



## Construction of Gender Identity in Two Kiswahili Short Stories

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the construction of gender identities in two Kiswahili short stories-*Wasia wa Baba* (A Father's Counsel) by A. Kipacha and *Usia wa Mama* (A Mother's Advice) by Fatima Salamah from the anthology *Kunani Marekani? na Hadithi Nyingine* edited by P.I. Iribemwangi. Gender criticism is the approach used and is an unprejudiced tool for the interrogation of how both female and male identities are constructed in literary works. It was found out that, in *Wasia wa Baba* positive cultural traits and religious teachings are able to construct positive self and gender identities of both male and female characters. In *Usia wa Mama* too, positive attitudes, education and cultural traits are tools with which young girls construct positive self and gender identities in spite of pressure from parents.

### Introduction

This paper has as its objective to critically analyze two short stories from the anthology *Kunani Marekani? na Hadithi Nyingine* (2011) edited by P.I. Iribemwangi. The analysis uses gender criticism as a tool for inquiring into how the writers of the two stories- Ahmad Kipacha's '*Wasia wa Baba*' (A Father's Counsel) and Fatima Salamah's '*Usia wa Mama*' (A Mother's Advice), map the sites in which the two genders- male and female- interact and how they strive to construct gender identity whether positively or negatively. At the same time, the analysis will interrogate whether the identities each one of the main characters in the two stories wishes to portray and construct is asserted or subverted and the reasons for this.

Gender criticism as a tool for literary evaluation and analysis originates in the broad ideology of feminism. Feminism itself is a child of the feminist movement whose main concerns were the political, social and economic empowerment of women (Moi, 1985). In essence, it is a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy.

Patriarchy is a pervasive ideology of culture with immeasurable power whose main concern is to dominate women socially, culturally, politically and economically. Feminists argue that patriarchy relegates women to 'otherness'-always subservient and transparent in a world of male dominance.

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It is clear that the two views or approaches are extreme in nature and provide no meeting point or coalescence. They suggest a permanent binarity of the social order in which one gender is in control or independent of the other. This analysis proposed that gender criticism enabled us interrogate how the male and female writers map and construct gender identity in the selected stories without undue prejudice or extremist views.

## Synopsis

Ahmad Kipacha's '*Wasia wa Baba*' is a father's advice to his daughters on the way to conduct themselves and avoid being entrapped in the otherwise glamorous and enchanting evils of the world. It is clear that the father's advice is guided by traditional African culture and Islamic ideology captured in the metaphors he continuously uses to drive home his message in vivid imagery. He says,

*...Nitakuwa msaliti wa amali  
iwapo sitatimiza ya Muumba  
wa wakati aliyonitabarukia  
katika huu mgongo wa dunia... (P.50)*

...I will have betrayed all my  
deeds and actions were I not  
to fulfill what the Creator of  
time has granted me in life  
on the surface of the earth...

It is clear the father wishes to prepare his daughters for adulthood and the duties and obligations commensurate with it in society. The daughters have already undergone both the cultural and religious rites of passage from the initiation marriage instructors (*...kutoka kwa makungwi na masomo zenu. P.51*). He exhorts them to be upright, not to be alienated from their culture and religious beliefs. He reiterates the fact that the Creator is All-Seeing, All-Knowing and would surely guide them well in life as long as they are ready and willing to follow wise counsel and shun peer pressure in their day-to-day interactions in society.

Fatima Salamah's '*Usia wa Mama*' is in epistolary form and is essentially a dialogue between a daughter (Furaha) and her mother (Chaurembo). The two have been living apart for eleven years. Furaha, the daughter, together with her siblings Nuhu and Musa, remain with their father Abdulhaq after their parents' divorce.

After the divorce, Chaurembo, the mother, begets two more children- Rukia, fathered by an American Marine and Yasini, from a Kuwaiti Arab. As the daughter (now in form four) and mother dialogue, Rukia is living with her father in the USA while Yasini is forcibly taken away from Chaurembo and taken to Kuwait by his father. It is apparent that Chaurembo holds her former husband Abdulhaq morally culpable for their separation insisting he had divorced her after believing in the many lies said about her including promiscuity. However, the fact that Abdulhaq remarries may point at the fact that his identity is incomplete without a wife.

Chaurembo's life after being divorced by Abdulhaq seems to be in the doldrums and this could be one reason she is so bitter and full of hatred towards her former husband, Abdulhaq. More importantly, Chaurembo is intent upon separating Abdulhaq and his children by poisoning Furaha against him. This is inferred from her continuously blaming him for all his actions when she was married to him and also after remarrying to Safina.

Safina loves and respects her step-children Furaha, Nuhu and Musa, all of whom reciprocate these feelings to their step-mother. According to Furaha, Abdulhaq's and Chaurembo's eldest child, she and her siblings have totally accepted Safina as she is not beautiful but caring; not from a noble family but humane and humble. Safina's character is an indication that a woman's self and gender identity are commensurate with her being able to carry out her obligations dutifully.

Chaurembo tries (without any success) to impress upon Furaha to assert an identity akin to her own. But Furaha's own demeanor, her upbringing, strengthen her enough to ward off her mother's 'incitement' to rebel against Abdulhaq and Safina and follow a path to immorality and self-destruction in the same manner she, Chaurembo, did. This is an indication of Furaha's strong will, sense of purpose and vision to be her own person, to chart a path to her personal identity, self-esteem and ultimately, gender identity. She is intent upon mustering strength and will to avoid being entrapped in a vicious cycle as suggested by her mother, Chaurembo.

## Discussion

In African societies (and indeed in human societies), parents are obliged to offer wise counsel and guidance to their children in life. Ahmad Kipacha's story is of a father fulfilling the age-old tradition. "*Wasia wa Baba*" uses metaphors and imagery to encapsulate a father's moral and religious obligation of guiding his daughters as to how they should conduct themselves, in order to construct a positive personal identity, self-esteem and ultimately, a sense of gender identity in life. We read,

*Seuze vifaranga hugubikwa  
ndani ya mbawa za wazazi wake  
iweje nami nishindwe kuwakinga  
wanangu na shuruba za dunia? (p.50)*

Befitting that chicks are covered  
in their mother's wings then how  
would it be that I fail to  
protect my children from the  
bitter experiences of life?

The rhetoric above, captured in metaphor and vivid imagery, summarizes the father's will to offer wise counsel and guidance to his daughters who are now young adults and are obliged to fulfill certain duties and obligations to themselves, their Creator and society. It is inferred that he has already had such a session with the sons-...*sitazungumza na kaka zenu...* (p.51) (...I will not talk to your brothers...). He rightly tells them that they cannot go against the natural order of things but rather,

they should strive to be humble in order for society to judge and treat them well and not harshly, and relegate them to 'otherness'. This is captured in his use of the word *habithi* (evil person) (p.51). And that his counsel is part and parcel of their culture and religious teachings in his use of these words,

*Mama yenu kaning'ata sikio kuwa  
mshakua nanyi ni watu mbele za  
watu na mmeshakabidhiwa vyungu  
na vyetezo. (p.51)*

Your mother has confided in me  
that you are now all grown up and  
are your own persons for you  
have already undergone both the  
cultural and religious rites.

The father insists that a positive gender identity cannot be cultivated or constructed by deviating from positive cultural customs and practices and religious teachings. The two should work together to strengthen a person by creating synergy and harmony within individuals; the wider community and society. Feminists like Millet (1977) argue that culture collaborates with patriarchy to oppress women and render them 'other' with no self-identity, no power, and no authority. However, it is apparent that by invoking positive cultural traits, a person imbues a sense of belonging since the values that give a community its identity, can greatly bolster a person's self-esteem, self-identity and ultimately, gender identity. Of course, outdated and disparaging customs and practices are detrimental to any given gender's identity. The father reiterates,

*Wanangu! Sina budi nishukuru  
mila za wazazi wangu waliotangulia  
njia ya mlango moja zitufunzazo (p.52)*

My children! I am obliged to  
thank my parents whose customs  
I follow as they did before  
They died.

That physical endowment and beauty is a gift from the Creator and not a reason to let the world use and abuse oneself, is a clear admonishment from the father to his daughters. At times, both men and women may use their natural beauty and endowment to continuously construct a negative identify for themselves. Most or almost all of these attributes would lead a person into such dehumanizing and immoral acts as promiscuity and prostitution which according to African tradition and Islamic teachings, imbue in a person a negative identity and ultimately makes a person alienated both to themselves and society.

The father wishes his daughters to be sensitive, to understand their culture, to shun what is detrimental to their personal development, their self-esteem and their gender identities. He impresses upon them to view the world as being a laboratory- how one

performs one's experiments, so will be the desired results. This metaphor encapsulates his vision for his daughters. He says,

*Dunia ni maabara ya  
adha na kadhia...* (p.53)

The world is a laboratory for  
all kinds of evil and atrocities..

Furthermore, he insists that *ukweli ni kambare mkavu aliyeonja jahanamu katu hapindiki* (p.53) (The world is a dried mud fish, hard as granite and cannot be bent). This image impresses upon the daughters that a person's identity is commensurate with one's effort and will to shape and construct it well or badly. Once a person imbues certain characteristics, it becomes almost impossible or too late to amend. In essence, the father says a person's character and identity are built or constructed gradually through that person's different stages of development in life- each stage building onto the other to create a whole human being either with a positive or negative identity. The father avers that this is the bitter truth, captured in the metaphor, *nitawalisha hirizi ya simba* (P.55) (I will feed you the lion's amulet).

The father is aware of his daughters' maturity and ability to decipher his encrypted message to them. He says,

*...Wanangu si wajinga na fumbo  
hufumbiwa wajinga; kitambo wao  
washang'amua niliyoyasema, kwamba  
tamu hugeuka chungu, kuna  
malimwengu ulimwenguni na subira,  
walinena wenye kunena, huvuta  
kheri!* (p. 55)

... My children are not stupid and  
puzzles are meant for fools; they  
have already understood whatever  
I have told them; that a sweet  
thing could become bitter;  
and the world is full of evil but patience, it  
has been said, leads to good.

To sum up, 'Wasia wa Baba' is a well-told story, using metaphors and imagery to instill a sense of purpose and awareness to one's daughters as they embrace adulthood. The writer insists that positive attributes of culture and religious teachings, can and are a sure ingredient for the construction of positive personal and gender identities in society.

Fatima Salamah's 'Usia wa Mama' is ironical in tone and captures a daughter's astute mind, sense of purpose, moral uprightness and a sensitivity to one's personal freedom, self and gender identities. This epistolary story is a dialogue between Furaha and her mother Chaurembo.

From the onset, Chaurembo goes out of her way to impress upon Furaha of her innocence in regard to Abdulhaq's (Furaha's father) reasons for divorcing her. It is

interesting that Chaurembo's advice to her daughter is both an avenue for trying to escape blame for her contribution in her failed marriage and a way of avenging the same by trying to influence her daughter to grow up to be like her. Her words to her daughter capture her intention vividly:

*Mwanangu, usithubutu kutiwa  
shemere na silsila za sijui  
utamaduni, sijui dini,  
sijui nini! Wewe ni mja  
huru-huru kama ndege  
angani! (p.121)*

My child, don't dare  
be fettered by the chains  
of tradition, religion or  
whatever! You are a free  
being-free like the birds  
in the air.

However, Furaha now a young adult in form four, is very aware of whatever it is that led to her parents divorcing. She does not wish to be dragged, together with her siblings Nuhu and Musa, into their parents' differences. She in no uncertain terms, enquires as to whether their mother cared for or loved them at all. It is informing that, despite his separating from his wife and mother to his children, Abdulhaq brought up the children to love and respect Chaurembo unconditionally. This is made clear in Furaha's words:

*...Babaetu katulea kwa kutuelekeza  
kukupa heshima kama mamaetu,  
na mtu uliyetubeba tumboni  
mwako... (p.122)*

...Our father brought us up  
and guided us to respect you  
as the person who carried us in  
your womb...

Furaha is in the process of learning her culture, her environment and people closest to her- her siblings Nuhu and Musa, her step-mother Sakina, her father and her biological mother Chaurembo. Chaurembo is however trying to endear herself to her daughter but unfortunately, by creating animosity and breathing fire and vitriol into Furaha's heart. Foremost, she paints a negative image of her former husband who she calls a *mnafik*i (hypocrite) and a *mzandiki* (evil person) (p.120). In essence, the mother seems intent upon avenging her being divorced by Abdulhaq (for defying her duties and obligations as specified by culture and religion), by having Furaha imbue characteristics of lewdity, promiscuity and egoism. Her words to Furaha attest to this,



*We malizia hiyo KCSE yako, nita-  
kuelekeza njia na namna za haraka  
za kujiopoa huu ulitima wa aibu  
na hizaya mlobandikizwa na  
huyu babaenu asiyefungua macho  
akaona dunia inavyoduru!* (p.126)

Just complete your KCSE, I will  
guide you as to quick ways  
to get yourself from the abject  
poverty and shame your father  
has subjected you to, a father  
who does not open his eyes  
to see how the world really is!

It is rather sad and ironical that Chaurembo wishes to see her daughter growing up to become a defiant and an alienated woman like herself. She wishes her to distance herself from the mores she has learnt from her culture, father and step-mother, to become 'other' like herself with little or no self-esteem, self-identity or gender identity.

It is apparent that Chaurembo, despite her being a mother of five children, is intent upon imbuing negative characteristics in her daughter. She is jealous and vindictive. She insults her former husband by calling him names like *kipofu* (blind man), *punguani* (crazy) (pp. 122-3). As to Sakina – Furaha's step-mother- she is a *jini* (genie), has legs that resemble *vichokonoa meno* (toothpicks), with *vishavu vimebonyea* (flabby cheeks), and will definitely give birth to a *katuni, jini, zimwi au nini?* (a cartoon, a genie, an ogre or what?). Coming from a mother who pretends to love and miss her children, this is the height of hypocrisy and is meant to create hatred, animosity and gender antagonism between Furaha, her siblings and their father on the one hand, the children and the step-mother Sakina on the other. All this is meant to derail Furaha's efforts at constructing a positive personal and gender identity.

It is clear Furaha is mature and willing to chart her own path in life in the way she counters her mother's insolence with words of wisdom. She tells her,

*Lau uzuri wa sura na umbo  
kingelikuwa kipimo cha utu  
na ubinadamu wetu, baadhi  
yetu tusingelizaliwa kuuona  
uso wa dunia.* (p.124)

Had it been a person's  
personal beauty and shape of the  
body parameters for gauging  
our personality and humanity,  
some of us would never have  
been born to see  
the face of the earth.

Whatever reason it was that separated Furaha's parents is clear testimony as to Chaurembo's escapades as confirmed by how she met her younger children's fathers. The two children are the products of promiscuity (Rukia) and desperation (Yasini). This unfortunately, is the treacherous path Chaurembo wishes to see her daughter Furaha tread. This is the personality and character a mother wishes to see her first born daughter cultivate and nurture. Having failed to construct a positive personal and gender identity for herself (for being deviant), Chaurembo seems intent upon avenging her current situation by trying to entice her daughter into following her evil footsteps.

The writer uses Furaha to show how proper upbringing, personal moral fortitude and education have immense power as the ingredients for cultivating and construction of a positive self and gender identity. Gender identities are not constructed in a vacuum or in isolation of a close interaction between the female and male genders; but rather, in an atmosphere or environment (site) in which tolerance, understanding, love, care, morals and a clear vision and mission reign supreme. These would enable an individual create and nurture self-esteem, self and gender identity, despite all odds.

Furaha sums up her refusal to 'relive' her mother's deviant and turbulent life in these words:

*...Lakini naomba nikuulize, una  
mfano upi wa kuigwa?...Lau  
watupenda kweli, basi dawa  
uwe mbali nasi mfano wa mbingu  
na ardhi!...Nakusihi mama, hadi  
utakapojitambua wewe nani, waelekea  
wapi, ishi katika ulimwengu wako  
ulioulilia, ukaupigania. Kama usia  
wako mama ni kutaka kuniteka  
na kunipulizia sumu ya shaka,  
tamaa na wasiwasi basi kuwa  
na hakika kama ya umauti si mimi. (p.129)*

...But I beg to ask, what do  
you have to be emulated?...  
If you really love us, then it  
would be best if you stayed far  
away from us like the heavens  
and earth!...I implore you  
mother, till you find out who  
you are, where you are headed,  
live your own life that you so  
craved and fought to have.  
If your advice to me mother  
is to try and entice me by  
poisoning my mind with  
doubt, greed and uncertainty,  
then sure as death, that person will not be me.



## Conclusion

This paper analyzed the construction of gender identity in Ahmad Kipacha's 'Wasia wa Baba' and Fatima Salama's 'Usia wa Mama' from the anthology *Kunani Marekani? na Hadithi Nyingine* (2011) edited by P.I. Iribemwangi. Gender criticism was used to find out how the main female and male characters, endeavour to construct both personal and gender identities.

*Wasia wa Baba* constructs female self and gender identity by insisting that positive cultural practice combined with religious teachings are sure ingredients with which young maidens can construct their identities. The father who authors the letter to his daughters, insists that he himself has been able to construct a positive self and gender identity in the same manner. This is because both his culture and religion have been successful when put to the test.

The study found out that in *Usia wa Mama*, Chaurembo was divorced by her husband and father to her three children Furaha, Nuhu and Musa because she refused to conform to cultural and religious norms. Her former husband marries Sakina together with whom they bring up the three children, imbuing them with love, care, tenderness and inculcating in them morals and a sense of belonging.

Chaurembo is intent upon imparting the same negative values to her daughter as a means of avenging her for the husband divorcing her. She criticizes Furaha's father, his wife Sakina and the upbringing he gives his children Furaha, Nuhu and Musa. She tries her best to entice Furaha into promiscuity to no avail.

Furaha is an astute, sensitive young woman with values; she respects her father and step-mother, learns her culture, and has a firm belief in her faith. These are what strengthen her resolve to remain chaste, obedient while cultivating and nurturing a positive self and gender identity. Whatever identity Chaurembo desired her daughter to assert is subverted. Whereas Furaha's wish and will to construct a positive identity for herself is asserted.

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