

Androgyny and Women's Identity in Ari Katini Mwachofi's *Mama Ee*

By
Amiri Swaleh and Rayya Timammy

Introduction

A reading of Ari Katini Mwachofi's *Mama Ee* reveals it as an analysis of gender relations specifically within the institution of marriage in a patriarchal social order. The playwright portrays an antagonistic relationship between women and men. However, different from earlier Kiswahili works, the woman's voice here is new, aggressive and revolutionary as she negotiates for her identity. The main female character Mwavita, can only be likened to Lanina the main character in Alamin Mazrui's *Kilio cha Haki*. But different from the latter, woman here not only fights for her rights, equal treatment, self-identity, and self-determination, her freedom, her sexuality, she is also on a mission of sensitization and consciousness- rising.

The ending to *Mama Ee* is symbolic: it envisions the birth of a new African woman; holding hands Mwavita and Tenge – the protagonists, in unison say:

*Umoja ndiyo nguvu, utengano udhaifu.
Tujitoe bila uvivu, kwa nyoyo zilonadhifu
"Uke na uonevu", usiwe msemu sanifu
kwa shime tujengeni, umoja wa wanawake (p. 97)*

*Unity is strength division is a weakness
We should be ready without being lazy
and with Clean hearts,
femininity and discrimination*

*should not be a standard singing,
lets put more effort to build
women's unity.*

Through Kinaya's and Mwavita's marriage, we see a bold attempt – albeit a radical move-towards the fight for woman's freedom, dignity morality and self-identity in a social order where patriarchy is the dominant ideology. The process being described here is the birth of a new woman, free from the fetters of tradition and its delimiting and debilitating beliefs and practices.

The play is symbolically divided into two sections: the first, describes the relationship between men and women as they try to live according to the norms, traditions and religious beliefs in a patriarchy. These are the norms that have enabled society to relegate women to "objects" as their rights are trampled upon. Despite all the atrocities committed against them, women stoically hold on since these roles and functions are upheld by tradition and are strengthened by the modern judicial system and religious belief to which they ascribe. However, we see the central female characters Mwavita and Tenge resisting the many attempts at marginalizing and discriminating

against them in a “man’s world”. This behavior, which can traditionally be termed “manly”, is what can be termed androgynous –a deviation from the norm and is used as a means of disentangling woman from patriarchy’s yoke.

The second section of the play portrays a radically transformed image of the two protagonists Mwavita and Tenge. We see them in a concerted effort to deconstruct the traditional world – view which had hitherto confined them to a miserable life. They exude confidence; they have matured and are very conscious of what not only ails them as women, but as human beings as well. They decide to chart out a new path for themselves and their fellow women despite the many traditional, social, judicial and religious constraints in their path. They see it their duty to enlighten other women by consciousness-raising. They believe the only way to achieving equality for women, is by uniting in order to aggressively fight all the socio-political systems militating against them. In this endeavour, they are

even ready to sacrifice their self-image, reputation and familial ties to agitate for their womanhood, sexuality and self-identity. Our analysis will be guided by the interaction between feminist theory especially gender criticism which is a branch of feminist theory specific to the analysis of relations between women and men in a social order dominated by patriarchal ideology and psychological analysis specifically expending androgynous perspectives.

Mbilinyi (1992) argues that the concept of gender rose to prominence in the late 1970s as “researchers looked for a way to conceptualize the social construction of masculinity and femininity” (p. 34). Hence, attention was shifted away from the biological dichotomous of female/male, man/woman – to the social relations between and among women and men.

Mbilinyi further argues that,

*Gender analysis examined the multiple
layers of social relations and identities
among women and men, individually
and collectively and the complex
Interconnections among gender,
imperial, class, race, ethnic relations (p. 34)*

In this regard, “gender” is a term that will be used to mean three things, following the model propounded by Moyana (1996) viz,

- a) As the body
- b) As the social roles and functions of male and female
- c) As the way these roles and functions are internalized and lived (p. 26)

For the purposes of this paper, the three definitions will interact at various levels at different times as they are applied in the play. The father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud once said “anatomy is destiny”. This dictum can be applied from the premise that, there exist men and women in the play. For the

male characters; and especially Kinaya and George, it applies for the most part as will be revealed in the analysis. However, at times it does not apply as we see the male and female roles

interchanging – especially with regard to women who behave in a manner traditionally regarded as “manly”.

Androgyny is the psychological concept that will be used together with gender criticism in this paper. The concept suggests a combination of femininity and masculinity. It is derived from two Greek roots : *andro* for male, and *gyn* for female. In a broad sense, it is a holistic concept; a way of thinking about the totality of a person’s life experiences. Though not all components of femininity and masculinity are included in this definition of androgyny, the concepts stereotypic and socially valued are to be added for the purposes of this paper. The use of stereotypic traits ensures that the characters included are commonly acknowledged to represent masculinity and femininity. For example, Bakan (1966) proposes a model that sees masculinity and femininity as being consistent with two primary modes of human interaction; masculinity with agency and femininity with communion. He explains that,

Agency is manifested in qualities of individual preservation: self protection, self assertion, self – expansion and the urge to master. Communion is manifested in qualities of interrelated contact, openness, union.....and non-contractual separation (Qtd) in Kaplan, A.G. et al, 1980, p.6)

It is often said that literary works portray undercurrents in society and the tensions that are experienced but seldom made manifest in daily life. Androgynous behavior in *Mama Ee*, is propounded by people who are seen to be

at odds with their society; they are seen to represent deviant or unacceptable modes of behavior.

Helibrun (1973) argues that androgynous ways “seek to liberate individuals from the confines of the appropriate” (P. x). However, Friedman (1978) argues that moving outside of the appropriate (behaving defiantly) most often that not, brings about conflict with one’s culture. In fact according to him,

Literature has often expressed the Longing for androgyny through its portrayal of heroes whose identities have been in conflict with the norms and institutions of decidedly non-androgynous worlds (p.9).

This psychological concept will be appropriated in this paper to find out when, why and to what end androgynous perception and behavior is used by both the male and the female characters with specific reference to negotiating for their identities.

Analysis

Section one of the play opens with Mwavita's soliloquy: she is complaining about Kinaya's persistent lateness in arriving home. She laments her husband's negligence and promiscuous behavior. The marital relations between the two are traumatic – it's fraught with tensions and conflict. Both speak of each other in derogatory terms. To Mwavita, Kinaya is a *jiume* *lazurura na mgogo wa gari likibadilisha wanawake kama mashati*" (p.4). (is a man who moves around with a big car and changing girlfriends like shirts). To Kinaya, Mwavita is a "*jike* (female animal) *gani hili nililoowa*" (p.2)(what kind of woman have I married?). From the outset, Mwavita reveals a formidable resistance to Kinaya's verbal insults. But patriarchy which has empowered Kinaya, has led to his emasculation. He even

beats her up knocking out two of her teeth and leading to her miscarriage. It is no wonder then that Mwavita exclaims '*Mimi ni mkeo si mtumwa wako!*' (ps, 3, 36)(I am your wife not your slave!). While Kinaya expects submissiveness and obedience from Mwavita as stipulated by tradition, Mwavita counters his demands with her own: she urges him to share the financial and household labour responsibilities. Her demands and conflicting views, only escalate tension leading to the physical abuse we witness. Kinaya's behavior is symptomatic of emasculated men in a patriarchal social order. It could be argued, is what has led to the emergence of some radical view from the writer and feminist theorists. For instance, Millet (1970) asserts that:

*Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of **physical abuse and even those of murder and sale.** (P.33)
(Emphasis ours).*

On the other hand, Mwavita's behavior is very "unwomanly". Foremost, we hear her lamenting that she has exchanged roles with her husband, Kinaya. She says,

*Mume gani asiyejua kwalika nini
nyumbani kwake au mkewe avaa
nini – taa, maji, kila kitu nalipia
mimi.(p.4)*

*What kind of husband who does
not know what is eaten in his home
or what his wife wears – electricity bill,
water bill, I am the one who pays for
everything.*

Mwavita's taking over responsibility of looking after her husband and child can also be considered androgynous when looked at as her dedication to her marriage and child through her conviction to the sacredness of the institution. At the same time, she has refused to yield aspects of herself to fit into a role that society has prescribed for her. Her traditional role as wife, mother and home maker is thus overturned.

Mwavita's younger sister Tenge, suffers similar gender discrimination. She is an unmarried young woman who is expelled from school because of becoming pregnant by George. She is chased from her home and is the object of both verbal and physical abuse from her father and brother because of her immoral behavior. The father is annoyed at her for causing him financial loss by paying her fees, and by making him lose face in society. He tells her "*Tenge nisikuone tena nyumbani kwangu*" (p.13)("I should not see you in my house again"). Apparently, women have to pay a heavy price for being deviant and immoral: Tenge is ostracized by her society (through the agency of her father and brother), and has to learn "*ulimwengu hauna msamaha*" (p. 11)("The world does not pardon"), the hard way. On the other hand, neither Tenge's brother nor her boyfriend George, are held responsible for dropping out of school or for impregnating many young girls. Tenge rebuffs her brother,

*Eeh! Nipige! Umesahau wasichana
watatu uliowatia mimba – hakuna
aliyekupiga. Ehe nipige kwa kuwa
mimi nilizaliwa mke wewe ukawa mume* (p.13).

*Eeh! beat he, have you forgotten the three
girls you impregnated – who beat you .
Ehe beat me because I was born a woman
and you a man.*

The revelation here is that women suffer discrimination for many reasons; foremost, for being female and secondly, for exercising their sexuality for which they are summarily disqualified as "malaya" (prostitutes). Patriarchal social order is hypocritical; it stigmatizes women for getting impregnated by men. However, as many feminists' theorists argue, patriarchy has a very elaborate and deeply entrenched system of "keeping women where they belong". This could be the reason Tenge's mother reprimands her thus:

*"Sikukuonya mimi? Ole wangu uso
wangu sitakuwa na pakuuweka* (p.11)

*"Did I not warn you? O God I will
not have a place to hide myself.*

However, this particular episode seems to have raised both mothers and daughter's awareness of who they are and what ails them as women. Tenge realizes that a woman has no rights, no authority and no sympathy in a man's world "*dunia ya waume*" (p. 14).

Mwachofi maintains the juxtaposition of Mwavita and Tenge throughout the play. Tenge is stigmatized by society for being an unmarried mother – the mother of a "*mwanaharamu*" (p. 56) (bastard). While Mwavita is despised for being a divorcee and is singly blamed for the failure of her marriage (p. 58,60). Their mother is not spared either; she is blamed for raising irresponsible daughters (p. 11-12).

Various socio-political systems have failed to ensure and maintain equality for the sexes. An example is the failure of the traditional council of elders (“*baraza la wazee*”) in arbitrating marital disputes justly. The council of elders obliges Mwavita to return to her husband after punishing him for “misbehaving” towards his wife.

A year later however, Mwavita is still suffering at the hands of Kinaya, while Tenge is considered immoral for being an unmarried mother, Mwavita on the

other hand, feels her situation is worse. She considers the respect accorded to marriages as a social institution nothing but slavery. This slavery is total to a woman’s being – physical, mental and spiritual. Mwavita asserts that

*.....mke mtumwa tena ua la kujigamba
Shereheni, mtumwa kimwili - kiakili- kiroho
-kila kitu!*

*...an enslaved wife and also a flower to be
proud of in celebrations, a slave bodily –
mentally, spiritually - everything*

Mwavita, and Tenge to some extent, have been able to critically analyze and articulate these social injustices and have to find their identity from alternative sources and by different means.

Mwavita’s androgynous nature is what compels her to expose the differences between the internalized social roles and functions she is nurtured to accept and play – all the pressures to conform to norms by being a submissive, accommodating wife. While Kinaya on the other hand, refuses to support her socially and economically by being irresponsible. She decides to place personal integrity and individual choice above sex-role expectations by proclaiming “*leo pingu ninakata, kutaka wangu uhuru*”(p. 52)(I am removing the handcuffs today, to get my freedom). Religion as a social institution is also castigated by the playwright. The pastor tries to convince Mwavita to forgive Kinaya claiming marriage is a holy sacrament. But Mwavita is adamant; she maintains that she has no need for religion if it meant being a slave to her husband. She says;

*.....kama kukubali kuwa mmoja wa
wafuasi utumwa, kunyonywa, sina
haja kuwa katika kundi lako
takatifu.(p. 65)*

*...If accepting to be one of your flock,
in your church is to accept slavery, to be
oppressed. I don’t need to be in your
holy group.*

It appears as though religion through its beliefs and practices empowers men and helps in the relegation of women to “objects”. The pastor quotes from the Bible entreating Mwavita to forgive

her husband and return to him. However, we do not see any biblical quotations giving the woman any avenue for redress when and if, she is the aggrieved.

In these instances, both Mwavita and Tenge declare “*uasi*” (rebellion) against the Christian faith. Mwavita declares;

*Sasa unaweza kumwambia bosi wako
huko juu aandike UASI. Sina haja
tena na dini yako. (p. 65)*

*Now you can tell your boss up there
to write ... RELLION. I have no need
of your religion*

As they fight for their rights, their self-identity and dignity, Mwavita and Tenge are acting in a manner most unlikely for women in a patriarchy. Their behavior is what could be termed androgynous. Their eloquence, articulateness in analyzing situations and astute minds are what typically could be termed “manly behavior”. But this androgynous behavior – different from the “womanly” meekness,

submissiveness, awe and uncertainty – is the only avenue left when patriarchy’s social machinery has but throttled all their efforts at accessing justice and equal treatment. And since as the radical feminist theorist Millet (1970) declared “patriarchy has God on its side” (p. 51), it’s only natural that women seek justice and equality from the opposing side.

Law enforcement agencies in a patriarchy seem to be biased – they only seem to serve the interests of men. The episode where Mwavita lodges a complaint against Kinaya at the police station is a case in point. Mwavita had been assaulted physically; but the inspector in charge tells her,

*Nenda nyumbani, polisi kazi yao ni
kuwasaka wahalifu siyo kuingilia
mambo ya “family” (p. 67).*

*Go home, the work of the police is
to look for criminals not to interfere
in “family” matters.*

Such institutions seem to serve as instruments of discrimination and the perpetuation of atrocities towards women. Instead of equally safeguarding the rights of all-men and women- they are actually stumbling blocks to women’s access to legal redress and social integration. They enhance discriminatory attitudes towards women especially by encouraging good (submissive) wives and castigating bad (emancipated) ‘prostitutes’. These are the social gender discriminatory practices that force Mwavita and Tenge to search for alternatives for asserting their identities and dignity. They have to refuse to be compartmentalized into their precast social roles.

If material gains are to serve as parameters for measuring the ability and success of women living up to the challenges of modern lifestyles, then Mwavita's new life as divorcee (disregarded by society) is a challenge to patriarchal social order

(P. 83). Her dressing code is also symbolic; she is now a free woman, free from the confines and enslavement of marriage. The playwright seems to reject Freud's absolutist view that "anatomy is destiny" in favour of the one proposed by Erickson (1968) which declares "anatomy, history and personality combine to form one's destiny". This is with reference to the social roles and how they are internalized and lived out by each individual – whether male or female. This view is further emphasized by Easthope (1986) who correctly observes that,

Every society assigns new arrivals
(i.e. new borns) particular roles,
Including gender roles, which they
have to learn. The little animal born
into human society becomes a socialized
individual in a remarkably short time.
This process of internalizing is both
Conscious and unconscious (p. 3)

Finally, Mwavita and Tenge decide to approach the national women's organization (union) *chama cha umoja wa kina mama* (p. 93 – 94). It is ironical that its chairperson is not ready to lend a helping hand to the two declaring,

*"sisi chama chetu si chama cha sheria.
Hatuwezi kupigana na mahakama.
Sheria hatuzielewi"* (p. 94)
(Emphasis ours)

*Our union is not a law union.
We cannot fight the court
We do not understand the law.*

Though Mwavita and Tenge are on a noble mission of trying to bring together the efforts of all women for a common cause – the women's organization fails them. In this context, the organization not only seems to serve as an instrument for maintaining the status quo (patriarchal ideology), but also as a private forum serving only the interests of elitist upper-class women in society. This is emphasized by the physical description (p.93) and the exclusive furnishings of the office "*majamvi ya sufi kutoka Uajemi, mapazia, taa za rangi*" (p. 93)(Kapok mats from Persia, curtains, coloured lights).

At another level, the women's organization seems to be acting as an agent of patriarchy by enhancing the interests of a few elite women, while the majority of the suffering women, both in the urban and rural areas, continue to shoulder the heavy burden of gender segregation and enslavement. Their mission of consciousness-raising seems to have suffered setbacks due to the deep entrenchment of patriarchal ideology (Millet 1970).

In this regard, it can safely be argued that the playwright is, castigating women for their role in shoring up patriarchal practices. Consciousness -rising is a fundamental aspect of affirmative action which Andermahr (2000) asserts “required collective articulation, and the exposure and rejection of an internalized ideology” (p.44).

That particular episode leads the two protagonists to conclude that, individual, national and even universal gender solidarity is hard to hope for. This is the case because, gender identities seem to interact with other allegiances; drawing motivation from class, national or even ethnic interests. It would seem only women who suffer from the same socio-economic conditions can pursue common, socio-political interests. Mwavita analyses the situation saying,

*..... ndipo tulipojuwa kuwa hichi ni chama
cha mama waliosoma na walio katika tabaka
la juu. Hawajui kabisa taabu za kina mama
vijijini...(p. 94)*

*...that is when we know that this is a
Union of educated women, and who
are from upper class.
They do not know the problems
of the women in the villages.*

Though men at the most seem to uphold and further patriarchal ideology, one male character Kheri, is an exception to this norm. From early childhood Kheri was forced to perform “feminine” chores like fetching water, firewood and cooking. Tenge says the following about his character,

*Yeye hana fikira za waume wa kikwetu.
Alijiheshimu na naona awaheshimu sana
wanawake. Hukumbuki ...alivyokuwa
akimfanyia mamake kazi zote hata zile
ziitwazo “za kike” kuchota maji, kuni na
kupika ...(p. 86).*

*He does not have the mentality of our men.
He respected himself and I see he respects
women a lot. Don't you remember...how
he used to do all work for his mother even
the so called “women's work” to fetch
water, firewood and cooking...*

Kheri's behavior is typically androgynous; through him, the same as in Tenge's and Mwavita's case, patriarchy is challenged. His actions seem to stem from his convictions (from early childhood) of the need to integrate the feminine and masculine characteristics. This is the reason he

respects women (Tenge) and is concerned (when George insults Tenge), he politely, very “unmanly” tells off George,

*Wewe wajua ni malaya. Wamfuatiani?
Si kumwacha. Wamsemesheani malaya
huyu? Mwache aende zake (p. 86).*

*You know she is a prostitute. Why do you
follow her? Leave her alone. Why do you
talk to this prostitute? Leave her to go
her way.*

In a similar situation, an emasculated man would have chosen to fight George to show off his “aggressiveness”, “no non-sense”, “muscular” and a “tough” man they were. Kheri serves as a pointer of hope in gender relations; he provides hope and a vision for positive social change. It is symbolic of hope for gender equality for the days to come.

No wonder Mwavita comments,

*Mimi dada, wanaume karibu ya
wote nawaona wana uhayawani.
Lakini nafikiri wako wachache,
wachache sana, ambao
macho yao ya wazi wanauona
na kuuheshimu utu wa kike,(p. 87)*

*Sister, I see nearly all men are animals.
But I think there are very few whose
eyes are open and they see and
respect the woman’s humanity.*

It is thus apparent that in *Mama Ee*, men are empowered by the social order while women have chosen to seek an alternative by behaving androgynously to give themselves an identity.

Conclusion

Mama Ee, different from earlier Kiswahili works discussing gender relations, is an example of what alternatives are available to women as they agitate, negotiate and renegotiate for their identities. In this play, they have chosen androgynous behavior by rebelling against the social beliefs and practices that have dehumanized them and turned them into objects and slaves. Their resistance emanating from their superior moral standards is what drives them along. This is accompanied by economic independence proved Mwavita’s financial independence and stability. On the other hand, as is typical in patriarchies, men like Kinaya, are empowered and draw their authority both from tradition and modern social institutions like the law and its agencies, religion and their superior social status accruing there from. We have also witnessed how patriarchy is able

to lengthen and widen its tentacles through such agents as the national women's organization an elitist urban oriented grouping which no regard whatsoever for rural and other lower class women. *Mama Ee* for the most deviates from the traditional negative imaging of women and grants them hope and a vision – a vision that change is not elusive, as long as women find a moral thrust with which to agitate for their identity and empowerment. In this regard, the play poses a challenge to Kiswahili artists to come up with alternative perspectives of handling gender issues, other than the traditional stereotyping of women and men which privileges males over females.

REFERENCES

- Andermahr, S, et al(2000) *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*, London/New York: Arnord and OUP
- Bakan, D(1966) *The Duality of Human Existence*.Chicago: Rand McNally
- Easthope, A(1986) *What a man Gotta Do?* London; Paladin Grafton Books
- Erickson, E.H. (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton
- Friedman, E.A. (1978) “The Physiological effects of pregnancy” in Notman, M.T. et al(Eds). *The woman Patient*.
Medical Psychological interfaces. New York: Plenum
- Helibrun, C.G. (1973) *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny*. New York: Harper & Row
- Kaplan, A.G. et al (1980) *Psychology and Sex Roles: An Androgynous Perspective*. Boston: Little, Brown Co.
- Kurger, M. (1998) “Negotiating gender Identity and Authority in the plays of Penina Muhando and Ari Katini Mwachofi”, in Beck, R.M. et al (Eds) *AAP Swahili Forum V*. Cologne Institut Fur Afrikanistik.

- Mazrui, A. (1981) *Kilio cha Haki*. Nairobi; Longhorn
- Mbilinyi, M. (1992) “Research Methodologies in Gender Issues”, in Meena R. (Ed) *Gender in Southern Africa*, Harare: SAPES
- Millet, K. (1970) *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago
- Moyana, R. (1996) “Men and Women; Gender issues in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and *She No longer Weeps*” in Jones, E.D. and Jones, M. (Eds) *New Trends in African Literature*, 20 London: James Currey.
- Mwachofi, A.K. (1987) *Mama Ee*. Nairobi: EAEP Ltd.