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No longer green: Female characters of African descent as sex workers in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995)

Gloria Ajami Makokha, Mugo Muhia & Oluoch Obura

Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages,
Kenyatta University, Kenya

Correspondence: ajamiglo@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0827-958X>

Abstract

This article explores the potentialities of diaspora as conveniently structured to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of migration for women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995). Sex and sexual intercourse between men and women in the African societies that are fictionalised in these texts are not only an issue about morality, but also about how morality is governed and policed within these societies. While the societies in these texts hope to derive their integrity through women's sexual purity, conflict arises when such communal integrity fails to recognise the individual circumstances of the female individuals upon whom such notions of purity rest. The question of what role sex and sexual practices play in upholding the honour of communities is a vexed one. While the societies that the texts explore here show less scrutiny on marital sex, regardless of whether it is consensual or forced, these societies occupy a judgmental pedestal on pre-marital and extra-marital sex. Harsher judgement, however, is reserved for individuals who engage in these practices for monetary gain. This textual analysis is informed by the postcolonial theory, as articulated by Homi Bhabha and his postulations on identity and 'othering'.

Keywords: African descent, diaspora, female characters, home, identity, immigrants, sex workers

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Public Interest Statement

Guided by the 'othering' concept of postcolonial theory as articulated by Homi Bhabha, this paper presents an analytical discussion on how female characters of African descent in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, in their immigrant statuses negotiate their livelihoods in diaspora, leading to changes in terms of identity with regard to their lines of work as coping strategies. In spite of the harsh societal judgements, they embrace their new identities as 'transactional sex workers'.

1.0 Introduction

The choice to live either permanently or temporarily in a given country solely relies on an individual. Their mobility grants them an option of either staying in a new place or making return journeys to their previous homes. Heine de Haas conceptualises migration as "a function of people's capabilities and aspirations to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures" (2021, p. 2). State borders have been weakened by globalisation, resulting into cross-border movement of labour. However, the influx of immigrants in the West has led to enforcement of stringent measures on the accepted immigrants to curb vices like terrorism and crime. In a bid to navigate these bureaucratic processes of visa acquisition, private recruitment agents facilitate women to secure employment. This explains the large number of African women migrating for domestic work.

Dreams of "affluence in the intended country of immigration" throws migrants into a crisis that calls for a grammar of self-making, if the migrant subjects are not to slip back into "a crisis of being" similar to the widespread poverty that forced them from home (Okome, 2002, p. 2). To circumvent the apparent marginality, migrants have to adopt a way of being that, of necessity, drops old visions by envisioning themselves anew.

Movement by Africans from their indigenous homes to Europe, America and other African countries has been taking place for a long time. John Arthur explains that to Ghanaians, migration is not a strange phenomenon as "[f]rom time immemorial, they have wandered throughout Africa for purposes of trade, to look for work, improve upon their lives, or escape from the harsh and unforgiving economic and political morass at home" (2008, p.vii). The emergence of transnational border crossings and global migration is characterised by either voluntary or involuntary movement of "skilled and unskilled population principally from the emerging nations of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and the former Soviet Republics to the advanced industrial nations in the West, particularly the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, and Australia" (Arthur, 2008, p.vii). Arthur's argument identifies poor economies as the most common reason for migration from Ghana and other African countries to the West. Migration, thus, is still ongoing, with the hope that the alternative home will provide a lasting solution to the unbearable circumstances that caused the movement from the indigenous home.

In examining the changing nature of identities among female characters of African descent in the diaspora as presented in the fictional worlds of the selected texts, this paper discusses how the selected African female writers portray the diasporic space as a site of self-refashioning. Ann McClintock's conception of "whorearchy" as an aesthetic of liberation for women under the yoke of patriarchy will be borrowed in structuring the exegesis of how the re-invention of female protagonists is made a possibility through transgression of boundaries that are simultaneously racialized and patriarchal. The paper also demonstrates that on successful self-refashioning, the protagonists in turn influence the identities of other characters surrounding them. It is notable that these protagonists relocate to the West in search of light, but end up in darkness instead.

2.0 Literature Review

Darko observes that her text, *Beyond the Horizon* “came out at a time when migration, prostitution and exploitation was a hot topic”. A lot of movement was taking place, from Africa to Europe and The United States of America, which is still the case currently, thus making this novel relevant. Emigration entails making a ‘home’ away from home, a process through which immigrants have to undergo, despite its complexities, including them being notably different from the hosts of the new locations. This makes the immigrants occupy the ‘outsider’ position, otherwise referred to as the ‘Other’, by Postcolonial theorists. This position has to be embraced by the immigrants for peaceful coexistence in the diaspora.

Salman Rushdie, explains that “mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries” form “the distinguishing feature of our time” (1992, p.425). Contemporary literary and cultural studies have centralized this position, as mass migration and indeed global movement has acquired a steady pace.

Regarding *On Black Sisters’ Street*, Sarah De Mul examines how black womanhood entails the struggle of women to recreate themselves and their transnational worlds, and re-describe themselves across cultural limits and societal forces. The text she notes, does not merely present the black woman as exotic and sexualized as in the European perception.

This research dwells on the struggles undergone by female characters of African descent in search of self-establishment in their new spaces.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by Postcolonial Literary Theory as articulated by Homi Bhabha. Postcolonialism’s main concern is the struggle that occurs when one culture is dominated by another, resulting to unwilling submission from the dominated culture. Bhabha states that ‘in-between’ spaces provide the grounds for “elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1994, p.1). The liminal spaces therefore are key to identity formation among transnational female characters of African descent under study. Being African, female, young and having emigrated from Africa to the west predisposes them to cultural differences leading to adverse change of tact for survival in their new environments.

2.2 Diasporic Identity Formation by women in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*.

New Identity formation in diaspora is inevitable, as Maver states: “What is important to acknowledge, so it seems, is that living in a diasporic space today essentially signifies the forging of a new identity and a new diasporic, hybrid subjectivity’ (2009, p.x). However, Maver notes, “It should be borne in mind that diasporic space is a category which encompasses not only those people who have migrated and their descendants, but also those who are constructed and represented as indigenous to a geographical location” (2009, p.x). This implies that the immigrants automatically become ‘the other’, as the indigenes of their new home retain their position as the original owners of the space.

The identity shift in the new spaces is not a simple process because of the different types of diaspora that are multi-layered even within the sub-units. In many cases, it involves creative re-imagination of the self. As Maver further observes, there are categories within the members of the diaspora:

[...]all diasporas are differentiated between themselves in these contested in-between spaces and are part of the process of the construction of Us vs. the Others: the problem, of course, lies in the question as how to identify the former and the latter, since binary constructions clearly no longer work today. Identify oneself with what? With "Home" which holds a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination and subjectivity and is, paradoxically, a place of no return? (2009).

Migrants are thus faced with the dilemma of whether to make a clean break with the past or assume new identity in which the originary homelands still function as an imaginary one. This dilemma entails a moral choice involving the struggle to belong in the new space. As liminal subjects, there arises a possibility that migrants could eventually end up with an individual's decision either to stay and confront the existential complexities in the alternative homeland and thus avoid ridicule from the members of their ancestral home for going back, or to go back to their homelands and reconfigure their lives.

The problems faced by Africans in the Diaspora intersect at the point of race, class, and gender. However, the race factor occupies a higher pedestal in the politics of migrant identity and identification. In Canada and America for instance, the black-white binary is central in the relations between migrant and host communities. John Darden explains the outcome of this ingrained racialised relations:

In order to maintain the superior position and competitive advantage, Whites (the dominant group in Canada and the United States) have created and maintained a racial hierarchy that treats groups differently based on skin color. Usually, the lighter skinned people, or those with features most like whites, are treated less harshly and receive less discrimination in housing, jobs, and education. Such differential treatment has had social, spatial, and economic consequences on various racial (visible) minority groups leading to racial stratification and differential disadvantage (Quoted in Frazier John et al, 2010).

Clearly, when faced with the stack odds of these racial compartmentalisations whose outcome runs contrary to the initial logic of migration (to better one's future), migrants resort to the effacement of any signs of non-belonging that would seal their marginalisation. This situation often leads to creative (albeit self-destructive) modes of negotiation such as skin lightening and visible 'beautification' as an assurance to a higher ranking in the hierarchy. To borrow from Ann McClintock's *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, such survival strategies causatively derive from the "racist fetishizing of white skin" (1995, p.184). As such, the tendency for African migrants (already beleaguered by the baggage of a colour so negatively defined) is to lay off any markers of "racial and class disgrace. . . [that] a sun-darkened skin" brings to bear while striving to amplify "visible signs of class leisure and wealth" (1995, p. 176).

However, this cosmetic emendation is not just cosmetic change. It allows for an easier circulation of embodied labour and, as the texts under study demonstrate, the gains accrued from such bodily/colour appeal profits not only the self in the diaspora, but also the dependants back home. To the migrants, these strategic colour upgrades are a sheer necessity and the techniques to such improvements vary from industry to industry. For instance, McClintock gives the example of skin lightening soaps which have for a long time, been used by migrants to the metropolises as an

enabler of re-inventing the self in accordance with racial realities, and dominant notions of aesthetics of colour. She notes that “[f]rom the outset, soap took shape as a technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration” (1995, p.212). This means that while at face value the change of one’s skin tone may seem as an act of self-hate and degeneration, it paradoxically plays into the politics of regeneration that survival in foreign spaces demands.

Even then, migrants must confront the overbearing ghost of colonial politics where even after the formal end of colonialism, the migrant as an ex-colonized, is still configured in terms of belonging and citizenship. As a non-citizen who is juridically coded as belonging elsewhere, the migrant is either fated to work in the labour intensive-low-wage sectors or operate illegally in the underworld depending, as the texts show, on gender. For instance, to make a living for themselves and meet the demands of dependants in the country of origin, women in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Ama Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* seem to bear the brunt of their migrant condition. Some, after failing to obtain the gainful employment they had hoped for, are forced into prostitution despite having university certification back home. Moral judgement by society leaves such women only with the consolation that necessity actually authors their paths.

A reading of Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Ama Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* reveals that pre-marital and extra-marital sex are deemed more immoral for women than men. In fact, in these texts, “prostitution” as a moral configuration is confined to women. This reading proceeds from such textual configurations of prostitution, while at the same time, remaining critical of such sexual practices as prostitution. Such reading takes cue from Laurie Shrage who notes that, juridically, laws governing prostitution are more punitive to the female than they are to the male counterpart in the same act. She argues that the “discriminatory criminal statutes [. . .] are mostly used to harass and penalize prostitutes, and rarely to punish johns” (1989, p. 347). Though Shrage falls to the trap of gendering prostitution as female in this quotation, this paper’s attention is centred more on the skewed punishment laws that translate to “the social subordination of women” (1989, p. 347) as she further notes. This paper’s argument in reading the two texts is to understand the regimes that lead to the characters’ shift to the less socially sanctioned forms of sexual engagement while still married or even after annulment of marriage. As Mara’s case in *Beyond the Horizon* clearly illustrates, the shift is neither simple nor predetermined. Such shifts are enmeshed in the larger politics of existence and survival for the woman, and still entangled with the economies of pleasure for the male client.

2.3 Female Characters of African Descent as Sex Workers in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* and Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon*

The indigenous African universe is categorical about the role of sex in the marital union: it is supposed to be a means of ‘pleasure for the man’ and also for procreation. However, for the Mara-Akobi union, and within the diasporic space, sexual intercourse is not only for the former, but also for generation of income for Akobi, and the only possible conduit happens to be Mara’s body. Odd as it may seem for Akobi to choose to prostitute his wife for money, it should be understood that for Mara, her status as an illegal immigrant leaves her with no choice at the beginning of her life in Germany. The two texts are anchored on two worlds that have different ideas about sex for the woman: one is the traditional African moral world which embeds the woman in notions of purity, and the second is the diasporic world where sheer existence dictates how sex can be an ally of everyday survival.

For instance, African notions of female morality and purity can be glimpsed through Alek, in *On Black Sisters’ Street*. At a young age, she is cautioned about premarital sex by her mother. The

mother, as a critical cog in the moral machine tells her that “[g]irls who let boys see them naked are not good girls. Nobody will give any cow to marry them. Save yourself for the man who will marry you. Marriage first. And then the touching” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 186). This puritanical ideal impressed upon the young Alek is scuttled by the existential hardships that confronts her upon her migration to Belgium. The body that is initially reserved for the man who marries her is changed into a tool of earning a living or income. Alek’s survival becomes dependent on the lines of duty to which her body can be sexually deployed.

The line between the body as a tool for income generation for survival, and a source of sexual pleasure becomes blurred, when the female characters’ longing to live beyond the sexual act outweighs the momentary act, and these characters fall in love with their clients. Sisi, Efe, Joyce and Ama, the protagonists in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* have been turned into sex workers by Madam, their host in Antwerp, Belgium. Madam reminds them of their status as *persona non-grata* in Belgium. She reminds them that they remain her properties until they fully pay back the debt they owe her for helping them relocate from Africa. She thus demands utmost respect and dedication. Every month they are expected to pay her and Dele five hundred Euros (Unigwe, 2009, p. 182). They also have to parade themselves at the Vingerlingstraat “in front of the glass showcase, strutting in sexy lingerie, lacy bras and racy thongs to attract customers,” (Unigwe, 2009, pp. 178). Demeaning as this commodified status is, these desperate women have to abide, especially if they remember that the alternative is to become vagrants and risk jail and deportation or both.

The brothel operators are aware of the vulnerability of the migrant women hence exploit the situation by forcing them to abide by unilateral conditions set by the operators. Such rules are used for cushioning their illegal business in case the recruits are to run away. Although the women are bonded to prostitution, they have no sense of power that the trade accords women. The trade that has traditionally given agency to the female practitioner is inverted so that the male counterpart still controls and abuses the woman’s body. Accounting for prostitution in “colonial Nairobi” where prostitutes offered sexual services to migrant labourers, Ann McClintock recalls how women in the business of transactional sex occupied a prestigious rank in the “whorearchy” (1991, p. 92) since, in the colonial setting “[p]rostitution presents not the scandal of moral degradation, but the scandal of female property ownership and sexual and fiscal control” (1991, p. 98). Unigwe’s novel presents us with a case in which migrant women are at the mercies of both the Madam, to whom they must give the product of their labour, and the men they must labour to please to earn a living.

As illegal migrant workers in the sex industry, these protagonists are enmeshed within the racial politik that essentializes their black bodies and the potential thrill of its consumption. In this work the women are stereotyped by male characters as being good at sex work. The men with whom Sisi sleeps keep telling her: ““Yes. Yes. You Africans are sooooo good at this”” (Unigwe, 2009, p. 36). These protagonists have to live up to the expectations of their male clients, whichever way the clients instructed so as to get their pay, and tips sometimes. Per night, they would have as many as five male clients. These would range from young men in their thirties “looking for adventure between the thighs of *een Afrikaanse*”, young boys looking to be rid of their virginity, bachelors seeking women’s warmth without committing themselves and old men “with mottled skin and flabby cheeks looking for something young to help them forget the flaccidness time has heaped on them” (Unigwe, 2009, pp. 178-179). What is clear from the above is not only the fact that the sex workers do provide services to all, young and old alike, but also from the tone of the excerpt, one can glean the fact that the work they do is seemingly unpleasant but has to be done out of want.

Their new group identity as 'Sisters' in prostitution emerges out of the stories they tell about their travails:

Thrown together by a conspiracy and a loud man called Dele they are bound in a sort of unobtrusive friendship, comfortable with what little they know of each other, asking no questions unless prompted, sharing deep laughter and music in their sitting room, making light of the life which has taught them to make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs, dissecting the men who come to them (men who spend hours thrashing on top of them or under them, shoving and fiddling and clenching their brown buttocks and finally-mostly- using their fingers to shove in their own pale meat) in voices loud and deprecating. (Unigwe, 2009, p. 26)

What emerges out of this group identity is a being which has rejected self-pity. Even in sheer adversity, such as when men spend "hours thrashing on top of them or under them" they survive by "making light of the life." It is worth noting that the driving force is survival mediated by adaptation and self-fashioning to fit into the circumstances that are put by greedy and insatiable men whose value for women is dependent on what they can get out of their womanhood. The sanctity of marital union is violated by the evil schemes that are authored by these avaricious men who lure the young and naive women from Africa knowing too well these women's dreams will be sacrificed to enhance the traffickers' dreams.

The case of Mara in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* is illustrative of the depths to which avaricious traffickers are ready to sink for profit. Mara's husband, Akobi, personally supervises the drugging and gang-rape of his wife while the camera rolls. When she comes to, Mara is shown the video which, from then on, becomes an instrument of blackmailing her to prostitution and coercing her to abide by surrendering the money she gets. Henceforth, she has to re-adjust her life to suit these circumstances. Devalued as a woman, Mara decides never to go back to Ghana because of the moral implication the video portends if it gets leaked. The videos become the object of dishonour that eventually seals her fate as an illegal immigrant who is never to return to Ghana. She speaks of this choice:

Moreover, I have this fear that haunts me day in and day out that if I show my face there one day, out of the blue that sex video Akobi made of me clandestinely will show up there, too. Worse still, I am now to be seen on a couple more sex videos. Home will have to remain a distant place (1995, p. 139)

Her new identity as a prostitute turns Ghana, her indigenous home, from being a place of unconditional acceptance, to a place of judgement which she would rather never go back to.

Faced with the reality of her condition, Mara re-fashions herself anew by opting to forget her life before being recruited into the sex industry. She also resets her psyche in a way that helps her escape from victimhood mentality and by so doing she becomes an actor with agency. She narrates how:

At Oves' brothel, I have plunged into my profession down to the marrow in my bones. There is no turning back for me now. I am so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine what being a non-whore is. I have problems recollecting what I was like before I turned into what I am now. (Darko, 1995, p. 139)

The wilful amnesia in “recollecting” her life as a married woman, coupled by the strategic embrace of her new trade signifies not only the transition into a new self, but also the transitivity of her identity. Mara’s new identity as a ‘whore’, and her own sense of guilt, contrasts her former identity as Akobi’s wife, who could not sexually engage with any other man, despite Akobi’s beating and his cheating on her. This transition is not unique to Mara. As MacClintock notes of “*Malaya*” sex workers in colonial Nairobi, the move to capitalize on the new status is also liberative as it takes the woman from the colonialism of the institution of marriage under patriarchy.

McClintock notes that “*Malaya* prostitution mimicked marriage, with the radical difference that the women exchanged for money the domestic, emotional, and sexual services most wives perform unpaid” (1991, p. 96). For Mara, the new image of the self is driven by bitterness, servitude and dishonour which Akobi had put her through. For her, the marital bond with Akobi was the site of reproducing insecurity, devoice, liminality and unpredictability. The shifting of her initial perception of sex from being sacred and guarded to being a source of income signals her rediscovery of the self as an independent agent of her life. This is seen through the radical departure from commitment to a monogamous union to “whorearchy” through which she is the sole author of the way her body is to be put to use, and how this body is to be re-styled for business. She tells Kaye:

I came here to you and Pee and all the others with thick bushy hair which has now been exotically cut short, close to my scalp. My eyebrows have been plucked thin. I have mastered the use of make-up, so that my lips are never without their scarlet taint. And I have received into me the rigid tools of many men and accompanied them on sinful rides through the back doors of heaven and returned with them back to earth, spent men. I am no longer green and you know it. As for the morals of life my mother brought me up by, I have cemented them with coal tar in my conscience. If the gods of Naka intended me to live by them, they should have made sure I was married to a man who loved me and who appreciated the values I was brought up with. I lived by these values until I could no longer do so. The rot has gone too deep for me to return to the old me. And that is why, Kaye, I am going to do the films and stage shows and all there is to it. But I want every pfennig of what I make to come to me! (Darko, 1995, p. 131)

The above copious quote is made because it enables the reading of Mara’s identity as transitive, as one that is in transition, and also because it unveils the self-styled philosophy that informs her decision as an independent actor away from the strictures of marriage. To start with, one can juxtapose Mara’s experience while living under “the morals of life [her] mother brought [her] up by” with the present life of her choice. Celebrating “sin” and making money is the chosen transitive way of escaping the haunting of the “old” self. Her total immersion into the now accepted profession to make money and help those at home may seem as a negative transition. However, as McClintock argues, through prostitution “women also consciously [take] control of social opportunities” (1991, p. 97). Viewed through McClintock’s lens, prostitution enables Mara more than it disempowers her. Mara has chosen the identity that was forcefully thrust to her and used it to assert herself. Generally, McClintock suggests, “[w]hatever else it is, prostitution represents the erasure of female sexual pleasure in exchange for money” (1991, p. 97). Transitivity thus enables Mara to escape the authoritarianism of handed down village morality that makes her an object of patriarchal manipulation.

The choice to break away from the intransitive patriarchal governance of the original home in Africa is made easy by the new consciousness that the diasporic space offers. Just like Mara, her

friend Vivian also gets hooked to sex work so much so that she would do it to support the men she loved. Osey, her Ghanaian husband subjected her to prostitution as he took the proceeds and spent them on his German wife, Ingrid, in the pretext of a marriage for convenience. When she leaves Osey after he beats her up with a pressing iron (Darko, 1995, p. 128), Vivian moves on with Marvin, a Government Issue and American soldier, who is to relocate with her to Chicago where she did not mind spending the proceeds of her prostitution on him. She says:

He can't go without me. He's got a big taste for hashish and needs at least four rolls every month. You think his soldier pay can finance that? Only a whore's income can finance that [. . .] I got Marvin [. . .] I got my papers, I got hashish and I got a profession that I can practise in every corner of the world. Can you give me a better formula for happiness? (Darko, 1995, p. 130)

Vivian's dream of acquiring an American visa and settling down with a man who values her as a woman who has her profession, is actualised by a transitivity that allows for multiple ways of being which is un-prescriptive of the way her marriage was.

These protagonists' naivety is shed off by the circumstances in which they found themselves. They are no longer 'green', they neither fear being referred to as prostitutes and whores, nor are they ashamed of actualising themselves through transactional sex. Similarly, they are not afraid of transgressing on indigenous African traditions which are prescriptive of how women's bodies can be used before or after marriage. At the beginning of the narratives, these women do not expect to be physically molested and sexually abused by the men who they called husbands, boyfriends and fathers, with who they were intimate. However in time, out of betrayal, fate and need for survival, their identities change from being the 'faithful sexual partners' to being 'prostitutes', 'whores' and sex workers. Flouting patriarchal norms becomes the new way of being which enables the diasporic 'Sisters' to regain dignity and help improve the lives of relatives back in Africa by remitting the fruits of their labour.

3. Conclusion

In the two texts, Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, the tribulations which the protagonists undergo lead to their ultimate reformation of identity and character as discussed. As the stories end, all the protagonists in one way or another experience self-fulfilment, even though they all take different paths in life. They come to a realisation that in spite of having relocated from Africa, their new diasporic spaces do not offer the warmth they had gone to seek. They realise the value of their indigenous identities as wives, mothers, daughters and educated women seeking productive career paths, which are devalued as they are turned into prostitutes and transactional sex workers. It dawns on them that on relocation from Africa, their bodies become but commodities for not only their bosses, but also their husbands and lovers who perceive them as sources of income hence the need for self-refashioning.

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Author Bionote

Gloria Ajami Makokha is currently a Tutorial Fellow in the Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University, Kenya. She is a finalist PhD in Literature. Her research interests include: Feminism, Ecofeminism, Postcolonialism and Diasporic Studies. **Mugo Muhia** is the Chairman, Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University. **Oluoch Obura** is a Professor of Literature, Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University.

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