

**WOMAN IN WAR LITERATURE: INTERROGATING UNCERTAINTY AS A
CHARACTER IN GORETTI KYOMUHENDO'S *WAITING: A NOVEL OF UGANDAN
AT WAR***

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Abstract

One of the socially accepted gender roles for the male folk is to exhibit physical strength and suppress weakness. In history and in many literary works, it has become conventional to portray male characters as the frontline fighters in war situations. The female counterparts are not utterly unappreciated but are often presented as the one who is raped, killed, died or one who sleeps around with men due to the hardships of war and after war situation. Contemporary African writers are beginning to get fascinated by tales on women-warriors. Interestingly there exist a good number of them in Africa who have been shelved into the archives. Literary works have exhumed these tales and are now replicating them in their works. Talk about the Dahomey Amazons, Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana and Amina Sukhera of Nigeria, to mention but a few. Goretti Kyomuhendo has join the many Ugandan authors to tell her war tale, neither from the war-front stand point nor from the poverty-ridden camp's stand point but using a young girl as the omniscient narrator; she presents what a family is like in a war situation. A hurried reading of this work would make it look like a balanced split of gender roles in a war zone, but a closer study would reveal that a group were the real fighters of this war. The aim of this work is to analyze this novel in order to find out who actually were the fighters of this war and in what way was it so. With the gender schema as the theoretical framework, the reader-response theory is used to bring in the researcher's personal interpretation of the work. The paper concludes that there may be no physical enemy in the novel. Uncertainty/Waiting are the real enemies, while she who carried her pregnancy and put to bed with little or no aid, who nursed the wounds with only natural herbs, who fed the family and cared for the rest of the family, who filled the gap of anxiety created by Uncertainty/Waiting is the real combatant and the hero in the novel.

Keywords: war, gender, strength, health, reader-response, uncertainty.

Introduction

One of the socially accepted gender roles for the male folk is to exhibit physical strength and suppress weakness. In history and in many literary works, it has become conventional to portray male characters as the frontline fighters in war situations. The female counterparts are not utterly unappreciated but are often presented as the one who is raped, killed, died or one who sleeps around with men due to the hardships of war and after war situation - the typical weaker sex! This categorization does not begin and end with war situations. Such divisions are also manifested in a typical society where gender roles are firmly depicted. Neither of the genders is free from these expectations because they must fit themselves into the specific modules created by the society. Famous psychologists and sociologists have proffered different theories on gender roles and identity some are : The evolutionary theory (Buss 1995; Shields 1975), object-relations theory (Chodorow 1989), social role theory (Eagly 1987) and the gender schema theory (Bem 1981, 1993). For the purpose of this research, The gender schema theory will be used as the theoretical

framework under which this wartime novel is analyzed using the reader-response theory. (*Family.jrank*)(NP)

Anselmi and Law quoted by an unknown author defines gender roles as "socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behaviour and emotions of men and women". (*Family.jrank*).(NP) These roles are functions, characters and attributes taken on or assigned to a person because of the person's gender. Evolution theory believes that male and female evolved differently in order to fulfill their different but complementary functions. Object- relations theorists suggest that the different roles emerge as a result of the painful separation the male gender must undergo in order to separate themselves from the mother. The paper does not dismiss the above mentioned theories but agrees more the gender schema theory (Ben 1981) which posits that:

Children learn how their cultures and/or societies define the roles of men and women and then internalize this knowledge as a gender schema, or unchallenged core belief. The gender schema is then used to organize subsequent experiences (Bem 1993). Children's perceptions of men and women are thus an interaction between their gender schemas and their experiences. Eventually, children will incorporate their own self-concepts into their gender schema and will assume the traits and behaviors that they deem suitable for their gender. (*Family.jrank*)(NP)

In other words, the society and the cognitive organization of the individual person has a lot of influence on the role a female or male plays. The role must be socially acceptable and must have been internalized.

Apart from the socially gender-assigned roles, we find, in literary works that the female roles presented in war novels 'are inhomogeneous. Some women are quiet, timide, submissive and passive. Others are enlightened and active yet submissive. There are yet some radical liberal and vociferous ones. Given the heterogeneous nature of females characters encountered in war literature, it suffices to remain with two broad categories. The quiet submissive ones and the radicals. It goes then that:

A close examination of the portrayals of women in literature and myth reveals that the entire female experience is one to which very little freedom is accrued. One would find that the women we meet in stories are limited to just two broad categories, the chaste, submissive woman who is the personification of every good thing. She is the lovely virgin, the good girl who helps the old woman and gets rewarded, the one who suffers tribulations silently until a rich man comes along to 'free' her; she is the kind gentle loving mother of myth, long-suffering and accommodating to all. The other category is just the opposite, usually independent and sexually liberated, she is the witch, the prostitute, the evil femme fatale who leads men to their doom, the proud, educated woman who becomes someone's girlfriend, but never wife, the one who is never able to have a child. (Awogu-Maduagwu and Umunnakwe 1)

The above citation gives a general view of the woman as seen in stories and literary works. The war situation is not totally divorced from the view as seen above. Authors of war literatures have painted the picture of what the roles of women are and should be in times of war following the categories above: Nurses, mothers, prostitutes, but sometimes soldiers, ammunition makers, but again passive sufferers and weaklings. (Awogu-Maduagwu and Umunnakwe 1). Unfortunately,

in war situations, more often than not, women are depicted as passive, weak and amoral when they may actually be the real fighters.

Some representation of women in war literature

The very first page of Chinua Achebe's story "Girls at War" has it as: "That was in the first heady days of warlike preparation when thousands of young men (and sometimes women too) were daily turned away from enlistment centres because far too many of them were coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defense of the exciting new nation." (Achebe 87) It was thousands of young men who flooded the centres. Women were only added in parenthesis, as an after thought, in an effort to be fair to the few women who turned up. Although Gladys proved she was tough, Achebe found a way to bring her under the caprices of Reginald who after having a sexual relationship with her, judged her as wild, called her victim of circumstance and presented himself as a redeemer who would cleanse and save her from the deluge of immorality. On the contrary, a young soldier who lost one of his legs was picked along the road, praised and promised a good reward after the war. Nothing was said about his moral life. In his work, morality is used as a weapon to abase the independent personality of Gladys and bring her into the socially accepted role of a woman. As a way to bring her low, that moral aspect must be showcased. But the war claimed them both men and women (Gladys and the young soldier) because they were all equal fighters and victims of the war.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* did not leave the women folk less vulnerable in her description of the Nigerian-Biafra war. While men were depicted as the heroic frontline warriors women were gang-raped. Illiterate maids like Chinyere and Amala as well as enlightened ones like Olanna and Kainene were all presented as women with sexual freedom and dominance. Nnesinachi (a woman) went after an Hausa soldier. While the young men like Ugwu - the servant boy - were conscripted into war at 16, the likes of Amala - the servant girl - was made to seduce, conquer and sleep with Odenigbo. While the servant boy became a 'gas chamber' that takes away life, the servant-girl gives the world a baby in order to keep the family lineage. So much attention was given to the woman's sexual and moral behaviour. The men went to fight, the women went to the market. Each carrying his and her life in their hands. Neither Richard nor Odenigbo went to the warfront, but Richard, an unsuccessful journalist, communicated what happened in the war to the outside world. The revolutionary lecturer Odenigbo was most of the time lost in his mental cum academic stratagems, arguing who discovered what and what existed from the origin of The World. But the stoic Kainene needed to be more "useful" than that. She opens a refugee camp, visits hospitals and moves out to save the starving and sick children. Unfortunately she disappears from there. Amala, Kainene, and Olanna, despite their apparent sexual freedom, are undoubtedly the real heroes of the war judging from the angle from which this tale was narrated. For even in their vulnerability, Adichie apparently creates the amazons without whom life would have lost its continuity. Kainene's disappearance and not death could be a glimpse of hope that one day the strong woman will reappear to continue her life-giving role.

The same familiar lines of violent, fearless men and vulnerable women fill the tale of Feta Iyayi's *Heroes*. He is better seen as a literary social reformist, given the Marxist ideas that trailed his works. In *Heroes*, he later concludes that neither the Biafra nor the Nigerians are bad but the architects of this war are the high class corrupt politicians and lords. He organizes the proletarian class to fight them. However, in all this, he gave the literary world a patriarchal society where the women are economically dependent on men, physically weak and morally vulnerable. He may seem to have sought equity and freedom for women. If he did, it is not because of their gender but because women belonged to the class which he defended - the lower class. A subtle way of emphasizing her vulnerability. Ilo is of the opinion that:

The society presented in Iyayi's writings is structured in such a way as to make it more beneficial to men to the detriment of women. He depicts the patriarchal system in its fullness. The author is usually acclaimed and hailed as a feminist because he pays attention to women's predicaments and rights in his works. He portrays how women are deprived of their rights and exploited by men. An in-depth study of his works will reveal how feminist he is. (230)

Ndudi was raped. There are cases of sexual freedom and economic dependence in Iyayi's works. Ilo goes on to say:

Another striking observation about these women and the men around them is the fact that their existence usually revolves around hotels and clubs. These leisure/ recreation centres are only evidences of the pleasure seeking instincts which goes to give credence to women as objects of pleasure for the male folks. Could Festus Iyayi have been overwhelmed by the morality question? (246)

Apparently, there are morality issues around women in war literatures either as an expression of freedom, power or vulnerability. However, Iyayi's women are mostly victims of men's oppression.

War literatures not only in Nigeria but in Africa have the above background which usually serve as the basis from which many other issues spring up. Tales of the Rwandan genocide and Ugandan wars are not exonerated from the scenario above.

Interestingly, some contemporary African writers among whom Kyomuhendo is cited are approaching this war stories from divergent dimensions. *The Battles of the Ugandan Resistance: A traditional maneuver* by Muhoozi Kainerugaba presents the experience from the military point of view and with military terms. *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality* Edited by Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot uses the History and politics of the Northern Uganda, the experiences of academics and common man to make his story a well rounded one. Both Tanzanians and Ugandans narrate their horrendous experiences in both fictional and non-fictional essays. In the book *Women, war and Peace* by Elisabeth Rehnquist and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the horrific effects of war on women is narrated from the lived experiences of such women. We shall concentrate on the female characters as the presented by Goretti Kyomuhendo.

The presentation of the novel: *Waiting: A Novel of Ugandan at War*

Through the mouth and mind of the 13 years-old Alinda, Goretti Kyomuhendo presents the uncertainty that filled the families during the last regime of Amin of Uganda. The Amin troops massacred and looted all they could as they retreated from the advancing liberators. (Made up of the Tanzanian soldier and the Anti-Amin's Ugandans.) People had deserted the cities and gone into the villages where they slept, not in the family houses but in different parts of the bushes. Valuables were also hidden inside the pits where the soldiers would not see them. Alinda's elder brother Tendo had to be on a tree to act as a guard, on the look out for soldiers. The mother was heavily pregnant and could give birth anytime. There was also her father who provided for the family and gave instructions as regards where the whole family will sleep whether in the bush or in the family house. The grandmother Kaaka and Maya the younger daughter all where together in this plantain farm which served as a hideout. Nobody was sure of the next step. Sometimes, the little Alinda had to take the role of an adult and take decision for the family even though she does not fully understand.

As the soldiers advanced, the unrelenting old woman Kaaka was killed because she confronted

the soldiers, the mother could not survive the labour but miraculously the child survived. Alinda had to take care of baby too.

After the havoc of the retreating soldiers, The liberators became the new occupants who wrecked a new form of menace. But The remaining members of the family formed a new troop to affront the situation.

There is uncle Kembo who enjoyed much more affluence before the war because he converted to Islam as commanded by Amin. He also come over to the village in Hoima, due to the war. Other people who came in contact with the family were: Jungu Alinda's friend who joined the family in order to meet with her soldier boyfriend but she left later thinking that her boyfriend went away with the liberators meanwhile the boy came back to look for her and stayed with the family. The neighbour who killed his wife many years ago, the lendu woman, the Zairian nurse who healed with only local herbs and who was considered a witch by her people, and Nyinabarongo, the mother of twins who ended up becoming Alinda's step mother. All these people came together to reconstitute a new type of family after the departure of those who were taken by the effects of the war.

The attention of this research is drawn to this work on Ugandan war which approaches the war situation from the family point of view. The aim of this work is to examine the gender role within a family in a supposedly patriarchal community in a war situation. It would be seen if the socially approved gender roles still continued in the nucleus of an extended family and who the actual heroes of this war were. Before we name the heroes, we better find out who the enemy is.

Uncertainty/Waiting as characters and the real enemies in the novel.

In every warfare, there is the attacking and defending side. In the actual Ugandan society of the period depicted in the novel, the enemy maybe the dictator, or his soldiers, or the anti-Amin soldiers or even the liberators. They could be the Tanzanian soldiers or the perpetrators of evil, or even the criminals and those who indulge in destabilizing the society. The enemy could be the opportunists who make profit out of the wartime to the detriment of the fellow citizens. These could be the enemies in the actual Ugandan society just like in any war-situation elsewhere.

In a war novel such as *Waiting*, Kyomuhendo avoids introducing her reader into the bloody confrontations of bombs and bullets. However, the reader feels the unfriendly atmosphere filled with fear and tension. The war had begun. Thus the situation as presented in the novel has an enemy different from the ones suggested above. An ever present evil, which constitutes an insurmountable nuisance. This enemy is Uncertainty/Waiting !

From the title of the work to the very first page of the book until the last page, every character in the novel was bent under the agonizing weight of uncertainty. The title is *Waiting*. Every character in the novel waited for everything and everyone was uncertain of what they waited for.

Tendo was made to climb the tree and mount as a sentry/spy to alert the family of the soldiers' advancement. The whole family waited. Uncertain of next movement. They all waited in fear. A fall of a leave from the tree alerts them, Tendo throws a plate from the tree, they get frightened. "The sound of a plate hitting the ground made us all jump." (14). They were all advised to eat well so that they can be prepared for the future that they were all unsure of. "I've told you again and again if these men come, they'll kill you unless you have enough energy to run, and run fast" (14).

The father brought the news about the war,

We had learned about the details of the war a month before, when Father returned from the city where he had worked at the Main Post Office as a clerk. He told us that President Idi Amin was about to be overthrown by a combined force of Ugandans who lived in exile and the Tanzanian soldiers who were assisting them. The soldiers were advancing quickly, heading for Kampala from the southwestern border that Uganda shared with Tanzania... People had vacated the city in fear of both the advancing Liberators and the fleeing soldiers. No one knew what each group was likely to do to civilians. (8)

The troubled civilians ran out of fear because they were uncertain of what each group of soldiers could do to them. They dug a pit and hid their valuables in preparation, they got hideouts and waited. The civilians were not the actual targets of the war, they were hunted by uncertainty. Nobody was certain of anything.

The mother was heavy with child. Everybody waited for the child. Nobody knew when it will arrive. This uncertainty brought with it: anxiety, fear and tension. It dealt them heavy emotional blows. Because of the anxiety, every discomfort the mother complained of was interpreted in relation to her state of health: Fatigue, heartburn, anorexia etc. They explained it away to assuage the uncertainty that menaced them. They knew that there was an imminent danger but the how and when it will come was the main agony. It is clear that:

Waiting is very much about waiting, as everything about the future is uncertain. There's little news, and no way of knowing what will come upon the family next. The waiting for the birth of the child is just another layer of expectation: something inevitable, yet whose outcome is still completely indeterminate. With the hospitals closed and the difficulty of finding a midwife the pregnancy brings with it more dangers than usual, too. But there is little to be done, beyond preparing as best one can with what is at hand, just as they eventually bury what few valuables they have (a bicycle, a radio, mattresses, saucepans) in a pit when they believe the looting soldiers are coming closer. (Khere web NP)

They buried their valuables and waited. They slept in the plantations and waited. To assuage the agony of this overwhelming uncertainty, something has to be done. These activities that took place during this time is the war and the people who carried out the activities are the real combatants.

When the soldiers eventually arrived, Kaaka confirmed that they (the citizens) were not the real enemies. According to the wise woman "Heeeeh," she laughed. "If you are real men, go and fight with your enemy, instead of coming here to terrorize a poor harmless old woman like me. Eh? (33)

They did kill her, the mother died too. The Liberators came after the soldiers had gone and occupied the area for a period, yet Uncertainty remains the order of the day. Fear and anxiety filled this little space until the departure of the liberators. They waited no longer but came out from hiding to go after their businesses.

The real combatants of the war.

Having determined the true form of the real enemy, it is then irrefutably clear that the kind of violence meted out to the family in question is not the usual physical attack but the one redefined by Iyayi in his first novel *Violence* as “a continual, demoralizing structure that eliminates hope, pride, self-esteem, health, and the ability to live independently, having to rely on borrowed naira from those who are more fortunate leaves deep scars of shame and guilt.” (Da Ville NP) This is the kind of violence which these characters encountered.

A cursory reading of the novel would give a wrong or inconclusive image as it concerns the gender roles during the war. It is arguably correct that every character in the novel suffered the terrible situation of the wartime. Suffering is one thing, taking steps to alleviate or proffer solutions is another.

As the cruel uncertainty weighs them down, The father fulfils his gender schema by giving instructions, making some decisions, takes his position to protect the family and provide some of the things needed for sleeping. Tendo fetches waters and mounts as guard on the tree. Kaaka gives advice, answers questions and provides explanations from her wisdom that comes with age. The sick mother drags herself along while waiting to put to bed. Alinda cooks, takes care of the household while little Maya helps with the other little chores. Being a female has to do with gender but being a mother carries with it a much more serious function which goes beyond childbirth and being a wife.

A perfectly shared out roles. It should be noted that apart from Alinda, Jungu and Maya, (who are by the way potential mothers) every female character in the novel is a mother. None of these mothers has had it easy with life. Kaaka who plays the role of a grandmother was actually Alinda's aunt who came back from her husband's place because she had issue with childbirth. With the closure of maternities and hospitals, Kaaka took over the care of the pregnant mother. She never left her side, she protected and advised her until she gave birth. As if their mission ended with the coming of the child, both women died the same day as the baby arrived. Fearless Kaaka preferred to give her life to protect the mother in labour, than allow the soldiers get into the house. The courageous mother gave birth to her baby before she gave up on uncertainty. She stopped waiting.

The Lendu woman was accused of witchcraft continued to help out with her knowledge of herbs and medicine until she could tell her story. She was a wartime nurse assistant in Zaire. She performed a local surgery on a man who stepped on a land mine stone, and also not only diagnosed the baby of Ebino disease but brought the cure as well. (53-54) Nyinabarongo was an outcast from her husband's village because she had two children who presented themselves in abnormal way. She was called mother of twins out of derision. But she continued to be useful in the family until she became Alinda's stepmother.

None of these women had it easy in her husband's house but gathered in this family and armed with courage, talent and the already formed gender schema, they became the combatants to affront the plague dished out to them by the unseen enemy - uncertainty.

As might be expected, it is the Lendu woman who takes charge of the wounded man, but, and this is at first surprising, neither Father nor Uncle Kembo are capable of helping her when, for example, the old man has to be held down for rough-and-ready surgery. Although Father was ready to take up a panga against the soldiers in defense of his homestead and family, when it comes to caring for the wounded—or even for an ailing

person, as is evident in his clumsiness when his sickly infant son has to be treated (50)—he, like the other men, cannot cope. (117)

His gender schema made him understand that he should protect his family. That was why he took the panga against the-yet-to-be-seen soldiers but neither him nor uncle could help to nurse a wounded man nor take care of the sick child.

Father hated the Lendu woman but could not resist her services to the his family. Alinda despite her young age, had to be the 'mother'. She had already imbibed the feminine gender schema and must live up to it. She took care of the sick child. The Lendu woman's husband abandoned her and remarried, uncle left his wife and remarried the Lendu woman, father remarried Nyinabarong after mother's death, Tendo went away with the soldiers. In a menaced patriarchal society, the already emotionally wounded women found ways to remain steadfast and care for everyone amidst the devastations of war even to the extent of giving up their lives like in the case of Kaaka.

Gender roles in Waiting

Gender role has been defined earlier as "socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behaviour and emotions of men and women" (Anselmi and Law 1998, p. 195). It "can be conceptualized as behavioural expectations based on biological sex. Traditionally, for men to be masculine, they are expected to display attributes such as strength, power, and competitiveness, and less openly display emotion and affection (especially toward other men)." (Fawcner 194). So it is the socially accepted behaviour of a person due to the person's gender. In *Waiting*, as in many other war stories, both man and women are created to depict their socially accepted roles. Anyone who goes against this norm is treated as a stranger or at worst eliminated. Kyomuhendo successfully creates characters who played their roles, however, her women were created to be conquerors. Hence their femininity was turned to a weapon of victory.

The pregnant mother was very resilient. With all the discomfort of pregnancy: her swollen legs and aching back, her bleeding, nausea and heavily pultruded belly, she ran and slept in the bush. These were her efforts to save her life and that of her unborn child. To spear her loved ones the agony of losing her and the coming baby. In that condition she cares for her family and fellow women. She suggested that Nyangboro should sleep in the house for safety reasons (18). She did not want to be a liability to family. She woke Alinda to accompany her to toilet (16). In doing so she subtly transmits to the young girl, the act of caring and courage which a woman should have in all circumstances.

Kaaka was that courageous old woman who took it upon herself to explain away most of the events of the book with her traditional wisdom. Her special duty was to care for the pregnant mother. Her ever watchful eyes was on her. She cared for mother and the unborn baby even to the extent of defying the soldiers and dying instead of letting them into the "labour room". "Heeeeh," she laughed. "If you are real men, go and fight with your enemy, instead of coming here to terrorize a poor harmless old woman like me. Eh?" (33) By confronting the soldiers, Kaaka defied her gender role and therefore had to be eliminated. She was a stranger to the society.

The Courageous and dutiful Lendu woman was the nurse of the society. She was initially despised but she proved that she was inevitable for them at that time. With the hospitals closed, she was about the only option they had for healing and she did not fail them. She diagnosed baby of *ebino* and heal it. She successfully performed a local surgery on the wounded man.

When Alinda assumed the role of an adult-woman during her mother's illness and after her death. Kaaka and Nyagoboro were there to help her layout her gender schema and assume the role which she was too young for.

On the other hand, men are expected to protect and provide for the family. Father did not also fail in his duty. He was not only conscious of it but also gradually initiated Tonda in the role of a man. Uncle Kembo was a watchman. Tendo mounted as guard everyday to be on the look out for the soldiers. Father always surveyed the surroundings to make sure the soldiers were not near. If he sensed any danger, he immediately takes up his weapons - (the panga and the spear) (3-4) to defend his family. Immediately the war was over he left his family under the care of another man and went to the city to provide for them. "Father said jokingly to us, "Now, I'm confident that you won't be washed away by the rains. You have a man who can take care of you," he said, patting Bahati's shoulder." "I will take care of them," Bahati said with assurance, flexing his shoulders. (89). He is the man of the family.

Conclusion

Using the reader-response approach, we have used the gender schema as the theoretical framework to analyze *Waiting: a novel of Uganda at war*. Certain issue became clearer: Even though it is a war novel, the characters here did not fight a physical war. In the war situation depicted in the novel, Uncertainty brought about fear, tension and anxiety which they had to contend with until after the war. Therefore uncertainty was the real enemy.

It is arguably true that each of the characters dutifully fulfilled his and her gender roles. The men exhibited some strength, protected the family and also provided shelter and feeding for the family. The women also complemented those areas the man could not cover. They cared, cooked, nursed, endured and managed the home and the people. However, a closer examination of the work will show that this is not a society where functions were equitably divided among the existing genders. It went way beyond that to create a war situation where the unarmed combatants confront the unseen but ever present enemy. Where the one who dared revolt against her gender role was eliminated and the rest fought onto their victory with a silent revolt. The author does not clamour for a change of role but resilience, courage, love and steadfastness are assuredly the key to victory in a silent war.

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