

Power and Gendered Identities: (Re) Configuring the Gendered Self in Kenyan Drama

Waveney Olemba and Charles Kebaya

Literature Department, Kenyatta University, P.O. Box 43844-00100, Nairobi, Kenya.

*e-mail of the Corresponding Author: kebayama6@yahoo.com

Abstract

Studies of power and gender identity form part of the dominant discourses of various scholars such as Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Margaret Hall, Michel Foucault, and Gloria Anzaldúa who have explored the concepts of power and gender identity at various levels and contexts. This paper, while contending that gender is one of the most important components of social identity and cultural classification across human cultures, investigates how the politics of gender identity intersects with power in the Kenyan society. To do this, we examine two selected Kenyan plays: Francis Imbuga's *Aminata* and Dennis Kyallo's *The Hunter is Back*. The study perceives gender as a multi-layered structure in which the perpetuation and re-creation of gender concepts, social divisions and individual identities take place and are in a continuum of struggle. In this regard, we explore how the gendered self (re)configures her position in society as portrayed in the selected texts. Anchored within a multiple complementary theoretical framework in interrogating the nexus between power and gender, the paper argues that the gendered self is in a constant struggle for space within her socio-cultural context. Conscious of the inferior position and roles assigned to her by societal structures, the woman, as the gendered self, confronts socio-cultural practices, politics, and agency among others in an attempt to re-create her own space. Ultimately, these actions (re)define and (re)configure the woman in echelons of power and authority and enable her to participate actively in public spaces. This paper proffers new insights in exploring the representation of power and the gendered self in society through creative works of art in Kenya.

Keywords: Power, Gender, Identities, Gendered Self and (Re)configuration

1.1 Introduction: Conceptualising Power and Gender

This paper interrogates the dramatisation of power and gender in Kenyan drama. These two concepts pervade every society and form the subject of investigation by various theorists such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. However, notable in their theorisation is the fact that power and gender have different notions and are realised differently in different contexts. Whereas these scholars' contributions to power and gender are acclaimed and largely inform this study, our intention in this paper is to re-examine the two concepts and trace their combined trajectory within the specific realm of Kenyan drama.

There is no doubt that available literature on power is characterised by widespread disagreements over how the term power should be understood because, as Steven Luke argues in *Power: A Radical View* (2nd ed.), power is often regarded as an "essentially contested concept" (63). In his theorization of power, Michel Foucault advances the idea that power is located in the social structures such as social institutions that hold society together as opposed to individuals. Basing on the Panopticon model in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (202); in this way, he shows how the creation of modern disciplines tends to "disindividualize" power, making it seem as if power inheres in the prison, the school, the factory, and so on.

Judith Butler in her criticism of Foucault in *Bodies that Matter* argues that "power operates for Foucault in the constitution of the very materiality of the subject, in the principle which simultaneously forms and regulates the 'subject' of subjectivation" (34). Thus, for Butler, power understood as subjection is implicated in the process of determining which bodies come to matter, whose lives are livable and whose deaths grievable. In her introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler notes that subjection is a paradoxical form of power and has an element of domination and subordination. She writes:

if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (2)

Butler, while crediting Foucault for recognising the ambivalent character of subjection, argues that he (Foucault) does not offer an account of the specific mechanisms by which the subjected subject is formed. For this, she maintains that there is need for an analysis of the psychic form that power takes because it is through such an analysis that we can illuminate the passionate attachment to power that is characteristic of subjection.

On her part, Marion Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, while critical of the distributive

model of power, argues that “power is a relation rather than a thing” (31). In this regard, she views power not as something static, but as a relation that unfolds in interactions. She further points out that power is “widely dispersed and diffused” (32). Young’s criticisms on the distribution of power offers an alternative way of conceptualizing power - one that views power not as a resource or as critical social good but instead as a relation of domination.

Building on Young’s views on power as a relation of domination, Marilyn Frye in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* presupposes a dyadic model of domination. In her analysis, she identifies several facets of power, and singles out access as the most important facet. Consequently, Frye posits that “The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access” (103). In addition to access, Frye discusses definition as another facet of power. She claims that “the powerful normally determine what is said and sayable” (105). Frye seems to suggest that men dominate women in society since they have power and control access. While under subordination, Frye argues that women typically do not have the power to define the terms of their situation. However, by controlling access, as Frye argues, women can begin to assert control over their own self-definition.

Catharine MacKinnon in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* points out that domination is closely connected with gender difference which she views as the reified effect of domination. Mackinnon opines that “difference is the velvet glove on the iron fist of domination. The problem is not that differences are not valued; the problem is that they are defined by power” (219). Hence, MacKinnon, like Judith Butler, affirms that sex difference, no less than gender difference, is socially constructed and shaped by relations of power. Indeed, MacKinnon claims that it is a basic “fact of male supremacy” that “no woman escapes the meaning of being a woman within a gendered social system, and sex inequality is not only pervasive but may be universal” (104–05). As a result, she presupposes, like Marilyn Frye, a dyadic conception of domination, according to which individual women are subject to the will of individual men.

On his part, Thomas Wartenburg in *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*, points out that “power is always mediated by ‘social alignments’ which are dynamic” (173). Within this dynamism there exist continuous shifts as the subordinated agents seek ways of challenging the actions of the dominant agents. Wartenburg argues that the “subordinate agent is never absolutely disempowered, but only relatively so...just as the dominant agent’s actions are subject to the problematic of maintaining power by maintaining the allegiance of the aligned agent’s complicity in her disempowerment”(173).

As we have shown in the discussions above, there are various perspectives on how scholars view power and its manifestation in the society. We contend that any attempt to come up with a meaningful definition of power should pay particular attention to the ever-changing economic, socio-cultural, geo-political, and historical circumstances that the concept aims to illuminate. As a result, we adopt Mark Haugaard’s views on power which also reflect that of the other theorists that we have examined above. Haugaard in “Power: A ‘Family Resemblance’ Concept” defines power as “the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring their possibilities for action” (425). His definition is based on the systemic conception that highlights the ways in which broad historical, political, economic, cultural, and social forces enable some individuals to exercise power over others, or inculcate certain abilities and dispositions in some actors but not in others.

The exercise of power pertains also in the sphere of gender relations. Gender is regarded an important component of social identity and cultural classification across the world. Various researches have also shown how different perspectives have been used in defining gender. However, in this study, we conceive gender as a product of social interaction rather than a fixed bipartite division and proceed to examine how drama renders recognizable those actions, images, and socio-cultural and structural patterns that contribute to gender construction. Drama is to some extent informed by a set of socially constructed and validated gender roles and attitudes in society. Therefore, the audience gets engendered by the time the enactment of specific categories of plays on stage is over. Hence, it is our contention that drama as an art form bears the potential of perpetuating and re-creating the gendered identities in society.

Sophie Macharia in “Gendered Identities: Women and Power(lessness) in Kenya” argues that “exploring the subject of identities within the Kenyan socio-political context requires a perception of the ambiguities of gender and power as experienced within defined cultural and political spaces”(127). She further points out that “understanding the social relations of gender requires that it explicitly recognises its systematic roots in the historicity of social structure (127). With this in mind, this paper engages a theoretical and literary analysis of how the gendered self (re)configures power in Kenyan society. We examine how through drama, literary artists in Kenya interrogate the notion of power and gendered identities by re-examining the socio-cultural structures that create these positions while highlighting women’s ability and willingness to take up agency. In this regard, we argue that Kenyan drama offers an alternative space where issues of power, identity and gender are not only dramatised but also questioned. In other words, by dramatising issues that revolve

around power and gender within the Kenyan context, playwrights invoke subjectivity and agency which eventually the gendered self assumes in her self-identification.

In order to understand ways in which the nexus between power and gender is played out in Kenyan societies, we pay attention to how society is depicted in the two selected texts, and how it is organised and filtered through the identification of cultural practices, structural aspects and its value systems. It is our assumption that the intersection between power and gender takes place, in part, through the dramatic process; that is, the conveyance of concepts and values through dramatisation. It is also our assumption that the two writers, whose works have been selected for this study, are actively engaged in the production of alternative ideologies to counter the dominant ideologies in society. We therefore interrogate how the gendered self contests or enhances dominant ideologies within certain contexts in society.

1.2 Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is grounded on multiple complimentary theories in unraveling the nexus between power and the gendered self in the selected texts. The use of a multiple complimentary theoretical framework is informed by the fact that there is no single theory that can comprehensively help us analyse thoroughly issues concerning power and gender due to their diversity, fluidity and subjectivity. We are also aware of the fact that different theoreticians on gender and identity have divergent views and hence putting them together for analysis is not only a daunting task but is also likely to engender certain complexities because the theoreticians are from different locations, speaking at different times and speaking for different audiences; this implies that their engagements with matters of power and gender identity are subjective and may differ in meaning and application.

Taking a cue from this conundrum, this paper calls for a further conceptualisation of the concepts of power and gender identity and their application within the Kenyan context, with specific reference to Kenyan drama. It is worth noting that we examine Kenyan drama in this paper as a site that offers the social space upon which to interrogate the questions of power and the gendered self in Kenya. Drama in this case will be viewed as an imaginary site where issues that concern humanity are dramatised. The dramatised issues are further informed by the socio-cultural, political and economic landscapes in the society.

Gender theory is one of the theories that we shall engage in this paper. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* views gender as “a human construct enacted by a vast repetition of social activities” (14). This observation challenges the idea that gender theory originated as a tool to examine the biological distinction between man and woman. Butler argues that the concept of gender makes it possible to view practices that are subjective to females as being not solely female issues, but as concerns deeply rooted in the social relations between men and women. In this way, gender development should be seen as that literary approach that recognises the unequal relations between males and females in society (Treichler 128). The two sexes are characters created by unjustified patriarchal practices and power structures in the society. For this reason, Butler argues that the restraining power structures in society form the basis of emancipation and that a person should have possibilities of choosing his/her own individual identity. Hence, Butler invokes issues of subjectivity and agency in order for the subject to assume self-identification.

Thus, the gender approach within feminist discourse focuses on relations of dominance and subordination and all possible structures, dynamics and dialectics between male and female, men and women as gendered individuals in society. In this sense, this paper examines the category of ‘female’ and ‘femininity’ while acknowledging the reproductive differences between males and females as key to gender. The study takes cognizance of the feminist concerns which have striven to redress the place of women in culture, society and history. The postulations of Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Lucie Irigaray that Gender theory challenges the paradigms and intellectual premises of Western thought and proposes frequent interventions and alternative epistemological positions largely inform our position in this study in that they illuminate the international contradictions in a seemingly perfect and coherent system of thought, which serve to attack ordinary notions of authorship, identity and selfhood.

In her theorisation of gender, Keddie Nikki in *Debating Gender: Debating Sexuality* points out that gender appears in different forms:

Firstly, it appears as a widespread system of dichotomous meanings that assign masculinity and femininity to objects and processes that have no literal connections to any human biological distinctions. Secondly, gender appears as an important element in individual identities. Thirdly, it appears as a component of the general social structure as a whole. (116-117)

Nikki’s postulations above tie individual identity to gender and the social structures, indicating that an individual’s identity can be well understood within a particular social context. It is worth noting that despite the fact that the socio-cultural context plays a pivotal role in the understanding of one’s identity, identity is a complex issue which goes beyond the socio-cultural context as a parameter. Hall and du Gay in *Questions of Cultural Identity* argue that the concept of identity is a paradox and suggest that identity is simply “strategic and

a positional one” (3). This shows that there is no fixed way of looking at identity simply because, as Hall and du Gay put it, identities are “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply,... and are constantly in the process of change and transformation” (4). This observation gives impetus to the fact that identities are fluid and individuals negotiate new identities as social contexts change.

We also make use of cultural materialism as part of the theoretical framework upon which this study is hinged. Our choice of cultural materialism is informed by the fact that attempts to negate the contradictions posed by gendered societies as well as patriarchal sanctioned power relations in society is anchored in cultural resistance dialectics. This is so because culture is at the heart of the concept of gender identity and power play. Therefore, cultural materialism is an attempt to modulate that aspect of social existence – culture; which was considered by classical theorists to be less materialist and even political in scope.

Raymond Williams in *Writing in Society* points out that the provenance of power (play) is lodged in cultural materialism. Consequently, he defines cultural materialism as “the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production” (210). This shows that cultural materialism provides a system through which social order is experienced, reproduced and communicated. Hence, the theory holds that human existence and relations of power are a function of practical issues of earthly, material reality. In line with the purpose of this paper, cultural materialism may serve in investigating power play and the gendered self within the Kenyan context.

The cultural materialist resource and source for oppression of women is lodged in power struggle and ideology. Central to the power struggle is the cultural gibbet at work in a particular social context. LeBaron and Pillay in *Conflict across Cultures* opine that “culture and conflict constantly shape and reshape each other in an evolving interactive process” (7). The perplexity posed by interface between class and struggle is how to wrestle power for the dominant as well as possible oppression of other classes in society. In this study, we restrict our focus to two worlds: the man’s world and woman’s world. We examine the Manichean nature of power relations as manifested in the unabated power play in the gendered social space. Gendered space creates a world in which power play flourishes. This is fundamental to this study for we seek to investigate how power and gender are dramatized in the Kenyan context. We hold the view that creative works of art, as is the case with the selected works for this study, have taken the commitment to address issues affecting society; power play which is associated with cultural practices being no exception.

It is thus clear from the theories that we have discussed above that subjectivity and agency are key to self realisation. As well, agency enables one to challenge the gendered spaces created by the skewed power structures in the society. While drawing from the theoretical frameworks discussed above, this paper investigates how the gendered self is dramatised in Kenya exposing underlying oppressive ideologies and how women contest and subvert them in their attempt to (re)configure themselves in public spaces. We therefore interrogate the two selected plays for this study as sites for contesting and/or subverting patriarchal structures, power relationships, identities and ideology. We do this by taking into consideration possibilities of interpretation that recognise creative works of art as active agents in the struggle for space in a patriarchal society.

1.3 The Gendered Self and (Re) Engaging Power: The Case of Aminata

Gender disparity pervades many African societies, the Kenyan society being no exception. Many of these societies are grounded on traditional patriarchal systems of governance. The place of women in many of these African societies for a long time is culturally defined, therefore restricting women to domestic chores and specified places of operation, commonly known as domestic spaces. However, with the advent of modernity, culturally defined roles and places for women are sharply contested. Gender crusaders in Africa and the world over have upped the fight against the discrimination of women as they agitate gender equality. They argue that women, like men, need and deserve to be treated as decent human beings, to be listened to and to inherit property.

Francis Imbuga is among writers in Kenya and Africa in particular who through their creative works, the writers have added their voice on the on-going discourses on gender and power and their manifestations in society. *Aminata*, Imbuga’s play, explores the politics of power and gender as played out in the fictional community of Membe society. As Ruganda points out in *Telling the Truth Laughingly*, the play “dichotomizes gender politics and explores the polarity of dominance” (10). The play pits Jumba, the village headman against Aminata, his niece and his late brother pastor Ngoya’s daughter. Jumba has refused to honour and respect the wishes of Pastor Ngoya who in his will had bequeathed his three acre piece of land to Aminata and had stated that his grave should not be cemented (*Aminata* 4).

Central to our discussion is how Aminata, the gendered self, engages Jumba, the embodiment and custodian of tradition, in ensuring that Pastor Ngoya’s wishes are honoured and fulfilled. Ngoya’s act of bequeathing his land to Aminata is an affront to tradition in this society where women are not entitled to any form of inheritance. Therefore, Jumba, the one charged with the responsibility of ensuring that tradition is followed to the letter as the village headman, refuses to let Aminata inherit the piece of land because it

contravenes traditional practices that he is supposed to protect.

Jumba finds himself at the crossroads of obeying tradition or fulfilling Ngoya's wishes. He feels that if he disregards the wishes of his late brother, he is also in danger of being punished for the community believes that ghosts of the dead person will pursue the one who fails to follow the wishes. Hot on his heels is Aminata - the beneficiary of Ngoya's wishes. Jumba finds it difficult to deal with Aminata as he admits "That woman is stubborn as a he-goat on heat" (15). In *Telling the Truth Laughingly* Ruganda points out that as uncle and niece "lock up horns" on the issue of obeying a dead man's will, it is clear that the conflict is not between the two of them but is one that is informed by irreconcilable ideological differences between tradition and modernity (74). This confrontation between Jumba and Aminata forms the basis of this discussion since it is through it that we shall be able to visualise how the gendered self engages with power structures in the society.

Aminata is determined to fight for her full rights regardless of whatever it takes. She cannot be deterred by the traditional practices that her uncle Jumba keeps citing to deny her the land. She even wonders why Jumba cannot embrace change which some of the elders have seen instead of clinging to tradition. She says "That is precisely why I am asking, no, demanding that my Uncle and his circle of elders tell me what is wrong with being a woman. I want them to tell me what is wrong with me!" (39). This shows that Aminata is ready and set to engage with the patriarch "to the bitter end" (39). However, Jumba remains adamant that Aminata as a woman does not deserve to inherit any piece of land for tradition demands so. He views Aminata's attempt to acquire land as a form of subverting traditional cultural codes and as an indirect invasion of the male space.

In demanding to know from her uncle, Jumba, what is wrong with her inheriting property such as land, Aminata seems not only to speak for herself but also for her fellow women who are oppressed by the Manichean power structure in the society. Women are seen as victims of this oppressive structure and are in a constant struggle for self expression. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba opines that "postcolonial women's struggles are less concerned with speaking on behalf of all the people than claiming their own place within the national polity" (173). Further, Loomba argues that the nation in postcolonial era "itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological interests" (173). Loomba's postulations resonate well with the predicament that Aminata and her fellow women in Membe find themselves in. In Membe's power structure, they have been reduced to either conform or resist. Aminata opts for resistance as the only means of attaining freedom and self-definition as a woman.

Aware of the resistance that she will receive from the patriarchs, Imbuga portrays Aminata as a highly educated, brilliant, aggressive and assertive lawyer with a mind of her own. Her knowledge, especially in law, plays a significant role in her battle for the land as she points out "In law, their defence is totally helpless. Some of the more enlightened elders know this. But the rest led by Jumba, are totally impervious to reason" (36). By juxtaposing Aminata's wide knowledge to that of Jumba, Imbuga foregrounds the fact that knowledge is important in the emancipation of the gendered self. The playwright is conscious of the fact that knowledge gained through avenues such as education and professionalism is one of the ways of empowering the oppressed in the society. Knowledge, as Couze Venn points out in *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds*, "gives a voice to those not allowed to speak in the public sphere" (118). Aminata's wide knowledge enables her determine when to talk or not as is the case when she was in a meeting with Membe elders regarding her inheritance thus:

Nothing. In fact some of them were quite surprised of my silence... From the anxiety on their faces, I guessed they were expecting a bitter confrontation between me, Ababio and my uncle. But they were wrong. What would I gain from such a confrontation? Absolutely nothing. So I just sat there and played it by the ear. (36-37)

From the above excerpt, Aminata is shown as one able to read the mood and make an informed opinion on how to react. Therefore, it is clear that knowledge empowers the gendered self and offers her an array of ways of engaging with the patriarchs and power structures in society.

Imbuga further foregrounds the gendered self's need to transform society as a key element in engaging and (re)configuring herself in the society. Aminata's development record speaks volumes. The playwright depicts her as the epitome of social transformation through the various projects that she initiates such as bringing piped water, campaigning against cultural practices which discriminate against women, family planning and paying school fees for her brother's children. All these roles she ably executes and with ease. Her aunt Kezia, though critical of her failure to give birth to many children, acknowledges this when she says:

We do not belittle what she has done for Membe and for us, no. All we want is the woman in her. Is she to invest all her goodness in only two children? That, son of my brother, is our worry. Every time we switch on our wireless, it is Aminata's name we hear. What happened of yours? (33)

Therefore, through her development projects, Aminata has not only endeared herself to the people but (re)configured herself in society. In her struggle with the patriarchs, she has succeeded in moving and showing that the gendered self is capable of actively taking part in the society's social transformation processes.

1.4 (Re)Configuring the Gendered Self: Rita as the Archetype of good Leadership

In this section, we turn our attention to Rita in Kyallo's *The Hunter is Back* to illustrate how the gendered self struggles to liberate and (re)configure herself in the societal power structures. We explore how women defy oppressive power structures legitimized by patriarchy to take over leadership roles in society. It is while in power that women unlike their male counterparts show outstanding transparent, equitable and accountable leadership. It is in this way that women succeed in reconfiguring themselves in public spaces.

The various strategies that women characters in the selected texts employ to contest and subvert power structures in society range from education and knowledge acquisition, resistance and struggle, women organisations, and work. Through these means, women endeavour to break what Tiyambe Zeleza, in "Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera's Imagination," calls the "suffocating grip of masculinist nationalism" (11), a nationalism founded in patriarchy.

Rita is the protagonist in the play *The Hunter is Back* which is set in Chamaland, an imaginary community. The playwright depicts a social life that is characterised by male chauvinism, patriarchy and gender imbalance. Women are portrayed as the disadvantaged group in this set up. They are shown as weak subjects, oppressed by their male counterparts and patriarchy such that they are subject to all sorts of manipulation by the male gender. This is clearly evident through Rita's tribulations in the hands of Mzee Tumbo, the chief, and Ngumi.

The author shows that traditional power systems pervade the system of governance in Chamaland, oppressing and subjugating women. For instance, in the beginning of the play, Naomi and Maneno in their conversation allude to the forms of oppression that they are subjected to by their husbands as a result of tradition. Maneno asks Naomi "Look here, Naomi my sister, what have we done to merit all these? Our gods must be..."(3). Their conversation points out that women are expected to be submissive to their husbands without question. By privileging men over women, tradition creates a gendered social space where men wield unabated power while relegating women to the periphery. This creates a Manichean society where men are at the centre and call the shots while women are at the margins and only dance to the tunes of men.

The traditional Manichean power structure is established in the chieftaincy. The chief is the traditional ruler of Chamaland and custodian of all the traditional customs and practices of the people. The chief is viewed as a demigod whose decisions are final and unquestioned. For this reason, members of the society have resorted to offering him bribes to rule in their favour. Mzee Tumbo, for instance, bribes him to ignore Rita's plea when she had sought his help to stop her impending marriage to Mzee Tumbo – a man supposed to be her grandfather! Having taken the bribe from Mzee Tumbo, the chief turns a blind eye on Rita's case, clearing the way for her marriage. Thus, Rita is grabbed and a wedding ceremony hurriedly prepared.

Further, the traditional order recognises women as sources of wealth. The woman is presented as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. For instance, Ngumi, Rita's benefactor, fantasises on how he will become a wealthy man once he marries off Rita to Mzee Tumbo. He says:

Time...time. I tell you time can really do wonders. They say time is the best judge on earth. And surely it is. One...Two...Three...Four...Five...Six, yes, on the sixth day I will become one of the lords in Chamaland. Yes, when Tumbo brings me the dowry, I will visit the watering holes and buy beer for all and sundry... (17)

Taking the cue from the creation story in the Bible, Ngumi demonstrates how he will become rich on the sixth day. The sixth day is regarded as the culmination of God's creation when He created man at the end of the creation process so that He rested on the seventh day. To Ngumi, the sixth day will mark the end of his poverty as he crosses over to riches on the seventh day from Rita's dowry. This is shown when he says:

You beggars and paupers, you who live from hand to mouth! Come, follow me. Come eat and drink and be merry. It's, after all, my niece's wedding feast. And you, why support your idling chin like a mourner? Come and be merry. Join the celebrating team. (16-17)

This shows that the cultural materialist economy which creates gendered spaces percolates Chamaland. Material well being is the measure of a man's wealth. Congruent to this is Ngumi's attempt to marry off Rita to get the much needed wealth in form of dowry hence climbing up the social ladder. He therefore takes it upon himself to ensure that the marriage pulls through regardless of Rita's position. He even rallies everybody including his wife, Naomi, to support Rita's marriage since it is a noble course. In the same vein, Mzee Tumbo will be seen as among the wealthiest people in the society by not only marrying many wives but also being able to sustain them materially. It is under this rubric that *The Hunter is Back* is significant. The play is appropriate in illustrating how ideology is imperative in deconstructing patriarchal frameworks that support the oppression of women.

Rita resists and subverts traditional power structure in the society. While referring to resistance, Homi Bhabha in "Signs Taken for Wonders" opines:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourse as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and

reinterpret them within the differential relations of colonial power-hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth. (1174)

Traditional cultural practices and the power structure dominating Chamaland is part of the cultural discourse that Bhabha points to in the excerpt above as the two marginalize women. Rita resists these traditional cultural practices such as arranged marriages that oppress women. For instance, she rebels against her impending marriage to Mzee Tumbo when she says “At the age of twelve! I would rather hang myself than be married off to the silly-looking old man” (23). First, she rebels against her culture by refusing to get married and seeking help from the chief who she thinks would use his power to save her from the marriage. Unfortunately, the Chief is bribed by Mzee Tumbo and he fails to stop the marriage arrangements (28). Having failed to stop the marriage by enlisting the chief’s help, Rita is left with no choice than to get married. However, she manages to escape the marriage when she secures a scholarship to study abroad. Hence, she runs away from the village altogether as she proceeds on her further studies.

After the completion of her studies, Rita returns home to complete the resistance that she had started. It is clear that the gained knowledge and exposure while abroad provided her with the impetus to face the injustices in her society. In this mission, her first stop is on the patriarchal power structures. We have argued above that these structures have created a Manichean society where men decide everything whereas women are left with no option than to carry on with men’s decisions. This is not the case with the transformed Rita as she challenges the masculine in society. For instance, Rita finds it unpalatable to carry out Ngumi’s decisions, though he is her benefactor.

The chief, who is the embodiment and custodian of the traditional power structure, is not spared from Rita’s wrath either. Rita constantly confronts him and his sycophants like Tumbo on abuse of power. For instance, she tells the chief that since he is government, he should be in the forefront protecting the people’s rights at all times. He should not be the one suffocating the people (45). Rita constantly attacks the chief’s system of governance which is characterised by bad judgments, mostly influenced by bribery. Rita’s constant criticisms do not auger well with the chief resulting in tensions between him and her. Angered by Rita’s criticisms, the chief incites the youth and his cronies against her. However, the chief’s actions do not bear fruit since she is unstoppable. In the people’s eyes, Rita is not only their redeemer but also their saviour. Through her enlightenment, the people are able to see the chief’s evils, machinations and pretences. The people, therefore, turn against the chief giving credence to Bhabha’s arguments cited above. Eventually, a people’s revolt overthrows the chief and hands over power to Rita. This signals the end of the traditional power structure in Chamaland, ushering in a new style of leadership.

Rita ably succeeds in negating and destroying patriarchy. This is made possible through her leading role in educating the people on their role and need to participate meaningfully in the leadership process. In this way, she succeeds in decentralising power across the diverse social networks - a central point in Foucault’s conceptualisation of power. Foucault, as quoted by Gutting in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, argues that:

Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by the ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re)produce social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode the effects, often by producing various counter-alignments. (Gutting 112-113)

Therefore, decentralisation of power and counter-alignments are clearly evident as people realise their denied roles in leadership hence agitating for representation in the existing power structures. In this play, the clamour for representation revolves around patriarchal power structures that have consigned power at one locus: the men’s world, giving impetus to women like Rita to take the lead in resistance as a means of countering Manichaeism. This resistance results in overthrowing dictatorial leaders as women take over the reins of power in Chamaland.

It is worth noting that the power struggle and the resultant counter-alignment in the play is founded and envisioned in the gendered self: Rita. By allowing Rita to take over power, the playwright’s preoccupation is not only on uncovering the cultural and ideological practices that portray women as “powerless” but on showing how the traditional concept of power and the burlesque of this stifling practice affect women, hence the need for subversion. Thus, when Rita takes over power, she overturns the masculine-informed excesses by making leaders like the chief, Ngumi, and Tumbo account for their excesses and abuse of power. She finally punishes them for misuse and abuse of power – a final blow to Manichaeism. In this way, Rita manages to shatter practices in society such as freedom, and power structures that are defined in terms of masculinity.

Rita’s leadership style is worth celebrating. The playwright portrays her as level-headed and development minded. She sets the development agenda for the society and guides her people in realising the agenda. Maneno confirms this when she says:

Your efforts are now bearing fruit. Remember you initiated several projects: building of schools, dispensaries

and drilling water wells. You have done what many men only dream of doing. Yours is a masculine brain in a feminine outfit! (46)

Rita, like Aminata in *Aminata*, brings change to the people through initiating various development projects and her campaign for human rights. The people are able to see, feel and live her vision. Through her, the writer shows that women are capable of bringing the much needed change in society. In the play, the author further shows that women, unlike their male counterparts, are conscious and concerned with the well being of the society and its development. This is confirmed by Rita's assertion that "I know the pains of trekking for kilometers to fetch water. I know the fruits of education, and I know the importance of good health" (46). Through Rita, the playwright deconstructs the patriarchal wisdom that women are only meant for domestic chores.

There is a rectilinear nexus between the oppression of the masses in the postcolonial society and the marginalisation, oppression and denigration of women in the gendered social space. To change this trend requires the awakening of the critical consciousness of the gendered self. This awakening can be acquired through enlightenment and self-discovery, as does Rita, resulting in identity consciousness amongst the women folk. This is evident in Rita as she says:

For a long time, we women have been constantly ignored. We have been demeaned, beaten and despised. In fact, the word woman in our society is synonymous with dishonoured house helps, child upbringers and sex objects! Time is up! We need to stand up and be counted as equal stakeholders in society. Where is our place in the cabinet? Where is our place in committees and other top decision-making organs? We need to become presidents, doctors, aircraft engineers and all that ... and the future starts here! (62-63)

It is clear that Rita, through education and enlightenment, has attained self-discovery hence being conscious of the fact that women should be accorded due recognition in society against the simple roles that traditional institutions have offered them. It is through self-discovery that the women's mobility from the margin to the centre may be realised.

Rita, by participating in negating patriarchy and taking over power from it implicitly shows how the gendered self (re)configures herself in the public space where she enters and declares her determination and commitment to change the status quo thus:

I want to change the ways of my people back to Chama. They should abandon some of their time-barred and useless traditions and join the rest of the world in embracing the world of enlightenment. I wouldn't live to see anybody else undergo the same harrowing experience as Taabu, my mother. (50)

Her declaration shows that she is not only aware of the problems that are facing society as a result of the suffocating patriarchal power structures but also the need to provide immediate and long-lasting solutions to the people's predicament. Rita believes that it is time to do away with the age old traditions which are detrimental to the development of a people. To her, the world is moving fast hence having no place for demeaning traditional customs and practices. Richard Taylor in "Black Youth and Psychological Development: A Conceptual Framework" argues that the negation of patriarchal arrangement, which is enshrined in identity consciousness, should be viewed as "an evolving articulation of personal capacities, value identification ... plans, ideals, expectations and opportunities" (202).

By allowing Rita to ascend to power in Chamaland, the author shows the transition of the gendered self from the margin to the epicentre of affairs, rather than being "in the peripheral, tangential role of a passive victim of a masculine-based cultural universe" (Mezu 8). This transition from the margin to the centre of affairs (re)configures the gendered self in the society's power structure as well as foregrounding her decisions within this structure. In this regard, the playwright shows that to the gendered self, the concept of power is redefined. Rita's acceptance speech shows this:

Thank you very much. I feel honoured that my people unanimously agree to make me their chief. It clearly indicates the high regard in which this community holds me. Thank you once more. And on my honour, I solemnly promise that I shall serve without favour. I will lead from the front in the way against bribery, as it is a major roadblock to service delivery and economic stability. I assure you that I shall champion the battle against drug abuse and also against demeaning practices such as wife inheritance and child labour. All these must be brought to an end. (66)

From the excerpt above, Rita shows that being in power means being a servant of the people, having a sense of commitment and dedication, and having presence of mind to protect all citizens. In this regard, Rita like Aminata in *Aminata*, shows her resolve to change society. The author portrays her as a pragmatic character determined to use the knowledge she has acquired to transform society. It is through societal transformation that she (re)constructs and (re)configures the paradigms of women representation in society. Hence, in reconfiguring themselves, the women characters gain new voices and in turn reposition themselves as speaking subjects; thus engaging in what Decker in *Ideology* refers to "recover[ing], reinscrib[ing], and reinvigorate[ing] the feminine subject (204).

1.5 Conclusion

The foregoing demonstrates that the two playwrights have dramatised how the gendered self challenges existing power structures that define, domesticate, oppress and disempower her. Women characters such as Aminata in *Aminata* and Rita in *The Hunter is Back* are portrayed as characters who have not passively succumbed to oppression but are constantly involved in contesting, subverting and re-working the oppressive power structure in society. Thus, from our analyses, it has emerged that the two writers conceptualise power beyond simple notions of patriarchy. They rather view its manifestations in various societal interactions and socialisations. It is for this reason that women contest the narrow patriarchal constructions of power that pervade society. The female characters, through their struggle, create new ways of engaging with patriarchal authority in the society as they (re)construct and (re)configure the meaning of womanhood, marriage, sexuality, and the masculine/feminine binary. The two texts map the gendered self's determination to create useful spaces - spaces that "value difference and complexity [hence making it possible] for sisterhood based on political solidarity [to] emerge" (Hooks 10). It is in this way that women manage to confront power enactments in the society and (re)configure themselves in the public spaces.

Since independence, the Kenyan society has failed to significantly alter the marginalisation of women, their participation in the struggle for independence and nation-formation processes notwithstanding. Women have been relegated to the periphery in issues dealing with the nation. Thus, postcolonial Kenya has become a site where power relations, socio-cultural and economic practices are contested largely by the women folk. For this reason, Kenyan writers, as is the case with the two playwrights selected for this study, have taken the lead not only in interrogating the marginalisation of women but also in (re)constructing and (re)configuring 'an acceptable order' which disrupts tradition and reconstitutes power positively for both men and women in society.

Works Cited

- Bartky, Sandra. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Signs Taken for Wonders". *Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Butler, Judith, 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge. Print.
- . *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- . *Excitable Speech: Toward a Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Couze, Venn. *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds*. Michigan: Sage, 2006. Print.
- Decker, J.M. *Ideology*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977. Print.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, California; The Crossing Press, 1983. Print.
- Gutting, Gary. ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
- Hall, S. & Paul du Gay. eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage Publications, 1996. Print.
- Haugaard, Mark. "Power: A 'Family Resemblance' Concept" *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2010. 13 (4): 419-438. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. *Yearning race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990. Print.
- Imbuga, Francis. *Aminata*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1988. Print
- Kyallo, Denis. *The Hunter is Back*. Nairobi: Oxford, 2010. Print.
- LeBaron, M. and V. Pillay *Conflicts Across Cultures*. Boston: International Press, 2006. Print.
- Loomba, A. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan Press, 2005. Print.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1987. Print.
- Mezu, Rose Ure. *Women in Chains: An Abandonment in Love Relationships in the Fiction of Selected West African Writers*. Owerri: Black Academy, 1994. Print.
- Nikki, R. Keddie. *Debating Gender. Debating Sexuality*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Print.
- Taylor, Richard. "Black Youth and Psychological Development: A Conceptual Framework." *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*. Robert Staples. California, 1986: 201-210. Print.
- Venn, C. *The Postcolonial Challenge: Towards Alternative worlds*. London: Sage, 2006. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Writing and Society*. New York: Verso, 1984. Print.
- Wartenburg, T. *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990.

Print.

Young, Iris Marion, "Five Faces of Oppression." *Rethinking Power*. ed. Thomas Wartenberg. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992. Print.

---. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990a. Print.

Zelesa, Peter Tiyambe. "Colonial Fictions: Memory and History in Yvonne Vera's Imagination." *Research in African Literatures*. 2007, 38 (2), 10-22. Print.

About the Authors

Dr. Waveney Olembo is a senior Lecturer, Department of Literature, Kenyatta University. She holds a Doctor of Arts degree from Idaho State University and Master of Arts in Education degree from Ball State University, both in the U.S.A. She is an accomplished and distinguished editor and author. Some of her publications include: *When the Sun Goes Down and Other Stories* (2010), *Integrated English*, Book I (1986), *The Music of Poetry* (1986) among others. Her research interests are in Poetry, Caribbean Literature and Comparative Literature.

Mr. Charles Kebaya holds a Master of Arts degree in Literature with a bias in Drama and Theatre Criticism and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Literature from Kenyatta University. His publications include: Pedagogical Aspects of Riddles: A case of Abagusii Riddles in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* (2013), The Kenyan Theatre: Its Growth and Development in *African Drama and Theatre: A Criticism* (2012), Re-appropriation of the African Aesthetic in Contemporary African Drama in *African Drama and Theatre: A Criticism* (2012), *Federico Garcia Lorca's Subversive Theatre: A Case of Blood Wedding and Yerma* (2011). His research interests are in Postcoloniality in Literature, Drama and Theatre.