand Broker although he had neglected his family for ten years.

In the same breath *The Last Plague* explains why women are forced to pick up male roles. To the writer, men have neglected their responsibilities; he shows men as idlers and escapists who do not want any form of responsibility while women are portrayed as hard working people. The contrast between men and women brought out by the novel helps boost the image of women. For example, while Janet struggles with boxes full of condoms, Musa and Uncle Mark play cards at the hotel. When Broker realizes that life is tough and he cannot cater for his family, he runs away with a prostitute and leaves his wife Janet, to bear the burden of taking care of the family. He only comes back when he is rich although he is sick and unable to enjoy the money he has made. Nobody knows how he made his money. It is because of this that Janet concludes that there are no men worth talking about in Crossroads.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah* Kaelo, having stayed in Nakuru which is cosmopolitan, one would expect him to soften on some traditional beliefs. However he comes out as a traditional man who believes that there are some jobs which are not to be done by women. His daughter Taiyo, who is interested in music as a career, is selected to go to Mombasa for a music extravaganza by an FM station which had been following her music development. Her father refuses to let her go saying that this was a short step to harlotry. To him it is demeaning for a daughter of his to perform in public for financial gain. This is very stereotypical of African men who are selective over what they think women should do or not do and in the process destroy women’s ambitions. The fact that women are dependent on men is also brought out when Mama Milanoi tells us that she expected her husband to take care of her and her daughters. So, when their vehicle breaks down while they are relocating to the village, she and her daughters stand aside as her husband takes charge of everything. This dependency syndrome does not sit well with Resian who has an independent mind and does not agree with her father who wishes that she be submissive because an independence of mind is not something encouraged in women as tradition dictates that they should be subservient to their fathers and husbands.

Although *Blossoms of the Savannah* brings out the importance of a man in a woman’s life the novel still faults the actions of Ole kaelo when he fails to protect his family when they have placed so much faith in him. Mama Milanoi’s over dependency on male protection does not prepare her for what happens to her family. She discovers too late that she has

been living in a sense of false security because her husband exposes her children to greedy old men like Oloisudori who destroy her children. Although Mama Milanoi cannot do much because tradition demands that the man is the head of the family, to some extent the author blames her for what happens to her daughters. Although Taiyo and Resian agree that their mother is in awe of their father, they blame her for what has befallen them and they conclude that they do not want to be the type of wife their mother is. They are not going to be subservient to men.

In *The Verdict of Death* the society argues that it is the responsibility of the man to go out and earn a living for the family. The men have very limited regard for working women because they feel that a working woman will neglect her responsibility as a mother and wife. It follows therefore that when Susan suggests that she should look for a job to supplement Morii's salary, Morii declines and asks her to stay at home and look after the children. When Morii is imprisoned Susan despairs because she now does not know what she is going to do without him. She has been made so dependent on Morii that she does not think of what to do. It takes an independent woman, Amina, to step in and guide her on what she should do. The author's views differ from the societal practice. He faults the idea of men being the sole bread winners because this makes it difficult for women to take up responsibility when there is a problem in the family.

5. MEN'S PERCEPTION OF STRONG WOMEN.

According to Muriungiand Muruki(2013) women who are seen to help solve problems are seen as a problem by men. Onyango-Oboo (1980) argues in her paper that when women attempt to cope with situations they are seen as betraying tradition and as a result their ability is limited and they are silenced and made invisible in the male dominated world. Mcleod (1993) also brings this out in his paper. He notes that colonialists did not believe in women being as strong as men therefore they introduced a governing structure that excluded women from power.

In *The Last Plague* there are those people who fear Janet because of her aggressiveness. They give her derogative names such as 'condom woman'. In some cases women run away from her because they do not want to be told the truth. Janet says that; "Julia was always in a hurry whenever she came to visit and Janet suspected she avoided her for the same reasons other women did- so as not to hear any truth about herself" (52). Women avoided her not because they did not like her but because of what she stood for in society. Men on the other hand look at her as inadequate as a woman. The author notes that "Men, total men, gave the gathering a wide berth and went about their business, shaking their heads and boasting how glad they are because they have married real women and fathered real women, not shameless rabble-rousers like Janet"(127). To them they preferred women who quietly carried out their traditional roles. Uncle Mark supports this statement later when he says that many men loved and hated Janet because in her they beheld the most problematic women in their lives.

Because of society's disapproval of her and her job, Janet is not very sure that she has done her best in whatever the government had entrusted her with. Her lack of confidence stems from the fact that she has been ridiculed so much by society and she is also aware that almost all condoms given end up in the toilet without being used. The worst is that people are still dying in great numbers. This is a possible sign that she has not impacted much on the local community. Her lack of confidence in herself is very destructive because in the end she lets men take credit for what she has done either to please them or she feels helpless.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah* women who live according to the demands of society are appreciated and accepted. Likewise any woman who does not do what society expects of her is hated and called names, and young girls are usually advised not to follow in her footsteps. For example Ole Kaelo's first appreciation of his wife concentrates on her feminine physical appearance not what she says or does. He describes to us his first glimpse of her. When Ole Kaelo holds a party for his fellow clansmen, Mama Milanoi goes out of her way to impress upon the people of her position in the home. Her recognition is in relation to her ability to work hard in the homestead not anywhere else. She on her part seems to feel satisfied for this fulfills her role as a wife. The author does not bring her out as somebody ambitious therefore we are not surprised when she fails to protect her daughters against cultural onslaught and help them fulfill their ambitions of going to university.

In so much as the author appreciates and approves of the work done by Minik in saving the young girls from circumcision, cultural demands of a woman's roles outdo his approval. For example Taiyo and Resian see Minik as their role model. Their aspiration is to help her in her crusade against female circumcision. However during the homecoming

party, the oldest man in Nasila abuses and curses Minik: “Do not listen to crusaders of an alien culture that is being perpetrated by a certain *Entangoroi*(wasp) called *Emakererei*. The wasp advocates that we maintain *intoiyenemengalana* amongst our daughters. *Taha!* May she go down with the setting sun!” (53). Minik’s education does not mean much to the people of Nasila; however, outside the village she is respected and honored for her education and her ability to manage a massive sheep farm at a tender age of thirty. In so much as the author sees the good being done by Minik, the culture of Nasila is too overpowering and as a result Minik’s work can hardly be appreciated and accepted by people of Nasila.

Blossoms of the Savannah makes a comparison between men and women in order to highlight women’s abilities. For example, when under pressure men take shortcuts at the expense of their families. When Ole Kaelo is exposed to Oloisudori’s wealth he gets excited and is ready to sacrifice his daughter. On the other hand Resian, his daughter behaves better than him. Resian is not taken in by Oloisudori’s wealth like Kaelo; in fact, she returns all the gifts given to her by Oloisudori. She knows what she wants and goes to every length to achieve it. The author shows Resian’s determination to overcome the demands of tradition.

In *The Verdict of Death* there is a comparison between the working women and the house wives. While Susan is portrayed as a respectable woman who does not approve of women flaunting their sexuality, the working girls are brought out as having loose morals, go to parties organized by their fellow workmates and generally behave badly. In fact, it is known that the same men they hung out with do not think them as marriage material. On one hand they encourage girls to dress badly and enjoy having them at parties yet they have no respect for these girls. Their Ideal woman is one that is like Susan.

Just like in *The Last Plague* and in *Blossoms of the Savannah* in *The Verdict of Death* there is a comparison between the relationship Morii has with Mutua and the relationship that Susan has with Amina. Mutua forgets the fact that Morii at one time saved him from losing his job because he realizes that Amina, the woman he is after, is in love with Morii. He implicates Morii who is later imprisoned. Matua therefore does not understand how Susan can get solace from a woman who has taken her husband. He has this misconception that Susan should have the kind of jealousy he has and destroy Amina.

From this analysis we note that the authors present the fact that even though women have specific roles to carry out which they are not supposed to deviate from, once in a while they are forced to do so out of necessity. For example Janet and Amina are forced to take responsibilities which are considered not theirs but are forced to carry them out for the survival of their families. However in the case of Janet her actions are received with mixed reactions as seen above. The authors advocate for breaking up of these boundaries so that people are free to choose what they want to do without restrictions.

6. IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION

African people upheld their traditions very much therefore anyone going against tradition was looked at with a lot of scorn and he was disowned by the community. All the three novels bring out the importance of traditions to the characters in the texts. In *Blossoms of the Savannah* Masaai culture was strictly followed by the people of Nasila. Female circumcision was a tradition upheld by the Masaai to an extent that a woman who was not circumcised was derided and would not get a husband. For example, Joseph Parmaut is attracted to Taiyo and he has an option of running away with her. However he rejects her love because he is too embedded in his culture and he is not ready to marry a woman who is not circumcised as per tradition and also a woman who sneers at their tradition. Taiyo’s rejection stems from the fact that she, by her education and her upbringing, does not adhere to traditions of the Masaai.

When the family moves to Nasila Mama Milanoi worries about what will happen to her uncircumcised daughters. True enough the girls are abused and they are nearly raped because of their uncircumcised status. The man who mishandles them and later tries to rape them says: “What women!” “Soon, you will be able to differentiate decent women from *intoiyenemengalana*” [Uncircumcised woman] (19). According to the man, decency is determined by circumcision. That is also the reason Oloisudori says that Resian should be circumcised before he marries her. Minik is rejected by her people and called derogatory names because she has made it her mission to rescue all young girls from circumcision. She is cursed by the elders of the community and called a ‘wasp’. When Oloisudori goes after Ole Kealo’s daughters, he tells Minik: “You are nothing but a mendacious spinster who has lost a chance to get married and now masquerades as a

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crusader against the so called F.G.M” (288). Minik was circumcised but she is hated because of her crusade against female circumcision.

In *The Last Plague* the author also brings out the fact that a woman who does not follow tradition is not looked at favorably. However, Broker seems not to mind the women who work in the bar who could have infected him with AIDS. For example Broker decides to live in squalor so that people can hate Janet for neglecting him. People look at the state Broker lives in and yet he is a sick man and they blame Janet yet they forget that it is Broker who had abandoned Janet and the children and ran away with a barmaid. Her grandmother castigates her for chasing him away instead of welcoming and cooking for him yet Broker only comes back when he is sick and abandoned by the many women who had helped him squander his health and wealth. We are told that: “He had come back to his conscience. To settle scores with his own demons. Janet and Frank had nothing to do with that” (328). On the other hand the author seems to praise the barmaid Atieno for diligently buying condoms to use. In fact, we are told that she was the one who kept the condom shop alive. However her precaution measures come in too late when she has already contracted the virus. Prostitution though not a traditional practice, the author seems saddened who feels that she does not deserve this after trying so hard.

In *Verdict of Death* the author brings out some of the girls as being independent. However as seen in Amina, even though a woman has job security, she must have a man in order to be somebody in society. A traditional woman was expected to be married and be looked after by a man. Independence of a woman was unheard of. Society judges a woman not by her job security but as per a woman’s role in society. Although the author seems to agree that a woman needs a man to validate her, he brings out the fact that job security is also important. When Morii is sent to jail it is Amina who volunteers to help take care of his family. It is also evident in the text that although Morii had told his wife to look after his children as he provides for them, he is attracted to Amina a working and independent girl. When he first gets to socialize with her, he is attracted to her regardless of whether he is married or not. His attraction to somebody totally different from his wife makes us wonder whether he regrets his earlier idea on roles of a woman or whether he just wants a good and subservient wife as well as a girl who is working and independent.

The authors of the three novels have little regard for women they think are greedy who are out to grab what men have and go away. These kinds of women are alien to the African culture which dictated that women should be submissive and good wives. In *The Last Plague* Broker aptly describes these kinds of women. While requesting Frank to oversee his projects when he will not be there to do it himself, he says that he does not want Janet to have to fight over his corpse. He says: “I would hate to think that all my sweat and labor will end up in the hands of the numerous vultures poised to claim it” (382). Broker further tells us the women he squandered his wealth and health with decamped when they realized that he was sick and dying but they will not mind coming to claim his wealth once he is dead. This brings out women as uncaring, unfeeling and greedy. They are only interested on cashing in someone’s misery.

In *Blossoms of the Savannah* Ole Kaelo says that it is only women who can choose whether to be poor or rich by the marriage choices they make. Traditionally a woman is supposed to be looked after by a man. It was therefore prudent that a girl gets married to a man who can look after her. When Ole Kaelo sees the wealth in Oloisudori’s house he says that his daughter should be grateful to get married into so much wealth: “And it was only a stupid woman, like his daughter Resian would probably be, who would turn down the offer to own the riches they saw in Oloisudori’s home” (192). Ole Kaelo implies that to a woman wealth should be more important than anything else. It does not matter that Oloisudori is much older than Resian or that she does not love him. However the doubt expressed in this sentence by the author implies that women are changing and they do not believe that they have to get married to a rich man. To the author, Oloisudori’s wealth excites Ole Kaelo more than the daughter but Ole Kaelo tries to justify himself by saying it is to his daughters advantage.

In *Verdict of Death* the author contrasts Amina with the women of low morals who associate with Kyalo. Unlike Amina who cannot take expensive gifts, the good - time girls are interested in a good time, alcohol and men. By doing this the novel is trying to dispel the notion that all women are necessarily interested in free things and money. His portrayal of Amina brings this out well. Mutua who has an interest in Amina has an imagination that expensive gifts will steer Amina straight into his arms. Unfortunately Amina does not like and trust him so she refuses his gifts to his surprise. He does not understand why she still rejects him despite his expensive gestures.

The authors despite their insistence on a traditional woman, they have respect for hardworking women who have proved their worth in society. However they do it with reservations considering society’s expectations of women. However in the

Last Plague, the author appreciates a hardworking woman. Musa and Uncle Mark find Janet so hardworking and independent that when Frank helps her load the condoms onto her bicycle, they are surprised that she never needs help. Both teachers Faro and Paulo respect her for the work she does. They feel protective of her because they knew what she went through when Broker abandoned her. So when Broker comes back, they are apprehensive that he might hurt her again. They make it a point to warn him and her that she should not go through what she went through when Broker first left her. Broker also admits to her that she has done a good job taking care of the family. This is an appreciation of the effort Janet has made for the community and her family considering that she is a woman in a patriarchal society and it greatly boosts her image. The author shows her as someone who has gone against societal norms and succeeded.

The author's portrayal of men in the text tends to build Janet's character. While Janet is brought out as someone willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of the society, men are brought out as selfish people who only think of themselves. Broker in trying to explain himself to Janet, tells her that he had lived in societies where people only thought of themselves and as a result he had learnt to look out for himself and not the community. These were people who even sold contaminated food to their people without batting an eyelid because they were more interested in wealth than family. He finishes by saying: "And all these things were done overtly, blatantly and without fear, shame or remorse, by husbands, and brothers; all of them men who claimed to be lovers of children and fearers of God" (227-228).

Janet's capacity to deal with pain and deprivation impresses Frank who does not understand how she withstands all this without going mad or screaming. Janet says that although women go through a lot they cannot give up because they are women and mothers. On the other hand, men are brought out as people who cannot put up with a lot of pressure. While Janet is ridiculed, avoided and rejected for trying to save the society but does not give up, Frank tells Janet that he wishes he had not come back to Crossroads. She says that: "Crossroads men do it all the time. All the time, and in droves, the men run away from the nightmares; rushed away from the horrors that were of their own making, and leave women to persevere alone and to tend to the land and to keep the home-fires burning. And to suffer and die alone with the children" (91). Janet understands the fact that men cannot take a lot of pressure and she does not blame them for it.

7. CONCLUSION

Though the authors of the three Kenyan novels are writing in the twenty-first century, we see from the above discussion that their work is heavily influenced by traditional definition of the roles of both men and women. Women are seen in some instance as good - time girls who like going out and having fun. To the male characters in these novels such women are not marriage material but they can be ornaments to be admired. In some instances women are seen as items to be owned by men because they are paid for dowry. For example when Oloisudori goes to demand for Resian's hand in marriage he assess her as if it is an animal he wants to buy. This chapter also brings out the fact that women are the weaker sex, to be looked after and controlled by men. That is why when Resian is betrothed to Oloisudori, Mama Milanoi feels helpless because she is not able to rescue her daughter as she cannot go against her husband and tradition.

It therefore follows that men do not seem to be comfortable with aggressive women like Janet in *The Last Plague*, Amina in *The Verdict of Death* and Resian in *Blossoms of the Savannah* because they go against traditional norms. The men treat these women's achievements with a lot of caution to the extent that they down play them. In some instances they are referred to by using derogatory names. For example, in *Blossoms of the Savannah* Minikis referred to as the 'wasp' while in *The Last Plague* Janet is seen as a prostitute. However the authors of the three novels bring out the fact that although women are expected to be subservient to men, they are quickly fighting their way out of this bondage.

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