

Characterization and the Construction of Gender Identity in John Habwe's *Maumbile si Huja*.

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1.0 Introduction.

This paper analyzes and evaluates characterization and its impact on gender identity in John Habwe's novella *Maumbile si Huja*.(1995). The relationship between women and men in literature continues to draw increasing interest and concern to literary artists, researchers and scholars. Gender studies in literary studies are continuously being accepted as an area of academic research as in the other disciplines.

'Gender' is an all-round term referring to the relations between women and men that are determined by social interactions. This is as opposed to sex which is determined by biological make-up or nature and is rarely alterable. Roles and functions that women and men perform are mostly inculcated in them through the socialization process. Being a social construct, the concept of gender has to be used cautiously. Oyewumi (1997:10) is of the view that gender being a "social construction then we must examine the various cultural/architectural sites where it was constructed." She argues further that, the different sites in which gender is constructed is affected by the various interested parties which were in the first place, part of that construction.

The term 'identity' according to Cabral (1973:64), refers to the shared characteristics and aspirations which affirm or deny other characteristics defining an individual or a group sharing historical, biological or sociological factors at any given moment of development. In essence, its definition would view gender as being a concept which is affected by both time and social context.

This paper uses a conceptual approach combining gender criticism and stylistics. Gender criticism is a branch of the broader ideology of feminism. Feminism itself is a product of the feminist movement which was concerned with the social, economic and political empowerment of women. Its dynamism is the reason it has the many branches and continuously - changing and multiplying branches. Moi (1985) summarizes its characteristics, despite the many branches and approaches as "a specific kind of political discourse. A critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism; not simply a concern for gender in literature. "(p204). In general, feminist criticism entails an interrogation of patriarchy and exposing the manner in which male domination of females constitutes perhaps the most pervasive ideology of culture and provides it with immeasurable power.

Showalter (1977) delineates the phases of the development of the women's movement in her theorization of feminism. She explains that the *feminine* phase (1840-1880), is the phase when women imitated the masculine tradition and used pseudonyms in their writing. *Feminist* and *female* phases – (1880-1920) and (1970 onwards) respectively –refer to the periods when women start protesting against standards imposed on them by men and hence start to aggressively assert female perspectives, identities and literary canons. This history of the evolution of feminist criticism leaves out the gender phase. We contend that feminist literary theory would undoubtedly have made a complete circle only when both male and female members of society do away with gender stereotyping and interact equally without fear of a unilateral sexual domination. This is the reason

this paper uses gender criticism as an approach that would enable us to interrogate how the writer creates and develops female and male characters and the eventual impact on their gender identity.

Another approach that is appropriated in this paper is stylistics. This approach, as Leech and Short (1981) agree, views style as the manner in which language is used contextually, by a certain person, for a given purpose. Of particular use to this paper is the duo's view that style is defined in terms of domains of language (for example what choices are made by a particular author in a particular genre or a particular text). Stylistics affords a critic the opportunity to break a text into significant parts that are the building blocks of the text. Our analysis and evaluation will interrogate how characters are created, their demeanors, and the impact they have on the construction of gender identity in the chosen text. This analysis will delve into characterization and its impact on the construction of gender identity.

2.0 Synopsis

Maumbile si Huja is the story of Juma, a rich coastal man proud of his Arab origin and seemingly a male chauvinist. His wife is not able to cope with her husband's mistreatment and lack of libido. She traps their worker Said to become her lover. Juma's brother, Iqbal is taken ill and Juma is forced to fly to Oman to attend to him for several months. Amina finds this an opportune moment to entice Said into her world and the two manage to bankrupt Juma. Amina and Said finally run away together and hole up in Nairobi. Juma dies of heart break and the ensuing poverty. Amina gets married to Saidi and are blessed with a blind child.

This paper analyzes how the main men and women characters construct their identities as they relate with each other in the different settings and whether these identities are asserted, subverted or even inverted.

3.0 Characterization

Characters are beings found in creative works to serve certain roles and functions. For this reason characters can be major or minor, flat or round and even caricatures. Though fictional characters are not real human beings, they resemble humans in subtle and interesting ways to meet the realistic or agreeability yardstick.

There are quite a number of methods of characterization but three have been found to be most important (Hawthorn 1977:122). Foremost, is the description or report method, in which the writer describes a particular character in the work. Other characters in that particular work also talk about and report on other character's actions, beliefs, demeanors, etc. Through these, plus the physical appearance of a character, a writer can suggest what sort of character the reader is faced with.

Secondly, characters are established by action. A character's action can reveal more than a large number of pages of description could give us. For example, in our choice text, Amina's actions tell us of her demeanor more than what Mzee Mgeni and the entire rumour-mill of her neighborhood says about her. The same goes for Ayisha, Mzee Mgeni's wife. We learn of her unwavering support for her husband by observing what she does around their homestead.

Thirdly, a character's thoughts or conversation, say a lot about them. In the novel, novella, short-story and drama, dialogue is a particularly powerful way of revealing character. Again in our chosen text, Amina's thoughts about her relationship with her husband Juma, and her worker Said, tells us

what she thinks of him as compared to Juma. Her conversations with the two also reveal her changing demeanor especially with regard to her failing marriage.

Finally, a writer can use symbolism or imagery to reveal a character as well as develop them. This method can use irony or sarcasm, or even allegoric structures. For example in Shaban Robert's classics, good characters are given names akin to their character as are evil ones (Wamitila 2008:278). An example is Adili (good/just) in *Adili Na Nduguze*. The name 'Adili' summarizes the character's actions, thoughts and demeanor as he struggles to counter his evil brothers' schemes.

3.1.1 Amina: A Symbol of Woman's Deceit and Promiscuity.

Amina is Juma's wife who from the beginning of the story is seemingly 'mistreated' and disregarded by her husband Juma. In the opening pages of the novella Amina laments thus,

*'Mimi na yatima naona tu sawa
kila siku nafokewa na kukaliwa
kiyatima kwa ajili ya jinsi hii
ifanyayo kiumbe duni '(p.3)*

I and an orphan are but the same
each and every day I am reprimanded
and oppressed like an orphan because
of this sex that has made me a lesser being

Amina's sentiments are as a result of her going to the servants' quarters to wake up Said in order to send him to the shops. She feels entrapped in her sex- her biological make-up is the reason Juma oppresses her (though there is no incident to confirm this) and makes her 'other' in their marriage. As to her feeling like an orphan, this could be as a result of not getting attention from Juma her husband, who is a business man and rarely in her company.

It is apparent that Amina's sentiments emanate from other issues rather than Juma ignoring her. Juma's libido is low (as will be demonstrated later on); translating into a lack of intimacy between the couple. The problem could either be physiological or psychological. Were it either of the two, the couple should have resorted to professional help. Throughout the novella, this does not take place. Neither do we see the couple discuss their 'problems' maturely in order to reach an amicable solution and save this institution which is the cradle of mankind.

Had we to assume Amina's and Juma's problems are not social or psychological, then they could be racial or a matter of class difference between them. We learn that, '*Juma ni tajiri aliyesema kwa maringo.....*'(p.3) (Juma is an affluent and proud man....) Could this be the basis for the couple's differences and animosity? Millet (1977) argues,

In the lower social strata, the male

is more likely to claim authority
 on the strength of his sex rank
 alone, he is actually obliged
 more often to share power with
 the women of his class who are
 economically productive; where as
 in the middle and upper classes,
 there is less tendency to assert a
 blunt patriarchal dominance, as men
 who enjoy such status have more
 power in any case (p.36)

The couple belongs to the upper merchant class of this African society steeped in Islamic and patriarchal ideology. Islam permits a woman to work as long as she needs to – most often to compliment her husband’s earnings (though she is not obligated to spend anything on her husband and family). It would seem Amina feels neglected for Juma is often than not, away from home conducting business. In this sense, patriarchy grants him absolute power over the wife. Being a housewife, Amina’s realm is the domestic-taking care of the home, her husband and his property.

However, the situation is complicated by the two ascribing to Islamic religious beliefs that encourages women to stay at home. Basically, this is aimed at curbing promiscuity and preservation of chastity amongst women folk. That it is the man’s duty to provide all the needs of a wife, the Holy Quran says,

Men are the protectors and maintainers
 of women, because God has given them
 one more (strength) than the other
 and because they support them from
 their means. (Annisaa- Surah IV, 33-34)

Despite Amina’s knowledge and belief in her religion’s proclamation, she is uncomfortable and continues to lament thus,

*Uzuri wangu na maisha yangu vimo
 mikononi mwa mme wangu. Labda
 Mungu ataturudishia mamlaka juu*

*ya maisha yetu sisi wanawake.
Maana sioni kwa nini tofauti
ya kibayolojia imfanye mme
mfalme wa maisha ya mke
hali tu washiriki sawa katika
asasi hii ya ndoa (p.4).*

My beauty and life are in the
hands of my husband. Could
be God will someday return
to us women authority over our lives.
This is because I do not understand why
biological differences should make a
husband the king over a wife's
life while we are the same in
the institution of marriage.

Amina laments her seemingly subordinate role in marriage. She feels her husband's feeling superior emanates from his being a man. Her sentiments are echoed by Beauvoir (1953) who castigates the patriarchal stance that woman is an object of beauty whose role and function in marriage is to bear and rear children. Furthermore this view is given potency by teachings of major religions.

However, one would pause to ask, why does Amina feel neglected, belittled and a minor partner in her marriage to Juma? African feminists would argue that marriage in an African setting provides security and a positive identity to the female gender since each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole (Steady, 1989: 9). Viewed in this way, it is apparent that neither Islamic nor African values played any role in promoting harmony and synergy in this marriage. It would seem the marriage is embodied in under currents of mutual mistrust, individuality, opposition and to some extent, competition.

Amina's demeanor or one would say, real intentions, are revealed when Juma leaves for Oman to take care of his ailing brother. She entices Said into becoming her lover by serving him good food and using her feminine qualities of beauty and her apparent predicament of being a 'neglected wife'. After the first incident of intimacy between the two, *Said alijihisi kama wanaume wengine. Yeye na Juma ni sawa.* (P.28) (Said felt like other men. He and Juma were equals'). It is as if the

class and racial barrier between worker and employer, African and Arab, is finally shattered by this act of promiscuity and betrayal by Amina and Said.

What happens between the two portrays them negatively. In fact, the identity Amina is trying to assert only furthers the male chauvinist's view of woman being lascivious and man's object for sexual gratification. In this sense, both Said's and Amina's identities suffer. But it is Amina's chastity, status and self-identity that suffer most. One would argue she perpetrates not only her person's oppression, but the female gender's as a whole. One would say, the writer portrays a stereotypical image of woman as a loose, immoral and ungrateful being.

Islam provides avenues for resolving the most intimate and sensitive of issues amongst couples. For one, a woman can seek divorce on the grounds of not being sexually satisfied by the husband. However, she cannot and is not permitted to indulge in or have an affair with any other man until her 'eda' (waiting period) is completed, once she is divorced. Then she can only do so if she is married again. Amina does not make use of any one of these provisions. This translates into her being hasty, immoral and cunning. That Amina got herself into marriage before weighing the terms and conditions that apply in an Islamic marriage, is clearly demonstrated by what she tells Said as the two scheme and plan. Amina is unhappy with Juma since in her words,

*Nikifanya lolote lazima aulize
unafanya nini? Nikienda popote,
lazima aulize 'wendapi?' Nikisimama
na mtu lazima aulize 'huyo ni nani?
Ni binamu yako?' (p.46).*

'If I did anything he would ask
'what are you doing? If I went
anywhere he must ask 'where
are you going?' If I stopped
to talk to someone he must
ask 'who was that? Is it your cousin?'

Amina's words are in fact what she as a Muslim woman, is supposed to uphold. She is to observe and preserve her chastity. She has to let her husband know of her whereabouts at any time and she has to observe discretion and only to associate with her 'maharim' (close members of her family and husband's family). One may argue had she been sincere about the general attitude of men and the supposed oppressive ways, she would not 'court' Said to take the place of Juma. She tells Said 'Juma ni mwanamme kwa jina tu' (p.46) (Juma is a man only by name'). Is this reason enough for Amina to seek intimacy in her labourer Said?

Amina's identity suffers most as she cajoles Said into her plan of stealing from Juma. It would seem the only thing Amina missed and longed for in her marriage to Juma, is adventure and masculine sexual potency- which she finds in Said. As the two hatch their plan, Amina reassures Said in these words,

*'Juma ana kibunda cha pesa katika
benki kwa jina langu. Ana mashamba
mawili kwa jina langu vili vile. Sisi
tunamfilisi na kuuhama mji na kwenda
twendako.(p.47)*

'Juma has a large amount of money
In my account. He also has two farms
under my name. We will make him
bankrupt and run away from town
to wherever we may go.

Amina feels her status and identity will change positively with the acquisition of illicit (stolen) wealth. She convinces Said to be her accomplice in taking what was lawfully Juma's and who had given her land and deposited money into her personal account. In this sense, rather than utilize the concepts of parallel autonomy and co-operation for the preservation of her marriage, she perpetuates dichotomy, individuality, competition and the amassing of wealth to control the male gender (symbolized by the gullible and naïve Said). To her, Juma (the patriarch) is 'other', an oppressor, a lesser man, who deserves the highest degree of punishment and pain. To Amina, it really did not matter how she acquired the wealth which would set her free have the freedom to control the males. In this sense, Amina has unconsciously internalized and is practicing sexist attitudes and desires. However, in the fight for their rights, women 'must be positivistic, fully conscious, morally and politically correct' (Moi, 1985: 28).

Amina's actions are exactly what can be termed interpellation- the contradictions and confusions of what patriarchy wants her to be or wants for her. Hence, the identity she wishes to assert, is averted by this very fact.

Earlier on, we mentioned some of the measures Islam provide for a woman who feels she no longer wishes to remain in marriage for legitimate reasons. One of the reasons is the impotence of the husband (which seems to be the case in Amina's marriage to Juma). A '*qadhi*' (Muslim judge) may terminate a marriage on such grounds. However, we only see Amina asking to be divorced after she has committed adultery and stolen Juma's property- a case of putting the cart before the horse. We see this happen on Juma's return from Oman when he finds all his property missing. '*Amina akaidai*

akapewa, akashukuru, akafanya mipango yake akaondoka' (p.60-61). 'Amina demands it (the divorce), she is given, she was thankful, made arrangements and left.'

In the ensuing court case, Amina and Said are absolved of any guilt with reference to the disappearance of Juma's property and are set free. She pours out her heart about her marriage to Juma in these words,

*'Ndiyo ulinioa lakini kwa muda huo
wote sikuhihi kama mtu aliyeolewa.
....mimi nilikuwa mfanyi kazi wako
si mke. Saidi ni kufu yangu japo ni
hafukasti. Ni bora kuliko uarabu
wa jina tu. Ni mwanamume wa
kweli'* (p.75-76).

'It is true I was married to you all
that time but I never felt like a
married woman..... I was but just
your employee not a wife. Said is of
my class though he is of mixed
blood. It is better than Arabism
only by name. He is a real man.

Amina's words are meant to pit man against man the male gender against itself, in this battle of the sexes. However, what Amina does not understand is that it is the male ego and identity that eventually turns victorious however one looks at the scenario. Amina retains her identity of a wife-always subordinate to her new husband Said who could blackmail her any moment he wished for he was privy to Amina's secrets. Amina may have found herself in a worse site of tyranny and oppression than she thought she was, while married to Juma. Her's and Said's is a marriage of convenience- borne of promiscuity, vindictiveness and deceit.

Amina and Said live happily in Nairobi and are blessed only with male children. After a while they visit a sherman (*Maji Mazuri*) who attends to them. Subsequently, Amina becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl who '*kaumbika vizuri, mzito wa wastani, mwekundu wa kutamanika lakini macho yake mawili yalikuwa yamepofuka.*' (p.100) ('a well developed child, of medium weight, light-colored but was blind in both her eyes). Could this be some form of punishment for the couple? Was it that Amina was to learn that despite her wealth, there are some things that did not bear a price tag? Or was it God's way of punishing the duo for atrocities committed against Juma?

In all, Amina as a character is too stereotypical- she fits the patriarchal view of woman as dependant on man for definition and identity. If we were to assume *Maumbile si Huja* uses Amina to exemplify woman's struggle in the institution of marriage and racialism in her quest for self- and gender identity, then as a character, she fails to rise to the occasion. This is because feminists would demand that woman's identity needs role-models, strong, impressive, female characters who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependant on men. In this sense, Amina's quest for constructing her self-and gender identity is thwarted simply because she fails to understand how patriarchal society is structured (and her failure to take advantage of Islamic ideology and especially with regard to her marriage) and pitting the male gender against itself and running away from her marriage to Juma, only to marry Said. She had to all intents and purposes, surrendered herself to the subordinate role of wife in an institution where the man reigns supreme.

3.1.2 Said: A. Symbol of Man's Gullibility and Inverted Identity

We first meet Said as a servant to Juma and Amina. It is apparent that Juma shows preference to Said, a fellow Muslim rather than Kinyua whom he Said, refers to as '*mshenzi*' (uncivilized) (p.7) while their employer Juma, refers to him (Kinyua) as '*kafiri*' (p.6)(infidel/unbeliever).It is interesting to note that when we meet Said this early in the story, he is a humble, hardworking, respectful and somehow scared servant. This is confirmed by how both Juma and Amina send him on errands and would reprimand him whenever he was late. A case in point is the incident when Said is sent to go to Mshihiri's shop, he is reprimanded thus,

Wataka kunilaghai siyo bwana?

...Najua una jambo wewe

Mwanaharamu. Hata hivyo yafaa

Utahadhari nami bwana(p.5)

You wish to con me?

I know you are upto something

you bastard. However, be aware.

Juma's words confirm Said's identity and place in Juma's household - just a poor, good for-nothing, house servant with no right, no say, no voice, just a tiny thing in what is the rich man's and woman's castle. At this juncture, Amina and Juma are identified by their aloofness, their pride and their being in a different class as both Said and Kinyua. It is interesting that Amina does not show any interest in him nor does she hint at having any liking to him as a man other than her servant. Here, Said's identity is just that of a poor African house boy or servant.

Immediately Juma leaves for Oman to look after his ailing brother, Said is slowly but surely, enticed into Amina's arms. After their incident of illicit intimacy, Said's sentiments were thus,

Said alijihisi kama wanaume wengine

*yeye na Juma ni sawa. Usawa ni nini
kama si kunywa katika kisima kimoja?(p.28)*

Said felt the same as other men
Him and Juma were equal.
What is equality if it is not
drinking from the same well?

It is noteworthy that Said feels that the construction of his identity and his social status, is by sharing or unlawfully playing 'husband' to an already married woman. It is as if his status as a poor, low class African is elevated by his fornicating with his boss's wife. Amina uses his gullibility, he is subconsciously wishing to be in Juma's shoes, to construct his own identity.

It is at this juncture that Said feels the need to reconcile with his former workmate Kinyua, through Mzee Mgeni's intervention. This translates into his trying to make amends for his wrong doing. Deep inside him, he must be feeling guilty for betraying Juma his boss. That Said feels guilty for his action, is confirmed by his thoughts.

*'Juma akirejea atanifikiriaje?
Bila shaka ataniona haini
mkubwa.Si neno na afanye
lolote apendalo .(p. 45).*

'What will Juma think of me on returning?
Without a doubt he would see me as a
criminal. It doesn't matter, let him
do as he pleases.'

Said's thoughts confirm the fact that the identity he so wishes to assert will only be artificial and temporary. He will only have changed from being Juma's and Amina's houseboy, to being Amina's slave. He will have acquired a lesser status, a negative identity. His status will be that of a male serf, his identity that of a wife-stealer, a social misfit for having gone against religious doctrine and societal expectations.

Juma returns from Oman only to find all his belongings had been stolen. He sues his wife Amina and his servant Said for theft. Said and Amina win the court case and after a while, Juma dies of loneliness, poverty and broken-heartedness. Amina and Said move to Nairobi and start a bar and shop business which flourishes after putting in hard work and dedication. However, Said is haunted

by what he and Amina had done to Juma. He has a nightmare in which Juma tries to kill him. The writer tells us,

*Ndoto iliyomkera ni ya Juma
kumsimamiakwa jisu refu eti
yuataka kulipiza kisasi
cha yeye kumtorosha mkewe,
kuiba mali yake na kumshinda
kesi mahakamani. (P.102)*

The dream that haunted him
was Juma standing over him
wielding a big knife saying he
wanted to take revenge for
Said's eloping with his wife,
stealing his wealth and for
winning the case against
him in court.

Said's dream symbolizes his guilt, his owning up for all his wrong doing. The fact that Said may want to believe he has constructed a positive self-identity, a raised social status and being a rich man, all this is inverted identity. Said is living in a fool's paradise, in a deceitful and ungrateful woman's world. How would Said be sure that Amina is not a *femme fatale*? Is Said sure that Amina would stand by him till death does them part? The answer to these questions would surely confirm that Said's identity and social status would have been much better than it is at the end of the novella. So whatever identity Said as a character had wished to construct for himself, is averted for taking a short cut, albeit a socially unacceptable route towards its attainment.

3.1.3 Juma as a Victim of Racial-Egoism and Woman's Vengeance.

Juma is a rich man of Arab Origin. At the beginning of the story, he belongs to the merchant class of this Islamic society. This is the reason he believes to be of higher social status and being more religious than his servants Said and Kinyua. It is apparent that, despite his apparent social status, his wife Amina has a very negative impression of him. This is because she feels despised and secondly, Juma seems to be unable to perform his conjugal duties.

That Juma has no regard for his servants is confirmed by the derogatory language he uses with them. He tells Said,

... Wende ukapatane na Kinyua

*ili mkanifulie nguo zangu.
Mchunge msichafue kama
mlivyo zifanyajuzi. Nyie
kelbu (p.5).*

...Go arrange with Kinyua so
you may wash my clothes. Take
care you do not soil them like you
did the day before yesterday
You dogs.

To Juma, his servants are but animals (*Kelbu*- dogs) Kinyua is sacked and his place taken by Issa whom Juma tells,

*Haya Issa. Nimetaka uwe mfanyi
kazi wangu mpya. Umekuja
badala ya Kinyua kijana mjeuri
sana. Tena kafiri(P. 17).*

Okay Issa. You're my new employee.
You have been employed in place
of Kinyua a very rude young man
and non believer.

The writer seems to portray Juma as a demi-god who wields the power of life and death over humans in form of his employees. This reinforces his being racist and egoistic. But despite these attributes which place him in a higher class socially, his marriage is in the doldrums. These two conflicting attributes, place him in a rather awkward position. We get to understand the source of Juma's and Amina's misunderstanding and conflict from Suleiman who describes Juma thus,

*Labda Juma alikuwa gamba tu.
Gamba tupu. Haiyamkini ndiyo
sababu hana miche yake*

mwenyewe(p. 80).

It could be that Juma was just a shell
 an empty shell. This could be the reason
 he has no children of his own.

It is evident Juma's libido was low or absent altogether. This is the reason Amina felt like a 'yatima' (an orphan) lonely, relegated, oppressed, an ornament. This is despite the fact that Juma wished to be seen as a real man in society's eyes. But could Juma's attitude, male tendencies emanate from his paying a huge sum to Amina's father as bride price? We learn that,

*....Babake Amina, Bilali, alidai
 pesa nyingi sana.
 Nasikia alimwambia Juma
 ampe shilingi elfu mia mbili (p.81).*

..... Her father, Bilali, has asked
 for a huge amount of money I've
 heard he asked Juma to give
 him two hundred thousand shillings.

Is it that Juma felt he 'owned' Amina? Was Amina his possession? Was she a 'thing' and part of his items of wealth? Given the social setting of the novella, it can be argued that part of Juma's attitude emanated from his feeling he owned Amina. Custom and patriarchy had sold her to him. She has exchanged her individuality, her sexuality, her freedom, her identity for bride price. Like we observed earlier, Juma's attitude and treatment of Amina is 'lawful' within cultural parameters, buttressed by Juma's higher social class and his Arab origin.

Consequently, Amina and Said manage to bankrupt Juma. He is devastated for losing two valuables- 'mpenzi' and 'mali' (p.84)(the love of his life and his wealth). It is too late for Juma. His Arab origin, high social status, wealth, health are all but gone. He is desperate, with no one or nothing to turn to. The identity he set out to assert, is subverted by his turning a blind eye to the realities of life and the vengeance of an ungrateful and despised woman. Juma suffers trauma and dies a lonely man. The writer paints an empathetic picture of the once proud, rich and unassuming patriarch thus,

*Juma yuasononeka na kuliwa na
 Mchwa wa ukiwa. .Labda leo ametambua*

kuwa maumbile si huja (p. 85.)

Juma is sad and being eaten up
by loneliness. It could be that
he has now realized that origin
is not an issue.

3.1.4 Mzee Mgeni: The Writers Mouth-piece and a Symbol of Gender Tolerance and Synergy

Mzee Mgeni is presented as a wise old man in whose words are a pacification of racial and gender inequality. We first meet the old man talking to Said and Moto about the issue of social relations, class and race. It is interesting that at the beginning Mzee Mgeni seems somewhat inclined to feel superior for having Arab blood. He tells Moto that '*waarabu ni watu, waalimu, marubani na matajiri wakubwa*' (P.9) (Arabs are people of stature, teachers, pilots and immensely rich people). It seems he cannot relate Arabs with such habits as the chewing of '*miraa*'(khat). That Mzee Mgeni's role in the novella seems contradictory is expressed in his words to Said,

*Lakini zamani za mwarabu
mwanangu, mwarabu alikuwa
mtu mwarabu ametanda mengi
mazuri na mabaya. Ametisha ili
kustaarabisha wenyeji
ameleta dini tukufu vile vile.
Jambo ambalo ni fakhari kubwa
kwetu sisi(p.10).*

But in the early years of the Arabs
my son, they were good people.
The Arabs have done a lot - good
and bad. He threatened in order to
civilize the local people. They also
brought the religion, something
that is of great pride to us.

What Mzee Mgeni is admitting to is the fact that the Arabs came, threatened and forcibly changed the local fabric and with them came the religion of Islam, which has made the local population proud. In other words, Mzee Mgeni admits to the fact that the local way of life was permanently changed by the advent of Arabs and Islam. But that he is proud of his Arab descent subverts the very title of the novella- *Maumbile si huja*- Origin is not an issue.

The other side of Mzee Mgeni's personality reveals he is a good husband, respects and delegates duties to his wife Ayisha. Unlike the traditional wife, Ayisha has a voice, a place and is an equal partner in her marriage to Mzee Mgeni. Their's is an example of the ideal marriage where husband and wife cooperate in all matters and not the husband or the wife, oppresses or disregards his or her spouse. We see Ayisha freely give her opinion about the issue of racial discrimination thereby confirming the fact that she is an equal partner in her marriage to Mzee Mgeni.

Mzee Mgeni reconciles Said and Kinyua when the two disagree at their workplace and the former calls the latter a "*kafiri*" (unbeliever) Mzee Mgeni says;

*Tumejia hili, kwamba Said
asema umwie radhi kwa
alotenda mkifanya kazi
kule kwa juma (p.52).*

We have come for one
thing, that Said asks
for your forgiveness for
what you did while you
worked at Juma's.

Despite his role as pacifier and an example of good marital relations, Mzee Mgeni's testimony at Juma's and Amina's court case, makes it difficult to label him wise and just. This is because Mgeni was aware of what was said about Said's and Amina's illicit relationship but he gives evidence in favor of Said. In this sense, one would question Mzee Mgeni's role and function in the novella. This is because it is evident that he is not a very consistent character nor is he developed to a degree of being called 'pacifier'. This could be because of the structure of the story, but it could also point to the weakness of having too many characters in a genre whose scope would not allow for their proper development. After the court case, Mzee Mgeni is literally removed from the story. Mzee Mgeni features minimally in the construction of gender identity.

3.1.4 Other Characters

These are minor characters that the writer presents at the beginning of the novella but does not care to develop them either to develop the themes of racial discrimination or construction of gender identity. Among them are Ayisha, Kinyua, Sauda, Ambiyu and Njeri.

Ayisha is Mzee Mgeni's wife and serves as an example of how an ideal couple should relate in society. She and Mzee Mgeni have each managed to retain their self-identity despite being wife and husband in a social and discriminatory society. She serves to buttress the idea that marriage is not necessarily a site for gender antagonism and conflict in line with African feminist views.

Kinyua and Sauda cohabit and are happy together. She is of Gunya origin and ran away from her home because of gender inequality and oppression. Her father had wanted to marry her forcibly to an old man after her education was cut short in school so that her sibling Hassan could continue in school. She laments thus,

*Endapo ni halali kuwa sharti
niolewe kwa nguvu hata kwa
mme asiye nyonda yangu tena
kikongwe, naomba ulimwengu
msamaha kwa ajili ya uhuni
wangu (p.41)*

If it is benefitting that I be married
off by force to a man who is not my
choice and a senile old man
at that, then I seek forgiveness
from the world.

Sauda's words are an indication of the place and identity of women in this society. Woman's identity is prescribed by culture, religion and the dominant ideology. Sauda serves to show that there still exists oppressive and discriminating customs and practices in society. However, it is apparent that women have started to question these age-old traditions that seem to hinder their quest for the construction of positive female identities even if it means their transgressing what religion teaches and patriarchal ideology.

Ambiyo and Njeri are two young women seemingly practicing prostitution. Sauda sees them '*wameshikilia ncha za mitandio yao wakifuatana na mabaharia wazungu*' (P. 41). "Holding the edges of their headscarf's in the company of European sailors."

The duo's predicament is as a result of poverty and discriminative gender relations. However the writer, like in the case of the theme of racism, does not develop it. One may argue the writer chewed more than he could swallow concerning many themes he introduces at the opening of the story and does not or is unable to adequately handle. One may also argue that the scope of the work itself, could not adequately handle the many issues introduced at the beginning. For example, the writer does not show how the duo could be victims of the discrimination of the girl-child and hence, resorting to moral decadence in society.

4.0 Summary and Findings

This paper has analyzed how characterization has affected the construction of gender identity in John Habwe's novella *Maumbile si Huja* (1995). In this regard, the female and male characters were analyzed as they related with each other in the different settings. It was found out that the novella has only one main female character Amina, and one main male character namely, Juma (and to some extent, Said).

It was found out that Amina as a character has used very trivial reasons to try to assert a self-identity, financial freedom and gender identity. Being a Muslim who could have used the 'Kadhi' or the courts to seek divorce from Juma, she deceives him, commits adultery and finally she and her lover Said, bankrupt Juma. The identity she sets out to assert is averted and inverted. Her getting married to Said actually negates all her efforts since it is marriage that was her problem from the very beginning. Hence, she becomes as a deceitful, ungrateful and a *femme fatale* of sorts.

Said on the other hand, takes advantage of his boss Juma's absence to 'steal his wife'. The reality however, is that Amina entices him into her fold by providing material things and illicit love. In this sense, Said fits the label of being a gullible male whose identity is inverted. He ends up being Amina's 'wife' - the rich and beautiful lady of Arab origin.

Other characters like Mzee Mgeni, who is presented as a voice of reason, an arbitrator and champion of gender equality and synergy, is not developed well to serve this role and function. Ultimately, he is identified as a social commentator of sorts rather than the writer's representative of gender harmony.

The duo of Ambiyo and Njeri are young women who resort to prostitution because of unclear reasons, while Sauda co-habits with Kinyua because her father preferred Hassan her brother to continue schooling. Her living with Kinyua, a non-Muslim, is clear defiance against her culture and patriarchy. But it is unclear what kind of identity she constructs for herself.

Finally, it was found out that though the writer had set out to discuss and assess gender and social relations, for the most part he was unable to develop male and female characters who understand their society and dominant ideology well enough to be able to construct positive gender identities. Perhaps this is due to the scope of the text itself, but it could also be that the writer set out to discuss issues which proved too complex to handle along the way.

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