Pathways to African Feminism and Development
Journal of the African Women Studies Centre
Harnessing Women's Knowledge, Experiences and Contribution towards Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Development

ISSN (online): 2309-3625

Volume 8, Issue 1, December 2023

African Women Studies Centre (AWSC)

Women Experiences With Religion in The Novels of Three Kenyan Women Writers

Mikhail Gromov[1], and Alina Rinkanya[2]

Abstract

The article analyses several novels by three distinguished Kenyan women writers from the viewpoint of the attitude of the authors (through their characters) to the role of religion in the life of Kenyan women and, on a larger scale, Kenyan society. While Margaret Ogola in her novels shows the revolutionary role of the Christian religion in the lives of Kenyan women (The River and the Source), and its role as the last resort for desperate situations in life (Place of Destiny), Pat Ngurukie focuses on the role of religion in marriage (The CEO Wife), and Rebeka Njau in her novel The Sacred Seed draws a semi-fantastic picture of the confrontation between good and evil forces, supported by supernatural powers. The study concludes that in the discussed novels religion is presented as a symbol of the forces that play a constructive role in the life of human beings and, on a wider scale, human societies, as opposed to the destructive powers, embodied by various negative characters, mostly of male origin, since the social ailments that are condemned by the authors are associated with the ideology of male dominance. The discussed novels also advocate constructive relationships between sexes, featuring positive male characters, that assist the heroines to overcome life hardships, and most of them are religious people. However, the authors' role models are those personages (primarily female) for whom religion is a driving force which enables them to follow a straight road in life, to vanquish many snares and obstacles, and to inspire future generations.

Key words: *Kenyan literature, Kenyan novel, religion in contemporary world, women's literature.*

1.0 Introduction

Even at a brief glance at Kenyan women's novels, one would notice that religion and religious experiences can hardly be deemed as one of the central themes. Thus, it may be worthwhile to attempt at least an initial research on those novels by Kenyan women writers, which reflect religious experiences as important and helpful factors in their characters' lives. This research may be even more relevant in the context of modern times, when religion, religious values and experiences appear to play a growing role in many African societies, Kenya not being an exception. This study attempts to analyze the novels by three well-known Kenyan women writers to trace the role of

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4984-1196
[2] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2800-1374

religion, its values and experiences in the lives of these novels' characters and its extrapolation to the life of the entire societies in which the described events take place.

2.0 Margaret Ogola

It appears that, among women writers, the most pronounced recognition of the role of religion in the life of Kenyan society and its members can be found in the novels of Margaret Ogola, one of the most prominent figures in modern Kenyan women's writing, who sadly passed away in 2011. Besides being a distinguished author and a medical doctor, Margaret Ogola was also a practising member of the Opus Dei, a Catholic organization *"whose members seek to implement* Christian ideals *in their occupations and in general society"* (Encyclopedia Britannica). Thus, it appears almost natural that in her books Dr. Ogola has paid considerable attention to the role of Christian religion and its various manifestations in the lives of her characters and the societies they live in. This can be traced already in her first and arguably the most known novel *The River and the Source* (1994), in which Christianity is shown as one of the main moving forces in the life of several generations of the Sigu family – and especially its female members. In fact, it may be stated that the novel traces the history of Christianity in Kenya, particularly in the author's native community of the Luo – from sheer surprise and incredulity *("Their god had a son! What sort of madness is that?"* – 53) to acceptance and embracement.

The family's devotion to Christianity, in fact, starts nearly from *"the source",* Nyabera, the daughter of the family's matriarch Akoko. Nyabera, who inherited her mother's courage and intelligence, led the life of an exemplary traditional woman, mother and wife, but this did not bring her happiness, because the unfortunate death of her husband, that left her with only a daughter and no son, made her a pariah in her community - until the day (this part of the novel is set in the 1930s) when her village is visited by a Christian preacher.

> "Nyabera felt full of bitterness, and she decided that a change was necessary. […] She would cut herself off from her people. She would seek another life, a different way. […] Now in that village, a man had once come dressed in a white robe and speaking of a new God who made meaning out of sorrow and suffering and who particularly liked the poor, the orphan, and the widow. The man said the latter two were poor in spirit, for having no earthly support, they could better trust in God. In fact, he said that this God so loved people that he had sent his only son to live, suffer and die like man. Nyabera had had to leave at that point to attend to her chores. In any case she had only listened with half an ear, but having a retentive mind, she had occasionally mulled over his words wondering what he might have meant" (92).

Later, after talking at length with one of the new converts, Nyabera realized that she was ready to accept *"the new religion of Kristo"*. With her mother's blessings, she made her way to a nearby Catholic mission, where she was accepted and given the Christian name of Maria. *"The ritual and symbolism of the Catholic church were balm to her wounded soul"* (101), and soon she managed to persuade her mother and her younger relatives to join her at the mission. In their life journey, Christianity really played a decisive role and enabled them to overcome all the restrictions of traditional patriarchal society and become *"the source"* for several generations of independent and open-minded Kenyans. All their descendants retained the same piety towards religion, however, to a different extent, which can be illustrated by an episode when Maria's nephew Peter, who became a priest, is about to be ordained as a bishop. The family members accept the news with equal delight but with a varied degree of piety. *"Soon you will be a cardinal and then you can choose the Pope or be Pope yourself,"* declared Tony with proprietary pride. […]

> His mother, mission-bred as she was and still a firm Catholic after all these years, was all for it. Mark had his doubts. It wasn't that he was not a good Catholic; it was just that he did not believe as fervently as his wife did, though he thought that religion on the whole was a good thing. Like many other quite decent people his religion had become a convenient and unquestioning habit. Although he had four sons, he would have been reluctant to give one up, especially a clever and determined fellow like Tony. Like so many he had a notion at the back of his mind, never quite given voice, that only those who were a bit daft could possibly want to be priests. Yet he liked and respected Father Peter and liked a good sermon as much as anyone else. Such are the contradictions of human nature" (173-4).

However, Father Peter's example of dedicating his life to people through God inspired one of the young women in the family - Vera, the daughter of that same Mark (Maria's son-in-law) for whom religion was only *"a convenient and unquestioning habit*". Unlike him, for his child and Maria's granddaughter Vera, an engineering student at the university, religion also became a real "*life jacket*" in one of the hardest moments of her life, after a breakup with her fiancé and harsh disappointment in her beloved but dissolute sister Becky. Upset and desperate, Vera pours her heart out to her best friend and room-mate Mary-Anne, who, in an attempt to console her, takes her to the religious ceremony of recollection, held *"for young single professional women or female university students"* by Opus Dei, which gives Vera a new understanding of the role of faith in her life and in the lives of other people. Impressed, she joins Opus Dei "as a non-marrying member" and decides "*to dedicate her life and her work to God, and there was no turning her back*" (249).

In light of the above description of Vera's personality and her religious devotion, a notable episode in the novel is the discussion about religion between Vera and her sister-in-law Wandia, the wife of her brother Aoro. In that exchange, Wandia, a medical doctor, sounds rather sceptical about religion, showing an almost atheistic stand, which Vera, although politely, tries to shatter.

> "As for God – hasn't he been completely forgotten if he ever existed?"
> "No," answered Vera with quiet conviction. "You can run away but you cannot forget. The memory of Him is deep there within you."
> "Oh!" Wandia looked into her subconscious, but no such memory stirred. "I can feel nothing."
> "Don't worry. There will be a day and a place" (262).

"The day" for Wandia comes soon – when she discovers that her son is seriously ill, and the dreadful disease of leukaemia is suspected. And then she finds out that fortunately *"it was not the most aggressive form, and there was even the possibility of a cure."* On hearing that Wandia abandoned her agnostic stance and went to church, a place whose doors she had not darkened since her wedding day […].

> 'God, I know you and I have not been great friends, but I have tried not to harm anyone, and I have served many others. This is my son who was born maimed but whom I love dearly. It is said you are loved. If that is true, then you should understand how much I love him. Please let my son be cured and from now onward, I shall regularly go to church and see to it that all the four children know You.' She could think of nothing else to say, but she stayed there kneeling for a very long time, head bowed before the tabernacle. Even she did not understand the significance of this act, for her knowledge of religion was almost non-existent (270-71).

Ogola's novel *Place of Destiny* (2005), the last one published during her lifetime, is marked by an even more personal attitude of the author to religion, since the life story of the character, a business lady Amor Lore, who desperately battles with cancer, considerably resembles that of the writer herself. Initially, Amor, a highly intelligent, self-conscious, and independent woman, displays a rather calm and detached attitude to religion.

> After a childhood filled with sermons of hell so graphic that one could feel the flames licking the hairs on one's skin, I find that I am now hardly moved by such reasons. Besides I have long since jettisoned my parents' faith – which I found simplistic and requiring constant fever-pitch emotionalism as a demonstration of being a true believer […] My father, an elder of the church and mindful of his position as head of the family, and his reputation of a righteous man, at first tried cajolement. But meeting stiff resistance from his puny teenage daughter, he finally called pastor Abraham Yoha Abishai and a mob of believers to pray over me. […] Soon, I was in high school as a boarder and at least my family didn't have to deal with my rebellion on a daily basis. However, this early experience was to determine my attitude towards religion for many years and I became more or less agnostic.
>
> My husband, on the other hand, being a convinced Catholic, has insisted on having the children baptized, catechized, and generally brought up Catholic. […] As for me, my creed has basically been – do whatever appears for the good, try to do no harm" (21-23).

However, "the day" comes for Amor as well – but alas, the reason is that one day she discovers that she is terminally ill. Facing an impending and near death, she inevitably puts to herself the questions that otherwise she may never have thought of.

> I looked at my body disintegration from within. My spirit – where is it? What of religion? Is it merely a grasping at straw – a denial of the bitter reality of the meaninglessness of life? What is truth? Is it merely relative or is it transcendental? Where does one turn to understanding? Why is religious sentiment the most pervasive reality and motive of almost all cultures? (51).

Unable to find the answers by herself, she turns to the person whom she always trusted more than anyone else – her beloved husband, a university professor of humanities and, as mentioned above, a devout Christian.

> I need to talk. What else at this point can be of as great an importance for me as this final departure, this going away? But from what to what and why? Do we die like animals, unknowing, unaware? Tell me my love – what have the historians noted, the philosophers taught, the great religions hoped? Please talk to me (53).

Amor's husband, who, as she herself confesses, *"more than I has been a believer, with well thought-out concepts of understanding being and its purpose"*, in his answer is *"burdened by the weight of neither wanting to cause pain, nor to give false, starry-eyed affirmations in the face of the finality of death"* (53). Thus, he says:

> Throughout known history, even the most primitive of humankind have pondered this subject. It appears that the collective human instinct has tended towards the concept of an afterlife. People have staked great fortunes and even life itself on the belief that after this life there is continuity in some state of being, whether understood as a circumscribed consciousness, a personal self-knowing spirit, or an actual physical existence in a different though material place. Of course, this may only be an extension of the powerful survival instinct that all living things appear to possess. And for us humans this world, with all its problems, is the only world we really know and feel safe in.

He was silent for a while. Then, abandoning History, Philosophy and Comparative Religion and his elegant exegesis, he says quite simply: *"But for me, the simple truth is that I cannot believe that after you die, I would never see you again."*

And this statement appears to me to be the quintessential, self-evident truth. *"The spirit is the receptacle of knowledge and love. And love and knowledge endure"* (53-54).

Amor's final revelation about the life of the spirit after physical death is confirmed further in the novel by Igana Mago, a young physician who works in the hospice for cancer patients – where Amore spent the last weeks of her life.

> There are few atheists in this place of destiny. I personally have never met any. I suppose that this is because by the time one reaches here, there is neither room nor time left for posturing of any kind. At the very least there are hopeful atheists - *"atheists"* hoping that somehow, they have been wrong and there is, after all, some continuation of the powerful experience of having lived. Such persons are, by then, rather more agnostic than atheist, atheism being the bleakest of creeds. Materialism, scientific or humanistic, is cold consolation when one is dying" (78).

As noted above, it is not surprising that Margaret Ogola, who was a practising Christian and an active member of Opus Dei, makes the religious experiences of her characters one of the prominent themes in her books. She convincingly demonstrates how the Christian religion transforms the lives of African women, giving them new horizons, perspectives and choices. The author also shows how her characters, alienated from spiritual values by the vicissitudes of modern life, find the way back to their spirituality – which, however, on many occasions happens in the gravest moments of their lives, when faith becomes their last resort. It is also notable that Ogola did not draw an absolutely ideal picture of the role of religion in Kenyan society. In her posthumously published novel *Mandate of the People* (2012) she commented on how religious rhetoric is used for political purposes. Still, religion in its true sense in her works remains the strengthening power, reinforcing the lives of many.

3.0 Pat Ngurukie

Pat Wambui Ngurukie is one of the most prolific Kenyan women authors, who started her writing career already in the 1980s, having authored several novels. Unlike Ogola, Ngurukie does not treat religious experiences as one of the central themes in her works; however, in some of her novels, this theme is given considerable attention. As an example, one can refer to the novel *The CEO* Wife, published in 2007. The novel narrates the story of Wanja Warui, an exemplary wife and a devout born-again Christian, who suddenly discovers the unfaithfulness of her husband, Fred. For Wanja, life has nearly ended – she cherished her marriage most of all in her life – and she is at a complete loss. Naturally, she seeks a solution in religion – first talking to the people who share her beliefs and convictions, such as her best friend Margaret, with whom they met when involved in the Christian Union rallies at the main campus.

> "How, just how could Fred do that? Are you sure it is not a hoax, a made-up story?"
> Margaret was shocked and confused. It took a long time before the two ladies calmed down and prayed together. Wanja felt a lot better after sharing and praying with her long time prayer partner and trusted friend, Margaret.
> "I always knew that in this world, God had given me physical shoulders to cry on and that's you. Without a doubt I knew I would count on you. Thanks Margaret."
> "That is what Sisters-in-Christ are for," Margaret replied. "The Bible encourages us to bear one another's burden, for that way, the burden is made lighter for the one carrying it," she paused. "It is my sincere prayer that all this is going to be solved amicably and Fred will come back and both of you will continue with life as usual" (19-20).

Similar support is given to Wanja by Margaret's husband Otieno, who, *"a civil engineer by profession, embraced Christianity as a little boy in primary school and he had never looked back"*. His last advice to Wanja before she left their home was to remember that those who trust in Jesus will not be put to shame. *"It may look like your world has crumbled but be of good cheer. Jesus is very near. He will never leave not forsake you. Trust Him to handle this situation his way and not your way"* (21).

At the same time, Fred, once *a "born again, Holy Spirit filled, and a Bible Study Coordinator in his university days"* (7), neglects his previous Christian convictions, namely, those concerning Christian marriage, and tries to force Wanja into admitting his young lover Njeri as Wanja's co-wife. Wanja's desperation grows, and that is when the divine force itself comes to her assistance.

At the end of the decisive conversation with her husband, when he contemptuously throws his wedding ring at her feet – "me and you *finito, kwisha kabisa*" (33) – she again rushes to her last resort: *"Lord Jesus, help me. Don't let me pass out please."*

"My child, do not be afraid. I am with you in joy and in pain. I will never leave or forsake you." The reassuring still voice spoke back to her. This gentle whisper in the depths of her soul brought only a fraction of relief, but it was enough to ease the pain and allow her to breathe (33).

This divine voice speaks to Wanja several times, for instance, when she visits Julie Njambi, another one of her friends, who advises her to share her difficulties with Pastor Anthony Onyango, a known preacher who helped many people. Conversations with him became a real salvation to Wanja. It was Pastor Onyango who convinced Wanja that her Christian duty was to try to put her broken marriage together. With this in mind, and God at heart, Wanja starts the necessary attempts – first of all, she tries to reason with Fred, which is in vain. Desperate with her failure, she locks herself in her bedroom.

> With head bowed, body convulsing in sobs, she buried her face in the bedspread and cried out to the only One who could make sense of her life.
>
> "Lord, I need a miracle… I am at the end of my rope."
>
> "My child, my grace is sufficient for you."
>
> The scripture passage came to mind again, and this time she remembered the rest of the verse: "for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Having cried to God, she could feel His presence. God was there with her. He saw how weak she was. And he knew what she needed… not just one miracle, but many of them. *"First, that Fred would stop his wayward lifestyle and return to her"* (119).

Meanwhile, Fred – with the "help" of his young lover Njeri – starts drowning his sore conscience in alcohol (with a family record of alcohol addiction), and in one of his rare moments of sobriety the miracle happens – he starts questioning himself, how he, a once devout Christian, caring husband and father, has turned into what he is now. Stabbed by the conscience, he decides to leave his lover and return to his wife – and, not knowing how to arrange it, calls Pastor Onyango and asks for his assistance. After a chain of vicissitudes (among them Fred's drunken escapades, ending with him sneaking, in Wanja's absence, into their bedroom and falling into a jagged sleep with Wanja's photo in their hands – in which state Wanja catches him when she comes back), Fred and Wanja reconcile, and their family life starts anew, with active support of Pastor Onyango and family psychologist Mbithi. However, Fred's former lover Njeri in her own turn grows desperate about Fred returning to his wife and tries to get Fred back, faking the story of her pregnancy. Fred, worried about Njeri, arranges a meeting with her for the final "having out" – and on his way to her house meets his death. Njeri's former lover Njogu, a gangster and a criminal leader, realizing that Njeri would not return to him, decides to take revenge on her by killing his rival. He ambushes Fred at Njeri's house and shoots at him several times with a silenced gun. Severely wounded, Fred is found by patrolling policemen and taken to Nairobi Hospital, where after a while he dies.

In our view, it would be the most appropriate to interpret Ngurukie's novel from the perspective of Christian religious views, since the novel clearly advocates most of the guiding Christian values, which are embodied in the novel's positive characters – Wanja and her friends, Pastor Onyango, family psychologist Mbithi and some others. Fred, Wanja's husband, presents a classic image of a "lost sheep" - once a devout Christian, he is seduced by the evil forces (apparently embodied in the novel by Njeri and Njogu), and not only succumbs to them but, moreover, being blinded by evil, cruelly mistreats his loving and devoted wife and abuses his once firm Christian convictions. Fred's death at the novel's end may be interpreted in two ways – as the revenge of the evil forces for his attempt to return to the right track, but also – as a divine punishment for

mistreating such an angel-like creature as Wanja and neglecting a considerable while the Christian faith. It is also notable that closely related to Fred's death is the value of repentance – before his death, he comes to conscience, and sufficient time is given to him by the divine powers to repent his sins and ask the Almighty for forgiveness.

> The Lord God Almighty is a God of redemption for anyone who repents and turns to him. And as he repented to the depth of his fading soul, a divine conversation was going on deep inside him even as he lay unconscious to the rest of the world.
> "I have summoned you by name," the words came loudly.
> "Yes, Lord," Fred answered in his spirit.

As his heartbeat slowed, as he drew his last breath, Fred was overwhelmed with a sense of deep sorrow, deep regret for all he had allowed himself to be, for all the times he had chosen to go his own way instead of following the Lord. And yet even at the heart of his sorrow, he could feel a ray of light begin to shine; spreading knowledge of love and peace that were deeper and more infinite than anything he had ever known.

> "You are mine. Fear not."
> "Oh Lord, God Almighty, forgive me. I am sorry for all what I have done. I've been a prodigal son. But now Lord I am coming home," he repented in his heart.
> "My child, I have redeemed you," the voice intoned.
> "Yes, my Father. Thank You."
> "You are mine and I will never leave nor forsake you."
>
> As Fred moved away from all he had known in this life, his sorrow combined with the deeper peace and love… love that would guide him into his Father's arms.
> His last thoughts were both simple and profound" (229-230)

Also obvious in the novel is the motif of heavenly reward – first of all for Wanja for her devotion, patience, sympathy and faithfulness to Christian values. During her undesired separation with Fred, she runs by chance at a function into Philip Maina, the old flame of her youth, whom she used to date before meeting Fred – but Maina went for studies abroad and made a successful career in Canada, deciding at one point to return to the land of his birth. Maina, himself a devote Christian, on learning about Wanja's plight, does everything to console her in a brotherly way. He soon realized that their old attraction is back, but tries his best to assist Wanja in restoring her marriage. Fred's demise opens a new way in their lives – after the mourning period finishes, they hope to contract a marriage – as put by Maina, *"let me be there for you and the children; give me a chance to be used by God to help bring joy and laughter in your lives"* (250-1). Wanja also decides to further her education for the benefit of other people, and to study counselling and Christian writing at a Christian university.

4.0 Rebecca Njau

An unusual example of depicting the relations between women characters and religious beliefs can be found in the novel *The Sacred Seed* (2003), written by a veteran Kenyan author Rebecca Njau, who became famous with her novels and plays already in the 1970s. To start with, the novel does not focus on Christianity – rather, the author puts into the centre a certain synthetic religion, based on African traditional notions of the supernatural.

The book tells the story of resistance of a village community, leading a peaceful and spiritual life in the sacred forest under the guidance of two courageous women – Mumbi, a forest prophetess, and her assistant Tesa, the main character of the novel, musician and artist. The community, supported by supernatural powers and obviously symbolizing tradition in its positive aspects, and the forces of good, is endangered by badly used and oppressive modernity, or the forces of evil, embodied in the novel by the figure of dictator President Chinusi, dwelling in the capital city of Raiboni (an anagram of Nairobi) in his fortified residence called The Castle. Chinusi and his henchmen (among them the local pastor, who was waging long-term war against Mumbi's community) want to get hold of the forest in order to demolish it and use the land for their own purposes. However, through their own courage and with the help of divine interference, the members of the community manage to overthrow the hateful dictator and give the people of the country (whose name is not specified in the book) hope for a brighter future.

> In the novel Njau extensively uses mythology, both traditional myths of her native people of Kikuyu and mythology-based images of her own creation. As noted by Lucy Maina,
> Njau exploits myths to envisage a moral society that is free from vices… She uses myths to criticise and to condemn immorality even in the highest institutions in society, namely the church and the state… As an advocate for moral living she utilizes myth to reward the virtuous and at the same time punish evil doers irrespective of their social status" (292-3).

Mythology and oral tradition abundantly provide the novel fabric with its specific features. On the level of plot structure, the novel also closely follows the mythological scheme of the quest. On the level of narrative mode, the third-person narrative is frequently and artfully interspersed with first-person told songs and folktales.

Supernatural powers manifest themselves in the novel indirectly; being frequently mentioned in myths and stories told by the author and the characters. "Physically" these powers take the shape of near-natural phenomena and appear only in crucial moments – mainly, to send severe warnings to the negative characters of the story and to inspire the good ones. For example, women, who are supporting Tesa and Mumbi in their struggle against the evil president, are given a sign confirming that the ancestral powers are with them – Mumbi gives to Tesa a castor seed, which she calls sacred and which, when planted, will give a fantastic crop that will symbolize the beginning of a new life for the people. Tesa plants the seed, and in an amazingly short time, the crop ripens – it is only one gourd, but of unusual size and decorated with beautiful natural (rather, supernatural) ornaments. Unfortunately, the gourd is stolen by the accomplice of evil forces, the pastor, and given as a present to the president himself. Ellen, the pastor's assistant, plants the seeds taken from the gourd – but only one seed grows, and it grows into a frighteningly looking ugly plant. Although the plant is covered with large gourds of a similar look, when Ellen cuts them, she finds that all the gourds are rotten inside and filled with worms. Moreover, on the next day, she finds that her legs are covered with blisters containing similar worms; no modern medicine can heal this strange disease, but when Ellen comes to Mumbi's forest, repents and disjoins from the forces of evil, Tesa washes Ellen's

legs with the water from the sacred pond, and the blisters disappear overnight. Meanwhile, the ugly plant, which remains in the yard, in the end, falls and ruins the pastor's house, and pthe astor also finds his feet covered with worm-filled blisters. The gourd, which was given by the pastor to president Chinusi, not only inflicts similar blisters on the president's body, but turns Chinusi's dreams into horrifying nightmares. Pastor repents his sins to the community's people just before his death and dies at least with hope; Chinusi does not repent – and dies painful and ignominious death, on the brink of insanity, behind the walls of his deserted Castle. Thus the divine forces, after series of warnings, spared the good and punished the evil ones.

Such examples of supernatural interference are multiple in the text; even in the ones quoted above it is more or less easy to discern the symbols with multiple and interrelated meanings – for example, the gourd is rather reminiscent of the one which is given to an obedient and a disobedient boy in many African tales; if used properly, it brings prosperity, if not – it inflicts death. At the same time, the gourd is also well reminiscent of a pumpkin from Okot P'Bitek's famous poem *Song of Lawino* – the pumpkin which shall not be uprooted and which symbolizes the traditional African culture, the culture of myths and divinity, after all. But what is even more notable is the fact that this mythological layer of the text is tightly interwoven in the novel with episodes set in recognizable modern African reality – people's strikes, political rallies, the author vividly describes receptions in the president's palace, his inspectional visits of the city streets, his plans to win the coming elections (which, he is afraid, Tesa might ruin), etc., etc. All this is done in a recognisable mode of political satire – and this is another layer, both stylistic and ideological, easily discernable in the book.

Along with that, the book appears to contain yet another layer – that of an ethical parable, prescribing the readers the pattern of behaviour in a situation similar to the described one. You will be supported by ancestral powers only if you rely on your own courage, says the writer – in the decisive moments of the novel President Chinusi orders sending bulldozers and even the police force in order to eliminate the forest and the community; however, the people, being sure that the divine powers are with them, form a live shield around the forest; their strength and the persuasive speeches of Tesa and Mumbi drive the machines and the policemen away. Because of their semi-divine origin and, mostly, because of their inner courage and faith in their cause the characters are able to enlist the support of supernatural forces, and in the end the forces of good prevail.

In light of the above, Njau's novel could essentially be deemed a mythological parable about evil forces being punished by the forces of good – only this parable is set in the political reality of modern Africa, and while the evil forces are pursuing *political* evil aims (dictatorial rule), the forces of good are determined to carry out *politically* positive program (overthrowing of the dictator and establishing the people's rule in the country). The leaders of both forces are also of semi-divine origin, which is indicated by their names and magical powers they possess. Chinusi bears the name of a man-eating sea spirit from the Swahili folklore (and the novel contains his biography confirming that Chinusi is in fact a descendant of this evil spirit); he is also an evil magician – at night he is able to turn into animals, such as chameleon and tortoise. Mumbi's name indicates her link with the legendary foremother of the Kikuyu people; she knows the language of animals, is helped by the divine bird Fina and can heal all diseases, both mental and physical. Tesa's name is derived from Swahili verb "-tesa" meaning "to torture" – and in fact, her life in the novel is rather torturous: in the city she was raped twice by Chinusi, who, in full accordance with his evil mythological origin, increases his strength and abilities when he rapes strong and talented women – that is exactly what makes Tesa leave the city and seek protection in Mumbi's forest; but even in the forest her trials do not end – her magical abilities, which she inherited from her foremothers (she is also the healer but, at the same time, can inflict deadly curse) do not allow her to marry the man she loves; thus Tesa has to sacrifice her private life for the benefit of her people.

In relation to the role of religion in Njau's novel, one question comes almost inevitably: does this book condemn Christian religion, embodied by the figure of the pastor, in favor of traditional religious beliefs? We suggest not – the figure of the pastor rather represents the abuse of religion for evil purposes; namely,

putting it to the service of the political regime (and politically oriented misuse of religious rhetoric is, as noted above, a well-known phenomenon in many societies, Kenya not being an exception). In fact, the pastor is shown in the novel as a rather civic person, who pretends to exercise his clerical duties of fighting the *"pagan"* forest community only for the purpose of pleasing Chinusi, in order to partake in the machinations of the dictator – and he is punished by the forces of good for betraying them. Njau, coming from a strong Christian background (her mother was an evangelist, and Njau herself worked with the National Council of Churches of Kenya, where she was the editor of the council's magazine *Target*), seems, as Ogola did, to reject totally the use of religion for any purposes except its true ones – to cleanse people's souls, to give them strength and moral orientations. In that sense, for Njau any religion that serves this primary purpose is worth following, be it ancient or modern. Njau rather clearly stated her position about religion in her interview with Tom Odhiambo in the journal *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, which she described using an example:

> Now that we are talking about the church, I worked with the church for fifteen years. I remember when I came to settle here, there were preachers around and they'd put on their music very, very loud so that we can hear them. And one day I was seated here writing and there was a church here that had started, and they would put the loudspeaker facing here. […] And when I went out and looked at the congregation, there were only four people in that *kachurch*. Do you know what I did? I took the speaker and turned it to face them. So, later they came here—a man and his wife—to talk to me. To tell me that am I not afraid of going to hell because what I did, God does not like. And you know what I told them? In the end of times when it comes and we are being shown where to go, there'll be a big wide road and a tiny one. The big wide road, maybe it will be pointed out to me where all those people who have been helping people, who have been living well, good ones, would be directed to. And you, pastor, and your wife, you'll be surprised because you'll be led to a road that leads to Jahannam, everlasting fire.
>
> I preached to them. I told them even in the olden times, our grandfathers, our fathers, they went to pray under the tree. Either Mugumo or whatever, and there they were quiet. They knew it was a holy place they were in. Here in your church, you go in people are shouting, laughing, talking, you do not even respect the house of God. I wanted them to learn about the old people of the past. They believed in god, whoever they thought was god, and they respected him. These ones here, you hear them shouting to the highest, they are not really interested in you; they want to be heard outside so that more and more people can go to their church. So, I feel sad about the church because it should be at the forefront of the struggle against suffering (23).

5.0 Conclusion

It can be concluded that in the novels discussed above, religion, be it Christianity, as in the novels by Ogola and Ngurukie, or a certain imaginary religion, based on African tradition, as in the novel by Njau, is presented as a symbol of all the positive forces that play a constructive role in the life of human beings and, on a wider scale, human societies, as opposed to the destructive powers, embodied by the recognizable characters of *"real"* scoundrels, created by Ogola and Ngurukie, or a symbolic villainous figure of Chinusi, whose human vices are *"enforced"* by evil magical powers. This contraposition takes a special meaning in women's literature, because the positive forces in the discussed novels, supported by religious values, are represented by main female characters, since women are the real and main constructive force in the life of any community, starting from the level of its physical creation. Social ailments that are condemned by the authors – tribalism,

sexism, patriarchy, gender discrimination, violence –up to now (and maybe now especially) are associated with the ideology of male dominance, embodied in the discussed texts by the negative characters of male origin. It should be noted that, that women authors do not intend to *"pay revenge"* on the opposite sex or to glorify women over men – they advocate constructive relationships between sexes, based on parity and equality. The discussed novels also feature positive male characters, which are really abundant in the novels by Ogola and Ngurukie, and are represented a bit more modestly in Njau's book; these characters assist the heroines tin overcoming life hardships, and most of them are religious people. The authors also create negative female characters (e.g., Becky in Ogola's first novel), who ignore or neglect values brought by religion – and are inevitably punished for this. And of course, the authors' role models that they offer to their readers are those personages (primarily female) for whom religion is not even *"a convenient and unquestioning habit"*, but a driving force which enables them to follow a straight road in life, to vanquish many snares and obstacles, and to inspire future generations.

References

Encyclopedia Britannica. "Opus Dei - Meaning, Beliefs, Members, & Controversy". https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opus-Dei. Retrieved 14 March 2023.

Maina, Lucy M. (2008). *Myths in Modern Literature: A Case Study of Rebecca Njau's Works.* A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Literature in the University of Nairobi.

Ngurukie, Pat Wambui. (2007). *The CEO's Wife.* Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

Njau, Rebeka. (2003). *The Sacred Seed*. Nairobi: Books Horizon.

Njau, Rebeka. (2021). "Remembering the past and reflecting on Kenya's present. Interview with Tom Odhiambo." *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde*, 58(1), pp. 20-24 https://letterkunde.africa/issue/view/886.

Ogola, Margaret. (1994). *The River and the Source.* Nairobi: Focus Books.

Ogola, Margaret. (2005). *Place of Destiny.* Nairobi: Paulines Publications.