

Female Characters in the Novels of Kyallo Wadi Wamitila

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Feminism, namely its post-colonial version, is one of the most used theoretical and ideological platforms in modern African literature. Indian scholar Raj-Kumar Mishra in one of his works gives the post-colonial feminism the following characterization: “The matter of fact is that postcolonial women refuse to remain passive and continue to bear male-oppressive environments. These women seek to emancipate themselves through education, struggle, and hard work. The postcolonial men re-colonized the bodies and minds of their women in the name of preserving their cultural values. Postcolonial feminism is primarily concerned with deplorable plight of women in postcolonial environment [...] Postcolonial feminists argue for women emancipation that is subalternized by social, cultural, or economic structures across the world.” (132-3). And thus: “Postcolonial feminism [...] comprises non-western feminisms which negotiate the political demands of nationalism, socialist feminism, liberalism, and ecofeminism, alongside the social challenge of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by its institutional and legal discrimination: of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, child abuse”. (130). In view of this, post-colonial feminine writers “seek for balance, mutual respect and harmony. [...] The matter of fact is that they want to remove age-old constrictions laid on women’s lives, and live at par with men. They expect emotional support from their partners” (133).

In Kenyan literature, feminist orientations are the most pronounced, logically, in the works of women writers, starting from its founding figure, Grace Ogot (1930-2015) and, in various and multiple manifestations, in the texts written by the subsequent generations of women authors of the years 1970s-2000s (for more detailed survey of Kenyan women’s literature see, e.g., Kruger 2011, Rinkanya 2018). It must also be noted that the sentiments, concordant with the basic postulates of feminism, are frequently found in the works by male authors, who also advocate for the ideals of gender equality and female emancipation, thus appearing as “literary comrades” of the female authors.

This “male feminist” tendency can also be traced in Kenyan writing in Swahili, which may be deemed as “male” by the predominant gender of its authors – the number of Kenyan women writers of Swahili expression currently does not exceed two dozens (including the aspiring authors, who published one or two stories), whereas its “male” part, existent since 1960s, has been strengthened recently by the new generation of writers, which entered the literary scenes in 1990s and 2000s (currently the number of male Swahili authors in Kenya is about fifty). This generation has also cradled the writers who may be deemed as “the big five” of Kenyan Swahili literature of the century – Kithaka wa Mberia, Ken Walibora, Mwenda Mbatiah, John Habwe and Kyallo Wadi Wamitila.

Wamitila may well be considered as the most prominent figure in the present-day Kenyan literature; and in his works, the feminist sentiments hold a notable place. In this paper, I will try to trace the development of these feminist orientations in Wamitila’s novels, since this genre occupies the leading position in his literary activities.

Kyallo Wadi Wamitila¹ entered Kenyan Swahili literature first of all as the founder of “new” novel, developing in Kenyan Swahili writing the trend founded earlier by Tanzanian writers Euphrase Kezilahabi and Said Ahmed Mohamed. The latter author, in one of his critical articles, characterized the “new” Swahili novel in the following way: “[T]he development of the Swahili novel reveals that a number of Swahili novels written from the 1990s to date, have detached themselves in various ways from hitherto Swahili novels written following the mainstream realistic mode. This “new” novel seems to “pervasively” adopt the fantastic, magical, and postmodernist tendencies that [...] adequately capture the cacophony and decay of the East African societies” (1).

It appears that, speaking about the “cacophony and decay of the East African societies,” the writer refers to the current social ailments of these societies, such as the co-existence of traditional and modern values, whose interplay is not always harmonious. The other ones, tightly intertwined are tribalism, corruption and the abuse of political power.

According to the authors of the “new” novel, the current social plagues of Africa and the entire world are caused by three interrelated factors – globalization (*utandawazi*), imperialism (*ubeberu*) and individualism (*ubinafsi*), which are perpetrated by the global forces of evil, embodied by the policy of certain industrial states and their henchmen in other regions (and frequently – their supernatural patrons, namely the devil). Nevertheless, it is possible to resist these evil forces – which requires the unity and courage of all the people of good will. In view of this, the typical hero of the “new” Swahili novel is the “little man”, helped by divine assistants (mostly coming from oral literature) – Voice, Old Man, Woman. Another unifying trait of the “new” novel is the motif of quest, also coming from oral tradition – the hero is suddenly faced with a mission of saving his community and, on a wider scale, Africa and the whole world from the evil forces, for which purpose he undertakes the journey to another world.

Two texts by Wamitila may be categorized as the examples of the “new” novel – *Bina-Adamu!* (Wonder-Man, 2002) and *Musa-Leo!* (Moses of Today, 2005) (which, according to the author himself, are parts of an unfinished trilogy – see Bertoncini et al. 2009: 284). In the first novel female characters are not many – those are the supernatural female creature named Hanna, who leads the hero in his journey to the “new Eden” (a sarcastic authorial euphemism for North America), and tertiary characters, like the hero’s late grandma, who comes in his reminiscences, nameless woman from “new Eden”, and the like.

The novel *Musa-Leo!* is set in an unnamed African country, ruled by a tyrannical dictator, known to his people under the name of Mzee (The Old Man) and under numerous titles, among them Moses of Today, because, as put by Mzee himself, “I have a purpose of liberating people, delivering them from the Egypt of history and economy” (76 – *all the translations from Swahili are mine – MG*). The frightening reality of the country described in the novel – abuse of power, police terror, ethnic clashes, agonizing economy – are typical for many a country in modern Africa. But out of this very “real reality” the main character of the novel, a young intellectual named Mugogo Wehu (another incarnation of the “little man”) is suddenly taken to another, transcendental world, where his task is to reveal the mystery of Mzee’s origins. It turns out that already Mzee’s grandfather was aiding the Europeans in colonizing Africa, and Mzee himself, in order to please his overseas masters, disowned his blood sister Mama-Nchi (“Mother of Native Land”). After returning to the earthly world, Mugogo shares his findings with his compatriots; his country is shattered by “the wind of change, which earlier had blown the Berlin Wall and destroyed the palaces of many previously famous rulers” (166). Mzee’s power is overthrown, and he retires to his native village (from which he was expelled during his young years) – but still nurses the frail hope of regaining the power.

In this novel Wamitila has created two memorable female characters, acting in two spatial planes of the text and initially playing different roles in the fate of the main hero. In the earthly world, Mugogo's girlfriend Anima – the author inclines towards the literal Latin meaning of the name, “soul” – is really a “soul” to Mugogo, supporting him and frequently salvaging him in various difficult situations, where Mugogo finds himself because of his moral convictions (e.g., with the help of Anima he is trying to trace the policemen who shot destitute children near his house – which in fact helps the supreme powers in choosing him). In the transcendental world, Mugogo is assisted by Mama-Nchi – she reveals to him the mystery of Mzee's origin and nature, and helps Mugogo return to his world. In several last episodes of Mugogo's sojourn in her world Mama-Nchi talks to him with Anima's voice; to Mugogo's question, why now she and Anima have the same voice, Mama-Nchi answers – “because me and her is the same.” Anima and Mama-Nchi are two sides of one allegorical image of mother Africa, embodied by Mama-Nchi as its eternal incarnation, supporting her children in their struggle against oppression and violence, and by Anima as the symbol of contemporary African woman, the “soul” of modern Africa and its continuing resistance to neo-colonialism.

In his short novel *Tikitimaji* (Watermelon, 2013) Wamitila uses basic principles of the “new” novel (quest to another world, dystopian setting, folk motives) for highlighting one of the most burning themes of today – the problems of the environment (exactly this name is given to the novel in the cover note – “*riwaya ya mazingira*”, “novel on environment”). The quest of the novel's characters into another unknown land – The Country of Watermelons, also devastated by the power of a tyrant known, as Mzee in *Musa-Leo!*, under many names, and their resulting victory over the tyrant is actively participated by female personages – journalist Zinji, librarian Sapna and environmentalist Maya. They manage to unite the youth in the Country of Watermelons into an ecological movement (their main task is to clean giant heaps of rubbish, that emerged in the country during the years of tyranny and metaphorically symbolize it), which grows into the resistance movement and overthrows the power of the tyrant. On the same metaphorical level, the victory is symbolized by the garden-beds, flourishing – through the efforts of the movement members – with sweet watermelons, that once were the pride and glory of this land; they have now replaced the giant, but inedible watermelons, which were growing there during the years of tyrant's rule (symbolizing his “puffed” power). The main part in the victory is played by courageous heroines – Sapna found in old books ancient recipes, Maya modernized them, Zinji helped in their distribution. The female characters in *Tikitimaji* appear as a kind of “simplified” versions of Anima from *Musa-Leo!*; their characteristic features, that Wamitila deems as essential for such ideal figures – courage, independence, intellectuality – allow them to successfully complete their task and, in the long run, advocate for the ideals of equality and emancipation.

More expressive gallery of positive female characters is created by Wamitila in his realistic novels, which currently hold the leading position in his writing. It appears that these characters find a wider response among the readers, first, owing to a higher accessibility of traditional novel forms – the author of this article had frequently heard from the readers, among them literature teachers, that Wamitila's experiments with the “new” novel are more difficult for understanding. Secondly, his realistic characters seems to become more convincing, because they are placed in the recognizable setting of modern Kenya (or imaginary countries– which again allows the writer to create series of ideal women characters, but not purely allegorical or semi-fantastic, as in the “new” novel, but equally recognizable, a kind of “role models” from everyday life, whose behavior in comprehensible and typical situations imbues these characters with more credibility.

The first attempt to create such a character was made by Wamitila in his debut novel *Nguvu ya sala* (Power of prayer, 1999). The novel is centered on the conflict between the heroine, a young girl named Susan, and her family circle, embodied by her father, Richard Ngunze, who in his blind following of religious rules is ready even to destroy the lives of his children. “The faith that kills parental love can not be a true one,” retorts Susan when father expels from his house her elder sister for “daring” to fall in love with their neighbor’s son. At the same time, Wamitila does not directly accuse or acquit his heroes – he is trying to look at their personalities impartially, to investigate the very process of their development. It may be stated that the writer gets very close to a polyphonic novel – he is trying to show the readers the appropriateness of diverse viewpoints on the described events. For Richard Ngunze, the father of Susan, his religious asceticism at one point allowed him to solve many of his life problems – recession to religion helped him re-acquire guidance in life and marriage, restore self-esteem, previously lost in his fruitless efforts to find his own niche. However, Susan, a modern and emancipated girl, is convinced that everyone should be led by his or her own mind, and the main orientations should be those of love and sympathy to fellow humans (which principles her father interprets in the spirit of authoritarian submission to the “will of the wise one”). Eventually, the conflict of generations is reconciled – but Ngunze has to revise a lot of his lifetime rules, which he considered as permanent and the only possible.

In the novel *Msimu wa vipepeo* (Season of butterflies, 2006) Wamitila tells the story of “the unhappy marriage of a young woman who divorced her loving but poor husband and married a government minister, whose wealth, however, fails to change her life for the better” (Bertoncini et al. 2009:73). This brief outline of one of the main plot lines of course does not exhaust the contents of the novel. Interweaving it with the lines of other characters, the writer succeeds in creating a vast panoramic view of the life of an imaginary African country in the first quarter of the current century; a country infested with many typical social diseases and also strikingly resembling Kenya. Minister Mkurutu, the main male character of the novel, marries a divorced lower-middle-class young woman with a daughter – not out of altruistic sentiments, but for the purpose of creating a likeable image for himself, which he intends to use for disguising his main, blatantly criminal activities. Julia, his new wife, is depicted in the novel as a symbol of social conformism: life of luxury, which she indulges in owing to her husband’s high position, for a long time overshadows her own real problems – alienation of her daughter Ndumi, who does not accept her “new father” due to his cold attitude and retains her love to her real father, Julia’s first husband engineer Kanda; gradual loss of friends and relatives; finally, the repulsive personality of Mkurutu and his closest friend, the country’s attorney-general Fabio Mkalla, the inspirer and organizer of their criminal schemes. Incidentally, Julia makes acquaintance with a lawyer called Miranda, whose character opens the gallery of positive female personages in the book. Miranda, in her past, was a victim of Fabio’s intrigues – starting at love affair with Fabio, which was supposed to be crowned with marriage, due to Fabio’s machinations she ends up in jail on a fake charge. Joining her efforts with other innocent victims of “everyday patriarchy” – Melissa, who made all the way from an object of sexual abuse to the owner of a prosperous bookshop, Kasoo, former servant at Mkurutu’s house, fired by her master and employed by Melissa, – Miranda attains her full rehabilitation and discloses the criminal alliance; Fabio is arrested, Mkurutu loses his post. Miranda’s courage inspires other characters in the novel – Kanda, Julia’s first husband, decides to restore his family. “Kanda was resolute to fight for his butterfly to the end, all his fear was melted by Miranda’s courage” (320).

The metaphor of a butterfly is constantly used in the novel in a variety of contexts: as a symbol of female beauty and frailty, of woman as an innocent victim – Julia initially, by

marrying Mkuruto, desires to prove that “she is no longer a worm but already a butterfly” (67), which ends in her “feeling like a butterfly who was forced to wing before her time” (316). Sometimes the metaphor acquires opposed meanings – from the symbol of revived hope (Kanda compares Julia to a butterfly that is supposed to come back to him) to the symbol of hopes lost (Mkurutu’s project of a butterfly farm, which he initiated in his constituency, collapsed after his demission – and together with it died the hope of his voters for a better future).

Miranda and Melissa – two main positive female characters in the novel – impersonate the author’s ideal of modern African woman, who does no longer agree to be taken as the second-rate person. Miranda, unjustly accused of murder, and after her release deprived of profession and perspectives for the future, finds the courage and the means to restore her honor, professional reputation and to defeat the “strong sex” (or rather – its negative epitome in the figure of Fabio) in his own game. Melissa, having lost her parents in her teens, is first sheltered in the house of her uncle, who soon rapes her. She runs to her grandparents’ house, soon by her own effort enters the university, gets her second degree abroad and becomes the owner of the largest bookshop in the capital. Asserting by her own example the ideas of female emancipation, Melissa at the same time perceives negatively the “ultra-radical” versions of feminism; in one of the episodes she tells Miranda, that after being raped by her uncle she started to hate men with all her heart, and after graduation rejoiced to find a job in a company headed by a woman. However, soon it turned out that her female boss is an adept of militant feminism, that denies the practicability of the very existence of the male gender. In her talk to Miranda she confesses: “I, Mira, do not think that such a position will lead us anywhere. How can we hate men, if we have fathers, brothers, husbands and sons? And where will we come if we take the men’s language and make it ours? Yes, we may have problems with them, but we should not use them for treating the others with our own poison... Otherwise, the third world war will not be between states, but between sexes!” (165).

A similar method is used by Wamitila in his novel *Dharau ya ini* (Contempt of the liver, 2007), which narrates the story of “two investigative women journalists, Lila Keli and Derby Mwiti, in a fictional African country. Lila’s mother is disinherited after the violent death of her husband Keli, murdered at the instigation of a cruel and ambitious step-brother, Munene, who later becomes the local chairman of the ruling party. Upon becoming a journalist, Lila is spurred to unearth the circumstances leading to her father’s death. Her investigations inevitably make her come face to face with her uncle and his business partner, the corrupt KK, a minister in a postcolonial state. Lila’s course of action is aided by the old and enigmatic sage, Mbulu, himself a victim of the machinations of Munene and his father (a colonial chief) and seen by many as a madman. These events are narrated against the background of the history of an imaginary (but bearing an uncanny resemblance to Kenya) postcolonial African state that is struggling to come to terms with the societal ills at a time when the forces of democracy are on the rise” (Bertoncini et al. 2009:313-14). In the end justice prevails – Munene’s misdeeds are disclosed, and he mysteriously dies in a hospital, choking on the cooked liver. This episode of Munene’s death, drawn in chapter 73 of the book with the same title as the novel, has a symbolic meaning, and also involves two female characters, albeit secondary. In the hospital, a young nurse, seeing Munene’s weakness, talks him into eating liver as a nutritious food, which is a taboo in Munene’s native culture of Kisii. He nevertheless agrees, finds the liver tasty, but as soon as he finishes the last piece, his ward is entered by the ghost of his late wife, who perished through Munene’s fault; the ghost strangles him to death. The author does not explain, whether it was a “fantastic reality” or the fruit of Munene’s imagination, but apparently Munene’s death is caused by his abruption from his roots (which is confirmed in the last, folklore-styled paragraph of the novel).

Wamitila's novel *Harufu ya mapera* (Smell of guavas, 2012) differs from the previously discussed ones both by its volume (more than 700 pages) and its setting. The events described in the novel take place in Kenya – as it could be understood, in Kenya of a near future – at a decisive time: the ruling party (unnamed) is going to appoint its candidate for the forthcoming presidential elections. The candidature is rivaled by two claimants – sordid and power-hungry Pipo Kenya, and true “man of the people”, liberal reformist Jude Kinya (the “wordplay” with the country's name in the surnames of the candidates represents, probably, the “dark” and “light” sides of the country's politics). The novel is abundant in female characters, but only one can be deemed as central – a young girl named Maria, who also embodies the author's ideal of a modern African woman. Like the characters from the previous novel, Maria is a self-made woman – after losing her mother at an early age (and not knowing anything about her father), she is brought up by her aunt, who refuses to tell her anything about her parents. For her success at the secondary school a foreign sponsor finances her high schooling; the schoolmaster, proud of her success and thinking that she sets an example for the local youth, pays for her first two years at the university – but after his death Maria has to abandon her dream of a degree. Not willing to live at her aunt's expense, she goes to the capital, where her school friend Zuhra rents her a room in exchange of the tuition for her son; then Zuhra secures for her a place at a children's orphanage in Kibera slum area. For Maria it is a crucial point in life – the orphanage is sponsored by international organizations, whose representatives do research in Kenya. They appreciate Maria's abilities, she becomes the coordinator in the research project on medical properties of guavas, which enables her to complete higher education. Maria, an altruistic and devoted person, settles also the lives of her friends – among them Matata, her childhood admirer, and his friend Luka; Maria helps Matata to restore the co-operative farm in their village, and assists Luka's career as a journalist. In the long run, the efforts of Maria and her friend help in disclosing the felonious activities of Pipo Kenya and his brother Kunda – from the far-off murder of Matata's father, who was their county's representative, to the recent scheme of grabbing the guava farms, belonging to local peasants, for profitable private projects. The appointment of a candidate is postponed – but most likely the candidature, and later presidency, will be taken by Jude Kinya, the proponent of people's interest (to this character is also related the metaphor of the smell of guavas, symbolizing the people of Kenya and also chosen as the novel's title). For her courage and humaneness Maria is awarded – Jude Kinya turns out to be her long-lost father, and her mother, whom she thought to be dead, is an employee at his office (unbeknownst to Jude himself). The last chapters of the novel depict the family reunion.

Such a twist of the plot, characteristic rather of “popular” literature, is not the only one in the novel – similar means are used by the author for the characterization of other women personages. First of all, these are the wives of Pipo and Jude with “talking” names of Cleopatra and Cassandra. The two characters can be labeled as variations of Julia in *Msimu wa vipepeo* – but with less hope for revival, which partially is caused by their turbulent private life. Cleopatra, in full accordance with her name, is a femme fatale – first getting married to Jude and bearing a daughter with him, she soon got tired of his negligent (according to her) attitude and deserted him for his former friend and current rival Pipo (“Jude did not take heed of her whims, and spent even his leaves visiting the peasants; but Cleo wanted to travel abroad, and she found Pipo, who readily satisfied her caprices” – 140). Despite her life of luxury, Cleo is unhappy – the marriage of her daughter Jacky ends with a divorce, followed by death of her husband; her two sons do not care about getting educated or getting a job, hoping to inherit their father's riches; her second daughter Isabell causes her even greater anxiety. Feeling first as “free supplement” to her husband's political career, and then harshly disappointed with his fall, Cleo decides to devote

this complicated period of her life to her elder daughter, seeing no other sense in life that changed so abruptly and so drastically.

Cassandra also resembles her Trojan predecessor – even her husband does not believe the truths she tells. After the newspaper publication of her photograph with an unknown young man (which the press nibbles as the proof of adultery) she is forced to reveal to her husband the truth – this is her son John, born out of wedlock. It takes Jude quite some time to believe her – but, after having more or less reconciled with that, he asks her half-jokingly, who is John’s father. Here a new blow awaits him – John was fathered by Kunda, Pipo’s elder brother and the backbone of their criminal schemes. It seems that this entwinement of the plot lines serves a task more serious than just adding to suspense – the writer tries to show thus, that the “dark” and “light” sides of politics are tightly interrelated, being a part of indivisible whole. However, Wamitila gives a hope that this vicious circle can be broken – first, by the crash of Pipo’s plans and Jude’s success, second, by the convergence of their families – in the final part of the novel *Isabella*, daughter of Pipo and Cleo, gets married to Jimna, Jude’s son, thus ending the feud between the old friends-cum-rivals.

In this novel, Wamitila uses the female characters first of all as the symbols of various groups of Kenyan society, and also – as the bearers of his own vision of social development in the country. Cleopatra and Cassandra, the wives of high-rank state officials, symbolize the “upper middle class” with its social conformism and unrelenting support of the current social order, are largely, as noted above, similar to Julia from *Msimu wa vipepeo* – however, unlike them, Julia finds the courage to release herself from her husband’s world, where politics is tightly linked to crime. The future of Cleopatra and Cassandra remains vague – the former is derailed by the crash of her hopes to become the first lady, the latter is concerned with the familial relations, which have been in crisis for quite a while, and the news about the illegitimate son may become the last drop.

Unlike these two characters, symbolizing the obsolete conformist mentality, the author’s hopes for the future are embodied by the character of Maria, with her independence, energy, critical mind and at the same time – readiness to help the others. This again is expressed through kinship – it is not by chance that Maria’s father turns out to be Jude Kinya, vindicator of people’s interests. Maria’s friends – Matata, Luka and Jude’s stepson Jimna – are of the same kind, and these characters reflect the author’s hopes for the day when the power will be taken by young professionals, lead by ethical values and principles.

Three novels by Wamitila, discussed above, by their generic traits can also be put into the category of political novels, which Mathew Karauri defines as the novel which “has the high level politics (politicians and the state political process, machinery of law-making, political parties, voting, legislation, courts of justice, armies, etc.) as its principal theme or one of the main themes, and reflects the political situation in the society critically (by exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government, by presenting the inside life of politics, disclosing political machinations, abuse of power, etc.)” (8). The above-listed themes and orientations are widely represented in the discussed novels, and the female-related themes are developing in various relations with these aspects. At the same time, in a number of his novels Wamitila evolves the female theme as central, focusing on gender-related aspects of modern Kenyan society, and using for this purpose various methods – from open social criticism to allegorical generalizations, embodied in “mythologized” female characters.

Unaitwa nani? (Who are you called?, 2008) is notable not only for its emphasized orientation towards gender problems, but also for its formal originality. It consists of two parts,

each part containing a frame story (the main character, female in the first part and male in the second, wakes up in a hospital and cannot remember his/her name – thus the title) and six short stories. The first group of short stories feature female protagonists, the second – male ones.

The first part is unambiguously feminist – the heroines of the stories are subjected to various forms of discrimination and violence in the male-oriented world. Moreover, these heroines, regardless of their origin, level of education and social status, are oppressed both by the adepts of tradition and the bearers of “modernity.” Kaseli and Mwanamuka have to leave their husbands’ houses being accused of witchcraft and “intentional childlessness”; nameless heroine of the story *Fimbo la mnyonge* (Stave of the weak) flees her native village at the threat of forced marriage and circumcision. On the other hand, even the “modernized” men reveal their unexpected and strongly traditionalist mindsets. Kamene, a lady lecturer, gets married to her colleague Cedric, hoping to create a family free of old stereotypes – but it turns out that Cedric always visualized himself as the traditional “husband-ruler”; the last drop for Kamene was the quarrel with her husband over the traditional rite of passage for their child; after their divorce Cedric still tries to take the sun away. Nyakor, a university graduate from the story *Mizimu ya marehemu* (Spirits of the deceased), like Kamene, gets married to an engineer, who only sees in her a means of quenching his lust; after his unexpected death his relatives, striving to submit her to “our culture”, plan to forcibly betroth her to the brother of the deceased. A schoolgirl Zahra from a small coastal town is raped by her school teacher; her relatives ask the local chief to take measures, but the “measures” prove to be unexpected – Zahra’s family is expelled from the town, because “their ancestors did not live here”; Zahra, who tried to protest till the end, is forcefully given a shot of sedatives.

The stories in the second part, told on behalf of the male personages, could logically have been designed to “balance” the first part by telling about the male plight on the increasingly feminized world. At first glance that is so – but at the more thorough contemplation it becomes clear, that the misfortunes of the male heroes are still caused by the male-oriented social norms of modern Africa. Mumbo’s father was always indoctrinating him that “old knowledge is working even now, in the age of mass media”, was comparing women to vipers and warning his son against the charms of female beauty, because “the prettiest flowers grow on poisonous plants, and the ripest bananas – near the latrine”; Mumbo marries his classmate, independent and brave girl, and their marriage collapses, because Mumbo cannot cope with the role of family provider in the free market age. Kaminda’s marriage crumbles, because his wife Sasi has an illegitimate child – his father Katina deserted her in favor of marrying a big fortune heiress. Kassim the merchant, as his riches were growing, was increasingly neglecting his young wife Betty; her last attempt to save their marriage with the help of a psychologist did not bear fruits – Kassim was arrested on a fake charge, after his release he learns that Betty with their children fled to her mother. Such is also the fate of Pipo from the story *Kichwa cha lori* (Lorry’s head) – devoting himself to business, he almost forgot about his wife, who in revenge became the follower of radical feminism. The scholar Purupesa from the story *Butwaa* (Perplexity) meets her wife in a night club, dancing strip-tease and, returning home, in perplexity remembers all his sins – “how he was disavowing Valentine’s day (and did not even know its meaning), was forgetting about her birthday and even to wish her good morning and good night, was not noticing new haircuts and perfumes, complained about the smell of nail polish, and made her warm up his tea ten times per day, which he always forgot to drink, drowned in books” (228).

The message of the book is summed in the short epilogue: “From afar, I heard a voice saying: Man... Woman. Each one, living in this world, is a hero in the entangles of life. And every fellow human becomes an enemy, and is looked at only from outside. Since ancient times, since the stone age one human perceives another only this way. Who are you called? Who are you called? Who are you called? Maybe a new story of life could be told in the first person, the

story of a look from inside... Who are we called? And not only this. Who do we call ourselves? A story of a man and a woman. A story of a Human... A story whose tellers will be on the equal sides of the life circle – not like in that old school game. M-m-m, reader? And who are you called?” (256). Lutz Diegner in his analysis of the novel notes: “In the end, one realizes that the symmetry of parts [...] serves as a mirroring of gender relationships [...], representing not only male dominance in society and male chauvinism dominating society, but also [...] the writer himself ironically admitting his own male perspective, even though, with his novel, he is trying to bring women’s emancipation to the foreground. Consequently, in the epilogue, the narrator recalls the two frame stories and then makes a plea for a world in which people do not judge one another on the basis of sex, origin, name or physical appearance” (351-2).

Wamitila gives an original continuation of gender-focused topics in the novel *Msichana wa Mbalamwezi* (Girl of the moonlight, 2011) – a real hymn to female virtue. The central male character, a city clerk Yosi Kanga, literally survives owing to the best features of female soul, embodied in multiple women characters of the novel, who in different periods lightened up Yosi’s life. All these women come to Yosi, alive or in his memories, during a hard time in his life – he is hospitalized with an unknown diagnosis, suspects it to be mortal, and is slowly preparing himself for impending death at his relatively young age. The only support for him in these sad days are the memories and thoughts of those women who did and are doing so many good things to him – his school loves, classmates Aphrodite, Diana and Illuminata, his workmates Karisa and Zubeda, his friend Amore, nurse Mwala. He even creates a common metaphoric image for them all – each of them for him is an incarnation of an ideal woman, Girl of the Moonlight. Girl of the Moonlight again delivers Yosi even from this dire condition – in the novel’s last chapter, when Yosi’s friends come to his ward fearing that this may be their last meeting, his new physician, a young female doctor, appears in the ward and declares that his disease is benign, Yosi’s health is out of danger, and he will be discharged in two days. In this young and beautiful female professional Yosi recognizes the latest incarnation of the *Msichana wa Mbalamwezi*:

I cast my eyes to the collar of her coat, to see if there was a name badge. There was none. [...] I was struck by a big surprise. [...] When she was about three steps from where I was, a certain wave of emotions stirred me, and I raised my voice to say: “Girl of the Moonlight!”

She stopped abruptly, turned slowly, like an actress in a movie where the speed was slowed down for an effect, looked at me and smiled, her face making lines of longing, before [...] disappearing completely where she was heading for (191).

The female essence is depicted in the novel as the positive force, that saves individual humans from the horrors of life, and the whole humanity – from disaster. During his hospital opposition with death, Yosi thinks of women as the foundation that puts the whole world into order:

Sometimes I felt like a chicken that is running to its mother’s wings. I felt safe. Maybe this nurse, like Amore... like Aphrodite... was a certain force having a capability of pulling things her side; a thing like centripetal power which pulls what is distant towards a certain centre. The force that resembles the force of a magnet. A certain power. Power of attraction. Power of love (66).

In this article, I sought to demonstrate that in his depiction of women personages Wamitila is guided by the principles of post-colonial feminism, which advocates the idea of gender equality and female emancipation in the context of post-colonial societies, still dominated by patriarchal mindset. Supporting these principles, Wamitila creates in his novels a gallery of positive female characters – from supernatural or semi-fantastic personages of his works in the genre of “new” novel to recognizable “role models” of his realistic works. These characters embody those personal and social qualities which, in the author’s vision, are essential for the progress and renovation in the contemporary African society.

In his article about women’s literature in East Africa Lennox Odiemo-Munara wrote: “[T]hese writers, through the women figures in the texts, subvert, actively resist, and engage with power/authority and, in the process, manage to re-evaluate the dominant zeitgeist, oppositionally establishing the East African woman as an active and speaking subject in the ongoing re-imagining and re-writing of the East African post-colonies” (1). In our opinion, the novels of Kyallo Wadi Wamitila vividly demonstrate, that such feminist orientations are characteristic not only for the works of women authors, and that gender, social and other barriers are consciously rejected by East African writers, regardless of their gender and origin, in the name of addressing urgent issues in the society.

¹ Kyalo Wadi Wamitila was born in 1966 in Machakos. He gained his PhD degree in 1999 at the University of Bayreuth (Germany) where his thesis on *Archetypal criticism of Kiswahili poetry with special reference to Fumo Liyongo* was awarded a *summa cum laude* grade; currently he lectures in the Department of Linguistics and Languages at the University of Nairobi. Has published nine novels (discussed above), four plays - *Wingu la kupita* (Passing cloud, 1999), *Pango* (Cave, 2003) *Sumu ya bafe* (Adder’s poison, 2006), *Uncle’s Joke* (in English, 2007) and *Seserumbe* (Puppet, 2009); children’s books *Zimwi la leo* (Ogre of today, 2002), *Jumba la huzuni* (Palace of grief, 2006), *Msichana mlemavu na ndugu zake* (Disabled girl and her relatives, 2006), *Yatima* (Orphan, 2006) and a number of others in English: *Kelu and the mysterious puppy*, *Mumu and the cruel chief*, the trilogy *The helicopter rescue*, *The mysterious box and the magic spoon*, and *The magic spoon and the tiny little book*, as well as a series of poetic stories *Hadithi za mashairi 1–4* (Stories in verse, all 2006). Has authored a number of dictionaries – *Kamusi ya Misemo na nahau* (Dictionary of sayings and idioms, 2000), *Kamusi ya methali* (Dictionary of proverbs, 2001), *Kamusi ya tashbihi, vitendawili, milio na mishangao* (Dictionary of similes, riddles, laments and surprises, 2004), a pioneer poetic dictionary, *Kamusi ya ushairi* (Dictionary of poetry, 2006), as well as a detailed literary dictionary, *Kamusi ya fasihi* (Dictionary of literature, 2003). Has also written two literary textbooks, *Uhakiki wa fasihi* (Literary criticism, 2002) and *Kichocheo cha fasihi* (Inspiration of literature, 2003), and secondary school books on Kiswahili, *Chemchemi za Kiswahili I-IV* (Springs of Swahili, 2003–2005). With Florence M. Kyallo has authored *English-Kiswahili assorted dictionary* (2003).

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