



## **Critical Exposition of Retrogressive Socio-Cultural Practices in Henry Ole Kulet's Blossoms of the Savannah**

**\*Jennifer Koskey**

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0021-7918>

School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya

**Email:** [koskeyjennifer@gmail.com](mailto:koskeyjennifer@gmail.com)

**Prof Catherine Amimo, PhD**

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4292-1472>

School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya

**Email:** [amimoc@ueab.ac.ke](mailto:amimoc@ueab.ac.ke)

**Edward Mooka, PhD**

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2786-930x>

School of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya

**Email:** [mookae@ueab.ac.ke](mailto:mookae@ueab.ac.ke)

**\*Corresponding Author:** [koskeyjennifer@gmail.com](mailto:koskeyjennifer@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Retrogressive socio-cultural practices are rooted in cultures and traditions and they directly or indirectly violate human rights. One function of literature is to highlight such practices and invite the society to reflect and change for the better. Henry Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah* is a Kenyan novel approved for study in secondary schools in Kenya and was the basis through which this paper was done. The study adopted a comparative research design. The novel was selected purposively to examine how it interrogates retrogressive socio-cultural practices in the Maasai culture. Data was collected using a close reading of the text and was subjected to content analysis. The study found that four major retrogressive socio-cultural practices are highlighted in the novel, namely female genital mutilation, polygamy, patriarchy along with male chauvinism and early or planned marriages. These practices deprive women of their dignity and right to make decisions as individuals. They work by exerting control over women's bodies and limiting their decision-making options within the social spaces. Some women have resigned to the status quo, having been socialized and oppressed for a long time. However, others, due to their young age and exposure to western formal education, assert strive to break free from these retrogressive practices. Ole Kulet envisions the possibility of women breaking free from these practices and finding a chance to improve their lives through education. There is need to sensitize women, men, children and communities on the detrimental effects of retrogressive cultural practices, especially FGM, and on the value of girl-child education.

**Keywords:** FGM; Polygamy; Early Marriage; Blossoms of the Savannah.

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### **Introduction**

According to Elimu Network (2016), one objective, among others, of teaching Literature in Kenya is to

help provide suggestions on ways of resolving challenges that students face. This is based on the understanding that literature reflects life (values, conflict and human nature). Based on this objective,

Teachers of English are expected to sensitize students on the retrogressive socio-cultural practices depicted in set texts. It is, therefore, within this context that the study sought to establish retrogressive socio-cultural practices that have been given prominence in the Kenyan set book, *Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry ole Kulet.

Culture influences thinking, language and human behaviour (Kim, 2002). According to Freedman (2003), creative arts and literature help us to understand specific cultural and social heritages from different spheres of living. Gallagher and Meier (2014) also posits that literature reflects the social and cultural constructs of the societies from which they are taken. In other words, Literature conveys certain truths about people and their cultures. Shove *et al.* (2012) state that literature affects the reader both cognitively and aesthetically. In every culture, people engage in social activities that define their sense of community and identity and form part of their traditions and customs (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, some of these practices, while they may be regarded by the community as useful, they may be deemed retrogressive in the universal context (Gachari, 2012).

Retrogressive socio-cultural practices are common in Africa. They include Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), abduction of women, dowry-related violence, early marriages, child labour, thigh sex, virginity tests and trafficking of girls and women (Yarosan, 2014; Okpala, 2016). Such practices, according to Neculaesei (2015), though they may embody a common cultural identity for the community, they often violate a person's human rights, individuality and freedom of choice. Such retrogressive socio-cultural practices are harmful (AMREF Health Africa, 2020; Equality Now, 2020). It is no wonder then that the Kenya Government, through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) has taken it upon itself to highlight such gross socio-cultural vices in Literature set books so that the young minds are sensitized and taught on the dangers of such practices (Wycliffe, 2016).

According to Okwu (2016), socio-cultural vices are acts and conditions that go against the accepted procedures, rules and values of society. They are termed as evil, wicked and criminal actions or behaviours. In South Africa, common vices associated with the youth include fights, attempted suicides, unwanted pregnancies and subsequent

abortions, drug abuse and misuse, sexual orgies and corruption (Huda, 2006). In many African countries, incidents of female genital mutilation are also widespread. A study in Ethiopia found that infibulation type of FGM is a common cultural norm in the Eastern parts of the country (Dhanapal, 2010). Althaus (2017) further asserts that in most cases, FGM is always forced on girls. Soon after undergoing FGM, these young girls are then married off and are immediately urged to bring forth children. This practice has consequently seen girls and young mothers compromise their physical and psychological wellness and most of them are victims of sexual and gender-based inequality. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) notes that FGM and such like practices in Ethiopia and other parts of Africa has, unfortunately, manifested and entrenched the social, economic and political strata of societies. WHO further observes that the communities involved do not see anything wrong with such practices, but have instead continued to validate them thus giving FGM and other atrocities against women a sustained continuation.

In some parts of Africa, virginity is regarded as a symbol of respect from girls to their parents and a pre-condition for getting married (Adebowale *et al.*, 2012). Marriage is both a social and economic event for women and the families concerned. It is economic because men are considered the sole providers and property owners in the home; thus women resort to marriage to receive financial leverage from their husbands. Parents also marry off their young daughters as a means to alleviate their economic hardships. In Kenya, Nyamai (2018) avers that parents are to blame for abandoning their roles in nurturing and shaping children into good and responsible citizens. For this reason, Kenya has seen waves of social vices that mostly affect the youth. These range from petty crimes such as stealing, drug abuse and lying to major atrocities such as engaging in suicide, terrorism and murder. According to Nyamai, the Kenya government needs to device ways to provide foundational formation of young people through education and social, political and economic programs.

Despite the wave of education and modernization, some communities in African societies still practice FGM, early marriages, circumcision and its associated teachings and acts, such as virginity testing, thigh sex, African renaissance and other forms of initiation (Rumsey, 2012). Research indicates that among all these practices, FGM, early

marriages and stereotypic gender roles are deeply ingrained in African cultures and have often been barriers to full access to education by girls in places such as Kenya and other countries (Oketch & Somerset, 2010). In Kenya, socio-cultural factors depict girls as inferior to boys in almost all circumstances (Okpala, 2016). The government of Kenya has not only outlawed practices such as FGM, but has worked with the Ministry of Education to integrate teaching of progressive norms and values through subjects such as English literature in the secondary school curriculum. As such, often the set books used to teach English literature in Kenya depict the causes, manifestations and effects of retrogressive socio-cultural practices.

## Methodology

### Design

This study employed the descriptive comparative research design. The study used a close reading of the novel for data collection. Data was then analyzed using content analysis method.

### Population and Sampling

The target population was all the five Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) English Literature set books approved for use by KICD and run from 2018 to 2023 in all public secondary schools. From the five English Literature set books vetted and approved for use in secondary schools by KICD from 2018 to 2023, *Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry Ole Kulet was selected purposively. The inclusion criteria were a novel, approved as a set book in Kenya's secondary schools and containing a story related to retrogressive socio-cultural practices.

### Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of the close reading and content analysis method were ensured using expert support. The researchers requested the university supervisors to review the units of analysis of the text under study to ensure that the data provided was valid and the instrument were reliable.

### Ethical Considerations

The study abided by the dictates of originality in conceptualizing the topic of research. The researchers also ensured that all sources cited were acknowledged properly. Moreover, the researchers ensured there was limited levels of plagiarism in the conceptualization, research and writing of the paper.

## Results and Discussion

Henry ole Kulet in *Blossoms of the Savannah* depicts the life and experiences of the Maasai community set in Nasila. He paints a picture of a community at crossroads on which aspects of culture to retain and which ones to abandon. The novel is set at a time when formal education and Christianity have taken root in the Maasai society. There is therefore a clash of traditions and modernity in the society of the novel. Parents in rural areas within Nasila and urbanized settings like Nakuru want their children to be formally educated, but they "feared the influence of that education as it resulted in cultural alienation" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 150). Formal education brought along with it value systems that "shook the foundation of Nasila culture" (Not clear) (Ole Kulet, 2008, p 150). This new value system has brought many invaluable gains so much so that the Nasila culture is in dilemma as the changes "were not only subtle but insidious, threatening an explosion in the not too distant future" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 151). The study sought to establish the retrogressive socio-cultural practices highlighted in Henry ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

### Female Genital Mutilation

As shown in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, the traditional Nasila community from which the plot of the story emanates valued FGM for various reasons: it defined womanhood; it was a pre-requisite for marriage and subsequent motherhood; it was an honoured rite of passage and it was considered necessary to make a woman decent and docile (Ole Kulet, 2008). Despite the formal western education wave sweeping across Nasila, the practice of FGM has been sustained and proven difficult to be abandoned by this community.

Ole Kulet in *Blossoms of the Savannah* describes the irony involved in the struggle for eradication of FGM amongst the Nasila community: That it was "began by women and must be ended by women" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 47). The author gives the historical foundation of the revered practice through a legend as narrated to the Kaelo daughters, Resian and Taiyo by Joseph Parmuat, a young, educated teacher who has been requested by Ole Kaelo to coach the girls on matters of culture. According to this story within a story, FGM started as a form of female liberation for women to take charge of themselves against the rule of the 'Ilarinkoi', a despot who belonged to a splinter group of the Maasai people who had been left down Kerio Valley as others ascended up the valley (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 82). The

Ilarinkon warriors forced the women to carry out illegitimate sexual activities.

According to Ole Kulet (2008), the women were forced to “compose lewd songs and perform them in indecent postures and styles” (p. 86). In addition, the Ilarinkon warriors sexually abused their women. Ole Kulet (2008) says they “made bawdy jokes that demeaned the women, teasingly provoked them knowing that they could not resist their natural instinctive desires aroused by their immoral and repugnant suggestive moves made before them” (p. 86). In a bid to find a lasting solution, the women invented a stop-gap measure, aimed at helping women to resist the temptation from engaging in sexual relations with the enemy. One woman declared that she had “located within herself, the source of the salacity that caused the involuntary gravitation towards men when provoked” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 87). From then henceforth, the women found a lasting solution by inventing FGM: “And it was from that resolution collectively made by women of Maa, that gave birth to enkamuratani. And her olmurunya was shaped, sharpened and handed over to her” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 87). Much later, FGM became a rite of passage for all girls in order to qualify them as mature women capable of carrying out adult responsibilities of womanhood and, subsequently, motherhood. Parmuat rationalizes this, that “many years after the rule of their enemies is said to have been overthrown, the misrule forced upon the Maasai women is still strongly believed in” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 87).

With the story of the Ole Kaelo sisters, Resian and Taiyo, *Blossoms of the Savannah* hints to hope that since women started the practice of FGM, it is through them that the practice will end. Nabaru, a retired ‘enkabaani’ (traditional nurse), poses a question, that since no man had “ever taken up the olmurunya to circumcise a girl...what would happen if the enkamuratani threw away the olmurunya and refused to wield it again?” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 277). From Taiyo’s reply to Nabaru, however, it is clear that men indirectly contribute to the survival of FGM by deriding and refusing to marry an uncircumcised woman: “but it is the men who force women to perpetrate the obnoxious tradition by insisting that they can only marry a girl if she is circumcised” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 277).

Nasila people believe in the supremacy of FGM. Ole Supeyo, a businessman and self-proclaimed polygamist, affirms: “female circumcision was not

only an honoured rite of passage that had been in existence from time immemorial, but an important practice that tamed an otherwise wild gender” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 22). Further, he likens FGM to dehorning cattle. He says “like cattle that required to be dehorned...a certain measure of docility was also necessary to keep more than one wife in the homestead” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 22). FGM thus supposedly serves to tame the female gender of their wild appetite for sex. ‘Yeiy-Botorr,’ the senior wife of Ole Simiren confirms to the Kaelo sisters that indeed women suffered from a certain wildness, a disease known as ‘olkuenyi’ or ‘kisirani’. While she is amazed by Resian’s level of self-assertiveness and confidence, she confides to Mama Milanoi, Resian’s mother “Your daughter has olkuenyi...a bad spirit. And it is in her blood...it is time to circumcise your daughters and get rid of olkuenyi” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 78). Thus, FGM was used as weapon to make women sexually docile and curtailing their sense of independence and self-assertiveness.

In Nasila, a girl who was not circumcised within a given timeframe was derogatively referred to as ‘intoiye nemengalana’ (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 13). Yeiy-botorr chides Mama Milanoi: “you can now see the danger of keeping intoiye nemengalana at home. It’s not healthy and it is neither in the interest of the children nor their parents” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 78). Way back in Nakuru before they relocated to Nasila, Mama Milanoi suffered humiliation from some women who had paid her a visit: “The words they had used to describe the status of her daughters came back to haunt her like demented spirits of a past that was better forgotten; ‘intoiye nemengalana’ they had called them contemptuously” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 8). Later, when settled in Nasila, the same feeling kept gnawing her conscience. She is concerned about “her daughters’ status of being intoiye nemengalana in the midst of a community that cherished girl-child circumcision” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 17). On his part, Ole Simiren, Ole Kaelo’s younger brother, is worried about the cultural alienation his brother has experienced by not circumcising his daughters early enough. Evidently, parents of uncircumcised girls suffer ‘shame’ or stigma from the community, which makes some parents to continue supporting FGM.

The Ole Kaelo sisters, Resian and Taiyo, are accosted by a young man who derogatively calls them “intoiye nemengalana from Nakuru town” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 19). He makes it clear to them that he wants to have a good look at them to “know the

kind of stuff they are made of” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 19). He chides them that they are not proper women before threatening them: “Soon you will know that there is no place in our society for women of your ilk” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 19).

In Nasila society, a girl who becomes pregnant before going through the cut suffers dire consequences. In yet another internal monologue, Mama Milanoi sheds light on this: while growing up, “girls’ circumcision was relevant and cherished. It was a rite of passage” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 63). It is thus clear that FGM was a revered rite of passage in traditional Nasila community. In Mama Milanoi’s account, the derogatory term ‘entapai’ was given to a girl who goes against tradition and becomes pregnant before she is circumcised (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 286). An ‘entapai’ was “Often circumcised at the time of giving birth and married off to the oldest man in the village” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 63). To seal it all, an entapai’s family “was always held in derision” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 19). Silently, Mama Milanoi believes that FGM is now an “archaic rite that had been discarded and forgotten” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 63). Having gone through the rite herself, she knows too well the mental and physical torture its victims suffer. In her own words, “the last thing she’d have wished on her daughters was mental torture” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 63). As a responsible mother, she knows she has a parental duty to protect her daughters from “...a retrogressive world of excruciating pain and turmoil” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 63).

Mama Milanoi’s only undoing is her stubborn husband, Ole Kaelo. She knows that it will be very difficult to make him change his mind because he wants his daughters to undergo the rite. All she can do at the moment for her daughters is to prepare a “soft landing against what appeared to be an inevitable eventuality” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 64). Mama Milanoi fears the stigma her family will suffer from community due to their uncircumcised daughters: “as a family they were already in breach of the tradition for keeping at home their grown up girls as ‘intoiye nemengalana’ instead of transforming them from little girls into young women” (Ole Kulet, 2008). She fears her family would be labelled a “pariah in the Ilmolelian clan and Nasila society” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 60). In the end, overwhelmed by societal and social conventions, she throws in the towel and tells her husband, Ole Kaelo, that their culture is

“...everything and it rules our lives” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 61).

The Nasila culture demands that a girl must be circumcised before she can be recognized as a mature woman. Olarinkoi’s mother, a prophetess, challenges Resian’s womanhood: “What were you guarding so tenaciously and valiantly when I am told you are not yet a woman?” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 227). This reproach paints the prophetess’ perception of Resian as a mere child yet to cross over to womanhood. She goes on taunting her, “...as soon as we clip off that erogenous salacity from you that destroys homes, you will become a respected woman worthy to be called...” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 229). The impression is that regardless of her being legally an adult at 18 years, Resian is a child because she is not circumcised. Such taunts reinforce in women the notion that they need to undergo FGM to identify as fully-grown women.

Some of the female characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah* have staged a rebellion against FGM. As the eldest daughter of Ole Kaelo and the apple of his eye, Taiyo finds herself at a crossroads, as she contemplates the possibility of being circumcised and, in the process, disappoints her father and be forced to abandon her thirst for further education. She sets the ball rolling: “Of course I do not care whether I am counted among intoiye emengalana...what I know is that my body belongs to me and I belong to myself” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 33). Further, she adds that “...two of such moribund aspects of culture are FGM and the clan system...these should have disappeared at the turn of the century (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 128). She has fully embraced her ‘intoiye nemengalana’ status and will go to any length to remain so. She minces no words while describing FGM. She calls it a “repugnant ritual” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 87).

By a strange twist of irony, Taiyo is, unfortunately, forcefully circumcised and is on the verge of being married off against her will. On Minik’s account, Taiyo “...was said to have been forcefully circumcised” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 270). When Minik’s rescue team found her, she was in a sad state, “weak and sickly...” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 271). Minik, who runs a government ranch and a rescue centre for girls running away from FGM and forced marriages, describes Taiyo’s condition as dire and she “still found it difficult to walk, for the injuries inflicted to her by the enkamuratan’s olmurunya had not yet healed” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 271).

Through this forced genital mutilation of Taiyo, a candid picture of the physical and emotional trauma FGM causes its victims is seen as is evident in the novel. Ole Kulet sheds more light on this when he highlights Taiyo's physical and mental state. He says Taiyo "was shocked, traumatized and terribly emaciated" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 271). Taiyo's experience shows that there is no dignity in FGM as it is done against one's will and wish. Moreover, elderly female family and community members play a role in sustaining the practice of FGM in the Nasila society. Taiyo is rescued by Minik's rescue team, and, as her evacuation is taking place, Taiyo gets into a haze and imagines that she is dead. This underscores the traumatic experience that FGM entails for women. Through a combined therapy of counselling, care and healthy food administered by Nabaru, Taiyo regains her full memory, physical strength and finds emotional healing. Nabaru wisely tells her "What you need to do, Taiyo, is to accept that it happened to you. The most important thing is that you will discourage others, and you will not allow it to be performed to your children" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 278). This shows that it is the women who have suffered the trauma of FGM who understand the full pain of the experience and can best provide solutions to eradicate the retrogressive practice.

Taiyo's younger sister, Resian, vehemently fights FGM with a deeper forward thrust than her sister did. She states that "I would rather live in the most noisy place on earth than live anywhere near a vagabond who would accost me in the most quiet and serene atmosphere with the intention of mutilating my sexuality!" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 33). According to Resian, FGM is a tool meant to oppress women: "...one of their ways of oppressing us is to demand that FGM be perpetuated against us forever!" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 91). Additionally, Resian abhors FGM and considers it "obnoxious, repugnant and a threat to the health of young girls" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 262). Resian is the voice of reason in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. While having a deep, sister-to-sister conversation with Taiyo, her worries about her career and future are laid bare. She confides in Taiyo her worries about being forced to undergo the cut. She asks her sister fearfully, "What do you think will happen to us if Papaai is forced by his clansmen to embrace the archaic culture that would require us to get the cut?" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 55). However, Resian acknowledges that through further education, both her and Taiyo

will be able to escape the enkamuratani's knife. She pleads with her sister to talk to their father to allow them proceed with further education at Egerton University, a safer environment than their native Nasila home. Therefore, Ole Kulet underlines the value of girl-child education as one way to help them escape retrogressive cultural practices such as FGM.

As a young Maasai girl, Resian has a role model, Minik ene Nkoitoi. She admires Minik's unrelenting fighting spirit and her "relentless struggle to end the abhorrent practice of FGM" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 262). An agent of women's empowerment and freedom, Minik has fought FGM and other social ills inflicted on the girl-child. Through her, Ole Kulet addresses the issues of FGM as well as forced, early and unplanned marriages. Minik is "hated and reviled for criticizing and campaigning vigorously against the traditions which abused the rights of the girl-child, namely girls' circumcision and early marriages" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 263, 264). In spite of this, Minik was so determined to weed out FGM that she set up a rescue center for girls who had been forcefully circumcised, those who were running away from the rite itself or escaping forced and planned marriages. She helped such girls pursue their future aspirations, gave them hope to live for as well as food, shelter and security.

Minik has nothing but admiration for Resian. She congratulates Resian for standing her ground and resisting "the pressure to have her circumcised" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 264). She invites Resian to join 500 other girls in the rescue centre "who had refused to undergo the cultural rite" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 264). Minik is intelligent enough to realize the fight against FGM is far from over. In her own words, "the battle was still far from being won" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 264). She confides in Resian that there were still many girls out in remote villages "who needed to be rescued from the obnoxious rite and be taken back to school" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 264).

From Minik's story, it is evident that formal and tertiary education liberates, re-defines women and transforms their lives. When women say no to FGM, they are re-defining themselves against retrogressive and moribund socio-cultural practices. Minik's fight against FGM and early marriages is attributed to the influence from western formal education to which she has been exposed. However, it is also a product of her own conviction about the

dignity of women, which has been sharpened by her education. Her nickname 'Emakererei' is a corruption of Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, where she attended for her undergraduate studies, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Veterinary Science.

### **Polygamy, Planned and Early Marriages**

*Blossoms of the Savannah* also explores the practices of polygamy and planned, early marriages. One of the leading contributions to polygamy in the traditional Nasila community was arranged marriages. In this community, a man could marry as many wives as he wanted (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 13). Furthermore, the community believed that children were a source of wealth and the only way to bear many children was through polygamy. This is well illustrated by Uncle Simiren, Ole Kaelo's younger brother, who "...had four wives and 16 children..." (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 12). Ole Kaelo, though the eldest in his family, had opted to remain monogamous; his choice is not surprising seeing he had mostly lived in Nakuru, an urbanized setting for the largest part of his working life (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 10). His departure from home was symbolic of his departure from retrogressive cultural traditions of his community. Due to Ole Kaelo's monogamous state, Simiren is constantly worried about him. He confides in Ole Kaelo that the elders were not happy with his one-wife-state and what they "had termed reckless his decision to remain married to only one wife, who had only borne him two daughters" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 13).

Ole Supeyo is Kaelo's close friend and confidant. He takes great pride in polygamy. Ole Supeyo had "six wives and about thirty children" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 21). Ole Supeyo, however, had embraced modernism and blended it well with traditionalism by educating his sons up to university level. Yet, on the flipside, "all his daughters were circumcised and married off to prominent elders in Nasila" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 21). Again, it is clear that retrogressive cultural traditions tend to be more biased against women than men's social progress. Ole Supeyo has built himself a modern house, "owned a massive homestead accommodating eight large houses. The first wife's house was the largest and was built amongst tall iloiraga trees." Supeyo justifies both FGM and polygamy simultaneously. He tells his friend Ole Kaelo, "Like cattle that required to be dehorned, to reduce accidental injuries to each other, a certain measure of docility was also necessary to keep more than one wife in one

homestead" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 22), to which his friend agrees with, quoting a Maa adage, "two women in one homestead were two potent pots of poison" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 22). Ole Kaelo seems to support polygamy, despite being monogamous in practice. He suffers from cultural syncretism; he struggles to amalgamate his beliefs in Maa cultural traditions and the modern practices to which he has been exposed.

Oloisudori is Ole Kaelo's business partner. Supeyo describes him as "a poacher, a smuggler, a robber, hired assassin and as randy as a he-goat" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 26). Oloisudori is openly polygamous. He is affluent and can afford to "live in six ostentatious houses in six different towns, with a woman and servants in each one of them..." (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 109). Oloisudori is ready to take on a seventh wife. So, he takes interest in Ole Kaelo's daughter, Resian: "...that daughter of yours, Resian, she interests me. I am interested in your daughter, Resian..." (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 110). Oloisudori goes further to demand for Ole Kaelo's elder daughter, Taiyo "...for a friend who will also be interested..." (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 110). He closes by affirming to Ole Kaelo that that he would like to relieve him of "his two daughters" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 110). Oloisudori clearly treats women like merchandise that he wants to purchase in surplus to share with friends. His attitude towards women underlines the demeaning nature of polygamy towards women. We also learn from Oloisudori's determination to marry Resian that FGM is a means for 'packaging' a woman into a marriageable state.

Incidentally, Ole Kaelo and his wife finally give in to the demands of Oloisudori and make plans so that Resian can get married to Oloisudori. This underlines the fact that poverty is one of the drivers of retrogressive cultural practices such as polygamy. On her part, Resian shows utmost contempt to Oloisudori and resists his demands relentlessly. She understands that marriage to Oloisudori would end her desire and ambition for education. Resian, as an ardent opponent of polygamy, lends her voice on the matter when she pays a visit to her uncle Simiren's home. She believes that when families are large and extended (polygamous), there is bound to be tension and an unhealthy competition for and against each other, compared to a monogamous home. Planned, early and arranged marriages went hand in hand with polygamy in the traditional Nasila community. Through Joseph Parmuat, charged with the responsibility of teaching cultural dances and

customs to the Kaelo daughters, it emerges that girls were often booked for marriage even before they were born. As such, the girl-child is always victim to planned, early and forced marriages. Ironically, fathers, who should be protecting their daughters from such retrogressive practices, are the ones marrying them off against their wishes.

Although Ole Kaelo and his wife, Mama Milanoi, appear to be a perfect couple, we learn that their marriage was pre-arranged. She married him at 18 after an engagement attended by relatives from both sides of the family. Through flashback, she recounts the events leading up to her marriage to Parsimei Ole Kaelo. Ole Kaelo's parents, accompanied by elders, had come to her home to officially seek her hand in marriage (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 28). In her own words, her parents were all along determined to marry her off to a well-known family (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 28). There was no courtship prior to the engagement; after what appeared to her to be protracted negotiations, the parties had agreed and she was betrothed to him immediately. After undergoing the mandatory female circumcision, she had married Ole Kaelo.

### **Patriarchy and Male Chauvinism**

In the Nasila community, men are the sole decision-makers and their authority is not to be unquestioned by women. The male figure rules over his household. The story in *Blossoms of the Savannah* opens with a portrayal of a modern, well-educated family residing in Nakuru, miles away from their native Nasila village. The head of the household is Parsimei Ole Kado, and his wife of twenty-two years is Mama Jane Milanoi. Ole Kaelo has just been retrenched and the family relocates to Nasila. As the family head, Ole Kaelo knows full well that cultural demands must be upheld and a woman has no room for dissent. This is very well illustrated by his wife in an internal monologue she has after they return to Nasila. She reveals a lot about her husband's personality. He stamps his authority in as far as cultural obligations are concerned. "You know as much as I do the demands of the culture we have now been ushered into" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 60).

Mama Milanoi understood and agreed with him that their culture was everything. Because she could not question his authority, she accepted to do as he said, to which Ole Kaelo replied "Good...Start counselling the girls to understand their roles as potential wives...to appreciate and accept their

future responsibilities as wives and home-builders" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 61).

It is clear that the men in this community are the sole decision-makers in the family and whatever they say is final. Mama Milanoi cannot defend her daughters against an impending forced FGM ceremony and, subsequent, planned and early marriage.

As a husband, Ole Kaelo comes across as a good provider. However, he does not involve his wife in the major decisions around their home. It is only when they settle in their family house in Nasila that she learns that "the magnificent house they lived in was built with finances secured by the guarantee Oloisudori gave Ole Kaelo. The business they ran in Nasila was financed through the banks by guarantees that he offered" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 114). In her society, patriarchy infantilises women, so that, like children, they are rendered fully dependent on men. The macho men of Nasila are terrified of women's independence and assertiveness. Ole Kaelo decides for his daughters what to do with their lives once they graduate from high school. He does not allow them the privilege to choose their own career paths. His elder daughter, Taiyo, is a talented musician. She had been selected by local radio stations together with other young men and women to attend a music extravaganza in Mombasa. Her father does not grant her permission despite her fighting so hard to travel.

According to Taiyo, Ole Kaelo's male chauvinism had "nearly damaged their good relationship that had always been remarkably close" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 5). Taiyo and her younger sister, Resian, both had dreams of joining Egerton University for further studies. However, Taiyo is left wondering what would make their father change his mind "...if that was not his intention." (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 5). As a father, Ole Kaelo prioritizes his male chauvinism at the expense of his children's dignity and individuality.

Ole Kaelo betrays the trust his daughters had in him. He aids in the abduction plan hatched by his friend and business partner, Oloisudori, to forcefully marry Resian (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 208). When the plan fails after Resian runs away from home, he sets up Taiyo as her replacement, lures her to a house in Esoit village where she is forcefully circumcised (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 211). The two girls have picked lessons from their parents' marriage. They sympathize with their mother who is trapped in



retrogressive cultures. To these girls, their mother was “an example of a wife they never wanted to become” (Ole Kulet, 2008 p. 277). They believe that a good marriage is where “they were considered as equal partners with their spouses and had a say in all matters that affected them” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 277).

Some women have accepted patriarchy as the norm. Mama Milanoi reprimands her younger daughter Resian when she criticizes men, Oloisudori in particular. She tries to domicile her daughter by teaching her that it is the men who have the upper hand in their lives. However, Resian is an assertive woman in an otherwise male-dominated society. She refuses to cook for and serve a lazy “...bunch of busybodies who do nothing but lounge about in the living rooms, waiting for tasty food to land on their tables ...” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 76). She picks issue with men who keep ordering them around “simply because they are male” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 77). She has no kind words for her mother and paternal aunt, Yeiyo Botorr, and blames them for giving them the “leeway to respond to their (men’s) requests” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 77).

Oloisudori is the embodiment of male chauvinism in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. On his first visit to the Kaelo’s home in Nasila, he has the audacity to reveal his appetite for Resian’s beautiful body. He stares at her as his eyes “Slid from her face and were now deliberately scanning her body” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 92). As he forcefully walks into the sitting room, “she certainly felt the finger of his lifted hand graze the fullness of her breast” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 93). This angers Resian so much that she calls him “an ill-mannered devil...” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 93) and a “despicable character of an old man who behaves badly before a girl young enough to be his daughter...” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 94). Thereafter, he demands to have Resian as a wife and does not expect an opinion from her. He feels entitled to take Resian just because he has given financial favours to her family.

Oloisudori uses his immense wealth to lure women in for sexual favours. He has no respect for women; to him, they are just property to be bought, used for pleasure and discarded. He has built a palatial home in Naivasha, which he intends to gift Resian as soon as he marries her. He invites her parents over to “see and appreciate in the proximity of his kingdom....” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 185). True to his expectations, Ole Kaelo and his wife are totally sold

out. It is from there that Ole Kaelo makes his final decision to forcefully marry her off.

Olarinkoi is also a symbol of male chauvinism in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. He settles in the Ole Kaelo’s home, uninvited albeit to fulfil his mother’s prophecy. Olarinkoi’s mother was a renowned and respected prophetess who had foreseen her son “live with the Kaelo family for some time and eventually bring one of his daughters to be circumcised and have her as his wife” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 232). This drives Olarinkoi to lure Resian into thinking that he is rescuing her from Oloisudori’s impending forced marriage to her. He takes Resian to his home in a remote village and yells at her angrily, “light the fire and make some food... food here is not a right, it is a privilege that comes with conditions” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 218). As Resian tries to fit into her new environment, he constantly derides her: “you woman” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 218); “You silly thing .... you are my wife... you are my wife. Today we shall see how educated your body is! Yes, we shall see!” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 221). He then attempts to rape her (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 221, 222). In self-defence, Resian “bites his thumb, nearly severing the limb” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 222). Thus, Resian manages to save herself from yet a third attempt at another assault on her womanhood, rape. In so doing, Resian is a symbol of women struggling to break away from retrogressive cultural practices that are championed by patriarchy. After the failed attempt to subdue Resian, Olarinkoi makes plans to take her to Tanzania, have her circumcised and eventually marry her.

Nasila as a community is largely patriarchal and the men are mostly chauvinistic. Even young men do not respect women and girls. Boys are raised to believe they are superior to the girls and women. A case in point is when a Nasilian young man attacks, verbally harasses and attempts to rape the Kaelo sisters, urging them to either get circumcised or face his wrath. True to his words, he and his friends later accost the two girls. The wayward young men are described thus: “Physically they looked intimidating with bulging muscles and demonic determination in their eyes to harm them... heightened by heavy knobkerries” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 141). These related incidents rattle Resian so much that later on that night, she contemplatively thought “how hazardous it was to live in a society where men thought they had a right to every women’s body” (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 143). Thus, Resian and Taiyo symbolize

women who are spurred on by painful experiences to seek to overthrow the patriarchal order.

As the story of Ole Kaelo's daughters draws to a close, Oloisudori makes a comeback to Minik's camp. He demands for both Resian and Taiyo, claiming that he had paid dowry for both of them. However, "the pandemonium that broke was unprecedented" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 283). The 400 workers in the camp burnt up Oloisudori's convoy to smouldering empty shells and beat him up together with his men so much that they "had to run for dear life" (Ole Kulet, 2008, p. 284). In this dramatic scene, the author envisions the ultimate violent overthrow of male chauvinism, patriarchy and all other retrogressive socio-cultural practices in Nasila.

### Discussion

The study findings reiterate the recommendation by Lorentzen (2020) that retrogressive cultural practices can be eradicated by placing emphasis on education for all members of society and putting laws in place to counteract gender-based violence and teenage marriages. He further identifies other measures to include putting in place rescue centres for girls affected by practices such as FGM and early marriages and enrolling them in school.

The study affirms the views of Mkuchu (2004) that set books are one of the main agents of socialization in society. They pass on the culture and traditions of the society, and thus help students to form attitudes in regard to the themes they encounter in the set books. Similarly, he adds that set books are important in that they act as sources of information. In this case, *Blossoms of the Savannah* is a source of information about the Maa community. As noted in the novel, retrogressive cultural practices deprive women of education and other life opportunities. This is in line with Jayawardana's (2022) observation that once a girl gets married at an early age, getting education or going back to school would be next to impossible for her because of the subsequent preoccupation with household chores, stigma, child bearing and nurturing and other prejudices that accompany early marriages. Neculaesei (2015) similarly states that early marriages violate a person's human rights and freedom of choice and have no regard to the will of the individual.

According to Ndungo (2021), literary works do not create problems; they exist to remind the society about vices and point towards possible solutions. Prastyowati (2019) argues that *The Breadwinner* by Deborah Ellis tackles many issues affecting women

and girls in Nigeria today, from child marriage and sexual violence to economic empowerment. Shaiful Bahari *et al.* (2021) identify polygamy as a risk factor associated with serious mother and child health risks. Reinforcing this view, Omigbodun *et al.* (2020) aver that circumcised women and girls stand higher chances of experiencing pregnancy and labour complications. Further, Sundaram (2018) observes that FGM is usually performed without the consent of the victim. This goes against her right to make personal decisions concerning her sexuality and reproductive health. Indeed, these views were affirmed by the characters of Minik, Resian and Taiyo in *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Perrin *et al.* (2019) opine that the ability of women to liberate themselves from the confines of gender-based violence is a basic human right. They add that all forms of gender-based violence undermine the victim's self-worth and self-esteem. Ijem and Agbo (2022) also argue that men tend to take offense when women try to liberate themselves from the chains of patriarchy, because they feel that female assertiveness is a betrayal of traditions that have existed from time immemorial. Serisier (2018) lends his voice to the debate, asserting that women are traditionally considered as lacking power, emotionally weak, nagging and prone to male dominance.

Dinda (2020) posits that the novel *Blossoms of the Savannah* has not sufficiently addressed values on gender balance and the aspect of social justice. However, Gachari (2012) asserts that literature remains a common channel for passing moral values to readers as it helps them internalize and imitate the good behaviours of the characters depicted in the literary works. In view of this, it is important to note that Ole Kulet envisions the dramatic ending of retrogressive socio-cultural practices in *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Kivai (2010) opines that male chauvinism downplays the efforts made by women to be at par with their male counterparts in terms of knowledge and experience. He laments the strong belief systems put in place to suppress the female gender in many communities. Kivai further reiterates that patriarchy in Africa derives its strength from the continued silencing and suppressing of women, and especially by also taking full control of their bodies. Mengo (2010) observes that the Maasai woman has always been mistreated in her community. She adds that the Maasai community is known to be patriarchal and tends to downgrade the efforts and presence of

women within the community. This is indeed true of most of the female characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, such as Minik, Mama Milanoi, Resian and Taiyo who feel trapped and must strive to overcome patriarchy in their own community. Whereas some of them like Minik and Resian managed to rid themselves of the tentacles of the oppressive culture, others like Mama Milanoi are not lucky. They have become conditioned to live under the command of the men in their lives.

Amouzou (2006) is of the view that literary writers use female characters to protest against past and present prejudices against women and to restore their dignity and rightful place in society. Ole Kulet, in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, paints a picture of women fighting to liberate themselves from cultural structures that are skewed in favour of men. In the end, through persistent struggle, the women can see the triumphant end to their struggle, as Resian and Taiyo finally find their Nirvana in Egerton University where they enrol for undergraduate degree programmes. Taiyo also breaks from traditions and confesses her love for Joseph Parmuat, her 'brother', in the sense that they both belong to the same clan. In so doing, she becomes the first woman to choose a man for herself and violates the oppressive culture of clannism that forbids members of one clan to intermarry.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Conclusions

The novel *Blossoms of the Savannah* by Henry Ole Kulet highlights some of the retrogressive socio-cultural practices that are prevalent in the traditional Maasai community. FGM seems to be the most deeply rooted practice in the Maasai and similar communities in Kenya. Other retrogressive practices tackled in the novel include polygamy as well as patriarchy and early or planned marriages. These practices mainly deprive women of their dignity and right to make decisions as individuals. They work by exerting control over women's bodies and limiting their decision-making options within the social spaces. Some women have resigned to the status quo, having been socialised and oppressed for a long time. However, many other women, thanks to their young and vibrant age and exposure to western formal education, tend to assert their desire for freedom and subsequently strive against these retrogressive practices. Ole Kulet envisions the possibility of women breaking

free from these practices and finding a chance to improve their lives through education.

### Recommendations

The study recommends the need to sensitize women, men, children and communities on the detrimental effects of retrogressive cultural practices, especially FGM. Communities should also be sensitized on the value of girl-child education. The Kenya government and other agencies should strengthen enforcement of laws that seek to eradicate such practices. Women who are striving to break free from oppressive cultural practices should be assisted by governmental and non-governmental organizations to find freedom and education to improve their lives. Programmes and rescue centres should be established to support victims of retrogressive cultural practices. Teachers of set books such as the *Blossoms of the Savannah* should strive to inculcate value for human rights among students.

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