Women Characters in the Novels of Ken Walibora: Victims or Winners?
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Abstract

Ken Walibora, one of the most well-known and promising authors in the new generation of Swahili writers in Kenya, may well be considered as a male-centric writer, since his novels published from 1996 to 2012 feature men as their main figures. However, in all his books women characters play roles of growing importance not only in the lives of the main personages, but also in the author’s views on the social situations described in his novels. Women in Walibora’s books are almost exclusively portrayed as victims of cruel and unfair patriarchal society but it is their state of victim that motivates them towards the effort to elevate themselves above their second rate condition. In Siku Njema (Nice day, 1996) the main character Kongowea is inspired for life by the character of his mother, a famous singer, as well as by his school friend Vumilia, whose human virtues shape his own character when in his journeys after his mother’s untimely death he meets a young girl Amina, driven by social calamities to the state of a prostitute, and later his dead friend’s bride, who is rejected by the society as a “virgin widow”. These young women, nevertheless manage to overcome the ostracism of patriarchal society and build their own lives. In Ndoto ya Almasi (Almasi’s dream, 2006) most of the women characters are victims of the social order, however, the hope is vested in the main woman character Chebosio, who, in spite of being impregnated by her own father-in-law, still manages to construct a living with the support of her husband. A new type of a woman character is drawn in Kidagaa Kimemwozea (His Small Fish has Caught a Rot, 2012) where Imani, a girl of a destitute background, rebels against the current social order, helping her sweetheart Amani to topple the dictatorial regime in an imaginary African country. This close bond between genders (female characters ‘salvaged’ or assisted by the male ones) appears as the author’s vision of the new type of gender relationship, which will help African women in reaching self-empowerment and equity.

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The novel was published in 1996 and saw Walibora become an instant household name in Swahili fiction. Written in the first person, the book deals with the life of a young man, Msanifu Kombo who is born in Tanga, Tanzania and who faces family hardships with his single mother, who is a talented singer of taarab. Being a child born out of wedlock does not make life easier for him as he is chided by his school Siku Njema is a popular Swahili novel written by the renowned Kenyan author, Ken Walibora. The novel was published in 1996 and saw Walibora become an instant household name in Swahili fiction... Ken Walibora ni mwandishi anayetilia maanani aspect zote za maisha kabla ya kuandika vitabu vyake. Interesting, humor, misamiati tele, lugha isio enda kinyume na mahadhi. A decline in women authors and named characters has subtly shaped our understanding of literary history, says study author Ted Underwood. (Wikimedia Commons). By Kat Eschner. smithsonian.com February 14, 2018. Another silence she feels is important is the growing absence of named women characters in the novels studied. She’s a fan of the novels of pseudonymous Italian author Elena Ferrante, and says that the characterization of female friendship in Ferrante’s books highlights the “silence” of female friendship in fiction elsewhere, from both the past and the present. For her, the study underscores the same thing, and highlights “the importance of works with women seeing women.”