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### Nurturing Women Leaders and the Danger of a Single-Narrative Regarding Them in Memories We Lost and Other Stories

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Human productions such as literature, film, music, art, science, technology, and architecture among others are outgrowths of human experiences and therefore reflect human desires, conflicts, and potentials. Therefore, critical interpretation of those productions is vital in understanding something about human beings who make sense of the world through telling and listening to stories; which shape their worldview. *Memories We Lost and Other Stories* is an anthology of fourteen short stories written by fourteen authors from thirteen different countries. From the year 2018 to 2021, this anthology was recommended by the Ministry of Education in Kenya to be studied by Kenyan secondary school students. These were at least 2,931,394 teenagers, who were preparing for their college and university entry exam; the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) national exam in English literature. A critical reading against the grain of this anthology however shows how five of these stories depict a general negative single-narrative of female characters. This presentation has questioned how young minds, especially females, may internalize their position as future women leaders in Kenya after interacting with the narratives. Additionally, it has proposed possible solutions to the established challenges that are likely to hinder the nurturing of sustainable women's leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study has investigated the nexus between the narrative of the role of women in state-building in postcolonial Africa; and a prevailing single-narrative about female characters in the selected literary text studied by at least 2,931,394 teenagers in Kenya, between 2018 and 2021. These are students who were preparing for their college and university entry exam; the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) national exam in English literature, within that period. A single-narrative creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they might be untrue, but they are also incomplete. They make one narrative

become the only narrative about a phenomenon (Adichie 2009). *Memories We Lost and Other Stories* is an anthology of fourteen short stories written by fourteen authors from thirteen different countries. Critical reading of five of these short stories tends to depict a general negative single-narrative of female characters which is worth investigating. The selected short stories are: *Memories We Lost* by Lidudumalingani Mqomboti of South Africa; *Light* by Lesley Nneka Arimah of Nigeria; *The President* by Mariatu Kamara of Sierra Leone; *Hitting Budapest* by NoViolet Bulawayo of Zimbabwe; *Missing Out* by Leila Aboulela of Sudan. The table below shows the distribution of the students' data, for the period of study:

**KCSE Examination Candidature, 2018-2021**

Year	Total Candidature	Female	Male
2021	826,807	405,489 (49.04 %)	421,318 (50.96%)
2020	747,161	366,834 (49.10%)	380,327 (50.90%)
2019	697,222	341,440 (48.97%)	355,782 (51.03%)
2018	660,204	321,576 (48.71%)	338,628 (51.29%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2,931,394</b>	<b>1,435,339 (48.96%)</b>	<b>1,496,055 (51.04%)</b>

Source: Kenya National Examination Council and Ministry of Education, Kenya

The table above shows the actual number of candidates who sat for the KCSE national exam between 2018 and 2021. In Kenya, English is a compulsory subject in secondary school education, and one of the literary texts they were expected to study for the purpose of the national examination is *Memories We Lost and Other Stories* anthology. Therefore, almost all of them should have read the selected short stories in the anthology. As a result, the effects of the prevailing narrative reach almost the same number of households to which they belong. Additionally, there are other learners who are reading the short stories long after the four-year period, because the anthology is readily available in schools' libraries, free of charge in government secondary/ high schools.

Human productions such as literature, film, music, art, science, technology, and architecture among others are outgrowths of human experiences and therefore reflect human desires, conflicts, and potentials (Tyson, 2006). Therefore, critical interpretation of those productions is vital in understanding something about human beings. In this study, I have focused on the human desire to

perceive and nurture post-colonial African women leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Since time immemorial, human beings have made sense of the world using narratives. Narratives have been the way to shape experiences, give them meaning and record events and activities that give meaning to human life. They gather and keep alive memories for centuries. In ancient times, narratives existed only in oral form, but with the development of the printing press, which became popular in the eighteenth century, narratives began to be written and published in their modern structures. Understanding a narrative involves the ability to unravel its layers of meaning. The simplest among them is the basic knowledge of which character did what. Critical interpretation goes further and unmask the implied meanings. In this analysis, I have taken a reading against the grain literally criticism path, of five selected short stories. Thus, demonstrating the ways in which the selected texts are promoting a narrative that they clearly desire to condemn.

Narratives are effective communication aimed at convincing or persuading the audience to look at a

phenomenon in a specific manner guided by what you are telling them and how you are telling it. It can even modify the audience's pre-existing perception or perspective. The author, through the representation of a linked sequence of events, makes the audience think after their thoughts. Herman (2012) adds that human beings have mental capacities and dispositions that provide ground for evoking imaginative worlds in which literal texts are experienced in relation to the real world.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To be able to carry out this study in a logical manner, the analysis has been guided by insights from the Feminist Narrative approach as discussed by Warhol (2012), Habib (2011), Tyson (2006), and Arndt (2002), to mention but a few. Feminism examines the culturally programmed gender roles which privilege men. They cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive. On the other hand, they cast women as irrational, weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used successfully to justify gender inequalities such as access to leadership and the ability to practice certain careers. Feminists do not deny the biological differences between men and women. Instead, numerous feminists celebrate those differences. However, they do not agree that such differences as physical size, shape, and body chemistry make men naturally superior to women: for example, more intelligent, more logical, more courageous, or better leaders. Feminism therefore distinguishes between the sex concept, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male and the gender concept, which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society, which is why this view of gender is an example of what has come to be called social constructionism. For this study, a female is equal to woman and a male means man.

The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power (Oyewumi, 2016). In other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the educational and occupational

means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced. Patriarchal ideology works to keep people in traditional gender roles thereby maintaining male dominance. Feminists are opposed to such dominance in which patriarchy reigns, marginalizing women who are defined by what they allegedly lack and that men allegedly have. Feminist narrative theory, therefore, has its mandate to change the world by promoting women's equality using narratives regarding women. It considers the narrative text not just to represent, but to constitute a transaction between an author and an audience.

## EMPIRICAL REVIEW

### Education in Kenya and the Feminist Narrative

This study quite agrees with Momanyi (2016) when she states that, gender is a social power where relationships between men and women are governed and controlled through a social system that also assigns their roles in society. Hence, gender relations are a social phenomenon that is present in many world societies including the Kenyan society. However, what is significant in the different roles between men and women is that they can be changed depending on the needs and aspirations of society. They are not inborn nor are they fixed. Male and female attributes are, therefore, socially constructed and can be changed for purposes of posterity and development. The greatest socialization agent is the education system.

From a global context, the Kenyan education system is influenced by the United Nations's *sustainable development goal number 4* which advocates for inclusive lifelong education. In the African context, the African Union through the *Agenda 2063* policy document asserts that Africa's development should highly depend on women and youth. At the national level, Kenya's development blueprint, *Vision 2030*, the *national constitution* and the *national goals of education* all in unison advocate for the importance of women in the sustainable development of the nation. However, critical reading against the grain, of the above purposively sampled five short stories contradicts the values held in the policy documents

mentioned above, regarding women due to the negative and intersectional attitudes against women that tend to arise.

A previous study that is relevant to my study is that conducted by Gachari (2012) for her PhD thesis, “*Gender analysis of literature set books: a study of selected Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) literature texts*”. She examined the gender responsiveness of students and their teachers based on three novels namely: *Coming to Birth*, *The River Between*, and *The River the Source*. Additionally, she analyzed one play, *An Enemy of the People*. Students’ responses revealed a great sense of gender awareness and sensibility regarding the gender issues raised in the set books. Teacher’s responses revealed that the teachers were keen and enthusiastic about gender issues in the set books even though they had no formal training on how to implement the gender policy in education. This previous study affirms my assumption that literary narratives have a tangible impact on the real lives of the audience. The literary texts selected for my study were recommended to be studied six years after Gachari’s research. Reading them against the grain reveals the following dangerous single narratives regarding women, also referred to as females in this study:

### **Female Characters in the Domestic Sphere and Absolute Submissiveness**

Through the patriarchal systems, young girls are made to internalize that, women religiously belong to the domestic sphere of serving men with absolute submissiveness even in situations where such submissiveness is leading to self-destruction. The texts come to a climax and end without providing an alternative way of saving the girls from the tragedy.

*Light* contains an opening paragraph that states women exclusively belong to the domestic sphere:

When Enebeli Okwara sent his girl out in the world, he did not know what the world did to daughters. He did not know how quickly it would wick the dew off her. How she would be returned to him hollowed out; relieved of her better parts. (*Light*, pg. 28)

The narratives end without correcting the stated misconception. In fact, it reinforces it by portraying how unruly Enebeli’s daughter whom he had raised

since she was a child to when she was a teenager, becomes out of the domestic sphere. When she migrated to America to reunite with her mother, she drew a clear boundary with her father who feels she is disrespectful and rude for being bold and trying to stand on her own. The father regrets allowing her to go abroad.

From abroad, where Enebeli’s wife is for studies, they, both parents, strive to make the daughter internalize that her space is the domestic sphere.

Her mother is in America reading for a Masters in Business Administration. She has been there for almost three years in which her eleven-year-old bud of a girl has bloomed. (*Light*, pg. 28)

When she communicates with her daughter online from abroad through Skype, she does not make any effort to mould her into academic excellence. She only insists on the domestic sphere and patriarchal standards set for women as the narrator describes below:

The girl, at fourteen, is almost a woman. But she is still a girl. Her mother is trying to prepare her for the world. Stop laughing so loud, dear. How is it that I can hear you chewing all the way here in America? What do you mean Daddy made you breakfast; you are old enough to be cooking... Her mother attempts to correct the girl herself but much is lost in transmission over the wire. The long absence has diluted much of the influence a mother should have. It is one of the things Enebeli and his wife disagree on; training up of the girl. It has widened the schism between them. (*Light*, pg. 29)

Despite this space barrier, the father denied the mother an opportunity to take the girl with her to America just because of the selfish patriarchal status of being a father. The extract shows deliberate efforts from an educated woman, to socialise her daughter to domestic chores. As a result, the girl becomes angry and no longer interested in communicating with the mother.

Another form of domestication is portrayed in terms of how the body of a woman should look like:

She waits with arms crossed for the Skype calls to end and the mother becomes more nit-picky, troubled that her daughter cannot see she is trying to



ease her passage. What is this the girl wearing? The girl should be sitting with her legs crossed at the ankle. Why is the girl's hair scattered like that, when was the last time she had a relaxer? (*Light*, pg. 30)

When her husband appears to ignore her concerns above, she threatens to inform her sister about it. Her sister also has children. Perfect children, because they are male:

His wife's sister is a terrifyingly competent woman with three polished, obedient sons. (*Light*, pg. 30)

Since her children are perfect sons, this aunt has been trying for years to get her hands on the sister's girl but the father did not like it. In a panic mood, the father buys a hair relaxer gadget and unsuccessfully tries to do the girl's hair himself:

He massages the cream into her scalp like lotion and the smell of it makes both their eyes water. When they wash it out, half the girl's hair comes out with it, feathery clumps that swirl into the drain like fuzzy fish. (*Light*, pg. 30)

After this incident, the girl's aunt takes the girl with her. She shaves her. They all, including the mother, agreed that the girl appeared lovely and beautiful. However, the mother spoils everything by saying the following, as the narrator informs:

But then her mother ruins it by adding that she cannot wait till it grows out so she can look like a proper girl again. (*Light*, pg. 30)

This leads to a terrible argument between the husband and wife. The husband is against his wife's comments. The disagreement ends up developing enmity between them. The girl also joins the parents' enmity and the father takes advantage of her to revenge on the wife.

The girl stops talking to her mother after that. For a week, his wife pleads with him to soften her and he agrees but does not because he enjoys having the girl like this; as angry with her mother as he is. (*Light*, pg. 30)

This implies that a father cannot genuinely allow a daughter to have freedom of thought and choice. There must be a hidden agenda behind it that is benefiting the father. This narrative is both untrue

and dangerous through the suspicion it creates. The girl holds a grudge against the mother. Their relationship is ruined because of mistrust and awkwardness. Even later when the mother and daughter reunite abroad, their relationship is as casual as that between strangers.

Another notable case in *Light* is that of Enebeli's family house help who is female. This is in line with a patriarchal system which advocates for domestic workers to be women. She is portrayed as a lazy girl who spends most of the day watching television, specifically a program called *Africa Magic*, and pretends to be cleaning the floor but only ends up mopping the same patch. When she is not pretending to clean, the house girl is engaging in conversations with Enebeli's daughter. He is neither concerned nor worried about their conversation if it is happening within the house because according to him and the singular cultural narrative as earlier discussed, is that women belong and are safe inside the house:

When she is not pretending to clean, the house girl talks to the girl in whispers and Enebeli is not concerned because they are in the house and how much trouble could they get into. Talk is just talk. (*Light*, Pg. 30)

That is what he tells his wife when she becomes suspicious that the girl might be learning all the wrong ways to be in the world from the talk. She goes further, without any investigation regarding the content of the talk, and recommends that the house girl be fired. Enebeli fires the house girl and sends her back to her village. Her downfall in terms of losing her job is caused by a fellow woman. A skewed way of portraying women as their own enemies and not the patriarchal system.

In *Missing Out*, the short story begins with a male character studying abroad. In his first term at college in London, Majdy wrote letters home announcing that he would not make it, threatening that he would give up and return home. His mother called him expressing her disappointment because Majdy was a brilliant son and always came top of his class back home as shown in the following excerpt:

She had a newspaper photograph of him at sixteen when he got one of the highest marks in the

secondary school certificate, shaking the now-deposed president's hand. (*Missing Out*, pg. 108)

Majdy explained to his mother that he had failed his PhD qualifying exam and the mother encouraged him to retake the exam. He did and succeeded. As a long-term solution, the mother pays air ticket for her son to travel back home for a quickly arranged marriage which was meant to stabilise her son without displaying any care about the wellbeing of the innocent bride:

...she gathered the family and launched a new campaign: 'my poor son all alone in London needs a wife'. That was how Majdy came to marry Samra. (*Missing Out*, pg. 109)

They hurriedly married in an arranged marriage even though they did not know each other well and together flew to London as husband and wife.

...he was returning to London accompanied by his new bride. All his life Majdy had known Samra, as a cousin of his sister's best friend, as the daughter of so and so. There was no sudden meeting between them, no adolescent romance. He had detached memories of her. (*Missing Out*, pg. 109)

Therefore, this is just a marriage for convenience, as arranged by his mother. Immediately they arrived in London, they quarrelled over religion because in his room there were no signs of religious faithfulness and all that mattered to her was religion.

"Where is your prayer mat?" she asked. "I don't have one," Majdy said. He was lying in bed... "Well, what do you use instead?"... "Where's the qibla?" (*Missing Out*, pg. 111)

He does not have an answer to those questions. He later reveals that he is not committed to the religious duty. Instead, he is focusing on academics. To make Samra happy, he purchases a prayer mat for her and a well-calibrated compass to identify the required direction for prayers. Throughout her stay in London, she is fully committed to her religious obligations. Even when advised by the husband to get involved in some academic studies, she does not show interest:

It was good that she was a simple Khartoum girl, neither demanding nor materialistic...He wanted her

to enjoy lively, civilized London. He wanted her to be grateful to him for rescuing her from the backwardness of Khartoum...Enjoyed looking at the shops...pharmacies were stocked so full of medicine in so many different colours and flavours that she almost longed to be ill. (*Missing Out*, pg. 112)

In addition to the above sarcastic description of Samra, her utmost joy is in being just a housewife. The narrator tells how she appreciates buying meat that is already sliced, to go and cook for her husband. Even when shown the university's library, she does not show interest in studies. On the contrary, this is what happens to her:

She put on weight, she wrote happy letters home. (*Missing Out*, pg. 113)

To make matters worse, she even wishes for her husband to take time off from university they just stay in the house:

"Don't your lectures ever get cancelled? Don't your lecturers get ill, don't their wives give birth? When the Queen dies, will they give everyone a holiday?" (*Missing Out*, pg. 113)

He only laughs off her questions and tells her jokingly that the queen will die on a Sunday. As a practical solution to her problem, he registered her to study typing skills, which he would also take advantage of:

Already her English was good so word processing would be ideal; she could type his thesis for him. (*Missing Out*, pg. 118)

She begins the course but does not complete it, because of the following excuse in the form of a question from her teacher:

You must be so relieved that you are here, all that war and famine back home. You must be relieved that you are not there now. (*Missing Out*, pg. 118)

That conversation made her give up and indefinitely stop attending the training.

As a total housewife, she keeps fantasizing about how to perfect her responsibilities as a possessive housewife and give birth to several children whom she prefers they raise back home in Khartoum. He perceived all that as mere hallucinations. When he

almost completed his PhD studies, he began planning to acquire a work permit, as he intended to stay in London and reap what he had sown. She became very angry with him; their relationship became sour and he decided for her to travel back home to Khartoum.

This single narrative dangerously depicts women as just domestic workers whose only duty is to serve men, give birth and not pursue academics. This is how women are depicted whether at home or abroad. That is shown to be their place in the society. They are not even able to make decisions on their own on who to marry. The worst is that arranged marriages among people who do not know each other well are being spearheaded by women themselves. Samra's marriage arrangements were made successful by Majdy's mother and elder sister. This is a double tragedy of making women hate fellow women without clearly exposing their real enemy which is the established patriarchal system.

### Female Characters and Sexuality Education

The main purpose of sexuality education is to provide young people with accurate, age-appropriate information about sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health, which is critical for their health and survival. The selected texts only portray the total absence of sex education and make no attempt to suggest how it can be provided. This might pose the danger of the audience internalizing that this is exactly how a girl should grow up, only to do self-discoveries, sometimes accidentally.

In *Light*, parents fail to prepare their daughters for reproduction education. In the physical absence of a mother, the menstrual cycle is seen as something terrible as metaphorically described:

They survived the crime scene of the girl's first 'moon time'. It seeped all the way through to the other side of the mattress. They survived the girl discovering this would happen every month. (*Light*, pg. 28)

It is sarcastic that this happens to a school-going girl, whose mother is well-educated and is being taken care of by a father who is expected to be responsible. The narrator says that they (father and daughter) just survived. This is a teenager who is already eleven

years of age and school-going but is surprised by her menstruation, she has not been taught about it. Even the mother who is pursuing a master's and regularly communicates with the girl has not done it. This can insinuate the failure of women in child upbringing when they engage in educational pursuits especially abroad.

The girl's troubles continue: when she sends a romantic note to a boy who is her classmate, her father is summoned to school:

The girl is in trouble for sending the boy a note and it is not the first time. (*Light*, pg. 28)

The father promises to chastise the girl and assures the head teacher that it will never happen again. It happens two more times before the girl learns to pass notes better. Interestingly, nothing happened to the boy who was receiving the notes. The narrative ends with only this single negative perception about menstruation cycle sexuality education and no attempts are made even elsewhere in the entire anthology to correct it. What is provided is different shades of the single narrative.

In *Memories We Lost*, two sisters are facing a challenge in understanding the physical changes they are experiencing with age:

She had begun to grow breasts, and she was telling me how sensitive they were. She had brushed her fingers over them and a sensation she had never felt before had pulsed through her body. She did not know what was going on or what had caused her body to tingle apart from the touch. I remember trying to interject that she was becoming a woman-not that I knew anything myself. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 11)

The narrator who is a teenager seems not conversant with sex education just like her elder sister. She does not listen carefully to the narrator because she doubts if she really knows what she is trying to say. She dismissed the advice teasingly. The fact that the two are school-going teenagers and they do not fully understand the described physical changes, puts a question mark on the nature of education they received from school. Besides, the society in the village does not provide this kind of education.

Instead, women have been conditioned to a patriarchal hierarchy system as discussed later.

### Female Characters and the Myth of Superwoman

The selected texts have empowered the narrative of the myth of a superwoman as discussed by Michele Wallace (1978) in her book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. She describes in detail how women remain marginalized by the patriarchal Black Power culture, demonstrating the various ways in which genuine female subjectivity is blocked by the traditional myths of Black womanhood.

The *Memories We Lost* short story is a narrative about superwomen, which ends with an unresolved situation regarding the myth as depicted in the following quotation.

I remember when she ran out to the fields in the middle of the night, screaming, first waking my mother and me and then abducting the entire village from their sleep. Men and boys emerged from their houses carrying their knobkerries as if out to hunt an animal. Women and children stayed behind, frightened and children clutching their mother's nightgowns. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 10)

The men and boys divided themselves into various groups to look for the mentally ill girl who was running away. Despite their advanced knowledge of the village's terrain, after a longtime search, they came home long hours later without the girl. They do not find her and they claim to have looked for her everywhere. Additionally, the narrator says that they express a mixed reaction of being worried about not finding the girl and being annoyed to have been woken up in the middle of the night.

A superwoman, the girl's mother is the one who single-handedly manages to bring the mentally ill girl home when the entire village men and boys are unable and have given up:

Mother, a woman of tall build and wide hips, only returned home when the sun was way up in the sky the next day, carrying my sister on her back (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 10)

This heroic act of a superwoman is both misleading and harmful to the well-being of women.

The mentally ill girl seriously injures herself by hitting the back of her head against their house wall, and the mother fails to take action to seek medical attention for her daughter. Instead, she covers up the bloodstains evident on the wall using a layer of mud and painting it. Also, she invites a traditional healer, *Sangoma*, to cleanse the spot on the wall. Not to cleanse the girl:

She gently rocked back and forth then began hitting the back of her head against the wall...she begun to scream...then she had smashed her head and left blood on the wall...Had it not been a mud wall, an old one at that, she would have cracked her skull open...The stain stayed long after mother scraped it off...(*Memories We Lost*, pg. 12)

Because the girl is a superwoman, she is left to naturally heal which is a myth, but the wall is taken care of. Despite the mothers' efforts to erase this incident, the narrator, who witnessed it first-hand, becomes psychologically disturbed for a lifetime:

I began to smell the bloodstain in my dreams, in my clothes, in everything. The smell of blood lingered after many sunsets had come; even after the rain had come. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 12)

The narrator continues to innocently suffer because of her sister's illness but neither their superwoman mother nor the school seems to seek medical attention for her. The harsh consequences continue to occur as described below:

The other time I remember this thing entering my sister was when she threw hot porridge on me. This thing arrived in her and abducted her while she hovered over a hot porridge pot. In the middle of a joke she never finished, she flung the pot across the room. It only just missed my face but my chest was not that fortunate. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 12)

The unbearable pain that the narrator experiences makes her run out, pull off her dress and stand outside naked. Later when the sister gains consciousness, she is shocked and feels devastated about what has happened to the narrator. However, the narrator hides the truth by telling her sister that she had accidentally poured hot water on herself by mistake. She did this so that the ill sister did not hate her own self. Their mother and society took no



action about it. Perhaps because they did not understand it was a medical condition. They referred to it as this thing:

There was never a forewarning that this thing was coming. It came out of nowhere, as ghosts do, and it would disappear as it had come. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 10)

The mental illness made the girl drop out of school. It continued to haunt her sister who sympathized with her as the society just watched:

...this thing that took over her followed her to school and she had to drop out. It arrived when she was in class...she flung a desk across the room and smashed a window. When I arrived in her class, everyone was standing around watching. She had broken a chair...she was screaming words I did not understand...Her eyes had turned red and her entire body was shaking. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

The narrator, who is a superwoman, successfully calms her down. When the narrator told her mother that she was sick and could not make it to school after the above incident, the mother did the following:

She asked a boy who went to the same school to tell my teacher that I had come down with an illness. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

The boys are in school without challenges and they are the ones being sent to report the absenteeism of girls even when what caused the girls to be absent is not taken care of. The boy who sent the absenteeism note did not deliver the message, and the school is not concerned about the girl being absent:

It turned out later, when I went back to school, that my week of absence had gone unreported. This bothered neither my class teacher nor me. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

The reason the narrator is not bothered is because she is sympathetic with her elder sister who is mentally ill and has missed school so much that the narrator has caught up with and was, in fact, two grades above her. The only concerned person is the ailing sister:

She and I spent that week doing sketches. With a pencil she could sketch me onto the paper such that it appeared as if I was alive on the page, another me, more happy, less torn, existing elsewhere. She begged and begged me to go to school and promised me that she would fine... (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

The narrator went back to school and every day when she returned home, she found the sister having drawn new sketches for her. Coincidentally, in school, she learnt exactly the mental sickness that was disturbing her sister:

A few weeks after I had returned to school, the teacher told us about schizophrenia and I knew then that this is what my sister had...( *Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

Despite the existence of this knowledge in school, the society does not seek modern medical attention for the girl. They just allow the mother to keep looking for more traditional healers who thought that the girl was suffering from a spiritual challenge, giving her an irrelevant arsenal of medication. The narrator advised her to secretly throw away the medication:

On our long walks, away from our mother, we dug holes and buried the roots she had to chew. The way to get rid of the medication drink, I demonstrated to her, was to pour it into the mug and take an empty sip, when no-one was looking, throw it out the back window.....(*Memories We Lost*, pg. 14)

They consistently did as they agreed, and when their mother asked if she was taking the medication, they said yes, she did. Her condition begins to improve. She recognizes herself and can communicate with her sister. They both begin to create new childhood memories, filling the void left by the one that had been wiped out. Although the mother is happy to see her two daughters having joyous moments, she is sceptical that the illness might catch up with the girl. She therefore falls into a backward tradition of an inhuman ritual to the ancestors led by elders and traditional healers and witnessed by the entire village:

The day of the ritual, women's chatter and songs reached us long before the crowd was visible. Men

came in silence, arms folded behind their backs, carrying sticks...children ran around...Everyone moved in a chaotic choreography...From our house, I could see the chaos amplifying as more people arrived ...(*Memories We Lost*, pg. 15)

When the rituals began, there was the slaughtering of goats to summon ancestors from their enclaves. After the rituals, the mother and an uncle discussed how the sick daughter would be taken to see *Nkunzi*, a traditional healer whose process of healing is deadly, as described below:

He would make a fire from cow dung and wood, and once the fire burned red, he would tie the demon-possessed person onto a section of zinc roofing then place it on fire...baking the demons and that the person would recover from the burns a week later...(*Memories We Lost*, pg. 13)

The narrator could not allow this to happen to her sister. They unexpectedly fled home without pre-knowledge of exactly where they were going. The narrator told her that they were going to urgently visit an ill aunt in another village. It was an imaginary aunt:

“We are close,” I told my sister. Close to where, I had no idea. All the same, we were going forward, and it felt like we had reached where we were going, which was nowhere in particular. All that mattered was that we were now far from home. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 17)

They have no idea where they are going to get shelter among other basic needs for them to survive but returning home is not an option. They even wish for their mother to die:

Maybe when my mother dies, I said, maybe then we can return. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 17)

This a dangerous single narrative where daughters perceive their mother as their only enemy and not the entire village including the school. It can even imply that when daughters are faced with difficult situations in life, the death of their mothers is part of the solution to their troubles. The mothers might also become psychologically disturbed when children run away from them.

The narrator also reveals that their father suffered the same illness but the society did not stigmatize him. He left home and later was seen healed in another village. However, he had abandoned them. Perhaps, it is from this history that the narrator gathered courage to leave home hoping that the sister would heal. They continued with their quest; the narrator was not able to reveal to her sister that she had a mental disorder that would have made her keep suffering in the hands of traditional healers. After a long, entire night journey, they finally become relieved:

Morning was close, I thought and I told my sister who nodded and smiled. I could see modern buildings from a distance. Hospital, I sighed and tightened my grip on my sister's and she too did it. (*Memories We Lost*, pg. 17)

Morning here symbolizes the desire to end the superwoman myth. The symbol is mentioned as the climax of the short story.

### Female Characters and the Penis Envy Dream

The penis envy dream is a psychoanalytical thought that little girls, upon realizing that little boys have penises, suffer from the desire to have a penis. On the other hand, little boys, upon realizing that little girls do not have penises, suffer from castration anxiety. That is, the fear that they will lose their penises. For women to succeed, they require to have a penis. The only choice left for them to have is to give birth to a son, especially as the first-born child. This forms the basis for traditional gender roles, which are used to oppress females of all ages and to elevate males to positions of dominance in all spheres of human life.

In *Hitting Budapest*, a female character Sbho fantasizes that the only way for her to migrate from her poor rural village to the desired rich urban centre; is through being married by a man from the desired area as quoted below:

“... Budapest is not a toilet where anyone can just walk in...” “I’m going to marry a man from Budapest. He will take me away ..., away from the shacks” (*Hitting Budapest*, pg. 103)

The above conversation involves Sbho and her fellow teenagers. They have been socialized to believe that for a woman to have a good life in urban areas, she should get married to a man from the area. This narrative does not change throughout the short story. Another girl in their company who is a victim of sexual abuse of young girls by male adults, still believes that resulting from the rape, she should give birth to a son. She has been raped by her grandfather when she was only ten years of age:

“Is it a boy or girl?” “It’s a boy. The first baby is supposed to be a boy.” “But you’re a girl and you’re a first-born.” “I said *supposed*.” (*Hitting Budapest*, pg. 98)

This girl has been socialized to believe that her salvation is hidden in a male character even though she was raped by a man. In their innocent discussion, they do not show any signs of questioning the patriarchal system through which the rape occurred.

In *Missing Out*, a female character, Samra is lured into a hurriedly arranged marriage meant to serve patriarchal interests. She accepts it, simply because it will make her go abroad, London:

Prospective bridegrooms living abroad (it didn’t matter where) were in great demand. (*Missing Out*, pg 110)

Her sense of the path to London is through marriage. That is all that mattered without having any long-term goals and vision. This can be equated to penis envy bearing in mind the housewife position she occupied throughout her stay abroad. To clearly support this claim, she fantasizes about bearing children.

The children playing on the roof...they are not allowed up there, it is not safe...when you become furious with them; you go outside and throw your slipper at your son...He will be the eldest, the instigator. (*Missing Out*, pg. 114)

She elevates the position of the imaginary male child. He will be the one to tighten the bond between her and her husband. She has been socialized to believe that a son is a source of power for women. This misconception is also depicted in another short story, *Light*:

The head teacher calls Enebeli in and hands him the note. This one read *Buki, I love you. I will give you many sons...* (Light, pg. 29)

This is meant to be a romantic note from a girl to a male classmate that she admires. Because of this note, the head teacher summons the girl’s father to school to show him the note as a way of demonstrating how indisciplined the daughter has become. The girl thinks that for her to be in a great relationship with Buki, she must bear her many sons. The narrative ends without this misconception being corrected.

In *The President*, which is a real-life memoir of the main character who is a civil war survivor, a little girl who is not even aware of who is a president; becomes a victim of patriarchy and political anarchy. It is during a government overthrow by rebel soldiers who claim the government is corrupt. She ruthlessly loses her hands. They are chopped off by boys of her age supervised by an adult old enough to be their father. The adult sarcastically asks the girl which hand she wants to lose first. Then one of the boys pulls out a machete. The girl pleads with him that they are the same age and they can be friends but the boy scowled her. Desperately the girl requests them to just kill her instead of chopping off her hands. They reject that to:

“We’re not going to kill you,” one boy said. “We want you to go to the president and show him what we did to you. You won’t be able to vote for him now. Ask the president to give you new hands. (*The President*, pg. 54)

When her both hands were chopped off, she became unconscious and lost a lot of blood. On the other hand, the boys were excited and giving each other high fives:

I could hear them laughing. As my mind went dark, I remember asking myself, “What is a president?” (*The President* pg. 54)

The helpless girl staggers and stumbles her way, away from the scene and lucky enough she is helped by well-wishers who carry her to hospital. She was treated and another shock emerged that she was pregnant. She had been earlier raped by an adult from her village before the current attack. Through

the cesarian section, she gave birth to a baby boy. She lived in an amputee camp which had over four hundred victims. Her source of income is a street beggar and for her to earn more, she had to carry the baby boy with her in the street.

I had a boy, who I called Abdul. When I went back to begging, I earned more money than my cousins combined if I had him with me (*The President*, pg. 57)

The women in the society including a female doctor who oversees the narrator giving birth, do not do anything significant to be of help to this helpless teenager. After 10 months, the child passes away. After the burial, the narrate is rescued by a man from abroad:

A man phoned from Canada...His name is Bill and he wants to find the girl he read about in a newspaper article. (*The President*, pg. 57)

The narrator is finally rescued and she secures asylum in Canada. The single narrative of penis envy is indirectly demonstrated coupled with the notion that a girl cannot have a good life in Africa where she is unsafe.

This kind of narrative should be taught in an anthology containing another narrative of a female character who emerged victorious and derived a sense of patriarchal politics. A narrative like that of Prof Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, who successfully fought for multiparty democracy and environmental conservation during a period when it was not fashionable to do so. That way, the danger of a single narrative regarding women and politics will be eradicated, thus, empowering women towards gender equality.

## DISCUSSION

The prevailing single-narrative regarding female characters in the five analyzed short stories portrays stereotypes against women. The main danger results from the incomplete nature of the narratives. They only depict one perspective of a phenomenon. Therefore, reading them against the grain results in a dangerous single-narrative consumed by at least 2,931,394 Kenyan teenagers and their households, between 2018 and 2021.

The feminist narrative literary theory has successfully provided intersectionality and multiple viewpoints for this study. It has provided a logical analysis of the texts and an examination of the philosophical systems within which the implied meanings have been derived. It has been established that gender roles are socially constructed depending on the needs and aspirations of the society. They can be reviewed for the purpose of posterity and development. The greatest socialization agent is the education system, both in school and in family households. In addition, literary narratives have a tangible impact on the real lives of the audience. Teenagers may hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways.

The patriarchal ideology of men being superior to women is evident in four main categories, despite the expected standards of the Kenyan education system which is highly responsive to gender equality: first, domestic sphere and mediocre submissiveness as depicted in *Light* and *Missing Out*. Second, absence of sexuality education as outlined in *Light* and *Memories We Lost*. Third, the myth of superwoman as it unfolded in *Memories We Lost*. Fourth, the penis envy dream is seen in *Hitting Budapest*, *Missing Out*, *Light* and *The President*.

The selected texts have used female characters to promote the existence of a patriarchal programmed society. They are likely to lead to internalization of the norms and values of patriarchy. That is, cultural systems that privilege men by promoting traditional gender roles and ultimately, making women hate each other. This is likely to hinder the growth and development of sustainable women's leadership in post-colonial Kenya.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Narratives for educational purposes should strive to offer ways of thinking that oppose the retrogressive tendency to believe there is a single best point of view. The reduction of feminism to an oversimplified negative attitude between men and women should be rejected. The negative oversimplification works to blind us regarding the seriousness of the issues feminism raises. Instead of waging a war of women against men, we should focus on promoting and developing positive issues about females and peacefully making men value



them. More energy reinforces the positive such that the negative dies a natural death. Otherwise, we might end up promoting oppression by shifting it from one gender to the other instead of resolving it into gender equality.

We should not encourage the internalization of the norms and values of patriarchy which can be defined as any cultural system that privileges men by promoting contemporary biased gender roles to the extent that men are feeling unsafe in being men. Thus, they strive to become women. Be in a sexual relationship where they will assume the traditional role of women, especially in sex roles. Will we be solving a problem or creating a new version of a problem, which in the near future will require solving and thus end up in a cyclic process? It will be cyclic and might backfire violently! For instance, if all women end up hating anything to do with men and all men console themselves by totally disassociating themselves from women, the human race might fail to reproduce, thus eliminating itself.

Patriarchy is sexist, and so is patriarchy: promoting the belief that one gender is innately inferior or superior to the other. The most permanent solution to solve this universal human being's challenge is to embrace the dual nature of life. A piano produces melody by combining black and white keys, and low and high keys. We appreciate the day because of the presence of night. You cherish good memories in relation to bad memories.

Imagine how boring life could be if it was either winter or summer throughout! You enjoy the beauty of summer because of the existence of winter. Their joy is even enhanced by the cultural programming of how these two seasons usher in each other with fall and spring in between them. Look at how busy human beings all over the world are planting trees, and reminding each other about an approaching nightmare of the planet doing away with either summer or winter. Resulting in only either extreme summer, or extreme winter throughout. It is wise we embrace 'sumwint' season whereby we will let summer be and winter be without questioning the ability of summer to better dry wet clothes compared to winter, and winter's ability to cool down the atmosphere in a better way than summer. In African philosophy, we refer to that duality concept as

*msimamo wa kati na kati*. That means, a balanced position.

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