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The "Sweet Pepper:" Prostitution Declosetted in Kenyan Women's Writing[1]

1. Introduction

In her book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* Florence Stratton argues that the conversion of the Mother Africa trope into a prostitute metaphor has been a recurring feature of contemporary tradition in men's fiction.[2] According to Stratton the trope has been used to exploit the male-female power relations of domination and subordination. She posits that many male writers in African literature like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Cyprian Ekwensi, and others, "people (or woman) their texts with prostitutes."[3] She contends that the prostitute metaphor has been used by these male writers to encode women as agents of moral corruption and contamination in the society. These writers, she says, have tended to represent the prostitute as a miserable and an exploited woman whose redemption can only come through her repatriation from her operation grounds in urban centres, back to the village.[4] The prostitute figure has in most cases been blamed for the evils in the society and portrayed as a home breaker and a

carrier of diseases. Prostitution is thus viewed as an "intolerable social evil that brings moral and physical disaster to all concerned".[5]

This paper discusses Oludhe Macgoye's *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* and Genga-Idowu's *Lady in Chains*, both published in 1993, with the aim of examining how the two Kenyan women writers subvert the notion of the prostitute as a home breaker, an undesirable character or a morally degenerate person as mentioned above. We pay attention to how Macgoye and Genga-Idowu conceal or camouflage the activities of the prostitute while at the same time trying to project prostitution as a career and as a productive economic activity like any other. This camouflage becomes clear in the way the two writers manipulate language by making use of euphemism to refer to sexual episodes in the novels, or by the way prostitutes' activities are implied, rather than an overt description. We argue that this camouflage gives prostitution a human face and revises the portrayal of the prostitute as it is cast in writings by other artists in Kenya, especially the male writers. We examine three main aspects of style that aid in understanding how Macgoye and Genga-Idowu view prostitution. First there is the use of dialogue between characters which helps the reader to discover how characters themselves have benefited from prostitution. Secondly we look at how flashbacks are utilised in order to compare prostitutes' lives at the beginning of their career with their present lives. Thirdly, the use of the omniscient narrator, who also communicates the authors' view on prostitution, helps the reader to understand that Macgoye and Genga-Idowu do not totally condemn prostitution but that they perceive it as an avenue that can possibly make life livable. They both portray prostitution as a means of capital accumulation, therefore turning what has traditionally been viewed as an evil enterprise

into an economically viable venture—a "sweet pepper." The two authors show that women who become prostitutes are not inherently immoral, but that they are compelled by the kind of life that they face daily to reinvent their survival strategies in an environment where poverty is increasing, economic life changing and traditions are becoming unbearable. Therefore Macgoye and Genga-Idowu suggest prostitutes should be regarded as part of the whole mix of society, rather than being singled out as causes of evil.

In the introduction to *The Prostitute in African Literature*, Senkoro asserts that critics and many writers in African literature have tended to avoid the issue of prostitution because it is viewed as a forbidden field that is circumscribed with rules and taboos. Therefore any writer who dares to venture in this field must break these rules and "justify his dealings with the forbidden 'dirty' subject of prostitutes and prostitution."[6] It is this taboo that Macgoye and Genga-Idowu break. The two are among the very few Kenyan women writers who have unequivocally looked at the institution of prostitution and attempted to revise and disavow both the male and the socio-cultural conception of the prostitute in Kenya, therefore declosetting it. The term declosetting is used in this discussion as a term meaning to expose or to speak about prostitution explicitly in spite of the view that it is a forbidden ground, such that many Kenyan women writers have tended to avoid writing on prostitutes. Macgoye and Genga-Idowu have shown that people should neither take the existence of prostitution in society for granted, nor try to view prostitution as undesirable, because it is a means through which those who practise it can survive in a society that offers little chance for women to progress economically and socially.

Foucault argues that sexuality is an important means of maintaining power over people, and also a means of acquiring knowledge of oneself and others.[7] Blumberg and Soal[8] also claim that talking about sexual issues has come to be considered a liberatory process and can also be seen as a subversive act in itself. This is the kind of discourse Macgoye and Genga-Idowu utilise to suggest liberatory avenues for women through prostitution. The two rewrite stereotypes and myths that have surrounded the discourse of prostitution, which have often been used to define women in general. They do this by acknowledging the existence of prostitution, and trying to shed some light at the end of the tunnel for the prostitute figure. This light is evident by the way prostitutes in both texts advance in life through the savings they acquire from prostitution.

We start this discussion by briefly looking at the background of prostitution in Kenya alongside the representation of prostitution and the prostitute by writers in Kenya, and then proceed to examine how Macgoye and Genga-Idowu present prostitution in their texts with specific reference to the use of language and the benefits prostitution affords the prostitute. In attempting to show how these writers give prostitution a human face, we will occasionally refer to the use of language by other writers in Kenya on prostitution, using these other writers as pointers to demonstrate how Macgoye and Genga-Idowu deviate from the male representation of the prostitute, and how far the two are bent on sanitising prostitution.

2. Background, and Writing on Prostitution in Kenya

Writing about women in the urban economy in Africa, Claire Robertson shows that colonialism facilitated prostitution. She argues that the establishment of towns by

colonialists provided jobs only for men and not for women. Women were then left only with the choice of employment opportunities such as provision of cooked food and prostitution.[9] Thus prostitution became one of the earliest economically rewarding jobs for women especially in the case of Africa.[10] Luise White has conducted extensive research on prostitution in Nairobi, and has shown that it existed in urban Kenya as early as the days before the turn of the twentieth century. White supports Robertson's idea that colonialists only provided jobs for men, and shows that with the absence of conventional employment opportunities, prostitution enabled many women to earn money with which to acquire property.[11] She argues that "women saw prostitution as a reliable means of capital accumulation [and] not as a despicable fate or a temporary strategy."[12] White shows that the work of prostitutes was like family labour because a prostitute would either choose to invest in an urban estate or buy her property in the rural areas using the money earned from prostitution, or sometimes assist other members of the family. In an interview with some of the women who sold sex, White reports that these women claimed that prostitution was "extra money" in addition to sales from agriculture. She adds that these women earned more money from prostitution than many African men who worked in the city before the First World War.[13] Thus prostitution became historically the most profitable transaction between men and women in Nairobi.

Although prostitution has been evident in Nairobi for a long time, most female writers in Kenya have, more often than not, avoided writing about the prostitute figure. Those who choose to write about her, and these have characteristically been male writers, depict the prostitute within the sociological framework that sees her as an agent of moral decay

in the society. We will now look at some writing on prostitution in Kenya and see how the prostitute has been represented.

In Thomas Akare's *Twilight Woman*, Resilia runs away from her husband to go and enjoy life with Arthur, who later dumps her, and she becomes a prostitute in Nairobi.[14] In this text, Akare views prostitution as a likely final resort for women when marriages fail. However unlike Macgoye and Genga-Idowu who offer chances of success for the prostitute, Akare shows that women who leave their husbands are likely to end up worse off than when they began, even if their marriages are already in shambles.[15] Akare's text suggests that the problem of twilight women is that their ideas of freedom from men have backfired,[16] and thus prostitution may not assist women in any way to resist gender inequalities that are engendered by patriarchy.

Emili Katango, the prostitute in David Maillu's *After 4.30*, is poor and her prostitution does not assist her much to transcend her poverty. Generally, women in this text are presented as sex-exploited by men, mostly their bosses after working hours: after 4.30. Maillu overtly describes the activities of the prostitutes in this text, thus presenting prostitution as an ugly sexual encounter, with characters uttering vulgarities like "Your father is somewhere…. Laying eggs between thighs of wild women."[17] In another instance a woman is referred to as a "primitive filthy bitch with a decaying cunt."[18] Such utterances are absent from Macgoye and Genga-Idowu's texts, which shows how the two are inclined toward sanitising prostitution. Roger Kurtz observes that male writers in Kenya employ the prostitute figure not as a way to illuminate and explore the problems of women in postcolonial society, where the inequality brought about by capitalism disadvantages women, but as a grand metaphor for men's degradation.[19] Kurtz shows that

in *Broken Drum*, Maillu portrays women like "jigger fleas" that live on men's emotions. "Like a flea [a woman] enters you with a sweet itch… comes to you easily like a disease but does not get out of you easily."[20] This presentation shows that Maillu sees prostitutes as parasites and as enemies of men. In addition Maillu supports the idea of repatriating prostitutes to the village, because the innocent country girl Beatrice, in *The Ayah*, and the hardened prostitute Emili, in *After 4.30*, both have to learn essentially the same lesson: that only through a return to the countryside and to traditional female roles found there, will they be saved.[21]

Other writers in Kenya like Ngugi wa Thiong'o view the prostitute as an exploited character. Ngugi treats Wanja, the prostitute in *Petals of Blood*,[22] variously. At one point he repatriates her to the rural Ilmorog but returns her to town and takes her back to Ilmorog again. Ngugi makes Wanja a successful prostitute just like Victoria, in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*, because like Victoria, Wanja manages a group of girls from whom she earns money.[23] However, unlike Victoria, Wanja does not transcend prostitution. Munira, a man who sees Wanja as an evil that should be eliminated from the society, burns down Wanja's whorehouse. Ngugi objectifies Wanja and often portrays her as having an "irresistible charm needed to seduce men,"[24] while in Ilmorog, Karega and Munira are competing to possess her. The dominant image of Wanja in *Petals of Blood* is that of a victim, because every step she makes she is confronted with men who want to have sex with her: Kimeria, Mzigo, Chui, Munira, Karega and even the cripple Abdulla. Prostitution in this text is therefore presented like a kind of entrapment for women.

Charles Mangua in *Son of Woman* not only sees the prostitute as corrupting the society but also shows that the son of a prostitute views the mother as a happy-go-lucky figure. Mangua's narrator, Dodge Kiunyu says:

> I am a son of woman…. Never had a dad in my blinking life. My whoring mother could not figure out who my pop was…. It was one of the scores who took her for a bed-ride but she wasn't bothered to remember who among them I resembled. That's my mother.[25]

Mangua's view of the prostitute is that of a careless character who cannot remember who fathered her son. When Kiunyu's mother dies, he is forced to live dangerously in the city of Nairobi, and other towns in Kenya. Subsequently he marries his childhood friend Tonia who is also a prostitute, probably involved in prostitution because of the life she has been exposed to in the city by her mother, who was also a prostitute. In "Feminist Issues on Prostitution" Sarah Bromberg identifies nine categories that prostitutes appear to fall into, one of these being inherited prostitution. This category, she argues, includes women prostitutes whose mothers or relatives were prostitutes. Bromberg asserts that such women know what they are doing and are confident that they can handle most of the dangers.[26] Tonia in *Son of Woman* certainly enters into prostitution through this kind of inheritance that Bromberg talks about. However what we are interested in, in this text, is Mangua's abhorrence for prostitutes which is demonstrated by the way his narrator, Kiunyu, uses the word "whore." When he decides to marry Tonia he says, "so there you are. You know all about me. My mother was a whore and I am getting married to a whore."[27] Kiunyu's words show that Mangua is inclined towards the sociological judgments that sees the prostitute as unwelcome in the society, and thus makes his characters feel guilty for having any association with prostitutes.

In Rebecca Njau's *Ripples in the Pool*, Selina, a prostitute, easily gains from rich men but does not want to be close to them. She eventually marries Gikere, a simple and averagely prosperous man. Gikere takes Selina to the village but his mother and the other villagers cannot accept her. Gikere's mother thinks Selina is a dangerous and a notorious city woman who brings shame to her husband: a witch who cannot let her son progress. Unlike fellow women writers like Macgoye and Genga-Idowu, Rebecca Njau has no sympathy for the prostitute. Like the male writers discussed above, she sees prostitutes as corrupting the society, whores that should be destroyed or, "be sent back to the village to dig and weed the fields."[28] In this text, the city is seen as corrupting and many village men do not wish their daughters to move to the city. Selina herself admits: "I am wicked woman, a very low creature. That is why men are afraid of me. I'm cruel and unkind to Gikere."[29] Rebecca Njau makes Selina live to be a dangerous woman who kills Gikere's sister, Gaciru, and her (Selina's) only known relative Karuga when she suspects that the two are in love.

In contrast Macgoye and Genga-Idowu's texts are significant in that the two depart from the view that has been accorded prostitutes by other Kenyan writers by showing that prostitution can influence women's lives positively. The two decloset and make the institution of prostitution desirable by the use of euphemism. One of the areas of social intercourse in which euphemisms, veiled language to express what is sometimes viewed as "inexpressibles" or "unmentionables," are used is in relation to prostitution, mainly because it involves human sexual contact, viewed as private and taboo in common speech. Korhonen states that in past centuries and in earlier decades of the twentieth century women were the chief promoters of a verbal delicacy which included the creation

of more or less thinly disguised terms for houses of prostitution.[30] Macgoye and Genga-Idowu's use of euphemisms to talk about prostitution, unlike their male counterparts, may be attributed to the fact that the two are women; hence they are keen in promotion of the verbal delicacy. The use of euphemisms by the two writers will become clear as we engage with the two texts.

3. Representation of the Prostitute Figure in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*

In *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* Victoria's father marries her off as a second wife to Odhaimbo at fifteen. For two years Odhiambo could neither satisfy Victoria sexually nor give her a child. In this text we are presented with what Nana calls "the insensitivity of the patriarchal world that measures a woman's worthy by her fertility,"[31] by the fact that Victoria is not appreciated in her society because a woman without children like her is a failed woman. As a result she gets involved in a sexual relationship with another man who makes her pregnant. She, however, abandons her child at a mission hospital where she gives birth, goes to Kisumu, then the centre of colonial administration in Western Kenya, and becomes a prostitute. Victoria becomes an acquaintance of Chelagat who owns a brothel in Majengo in Kisumu, an association that marks the starting point of her successful life. With time she becomes a wealthy woman and moves to Nairobi to operate other businesses. The narrator in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* informs us that meeting Chelagat

> had been a turning-point in her [Victoria's] life. That day she had not only embarked upon a career, she had also began to live with complete deliberation. Nothing that happened to her after that was completely independent of her own free will.[32]

The omniscient narrator that Macgoye uses throughout the text acts like her own voice to suggest that prostitution creates opportunities for women because it is an occupation that can be used by women to acquire space in the production hierarchy. It is not that prostitution is a socially acceptable profession. Rather, our argument is that Macgoye revises the way in which this institution is viewed in Kenya by showing that life can be productive and satisfying for the prostitute. She suggests that prostitutes be judged as following a profession that benefits their lives, and that sometimes this profession helps them to progress to a higher rank in terms of economic establishment. Her writing is read in this discussion as supplementing women's search for a just society through a foregrounding of women's struggle from both oppressive patriarchy and the marginalising economic structures,[33] like the one from which Victoria originates.

Much of the narrative in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* is set in postcolonial Kenya where we witness Victoria running her business in Nairobi. But through flashbacks Macgoye takes us back to Victoria's past life in colonial times when she worked as a callgirl in Chelegat's brothel in Kisumu. When Victoria first meets Sara Chelagat she "took her to a thatched house, mud-walled…. She told her to lie on a rope bed with straw filled mattress covered with gaudy cotton."[34] Such is the state of life at the beginning of a prostitute's career. This situation can be contrasted with life later in the brothel when Chelagat dies and Victoria takes charge of it, or with Victoria's life in Nairobi, both of which have a touch of affluence. This sense of richness is implied by the narrative voice in the very first sentence of the novel: "Victoria surveyed the shop…. Shelves were neatly stacked with goods… towels, suitcases, shorts…."[35] There is a marked shift in Victoria's lifestyle, which shows how prostitution has aided her to advance in life.

Frances Finnegan observes that the Victorian image of the prostitute in York was that of a demoralised creature treading a downward path and ending in drunkenness and disease.[36] Finnegan however notes that prostitution could also provide a channel for women to redeem themselves and begin a new life. *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* examines this possibility for sex workers to have a channel to redeem themselves, through Victoria who uses her earnings from prostitution to establish her own businesses. We argue that Macgoye's presentation of Victoria's success as having its base in prostitution rewrites the arguments of critics, as well as writers, who see the prostitute as a victim of terror in the city, "who dies in oblivion after living her wretched life of drunkenness, violence and cheap sex."[37]

Commenting on Macgoye's earlier novel, *Coming to Birth*, Elsie Cloete[38] says Paulina, its woman protagonist, finds for herself a new urban maturity and self-development after she moves to the city of Nairobi. Cloete shows that closely aligned with the urban space for women are opportunities for better employment, education and social economic and political influence. The city is also viewed as offering opportunities for women in Macgoye's later text, *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*. Moving to the urban space and subsequent involvement in prostitution not only allows Victoria to resist sexual subordination but also allows her to become empowered economically. She therefore redeems herself culturally and economically. This redemption is demonstrated by the fact that Victoria has an obligation to go home after leaving her husband, as she had been legally married. However, having already been rooted in her "career," it is not possible for her to go back home. Thus she saves money enough to buy herself back because she prefers to remain in prostitution as it was "work being done and money

coming," and she thought, "Perhaps… she was going to make a better *malaya*[39] than a wife."[40] Norman Miller asserts that many Kenyan women do the majority of routine farm work, tend babies and manage the hearth.[41] Miller also notes that in some societies, these women have no control over their destinies because of the fact that bride-price has been paid for them, which reduces them to second-class citizens.[42] One could argue that Victoria's act of paying back her dowry points to prostitution as having the power to subvert patriarchal gender relations because it gives women economic power, which redefines their position in the society. We are informed that Victoria sometimes uses private taxis instead of the usual public buses, which places her above other women economically. Victoria's earnings from prostitution therefore become like a vehicle that takes her across the bridge, to move away from economic marginalisation, to economic independence. In another instance the reader is informed that when Victoria's savings "had reached the figure she had calculated enough to retire on…"[43] she does not wish to continue with her career. Retiring here alludes to the view that prostitution is a career that comes with retirement like other forms of employment that the society accepts.

Macgoye's attempt to sanitise prostitution is witnessed by the way she uses language to "clothe" the "nakedness" of the sexual activities of the prostitutes. Instead of mentioning the actions of the prostitutes bluntly, terms describing prostitution and its attendant practices are "clothed," through the use of phrases like "dealing with a client"[44] when referring to having sex, "to be desired was pleasure…. Men came to them,"[45] "come up and see me another time"[46] when requesting a sexual encounter, or "house of pleasure"[47] to refer to the brothel. On the contrary, Ocholla, a character in Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* says, "will you screw with me for lunch…. Hell, I

want a screw bad…."[48] These and other words that overtly describe sex urges and episodes in Mwangi's text present prostitution as undesirable.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, writing on prostitution within the same Kenyan society, views prostitution as "a symbol of degradation rather than liberty—a path to entrapment and slavery."[49] Through Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi shows that the prostitute is subjected to sexual exploitation by the males and attempts to free herself are rendered futile. And unlike Macgoye who uses polite language to describe the condition of the prostitute, Ngugi uses language that has some touch of vulgarity. Such language is evident in Wanja's assertion that "If you have a cunt…if you are born with this hole, instead of it being a source of pride, you are doomed to marrying someone or being a whore."[50] In this case Wanja sees femaleness as a source of enslavement to men. In the process, Ngugi almost reduces female sexuality to a biological attribute rather than a social construct that can be transformed into something positive. There is a tone that suggests some fixity of female position because of her "cunt." Such vulgar language is almost absent in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*.

Dialogue used in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* helps to establish the illusion that the society in which the text is set has accepted prostitution as a means of acquiring property. For example when lawyer Obonyo is killed next to the Welcome Friendly Bar[51] and Fatima, a woman from the brothel, is suspected of having been involved in the murder, Obonyo's clerk and sergeant Ouma speak about Fatima thus:

> "…. But, of course, they have many words, these ladies… though if she is *who* I think *she is*, she must be *rolling with money.*"
> "She is Mama Victoria's second in command, yes I know her" [Italics mine].[52]

The use of "who … she is" makes an allusion to Fatima's career, while "must be rolling with money" refers to the income that prostitution affords Fatima. Prostitution is also depicted as a job with status and hierarchy in this quotation, and since Victoria is away Fatima takes charge of the house just like Victoria does when Chelagat dies. Macgoye thus rewrites African traditional inheritance order by showing that through relocation to urban centres women find a new world which gives them freedom to control their lives at will without any socio-cultural ties, and thus they can inherit from other women as opposed to many patriarchal societies which view inheritance as only for the male offspring.

Writing about prostitution in colonial Nairobi, Luise White says, "the way a woman spends her earnings from prostitution tells a lot about why she became a prostitute."[53] White notes that those who became prostitutes because of need were able to appropriate income and improve their lives. In Chelagat's brothel, Macgoye demonstrates that the purpose of the girls becoming sex workers was not just because they were immoral but because of the desire to earn a living. Chelagat is also shown to be quite friendly to the girls and she cares about their being well mannered and organised. Consequently women in Chelegat's brothel like Victoria make savings in order to distance themselves from economic deprivation. But if we compare life in Chelagat's brothel with Wanja's in *Petals of Blood*, we realise that Ngugi depicts the call-house as a place for sexploitation and not a place that would better a woman's life. Wanja says:

> I have hired some girls…I promised them security…and for that…they let me trade their bodies…what is the difference if you are sweating it out in a plantation, in a factory or lying on your back anyway? I have various types for various types of men.[54]

I repeatedly quote Ngugi to demonstrate my argument that Macgoye is sympathetic to the condition of the prostitute and that she also uses language to exhibit the positive attributes of sex workers unlike her male counterparts. Likewise Meja Mwangi in *Going Down River Road* describes the prostitutes as people who are "big-arsed," with "tits" and "udders" and that they walk around with "on sale" adverts in front of their skirts.[55] Such descriptions reduce the female body to a sex commodity that can be bought at a bargain price. This commodification is similar to the payment of bride-price which Victoria rebels against when she refuses to get tied to an unsatisfying marriage as a second wife by running away into prostitution and paying back the dowry, as we have already seen.

Macgoye uses the trope of rebellious woman through Victoria, and equips her with business talents so that she saves from her prostitution in her productive (youthful) age, and invests in businesses so that she does not suffer in her old age. The trope of the rebellious woman that Macgoye employs is also evident in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. Adaku the co-wife of Nnu Ego refuses to be tied to Nnaife their husband and declares that she was walking out of the small house in which the family lived to become a prostitute in Lagos.[56] Like Victoria, Adaku becomes successful, and in addition she is able to pay for her daughters to be educated, something her co-wife could not afford.

Due to the political changes that are taking place in Kenya in the events leading up to the country's independence, many political activists seek refuge among the sex workers. Victoria provides hiding places for these politicians and she sometimes has sex encounters with them. This organisation demonstrates that having entered into prostitution Victoria has become socially conscious of the fate of other people that the

society discriminates against, just like her—as a woman and a prostitute—and thus she tries to help them. In an incidence when one of these refuge seekers overstays in Victoria's room, Fatima, the second in authority from Victoria discusses with Victoria:

> "Huh! Overtime!" Fatima grinned at her.
> "Very nice man, too," smiled Victoria. "Now he will sleep it off."
> "And if he is sleeping it off when the next one comes?"
> "In that case you might consent to give a hand with the next one, sister?"
> "I'll look after the prick and you see to the politics."[57]

This conversation encapsulates my main argument in this discussion. Although presented in an ironical manner, prostitution is here shown to have its demands including the need to do some extra work at times, just like other jobs. Secondly Macgoye uses a euphemism, "prick," to avoid the mention of the taboo word. Thirdly the manner in which Fatima and Victoria discuss this affair uncovers Macgoye's intention to decloset prostitution. The conversation shows that prostitution is an activity that Victoria and Fatima are acquainted. The two have accepted their career and there is no shame in speaking about it, as would normally be expected in their society.

After Victoria has settled in Nairobi, we see her wondering, "Did any of the men *she had used* in the *days of her power* really know who she was?…. She was a woman who *had worked hard* for what she owned" [Italics mine].[58] We read the mention of the phrase "had worked hard" as Macgoye's own implicit suggestion that like other jobs, prostitution needs hard work if any success is to result. Notice also how Victoria refers to her past days as "days of her power." Power here refers to the ability to attract men, retain them, serve them and earn money in return. The assertion that Victoria "had used" men in the quotation also signals the suggestion that prostitution changes power relations between the sexes.

It is important, of course, to point out that not all women who join prostitution end up liberating themselves. The argument here implies simply that prostitution like other forms of work and career can have successful and unsuccessful people, and that since prostitution is a complex issue, grouping virtually all prostitutes into one general category of exploited beings might yield an inaccurate view of their lives. As we have already seen, comparison between the kind of life Victoria leads in Nairobi and the one that she led before she met Chelagat, undoubtedly confirms that prostitution changes Victoria's life for the better. In fact the narrative voice informs us that Victoria's wealth was a "worthwhile fruit of lifetime's skill organized on prostitution."[59]

3.2 Construction of Prostitution in *Lady in Chains*

Like Macgoye, Genga-Idowu figures prostitution as a reliable means of upward social and economic mobility, a career through which women can reliably succeed. Susan in *Lady in Chains* starts life at a very low level of economic status, relying on second hand and borrowed clothes. However, towards the end of the novel she claims that her eyes have opened and she is completely transformed into a well-established independent businesswoman. In this text as in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* we see the deployment of the trope of the rebellious woman through Susan, as she cuts herself off from being married to any man, a husband seeming to her to act like a "chain" to inhibit her economic well-being.

After moving from her rural home in Western Kenya to Nairobi with her husband and three children, Susan realises that her family is not only lacking enough clothes, a thing they had got used to in their rural home, but this time food has also become a

problem. Living in the slums of Nairobi becomes worse than the home they have fled. As a result, Susan decides to start brewing and selling beer like other slum women to supplement income from Ochola's work as a night watchman. But her business collapses and life gets worse. Ochola then suggests that Susan should take up a job in a bar, which marks her first step into prostitution.[60] At first Susan is unwilling, and she calls Ochola's suggestion pure madness. Her resistance towards taking up a job in the bar shows she is rooted in the sociological stereotypes that view women bar attendants as prostitutes. However, later she realises that in the society in which she lives, women could not make any significant progress by being tied to a societal moral code. She therefore takes up the job with a declaration that, "after all town was far…and nobody would know what kind of job it is."[61] Moving to town, away from her slum house, is in this case seen to provide a new space for Susan where she can act without scrutiny from her neighbours. Susan's interaction with different people, especially her female colleagues at work, influences the way she relates to men, and this changes her life tremendously. At the bar she gets to know Polycap Mbogo who occasionally takes her out for lunch, dinner or a holiday at the coast. To Susan this is very exciting and she feels "life had just begun" for her. She wondered why she had not "lived" all those years.[62]

In this text, we note that like Macgoye, Genga-Idowu avoids detailed description of episodes that take place in bars, or any overt condemnatory comments towards Susan and the friends whom she works with in the bar. She also does not project overt representations of the sexual encounters that Susan has with men, mainly Polycap. The writer chooses her scenes and words carefully so that at the end the reader understands whatever has been happening just through implications made in the text. Genga-Idowu's

choice of words can be compared with Meja Mwangi's in *Going Down River Road*, which describes the places prostitutes operate from in a pejorative manner: "A woman's blood-stained under pants hung behind the door,"[63] "a harlot watched from the balcony of first floor…legs apart…she had nothing under the miniskirt."[64]

Although Ochola suggests that Susan should start work as a bar attendant, he sometimes takes a patriarchal stand and sees Susan's place as the home and calls her a prostitute. When one time Susan comes back home after staying out of her house for three days with Polycap, Ochola in a moralistic manner tells her, "you can take back your prostitution where you spent the last three days. I have nothing to do with you any more,"[65] conveniently ignoring the fact that he was the initial cause of Susan's behaviour. But *Lady in Chains* shows that prostitution makes life better in conditions of economic deprivation, because Susan improves the diet for her family, buys good clothes for Ochola and the children, and as a result, Ochola's fury settles. Therefore prostitution earns Susan money, and money becomes the power that breaks stubborn hearts like Ochola's. The narrator captures the situation thus:

> She [Susan] was very happy that night. She had finally won the battle. She would give him as much money as he wanted if only she could get a chance whenever she needed it to be with her dream man. Things could change for better materially in the Ochola household after this…. She felt like a new woman. She wanted to waltz all over the slum and announce that she was done with misery and poverty.[66]

The gloomy mood in the Ochola family changes because of the availability of money, but what is interesting at this point is the source of the money. Prostitution in *Lady in Chains* improves people's lives just as Macgoye does in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*. Significant too in this text is the fact that Ochola allows Susan to get sexually close to

Polycap because he tries to solve economic difficulties by "leasing out" his wife.[67] This suggestion becomes explicit by the fact that husband and wife wanted their secret kept away from Ochola's cousin, Ong'ora. "They sat and drunk together for the first time in their lives" [and after the drink] "they conspired… to do what the people of their community had never heard of,"[68] "an abomination."[69]

In *Prostitution and Morality* Benjamin and Masters argue that married women may engage in occasional prostitution as a means of supplementing income from other sources.[70] This kind of supplement is what Susan intends to pursue when she agrees to take up the job at the bar. Her prostitution however is not the occasional money search that Benjamin and Masters talk about because Susan neglects her marriage and has to live a double life with Ochola and Polycap—a "part time wife," as Laurie Shrage calls it.[71] However, the manner in which Genga-Idowu allows Susan to make progress in her businesses suggests that prostitution removes women from their confines, and gives them a chance to realise their talents, repressed by patriarchal societies that tend to privilege male talents over those of women.

When Susan's marriage to Polycap is discovered she leaves both Polycap and Ochola, and lives with her five children [three from Ochola, and two from Polycap]. Genga-Idowu therefore questions the usefulness of the father figure in the well-being of children and whether marriage is a necessary role for a woman, by the way Susan decides to abandon the two men. But significant in this arrangement is that she benefits from her relationship with these men. First she establishes her businesses using Polycap's money and secondly she registers the vehicle that Ochola had got from Polycap under her name. Susan's deeds show that women need not be subjected to male domination forever—the

traditional African wife who submits to her husband.[72] In *Lady in Chains* there is a change of power relations, and the subversion of the presentation of prostitutes as exploited beings, and of the assumption that men take advantage of women (read prostitutes), because it is Susan who takes advantage of Polycap and Ochola. When Susan detaches herself from the two men, Ochola is forced to go back to his rural home as he cannot survive in the city without money. Here again Genga-Idowu rewrites the repeated repatriation of women to the village noted by Stratton, by sending Ochola home rather than Susan, the woman.

Through dialogue between Susan and her friend Marilyne we learn that Genga-Idowu privileges women's friendship as a tool for enlightenment in prostitution. Many times we witness Marilyne telling Susan to take the opportunity to earn money from men, as she herself does. For example, the following dialogue shows how Susan was inexperienced before she started her career:

> "But what if he gets to know?…" she almost wailed for understanding.
> "Pack you off, of course! But they are many. You said you came to town to "seek" and now you have "found." Now it is up to you to take it. You want money, don't you?
> "Yes but…"
> "No buts Sue. Listen…. get the stuff, get rich and beat misery…. Personally I beat them by not being tied to any in particular."[73]

Marilyne later tells Susan not to spend all her earnings and also warns her not to tell Polycap that Ochola is her husband. In this text we see the experienced Marilyne guiding Susan as to how she can stabilise herself economically through prostitution. Marilyne says it is money that Susan needs and there is no need to tell people about her past. It is a matter of picking a man who can provide for her needs. This arrangement that Genga-Idowu suggests reflects the argument of Carol Pateman that the prostitute is not an

oppressed victim, rather the quintessential liberated woman. Pateman argues, "The man may think he 'has' her, but his sexual possession is an illusion; it is she who has him… she will not be 'taken' since she is being paid."[74]

Genga-Idowu shows that prostitution is present in the society not because those who practise it are immoral but because they are forced into it by the economic circumstances present in the society:

> "When 'grandmothers' travel to sell themselves for money," she [Nyar Suna] snorted….
> "What are you talking about?" Kail intruded… "What do you want them to do when all trades are being monopolized by moneyed people…? I do not see it wrong in finding something else to trade on when one can!"[75]

In this dialogue prostitution is seen as a trade which women get involved in when they are excluded from other avenues of production, and consequently it becomes part of the means of production in the economy. But equally we cannot overlook the fact that there are those who go into prostitution by choice. Genga-Idowu shows that regardless of what pushed them into prostitution, prostitutes could become economically independent if they were wise in using the money they earned from prostitution.

Carol Pateman argues that "the prostitute is not really a wage laborer but rather an independent contractor who has it within her means to start or stop a transaction. Her contract is with a male customer and not an employer."[76] Pateman's argument opposes Marxist feminists' supposition that prostitution represents a corruption of wage labour and is therefore degrading and oppressive. Pateman's supposition shows that the prostitute is not a completely exploited and oppressed being because she can easily disengage herself from the profession at will and stop selling her commodity, either after

saving enough as Victoria and Susan do, or sometimes when she feels the profession is not appealing.

As in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*, the narrator in *Lady in Chains* enters into the characters' minds and tells the reader how their thoughts drift into their past from their present lives. For instance we are taken into Susan's mind as she reflects how men at the Sabina Joy Bar treated one of her friends, Wagathis: "Men can be shockingly obscene. They dragged her [Wagathis] by the breasts, pinched her buttocks… they did everything obscene and she never resisted."[77] Here we learn that prostitutes sometimes experience some brutal treatment from their male partners. Such scenes linger in Susan's mind long after they happened, which shows that although on the one hand prostitution can be beneficial, on the other hand, its workings and experiences can sometimes become traumatising. But Genga-Idowu does not go beyond the assertion that men do obscene things to women. She communicates to the reader the activities that occur in bars (prostitution sites) but at the same time protects the institution of prostitution by not saying anything beyond the obscene things mentioned in the quotation above. This protective use of language that we have called the "clothing" of the nakedness of language is further made clear by the way characters in the text decline to use some specific words but instead make use of euphemisms. Characters in this text use phrases such as "to have a woman,"[78] or "move with me"[79] when referring to sexual activities, which we read as an attempt to make the business more appealing and to project it as a career that helps/assists prostitutes in earning their living.

4. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to demonstrate how Macgoye and Genga-Idowu revise the perception of the prostitute figure in the Kenyan society. Being women, Macgoye and Genga-Idowu have undertaken a practice that attempts to resist hegemonic sexual mores by talking about sexual issues. They have refused to cooperate with the male writers who view prostitution as a kind of exploitation by demonstrating that the unattached female figure that migrates to the city should not be singled out as the cause of societal indiscipline. Instead the two writers have shown that this figure acts as metaphor of women's ability to transcend the socio-cultural and economically marginalised position that they have tended to occupy in the society. Macgoye and Genga-Idowu have shown that prostitution should better be understood as a form of work, which can come with success and failures rather than a form of sexual violence. In this case those women who are able to save money from prostitution, as Victoria and Susan do, can use prostitution as a stepping-stone to better prospects. The two writers subvert the perception of prostitution as a dirty game by the way they use language that sanitises prostitution as compared with writings by male writers like Meja Mwangi and others. There is also the subversion of the sexual allegory that male writers have tended to valorise by repatriation of the prostitute figure to the village,[80] which implies that the city is no longer a forbidden place for women. Therefore like a pepper, which although bitter, is used to add flavour to food, prostitution, which is condemned in the society, could have some desirable attributes/benefits.

But it is also important to note that there are impediments to prostitution such as the presence of many Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and the subsequent advent of HIV/AIDS, plus the illegality of prostitution and sometimes the battering of prostitutes

by rogue male partners, which prostitutes may face in the course of their business. However since these issues have not succeeded in terminating prostitution we argue it is important to offer suggestions that can possibly help this figure to progress, as, we argue, the two writers have done. The narratives in the two texts supplement women's search for a fair society because in both texts prostitution finds victory over patriarchy, and shifts the centre of economic power from men, allowing women a share in this power. Macgoye and Genga-Idowu's writing can therefore be viewed as, to borrow Nasta's words on women's writing in general, "a non-violent but effective weapon in countering the dominant male mythologies."[81]

Notes

[1] This paper is based on my MA Research Report: "The Figuring of Prostitution in Kenyan Fiction by Two Women Writers" completed at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in February 2003.
[2] Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994), 47.
[3] Ibid., 53.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

[6] F. E. M. K. Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature* (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1982), xi.
[7] Quoted in Roger Horrocks, *An Introduction to the Study of Sexuality* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), 97.
[8] J. Blumberg and Judith Soal "Let's Talk about Sex: Liberation and Regulation in Discourses of Bisexuality" in Ann Levett, et al. eds., *Culture, Power and Difference: Discourse Analysis in South Africa* (London: Zed, 1997), 83.
[9] Claire Robertson, "Women in the Urban Economy" in S. Stichter and M. J. Hay, eds., *African Women South of the Sahara* (Harlow: Longman, 1995), 44-65.
[10] See Harry Benjamin and Robert Masters, *Prostitution and Morality* (London: Souvenir Press, 1965), who also argue that prostitution can be traced from as early as human society has ever existed.
[11] Luise White, The *Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 1.
[12] Ibid., 1-2.
[13] Ibid., 40-41.
[14] Thomas Akare, *Twilight Woman* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1988).

[15] J. Roger Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 144.
[16] Ibid.
[17] David Maillu, *After 4.30* (Nairobi: Maillu Publishing House, 1987), 13.
[18] Ibid., 18.
[19] Kurtz, 140.
[20] See Maillu's *Broken Drum* (Nairobi: Maillu Publishing House, 1991), 546. Quoted in Kurtz, 143.
[21] Kurtz, 157.
[22] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986).
[23] Although this in itself is a kind of exploitation, we argue that to some extent this kind of business lifts the women's economic standards, because they accumulate some money, which they use for satisfaction of their basic needs.
[24] James Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation* **(**London: Pluto Press: 1999), 117.
[25] Charles Mangua, *Son of Woman* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 7.
[26] "Feminist Issues on Prostitution" in http://www.feministissues.com/index.html
[27] Mangua, 159.
[28] Kurtz, 98.
[29] Rebecca Njau, *Ripples in the Pool* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1975), 121.
[30] Sanna Korhonen, "Euphemisms in American English," http://www.uta.fi/FAST/USI/PI/euphm.html (2.12.02).
[31] Nana Wilson-Tagoe, "Reading towards a Theorization of Women's Writing: African Women Writers within Feminist Gynocriticism" in Stephanie Newell, *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997), 18.
[32] M. O. Macgoye, *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* (Nairobi: Macmillan, 1993), 27.
[33] Peter T. Simatei, *The Novel and the Politics of National Building in East Africa* (Beyreuth: Beyreuth African studies, 2001), 131.
[34] Macgoye, 33.
[35] Ibid., 1.
[36] Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 8.
[37] Chris Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom* (Nairobi: African Literature Bureau, 1980), 209.
[38] Elsie Cloete, Elsie, Leonara, "Re-telling Kenya: Wambui Waiyaki Otieno and Mau Mau's Daughter" (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2002), 189.
[39] *Malaya* is a Swahili word for prostitute.
[40] Macgoye, 28.
[41] N. Norman Miller, *Kenya: The Quest for Prosperity* (London: Westview Press, 1984), 74.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Macgoye, 99.
[44] Ibid, 29
[45] Ibid., 24.
[46] Ibid., 25.
[47] Ibid., 65.
[48] Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2001), 11.
[49] James Ogude, "Ngugi's Concept of History and Character Portrayal in his Post-colonial Novels" (PhD Thesis: University of the Witwatersrand, 1996), 165.
[50] Ngugi, 293.
[51] Victoria's nephew James ran the Welcome Friendly Bar, which was next to the brothel.
[52] Macgoye, 190.
[53] White, 8.
[54] Ngugi, 293.
[55] Mwangi, 118.
[56] Buchi Emecheta, *Joys of Motherhood* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1994), 168.
[57] Macgoye, 51.
[58] Ibid., 59.

[59] Ibid., 18.
[60] Working in a bar in Kenya is seen as equivalent to prostitution. Ochola himself acknowledges that women who work in bars are prostitutes, but then says, "a job is a job… women have all the rights to any job" (53), which communicates the author's stand that prostitution is a career from which the income can assist those who practise it.
[61] F. M. Genga-Idowu, *Lady in Chains* (Nairobi: East African educational Publishers, 1993), 37.
[62] Ibid., 57.
[63] Mwangi, 4.
[64] Ibid., 75
[65] Genga-Idowu, 57.
[66] Ibid., 62.
[67] Online Review in http://msupress.msu.edu/bookTemplate.php?bookID=1168
[68] Genga-Idowu, 62.
[69] Ibid., 149. In this instance Ochola and Susan plan that Susan should get married to Polycap and Ochola would take the bride-price from Policap in the pretence of being Susan's father.
[70] Benjamin and Masters, 17.
[71] Laurie Shrage, *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism: Prostitution, Adultery, and Abortion* (New York: Routledge, 1994)
[72] Katherine Frank, "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa" in E. D. Jones, ed., *Women in African Literature Today* (London: James Currey, 1987), 19. Although one might argue Susan's actions to the two men were unfair, I assume Genga-Idowu is trying to show that men should not think they will cheat on women for ever. Women too have their own ways of survival, however unfair.
[73] Genga-Idowu, 77-78.
[74] See "Existentialist Feminism" http://www.femistissues.com/existential_fem.html
[75] Genga-Idowu, 191.
[76] Quoted in "Liberal Feminism" http://www.feministissues.com/liberal_deminism.html
[77] Genga-Idowu, 81.
[78] Ibid., 48.
[79] Ibid., 55.
[80] Stratton.
[81] Susheila Nasta, ed., *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing From Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), xxv.