

Kenyan Women's Literature in Swahili as a Factor of Female Rights Development

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In a previously published article, the author of this study asserted that feminism, as a system of views establishing and defending equal rights and opportunities for women, has acquired a profound stand in Kenyan literature already since its formation period, the first decades of the country's independence, in the works of such writers as Grace Ogot, Rebecca Njau, Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye and others, whose names now rightfully and deservedly form the treasury of Kenyan writing. In their books these writers were addressing the whole variety of problems that modern Kenyan women were faced with, forming new post-colonial mentality in concern with these problems and their solutions both in female and male audiences (primarily addressing the former) – and thus contributing to the advancement of Kenyan society (see Gromov 2017).

At the same time the situation about women's literature in Kenyan writing in Swahili appeared tangibly different. To start with, in the period of 1960s – 1980s, when Kenyan women's literature in English became an established and growing trend in Kenyan *belles lettres*, women's writing in Swahili – that is, poems, plays and prose works written by female writers – barely existed. Furthermore, the situation did not change much even in the 1990s, when Kenyan Swahili literature received a fresh impetus from the new generation of Kenyan Swahili writers, which brought to the literary scene such renowned names as novelist Kyalo Wadi Wamitila, poet Kithaka wa Mberia, playwright Timothy Arege, and many others. However, among these authors one will hardly see any female ones. The real “first wave” of Kenyan women writing in Swahili appeared only after the year 2000, when the breakthrough in short story writing was done by Rayya Timammy, Rebecca Nandwa, Pauline Kyovi, and other authors. This period also witnessed the emergence of the first female Kenyan Swahili novelists, such as Clara Momanyi, Sheila Ryanga and Assumpta Mulila-Matei. In this study, I am not focusing on these novels, because they have been treated in previously published works, among them the above mentioned one. This article, therefore, concentrates on a number of burning social issues related to female rights as highlighted in short stories by Kenyan women writers of Swahili expression, such as school-age sex, female circumcision, forced marriage, and some others.

The theme of school pregnancy 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. Describing 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 seduced and 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 is expelled from the school. 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 cut her education, she had to turn her heart to all the hardships of marriage” (mradi tayari alikuwa kakatiza masomo yake, ilibidi aukabilishe moyo wake kwa magumu yote ya ndoa – 131). However, one day she is brought to the end of her tether and explains to her husband that she can bear 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 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 road 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 Ndungo. 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 to 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” (Punde tu tulipofika shuleni, tuliambiwa kuwa wanafunzi wa kiume wa shule iliyokuwa karibu nasi walikuwa ndugu zetu. Tuliombwa kushirikiana nao kwa kila njia – 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 of. 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” (tangu siku hiyo nimeteseka maisha yangu yote – 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 sufficient compassion.

In their stories, the authors closely contemplate the general theme related to school pregnancies, that of the school school-age sex, trying to alert their readers about its negative consequences, and also disclosing the social factors that lead to it, one of these being the lax attitude of some young women to the matter, which many of them perceive as the “spirit of times”. An illustrative example is found in the story *Ningali hai* (I am still alive, 2015) by Rebecca Nandwa, whose main character, a schoolgirl Melissa, acquires this flippant approach to sexual relationships from her volage-minded friend Nina, a university student. Among the

arguments that Nina uses to persuade Melissa is that such an approach to sex is an ultimate sign of modernity - “part with your elder ones, their matters of analogue era do not fit into the modern digital world... this is our time” (achana na wazee hao, mambo yao ya ki-analogue hayana nafasi katika dunia hii ya kidijitali – 168). As a result, Melissa starts her sexual life at seventeen – only to find herself in a hospital ward, heavily seek with an STD, condemned by most of her family and abandoned by most of her friends – of which Nina is the first to leave her; as she tells Melissa’s father, “our friendship was just a contract!” (urafiki wetu ulikuwa wa kikandarasi tu! - 165). However, due to the faithfulness and compassion of her mother and her school friend, a virtuous girl Chausiku (whom Melissa at one point neglects as an “old-fashioned one”), and her doctor Rogo, Melissa regains her health, self-esteem and hope for the future. The author’s warning to the girls like Melissa is formulated in one of the lamentations of the heroine’s mother:

“Into which trench did you put your morals, that it is now impossible to retrieve it? Teachers, students, school workers – they all say that these days you are studying only fashion and parties. Instead of reading books, you turned yourself into a book to be read and to be written in, regardless of the ink color. Instead of drinking water, you are gulping wine. You do not remember any more the road to the classroom, but the road to X parties or what – to this one you can even lead a blind man in the dark. Why all this, my child?” (All the translations from Swahili are mine – MG).

(Maadili yako umeyaweka katika handaki gani lisiloweza kufukuliwa? Si walimu si wanafunzi si wafanyakazi shuleni; wote wanasema kuwa siku hizi unasoma mitindo na tafrija. Badala ya wewe kusoma vitabu umekuwa ndiwe kitabu cha kusomwa na kuandikiwa kwa kalamu yoyote, hata usijali rangi ya wino wake. Badala ya kunywa maji, unabugia mvinyo. Njia ya kwenda darasani huikumbuki tena, lakini ile inayoenda katika sherehe za X party sijui, utamwelekeza hata kipofu ukiwa usingizini. Mbona haya mwanangu? - 167)

If in Nandwa’s story the misery in heroine’s life is largely a result of “teenage rebellion”, other authors show how their characters are victimized by long-rooted social customs and attitudes – such as the treatment of women as “disposable material”, always subject to male authority. In Violet Atieno’s *Dawa ya deni* (Medicine of debt, 2017) the schoolteacher Fasiki (his name meaning “lecher” – a good example of “self-explanatory” names of the characters, frequently used by the authors) intimidates Tabu (Misery), one of his students, into sex relationship with him; later she co-habits with him for money and food, for her parents are abjectly poor. Again, the solution (and salvation) comes through the effort of the compassionate ones - Tabu’s father happens to be a friend of the local senator Zuri (an example of an ideal politician, the name loosely translatable as “the good one”), 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 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. Stella’s life in the camp, however, is also full of hardships – poverty, hunger, mistreatment. Salvation comes in a truly miraculous way - 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. “Stella ran up to her

brother and said, “Brian... I am your sister. I am Stella, and...” They hugged each other, and tears of joy appeared on their faces. When Stella got into the car, accompanied by her brother, she felt a lot of gratitude to God. A lot of hope” (Stella alimkimbilia nduhuye na kusema “Brian... mimi ni nduguyo. Mimi ni Stella na...” walikumbatiana na machozi ya furaha yakawaenda njia mbilimbili. Stella alipopanda gari na kuandamana na nduguye, alikuwa na mwingi wa shukrani kwa Mola. Mwingi wa matumaini - 84).

Especially remarkable, in terms of advocating women’s rights, are the stories by Rayya Timammy, a distinguished writer and scholar, lecturing at the University of Nairobi. One notable feature of her stories is their setting – almost all of them describe the communities of Kenyan coast (Timammy herself originates from Lamu). These communities are known for their strong adherence to traditions and their especially conservative attitude towards the social stand of women. Thus, in her stories Timammy tries largely to reconcile women’s empowerment with tradition – but at the same time, she strongly opposes those cultural practices that she considers as abusive of women and destructive for the social progress on the whole. The heroines of her stories fight against these obsolete and humiliating traditions in different walks of life. Zena, the heroine of Timammy’s story *Uteuzi wa moyoni* (Denomination of the heart, 2004) makes arguably the bravest move – she tries to join a political field as an MP. Her decision is largely stipulated by her strong, determined and independent character – being subjected at a young age to an arranged marriage, which ended her schooling, she terminated it at her own will after finding the husband to be abusive and, moreover, unfaithful; after divorce, she joined a daytime sewing course, took decisive steps in self-education, and also, “because their town was visited by many foreign tourists and students, also sometimes she was getting a side job of teaching them Swahili language” (kwa kuwa pia mji wao ulitembelewa na watalii na wanafunzi wengi wa kigeni, pia akawa mara nyingine anapata kibarua cha kuwafundisha lugha ya Kiswahili – 12). From one of her students, a European woman, she got the ideas about women’s emancipation:

“Exactly among those whom she was teaching she picked a thought of competing for parliament seat. There came a student, Carol, who was doing research about local people. She got to Zena a lot, and their friendship continued even after Carol returned to her country. [...] Every time she was telling Zena that she can do whatever she wants, provided that she is determined and has a fighting spirit. In these conversations Zena explained to her concerns and hopes for their community. Carol told her that all this she will be able to perform if she becomes an MP for this area. Even after her return to Europe, Carol was inspiring Zena in all her letters not to throw their dreams away. She was also reminding her from time to time what she would do”.

(Kati ya hawa aliowafunza ndipo wazo la kugombea ubunge lilipochipuzwa. Alikuwa mwanafunzi mmoja, Carol, aliyekuwa anafanya utafiti kuhusu watu wa hapo. Huyu alishikana sana na Zena na urafiki wao uliendelea hata baada ya Carol kurudi kwao. [...] Kila mara alikuwa akimwambia Zena anaweza kufanya analolitaka pindi awe ameamua na ana moyo wa msukumo. Ni katika mazungumzo yao ndipo Zena alipomwelezea mambo yaliyomsibu na matarajio yake katika jamii yao. Carol naye akamwambia kuwa hayo yote ataweza kuyatenda akiwa mbunge wa eneo hilo. Hata baada ya kurudi kwao Uzunguni, Carol alimhimiza Zena katika barua zake zote asiitupilie mbali ndoto yao. Alikuwa anamkumbusha mara kwa mara yale atakayofanya – 12).

It is notable that Zena’s family, especially her father, has met her decision with commendable understanding and even encouragement, admitting her rights and appealing to her reasoning:

“When the elections were near, Zena decided to tell her parents about her aim. One day after lunch Zena broke the truth to them. Her mother, though open-mouthed, did not have anything to say. Her father calmed down like water in a pot. [...] After putting himself together he asked Zena again, “My daughter have you thought this over?”

Zena replied, “Yes father, very thoroughly.”

“Are you sure?” Mzee Saidi asked again.

“Father it took me many days before I decided,” Zena replied.

“So, if you have thought and this is your decision, that is what I want to know.

When you were abandoned by Ali, I asked you the same, if you have decided, and now also if you have, that is good,” father told her, and then continued: “I do not want to press you about anything. [...] I still remember how I failed you. When you said you wanted to continue studying, I said there is no need for there was a husband ready to marry you. But I admit my mistake, and you suffered a lot, my child. I beg you to forgive me, and that time when you wanted divorce I was asking you the same as now. And if you thought it over, be it, my child. Face your Lord and pray to Him, and I am with you no matter what”.

(Uchaguzi ulipokaribia, Zena aliamua kuwaelezea wazazi wake nia yake. Siku moja baada ya chakula cha mchana, Zena aliwapasulia mbarika. Mamake, mdomo ulimfunguka lakini hakuwa na la kusema. Babake naye alitulia tulii kama maji ya mtungini [...] (A)lipotopokwa alimuuliza Zena tena, "Mwanangu umelifikiria hili?" Zena naye akajibu, "Ndiyo baba kwa makini sana.“

"Una hakika?" aliuliza tena mzee Saidi.

"Baba limenichukua siku nyingi hata nilipoamua" Zena akajibu.

"Basi, kama umefikiri na ni uamuzi wako, ndilo ninalotaka kujua. Maana ulipoachwa na Ali nilikuuliza vivyo na ukawa umeamua na sasa kama umeamua sawa", babake akamwambia kisha akaendelea, "Maana sitaki kukulazimisha na jambo. [...] Bado nakumbuka nilivyokukosea. Uliposema wataka kuendelea na masomo, nikasema hakuna haja kwa vile kulikuwa na mume ambaye tayari amesimama akitaka kukuo. Lakini nakiri kosa langu na uliteseka sana mwanangu. Naomba unisamehe, na wakati ule ulipotaka kuachwa ukikumbuka nilikuuliza vile vile kama sasa. Na kama umefikiria basi mwanangu. Lekea kwa mola wako uombe Mungu nami niko nawe mia fil mia" – 13-14).

In her speech during the pre-election rally, Zena specially stresses the importance of education: “Important for her was education and eradication of poverty. She understood that if she provides them with education, all the other matters will come. She was especially stressing the education of women, both the young and the grown up” (Muhimu kwake lilikuwa ni elimu na kumaliza umasikini. Alitambua kuwa angewapatia elimu mambo mengine yote yangukuja. Hasa zaidi alisisitiza elimu ya wanawake, wote wadogo na watu wazima – 17).

Of course, Zena’s views are welcomed by local women and harshly rejected by local men – and, of course, the election results are predictable: Zena loses to a local male candidate, because most of her women supporters were forced to vote for him by their male relatives. But, as the writer shows, their minds are slowly changing: “There are those who said “if we had tried Zena, maybe she would have brought us progress.” And those who agreed: “we, all the women, made a mistake, because if we had given her our votes, she would have won.” (Kuna wale waliosema "afadhali tungemjaribu Zena pengine angetuletea maendeleo." Kuna waliokubali, "makosa tulofanya ni sisi maana sisi wanawake kama sote tungempa kura hangeshindwa“ – 18). Timammy’s standpoint, as could be drawn from her stories, is that emancipation of women in the

coastal communities would lead to the general emancipation of these communities themselves, which could assist their existence in the swiftly changing world of today.

Female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation - FGM) even in this century is certain communities in Kenya, despite the serious governmental efforts to do away with it. Kenyan female writers almost unanimously depict this custom 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 others involved, including family members (who frequently happen to be the participants, if not the organizers, of the “ritual”). ir family members.

Doreen Otinga in *Maridhia mama* (Amiable mother, 2015) tells a really tragic story of Saida, the girl from a coastal community, whose tribulations start when her father boots his wife, Saida’s mother, out of his house because of her claims that she wants to send their daughter to school. Afterwards, other misfortunes befall Saida. She is forcedly 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 run by a European lady Mrs. Anderson to benefit girls who escaped circumcision or early marriage and give them the chance to continue their education up to university” (shirika ambalo liliasisiwa na Mzungi, Bi. Anderson, ili kuwakarimu watoto wasichana waliotoroka ukeketaji ama ndoa za mapema na kuwapa fursa ya kuendeleza elimu yao hadi chuo kikuu - 39). The sanctuary is attacked by the “defenders of tradition”, 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 faith 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 beast heart left him, and he became humane” (baba aliguswa na hadithi ile. Moyo wa unyama ulikuwa umemwondoka na akawa na utu - 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, all this has passed. Since everyone makes mistakes, there is nothing that can not be forgiven. I pray that you come back as soon as this letter reaches you” (Mpendwa mama, yote haya yameshatokea. Maadamu kila mtu hukosea, hakuna linalozidi msamaha. Naomba urudi nyumbani punde to utakapoipokea barua hii - 45).

The schoolgirl Masi in Hannah Mwaliwa’s story *Kutiwa jando* (To get circumcised, 2010) 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, run by the local woman Bi Mshenga, “one of those who were lucky to escape the knife” (mmoja wa waliobahatika kukikwepa kisu – 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 – during her schooldays, 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 strife to continue education uses the support of the district commissioner, and later comes home only to visit her

parents – she feels a certain guilt for leaving them once. It is interesting to note that, contrary to the father figure in the previous story, who repents, however belatedly, 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: “I do not even want to see you here. Pack your things and leave. Otherwise, I’ll make it hot for you” (Hata wewe sitaki kukuona hapa. Funga virago uondoke. La sivyo utakiona che mtema kuni – 90). 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) Julia, 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” (kuasi mila za jamii yetu – 124) by refusing to get circumcised. However, Muchemi, like Mwaliwa in the previous story, also spares her heroines from the negative outcome – after an array of trials, which include their arrest (by mistake) and gruesome experiences in the police cells, Julia and her daughter Philomena on their release read in a local newspaper that their husband and father is imprisoned for his brutal deed, and, moreover, one of the charity organizations, named *Zinduko la Hawa* – “The Rise of Eve”, is trying to restore their rights: “*The Rise of Eve*” organization is putting effort into finding them, so that they are able to get a legal assistance...” They could not finish reading this news because of excitement. Immediately they decided to start looking for “The Rise of Eve” headquarters” (*Shirika la Zinduko la Hawa linafanya juhudi za kuwatafuta ili waweze kupata usaidizi wa kisheria...*” Hawakuweza kukamilisha kusoma habari hiyo kwa sababu ya msisimko. Wakaamua moja kwa moja kuyasaka makao makuu ya *Zinduko la Hawa* – 137).

Forced (or arranged) marriage at an early age, almost a “sister” custom to circumcision, is also condemned by the authors – especially in the cases when this marriage is arranged in complete disregard of the will or even opinion of the future spouses (especially bride). The writers use all the colors to depict the barbaric nature of the custom in which the interests of young girls are totally subjected to those of their male relatives – who more frequently than not are moved by exclusively materialistic motivations. Thus, those characters who rebel against this custom are usually awarded by their creators. For example, Clara Momanyi in her story *Ngome ya nafsi* (Fortress of self, 2004) renders to her heroine, a schoolgirl named Naseko, almost the same lucky fate as that of 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. Naseko’s tribulations are redeemed by the opportunity to continue with her education – and in that spirit Bi Tesi delivers a passionate speech, which largely summarizes the views of the mentioned authors about this sensitive subject:

“The girl child has the same right as the boy one to get educated. It is unfair to spoil her studies, marrying her by force. Early marriage of the little girls like you is the problem which I am fighting with daily. Because government supports me, I will not fear threats of the parents neither of the chiefs,” promised Bi. Tesi, taking Naseko by the hand to lead her to her hostel”.

(“Mtoto wa kike ana haki sawa na yule wa kiume kupata elimu. Si haki kumharibia masomo yake kumwoza kwa lazima. Ndoa za mapema kwa wasichana wadogo kama wewe ndilo tatizo ninalopigana nalo kila siku. Kwa sababu serikali inaniunga mkono,

sitahofu vitisho vya wazazi wala vya chifu," alikaulisha Bi. Tesi, huku akimshika Naseko mkono kumpeleka katika bwani lake – 114).

Education for female children is also the main theme in Rayya Timammy's story *Haki yangu naidai* (I demand my rights, 2011), and here an early marriage is also one of the impediments to it – but the writer gives the problem a different scenario. Earlier we mentioned that many stories by Timammy demonstrate the author's conviction about the constructive relationship between traditional and modern values – and this story is yet another illustrative example. The heroine Rehema, as usual, a girl from a coastal community, is eager to study, and has the best exam results in the entire province, which enables her to continue at a higher institution. However, her father, who does not believe in girls education, is determined to get his daughter married to their neighbor. At that, the neighbor, named Hemedi, appears to have genuine feelings towards his young wife-to-be – but for Rehema this marriage is the crash of her life's hopes. 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:

“Harm has not yet been done, bwana. Things will get spoiled if you continue with your plan to get Rehema married. I mean, from the way I know Rehema, she will not live with that man. Their relations will not be good, because Rehema will always see Hemedi as her enemy, who ruined her life. Think carefully of what I am telling you, or if you get her married, even six months will not pass before they part, then Rehema will return home to live with you, and maybe she will already be pregnant. [...] And if Hemedi really loves Rehema, let him wait until she finishes her studies”, explained Mzee Omari”.

(Hapajaharibika neno bwana. Mambo yataharibika ikiwa utaendelea na mipango umuoze Rehema. Maana nimjuavyo Rehema hatokaa na huyo mume. Uhusiano wao hautakuwa mwema maana Rehema daima atamuona Hemedi kuwa ni adui yake aliyemharibia maisha yake. Yafikirie sana ninayokwambia au utamuoza hata miezi sita haitofika wataachana halafu Rehema akuketie nyumbani na pengine awe ashabeba na mzungu. [...]) Na kama kweli Hemedi anampenda Rehema, basi amngoje amalize masomo," Mzee Omari alielezea – 38).

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.

Summing it all up, it can be said that women's literature in Swahili appears to pursue at least two basic aims. The first and, arguably, the main one is to make contribution to the formation of a new mentality in modern Kenyan society – mentality generally based on feminist orientations, anticipating equality and development of women as full-fledged members of the society. To that end, the authors highlight in their works those issues that they deem as prominent in the advocacy of female rights in Kenya – such as the ones shown in the above discussed stories. The writers are trying to demonstrate, that the problems that have been haunting Kenyan women and, on a larger scale, the entire society for quite a while, can in fact be solved, and at that in a variety of ways – some of this require the interference of state bodies, like in case of female circumcision, or the assistance of various non-governmental organizations (whose positive role in the process is also stressed by the authors); at the same time, many of these issues may be solved on personal level, through compassion, empathy and open-mindedness.

The second purpose, firmly related to the first one, is to create a narrative of modern Kenyan woman and, on a larger scale, of modern Kenyan society – the society which is free of all these gender-related ailments that the writers raise their voices against. As put by Susan Andrade, “as time progressed, African women began to represent the nation squarely and explicitly, in tandem with gender and the family” (206). It may be argued that this objective has been successfully pursued for already several decades by Kenyan women’s literature in English – but the difference is that the above-mentioned authors are trying to create this narrative in the language that to many Kenyans is closer than English, being the national one in its true sense. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that many of these texts are intended for school audiences, and are part of language and literature syllabi (this was confirmed, for example, by many of my own students, who used these texts in their school days), which, in my view, largely facilitates the accomplishment of both aims – the foundations of this new mentality are laid at an early age, and its bearers (and the reality shows that now there are many) are the ones who will hopefully actualize this new social narrative both in theory and practice.

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