

Female characters in the plays of Kithaka wa Mberia

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Introduction

This article is a kind of continuation of two previously published articles about the female characters in the works of two distinguished Kenyan writers of Swahili expression – Kyallo Wadi Wamitila and Ken Walibora (Gromov 2015, 2020). In these articles I attempted to outline the roles and importance of female characters in the works of two topmost Kenyan Swahili novelists. This study is based on the plays of Kithaka wa Mberia (born 1955), who also holds one of the leading positions in modern Kenyan literature in Swahili. Initially wa Mberia became renowned as a poet – he has authored seven collections of poetry, and is arguably the only Swahili poet in Kenya who uses the poetic technique of free verse. Elena Bertoncini in her article gave wa Mberia’s poetry the following characteristic:

Kithaka wa Mberia is one of the most innovative Kenyan poets. [...] His poems contain a strong political and social criticism, sometimes in the form of animal allegories. He condemns various acts of violence done to women, like rapes of schoolgirls or prostitution caused by poverty. Some compositions seem life-stories of real persons, others are overtly didactic and moralizing, but in all the theme of social justice is almost obsessive. Another group of poems highlights the author’s concern with his surroundings and with the “health conditions” of the Earth in general; thus, for instance, he denounces the devastation of Kenyan soil in order to get foreign currency. His love of nature makes him address affectionate verses to animals, insects and plants.

Formally the poems have little in common with the poetic tradition of the Swahili coast as they are in free verse. Kithaka exhibits a rich vocabulary of [...] terms and is fond of various forms of word-playing like chiming and punning; an important role in his poetry is played by parallelism. Moreover, he introduces into Kiswahili visual poems where typography is relied upon to perform expressive effects.

Kithaka wa Mberia, together with other East African contemporary poets, proves that Swahili poetry is able to express universal themes and can reach a high artistic value even without repeating traditional models (Bertoncini 2010:91).

Poetic achievements of Kithaka wa Mberia have been deservedly acclaimed – his poetry collections are used for the university courses in several countries, as a visiting professor he lectured on African literature and culture in the universities of the USA, Poland, Italy, Germany, Arab Emirates, South Korea and China.

Paradoxically, the younger generation in Eastern Africa seems to know Kithaka wa Mberia more as a playwright. His five plays, written from 1997 to 2021, are successfully staged in theatres of Kenya and the neighbouring countries (some of them also in authorized English translation), and form an integral part in the repertoire of numerous semi-professional and amateur troupes.

Generically the plays of wa Mberia may be ascribed to “social problem plays”, as they deal with problems topical for modern Kenyan and, on a wider scale, African society. One of the traits that bring these plays together is that their heroes are seeking liberation from various forms of social oppression. In other words, one of the central themes of these plays is that of social

emancipation. In this study, the term “emancipation” will be used in the meaning outlined in the online edition of the Oxford Dictionary: “the fact or process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions.”¹ In an interview, given to a Kenyan author and journalist Wanjiru Waithaka, the writer himself stressed the importance of social themes in his plays:

One element that humanises us and separates us from animals is our ability to change our environment. Creative writing is a way of chipping in or contributing in a modest way in improving society. [...] My books are written for different purposes. *Natala* (1997), which became a set book in 2005 until last year, is about gender issues. *Kifo Kisimani* (2001), which was also a set book for seven years, deals with dictatorship. *Flowers in the Morning Sun* (2011) is about political clashes and also tackles the land question which is a big issue in this country. None of these issues is more important than the other (Waithaka 2017).

Female characters play a prominent role in his plays, frequently becoming more active agents of action compared to the male ones. Using as a criterion involvement of these characters in emancipation, it appears that most of the female personages in wa Mberia’s plays can be categorized in two groups – those assisting emancipation and those opposing it. The female characters, who are not obviously belonging to these two categories, are rather few in number, and usually are assigned various “supporting” roles. In the sub-sections below we will try to outline the roles these characters play in each of the specific social situations that Kithaka wa Mberia highlights in his five dramatic works.

Natala (1997)

The staging of the debut play of Kithaka wa Mberia was, as he wrote in the preface, commissioned by Women and Law in East Africa, a non-governmental organization engaged in the issues about women’s rights. The reason for this support was that the central theme of *Natala* is emancipation of women, one of the main topics in modern African literature from its founding times. The situation depicted in the play has also been dealt with by quite a number of authors from various parts of the continent. The play is set “in an abstract East African village during the last decade of the twentieth century”² (*all the translations henceforth are mine unless otherwise noted – MG*). *Natala*, the heroine of the play, is expecting the return of her beloved husband Tango from a business trip – but instead receives a telegram from town, announcing Tango’s death in a road accident. But this is only the beginning of *Natala*’s tribulations. After her husband’s funeral she happens to know that Wakene, her late husband’s brother, a drunkard and a lazy-bone, intends, according to the custom, to “inherit” his brother’s widow as the second wife. By doing that, Wakene hopes to kill two birds with one stone - first, to possess a woman he was long lusting for. Secondly, Wakene hopes to sell the property that *Natala* inherited from her husband (a plot with a house) and to use this money for starting his own MP campaign. Wakene’s plans find full support among the local zealots of the customs, and *Natala* is constantly visited by her elder relatives, who come to her house in order to talk her into an “advantageous” position of an inherited second wife (at that, these relatives also have a very material interest in Wakene’s plans).

Natala resists all these schemes almost alone; she is supported by her relatives Gane and Bala, but the bulk of the struggle falls on her shoulders. *Natala*’s resistance to the patriarchal mindset in the form of out-dated customs and notions exactly forms the social-critical line of the play; I agree with Wambua Kawiwe’s statement that “tradition is presented as antithetical to the realisation of social justice. The projection of the man as advantaged over the woman in the setting of the play is purely a function of the patriarchal construct” (Kawiwe 2018:23). At that, a notable fact is that this opposition is symbolized in the play by two female characters. It could be

expected logically that the “patriarchal” side of the conflict would be embodied by a male, specifically Wakene; and indeed he plays this role, but in a rather passive way, compared to painstaking efforts of Mama Lime, an elderly woman from Tango’s clan, who performs the role of a main “parliamentary” to Natala’s camp. One of the most acute moments in the play’s action is that duel between the two women, which Natala wins, but her contestant does not want to lay her arms down completely:

Natala: How does the family know that I want to get re-married?

Mama Lime: It is the custom. If the husband dies, the wife is re-married in the same family. You will not be the first, nor the last.

Natala: I will take a different road! [...] And you, Mama Lime, rather go. Leave Natala with her widowhood. She would know how to bear it. [...]

Mama Lime: There is a lot of benefit in being the second wife.

Natala: Thanks. I do not need such benefits. [...]

Mama Lime: Because, what is a woman’s joy? To have a place to stay, to eat to the full, to wear clothes and to bear children. [...] Our ancestors, when they started to marry many wives, were not fools. [...] If there is more than one wife in the house – the husband will surely be satisfied. An if he is satisfied – than there is peace in the house. The ancestors understood perfectly the nature of man.

Natala: Only they did not bother to understand the nature of woman. [...] Mama Lime, woman’s life is more than bearing children. And more than having a house, clothe and eating to the full. (*Stands up*) Now I see we’d better cut this talk. [...]

Mama Lime: (*Also raising*) Of course I will not sit here forever. So what shall I tell those who send me? [...]

Natala: Tell him I am a human being, and not a thing.

Mama Lime: Therefore you refuse?

Natala: (*Now angrily*) Completely!

Mama Lime: There is no need to raise your voice. I’m going. But still, I have to remind you, that refusing to follow the custom is not a wise matter.

Natala: Thanks for your advice (wa Mberia 1997:38-40).

This exchange (given here in an abridged English translation) clearly shows the difference in the mindsets of the two women. Mama Lime is presented here as the diehard defender of male-centred customs, set by patriarchal mentality; and she does it not despite her gender, but exactly because of it – in its patriarchal version, regarding a woman as a “thing” totally submissive to the superior male gender. On the other hand, Natala is shown as a modern, end-of-the-twentieth-century emancipated woman, who would not tolerate any interference in her life. And she is quite capable of defending her positions – not only mentally, but even physically, as shown by some episodes in a play. When Natala comes to a city mortuary for claiming her husband’s body, the mortuary attendant first demands sexual services from Natala, and after her refusal tries to rape her. But this attempt of his is met with the reaction that he never expected:

Natala: I understand what? I am not a door in a public building to be touched by everyone.

Attendant (getting ready to jump at Natala): Rubbish! You’ve set the fire. Today you will learn that I’m a real man.

Natala (getting ready to defend herself): And you will know that I am a real human being.

(*Attendant rushes at her, Natala catches him and throws down with force. He falls on his knees and hands. On the floor he looks like a four-legged animal. He stands up. Natala watches him with determination*).

Attendant (after looking at Natala for a while): You think you're a big hero? (*Points at her*) You! You-u!

On returning home, Natala narrates the episode to her friends Gane and Bala:

Natala: So this was how it ended.

Gane: Very good end. Your physical exercises helped you a lot. [...] (*Shakes Natala's hand*). Congratulations for defending your honour!

Bala: And the honour of women in general (wa Mberia 1997:22-23).

Gane and Bala also come to Natala's aid in her final battle with her foe. Having failed with his plan to "inherit" Natala, Wakene, supported by his kin, makes the last desperate step. Coming once to Natala's house, he announces that, since Natala decided to "fully separate from our family", then her house and ploy must remain the family's property. It also applies to Natala's children – because they are "our family's children"; Natala herself must vacate the house in two weeks. Knowing Natala's fighting nature, Wakene does not dare to openly demand from her title deeds for the property – but, when Natala takes her children to the kitchen for lunch, Wakene sneaks into her bedroom and steals the documents from the wardrobe. Unluckily for him, Natala returns from the kitchen too early – and literally seizes him by the hand. Ensuing exchange shows clearly the "gender sympathies" of its participants:

Natala: Vain job! You will not leave this place with these papers.

Wakene: You will tear my coat, Natala!

Natala: Give me my papers!

Wakene: Woman, take your hand off my coat.

Natala: Of course I am a woman. But you will discover that not any woman trembles before man. [...]

Wakene: Woman, if you do not let me go, you'll shed tears right now!

Natala: Your tears, you man, will be shed before woman's! (wa Mberia 1997:54-55)

In the succeeding struggle (participated by Mama Lime and an elder Mzee Palipali on Wakene's side, and Gane and Bala – on Natala's) Natala manages to repossess the documents, but the whole situation is solved in a totally unexpected way. At the peak of the struggle in the room's doorway appears... Tango, Natala's husband, who is presumed dead and buried. It turned out that the person whose body Natala claimed in the mortuary and later buried in the village was a thief, who stole Tango's clothes and papers and later died in a car crash (the body in fact was identified only by papers, since the face was injured beyond recognition). Tango himself was arrested by the police for lacking papers and was released only after a few days. Disgraced foes flee, Natala, her husband, children and friends celebrate victory with singing and dancing, but in their last song they send a warning to the audience:

The ogre who
For several days
Was gazing at Natala
Has now disappeared.
But let's look around –
How many Natalas
Are still in the ogre's teeth?
(wa Mberia 1997:61).

With the main female characters embodying the general conflict of the play (Mama Lime – defender of the custom, Natala – adept of emancipation), two other female personages play secondary, but important roles. The role assigned to Gane is clear – she is Natala’s relative and faithful friend (in the list of characters she is described as “Natala’s friend and Tango’s cousin”), another agent of emancipation, who assists Natala in most of her trials. The character of Tila, Wakene’s wife, appears to be a bit more ambivalent. Tila is in constant feud with Natala, the two women personally dislike each other – but when Wakene’s plan to “inherit” Natala floats up, it is Tila who, although unwittingly, comes to Natala’s side in this matter and therefore facilitates her fight with Wakene’s plan. One day she comes to Natala’s house and fiercely accuses her of planning to snatch her husband Wakene from her, declaring that “Tila will not give her husband to another woman – whoever this woman could be! [...] My husband does not need another woman. Tila is enough for him” (wa Mberia 1997:42-43). In other words, Tila, who apparently is not a full-fledged “positive” character, still acts as an agent of emancipation, opposing the “inheritance” plan. Probably the aim of the playwright was to show that the concept of monogamous marriage has deeply entered the minds of many African women, and its defence is not only the “privilege” of progressive-minded and apparently positive personages, like Natala and Gane.

Kifo Kisimani (Death in the well, 2001)

In the above-quoted interview Kithaka wa Mberia referred to his next dramatic attempt as “a play about dictatorship”. This theme has also been highlighted in the works of many African authors, and the whole post-colonial African history confirms this theme’s topicality. Like in many other literary works dealing with this theme, the play is set in an imaginary, typified African country of Butangi, ruled single-handedly by its leader Bokono. Bokono’s rule is marked by the traits characteristic for many dictatorial regimes – high-handedness, power intoxication, and suppression of any dissident thought, which is shown vividly already in the play’s first scene. To keep up the allegiant spirit of his people, Bokono orders to organize a “patriotic” meeting, which, to his surprise and anger, is attended by no one. Infuriated, Bokono orders his retinue to find out the reasons for such disobedience. His counsellors Batu and Zigu inform him, that this must have resulted from the work of the “dissident agitators”, especially, there is one young man who was “inciting people”.

This young man is Mwelusi, the play’s main character and the most devoted defender of the people’s rights. Bokono’s security agents manage to trace Mwelusi down and put him into prison, where he is subjected to humiliation and torture by security agents Mweke and Talui. But soon Mwelusi escapes from the prison. Bokono, in order to tighten his rule, issues a decree forbidding everyone, except his retinue, to fetch water from the well, which previously was “benevolently” open for public use three days a week. In response people organise a countrywide protest movement, its participants give resistance to soldiers, perform a march to the state prison, which facilitates Mwelusi’s escape and even makes the prison guards run away. Bokono, realising the growing threat, orders elimination of Mwelusi, whom he suspects to be the mastermind behind the protests. This comes to pass – Mwelusi is betrayed by his brother Gege, and one of the security agents knives Mwelusi down. But the days of Bokono’s rule are over – the protesters capture the government residence, Bokono and his henchmen are arrested and will be prosecuted by the people’s trial.

Unlike *Natala*, the play appears to be centred on the male hero – but female characters play in it a very substantial role. The leading roles are given to those who participate in resistance to the dictator. These are, in the first place, Mwelusi’s sister Andua and his sweetheart Atega. The latter plays a crucial role in Mwelusi’s short life – first, she organizes his escape by outwitting the prison guards. When she brings a food basket to be given to Mwelusi as a care

package, she already knows that the guards usually eat it by themselves. This time the care package is extremely rich – it even includes a bottle of wine; the excited guards, deciding to leave the bottle for themselves, agree to pass the pie to Mwelusi. The rest is reminiscent of Liyongo Fumo story – the pie contains a file, Mwelusi cuts his shackles down; when the half-drunk guards discover that, they first try to catch him, but then, discovering that a big crowd of protesters is approaching the prison, they prefer to flee. After Mwelusi’s escape, Atega takes care of him in his hiding; and she is among the women who take the lead during the capture of Bokono and his retinue. Moreover, she prevents Bokono’s unlawful execution – when one of the protesters wants to slaughter Bokono with an axe, she stops him, saying that “we’ll leave this duty to the Council for Justice”, stating also that “the council for justice will be re-constituted” (wa Mberia 2011:115). It appears thus, that Atega inherits the leading role from her perished loved one.

Andua, Mwelusi’s sister, also supports his struggle – not only does she help to lull the guards’ vigilance by coming frequently with a basket of food and letting them eat it, but later she becomes one of the most active protesters, organizing the attempts to fetch water from the forbidden well; they are frequently beaten by the guards, but do not give up, setting the example for others. She is also among the leaders during Bokono’s capture, participating in the arrest of Bokono’s henchmen.

The third woman in this trio is Azena, who is simply described in the character’s list as “a citizen of Butangi”, but is in fact one of the most active and courageous characters in the play. In the beginning Azena appears rather as a victim – she is not only beaten by the guards while trying to use the well, but even her village is burned down by the arsonists; she does not believe the propaganda, which states that the attack was organized by the neighbouring tribe – more likely, those were crooks hired by Bokono for his “divide and rule” purposes. During the attack Azena has her leg badly injured, but she still helps Mwelusi and Andua to hide, distracting the attention of the chasers. In the play’s finale, Azena leads the capture of the government residence – she is the first to break into the hall with a sword in her hand.

Batu (to Azena): Who are you?

Azena: You’ve killed Mwelusi. But your heinous deed will not cow us. Here we are!

Bokono (calling loudly): Mweke! *(To Batu)* Go and tell Mweke to come here!

Batu: How do I get out? There is an obstacle in the way!

Azena: Speaking of obstacles, our path has had obstacles for two decades now. *(To Bokono)* Wise father! Father of Butangi! Father of all Butangi citizens, if you want me to send for your shield, I shall do so. *(Her voice towards the door)* Mweke! Mweke! His Highness Chief Bokono demands your presence! *(Mweke is pushed into the room by Kame. His hands are bound. His clothes are blood-stained. Andua enters dragging along Gege. His hands too are bound).*

Batu: Have pity on us!

Azena: (To Bokono, indicating Mweke with her finger) I beg your pardon! One of the long arms of Butangi has been slightly wounded. The long arm was trying to attack change and change scratched a little (wa Mberia 2011:113-114).

One of the most interesting female characters in the play is that of Nyalwe, the wife to dictator Bokono. Being Butangi’s first lady, she is supposed to be part and parcel of her husband’s rule – but in fact in her face Bokono has one of the harshest critics of his governance. Moreover, her status allows her to criticise Bokono’s misdeeds openly:

Nyalwe: What’s so difficult in changing your ways?

Bokono: What ways?

Nyalwe: Bad governance! It’s time you stopped engaging in acts that distress the people.

Bokono (in a firm voice): My people love me a great deal. Had my leadership been bad, people wouldn't have been congratulating me from every corner of Butangi.

Nyalwe: They're deceiving you! You're being deluded by the hypocrites whom you call trusted advisers. [...] You aren't loved by the people. It's nothing but flattery! (wa Mberia 2011:17)

Nyalwe even takes the audacity to help those who suffered from her husband's actions. In the second scene of the play Bokono's house is visited by a woman named Mama Agoro, who complains that their land has been snatched from them by a government order and given to the guards commander. After Bokono rudely dismisses the petitioner, Nyalwe not only confronts her husband, but decides to attend to Mama Agoro's plea herself.

Bokono: If she comes, tell her that she is forbidden to come back to see me.

Nyalwe: Obviously, Mama Agoro has permission to come back to see me.

Bokono: Oh really!

Nyalwe: When the laws of Butangi are disregarded to suit your friends, you're content to turn a blind eye so that you don't see what's going on. [...] (*Mgezi enters*)

Mgezi: Madam, you have a visitor. [...] She says her name is Mama Agoro.

Nyalwe: Tell her I'm coming (wa Mberia 2011:17).

This scene introduces another female character – Mgezi, a servant at Bokono's house, a "tertiary" personage but with an important function. When during the capture of Bokono's residence Nyalwe is arrested along with her husband, this is Mgezi's information that saves her:

Atega: [...] No, Andua! Don't tie Nyalwe's hands! [...] A wife shouldn't suffer because of her husband's actions. Mgezi has been our eyes and ears in the big house and many a time did she hear Nyalwe admonishing her husband for oppressing the people of Butangi.

Kane: Nyalwe has been doing it all along. In fact, had she not been here, the people of Butangi would've suffered much more than they have done (wa Mberia 2011:115).

The remaining two female characters of the play appear to have symbolic representation as their main function. One of such characters is Tanya, mother to Mwelusi and his siblings Andua and Gege. Tanya is a perfect embodiment of a Mother – ever caring, protective and compassionate. She loves all her children, worries about Mwelusi and Andaa, and tries to shame Gege for neglecting his brother. She starts to take food to Mwelusi when he is in prison (which later turned into an escape plan), helps Mwelusi to hide during pursuit, supports the women who use the well despite the ban. Tanya's character may be interpreted as an incarnation of mother Africa, who loves, pities and protects her children; it is one of the most likeable characters of the play.

The character of Kaloo appears to represent the victimized women, those who suffer under the tyrannical rule of Bokono, but try simply to survive in these conditions. Kaloo even tries to win the favour of the powers-that-be – she arranges the chairs for the "patriotic meeting" in Scene one, and she is the leader of the entertainment programme for the guest of honour (Bokono likes "gyration" dance performed by women). Kaloo's efforts appear to get rewarded – her son, through the patronage of Bokono, gets a job, but it turns out to be a trap – Bokono, through his advisor, orders Kaloo to come to his residence in order to "gratify" him. Kaloo illustrates the way women are treated by rulers like Bokono – they are used as servants, whatever kind of services they are supposed to perform.

Kaloo as a character is important, since she illustrates the choice which the characters of the play are to make – either to oppose the regime, with all the danger involved, or to lead a miserable life as its subjects. Most of the female characters favour the first option, and after

Mwelusi's death they play the crucial role in the elimination of the tyrannical regime. They are depicted in the play as the major mobilizing force of social emancipation – and this “social vocation” of women is confirmed in other plays of wa Mberia.

Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi (Flowers in the morning sun, 2004)

In the preface to the play Kithaka wa Mberia wrote that the “scripting and production of *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* [...] was sponsored by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The aim of the collaboration between the playwright and the International Committee of the Red Cross was to present, artistically, the tenets of the International Humanitarian Law (the Law of War) as stipulated by the Geneva Conventions” (wa Mberia 2011a: iii). Although Wambua Kawiwe states that “the play reads like a rewriting of the conventions, a recasting of the conventions into dialogues” (Kawiwe 2018:170), it must be noted that the Geneva Conventions as such are mentioned in the play in one episode. However, this “social mandate” from an international organization allowed the playwright to highlight in this play another theme topical for modern Africa – that of interethnic conflicts. In the above-quoted interview with Wanjiru Waitthaka the writer himself shed his view on the nature of such conflicts:

There have never been tribal clashes in this country by the way. If the clashes of 1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007 were tribal, then logic dictates that the fighting would continue in intervening years, which didn't happen. The most dominant variable in these clashes is politics. I call them political clashes because they happen around the time of elections. Negative ethnicity definitely plays a role in the suffering of Kenyans, but politicians use it as a trigger to create clashes (Waitthaka 2017).

The play, like *Natala*, is set “in the end of the twentieth century in an abstract African society”, which again stresses the typicality and topicality of the highlighted problem. The conflict between two ethnic groups, Tange and Nduku, is depicted by the writer in full compliance with his above-quoted opinion about the real nature of these clashes. The main reason of the conflict are the political ambitions of Chebwe, leader of the Tange, who wants to get a ministerial post at the nearest elections, and for this purpose, in order to get the reputation of the “defender of his people”, organizes full-scale persecution of the Nduku, from economic clampdown (the lawyers hired by Chebwe started to close enterprises owned by the Nduku) to open clashes with the use of weapons. One of the pretexts was that Chebwe's militia units were “liberating” the lands, allegedly from the olden times owned by Tange, but then unlawfully “occupied” by the Nduku.

Kabitho, leader of the Nduku, is supposed to represent the interests of the people victimized by political scheming – but himself he is not quite different from Chebwe. He has very little concern about his tribesmen, dying of hunger and diseases in the IDP camps; during his brief visits to these camps he only promises to the IDPs that “we'll take drastic actions against the enemy”. These “drastic actions” become a real obsession for Kabitho; in order to organize acts of revenge he tries to engage his relative, a retired army captain Tungai, thinking that his expertise would allow to quickly train Nduku youth in combat skills. At first Tungai indignantly refuses – “In the military, I was taught to defend my country against any aggressor; I wasn't taught to train squadrons to kill our neighbours” (page 17). However, after seeing all the suffering of his people, he eventually agrees. One aspect, although, causes drastic controversy between them. When Kabitho demands, that during their revenge attack all the people in the nearby Tange village, including children, women and elders, should be killed, for “snakes beget snakes”, Tungai opposes him, saying that even wars should be waged according to the laws, which, among other things, demand to spare the lives of non-combatants. Kabitho retorts disdainfully:

Kabitho: Tungai, don't take me for a fool. I may not be well-learned, but I've heard about the rules that you mention. I once attended the seminar where we were told those rules were formulated in Geneva. Now, Geneva is not in Congo or Uganda. It's not in Ethiopia, Sudan or Somalia. It's a certain country in Europe! [...] Tungai, Geneva has the right to fight wars as it pleases. But the conflict between us and the Tange is our war, not Geneva's. We have a right to fight as we please.

Tungai: You asked me to lead the Ndikus in the fight against the Tanges because I've a firm expertise in war. That experience includes the knowledge of the rules of engagement. I, therefore, have no choice but to utilise that expertise in its full scope (wa Mberia 2011a:69).

Nevertheless, both leaders, Chebwe and Kabitho, are deliberately ignoring the Law of War – to an extent that both decide to recruit into their militias the homeless teens from town. Kabitho, blinded with revenge, puts it openly:

Kabitho: When children are trained to fight, they make very good soldiers. I got that information from a magazine. They were a great asset to a certain leader in Liberia. [...]

Tungai: No, Kabitho! It's not right to destroy the lives of children. Once children get involved in the ravages of war, once they get introduced to drugs, they no longer have any hope in life. [...]

Kabitho: Consider the issue in its proper perspective. I'm sure that you'll eventually see the good side of it (wa Mberia 2011a:69).

On his part, Tungai still hopes to find a peaceful solution to the conflict - and in this he finds supporters in both belligerent camps, and exactly among the youth, whom the leaders intend to use for mutual extermination. Tungai's main supporters and oppositionists of bloodshed are the younger relatives of the leaders – Nali, daughter of Chebwe, and Waito, nephew of Kabitho. Nali and Waito are deeply in love, and in the name of their love for each other and for their people they decide to do everything possible to stop the bloodshed. For that purpose, they first try to talk to their relatives, the leaders of warring groups, but this brings very humble result. Then Nali and Waito organize the youth demonstrations against the tribal war and are going to petition the international court. Once, going to a date with Waito, Nali happens to come to the camp where Tungai trains the Ndiku youth; she is caught and taken to him for interrogation as “Tange spy”, but, knowing Nali's good intentions, Tungai sets her free.

Nali (still shedding tears): Thank you. I'll take part in the demonstration with all ardour.

Tungai: What demonstration?

Nali: The demonstration against ethnic violence. We've organised a public demonstration to protest against leaders who incite citizens to ethnic violence. [...]

Tungai: You have my blessings.

Chugu: She's the chief organizer of the demonstration.

Tungai (shaking Nali's hand): Congratulations! Hopefully, your demonstration will stir the people and make them realize that the leaders are merely using them. [...] Farewell. Rest assured that we'll respond to any attack by the Tanges. It's not that we hate them but we'll fight tooth and nail in order to guarantee our survival. But we'd prefer to live in peace and good neighbourliness with them (wa Mberia 2011a:82).

The play features an open finale – on both sides of the scene appear two groups of people with arms, symbolising the warring tribes; they sing the song of war. “The two groups come face to face. Nali and Waito, holding pieces of broken arrows and singing a song of peace, burst upon the scene between the adversaries. Nali is holding back the Tange group, while Waito restrains the Ndikus. Shortly, dancers come onto the stage and join in singing the song of peace.

Gradually, the aura of hostility and antagonism disappears from the faces of the adversaries on either side. Everyone on stage now joins in singing the song of peace. Nali and Waito stand opposite one another. Chebwe stands next to Nali and Kabitho is next to Waito. Tungai stands next to Nali and Waito and he gestures to Waito. Waito takes a ring from Tungai's hand and puts it on Nali's finger. Next, Nali takes the second ring from Tungai's hand and puts it on Waito's finger. At this stage, the song of peace grows louder. Nali and Waito hold hands like a married couple and exit the stage, trailed by singers who break into a wedding song" (wa Mberia 2011a:86). However, at the next moment it becomes clear that this "happy end" happened only in Tungai's imagination. Thus, the author invite the audience to speculate on who may become the winner – Tungai, Waito and Nali with their love for peace and their people, or Chebwe and Kabitho with their power ambitions and blood thirst.

In comparison with *Kifo Kisimani*, this play features relatively few female characters – four all in all – whose roles are very clear from the onset. First, there are two agents of emancipation, oppositionists of ethnic violence. The first of them is, of course, Nali, who (along with Waito as her "male half") does everything in her ability to prevent the war. She organizes a theatre troupe, to educate the people on war horrors, and with this troupe she visits the towns bordering the neighbouring country, sunk in a civil war, to witness these horrors herself. She firmly opposes her father's false claims that the Nduku "came from hundreds of kilometres to this place to shamelessly settle on our land; now, they want to rule us again so that they may grab even more land" – in fact, she destroys them with one strong argument: "There's a basic land problem in this country. A few people own thousands of acres while the large majority don't own even ten square metres" (page 63). Later, in order to trace down her father's involvement in ethnic violence, she together with her friends Waito and Chugu breaks into a cabinet in Chebwe's bedroom to discover there the weapons prepared for oncoming attack against the Nduku. Nali is the most active peacemaker in the play – she organises demonstrations, secures the support from Tungai, and finally appears in that imaginary wedding in Tungai's mind.

As a role model female character in the play, Nali is joined by her mother Neche. Despite her long-time marriage to Chebwe, Neche harshly and openly condemns her husband's involvement in the organisation of ethnic clashes (in that sense, Neche may be regarded as the development of the character of Nyalwe from *Kifo Kisimani*). Neche discovers that Chebwe's alleged trip to Tanzania was only a disguise for setting the decimation of the Nduku in Lolomo – and straightforwardly tells it to him; when Chebwe comes home and discovers the broken cabinet, Neche firmly comes to the defence of Nali and her friends.

Neche: You didn't answer her question. Why should we throw the country into a pool of blood? [...]

Chebwe: You just wait! Should the hostilities escalate into war, we shall crash them in a manner that they'll not forget in a long time. [...]

Nali: No! No! I say no to the cloud of blood! (*Chebwe enters into his bedroom*)

Neche: Bravo, my child. Small strokes felled great oaks.

Nali: Mum, I dream of a nation where peace reigns supreme; not a nation crisscrossed by rivers of blood.

Neche: That's a good dream, my child. And good dreams are the foundation and the pillars of human progress (wa Mberia 2011a:64-65).

Two other women characters in the play, Gachono and Nyagachi, are embodying, so to speak, "the other side" of ethnic violence. If Nali and her mother are depicted as active fighters against the war, Gachono and Nyagachi epitomize exactly the results of war – what it does to the people, especially defenceless women and children. Gachono and Nyagachi, two Ndiku women, are the

dwellers of an IDP camp, after Chebwe's militia has evicted them from their farms. The title deeds for their land were burned, children's school certificates were destroyed; in the camp they are suffering from cold, hunger and diseases – Gachono is infected with AIDS, the camp has no medicines, and remains with only a few months to live (and she does not know about her disease). When Kabitho visits the camp, they severely reproach him - "our children are dying as you snore in bed", and Nyagache proposes her friend to give Kabitho "a skirt and a petticoat so that he may be properly dressed in order stop dressing as though he were a man" (page 3). On top of all this, another blow awaits Gachono and Nyagachi – succumbing to the suasion from the government, they attempted to return to their farms in Lolongo, but after three days the returners were suddenly boarded onto army trucks and taken (as they were told) to Mkuyuni, the "native land" of the Ndiku. Gachono and Nyagachi escaped on the way, and try to go to Tunyaga, where some of their tribesmen have temporarily settled. On their way they pass Tungai's farm; horrified by their story, he tries to persuade them to dwell at his place; when they refuse, he assists them with money; and exactly this encounter propels his final decision to become the military trainer for the Ndiku.

It appears that in this play the author uses the female characters to create two contrasting dimensions of ethnic war: first – its victims, Gachono and Nyagachi, who lost everything in the war but, not losing their spirit, still aspire to go on with their lives. Second, there are two women from the "enemy camp", Nali and Neche, who nevertheless do whatever they can in order to stop blood shedding. All these four characters are brought together by hope – hope that the situation will get better, that hope is embodied in the final scene of the play, and women character in the play may be regarded as the main liners of this hope.

***Walikiona cha Mtema Kuni* (2021)**

Wa Mberia's fourth play, whose title can be loosely translated as *They have suffered the consequences*, appears to be rather different from his other plays with their pronounced social-critical charge. In terms of its generic characteristics *Walikiona cha Mtema Kuni* can be classified as a comedy, thinly bordering with burlesque, centred around an adulterous adventure of a high-rank state official Paul Ontoro, the governor of the Taungu county. However, this seemingly "entertainment-type" play, with a rather tenuous plot and abundance of comic situations, in fact bears recognizable features of a barely disguised social satire. All the characters of the play represent various groups of contemporary African society (the play is set in an unnamed, presumably imaginary African country). This of course applies to female characters, which, taken together, give a kind of "laboratory slice" of modern society, from high to lower social levels. It must be noted that this is arguably the only play of wa Mberia to whose characters the above outlined criterion – their relations with emancipation – is not fully applicable; however, for the audience it almost immediately becomes clear, which characters are favoured by the author, thus finding them socially useful, and which characters he deems as detrimental for the constructive development of the society. Among the latter, the first ones to be mentioned are Ontoro's wife Suzie and Nancy Kirige, a middle-aged businesswoman, Ontoro's mistress and wife to his friend, entrepreneur John Kirige. Both women represent the higher social circles, with traits typical to this group – and these traits could hardly be called likeable. Mrs Ontoro is a perfect exemplar of a woman who attained her social position because of her husband's post – but at that she thinks herself to be higher than anyone, and therefore treats other people as her subordinates and generally "surplus material". She does not hesitate to insult – verbally and even physically. While talking to her husband's office personnel, his secretary Kenina and personal assistant Anna, she uses the most offensive manner, calling Kenina "loose tongue" and "dumb head"; in another conversation, she makes insulting hints at the alleged relations between Kenina and her husband, calling Kenina "bedmate".

Mrs Ontoro: One day I came here, and exactly that day my husband did not sleep at home. And when I came, I saw your face shining, as if you spend day and night in a massage parlour. Was it so?

Kenina: Mrs Ontoro, your words are disgracing me.

Mrs Ontoro: You did not answer!

Kenina: I have nothing to answer you.

Mrs Ontoro: This is not so! Then I repeat! The face of my husband's secretary shines in the morning after my husband did not sleep at home. What kind of coincidence is that? Days of a thief are just forty! (*Mrs Ontoro steps towards the door of the governor's office. Kenina rises quickly and blocks her way.*)

Mrs Ontoro: Let me pass, you bedmate!

Kenina: Mrs Ontoro, I do not have a permission to let anyone enter the office of the Governor if he is not in. The only one who has the right to enter in this case is his official assistant.

At that moment, the official assistant Anna comes, and Mrs Ontoro, although seeing her for the first time, does not shy from similar insulting implications about her:

Mrs Ontoro: Who are you?

Kanina: Anna Kanina, official assistant to Mr. Governor. [...]

Mrs Ontoro (passing an inciting laughter): Special woman for the Governor of Taungu!

Kanina: I did not say I am a "special woman", I said I am an official assistant.

Mrs Ontoro: It's all the same, official assistant, special woman – special services!

Kanina: You are insulting me, Mrs Ontoro! [...]

Mrs Ontoro: Shut up, you mudheap!

Kanina: Mrs Ontoro, stop insulting me, or I will call the police to come to my assistance because of insult.

Mrs Ontoro: And you mudheap insulted me how many times?

Kanina (to Kenina): Kenina, please call the police and tell them we have trouble in the office (wa Mberia 2021:24-25).

In the same way Mrs Ontoro communicates with other female personages, even on her first encounter with them. Another illustrative episodes is her phone talk with Dr Limayal and Inspector Simika:

Mrs Ontoro: Tell me how is my husband.

Dr Limayal: Medical ethics does not allow me to talk about the patients without first confirming that I am talking to a relative. [...]

Mrs Ontoro: You! You know that I can put you into trouble?

Dr Limayal: No doubt, I know that there are people who can put others into trouble, but this cannot make me violate the ethics of my profession. [...] (*Gives the phone to Inspector Simika*) [...]

Insp. Simika: Yes, Mrs Ontoro, Inspector Simika here! [...]

Mrs Ontoro: This doctor her name is what?

Insp. Simika: I only know her as Dr Limayal.

Mrs Ontoro: What tribe is she from? What is the tribe of such insolent women?

Insp. Simika: Mrs Ontoro, I do not think that Dr Limayal is insolent. I think she is observing the professional ethics.

Mrs Ontoro: Now you are also starting to talk like that? (wa Mberia 2021:54-55).

Later, when Mrs Ontoro finds her husband in a delicate condition with Nancy Kirige, all the power of her revenge is directed at the “husband snatcher” – she simply tries to strangle her, and Kirige is only saved through the efforts of people present there. Later Mrs Ontoro repeats the attempt – as written in the stage remarks, “*Mrs Ontoro suddenly rushes in [...] jumps at Mrs Kirige and wants to strike her. Inspector Simika seizes her arm and, helped by Corporal Kaanji, drags Mrs Ontoro from Mrs Kirige.*”

Mrs Ontoro: [...] Leave me, I will teach this slut that not every man is her clown for entertainment. (*Tries to hit those who are holding her, but they manage to control her*) (wa Mberia 2021:79).

The “slut” that Mrs Ontoro is so fierce about is Nancy Kirige, businesswoman and Ontoro’s lover. This is apparently her main function, since her voice is heard in only one episode of the play – but this is enough for the audience to make a picture of this lady. Mrs Kirige is a typical business figure of today, who has to secure the support of the powers-that-be for being successful in her business ventures. In Scene one from the telephone conversation between her and Governor Ontoro we learn about their “scratch-your-back” relations – Mrs Kirige helped Ontoro’s electoral campaign by luring women voters to his camp, for which Ontoro promised to give her company the tender for school uniforms. Alas, he had forgotten about the promise, and gave the tender to another “friend”, pledging Mrs Kirige that “next time for sure” – and it appears that to secure her future Mrs Kirige decides to become the lover of the Governor. It may seem that Mrs Kirige is depicted in the play largely as a victim figure, the business lady whose future depends on the favours from the high and mighty – but at the same time, the methods that she uses for securing the future would hardly win the sympathy of the audience, and Mrs Kirige and Ontoro get well-deserved punishment, being caught in a shameful condition.

While the female representatives of the higher classes are drawn in the play in the negative light, the author creates much more favourable picture of women from middle class. Those are the workers at Ondoro’s office – the secretary Kenina and official assistant Anna Kaninga; to the same list belong police inspector Linda Simika and medical doctor Rose Limayal. These characters have several common traits: they are young, highly professional and demonstrate high level of integrity, especially personal dignity and respect to others. It becomes obvious when Kenina and Anna oppose the aggressive advances of Mrs Ontoro with her almost feudal treatment of “those below” – they are polite but firm in their resistance. Same behaviour is demonstrated by Inspector Simika and Dr Limayal in their conversation with the Governor’s wife. Along with that, the four ladies show high level of professionalism – Kenina and Anna manage to handle the situation in the office during the sudden absence of the Governor, Simika conducts the search for Ontoro and, after she finds him successfully, it is Dr Limayal who undertakes the necessary medical measures. On the whole, these characters are depicted as modern and, yes, emancipated women – which is confirmed by their social stand, their educational level and their personal behaviour.

The last two female characters in the play, Kajore and Chwene, come from the lower steps of the social ladder – and the author again gives a rather favourable portrayal of them. The first time the audience meets them is when they are knocking at the door of Kiriges’ house - both are neighbours of Kirige family, but their neighbourliness is of different types. Kajore is apparently a good neighbour, which is confirmed by the fact that Mrs Kirige sometimes credits her with money – likely due to her good character. It is Kajore who later takes care of the ill-fated lovers, Ontori and Mrs Kirige, by taking vigil at their bedside and giving them food and water. Chwene, on her part, is a not-so-good neighbour – she is in fact in a feud with Kirige family, because

Kirige's chicken are spoiling her garden. She tried to talk to them many times, but "instead of ears they have certain devices on all sides of their heads", therefore it is the last try before she goes to authorities. Chwene is also depicted as a possessor of a callous, but funny type of folk-based, people's wit – she gives very sharp and caustic comments to the unfolding events. Kajore and Chwene fully support and participate the actions of the above-mentioned four "middle class" characters, thus it may be assumed that the author also ascribes them to the positive side.

From the above, it may be summed up that through the female characters the author again expresses his assessment of those social powers who either promote or hamper emancipation. Creating negative images of the representatives of upper social groups – official's wife and a businesswoman, the author paints a favourable picture of the characters standing for lower social levels, especially middle class. It also should be noted that women in the play are the most efficient agents of action, compared to the male characters – their active position in the long run brings the desired results (detection of the missing governor and her lover) and largely enhances the solution of the situation.

Kwenzi Gizani (A cry in the darkness, 2021)

Kithaka wa Mberia's latest-to-date play *Kwenzi Gizani*, that won 2022 Jomo Kenyatta prize, deals with the themes which may also be deemed as topical for contemporary African societies. One, more general theme – how social emancipation is negatively influenced by the so-called "communal spirit", which is frequently used for covering the most heinous crimes. Paul Mkando, a respected member of his family clan and the church community, cold-bloodedly rapes his 15-year-old daughter Kanevu, threatening to kill her if she tells anyone about his deed. Kanevu, deeply shocked, in a hysterical bout confesses everything to her mother Chagi, Mkando's wife. Chagi, shocked even more, decides to handle the case to the law – supported by her friend and sister-in-law Lucy Kagori she brings her daughter to the hospital, and after obtaining the medical verdict proceeds to the police station, where, guided by inspector Ruth Kabusa, writes a statement against the rapist. Mkando is arrested and is going to face the trial, and at that moment Chagi, her daughter and Lucy encounter numerous attempts to silence the case down, convince them to "settle everything in the family", "not to bring the quarrel out of the cottage" and the like. These attempts are made by the members of the church and family communities of both Mkando and Chagi – one of the most active "inducers" is Chagi's mother Nyatu, who urges her daughter "to save family's honour at all costs" (according to her, the family is disgraced not by Mkando's deed, but by the fact that he will face the trial). Nyatu is supported by Akori, the leader of local "church women group", who promises Chagi various benefits if their charges are called back. The zealots of "community honour" use a variety of methods, from sugary promises to threats and even badgering, organized at Kanevu's school – she is accused by her classmates and even some teachers of an attempt to seduce her father and then to scathe him. Despite all the opposing efforts, the case is brought to the court; the author masterfully reflects the intense struggle of the sides in the court, but in the end the justice prevails – the culprit is sentenced to 35 years of imprisonment. Moreover, this sentence is not final – at the end of the session, the prosecutor unexpectedly produces a letter, addressed to Chagi and written by her recently deceased elder daughter Naranja. In the letter Naranja confessed that she was going to kill herself after being raped by her father – the same Paul Mkando. The letter was lost by bad luck, and Naranja, not receiving expected support from her mother, fulfils her intention. Thus, Mkando's fate is likely to become even more unenviable.

This theme of incestual violence, raised in the play, is also one of the topical issues for modern African societies; Kenyan newspapers are filled with such reports, and, according to the journalists and lawyers, two thirds of such cases do not reach neither the press nor the law – in the same spirit of "preserving the family honour". But one of the play's strengths is not only

highlighting this hot theme, but also showing the social mechanisms which can and must facilitate the just punishment of the guilty. The author himself mentions this in the above-mentioned interview:

People talk about writing as being a mirror which you hold up for people to see themselves in it, but it's much more than that. A good poet, dramatist or novelist goes beyond the mirror, not only painting the reality of society, but also making concrete suggestions for change. It's not enough to say there is a lot of incest in this country. You must also prick people's conscience so that they can protest and in effect deter or dissuade the next potential incestuous villain (Waithaka 2017).

It is understood that the social mechanisms do not function by themselves – they are moved by the people. And in the play the author paints expressive and convincing portraits of the people that move various social mechanisms – those which assist law and justice, thus promoting emancipation, as well as those which interfere with the advancement of the society. And in this, a major role is again played by the female characters, which in fact occupy central positions in the play.

As in other plays of wa Mberia, female characters can be divided into two groups – those favouring social emancipation and those opposing it. The latter group is small and consists of the above-mentioned figures of Nyatu, Chagi's mother, and Akori, the leader of local "church women group" and the wife of the head of the local ecclesiastic community. Nyati is a staunch defender of patriarchal customs (which makes her somehow similar to Mama Lime from wa Mberia's first play) and mostly cares about her esteem in the eyes of the others, thus fully acquitting Mkando's violence towards her granddaughter, regarding her only as a means of satisfying men's needs:

Nyatu: As I was fearing, these days I am not a human – I am a thing. Everywhere I go, women of my age, and even those who are younger than me by several years, turn their heads and whistle in contempt. Those with loose tongues do not hesitate to insult me openly. I am told that me and other women from your family did not teach you how to care about husband's interests. It is said, people know, that a man with needs is like an animal. They say that it is no surprise that father of Kanevu is thrown into dirt by a temptation (wa Mberia 2021a:97).

Akori, on her part, appears to be caring about the good name of the church community, and uses corresponding rhetoric – again in order to justify Mkando's deed:

Akori: In the church people do not trust that accusations against Paul are true. [...] Paul is not a stranger to them. He is their fellow believer, whom they have known for years. [...] And not only this. They say that even if it is true, then it is clear that the devil overcame him and threw him down, and it is a mistake on the part of his wife and daughter to pursuit him and to kick him, when he is lying down being thrown there by the devil. They say proper thing is to forgive him by both of you, that is you and your daughter, and to pray the Almighty Lord to give him a strong shield, a sharp double-edged sword and a roaring braveness to allow him stand up and protect himself against Satan, from now till the day he meets the Creator in heaven (wa Mberia 2021a:99).

Akori even speaks very openly about the benefits that the church community could accord to Chagi if the charges are withdrawn:

Chagi: [...] I am also sending you back to the believers in the church. Tell them that you came to me, explained everything that they had sent you to explain, and I listened attentively.

Akori: They told me to bring them the reply, and you have not replied yet. I tell you another thing that they told me to tell you. If you agree to persuade your daughter to retract what she said and the charges against Paul are removed, the church plans to thank you by buying you a new Harrier!

Chagi (standing up and ready to say goodbye): I hope you will not forget to pass my message to those who send you.

Akori: [...] You have not answered. You just kept silent.

Chagi (showing them to the door): Silence is also an answer (wa Mberia 2021a:100).

Chagi sees very well through the righteous intentions of Akori - even earlier in the play, in Scene six, she discloses Akori's main motive:

Chagi: I will find a potion to help me understand you better! (*To the audience, pointing at Akori*) She and her husband, the pastor, have a gabbling dream, blowing desire, bubbling hope that the pastor gets the post of a Deputy Bishop. If this happens, both will have reputable names: the pastor will be a Deputy Bishop, his wife will be a Deputy Bishopess. And they feel if this commotion reaches the ears of the Church Council, maybe it will break a step in the ladder that might bring them to a new value. Paul Mkando and the pastor are bosom friends (wa Mberia 2021a:39).

The characters which embody emancipation form the largest group of female personages in the play. First and main of them is of course Chagi, a local hospital nurse, who did not fear to cross out almost thirty years of marriage for the sake of saving the future of her daughter, standing firm against the adepts of "communal honour" and in the end winning the case.

Mkando, on his part, is trying to use all the ways known to him to escape justice, mostly bribery – but here he runs against strong will and high professionalism of the officers from all levels of judicial bodies, basically women. At one point he reaches certain success – through bribery he is released from the cell until trial, through bribery he convinces one of the policemen to fake Kanevu's evidence... but all this is ruined by Lydia Chwendo and her colleague George Tuati, inspectors from the Public Authority for Supervising the Police Performance (Mamlaka Huru ya Kusimamia Utendakazi wa Polisi), who disclose the clandestine activity. Other female workers of judiciary behave likewise. Police inspector Ruth Kabusa becomes a "guardian angel" for Chagi and her daughter during their visit to the police station. Medical doctor Amina Laminza, who also works as a police expert, gives in the court the decisive evidence assuring the guilt of Paul Mkando. One of the key characters in the play is the judge Flora Mtari, who finally decides the case in favour of the complainants and issues a guilty verdict to Mkando. Lucy Kagori gives Flora Mtari a very complimentary characteristic:

Kagori: [...] What inspires to an extent is that, after talking to you, I talked to a friend about the case. This friend says that Flora Mari, the judge who conducts the case, is a red-hot iron. Several times the advocates tried, smiling, to touch her with a hand full of dates, and they got burned badly.

Chagi: This society is quite rotten, and it stinks. But here and there we find angels who are waving the banner of integrity (wa Mberia 2021a:115).

Lucy Kagori herself is another important character in the play. Sister-in-law and friend to Chagi, a young educated woman (in Scene nine it is mentioned that Lucy works in an energy company after getting a degree in business studies), she is a devoted ally of justice – to such an

extent that, being a relative of Paul Mkando, she manages to break the frank-pledge of the family kinship in her urge to punish the rapist, even though they are closely related. Lucy also takes care of Kanevu, the rape victim, by giving her shelter in her house in order to protect her from further harm; she supports Chagi all throughout in her struggle (by that deserving a callous remark from Chagi's mother – "it is you who puts this madness into my daughter's head"), and largely her support gives Chagi strength to stand till the successful end.

The only pronounced victim character (and logically so) is Kanevu, Chagi's daughter, the prey of her father's repulsive lust. The author skilfully depicts a young innocent girl, whose world has totally fallen apart; she believes no one and in nothing, and wants only to die – and equally aptly he shows the never-ending effort of her mother and Lucy to restore her broken spirits. In the end Kanevu bravely withstands court interrogations, not hesitating to testify openly against her father, and the play's final episode, where Chagi, Lucy and Kanevu are embracing, leave the audience with hope of her successful recovery.

Like in his debut play, *in Kwenzi Gizani* the author gives female characters the central role in fulfilling the play's main artistic task, which he himself formulated as to "prick people's conscience so that they can protest" – in this case, protest against the corrupting influence of "communal spirit" in its negative interpretation, stipulated either by patriarchal mentality (as in case of Nyatu) or personal ambitions (as embodied by the character of Akori). Other female characters in the play practically form the "united front" of resistance against Mkando's crime and, in the long run, against that negative version of "communal spirit" – and their actions, propelled by common spirit of justice and emancipation, serve as the main prerequisite for success.

Conclusion

The plays discussed in this study, with all variety of their thematic concerns and character types, appear to have certain common traits in terms of the treatment of female characters. As was stated in the introduction, these characters may be categorized into two groups – as pro-agents and counter-agents of social emancipation. The latter are mainly motivated by either patriarchal mentality (such as Mama Lime and Nyatu), personal benefit (Akori, Susan Kirige), or modern version of a feudal mindset (Mrs Ontoro). The characters who advocate emancipation come from various social circles (mostly middle-class), are characterized by various education levels (mostly high- or professionally educated), represent different age groups, but are bound by at least one common feature – their aptitude for action. All these characters are trying to solve various social situations, depicted in these plays, by active participation, by putting all their effort into achievement of socially favourable solutions. And it seems no chance that the author largely delegates this active position to women – for women, as historically oppressed sex, want to be in the front row of changes (although, to be fair, many positive women characters in the plays have their faithful male partners). The author's call for active measures seems not to go unseen – suffice it to recall the growing social activities of Kenyan population in the recent years. It would be difficult to say how great a contribution to this was made by artistic works – but it seems that Kithaka wa Mberia, a celebrated Kenyan poet and playwright, was not very wrong when he stated that "creative writing is a way of chipping in or contributing in a modest way in improving society."

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=emancipation>

² wa Mberia 1997; no page number

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