

Unsung Hero(ine)ism in the Making of a Nation: A Reading of Muthoni Likimani's *Fighting Without Ceasing*

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Abstract

*This article delves into the exploration of unsung Hero(ine)ism, with particular focus on the role of heroines, in the context of nation-building through an in-depth analysis of Muthoni Likimani's work, **Fighting Without Ceasing**. Likimani's self-narrative serves as a rich source for understanding the often-overlooked contributions of individuals in shaping a nation's destiny. We uncover and elucidate the unsung heroine(s) portrayed in the text, shedding light on their pivotal roles in the making of a nation. Through a close reading of Likimani's autobiography, the paper unveils the nuanced facets of Hero(ine)ism, emphasizing the multifaceted efforts that go beyond conventional narratives. It 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.*

Key Words: Hero(ine)ism, Nation, Autobiography

Introduction

The autobiography is a literary genre that explores personal experiences, connecting them to broader social, cultural and political contexts. Its writing entails the reconstruction of the movement of life or part of life in the actual circumstances and environment in which it is lived. Hence there is the interplay between the past and the present. Through autobiographical

narratives, writers are able to reflect on their individual lives and experiences and construct their own versions of their personal histories and that of their society. Therefore, the genre of autobiography, the autobiographer (narrator) and her society are key in the exploration of the narrative of the Kenyan nation. The nature of the autobiography, its form and substance, has been discussed by many critics since the emergence of the genre. Much focus is on the question of the self in the autobiography in relation to the society of the writer. Many of these critics' focus on what distinguishes the autobiography from other genres of literature while highlighting the various elements that define the genre (Gohil, 2008; Lejeune, 1986; Watson, 2001; Lessing, 1994).

Just like any other nation builder, autobiographers use their own experiences as testimony to the historical happenings in the times in which they live. They unearth, appropriate and exploit the ethno-symbolic resources at their disposal as a way of narrating the being of a nation. The Kenyan woman autobiographer's experiences and contribution to the narrative of the Kenyan nation cannot be told independent of the history of the Kenyan nation. Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963 following intense military and diplomatic struggles (Ranger, 2005). The birth of the Kenyan nation was accompanied by conscious political and cultural efforts to consolidate its existence. On the cultural front there was the need to consolidate that independence through rewriting the history of the liberation struggle and the nation. This was in the wake of the attempt by colonialists to denigrate existence of any history or culture of the Kenyan people. The relative position of women in the writing of this history is evident in their contributions to myths of the nation like Mau Mau and the miscarriage of 'Uhuru'. The activities surrounding these myths affected them in one way or another, thus they also have their story to tell in relation to the men whose story is largely told through the history of the nation.

The women's movement in Kenya and East Africa has gone very far in fighting for the rights of women, particularly in the areas of representation, land rights, property inheritance, leadership and gender-based violence (Kabira, 2013). Kabira further notes that women writers and story tellers have explored the inner feelings, the alienation experience, the struggle not to be that other, the efforts to be what society expects of them while denying them who they are. They also present the struggle to understand the world around women, to define the self, to see oneself through own eyes rather than those of the other. On this paper, we explore how the Kenyan 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.

Muthoni Likimani

Noadia Muthoni Gachanja Likimani was born in 1926 to Christian missionary parents. She got married to a Maasai Dr. Jason Clement Likimani. She is an activist and a writer. She has been an actress, broadcaster, teacher and publisher. As a writer, Likimani has written novels: *They shall be Chastised* (1974), *What Does a Man Want?* (1974), autobiographical works: *Passbook F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya* (1985) and *Fighting Without Ceasing* (2005). She has also authored children's literature books among them *The Magic Bird and the Millet Farmer* (2008), *Grandmother's Fireside Stories*, *Shangazi na Watoto* (2001) and *Nyambugi and the Ogre*. As an activist she was involved in sneaking letters into and out of the detention camps during the Mau Mau period and has been involved in Women Rights Activism.

As observed by Alessi and Jossa (2019) there exists a gendered dialectical relationship between the female nation (who nurtures those who fight for her), and the male patriot, who both adores and possesses her (nation). More often than not, the heroic act is accorded to the male patriot who is perceived as the superior person to influence a nation's being and change the course of history. However, it can also be argued that heroines are as productive as heroes, if not more, when it comes to generating alternative views on the nation. The Kenyan woman autobiographer utilizes the genre to supply defining images, drawn from her life experiences, through which we understand the nation's emergence into subject-hood while justifying her selfhood in the construction of the nation. It is with this in mind that we read into Likimani to explore her unsung Hero(ine)ism in the construction of the Kenyan nation.

Muthoni Likimani's *Fighting Without Ceasing*: A Heroine in Her Own Voice

We begin from Likimani's own pronouncement that "a woman is the backbone of a nation." (2005, p.336). The analysis of Hero(ine)ism in Likimani's autobiography is cognizant of the invocation of women's bodies in nationalist myths to further nationalist agency but also as a subversive weapon. Likimani locates herself in the paradoxical position of victim and subject possibly to indicate the oscillation of her selfhoods between her embodiment as a nationalist symbol and her individual political agency. Her Hero(ine)ism is also well echoed in the title "Fighting Without Ceasing" that encapsulates the essence of her remarkable life and enduring struggle for justice, equality and freedom. The title is read as drawing from the biblical allusion of "praying without ceasing" as exhorted by apostle Paul as he calls for resilience from Christians. It carries the significance of a continuous struggle. As evident in the analysis, this title serves a poignant reflection of

Kimani's unwavering commitment to fighting against oppression and discrimination.

Likimani draws the source of her heroic deeds from family ties. Her link with her husband Dr. Jason Clement Likimani, who became the first African doctor in Kenya, exposed her to the needs of her people (Kenyans) to whom she then had a responsibility. Growing up at a time of political unrest in Kenya, with the struggle for independence from British colonial rule at the forefront, Likimani finds herself involved in the fight for national liberation. Her role in the liberation struggle is evident in her vivid recollection of how, as she accompanied her husband to the detention camp, she could smuggle letters for those detained by the colonialists. This she did without much suspicion because of being a woman. As these detainees were admitted in Kajiado hospital for treatment she smuggled their spouses and other family members to visit them. Her actions of linking the outside world with the world of prison mirrors the paradox of a situation where sickness became the exit to freedom (pp.70-71). As narrated in the text, the main reason for the visit to the detention camps by her husband was to attend to those who were sick. However, Likimani cunningly exploits this chance to enlighten those detained of what was happening outside who in turn collaborated to forge way forward for the liberation struggle.

Likimani's resistance to colonial order did not just start with her participation in the liberation struggle as mentioned above. As a child, she felt alienated from her peers as she lacked knowledge about childhood adventurous activities that were experienced by other children (p.17). This was caused by her Christian upbringing that curtailed her freedom of association with other children. Religion then becomes one of the means through which colonial order was imposed on the African. They were expected to embrace it without question; thus, creating a power discourse with the colonialist ideas being at the centre and the African ideas at the periphery. It is this power discourse of otherizing that awakens Likimani's desire to learn more about her culture. Out of curiosity, Likimani is determined to witness and understand the performance of circumcision that had been demonized by the colonialist (p.33). Being a daughter of a reverend, her sneaking to witness the circumcision of girls at dawn signals her resistance to the Christian practices. She perceives Christianity as one of the ways that the colonizer used to oppress and exploit the African thus the need to understand and appreciate her Kikuyu-African culture. Therefore, we argue that her childhood experience in a Christian family developed an inquisitive Likimani who through personal drive and determination had to understand the values of her community's practices. By documenting them in her autobiography she

is advocating for the understanding and embracing of the positive aspects of the Kenyan (in this case Kikuyu) culture.

Likimani strongly resents colonial indoctrination through religion that leads to emotional captivity of a people. Humorously, she tells of how the colonial missionaries preached with vigour and in the process emotionally confused the girls at Kahuhia school:

The white American lady evangelists...told us that the end of the world was near, so near that it could be now! . . . the Lord's trumpet could be blown at any time. "Repent, girls! Repent, girls, so that we can be the chosen ones. Others will be thrown into the fire. They will be thrown into the valley of Hell, where they will cry and gnash their teeth forever and ever. What pain! What pain! Repent now! God is calling you! . . . The end of the world is near, it could be now, this day, this night. The angels are waiting to usher you into the glory of heaven, where there are no tears" (pp.37-38).

Unlike most of the girls who got emotionally carried away by the preaching, Likimani did not. She says that she was then perceived as a hardcore sinner. However, according to her, she was a Christian and a God-fearing person who could not go against the Christian beliefs as the colonialists who brought this religion did. As evident in her motto "FEAR GOD AND DO WHAT IS RIGHT" (p.41). Likimani is strongly cynical of the Christian practices that are characterized by hypocrisy. She feels it is hypocrisy that has infiltrated into the Kenyan society thus becoming a bottleneck to national development. Her rebellious character to this kind of influence is a subtle way of enlightening Kenyans to shun pretense and hypocrisy and instead embrace sincerity and truthfulness in whatever they do so as to enhance national development in all spheres of life. Her observation and condemnation of the colonial injustices committed against Africans clearly indicate her desire to see a just nation.

Likimani's extensive use of the first-person personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' in her autobiography emphatically signifies the role she has played as an individual in the construction of the Kenyan nation. Her entrepreneurial skills can be interpreted as her heroic contribution to the Kenyan economy. She asserts that her business skills developed from a very tender age, "...I started becoming involved in business when I was about ten years old" (p.81). A skill that she claims to have inherited from her mother. By retracing her entrepreneurial nature back to her mother, she echoes the important role played by women in the economic development of a nation. As she retraces her employment and education history, she appreciates the exposure to new

ideas and attitudes towards the life that she acquires. Her emphasis then is in the value of hard work. She reiterates:

I value the virtue of working hard and I believe that it is important to have a plan for each day, time to work and time to socialize. Otherwise, many people waste a lot of time, sometimes with unnecessary, unproductive company and yet ... Time is money, and lost time is never recovered" (p.88).

Likimani's emphasis on the importance of economically empowering a nation and its people resonates well with Odinga's (1995, pp.76-94) argument that it was important for the African to assert himself in economic independence as a way of battling against the white dominance during the colonial rule. It would be the only way to show ability in entrepreneurship. This venture, Odinga narrates, brought many people from across Kenya and East Africa together. It also became a means through which the African's consciousness was aroused against the oppressive nature of the colonial administration. Hence, the need for the freedom struggle, not only for political liberation but also economic freedom, as witnessed in the history of the Kenyan nation. As a public relations officer in a prestigious public firm (that she does not name), Likimani turned out to be the pillar for the organization (just like Odinga) and brought many aboard (pp.158-159). She later establishes her own company 'Noni's Publicity' which she successfully ran and through it, she was able to help many other people establish themselves. Her great contribution to the establishment and growth of Seagram in Kenya cannot go unnoticed. From her credo we argue that Likimani becomes a heroine in ensuring the economic growth of the Kenyan nation; an aspect that is rarely realized as an important contributor to a nation's development.

Her work as broadcaster greatly contributed to the oneness of a nation. She used the media to inform the citizens of the newly independent African state (Kenya) of various ways of improving the community's standard of living. She focused on national issues like health, community development and education. Her role in enlightening women and children about who they are and their environment, gave her the title *Shangazi* (Aunt). Through children's programs, she clearly echoes the importance of our African oral tradition and the recognition of identity with our roots as the genesis of the making of a nation (p.146). The children and all the other citizens got enlightened about the various ethnic groups that make up the Kenyan nation and their way of life. Thus, Likimani advocates for the enhancement of national cohesion and development through appreciating cultural diversity of the various people of Kenya.

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, we consider Likimani's self-narrative as an assertion that patriarchy is the key instigator of women's oppression. Both men and women act as agents that institute oppression of the women while some men are rendered vulnerable to patriarchy. This is evident as Likimani at a very tender age is able to recognize the gender biases that exist in her society. She talks of her aunt Prisca who constantly reminded her of her role as a woman and how her bother Kagu, despite being younger and more vulnerable than herself, ordered her around as he still believed that girls were weaker and needed protection. Even the girls believed that with a brother around them, they were protected (p.263). However, as Butler further notes, individuals may fail to conform to the socially enforced norms fully because of the multiplicity of norms we are called on to reenact in our everyday lives. For instance, Likimani could argue with her brother Kagu and frequently tell him off when he ordered her despite being aware of the patriarchal order that empowered the man and disempowered the woman. Further, she resists the oppressive patriarchy when she bravely fights for her land in Maragwa and the right for her daughters to inherit their father's property. She notes that social injustices against women are instigated by patriarchy:

In many traditional communities in Kenya, women are not supposed to dream of inheriting anything from their parents – be it property, land or any other asset. It was regarded a pipe dream . . . if no sons were born in the family, all the property would be given to the uncles or step-brothers or cousins. That is why when a woman does not have sons, the husband will marry another wife . . . If your husband dies, some tribes in Kenya would go further and inherit you with all your husband's property (p.290).

From this extract, Likimani is cynical of the African cultures that tend to devalue and demean women. Her resentment of this kind of belief is an indicator of her determination to ensure gender equity. As evident in the discussions above, women, just like men, play a crucial role in the making of the nation.

Contrary to the gender inequity realized in her society, she is appreciative of families, her father included, that appreciated their daughters and left them some inheritance. She also recognizes the great role played by women and calls for gender equality as she affirms:

Children are equal, whether they are boys or girls, and it has proven beyond doubt that daughters, in particular, educated girls, can play the same role as boys and even contribute towards family education of their siblings. Women can contribute to the family income, and women take care of their parents and other members of the family when they are in need . . . (p.290).

From this excerpt, Likimani is arguing that society should recognize the ability of women to play crucial roles at family and national levels hence cease from relegating them to the background. The women have also to be aware of their ability and resist any injustices committed against them. The act of resistance should not be seen as disobedience but rather as a means of empowering the woman for the good of humanity and society as a whole. For instance, Likimani's decisions to walk out of her oppressive marriage and exploitative employment is read as a way of asserting her self-worth as a woman and advocating for justice for all, whether women or men. This metaphorically communicates on the importance of a nation and its people realizing its self-worth by discarding unjust practices and doing what is beneficial for the nation and its citizens.

She observes that the patriarchy had become one of the hindrances to the recognition of the women's role in national development. This prompts her to highlight women's contribution through publication in her periodicals 'women of Kenya'. She recognizes and applauds the role of women in the development of the nation through education, employment as well as through self-initiative activities. Together with other women, they empowered the women at the grassroots (p.168). She acknowledges the important role played by women in taking care of the family and the responsibilities that come with womanhood.

Further, Likimani proposes collective empowered womanhood as a strategy to reinstate justice in the volatile patriarchal society. This she does through the various women groups and activities that she participates in. For example, Dynamic Women Organisation, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, African Women Members of the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), The Kenya Women Finance Trust, The Girl Guide Movement, the Women Guild of St. Mark Anglican Church, Patron of St. John's Kahuhia School for Girls, Women Communication Trust, FEMART for Women Writers, SIA Women Economic Development, Women in Radio and Television, Young Women Association among others. Besides advocating for recognition of the major role that is played by women in national development, she also prides in her commitment to women issues:

My commitment to women issues has been my major target in all my life. To me a woman is the backbone of the nation; and despite a woman being marginalized through lack of education and being less empowered economically, politically and socially, nothing can be successful without involving her (p.336).

Despite her narration of the importance of gender equality and recognition of the woman in national development, Likimani highlights obstacles that hinder national development. In her self-story, she tells of her struggles against the odds of society from time to time despite her dedication and hard work. She is mistreated in her marriage, undermined while working with the Kenya Broadcasting Service (KBS) and exploited while working at a public relation company and Seagrams. Her endeavours to succeed are met with resistance from those who would not want her to succeed. Her experience is read as the experience of the Kenyan nation. It is this disillusionment which is characteristic of post independent African states that hinders any efforts made towards national development. She narrates the challenges she faces with bitterness but does not despair. Instead, they give her new impetus to explore new avenues. Her personal life experiences enrich her with wisdom and knowledge to handle new issues. She lives by her principle of "I must win; I have to win." Her resilience to overcome all the odds is echoed in the title 'Fighting without Ceasing'. Taking into account that autobiographies, once published, become public sites that assign women's stories into the public histories which then becomes a way of conducting a womanist historical version of the nation (Jelinek, 1980), we therefore argue that Likimani's *Fighting Without Ceasing* is a public site for all Kenyans to fight all forms of injustices that retrogress the development of a nation. For instance, neo-colonialism, tribalism, nepotism, corruption, insecurity and gender disparities. This she hopes can be done through the spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood as symbolized in her struggle and sacrifice to fight for her brother Kagu's freedom (pp.263-271).

Through her own voice, Likimani's tells of her Hero(ine)ism. Following her inspiring self-narrative, she advocates for the importance of unwavering determination in the pursuit of justice and societal transformation. This is projected in her contributions to community development through advocating for better standards of living for her people, fighting for the rights of the oppressed, insisting on fairness in all spheres of life, assisting persons to secure jobs or chances in institutions of higher learning and offering counseling services to others. Besides challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for gender equality, she emphasizes on communal/collective responsibility as the genesis of nationhood.

Thus far we have seen how Likimani uses her autobiographical work to challenge dominant narratives of Kenyan history and culture while promoting gender equality and inclusivity for social change. She has challenged traditional ideas about gender and power, and has shown how women have played an integral role in the nation's social and political development. We can therefore conclude 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 Kenyan nation.

Besides the use of the voice "I", the narrator has blended her self-narrative with aspects of the oral tradition as a way of narrating the nation. The genres of oral literature integrated in her self-narrative do not exist autonomously from other social, economic and political institutions. They are rather perceived as agents of communication for change in society as well as a reflection of the same society. It is worth noting that through the use of these genres, the narrator not only articulates ideas and emotions about the nation but also on how the happenings in the nation have shaped them.

We have thus established that the Kenyan woman autobiographer has played a critical role in narrating the nation and shaping the public discourse around the experiences and perspectives of women in Kenya. Their self-narratives become the space for narrating the nation. Through their writing, these women have given voice to their own experiences and that of the nation by providing an intimate and personal perspective on the challenges and triumphs of daily life in Kenya. They have used their personal narratives to challenge dominant narratives and to provide a counterpoint to the official histories and narratives that often exclude the voices and experiences of women. They have helped to expand the conversation around gender, race, class, and other forms of inequity and inequality. They have provided a powerful and nuanced understanding of the ways in which these factors impact on the development of the Kenyan nation. Moreover, through the self-narrative, the Kenyan woman autobiographer has been instrumental in highlighting the experiences of women in Kenya and in drawing attention to the ways in which patriarchal systems and institutions perpetuate inequality. These women have challenged traditional notions of femininity and gender roles, and provided a framework for understanding the ways in which systemic and institutionalized forms of oppression impact on women and their society – the nation.

Conclusion

Through the woman's voice in Likimani, we see that the narration of the nation is contested through gender power relations. Her autobiographical writing provides a space for women to assert their agency and to challenge patriarchal structures and systems of oppression. Through self-narration, the narrators contest the status quo created by patriarchy. In Likimani, we find that the Kenyan woman autobiographer narrates the story of the struggle for independence from a female perspective. This narration helps to fill in some of the gaps left out by male writers when talking about the liberation struggle. They raise awareness against injustices/forms of oppression that have been normalized by patriarchal systems and how they have greatly impacted on the social, economic and political state of the nation. The finding is that these oppressive systems have greatly been enhanced by both cultural and foreign ideologies. We have seen that these women move from their exclusively domestic and subordinate positions to the forefront of national construction. They contravene already established societal patterns of behaviour and men supported stereotypes of women. They seize the opportunity to fight not only their own traditions that suppress the woman, but also the colonial and postcolonial forces which relegated them to an inferior and exploited position. It is for this reason that these women reclaim their unsung hero(e)ism in the construction of the Kenyan nation.

Through the autobiography of the Kenyan woman, we can see that the nation is not a monolithic entity but a collection of diverse and often conflicting narratives. The women in the study often grapple with the tension between their personal identities and their roles as representatives of the nation as well as between their cultural construction and self-construction. Their stories reflect the ongoing struggle to reconcile these competing demands.

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