

EDITORIAL

The Treatment of Minority Rights in African Literature in Selected Texts

Tobias Otieno Odongo

Department of Literature, Linguistics, Foreign Languages and Film Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Moi University

E-mail: tobiasotieno@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-5405-9288

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Introduction

On 18th December, 1992, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration of the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities to protect and promote minority rights. This issue of *LIFT: The Journal of Literature and Performing Arts*, aims to further these goals by exploring how our African writers over the years have treated the issue of minorities, having taken over from traditional African oral narratives which always vouched for the underdog but experimented with European forms which foregrounded and projected the middle and upper-class voices. While minority positions may not be permanent but keep shifting with particularized circumstances, assimilating and being assimilated by the majority in a symbiotic fluidity, minorities will always be with us and will of necessity need protection.

It is noteworthy that minority rights awareness has been increasing over the years, and Kenya for instance officially marked the day for the first time at the Bomas of Kenya on Monday 18th December 2023. It was officially billed as giving communities a chance to celebrate the richness of their cultures and heritage through song, dance and a display of cultural artefacts. As reported by political Writer Allan Kisia of the *Star Newspaper* (*The Star Online* – 15th December 2023; 15:13), head of Kenya’s Public Service Felix Koskei opined that: “On this day, Kenya will be joining other nations across the globe to mark the commitments countries have made to promote the principles of diversity, equality and inclusion not only as mechanisms for national unity but also as a means of broad-based global acceptance and solidarity.” The minority as a subaltern – with a mute voice never given attention – must find

a voice in the foregoing pages where the best interests presented are not those imagined by the presenters but foregrounded by the minorities themselves.

A Survey of the Articles

The eleven articles in this volume cover a wide variety of the minority issues in African Literature. Two articles deal with materials from oral texts, namely Narratives and Songs, two others handle Ngozi Adichie's texts – *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* – while Achebe comes in with *Things Fall Apart*, Oyono with *Houseboy*, as Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Farah's *Close Sesame*, Chikwava's *Harare North* and Wanner's *London, Cape Town, Joburg* also earn a prominent place in focusing on minorities. Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague*, and Noadia Muthoni Gachanja Likimani's autobiography *Fighting Without Ceasing* too receive substantial attention from researchers in this volume, while the film subsector receives its fair share of analysis from the article by Waliaula et al. From the oral to the written, from the 1960's to our contemporary times, from West to South to East Africa, not forgetting the diaspora, this volume comprehensively tackles the thorny subject of minority issues in African literature, and opens up space for more research in this area.

Adalo Moga in "Deformity and Disability Transposed: Dynamics of the Periphery in Oral Narratives," examines the roles of the (female) chief protagonists of the two oral narratives 'Simbi Nyaima' (Luo) and 'Simbi' (Bukusu) as collected from the field in the early 1970's and 1980's by researchers Onyango Ogutu and Jane Nandwa respectively. In the essay he analyses in depth the dynamics of social construction and labeling, the ironies in the dynamics between good and evil as they are given physical identity and value, and demonstrates how the selected oral narratives transpose the minority relations and images in society. Utilizing the Critical Disability Theory (CDT) which sees disability not as a health or compassion issue, but as the politics of power and powerlessness, he analyses the two oral narratives from the position that language is inherently political and has far reaching ideological implications. The article further affirms that the two oral narratives expose interesting patterns of transposition that work subtly to re-center the disabled characters that had been cast to the periphery and into oblivion through the agency of voiced attitudes and actions. The paper concludes by asserting that 'Simbi Nyaima' and 'Simbi' can be read as centering disability identities and spaces, since unlike other literary texts where the disabled are stereotypically used as 'emblems of evil', these two protagonists distort and reverse traditional hierarchies. In essence, the solitudes (minorities) are at all times yearning to transpose the forces that hold them down.

In "Informational Social Power in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*", Joseph Nderitu Murage and Justus Kizito Siboe Makokha delve into the vicissitudes of informational social power as an alternative hegemonic trope that characters rely on in the negotiation for social power. Using Michel Foucault's idea of power and discourse as the theoretical lenses through which to dissect *Purple Hibiscus*, the authors affirm that Adichie uses different aspects of traditions to entrench informational social power and by so doing contest influence that hinges on modernity and its attendant indifference. They conclude that informational social power is more effective than coercive, referent, reward, legitimate and expert power – it is the kind of power exercised by teachers over students, such that years after, an unlikeable and forgotten-about teacher positively affects an individual, thus the power of such influence is permanent.

Albert Mugambi Rutere and Stephen Mutie in their paper "The Allegory of Colonization: (Re) Theorizing Dehumanization in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*", analyze in detail symbolism in Achebe's text to unravel the two phases of colonialism in Africa by utilizing New Historicism (as propounded by Jacques Derrida and Stephen Greenblatt) as an ideological praxis to examine the Umuofia-Igbo colonial encounter with the West while drawing some parallelism to Africa's colonization by the West. They argue that Achebe employs proverbs, allegorical forms and anecdotes among other stylistic devices to underline symbolism in order to advance Umuofia-Igbo and Africa at large. Their contention is that not only is Umuofia-Igbo marginalized, the entire African continent is, thus Africa becomes a minority in the world in this context. As a minority Africa's voice is stifled and the West speaks for her, painting a rosy picture of the benefits and splendor of colonialism, and Achebe attempts to change this by being the suppressed voice of 'subaltern' Africa. Rutere and Mutie conclude that in spite of the West propagating colonialism as a humanizing and civilizing mission, Achebe succeeds in exposing it as racist, exploitative, impoverishing and dehumanizing not only in Africa but also much further beyond.

In "Domestic Workers and the Politics of Space Within the Household in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966)," Peter Murage Ndambiri employ Marx and Engel's strand of Marxism to re-read the relationship between domestic servants and their masters in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966), since Toundi's diary works as the voice of the marginalized minority/underdog who is always spoken for by the Master whose accusations are more often than not indiscipline, laziness and theft. The focus then is in the cruel, exploitative tendencies, overworking and underpayment and above all the inhuman treatment inflicted on the poor domestic workers by their unsympathetic employers. The author proceeds from the position that domestic workers are not passive subjects of their employers' atrocities but

are equally involved in retaliatory acts of aggression as they struggle for the control of their domestic space. The findings of the paper reveal that there is a battle between these bourgeoisies and the proletariats, partly caused by the capitalistic system that necessitates that employers exploit their workers for maximum profit through low wages, long working hours, scolding, battering and menial chores 'to maintain discipline', unnecessary hazardous tasks and gender-based violence. On the other hand, domestic workers retaliate against these injustices through deliberate laxity in their duties, the exposure of their employers' confidential information, 'justified' stealing and any other forms of aggression available to them. Only through honest dialogue between the two parties can this impasse be broken.

Meanwhile Andrew Nyongesa in "Literary Writers and the Subaltern: (Mis)-representation of some Marginal Groups in Selected Contemporary African Novels," wades into the controversial issue of whether the literary writer has the capacity to speak for the marginal group in view of their heterogeneity. Using the Gayatri Spivak strand of the postcolonial concept of representation, the article overturns the literary writer's articulation of issues affecting marginal groups in four African novels namely Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Farah's *Close Sesame*, Chikwava's *Harare North* and Wanner's *London, Cape Town, Joburg*. Herein evidence is provided that a number of divergent voices within the minority – since the minority can never be homogeneous or monolithic – are of necessity sidelined and silenced by the writer; which renders writers suitable for speaking for only a small section of the minority and never the whole group. Who, for example, speaks for the women who agree with or fully support female circumcision, polygamy and other aspects of denigrated traditional African cultures? Who speaks for the conservatives, non-revolutionaries who benefit from and prefer colonialism to neocolonialism? Who speaks for the liberal immigrants who have adapted to their host nations and have no wish to ever return to their mother countries? Evidently, the author agrees with Spivak that it is difficult to articulate the differences in the marginal group. A major finding of this study, then, is that no author can effectively represent any marginal group without silencing quite a number of them because of the inherent idiosyncrasies.

In "Africa, the Global Minority: Ayaana as Africa in Yvonne Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*", Festus Kangongo Kibet takes a similar path of classifying the content of Africa as minority as done by Rutere and Mutie with *Things Fall Apart*, the difference being that Kibet illustrates from *The Dragonfly Sea*. The paper analyzes in detail the extent to which Ms. Owuor uses Ayaana's experiences as a microcosm of Africa as a minority in the global socio-political and economic interactions. Guided by Spivak's postulations on the Subaltern, the paper explores incidences where the main character is treated as the 'other' and establishes how this treatment accurately serves as a

representation of the treatment of Africa as a minority in global affairs. The essay treats Ayaana as a subaltern, just as the African continent is a subaltern, spoken for, struggling to beat the odds and establish her place in relationships with – Other ‘superior’ characters for Ayaana – and other ‘superior’ continents for Africa. It extends the assertion that Africa need not turn to the West or the East for support and resources, but must look inwards within herself, and utilize her vast wealth and untapped potential. It debunks the myth that the West and the East are ‘invincible’ and Africa cannot survive without them: Instead, it is they who need Africa’s resources for their very survival. The paper, like the novel under study, conclusively asserts that there is still hope for peace and reconciliation – between characters in the novel as between states within the African continent – all they have to do is to recognize and appreciate one another as brothers and sisters. Only then will the imperialists settle in Africa, not to colonize or to dominate, but to partner and to invest.

Mutie and Rutere, in their second paper, “Narrating Feminine Rebellion, Dynamism and Resilience in Meja Mwangi’s *The Last Plague*”, treat minorities at the level of beliefs and ideas held that are contrary to the larger and much more entrenched societal beliefs and worldviews. The paper proposes that Meja Mwangi’s *The Last Plague* is an inspiring metaphor that narrates female rebellion dynamism and resilience in taming HIV/AIDS in the context of cultural and patriarchal resistance. Using psychoanalytic and feminist theories, the paper analyzes the apparent resistance to combating HIV/AIDS and how the chief protagonist, Janet, rebels and takes a bold step to fight the pandemic. She faces fixed, long held attitudes and patriarchal structures, but more importantly she understands that patriarchy is exclusive and there is a dire need for her to assert herself for inclusivity in the socio-political and economic domains in order to save herself and the society at large. Through the active steps of Janet, a minority, and her few male colleagues’ actions, Crossroads comes to accept that HIV/AIDS pandemic is real and can be tamed through acceptance and change of attitude and sexual behavior. The reality of the pandemic brings a paradigm shift and consequently the desired gender respect, equality and partnership in the society. The common verdict reached is that it is quite clear that minority effort can be a run-away success story when patience and persistence prevail.

Japheth Langat takes the women as minority theme a little further in “Women Navigating Minority Status in Selected Stories in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*” through an inter-textual reading of three short stories in that collection namely ‘Imitation’, ‘The Arrangers of Marriage’ and ‘The Headstrong Historian’. The paper advances the argument that the most engaging feature in Adichie’s writing is how she uses marriage as a dramatic stage to test out her theories on feminism and gender issues and

to demonstrate how women navigate their minority status. The stories further demonstrate gendered consciousness in respect to issues of marriage, economic relations, power dynamics and cultural expectations. Deploying Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) 'Stiwanism' strand of African feminism, the paper advocates for the transformation of social, economic and political systems as a means of women's liberation and sustainable development – since African feminism acknowledges that men have a role to play in the reconstruction of society in which the rights of all people are respected. A major aspect of minority status is never being consulted whenever important decisions (that directly concern you) are made, never being viewed as anything more than the 'physical' you, never considered as needing pleasing but always expected to please, never considered intelligent or perceptive, never allowed to wield any form of power and never even allowed to be yourself. In essence, these are stories of individuals who by extension represent every African woman in a similar position, covering the broad spectrum of African culture, the history of slavery, racism and colonialism and the further discriminatory effects of Western religion and Western education. The paper concludes with an assertion derived from the reading of the stories: that women must recognize that the men in their lives are vital to their success in subverting patriarchy and minority statuses.

Like Adalo Moga, Muhoro Mwangi in "Images of Women in Agikuyu *Mwomboko* Poetry: A Selection from Performing Artists from Mount Kenya Region," ventures into oral literature, the songs (oral poetry) subgenre to expose the minority position of women in Gikuyu *Mwomboko* poetry. The article takes the position that popular artists in Africa have tended to be the mouthpieces of revealing the societal structures that define and affix the position of women in society, and employs the lenses of deconstruction and feminist theorists to analyze this phenomenon. It also employs descriptive techniques in dissecting the figurative language applied by both traditional and secular singers in approximating meanings to see if gender attitudes have changed over time and whether for the better or otherwise. The paper finds a visible link between the pre-independent singers and the contemporary ones, and establishes the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern views as well as an indication of a consistency in terms of drawing their imagery from the surrounding or the local environment to subvert the position of women and make them look inferior in society. However, the recent entry and participation of female oral artists and their consistency in answering back male counterparts has created a suitable meeting point for a healthy discussion of masculine and feminine gender positions.

Gladys Nyaiburi Ogaro and Samuel Macharia Ndogo in their article, "Unsung Hero(ine)ism in the Making of a Nation: A Reading of Muthoni Likimani's *Fighting Without Ceasing*", delve into the exploration of unsung

Hero(ine)ism in the context of nation-building through an in-depth analysis of Muthoni Likimani's autobiography, *Fighting Without Ceasing*. The article underscores the importance of recognizing and acknowledging these unsung heroines as integral contributors to the collective story of nationhood, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the formation of a nation. *Fighting Without Ceasing* being an autobiography is double advantageous, since the author and the narrator merge, and the marginalized no longer speaks merely as the authorial voice representing the 'other', rather we hear her voice directly as she presents her case without a filtering prism. The article thus affirms that women also have their story to tell in relation to the men whose story is largely told through the history of the nation – implying that the woman autobiographer, through her struggles within a patriarchal society, emerges with dual consciousness – the self as the culturally defined and the self that is different from what culture prescribes, to tell the story of the nation. It further avers that Likimani locates herself in the paradoxical position of victim and subject possibly to indicate the oscillation of her self-hoods between her embodiment as a nationalist symbol and her individual political agency. Reflecting on Butler's (1990) argument that identity is enacted daily through socially enforced norms that surround us and Yuval-Davis' (1997) observation that women are burdened with the task of maintaining the nation's honor and integrity, the article takes the position that patriarchy is the key instigator of women's oppression. These include abuse and mistreatment in marriage, being undermined and derided at the place of work, being exploited in business, and being unfairly targeted merely because of gender: experiences read as those of the nation namely neo-colonialism, tribalism, nepotism, corruption and insecurity among others, which engineers a kind of disillusionment that hinders efforts geared towards national development. Thus the contribution of the minority female is projected in her advocating for better standards of living for her people, in fighting for the rights of the oppressed, in insisting on fairness in all spheres of life, in assisting persons to secure jobs, and in offering counselling services etc. The article thus concludes, from the informed position of the autobiographer, that despite facing different challenges and barriers, by claiming the nation and asserting her role and identity, women writers share a common goal of contributing to the development and progress of the nation.

Lastly, in "Orality and Informality in Video-Film Distribution in Kenya: The Case of Eldoret," Joseph Basil Okong'o, Solomon Waliaula and Sammy Thuita Maina explore marginalization in access to Film making, distribution and marketing in Africa, using Eldoret town as a microcosm of similar situations in other Kenyan, and by extension, African towns. They argue that these are processes of exclusion that are closely tied to the colonial and

imperialist interests of domination and exploitation and the ideological concerns of the African postcolonial state whose policies privilege the political class and the powerful and the wealthy citizenship. Thus the article examines the strategies employed by the traders marginalized from access to formal structures of distribution of films who have established informal modes of transaction with their equally economically disenfranchised clients. Employing Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework to analyze data obtained through ethnographic field study involving interaction with traders and their clients in the streets of the town through observation, interviews and personal testimonies, the researchers convincingly demonstrate that there is a close link between informal trade in video-films and the broader *Jua Kali* informal systems, which can be traced back to strategies of coping in urban economies established by marginalized populations during the colonial era. As film processes shift to digital, these marginalized groups have also to adapt, hence their informal streak in film marketing is gradually mutating from the typical hawking and oral transactions to other digital forms such as YouTube, Netflix and other social media platforms. The informal networks that involve orality have been reconfigured by hawkers to improve on their sourcing and distribution of films. Herein is where they find their niche: for marginalization has to do with more than just numerical strength – when a majority are silenced and spoken for – they metamorphose into a minority whose rights must in essence be protected through affirmative action and favorable legislation.

Conclusion

It is quite evident that eighty percent of the articles in this volume deal with women as minorities, implying that they form the large majority of the spoken for group. As researchers we are duty bound to undertake further studies and recommend practical ways of changing this alarming situation, rather than just talk about it and write another 'book of lamentations.' There is a clear pointer that it is mostly men who speak for women, therefore more attention must be paid on changing the attitude of the menfolk to broaden their minds, as most articles in this volume recommend, and allow women – of whatever social class or cultural background – to freely speak for themselves. Inevitably the minority status is created by a lack of power to leverage being heard and accommodated, and in the long run more research ought to be hinged on balances of power in order to birth a society in which everyone feels safe, appreciated and belonging.