

FEMALE CHARACTERS IN KENYAN WOMEN’S SHORT STORY: FROM SUBMISSION TO SELF-RELIANCE

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Abstract The article analyses the depiction of new types of female characters in the stories by Kenyan female writers published from 2003 to 2012 in literary almanacs *Kwani?* and *Storymoja*. The author traces the evolution of female characters from the “victim” type, which appeared in Kenyan women’s literature already in the 1960s, to its modern alternatives – women advocating their rights in all spheres of private and public life.

Key words: Kenya, women’s literature, short story, literary character, *Kwani?*, *Storymoja*

1. Introduction

This study, as may be guessed by its title, deals with the developments in the genre of short story, written by Kenyan women authors, in the first two decades of the current century. The main task of the study is to trace the advancement of the female characters in Kenyan women-written short stories in the specified period of time as compared to the previous decades, from 1960s to 1990s. For this purpose, we decided to limit our research to the short stories by women writers published in *Kwani?* and *Storymoja* – one of the most reputable literary projects on the current Kenyan literary scene. The stories used in this article are written in English (which is almost the sole language of writing

in both *Kwani?* and *Storymoja* – exceptions are really few) and represent mostly the new generation of female writers, who entered the literary scene after the year 2000.

2. Female characters in earlier short stories by Kenyan female writers: the type of a victim

Of course, any survey of Kenyan women's short story should start with Grace Ogot, whom J. Roger Kurtz deems as “the founder of Kenyan woman's literature” (Kurtz 1998: 134). Her contribution into Kenyan writing as such and Kenyan short story in particular can hardly be underestimated: she was the one who initiated and, in the long run, outlined the themes and characters pertinent in Kenyan women's literature until the present time.

In her two collections of short stories, *Land without thunder* (1968) and *The other woman* (1976), absolute majority of the stories are dealing with women's problems and feature leading female characters. And, in our view, the main (if not the only) type of the female character featured in these stories may be deemed as the type of a victim. They are not just submissive – in many (if not most) cases they are submitted by force, or, in other words, victimised. At that, it does not matter which background they have – victimisation knows no differences, it penetrates everywhere, it happens in all the walks of life, it takes multiple and different forms, and it comes from one and the same source – male-created and male-dominated society. Women in Grace Ogot's stories are victimized both by age-old (and, again, man-created) customs of pre-colonial times and by the misused innovations of modern life. One of the most picturesque examples can be found in the short story *Elizabeth* (Ogot 1968) – one of Ogot's most famous works, widely translated, anthologised and studied (see, e.g., Mwanzi 1995). In this renowned short story, a secretary named Elizabeth is raped by her boss Jimbo and becomes pregnant. Out of fear of being ostracised by her family, her workmates and society on the whole (the only person who seems to support her is her last employer nun Hellena), she decides to

commit suicide. However, she makes a desperate attempt of revenge by committing suicide in Jimbo's house, where she manages to sneak in when the owners are absent.

In the subsequent decades – late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s – Kenyan short story writing was characterised with predominance of male authors (see Rinkanya 2010). Indeed, very few collections of short stories by Kenyan female writers were published in this period – we can name only such titles as *The hypocrite and other stories* by Rebecca Njau (1977) and *Stories by the fireside* by Jedida Mandara (1985); both books, which, to our knowledge, mainly feature adaptations of folk stories, has now become collectors' items. *Passbook number F47927* by Muthoni Likimani (1985) contains, as put in the cover note, "nine fictionalised accounts, based on her own observations, as well as those of family and friends" of women's participation in Mau Mau movement, thus belonging rather to a genre of fictionalised biography. The late 1990s also witnessed a debut and, unfortunately, the only collection by a young and talented writer Sheila Nhemi – *Midnight blossom* (1999), containing nine stories, mainly of moralistic message, with very few leading female characters, mainly also representing woman (girl) as a victim; an illustrative example may be found in the story *From home to approved school*, whose heroine, a schoolgirl, slandered by evil-minded stepmother, is ousted from the house by her dad, joins the gang of street crooks, is arrested and is sent to a government correction school, where, according to her, she feels still better than at her paternal house.

The victim type prevails in two other notable collections – *Our secret lives: An anthology of poems and short stories by Kenyan women writers* (1990) and *They have destroyed the temple* (1992). The two anthologies contain a total of twenty four short stories and nineteen poems, dealing with women's experience in Kenya. Just a few examples could be quoted – in *Mother of daughters* by Pat Ngurukie a man gouged out his wife's eyes using a knife; Wanjiru's husband in Mary Ngechu's *The other woman* brutalizes his wife for twenty years and then leaves her for a new flame; in *Milestones to marriage* by Grace

Ombara the father rapes his daughter when she is only twelve years old; in Elizabeth Gatibaru's *For my mother's sake* the same offence is inflicted upon the sixteen-year-old girl by her drunk stepfather – and almost every story in these collections depict various atrocities against women. John Kuria in his seminal analysis of the two anthologies confirms that the women authors in these anthologies “articulate a discourse of victim-hood in which men are the aggressors and women are the victims. While acknowledging that there are instances when men are equally victims of socialization, the women blame men for their woes and distance themselves from practices that are oppressive to their kind. This approach is evident in the editors' cataloguing of the themes in the anthologies. They list them as rape, battering, disinheritance, denial of love, marital problems, general harassment and women's domestication. All these imply that the stories are dealing with evils that men do to women” (Kuria 2001: 101).

New generation of female short story writers emerged in the first decade of this century. This development we tend to consider as a part of generally changing “national discourse” towards women – meaning that the slogans of women's empowerment and emancipation became the order of the day in the 21st century Kenya. On this wave, several projects came to life whose purpose, among others, is to give a new literary rostrum to women writers, the most notable being those of Kwani – “a journal founded by some of Kenya's most exciting new writers, and published by Kwani Trust” (www.kwani.org) – and Storymoja, “a venture recently formed by a collective of five writers who are committed to publishing contemporary East African writing of world-class standard” (www.storymoja.com).¹ By the very format

¹ “Founded in 2003 by the Kenyan writer Binyawanga Wainaina, Kwani Trust [...] profited from the vision of its founder [...] Associated with the success of the literary collective – and especially the international reputation of its journal *Kwani?* – are artists such as the late Wahome Mutahi, Judy Kibinge, Yvonne Owuor, Parselelo Kantai, and Muthoni Garland, who, in 2007, established Storymoja, a further publishing venture for Kenyan creative and non-creative writing” (Kruger 2011: 7).

of these projects' publications (Kwani's periodicals and Storymoja's website) short story occupies the leading place in their literary production, and the names of female authors of these stories surpass, surely by number and frequently by quality, all the female short story production of the previous decades. Most of these stories, like those of Grace Ogot, are devoted to women-related problems and feature a leading female character. What type (or types) of character is drawn and prevails in the short stories by Kenyan women writers published quarter of a century after Ogot? Is she still a victim – or the changes in the society provided, at least in a certain way, the evolution of the “good old” victim type?

3. Victim type in modern short stories

In order to find that out, we perused several dozens of short stories by women writers published by both projects since their founding days up to now.² Our first finding was: yes, the “good old” victim type is still there, since all the social factors which stipulated its emergence are still very much alive in Kenyan society. In many of these stories, women characters are again victimised by any male person possible. A secretary is humiliated by unscrupulous boss (*The mayor* by Muhonjiwa Khaminwa – Kwani 1), a woman, trying to release her husband unjustly imprisoned after the coup attempt, is cheated and robbed by a cunning policeman (*1982* by Andia Kisia – Kwani 2); even the pastor, whose duty is to save souls, does not hesitate from using his female parishioners bodies and impregnates a village woman (*On a fine sunday morning* by Mercy Ojwang'). A young woman in Lilian Kithia's *I didn't do it* is constantly cheated by males around her – boyfriends, neighbours, and even the local beggar: “May be it was the sight of the stale yellowing *ugali* (‘maize porridge’ – A.R.) on

² This is the reason why we do not group the stories “by project” or “by author”, but rather by the type of character found in both Kwani and Storymoja “female” texts. Also, it should be noted that the stories with no indicated source after the title, mentioned in the text, are taken from Storymoja website.

the brown, once white saucer on his table [...] Mercy is how I got myself there in the first place. I shouldn't have fallen for that story. "Ati baba yuko hospitali" ('As if father is in hospital' – A.R.) and barely two days later the guy was dishing out free drinks at the local drinking hole". Fellow women also may become victimisers – petty business of a roadside chips seller, loved by entire quarter in Mombasa (*Mama Viazi* by Amina Hassan) is destroyed by a jealous woman neighbour.

Violence, in different forms, also permeates the lives of these women. Rape is the usual experience, frequently accompanied with murder – the woman in *Lucky number 7* by Christine Yienya is a "victim on all sides": a prostitute, bound to sell her body to earn a living (another "archetypal" construct of a male-dominated social order), she is raped, robbed and killed by two crooks. Rape may occur everywhere – the life of a young heroine in *Tender, she calls* by Janet Mbugua is destroyed after an attempted rape on the day of her school graduation concert. Rape brings death in different ways – a young girl in *Nobody likes survivors* by Brenda Rhoda commits suicide after being repeatedly raped by her father (who tried to "justify" his doings by rendering his childhood story, also of a victimised woman – his mother used to beat her son senseless, trying to vent her husband's adulteries, which later led her to suicide).

In general, family life, as it was in Grace Ogot's stories, hardly brings any relief to women's life – contrary to that, familial milieu creates new fields for victimization. Male partners are, at best, oppressive – a village woman in *King of Khoja* by Esther Kariuki disowns her son under the pressure of her new husband; at worst, they are murderous – a jealous policeman guns down his wife in Muthoni Garland's *Eating*; another husband, a villager (*The mysterious visitor* by Beth Nduta), kills his wife and kid with a knife in a town's shopping mall. As put by the girl narrator, "I later came to learn that the woman and her son had run away from home, after years and years of brutality from the man she married. She had sought refuge in our village – miles away from hers – but the adamant man came after her."

Even if not faced with such extremes, women mostly have to cope with unworthy partners. A married woman in Beatrice Wainaina's *Coming home*, in order to preserve her family, has to stay with her husband, who has ten children from different women, and to cope with his current adulteries, although it leads to her growing moral distress. Social background does not matter – a rich lady in *Madam* by Susan Karimi equally suffers from her womanizing husband. A moving account of a family life episode, narrated by a six-months (!) girl (*The scary bed* by Mercy Barasa) depicts a scandal caused by her mother's discovery of a sexual relationship between her husband and their house girl. Moreover, these women are frequently bound to their unworthy partners by chains of love – despite everything, they still adore these deceitful and ungrateful creatures. An extreme case of such an attitude is depicted in *Kath* by Linda Kimaru, where the heroine is unable to part with her cheating and womanizing husband even after his death – she spends every evening in a fancy restaurant, attracts many men, but always leaves alone, carrying with her the newspaper with her late husband's obituary. However, few of these women, after years of trials and tribulations, manage to find salvation – Lucy in *Withering heights* by Miriam Jerotich, tortured by her husband's neglect and her own feeling of guilt (she is unable to conceive a son, and her husband devotes most of his time to his other family, where he has two male children), and inspired by the example of her sister (who, being childless, leaves with her husband happily), decides to end her marriage and to start life anew.

However, such hopeful solutions are not typical for the heroines; many of them try to change their lives – or at least to avenge them – by the methods which hardly appear promising. Anita in *Visitation* by Sharon Ogugu falls victim to the village superstitions, and the agent of victimisation is, again, her husband: learning that his wife is pregnant with twins (traditionally a bad omen), he forces Anita to drink a poisonous concoction, which kills the twins in the mother's womb, and then refuses to bring Anita, barely alive, to the hospital. The woman survives, and, after poisoning her husband to death with the remains

of the same mixture, flees the village. An even more threatening situation is depicted in *Ex-boyfriend's skeleton* by Jacqueline Kamau: the heroine, having lost her unborn child to AIDS, decides to avenge the child's and her own life by contaminating thirteen males with the deadly disease, and afterwards kill herself. "I seat in this table to defend my rights, my justice, and my ego. To fight, for my lost baby. By its positive status received from mother and father, it had a right to be on this table. Apart from my baby, I have no regrets. I am going out to look for my last man." Similar situation is described in *The confession* by Wanda Ngata: a woman publicly confesses in the church that she is a prostitute, is HIV-positive and, on the brink of death, wishes to repent – which causes commotion among the male part of the congregation, for all the men, including the pastor, have slept with her. Muthoni Garland in *Odour of fate* (Kwani 1) draws an allegorical picture of a woman who drives men crazy with a strange, almost supernatural 'odour', emanating from her body, which ruins the lives of lustful menfolk attracted to her.

Finally, some authors tend to leave at least a ray of hope for real 'legal' survival of women – and this time, it does not come solely from men's hands. In *Daybreak* by Cathy Wachiyaya two teenage Maasai girls are saved from genital mutilation and ensuing forced marriage by fellow Maasai women (and a European) from an NGO named "Fight for the Girl child". However, these 'hopeful' stories, as it can be seen from the above, appear to be really few compared to numerous accounts of female suffering – the hope for deliverance usually lies in the hands of women themselves, but, as shown in the above survey, the society of today is rather reluctant to allow its female victims any control of their own living.

In modern stories by Kenyan women writers one can find a related type of female character – a woman who openly and consciously accepts the rules of male-dominated world, but tries to use them for her own benefit; this benefit usually remains solely hers, hardly spreading to any other people (we will conditionally name it "type 2", or a "modern parasitic woman"). In fact, we tend to also qualify this type as a victim –

for this woman does not try to change anything in the society around her, but instead to adjust to it, frequently at a rather (or very) dear price. This type may already be found in some stories by Grace Ogot – such as Abura in *The middle door*, who easily goes to compromise even with otherwise hated male chauvinists (in the face of the ticket examiner), if it guarantees her a profit; or a teacher's wife in *The honourable minister*, who is ready to offer her body to a government official in exchange for a house loan, which for her symbolises the life of luxury. In modern stories, however, this type is found more abundantly, and in a wider variety.

Among the stories introducing this type one may mention *A Kenyan work place* by Hakaasa Renja (Kwani 4), a satirical description of a modern company in Nairobi, where a prominent place is taken by a young lady with an allegorical nickname Mrs. Paka (cat) – cunning and manipulative and exploitative, who does not hesitate to exploit her fellow woman clerk Mrs. Ndovu (elephant), meanwhile doing everything possible to win the favours of her male boss. Other stories show the gradual growth of this type – from a teenage schoolgirl, the narrator in *Her friend's father* by Pauline Odhiambo, who for material benefits sleeps with the father of her school friend, and Agiza in *Disguise* by Nandeché Okoti, who at fifteen is fully indulging in alcohol and has several abortions from “sugar daddies”, to 26-year-old Shiru in Kingwa Kamencu's *The jagged edges*, who in order to punish the womanizing nature of her boyfriend Ivan decides simply to imitate his attitudes and agrees to make a pleasant trip to Zanzibar with Ivan's friend, also a notorious philanderer. One of the highest expressions of this “parasitic type” in these stories are mature ladies whose life's ideal is to marry a white man. These women easily sever their former family and other ties; Ma in Claudette Oduor's *The god of sweltering mangoes*, after getting married to a German, light-heartedly leaves behind her sister Nashikawa, with whom she ‘re-unites’ for three days only at Nashikawa's funeral, and her illegitimate half-blooded daughter Marvel, to whom she even does not disclose her motherhood. Mother of the girl narrator in *Dear Mrs God* by Muthony wa Gatumo (Kwani 2) acts even easier –

after marrying an elderly American, at whose house in Nairobi she previously worked as a house girl, she flees with him to the US, leaving her little daughter in Nairobi slum at the mercy of charitable neighbours.

Some stories also feature a “sub-type” of such “modern parasitic woman” – a young girl who sees everything positive in the Western style of life, and, in order to get “westernized”, is ready to go out of her way (and, among other things, even to abandon her African background). This type is introduced briefly in *Kiririkano* by Wambui wa Wanjiru (Kwani 4), in the face of Wachu, the cousin of Soni, the main character. Wachu is absolutely sure that all the success that Soni has in life came through Soni's studies abroad and the fact that “your mother has been to Europe” (while, as we would see below, all the Soni's and her mother's achievements came to them solely through their efforts and hard work); she is envious of her friend Cindy, who is dating a German businessman, and is convinced that it is the only way to follow in life. An interesting version of this girl character is found in Nyambura Kiarie's *In the beginning there was eve*: Desta, a girl of a mixed Ethiopian-Kenyan origin, whom her Amharic father wants to bring up as a “nice Orthodox Ethiopian girl”, contrary to his wishes does her best to indulge in the Nairobi nightlife of clubbing and juicy funs; however, her long-awaited meeting with a popular singer at a club party is not going to serve her any good – as the singer confesses, “She does not need to know me anymore than I need to know her. No, what I am going to do to her tonight has no need for that.”

In the course of their “career”, these “female parasites” rather logically advert to crime. Regina in *If who you are is what you have* by Naomi Kamau kills the company owner to grab his money. A rich woman hires a killer to eliminate her husband, so as she inherits his riches (*The chameleon* by Christine Yienya). A coastal dweller named Ma, striving for “life of ease”, kidnaps children from poor families and, with the help of her accomplice Jumba, sells them to white tourists for sexual use. A topmost expression of this “parasitic type” is found in Brenda Mukami Kunga's *All in the family* (Kwani 6), where this

character type is presented as the product of high-level state politics. The heroine, a daughter of high-rank politician, is absolutely aware of all her father's dirty deeds – being part and parcel of Goldenberg and Anglo-leasing affairs, to name a few – but absolutely approves of that: “For all his philandering, stealing and whatever the rest of the seven deadly sins are, Dad is a pretty decent father. He's paid my way into some of the best schools in Nairobi, prevented three expulsions through generous donations to the schools' development funds, not to mention uncountable stints in rehab, halfway houses and hours of psychotherapy”. Along with this, the young lady has a history of abortions, hates her mother whose exact replica she in fact is (“The day she delivered she had her tubes tied and has ignored me ever since his driver brought me home that night” – 123), and, having learned that her father's name is found in “Ocampo's list”, and that his close friend, an MP, is accused of raping 12-year-old girl, perceives that as unpleasant, but passing episodes. The author convincingly shows how the criminal-type mind is bred by the very atmosphere of high political circles, leaving the reader with a question – would the heroine manage to lead this ‘life of ease’ as long as she herself wants.³

However, some stories featuring that type of a female character seriously warn the readers about the likely and dire consequences of such ‘choices’. This may be a moral devastation – Nakaya, the heroine of Susan Munywoki's *Cold feet on a sunny day*, in the church on the day of her marriage revives in her mind the list of the lost opportunities – in pursuit of riches she gave up the singing career, declined a scholarship in Malaysia; and now, at the side of her rich bride-groom Raphael, she is asking herself: “Have I become what I once despised, a gold digging tramp? No, I truly do love Raphael. Then why do I feel this way, torn

³ Goldenberg and Anglo-leasing are two major corruption scandals in Kenya (2002 and 2006 respectively), involving many government officials of higher rank. “Ocampo's list” is a list of names of the people, who were involved in the organization of ethnic clashes after Kenya's presidential elections of 2006. This list, presented to the Luis Ocampo, the Chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, contained many names of high-rank Kenyan politicians.

into two different directions? One side of me tells me that he is the best thing that has ever happened to me. The other side tells me that I haven't yet lived my life to the fullest. That I still have unfinished business. I should think things through more carefully." The consequences, however, may become much more serious – ambitions of "modern ladies" cost the lives of their dear ones. In *Curtain coming down* by Jackline Waithira the heroine, busy with pleasing "sugar daddies", gives up her university course; learning about both, her mother dies of heart attack. Later, planning to get more riches through the shady career of a drug dealer, she takes to the "probation date" at the night club her best friend Blake, which ends in the death of the latter. "How was I going to live with myself knowing that I had taken away the lives of two people who loved me unconditionally? At that instant it looked as though a veil had been taken from my eyes revealing the rotten person I had become. I had been so engrossed with feeding my obsession of fitting in and been accepted by the world such that I had forgotten the important things in life. The curtains had come down and I had nothing to show for myself except the catastrophe I had gotten myself into. As if that was not enough for one night I was been charged with murder since only my fingerprints could be traced on Blake's body. As I was being escorted to the police car I wished that someone had told me about this part of life, maybe things would have been a bit different".

4. New female character types in the shorts stories after 2000

As we see, the type of woman character, the victim, depicted in all these stories, hardly differs from the victim type created by Grace Ogot – even the agents and ways of victimisation remained largely the same (although, with the course of time, some became more elaborate and violent). Does that mean that, despite the mentioned societal discourse of female empowerment, things hardly changed for Kenyan women – in society and, consequently, in creative writing, that reflects this society with usual precision and sensitivity?

Hopefully, even the number of women writers, that had grown in a commendable proportion since Grace Ogot's times, provokes a negative answer to this question. And it is supported by further analysis of the stories – for, however profoundly is the victim type featured in these texts, even the first glance of a reader would reveal two other types of women characters, which, in our view, appear a novelty in women's short story.⁴

One of these types (which we will conditionally name “type 3”) is that of a mature, self-reliant, independent and mostly educated woman, who perceives her primary duty as that of daughter and mother – in that, the authority and interests of the male partner, or even his presence as such, are not a priority. This type is primarily glorified in the stories by Muthoni Garland. In *Obituary man* she gives a brief account of a Kikuyu woman who, after becoming impregnated by her Indian boss, who immediately sacked her from the factory, nevertheless managed to squeeze out of him money in order to educate their son up to the university level. In *The remaining* the heroine Rebecca, a bank manager, after mysterious disappearance of her husband (who, presumably, merely decided to “change his life” under the influence of his carefree brother) assumes the fatherly duties in order to preserve the life and studies of her two kids. In two other stories, the heroines are faced with similar situations – unfaithfulness of their husbands (even the names of both deceitful partners are similar). Wamuyu in *Wamuyu's cross*, although being assured by her sister that “polygamy is in their blood” (and earlier having personal experience of that in the face of her father), nevertheless decides to straighten the situation either by summoning her adulterous half back to familial duties, or forcing him out – “No matter the outcome, she would find the answers for herself, and for her children”. The heroine

⁴ These types have already been established in Kenyan women's novel by such writers as Patricia Ngurukie, Monica Genya, Florence Mbaya and others, but their development in short stories by women writers appears to have been delayed by several factors – among them, the fact that the conditions that stimulated considerable growth of female short stories have emerged, as mentioned, only in the recent decades.

of the story with an eloquent title *Why husbands who love their BMWs should avoid high hairstyles* appears to be equally decisive – she also intends to bring her partner to serious questioning: “Too much has built up inside me and it is time to let go. [...] It’s not enough. It’s not even the right thing to do. But it’s a start.”

Some other women authors also appear to favour this type. In already mentioned *Kiririkano* by Wambui wa Wanjiru this female figure is represented by the character of the heroine’s mum. “When things went bad for us after Fafa died, Mom moved us all the way to Langata where she opened a chicken kiosk and drove her own private school bus on weekday mornings and afternoons. When I was in secondary school and things were slightly better, Mom sold car spare parts while I killed and plucked chickens after school and on the weekends. She still kept the bus, helped Cucu at the farm, supplied meat to KQ and rented land in Laikipia where we grew maize. And she put me through university by selling curios all over Europe. She’s kind, has a wry sense of humour, is very strong – both mentally and physically – and is not educated in the *muzungu* (‘European’ – A.R.) sense. Mom taught me how to work hard and not depend on anyone, and she is very humble. Because of her, I can face the flood, which, I suppose, is the greatest lesson a child can learn from her parent.” (12)

Njeri Tunguru in *Beginnings* creates an almost ‘larger-than-life’ character of a woman, whose husband (for an exception, a loved one) perished in a car crash, and she nevertheless managed not only to bring up her two daughters, but, in the partnership with the younger one, to establish a business company whose “profits soon equalled the state budget”. A heart-rending version of this female type is presented in *If life lets you live...* by Juliet Maruru, whose young female narrator meets various people in a clinic that she attends for treatment. “Sonja, is what I’ll call the other very strong lady. She is in a bit of trouble because she contracted multi-drug resistant TB, and the ARVs seem not to be working for her anymore. I didn’t see her yesterday, because she has been admitted to a hospital. But I remember what she told me, “Don’t let illness kill you before it has killed you.” Until last week,

Sonja has been volunteering as a counsellor, and running a shop at the market. She has four sons, the oldest passed his High School exams and will be starting Uni later this year. She told me that it was much easier to give up, but she could not give up on her obligation to teach her sons that they could survive and be the best they could be.”

This character type, introduced by female short story writers of the younger generation, apparently presents a hopeful alternative to the type of victim which we tried to outline in the previous section of this study. But it is not the final development – for in these short stories, the reader most frequently finds a “brand new” type of a modern woman, which, in our view, may be considered so far as the highest achievement of Kenyan female authors on the way of creating “inspirational”, “emancipating” fiction. This type is featured in more than a half of the modern stories used for this study; and it appears to be the type that female writers are advocating with all their vigour. This new type (which we will conditionally label “type 4”) may be described as “a young urban woman, with different background and frequently with no familial ties (marriage included), who is trying to build for herself an independent living in the modern and still male-dominated world”.

It must be said from the onset that the writers do not depict the lives of these women as beds of roses. In fact, they stand as far as possible from being that, and the young heroines in their attempts to build their own lives are frequently faced with more disappointments than successes. These may be petty troubles of everyday life: a young woman, in the beginning of her working career (for that reason, as she almost proudly confesses, she has an old mobile phone and no watch on her wrist) is harassed by a tout in a *matatu* (‘city minibus’ – A.R.) (*My evening matatu ride* by Doseline Kiguru) – she does not receive her change and is not driven to her destination; but the same fate befalls her fellow lady of a higher status – the fact that she drives her own car does not protect her from the touts’ tyranny – “Madam, *Kama hujui kuendesha gari tutakuonyesha*” (‘If you don’t know how to drive we’ll show you’ – A.R.), they shout. The young woman is too scared to drive away. The touts join hands and pushing her small car of the way,

into the other lane.” Their freedom of thought often plays more dangerous tricks on these ladies – another young working lady in Judy Kibinge’s *The wake* (Kwani 2) inquires with a party guest, a well-known lawyer, how did he manage to steal two millions of state money, and afterwards openly calls him a thief; at first the lawyer laughs, but then his sudden change of mind makes the lady and her guests witnesses of his drunken rage, in which he axes down the door of the girl’s apartment. The self-choice of the career is also often fraud with disappointments – Margaret Kamau in *Transitions* by Muthony wa Gathumo (Kwani 3) leaves her job as an air hostess at Kenya Airways in order to become a full-fledged writer – only to find out that the modern literary world is the one of paid PR, chaotic sex and drug addiction; however, the perspectives of another cheap employment or the return to her parents’ rural world appear to Margaret even less tempting. An active working life often brings such “rewards” as the neglected private one, loss of ties with parents and ensuing stress on the brink of insanity – Doreen Owino, the 40-year-old manager of a cosmetics company (*Of love and insects* by Muthoni Garland), with her father and three siblings dead and no perspectives of her own family, is unable to react properly to even the hint of a tender feeling on behalf of a male colleague (moreover, an Englishman); his attempts to soothe her in a state of crisis cause only a fit of “inadequate behaviour”. Generally, modern urbanised life frequently makes the heroines of this type, regardless of their background or ethnicity, act against their wishes – Maya, a Kenyan-Indian woman in her thirties, childless and freshly divorced with her husband (*The unbearable heaviness of comfort* by Rasna Warah – Kwani 2) tries her best to settle her own life and those of her dear friends, a Kenyan Alice and an English woman Wendy, only to discover that the reality arranges differently. “What are we doing?” I was now sobbing. “Wendy, who loves Kenya and can’t stand England, is going back there. Alice who’s made a career of hating all things Western is now going to live in America. And I, who hates Nairobi, am stuck here. Where’s the justice in all this?” (112). Yes, justice is hard to find and even harder to hope

for; even the desire to serve the society may prove to be dangerous; a brave female journalist Tasha (*The risks of knowledge* by Ruth Lucinde) together with her detective boyfriend disclose the crimes of a cunning politician – only to be eliminated by his henchmen.

Equally unhappy many of these young working ladies appear in their attempts to arrange their private life – “love life” especially. One of the preferred plots in these stories is the one circling around a date, on which the heroine tries at last to meet “the right one” – mostly to her harshest disappointment. At best, he simply proves to be a full contrary to all the heroine’s expectations. Gina in *Mr.* by Joan Kabugu meets “a total Mr. Wrong”, who ruins her Valentine date, drinking at her expense and watching football the whole evening. (Valentine Day generally proves an unhappy occasion for many of these women – in *My doomed Valentine* by Phillis Mwangi the heroine, spending all the holiday at work, in the evening manages to make a surprise visit to her boyfriend’s house, only to catch him with a street girl). The full day of meticulous preparations may be ruined by one telephone call – the prospected candidate would not come, and Natasha’s specially chosen little black dress is now consumed by evening Nairobi rain (*The little black dress* by Eunice Kilonzo). A long-lost sweetheart comes to a romantic date with... his family, wife and kid, of which poor Beryl hardly had any suspicion – “It was not just a date from hell; it had Lucifer’s seal on it” (*Tales from my sad love life* by Leah Wanjiku).

At worst, the dates may bring direr results – ten years of marriage expectations are trampled into dust, when at the decisive date a Europe-educated woman, and a PhD candidate, learns that her long-awaited perspective male part decided to join the clergy (*On the brown sofa* by Miriam Jerotich). Rosalia’s date in a posh restaurant, arranged by her faithful friend Kristina (*Worst date ever* by Roselyn Odera), ends with the heroine finding herself in a hospital casualty ward. “Kristina has never stopped apologizing for that incident and has vowed to try and only plan dates for me with people she knows very well. I do not think she should bother because I have resolved to shelf all matters related to dating – it is a jungle out there for sure”.

The presence of an already settled male partner may well bring new complications to life. A young wife of a penniless aspiring writer in Amina Hassan's *A drum, a heart and a book* was patiently saving to give to her husband's birthday an expensive mobile phone, of which he dreamt – only to be presented on their wedding anniversary with an old drum, which her forgetful partner unearthed from the pantry. A working student in *The long road to nowhere* by Doseline Kiguru compares the long-time relationship with her boyfriend with a deserted land – her sweetheart is manipulative, selfish and egocentric. However, the young woman is not going to take this any more: "I paid the rent, bought food and as the faithful servant that I have always been, I served Kamau with undivided attention. As a result, I am not going to graduate with my class at the end of the year. That is why today I decided to take on another path in my life; away from the ordinary one that I had become used to". An office worker Susan Mwendu in Connie Mutua's *Life by any other name*, after an evening spent at a business meeting in a luxury restaurant, on her way home stops at the local bar, where she feels more at ease, and deepens herself into reflections. "It is while looking at the mirror that I realize I am not happy. What is it about mirrors that always seem to judge you? I have a good job, friends, family, the whole enchilada. Why?" It is apparent that Susan is no longer happy with the usual routine – "there must be more to life than this", and she makes her first, half-conscious steps on the way of this realization.

In the end, the authors' attitude to these characters in all the texts appears to be fully positive – for, the women in their stories make their own choices and defend them against all odds, unwilling to let anyone dictate them what to do with their own living. And no matter how many difficulties these woman have to face, they will not surrender their positions (sometimes at the cost of their family ties, private lives or even physical lives, as in Ruth Lucinde's story) – and the trials and errors that they make (no matter how serious could they be) is an indispensable condition of this character's formation and growth. These difficulties are caused by nothing but their own choice; a woman

of such type is no longer bound or motivated by anything but her will and her wish – and her wish is to be “working among people who respected her womanhood and capabilities” (Ogot 1968: 154). In these words Grace Ogot had once summed the dream of Elizabeth, her heroine killed by male-constructed and male-dominated society – but this dream, appearing impossible and impractical at those times, is now being implemented; no matter how dear a price modern women in Kenyan female short stories are to pay for this – they are ready and willing to do it, and their conviction in the way that they have chosen justifies all their trials and sacrifices. And, more importantly – for the fulfilment of their dreams and their choices they are ready to change not only their own lives (e.g., to end an unsuccessful relationship or to try a new job), but to oppose (and, in the long run, change) those social norms, regulations and customs which they deem as detrimental for the free development of their personalities.

And, after all, we are dealing with works of literature – and therefore it would be unfair of the authors (at least towards us readers) not to give a more rewarding and inspiring picture of this specific type. And this picture is given – for in many stories, this “young modern working woman” wins a triumphant victory over everything that impedes her emancipation, be it obsolete social customs, public opinions or her own doubts and reservations. Shamita, a Kenyan-Indian university student of Ugandan descent, successfully defies the warnings about “those damned Ugandan blacks that ousted us in 1972” that her family members use to slur her Ugandan professor (*1972 ain't me* by Farah Ahmed – Kwani 7). She wants to be free of these “collective fears of the past” and all prejudices – “I am not like him. But I am victimised. Victimised by the memories and experiences of 1972 that don't belong to me [...]. I don't feel those memories.” A female student in *My sister the evil spirit* by Wangui Kimari tries to exercise her freedom in a more vibrant way – by fiercely defying all her mother's sham invectives about “approved” behaviour, habits and boyfriends. “Sister, at her own will, chose her own path”, sums up her younger sister, who apparently will take after the rebellious one. Young educated women successfully

resist pocket thieves (*Catching a pickpocket* by Patricia Waliula), put to shame notorious street beggars (“all woman should be like her” – thinks the “King of Khoja roundabout” in the eponymous story by Esther Kariuki, when a girl whom he tried to frighten successfully confronted him) and instill respect into the street thugs, whose ringleader even volunteers with guardian service: “*Kimbia, nitaangalia mpaka uingie kaja*” – ‘Run, I’ll watch until you reach’ (*Walking home* by Juliet Maruru). With equal success they conquer different walks of life, cross social and ethnic boundaries – diligence and open mind helps the young university student to pass a difficult exam (*Passing* by Annette Majanja); Makena in Moraa Gitaa’s *Second chance dad* makes international singing career, meanwhile re-building the life of her long-lost and desperate boyfriend; Tasia Wekesa (*Sold for a song* by Yvonne Gitobu) discloses the evil plans of their scheming neighbour, thus destroying her forcedly arranged marriage, saves her family and is rewarded with a degree in agriculture; a young Maasai girl Namunyai from a poor family becomes a successful lawyer and, against all odds, wins the heart and gets married to her Indian “love-since-school-days” sweetheart (*The red bindi on Diwali* by Claudette Oduor). In this spirit of racial and ethnic tolerance these women also plan to raise their children: unnamed first person narrator of *My child’s culture is Kenyan* by Twahira Abdallah claims that “I was going to raise my children not to be tribalists”, whereas the heroine in Tabitha Mwangi’s *Where is the racist?* accuses her countrymen of various forms of xenophobia, and swears that the son of hers and her loved and loving European husband is going to be free of all this.

Some of these young ladies may even appear tough and somewhat brutal on the outside, but these hostile looks hide compassionate hearts and deep affections – the heroine of *Six feet asunder* by Wanjeri Gakuru loves roaring motorbikes and heavy metal music, but a sudden demise of her sister wakes the most tender and womanly feelings in her. “Who would cover for me when I snuck out? Try to set me up with her boyfriend’s friends? Understand my twisted sense of humour? Who was the one person I had been sure would have cried at my

funeral? It was my baby sister Helen who had loved me just as I was and who I had loved for it. Just then I felt that sharp pain again... I smiled. I didn't cry at my sister's funeral, at least not with my eyes..."

A somewhat "quintessential" example of this character type is found in *Kiririkano* by Wambui wa Wanjiru in the figure of the main character Soni (a short name from Muthoni). Her life condition, that is described in detail to the reader by Soni herself (like most of the surveyed modern stories, this is a first person narration) appear to assist Soni in all her endeavors. She is, by the concurrence of circumstances, the only child, brought up by mother after her father's demise, which guarantees her undivided support and attention. She does not want to take "just a job", and thus, waiting for something really attractive for her, shelves her hard-earned university degree and meanwhile is assisting her mother in their successful "joint venture" – a hair saloon in Nairobi, also helping her relatives on family farm. Unlike many other heroines of modern stories, Soni not only manages to preserve the familial ties, but uses them constructively and is proud of them – "We can name ancestors up to eleven generations back on Mom's side, and nine on Fafa's, and Kiambu is dotted with the homesteads of hundreds of my kin" (21). Her relationship with handsome taxi driver Wanjau Hinga (also an example of self-reliant person) remain on the level of friendship, since the whole idea of marriage does not appeal to her: "Unlike so many girls, I wasn't trying to get married – especially to a white man, which most girls around here appear to desire. I didn't want to marry a non-black husband and yet was resistant to many of our men – [...]when all you have to do is look around here to see that women really run the show" (25). Together with this high "gender consciousness", she also has a high national one – she is proud of the fact that her grandfather was a Mau Mau fighter; and class consciousness, too – being from the "lower middle", she disapproves of higher classes for their exploiting the poor, and thus is ready to help all the down-trodden, be it their gardener Absalom, whose wife contracted malaria, or poor street vendor woman, who lost her son. All the said features make Soni a somewhat "model figure" of a young modern woman; as

it appears, the author has created her as a constructive example, motivating the readers (supposedly, mainly female) to self-build their personal universes, their lives.

5. Conclusion

Susan Andrade, characterizing the manifestation of political commitment in the female writing from the former Third World, asserts: “Novels written by women from the Global South often do have allegories within them, but they are usually subtle (or not immediately visible) and require an act of strong reading to discern them” (1998: 39). This subtlety of allegories – and I would remind that the scholar refers to “national allegory”, i.e. the allegorical representation of the nation in the women-authored fiction – is mostly expressed through the fact that “women represent the nation in relation to the family”, but “as time progressed, African women began to represent the nation squarely and explicitly, in tandem with gender and the family” (1998: 206–207).

This representation of the nation “through gender and family” appears to have been started in the short stories of Grace Ogot, “mother superior” of Kenyan short story. As stated in the corresponding section of this study, she mainly represented her women characters as victimized by the male-dominated society, creating the “victim type” of female heroines. As time went, this type has re-emerged in short stories by women authors written after 2000, for, as we noted above, the social environment that stipulates/stimulates victimization of women in Kenya has largely remained existent.

And, as we also argued above, this type of victim, holding a lower place in the social hierarchy and submissive to male domination, serves not only to “allegorise gender relations in a patriarchal society where women are considered commodities, to be consumed when desired and discarded when useless” (Kruger 2011: 141), but also, on a higher level, to represent an allegory of the nation in submission, holding a lower place in world hierarchy, and exploited by superior economic and political powers.

In view of this, the new type of woman character that appeared and is affirmed and glorified in the larger part of modern stories by Kenyan woman writers – may also be considered as a new national allegory: independent, empowered, free-thinking and self-reliant woman is the embodiment of independent, empowered, free-thinking and self-reliant nation. Many philosophers asserted in their works that the level of a society’s development is defined by the state of women in this society. By creating in their works this new type of self-reliant woman – and, fortunately, this type is becoming more and more widespread not only in Kenyan writing, but also in Kenyan society – the women writers of the new generation are creating for their readers (yes, supposedly – mainly female) a sense of hope and alternative, “new” way of life, which may well become one of the factors leading to the empowerment of the entire nation. Throughout its history, literature on many occasions proved to be prophetic – and maybe this quality will show up also this time. Women’s emancipation in Kenya is apparently no easy task; even the recent political developments may serve as an example: on the one hand, there are female ministers, MPs and even presidential candidates;⁵ on the other – one of the recent decisions of Kenyan (male-dominated!) parliament has legalized polygamy. But anyhow – women’s empowerment is worth and must be fought for, and it appears that Kenyan writing makes it commendable contribution to this struggle.

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⁵ In fact, the idea of female president as a positive alternative for the country’s future has already been suggested in some novels by Kenyan women writers – for more details, see (Rinkanya 2014).

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