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

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Chapter Three

Gender in Children's Literature: The Female Character in Biographical Writing

Introduction

Before delving into the question of gender in children's literature it is important to look at the general representation of women in Africa's literary tradition in order to understand the profile, and the trajectory this representation has taken. In most writing by African literary writers, the female character has been figured in variety of ways, some of which are stereotypical. Mostly the female figure has been presented as a mother, who is confined within the home with the responsibility of taking care of the children and her husband. In such a presentation the woman's place is seen as the kitchen where she cooks and performs other kitchen chores. Otherwise, the female character is presented as a prostitute who corrupts the society and breaks people's homes; a presentation common in texts by African male writers. Florence Stratton argues that the conversion of mother Africa trope into a prostitute metaphor has been a recurring feature of contemporary tradition in men's fiction (1994: 47). Stratton posits that many male writers in African literature like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Cyprian Ekwensi, and others, "people (or woman) their texts with prostitutes" (53). She contends that the prostitute metaphor has been used by these male writers to encode women as agents of moral corruption and contamination in the society. These writers, she says, have tended to represent the prostitute as a miserable and an exploited woman whose redemption can only come through her repatriation from her operation grounds in urban centres, back to the village where she belongs. Stratton further argues that often the female figure is usually presented as a goddess who lures men to their death. Such a presentation, Stratton shows, is seen through characters like Ihuoma in Alechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, whose "first husband, the next suitor, and finally Ekwueme – the

cream of the village manhood - all die because they love her" (1994: 86). Amadi provides a myth for these deaths by showing that Ihuoma was a wife of a god (the sea king) who had sworn vengeance on any man who would be attracted to her. In such a case the woman becomes a character that men should be wary of.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie identifies the representation of the female character in African literature as "the figure of the 'sweet mother', the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self sacrifice" (1987: 6). This figure, Ogudipe-Leslie argues, is often conflated with mother Africa, with eternal and abstract beauty and inspiration. The figure of beauty, she reiterates, is usually related to the woman as the passionate and sensual lover, a view that makes women feminine archetypes and objects of sexual desire for men. Most often women are fixed by these stereotypes so that their attempts to transcend this position are often questioned. For instance, in her anthropological study of East African women and their struggle for economic independence, Christine Obbo (1980) argues "it seems that women's own attempts to cope with … situations they find themselves in are regarded as a 'problem' by men, and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women's roles" (143). Such notions that Obbo identifies, limit women's ability and serve to silence them, making them invisible in circles that have been deemed "exclusive for men".

Sometimes stereotypes are also used to confine women in positions where they only perform certain jobs, which further contribute to women's invisibility. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for example, we come across a masculine society in which women are accorded a very low status. Okonkwo's wives are just among his minor achievements. These women are not even mentioned by name but in numbers until later in the novel. Women are in this text seen as subsidiary characters and their good deeds are not recognised. Even when Ezinma portrays a sense of brightness, Okonkwo

always wished she were a boy (see page 44; 45; 122). This subsidiary level at which women are placed makes them silent throughout the text. Even when Okonkwo goes to exile, Ezinma has to follow her father's orders of not accepting any suitor in Mbanta until they are back to Umuofia. This is in contrast to Okonkwo's male child, Nwoye, who refuses to follow his father's strict model of masculinity, and also rebels against the instructions to keep off the Whiteman's religion. Culture had therefore conditioned Ezinma as a girl to take instructions without questions.[1] Ezinma submits to Okonkwo's definition of gender, "taking on the role of the tractable, serviceable, and selfless daughter", while Ekwefi seems to be content with her condition as battered woman, seen by her response to Okonkwo's beatings, and his attempted murder (Stratton 1994: 30). Stratton argues that in *Things Fall Apart*, women are silent in the face of their oppression under Igbo patriarchy (35). None of the women in this text attempts to rebel against the Igbo tradition, which is oppressive to women in many ways.

It is certainly clear that many African [male] writers are unwilling to represent female characters in their totality and in their true complexity, which is evident mainly in the way some writers have resorted to the use of stereotypes. This stereotyped representation of female characters has been seen, especially by women writers and critics, as a misconception which should be corrected. Kenyan writer, Grace Ogot attempts to question gender stereotyping in African literature through her text, *The Graduate*. Juanina, a character in this text, says:

> …no one should discriminate against girls and think that they should only take courses in home economics, nursing, nursery teaching and secretarial work; while boys are encouraged to study engineering,

[1] But it is also true that Okonkwo's children feared him. Therefore, Nwoye joins the white man's religion because he finds solace away from the oppressive atmosphere of his father's tyranny and Ezinma might have followed her father's wishes out of fear of the consequence of rebelling.

> medicine, and architecture. …. Both boys and girls are needed to build a strong nation (1980: 7).

Ogot further acknowledges women's contribution in the Mau Mau liberation struggle by the way they carried food and ammunition to the fighters in the forest (11). In this text one notices her awareness of the low status the female character occupies both in the society and in literature, and thus she uses her characters, like Juanina to question this status.

Gender stereotypes are not exclusive to adult fiction because stereotypes are also visible in children's books. In this chapter I examine two biographies whose narratives are about women's deeds, namely: *Mekatilili wa Menza: Woman Warrior* (2000), by Elizabeth Mugi-Ndua and *Mwana Kupona: Poetess from Lamu* (2000) by Kitula King'ei. Mekatilili was a woman political hero in Kenya in the early twentieth century, while Mwana Kupona was a celebrated nineteenth century poet from the East African Coast. The chapter aims at examining how the two writers use biographies meant for children to interrogate the idea of female heroism and to revise gender stereotypes in children's literature. In the two texts Mugi-Ndua and King'ei attempt to elevate female heroism, which African culture has often failed to recognize, mainly because of patriarchal ideologies, which view women essentially as supporting characters in the drama of life. Men are generally seen as agents of change while women are conceived as their helpmates (Pearson Carol and Katherine Pope 1981). I contend that biographies, whose narratives draw from real life situations, help in revising the representation of female characters in children's literature. Although I refer to suppositions by other scholars, this discussion proceeds under the theoretical influence of Susan Lehr (2001) who argues that in order to know who women are and what they have done, we must listen to their voices and watch their deeds.

I will first look at the general conception of female heroism and in the process examine how Mugi-Ndua and King'ei represent their characters in order to understand the kind of female models they create for children. Second, I look at gender stereotyping in children's literature, and in addition, I examine how the two authors use children's books to revise these stereotypes. Mekatilili's biography presents children with accomplishments of a political heroine, and thus it helps revise how the past has been remembered selectively in Kenya, with the history of struggle getting mascularised. In the biography of Mwana Kupona, I pay attention to how she becomes a model for children because of her hard work in the literary field. Mwana Kupona's spirit of hard work seen through her writing, especially in her old age, is important to young readers who might strive to imitate ambitious characters. In addition, her writing is also read as showing traces of women writers in times as early as the nineteenth century, in what has been a male dominated Kenyan literary tradition. In a nutshell, the chapter will address two questions that are somehow related: Does Mugi-Ndua's and King'ei's presentation of the two female characters deviate from how girl/women characters have been represented in children's literature in the past? If so, what kind of models do they create for children?

The Idea of Female Heroism

Heroism has mostly been associated with performance of extraordinary deeds or with people who step out and do something where others shy away. Again, as I showed in Chapter One, heroism especially in African oral narratives has been associated with animals, and mostly small animals like the hare. This aspect of attributing heroism to small animals helps to give young readers motivation to act, by assuring them that success does not reside in their body size. Animal fables are in such cases used in drawing attention to the cherished and enduring human morals and values, and also to the abhorred foibles. In cases where we have human characters, majority of heroes that we encounter are men, thereby relegating the female character to

the role of an observer and not a performer. Donelson Kenneth and Allen Pace (1980: 285), associate the submergence of female heroism with the emergence of oral narratives. The two show that the appearance and adoption of narratives by human beings is linked to hunting. They assert that whenever men went hunting they came back and narrated their experiences to their wives and children. In these stories that men told, some men were seen to have braved and killed dangerous animals and thus stories about them ended up being heroic tales. Such tales were exclusively about masculine encounters because women's work was to give birth, stay at home with children, and listen to men's stories when they came back from hunting. This heritage, the two scholars insist, has made people to think of the heroic adventure as being an exclusively male territory. Women's activities came to be considered as marginal and insignificant, and heroines were viewed as doing something unexpected of their sex.

Many African oral narratives therefore feature mainly men carrying out heroic feats. These men are most often seen rescuing their sisters from giants or from other dangerous conditions. This characteristic of oral narratives has been carried over to fictional creations of children's stories because the majority of these stories begin with the assumption that the hero is male. For example, in Jimmi Makotsi's *The Boys from Kakamega*, Ben thinks it is no girl's business to track criminals. Consequently Jemima and Farida are considered unnecessary and unwelcome into the group. Ben wonders: "What do girls have to do with men's business" (1996: 41). Similarly, in Oludhe Macgoye's *The Black Hand Gang*, Onyango reveals that he had not thought of having girls in their gang at all (1997: 1). Such episodes reveal the notions that female characters (girls) are supposed to be in safe places and that men only should be involved in certain expeditions, especially where there is a likelihood of meeting opposition, or taking risks.

Studies on heroism have further demonstrated that in most cases female heroism is either condemned, or it is simply ignored. It has also often been seen as less interesting. In their study of the female hero in the American and British literature, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope (1981) believe that differences in female and male heroism arise from the cultural assumptions that strong women are deviants and should be punished. Pearson and Pope contend that women are not supposed to be excluded in heroic studies because "the journey of self discovery which is a characteristic of traditional heroes is the same for both male and female"[2]. The two see it as a women's duty to place themselves in their due position as heroes. "The first task of the female hero is to slay dragons (negative myths about women which are internalised through socialization) that are a result of patriarchal myths and institutions that oppress women" (1981: viii). Therefore, if women are ever to be heroic, "they must refuse to see themselves as guilty or inadequate other" (7). On a similar note Julie Barak (1999) posits that in order to overcome gender inequalities, one has to recognize the qualities that have been assigned to her as a woman by the other and then define one's collective and individual self by working through these qualities, for a binary opposition only exists because of the presence of the other.[3]

Susan Lehr (1995) points out that the female hero in children's fantasy remains in mortal combat against images of arrogant destructive men. Lehr contends that in children's literature most of the imagery is created out of a world in which men rule and women must fight to find their voices (9). Many literary texts also make it clear that the strong willed, intelligent, self-managing, disobedient female heroes are anomalies (Lehr 2001: 193). Lehr

[2] The journey to self-discovery of heroes involves the departure of the hero, initiation and return. The successful completion of the journey requires the hero to overcome some obstacles "dragons" that may appear at any stage (Pearson and Pope 1981: viii). See also Joseph Campbell (1968: 30) for more details on the stages that a hero goes through in heroic narratives. The movement of the monomyth that Campbell identifies as separation-initiation-return has been seen as corresponding exactly with the "basic plot" of children's fiction identified as home-away-homecoming (Nikolajeva 2002: 28).

[3] http://www.ndsu.edu/RRCWL/V1/Reading1.html

argues that some female heroes are extremely lonely and unhappy young women despite their bravado. She further contends that women subsume their personalities under their husbands and their children and by doing so they become unliberated, boring people who are too frightened to be interesting (193). According to Lehr, the price of disobedience and free-spirited living may be too high for most women.

It is against a background that fails to recognize women's heroic deeds that King'ei and Mugi-Ndua write and identify women's achievements in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I endeavour in this chapter to show that in addition to motherhood [which is often used to subordinate women], Mekatilili and Mwana Kupona did much more admirable work during their time, thus demonstrating that gender is not an impediment to accomplishment. I now examine what female characters and/or models Mugi-Ndua and King'ei create in *Mekatlili wa Menza: Woman Warrior* and *Mwana Kupona: Poetess from Lamu*, respectively.

Mekatilili was a woman from the Giriama community of the East African coast, who led her people in resisting the British colonial rule in the early twentieth century in Kenya. In the text *Mekatilili wa Menza* (2000) Mugi-Ndua takes the reader through Mekatilili's life as a small girl, her marriage, and her fight against colonialism. Mug-Ndua shows that Mekatilili played a vital role in resisting the British colonial rule in Kenya and she got jailed along with other freedom fighters of the time. In this text, we discover that Mekatilili's struggle is twofold: she struggles against colonial invasion and also against her male dominated society. In Mekatilili's society men were the main leaders [and heroes of the society] but her determination made people to listen to her and heed her advice in the course of fighting the invaders, as we will see in this discussion.

Commenting on gender and nationalism in Tanzania, Susan Geiger (1997) argues that women's political actions and history are silenced in a cumulative process whereby successive written accounts reinforce and echo the silence of the previous ones. She cites Bibi Titi Mohammed whose name as a TANU leader, like that of Julius Nyerere, [Tanzania's first president], was known throughout the country at independence. But despite her prominence Bibi Titi receives only a passing mention in most accounts of Tanzanian nationalism. Geiger's argument on the exclusion of women nationalists in the Tanzania's national discourse is not unique to the country because such situations are found in the rest of Africa. In this discussion, I read the inclusion of Mekatilili's biography in children's literature as an attempt to sever the cumulative process of silencing of women that Geiger identifies.

Mugi-Ndua shows that Mekatilili grew up performing jobs that were seen as men's, and her deeds culminate in a great resistance that she facilitates against the British colonialists. Mugi-Ndua narrates Mekatilili's story all the time trying to show what determination she had. Some of the aspects of style that Mugi-Ndua employs include: the use of Mekatilili's voice, descriptions, and a series of illustrations – styles that help the reader to visualize Mekatilili's intrepidness. At the very beginning of the text, the reader is informed that Mekatilili's character was a mixture of gentleness, strength and determination; she would stop at nothing to see her people free from the yoke of colonialism (preface). The author further asserts: "perhaps out there some girls and boys will grow up to be like her" (viii). Such opening remarks in children's books create curiosity in the child reader's mind concerning the character, most likely forcing him/her to identify with the character.

Mekatilili's heroism is more visible in her effort in fighting British colonialism. The arrival of the British in Giriamaland not only destroys the organisation of the Giriama people, but it also impoverishes the Africans due to the hut tax that is imposed on people. They [British] also capture

Mekatilili's husband and takes him away as a slave. British actions annoy Mekatilili day by day – she declares she was not going to pay any more tax and she would not "fear these beasts" (38). Consequently she advises other women to keep away from the alien ways of the British. Other people in Mekatilili's village admire her determination and so they join her in the struggle. Mugi-Ndua enters into Mekatilili's mind and articulates her feelings towards British invasion. She says:

> Mekatilili was angry. Who are these people to say the government needs this land?! The Giriama need their own land! What can they be thinking? She had only experienced this kind of feeling when she had first heard about the slave trade. Her mother had told her that slaves went for days without food, were mistreated and, worst of all, they were separated from their families. "And now this is happening to us," she thought (43-44).

The author informs us that Mekatilili "did not fear power, even when there were soldiers and deadly weapons. The most important thing for her was to do what is right, and what should be" (44-45). In one of the meetings she speaks thus:

> Our men have been stolen…. Our sons our husbands…. We must stop paying taxes. Do not pay tax. You must refuse!…. They take our millet! And if the rains fail they take our goats. These strangers are nothing but common thieves…. When you do not pay tax they will force you. Resist them. We cannot let our land be taken and our people become slaves, poor and homeless in their own land…. Even if it means death, let us die but let us die proud to be Giriama in our own land!…. Many say the problem is that we have left the ways of our ancestors…. They say that we return to our *kaya* and consult the gods…. This is true. We should return to the *kaya* and hold fast to our Giriama ways. But….

> But… the problem is not that we have left the ways of our ancestors.… No my people…. It is the British who have left their ancestors and need to be cut down (46-48).

This scene presents a unique bravery to have such words coming from a woman especially in Mekatilili's time, when traditional patriarchal norms were profoundly tight. Quoting Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) Florence Stratton argues that women are naturally excluded in public places and viewed as unable to hold responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed (1994: 15). Politics has therefore been seen as men's domain and women are seen as needing tutelage before they can be politically active (ibid). In the text under discussion, we see Mugi-Ndua wrestling with revising the construction of nationalism as a patriarchal ideology through Mekatilili. Her [Mekatilili's] spirit of action presents women not as helpless and dependent creatures who are supposed to be kept away from the scene of action (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994: 138), but as characters that can occupy a central position in all fields. Mekatilili's insight and power of speech noted in the quotation above attracted crowds of listeners every time she spoke [Page 49; see also the illustration on the cover page]. In such meetings Mekatilili exposed those headmen who betrayed Africans to the colonialist (see page 51 for examples). Although a few men saw it as unusual for a woman to speak with such confidence because of their traditional beliefs (64), they never resisted Mekatilili's leadership, as she had impressive ways of stating her ideas. Mekatilili's own words are used in the above quotation to show how daring she was, which is complimented by the authors' comments. A story like Mekatilili's, written alongside those of other individuals [mostly men], who resisted colonial rule in Kenya, communicates to the young audience that it is not only characters like Kenyatta, Kaggia or Dedan Kimathi who helped to remove the yoke of colonialism; women too played part.

The motif of a courageous and daring woman [utilised in the quotations above] is further employed when Mekatilili and Wanje wa Mwadorikola, a male character in the text, are arrested by the British government and taken far away to Kisii, in Western Kenya, to serve a five-year jail sentence. The two escape from prison and "headed east moving as fast as they could through the forests, up and down steep hills" (60-61), until they reached their homeland at the coast. Although the British recapture Mekatilili, and burn up the *kaya,* she makes a lot of impact within the short time she comes back. "Her clear voice kept ringing in their ears: "Go back to Giriama ways! Fight the Intruders!" (72). Mekatilili's daring acts in this text make a kind of literature that documents women's revolutionary courage that provides a positive alternative to social norms that confine women to the homes. Her courage shows that "women, like men can attain heroism through their commitment to truth beyond what is recognized by social cultural assumptions that view determined and strong women as deviants who are supposed to be punished" (Pearson and Pope 1981).

Towards the end of the narrative, resistance against colonial rule heightens. The Giriama stage an attack where they kill many British colonialists and their soldiers. This surprises the British and although they get reinforcement in terms of more soldiers and guns, the Giriama can simply not honour the foreign rules. "The British therefore turned their attention away from Giriamaland and left them alone" (76). At this time Mekatilili and Wanje return from jail. In her usual determined spirit Mekatilili asks her people to rebuild their *kaya*, which had been destroyed by the British. She assures them that the British could not destroy their *kayas* any more: "My people they are tired of us. We have given them too much trouble…. They will leave us with our land and go away" (78). In fact, the British never attacked the Giriama people again. The author captures it thus:

> Mekatlili had been right about the British. She could see what the British had in their heart better than the British themselves could. The British gave up the idea of taking the land north of the Sabaki River. They never tried to destroy any of the Giriama homes. They stopped forcing men to work in their farms. The Giriama were allowed to live in peace and freedom. They turned to their traditional way of governing themselves…. The elders stayed in the *kaya* just like in old times, and people lived in peace and happiness. And so it was for many years (79-80).

In this organization Mekatilili becomes the head of the women elders and Wanje, the leader of the council of elders in the men's *kambi*. Mugi-Ndua magnifies Mekatilili's power and portrays her as having known what the British were planning to do and of course when it comes true people certainly trust her as a leader. In Mekatilili's biography we encounter a strong woman leader in a male dominated society who possesses some kind of bravery that is rare in fictional representations of women. This presentation that deviates from how girl and women characters have been presented in children's literature, forces us to agree with Lehr (2001) that it is only through examining women's activities that we can know them, rather than relying on stereotypical presentations. Mekatilili's courage negates the repeated stereotype of a young girl passively waiting for her brother to save her, evident in some African oral narratives.

Writing stories of characters like Mekatilili for children, one could argue, helps in bringing African heroines to the fore. The famous Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui (2000) [4] has noted the absence of heroines in the African literary and political scene. Mazrui argues that most of the unsung super-heroes of the twentieth century struggle against white minority rule in Africa are women who took great risks in this struggle, although their effort has most often gone

[4] *Daily Nation*, 5th March 2000.

unrecognised. However, looking at the effort the *Sasa Sema* Publications is making to "resurrect" or sing Kenyan [African] heroes and heroines, one can safely argue that the melody for such un-sung heroes is already on in the twenty first century.

I read the incorporation of Mekatilili biography in writings for children as a deliberate choice by both the publisher and the writer to give Kenyan children especially girls, heroes/characters that they can identify with. This gender reconstruction is also important because it nurtures the boys into realizing the potential of women and appreciating that their female counterparts are not an inferior class. Having had heroes that are mostly men especially those in Mekatilili's line of action, Kenyan children can now come to terms with the fact of women also being heroes. In the next section I examine how the literary writer is figured as a role model for children.

While the previous part of this discussion has read Mekatilili as a political heroine, this section looks at the biography of Mwana Kupona who was composer of Swahili poetry in late nineteenth century. I read the inclusion of Mwana Kupona in this series of biographies as an attempt to demonstrate that heroism is not necessarily linked to politics as many people have tended to assume. Mwana Kupona's poems show that women in Kenya played an important part as producers of culture, and were thus participants in literary studies in times as early as nineteenth century. I read the art of composing and writing poetry as a Swahili cultural artefact that King'ei is trying to bring to the public knowledge through Mwana Kupona. I pay attention to how King'ei creates Mwana Kupona and how he incorporates her poem into her biography in order to cast her as one of the great personalities of the nation. Mwana Kupona becomes a model, and thus a hero, not because of facing danger or a battle, but because of keeping up to her decision to compose a poem for her daughter, Mwana Hashima. In this case, the will to succeed when times seem hard, as Mwana Kupona does, is read as heroic. I argue that

Mwana Kupona's determination for success is important for children as they learn from her endeavours.

King'ei informs us that as a housewife confined in the Swahili-Islamic culture Mwana Kupona "rose above all odds and bequeathed to humanity a memorable and precious homily composed in glamorous poetic verse" (ix). Her diligence becomes noteworthy especially because she writes her poem during her last two years of life when she is in great agony from her illness. We gather this from King'ei's own suggestion and also from the complete poem that is provided towards the end of the text:

Maradhi yemenshika	I have fallen sick
Hatta yametimu mwaka	It's a whole year now since I got sick
Sikupata kutamka	I have not spoken
Neno lema kukwambia	To give you advice

[Translation mine] (See stanza 2: 95).[5]

In this stanza Mwana Kupona speaks about her sickness but also expresses her will to write a poem for her daughter. This poem would act as guidance for her daughter when she (Mwana Kupona) is dead. From the poem we also learn that Mwana Kupona's husband is dead (See stanza 54: 100). The death of Mwana Kupona's husband might probably have freed her from the bonds of domesticity. Mwana Kupona seems to be in a position of power because she has property and she is not subjected to any restrictions as leaves her home at will. She is however aware of what experiences women face in the household and she thus writes a poem for her daughter in an attempt to educate her on how to survive in such a society.

[5] King'ei has incorporated Mwana Kupona's poem into her biography (page 95-105). King'ei positions this poem as part of the biography because he shows that Mwana Kupona recited it to her daughter after she completed it. He uses parts of this poem in the course of narration, either to explain some points or to demonstrate the teaching that the poem contained. The verses that I quote in this discussion are either from the complete poem on pages 95-105, or those that are incorporated in the course of narration.

King'ei uses three channels to communicate Mwana Kupona's actions: his comments, Mwana Kupona, and thirdly Mwana Hashima; a vocal point that occasionally tells the reader about her mother's stamina in her work. Many of the conversations that she [Mwana Hashima] has with Zuhura, her best friend, tell the readers of Mwana Kupona's industry:

> "How is your mother?" asked Zuhura who knew that Mwana Hashima's mother had been ill.
> "She is better. She is strong, and nothing will stop her from writing at her desk…"
> …. "Did I tell you about the poem she is composing for me?"
> "You did".
> "It is to tell me how to be happy," added Mwana Hashima (4)

The dialogue utilised between Zuhura and Mwana Hashima in many incidences in this text is very important in understanding Mwana Kupona's diligence. In this text readers learn not only about Mwana Kupona's determination and skill of composing poetry, but they may also benefit from the teaching that the poem bears, as this discussion will show later. In the quotation above, we realize that Mwana Hashima had already noticed her mother's determination and that is why she says that nothing would keep her away from her desk. Any time Mwana Hashima gets home, King'ei promptly notifies the reader that she finds her mother busy writing her poem:

> When they reached the porch at the top of the house, they found Mwana Kupona seated at her writing table. Ink, pens and papers were scattered about the table (26).

Mwana Kupona even praises her own work towards the end of her poem because she is content she has done the best. (See stanza 97, 98 and 99, page

104). Apparently Mwana Hashima and Zuhura already like Mwana Kupona's poem and Zuhura occasionally asks her friend to recite verses for her.[6] Mwana Kupona's stamina to complete the poem is an inspiration to the young, mostly students. This story orients children towards seeking success in life, and such a story can also be used by teachers in a classroom condition to encourage learners to be diligent in their studies. Mwana Kupona therefore becomes a role model for children and thus their hero.

Mwana Kupona is not only good at writing poems but she also shows great skill in using and explaining the meaning of imagery she uses in her poem and other literary devices employed in literature. For instance, when Zuhura and Mwana Hashima come home with *khangas* (cotton materials used by women as wrap-arounds) that had some *methali* (proverbs), written on them Mwana Kupona explains the meaning of the *methali* to the two girls. She spends some time with the girls teaching them how to interpret imagery (See page 27-30 of the text). She also explains the importance of poetry:

> People all over the world create poetry. Poetry is a musical, entertaining and thought-provoking literary adventure. It sharpens our sense of word choice, helps us express ourselves more precisely, and even pushes us to think deeply about things (49)…. [P]oetry is the most satisfying way to communicate through language (51).

Here King'ei uses Mwana Kupona's words to explain to the readers the merits of poetry. He also employs Mwana Kupona as his mouthpiece throughout the text in order to demonstrate the importance of hard work, seen through the way Mwana Kupona tells Mwana Hashima that perfection in composing of poems and proper use of imagery "only comes after years of hard work and practice" (52), and that it also takes interest and commitment.

[6] See page (5) of the biography where Mwana Hashima recites for Zuhura a verse that warns girls against being malicious and making jokes that annoy other people.

King'ei uses such articulations to tell us that although Mwana Kupona might have been a gifted composer, hard work was the main determining factor in achieving her desired goal. She thus becomes a role model because excellent deeds by personalities in any piece of work can trigger the readers' wishes to imitate those who do well.

Tony Sanchez (1998) contends that a hero is not necessarily a celebrity or a famous person. A genuine hero, he argues, expresses values through self-sacrificing acts that benefit others and the community, and others are inspired by and united in recognition of the hero's contribution. According to Tony, the self-promoting celebrity or notorious seeker of fame fails to meet the definition of a hero.[7] Following Tony's supposition, I argue that Mwana Kupona is a self-made and not a self-promoting hero. This is because through her determination she manages to keep on writing even in her old age. Mwana Kupona is a heroine and a symbol of industry for the whole community, and her work makes her heroic in ways different from the political index that has often been used as a measure of heroism.

I now briefly look at gender stereotypes in children's books, which I use as a backdrop against which I examine how the two texts under discussion attempt to revise these stereotypes.

Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature

Studies in gender issues in children's books indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms as well (Manjari Singh 1998).[8] Girls [read women] are usually represented as sweet, naive, conforming and dependent on boys, while boys [read men] are shown to be strong, adventurous, problem solvers, independent, capable and in charge of

[7] http://www.ericfacility.net/ericdigests/ed424190.html
[8] http://www.indiana.edu/-eric_rec/ieo/digests/d135.html

situations (Bob Dixon, 1977; Manjari Singh, 1998; Toshiko Sugino, 1998; Shirley Ernst, 1995; Belinda Louie, 2001). Kimberley Reynolds (1994) sees the society as having some degree of contribution in moulding of children because he argues that while they are growing up girls are given toys to feminize and condition them for housekeeping and motherhood, while boys are given toys that prepare them for such things as war and bureaucracy (9). Making reference to researches on sex role stereotyping in children's texts conducted in 1970s and early 1980s, Shirley Ernst argues that these researches showed that women were not typically perceived as risk takers, being physically active, or having professional lives (1995:67). Ernst insists there is no way girls can build positive images of themselves when the books they read reinforce passive and dependent roles. She queries: "Why don't these books portray women in 'real-world' roles?" (68).

Manjari Singh (1998) argues that even in texts where female characters are presented initially as active and assertive, they are often portrayed in a passive light towards the end of the story. Exposing children especially girls to such stereotyped roles is dangerous as it limits their dreams and goals.

Gender stereotyping in children's books is therefore a major factor that hinders the representation of girls/women in their real roles and achievements. Since biographies outline one's deeds in life, having women biographies written for children goes a long way in trying to surface important deeds by Kenyan women, which have not been given much literary attention. For example, although the story of Mekatilili has featured in history textbooks in Kenya, it has not been written in a way that is accessible to children. The language is sometimes complex for children to understand and the presentation is a strict chronological display of facts, which is rather too serious. The styles of comprehensive description, dialogue and illustrations that the *Sasa Sema* biographies utilise, bequeath these narratives with a much more exciting narrative for the young audience. In addition, books like the

biography of Mekatilili and Mwana Kupona that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children with the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions, thus providing them with alternative role models who can inspire them [children] to adopt more egalitarian gender attitudes.

In the text *Mekatilili wa Menza*, Mugi-Ndua shows us that instead of keeping close to her mother to learn household duties, as was expected of her by her society, Mekatilili walks around the *Kaya* with her father. She goes to the meeting house of the elders, and listens to the stories told to her by her father about the society. One would expect stories about the society to be told to boys especially when they are learning from a male figure, as many African traditions have often stipulated, but on the contrary it is Mekatilili [a girl] who is told such stories. Important here is the agency Mugi-Ndua gives Mekatilili by allowing her to visit the meeting place in the *Kaya* which was/is out of bounds to women like her. The *Kaya* phenomenon is still not abandoned today and it is referred to as sacred and a special resting place for the departed souls korma (Wangutusi Mutoro 1987: 50). Mutoro argues that the *Kaya* is administered by a council of elders (*wazee wa kaya*). This last phrase "*wazee wa kaya*" implies that the *kaya* is an exclusively male-controlled abode. The *kaya*'s Committee is wholly and exclusively comprised of male elders. Hence care and conservation effort is exclusively left to the elders, while the youth and women have no role to play in the affairs of the *kaya* shrine. Women visit their husbands (those who live in the shrine as elders), but it is forbidden for these women to spend a night there. Exclusion of women from *kaya* activities survives up to date. Such exclusion was witnessed in the year 2004 when the final traditional funeral rites for the late Kenyan Local Government Minister Karisa Maitha [Maitha was a member of *kaya* Fungo, otherwise known as *kaya* Giriama]. During the performance of these rights, Patrick Beja reports, "Maitha's wives were absent as women are not supposed to take part …" (*East African Standard* online, September 20, 2004).

Mugi-Ndua's representation of Mekatilili to have been visiting the *kaya* in these early days shows her wish to create an atmosphere with no restriction for women in terms of their actions and movement, thus revising the conviction that the *kaya* is a no go place for women. Mekatilili is represented as venturing into men's activities from an early age, and she only speaks to her mother on limited occasions. Speaking to her mother is in no way wrong, but what I want to emphasize is the way the author creates Mekatilili in a way that suggests that it is not taboo for girls to get close to their fathers or to go to certain places which are deemed "forbidden" for women, like the *kaya*. Some of these taboos, one might argue, are just ways of making sure that women feature only in certain spaces. In this text therefore, Mugi-Ndua strives to create a boundless space for girls and women in general. This room for women is further demonstrated by the way Mekatilili accompanies her father in trading expeditions to Kenya's coast. Again the task of helping her father in trade matters could "traditionally" be associated with boys.[9] Such jobs helped to prepare boys for future responsibilities when they became fathers. But Mekatilili bears a heavy load on her head, braves the hot sun and walks beside her father all the way to the coast [See illustration on page 9]. It might be argued that the task of Mekatilili carrying a heavy load to the coast is the repeated identification of women as beasts of burden. But this representation also helps us to argue that sex roles are not necessarily low because they are naturally so, but because they have been constructed that way and feminized; showing that women perform tasks that are even extra burdening despite their gender construction as the weaker sex. Mugi-Ndua suggests that there are no jobs restricted to boys or to girls so long as one has the ability to perform them, which in my view is a revision of gender stereotypes. We could thus argue that this text falls in the class of non-sexist books that can help to combat gender bias and therefore provide models that children can learn from (Lesnik-Oberstein 1994). It also advocates Judith Stinton's (1979)

[9] I am not suggesting that women never went on trade expeditions; rather my concern lies in the way Mekatilili does this job in the company of the father and not with a female like her.

suggestion that the idea of older brother climbs a tree, while little sister admires from below should be scrapped from children's literature, because such ideas house harmful attitudes (3).

However, it is important to note that in this text Mugi-Ndua deliberately uses the inversion of gender roles as a subversive manoeuvre that creates a new narrative space for the representation of women (Stratton 1994). The use of the inversion technique certainly helps in the revision of gender stereotypes in children's literature. However, although performing men's duties may be viewed as one way of attempting to revise gender stereotypes, it is also limiting because women's activities seem to be visible only because they are linked to men; implying that women's success can only be noticeable through venturing into men's activities. Nevertheless, it cannot be refuted that Mekatilili showed her heroism in her later life when she fights against colonialism, as we have already seen, which places her in a position of admiration by the members of her society and I suppose by the readers. In the following paragraphs, I look at the biography of Mwana Kupona in relation to gender stereotypes.

In the text *Mwana Kupona: Poetess from Lamu*, Kitula King'ei shows that the *utendi*[10] that Mwana Kupona composes for her daughter concentrates on women's role in the home, the relationship a woman should have with her husband and God, and how one should treat others in the society in general. In this text, King'ei demonstrates that even if women are sometimes stereotyped as sweet mothers and as confined to the home, and some of them willingly obey their second-class citizen position, these women can still involve themselves in activities that are recognizable in the society. A close examination of Mwana Kupona's poem reveals that her advice tends towards a submissive approach to life for women. However, to be submissive in another sense can be read as a tactful means of acquiring what one needs in

[10] A long poem.

life, and empowering oneself. Rather than advising her daughter to fight her husband, Mwana Kupona counsels her on how to tame him. For example, in stanza 28-36 (97-98), Mwana Kupona advices the daughter to speak to the husband politely, cook for him, wash his clothes, laugh with him and make him happy so that she can live happily. In stanza 35, she tells the daughter to care for her husband like a baby who has not yet learnt to speak, so that the husband can respect her:

Mtunde kama kijana	tend him like a child
Asiyoyua kunena	that cannot yet speak
Kitu changalie sana	tend with great care
Kitokacho na kuingia	that which goes out and in

(98).

While Mwana Kupona's advice to her daughter to humble herself before her husband seems contradictory and an impediment to women's liberation agenda, her approach is in another sense a way of taming men. It is not that men are enemies but the point I am making is first, that Mwana Kupona's approach shows that women can use varied styles in order to make life liveable especially in societies that are inscribed with gender imbalances or stereotypes. And second, that women do not have to be rebellious in order to stand on a ground that they wish to. Mwana Kupona advocates women's acceptance of their womanhood, an approach through which they can create comfort and peace for themselves without being overtly antagonistic to men. This implies that in societies like Mwana Kupona's where women were subordinated, and "husbands had almost unbounded authority over their wives, … it was still possible for women to negotiate their positions without transgressing those boundaries" (Topan 2004: 218). The advice of mother to daughter is to take the whole situation in a subtle way, without making the husband [the child] aware that he is powerless. In a sense, the husband becomes vulnerable to manipulation. Such a tactic like Mwana Kupona's is

gallant and may be admired by young girls. Mwana Kupona's sexuality and her space that have been prescribed by societal norms due to her sex, are here seen as a resource that "a woman must exploit if she is to get what she wants in a male dominated society" (Stratton 1994: 101). Such a strategy can help women become self-defining characters.

Another important issue that needs to be examined in Mwana Kupona's biography is the way she is projected as one of the earliest composers of poetry in Kenya. The reader is here called upon to notice the masterminding of both cultural artistic world and written literature by women in times as early as nineteenth century. (Re)surfacing Mwana Kupona's contribution in the literary world is important because, according to the author, Mwana Kupona has been little known outside the circle of studies in classical Swahili although her work is deemed an important didactic piece. Mwana Kupona's writing is also important especially when we read it as occurring within a Kenyan literary tradition which has been predominantly male. This draws our attention to how female voices in Africa in general and Kenya in particular have been silenced. For example, as Florence Stratton (1994) notes, it took generations before Grace Ogot's work compelled attention to itself. Stratton argues that Grace Ogot has for a long time been one of the most forgotten writers, and a striking example of the invisibility of African women writers (58). Recognition of Mwana Kupona's poetic talent and her poetry in the twenty first century resurrects the antecedent of the Grace Ogots of this world. It tells us that after all Grace Ogot was not the first female writer in Kenya. Furthermore, recognition of Mwana Kupona also breaks the invisibility that Stratton talks about because through her, children and adults as well are made aware of this early literary contribution by women. This means that even though there has been an impression created that male writers dominate the Kenyan literary field, this has only occurred because women's contribution has repeatedly been sidelined. Mwana Kupona's

contribution is therefore seen as a major development in elevating female voices in this male dominated literary field.

Through the two texts discussed in this chapter, young readers are not only introduced to issues of hard work, morality, and good conduct exemplified by the biography of Mwana Kupona, but they are also introduced to other aspects of their national history, like resistance to colonial rule by women embodied by Mekatilili. One could argue that the *Sasa Sema* project has gone a long way in broadening the horizon of children's literature not only because it gives priority to gender, but also because the project uses this literature as a channel to publicise individuals like Mwana Kupona whose work is little known to other Kenyan communities, other than the coastal areas where she lived. Writing her biography therefore helps to spread her significance in Kenya. The content of her poetry is important because it encourages the adoption of particular virtues like honesty, perseverance, loyalty, tolerance, fairness, respect and responsibility, which are important in everyone's life. In addition, the inclusion of a political heroine like Mekatilili in the *Sasa Sema* project can be read as an assertion of the role that women have played in discourses of liberation in Kenya. Mekatilili overcomes dragons on the way that Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope (1981) talk about, and emerges triumphantly at the end. Indeed she is remembered as an important character in the history of Giriama's encounter with colonialism. Quite naturally, she is also a role model for the whole nation. Although Mekatili is somehow iconoclastic, while Mwana Kupona is a conformist, in each of the two strands of narratives there is an agenda of revision of gender stereotypes that creates space for the female character.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at how the series of biographies under study attempts to recover women heroes in Kenya, which I have argued is an endeavour to revise gender stereotyping in children's literature, and also an

attempt to give female heroism a different gaze. The texts discussed in this chapter privilege women voices by recasting cultural artefact into the public sphere through Mwana Kupona and re-constructing women political heroes through Mekatilili wa Menza. In Mekatilili's biography, I have examined how the character took part in the liberation struggle in Kenya in the early twentieth century by resisting infiltration of British rule into her community. I have argued that Mugi-Ndua attempts to represent the girl/woman character in a different light from what has featured earlier in children's literature, by employing the inversion model to place Mekatilili in spaces that were meant for men. I have further deduced that although the strategy of inversion may not resolve the problem of gender, it may be an inventive move that creates a new narrative space for the image of women. In Mwana Kupona's biography the act of writing that she got involved in, and her determination to finish her work in sickness, creates in her a role model that children can identify with. Moreover, in this biography there is a strategic positioning of the female character in the home environment where she can use non-violent tactics in patriarchal societies to occupy spaces she would wish to. In addition, Mwana Kupona's work helps in breaking the invisibility of women writers in Kenyan literary field, a field that has for a long time been viewed as male domain, especially in times when Mwana Kupona lived.

Mekatilili and Mwana Kupona represent exemplars of moral and physical action and this is what makes them heroic (Richard Hunter, 1993: 9). The authors of the two texts "construct a new… femininity endowing it with a positive power which undermines conventional images of women" (Newell 1997: 4). This demonstrates that children's literature is not only inscribed with revision of gender stereotypes but it also shows that these stereotypes may not be sustained in future. Should this trajectory of recovering women hero figures continue, women in Kenya, and Africa in general, will have their stories told and their place in history restored, or their history retrieved from where it has been shelved. I believe such an endeavour provides a window to

explore gender issues and may gradually revise the presentation of girl and women characters in children's literature. As a result, we will have the hero redefined, and this will shatter the old established order, creating a new community (Pearson and Pope, 1981). If children's literature is thus diversified, young people will in future become familiar with a literary canon that affirms women's lives, and one that represents female heroes independent of the male model.[11]

[11] Kay Vandergrift in http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/Feminist/femchild.html