

DEPICTION OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION IN KENYAN SWAHILI WOMEN'S PROSE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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Abstract

The article analyzes how the problems of Kenyan younger generation are depicted in the recently emerged women's literature in Swahili, giving an overview of both larger prosaic genres, such as novel, and shorter prose, which is currently favored by the majority of Kenyan women authors of Swahili expression. Using the works of both well-established and aspiring writers, the article shows how they outline the host of problems facing the young Kenyans – such as the abuse of the girl child's rights, drug addiction, adolescent crime, etc. – thus sensitizing their readers, especially younger ones, to these social ills, and proposing certain ways to mitigate them.

Keywords: Kenyan literature, Swahili literature, women's literature, younger generation

This article, as reflected in its title, deals with a rather special stratum of contemporary Kenyan writing – women's literature in Swahili. This literature is notable for several reasons. First, it emerged as a trend only in this century – in the previous decades, Kenyan Swahili writing featured only two women authors, playwrights Ari Katini Mwachofi and Sarah Mwangudza (each wrote one play). Second, while the current century has presented a larger number of women writers of Swahili expression, most of these authors demonstrate the preference for smaller prosaic forms, such as the short story and the novella. Novel writing in Kenyan women's literature in Swahili is currently represented by only a few texts, namely *Tumaini* (2006) and *Nakuruto* (2009) by Clara Momanyi, *Dago wa Munje* (2008) by Sheila Ryanga, and *Chози la heri* (2014) by Assumpta Matei. Three of these novels (with the exception of *Nakuruto*, which is a historical-allegorical novel) deal to a varied extent with problems of the younger generation;

this theme is also one of the main preferences in Swahili short stories by women writers. Thus, the depiction of these problems in the works of female Swahili-medium authors from Kenya was chosen as the topic for this paper.

The most remarkable text among the ones listed above is *Tumaini* (Hope, 2006) by Clara Momanyi. The novel is set in the coastal area of Kenya and centers on a young girl, Tumaini. “Her father, Mzee Masumbuko, wants her married off while still at primary school rather than seeing her continue with her education; her mother, Bi. Amina, seems resigned to the patriarchal ethos symbolized by her irrational and selfish husband. Tumaini, however, does not want to give in to her father’s wishes. She runs away from home to her aunt’s place. Her aunt, Bi. Halima has devoted her life to agitating for change and to liberating young girls from the shackles of tradition and demeaning rites like female circumcision. This puts her on a collision course with Masumbuko, who is prepared to do anything to satisfy his egoistic desires. Bi Halima and her husband are however determined to support young Tumaini in her education. Tumaini excels in her primary exams and wins a government scholarship, despite attempts by her father and the vengeful local Chief Andrea, who sides with her father, to deny her the award. Chief Andrea’s wish for revenge stems from the time when Tumaini, briefly employed by him as a house-help, rejected his lecherous advances; and also, during the same period, the Chief’s son, Majuto, a miscreant and a delinquent, attempted to rape Tumaini. His father initially succeeds in saving him from arrest, but Majuto is eventually imprisoned. Chief Andrea has been entrusted with the task of compiling a list of needy children in his area, which he tries to manipulate, maliciously eradicating Tumaini’s name. However, Tumaini courageously confronts the vetting board headed by the District Commissioner, who overturns Chief Andrea’s short list. The story ends with Tumaini going to university to pursue a medical degree, and realize her dream, allegorically captured by her name” (Bertoncini et al. 2009:460).

As could be seen even from this brief narration of the plot, the central theme of the novel is empowerment, especially that of the girl child. Two central characters – Tumaini and her aunt Halima – stand as two equally powerful embodiments of the feministic ideas of the book. They in fact epitomise two generations of feminists, and thus, despite their difference in age and life experience, hold very similar views on the issues related to the rearing and the future of a girl child, and women’s choices and perspectives. This is how Bi Halima formulates her vision of Tumaini’s life:

Mama mdogo wake alimshika kwa bega na kumwambia, “Nafahamu una wasiwasi mwingi kuhusu hatua atakayochukua babako. Nataka kukujulisha kuwa hapa ni kwenu pia. Utaishi na kusoma ukiwa hapa. Hutalazimishwa kutahiriwa wala kuolewa ukiwa hapa. Mimi na babako mdogo tuliyazingumza haya hapo awali. Tuliafikiana kuwa endapo babako atakufukuza nyumbani kutokana na msimamo wako, utakaa hapa nasi. Tutakusomesha kama tulivyomesha binti yetu Riziki, na hutapungukiwa na chochote hapa. Mimi mamako mdogo nakuhakikishia haya, kwa hivyo usihofu vitisho vya babako (30).

“Her aunt held her by the shoulder and told her, “I know you have a lot of worries about the steps that your father took. I would like to inform you that here is your place as well. You will study while you are here. You will not be forced to get circumcised or married while you are here. Me and your uncle have already discussed this before. We agreed that if your father expels you from home because of your stand, you will stay here with us. We will educate you, as we are educating our daughter Riziki, and you will not be denied anything here. I, your aunt, am assuring you of this, so do not fear threats of your father” *(all translations from Swahili are mine – MG)*.

The views of Bi Halima, who at one point was even the member of the delegation of Kenyan women to the International Women’s Congress in Beijing, all throughout the novel are echoed by her niece Tumaini. As an example, Tumaini tries to inspire her female classmates:

Tumaini aliwatazama wenziwe na bila kuwaficha, alitamka, “Mwajua babangu mdogo aliniambia kuwa wanafunzi wa kike kama kawaida hawapendi masomo ya sayansi. Lakini akaniambia pia kuwa sio ati hawawezi kufaulu, bali wanaamini tu kamba hawatafaulu kabisa. Hivi ndivyo nyinyi sasa mnavyodhania. Mkiamini kuwa masomo haya ni ya wavulana peke yao, ndivyo itakavyokuwa. Lakini mkiamini kwa dhati kuwa sayansi siyo masomo yaliyotengwa wavulana pekee, bila shaka mtafaulu. Hivi nivyo ninavyoamini (24).

“Tumaini looked at her friends and without concealing, told them: “You know my uncle told me that female students usually do not like lessons of science. But he also told me that it is not as if they can not succeed, only they believe that they will not succeed no matter what. This is exactly what you think. If you believe that these lessons are for boys only, it will be so. But if you believe sincerely that sciences are not reserved only for boys, no doubt you will succeed. That is what I believe in” (24).

As also could be seen from the passage above, the male characters of the novel are supported in their feministic stand by their male counterparts – Halima by her husband, Tumaini’s uncle Shabani, and Tumaini herself by her classmate Sifa. However, when Sifa after their school graduation comes to woo Tumaini, she also straightforwardly declares her views on marriage:

No, Sifa, I am sorry. Tuzidi kuwa marafiki kama kawaida, lakini kwangu mimi ndoa si mwisho wa kila kitu. [...] Mimi nataka muda zaidi ili nijijue mimi ni nani, na uwezo wangu maishani ni upi. Sipendi kuwategemea watu wengine waniamulie hatima zangu. I want to shape my own destiny (136).

“No, Sifa, I am sorry. Let us remain friends as usual, but for me marriage is not the end of everything. [...] I want more time so as I know who I am, and what my ability in life is. I do not like other people to make conclusions for me. I want to shape my own destiny.”

In the novel’s last chapter, Tumaini has a dream, in which she is climbing a big mountain, on whose top there is a forest full of trees with fruits. There are two groups of people at the mountain’s bottom, one group encourages her, the other curses her. In the end, she makes it to the top.

In a rather similar way, the problems of the Kenyan youth – especially young girls – are depicted in the debut novel by Sheila Ryanga, titled *Dago wa Munje* (2008). The novel is centred on the story of a male character, a school boy Dago from the small village of Munje in the coastal Kenya, who in the course of the book grows from a lazy and scatter-brained boy into a person of courage and concentration. However, a prominent place in the novel is taken by the characters of his sisters - Nchimoni and Swafiya.

Nchimoni is the family’s role-model – she joined the school one year late, and generally it was a lucky chance for her, for in their community the education of a girl child was traditionally considered useless, but the parents took heed of her thirst to study. Nchimoni, an exemplary student and a girl of high moral standards, after getting the best results at the final exams got a place at the secondary school – but because of parents being unable to pay the fees, she joined the courses of nursery school teachers, paid by the county government, and became a teacher at a nursery school in Mombasa; she supports her family and the education of her junior siblings.

Nchimoni's junior sister Swafiya, a quiet, focused and hardworking girl, had nevertheless become a family's headache – she got expelled from school because of pregnancy. However, her parents do not see it as an impediment – after delivery they are determined to send her back to school. All the successes and hopes that permeate the lives of the children in Dago's family became possible because of the firm stand of their mother, which she vocalises in relation to her second daughter's pregnancy:

Kama Swafiya hakukata tamaa ya kusoma na kumaliza shule, hata mimi sitakata tamaa kwamba siku moja msichana huyu atainua familia yetu. Dadake pia atamsaidia kupata nafasi ya kuendelea na kozi mbalimbali. [...] Ni nani aliyesema wasichana si watoto? Anayemzaa mvulana ndiye anayemzaa msichana." Alijiruhusu kudadisi mila za jamii zinazopitisha mbele thamani ya watoto wavulana. [...] "Lau kama mwanangu wa kiume angejibidisha kama dada zake. Mafanikio yetu yangukuwa makubwa si haba! (112-13).

"If Swafiya did not give up the idea of studying and finishing school, even I will not give up [the hope] that one day this girl will evolve our family. Her sister also will assist her to get a chance to go on with different courses. [...] Who said that girls are not children? Who gives birth to a boy is the same one who gives birth to a girl." She even allowed herself to question society's traditions which valued the male children more. [...] "If only my son were as diligent as his sisters. Our achievements would be great!"

It is also notable that in her efforts she is fully supported by her husband, a petty labourer, who also encourages his children to put more effort in their studies, in order to improve their lives, their family and their community.

It could rather easily be noticed, that in these books the authors paint an ideal picture of an ideal behaviour of the characters in the described situations – how the problems addressed should be treated from the humanistic viewpoint, thus giving an example of such an ideal behaviour to the readers. However, in real life people more frequently behave in a different way. A realistic and critical picture of such behaviour is given in the third novel that I would like to mention – *Chozila Heri* (Teardrop of luck, 2014) by Assumpta Matei. This novel, set in an unnamed African country, which is suffering from the aftermath of a civil war, depicts the various situations in a more realistic manner. In this book, for example, a schoolgirl Zohala after getting pregnant in Form Two is expelled from school and thrown out of her family's house by her parents, and becomes a street kid, roaming the streets of the capital city and sniffing glue for self-comfort. Likewise, a househelp Sauna, after the death of her employer, a single father who was raising

three kids, steals the orphaned children and sells them to drug traffickers. However, even in such dehumanizing situations the author gives her characters – and the readers – some hope: Zohala is saved by charitable nuns, and even sent to school, and the stolen twins manage to set themselves free from the claws of the drug lord and establish their own successful trading business.

It appears that in the novels discussed above the authors pursue two main aims – to inform the readers about the problems described and to provide them with guidelines about dealing with these problems. It may also be assumed that Swahili literature has a very high potential in fulfilling those tasks, since it is used very widely in the Kenyan educational system. All the novels discussed in this paper were in different periods used as set books in Kenyan schools – to my knowledge, *Tumaini* and *Chizi la heri* are still in the school curriculum. Thus, the younger generation of Kenyans is being explicitly informed about those issues that their age mates and even their own future descendants may face – and are given comprehensive guidance on solving those issues.

A more diverse picture is painted in short stories. It must be noted, that of the three authors mentioned above, only Clara Momanyi maintains equal prominence as the short story writer – she has written about a dozen stories, published in several collections. Other outstanding authors in this field are Rayya Timammy, Rebecca Nandwa and Pauline Kea Kyovi; however, the list of Kenyan female short story writers of Swahili expression includes more than twenty names of other authors, who so far published one or two pieces. The stories by various authors, mentioned below, are taken from seventeen collections published in the period from 2004 to 2017. In their stories, Kenyan female writers of Swahili expression have undertaken the same main task – to sensitize their readers (presumably female and young, since many of these collections and texts are used in the school curriculum) to the problems and challenges bedeviling Kenyan youth, forming at the same time a modern social mentality with the younger generation of Kenyans.

An illustrative example can be found in the theme of school pregnancy, which remains one of the topical gender-related issues in present-day Kenyan society, and therefore is frequently treated in the works of Kenyan women writers. Highlighting different scenarios, the authors appear to share one common stand: the solution to the problem is not the stigmatization, but understanding

and tolerance. Pregnant schoolgirls, more frequently than not, should be regarded not as the abusers of social morality, but rather as victims of the existent social order.

The negative consequences of social stigmatization of a pregnant schoolchild are vividly shown in a short story *Hadaa ya Mapenzi* (Trouble of love, 2015) by Brigid Simiyu. The heroine, a schoolgirl named Natasha, is impregnated by her boyfriend, a carefree and lustful university student named Sidi. Since Natasha's school has strict rules about pregnancy, after being disclosed Natasha gets expelled. She runs to Sidi, and, contrary to a typical scenario, the young people marry. But even marriage does not offer a solution – soon after the birth of the child, a boy named Levi, Sidi starts drinking heavily, frequently disappears from home, drops out of the university, and when his wife reproaches him, he beats her. She, nevertheless, has to put up, for “since she already dropped her education, she had to turn her heart to all the hardships of marriage” (131). However, one day she is brought to the end of her tether and explains to her husband that she can bear it no more; infuriated Sidi chases her with a panga. This in fact is the story's finale – hiding in the bush not far from her house, Natasha bemoans her ruined past and her nondescript future. Marriage based on an unwanted pregnancy brings no solutions – this is the idea that the author seems to be putting across. Even after the wedding, Sidi does not give up his character of an irresponsible womanizer and drunkard (“a male is always right”); Natasha, on her part, has no alternative in life. Had she been allowed to continue with her education – most likely, her life's journey would have taken a different turn.

An opposite approach, illustrating the advantages of tolerance and understanding, is shown in the short story *Jinamizi ya Maisha* (Nightmare of life, 2007) by Catherine Ndungu. Katini, a girl from a poor family, due to her diligence and determination receives a scholarship to a prestigious high school, which, among other things, is very liberal about the boy-girl friendship. “As we arrived at school, we were told that the male students of the school close to us were our brothers. We were asked to cooperate with them in every way” (49). Katini is befriended by Wekesa, “a dream of all the girls around” (in fact, a teenage version of Sidi from the previously discussed story). Her fascination with Wekesa soon leads to pregnancy, which Wekesa claims no responsibility for. Fortunately, their “friendship” had been closely watched by Bi Rehema, the head teacher of Katini's school, who, suspecting the result, invites the girl to her house and

offers her the solution – Katini will return home, after delivery leave the baby in the custody of her mother, and return to school to complete the course. What is said is done, after the birth of a girl child Katini studies with double diligence, gets a scholarship to the university, becomes a doctor at their county hospital and one day meets her abuser Wekesa, who is pulling a *mkokoteni*.

The story features another remarkable subplot, which in fact closely resembles the previously mentioned story by Brigid Simiyu. When Katini comes home to report to her mother about her mistake, her mother’s tears are those of grief – about her daughters pregnancy, but also of joy – about her chance to go back to school. It turns out that in her teens her mum also got pregnant, was expelled from school, her abuser was forced to marry her, but soon disappeared, “and since that day I was in torture for all my life” (54). By comparing in her story the two approaches, the author offers her readers to decide, which one is better – that of stigmatization or that of tolerance. Of course the authors stand the farthest possible from encouraging teenage pregnancies – contrary to this, by describing various scenarios of irresponsible behavior of their teenage characters (both male and female) the authors warn their readers from falling into the same trap (suffice it to recall the titles – the teenage pregnancy is called “trouble of love” and “nightmare of life”). But their stories also convey the message that this mistake, bad as it is, is yet not the end of life – provided that the society treats every case with lenience and empathy.

Generally, the theme of school-age sexual relationship is rather widely treated by the short story authors – and however different the cases could be, the negative consequences are inevitable. Rebecca Nandwa in *Ningali Hai* (I am still alive, 2015) laments about the lax attitude of some young schoolgirls to their chastity. A schoolgirl Melissa, being incited by her volage friend Nina (who persuades her – “part with your elder ones, their matters of analogue era do not fit into the modern digital age... this is our time” – 168), starts her sexual life at seventeen – only to find herself in a hospital ward, sick with AIDS, abandoned by most of her friends and condemned by most of her family.

Girl characters from other stories get similar blow in their lives for more serious reasons. Tabu in Violet Atieno’s *Dawa ya Deni* (Medicine of debt, 2017) gets pregnant from her schoolteacher Fasiki – she co-habits with him for money and food, for her parents are abjectly poor. Stella from Betty Kiruja’s *Mapenzi Chungu* (Bitter love, 2011) is adopted by her uncle’s family after her

father's death – and, mistreated by her aunt and harassed by her uncle, she finds shelter only in an IDP camp, where she poses herself for a refugee in order not to return to the uncle's home.

The situations, described in the mentioned stories, are hard to solve in real life – thus the authors, probably not willing to discourage their readers, fully utilize their “right to poetic justice”, and salvage their characters through the miraculous interference. Melissa is nearly cured through the effort of diligent and charitable doctor Rogo and her sympathetic friend Chausiku (to the surprise of her relatives, who have almost buried her). Tabu's father happens to be a friend of the local senator Zuri (an example of an ideal politician), who, hearing about Tabu's trouble, not only manages to put Fasiki into prison, but, mobilizing child-protection organizations, pushes local authorities into organizing the aid project for the poor families' children – Tabu returns to school, and her younger sister is given a scholarship. Stella is delivered from the IDP camp by a sudden coming of her long-lost brother, who, leading a delinquent life as a youth, after changing his ways became an official of an international aid organization, and his appearance on the camp in this capacity leaves Stella with “a lot of thanks to God – thanks and hope” (84).

Closely related to the above-outlined theme is that of underage prostitution, namely the seduction of the young girls into it. Clara Momanyi dedicates to this topic two of her stories (*Mtandao wa ufasiki* – Network of prostitution, and *Mtumbwi wa maskini* – Canoe of a poor), published in 2011 in two different collections, with an almost similar plot – young girls and women from impoverished urban areas (in the first story – two school graduates, who sell peanuts in the streets, in the second – a young single mother), lured by the envoys (in both stories – well-off and “respectable” women) under the pretext of “good employment” into brothels on the coast or even trafficked abroad. The author clearly indicates that the main reason of the girls' credulity is their flagrant poverty, which does not leave them many chances in life, stressing at the same time the positive role of state organs (the victims in both stories are rescued by the police), and the author's belief in human virtues (on their way to salvation the heroines of both stores are helped by “good Samaritans” – the taxi driver and the fishermen respectively). Notable also is the similarity between the stories' villain figures, with a difference in gender – in the first story, the international trafficking network is headed by a cunning woman nicknamed Mama Dola (mother of dollars), in the second – a male scoundrel known as Baba Fedha (father of money).

Drug addiction and trafficking, and their influence on a younger generation, is the theme recurrent in modern Kenyan writing, including women's literature (suffice it to recall the works of Moraa Gitaa). Depicting the heart-rending consequences of the destructive habit, the authors are trying at the same time to dig down to the reasons of this plague – and these, according to the writers, are to a high extent related to the personal circumstances of the characters, mostly the children from relatively well-off stock.

Zigu from Hannah Mwaliwa's story *Peremende* (Sweets, 2007) is driven by his home-related complexes – his mother died, and father brought a new wife, who neglects Zigu – and thus Zigu decides to “pay revenge” on his classmates from more stable families. He lures two girls from his class, Migo and Resa, into tasting “very delicious sweets” stuffed with drugs (the author does not indicate where he gets the substance from), and then tries to pull the girls' unconscious bodies into the nearby bush – at which moment Resa's mother, worried by her daughter's long absence, discovers him with the help of the local chief; Zigu faces the court and gets five years of imprisonment. The message of the story is summarized in its last phrase: “Zigu's punishment was a big lesson for the youngsters who involve themselves in drugs” (106).

A similar situation, but with an even more tragic outcome, is shown by Rebecca Nandwa in *Balaa bin Belua* (Utmost calamity, 2011). Sudi, the son of a solvent single mother (who is a tailoress and a *mitumba* seller), still is depressed by his fatherless childhood; thus he starts finding consolation in chemicals, after trying (at the bidding of his mother and uncle) to receive a treatment gets threats from the drug dealers, and, fearing a torturous death at their hands, commits suicide.

Rayya Timammy in *Kuwa Mume* (To be a man, 2011) presents a much happier ending – a well-to-do family child Hemedi starts taking drugs due to peer pressure, trying to show to his schoolmates that he is willing “to be a man”. The ruinous addiction demands money – and after stealing his mother's necklace Hemedi realizes, that this is the end of the road; he contemplates suicide, but then decides that “to be a man” means sharing his troubles with his loved ones.

Pauline Kyovi in *Njugu Karanga* (Peanuts, 2011) makes an attempt to paint a portrait of a drug dealer – who also turns out to be a victim of sorts. Roda, after losing her husband in a “tribal war caused by political differences” (2), was at a young age left with three children (the last one resulting from a rape) and with no source of income. In total desperation, she tries different trades – from fruits and food to illicit brew – but this does not lift her from poverty, until certain

people, nicknamed “the Swahili from Pemba”, persuade her to sell what they call “njugu spesheli” – peanuts stuffed with drugs – to the students of local schools (which leads to several cases of suicide and insanity among these youngsters). The trade goes lively, the living standards of Roda and her children are swiftly rising, but the inevitable end comes – out of an accident she is apprehended by the police and goes to prison.

In their treatment of this lamentably recurrent topic, the authors are trying to attract the attention of the readers to the factors that contribute to the spread of drugs both on the personal level (the problems in family relations, school environment), as well as on the level of major societal ills, such as poverty and ethnic conflicts.

Ethnic conflicts, mentioned above as one of the factors contributing to poverty and related social maladies, are also treated as a separate topic in women’s short stories – for the younger people are usually among the first and foremost innocent victims of such conflicts. In their texts, the authors depict both the reasons of the conflicts – mostly caused by the rivaling politicians – and the consequences of these conflicts for those who become involved in them against their will. The lead is again taken by Clara Momanyi, who highlights this, again, lamentably topical issue in two of her stories. In *Kilinge cha Matata* (Vale of troubles, 2007) she delineates the plight of a young boy Mbaji, whose village was burned and parents (allegedly) killed during one of the ethnic incidents. Orphaned Mbaji reaches Nairobi, where he manages to escape from the modern slave traders, finds a short-lived shelter in the roadside kiosk (whose lady owner later accused him of theft, and he was nearly “necklaced” by the crowd), another one – in the home of a seemingly charitable man (who later turned him into a serf); afterwards Mbaji joins a *chokora* street gang in Parklands, that lives from theft and burglary. After long chain of other troubles, Mbaji finds his long-lost mother, who is blind and begging in the street; through the lucky interference of state bodies, she is compensated for her losses, Mbaji goes to school (the state has announced free primary education), and dreams of becoming a doctor and bring back her mother’s eyesight. The story’s moral lesson is formulated in the phrase “if we do not agree to bear our fellow’s cross, there will be no peace in this world” (75).

In *Tafrani Kambini* (Hardships in the camp, 2012) Momanyi tells a story with a similar troubled beginning and similar happy ending. The main character, a schoolgirl Nangima, also survives the burning of her village and alleged death of her father and brother, after which she and her mum remain in an improvised IDP on the village ruins. Nangima is sustained through all the horrors of camp life – shortage of food, hunger, robbery, malversations of the local officials – by the need

to help her mother and the orphaned girl, whom they adapted, and even more so – by her burning desire to continue her schooling (symbolically, fleeing from their burning home, of all her belongings she cares only of her school bag with books). She manages to organize other camp dwellers of her age, and during the visit of the division commissioner handles him their collective petition. The commissioner praises their initiative, the school equipment is delivered to the camp on the next day, parallel to this the bodies of local self-rule are organized, and the crowning of Nangima’s victory comes at the school opening festivity, when in the crowd of newcomers she recognizes her lost relatives. Again, the author sums up the story’s lesson in a well-known saying “penye nia pana njia” – where there is a will, there is a way.

A much more tragic outcome of ethnic-based violence is shown by Sheila Ambuka in *Moyo Unalia* (Heart is crying, 2015). The campus of a provincial university is attacked by the terrorists, who claim that they are defending the local indigenous people of Wanyuni against the “newcomers” Wachenza. All the students of the “wrong origin” are mercilessly killed, among them the girl Zawadi, the sweetheart of the story’s main character, the male student Bili. The terrorists are demolished by security forces, but after attending Zawadi’s funeral in her native village Bili nearly loses his mind. The story apparently alludes to the recent attacks on universities in several African countries, such as Kenya and Nigeria, and this seems to be a reason why the author calls the terrorists and their victims by imaginary names, hinting that such horrible events may potentially occur in any country of the continent.

Forced marriage and female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation - FGM) are, alas, not total anachronisms in the Kenyan society of the twenty-first century, but are rather customs practiced by certain communities, despite the serious governmental efforts to do away with them. Choosing these customs as topics for their works, the writers almost unanimously depict them as the topmost form of gender discrimination, showing the negative consequences not only for the victims (who are mostly subjected to these without their consent), but also to their family members.

An extremely tragic story is told by Doreen Otinga in *Maridhia Mama* (Amiable mother, 2015). The tribulations of Saida, the story’s main character, start when her father forces his wife, Saida’s mother, out of his house because of her claims that she wants to send their daughter to school. Afterwards, several other misfortunes befall Saida. She is forcibly circumcised and given

to an old man, Mzee Iringa, as his sixth (!) wife; accompanied by her faithful friend Maria, Saida manages to escape to the “sanctuary for the circumcision and forced marriage victims, run by a European lady Mrs. Anderson” (39). The sanctuary is attacked by the “defenders of custom”, Mrs. Anderson perishes, but the girls manage to escape again and find shelter in an UN-managed organization, which sends them abroad for studies. They pursue medicine, but their promising careers are ruined – the UN office is assaulted by local thugs, the payment stops, and both girls, armed with sufficient professional education, decide to return home, where Saida learns about the tragic fate of her younger sister Ushindi, who was given by their father to Mzee Iringa as a compensation. Ushindi fled to another girls’ sanctuary, the case was pursued by the law, father and mzee were imprisoned for one year, and after release Mzee Iringa stabbed Ushindi to death and then committed suicide. Father, old and miserable, is now left under the care of his remaining daughter Zelia – and, on Saida’s return, he tearfully repents; “father was moved by my story. The beastly heart left him, and he became humane” (45), confesses Saida in the letter to her mother at the end of the story. After all this chain of miseries, in which so many people died, Saida’s future is still uncertain – and her only vague hope again is the hand of her fellow woman, as she dreams that her mother’s return may straighten things up. “Dear Mum, everyone is missing you, and there is nothing that can not be forgiven. I pray that you come back as soon as this letter reaches you” (45).

Other writers, who treat the same theme in their works, seem to be more merciful to their heroines. In Hannah Mwaliwa’s story *Kutiwa Jando* (To get circumcised, 2010) the schoolgirl Masi is largely put into the same situation as Saida in the story above – she is to be circumcised, married to an old man and “give birth for as long as she is able” (82); like Saida, she escapes, finds temporary shelter in the girls’ sanctuary (this time run by the local woman Bi Mshenga, “one of those who were lucky to escape the knife” – 88), then joins the government education program, finishes high school, makes it to the university and studies medicine; in the end of the story she, like Saida, returns home. However, the author prepares for Masi a happier lot compared to poor Saida – Masi wisely flees her father’s house before circumcision rites (owing to the influence of her beloved schoolteacher Sofia, and her own fear that she will have to leave school), in her struggle to continue education she gets the support of the district commissioner, and later comes home only to visit her parents – she feels a certain guilt for having left them once. It is interesting to note that, contrary to however belatedly repentful father in the previous story, Masi’s *baba* retains his aggressive demeanor – on seeing his lost daughter, he tries to hit

her with his hunting spear, and after failing the attempt turns his rage on his wife, ousting her from the house. But for both Masi and her mother this is a lucky turn – they, as it could be guessed, now leave the house of the stubborn old man for good.

In Leah Muchemi's story *Noti ya Bahati* (The note of luck, 2011), a young mother and wife is kicked out of her husband's house at the demand of his relatives, who even tried to kill her – all because at an adolescent age she “rebelled against our customs” (124) by refusing to get circumcised. However, after an array of trials the woman and her daughter are awarded – her husband is imprisoned for his deed, and one of the charity organizations, named Zinduko la Hawa – “The Rise of Eve”, is trying to restore their rights.

Forced (or arranged) marriage at an early age, sounding as almost a “sister” custom to circumcision, is however treated differently by authors, which apparently depends to a considerable extent on their cultural orientations. Clara Momanyi in *Ngome ya nafsi* (Fortress of self, 2004) renders to her heroine Naseko almost the same lucky fate as met Masi in the previously discussed story – she escapes from the house of the old man, to whom she is betrothed, and hides in the sanctuary “for the girls who fled home because of torture”, which is run, again, by a local lady Bi Tesi; the story's finale is a passionate speech by Bi Tesi about the benefits of girls' education. Education for female children is also an important theme in Rayya Timammy's story *Haki Yangu Naidai* (I demand my rights, 2011), and here it is also obviously counterposed with early marriage – but the writer gives the problem a different treatment. The heroine Rehema, a girl from a coastal community (it should also be noted that Timammy sets nearly all her stories on her native coast, which in itself comprises a valuable first-hand account of the local life), is eager to study, and has the best exam results in the entire province; however, her father, who does not believe in girls education, is determined to get his daughter married to an elderly neighbor. The solution comes in the figure of Mzee Omari, father of Rehema's school friend Mwanaisha, who manages to persuade loving, but stubborn father of Rehema not to deprive the intelligent girl of her chance; and “let her suitor, if he really loves her, wait until she finishes her studies” (39), concludes Mzee Omari to everyone's consent. Apparently, the more important marriage that the story is dealing with is the marriage between tradition and modernity, and the author gives an inspiring example of it. Reading her stories, one would notice

that this constructive relationship between traditional and modern values is one of the author's lasting concerns.

Since the girls education has already been mentioned in the texts discussed above, it must surely be noted that it is one of the recurrent and important topics in the stories by Kenyan women writers – and, to end this brief surveys on a slightly more optimistic note, the authors who undertake this topic as the main one in their works, almost unanimously write in favor of female child schooling, and lead their heroines to a satisfying outcome. Clara Momanyi in *Harubu za Zuhura* (Zuhura's conflicts, 2015) shows that a child's success in education may cause even a mortal envy. Zuhura, like Rehema in the above-mentioned story, has passed the exams with flying colors, and now is bound to the university. Her father's second wife Pili, whose daughter Riziki failed the exams, out of grudge tries to kill Zuhura – thrice, like in the tale about the jealous stepmother. Pili's schemes are disclosed, and she herself perishes of poison which she wanted to give Zuhura – thus the ending also fully complies to that of the tale; but the fact that the whole conflict is revolving around a very modern asset – namely girl's education – apparently gives an old story a new character.

The education of his daughter is also a stumbling block in the conflict between Sudi and his relatives and village-mates in Mary Mbi's story *Mafiga* (Hearth stones, 2015). Sudi's daughter, diligent and intelligent Kigwagu, also, like the heroines of the stories above, successfully passes the exams, and her father, supporting the girl's dream, is ready to send her to the university – which is harshly opposed by the elder Dhabina, who secretly dreams of taking her for his third wife, and especially her uncle, Sudi's brother Swalala, who is an adept of “good old customs”. The conflict between Sudi and Swalala even results in manhandling – but in the end, against all odds, Kigwagu's and her father's dream comes to pass.

Success at the exams is crucial for the modern youngsters of both genders – which is confirmed in the story *Mtihani wa Maisha* (Examination of life, 2016) by Eunice Kimaliro. The school graduate Samueli failed the exams, and is now stabbed by the fear of his father's rage, but even more so – of shame before his girlfriend, an excellent pupil Nina, and especially before his two elder sisters, who are taking their higher education. Unable to think of anything better but suicide, Samueli tries to drown himself in the village swamp, only to be rescued and shamed by the villagers headed by his disconsolate father – his only son shamed his name. The support and

consolation come, expectedly, from the boy's mum, who leads him home, on the way gently admonishing him that "even if you have failed the school exams, try now not to fail the exam of life" (140).

Passing some concluding remarks to the survey above, it may be stated that generally the Kenyan women writers of Swahili expression pursue the same aims as Kenyan and, on a wider scale, East African women's literature at large – as formulated by Lennox Odiemo-Munara: "These writers, through the women figures in the texts, subvert, actively resist, and engage with power/authority and, in the process, manage to re-evaluate the dominant zeitgeist, oppositionally establishing the East African woman as an active and speaking subject in the ongoing re-imagining and re-writing of the East African post-colonies" (1). From the stories highlighted above it is obvious, that their authors are mainly concerned with problems of female youth – an it is quite natural, for, after all, I would concur with a popular definition of women's literature as the one "by women, about women and for women." The authors apparently target mainly a school audience, and not only female, for the ideas and orientations outlined in their stories contribute to the formation of new mentality in all the young members of modern Kenyan society. The authors are consistently trying to sensitize the readers about this society's social ills, showing them as serious, but curable, and also are presenting their visions of constructive social values. They praise mutual care and support, advocate positive role of social and government institutions, confirm the validity in the modern context of many old guidelines, such as those of family and religion, and, of course, affirm the benefits brought by modernity – such as education, equality of society members, free choice – and reveal the harmful nature of ruinous "innovations", such as drugs or commercial sex. The very fact that many of these texts, as mentioned, are school-oriented, considerably increases their social potential, and, as it was assumed above, substantially assists the formation of the new mindset in the younger generations – the builders of the country's future.

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