



The Feminist Writer and the Subaltern: A Perspective on Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*

Andrew Nyongesa, Joseph Gaita Murimi & Justus Kizito Makokha

To cite this article: Andrew Nyongesa, Joseph Gaita Murimi & Justus Kizito Makokha (2021): The Feminist Writer and the Subaltern: A Perspective on Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/23277408.2021.1978766](https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2021.1978766)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2021.1978766>



Published online: 03 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Feminist Writer and the Subaltern: A Perspective on Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*

Andrew Nyongesa ^a, Joseph Gaita Murimi^b and Justus Kizito Makokha^b

^aSt Paul's University P. O. Box, Private Bag, Limuru, Kenya; ^bDepartment of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, P.O. BOX 43844-0100, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Dominant literary conversations like post-structuralism have crowned the literary writer as an impartial and reliable voice for the voiceless in oppressive cultural settings. Since the marginal group is weak and cannot speak for themselves, the intellectual is given express authority to articulate their issues. Emerging voices have nonetheless questioned the author's eligibility to speak for the marginal groups. Given the diversity typical of the marginal group, these voices doubt the author's ability to perfectly represent it. This perspective piece extends the conversation that the literary writer lacks the capacity to speak for the marginal group because of their heterogeneity. Using the post-colonial concept of representation, this review interrogates the literary writer's articulation of issues affecting marginal groups in Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The ideas of Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty will form the theoretical basis of interpretation. This review proceeds through close textual reading of the primary text, secondary texts and refereed journal articles. The major finding of the study is that Kulet takes the trajectory of Western feminists to not only generalise attributes and experiences in male and female characters, but silences divergent voices in the marginal group he purportedly attempts to represent and is therefore biased.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 May 2020
Accepted 18 August 2021

KEY WORDS

African Fiction; Post-colonial
Feminism; Representation;
Subaltern

Introduction

The presentation of the man as the oppressor and woman as the victim has become the norm in recent debates in East African literature. The common Kenyan experience for instance is such that only literary texts based on the maxim find place as set texts in high school. Between 1999 and 2002, the ministry of education selected Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* as a compulsory set text. Ogola selects women characters: Akoko, Nyabera, Awiti and Vera to perpetuate the family lineage in contravention of the patriarchal Luo tradition. Whereas male characters such Aoro and Otieno Kembo are unruly and immoral

respectively, female characters such as Vera and Wandia are comely, wise, intelligent and exceptional. Wise and loving male characters such as Owour Kembo and his son Obura die early to pave the way for the existence of unruly male characters to perpetuate the aforementioned stereotyping of male characters.

When Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* was selected to replace *The River and the Source*, there were claims that its content was 'sexually explicit' and contained 'pornographic material' (Ndima 2003, 1). Soon after it was withdrawn, the ministry of education selected Marjorie Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* in 2006 followed shortly by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* in 2010 and then *The River and the Source* was selected the second time in 2013. In the play and short story genres, there has been a deliberate selection of texts based on the radical strand of feminism in Kenya since the beginning of the new millennium. There have been plays such as Francis Imbuga's *Aminata* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The latter is a play with a scathing attack on Helmer Torvald, a husband who is blamed and jilted for questioning his wife for taking loans without his knowledge.

The year 2017 posited the worst-case scenario in which the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development selected three major literary set texts based on radical feminism: David Mulwa's *Inheritance*, a play in which Lacuna, the foolish and immoral king is overthrown by a revolution and replaced by Sangoi, his adopted sister, *A Doll's House*, a play in which Helmer Torvald, the mean and cruel husband is abandoned by his wife, Nora and Ole Kulet's (2008) *Blossoms of Savannah* in which the heroine, Resian lives among 'immoral' and 'callous' Maasai men that scheme to have her forcibly circumcised and married off to a polygamist, but manages, with the help of fellow women to flee to a government sheep ranch and attain her goal of further education.

The subjects of the selected texts tend to respond to the presumption that the African woman and girl are undoubtedly marginalised through female circumcision, forced marriages, domestic violence and elevation of males, which has to be eradicated through education. Simone De Beauvoir (1989) expounds on gender othering. She asserts that the physical differences between men and women are stigmatised to discriminate against women. 'A woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity' (15–16), yet the man too has testicles and glands. Whereas the man represents both the positive and neutral as indicated in the use of *man* to represent both genders, *woman* represents the negative (15–16). Beauvoir writes:

Woman is a relative being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is absolute — she is the Other. (15–16)

The woman in patriarchal societies therefore lacks the identity of her own and most times takes the name of the husband after marriage: Mrs. Harry, Mrs. Wafula or Mrs. Kinyanjui. These patriarchal communities will assign women

insignificant roles relegating them completely from leadership. To counter this, the Kenyan curriculum possibly entrusts the teacher of literature with the responsibility of effective interpretation of the ideas of De Beauvoir and contemporaries to demolish patriarchal mindsets in high school students.

Literary writers have heeded the clarion call to point out areas in which women are discriminated against such as leadership, land rights, education and other values. Some literary critics have raised concerns appertaining to the excesses in the works of these feminist writers in Africa. Amma Darko, a Ghanaian feminist writer exhibits strong anti-patriarchal tendencies and reduces men to 'worthless, irresponsible physically grotesque images, wicked husbands, drunkards, rapists, exploiters, predators, monsters, sexually depraved, perverse and evil' (Adjei 2009, 49). She however depicts women as victims of physical and psychological violence that the men instigate. In the same manner, the Zimbabwean writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga (1988) does not mince her words in her distaste for patriarchy when she begins her novel *Nervous Conditions*, 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (1). Tambudzai, the heroine of the story is so tormented by the father's brutal favouritism for the brother that she maintains strange sadism when her brother dies.

East African feminist writers have faithfully executed Darko's and Dangarembga's scripts through creation of monstrous male characters and angelic and noble female characters. In spite of Marjorie O Macgoye's focus on political subjects in *Coming to Birth*, Martin Were's promiscuity and flair for physical violence reiterates Adjei's sentiments on gender stereotyping of male characters. When Were's wife, Paulina, loses bearing after her miscarriage and arrives home in company of a white woman, Were turns on her and batters her so terribly that she remains in bed the whole day (Macgoye 1986, 21). When he returns from work, he raises his hand to strike again. In Ogola's (1994) *The River and the Source*, only evil male characters such as Otieno Kembo live longer to cause chaos and 'treat women like sluts' (47). In the heroine's words, he is 'fool' and even fails to retain the chief's stool. Such men undoubtedly exist in our communities, but do all men behave this way and if so then why? Are all women passive victims of patriarchal African traditions?

In her seminal paper, "Under Western Eyes" Chandra Talpande Mohanty (1984) rejects the universality of tenets of Western feminism like categorisation of the third world woman as monolithic. Mohanty feels that the assumption that third world women are a coherent group (ignoring social factors) is problematic (338). She adds that the model of men as oppressors is not universal. She comes up with the concept of discursive colonialism where first world women (subjects) try to explain third world women (objects) to create power hierarchies and cultural domination. Mohanty rejects the notion that women worldwide are either oppressed by men or are passive victims of the so called patriarchal cultural practices. Mohanty suggests that women should gain experience to get cultural insight to understand their situations rather than rely on a false sense of sisterhood. She

interrogates universalisations like women are sexual objects, commodities and others, which collapse without due consideration to the context and situation. Mohanty observes that whereas a veil symbolises oppression in one area, it signifies allegiance to other women in Iran (338). Similarly, the habit of women spending most of their time in the kitchen could symbolise patriarchal oppression in the West, but among the Maasai, the kitchen is simply a 'feminine part of the house' (Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte 2013, 214). Whereas kneeling to greet a man signifies oppression of women in the West, it may not suggest that in Uganda until context is considered to give insight into the act. This study will employ Mohanty's ideas to interrogate generalisations in Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Similarly, Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003) contends that Western feminists strive as much as possible to eradicate context in representation of African culture (51). Nawal El Saadawi complains that when submitting *The Hidden Face of Eve* to Beacon Press for publication, the publisher deletes the long preface to do away with her ideas on context (Nnaemeka, 2005, 54).

Similarly, Gayatri Spivak (1988) questions the notion of representation in literary studies. Although poststructuralists crown the literary writer as a transparent medium through which the voices of the oppressed can be represented, she contends that the colonised subaltern subject is 'irretrievably heterogeneous' (284). She asks, '[C]an this difference be articulated? And if so by whom?' (284). In other words, to what extent do African feminist writers represent the heterogeneity of women in Africa? There are those women characters that do not see African traditions as oppressive at all. Furthermore, African culture is diverse; not all African cultures are oppressive to women.

According to Spivak, such writers may either misrepresent some African women or in the attempt to give them voice start silencing other women. An attempt to give the oppressed women a voice will silence those who like the culture. Spivak gives the British example which, in an attempt to speak for oppressed widows by banning *Sati* rite, ended up silencing the Hindu culture (297). Can African feminists avoid this? Is their representation plausible? Apparently, the subaltern cannot speak; therefore, the intellectual remains a medium. This perspective piece extends the conversation that the literary writer lacks the capacity to speak for the marginal group because of their heterogeneity. Using the post-colonial concept of representation, this perspective piece interrogates the literary writer's articulation of issues affecting marginal groups in Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The ideas of Spivak and Mohanty form the theoretical basis of the interpretation.

Cultural Context of the Study: Maasai Traditions and *Blossoms of the Savannah*

This section traverses the literature review of Maasai cultural traditions and how they determine the subject of Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

The Maasai are a Nilotic speaking community that hails from the Rift Valley region in the south of Kenya in Northern Tanzania. They are nomadic pastoralists that were placed under indirect rule during the colonial period in Kenya. The application of indirect rule by the British implies that the Maasai were allowed to practise their traditional culture at a time when other African communities like the Agikuyu were being forced to abandon their customary rites such as female genital mutilation. Almost six decades after Kenya's independence, the Maasai continue with their past way of life exhibited through nomadic pastoralism, female genital mutilation, polygamy and arranged marriages, all of which exhibit a patrilineal trajectory.

Maasai tradition defines roles for men and women with the former having lighter responsibilities. Jennifer Sharp and Laangakwa Twati write:

Women are responsible for maintaining the home, including cooking and cleaning, collecting firewood and water, looking after children and building, repairing huts. Contrastingly, men are responsible for herding, protecting cattle, building kraals or cattle pens and contributing to larger decisions about the community through traditional political processes [...] women are busy all day while men have considerable time for relaxation [...] people in the community socialize with their gender. (2016, 5)

The men are reserved outdoor roles, possibly because of the nomadic lifestyle that entails migration with livestock and the risks of having to protect it from wild animals. The building of the kraal appears to be more pertinent to Maasai men than building the house because the kraal symbolises cattle, the prime means of livelihood to be defended from all enemies. To defend these means, young men have to be circumcised and trained through the institution of *murranism*. The women on the other hand are reserved home-making roles to nurture the offspring for posterity. Apart from multiple roles for women, the communal nature of the society contributes to the burden in Maasai families. Relatives and friends may show up in the home and the culture demands that they are welcome. The family has to provide for such visitors, and it is women who end up encumbered with extra domestic chores. Sharp and Twati (2016) write:

Women generally believe that having more than one wife in a house hold is beneficial to them as it provides companionship and someone to help with household chores. The first wife holds an important position and teaches other wives how to care for the family. (7)

The companionship is necessitated by the fact that the different genders socialise with each other and so married women do not keep the company of their husbands as is characteristic of Western monogamous marriages. The culture determines where the men and women sit and sometimes what they eat. Women 'are expected to sit in the kitchen because the community designates it as a feminine part of the house and men sit in the living room, the masculine part' (Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte 2013, 221). During mealtimes, women eat parts of beef such liver because they are associated with femininity while men eat those parts associated

with masculinity like the heart and blood. Sharp and Twati aver that among the most essential roles of women learn by apprenticeship are midwifing and female circumcision. The midwife is called *Ngariba* or *enkatoyoni* (15) and the female circumciser is called *enkamuratani*.

With regard to female genital cutting, researchers observe that a proportion of Maasai women underscore its significance in the construction of gender and female identity. Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte (2013) observe that in spite of the determined effort by non-governmental organisations and local authorities to discourage the practice, many Maasai women willingly give in to it, which attests to the fact that they are not 'passive victims' of the rite as these organisations claim:

It points out that female genital cutting plays an important role in facilitating culturally mediated processes of socialization, wherein it assists in transfusion of gendered identities, and in addition to signifying the onset of pubescence and fertility, serves as crucial element of legitimizing the status of womanhood, opening the door to matrimony and motherhood. (215)

The womanhood and motherhood of the Maasai woman to a large extent relies on female circumcision. Whereas the opponents make a synthetic judgment by viewing it as a physical operation, most Maasai women see it as a developmental milestone they have to undergo to be born into motherhood. Just like a baby cannot be born without conception, implantation, prenatal care and labour pains, so is it impossible for these women to become mothers without the rite. Esho and colleagues conclude that calls to eradicate female circumcision is tantamount to 'disposal of the very bases upon which such crucial elements are negotiated and established' (2013, 215). The crucial elements include the facilitation of transition from girlhood to motherhood, which is the very foundation of the continuity of the community.

In his criticism of anti-female circumcision crusaders, Ledama Olekina (2004) writes:

Activists leading the movement against female genital cutting have failed to understand the peculiarities behind the practice and their ignorance is dangerous [...]. Before Maasai girls are married, they must undergo circumcision in a ceremony that ninety-nine percent of the time is sponsored by their prospective suitors. Aside from the surgical procedure, the rite includes a ceremony in which the entire community comes together to celebrate girls' passage to adulthood. It is meant to protect girls from poverty as most Maasai parents cannot pay their school fees. Maasai girls are traditionally considered children until they are circumcised [...] this is a strongly engrained cultural belief that propels families to go to great lengths to complete the rite. (2)

Like the previous scholars, Olekina (2004) singles out female circumcision as a precursor to womanhood and motherhood without which the continuity of the Maasai community is curtailed. As a result, prospective male suitors contribute towards the expenses of the ceremony. Another essential role of the

ceremony is to bring friends and relatives together to strengthen the social fabric. Family reunions are enabled to promote social cohesion, which prevents social disintegration. Moreover, it demonstrates the parents' love and concern to ensure that their daughters find economically endowed suitors. Parents who cannot afford to pay fees for their daughters find a way to marry them in well-to-do families. Olekina concludes that one idiosyncratic belief among the Maasai is that girls remain minors until they undergo the rite. As much as it sounds unreasonable to activists and those who do not practice the culture, Kimani Njogu and Elizabeth Mazrui contend that '[i]t is vital to recognize certain universal values informed by advances in human thought, knowledge and respect peculiarities of communities' (2009, 1). The Maasai have been socialised in this culture and it is quite absurd to expect them to abandon it overnight.

During Olekina's interviews, a Maasai woman called Agnes Kisai acknowledges the demerits of female genital cutting. She singles out excessive bleeding among initiates and exposure of the girls to infections as surgical instruments are shared. She however opines that the Maasai value their culture and 'even though female genital cutting is outdated, it is hard for a person to leave his or her way of life and adopt a new one. If this change has to happen, it will happen gradually' (3). Kisai's assertion reiterates Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte's (2013) ideas on the prominence of the rite among the Maasai. Njogu and Mazrui's sentiments with regards to 'respect for peculiarities' of others' culture should not be taken for granted. Eunice Kaelo's mother, in Olekina's (2004) interview says:

Female circumcision is our culture. Why should we be forced to abandon it when we were born into it? Abandoning our culture would be annoying to our ancestors. It would bring a curse to the entire community. Circumcision does not affect the sexual activity of the Maasai woman as many Maasai people believe. The heavy workloads ... affect them more. (3)

Kaelo in this passage passionately associates female circumcision with the spiritual foundation without which the community perishes. The most feared ordeal in most African societies is the curse since it portends destruction both in the present, the future and after life. Unless the community is given a suitable substitute to a rite that affects its spiritual existence, then abandoning it becomes sheer fantasy

There are many parallels between Maasai cultural rites and the subjects of Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*. Sharp and Twati's (2016) assertion that relatives and friends visit and stay in any family to proliferate domestic chores for women is evident when Olarinkoi appears in Ole Kaelo's home and stays for months. The claim that men sit in the living room because it is believed to be a masculine part of the house is apparent when Olarinkoi 'idles' in the living room at Resian's displeasure and waits for meals. She says, '[do] we go to all these lengths to please some lazy bunch of busybodies who do nothing but lounge about in the living room, yawning and stretching ...' (Kulet 2008, 76). Polygamy is also palpable

in the novel when Resian and Taiyo arrive at their uncle's home at Nasila and are astounded to discover that he has four wives and sixteen children (14–16). Later, when they pay him a visit, they learn that the first wife, Yeiyo Botorr carries out administrative responsibilities such as instilling discipline and sharing out shopping to different houses (148). In this family, the two girls learn that everything is shared among children from different wives (149). The chores, secrets, feelings, clothes and even combs are shared. Resian, having gotten used to modern life and monogamous lifestyle dislikes the polygamous culture. This is why Njogu and Mazrui assert, '[v]iewed from the outside, a people's culture could be rebuked in totality without due regard for its positive attributes' (2009, 1). Resian refuses to see the disparagement of favourism in uncle Smiren's home while she is unfairly hated by the father just because he wanted a son when she was born (Kulet 2008, 10). Her father favours Taiyo and hates her venomously.

The divergent views over female circumcision are witnessed in *Blossoms of the Savannah* as Minik ene Nkoitoi comes to Nasila to teach the community the demerits of female genital cutting. When she visits Ole Supeyo's home, the old man insists on the paramount importance of the rite and throws her out of the home (21). There are many women characters who share Eunice Kaelo and Agness Kisai's views in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. These include Enkamuratani, the circumciser, Enkoiboni, the female seer and the women of Esoit who trick and circumcise Taiyo very early in the morning. Minik sends her team to snatch Taiyo from the hands of the rich suitor (Oloisudori) to take her to her sheep ranch where she lives with five hundred girls. She represents governmental and non-governmental organisations that Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte associate with the unsuccessful fight against female circumcision in the Maasai community. Olekina also refers to 'their ignorance of the rite as dangerous' (2004, 1). Minik's activism in *Blossoms of Savannah* confirms Laban Migudi's (2019) observation that Kulet's literary oeuvre has tended to echo wiles of the civil society. He writes:

One writer that has allowed civil society organizations and donor agents to dominate his texts is Ole Kulet. He employs plot, setting, language and characterization and themes that pander the whims of the civil society organizations and donor agencies. His writings correspond with current global efforts to relook into the issues of poaching, environmental preservation, woman emancipation and protection of minority groups. (7)

Migudi's sentiments run through *Blossoms of the Savannah* from men's callousness and oppression of women and girls, consistent poaching by male characters that use the illegal wealth to marry circumcised girls who are only saved by the philanthropic organisations in Maasai land. Resian's journey from Nasila to Inkiito demonstrates how human activity has resulted in environmental degradation. The final episode in which Minik's farm workers burn down Oloisudori's convoy of vehicles signifies civil societies' victory over Maasai traditional practices. It is the contention of this study that these are the dreams and aspirations

of foreign organisations and donor agents that find voice through a great East African writer and it is therefore essential to interrogate his representation of the marginalised groups in *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Generalisations and Universalisations: Men as Villains in *Blossoms of the Savannah*

This section applies Mohanty's criticism of universalisation characteristic of radical feminism to interrogate representation of men in Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*. Given her critical stance on Western feminists, the section adopts Migudi's argument that the voices of foreign (Western) donor agents and civil society have found their way into Kulet's texts. One essential concept to be applied in this part of the paper is Mohanty's assertion that 'the model of men as oppressors is not universal' (2019, 338) and judgments made on gender relations in the third world should consider the cultural context. Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah* is a feminist narrative that inverts Sarah Mill's (cited in Garvey 2012, 2062) argument that 'there is a male hegemony in both the treatment of women in society and characterization in literary works' (cited from Garvey 2012, 2462). Although Kulet is male, his presentation of male characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah* is in league with the tenets of radical strand of feminism. In her critique of this strand of feminism, Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) writes:

In their enthusiasm, our sisters usurp our wars and fight them very badly. The arrogance that declares African women 'problems' objectifies us and undercuts the agency necessary for forging true global sisterhood. African women are not problems to be solved. Like women everywhere, African women have problems. More important, they have provided solutions to these problems. We are the only ones to set the agenda and anyone who wishes to participate in our struggle must do so in the context of our agenda. (57)

In this passage, Nnaemeka contends that Western feminists fight the gender war badly by stereotyping African men as sex perverts, lazy, predatory and other vices mentioned in previous sections by feminist writers. They depict African women as victims and men as callous perpetrators. Nnaemeka concludes that it is a Western yearning to demonise African men in the pretext of saving African women. These are universalisations that Mohanty and Oyeronka reject. Like most feminist narratives, representation in *Blossoms of the Savannah* takes the generalisation of men as 'worthless, irresponsible physically grotesque images, wicked husbands, drunkards, rapists, exploiters, predators, monsters, sexually depraved, perverse' (Adjei 2009, 49) and women as victims of physical and psychological violence that the men instigate.

The male character, Ole Kaelo, and his friend, Oloisudori, are presented as 'sexually depraved and wicked husbands' in Nasila society. When he loses his job at Agribix, Kaelo starts a business, but when his mentor, Ole Supeyo tries

to advise him about the impending challenges of sole proprietorship, he quips, '[h]ow could the old fellow think he was so naïve as not to know how to organize his sales?' (Kulet 2008, 24). Kaelo puffs up and tramples on the friend's warning to avoid unscrupulous business partners. In the mentor's opinion, Oloisudori is a corrupt 'randy he goat' that Kaelo must ward off from his daughters (26). This representation reiterates Nnaemeka's observation of Western feminist stereotyping of African men as sex perverts and predatory (57). When Oloisudori visits Kaelo's home the first day, he finds Resian in the living room and the writer says, '[h]e peered at Resian. Those slanting black eyes had slid from her face and were now deliberately scanning her body. A creepy sensation sent shivers down her spine' (97). Oloisudori can only ogle at Resian, a girl young enough to be his daughter. He proceeds to trick her to move along the aisle so that he can stand in the way to feel her body:

But before she could complete her statement, he had brushed past her in one swift movement that nearly caught her off-balance. In a flash, he had pushed his way into the living room and as he passed by her, she certainly felt the fingers of his lifted hand graze the fullness of her breast. With a surge of outraged embarrassment, she glared at him viciously. She muttered inaudibly, 'what an ill-mannered devil this man is!' And as she fled to the kitchen she felt those black eyes, sharp and probing, moving like creepy fingers upon her back. (98)

The overstatement in this passage is bolstered by the realisation that Oloisudori has not spent more than an hour at Ole Kaelo's house, but has not just ogled after his friend's daughter, but fondled her breasts, felt her body by 'pushing his way' around and clarified his intentions. 'The black eyes' symbolise the evil embodied in this man whose 'creepy fingers' like a serpent schemes to bind Resian's future.

With reference to family relations, Kulet presents Maasai men as autocratic. Ole Kaelo dictates the family's return to Maasai traditions without consulting his wife, Milanoi. When she cautions him to place the family first, he retorts, 'I hope you are not implying that our culture comes second, do you?' (61). Sharp and Twati (2016) observe that decision-making in the Maasai family and community is left to men (5). Njogu and Mazrui (2009) note that whereas some agricultural communities in Africa were matrilineal, nomadic communities adopted a patrilineal culture (4) possibly because of the hostile environment they lived in. By virtue of being a weaker sex, women could possibly not ensure the survival of the community in a wild pervaded with lions, leopards, harsh weather and unfriendly African communities. It is therefore Kaelo's responsibility to make important decisions that determine the future of his family. However, his 'autocratic' attributes drive the family to Maa traditions, which the writer considers unreasonable, thereby bringing his daughters under the mercy of *enkamuratani*, the traditional circumciser. According to Maasai women such as Kisai, '[i]t is hard for a person to leave his or her way of life and adopt a new one' (Olekina 2004, 1), and this is why Ole

Kaelo resorts to re-connect with the culture of his people. As the character Ole Musanka puts it in the homecoming ceremony:

Home is Maa, home is Nasila, home is family and home is the children. Kill one of the four pillars, and there is no home to speak about. Sever yourself from the culture of your people and you effectively become *olkirikoi*, a man of no fixed abode, your elegant house notwithstanding. (Kulet 2008, 57)

Ole Musanka brings out the cultural context that compels Ole Kaelo to return to traditional Maa ways of life. The home in Musanka's speech signifies peace, contentment and success, which most human persons seek. Musanka suggests that in the Maa community, members can only find peace and be counted as successful if they uphold traditional Maasai way of life, live in Maasai land, have a wife and children. The four pillars have to be considered to pave way for self-actualisation; Ole Kaelo had pulled down Maa and Nasila and had become *olkirikoi* — a mere vagrant without a place among his people.

The writer further presents Ole Kaelo as callous in the manner in which he treats his two daughters. When Taiyo is sponsored to a music extravaganza in Mombasa, Kaelo claims that to perform in 'a public gallery' is akin to 'harlotry' (45). Milanoi also argues that had she been allowed to court and choose a husband, she would not have chosen 'a bully' like Kaelo (48). His idiocy is evident when he chooses Oloisudori as a business partner inconsistent to advice and brings him to his home. He says Oloisudori is a brother and should not be denied anything (98). When he forfeits the loans, Oloisudori demands to be given Resian instead and Kaelo cannot refuse having declared in front of the family that Oloisudori should be given everything.

Rather than present Ole Kaelo as a fool, the events in this episode can only receive a fair judgment if the writer and reader consider the cultural context from which Ole Kaelo originates. Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte (2013) observe that it is female circumcision that 'legitimizes' a Maasai girl's 'status of womanhood' (215) and because Taiyo is not circumcised, she is not an adult to embark on an epic journey to Mombasa alone. The derogatory words Kaelo chooses are a sheer cover up for his shock at Taiyo's desire to contravene the cultural norms. Olekina avers that Maasai girls are considered children until they are circumcised (Kulet 2008, 1), and therefore Taiyo is not mature enough to enjoy such freedoms. Kaelo's friendship with Oloisudori is possibly his preparation for the circumcision ceremony. Olekina asserts that circumcision is meant to 'protect daughters from poverty' (1) as most Maasai parents cannot afford school fees for girls. The rite opens doors for rich suitors to arrange the ceremony and take the girls. The novel begins when Kaelo has just been retrenched and although he does not want Oloisudori to woo any of his daughters, Kaelo hopes that Oloisudori's son or rich nephew will show up and get interested in one of his daughters.

As depraved as Oloisudori is, he makes advances at Resian after Ole Kaelo fails to pay the loans Oloisudori has guaranteed. He unashamedly tells Kaelo that he is

in love with Resian and wants to marry her as his seventh wife. Oloisudori brags that he has never struggled to marry his six wives, they all came pleading with him to take them and he dictated the terms, '[e]ach had to fulfill certain conditions and agree to live a certain pattern of life' (202). He rejected two women that did not accept his terms. Plans to hand Resian over to Oloisudori begin and his character is revealed to the reader mainly through explication. Kulet describes Oloisudori as 'after his stint as a *moran*, he turned into a hardcore criminal who had been jailed on several occasions' (101). In short, Oloisudori is presented as a 'poacher, smuggler, robber, extortionist and rapist' (101). He consistently blackmails his 'friend' Kaelo to the point of ruining his family. The two daughters flee to Minik Ene Nkoitoi's farm leaving Ole Kaelo alone.

As Mohanty (1984) asserts, it is reasonable to encapsulate the cultural context because it determines the kind of person Oloisudori is. While the Western perspective considers polygamy a kind of adultery, the Maasai community does not view it such. Sharp and Twati (2016) in their study observe that 'sexual autonomy is far greater in Maasai marriage and adultery is considered an inevitable aspect of any marriage [...] Maasai men are divided into age sets and members of the same age-sets are permitted to engage in sexual activity with another's wives' (6). Wives are not divorced if caught in adultery with men from younger age sets but the man will pay a fine of a cow. Sharp and Thwati come across women who assert that having more than one wife in a household is beneficial as it provides companionship and someone to help with household chores (7). In a study about polygamy in the Maasai, Stefah Hoschele finds out that most Maasai women uphold polygamy because a single woman is terribly despised in the community:

An unmarried woman does not have a recognized status in society in society, but the danger of remaining single is reduced if she can be appended to an existing marriage union. It may even happen that a woman who has no husband approaches a wealthy polygamist in order to be added to his group of wives, which the rich man often gladly accepts. (2006, 45)

From Stefah's study, it is apparent that Oloisudori's polygamy is not as result of wanton lust for women, but fulfilment of cultural requirements to rid singleness in women. Going by Hoschele's study, Oloisudori's assertion that some of his wives had pleaded with him to be married should not be misconstrued as 'bragging' but frankness. He is the 'wealthy polygamist' and when the single women implored him to save them from the shame of singleness, he 'gladly accepted.' Furthermore, Oloisudori's illegitimate career as a robber and poacher should be examined in the light of his *Murran* training in which they 'are taught the importance becoming rich ... obtain skills for sustenance and expansion of this wealth, ... how to hunt ... how to organize and actualize raids to acquire cattle' (Ronoh 2010, 12). The education in the *Murran* institution focuses on the importance of material things, which they can get through raiding

neighbouring communities. The underlying principle of raiding and robbery is the same as they involve taking what belongs to the other by force. It is quite irrational to teach Oloisudori to rob and when he executes it, he is condemned. The hunting he was trained by the culture to do has now been demonised as poaching. The cultural components have turned Oloisudori to the man Kulet (2008) complains about: '[n]o the end product justified the means ... Oloisudori was successful ... yes he was successful and was reverently bestowed respectful titles such as *Mzee, mheshimiwa*' (108–109). There is a semblance between the vices expressed in this quote with the *Murran* informal education Oloisudori received on the importance and getting wealthy through raiding.

Another male character that the reader expects the writer to assign positive attributes but turns him to a rapist is Olarinkoi. His appearance in Kaelo's home is queer if not eccentric. He just comes to the home one morning and, given the unwritten rule that dictates hospitality for strangers, the family welcomes him for breakfast and forthwith Olarinkoi becomes a family member. The narrator writes:

He would disappear only to saunter in like the owner of the house two days later, bringing with him either a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, a quarter of mutton or large bundle of lamb chops. He would hand over his gifts to Mama Milanoi quietly and because the house was always frequented by visitors, any additional foodstuff was always welcome. (74)

Resian and Taiyo are forced to accept a stranger as member of the family, which is inconsistent with such attributes of modernity as privacy. Worse still, the practice of giving unsolicited gifts defies the modern elements of budgeting for individual growth. The 'vagrancy' and 'laziness' typical of Olarinkoi is inadmissible in the modern space that Resian and Taiyo have got used to at Nakuru. Sometimes he comes, sits in the living room and orders the girls to serve him meals (77). Resian dislikes his strange behaviour until she and Taiyo are accosted by other two men that drag them to the bush to rape them (141). Olarinkoi appears at the scene, attacks the rapists and saves the girls. Resian trusts him and even accepts to follow him after refusing the father's insistence that she marry Oloisudori. Olarinkoi's callousness begins during the journey with Resian. He leaves her at the back of the old pick-up truck as he enjoys a comfortable driver's cabin. When they reach Olarinkoi's hut, he shouts insolently, '[w]hat are you still doing at the back of the vehicle?' (217). When they reach his hut at Esoit, the narrator says, '[s]he tried to get away from him, but he held her effortlessly as he brutally continued fumbling with her dress trying to loosen it' (221). Olarinkoi turns into a brute and potential rapist as all male characters seem to be.

Similarly, context should be considered before the writer and reader condemns Olarinkoi as a lazy vagrant. What Resian does not know is that both Ole Kaelo and Olarinkoi have been *Murrans*. Ronoh observes that during *Murran* training in family life, young men are encouraged to 'learn to share practically

everything including food, water, company and at a later stage even their wives' (10). *Murrans* of the same age-set share their wives; however, the sharing of food, water and other things is upheld as an essential aspect of Maasai culture. Sharp and Twati (2016) aver that in Maasai culture, it is common for a person to live away from their parents with another family for 'practical reasons such as ease of access to health care' or strong connection to the host (15). Resian's claims are therefore a foreigner's perspective to the context in which Olarinkoi exists; her complaints about his lounging in the living room demonstrate her ignorance of the cultures' prescription of the living room as the masculine space (Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte 2013, 203, 221). His insolence to women is a Maasai cultural training that encourages circumcised young men to treat women with contempt (Ronoh 2010, 18), thereby dropping out of school.

It is clear from the above examples that male characters in this novel take Mohanty's description of the model of men as 'oppressors which is not a universal model' (1984, 338). The gender stereotyping of male characters neglects the cultural context in which they have grown and therefore lacks insight. As Migudi observes, Kulet, like the civil society and donor agents, is determined to draw the audience's sympathy for the plight of women without consideration of context. The assumption that male characters are evil and oppressive without the existing cultural context is absurd. Mohanty suggests that generalisations like Kulet's 'collapse without due consideration to the context and situation' (1984, 340). Why should the character Joseph Parmuat be portrayed as a coward that deserves death for refusing to marry an uncircumcised girl (Kulet 2008, 132), yet the culture he has embraced all his life forbids him to do so? There is a need to study Maa culture as demonstrated in this paper to judge Parmuat fairly.

Women as Passive Victims: Possible Misrepresentations in *Blossoms of the Savannah*

This section interrogates Kulet's (2008) representation of women as passive victims of Maasai patriarchal traditions in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The analysis will adopt Spivak's notion of representation to investigate the proposed homogeneity and universal sisterhood of Maasai characters. In Spivak's view, the 'oppressed' women Kulet claims to speak for are 'irretrievably' diverse, how can the difference be articulated? (284). The attitudes of female characters towards female genital cutting will be scrutinised to corroborate the writer's representation.

In spite of the dominant voices that view Maasai women as innocent victims of oppressive traditions perpetuated by men, emerging voices have questioned this perspective. Citing Wairimu Njambi (2004), Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte (2013) opine that it is erroneous to speak for Maasai women as an oppressed group with distaste for female genital mutilation:

Portrayal of female genital circumcision subjects as passive victims in what is clearly a crucial and determinative aspect of their existence is unrealistic [...] the ritual's perpetuation in the present has less to do with any male desire to superintend over societal matters pertaining to femininity and status of women in society, but it signifies women's own inspiration to carve out a niche within society by directly negotiating the cultural and social parameters upon which their daily life worlds are mediated. (216)

In this passage, Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte (2013) underscore the critical role of Maasai women in elevating female circumcision as an essential milestone that bolsters their harmonious existence in the community. The belief that Maasai men invented it and constantly impose it on the women runs counter to truth when the women themselves desire to be circumcised to attain a status in their communities. A number of women characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah* with love for Maasai traditions as elucidated by Esho, Enzlin, and Wolputte (2013) are portrayed in the negative light to bolster the aspirations of Western feminists. Kulet (2008) writes:

Taiyo also thought of *Emakererei*. She would ask Joseph Parmuat to assist her compose a song in her praise. She had already put words to her tune she had composed to ridicule the three women who she thought collaborated with men to oppress the womenfolk. They were Nasila's three blind mice, who she thought, did not seem to know that the world was changing. Those were *enkasakutoni*, who threatened to curse *intoiye nemengalana* and ensured that they did not get husbands nor children, the mid wife *enkaitoyoni*, who threatened to spy on the young women as they gave birth and *enkamuratani*, who would never tire of wielding her *olmurunya* menacingly. (153)

The three 'mice' in this passage symbolise Maasai women who uphold the traditional culture in spite of campaigns that pressure them to abandon it. *Emakererei* is praised because she is embodiment of the civil society and donor agents that 'save' girls from female circumcision. The phrase, 'blind mice' corroborates the spiteful attitude which the writer holds towards these conservative women he does not speak for.

Enkamuratani is the first 'mouse' that disapproves external voices, which have consistently presented Maasai women as passive victims of female genital mutilation. The word *enkamuratani* is the Maasai term for the woman who circumcises girls in the community. Sharp and Twati observe that one of the traditional roles that Maasai women learn willingly is 'perform female circumcision' (15). In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, *enkamuratani* is very proud of her role such that when she pays a visit to Ole Kaelo's home after their arrival from Nakuru, she springs 'up with the agility of a young woman [...] fished out a dirty oilskin that she held aloft [...]'. She then picks up the *olmurunya* (circumciser's knife) and 'brandished it aloft with her ... claw like hand' (Kulet 2008, 52–53). There is no evidence that her husband or male elder directs her to perform the rite, but as Esho et al. contend, it signifies her own 'inspiration to carve out a niche within society' (2013, 216). She feels proud of her vocation as a way of giving back to her society by her 'profession of transforming young girls into young women through the cut of *olmurunya*' (Kulet

2008, 53). Working closely with her is *enkaitoyoni* or *ngariba* the midwife that spies on young mothers and informs *enkamuratani* to come and circumcise them as they give birth. Sharp and Thwati observe that the mid wife or birth attendant is the most significant role of women given the limited access to hospitals in the Maasai community (15). They add that sometimes the birth attendant doubles up as the circumciser to possibly ensure no uncircumcised woman ‘adulterates’ the marriage institution.

Similarly, the women of Esoit, who are portrayed in the negative limelight, demonstrate active and personal involvement to ensure Taiyo is circumcised. Like Eunice Kaelo in Olekina’s study, these women possibly feel that Taiyo will attract ancestral curses (2) if left uncircumcised. They trick Taiyo that she ought to placate Resian who is at their village to eat. When she goes there, they direct her to a dinky hut to spend the night. Early in the morning, ‘pandemonium broke loose at the entrance of the small hut. Many women struggled to enter amidst excited chants, arguments and banter. In no time, she was dragged out despite her fierce resistance’ (273). They grabbed, pinned her to the ground and *enkamuratani* circumcised her. The whole event from the journey to Esoit, offer of accommodation, pouring of cold water through to the strong hands that hold Taiyo to the ground, not a single man is the picture.

Another female adherent to Maasai culture is Yeiyobotorr. She is the first wife to Uncle Smiren, Ole Kaelo’s brother who maintains unwavering attachment to Maa culture. During the homecoming ceremony arranged by Kaelo, she appraises Mama Milanoi for training Taiyo and Resian in cooking. She adds that Maa education (informal) has endured from the days the Maasai people ascended Kerio valley (76). When Resian argues that informal education is insufficient and encourages subservience to illiterate men like Olarinkoi (77), Yeiyobotorr accuses her of being possessed by *Olkuenyi*, an evil spirit that targets uncircumcised girls (78). Yeiyobotorr reiterates Eunice Kaelo’s mother in Olekina’s study that rejection of female circumcision will ignite ancestral wrath that results in spirit possession. The curse in her assertion is a reference to the evil spirit, Yeiyobotorr refers to. Her pride in female circumcision is evident when she uses the derogatory term *intoiye nemengalana* to refer to despised uncircumcised girls in the Maa community.

Enkoiboni is another Maasai woman that passionately defends the traditional values of her people. Her name is a Maasai noun for a female seer, but in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, she also is Olarinkoi’s mother. She is a fanatic of Maasai culture and prophecies that ole Kaelo will leave Nakuru and return to Nasila after which one of his daughters will be circumcised and become Olarinkoi’s wife. This accounts for Olarinkoi mysterious appearance at Ole Kaelo’s home. She tells Resian that after her recovery from effects of Olarinkoi’s beatings, she will call the *enkamuratani* to have Resian circumcised, arrange their marriage and flight to Tanzania (241). In her opinion, female circumcision is just a small matter and ‘there is nothing to be afraid of’ (241).

Enkamuratani, Yeiyobotorr, Enkoiboni, Enkaitoyoni and the women of Esoit uphold Maasai traditional culture and female circumcision in contravention of

aspirations of Western feminists that claim to speak for Maasai women in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. How then does Kulet speak for Maasai women as a marginalised group, yet they are such different? Apparently, he speaks for women that have adopted Western culture and silences those firmly behind Maa culture. Njambi (2004) refers to this as a mistake made by 'anti-FGM discourse: presuming that female bodies can be separated from their cultural contexts' (i). In other words, Njambi suggests that as long as Maasai women find merits in female circumcision that pave way to acceptability, self-expression and continuity of the Maasai community, they will continue to practise it regardless of foreign opposition.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is a considered opinion that Kulet's *Blossoms of Savannah* has generalisations regarding presentation of male characters without regard for context of Maa culture. Ole Kaelo, the protagonist cannot be a fool for befriending Oloisudori yet the cultural Maasai background expects him to protect his daughters from poverty by making alliances that will facilitate the advent of rich suitors. In the same way, Oloisudori's character should be judged within the context of Maasai culture. It is imprudent to judge him as a lustful polygamist when the culture allows him to accept single women that are afraid of the shame of singleness in their community. In a context where a man is free to have sex with women married to men in his age sets, even claims of adultery become mere sham. Associating a male character such as Parmuat with cowardice and inconsistency is unfair in a culture that considers uncircumcised girls as children. As an adult man, choosing to love Taiyo in her uncircumcised condition is defilement and for Njogu and Mazrui (2009), these are peculiarities of this culture that ought to be respected. Finally, in his attempt to speak for women as a marginalised group, the writer also silences a proportion of female characters and generally Maasai culture. He elevates modern educated women and girls such as Resian, Taiyo and Minik ene Nkoitai whose distaste for Maasai culture is palpable. The latter, an unmarried spinster with a PhD in veterinary medicine, is hailed as the role model. Resian emulates her and vows never to get married unless she is treated as an equal to her husband. Unlike Ogola's *The River and the Source* where there are a number of exemplary marriages, Kulet portrays marriage as a creation of patriarchal traditional Maasai culture only valued by conservative female characters such as Milanoi and Enkoiboni. Does the writer speak for them? What does this contemptuous representation of marriage portend for the marriage institution? What then do teenage girls learn about marriage from the text?

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Dr Andrew Nyongesa is a novelist and teacher with great passion for English language and literature. Some of his published works are *The Rise of Rodedom* (2013), *The Endless Battle* (2016); *The Water Cycle* (2018) and *Many in One and Other Stories* (2019); all of which spin around the struggle of the underdog to subvert the values of the dominant group. His writing draws from his keen observation of the African society and desire to dethrone the dominant beliefs that incarcerate the otherwise free person. His publications can be traced at his author website, mazon.com/author/andrewnyongesa. He holds a PhD (Literature) from Kenyatta University and is currently a lecturer in Literature at St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya.

Dr Joseph Gaita Murimi is a lecturer in the Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Nakuru Campus, Kenyatta University. He is a prolific literary critic and Deputy Director of Nakuru Campus. His recent published work is *Anatomy of Contemporary Story Telling: Performing National Culture in Kenya* (2018).

Dr Justus. K.S. Makokha is based in the Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Main Campus, Kenyatta University. He is a widely published literary critic and editor of several volumes on literary criticism. His most recent work is *Cultural Archives of Atrocities: Essays on the Protest Tradition in Kenyan Literature, Culture and Society* (2019) co-edited with Dr C.A. Kebaya and Prof. C.K. Muriungi. He is a poet. *Nest of Stones* (2010) is his debut book of verse. He serves on advisory boards of several peer reviewed journals including, *Journal of Somali Studies (JOSS)*. His research interests include literary theory, diaspora and gender studies in Anglophone literature. He is also interested in media and society in Africa. He is a columnist for the Star Newspaper in Kenya. Makokha.justus@ku.ac.ke (0746684947)

ORCID iD

Andrew Nyongesa <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3926-1585>

References

- Adjei, M. 2009. "Male Bashing and Narrative Subjectivity in Amma Darko's First Three Novels." *Journal of Literary Studies* 1: 47–60.
- Dangarembga, T. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. London: The Women's Press.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. 1989. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Esho, T., Enzlin P., and Wolputte S. 2013. "Borders of the Present: Maasai Tradition, Modernity and Female Identity." *Lit Verlag*. <https://www.researchgate.net>.
- Garvey, B. 2012. "Feminist Stylistics: A Lexico-Grammatical Study of Female Sentence in *Austen's Pride and Prejudice* and Sotomi's *The General's Wife*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 2: 2460–2470. doi: [10.4304/TPLS.2.12.2460-2470](https://doi.org/10.4304/TPLS.2.12.2460-2470).
- Hoschele S. 2006. "Polygamy Among the Tanzanian Maasai and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church: Reflections on a Missiological and Theological Problem." *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 2 (1): 44–55.
- Kulet, O. 2008. *Blossoms of the Savannah*. Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers.
- Macgoye, O. M. 1986. *Coming to Birth*. Nairobi: EAEP.
- Migudi, O. L. 2019. "Voices of the Civil Society and Donor Agents in Ole Kulet's *The Elephant Dance*." University of Nairobi. <https://www.erespository.uonbi.ac.ke>

- Mohanty, C. 1984. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Boundary 2* 12 (3): 333–358. doi:10.2307/302821.
- Ndimma. 2003. "Catholic Church lobbies to have three novels withdrawn from school curriculum". *Ifex*. <https://ifex.org/catholic-church-lobbies-to-have-three-novels-withdrawn-from-school-curriculum/>.
- Njambi, W. 2004. "Dualisms and Female Bodies in Representations of African Female Circumcision: A Feminist Critique." *Feminist Theory* 5 (3): 281–303. doi:10.1177/1464700104040811.
- Njogu, K. and Mazrui E. 2009. "Gender Inequality and Women's Rights in the Great Lakes: Can Culture Contribute to Women's Empowerment." <http://www.africainequalities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Culture-Womens-Empowerment.pdf>.
- Nnamaeka, O. 2004. "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way." *Signs* 29: 357–385
- Ogola, M. 1994. *The River and the Source*. Nairobi. Focus Publishers Ltd.
- Olekina, L. 2004. "Female genital Cutting: Maasai Women." *Cultural Survival Magazine*. <https://www.culturalsurvival.org>
- Oyeronke, O. 2003. *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Ronoh, A. 2010. "Effects of Murran System's Indigenous Knowledge on Maasai Youth's School Attendance in Narok District, Kenya." *African Research Review* 14: 1–23.
- Sharp, J. and Twati, L. 2016. "Documentation of Maasai Culture." Unesco. <https://www.unecodar.tz>.
- Spivak, G. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–316. London: Macmillan Education Ltd.