

Masculinity Redeemed! : Euphrase Kezilahabi's Gendered Vision in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Nagona and Mzingile present Kezilahabi's overarching vision of a gendered society. The paper argues that through Nagona and Mzingile, Kezilahabi interrogates, challenges and alters the conventional concept of hegemonic masculinity and gender relations in the two novels, and suggests a new way of imagining gender relations in a contemporary world. Through the representation of his female and male characters, Kezilahabi argues that conventional definitions of gender are no longer valid for the contemporary societies because gender is not a static identity. He emphasizes the agency of women in masculinity construction and the importance of recognizing the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. From his characters' representation in Nagona and Mzingile, Kezilahabi demonstrates that masculinity and femininity are interdependent concepts because they complement each other. The novels affirm that masculinity is not independent and static. It is constructed within a specific socio-cultural and historical moment and changes accordingly.

Keywords: overarching vision of gender, gender performance, gendered nation, gender complementarity, conventional definition of gender, hegemonic masculinity, contemporary society

Introduction

Kezilahabi's overarching vision of gender is clearly demonstrated in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* where he presents a fluid notion of gender relations by demonstrating extensively how

women play a great role in constructing men's masculinity. He tries to defy the stereotype of hierarchical traditional model, and presents an alternative approach to interpret gender relations. This alternative approach broadens our understanding of a contemporary definition of gender. It foregrounds what it means to be masculine and feminine and who gets to embody masculinity and femininity. In the two novels, Kezilahabi demonstrates the ways in which masculinity and femininity are flexible and interdependent.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Judith Butler's (1990) idea of the performative aspect of gender. According to Butler, gender is a human construct enacted by a vast repetition of social performance and varies between situations. She also insists that there is no innate gender identity, only the expression of gender through this performance. It is performed through language (as a form of speech act), bodily (in terms of one's appearance), and also through one's actions. Furthermore, Butler claims that gender is 'unnatural' and emphasizes that the best approach of contesting the status quo is to displace categories such as 'man', 'woman', 'male' and 'female' by revealing how they are discursively constructed within a heterosexual matrix of power. Butler commends de Beauvoir's claims that an individual is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (1949). She responds to this claim in Salih's *Judith Butler* (2002) by stating:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. (45)

This response suggests that men and women are not born but they become men and women, and their becoming is an ongoing process. This implies that masculinity and femininity are

gender identities that are not made in a single moment of time. Butler's views infer that masculinity is a mutable subject because it is possible for a woman to possess masculine traits and a man to possess feminine traits. Butler's theory of performativity assists us in understand how Kezilahabi's female and male characters perform their masculinities through their repetitive actions and how these actions in return construct various forms of masculinities in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*.

Research Method

This is a qualitative study, which employs a constructivist paradigm. A constructivist paradigm is based on understanding the world of human experiences (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2011). The paradigm places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996). The constructivist paradigm traditionally follows qualitative research methods, although quantitative methods may also be used in support of qualitative data. It studies how- and sometimes why-participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations (Charmaz, 2002). The paradigm lies squarely in the interpretive tradition (Charmaz, 2006) It usually seeks to understand a particular context, and its core belief is that reality is socially constructed (Willis, 2007).

This paper uses a constructivist paradigm in order to explicitly observe the construction of data and their interpretation in explicitly spelled-out theories. The employment of the constructivist paradigm enables us to analyze literary texts; *Nagona* and *Mzingile* as source of information and construct meaning from characters' expressions and performances. In these two novels, the author is considered as an individual who constructs social realities through his female and male characters.

According to Charmaz (2006), we can gather rich data from texts. Charmaz views texts that tell the story as a source of information that suggest the social context for the analysis. Charmaz points out that a close investigation of the text helps a researcher to study it and both the detail of the texts themselves and the thoroughness of the analysis can create understanding and make claims about reality. She emphasizes that a major way of using texts is to use them as objects for analytic scrutiny rather than for corroborating evidence. Charmaz

lists features that one has to consider when approaching a text and among them are: the author of the text, the ostensible purpose of the text, which meanings are embedded within the texts and how do those meanings reflect a particular social and historical context.

Using a constructivist approach we therefore pay attention to the contextual meanings that the texts imply and the way content of these texts construct images of reality. Affirming constructivist paradigm views; that there are many realities and these realities are reproduced, negotiated and transformed through social practices, this paper considers data collected from the novels as gender facts that reflect social realities that are determined by various circumstances in the author's society.

The research of this paper followed the following procedures: the researcher started by constructing the research topic, selected the literary texts- *Nagona* and *Mzingile* and read them thoroughly well focusing on the intention of this paper. In the process of reading the two novels, the collection of data through the characters' expressions and performances was done. Focusing on the objectives of the paper, the presentation, interpretation and analysis of data was done using Judith Butler's theory of performativity. This stage led into findings and conclusions.

Females' (De)construction of Males' Masculinity in the Project of Building the New Nation

Kezilahabi does not perceive hegemonic masculinity and gender relations as rigid, stable and unchanging in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* but he sees it as a fluid space constantly under construction and reconstruction. Through his female and male characters' representation, Kezilahabi affirms Butler's views of gender by destabilizing the regular conventional notion of power in a traditional system whereby leadership positions are assumed to be occupied by men only. According to Butler:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 1990:179).

Kezilahabi depicts both women and men occupying administrative positions in the novels. Through the portrayal of central male and female characters in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, a woman is portrayed as a powerful leader who performs the duties of a director. In *Nagona* for instance, a woman is the immediate assistant to the king and she gives orders and directions to men who are in search of Paa, the saviour of the nation (29). This woman familiarizes these men with the environment and informs them about the consequences of failing to perform the tasks assigned to them. She tells them how to deal with the king, the girls in the castle and the Paa herself. She encourages them when they seem to lose hope. This woman's depiction illustrates how a woman contributes in constructing men's masculinity because it is her directives and the courage she gives to these men that strengthen them and enhance their masculinity. Implicitly, she contributes in building a new nation for, this Paa is meant to go and free these men's nation from annihilation.

A pregnant woman is another female figure who holds political power in the community. The government in her community trusts her and assigns her the duty of keeping and protecting community assets which hold the community power: a bow and arrows. Babu tells Mimi: "...*Lakini (wazee) hawatakupa (mikuki na upinde) wenyewe mkononi. Utavipata wakati fulani na mahali fulani (kwa mwanamke mjamzito)...*" (But (the elders) will not hand them to you (a bow and arrows). You will get them at a certain time and a certain place (from the pregnant woman)...(Kezilahabi, 1990:12). We later see the pregnant woman giving a bow and arrows to Mimi;

"*Vyote hivyo (mikuki na upinde) viliandaliwa kwa ajili yako. Vichukue na ufuate nyayo hizo. Unachotakiwa ni kumshika huyo paa mikononi, umjue....Huo upinde na mshale ni ishara yako. Usivitumie ovyo...Nenda . Fuata nyayo. Nitaitunza mishumaa isizimike mpaka utakaporudi*" (Kezilahabi, 1990:25).

Those (a bow and arrows) were prepared for you. Take them and follow Paa's footsteps. What you are supposed to do is to catch the Paa in your hands, you have to know her...the bow and the arrows are your identity. Do not misuse

them...Go. Follow the footsteps. I will take care of the two candles to make sure they do not blow out until you come back.

This depiction demonstrates that men are not solely performing their masculinity but they do it under women's support. Both, the girl in the castle and the pregnant woman in *Nagona* guide and give knowledge to men that enable them to achieve their individual and societal goals. The fact that the intention of the journey is to seek freedom that can be only achieved by bringing the savior of the nation home, it is evident that women in this context perform masculine role of building the nation and assist men in constructing their own masculinity.

The female masculine performance is also observed in *Mzingile* where a nameless woman is expected to serve and rebuild the community by bringing back humanity, hope and peace. Although people kill her, the author mentions that she was the only hope of the community and people believed in her. The woman's death worries the elders and brings sadness in the community (12). The elders' anxiety suggests that the woman's presence is important to the nation. This implies that men trusted and depended on her. It is the death of this woman that spurs Mimi's journey to the mountain to inform Mzee about the death of second savior.

From Kezilahabi's portrayal of his female characters we can argue that the body is a neutral surface onto which social constructions are placed. Our argument affirms Butler's (1990) notion of gender when she regards the body as a mere object that can be transformed in the presence of societal discourses. The process of acting out these discourses and repeating them is what enforces their naturalness. In *Nagona*'s case, leadership skills can be attached to both female and masculine bodies and these bodies may change depending on one context or culture. This is revealed through the female characters - Paa, and the nameless pregnant woman who perform various tasks in different contexts. From this understanding, female and male bodies can both be culturally and politically constructed.

The idea of a body being an object that can change according to societal discourses is further illustrated by Kezilahabi through his portrayal of the pregnant mother. Kezilahabi depicts this female character as a woman who displays multiple roles that are influenced by her being a woman and being responsible for the community protection. We see a pregnant woman in

Nagona performing her essential feminine role of motherhood; giving birth to a child but in doing so she also performs a masculine role. The child she is carrying symbolically elevates the power of this mother as she is carrying and protecting the hero of the community who is also expected to free the community from massive problems so as to rebuild the ruined community (24).

The case of a woman playing multiple roles and displaying her feminine position is also brought out in *Mzingile* where a woman is not only playing a leading and a protecting role, but also serving him. Kezilahabi depicts a woman carrying a water gourd throughout the journey and offers Mimi water to drink and wash his face (7). She also uses her *khanga* (a woman cloth) to prepare Mimi's bed. In this case, a woman is portrayed as a female character who performs what are assumed to be predominantly feminine roles such as serving her husband, and masculine roles such as freeing and protecting her country from problems. This portrayal demonstrates that problems of the society have given women a new status and recognition, because they have to perform their gender according to the circumstances. They have to be arrogant and aggressive when the situation forces them to retain their femininity when it is necessary to do so. This portrayal affirms how gender roles have become more flexible in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*.

In the two novels, female characters are not the only ones who challenge male power but also men. As Mimi travels for the purpose of freeing the community from massive problems, he encounters many tests and trials, both physical and mental, before returning to his homeland. The King gives Mimi and the four men he meets on the way three difficult tasks that they must perform and pass in order to get the Paa in *Nagona*. These tasks include moving the mountains, tilling a dry piece of land, and retrieving the King's lost pipe from a distant place (29). These challenges motivate Mimi and the four men to keep moving and surviving, no matter the circumstances. These struggles are important to men as they help them to prove and maintain their masculinity. The important thing to note here is that though these men attempt to maintain power, they do not escape the feminine influence that strengthens their masculinity.

Through Mimi's journey Kezilahabi reveals further the power of the woman in guiding, controlling and assisting a man to maintain his masculinity. In this journey that Kezilahabi uses as the most important symbol in the stories, depicts the woman in the fore throughout, while Mimi remains behind. Traditionally, a man is expected to be ahead because he is assumed to be fearless, brave and confident therefore he can protect a woman in case of danger. On Mimi's journey, a woman takes this masculine role and reverses the traditional definition of gender roles. Mimi acknowledges this situation when he says:

*Miaka ilipita bila kupunguza umbali kati yetu (mwanamke akiwa mbele).
Tulipumzika tulipochoka. Usiku na mchana. Safari iliendelea hivi hadi
tulipofika mahali palipokuwa na njia panda (Kezilahabi, 1991:24).*

Many years passed without reducing our distance (the woman at the front).
We rested when we were tired. Day and Night. The journey continued this
way until we reached a junction.

This inversion of gender roles suggests that the woman has crossed the bounds of femininity, leading men on the way and protecting them. Leading a man the entire journey implies that this woman is brave and confident. Furthermore, since Mimi's journey intends to free the community from massive problems, the woman in this case plays a role of leading a man when struggling for the national freedom. Mimi and the nation totally depend on her. This portrayal affirms Butler's views on female masculinity. According to Butler:

“[Women] maintain the power to reflect or represent the ‘reality’ of the self-grounding postures of the masculine subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position . . . women must become, must ‘be’ (in the sense of ‘posture as if they were’) precisely what men are not and, in their very lack, establish the essential function of men” (1990: 45).

In Kezilahabi's depiction, the woman appears masculine as she displays the dominant masculine qualities such as strength, bravery and competitiveness. These qualities lack in

Mimi. The woman challenges the conventional masculine subject position. In this context, the woman complements what lacks in Mimi's masculinity and together, they achieve their goal. This depiction therefore emphasizes that femininity complements masculinity.

Kezilahabi further demonstrates about woman's power over men through the portrayal of Paa, Mimi and the four men on their way home from the castle in *Nagona*. Paa takes the leadership role as soon as they leave the castle and starts to impose her power over the men who are depicted celebrating their success of winning Paa and taking her home. These men count themselves as national heroes. However, Paa does not allow them to express their excitement for their achievement. When they try to ignore her and continue praising themselves, she calls them liars. She accuses them of making up stories (34) and tells them to remain quiet and follow her instructions (35). They obey and remain silent until they reach their destinations. Paa's performance over these men illustrates her power and control. She shuts the men down, mutes them, controls their feelings and deflates bloated ego by calling them liars.

In this episode, Paa limits men's freedom of speech and their independence. Her character and performance defies the traditional concept of patriarchal system whereby men are expected to always dominate, oppress and exploit women. In this depiction, Kezilahabi reverse this gender hegemony and reveals that women too can sometimes aggressively lead and control men.

Kezilahabi gives more evidence on how a man's masculinity can be determined by female masculinity. He illustrates the way a man operates under woman's control so as to accomplish his goal. For instance Mimi admits that a woman often controls him as overtly presented in *Mzingile* and he has to obey her instructions. He states:

Kwa mkono alinionyesha mlima...halafu haraka akageuka akaanza kukimbia...Mimi pia nilijikuta nakimbia...(Kezilahabi,1991:9) aliniashiria kwa kidole nimfuate. Niliamka...Aliongoza njia...(56) Nilifanya kama alivyonielegeza... 'Sasa nifuate'... Nilimfuata.. Aliniongoza hadi bondeni ...

'maji hayo hapo. Yaoge'. Nilianza kuyaoga... (63)... Aliniongoza hadi kwenye kibanda (64)...Amka twende kwanje chemichemi. Nilitii... (68).

Using her hand she showed me a mountain... she then turned quickly and started to run...I found myself running as well...Using her finger she gave me a sign to follow her...I did what she instructed me... 'Now follow me'...I followed her...She led me to the valley 'Here is the water. Take bath'...I started taking bath...She led me to the hut... 'Let us go to the spring water'. I obeyed...

The woman's instructions and Mimi's responses above reveal a woman's masculine position and Mimi's femininity. This portrayal affirms Butler's idea of gender that reminds us that "[g]ender is always a doing," it is not something one *is*; it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts (1990:25).

Kezilahabi further illustrates the importance of a woman in Mimi's life when he portrays him as a man who is ignorant of important things while the woman seems to know a lot. We learn this through a number of events in *Mzingile*. For instance, Mimi forgets his own house while the woman recognizes it and shows it to him (62). He also fails to recognize his wife until she proves to him that she is the one he has been with (63). This explains the extent to which this man's world relies on this woman. His ignorance enhances the woman's masculinity because it gives her power to make decisions for him.

Mimi's lack of knowledge is also revealed through the portrayal during his conversations with the woman in the episode in which they burn the ruined church and mosque. Mimi asks her many questions and relies on her decisions. In this performance, they burn the bible, Quran and an old dictionary, but before they burn them, Mimi asks about the significance of the books and her views on their function in the world. He asks:

'Tutafanya nini navyo?' Nilimuuliza mwenzangu.

‘Vitabu vyote hivi sasa hivi havina maana. Kinachojengeka juu ya kikuukuu si kipyra’

Utasema nini juu yetu sisi na ulimwengu? ‘Sisi tumetakasika pamoja na ulimwengu huu tuliomo. Mvua zilionyesha zilifanya kazi hiyo. Sisi ni watu wapya ingawa bado tunazo kumbukumbu za ulimwengu uliopita. Tusiruhusu kumbukumbu hizo kututawala’ (68-69).

‘What will we do with them (the Bible, Quran and dictionary)?’ I asked my companion.

‘These books are now meaningless. A new thing cannot build on the old (foundation).’

What are you going to say about us and the world? ‘We are cleansed together with the world that we live in. the rains have done that task. We are new although we have the memories of the past world. Let us not allow those memories to rule over us.’

This conversation portrays the woman as active and analytical, while the man on the other hand is rendered as irrational and inchoate. The woman, however, is delineated as domineering and her ideas dominate their discussion and actions. The recurrence of Mimi’s dependency confirms that the woman is more powerful than him. This is consistent with Butler’s theory of performativity. Where she avers that: “performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and a binding power” (Butler, 1993:225).

Kezilahabi presents a similar image of an intelligent and competent woman in *Nagona* who exhibits multiple talents. Through this woman Kezilahabi defies the conventional definition of masculinity and femininity that assumes men are always confident and competent. She challenges men in what are conventionally called men’s games. Kezilahabi enables us to see her ability when she competes with men in *bao* (mancala game). Before they start the game, the King reminds Mimi that Paa is very competent in this game and no one in the kingdom has ever defeated her (33). *Bao* is a traditional mancala board game that is normally played

by men. It is a very complex game and needs one to be very strategic to win it. This portrayal of Paa confirms women's intelligence and competence.

Something important to note in this portrayal is that a woman's competition in *bao* is crucial in constructing men's masculinity. In this case a man's masculinity is attained through winning or losing the game. This means the only way they can take this saviour home or to free their nation from disasters, is to win the game. Kezilahabi in this instance insinuates that a man's masculinity is determined by cultural practices. Winning the game here indicates a man's victory and elevates his masculinity while defeat effeminates him. This projection of gender affirms Butler's notion of gender as she points out, "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1990: 34).

Kezilahabi offers another illustration of how a woman becomes a factor in the (de)construction of man's masculinity. He depicts Mimi attempting to perform his masculine role as a husband but fails because Paa does not allow him to do so. She asks him to do a wrestling match as a prerequisite to engage sexual intercourse. This imperative becomes a major challenge for Mimi as Paa throws him down during the wrestling match. Despite Mimi's struggle to win against Paa, he ends up getting hurt and loses the match. Mimi is annoyed and irritated by being defeated by a woman and intends to fight like a man: "*Sasa nilitaka kuonyesha uhodari wangu wa kiume*" (I wanted to show my manly competence) (Kezilahabi, 1990:37) but Paa defeats him.

Wrestling like *bao* is a primal men's game. Arguably, Paa's ability to compete and defeat men in what are predominantly perceived as male games suggests a rethinking of essentialist masculine and feminine categorization. Through this portrayal, Kezilahabi symbolically challenges the conventional idea that men have power over women's bodies and can freely use their masculinity for sexual conquest but in this case we see Mimi failing to quench his sexual desire because Paa does not allow him. In this context, Mimi appears weak and inferior in contrast to Paa who is portrayed as strong and confident, active and superior. Kezilahabi's portrayal of Paa affirms that "gender reality is created through sustained social

performances” (Butler, 1990:180). It is from several such instances that we witness Paa’s performances that attribute her gender. It is also from these instances that we are confronted with the reality that female masculinity indeed constructs males’ masculinity.

Further, through Kezilahabi’s portrayal of Paa we are made to understand that females do not only contribute in constructing men’s masculinity by enhancing their courage and patriotism in building the new nation but they also become important in validating man’s masculinity that is actually connected to their sexual potency. Since sexual access to women’s bodies invest men with power, the female rejection of male conjugal right poses a threat to male power. The threat signifies that women are controllers of men’s sexual roles, a state that challenges men in marriages or sexual relationship. A woman who manages to remove herself from the ties of sexual contracts like Paa places herself outside of male power and eliminates the link between the female body and men’s access to power. By doing so, she becomes a controller of her own access to sexual power and affects man’s masculinity. We see how Mimi is frustrated after failing to assert his power over Paa’s body. His anxiety and frustration offers a clear example of female masculinity’s influence on the construction of men’s masculinity.

Women’s Role in Men’s Downfall

In *Nagona*, Kezilahabi discloses also that a woman can help a man to restore lost masculinity. He illustrates this point through the depiction of Mimi when he loses Paa because of his personal interests. He follows Paa’s orders to fulfil his own desire and fails to focus on his nation’s mission; to bring the savior home so as to free his nation from disasters. By blowing out the candle that he was warned not to, Mimi loses the stature of a national savior (38). This way he becomes a coward since he betrays himself and the community that had put its trust on him. He has lost his dignity and what would most probably define him as a hero. Through Mimi’s depiction, Kezilahabi seems to suggest that credibility and stability are important traits in maintaining a man’s masculinity. Again, it is a woman that legitimates his masculine status.

Symbolically, Mimi’s failure to control Paa signifies his failure to maintain the freedom that he has struggled to achieve. This means the nation has failed to achieve the freedom it has

been longing for. And this is caused by the incompetent leader who has lost his sense of patriotism because of personal selfish interests. Kezilahabi in this case emphasizes that the nation can only achieve its total freedom if individuals privilege the interests of the nation and not their own selfish interests. It is in this regard that sense of commitment and patriotism become pertinent in constructing man's masculinity and in the very project of building the new and a strong nation.

From a gender perspective, Kezilahabi affirms that a man can only maintain his masculinity if he can overcome the challenges he encounters. In this instance, Mimi fails the test of maintaining it because he loses Paa and only regains his lost masculinity with the support of the woman. We encounter the pregnant woman encouraging him after losing Paa (38). She assures him that they have another chance and considers Mimi's downfall as a prerequisite for the creation of a space for a new leader. This space gives room to the new child she is carrying, who symbolizes a new beginning and continuity. Although Mimi has failed to rescue his community, this woman intends to do it through the child she is carrying who is the second savior (62). The implication of the pregnant woman's performance in this case also insinuates that women are not only expected to perform essential reproductive sex role such as giving birth but they also do perform masculine role like nurturing leaders of the community.

From Mimi and the pregnant woman portrayal we realize that during the time of restoration of the lost freedom and/or men's masculinity, Kezilahabi clearly demonstrates how females play a great role in restoring the lost freedom/masculinity. This implies that to be masculine in a nation that women are inclusive largely means to be flexible and accommodative of feminine performances. This also suggests that in the contemporary society, it is important to allow more flexible sexual boundaries than would be expected in a traditional setting.

From the foregoing discussion it is obvious that building a new nation requires mutual relationship and understanding between men and women. It is important to note that the pregnant woman, who is trying to restore Mimi's masculinity, is the same woman who gave him the tools and conditions that were to assist him on his journey. After losing Paa, which

signifies his downfall, the pregnant woman does not leave him to his own designs; but, assists him to regain his masculinity. It is this woman who suggests an alternative way of rescuing the nation after the initial failure. From this portrayal, it is clearly apparent that the woman is a key actor in the deconstruction and reconstruction of Mimi's masculinity in the novels. From this depiction, Kezilahabi might be suggesting that the project of building a new nation must include both masculinity and femininity.

The importance of the interdependence of masculinity and femininity is also mentioned in *Mzingile*. Kezilahabi illustrates this when Mimi and the woman agree to be part of their venture on the basis of mutual understanding (65). Different from the wrestling match in *Nagona* that makes Paa to run away, in this particular case the wrestling match is a friendly one: "*Tulianza mieleka na tulipoangushana tulikumbatiana*" (We started wrestling but when we fell down we embraced each other) (Kezilahabi, 1991:65). We however note that, it is the woman who initiates this relationship as we see her instructing Mimi to take bath in order to cleanse himself so that they can understand each other better.

The act of cleansing Mimi's body symbolically means disabusing him of deeply held notions of gender which make him assume that there are distinct gender roles. In this portrayal Kezilahabi reveals that Mimi and his wife perceive gender differently and suggests that unless they think the same, they cannot have a mutual understanding. Kezilahabi illustrates this position metaphorically through Mimi's body which had dark spots but now glitters like a woman's body after taking bath; this implies a transformation in him. After this transformation, the woman minimizes the distance she kept throughout the journey and allows Mimi to come closer. Mimi's transformation affirms the possibilities of gender transformation that Butler contends. According to Butler:

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction (Butler, 1990:179).

After Mimi's transformation, we note a firm bond between him and the woman. They perform everything together: they wash and carry one another (64) and start putting in place strategies of building a new nation together. They both agree to create a new nation, forget the past and ensure that the new world remains clean (65). Kezilahabi illustrates this mutual relationship further in a metaphorical way as he depicts them walking across the valley, climbing mountains, holding hands and playing games together. They teach each other new songs. Kezilahabi terms this song as a song of a century (65). This depiction emphasizes that a new nation is built through combining efforts of men and women.

Through the relationship of females and males characters in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, the author suggests reformulation of the concept of gender relations and hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating how females play a significant role in constructing man's masculinity. The portrayal reveals Kezilahabi's ultimate vision of gender. He posits that the only way to build a new nation is to revisit gender relations and neutralize hegemonic ideologies. This means conventional gender theories have to shift to suit the contemporary world because gender is not static. It is socially and culturally determined and changes according to societal change.

Woman: The Icon of the Nation

In *Nagona* and *Mzingile* Kezilahabi presents a close relationship between the nation and women. He describes a woman's pride as a nation's pride and thus, a woman's insults are nation's insults. This means there is a relationship also between a hegemonic nationalism and hegemonic masculinity and they both reinforce each other. In the two novels we see the nation setting roles for men and women. A woman is represented as a mother and the nation itself. As a mother she protects the nation as we see the pregnant mother carrying and protecting a child who is expected to be the second savior of the nation in *Nagona*. She also protects community assets that assist Mimi to bring the savior home. As the main savior, Paa is the nation's protector as she is expected to free the nation from annihilations. On the other hand, Paa is protected by men because her existence assures the stability of the nation.

Similarly, in *Mzingile*, the woman is portrayed as a savior and hence a protector of the nation. As such, when men insult and eventually kill her (12), the nation is also insulted as we see it suffering from massive problems associated with her death. Kezilahabi reveals how people suffer because of the misfortune they have caused. In *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, Kezilahabi affirms that the nation is comprised of females and males whose “performativity” constructs not only their own gender identity but the identity of the entire nation as well.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Kezilahabi interrogates, challenges and alters the conventional concept of hegemonic masculinity and gender relations in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. Through the portrayal of female and male characters in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, Kezilahabi’s overarching vision of gender is revealed. He seems to argue that state ideology and the project of building a new nation have altered our understanding of the notions of masculinity and femininity as well. His vision of gender is revealed through his portrayal of women whose female masculinity seems to influence the shifting definitions of hegemonic masculinity and gender relations. The analysis reveals that female masculinity acts as a catalyst in constructing male’s masculinity. Through this presentation, Kezilahabi emphasizes the agency of women in masculinity construction and the importance of recognizing the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. He also challenges conventional definitions of gender that are no longer valid for the contemporary societies and calls for a review of such notions of gender because they do not suit the contemporary perspectives of gender performances. Kezilahabi appears to suggest that for a country to build a new nation and ensure materialization of state ideology and its principles, the hegemonic ideologies and gender relations have to be tampered with and then be reformed. He thus suggests that masculinity has to be tempered with malleability of femininity. Through these two novels, Kezilahabi has illuminated the need for changing our notions of gender. He has helped us to understand the complexity and function of gender relations in the contemporary world. He has informed us about the connection between masculinity and femininity and how they complement each other in the project of building a new nation. Through his presentation of the characters, we have understood the necessity of female-male gender complementarity in a developing society.

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