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Women Engagement with Power and Authority in Re-writing East Africa

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Abstract

From the relative absence of serious women writing in the early mainstream East African literature in English, starting the last quarter of the twentieth century, women writing has flourished to gain deserved space in the East African literary canon. In the writing of Kenya's Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Uganda's Mary Karoro Okurut, and Tanzania's Elieshi Lema, literature in English by women has exponentially broadened, thematically and aesthetically, to adequately carry and represent the East African woman person's socio-historical and economic experiences as well as her private/public narratives. This literature perceives the woman in both the specific and broader historical and cultural realms of the East African society. It shows how she, with intellectual and emotional maturity, interrogates practices and institutions that are, in most cases, patriarchally constructed, in order to evolve a gender inclusive and all-encompassing human space. Three works by these authors – Macgoye's *The Present Moment* (1987), Okurut's *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), and Lema's *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (2001) – clearly stand out in their contribution to the mapping of unique paradigms in (re)defining the East African woman's experience in her relation and engagement with the public sphere. This article demonstrates how these writers, through the women figures in the texts, subvert, actively resist, and engage with power/authority and, in the process, manage to re-evaluate the dominant zeitgeist, oppositionally establishing the East African woman as an active and speaking subject in the ongoing re-imagining and re-writing of the East African post-colonies.

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Résumé

Partant de l'absence relative d'une écriture féminine sérieuse dans les premiers textes de la littérature anglaise dominante en Afrique de l'Est qui commence au dernier quart du XX^e siècle, la littérature d'expression féminine a proliféré pour se faire une place méritée dans le canon littéraire est-africain. Dans l'écriture de la kenyane Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, de l'ougandaise Mary Karooro Okurut et de la tanzanienne Elieshi Lema, la littérature féminine d'expression anglaise s'est beaucoup élargie, aux plans thématique et esthétique, pour porter et représenter dûment les expériences sociohistoriques et économiques de la femme est-africaine ainsi que ses récits privés/publics. Cette littérature perçoit la femme dans les domaines historiques et culturels, à la fois spécifiques et plus larges, de la société est-africaine. Elle montre comment, avec sa maturité intellectuelle et affective, elle interroge les pratiques et les institutions qui, dans la plupart des cas, sont construites de façon patriarcale, afin de développer un espace humain inclusiviste du genre et global. Trois ouvrages de ces auteurs – *The Present Moment* de Macgoye (1987), *The Invisible Weevil* d'Okurut (1998), et *Parched Earth: A Love Story* de Lema (2001) – se détachent clairement de par leur contribution à la cartographie de paradigmes uniques dans la (re)définition de l'expérience de la femme est-africaine dans sa relation et son engagement avec la sphère publique. Cet article montre comment ces auteurs, à travers les personnages féminins des textes, subvertissent, résistent activement, et discutent avec le pouvoir/l'autorité et, ce faisant, parviennent à réévaluer le *zeitgeist* (esprit de l'époque) dominant, en établissant oppositionnellement la femme est-africaine comme un sujet actif et parlant dans la ré-imagination et la réécriture en cours des postcolonies est-africaines.

Introduction: Women Re-writing East Africa

Beginning in 1966 with the publication by the Kenyan novelist and short-story writer, Grace Ogot, of the novel *Promised Land*, women's writing, especially in the novel mode, in East Africa has been developing steadily. Women writers have continuously been setting for themselves goals of representing the woman's experience in East Africa in unique ways. Women's voices of the late twentieth century to the present dynamically confront the intricate questions of patriarchy, politics, history, culture/tradition production and formulation, among others. They aim at (re)defining the East African woman in the exercise of power and authority in the society, and in the process see to her active participation in the public sphere.

Women's resistances through the mode of literature, both written and oral, date back to the colonial times in East Africa. Françoise Lionnet correctly captures the role of literature in resistances when she conceptualises that:

Literature, as a discursive practice that encodes and transmits as well as creates ideology, is a mediating force in society: it structures our sense of the world since narrative or stylistic conventions and plot resolutions serve to either sanction and perpetuate cultural myths, or to create new

mythologies that allow the writer and the reader to engage in constructive re-writing of their social contexts (Lionett in Nnaemeka 1997:205)

Thus, from early on in East African history, women engaged in various forms of resistance through the written and spoken word to seek to collapse what Ali Mazrui called 'the triple custodial role' of 'remaining trustee of fire, water and earth' (Mazrui 1990:190), a custodianship that ensures the woman's limited participation in the public space.

As labourers on the colonial plantations, for instance, women organised themselves and protested over socio-cultural and economic exploitation. 'Song of the Coffee Girls' in Kenya during the early twentieth century, for example, offers a representation of resistance to colonial power and other exploitative, Otherising societal institutions in colonial Kenya (Lihamba et al. 2007:33). Colonialism itself, of course, enhanced the marginalisation of the colonised women by 'reinforcing and extending some of the worst elements of African patriarchy' (Lihamba et al, *op. cit* :36).

Women in East Africa thus had to contest various marginalising forces springing from African traditions, colonialism, and the post-independence establishments. As Homi Bhabha has argued in the essay, 'Signs Taken for Wonders':

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of an other culture, as difference once perceived. It is the effect of *an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reinterpret them within the differential relations* of colonial power – hierarchy, normalisation, marginalisation, and so forth (Bhabha in Rivkin and Ryan 2004:1174, emphasis added).

Independence in the East African society fails to meaningfully alter the marginalisation of women; and their participation in independence struggle and nation-formation processes goes largely unmarked. The post-colonial East African state thus becomes a site of problematised power relations, as its socio-cultural and economic institutions rest on grounds that enhance the occlusion of women as equal partners to their men counterparts. To seek to centre themselves, to participate in the public sphere, therefore, East African women undertake the task, through literature, and especially the novel genre, of reconstructing, at times subverting, the narrow horizons of 'the acceptable' to disrupt the 'tradition' in order to enlarge it, make it inclusive, and reconstitute power into a positive-sum game.

Power, itself a complex concept, is understood in this paper as the condition in which some individuals or groups exercise domination over other individuals or groups. And, broadly, to possess power is to have the

ability to achieve whatever is desired regardless of any opposition (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004:115). Authority, on its part, is a form of power (other forms being persuasion, force, coercion, and manipulation) that inscribes in certain individuals rights to command and prescribe to dominated individuals or groups corresponding duties to obey.

However, the dominated individuals or groups are in perpetual search for forms of resistances, consciously and unconsciously, actively and passively. This is what is manifest in women writing in East Africa. Thomas Wartenburg in *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (1990) argues that power is always mediated by 'social alignments' which are dynamic. In this dynamism, there are continuous shifts as subordinate agents seek ways of challenging the actions of the dominant agents. Wartenburg holds 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 agents, the subordinate agent is always in the position of being able to challenge the aligned agents' complicity in her disempowerment' (Wartenburg 1990:173).

Hence, for the women characters of the texts under focus in this paper, life is a series of various forms of challenges to the power that seeks to peripherally define the woman, Otherise, domesticate and disempower her. The women in the three texts are not passive victims of oppression, but are involved in re-working power and subverting dehumanising centres of authority.

Women's writing in East Africa has been, to a large extent, a contestation of power and authority. However, engagement with power and authority in East African literature finds its most articulate spaces in *The Present Moment* (1987) by the Kenyan writer, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, *The Invisible Weevil* (1998) by the Ugandan, Mary Karoro Okurut, and *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (2001) by the Tanzanian, Elieshi Lema.

Kristeva has argued that 'it is in the aspiration towards artistic and, in particular, literary creation that women's desire for affirmation ... manifests itself' (Kristeva in Keohanne, Rosaldo and Gelpi 1982:50). The three authors under study can be seen in this Kristevian sense, so that in literature, and especially the novel genre, they find an appropriate realm for the 'identification with the potency of the imaginary' (ibid.). In the process, the texts, *The Present Moment*, *The Invisible Weevil* and *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (hereafter referred to as *Moment*, *Weevil*, and *Earth*), subvert and resist monolithic institutions like patriarchy and phalocentric thought systems that perpetually seek to marginally locate women.

Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema represent diversity and heterogeneity in the East African literary process in their socio-cultural and national backgrounds as well as literary philosophies. However, there is a strong conflation, thematically and aesthetically, in their works under focus in this paper. In these works, women conceptualise gender issues and their inscription into the national history and memory within larger historical and socio-cultural thought landscapes.

The authors and the key characters in these texts: the seven major women in *Moment*; Nkwanzi and Mama in *Weevil*; and Doreen and Foibe Seko in *Earth*, are interested in seeing their situations within more philosophically enduring perspectives that seek to transform East African institutions into gender-inclusive spaces. In these active engagements with their situations, historical and socio-cultural, they manage to alter the imagining of the East African woman's often patriarchal-limited space. And they are informed by a deeper epistemic understanding of the various forces and powers in operation in these societies. It is in this sense that these texts chart and reconfigure a novel path in the quest to understand the East African woman and her struggles towards revealing her fulfilled true self in the East African power politics and public sphere.

East African Women Re-engaging Power and Authority: Paradigms and Strategies

East African women writers operate within the paradigms of the dominated/peripherally defined groups, and they are thus actively engaged in the production of oppositional ideologies to counter the dominant ideologies that are patriarchally centred. They, as is manifest in *Moment*, *Weevil* and *Earth*, however, conceptualise power beyond simple oppression and constriction by men and other patriarchal institutions. Rather, they see its enactment in various societal interactions and socialisations. This view of power is in line with Michel Foucault's theorisation in *Power/Knowledge* (1980), in which he formulates that power 'must be analysed as something which circulates ... something which only functions in the form of a chain ... [it is] employed and exercised through a net-like organisation ... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application' (Foucault 1980:98).

There are various strategies employed to contest power and authority in East African society depicted in *Moment*, *Weevil* and *Earth*. These range from education and knowledge acquisition, narrative and art, armed resistances and struggles, women's organisations and communions/spaces, to work and profession. In and through these, women seek to find voices necessary and capable of confronting the highly patriarchal East African

societies. They also endeavour to dismantle what Zeleza has called the 'suffocating grip of masculinist nationalism' (Zeleza 2007:11), a nationalism often couched in patriarchal notions of nationhood and nation-building processes.

Loomba, in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005), notes 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). Loomba posits the problematic of the (postcolonial) nation in that it 'itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests' (ibid.). The post-colonial women's place in the post-colony is thus that of continuous imaginings of the various paradigms of liberation; a process of 're-writing indigenous histories, appropriating postcolonial symbols and mythologies, and amplifying, where possible, the voices of women themselves' (ibid.:191). In these texts register their active presence in the East African public sphere.

Conscious that it is in gaining knowledge as human beings that they can inculcate the wisdom necessary in their socio-cultural and economic fulfilment, the women in the three texts consider education and learning as sacred institutions and endeavour to utilise every opportunity available to participate in education/learning processes. This knowledge acquisition subsequently empowers them, bestows on them authority in engaging the society. Most importantly, biased assumptions about male/masculine, and female/feminine encompassed in binarisations in institutions of knowledge production as well as those of culture and tradition formulation such as the family, school, church, among others, are re-evaluated. Wairimu, Nkwanzu and Doreen Seko manage to lay bare the artificiality inherent in boys and education/girls and domesticity. And hence Nkwanzu and Doreen's professionalism in their fields, law and teaching respectively, assures them independence, economically and socially. To Wairimu (the most pragmatic character in *Moment*), it is the independence and wide horizon that 'education and learning' offer that are important in her being.

In these women's steadiness and single-mindedness in acquiring meaningful learning and education, they engage in the Hooksian philosophy of 'creat[ing] spaces for the re-discovery of unlimited potentials to transgress various socio-cultural boundaries' (Hooks 1994:110). And, in many ways, they manage to liberate themselves from phallogocentrically-defined institutions.

Oludhe Macgoye: Women's Private/Public Narratives in 'The Refuge'

In *Moment*, Macgoye depicts a community of women in 'The Refuge', a missionary-run home for the destitute elderly, but, metaphorically, a form of a re-imagined nation in which they (re)tell their different private stories from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Theirs are stories and sub-narratives which conflate into part of the historical narrative of the (post)colonial Kenyan nation. Kibera notes that in 'The Refuge', the women relate, recall their humble lives of privation and constant struggle in the lower reaches of a hierarchical, androcentric, and rapidly changing society' (Kibera 2000:157).

'The Refuge', however, is not in permanent stability, the various narratives aspire to certain authorial powers, ethnic, age-wise and other; a testimony to the dislocated and disrupted nature of the post-colonial narrative, dislocations and disruptions that in turn produce differentiating power(s) that should be resisted and engaged with, a task that the major women characters in the novel gradually undertake.

Through these women and their stories, we encounter their various resistances and subversions of power/authority, both in the public and private spheres. In engaging in these acts of resistance and subversion, they construct new idioms and paradigms of representation. The binaries in male/education and female/domesticity are fiercely contested in these narratives. The women in here have been given the voice, and in turn they have been repositioned into the realm of the speaking subjects. The text thus appropriately engages in 'recover[ing], reinscrib[ing], and reinvigorate[ing] the feminine as subject' (Decker 2004:108).

Marie Kruger captures the women's transformation into the speaking subjects vividly when she argues that as the text 'unfolds the biographies of several "ordinary women", it provides an additional dimension to the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism, endowing with a voice those who have previously been silenced and marginalised' (Kruger 1998:31).

In the seven major women characters of the novel, Wairimu, Rahel, Sophia, Mama Chungu, Priscila, Nekesa, and Bessie, and in their rendition of their various 'herstories' during both the colonial and independence Kenya, women are 'seen not as passive or barely visible entities, but as articulate and talented producers of art and knowledge, and as heroic makers of history' (Lihamba et al. 2007:2). In this sense, therefore, we register women's vital roles in participation in the independence struggles, their commitment to the ideals and philosophies of a liberated Kenya/East Africa, the post-independence collapse of these ideals, and the residual ramifications of the collapse on the

Kenyan and East African peoples, more so women. These women's pains of experience call into interrogation both the colonial and post-colonial Kenya's enaction of socio-political power and authority.

Wairimu, the most pragmatic of the women in *Moment*, is portrayed as an individual who revelled in the ability to learn (24); and this opens her up to the world beyond the narrow Kikuyu life in Central Kenya as she travels as a coffee girl (working on different coffee plantations), then to Nairobi as a hotel worker. The motivation to be a coffee girl, a worker, is so strong for the young Wairimu in colonial Kenya, '[a]t the end of the month you got some money, and so you were like a man and could do a lot of choosing for yourself' (18).

This ability to do 'choosing for yourself' is also an informing motif in Rahel's life as she refuses to be domesticated by being 'inherited' after her husband dies. Rahel notes, '[a]fter the town kind of life we lived in quarters I didn't much like the idea of being inherited by some old man in Uyoma' (38); and 'church friends were pleased that I had refused to be passed on to another man, and so they tried to teach me more and I got some comfort out of it' (39).

Sophia, on her part, seems to delight in the received world-view from the men in her early life: 'It was a good thing – *Ali said so, and therefore she must believe it*' (30, emphasis added). Her life was thus solely that lived in the home. To her, the public domain was for the men. However, later on in her life, and after the men have either died or 'disappeared', she learns that the private and the public are interrelated. Sophia has to take up responsibilities that define both the private and the public. She has to be the provider for her daughters. And though still detached from the political events around Africa, '[i]t was the beginning of 1957. People were talking again of freedom and equality. Sophia reserved her judgement' (106), she is conscious of them and knows that they impact on her life and that of her children. Thus her resolution about the life for her daughter, Hawa, is: "[l]et her read ...let her get ahead. Let her be rich, *and command the power* which stops men of their work and wages' (105, emphasis added).

Still, even in her 'domestic' work of embroidery and sewing, an occupation she relishes, she is involved in aspects of challenging authority, as a worker and an artist. Couze Venn has rightly argued of the 'central importance of the expressive arts ... as the imaginative space that is able to keep as a trace the memory of other ways of being, or transmit a history of resistance, or give a voice to those not allowed to speak in the public sphere' (Venn 2006:118).

However, it is Wairimu who fully succeeds in ingraining the concept of choosing for herself and shaping her life in her own ways. Kibera is right in her reading of Wairimu that '[t]he new world she set out to taste and master offer satisfactions for various yearnings: for independence, for participation in the anti-colonial struggle, for broadening of the mind, and for freedom to make choices and to learn about and explore her world' (Kibera 2000:166). Hence, the 'weight of experience' steeps Wairimu's knowledge of both the colonial and the post-colonial Kenyan nation.

To Wairimu, marriage becomes a disruption to the process of learning. She does not want to simply wither away as wife, mother and grandmother in the village. Thus as her younger sisters get married away, Wairimu, 'bearing no ill-will towards the sisters, nonetheless hugged to herself her new knowledge and her growing horizon' (95).

Presley in the essay, 'The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change' insightfully captures the Kikuyu women's participation in the Mau Mau land and freedom movement: 'Kikuyu women joined the nationalist associations to improve their economic status, to gain access to the political process, to further their education, and to abet the return of alienated land' (Presley 2003:299). Wairimu, in her narrative and other correlate sub-narratives, embodies this participation. She says, 'I was there at the Harry Thuku riots. We heard that there was a big meeting and that everyone was going, so of course I had to join in too. I learned early enough about terrible things' (45). She eventually comes to terms with the complex nature of the struggle for Kenya's political liberation, 'I understood that this was real fighting. I had seen our great hero and come close to where he was shut up in prison, and not even a great crowd of us could get him out. I learned something about power that day' (49).

Elkins in *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (2005), through women's own oral testimonies during the Emergency years in Kikuyu reserves, captures the brutalities and horrors visited on the women in colonial-created communal villages. However, despite the villagisation (a system of forced restriction in villages in order to contain any form of assistance to the Mau Mau freedom fighters), the women's struggle had to keep the spirit of liberation alive, through various subversive activities and strong resolves to not give up.

Despite their efforts, when independence comes, Wairimu and the other women participants in the struggle find themselves isolated and in great deprivation. On the coffee plantation, after a new African owner takes over, there is rejoicing by Wairimu and other workers. This, however, does not go on for long. Wairimu says, '[w]e found ourselves turned away, new clansmen brought in: they said we were too political, bargaining, counting

hours. Fighting for land and freedom we had not grudged the hours, or money either' (113). This is the predicament of these women. Post-colonial Kenya denies them spaces to celebrate their contribution in its formation. They, however, get this denied space in 'The Refuge', making their individual narratives become major stories of engagement with power/authority and the dominant post-colonial ideologies.

Of import is also the fact that the old women's lives in 'The Refuge' are contrasted with those of some younger women (trainee-nurses and community health workers). The younger women are made to see the opportunities open to them for acquiring knowledge in post-independent Kenya. As a result of this, their resistance is expected to be more sustained, in the manner Mohanty visions resistance as 'lying in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces' (Mohanty, quoted in Hooks 1994:22).

Moment manifests as an interceding text in the epistemic violence of the erasure of women in the East African historiography. It obviously belies Odhiambo's view that it is 'a historical sweep of twentieth-century Kenyan society' (2005:192). It provides a major space for East African women's active resistance and engagement with power/authority, and the correlate imagination and representation of the public domain.

'Weevil': Women's Entry into the Public Space as Equals

Uganda's history, more than that of any other East African country, has been intricately problematic in the various manifestations of Milton Obote's reductionist politics and latent authoritarianism; Idi Amin's outrageous, anomic militarism; various intervening weak caretaker regimes; Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) dispensation of 'no party democracy'; and the myriad brutal Northern rebellions. Such violent history scripts in blood the lives of a country's citizens, particularly women. Dangarembga captures the Ugandan women ordeals thus; '[t]heir hopes are not often made explicit, and there is a sense of desiring ... to stay alive in the impossible conditions of their worlds, where war is not an event, but a condition antithetical to love to be lived through, with all of its horrendous consequences for the women's lives' (Dangarembga 2006:viii).

It is this violent history, and the constant struggle by women to disrupt it, that Okurut explores in *Weevil*. In this text, we encounter intelligent women who revisit the patriarchal ideological dominant view that seeks to relegate and decentre them from the main narrative of the struggle. They become non-peripheral in the post-independence liberation struggle itself, by

participating in it ideationally and militarily as students, workers, mothers, etc. In this way, when the dictatorships are overturned, and a new alignment envisaged, their entry in it is as equals. In the struggle, they are experientially equipped to feel obliged to question masculine-informed excesses by men, an endeavour they manage well, because the liberation struggle itself interpellated the simple binarisation of masculine/feminine; domestic/public. It is in this involvement that they actively write 'their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life' (Tripp 2000:27).

In the two central women characters in the novel, Nkwanzi and Mama, Okurut's controlling vision is that of the liberated woman participating in rebuilding Uganda as a nation that would guarantee gender equality, among a whole spectrum of other freedoms (Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara 2006:258). Nkwanzi, Mama, and other women in the text understand the cenotaphic nature of political institutions in their 'saturat[ing] with highly problematic, often dangerous, ideals and practices of womanhood [and in which] concepts such as freedom, political power, and property are defined in terms of masculinity' (Brown 1998:12); but they are consciously aware that 'disadvantage may indeed be an excuse but not an intellectual [or philosophical] position' (Nochlin in Christensen 1999:617).

Nkwanzi, the heroine of the text, manages to grow up into a fulfilled human being intellectually and economically. Though she grows up in a fairly enlightened family that does not see the place of the girl and the woman being in the private realm of the kitchen/home ('Papa always insisted that both boys and girls had to do the same household chores ... because the world was changing' (Weevil:28-29), there are various patriarchal residuals that she is confronted with. Tingo, her brother, for instance, often assumes the air of superiority associated with masculinity, 'I am a senior one boy now, and everybody should hearken to my call,' (64). Like Godbless, brother to Doreen in *Earth*, Tingo conceives of himself going further and further away from home for higher things and callings in the public domain. He cannot envision Nkwanzi achieving this.

But perhaps nothing best exemplifies the desire to domesticate girls and women than the ordeal Nkwanzi goes through when a teacher is invited in their home to talk to them, both she and her brother Tingo, about their future and give them 'career guidance' in preparation for possible university enrolment. When Nkwanzi holds that she wants to concentrate on Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Literature, Geography and History, the teacher points out that she should choose subjects which will ensure she wins herself a big man for a husband, '... we have to think about your future. The future for

any good girl lies in a good marriage. You must be a good wife. Therefore, the subjects you offer should shape you, mould you into a good wife' (90).

The teacher then goes on to prescribe English Language, Home Economics and Divinity for her: English language, because the wife of a big man must be able to communicate with foreign visitors; Home Economics, because a good wife must be a good cook; and Divinity, because a good wife must be religious (91). On the contrary, Tingo is advised to concentrate on Commerce, Economics and Political Science (92), so that he can become a permanent secretary or a minister. But for her determination to want to 'use my knowledge to work', Nkwanzu subverts the prescription of the domesticating subjects, passes well to enrol for A-Levels and later on takes Law at the University.

The University years for Nkwanzu are also the years that the military dictator Idi Amin (referred to as Duduma in the novel) desecrates Uganda to its core, 'Duduma has brought a weevil that will take years and years to remove: the weevil of bribery and greed, of rape and inhumanity' (134). The University thus becomes a site of resistance. Nkwanzu and other women students are fully involved in the ensuing struggle to restore sanity in the Ugandan society.

Mama, the underground woman figure and organiser of the struggle among the Kampala elite, and a teacher by profession, emerges as a major strategist. Through her disguise as a crude spirits seller, she would get information from Amin's soldiers, information necessary in 'strategising for the underground movement to topple the regime' (143). The regime is subsequently toppled and a new dispensation envisaged but which fails to bring the desired change, hence the struggle has to continue till its overthrow. In the Kazi (Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army) regime, women like Nkwanzu and Mama rightfully occupy political positions alongside their men counterparts. Women's visibility in the public sphere is thus assured because of their active participation in the struggle.

The women in *Weevil* contest power/authority not to superficially possess it, but to restructure it and bestow it into institutions that are inclusively accessible to both men and women in the Ugandan society. Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara observe that 'Okurut does not find reason to bemoan the plight of women or to fantasise about their empowerment. She confidently brings out the authority that women actually possess and the power they wield, while emphasising that a lot still remains to be accomplished' (2006:260). It is in the above sense that this text manages to authoritatively interrogate the form(ula)tion of contemporary East Africa's power politics.

Re/Negotiating ‘Societal Labyrinth’: *Earth*’s Quest for Gender Inclusive Public Sphere

Lema’s *Earth* is arguably the first serious novel in English by a Tanzanian woman writer. It thus occupies a central space in that country’s literature in English. And since the novel is a genre that is ‘inherently anti-normative ... a maverick form, sceptical of all the authoritative claims to truth’ (Bakhtin, quoted in Eagleton 2005:7), Lema uses this mode of narrative to bring out the lives of ordinary women and their dynamic contestations of patriarchal societal arrangements in the Tanzanian society.

In this novel, the portrayal of men/women relationship is steeped in social and psychological maturity. As Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara comment, ‘[it] both celebrates and it is itself steeped in emotional intelligence ... [and is] a startlingly new realistic portrayal of the man/woman relationship in East Africa’ (2006:268). In *Earth*, there are to be found men who are senselessly fixated in culturally determined patriarchal residuals of power and authority; but there are also those that are in constant quest for new forms of enlightenment that seek to collapse retrogressive societal practices.

The text’s major women characters, Foibe Seko, Doreen Seko and Aunt Mai, are driven by a strong sense of survival into a newness (they are creatively and intelligently interpreting Aunt Mai’s insightful life philosophy that a woman is a ‘social orphan’, and incipient here is that as women they have to always be searching to ‘try to find our way towards that spot, that warm, keenly desired area of absolute comfort’ [*Earth*:4]). They endeavour to do this by methodically and deliberately seeking to re-engage the power in their various social spaces, both traditional and modern.

To escape oppressive, otherising societal processes, what is metaphorically defined as the ‘spider’s web’ in the novel, the women have to continuously evolve strategies of avoiding being trapped. This they do through outright rebellion against the patriarchal societal expectations, reformulating paradigms of woman’s life and existence, and so forth. Doreen, the heroine of the text, reflects:

The image of the spider comes to mind, the way it spins its web from the very inside of its stomach, for itself, and for trapping others into its power and into death, which is life for itself. Death for one, life for another. The spider spins its power web from the secretions of its stomach in order to survive ... (4)

The lives of these women thus constitute of a succession of contestations of the effects of the ‘spider’s web’.

Doreen’s mother, Foibe, from very early on in life makes up her mind to live as ‘the man’ of her house, provide for her children and herself, despite

the difficulty that this resolve involves. When it is found out that she had been having an affair with a man, Sebastian Shose, and is pregnant, her mother convenes a meeting of other women, and '[t]hey summoned Foibe and talked to her about how girls are supposed to live a chaste and Christian life until they are given to a husband in marriage' (112). They proceed to punish her the most severely and dehumanisingly, so that at the end, 'she carried sadness like a tarnished sheen underneath the youthfulness of her face' (113). And because the man responsible for her predicament is married and one who should not let 'any feeling for a woman surpass the obligation to follow the way of the Lord' (110), Foibe realises that she has to be keeper of herself. With stubborn dignity, she vows, 'My children will find laughter in my house' (134).

Foibe then, in a teleological rebelliousness, goes on to become 'the unusual one, the one who did not get married ... the spoilt one who gave her children her own name' (134). It is in this defiance that Foibe disrupts authority, and redefines power and its enactments within the society. Within this freedom, she negotiates her life in both the private and public domains on her own terms.

Doreen as the only girl child in her mother's household has to carry responsibilities, but again in the fact that the most important people she knows in her life are her mother and great aunt, Aunt Mai, she learns from them schemes of existence as women. She realises that often- times, as women, they are destitute in the society, but they resist being trapped in the societal labyrinth that entraps women in the traditional East African societies, the spider's web.

Aunt Mai's statement that 'a girl child is the laughter that brings tears' (84), emerges as prophetic when in her marriage to Martin Patrick, and becomes Mrs Patrick, Doreen discovers that because she cannot have a boy child, Patrick's love for her soon withers. She has to recourse back to the guiding ideas of her mother and great aunt, Aunt Mai. Hence, '[l]ooking at my mother's life as it passed before my eyes, I again recognised how she had refused to let the apathy home in her flesh like a disease. Mother had fought life with a keen love for life. *Fight life with life! Don't let them refuse you now!*' (168, emphasis in the original). This becomes a daemon that drives her on into the refusal to collapse, wither away as just another domestic object, a housewife. Through Aunt Mai, Doreen revisits and internalises the Socratic philosophy about the necessity to reflect about life carefully, '[s]it down until your buttocks touch the grass and think. Look around you' (164), Aunt Mai counsels her.

Indeed, these lessons free her from insidious ennui, and in Joseph, the painter and former diplomat, she revives her spirit to confront the public

spaces and, inside them, make value-laden meaning and purpose for her life. She also learns how to paint; transforming her inner feelings into public subjects to be interrogated, re-evaluated, and add something to the general philosophy of human existence. She, in the end, seems to be finding water for the ' parched earth ' that her being was increasingly becoming.

Doreen's circumstances are somewhat unique compared with that of the other two women; her mother and Aunt Mai. She is educated and is a teacher, and thus is able to provide for herself as a professional woman. Spaces for her entry into the public sphere are also more open, because as a teacher her 'opinion' has strength and voice. Still, her story and that of the two women is one in a way. As Aunt Mai had told Foibe on her expulsion from her father's home, '[a] woman becomes a social orphan just by being a woman' (120). It is the communion with these women and the internalisation of their philosophies of existence that makes Doreen to rediscover herself, strengthen her 'opinion'. Aunt Mai's philosophies may sound outdated, but they continue emerging with newer strengths and realities all the time Doreen revisits them. The independence of her mother, on the other hand, remains her guiding motif in life. As she notes:

By the time I grew up to recognise things, Mother was a woman who had reached a realisation that her strength, and the basis for her life and happiness, was in the value of her labour. She nurtured us to believe the same. She had learned also that a woman's sexual life must be hers, to own and control, utterly. So, the men she slept with were not, *could not*, be part of our life (121, emphasis in the original).

In their timeless search for expansion, these women reconstruct the meaning of womanhood, marriage, sexuality and masculine/feminine binary. They thus create a new mythos of engaging the patriarchal authority, and disrupting its unbearable excesses at their own volition and on their own terms. The text does not lend itself to essentialist feminist preoccupations, but rather maps women's self-determination to create useful spaces, both private and public, of communication and existence.

Conclusion: Re-writing the East African Postcolony

In *Moment*, *Weevil*, and *Earth*, Macgoye, Okurut and Lema meaningfully participate in the (re)examination of power/authority in the East African society, and seek to create a society in which no condition, woman's or man's, is undermined and underprivileged. In their close interrogation of the East African society, they manage to 'reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses [in order to] destroy false consciousness [and] take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought and true greatness are

challenges open to anyone, men or women' (Nochlin 1999:617). There is no doubt that the imagining of the institutions of marriage and family, politics, education, art, *inter alia*, is altered in the three texts.

Moment endeavours to centre the women in the processes of East African post-colony formation. Theirs, as is manifest in the seven women characters in 'The Refuge', may sound as simple narratives, but they carry the potency of thoroughly interrogating the 'grand narratives' of the nation that are couched in patriarchal discourses. The narratives by these women redefine colonialism, independence and its 'after/other' discourses. They also collapse the 'official history' that seems grounded in dangerous socio-political stereotypes capable of narrowly constructing the East African post-colony.

Weevil comes to a close thus: 'The sun bathed the land with its increasing warmth as The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs [Nkwanzu] entered her car, with Mama on the other side and Ihoreere [Nkwanzu's daughter] cushioned comfortably between them' (232). There is a degree of certainty that the Ugandan women have attained a visibility that is bound to last, despite the fact that the land still has many 'invisible weevils' (ibid.). And, in *Earth*, the heroine, Doreen Seko reawakens more forcefully to the inner voice that '*It is up to you. It is all up to you, Doreen ... to find your own path...*' (223, emphasis in the original). This path, like that of the others in *Moment* and *Weevil*, is a liberational one, it gives women ample space to speak, to think independently, and to create new mythos out of their situations.

In these three texts, the cryptic bases of canonical constructions of power and authority are made visible and then destabilised (Ashcroft et al. 2002:173). The women in the texts manage to admirably create 'woman space [in which] they can value difference and complexity [hence making it possible] for sisterhood based on political solidarity [to] emerge' (Hooks 1994: 110). We realise that it is partly in this creation of women's spaces to 'destabilise' the status quo that women manage to confront Otherising power enactments in the various East African post-colonial discourses; and, in the process, they re/write the East African post-colony.

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