

## THE PROBLEMS OF KENYAN FEMALE YOUTH IN THE NOVELS OF MORAA GITAA

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### **Abstract**

*Moraa Gitaa is one of the most prolific and well-known Kenyan women authors of the new generation. Born and raised in Mombasa, she has worked for more than 15 years with various organizations, among them the British Council, Aga Khan Foundation and PEN Kenya Centre. Gitaa won First Prize in the National Book Development Council of Kenya Adult Fiction literary award in 2008, was nominated for the 2010 Penguin Prize for African Writing, and was one of the Kenya Chapter winners of the 2014 Burt Award for African Literature.*

*In her fictional works, which include four novels, a number of stories and a secondary school reader, she manages to treat a wide range of issues topical for modern Kenyan society, and especially for the younger generation, focusing on the challenges that haunt young females. Among the problems treated in her works are drug addiction, human trafficking, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, gender discrimination, inter-generational and ethnic tensions, economic marginalization, HIV and AIDS, corruption and transnational crime. All these concerns are tackled by the author in the setting of her native Coastal province, – but the setting is also symbolically used as a microcosm for the whole country. The paper analyses the four novels of Gitaa - *Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* (2008), *Shifting Sands* (2012), *Hila* (2014) and *Shark Attack* (2017). The paper concludes that Gitaa's works are notable not only as an example of social criticism in literature, but also as inspirational texts for young readers.*

**Key words:** *Kenyan women's literature, social criticism, gender criticism, youth*

### **Introduction**

Moraa Gitaa is one of the most prolific and well-known Kenyan women authors of the new generation. Born and raised in Mombasa, she has worked for more than 15 years with various

organizations, among them the British Council, Aga Khan Foundation and PEN Kenya Centre. Gitaa won First Prize in the National Book Development Council of Kenya Adult Fiction literary award in 2008, was nominated for the 2010 Penguin Prize for African Writing, and was one of the Kenya Chapter winners of the 2014 Burt Award for African Literature.

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Among the problems treated in her works are drug addiction, human trafficking, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, gender discrimination, inter-generational and ethnic tensions, economic marginalization, HIV and AIDS, corruption and transnational crime. All these concerns are tackled by the author in the setting of her native Coastal Province, – but the setting is also symbolically used as a microcosm for the whole country (and maybe, on a wider scale, the whole of the continent). In an interview the author confessed: “I grew up at the Coast and all my novels are set there. I feel that the Coast is under-represented in Kenyan literature. The themes explored in my novels, like drug abuse and trafficking, domestic terrorism, homegrown extremism and child prostitution on our beaches, are everyday realities of people living there” (Oneya 2016).

Gitaa began her writing career with the novel *Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* (2008) – a moving story of a young Kenyan artist Lavina Kante, saved from impending death by the love of her Italian sweetheart Giorgio Santini. In this book, which demonstrates literary qualities that levels it with the best samples of Western romance writing, the author seems to pursue two main objectives – to capture the readers’ hearts with a well-written romance story (which she apparently succeeds in), and to inform a presumably foreign audience (the book, in fact, was published in Canada) about the attractions of Kenya (hence, the book includes a lot of historical and ethnographic material, sometimes written in a guide-book style). Because of that, the social problems that haunt the country are touched in Gitaa’s first novel not as deeply as in her subsequent ones. Her later novels, however, focus on social criticism and the analysis of the topical problems of modern Kenya, from the ones affecting the entire society – such as poverty, corruption, terrorism, dependency on foreign powers, corruption and injustices of the legal system – to specific female-related problems;

*Shifting Sands* (2012) investigates the ills of modern Kenyan society through the lives of four female characters. Although their lives are intertwined from the childhood years, they all bear different backgrounds – Kemu and Myra are Kenyan Africans, while Shilpa is third-generation Kenyan-Indian, and Latifah is third-generation Kenyan-Arab. Despite their close friendship during their school years in Mombasa, in the end they go separate ways – Kemu, a divorced single mother, makes her living from odd jobs; Shilpa, after an unsuccessful love affair with a Kenyan navy officer of an African origin, is hastily married off to India; Latifah, after the imprisonment of her husband on accusation of being a terrorist, flees to oblivion on Lamu; Myra prefers her training as a marine biologist to drug trafficking and finally dies of AIDS.

*Hila* (2014) tells the story of the eponymous main character, who, judging by her name (which in Swahili means “trickery, machination”), may well be suspected to be the villainous figure in the story. But contrary to that, Hila is rather a victim – she is in fact a young single mother, who works for a meager salary of a cashier in a Mombasa casino, desperately struggling to make ends meet. Her boyfriend and occasional “sponsor”, a petty crook called Njoroo, one day offers her to participate in “something real” – an organized bank robbery, which, if successful, will end her poverty for good. The plan proves to be effective – the gang manages to steal sixty million shillings and get away with it. This, however, does not bring Hila the enormous riches that she was dreaming of; she is awarded, according to her understanding, in a higher manner – a young bank teller Richard, who also partook in the plan, becomes her prospective husband.

The short novel *Shark Attack* (2017) speaks about the trying time in the life of three Mombasa youngsters, Kadzo, Kenga and Issa, who are hired by the local drug dealer as couriers, which puts their lives into danger, but they are spared through the intervention of their relatives and friends assisted by the state bodies. Kadzo and her brother Kenga, who were driven into drug-trafficking by poverty, later join their efforts with the police force in fighting the drug peddling. At the same time, Issa, who comes from a rich and affluent family – his father is a medical doctor, and his mother a lawyer – does not give up the ruinous habit, and ends up in drug rehab

As noted above, Gitaa’s novels highlight a lot of problems that torment Kenyan society in general, and Kenyan females, especially young ones, in particular. The latter problems, as reflected by Moraa Gitaa, will be analyzed in this paper, using the material from the four novels of hers. This analysis will largely be informed by the sociological approach to literature, with its regard of the writer as both a creature and a creator of society, and literature as both a social

product and a social force, which reflects and at the same time influences the socio-cultural milieu – and thus may and does enhance changes in the social mentality and practice.

### **Female genital mutilation**

This “rite of passage”, which the author describes as an “injustice society metes out on individuals”, ruins a lot of female lives at a very early stage. Kemunto, the heroine of *Shifting Sands*, is no exception. One of the first chapters of the novel features a heart-rending description of excruciating pain that the girl goes through, as well as other aspects of the infamous ceremony, which, as it turns out, will have a profound impact on Kemu’s entire life. “In later years I came to learn that what I have undergone was called Female Genital Mutilation, or FGM... Only later would I reflect on this event and realize the profound effect it was going to have on my life, starting from my schoolwork... I had always been a vivacious, daring and outgoing girl, but something had now happened to me. I was different. Changed. Withdrawn” (27-8). Later, FGM also contributes greatly to ruining Kemu’s marriage to a young man named Maxi: “In the end, I decided to be totally honest with Maxi, and told him that sexually I felt nothing because of the FGM I had undergone To me, FGM is an injustice society metes out on individuals while presenting the injuries as beneficial to the victim. How have I profited when a pleasure-giving and joy-receiving part of my body was cut from between my legs and buried in a tea plantation? [...] After my confession, things were never the same between me and my daughter’s dad” (66-7). Eventually, their marriage ends in separation, introducing Kemu to the “joys” of single motherhood.

In her debut novel, Gitaa does not indicate how Lavina, the heroine, managed to avoid FGM (bearing in mind that she, as Kemu in *Shifting Sands*, comes from a rather typical Kericho family) – but apparently this very lucky occurrence in her life gives a powerful boost to her love relationship with Giorgio. “He was taking her to heaven and beyond. [...] If she thought she had seen heaven before, she now knew she had only glimpsed a far horizon, because with him, for the first time in her life, she felt a complete woman [...] With him, each time was like their first time together. Rediscovering over and over again” (217). As put by Japeth Muindu, “the novel [...] graphically depicts sex as what love entails. Lavina falls in love and rediscovers her sexuality” (44). Had Lavina, as her unfortunate sister heroine in *Shifting Sands*, fallen victim to genital mutilation, such rebirth of her love and sexuality would have hardly been possible.

### **Male dominance in the family**

The age-old tradition of putting the father figure as an unquestionable authority – in fact, the owner of the fates and sometimes even lives of other family members – had also exerted a profound effect on the heroines in Gitaa’s novels, starting from her debut one, in which Lavina suffers the first blow in her young life when her father interdicts her from home after becoming aware of Lavina’s love affair with a local businessman of Indian origin. As Lavina confesses, “my family was very disappointed with the relationship and my dad actually cut me off from his will and said that I was persona-non-grata in any of the family residences and farms” (194). Fortunately, in the end Lavina reconciles with her indignant parent. “Her father strolled out and stared at her for a long while. They had not talked for over a year now, let alone meet face to face! Lavina took the first diffident step and stretched her hands towards him. “My baby! I’m sorry for being such an idiot.” [...] Lavina could not believe that her father has just apologized to her for shunning her and ostracizing her from the family” (232).

The role of father in the lives of the heroines of *Shifting Sands* was even less inspiring. Kemunto, the main character and the narrator of the novel, spent her adolescent years in constant stress due to the strife between her parents. “I was twelve years old, and I did not know what the fights were about, but I soon learned [...] Our father had a mistress. He was supporting her, and they even had a child. My life became hell [...] listening for Dad’s car in the driveway and then waiting for the fight to start” (51-3). Kemu’s stress grew to the point when mother even had to take her to psychiatrist, which proved a failure. “How could I tell him how I averted a dozen fatal tragedies in as many formative years? I looked at the doctor, and the tears slowly streamed down my cheeks. I never told him anything, and he eventually gave up” (56).

Myra, Kemu’s best friend, in her parental home faced a similar situation. “Myra grew up seeing her Meru father – who was jobless most of the time – put down her civil servant mother, who toiled hard as a copy typist. Not in many words but by show of proverbs, especially when he was drunk. [...] Sometimes I would be present when Myra’s drunken papa would tell her mama that “the neck cannot come above the head” or “women are destructive”, despite Myra’s mama being the sole bread winner at times. As we grew older, we were to notice how men would use such proverbs in the subjugation of women or to portray women as people with no identity. [...] Just like in my family in my formative years, Myra’s parents did not go to church and were always fighting. It got worse when her mama discovered that her husband had another wife at his rural home” (34-5).

Latifah, Kemu's and Myra's friend from a Muslim family, soaked the idea of male superiority through her very upbringing. "Every time we were at their place, it always seemed like Latifah was being taught to be submissive. [...] Her ma and shangazis taught here that girls are supposed to get married and have babies. [...] Her elder shangazi on her ma's side never ceased to tell her that a wife is to be submissive to her husband in all aspects. She constantly told her that brimstone and hell fire will consume her if she did not follow the directives. [...] Latifah once shared with us that all the women in her life hid their emotions behind the veil [...] She was taught to lead an obscure life. She could not talk. She was only to be seen, not heard. She was taught that men were supposed to only see the clothes she mended, food she cooked and sons she bore. And never any mention of bearing daughters, as if it was an abomination! [...] She grew up avoiding normal things that girls of other fates had. [...] I wondered if Latifah's baba would ever allow her to pursue the dentistry course she so dreamed of" (46-7). In the footnote, however, the author makes a reservation that "this type of behaviour is not an Islamic view, but more of a culture influenced mind-set specific to most Muslim families in Mombasa" (46). In any case, this "culture influenced mind-set" finally ruined Latifah's life – being married off by the choice of her father, and never even thinking of putting questions to her spouse, she became involved in a terrorist plot, which led to her husband's life imprisonment. "I could not help but feel that we lost Latifah psychologically. I was proven right months later when she became withdrawn, disappeared to Lamu and forgot all about pursuing her dentistry course" (247).

Father of Shilpa, the Indian-origin classmate and friend of Kemu, Myra and Latifah, also played a destructive role in his daughter's life; but his decision to marry his daughter off to India was, as in Lavina's case, driven by another potent social ill – ethnic intolerance, which we will discuss in the section below.

Father figures in *Shark Attack* are also far from being ideal – although they are not interfering directly into the lives of their children, they also do nothing to protect them from the evils surrounding them. As was put by one of the positive characters in the book, Dr. Otieno, "most families are enablers and supporters. [...] They enable their children's addictions by pretending that there is nothing wrong with them. An example is when a parent who is not well-off does not question the kids when they come home with expensive toys" (15). That was exactly the case of the families described in the novel – a poor fisherman Karisa, father of Kadzo and Kenga, comforted himself with thoughts that his children bought the expensive speed-boat (which they used for drug trafficking) for the money that they earned working as bait boy and girl for a rich

Italian. Likewise, Dr. Abdul, father of Issa, confesses to his son: “I really blame myself because your sister tried to warn us that you were not yourself but we wouldn’t listen to her” (23).

### **Male dominance in the workplace**

As fathers are depicted in Gitaa’s novels as sole rulers of their children’s lives at home, the same role is played by male bosses of her characters in the workplace. The only bright figure in this row of villains is the character of Tom in Gitaa’s first novel. Occupying the high post of the mayor of Mombasa, Tom is the person of upright morals, he dearly loves his European wife and mixed-race daughter, helps Lavina up to the level of giving her shelter in their home, and sides with her sweetheart Giorgio in joint effort to improve the life of the local community.

Male boss figures in other novels look as if they were made using the same gauge – they are lustful, cruel, mean and sometimes stupid tyrants. The episodes featuring these characters in the novels look almost similar – they are treating their female subordinates nearly as slaves, demanding favours (primarily sexual) for any “good office” on their part or even without it. Kemu from *Shifting Sands* had several male bosses in her life, of different origins – both Africans and expatriates – but with almost identical behaviour.

The first one, Mr. Kamwanthe, a senior bank manager, lured her to a post of the office assistant, which soon started to mean personal services. “The following day he asked me to serve him. Then he was at it again the next day, and the next. ‘I like it when you serve me. It is an African thing for a lady to do. That is the problem with you ladies of this generation’ (98). Soon he declares his feelings to her: “I asked him, ‘Do you need anything more, sir?’ ‘Just you, Kemu. I fell in love with you the minute I saw you.’ It became a refrain, like a scratched CD. I could not avoid or escape that” (99). He starts to follow her home, knowing that this involves no penalty (“I had tried talking to the ladies who had gone through such experiences. I found out that most succumbed to the pressure or quit their jobs [...] My take on the whole issue is that in Kenya, sexual harassment is not recognized explicitly” – 106-7). It all ended up in open sexual assault: “The next minute he grabbed me by the waist and turned me around. I struggled but only burned my hand on the electric hotplate which I had earlier switched on, as he was trying to kiss me forcefully. In the process, we knocked over one of the china cups from the shelf, and it crashed on the table in smithereens [...] A piece of broken china cut into my arm, and the blood gushed out. I kicked at his shins and kneed him in the groin. He let go and crashed headlong into the

door. Patrick, the junior officer, came to check, as the door crashed open. When he saw Mr.Kamwanthe picking himself from the pieces of china on the floor, Patrick pretended to come for a glass of water. I walked past both of them and told Rupti that I had hurt myself and was going to the hospital” (107). Some time later, Kemuntho resigned.

Two other bosses of Kemu were not much different from Mr.Kamwanthe. “[Should I tell] How we had gotten a worse ‘expat’ security manager, who would not increase my salary after I refused to go out with him, [...] and then tried to force himself on me sexually? Should I tell how I had to put my foot out, jamming the door and screaming for the security personnel? How he then started to hate me and refused to give me my increment, [...] and stated deducting money from my salary every month, claiming my computer entries showed shortage of money? The same trick he had used to land me in police custody. [...] Or how I walked out of a new job after the first two months because the married boss started talking of trips and that I was supposed to accompany him? How I kept breaking into tears by the end of a temporary job with no other in sight?” (159).

Kemu’s last male superior, an expatriate of Swedish origin, was only “larger in scale” in terms of his crimes and riches – but demonstrated the same staggish behaviour. “I was openly being asked to cook up figures that would convince external auditors that my boss’ firm was clean. [...] Whenever I refused to cook figures, others would do the boss’ bidding” (300). “From asking me to cook figures, my boss degenerated into a worse pastime of pestering me to become his woman” (305). Making a sexual advance at her in his home – where he lured her on the pretext of “helping in inventarisation” – was the last drop. “I stared at him and replied as always. “And I have told you time and again that I do not want you,” infuriating him further” (307). “Once back in the office he fired me [...] In his office on that last day, he looked at me and said that he would give me a hard time with labour officials if I dare take him to court and charge with wrongful dismissal. [...] He said that he was about to become a citizen and that I had dare not ruin that chance for him. He told me that my intelligence would not get me anywhere in Kenya, and ordered me to leave the premises [...] He gave me my summary dismissal letter. Barely two hours later, he went to the bank to withdraw his millions. He usually kept the money in a safe in his office to use as bribes on the police and government officials seeking handouts. As usual, he went to the golf club with his briefcase in the trunk of his four-wheel gazzler. Gangsters struck at the club brandishing guns. They only targeted him and took his keys from him, and drove off with his car, his briefcase of money and his original documents. [...] It looked like God’s hand at



play. Earlier he had fired me, did not pay me my dues, but lost much more in the robbery. He later said that he had never been robbed in the twenty years that he had been in Kenya and that it was like God telling him that he had been unfair to me. He called me and asked me to go back to work for him, but I refused. What a pervert” (309-10). Kemu becomes even more assured of divine intervention when some years later she learns about his bankruptcy and untimely death. “Some people say it was a cocaine overdose, others – a heart attack, and even AIDS” (311).

Poor young casino teller Hila, the main character of the eponymous novel, faced the same fate. “Her long promised, long-overdue increment has been delayed for months. When she went to talk to her immediate boss about it, all she got was lewd sexual advances and threats. One morning he had called her to his office to collect the day’s float and had tried to come on to her, even going as far as touching her breasts. She had put her foot in the doorway, jamming it and screaming for security personnel. She knew there was no point in reporting it as an attempted rape case. Everyone knew what happened in the courts. The victim became the accused. Of course her boss started to hate her from that day. She never got the increment. Newer employees were promoted over her, all of whom, of course, were female [...] Hila realised that unless she gives in to his demands, there would be no increment, no promotion, nothing. All because she tried to stand for herself. [...] She was being frustrated by her boss because she wanted to follow an honest path” (5-6).

### **Ethnic intolerance in various aspects**

Ethnic and racial intolerance in various spheres and on various levels are dealt with in every novel by Gitaa, starting with her debut one. In fact, the very plot of *Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* revolves around the love relationship between an African woman and European man – the relationship which, already complicated by Lavina’s illness (which fortunately is cured in the end), was further aggravated by the resistance of the lovers’ relatives. Lavina’s father already, as was mentioned above, ostracized her from the family because of her previous love affair with an Indian businessman Rawal; it is worth noticing that Rawal, on his part, declines Lavina’s marriage proposal on the pretext that his Asian family will never agree with him marrying an African. In the case of Giorgio, he suspects that his Italian relatives would also not be fascinated with his prospective marriage to a Kenyan girl. “He thought of his mother back in Italy. What would she think if she knew that he was contemplating marrying a foreigner?”

For that matter an African? A Kenyan? He mentally pictured his old *madre*'s face as she ticked on her fingers asking in rapid Italian, 'My good child! Is she of good breeding? Good behaviour? Good Christian? Good character? Good citizen? Good disposition? Good influence on you?' (34). His suspicions turn out to be not too rootless – in one of the most passionate episodes in the novel, when Giorgio and Lavina are trying to sort out their relationship, he reminds her of the difficulties that he had with his home-folk. "My family back in Italy are still in shock, they still don't believe that I've finally made up my mind to marry and settle down here... they call me a *lunatico*, that the tropical winds of this *paradiso* have gone to my head [...] and that I'll soon get over it. They thought that I would marry Gabriella, [...] but I've disappointed them. Are you still question my love...?" (215). Quite fortunately, in the end the case is settled happily – which can hardly be said about the heroines of other Gitaa's novels, whose lives are deeply influenced, and sometimes ruined, by ethnic and racial conflicts.

The heroines of *Shifting Sands* were faced with ethnic strife from the early childhood, even within the families. One of the reasons why Myra's parents are constantly fighting is that "Her parents were from different ethnic communities, Her mama was a Kikuyu and very hardworking despite her [Meru] husband's lack of support" (34).

Shilpa, the Indian-origin member of the quartet, is the one to suffer from racial intolerance most bitterly. At a party she meets a young naval officer Victor, a Kenyan of African origin. The young people fall in love, and decide to get married. However, Shilpa's parents harshly oppose her choice. Her father "was so shocked that he even forbade her to see Victor. He told Shilpa that she, being their only child, had disappointed him and had dishonoured her family by dating Victor. Shilpa, in turn, told her papaji that his attitude towards Vic was a kind of xenophobia dishonouring mankind! She asked him why he was applying double standards in judging Vic, yet they had taught her that a passage in the Bhagavad Gita instructs them to know the people around them? [...] The majority of customers in their fabric and spices shop in the Old town were black Africans. She could not understand their hypocrisy" (199). Characteristic are the comments given by the members of the local Indian community: "Her other Indian friends gave her mother the 'we told you so' look, which said albeit silently, 'look what her African and Arab girlfriends have gotten her into!'" (200).

When Victor, with the last desperate hope to save the situation, comes to Shilpa's home to talk with her parents, the things get even worse. "One day we went to pick her up at her home, and Victor decided to accompany us in order to try and break the ice with her parents. Her mamaji

[...] had screamed at Victor to get out and not to shame her daughter [...] Shilpa's papaji had shouted that his daughter will marry an African man over his dead body. He had screamed that he did not want chotara grandchildren, [...] and asked him not to ever come to their house again, because his presence was certainly not welcome. He instructed the watchman never to open the gate for him [...] I think it was the first time Shilpa encountered racial perceptions and racial prejudice as a reality and not a myth" ( 200). In the end, her architecture course is cut short, and she is sent to her relatives in Mumbai, where her aunt would arrange for her the marriage "to a nice Indian guy with no stains, whose generation they will investigate to their second generation" (215). The chapter ends with Shilpa's letter, which she sends to her friends from India, full of bitter comments and lamentations: "Between me and you, I could not care less what colour, creed, caste or race my husband comes from so long as I am in love... For Victor and me, tradition cut away the frayed hope of a hopeless love that tied us together" (215-17).

Elizabeth Mukutu in her dissertation notes that in Gitaa's novels the characters (at least try to – AR) "establish these cross ethnic/racial relationships based on mutual consent, romance and intimacy. They consciously seek friendship with people from different communities rather than those from their own community." However, her study also "suggests that these relationships still have problems because politics, gender relationships, cultural stereotypes and sociological boundaries arising from historical forces indirectly influence the perception about these relationships". Nevertheless, Mukutu concludes that "despite these problems contemporary postcolonial Kenya is moving towards becoming more tolerant and accommodating to people who are regarded as different" (i). We tend to concur with the researcher – although the above described problems are really difficult to uproot, but the tendency towards the tolerance is nevertheless obvious.

## **HIV/AIDS**

This problem can definitely not be defined as "specifically female", for it is gnawing the entire Kenyan society (and, in fact, it is one of the burning issues in contemporary world). However, Gitaa's novels demonstrate the societal attitude to the females with regard to the disease – and it can be seen that women are usually given a negative role, sometimes as "initiators" or "spreaders", and almost inevitably are treated as "disposable material". Lavina in *Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* contracts HIV as a result of her love affair with Rawal. She finds it

out incidentally, for at the hospital where she works the personnel is subjected to regular mandatory tests. “From then on, every aspect of my life took a downhill turn, and I decided to confront Rawal at his office. When I informed him that he had infected me with the virus, his coolly impolite and impersonal countenance proved that my accusation was justified. He neither accepted nor denied my allegations. He ordered me out of his office and told the security officers that I should never be allowed to step into the premises again. I was reeling with shock, but I knew that there was nothing I could do. I would have said that I was going to sue him at the court, but still I would need proof” (198).

Kemu in *Shifting Sands* tells an even more terrifying story about a man who were pressing sexual favours from women, being aware of his positive HIV status – if he is going to die, at least he would take his pleasure, and women’s life does not matter. “ I remember how a neighbour friend had lost her receptionist job. [...] One evening she came to my place and told me that she had gotten a job offer as a telephonist, but she was not very comfortable with it, since the salary [...] was almost double a regular rate! So she told me to go check out the prospective employer and ask for a job and then [...] give her feedback.

The following morning I went to the bureau. On the wall there was a sticker that proclaimed “no job without sex”. I thought it was a sick joke. I found that Indian gentleman. He looked sick, he had sores all over the face. I enquired about the telephonist vacancy, he interviewed me and offered me a job. [...] Then he said I would have to work odd hours. His next comment started the warning bells ringing in my head. “I don’t want to hear about children. You said you stay alone but with your child, how then will I get other favours?” [...] I did not even answer him. I picked up my papers hurriedly and tumbled out of the bureau. [...] Later, I linked up with my friend. She shocked me saying, “So she tried that on you too? I just wanted a confirmation”. [...]

After a month my neighbour moved out and we lost contact, meeting two years later in the streets of Mombasa. [...] I could barely recognize her, because she had lost so much weight [...] She did not have a job again [...] She was coughing terribly, but would insist she was not sick. [...] All I said was, “Oh, my God! After we parted ways, did you go and work at that Indian’s telephone bureau?” She looked at me with tears in her eyes and nodded barely noticeably. That was the last time I saw her” (161-3).

In the same novel, another case of the same disaster befalls Myra, one of the primary characters. An educated and prosperous woman, she meets a rich German businessman, they become a

married couple, he seems to love Myra as much as buying a personal island for her – until one day she discovers that she is HIV-positive, and the only source of the contamination could be her dear husband. Symbolically, Myra perishes of AIDS – but her husband, who is allegedly only the bearer of the virus, attends her funeral in a good health condition. We believe that this also confirms our above statement – women, no matter how educated and refined, are still treated as disposable material by the males, to whom female lives do not matter.

### **Drug trafficking and addiction**

This, again, is a burning problem not only for Kenyan women, and not only for Kenya. However, as it is known, and emphasized by the author in an interview, the coastal region of the country is especially known for drug abuse and trafficking. It would be difficult to say that drug-related problems have different effects on men and women – they are equally destructive for everyone. All Gitaa's novels touch upon this issue in this or that way, but in two of them she gives picturesque examples how drugs ruined the lives of women characters – moreover, the characters coming from very different, in fact opposite, social backgrounds.

As mentioned above, drug-related problems are the main focus in *Shark Attack*, where the author traces their ruinous effects on the lives of the three Mombasa youths. However, of the three it is the girl Kadzo who suffers most – during their escape from the boat of their drug boss, known as Big Man, she is attacked by a shark and loses her leg. Later in the hospital she confesses to the police inspector: “Despite the fact that being a top girl in my class guarantees me a bursary from our community, that does not provide pocket money or sanitary pads for me. So isn't Big Man's quick and easy money better than spending a whole Saturday with Baba from dawn to dusk, trying to fish, which rarely brings success?” (38). Kadzo's case, though, is a happy one – Kadzo, her brother Kenga and Inspector Korir join forces against the drug cartel, Kadzo is awarded the Head of State Commendation, and has a chance to read her essay on effects of drugs entitled “The Kenya I do not want to live in”.

A somewhat opposite example is given by Myra, one of the four primary characters in *Shifting Sands*. According to Kemu, the narrator, “because she loved the sea so much, she wanted to be a marine biologist [...] She believed the profession was one of the best paying and would get her in the world of the elite” (35). Following her dream, Myra indeed managed to complete her marine biology course, and when after a period of parting Kemu meets her on a Mombasa street,

the fact that she successfully made her way to the world of the elite leaves no doubt – Myra drives a luxurious car and throws for their lunch at a restaurant an amount equal to Kemu’s salary. As it turns out, Myra obtained her prosperity not in the scientific field, but as a member of a drug trafficking syndicate, which she offers Kemu to join. Appalled, Kemu asks: “Myra, do you ever stop to think of what these drugs have done to the Kenyan youth?” To which Myra replies cynically: “Listen to you, Kemu! Will you please stop being silly? Stop focusing on other people and start thinking about yourself and your child for a change [...] You better think twice, and please do not start on me with that guilt-trip stuff! If you continue behaving this way, you’ll remain poor in Kenya for the rest of your life” (288-9). Kemu resolutely refuses, and with the last desperate thought – “Who was this stranger in my friend’s body?” – leaves her, only to meet her again during the last months of Myra’s life, and nurse her way to the deathbed and beyond.

The above stories of the two characters, given in two novels of Gitaa, lift only slightly the veil over the complicated issue of drug-related problems in the country. On the one hand, millions of youth of poor backgrounds, like Kadzo and her brother, are brought into the drug industry by raving poverty and their youthful unstable and inexperienced minds. On the other – educated people, like Myra, are seeking for quick riches and a luxurious life, consciously disregarding the harm that they inflict on their people. The result largely is one – they are used by their drug bosses, and face an ignominious end – unless, as in Kadzo’s case, they listen to the voice of reason. That seems to be the message that Gitaa tries to put into her reader’s minds.

## **Conclusion**

Wanjiku Kabira, a prominent Kenyan female scholar and writer, in her foreword to *Shifting Sands* wrote: “Gitaa walks on the path of all those women writers who are redefining the women’s space, naming the world for themselves and their societies” [1: xvi]. Gitaa is really trying to redefine the existing social relationship and the place of women in the society, by painting the picture of the trials and tribulations that most of the Kenyan women have to face, and by sharing with the reader her own views how these problems could potentially – or even actually – be solved, and provoking the readers towards their own contemplations of these problems. It should be pointed out especially, that Gitaa’s works are notable not only as an example of social criticism in literature, but also as inspirational texts for young readers, since the problems they tackle are typical of the lives of many young Kenyan females. By dealing with

these problems, and showing certain solutions, Gitaa is telling her readers – and especially young females - that an independent, self-reliant and equal status of women is also achievable against all odds, although the obstacles on that path are many, from obsolete cultural practices to modernity-generated ills. The works of this type, which are currently forming a tangible trend in Kenyan women’s literature – suffice it to recall the novels of Florence Mbaya, shorter texts by Renatta Chepkoskei, Florence Kirianki, Diana Gitau, Kingwa Kamencu, Pasomi Mucha, Carol Kairo and other authors – are readily accepted by the young readers (some of them are used by schools as set books), and, quoting the words of Kemu from *Shifting Sands*, will surely “contribute to the betterment of our country”.

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