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Emerging trends in Kenyan children's fiction: A study of Sasa Sema's Lion books

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Chapter Six

Through the Eyes of a Woman: The Mau Mau Narrative in Children's Literature

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the text *Dedan Kimathi: Leader of Mau Mau* (2003) by David Njeng'ere. Dedan Kimathi was a hero of the Mau Mau war that was waged in central Kenya in the 1950s. He was convicted and executed [hanged] by British colonial government in Kenya because he was considered a Mau Mau terrorist. In this biography Kimathi's story is interwoven with that of Mau Mau, so much so that the text becomes like an avenue for teaching children about the colonialists' ills that influenced people to go into the forest to fight, and also the difficulties experienced by the Mau Mau liberation fighters. Unique in this text, and this is what this chapter pays attention to, is the narrative strategy employed. Njeng'ere tells the story of Kimathi through the eyes of a female narrator, who is positioned as a participant in the war. This narrative point of view is crucial as it not only gives voice to women's activities in the war but it also brings in the female model in the context of Mau Mau historiography. In addition, a woman narrator contrasts the way the Mau Mau narrative has been represented in earlier narratives mainly through the male voice. The importance of the biography under discussion also lies in the fact that it removes the Mau Mau narrative from adult domain to a children's audience. I would want to point out at this stage that although both Chapter Six and Chapter Three look at women, their thrust is certainly different. While in Chapter Three I focused on gender issues, specifically the representation of women in children's stories, in the current chapter I look at how the narrative is rendered through the eyes of a woman, and what implications this rendition has on the history of the Mau Mau story in Kenya.

In the first part of the discussion, I briefly look at the representation of the female character in Kenya's adult fiction on Mau Mau. I also focus my attention on how the character of Kimathi is represented in some of the works where he appears. In the second part I examine the importance of a woman narrator in delivering the Mau Mau narrative to children and how the portrait of Kimathi is constructed for the children. In the process I examine whether Njeng're's presentation of women differs from earlier representations and/or how he probably turns stereotypes about women into instruments of struggle**.** I also argue that Njeng'ere wills into being a children's audience because of the way he presents this narrative. For example, the book is written in simple and clear language, making it possible for the audience to easily comprehend the narrative. In addition, Njeng'ere utilises paratextual features on the cover of the book which are useful in framing children's understanding of the text as the narrative commences. Towards the end of this discussion I examine how Njeng'ere interrogates the place Kimathi has been accorded in Kenya's historiography. I now examine the representation of female characters in Mau Mau narrative.

Representation of Women's Role in Mau Mau

Mau Mau fiction in Kenya has more often than not tended to privilege male voices and heroes, a practice that has resulted in sidelining of female participants in this war. Both fictional narratives and memoirs about Mau Mau war have been presented mostly from a point of view of the male character that in most cases is privileged as a participant in the war, or as having been affected by the war in various ways. Even when female characters are inserted in such narratives, they are only visible in liminal spaces, mainly being credited with minimal importance and accomplishments (Cora Presely 1992: 123). Women's activities in the Mau Mau war can generally be said to have been kept in the shadow of men's accomplishments. Jean O'Barr argues that in firsthand accounts of the Mau Mau war, and in Kenyan fiction, women only emerge as supporting characters in a play

dominated by men (1985: 6). O'Barr reiterates that although narratives of involvement in Mau Mau, which are mostly written by men, acknowledge women's presence, they do not explore women's presence beyond those of sexual partners and couriers, and mostly these women remain nameless (Ibid). Sometimes female characters are completely excluded from the Mau Mau narrative. For instance, there is a significant absence of women in Meja Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* which suggests that the war was fundamentally a masculine affair.

An examination of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's early writing provides insight into actions attributed to women during the emergency. In *A Grain of Wheat* (1986) for example, women's actions are certainly visible, but the story centres on male characters who had taken the oath, some of whom were either jailed like Mugo and Gikonyo, or Kihika who represents the figure of Kimathi. Kihika in this text runs to the forest to fight the colonialist, but he is later betrayed by Mugo and is hanged. Other male characters in this text include General R, Lieutenant Koinandu, Warui, and collaborators like Karanja. Violent Mau Mau activities are rendered mainly through the eyes of male characters who, led by Kihika, break into prison and let the prisoners free (18). Although there is information in this text that women got involved in the Mau Mau war, by for example providing food, or carrying weapons to the fighters like Wambui does, these women are only visible and mentioned in a few instances. Otherwise Ngugi's women in *A Grain of Wheat* are mainly seen in their motherhood roles, or beyond this presentation, they make food available for their sons [for example Gikonyo's mother], or are girlfriends to the men. The woman is sometimes represented as an object of male desire. For instance, when Gikonyo is jailed he longs to come back to his wife Mumbi, and Karanja collaborates with the colonialist to evade jail, so that he could be close to Mumbi. Women's influence on men, rather than their activities in the war is emphasized so much in this text, so that even when news on Kihika's capture is received, Koinandu speculates that he [Kihika] "was going to meet a

woman" (see page 26). In addition, Wambuku is beaten by a homeguard [which causes her death] because she turned down his sexual advances (page 137), while Mumbi, the woman who is a central character in this text is assaulted by Karanja and bears his child. I agree with O'Barr's argument that Mumbi's "violation coming at the end of emergency symbolically eliminates her personal and political contributions to the struggle, denying her a social status other than that based on sexuality and maternity" (1985: 12). This sexual imagery in Ngugi's text minimises women's choices as political actors because they are seemingly confronted by the disadvantage of being women in the war.

In the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, women lead men to heroic action, urging them on to prove themselves as men, but women are not expected to prove their bravery. The small boy in the play remembers what the woman had told him: "One day you'll understand that beating those in your lot is not how to become a man" (52); words that motivate his desire to rescue Kimathi. Ngugi and Mugo show that men are fighting for the women and the children they left behind but the motivation of women fighters in the war is not addressed. Throughout the scenes in the play the dialogue acknowledges the presence of women, but women that are nameless [the female characters are only referred to as "woman" and "girl"], which I argue minimises their visibility in the struggle.

Like Ngugi, Sam Kahiga in *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* (1990) shows that women took part in the Mau Mau war. In this text Kahiga does not only accord women the role of cooking for men[1], but he to a certain extent reduces women's role to that of keeping the male fighters entertained throughout the night. The main female character in this text, Agnes Ndiritu, runs to the forest after killing a homeguard. In the forest she rises to high ranks of hierarchy in

[1] Even when women are invited to attend Mau Mau meetings they are reminded that they should bring food with them. For example, see the invitation letter Kimathi writes to Wangeci on page 15.

the war, but her prominence is watered down because she and other women are reduced to sexual objects that cause enmity between the generals. In fact, when the war ends in this text, she [Agnes Ndiritu] goes home with a child whom she has borne through a relationship with one of the generals [General Kabuku]. It then seems like women's sexual status prevents their visibility in the war, while men's activities are valorised.

Although there are female characters in Kenneth Watene's play *Dedan Kimathi* (1974) it is only Lucia and Wahu, whose names are identified, otherwise the others are simply referred to as "women". Such references, I reiterate, demonstrate the liminal spaces that the female character occupies in the war. Lucia's and Wahu's role in the war is also wanting as it centres around their sexual involvement and love for men, especially with Kimathi. For example, at the beginning of the play Lucia accuses Kimathi of being in love, and sleeping with Wahu (8). And although Kimathi praises Wahu as one of his best fighters (46), she is generally positioned as Kimathi's caretaker. She is further represented as a comforter of other men in the war, seen in Kimathi's directives that she should go and sleep with Nyati "and woo him and please him" (33) so that he may forget the recurring worries he experiences after killing a loyalist and his wife in the African village reserves. Lucia's role is certainly minimal. We see her at the beginning of the play and she only resurfaces towards the end (90), bringing news about Kimathi's wife and mother. Lucia seemingly leads Kimathi to his death trap, which presents women in this play as untrustworthy in the war.

This bias on women's participation in Mau Mau war is also evident in writing of personal life experiences seen through the autobiographies and memoirs by Mau Mau freedom fighters. Either women who took part in the war had not acquired the know-how to put down their own experiences, or they have just kept a low profile which has given the impression that it is only men who took active roles in the war. Many Mau Mau autobiographies are written by

men and narratives about the war are therefore told as witnessed by a male character. For example, as Godfrey Okoth (2001) shows, among the thirteen memoirs/autobiographies historian Marshall Clough studies in his text *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics* (1998), few are written by women.[2] Wambui Otieno-Mbugua who was herself a Mau Mau was recently quoted in the *Style* Magazine in Kenya lamenting the invisibility of women who took part in the Mau Mau liberation struggle. The magazine read:

> Now in the twilight of her life, Wambui is angry at the fact that women who were involved in Mau Mau war never get recognition as their male counterparts do. "Women in Mau Mau did so much, yet hardly anything is said about them. I wish I was a teacher to teach all these," she interjects. "You people read history, some of which is false. Have you ever heard of any woman who was arrested with the Kapenguria Six?" she quips. [3]

Wambui identifies two women, Mama Nyoroka and Sarah Salai, who were arrested with the Kapenguria six,[4] yet no one knows if such characters ever existed because it is only men's stories that are usually privileged. Njeng'ere's use of the female narrator certainly helps to address the point of view that the Mau Mau narrative has taken in the past, thus giving women room to tell their story. The narrator in this case not only tells Kimathi's story but she at the same time narrates women's accomplishments in the Mau Mau war.

Having looked at the representation of female characters in Mau Mau narratives, I now move on to examine how the figure of Kimathi is represented in some of the narratives where he appears. I look at Kimathi's

[2] http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3821/is_200110/ai_n8984032
[3] http://eastandard.net/mags/style/articles.php?articleid=25276
[4] The Kapenguria six refers to the people who were arrested and tried at Kapenguria after the state of emergency was declared in Kenya in 1952. These were mainly leaders of the political movements that were formed to agitate for freedom and they included: Kenyatta, Kaggia, Fed Kubai, Kungu Karumba, Achieng Oneko and Paul Ngei.

narrative in conjunction with the representation of the Mau Mau guerrillas because Kimathi's actions cannot be examined in isolation, as his life was linked to that of other guerrillas.

Representation of Dedan Kimathi in Mau Mau Fiction

Kimathi's figure in Mau Mau fiction has been characterised by him being positioned as a leader, a merciless terrorist, and a mysterious being. The Mau Mau story has itself been presented by some writers as one full of mystery, terror and confusion. For example, in Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* mentioned earlier, we encounter fighters that are possessed with violence so that when they are not killing settlers and maiming animals in the settler farms, they are busy stealing from each other's camps in the forest. The atrocities of the guerrillas in this text are further emphasized when we see General Kago ordering Captain Theuri to stuff the genitals of a man into his mouth after killing him and chopping his body into pieces (See page 152). In this text Kimathi is presented as one to be feared for he punishes the guerrillas mercilessly. General Kago for example says that Kimathi threatened to hang him when they differed (see page 90-91). Kimathi is also presented as a mysterious being that could not be killed easily. For instance, Kahiga shows that towards the end of the text when many of the Mau Mau fighters have resigned and joined the colonialists in the hunt for the guerrillas who had remained in the forest, Ruku tries to shoot Dedan Kimathi and fails. Instead the gun turns round and points at Ruku (323).

In Kenneth Watene's play *Dedan Kimathi* (1974), the first scene of the play presents a character of Kimathi that punishes people by death for some of the slightest offences, like showing signs of fear. Kimathi alleges that he kills to protect the fighters "from dissidents and cowards" (see page 7). He feels insecure and he keeps demanding that Wahu report to him what the men are saying about him (24). In fact, Watene shows that even those that are close to

Kimathi do not understand why he kills people. This is indicated by Lucia's words:

> Why, why, why did you do it?
> You could have sent him away.
> You could have sent him to Mt. Kenya
> And he would have been glad to fight.
> For how long must you destroy others?
> (7).

Lucia's last question suggests that Kimathi has been murdering his soldiers. He even kills Nyati, his close friend who he viewed as a father (44). In this play Kimathi lives in fear and suspicion of his soldiers and that is why he kills them. Watene also portrays the whole Mau Mau group as having been generally confused, evil, and devoid of any serious commitment to the liberation of Kenyan peoples. They were simply driven to action by the fact that they had taken the oath.

The Kimathi-like figure of General Haraka in Meja Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds* (1973) is presented as a man who degenerates into a blood-thirsty creature, and finally dies from a wound he sustains from a bullet. On his deathbed the General is described thus: "mixed with this hate was fear, an instinctive fear of a trapped beast…. The beast in him barred its fangs in a bid to fight its way to safety" (102-103). The guerrillas are also described as a gang (102) or as terrorists (40) – terms that evoke criminality. There is a tone in Mwangi's writing that suggests hatred or condemnation of the guerrillas. Mwangi also fails to probe any social dynamics of the revolt. Haraka's view of freedom remains undefined. He goes to war not to fight for land but to seek revenge.

Unlike Kahiga or Watene who present Kimathi as one possessed by fear, and

the urge to kill others, Ngugi wa Thion'go and Micere Mugo present Kimathi as a symbol of the toiling workers and peasants in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In this play, which as the title suggests deals with Kimathi's trial, it is Kimathi's strength against the imperialist that is tested. He serves as an inspiration of the oppressed and believes in armed struggle for total liberation of the colonised people. Ngugi and Micere Mugo attempt to revise the ambivalent presentation of the Mau Mau, and especially the character of Kimathi, by showing that Kimathi was human, and a character that was focused on the liberation of the oppressed. Such a portrayal of Kimathi, as Ogude argues, explains why he does not kill the two British soldiers when he discovers they are the oppressed workers in Britain (1979: 26). Kimathi says: "It is always the same story. Poor men sent to die that parasites might live in paradise with ill-gotten wealth" (64).

What I find questionable in the representation of the Mau Mau narrative in the texts discussed above, is the way the story revolves around specific figures that are mostly men. Even when women appear in the scenes, they are only mistresses of the men fighters as already seen. I argue that the *Sasa Sema* narrative about Mau Mau, which I discuss in the next section is important because it not only simplifies the narrative strategy which makes the story accessible to children, but as I have already mentioned, the story is narrated from a woman's point of view which goes a long way in revising the way this narrative has been presented in the past – mostly through the eyes of male characters.

The Woman Narrator, Kimathi and the Mau Mau Narrative

In *Dedan Kimathi: Leader of the Mau Mau* (2003), the narrative is told through the eyes of a fictional character, Wangu, whose father was killed by colonial soldiers and her two brothers were held in concentration camps during the Mau Mau war. Njeng'ere's choice of Wangu, whose family had experienced death and separation from family members, shows how he wants the

narrative to be told from inside– i.e. by a person who had experienced the effects of the war. Wangu was supposed to take a letter to Kimathi in the forest when she was a young girl. In the narrative she is currently an old woman (grandmother) who narrates her experiences to her grandchildren. It is through Wangu's mission that the readers witness the activities of Mau Mau, and the hunt that existed between the Mau Mau and the British colonial authorities, which culminated in Kimathi's capture and execution. When Wangu arrives in Kimathi's hiding place she easily interacts with him and he tells her the story of his life. Thus, the portrait of Kimathi is painted by Wangu's narration of what she witnessed in the forest and what Kimathi himself told her. I assert that Njeng'ere wills into being an imagined children's audience in his writing because of the choice of his narrator; a child who bears witness to the activities of the Mau Mau. The question and answer style that Njeng'ere employs in the encounter between Wangu and Kimathi when she arrives at Kimathi's home in the forest is vital because the story is rendered as if the readers were listening to Kimathi himself. Wangu also identifies with her audience, which is seen in phrases like "I was a young girl, like you, Gathoni" (2-3). Such a technique helps the young readers to identify with the narrator and the narrative at large.

Njeng'ere seeks to give voice to women and revise the presentation of the Mau Mau narrative which as I have already argued, has often been told from a male point of view which resulted in giving women subordinate roles in the struggle. In her dissertation entitled "The Role of Kikuyu Women in the Mau Mau" (1986) the historian, Margaret Gachini argues that although there has been intensive local studies by Kenyan historians on the Mau Mau movement, covering a wide range of issues and historiographical problems, very little has been written on the role of women in the Mau Mau. Gachini reiterates:

> This absence, or perhaps more accurately incompleteness, … cannot be adequately justified in view of the fact that oral data from actual

> participants, both men and women, convincingly show that women featured prominently in the Mau Mau movement, and that they were in fact a critical and decisive element in the shape that the Mau Mau assumed (1986: 7-8).

Santili (1977) also points out in her article on Kikuyu women in the Mau Mau, that women's role has been seriously underplayed. She attributes the status of Mau Mau women to the one-sided view that most first hand accounts on Mau Mau have given – a male perspective that hampers their discussion of the females in the Mau Mau revolt (quoted in Gachini page 8). The questions that arise here are: Did male fighters underplay women's role out of their ignorance of women's organisational patterns? Weren't both men and women working in conjunction for a common goal – to succeed in the struggle? Or does reluctance by men fighters to accord women equal status with men in their accounts of the war bring to surface the repeated portrayal of women as the weaker sex? Njeng'ere's text certainly helps to address the bias against women that has existed both in historical accounts and in literature in general.

Wangu's participation in the Mau Mau activities is shown to have emanated from her own mother, who allowed groups of people that planned the war against the colonialist to hold meetings in her house. The narrator says:

> My mother had agreed to let our homestead be a meeting place for men planning the war against the colonial government. She was a poor widow and that made her an unlikely suspect. Even so, she was taking a huge risk. It was of utmost importance that no one knew of the elders' presence in our home. This could spell trouble for my mother as the homeguards who watched our village would know that she was supporting the Land and Freedom Army (6-7).

In this quotation we discover that the story in *Dedan Kimathi: Leader of the Mau Mau* is not just about Kimathi, but a composite and complex narrative of the Mau Mau players across gender divide. These other narratives and voices within Kimathi's story are only visible through Wangu from whom we get her story and her female subject position, since she is part of the narrative. In the above quotation Njeng'ere suggests that the Kikuyu [who were the main participants in the Mau Mai war] overturned cultural assumptions (or are they stereotypes?) to their advantage during the Mau Mau war. What I am referring to is the assumption that women are docile and therefore harmless – like Wangu's mother – "a poor widow" and "an unlikely suspect". Since women were seen as unlikely suspects they became important contacts in the war. The "passive" therefore became active. It is by the same assumptions that Wangu [a young girl] is sent to take the message to Kimathi because nobody would suspect that such a small girl would dare venture even on the fringes of the forest leave alone participating in the Mau Mau activities. She is accompanied by the crippled Muchemi – "because the homeguards would never suspect a man hobbling on a crutch was actively involved in the war" (15). One could therefore argue that Njeng'ere attempts to give children the various war tactics that were used by the Mau Mau. But at another level, it is also possible that Wangu's mother allowed meetings to take place at her house with the hope that the war would bring freedom, which would in turn see the return of her two sons, showing the hope people had in the success of the war. Wangu expresses this hope when she says: "My only wish was that Kimathi would win the war so that my brothers would come back home and people like mother could be happy again" (37). Wangu and her mother represent the kind of women who took active part in the Mau Mau. The two also help to show the operations and the organizational network between the Kikuyu in the reserves and the fighters in the forests, "an important feature in Mau Mau [which] was dominated by women" (Gachini 1986: 10). Women who played such roles were mainly peasant women, zealous Mau Mau supporters, who shouldered heavy burdens and executed dangerous tasks in

the name of the movement, like carrying information through hazardous routes, like Wangu does.

Wangu spends only one night in the forest where she sleeps in a cave and shares bedding with the women fighters. In the process she discovers the hardships the Mau Mau fighters went through, especially with regard to lack of food. Njeng'ere shows that there were quite a number of married and unmarried women who stayed in the forest and endured all the hardships. Wangu says: "… there were many women who fought alongside the men and never complained about going hungry. Some were even stronger than their male counterparts" (34). Such statements by the narrator can be read as Njeng'ere's own way of emphasizing the strength that was found within women guerrillas. These women express their determination to remain in the forest although life was hard because they saw it "better to die in the forest than to be slaves in your own house" (Njeng'ere 2003: 62). It is worth contrasting the hope and determination of these women in Njeng'ere's text with that given in Sam Kahiga's and Kenneth Watene's texts where some women stay in the forests to satisfy male sexual desires, and thus they are mere instruments of comfort for men. In fact, when General Kago defects from the Mau Mau group that operated from the forest in *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*, he describes the fighters as people who "just eat and make love to girls" (1990: 91).

But although I have argued that through Wangu and her mother Njeng'ere attempts to give women agency in their participation in the Mau Mau war, and although the women in the forest show determination to fight to the end, I find some of the roles played by women fighters in the forest still problematic. These women cook and take food to the men and afterwards return to the safety of the cave where they perform their "assumed" role of storytelling, mending clothes, and singing Mau Mau songs in the night. Although there may be nothing wrong with some of these chores, they

nevertheless tend to fit women in fixed "traditional straight jackets" whereby we do not witness their involvement in the armed struggle, or any leadership positions although some women rose to influential positions of leadership and performed duties that called for military know-how throughout the revolt (Gachini 1986: 12; Maloba, 1993: 178). Thus while I agree that Njeng'ere's narrative goes a long way in revising the way the Mau Mau story has predominantly been seen through the eyes of men, his portrayal of women in this text is still limited by the fact that he does not draw attention to the complex facets of women's participation in the war. However, he certainly moves a step further than many other writers before him, who present women in the Mau Mau war as mistresses of men in the forest

At another level, one could argue that Njeng'ere attempts to show that the roles women played like cooking and mending clothes were nevertheless important because these roles are part of the struggle process. While maintaining women's roles that have featured in narratives told from a male point of view has a possible risk of presenting Njeng'ere's narrative as a mere inversion of gender roles, this inversion technique is still important because it gives voice to women and undermines certain gender biases – creating space for the female subject (1994: 62). This text undermines the masculine representation of the war – showing that women did not have to do the jobs that men did in order to be heroes. At least in Njeng're's text we are able to see women in their roles in the war without a repeated biased representation of women as sex objects. Therefore, through the narrator in the text under discussion, Njeng'ere gives agency to female characters in the war without looking down upon them.

I have mentioned earlier in this thesis that there has been writing about Mau Mau in children's literature in the past by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. But Ngugi still perpetuates the bias on women's participation in the war in his children's books by focusing on how male children participated in the war. This is

demonstrated through the character of Njamba Nene [See *Njamba Nene's Pistol* and *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*], who is sometimes too-knowing for his age. Ngugi equips Njamba Nene with so much courage that sometimes when he (Njamba Nene) speaks and acts, one doubts the ability of such a young character in children's fiction. For example, in *Njamba Nene's pistol*, Njamba Nene leads a section of people in a screening camp into rebelling against the colonial home guards and the white officers (see page 25-26), which portrays exceptional courage and wisdom from a child of his age. We notice in both *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* and *Njamba Nene's Pistol* that it is only Njamba Nene's mother [Wacu] who somewhat believes in the struggle, otherwise there are no other female characters in the two texts. In fact, all the school children that get lost in the forest in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* are male. While it is possible to have a school with only male children, Ngugi's gender bias is repeated in *Njamba Nene's Pistol* where still we have the female characters represented by mother Wacu. Women in this text are only visible at the screening camp (see illustration on page 19) and their voices are completely muted. The use of a female narrator by Njeng'ere not only incorporates the female figure into children's fiction about Mau Mau, but it also revises the approach of the too-knowing fictional [male] child heroes in liberation wars like Njamba Nene. These changes in the narration of the Mau Mau story, and the insertion of Kimathi's story into children's literature, are new trends in Kenya's children literature; trends that privilege biographies as avenues to tell the story of Kenya's liberation struggle, like the Mau Mau. These trends argue for children to be given socially useful and relevant information and not exclusively fantastic stories, which sometimes have characters that are beyond the realm of reality.

Having looked at how Njeng'ere incorporates female voices in the Mau Mau narrative, I now examine how he uses Wangu to paint the picture of Kimathi, and the Mau Mau experience in general. And as mentioned earlier, I examine the figure of Kimathi and the Mau Mau narrative concurrently because it is

within the Mau Mau narrative that Kimathi's story unfolds. The trend of Kimathi's story is set by pictures on the text's cover page which portray an environment engulfed by tension and fear. These pictures on the front cover suggest hard life and constant hiding of people who lived in the forest. At the bottom, right hand side of the cover, there are two men hiding behind a shrub with their guns ready, as if waiting for some prey or some attacker. On the left hand side of the cover there is a picture of a man [who is supposedly Dedan Kimathi], with a riffle fastened across his body, and looks quite attentive, as he stealthily strides across the field. These people are thin, their unkempt hair is in long locks that drop onto their shoulders, and they are dressed in tattered clothes. All these pictures are brightly coloured which I argue play a significant role in mediating reader engagement and interpretation and an entry point into the text. Certainly these pictures give the readers a clue of what to expect from the story, and thus a view of life in the forest. The blurb is equally informative: "Dedan Kimathi was a beloved leader of the Mau Mau guerrilla war waged in Kenya's forests to win freedom from the British Empire". Since we know the text is about Kimathi, the content of the blurb is bound to lead us into identifying the man with the gun on the front cover with Kimathi. While paratextual features are not unique to children's literature, their deployment in children's books is important because these features help to frame children's interest right from the cover of the book, and they help them to approach the story with anticipation. A text's paratext is therefore important because it is the means by which readers are given access to the text.

Before Wangu starts her journey into the forest to deliver the letter to Kimathi, we are given an episode that shows the hope that people had in him [Kimathi]:

> The four men were discussing various ways to take the message to Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi Waciuri. Kimathi was our hope for

> freedom from colonialism. We believed that *Ngai* [God], our creator, had given him the power to fight against our oppressors and redeem our stolen land. And now he was leading the war from his hideout deep in the forest (7).

Njeng'ere adopts the motif of a powerful Kimathi and shows that his power came from *Ngai*, the maker and the giver of life. Njeng'ere evokes this power in Kimathi through Wangu later in the narrative because when she meets Kimathi she says: "… there was something about this man that made me feel safe even though I knew we were surrounded by danger on all sides and the government soldiers could strike at any time (28). Njeng'ere shows that Kimathi became a source of hope for a whole group of people during the emergency, and he figures Kimathi as having had great influence in shaping the destiny of freedom fighters. In the quotation above we also read the strategic ways through which those who lived in the reserves communicated with the forest fighters. This secret communication is further demonstrated when Wangu's mother sews Kimathi's letter on the hem of her [Wangu's] dress, rather than carrying it by hand (12). Concerning her mission in the forest, Wangu says that her mother had told her that "homeguards would be less suspicious" of her if she was "pretending to be collecting firewood in the forest" (14). In fact, after her mission is completed, Wangu carries home a bundle of firewood to reduce any suspicion from the homegaurds. These secret codes and ways of carrying out assignments represent Mau Mau as a "Kenyan historical process in which the struggle against colonialism was at its most organised" (Ogude 2003: 280). Women like Wangu and her mother ensured exclusive communication between the Mau Mau adherents in the reserves and those in the forest, a role that was certainly vital for the success of the movement.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the text that there were times when freedom fighters were betrayed to the enemy [British colonialists], which brought

setbacks in the struggle. Most treachery is shown to have come mainly from people who were loyal to the colonialists like the chiefs. Sometimes the colonial chiefs ordered the arrest of Mau Mau adherents. Such disloyalty to the course of the struggle, Njeng'ere shows, was often met with counter action from the Mau Mau, and as a result there was witch-hunting and revenge amongst fellow Africans. For example, the narrator says:

> We were all shocked when we heard what happened to Senior Chief Nderi Wang'ombe. Nderi had ordered the arrest of thirty-seven people for taking an oath. Later, the chief was walking down to the river with several of his personal guards. Mau Mau fighters opened fire on the chief, killing him and his men instantly in a hail of bullets (57).

Such were the tragedies that characterised the Mau Mau war, sometimes leading to arrests of many Mau Mau fighters by the colonial government. Despite such frictions however, Njeng'ere shows that Kimathi was determined and had a lot of trust in the war.

> Kimathi always believed if you want something, it is not enough to just say it. You have to do something to get it. He wanted to do something to force the white settlers to give back the land they had taken. He wanted to put an end to the injustices (52).

We learn that Kimathi's encounter with the settlers as a young man helps him to understand their bad side. From an ordinary boy who lives and goes to school in a local village, Kimathi grows up changing his view towards the British colonialists and his hatred for colonialists develops gradually. In fact, he even worked in a settler farm before he was provoked beyond patience by the settler's discrimination, whereupon he went into the forest. What Njeng'ere shows the readers therefore is that those who went into the forest did so out of the discovery of the ills of the "friendly strangers" who turned

brutal when people demanded their rights. This brutality was exercised mainly through African homeguards who worked for the British colonialists. For example, Wangu tells us that her father was killed in the early days of the war. While killing may be inevitable in any kind of war, and Mau Mau war is no exception, what I find of interest [because it demonstrates the British government's harsh rule] is Wangu's assertion that

> [n]o one knew exactly how my father died. His body was dragged to the village reserve by government soldiers as a warning to others who intended to join the Mau Mau. "You shall end up like this," the soldiers shouted as they marched through the village (5).[5]

Throughout the text Njeng'ere demonstrates the reasons that impelled the Mau Mau to act the way they did and consequently negates the assertion that Mau Mau was a result of failure of Kikuyu to adapt to civilization, or an ethnic fight between the Kikuyu's haves and the have-nots, which was characterised by a bunch of misguided people who killed indiscriminately, as it was alleged by many colonial settlers (Buijitenhuis: 1973: 45; Simatei 1999: 154). Therefore behind Njeng'ere's narration of Kimathi's story, is the desire to show the ills meted to Africans by colonialists during the Mau Mau insurgency.

Njeng'ere shows that life for those who fought from the forest was characterised by many hardships, which called for extreme perseverance. These hardships are witnessed through the narrator's eyes, who while on her way to the forest with Muchemi says:

[5] Atrocities like this are similar to those exercised in Jewish holocaust. For instance, Judith Tydor (1998) gives an example of how a Jewish mother had bought an egg from a Polish peasant so that her child could not die of hunger – and both the mother and peasant were hanged. Their bodies swung in the market for several days as a lesson to the remaining population.

> Three men appeared. One was armed with a rifle, another was holding a large knife and a third was holding a jerry can for drawing water. They had long hair flowing behind their heads and their clothes were ragged. Their eyes were bloodshot and their faces tense. I could almost believe that they were ogres who just stepped out of one of our childhood stories. Muchemi made the sound of a bird. The three men vanished into the trees…. Muchemi repeated the sound again and one of them responded with a similar call… this was a coded way of identifying oneself without the enemy knowing (19).

The comparison of the Mau Mau guerrillas to ogres in the above quotation portrays the hardships the fighters went through. Such similes play with children's consciousness and help them to create a picture of the Mau Mau fighters. The description of these Mau Mau fighters is supplemented by illustrations which I again argue help in making the story accessible to child readers (see page 20). Lack of food and the hostile environment in the forest made the guerrillas to look like ogres that Wangu talks about. Sometimes the fighters sustained injuries from shots by the enemy and lived through them. For instance, when Wangu visits Kimathi she discovers that he had a wound in his left arm where he had sustained a gunshot in an encounter with homeguards (page 34).

Important in Njeng'ere's writing is the way he utilises the motifs of bravery, composure, vigour and power in the portrayal of Kimathi. He also presents him as a person who the other guerrillas looked up to for advice. Kimathi is figured as one with authority; a field Marshal. His residence is a special place where people visit only when there is something to be reported, like attacks by the enemy, and to seek his guidance concerning what action to take, whereupon he leads them in the fight. Other guerrillas refer to him as "*Muthee*, the elder one, as a sign of respect" (21). However although Kimathi operates from a position of authority, Njeng'ere shows that he was friendly

and approachable unlike the contemptuous figure of Kimathi in Meja Mwangi's *Carcase for Hounds*, or in Kenneth Watene's Play, *Dedan Kimathi*, who threatens other guerrillas with death. The Kimathi figure in Watene's play is a dictator, and he is so strict with his subordinates that one time we see him telling Wahu that she has no right to think (60). Having such representations of Kimathi from earlier narratives in mind, I reiterate that Njeng'ere wills into being an imagined children's audience and in the process sanitizes the language he employs when writing about Kimathi and Mau Mau. For example, although Njeng'ere acknowledges people were killed in the forest, such occurrences are mentioned in phrases like Kimathi "was a strict disciplinarian and often punished errant soldiers severely so that they would serve as an example to the others" (37); "... he ordered that they be executed … he knew letting any offender off the hook could lead to indiscipline in the whole army, and to him indiscipline was a recipe for failure. Kimathi did not want to fail" (38). In this case, although child readers are aware that those who betrayed the Mau Mau movement were sometimes punished by death, it is communicated through a language level that does not betray beastly killings that have been associated with Mau Mau in earlier narratives. Examples of scenes where killing associated with Mau Mau is described in more ghastly terms can be seen in texts like Robert Ruark's *Something of Value* (1950: 324-326), Sam Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* (1990: 152), or in Kenneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi* (1974), where Nyati describes how he killed a loyalist and then "slaughtered" his wife as the children "watched and screamed in vain", and "pleaded for their mother" (30-31). There is also no overt condemnation of the forest fighters in Njeng'ere's text, and descriptions of the oath-taking scene [see page 55] are comparatively mild as compared to those described in a text like Ruark's *Something of Value*.

Njeng'ere's selection of words and scenes also shows that he endeavours to show that Kimathi [and other guerrillas] was a well-purposed fighter and

leader who only punished people when there was a cause. He consequently does not incriminate Kimathi into a beast-like figure. This text therefore attempts to revise the already existing myths about Dedan Kimathi, which Njeng'ere effects through Wangu. For instance, when Wangu meets Kimathi, she sees a different man compared to what she had apparently heard about him. She says:

> I did not understand all the implications of what he was saying at the time, but from the way he was talking, I got the impression that he was fighting for a just cause. I had heard many people say that Kimathi was a villain and a rogue, a terrorist and even a murderer. But listening to him talk in his little home in the forest, all these thoughts seemed absurd. I found him approachable and fascinating. Mostly I just liked him (29-30).

Wangu's discovery is meant to influence the child readers towards their perception of Kimathi and subsequently negate what they might have heard or read elsewhere. Like Njeng'ere who uses a female character as his narrator, Sam Kahiga also uses Agnes Ndiritu [though not as the narrator], to introduce the reader to the character Kimathi. Agnes describes Kimathi as a man who was admired by many in the forest. However, in contrast to Wangu's view of Kimathi, which is maintained throughout the text, the positive perception of Kimathi in Kahiga's text fades away as we confront a man who suspects the guerrillas and is "obsessed … with organising the killing" (1990: 128). General Kago runs away from the forest allegedly because Kimathi wanted to hang him after they had differed (90). Ironically he (Kago) himself organizes many atrocious killings when he forms his own guerrilla force, which operated from the reserves (see page 152 and 160 for examples).

As the narrative unfolds in *Dedan Kimathi: Leader of Mau Mau*, we also discover that Njeng'ere attempts to unravel the mystery that was allegedly

associated with Kimathi, again probably because he is writing for children. Wangu says:

> As we walked I thought over in my mind what I knew about Kimathi. I had heard that he could crawl on his stomach for ten miles and he could change himself into a bird. People even said he could change into a leopard. My mother had told me that this was because, in order to camouflage himself from his enemies, he would kill a leopard, cover himself with the skin and then climb up a tree. When any enemy came near, they would just see a leopard and turn in another direction. When his fellow freedom fighters passed under the tree, Kimathi would similarly hold his cover. Later Kimathi would join them and tell them exactly what they had said while under the tree and the dumbfounded fighters would conclude that their leader had turned himself into a leopard (18).

Thus, although Njeng'ere shows that Kimathi was perceived as a mysterious character, he tries to explain the actions that made him strange; for example, the use of the leopard skin. The power that was associated with Kimathi is also emphasized in this text by the falling of the *Mugumo* tree after he is captured by the British soldiers. The fall of this tree had been prophesied earlier and it was meant to show that Kimathi was close to God, and probably how powerful he was (Watene 1974: 97; Kahiga 1990: 330; Njeng'ere 2003: 80).[6] Wangu reminds us of the mystery associated with Kimathi when she says,

> Many white people came to see the man who had instilled the fear of God in their hearts. Most of the Africans came to stand by their hero.

[6] But the falling of the tree can also be read as symbolic of defeat of the revolution as it is the *Mugumo* tree that was the source of courage and hope, not only for Kimathi but also for the whole Mau Mau group and the Kikuyu in general. This is because it was under the Mugumo tree that they prayed Ngai to assist them in wining the war.

> Some had come out of curiosity to see this dreaded man, while others had come to confirm that Kimathi had really been arrested and that he was not a mythical figure but a man of flesh and blood (81).

Towards the end of the text, Wangu laments that the effort that Kimathi made in resisting the British colonialists has not been recognized in Kenya's postcolonial era. She says:

> … [M]any years after independence his [Kimathi's] body has lain at Kamiti Maximum Prison… this means that Kimathi is in jail yet he does not belong there. Jail is a place for criminals. Kimathi was not a criminal. He was a man who believed in justice but who was forced to fight to demand that justice be done. He was a man who wanted peace but had to fight for it (82-83).

From this quotation, it is imperative to add that Njeng'ere strives to incorporate a public discourse into children's literature; a discourse that was prevalent in Kenya's political arena at the time the biography under analysis went into print. This discourse was a repeated urge from the members of the public that Kimathi's body be given a decent burial. Njeng'ere further expresses this urge through the narrator's voice when she says: "I hope Kimathi's remains will be accorded a dignified burial in a special place where those who believe in freedom and justice could visit to pay homage to the ideals that he fought for" (83). Throughout the text Njeng'ere accords Kimathi honour that few writers have given him in the past. He shows that Kimathi was a man who was fighting to make right what was wrong in the society; a saviour who met his death before he brought salvation home.

Conclusion

I have argued that using a female participant in the Mau Mau war as a narrator in children's fiction is important because it portrays this literature as

an avenue that argues for recognition of women's deeds in the Mau Mau war – an issue that has not been given enough room in Kenya's literary studies. I have showed that although in earlier narratives women have been seen as participants in the Mau Mau war, few writers have presented these narratives from a female narrator's point of view. In many of these earlier narratives, there is a tendency to valorise women's sexuality, a representation that reduces their visibility in the war. In the text discussed in this chapter, we have seen that Njeng'ere does not limit women's activities to their sexuality and he shows that women provided a complex organisation in carrying out Mau Mau assignments. This chapter has also examined how Njeng'ere represents the figure of Kimathi to a children's audience. Njeng'ere shows that Kimathi was a person who was determined to fight for a just cause; he was a leader with authority but who was nevertheless approachable to his subordinates. Njeng'ere also wills into being a children's audience in writing Kimathi's story, which is mainly seen first, by the way he positions Wangu as having participated in the Mau Mau activities when she was young, and as a result young readers can easily identify with her experience. Second, the use of paratextual features on the cover page, and narration through simple language, evident in this text are important devices in children's writing because they make the story accessible to young readers.

Furthermore, the biography of Kimathi is informative to child readers because apart from arguing for recognition of women's work in the war it helps children learn other issues concerning Mau Mau liberation struggle, which include: first, readers get a sense of the reasons that might have propelled people to fight against colonialism in Kenya, and second, the hardships these fighters experienced in the forest. In addition, Kimathi's biography partly argues for recognition of Mau Mau freedom fighters by Kenya's post independence government. Some of these concerns are in no way new in Kenya's historical and critical approaches to Mau Mau. However, my argument has been that the Lion series has given a variety to the mode

through which these issues have been raised in the past by inserting such issues into children's fiction.

I conclude this chapter with the words of Kathy Short (2001) who, although arguing in a context of gender, says:

> There is no such a thing as politically innocent book for kids. Authors and readers bring their own life experiences and social views of the world to a book, and these experiences shape the story that they construct through writing and reading (186).

Children's books can therefore go as far as telling the Mau Mau story and other Kenyan narratives [discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis], which shows that issues pertaining to liberation struggle are not exclusively for adults. The children's biographies by the *Sasa Sema* certainly influence the young to pay attention to matters that these biographies address. Such a series also helps children to recognize heroes who have made their country's history.