



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

-Mikhail Gromov¹

Abstract

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

Introduction

Since the early years of its existence, the Swahili novel has been featuring women characters of two basic types which Elena Bertoncini labelled as *vamps* or *victims*, using these words as a title of her well-known anthology (1996). *Vamps* are those who are parasitizing on men as their benefactors, frequently bringing them to financial or even physical ruin (thus accepting the rules of patriarchal society but using them to their own advantage). *Victims* are those who accept their inferior position in the society (which often turns them into almost non-entities) or try to rebel against it, dooming themselves to moral or even physical damage, if not demolition. These types of a woman as a *vamp* or a *victim* permeate the Swahili novel of the 1960s and the 1970s, regardless of the generic and ideological orientation of the writers. They either portray an obedient female who almost gladly subjugates herself to man-made laws (e.g., *Titi la Mkwe* by Alex

¹ Associate Professor of Literature, United States International University, Nairobi | Kenya

Banzi) or an unsuccessful female rebel, victimised by these laws- a type found in many novels by major Swahili writers, such as Euphrase Kezilahabi. The situation in Tanzanian Swahili writing, for so far I have been referring mainly to Tanzanian authors, has tangibly changed since the 1980s and the 1990s, when such writers as Said Ahmed Mohamed and Kajubi Mukajanga introduced a new type of woman character-a victorious rebel, who consciously opposes obsolete social demands and wins her fight.

In the Kenyan Swahili novel, the first steps of which were made also in the post-Independence decades, but the active development of which started mainly in the 1980s, the figures of female *vamps* and *victim* are also featured sufficiently. However, from the late 1980s on, they co-exist with the figure of a *winning rebel*. This is especially evident in the works of those writers who entered the literary scene in the 1990s, such as Kyallo Wadi Wamitila, John Habwe, Mwenda Mbatiah, and others. These authors, depicting in their books the rapidly changing African society on the verge of a new century, have acknowledged and glorified a new role of the woman in this society, not as an *appendix* to a male, but as a full-fledged member, rich in initiative, determination and intelligence, who frequently behaves in difficult life situations more aptly than a man does, and whose social role is swiftly increasing.

Ken Walibora,¹ one of the best known and promising authors in the new generation of Swahili writers in Kenya, may well be considered as a *male-centric* writer, since his novels published from 1994 to 2012 feature men as their main figures. However, in all his books women characters play roles of growing importance not only in the lives of the main personages, but also in the author's views on the social situations described in his novels. Women in Walibora's books are almost exclusively portrayed as being victimised by a cruel and unfair patriarchal society but it is their state of victim (actual or presumed) that motivates them towards the effort to elevate themselves above their *second rate* condition.

The focus of this paper is on Ken Walibora's four novels which will be discussed in the order of their publication with the purpose of investigating which of the above-outlined types of main female characters are represented in these texts. As we mentioned, Walibora's female personages hardly comply with the type of a *vamp*; they are rather *vampirised* by the male-based society than vice versa. Therefore, I will try to find out whether these characters in Walibora's novels can be categorised as meek victims of social pressure or as successful rebels against it.

Siku Njema: Who's been Moulding Who?

In Walibora's debut novel *Siku Njema* (Nice Day, 1994) women characters already play an important part. From the very first chapter we learn that the main character Msanifu Kombo (nicknamed Kongoweia Mswahili), an exemplary human being who apparently serves as the author's ideal, got all the commendable virtues of his personality from his mother, whom he adored all his life. Born in Mwanza, western Tanzania, and having gone through all the tribulation of an orphan's life, she not only managed to achieve secondary education, but also to become a famous *taarab* singer, thus earning money to raise her boy child whom she, following her free and struggling spirit, had born out of wedlock. In order to give him proper upbringing, she sacrifices a large part of her singing

career, and, despite her fame, she brings up her child in the spirit of modesty, righteousness, love for the arts and knowledge:

Baada ya kunikopoa, mama akapunguza safari za mbali. Akawa yuaimba tu maadam *Mbelewele* hawakwenda nje ya Tanzania au miji iliyo mbali na Tanga. Alitaka awe karibu na kitoto chake, akae nacho akichuchie, akipakate, akikoshe, akiase, akilishe-muradi alipania kukitunza kama afanyavyo ndege mzazi kwa kindi lake kiotani [...] Pamoja na sifa alizokuwa nazo mama, aliishi kikabwela tu [...] Nyumbani tulimoishi ilifaa kuitwa kibanda wala si nyumba. Ilikuwa na paa la makuti yaliyochakaa (3).

{After giving birth to me, mother had reduced long travels. She sang only when *Mbelewele* were not going outside Tanzania or to the cities far from Tanga. She wanted to be close to her child, to stay with it, to lay it, to hold it, to wash it, to guard it, to feed-she intended to care for it as a bird its chick in the nest [...] With all the fame that mother had, she lived as common people do [...] The house in which we lived deserved more to be called a hut. It had a worn roof of palm leaf fronds (all translations from Swahili are mine, MG).}

It is Kongowea's mother who gives him his lessons of moral virtues not only by her own example, but also through the power of the written word:

Kadhalika pale ukutani palikuwa na ubao uliopambwa vyema na kuandikwa maneno yafuatayi kwa herufi zilizomeremeta:

Kinywa chako mwenyewe, kisikusifu fulani

Ni kheri sifa upawe, na wengine duniani

Sifa nyingi upaliwe, zijae hadi pomoni

Mwenyewe usijisifu

{Maneno hayo yaliitangaza waziwazi falsafa aliyoiandama mama katika maisha yake.

Ninakumbuka pia rafu iliyokuwa pembeni iliyojaa vitabu vya kila nui, lakini haswa vya mashairi vya Kiswahili. Mama alikuwa na mazoea ya kusoma tungo za washairi farisi. Ndiposa hakumwia vigumu kutunga na kuimba nyimbo za taarab zilizowapa watu pumbao. Alikuwa ashiki mkubwa wa lugha ya Kiswahili na ushairi wake, nami nadhani sitokosea sana kusema kwamba alinirithisha mwelekeo huo (4-5).}

Also, on the wall there was a well-decorated board, with the following words written in sparkling letters:

Your own mouth should not praise yourself

It is better to get praise from other people in the world

A lot of praise will choke you, fill to the brim,

Do not praise yourself

These words were declaring openly the philosophy which accompanied Kongowea's mother through her life.

I also remember the shelf in the corner which was full of books of every kind, but especially those of Swahili poetry. Mother had a habit of reading works of expert poets. That is why it was not difficult for her to write and sing taarab songs which astounded

people. She had a great passion for Swahili language and her poetry, I think I will not be mistaken to say, she made me a heir of it.

Nilipojua kusoma nilijikusuru kuzisoma tunzo adhimu za Kiswahili nilizopata kukumbana nazo, vitabuni na magazetini. Mama alihakikisha kwamba hamna makala ya magazeti ya *Ngurumo*, *Mapenzi ya Mungu* na *Barazaingalinifutu* (5-6)

{When I learned to read, I compelled myself to read eminent works in Swahili which I encountered in books and newspapers. Mother made sure that there would be no article in the papers *Ngurumo*, *Mapenzi ya Mungu* and *Baraza* which I would overlook.}

As Kongowea learns later, his mother rejected his father, a young university lecturer and a promising poet, because she heard something about his unfaithfulness. This allegation was true and his father regretted till the end of his days. This did not prevent her from bringing up her child and making a successful singing career. Although finally she succumbs to a mortal disease, her human battle is won: she has lived her life not as dictated by society, but as she herself wanted.

Thus women, to a high extent because of their strong spirit, became an object of admiration for Kongowea right from his childhood years. First it is his mother, then his school friend Vumilia:

Katika darasa letu mimndiye niliyekuwa mdogo zaidi kwa umri na mfupi zaidi kwa kimo [...] Wengine walianza kunionea kijicho na kuniramba kisogo [...] Nilipochekwa [...] niliona fundo chungu moyoni. Msichana mmoja tu aliyelitwa Vumilia [...] ndiye peke yake aliyenitetea mbele ya bughudha [...] Niliemewa si kidogo (8).

{In our class, I was the youngest by age and the smallest by height [...] Others started to envy me and disdain me [...] When I was laughed at [...] I felt a bitter lump in my heart. Only one girl named Vumilia [...] was the only one to protect me from being bullied [...] I was very lucky indeed).}

Vumilia, as we will see later, would become the pinnacle in Kongowea's dreams; but even before that, on his way of life he meets other remarkable female characters, who strengthen his perception of women and admiration for them.

Following his mother's death, Kongowea, in search of his lost father, goes to Mombasa where he is hosted by a girl he met on a ship. The girl, named Amina, lives in a "red-light" district, and is driven to prostitution by the atrocities of the male-dominated world. Her mother is abandoned by her wealthy husband because of giving birth to only female children, and re-marries in Dodoma Amina's stepfather, a person of selfish and cruel character who not only ruins Amina's prospective marriage because her suitor is a 'stranger' (a teacher from Kenya), but later rapes Amina in the absence of her mother. Amina flees his house and settles in Mombasa, where, after trying to take several odd jobs, she becomes a prostitute. Although Kongowea, in his long sermon-like talk admonishes her that *it is better to work in a mortuary* (54), yet for Amina her current condition is the more feasible choice. This is because she is aware that in the society she lives in, a young rape victim and fugitive has no other option. Secondly to her, it is better to be self-dependent, no matter how miserable her life may be, rather than be totally dependent on the illwill of her step-father and live the daily life of abuse and horror.

Trials of her life apparently fortify Amina's strength and several months later when Kongowea accidentally meets her in a street, she has already left the *red-light* district and taken a decent job selling fruits and vegetables. Although she highly commends Kongowea for putting her onto the right track, it is apparent that she herself was the main vessel of her own salvation. Before Amina re-joins her ailing mother in Dodoma, she becomes a confidant and consoler to another strong female figure in the novel--Zawadi.

Zawadi's first appearance is when she arrives in Mombasa from her native Lamu, where she is a school teacher for the funeral of her sweetheart and suitor Rashid, Kongowea's friend, with whom he shared a house. Rashid's sudden death in a road accident is a big blow to Zawadi, who, while trying to attain her happiness, had to struggle with social conformities and her parents, to whom Rashid is a 'stranger', an orphan and thus an undesired element. Her parents do everything possible to ruin their marriage and are rejoiced at the news of Rashid's death to the extent that they lock their daughter up in the house so that she cannot go to her dead sweetheart's funeral.

Zawadi, however, demonstrates remarkable determination and strength. She runs away from her parent's house, arrives at Rashid's mourning, and then decides not to return to her birthplace but to settle in Mombasa, taking a job at a local school. Like Amina, she demonstrates equal resoluteness not to depend on anyone's will and whim, she builds her life as she deems it proper, taking the initiative into her hands at important moments. In that spirit, she even proposes to Kongowea and after his polite decline, she soon finds the man of her life, also a school teacher. For some time, she and Amina live together in Kongowea's house, forming (and exemplifying) an ideal relationship between humans. The author describes this relationship using the words *itikadi njema* which can be translated as, "*good commitment*" or even "*good ideology*".

The image of Vumilia, the only friend and consolation of Kongowea's childhood, haunts him all through his young life. His cautiousness in his relationships with women (he politely, but firmly rejects the advances of even such remarkable ladies as Amina and Zawadi) is largely caused by his semi-conscious desire to reunite with the girl with whom (as he feels but does not realise) he has been in love ever since. Becoming tired of waiting for Kongowea's wooing Vumilia, on her part, also does not hesitate to take the bridles into her hands. She manages to find his current address and writes a letter to him, in which she not only bitterly reproaches him for his long disappearance, but also swears "*to wait for you until you realize the benefit of affection; come and we embrace. If you do not marry me, I will not get married ever*" (95). Vumilia justifies her name-which literally means "persevering"-not in a sense that she is ready to wait forever for her happiness, but, against all odds, to *drag* this happiness her way. We can only imagine how she managed to settle the issue of marriage with her father, a respected member of Tanga city council. It is no surprise that at the end of the book we see a happy family union between Kongowea and Vumilia.

Thus, the reader has to grapple with the question, was it Kongowea who set these remarkable women onto the right track in life, or were they the ones who contributed heavily into building his own personality and orientations? I tend towards the second option. As we learn from the text, the encounters and relations with each of these

remarkable women turn Kongowea into a more mature and accommodative person than he had previously been. His mother had instilled into him the foundations of his life stance; Vumilia taught him the importance of human compassion; Amina showed him the ability to rise above even the most unfortunate situations; Zawadi demonstrated non-desponding spirit and will of life. As it can be assumed, the author, in compliance with the largely moralistic nature of his text², was striving to draw a picture of a person changing under Kongowea's positive influence. However, it seems that in fact, there is a two-way change. Kongowea also changes under the influence of the women whom he met. Whether this change and influence was stronger on Kongowea or the women he interacts with is for the reader to decide. However, I personally tend to think that Kongowea appears more as the clay than the potter. In any case, it seems that women depicted in the novel stand equally far from both *vamps* and *victims*. They have put up their own fight against the unfair social system-and won it.

Kufa Kuzikana: Male Weakness, Female Strength

Walibora's second novel *Kufa Kuzikana* (the title can be translated as *Life Buddies*, 2003), according to K. W. Wamitila, is a *more mature [...] socio-critical novel [...], describing the ethnic strife [...] emphasizing the heightened tribal tensions.*

The story in *Kufa Kuzikana* is set in a fictitious country called Kiwachema. At the centre of this story are Akida Sululu and his friend, Tim. Akida Sululu excels in his examinations and has to travel to the country's capital city to receive an award from the Minister for Education. While he is there, news spread that an ethnic war has broken out between the two friends' ethnic groups, the Wakorosho and the Wakanju. The two friends find themselves at a crossroads and this turns out to be the biggest test of their friendship, as they are torn between identifying with their ethnic tribes and remaining friends." (Bertoncini et al.59).

However, humaneness prevails, and Akida, with the help of his friends, escapes unscathed from many dangerous situations. Among those friends, who repeatedly help him when in need, are several women characters, who also hardly comply with the two types described above. The first of them is Pamela (Pam), the fiancée of Akida's best friend Tim. Pam, an intelligent, joyful and good-looking young woman, is also the embodiment of all human virtues. She does not leave Tim, when he becomes jobless, loses his parents and moves to a slum; their marriage plans remain, and their affection only grows stronger:

Japo Tim alikuwa ameshuka ngazi ya kijamii na kiuchumi vidato vingi, sikuona kama mapenzi ya Pam kwake yalipungua. Kuendelea kumpenda Tim katika hali alivyokuwa nayo kulikuwa mtihani kwake Pam bila shaka. Ni mtihani ambao Pam alionekana akielekea kuushinda kwa asilimia mia moja. Na kila alipokuja Pam, Tim alitatarika kwa mahaba na kushikwa na kitata. Sikuona chochote ambacho kingewatenganisha hawa wawili. Walikuwa na mapenzi yasiyojua kufa (125-6).

{Although Tim had descended on the social ladder by many steps, I did not see as if Pam's love for him went down. To continue loving Tim in the state he was in, no doubt was a test for Pam, a test which Pam seemed to have passed by a hundred per cent. And every time Pam came, Tim was rattling with love and

caught by stammer. I did not see anything that could separate these two people. They had love that could not die.}

This love, to which Pam serves as a backbone, withstands many tests: from being marred by occasional gossip to being directly opposed by Pam's malevolent aunt who hated the idea of her marrying a man from another community. Owing to her strong character and undying spirit, Pam not only puts Tim's life in order, but also manages to organise Akida's last stay in the capital before his departure for overseas studies and becomes the darling elder relative for Tim's sister Tamari.

Tamari, in fact, although still a school girl, appears an even more enigmatic character than Pamela. Despite her young age-she is a secondary school student-it is exactly she, and not the more intelligent and mature Pam, who gives Akida even a greater lesson about the strength of a woman, especially a woman in love. Tamari, as the reader understands, is in love with Akida since their school days. When Akida declines her love confessions (just as Kongwea did in the previous novel, because of his high moral standards), he experiences the power of hatred from a rejected woman. She accuses him in front of her brother and Akida's friend Tim of an attempt to rape her. Tim does not believe his sister, but Akida, deeply hurt, leaves his house, which consequently causes him a lot of woes. Nevertheless, when he returns and his life becomes incidentally threatened by crooks who trace Akida to his friend's house, it is Tamari who saves him by disguising him as her school friend. The last meeting between him and Tamari, right on the eve of Akida's departure, again shows the powerful character of this young girl. Tamari once more declares her hatred to Akida but now, as the reader understands, she hates him because he leaves the country without even thinking of their common future. However, Tamari is not going to accept the situation but intends to change it drastically and on a larger scale since ethnic strife, in the long run, has parted her with her sweetheart, she will do her best to eradicate it once and for ever:

Nakuchukia, alisema Tamari, bila ya kuonyesha uchungu wo wote usoni. Laiti nisingaliokoa uhai wako! [...] Ningekusamehe kama ungebaki hapa. Kwa nini unatoroka? Nakimbia adui zangu.

Kama mimi?

Hapana.

Haidhuru, mimi nimepania kusoma hadi chuo kikuu, nidadisi

kinachowafanya watu kuchikiana. Nijue mipaka kati ya uadui na urafiki,

kati ya kisasi na msamaha, kati ya hatia na kutokuwa na hatia. (218-19).

{I hate you, said Tamari, without showing any bitterness on her face. I wish I did not save your life! [...] I would forgive you if you stay. Why are you running?

I am running from my enemies.

Like me? No.

Does not matter, I intend to study up to the university, I will inquire what makes people hate each other. I will know the borders between anomy and friendship, between revenge and forgiveness, between guilt and innocence.}

In *Kufa Kuzikana* the reader sees an obvious case of two women bringing up a young man, giving him vital lessons of human relationship themselves being examples of

strength and a fighting spirit. Neither of the two yield to the pressure of the situation. Pam fights for her marriage while Tamari, through university education, intends to make the world free of hatred between peoples. These women were intended to be victimized by social conventions-but they refused, they fought and they won, creating, or striving to create brighter future for themselves and for others.

Ndoto ya Almasi: Victim Turned Winner

Women victimized by societal convictions comprise the majority of female characters in *Ndoto ya Almasi* (Almasi's Dream, 2006).

This is the story of a young man, Almasi, whose dreams of success are turned upside down when he is falsely accused of participating in a strike at his school during which the head-teacher is burnt to death. He is convicted and sentenced to a jail term by a corrupt judge, who is later promoted to the Court of Appeal. Almasi is released from prison thanks to a presidential pardon, only to be faced with the harsh realities that beset his family, headed by his irresponsible father, Masasi, a reckless man and a drunkard. The villagers do not accept Almasi: he has been ostracised because of his failure to undergo the traditional circumcision. The story ends with Almasi marrying his childhood sweetheart, Chebosio, albeit as a consequence of her crafty tricks (she falsely accuses him of making her pregnant); he is therefore forced to marry her, but in doing so he at least fulfils his love dream. (Bertoncini et al., 59).

In this novel Walibora for the first and so far the last time draws one of the leading female figures, that of Paulina, mother of the main character to fully represent the *victim* type . Her personality can be generally characterised by the word obedience, frequently becoming absurd. She is obedient to the social hierarchy where she, in all humility, holds the place of a poor grass widow to the religion, which lures her with the promises of after-life to the extent that one day she tries to ascend to heaven instead of dying. But most of all, she is obedient to her egoistic, unfaithful, neglectful and abusive husband Mzee Masasi, Almasi's father to the extent that she is ready, at his bidding, to chase her long lost son out of the house again for her husband cannot be a father to a jailbird (20). During Masasi's frequent escapades, Paulina lives only by the hope of his return, no matter how long is he away, and with how many other women. Even the last blow--Masasi not only coming from another absence with a new wife, but also impregnating his daughter-in-law Chebosio--does not make Paulinarise against him: she only decides to retreat to her native village to finish her days in peace.

The character of Almasi's mother Paulina is, however, somewhat counter-balanced by the figure of the main female character Chebosio, Almasi's long-time love and finally his wife. Chebosio, a girl with only a primary school education, but intelligent and resourceful, from her young years finds herself in a dire state. Chebosio wants to get married to Almasi and tries, on the one hand, to attract his attention although in quite a girlish way, by challenging him about everything possible, but especially about him not being circumcised, apparently hoping that this would awake his manly feelings towards her. On the other hand, waiting for Masasi's woos, Chebosio, fearing to be married to someone else, tries to postpone or even shun her own circumcision, fully aware that no one will marry an uncircumcised girl which, fortunately, is not a problem for Almasi. This indefinite period of waiting ends abruptly and brutally when Almasi's father mzee

Masasi, who treats women as disposable material, impregnates Chebosio while cohabiting with her mother. Instead of preparing to face the disastrous lot of a pregnant-out-of-wedlock woman as was the case with Masasi's own daughter, whom he nearly killed and seriously maimed (21), Chebosio turns the situation to her favour, publicly accusing her loved one Almasi of her pregnancy. The village council of elders sentences Almasi to marry her, and thus Chebosio kills with one stone not two, but three birds. She escapes the fate of an outcast, gets married to her loved one and secures a decent family life for herself, her spouse and her future children. Moreover, she does not transgress the norms of any morale, including the traditional ones and the happiest person of all is her husband, who, knowing the nature of his father, only sympathises with his young wife. Chebosio's marriage to Almasi may be seen as a result of her crafty tricks but it also may be interpreted as a victory, which she won over the unfair and cruel social order. She was to fall a victim to at least three birds of prey: forced circumcision, forced marriage and the life of a pariah but she emerges in the end retaining her physical integrity, social status and secures the love of her life.

Kidagaa Kimemwozea: And Harmony for All

A somewhat different type of a woman character is drawn in Walibora's latest-to-date novel *Kidagaa Kimemwozea (His Small Fish Has Caught a Rot, 2012)*. The story, as in the previous novels, is set around a male main personage of poor background and rich personal virtues. Amani, a young man, makes his journey to the city of Sokomoko, the capital of the imaginary African country of Tomoko to seek justice since his father had been murdered, his land grabbed, his uncle unfairly imprisoned, while he himself had been undeservedly expelled from the university; only to face the atrocities of a tyrannical government, led by the dictatorial figure of Mtemi Nasaba Bora, the country's ruler. However, Amani's personal talents and support from his friends and the people allow him to topple the regime and give his countrymen hope for a new and brighter future.

Leaving aside the allegorical/parabolic nature of this novel (see Endnote 2), I would focus on one of the characters, who plays a drastic role in all of Amani's successes, and finally becomes his ultimate success in life. Yes, it again is a woman character, rather resembling her 'sisters' from the author's previous works. Imani is a girl of a fate even poorer than that of Amani. Her father had died in the struggle for independence, but after independence the new government killed her mother, grabbed their land, and turned her and her brother into fugitives. She acts as Amani's 'good fairy' since the very beginning of the novel. Together with him she tries to bring up a foundling kid, together with him she suffers in prison where they are thrown through the scheming of the dictator, and released only after the sudden interference of a friend. She even watches over Amani in the hospital after an attempt on his life, and it is she who unveils the government minister, brother to the dictator, who had stolen the manuscript of Amani's book. It is no surprise, therefore, that after the demise of the dictator the masses, looking for a country's new leader, invite Amani to take the reins of government into his hands, which he declines, for to all the temptations and snares of power he prefers peaceful family life with his beloved Imani (thus the symbolism of their names: peace-*amani* and faith-*imani* always go together). The novel ends with the reunion of all their unjustly offended relatives.

Imani, as can be seen, is also a woman with a strong position in life, who would not subjugate herself to the powers that be, neither wait for salvation to come her way, but rather actively partake in bringing it closer. This trait of her character she demonstrates in the episode depicting her confrontation with Mwalimu Majisifu, the dictator's scheming brother, who had stolen from Amani the manuscript of his first book. After receiving Amani's letter, outlining his suspicions about the fate of the manuscript, Imani deliberately leaves it on the table in the hall of Mwalimu Majisifu's house, then catches him reading the letter and corners him:

"Ahaa, Mwalimu wasoma barua za watu?" Imani alimuuliza kwa ukavu wa uso.

Mwalimu Majisifu akawa anatemeka na kijasho kumchiriza.

"Kunradhi bibie. Kunradhi sana."

"Kumbe wewe si mwandishi?"

"Lakini usimwambie mtu Imani tafadhali."

"Umepata sifa za bure!"

Lo, kamwe sikujua kwamba huyu bwana mdogo alikuwa ndiye... mwandishi, aliwaza Mwalimu Majisifu [...]

"Eeh! Kumbe humdhaniwe ndiye siye?" alimchokoza Imani. "Tuambie ulifanikiwaje?"

"Nili...kuwa ninatolesha nakala miswada niliyopewa na mashirika ya uchapishaje niisome," alisema Mwalimu Majisifu baada kitambo (141-42)

{ "Ahaa, Mwalimu, you read other people's letters?" asked Imani with a dry face.

Mwalimu Majisifu started to tremble, and broke into a sweat.

"Pardon me, my lady. Pardon me".

"Then you are not the author?"

"But don't tell anyone, Imani, please."

"You got the fame for nothing?"

Ah, I never knew that this small one was exactly...the author, thought Mwalimu Majisifu [...]

"Eeh! You did not think him to be thee one?" Imani teased him. "Tell us, how did you succeed?"

"I... was making copies of the manuscripts that I was given by the publishing houses to read", said Mwalimu Majisifu after a long while.}

It also seems that one of Imani's main functions (again, in full compliance with the parabolic/moralistic nature of the novel) is to bring out strong moralistic passages, which, as it were, sum up the developments of the plot. It becomes especially evident in the epilogue part, where the dialogue between the future spouses (after Amani confesses that he intends to write a new book about what happened to them) appears to reflect allegorically the author's viewpoint on many problems that he touches upon in the novel, those of marriage, gender parity, not forgetting even "male-centeredness" in literature:

"Katika hadithi yako usiniweke pembeni kama tanbihi, mimi na wanawake wenzangu, kama wanaume wengine wafanyavyo waandikapo," Imani aliusia.

Amani alicheka.

“Kwa sasa hilo siliwezi kwa sababu sijui yamaanisha nini kuwa mwanamke. Hilo naweza kufundishwa chuo gani?”

Imani akaangua kicheko.

“Basi nami sijui kabisa yaamaanisha nini kuwa mwanamume maana sijawahi kuwa moja.”

“Basi kabla ya kukuweka katikati ya ulingo wa kitabu, acha kwanza nikuweke katikati ya uwanja wa maisha yangu. Nikusome kama kitabu, ili labda nikujue walau kidogo.” (160-1)

{“In your story, do not put me aside like a footnote, me and my fellow women, the way many men do when they write”, Imani demanded.

Amani laughed.

“By now I cannot do this, because I do not know what it means to be a woman. This I can be taught at which school?”

Imani burst out laughing.

“So I too do not know what it means to be a man, for I have not yet managed to be one.”

“So before putting you in the middle of a book space, let me put you in the middle of the space of my life. Let me read you as a book, so that I know you a bit better.”}

Apart from Imani, there are a few other female characters in the book who also support the author's concern (and concept) of women's empowerment. Among them is Zuhura, the wife of Mtemi Nasaba Bora. Zuhura's generally loving and compassionate character, strengthened by her sympathy to Imani, helps her to eventually abandon her tyrannical husband and start a new life in her native town. But even Zuhura's final decision is inspired by Imani's personality, which leaves the reader in a very thin doubt that it is exactly the character of Imani who embodies the authorial concept of a “woman of the new day”: a winner in the fight for the right cause, regardless of the circumstances.

Conclusion

The above-presented survey of female characters in Ken Walibora's novels aimed to illustrate the assertion given in the introductory part of this paper, which is, that Walibora's female characters, regarded by their social standing and the demands of the society as potential victims, in fact become winning rebels, opposing the unfair social dictates and winning the battle. Of course, in the above survey I was trying to outline only the leading and prominent characters; but it should not be forgotten that the mentioned novels also feature some secondary woman personages with no less assertive and determined personalities such as Mercy Macdonald, who leaves her prestigious work of a senior nurse in order to attend to her family after the untimely death of her husband (*Siku Njema*); Bi Tina, who runs the family farm and her daughter Cynthia, who escapes circumcision and forced marriage in order to further her education (*Kufa Kuzikana*); Dina, the young niece of Almasi, who even at her very young age already reveals the temper of a warrior (*Ndoto ya Almasi*) as well as the compassionate and courageous Zuhura, who rebels against her dictator husband (*Kidagaa Kimemwozea*), and others.

All these characters, as I tried to illustrate, are put together by a series of common features: strong feeling of justice, strength of spirit, resoluteness and compassion, all of which tangibly distance them from the earlier-mentioned types of *vamps* and *victims* and, in fact, turn them into role model figures of no lesser extent than the ideal main male characters of these books. Moreover, the fact that in the novels discussed above the main male characters form family union with the main female ones expresses, in my opinion, the author's vision of the new type of gender relationship, which will help African women in reaching self-empowerment and equity, and African societies to make one more step towards a more acceptable future. In his novels Walibora seems to portray the growing consciousness and abilities of his female characters to win their personal struggle against unfair communal claims (*Siku Njema*, *Ndoto ya Almasi*) and to set for themselves wider tasks of bringing awareness to wider masses of people (*Kufa Kuzikana*, *Kidagaa Kimemwozea*).

Could it be assumed, then, that in his novels Walibora demonstrates a largely feministic approach? I suggest, yes. Moreover, his novels seem to assert that the objective of feminism may be not only to give women access to power in the society as it exists, but to beat men at their own game (Petersen: 238), which the above-discussed women characters accomplish successfully, as well as to build fair and harmonious relationship between the genders. As Kirsten Holst Petersen once affirmed, women should have the last say in the discussion about their own situation, as, undoubtedly, we shall. This, however, is not meant to further the over-simplified view that a woman's view is always bound to be more valid than a man's in these discussions (237). This phenomenon-a feministic approach demonstrated by a male author in a seemingly male-centric novel-is not a total novelty in modern Swahili literature (suffice it to recall the novels of Said Ahmed Mohammed or Kyallo Wadi Wamitila) but Ken Walibora made his own unique contribution into this grand theme-the discussion of women's position and role in modern society and has created an image of a woman not as a victim, but as a winner, hopefully an inspiration to his readers, regardless of their gender.

Endnotes

¹ Walibora, Ken (pen name of Kennedy Waliaula)-Kenyan writer of Luhya origin was born in January 1965 in Kitale (Western Kenya). After finishing secondary school he worked for eight years as a probation officer and later became an anchor at the Swahili division of Kenya Television Network. In the meantime he studied at the Kenya Institute of Administration and graduated from the University of Nairobi in Literature and Kiswahili (BAHons.). Since 2004 he has continued his education in the USA, studying African literature at Ohio State University. He is the author of the novels *Siku Njema* (1996), *Kufa Kuzikana* (2003) and *Ndoto ya Almasi* (2006), as well as of the children's books *Ndoto ya Amerika* (2001), *Mtu wa Mvua* (2004), *Mgomba Changaraweni* (2004) and *Innocence Long Lost* (2004). He has edited a poetry anthology *Diwani ya Karne Mpya* (2007), an anthology of short stories *Damu Nyeusi na Hadithi Nyingine* (2007, together with Said A. Mohamed; Walibora's short stories "Damu Nyeusi" and "Maskini Babu Yangu" are also published there), co-authored another anthology with Said A. Mohamed, *Kiti cha Moyoni na Hadithi Nyingine* (2007), and co-authored school textbooks *Uhondo wa Kiswahili* (2005-2006). He has also contributed a short story ("Tuzo") in *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi na Hadithi Nyingine* by K. W. Wamitila (ed.) and two short stories ("Kipara-Ngoto" and "Songoro Leo-Mimi") in *Mwendawazimu na Hadithi Nyingine* by M. Mbatiah (ed.). He has several works that are forthcoming" (Bertoncini et al. 283). Currently Walibora continues his activities as a media and literary figure in Kenya.

² Moralistic/parabolic nature of Walibora's novels (at least earlier ones) has been noted by several critics (e.g., Wamitila in Bertoncini, 2009); in forthcoming publications, I intend to attempt demonstrating common features of his novels and works of the European Enlightenment.

References

Banzi, Alex. *Titi la Mkwe* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1972).

Bertoncini-Zubkova, Elena. *Vamps and Victims. Women in Modern Swahili Literature*(Köln: Köppe, 1996).

-----, Mikhail Gromov, Said A.M. Khamis, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila. *Outline of Swahili Literature: Prose Fiction and Drama* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009)

Petersen 1995-Petersen, Kirsten Holst. "First things first. Problems of a feminist approach to African literature", in *Post-Colonial Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Hellen Tiffin (Oxford-New York: Routledge, 1995).

Walibora, Ken. *Siku Njema* (Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers, 1994).

-----*.Kufa Kuzikana* (Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers, 2003).

-----*.Ndoto ya Almasi* (Nairobi: Macmillan, 2006).

-----*.Kidagaa Kimemwozea* (Nairobi: Target Publications, 2012).