



## Emerging Social Landscapes: Subverting Notions of Male-dominated Politics in Koinange's *The Havoc of Choice* and Mengitse's *Beneath The Lion's Gaze*

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### ABSTRACT:

The changing role of women in East Africa has been a significant and ongoing process shaped by shifts in the social and political landscapes over the past few decades. This transformation has both challenged and opened up new vistas for women. From a historical perspective, women in the East African region, and indeed most parts of the African continent, have encountered various forms of marginalisation and discrimination, being confined to predefined roles and norms; however, as the region experiences social and political changes, women have found opportunities to break away from traditional roles and embrace new perspectives and world-views. Readers, historians and literary scholars have much to learn from the deeply complex works of these women. In truth, women writers are just as concerned about the entire social, political landscape as are their male counterparts. This paper examines two works, Koinange's *The Havoc of Choice* and Mengitse's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* to illustrate how women writers paint a picture of the changing political and social landscape in East Africa. The study is grounded on the postulations of postcolonial literary theory, particularly Spivak's (2008) subalternity, and Ogunjipe-Leslie's (1994) Stawinism as a brand of African feminist literary theory. This seeks to demonstrate that are used to depict changing socio-political landscapes. This paper analyses the emerging socio-political landscapes as depicted in the lived experiences of African women as represented in the two literary works, a significant departure from the early post-colonial and colonial periods in Sub-Saharan Africa. We argue that literary writers, women authors to be specific, have subverted notions of male-dominated politics by depicting the frailties of their leadership styles. By placing the novels within their historical context, we demonstrate the writers' calls for feminisation of African leadership. This paper has analysed emerging socio-political landscapes that subvert traditional notions of male-dominated politics in African societies. We conclude that the two literary writers, Mengitse and Koinange, have constructed societies that amplify and dignify the voices and lives of ordinary African women. The two literary artists invoke the sympathetic imagination within women. These women – as represented by Sara, Wanja, Cheptoo and their ilk – are symbols of trailblazers in the political history of Eastern Africa; their steadfast positions serve to restore the dignity of women and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

**(Key words:** political landscapes, subalternity, activism, subversion, emerging social landscapes, Stiwanimism)

### 1. Introduction

Literature does not only provide a platform for reimagination of the various facets of life and its vicissitudes, but it is also a vehicle for social transformation. The East African literary platform is no exception. The changing role of women in East Africa has been a significant and ongoing process shaped by shifts in the social and political landscapes over the past few decades. This transformation has both challenged and opened up new vistas for women. From a historical perspective, women in the East African region, and indeed most parts of the African continent, have encountered various forms of marginalisation and discrimination, being confined to predefined roles and norms; however, as the region experiences social and political changes, women have found opportunities to break away from traditional roles and embrace new perspectives and world-views. This is reflected in contemporary African fiction. By social landscapes here we mean the identification of people (representation of people), relationships, social norms and values and priorities. Political landscapes, on the other hand, are the strategies of acquisition of power in relation to the reason for acquiring this power, its progression and effects on individuals and the general public. Socio-political landscapes, therefore, refer to the social norms inclusive of values, relationships, social hierarchy and the acquisition, effects and use of power within a society.

The evolving social and political fabric has created a more inclusive environment, providing women with opportunities to participate in various spheres of life that were erstwhile the preserve of men. As education becomes more accessible and economic opportunities grow, women have entered the work force, pursued higher education and taken on leadership roles in both public and private sectors. This has allowed them to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes, asserting their capabilities beyond the confines of domestic responsibilities. Women's increased participation in politics is a notable aspect of this transformation. In recent years, more women have taken on roles as political leaders, parliamentarians and policymakers. Their presence in decision making positions has led to greater focus on issues such as gender equality, women's rights and social welfare. As women become more involved in governance and policy formulation, the perspective on critical issues has become more inclusive and diverse.

Moreover, women's empowerment has been driven by grassroots movements and activism. Women's rights organisations and feminist movements have mobilised to demand gender equality, social justice and end of discrimination. These movements have been instrumental in raising awareness about women's rights, advocating for legal reforms and pushing for more gender inclusive policies. Despite these positive changes, challenges persist not all segments of society have embraced the evolving roles of women with equal enthusiasm. Women writers have responded to these challenges in equal measure. They have utilised their fictional platforms to demonstrate that traditional beliefs, patriarchal norms and resistance to change have hindered progress in African societies. In some communities, resistance to women's empowerment stems from fear of losing traditional power dynamics or lack of awareness about benefits of gender equality. Furthermore, while progress has been made in urban areas and certain sectors, women in rural regions often face additional barriers. Access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities may remain limited, perpetuating gender disparities and reinforcing traditional gender roles. In this paper, we rely on illustrations from the two literary works Koinange's *The Havoc of Choice* and Mengitse's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* to subvert notions of male-dominated politics that have blinded African societies to social realities.

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## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study benefits from two theories: postcolonialism (Spivak's subalternity) and feminism (Ogundipe's STIWANISM). The critical intervention in this paper encompasses Spivak and her concern for 'subaltern' people who were and are often marginalised by the by dominant western culture. The 'Subaltern' is a military term which means 'of lower rank.' She borrowed this term from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The subaltern has become the major issue of discussion in postcolonial studies. It tries to explore the unjust representation of the third world women and men, working class or black people in literature. Postcolonialism is the recent development in the field of contemporary critical theories. It examines the impact of colonialism, imperialism and other such postcolonial issues on developing nations and other once colonised countries. Spivak's concept of 'subaltern' has made her one of the influential critics. Her idea of subalternity is often associated with feminism, deconstruction and Marxism. Spivak has explored the representation of the third world women, tribal people and the orient. Her primary focus is on the struggle of the silenced groups. She strives to give them a voice in a society hardly recognises their existence. By championing these marginalised voices, Spivak challenges some dominant idea that the western world is more civilised and developed than the non-western world. She criticises western critics such as Karl Marx, Derrida, Foucault and British or French feminists. For the purposes of this study, we have appropriated the 'subaltern' to refer to silenced voices of women in African leadership. Using illustrations from the two literary texts, we argue men have marginalised women in contemporary societies, but these forms of marginalisation have denigrated their political image, consequently painting feminisation of political leadership as the best option for modern societies.

Stiwanism, one of the most referenced theorists by contemporary feminist thinkers, is a strand of feminism propounded by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994). This feminist movement is founded on STIWA, an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Ogundipe says this of this indigenised model of feminism:

Stiwa means 'Social Transformation Including Women of Africa.' I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (Ogundipe, 1994, p. 1)

Ogundipe advocates for the understanding of black African women in the context of socio-economic hierarchies, indigenous social culture, gender, race, religion, class, and national development, in ways that are both individual and collective even when contradictory. The development of social and political institutions is hinged on the inclusion and rediscovery of the role of women. Her ideas have revolutionised conceptualisations of gender and politics, particularly in the context of the African society. literature in its comparative depth becomes a cross-cultural armament for outlining diverse cultural tropes that combine history and culture within a literary matrix for unravelling gender and its terrible assumptions. Thus, the many literary studies, poetry and stories of Ogundipe-Leslie become the instrument by which women could be allowed to 'recreate themselves' away from cultural, social and even theological strictures that limit the possibility of what a female can ever hope to become in a male-dominated world.

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## 3. Methodology

This qualitative study has adopted an analytical research design. We recognise that this study calls for a critical appreciation of literary works to determine its correspondence to emerging social discourse on women and politics. Literature, African fiction to be specific, is regarded as a platform for representation of emerging socio-political realities. Two texts, which are drawn from African literary space, have been purposively sampled for this paper. We critically read the two texts and assigned codes to textual components that seemed relevant for interrogation of the two writers' representation of emerging social landscapes. Our critical analysis was guided by Ogundipe-Leslie's brand of African feminism and Spivak's subalternity. To reinforce our arguments in this paper, we have also made references to similar studies that we found particularly intriguing.

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## 4. Analysis and Discussion

Historically speaking, women have been displaced to the margins of society. The political arena has, for a long time, been the preserve of men. Cultures have evolved over time and the socio-political landscape seems to be changing. Western societies have made significant progress in this regard. Across different political terrains, ranging from ethnic, communal, cultural and economic, from all continents around the globe, social marginalisation invites scholars to understand the current conflicts around expertise as something deeply entangled with culture, history, and institutional landscapes in which

modern societies develop their policies. Though African societies have also evolved, instances of gender-based discrimination still exist. In contemporary African societies, male-dominated politics has promoted social injustice and social anxiety. Chessman and Kanyiga (2021) study on democratisation in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda underscores the complexity of the democratisation process in the region. While these countries have held regular elections, the authors argue that the quality of their democratisation remains contested. Political violence, weak institutions and patronage are identified as key challenges to democratisation hindering full realisation of democratic principles and practices.

Chessman's and Kanyiga's positions are confirmed by Zevnik (2017), who avers that modern political landscapes are characterised by social anxiety and instability. According to Zevnik, these characteristics are normal since they represent the tumultuous process that gives birth to social and national transformation. The cure prescribed in these chaotic times usually takes the form of legal, policy or direct state interventions. Zevnik concludes that anxiety then becomes a tool for examining the state of social and political environment in a nation. In *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, nationalism emerges as Ethiopia faces political turmoil during the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie's regime and the rise of the Derg government. The novel captures the growing sense of Ethiopian nationalism and pride among the people, who are struggling for independence and freedom. One notable instance is when protestors take to the streets, waving Ethiopian flags and singing nationalistic songs, demanding an end to the regime. At the very beginning of the novel, as the revolution unfolds and the Derg (the military junta) tightens its grip on power, there is a sense of fear and uncertainty among the people. Mengitse describes the streets of Addis Ababa as 'nervous and tense,' highlighting the social anxiety that permeates the atmosphere. People are apprehensive about the future, unsure of what lies ahead, and are cautious about expressing their opinions freely (Mengitse, 2010, p. 4).

The air of social anxiety intensifies as the novel progresses. There is a growing sense of distrust among friends and even family members. People become cautious about whom they can trust and what they can say without repercussions. Fear of betrayal and the consequences of speaking out against the government create an atmosphere of tension and unease in everyday interactions (Koinange, 2014, p. 16). *The Havoc of Choice* shows growing tension after the voting day; election results trickle at a slow rate, which is an indication of inefficacy in electoral management. This is a harbinger of trouble; there is no sign of communication from polling stations and in the absence of news, rumours of rigging and voter tampering become widespread (Koinange, 2014, p. 212). The Chairman of the Electoral Commission speaks frantically, his voice heavy with nerves. There are delays in election results release and the atmosphere is described as tense, which is a clear sign that the country is no longer at ease. What follows is a long silence after the announcement of presidential results winner; this is the beginning of magnified violence around the country (Koinange, 2014, p. 222).

Mahmoud (2022), who studied the socio-political landscapes of Nigeria as represented in Labo Yari's *A house in the dark and other stories*, argues that storytelling is a powerful means of engaging contemporary realities. He lists rural-urban migration, individualism, religion, social injustice and the realities of post-modern perversions and materialism. The novel, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, portrays the social injustices perpetuated by the male-dominated military regime, particularly through the character of Hailu, a respected doctor (2010, p. 5). Hailu's dedication to his profession and his commitment to saving lives are overshadowed by the regime's demands. He is forced to treat a high-ranking military official, Colonel Argaw, even as he knows the Colonel is responsible for terrible acts of violence against innocent civilians. He, too, is eventually arrested (Mengitse, 2010, p. 98). This illustrates the oppressive nature of the regime, where the powerful can act with impunity while ordinary citizens suffer injustice. The novel suggests that the frailties of male-dominated regimes impact negatively on both male and female citizens.

The impact of the chauvinistic regime's actions on the common people is further underscored when a girl is brought to Hailu's clinic by soldiers who demand that she be treated. Cursorily, the soldiers' concern for the health of the girl humanises them. Yet they continue to visit more physical harm on the voiceless. This girl is a victim of torture and abuse orchestrated by a patriarchal political regime. Women find themselves in a helpless and deplorable state, bearing the brunt of social injustice at the hands of the military. This scene emphasises the wide disparity in power and the vulnerability of those who lack influence or protection in this socio-political landscape. The narrator says:

He had been a doctor for nearly thirty-five years, treated infections and war wounds with calm efficiency, battled unknown illness with cunning and forethought. He knew the site of a body better left to die on its own, could decipher the clues that spoke to a life still struggling to hold on. But what could have prepared him for a girl wrapped in a clear plastic sheet? What medical book could have taught him that a sheet of plastic as big as a body could dig into wounds like this? That wounds this deep and vicious could be on a young girl? (Mengitse, 2010, p. 119)

In *The Havoc of Choice*, Thuo Maliti, the driver to the Muli and the Ngugi families, is wrongfully arrested for the kidnapping of Kavata, the protagonist (Koinange, 2014, p. 25) and taken to prison for the entirety of the election period. Thuo's childhood is marked by ethnic conflict, which is a form of social injustice. At the age of ten, he and his father are forced to flee to Nakuru where they end up living in a tiny shack at the edge of Nakuru National Park until they are caught by the police. Police arrest separates father and son. The National Housing Saga is also an indictment on the integrity of men. The saga vilifies Ngugi; he allocates houses to Muli's friends, his former staff and family members, including his grandchildren. These houses were built to accommodate citizens from the low-income brackets (Koinange, 2014, p. 68). This saga illustrates the insensitive and nepotistic nature of men in power; they abuse power unsparingly.

Men are unable to safeguard public resources; they take advantage of every opportunity to squander them. Muli, for instance, orchestrates an elaborate plan to redirect public resources intended to dig four hundred wells all over Machakos. At the end of the day, only twenty-five wells are dug. To cover his fraudulent actions, Muli bribes a surveyor to fabricate a detailed document claiming that these are the only areas that have water underground. To shun further scrutiny, he commissions a second analysis which produces the same results. He syphons the remaining millions into bank accounts in Seychelles and Liberia (Koinange, 2014, p. 48). These nefarious acts demonstrate that men are incapable of fully implementing significant development projects.

Employment opportunities are skewed towards the powers-that-be; nothing stops persons in power from serving their egotistical interests. They do this at expense of the underprivileged members of their societies. Power has blinded them to social realities. The firing of almost one hundred clerks and officers to make room for politicians' personal agents to ensure a guaranteed win for preferred candidates instead of those who deserved it portrays social injustice. Those who hold positions of power are willing to maintain their positions at all costs.

What complicates the situation is that religious leaders too are so spiritually weak that they are unable to stand by their moral principles. Abraha is one such example. He is a respected priest within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. As the revolution unfolds, Abraha finds himself in a political dilemma. He, on the one hand, feels a duty to maintain the sanctity of his religious position and adhere to traditional practices. On the other hand, he is aware of the injustices and violence perpetrated by the Derg regime. His struggle is evident when he witnesses the regime's brutal actions but finds himself torn between speaking out against it as a religious figure and maintaining a sense of loyalty to the state to enjoy the trappings of power. Dawit, unlike Abraha, remains committed to his spiritual values. This depiction is deliberate; he is a lone ranger's voice. Dawit is a university student who actively participates in protests against the government. As the political unrest escalates, Dawit's political activism becomes intertwined with his religious beliefs. He draws inspiration from the stories of biblical figures that resisted oppression, finding parallels between their struggles and his own fight for justice and freedom. Dawit and his fellow student protestors invoke religious imagery and symbolism during their demonstrations, highlighting the fusion of their faith with their political resistance.

The Emperor Haile Selassie, like Abraha, also cuts the figure of a devout Christian ruler, often seen attending religious ceremonies and being surrounded by religious symbols; however, his actions and policies, such as his oppressive regime, corruption, and failure to address the suffering of the Ethiopian people, contradict the principles of compassion and justice that Christianity vouches for. Male-dominated leadership, this novel illustrates, is characterised by hypocrisy. Colonel Mengistu, a military officer who plays a significant role in the revolution, is another typical example. He puts on the façade of devout Muslim and claims to fight for the rights of the oppressed people; however, his actions including the brutal suppression of dissenting voices and the execution of political opponents, contradict the teachings of Islam.

Women, as opposed to their male counterparts, are forthright and committed to their pursuit of social justice. Sara, the wife of Yonas, for instance, is portrayed as a woman of strong faith. As the revolution impacts her family – her mother-in-law and the sudden illness of her daughter after her fall – she turns to prayer and religious rituals for solace and strength. The name 'Sara' evokes an image of spiritual fortitude as it alludes to a Biblical figure who stood firm in the midst of adversity. She finds comfort in her religious practices such as praying on a pile of broken glass until blood oozes out of them. She stands firm in the face of trials; even when there is a lot of 'blood on this road,' she refuses to back down. She asks: 'Didn't Christ also bleed so we wouldn't have to?' (pp. 95-96). Her faith is also challenged by the harsh realities of the political situation. Her personal journey reflects the intersection of religion and politics on an individual level, showing how faith can be both a source of support and a point of internal conflict during tumultuous times. Her commitment to social values resonates very well with other women characters in *The Havoc of Choice*. Like Sara, Thuo's mother is seen praying while the world around her erupts in chaos, she says: 'this is our home and it is covered by the blood of Jesus' (Koinange, 2014, p. 30). She pays the ultimate price for her commitment to these values.

Women whose husbands are positions of power are unable to resist the temptations of power. Mrs. Muli is one such example; she conveniently quotes the Bible to assuage her biting conscience and to relieve tension before voting: 'The Lord will deliver those votes to us. Like he said to Joshua, 'do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. None of them will be able to withstand you...' She, in this sense, is a representation of religious hypocrisy. Evidently, she claims to be a devout faithful, but she tolerates her husband's corrupt actions and infidelity. This goes against Christian teachings of respect and honesty. She represents women who are consumed by political darkness that characterises blind worship of persons in authority. Perhaps this explains why Ogundipe indigenises and deliberately avoids a confrontational approach:

I have since advocated the word 'Stiwanism' instead of feminism, to bypass ... the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word 'feminism' itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening ... Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as 'feminist' unless they are particularly strong in character ... (Ogundipe, 1994, pp. 22-23)

Political leaders use the church as a platform for woodwinking gullible electorates. In order to be considered worthy, one requires church approval. Muli sets up a church service for Ngugi to in some way pave way for his success in the elections; he is referred to as a God-ordained leader, 'The chosen one', and the one who would lift Kenya out of her delicate state into prosperity that would shock her neighbours (Koinange, 2014, p. 60) the writer uses hyperbole to critique Ngugi as a Christian, the religious leaders and the congregation for tolerating hypocrisy. Muli's choices, nonetheless, impact negatively on his own and larger family; they strain his relationship with his daughter. His political career detrimentally breaks down his family. His infidelity eventually causes a rift in his relationship with Mrs. Muli, his wife. The writer uses these instances to demonstrate the vanity of men's political ambitions.

Male leaders are unscrupulous and have very limited regard for moral fibre that holds families and, by extension, societies together. Muli's friends sponsor Ngugi for their own benefits. Before the elections, Muli calls his friends to ask for financial support; the team comprises ex-ministers and retired politicians. They, like Muli's friends, do not offer their support in good faith; they expect monetary benefits after elections. Ngugi's choice to vie for the parliamentary seat crumbles his family; his wife becomes distant and she threatens to leave him. Kavata makes good her threat and eventually leaves the country, a decision comes as a shock and, subsequently, his son, Amani dies during the post-election violence. Kavata's decision to leave her family culminates in some form of political confusion. Several people are affected by this: Thuo is wrongfully arrested for kidnapping, Ngugi's political career

is tainted and the death of her son Amani. The family unit is a microcosm of the wider East African society. Women are depicted as the real power behind the male-dominated thrones. In their absence, things fall apart. Aidoo's arguments buttress this position as she posits:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I would not only answer yes but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist especially, if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives and the burden of our own development because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. (Aidoo, 1988, p. 183)

The two writers have used to marital institution to represent political failings. Marriage in both texts is used to depict the effects of dirty politics on households. These households are representative of the larger whole, to wit, the community and the nation. As Ethiopia undergoes political upheaval during the revolution, marriages are affected by the changing socio-political landscapes. A good example is witnessed when the protagonist, Dr. Hailu, tries to keep his wife Selam alive. Amidst all the chaos brought about by the revolution, he longs for her since he is also overwhelmed by their son's Dawit's choice to join and head the revolution; Hailu believes that she is the only one who can convince him to back down. Yonas and his wife Sara are also overwhelmed with the sudden illness of their daughter, which causes a rift in their relationship. The novel delves into the struggles of maintaining personal relationships and family ties amid the turmoil (Koinange, 2014, pp. 99-103). These illustrations demonstrate the strength of women; they are the glues that keep families and, macrocosmically, societies closely knit. Aidoo has opined that 'African women's struggling both on behalf of themselves and the wider community is very much a part of our own heritage. It is not something new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad' (1988, p. 183).

Kavata and Ngugi's failing marriage begins when Ngugi announces his political career. Ngugi announces his bid for Machakos parliamentary seat position under the PNU party, which sends Kavata on her feet then on an alcohol frenzy. Ngugi's attempts to talk to her are largely unfruitful. The two are, consequently, forced to settle into a wordless routine which leads to her taking the rest of the school term off. Kavata perceives Ngugi's decision as an attempt to send her back to her childhood prison; she feels betrayed by him since she had poured out her heart to him when they were still courting. She had highlighted her struggles as a politician's child, narrating incidents of a stranger's demand to have Muli's neck for getting his wife pregnant. This was a reality she was not willing to go back to. When Ngugi eventually talks to Kavata and tries to reason with her, she gives an account of the National Housing Committee Scandal and how this scandal had taken a toll on their daughter Wanja:

Oh, that's right, you were so preoccupied with my father's betrayal of you that you probably missed it. I came home and Wanja was reading the Newspaper as usual. Only this time she was reading about her father being in the middle of one of the biggest real estate scandals in our country's recent history. And because of this scandal, which you might recall was all my father's doing Wanja's name was tainted in the national press. Do you know what she said? (Koinange, 2014, p. 86)

In *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, there are references to the use of radio broadcasting as a means of communication and dissemination of information. The Derg government uses the state-controlled radio to spread propaganda and maintain control over political narratives. The regime preys on radio broadcasts to vilify its political opponents and suppress dissenting voices. During the Ethiopian Revolution, there is a noticeable shift in media control and censorship. The Derg government restricts the press and enforces strict control over information dissemination. This is portrayed through scenes where newspapers are confiscated, and journalists face threats and intimidation for reporting on the true state of affairs. This restriction of access to information and media control serves to shape the public's perception of the events unfolding during the revolution.

Tushar (2020) has argued that media and literature are two inseparable cogs yet discretely and strikingly distinguishable, complementing each other, purported to bring about the same result in different ways. In the present times, media has become an umbrella term for all the channels of communication and information whether social media, TV, radio or social media. Today whatever comes through media becomes the basis of what people think feel and say and, conversely, it is the duty of the media to express people's feelings, emotions and reactions. One cannot deny its power in bringing about quick change in the society as media is always current.

In *The Havoc of Choice*, the media, especially the visual media, are sources of propaganda. When Kavata's disappearance is made public, the opposition (ODM) uses it as propaganda in favour of their candidate. This is indicated by the conversation that Wanja has with Sally, one of the campaign team members. Wanja reports knowing fully well that she would be the centre of the whole unfortunate event since her father is the victim of the propaganda. The writer ironically portrays the unfortunate responsibilities that party officials and members of the campaign team are forced to do:

She grabbed a stack of newspapers and did a quick skim to check for any propaganda that the opposition had spread, so that she had an answer when Tom asked her how she thought they should respond. The opposition didn't give her much to work with-the media, the bloggers were still spinning the propaganda that her team had fed them over the weekend. She was grateful for this because it had taken her forever to settle her mind she kept looking at her phone, checking for news from home. (Koinange, 2014, p. 123)

The media channels are also used to lure candidates to vote or sway the vote. When Ngugi fails to vote at the intended polling station forcing the media to spin a story of discord within the family: 'Interestingly enough, we have received news that Ngugi Mwangi who has largely been viewed as Muli's protégé opted to vote at another polling station altogether. Might this be a signal that things are already falling apart for this team?' (Koinange, 2014, p. 176).

Traditional notions of male-dominated leadership are thus subverted in these two novels. Men hold positions of power for selfish political gains and they use all avenues available to them to maintain their stranglehold on authority. Feminisation of leadership appears to be the better option. The role of women in political leadership can no longer be ignored; they have to be mainstreamed in critical decision making, especially decisions regarding Africa's political

destiny. Tembo (2020) asserts that women have been given agency in socio-political landscapes through revolutionary nationalism and feminist struggle. Ogundipe's stiwanism further advocates for this calling for an end to oppressive institutionalised structure against women. Instead, she argues, there need for advocacy for African feminism that derives from contemporary realities affecting women.

The two novels explore the challenges and changes to patriarchal norms during times of political upheaval. They delve into the lives of various female characters that resist traditional gender roles and expectations. Ng'umbi (2015), has, for instance, cautioned against underrating the contribution of female characters in the making of the Ethiopian nation. Apart from being victims, Mengitse's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* endows them with the power to be agents of change alongside their male counterparts (2010, p.180). For example, Selam, the protagonist's wife, refuses to conform to the submissive role often expected of women in Ethiopian society. Instead, she exhibits strength and resilience, often confronting the male characters to assert her agency and rights. Her illness asserts her pivotal role as one of unifying; her family her presence before her death is seen to tame even the unruly Dawit. Hailu uses his expertise to try to save her; this shows how much she means to the family and the Ethiopian nation. She plays a pivotal in the sense that, as opposed to patriarchal norms that place men at the centre of power and women as being largely excluded from it, Selam is depicted as the cornerstone of this family. Her death ushers in a period of uncertainty, despair and a deep sadness to the family. In fact, she is the one who inspires Dawit's revolutionary spirit; she appreciates his heroic deeds as she comes in spirit form to Hailu when he is imprisoned (Mengitse, 2010, pp. 103-106).

Sarah, like Selam, represents the move from housewife to revolutionary as she helps Dawit in the underground struggle against the Derg they help to return the bodies of those who are left to rot on the street. This is a show of resistance as the bodies are left out in the open to scare any protestors (Mengitse, 2010, p. 234). In Koinange's *The Havoc of Choice*, the fall of patriarchy begins when Kavata decides that she is leaving her husband because she does not want to live in the same shadow she grew up in (Muli as a politician); she follows through with her plan to the disbelief of her husband Ngugi. Koinange uses here Kavata to diminish the submissive tag that women have historically worn in African communities. The contemporary African woman that she represents is supposed to take a leading role in community leadership and, more so, her family. Unlike her mother, Mrs. Muli, Kavata is an independent thinker, carefully laying out her plans and decides that she will go to the USA to stay with her cousin Mutheu. This is a powerful statement in an evolving social landscape.

Wanja, too, stands up to her father and declines to vote after her father tears her registration card for wanting to vote in Nairobi (Westlands) and not Machakos. She joins her father's rival team, which a bold move for a woman in a society that had largely perceived to be male-dominated. Wanja, who later becomes a politician, is seen as resilient African woman, a symbol of changing socio-political landscapes. Her initiative demonstrates the idea that women's role in politics can no longer be assumed. Her slow-but-steady rise to power is an indication of the fall of patriarchy, the peripeteia arising from tragic flaw of male leaders. She strategically places herself in a position to receive information, act on it and do what is right. She is also educated, a demonstration that she intellectually empowered. She becomes the beacon of hope for women, subalterns as it were, who have been silenced for quite some time. Wanja's active involvement in politics provides light at end of a dark political tunnel.

Cheptoo, Thuo's wife, she stands up against police officers and demands for the release of her husband after his unfair imprisonment. She storms into the police station yelling for her husband's release. This is a clear indication that that the social landscape has significantly changed and women are unfettering themselves traditional chains that emasculated them. Though uncharacteristic of a woman, Cheptoo makes the officer feel intimidated, an indication that men are beginning to acknowledge the power behind the throne. She and her ilk represent women who no longer willing to acquiesce in their decisions. She, like Wanja, stands up against an oppressive police force. Anne Agallo – Kavata's friend – also speaks her mind she cautions Kavata against making a hasty decision. She feels that her decision to leave should be well thought out before any action is taken. This demonstrates her independent-mindedness.

Jane, besides Cheptoo and Wanja, is seen at the centre two election periods handling two candidates. Her active involvement in the political affairs of the country subverts traditional notions of patriarchal leadership. She plays a significant role in both Muli's and Ngugi's elections. She earns substantial benefits from this a ten-year government job and money to spare. When Muli asks her to design a winning formula for Ngugi, she obliges; she plants agents in all electoral stations to ward off voter fraud, a political strategy she had seen work before in 1997. She places these agents a week before the elections and pays off the clerks not to disclose the well laid out plan. She has an affair with Muli, which her husband discovers and blackmails her into giving half of her wealth. Jane temporarily loses out, but later gets her money back after the demise of her husband. Koinange portrays Jane at the helm of an extremely politically volatile environment, yet she manages to use her intelligence, wit and connection to manoeuvre her way out; she is, indeed, morally unscrupulous but she represents many African women who have been forced to play dirty because the push has come to the shove. Even in a male dominated field of politics, she demonstrates, men can claim to enjoy the monopoly of politically dirty games.

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## 5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed emerging socio-political landscapes that subvert traditional notions of male-dominated politics in African societies. We conclude that the two literary writers, Mengitse and Koinange, have constructed societies that amplify and dignify the voices and lives of ordinary African women. The two literary artists invoke the sympathetic imagination within women. These women – as represented by Sara, Wanja, Cheptoo and their ilk – are symbols of trailblazers in the political history of Eastern Africa; their steadfast positions serve to restore the dignity of women and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit. This study is, therefore, not just a testament to their characters, but also to their persons. The writers' works are a symbol of activism in that they represent efforts to promote social and political reform with the desire to make changes in society towards a perceived greater good. The contemporary literary space is a dynamic one. We have argued that indeed the emerging socio-political landscape is one that accommodates contemporary realities. The two texts *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* and *The Havoc of Choice* therefore reveal forms of social evolution anchored on gender-based aesthetics. These contemporary literary texts are uniquely modelled to accommodate the changing socio-political landscapes in East Africa in particular and the two

writers have brought about a literary revolution in East African women writing drawing with it a breath of fresh air. The subalterns have truly been given a platform to speak.

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