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 Macqoye 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. Blumberg and Soal 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 opportunitie

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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Akare's text suggests that the problem of twilight women is that their ideas of freedom from men have backfired, <sup>16</sup> 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." <sup>17</sup> In another instance a woman is referred to as a "primitive filthy bitch with a decaying cunt." <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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." <sup>20</sup> 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.

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." <sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> 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. 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," <sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

coming," and she thought, "Perhaps... she was going to make a better malaya<sup>39</sup> 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.

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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

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. 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)

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:

This conversation encapsulates my main argument in this discussion. Although presented in an ironical manner, prostitution is here solfothine tablogomedits blievellands incharded in the neef 6t17(")] icto6x wi(ir

<sup>&</sup>quot;Huh! Overtime!" Fatima grinned at her.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Very nice man, too," smiled Victoria. "Now he will sleep it off."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And if he is sleeping it off when the next one comes?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;In that case you might consent to give a hand with the next one, sister?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'll look after the prick and you see to the politics." <sup>57</sup>

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." <sup>59</sup>

## 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

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. <sup>60</sup> 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." <sup>61</sup> 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

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," a harlot watched from the balcony of first floor...legs apart...she had nothing under the miniskirt."

Although Ochola suggests that Susan shoul

Polycap because he tries to solve economic difficulties by "leasing out" his wife.<sup>67</sup> 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," <sup>68</sup> "an abomination." <sup>69</sup>

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. 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. 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. 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.

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 Gengaldowu suggests reflects the argument of Carol Pateman that the prostitute is not an

<sup>&</sup>quot;Pack you off, of course! But they are many. You said you came to town to

<sup>&</sup>quot;seek" and now you have "found." Now it is up to you to take it. You want money, don't you?

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes but..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;No buts Sue. Listen.... get the stuff, get rich and beat misery.... Personally I beat them by not being tied to any in particular." <sup>73</sup>

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."

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!" <sup>75</sup>

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." 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

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

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

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." <sup>81</sup>

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Notes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Florence Stratton, Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender (London: Routledge, 1994), 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Judith Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> F. E. M. K. Senkoro, The Prostitute in African Literature (Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press, 1982), xi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Quoted in Roger Horrocks, An Introduction to the Study of Sexuality (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Robertson, "Women in the Urban Economy" in S. Stichter and M. J. Hay, eds., African Women

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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> J. Roger Kurtz, Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 144. <sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> David Maillu, After 4.30 (Nairobi: Maillu Publishing House, 1987), 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Kurtz, 140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See Maillu's Broken Drum (Nairobi: Maillu Publishing House, 1991), 546. Quoted in Kurtz, 143.

Kurtz, 157.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Petals of Blood (Oxford: Heinemann, 1986). 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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> F. M. Genga-Idowu, Lady in Chains (Nairobi: East African educational Publishers, 1993), 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Mwangi, 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Ibid., **7**5

<sup>65</sup> Genga-Idowu, 57.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Online Review in http://msupress.msu.edu/bookTemplate.php?bookID=1168

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Genga-Idowu, 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Benjamin and Masters, 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Laurie Shrage, Moral Dilemmas of Feminism: Prostitution, Adultery, and Abortion (New York: Routledge, 1994)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Genga-Idowu, 77-78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> See "Existentialist Feminism" <a href="http://www.femistissues.com/existential\_fem.html">http://www.femistissues.com/existential\_fem.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Genga-Idowu, 191.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Quoted in "Liberal Feminism" http://www.feministissues.com/liberal deminism.html

<sup>77</sup> Genga-Idowu, 81.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Stratton.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Susheila Nasta, ed., Motherlands: Black Women's Writing From Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), xxv.