

NEGOTIATING GENDER IDENTITY AND AUTHORITY IN THE PLAYS OF PENINA MUHANDO AND ARI KATINI MWACHOFI

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When there is no vision, the people perish
(Rose Brewer & Lisa Albrecht)¹

Mwavita: Mimi dada, wanaume karibu ya
wote nawaona wana uhayawani. Lakini
nafikiri wako wachache, wachache sana,
ambao macho yao ya wazi wanauona na
kuuheshimu utu wa kike²

What are the visions of gender identity that emerge in contemporary Swahili women's writing? How are gender relations negotiated? How are the attendant notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' defined? How does gender identity implicate issues of power, agency and authority? These and other questions I intend to discuss for three plays by Tanzanian and Kenyan women authors: *Heshima Yangu* (1974) and *Nguzo Mama* (1982) by Penina Muhando and *Mama Ee* (1987) by Ari Katini Mwachofi

The theoretical focus of my analyses is stimulated by the interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist theory, cultural studies, and narrative poetics on narrative identity, in particular literary configurations of gender identities and relations. This collaboration proceeds from the premise that any verbal or performative expression of identity already intertwines narrative and identity by representing an individual subjectivity, a 'life story' (see for example Liebllich & Josselson 1984). Narratives are a way 'of making sense' out of seemingly incoherent experiences, and even the lived life is a 'storied life' (Ochberg 1984), a telling or performance of a story

Beyond this general assumption, narrative imaginations of gender are dialectically related to contextual gender configurations in several ways. The socio-political interests informing gender representations are revealed in attempts to revise gender imaginations and the movements that oppose those attempts (Brinkman 1996; Schipper 1987; Ogundipe-Leslie 1987). Whoever produces and controls a society's repertoire of fictional images can gear them to support his or her intentions, for instance, to legitimize or to criticize the status quo. Thus, many literary critics, among them Mineke Schipper (1987), Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) and Irène d'Almeida (1994), have encouraged African women writers to reappropriate fictional discourses by reflecting on society from their perspectives as women.

1 Quoted in Susan Friedman 1995:40

2 Ari Katini Mwachofi 1987:87

Furthermore, both contextual and textual expressions of gender relations tend to emphasize a moral crisis at the core of East African gender identities³. Phrased in terms of violence, indifference, and immorality, moral crises are always associated with cultural change. Social change, in turn, is linked to images of past and present, traditions and modernity, town and countryside. This emphasis on recurrent images and representations, oscillating between the proverbial 'good and bad girls'⁴, further accentuates the interdependence of textual and contextual gender articulations. Both literary and social discourses tend to conflate 'nature' and 'culture', 'female' and 'feminine' in the psychological and social construction of 'woman'. Women's qualities are perceived as innate, not socially acquired traits. 'Femininity' imposes patterns of sexuality and behaviour through cultural norms. But since these cultural standards are ascribed on the basis of biological sex, they often equate 'feminine' with 'natural' (Moi 1989). Such a conflation of 'femaleness' and 'femininity' serves to perpetuate patriarchal ideologies. If women are 'naturally' 'modest', 'reserved' and 'yielding' and not culturally conditioned to perform according to these qualities, then attempts at social change can easily be discredited as attempts to change 'natural' conditions.

Several narratological approaches have explored the text-context nexus from a feminist angle. I will limit myself to a brief discussion of Rachel Blau du Plessis (1985) and Susan Lanser (1991, 1992) whose theoretical concerns guide my readings. In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of 20th Century Women Writers* (1985), Rachel Blau Du Plessis interrogates the interrelation of social and narrative scripts, both patterned on culturally conditioned, ideologically accepted conventions. Modified cultural scripts and attendant gender roles are reflected in changing literary representations. "Writing beyond the ending" of conventional narrative scripts reflects changes in cultural conditions and often focuses on major sites of struggle. 'Marriage', for example, features as the prominent 'site of struggle' in the fiction of 19th century British women writers. Works by Maria Edgeworth or Jane Austen tried to envision alternatives to the conventional 'romance plot' that prescribed marriage as the only desirable social status for female characters (see also Julie Shaffer 1993). In their critique of the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women, these transgressive narrative strategies require a writer's awareness of her marginality; they suggest spaces beyond patriarchal control and outside the conventional normative and narrative expectations.

Susan Lanser's (1991, 1992) concern with narrative voice pursues similar questions. She argues that 'narrative agency' is defined by the social, economic, and political conditions of its production, and hence by power relations. Discursive authority - i.e., the intellectual and ideological validity claimed by a work, an author, a narrator, a character - is predominately constituted by the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to the dominant social power. Consequently, women authors

³ See for example Brinkman (1996), Grosz-Ngate & Kokole (1997), Mikell (1997), Stratton (1994), Nnaemeka (1997), Wachtel (1977). However, the connection between gender relations, cultural change and moral crises is not only postulated for the East African context but is perceived for many different cultural locations (cf. Egejeru & Katrak 1997).

⁴ For a detailed exploration of stereotypical female portraiture in East African and Kenyan literature respectively see, for example, Wachtel (1977), Stratton (1994) and Krüger (1998).

who 'write beyond the ending' of established literary plots, whose 'counternarratives' do not affirm dominant ideologies, have to find alternate modes to authorize their narrative voice. However, Susan Lanser also acknowledges that criticism of hegemonic discourses is not confined to female authors⁵.

My own reading of *Heshima Yangu*, *Nguzo Mama* and *Mama Ee* does not proceed from the premise that women's writing can simply be equated with feminist writing. The fallacious equation of 'female' and 'feminist' is based on the assumption that the mere description of "experience typical of women is a feminist act" (Moi 1989:120) when instead any fictional portrayal of women's experiences can also perpetuate and condone relations of power and domination. I furthermore do not agree with essentialist positions that insist that there is an 'authentic female experience' pertaining to a monolithic and fixed identity defined as 'woman' (Gayatri Spivak (1988) and others have drawn attention to the process by which the heterogeneity of gendered experience is erased to establish a single 'authentic' experience as an obligatory prism of socio-political experience).

Carole Boyce Davies (1994) has specifically addressed the question of how black women's identities are mediated in their creative works. She argues that the multidimensionality of each individual identity negates monolithic social and textual constructions that claim to represent 'African womanhood'. Instead she emphasizes that the different aspects of one's identity configure dynamically in relation to geographical and social positionality. However, migratory subjects who exist in multiple locations reassert the linguistic sign as a site of struggle over semantic and social authority. As they try to reassert their identity outside dominant discourses, they expose the reliance of authoritarian speech on fixed inscriptions of identity and power to further its political interests. In their emphasis on the interdependence of language, identity and power, social and literary discourses often become 'minefields' for renegotiating gender (and race) relations.

The central concept of Carole Boyce Davies' theoretical approach - migratory subjectivity - has been prominently foregrounded in recent feminist studies. Susan Friedman (1995), bell hooks (1989), Gayatri Spivak (1988), to name only a few, have emphasized the notion of 'relational identity' in their research on gender relations and norms and have viewed gender identity as a dynamic negotiation of social norms and political affiliations. Deborah King (1988) has also referred to the 'multiple jeopardies' of black women's lives, so as to emphasize that discrimination takes on additional ramifications for women of colour based on their multiple allegiances to racial, ethnic, national and other social groups⁶.

The concern with 'relational identity' is further stimulated by recent developments in cultural and anthropological studies which go beyond static definitions of culture as a bound, independent entity and instead perceive culture as an "open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and

⁵ For example, in the 1950s and 1960s African authors of both sexes criticized Eurocentric misrepresentations of African cultures.

⁶ However, 'multiple jeopardies' are not an exclusive experience for black women but affect the life of any person operating within multiple social and political networks.

outsiders, of diverse factions" (Clifford 1988:46) 'Culture' becomes discursive practice, a site of actively negotiated global processes which allows for multiple articulations of gender at the nexus of local and global developments. Instead of a biological fact, gender emerges as "a traveling sort of trope" (Grosz-Ngate & Kokole 1997:199)

Focusing on the plays of Penina Muhando and Ari Katini Mwachofi, I am interested in further pursuing the questions initially raised by Lanser's and du Plessis' theories within the context of dialogic definitions of culture and identity. What fictions of gendered identity and authority emerge in the plays?

With regard to 'fictions of identity', I will discuss the following questions: How are gender relations and identities imaginatively expressed in the plays? How does identity implicate issues of power, agency and knowledge? Does gender identity configure as relational identity, i.e., defined within a network of diverse social affiliations, norms and interests? How is social authority (or the lack thereof) aligned with discursive authority? How is gender identity connoted with conformist and/or transgressive social behaviour?

With respect to 'fictions of authority', I will focus on: What narrative strategies are employed to inscribe gender relations? How is a character's speech qualified and/or disqualified by a superior narrative agency? What relationship exists between the public and private speech of characters? How are potential counternarratives mediated by characters and narrators legitimized?

Heshima Yangu (1974, 1968¹) by Penina Muhando is a short, seemingly straightforward play about a highly respected elderly village chief, Mzee Isa, who fears for his reputation when his daughter, Rukia, becomes romantically involved with Salum, a poor man and an illegitimate child. Salum, however, is Mzee Isa's own illegitimate son. Since Isa has never publicly acknowledged the paternity, he tries to prevent the marriage without revealing the true reason for his objection. The heroine, Salum's mother (Mama Salum), distinguishes herself by her courageous efforts to resolve the situation in a responsible and dignified manner. But she remains without a supportive social network, reflecting her marginalized status as a single mother. Interrogating the notion of 'honour' in its gender-specific implications, the play privileges the female voice: Mama Salum becomes the voice of moral but not (yet) social authority. This gradual subversion of patriarchal discursive practices alludes to a potential loss of social authority, and hence enunciates the interdependence of language, identity and power.

The double standards by which society judges men and women are pervasive. Social practice and gender ideologies absolve men from guilt and responsibility in sexual relations, while women are readily condemned for any deviance from established sexual codes (Balisidya 1985). 'Morality' and 'honour' are culturally encoded. Thus Rukia exclaims: "Unasahau kuwa sisi ni wa-Bantu" (7) when her sister tries to assure her that illegitimacy is not attached with social stigma. More importantly, 'honour' and 'morality' acquire definite gender- and class-specific overtones: the lexical usage of terms signalling inappropriate and immoral behaviour (*mwasherati* = adulterer, *mwana Haramu* =

illegitimate child) is reserved for those lacking socio-economic assets and political control - women and/or the poor

Their position of power and privilege enables men to use cultural concepts to their advantage. Throughout the play Mzee Isa manipulates the notion of 'honour' to camouflage his responsibility. Early in the play he emphasizes that his honour is tarnished by even the prospect of his daughter marrying a *mwana haramu*:

Mzee Isa: [] Walahi, Rukia mwanangu, unavuka mpaka kabisa. Yaani natarajia kuwa siku moja nitakuja kuarifiwa kuwa unatake kuolewa na Salum! Salum! Salum, mwana haramu yule! Huku ni kutaka kunivunja heshima yangu

[] Hata kidogo siwezi kumwoza binti yangu kijana namna hii (9).

Implied in his words is the assumption that his daughter represents a socio-economic asset to him, so that a marriage beneath her station lowers his own reputation, and, more importantly, reflects negatively on his loss of control over her. He quickly disqualifies Rukia's explanations and reasoning as *upuzi* (nonsense), *kubwata* (to speak nonsense), and *wazimu* (madness). Any independent opinion she might have is interpreted as showing contempt for his parental authority (10). Thus, he effectively silences her dissent, which implies a contestation of power, with reference to traditional values and modes of behaviour. Later he further authorizes and authenticates his demands by equating 'heshima yangu' with 'heshima za desturi':

Mzee Isa: Eheeee! Unalionga dogo? Vijana wa siku hizi ni vichaa tupu. Hawajui tena heshima za desturi zetu. Lakini usinikosee mimi ukadhania ni kijana kama wewe [] Siwezi kuvunjiwa heshima yangu (14)

This equation of individual and cultural honour becomes a powerful argument that legitimizes his interests in the name of tradition and culture and hence invests his individual voice with a collective authority. He also employs the grammatical passive to refer to his social status: "Sikiliza, Mama Salum, mimi ni mzee ninayeheshimiwa sana, []" (17). Such a wording endows his individual judgement with further authority by presenting him as the recipient of status and prestige through social consensus.

Mzee Isa also exploits his position of power to further dishonour the mother of his illegitimate son. Since hers is already a liminal social position, cultural codes allow him to silence her and to prioritize his honour over her dishonour. In the encounter with his son he exemplifies a similar authoritarian, if not verbally abusive attitude. He insults Salum as a *mwana haramu* who should not dare to speak in the presence of elders nor should he socialize with those of higher station (13). In general, Mzee Isa's rhetoric and demeanour indicate how the control of social discourses serves to the advantage of those in power, and hence perpetuates established gender relations and identities.

For women, the conflation of biological, discursive and social identity has extreme social repercussions. As cultural constructions are transformed into natural attributes, men are perceived as being 'naturally' endowed with 'honour' while women have to prove their honourable status to society. This deliberate confusion between culturally defined notions of 'femininity' and biologically

given 'femaleness' sanctions existing cultural practices and institutions. Women's sexuality connotes danger and hence necessitates male control to prevent society from slipping into chaos and degeneration⁷ Consequently, any female expression of sexuality without male approval through 'single mothers' and 'runaway daughters' is phrased in terms of moral decay and chaos to camouflage the underlying contestation of social and political power.

Heshima Yangu envisions gender inequity in a broader socio-economic context involving the process of socialization and transmission of values to the next generation. Rukia is acutely aware that her choices are curtailed by the absolute authority of her father, that the *sheria*, i.e., religious and ethnic laws, privileges male control in the choice of a spouse or the negotiation of *mahari* (9). Mama Salum suffers from the double stigma attached to single motherhood and poverty. In her case, gender and class affiliations converge to ensure her dual marginalization. Privileged by the law in regards to ownership and inheritance, economic relations are predominately controlled by men. They have access to the monetary economy and regulate the exchange of economic goods, for example through negotiating the *mahari*.

But the portrayal of gender roles in *Heshima Yangu* remains ambiguous. Traditional gender roles are opposed by a subtext of female resilience, courage, aggression, strength and resourcefulness which allows for multiple dramatic strategies to authorize the counternarratives of female characters. On the representational level, women remain in their traditional roles. Salam's mother seems to have accepted her subordinate social position and exclusively bears the shame and guilt for the illegitimate child. In their traditional roles, women appear as mothers (procreation), wives (reproduction), and daughters; as labour source and reproducers, they need to be carefully 'controlled', and seem trapped in strict gender codes. But these traditional images are used to criticize the inequality and discrimination experienced by women. Thus, on the discursive level, the play foregrounds an implicit and explicit discussion of gender roles and identities which allows for alternative images of women and even alternate enactments of gender roles. For example, the caring and honest conversation between Rukia and Salum envisions gender relations as a dialogue between equals (13).

Throughout the play, the question of 'honour', as a vital concept for encoding definitions of masculinity and femininity, has been interrogated by female characters and exposed as serving definite political and ideological purposes. Two leading female characters, Rukia and Mama Salum, occupy instrumental roles in decoding the rhetorical strategies of patriarchal ideology. Rukia defies her father's authority throughout the play, in particular when she meets with Salum without her father's permission and leaves a scene before her father can reprimand her. Early in the play, Rukia's reactions to her father's authoritarian silencing of her have been outspoken. However, her dissent initially has been confined to private speech. Only when he has left the house does she

⁷ Inge Brinkman's (1996) research on gender imaginations in Kenyan oral and written narratives foregrounds the interdependence between gender politics and sexuality. In the narratives she analyzed women's sexuality is always represented as needing (self-)discipline. Men, to become fully responsible social and political actors, must learn to control these potential dangers of female sexuality.

appropriate his words through irony and open criticism, 'rewriting' his speech to reveal the self-serving connotations of his arguments:

Rukia: (Anasogea mbali na nyumba, anawaza kwa huzuni)

'Heshima yangu, Heshima yangu' (kimya kwa muda) Ni heshima gani ipatikanayo katika kumkatalia furaha kijana mzuri, mwenye tabia nzuri na moyo wa imani, eti kwa sababu ni mwana haramu (10)

She becomes an even more radical voice of dissent and criticism when she prioritizes personal happiness over social and legal customs, having realized that these customs only serve a small élite of men: "Sherehe za harusi ni heshima kuliko furaha ya maisha ya binadamu asiye na kosa. [] Hivyo hizi heshima ni za wazee tu?" (10) Her defiance climaxes in an open and public confrontation with her father in which she asserts her verbal and social authority: "Sitaki kuyasikia maneno hayo tena, Baba. (Anapotea)" (13) As she physically removes herself from a scenario which has previously resulted in her silencing, she signals a newly found social autonomy in a space that is - quite literally - off stage, beyond the visible orbit of patriarchal control.

In the second part of the play, this gradual establishment of alternate discourses is carried even further in Mama Salum's explicit and public accusation of the 'dishonoured father'. Her anger that her social stigmatization is deemed acceptable while his reputation is 'above blame', her ridicule of his hypocrisy and double moral standards culminates in verbally assertive, even aggressive behaviour. The anger and ridicule defining her demeanour is explicitly detailed in the stage directions (*kwa hasira, anacheke* 17/18). When confronted with Mzee Isa's demands to protect his reputation, she declares that

Miaka yote hii nimeishi kwenye aibu ya kuwa na mtoto asiye na baba. Heshima yangu ulivunja wewe zamani sasa. Sasa sielewi kwa nini unataka mimi nikusaidie kusitiri heshima yako. Yaangalie wewe mwenyewe (18)

She reclaims the legitimacy of her status and the validity of her side of the story, revealing the hypocritical foundations of his seemingly infallible ethics. She restores her own agency when she emphasizes her intentions to prevent further pain and suffering for those marginalized by the prevalent cultural script by publicly announcing Mzee Isa's paternity (18). Admonishing him for his self-righteous hypocrisy camouflaged as honour, she reinvents her own voice as one of moral authority that is superior to his lies: "Hukuijua maana ya heshima toka mwanzo wala hujui sasa na sioni kwa nini ujidanganye wewe pamoja na watu wengine kuwa una heshima ya kujivunia" (19). Her behaviour signifies a temporary upstaging of established gender relations and identities. The play concludes with her angry declaration, her transformation into a public speaker as she announces Mzee Isa's paternity to Salum and Rukia. *Heshima Yangu* prominently foregrounds the process by which women reclaim discursive agency but the play remains silent on the possibility of permanently transforming the underlying social codes.

Nguzo mama (1982), the second play by Penina Muhando I intend to discuss, revolves around the central motif of the Mother Pillar, a metaphor for peace and unity, but also for the pivotal role women play in society. Like the central pillar for every house, so are women the foundation of society in their dual function as providers on a familial and national level. The fallen pillar symbolizes that neither women nor society in general can prosper if women are mistreated and marginalized. Interweaving gender and national concerns, the play illustrates that "NGUZO MAMA ina faida kwa wote" (58)

The eight female characters, whose efforts to uplift the fallen pillar define the dramatic action, represent six economic professions: farming, commerce, politics, academics, prostitution, clerics. Together they constitute a kaleidoscope of different economic and social backgrounds, a broad spectrum of national experiences. Their representational character is further underlined by the fact that they remain nameless throughout the play, merely typified as Bi Moja, Bi Pili, etc. Regardless of their social and economic affiliations, however, similar themes resurface in the story of each character. Their gender identity subjects them to identical experiences of discrimination and oppression. Refracted and hence amplified through a host of female voices, gender inequity emerges as a dominant characteristic of Tanzanian society.

If the Mother Pillar is ever to be uplifted, i.e., if society is ever going to change, women have to maximize their strength and energy through collaboration. This imperative of unity is acknowledged by Bi Nane whose efforts to lift the pillar single-handedly remain futile:

Bi Nane: [anavuta peke yake. Anaimba wimbo wa kazi. Anavuta lakini wapi]
Hizi nguvu zangu napoteza bure (44)

Bi Msimulizi, the female storyteller who comments on the dramatic action periodically and of whom the characters remain unaware, summarizes the central dilemma faced by the women:

Bi Msimulizi: [] Jamani umoja ni nguvu
Utengano ni udhaifu
Twendeni sote pamoja
Nguzo Mama kuisimamisha
Kwa nguvu zetu wenyewe
Hata kwa jasho la damu (33)

In the end, the women seem to fail in their efforts to rebuild the familial and national house because they lack the necessary unity and solidarity. But this lack of cooperation is explained by their precarious social position, in particular the 'multiple jeopardies' from which they suffer (King 1988). As mothers, as wives, traders, and peasants, their obligations multiply while their access to resources is strictly limited. To an alarming degree they have also internalized the socially conditioned images of themselves as facts, have accepted their own inferiority as an unsurmountable obstacle. Thus, external and internal pressures interact in their defeat.

The constant struggle for authority and leadership among the women is essential for their failure. Thus, the individual schemes they devise to uplift the pillar cannot result in social improvement.

Instead of unanimous action, each plan provokes only selfish bickering: Bi Nane's suggestion to multiply their physical strength with a rope (12), Bi Pili's and Bi Moja's intention to improve their financial situation through beer brewing (14) and cloth selling (17), and finally Bi Nne's attempt at political lobbying are all destined to fail. Mistrust, pessimism and selfishness negate the possibility of finding a consensus. Repeatedly, the women are frustrated because of the multiple social roles and obligations they have to juggle. Continually called away from the task of uplifting the mother pillar to look after their children, cook for their husbands and cultivate the fields, their loyalties can only be divided. Social and economic expectations by far exceed the abilities of any single woman:

Bi Msimulizi: Hayo maisha Bi Pili aliyaona machungu
 Aliomba muujiza utokee
 Mikono mingi ajipatie
 Tena mikono mirefu sana
 Kumwezesha kufanya yoe yaliyomkabili (37)

But the women have also internalized images of inferiority and inadequacy which effectively neutralize their potential opposition and resistance. Bi Pili acquiesces to her husband who physically and verbally abuses her when he wants to obtain money from her (15). Bi Sita's only vision to improve her economic condition is to prostitute her body, which causes further strife and tension within the group (38). Bi Nne and Bi Nane fight over the control of political interest groups, and hence remain unaware that they are both manipulated by the *mwenyekiti*, the highest (male) political authority. Time after time, tension among the women erupts into horizontal violence, negating any attempt to uplift the *Nguzo Mama* and thus reestablishing the patriarchal authority responsible for such antagonistic gender relations.

Thus, women accommodate to the existing gender relations because of their economic dependence and political impotence, because of cultural norms and legal standards. External factors further reinforce the internal social divisions that make them prioritize their own needs over those of the group. Petty interests like clothes and social gatherings, professional obligations designed to improve their social status and their many duties as mothers and peasants impede any attempt at social activism. Although acutely aware of their predicament, they are still unable to overcome fragmentation. That this factionalism is passed on to the next generation is illustrated in the scenes with the little girl. Twice she appears in the play (9; 55), each time she is caught between different voices that call her into opposite directions. Unable to decide which voice to follow or how to honour them simultaneously, she exits the stage from where she has entered. Her circular movements signify suspension and stasis. She remains a silent figure, lost in her own moral and emotional confusion: "Msichana hajui la kufanya, hajui atokee wapi. Anajaribu kutoka kwenye jukwaa kutumia milango yote ya kukwaa mwisho anarudia upande alioingilia" (10). Her bewilderment contributes to the sober mood of the play. Emphasizing the lack of unity and understanding among women, *Nguzo Mama* foregrounds images of struggle over those of intergenerational defiance and resistance prevalent in *Heshima Yangu*.

Further social commentary is provided by the character of the artist, Chizi, who appears in Act 3 and Act 4. An eloquent advocate for the rights of the dispossessed, he identifies the cause of the social problems in the village as disrespect for the principles of democracy, i.e., cooperation, consensus decision, and solidarity: "Waoneni watu hawa hawapendi demokrasia" (32). His critique of gender inequity refers beyond domestic politics to the politicians (*wakubwa* [30/31]), whose selfish greed causes many of the social ills. Like Mze Isa in *Heshima Yangu* manipulates his chieftaincy for his personal benefits, so do the politicians in *Nguzo Mama* exploit political office for individual gains. But Chizi's wisdom remains unheard. A *mwanaharamu* and *hohehahe*, he leads a peripheral existence outside of society. His pariah status effectively nullifies his clairvoyance and eloquence. He remains an articulate critic whose superior morality does not translate into political influence. However, the male gendering of the artist changes the gender dynamics of the play, and in the final act provides a crucial subtext for the feminist agenda of *Nguzo Mama*.

The final act of *Nguzo Mama* begins with an ultimatum to the women to uplift the pillar within three days. Elders and politicians ridicule the women who - so they claim - have never achieved anything of value and hardly qualify as humans: "Tangu lini wabeba wana kuwa watu" (46). Exclusively identified by their reproductive abilities (*wabeba wana*), women's identities are reduced to a host of negative qualities like *wapumbavu* (foolish, ignorant). Biological traits and cultural stereotypes again are conflated to indicate female inferiority. This derogatory representation is opposed by the chorus of the women who reiterate that a strong mother pillar will be beneficial for everybody:

Bi Nane: Tushirikishe wanaume pia NGUZO MAMA ina faida kwa wote [. . .]
Tuite na watoto wote - wao taifa la kesho. (58)

But again, by the evening of the third day, the women have not yet achieved their goal of uplifting the *Nguzo Mama*. The play concludes on an ambiguous, inconclusive note with the female storyteller (Bi Msimulizi) reflecting on the possibility of either abandoning or continuing the work (and her story):

Bi Msimulizi: Wakainua wakainua
Usiku na mchana
Siku ya pili ikapita
NGUZO MAMA pale pale
Sasa leo ni siku ya tatu
(Kwa hadhira) Niendelee, nisiendelee
Niendelee, nisiendelee
(Kimya)
HADITHI YANGU IMEKWISHA (59)

This ending carries strong pessimistic overtones since there has been little indication of an escape from circular patterns. In contrast to *Heshima Yangu*, social and psychological pressures have proven too strong for the female characters in *Nguzo Mama*, denying temporary relief and the suggestion of change.

Nguzo Mama portrays women in their traditional roles as mothers and wives. As agents of production and reproduction, they are 'controlled' by the male authority of a husband, an employer, an in-law or a politician. Trapped by rigid gender codes, Bi Saba is disowned by her in-laws after her husband's death (43), and Bi Pili is pressured to conform to the role of 'good wife' by her abusive husband (15). Curtailed choices and multiple obligations leave them little time for the political activism of uplifting the mother pillar. These traditional images are used to show how narrowly defined gender roles and abusive gender relations discriminate against women. The play's social criticism of conventional gender identities is phrased within the wider context of national problems and concerns. Gender concerns are national concerns since no democratic society can tolerate the systematic abuse of many of its citizens.

The interdependence of gender and national interests is reinforced through the inclusion of oral literature into the play. The allegorical tale of the island of Patata (4 ctd) explains and gives historical depth to the current situation: previous mistreatment of women has resulted in the fallen pillar, i.e., social strife and desintegration has been a recurrent pattern ever since the ideal society collapsed. Narrated by the female storyteller (Bi Msimulizi), the tale provides social and dramatic commentary on the present. It results in a discursive multiplicity that authorizes contemporary voices through the knowledge and experience distilled in the oral traditions. Armed with the authority and authenticity of earlier modes of speech, Bi Msimulizi can legitimize the demands of the female characters.

Throughout the play, Bi Msimulizi fulfills a crucial role in commentating and elaborating on the characters' words and deeds. Superior to the characters in her knowledge and insight, she represents a higher narrative agency, a storyteller who simultaneously controls the stories of the characters and is controlled by the story of the play. In the final act, however, her narrative authority and even more so those of the characters is progressively eroded by another male character, Chizi. The final act opens with a procession of the female characters. As each character enters and addresses the *Nguzo Mama*, she repeats and modifies the lines that run like a refrain through the play. Bi Moja, for example, exclaims:

Bi Moja: Tukupambe kwa dhahabu
 Au tukupambe kwa fedha
 Wanja hina na uturi
 Tukupambaje maua (47)

Alluding to the type of adornment they will choose for the pillar once it has been uplifted (gold and money, cars and 'sweet words'), they prioritize once more individual strategies over communal action. Throughout the scene discursive authority is gradually transferred to the voice of the artist, Chizi. Predicting a character's fate and future, emphasizing her distress and illusion, he comes to represent a superior narrative authority, a position previously occupied by Bi Msimulizi. He even gives voice to those too indifferent (Bi Tano) or too tormented (Bi Saba) to speak for themselves, and reveals the hypocrisy and deceit behind the words of Bi Tatu and Bi Nne, the politician. Speaking from a superior moral vantage point, he silences and privatizes the voices of the women,

establishing a precarious hierarchy between a male public and female private voices. Simultaneously, the words of the women prove to be words of grandeur without substance, their temporary union behind a discourse of liberation and resistance remains an empty signifier attesting to their powerlessness. Only briefly do they acknowledge the mother pillar's value for society in general before the familiar pattern emerges and their strength and resilience declines once again into petty bickering (58)

Throughout the play the feminist agenda of *Nguzo Mama* has eloquently exposed the dramatic consequences patriarchal ideologies have for gender and national identities. Yet, as the female characters lose their voices once again to a male character this feminist trajectory is partly subverted. Even though sympathetic to their concerns, Chizi continues to prioritize male interpretations of gender relations and roles over female perspectives. There is little hope for social reforms if women remain unable to verbalize their problems and express their demands.

The play *Mama Ee* (1987) by Kenyan author Ari Katini Mwachofi is a scathing criticism of gender relations and identities that replaces the more moderate image of the fallen Mother Pillar with the harsh metaphor of marriage as slavery. This metaphor, already expounded in the prologue, is illustrated on a figural level in the play. The prologue introduces a group of three women - identified only as wives - who, shaken with grief and sorrow, lament their social condition as one of servitude and slavery (*utumwa*). Used and exploited, sold and beaten, the women experience *utumwa* as a position of profound discrimination and exploitation.

Like the women in *Nguzo Mama*, the three wives consider it imperative to change these unacceptable conditions through cooperation and solidarity. They voice their adamant resistance to the triple burden of discrimination, based on gender, race and class. *Mama Ee* advances a more inclusive vision of oppression that foregrounds the interrelatedness between different manifestations of social marginalization and extends it to include the struggle against *ubeberu* (imperialism) in its colonial and neocolonial manifestations⁸. The dramatic action is framed by the communal voice of the three wives which establishes women as a 'body politic' (Lanser 1992), as a social agent with a collective agenda:

Mke I and II: Wanawake tuungane, mabibi tuungane
Haki zetu kuzidai, tusikubali kunyonywa
Dunia haiwi yao tuka. (viii)

Their chant culminates in the reiterative chorus: "Tuungane katika usawa" (Let's unite in equality [ix]). In contrast to *Nguzo Mama*, all the women in the play, the wives appearing in the prologue and the two main female characters, pledge allegiance to female solidarity through words **and** actions.

The play juxtaposes the experiences of two sisters, Mwavita and Tenge, with abusive gender relations and social practices. This technique of pairing reinforces the social and ideological patterns

⁸ However, only in the prologue is *ubeberu* explicitly identified as an oppressive social and economic force

and themes that the play seeks to expose. Act One opens with a passage from the *Utendi of Mwana Kupona* (1). The intertextual reference to the book of ideal (and idealized) gender relations satirically comments on the social realities mediated in the play. Or, as Mwavita dryly comments: women have to accept how the language of gender relations changes abruptly from the cloy idiom of romance to the harsh realities of marriage, from the “I love you - Nakupenda” to the “Fungua mlango haraka!” (2)

The marital relations between Mwavita and Kinaya are fraught with conflicts and tensions, indicated also in the derogatory terms in which he speaks of her. The address *jike* (female animal [2]) instead of *mke* denies humanity to her, and hence is emblematic of the physical and mental enslavement she suffers in her marriage and the larger society, leading Mwavita to exclaim: “Mimi ni mkeo si mtumwa wako!” (3; 36). His verbal abuse extends also to her sister whose alleged immorality he denounces as prostitution. Mwavita opposes this treatment of her and is vocal in her criticism of his adultery, alcoholism, and physical violence. Resisting his wishes to be a submissive wife, she counters with her own demands and urges him to share the financial and labour responsibilities of the household. But the conflict is never resolved through a negotiation of conflicting views, and instead escalates into physical abuse when Kinaya beats his wife and causes the pregnant Mwavita to miscarry.

As Tenge's experiences indicate, similar themes of gender discrimination translate into the lives of unmarried women. Expelled from school because of her pregnancy, she is also chased from her parental home and suffers verbal and physical abuse for her ‘immoral’ behaviour. Women pay dearly for their mistakes and learn that “ulimwengu hauna msamaha” (11), while men are excused from responsibility. Neither Tenge's brother nor her boyfriend are ostracized for impregnating young women, a hypocritical morality reminiscent of *Heshima Yangu*. Women's sexuality connotes danger and requires social (male) control. Any sexual activity resulting in a transgression of accepted behaviour carries social stigma and disqualifies women as ‘prostitutes’ (12), a blanket statement that denounces deviance from social norms.

The juxtaposition of the situation of the two sisters continues throughout the play: Tenge will be socially stigmatized as an unmarried mother, the parent of a *mwanaharamu* (56), Mwavita endures social discrimination as a divorcee, who is blamed for the failure of her marriage (58, 60). The sisters' experience is metonymically extended to include even their mother who is blamed for the ‘irresponsibility’ of her daughters (60). When, years later, Tenge accidentally meets George, the father of her child, his derogatory remarks towards her reflect the earlier insults of Mwavita's husband:

Tenge: [...] George akaanza kutukana ‘Nenda zako na umalaya wako. Endelea kuzurura mjini na kila jiume’ (85).

Such a duplication of abusive gender relations becomes a powerful sign of women's social status which is little better than the ‘condition of a beast’:

Mwavita: Mimi dada, wanaume karibu ya wote nawaona wana uhayawani (87)

Repeatedly throughout the play, the female characters poetically lament their marginalization and discrimination in 'a man's world': "Dunia hii ya wawi, dunia ya waume" (14) They eloquently voice their resistance through poetic discourse that celebrates the end of servitude and the reclamation of agency. For example, Tenge's language changes into a lyrical idiom when she bewails the hostility she encounters in her own family:

Tenge: Na nyinyi kaka zangu mlio hapo mwasema nini? Kunipiga?
 Niueni niueni, mabingwa wa najisi,
 Mliojaa pomoni, ashiki na ubinafsi
 Matusi tele domoni, wingiwe siwezi kisi
 Nyani haoni kundule, walisema Waswahili (15)

Immediately following her assertion that "Leo ndio mwisho wa utumwa [...] Leo ndio mwisho wa kuufuata mfano wa nyanya zangu", Mwita's language transforms into a metaphorical discourse on gender discrimination and the need for freedom and autonomy:

Mfano wao ulo bora, siku nyingi ninao
 Hali yangu kudorora, ilizidi kila uchao
 Dhiki pia bakora, matusi kukabwa koo!
 Leo pingu ninakata, kutaka wangu uhuru (51)

And later in the play she proclaims herself guilty of 'treason' and 'disobedience' (*uasi*) because she refuses to follow the social and discursive paths outlined for her (65).

Women's moral authority is expressed with poetic eloquence Mwavita and Tenge may not have authority over hegemonic social interactions and discourses, but they control a poetic discourse, inaccessible to men, that is indicative of their superior morality. Their ability to analyze and articulate social injustices attests to their knowledge and agency, establishing an alternate discursive authority that reveals the lies and hypocrisies of the dominant ideology. Thus, Mwavita exposes the discrepancy between the social role she is forced to play, the pressures to conform to an idealized projection of the submissive, accommodating wife, and the lack of economic, social and legal resources - either modern or traditional - with which to support herself. The social reputation of women is dependent on their status as wives. But marriage equals slavery, and might be worse than slavery since it camouflages servitude with the seemingly respected title of 'wife'. Marital roles entail a condition of enslavement that envelops every aspect of a woman's existence - spiritual, physical, mental:

Mwavita: [...] Nilikwambiaje mke mtumwa tena ua la kujigamba shereheni - mtumwa kimwili - kiakili - kiroho - kila kitu! (49)

The repetitive experiences of Mwavita and Tenge exemplify the simultaneous failure of various socio-political systems to ensure the social equality of women. The legal system in its various manifestations privileges male over female interests: indigenous councils that arbitrate in cases of familial disputes oblige Mwavita to return to her husband (20 ctd.), national courts that follow British law require her to relinquish child custody to Kinaya (73 ctd.), and finally, the police when

asked to prevent physical violence refuses to intervene in 'domestic disputes' (67). Instead of safeguarding the rights of women, these institutions systematically serve as instruments of discrimination by negating women's access to legal rights and social networks and by perpetuating a repressive social discourse that vacillates between 'good (submissive) wives' and 'bad (assertive) prostitutes'.

Tenge's and Mwavita's experiences once again illustrate the manipulation of social relations and discourses through those in power. Not only traditional and modern authorities, but also the Christian religion and its representatives offer a strict moral code by which to judge women's behaviour. Mwavita's conversation with the Padre indicates that women are held responsible for maintaining harmonious social relations. If they are unwilling to compromise and yield to their husbands, they are considered disruptive and selfish. The Padre urges her to oblige with Kinaya's demands and return to her husband regardless of his failure to fulfill his marital responsibilities.

Even 'tradition' and 'modernity' are constantly manipulated to reflect a person's interests. For example, Kinaya insists that the payment of the *mahari* (dowry) signifies - quite literally - the purchase of a wife, her productive and reproductive abilities, and her possessions. Thus, he legitimizes his demands that Mwavita should act like a traditional wife, exhibiting qualities like submissiveness and subordination (39). The council of elders later rejects Kinaya's interpretation as a grave distortion of social codes. In spite of the *mahari*, husband and wife have to divide responsibilities: "Kulipa mali si kununua mke" (30). But the elders also criticize that the introduction of the modern school system has replaced initiation societies and the cultural knowledge transmitted through rites of passage. Some women, however, emphasize that to 'follow European ways' ("fuata Kizungu" [15]) has given them an alternate way of life that includes the possibility of single motherhood.

Ironically, women's organizations in *Mama Ee (umoja wa kina mama)* have been coopted by the regime and serve as instruments for maintaining the status quo. Consequently, the chairwoman of *Umoja wa kina mama* rejects Tenge's request for help with the words: "Sisi chama chetu si chama cha sheria. Hatuwezi kupigana na mahakama" (94). Women's organizations fail to mobilize political support, and hence have little social and legal impact. Instead they remain an exclusive forum for upper class women and their charity work. While commenting on the corruption of women's organization, Mwavita and Tenge even transcend their character status briefly and directly address the author of the play. Their metanarrative references to the social and narrative status of the playwright ridicules her as just another member of the élite, who appropriates the concerns of 'ordinary people' to further her own literary and social interests:

Mwavita: Utaona hata mwandishi wa mchezo huu amewasahau wao na taabu zao! (95)

Poignantly Mwavita and Tenge conclude that national, or even universal gender solidarity cannot be hoped for since gender identities always interact with other allegiances, motivated by class, national or ethnic interests. Hence, not all women but only those suffering from comparable socio-economic conditions can pursue communal political interests (94). However, their concluding remarks again

testify to a poetic diction that appeals to the unity and solidarity of ALL women to fight against their status of servitude. The reiterative poetic laments of women create a counter-discourse to the prevailing social language that is abusive and discriminatory towards women and helps to solidify the established system of socio-political stratification. Their efforts to create an alternate 'discursive universe' illustrate the triad constellation of social identity, language and power. Identity and reality are produced through language and hence always invested with the political interests of the speaker.

Dramatic action and language in *Mama Ee* often reflect on the manipulative use of language. Multiple and divergent points of view are not only illustrated through the opposition between patriarchal discourse and the poetic laments of women, but also through the repetitive narration of dramatic events by different characters. When Kinaya's and Mwavita's families assemble before the local council, different versions of the marital dispute are heard and account for a diegetic multiplicity essential for democratic societies. A similar positive subtext is provided by the example of Kheri, a young man whose understanding of gender identities and relations is remarkably different from those of other men. Since Kheri had to perform 'feminine' tasks during his childhood - carrying water, cooking and collecting firewood - he has accepted modified gender roles and attendant notions of femininity and masculinity. He has learned to show respect and empathy for women (84). Kheri's example might be an isolated case but it provides a vision of positive social change that leads Mwavita to comment that gender equity can be hoped for:

Mwavita: Mimi dada, wanaume karibu ya wote nawaona wana uhayawani. Lakini nafikiri wako wachache, wachache sana, ambao macho yao ya wazi wanauona na kuuheshimu utu wa kike (87)

Heshima Yangu, *Nguzo Mama* and *Mama Ee* prominently foreground the discussion of gender identities and relations. They explore gender with reference to central cultural images and metaphors - ambivalent notions of 'honour' and metaphors of fallen Mother Pillars and marriage as slavery define gender identities in a negative way. These metaphorical allusions already prefigure discriminatory social practices and ideologies that result in moral hypocrisy and the systematic exclusion of women from positions of power and privilege. Interestingly, the figure of the mwanaharamu appears in all three plays. The mwanaharamu becomes a voice of moral integrity who is confined to a peripheral existence on the margins of society. The situation of the 'illegitimate child' is emblematic for a society that harshly sanctions any transgression of social norms. But these norms and values are invested with the interests of those in power, they serve to perpetuated established cultural practices, institutions and ideologies.

Heshima Yangu explores the ideological interests behind 'honour' and 'morality' by revealing the double standards of society that absolve men from responsibility and prioritize their needs over those of women. But even though women lack socio-political influence and economic resources they are outspoken in their criticism of patriarchal discourses. Rukia and Mama Salum reclaim discursive agency and validate their voices through their superior ethical stance. Authorized by moral superiority and integrity, they reclaim their status as public speakers. Rukia's and Mama Salum's verbal defiance implicates the possibility of changes in gender identities and relations.

The female characters in *Nguzo Mama* have also realized the imperative of unity and solidarity for social reforms. But they fail in their efforts to improve their condition, unable to transcend the multiple social, economic and psychological factors working to their disadvantage. In contrast to *Heshima Yangu* and *Mama Ee*, the women in *Nguzo Mama* have internalized the socially conditioned images of themselves, have accepted the negative qualities ascribed to women as real reflections of their identity. Mwavita and Tenge never believe that women are meant to be servants, Rukia and Mama Salum learn to refute notions of female dishonour and powerlessness as social inventions, but the phalanx of women in *Nguzo Mama* is hesitant to define alternate gender roles than those culturally accepted. Only periodically do they join together in a rhetoric of liberation and collective strength before they again fall silent and relinquish discursive authority to Chizi.

Much different is the situation of women in *Mama Ee*. Their realization that marriage equals servitude manifests itself in unanimous words and deeds and encompasses the central characters as well as the women in the prologue. Their resistance and defiance culminates in a unique poetic discourse which, again, derives authority and validity from the women's superior moral standards. Their moral superiority is also accompanied by economic independence - Mwavita's education has provided her with financial assets that allude to significant socio-economic changes. *Mama Ee* endows its female characters with a discursive authority that even impinges on the control of the playwright who is included in their critique of upper class women⁹.

The underlying tension between class and gender also surfaces in the plays of Penina Muhando, indicating that identity (and discrimination) configure in wider social contexts which include, among others, class, national and racial affiliations. Such relational identities reinforce the notion of culture as a creative dialogue of diverse social factions and subcultures, but they also attest to the difficulty of formulating a definite agenda for women's rights. Consequently, the plays discussed here pursue different visions of gender identity and social change, but they all 'write beyond the ending' of patriarchal cultural and narrative scripts. Their advocacy of gender equity necessitates at the very least a redefinition of cultural concepts like 'honour', but might even require an alternate discourse, a lyrical idiom inspired by the metaphorical language of the oral traditions that equates integrity with eloquence. As the plays work towards a revision of gender imaginations, literary discourses emerge as minefields for renegotiating gender relations and identities.

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⁹ This subversion of the playwright's authority through metanarrative comments is, of course, orchestrated by the author herself, and hence a 'fiction of authority'.

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