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Imaging the Woman through Tanzanian Women's Maxims

By Shani Omari¹ and Fikeni E. M. K. Senkoro²

Abstract

Women's maxims, as well as other forms of oral literature in Tanzania, are a popular genre. They are verbal arts that can be self-addressed or addressed to a fellow woman among womenfolk. This paper intends to examine the role of these maxims in imaging women in Tanzania. This study was prompted by the findings of previous studies regarding the portrayal of women in Kiswahili³ literature where, generally, women are depicted as inferior beings compared to men, partly due to the fact that most authors are men. Hence, we found it imperative to investigate women's maxims that are created and uttered by women themselves. The study was also prompted by other studies worldwide on language and gender. The questions to be addressed in this paper are: What is generally portrayed in such maxims? Why do women create, use and perpetuate such maxims? How do women consider themselves in relation to men? The data of this study was collected in Dar es Salaam through interviews and observation techniques. This study is significant to literary critics, sociolinguists, gender practitioners, cultural theorists and researchers on women studies. The study revealed that women's maxims make much contribution to group identity formation, gender relations and culture. Through these maxims women marginalize their role, empower themselves, create gender constructs and gender differences and give themselves new outlook in the modern society.

Keywords: Swahili women's maxims, gender role and identity, Tanzania.

Introduction

Women's maxims have had prominence for quite a long time in Tanzania. However, no study has been done to analyze them in terms of their contribution to women's literature, group identity, gender relations and culture. This paper therefore intends to fill that research gap by examining how they portray women and the role they play to women themselves and the society

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³ Kiswahili is a Bantu language widely spoken in East and Central Africa.

at large. The topic of this paper was partly prompted by the findings of the previous studies regarding portrayal of women in Kiswahili literature. Several studies dealt with examining the portrayal of woman in Kiswahili literary genres (see Mattered, 1982; Senkoro, 1988; Mbughuni, 1982; Kayoka, 2000; Momanyi, 2001; Omari, 2008; Lyatuu, 2011; Mkomwa, 2014) found that to a larger extent a woman is depicted as an inferior being compared to a man. For instance, Mbughuni (1982:15) concludes that one of the reasons for negative portrayal of woman in literary works is due to the fact that “most authors are men; therefore women receive very little character development.” The paper is also motivated by works of other scholars worldwide on women’s language, language and gender, gender differences in language use, and women’s talks in different settings (see Lakoff, 1975; Basow, 1992; Rakow, 1992; Coates, 1996; Talbot, 1998; 2003; Holmes, 2000; Weatherall, 2002; Cameron, 2003; Holmes & Marra, 2004 to mention just a few). My paper does not intend to investigate gender differences in speech styles or language use but to highlight women’s self-depiction and imaging in their maxims as well as depiction of the other gender. The questions addressed in this paper are: What is generally portrayed in such maxims? Why do women create, use and perpetuate such maxims? How do women consider themselves in relation to men?

The data presented is based on fieldwork in Dar es Salaam between 2009 and 2015, one of the coastal regions in Tanzania. The data collection methods combine observation, questionnaires and interviews. Being part of this society it was easier for researcher to collect as many maxims as possible through participant observation in wedding ceremonies, kitchen parties, *ngoma* (traditional dances) and female initiation ceremonies. Sometimes, as a woman, she involved herself in these communicative acts. With regard to questionnaires, the study involved 30 respondents, 5 from each district of Dar es Salaam, namely Kinondoni, Temeke and Ilala. Respondents were both males and females ranged from 18 to 70 years irrespective of their socio-economic status. This includes students, (self) employed, retirees, house wives and jobless. They were given open-ended written questionnaires to list women’s maxims, contexts of their performance and roles. In addition, interviews with a total of 15 women and men were also conducted about which maxims are usually uttered by women and their roles to women and society. The participants were randomly chosen in the same three districts. All responses were compiled and analyzed qualitatively to identify the recurrent and new maxims, the meaning, purposes and contexts and significance. This paper is divided into five sections: introduction, definition of maxims and their contexts, imaging of woman in maxims, the role of maxims and conclusion.

Defining Women’s Maxims and General Contexts of their Performance

Women’s maxims are verbal art expressions mostly self-addressed or addressed to a fellow woman among womenfolk. Depending on the occasion, their occurrences may also involve the presence of men. It is important to note that maxim and proverb seem somewhat similar as they are both concise statements which use various artistic features such as similes, allusion, metaphors and metonyms. However, while generally “proverb is conservative, authoritative, has anonymous origin, presents truth, associated with established wisdom and have poetic mode of expression” (Schipper, 2006:22-26, Finnegan, 2012:380-385), women’s maxims lack most of these characteristics. Most of them⁴ are straightforward, formed mainly by two words (noun + noun or noun + verb). Apart from a few figurative languages they can also use slang or street language.

⁴ We have appended all maxims, which are usually in Kiswahili, with their English translation at the end of this paper.

While “proverbs should be accepted by the community as a whole” (Finnegan, 2012:404) women's maxims are a popular verbal genre among the Swahili women in Tanzania. Women are the main creators and users of these maxims.

They mainly occur in celebratory contexts such as weddings, kitchen parties, *taarab* music, send offs and female dances where groups of women or people are involved. They can be heard at beauty salons when one styling hair, at homes when discharging house chores or when discussing about what to wear or how to appear in a certain occasion. They also occur at formal settings such as conferences and other such places, if need be. When uttered, they can be accompanied by a laughter or laugh at unison to appreciate the maxim. To make what is said meaningful and to capture the attention of the viewers, usually the maxim is accompanied with bodily expressions, an activity, action or visual image of what is referred to. For example, if they are talking about hair, one has to be in the process of braiding her hair or ready well plaited. If they are talking about henna, one has to be in the action of painting henna or already painted. Hence, to perform and understand women's maxims they have to be interpreted in their actual context. That is, maxim performance, as for other “oral literary genres such as proverbs, has to be tied up to a certain context” (see Parker, 1974; Eastman, 1984; Mulokozi, 1996; Schipper, 2006; Finnegan, 2012). Both maxims and proverbs are contextual but proverbs seem drawn from established repertoire and laden with philosophical meaning representing a wider society while women's maxims emerge daily prompted by the one's appearance, activity performed or event; are not philosophical and mainly carry women's attitudes and perceptions. Generally, these maxims are typically associated with and spoken by women, however in rare cases a man can also make reference to them. Although, as Gower et al. (1996:255) note “Swahili women cannot be seen as a homogeneous group in terms of class, religion, ethnicity, and geography”, it is interesting to note that, depending on the context, these maxims may be used by any Tanzanian woman regardless of her ethnic background, educational level, social stratum and political or economic positions. Though, the extent in which they use them and which maxims they prefer may differ.

Women's Maxims and Imaging Women

Women's maxims are quite diverse in terms of their focus. These include smartness, procreation, beauty, marriage, hardworking, house chores and sexuality. References are also made to politics, business, economy, education, environment, African philosophy, tradition and culture. The analysis is divided into two sections: the first section discusses maxims that are referring to women, and the second deals with those referring to men. In every set of maxims I provide some contexts in which are used and also acknowledge that their contexts are so broad.

Maxims Referring to Women

Most women's maxims concern women's physical appearance and beauty such as cosmetics, outfit and physique. With regard to cosmetics, women's maxims emphasize that a woman has to apply local skin lightening crème (*mwanamke mkorogo*), a face powder (*mwanamke poda*), eyeliner (*mwanamke wanja*), fragrant perfumes or incense (*mwanamke pafyumu au udi*), henna (*mwanamke hina*) and so forth. The maxims of such type can be uttered by women at the beauty salon or at home when applying those items. Their maxims also underline that a woman should have soft face, visits beauty and hair salon to braid, weave, extend or curl her hair. Generally, the maxims emphasize on being attractive by using body ornaments, decoration and cosmetics. For instance, henna which is painted in many occasions in Islamic, Hindu and Jewish

cultural traditions is also common among the Swahili women in East Africa. It is used on hair and skin for body adornment, beautification and enhance the image of the female in weddings or other occasions. It is important to quote Fiske who argues that the body is not kind of natural biological entity, but a socially constructed artifact (Fiske, 1992:161-162 in Freccero, 1999:19). Their maxims emphasize on this fact and their group identity as women.

Likewise, *mkorogo* (locally made bleach for skin lightening), which is usually used by some Tanzanian women, is widely mentioned in their maxims. “Despite its adverse effects such as skin cancer, women growing moustaches, skin burnt and kidney failure the use of bleaching creams among African women became common. Those who cannot afford to buy expensive creams and pills, resort to *mkorogo*; a mixture of creams, soaps, and *Jik*. There is a notion that most African men prefer pale skinned women and shun away from women with darker skins” (Rugina, 2013). Although this may provoke mixed reactions among men but, to some extent, there is a bit of reality⁵ because “what people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience” (Mbiti, 2011:4). Adorers of this habit have an outlook that one is becoming not only beautiful but also attractive. The value of a longstanding wise saying that ‘Black is beautiful’ is now declining. For some, *mkorogo* is taken as a representation of the modernity and beauty. As Memel-Fotê (1967 cited in van Damme 2002 emphasis is mine) suggests that “verbal arts are useful in learning about the African views on *modern* beauty in *contemporary* African cultures”.

The second part of body beauty and appearance is on outfit worn by a woman. Their maxims mention varied garments, these include wearing fashionable outfit, minis, *kitenge* (a piece of fabric usually wrapped by women), head scarf (*kilemba*), shoes and so forth. As said earlier these maxims depend on the event, what is fashionable at that particular period of time and what the addressee who is praised wearing. Generally, women’s maxims on outfit are uttered when a woman is wearing a respective outfit in a given occasion. However, *mwanamke kimini* (woman is to be in minis⁶) is widely heard in these maxims as younger women prefer them.

The third part of woman beauty according to their maxims is on body type. Their maxims mention that woman has to have big attractive bottom (*mwanamke matako*), woman is attractive when she has dimples (*mwanamke dimpo*) and a diastema (*mwanamke mwanya*). She is also supposed to have good sexy eyes (*mwanamke jicho*), nice hair (*mwanamke nywele*), shapely legs (*mwanamke mguu*) and attractive body shape (*mwanamke shepu*). In general, with regard to physique, their maxims celebrate the beauty of their body parts and appreciate woman who has those attributes, as she is considered beautiful and attractive. These maxims can be spoken by a woman when sees her fellow woman possessing those physical traits. They are used as flattering remarks. They can also be spoken by men for instance a master of ceremony at a wedding when praising a bride.

According to my informants, a woman in these maxims sees herself through the eyes, feelings, desires, and wishes of others (especially the opposite sex). It looks like she advertises herself and persuades a man to look for those traits when seducing a woman. Even if beauty is on the eyes of beholder, these maxims imply that this is what women perceive “men to look for in romantic partners” (de Casanova, 2004:290). One would have expected that these maxims would be spoken by men. On the contrary, it is women who speak and perpetuate them in various gatherings and contexts. Even the woman with pill-enlarged bottom is also praised “woman is

⁵ Some informants indicated that in some societies in Tanzania a pale skinned girl is highly valued and her bride price may be high compared with the darker skinned one.

⁶ The minis are highly favored by young women compared to old ones.

buttock". Women seem to depict themselves as "helpless victims who only have their bodies to rely on" (Seethaler, 2013:126). In other words, I can say that, they "draw the attention of men toward the physical appearance of women" (Beck, 2005:155). Maxims concerning women's beauty and physical appearance may mean to appreciate, show off, encourage or even ridicule. For instance, if a woman is wearing a mini dress exposing her not shapely legs which are also 'burnt' by *mkorogo* (locally made crème), the maxims *mwanamke kimini* (woman is to be in minis) or *mwanamke mguu* (woman has to have shapely legs) intend to mock the recipient and might suggest her to change her clothing style or stop *mkorogo* application.

Other maxims refer to the issues pertaining to sexuality and sensuality. They hint on how woman should be in relation to sexual affairs. The maxims collected insist that a woman's beauty and attractiveness lie in her waist (*mwanamke nyonga*), woman should turn her waist like a fan (*mwanamke feni*) and should wear waist beads (*mwanamke chachandu*). These maxims reveal that "bodies are sexually marked, and they are gendered too" (Freccero, 1999:60). For an outsider, it is not easy to quickly interpret them as they use hidden language, allusion and are culturally bound. In fact waist beads for women, in Swahili culture in many parts of East Africa serve as an aesthetic item and for erotic practices to please their husbands or partners (Boswell, 2011; Reuster-Jahn, 2014). These maxims reflect the reality. *Kiuno* (waist) and *shanga* (beads) and *kukata kiuno* (to shake waist), focusing on sexuality, desire and sexual pleasure are also parts of the teachings in Swahili female initiation rites regarding their importance in marriage life (cf. Caplan, 1976; Eile, 1990; Larsen, 1990; 2005; Askew, 1999). Waist beads have played an important role in the formation of female gender identity among the Swahili women and some parts of Africa. For instance, among the Yorubas of Nigeria, Duru (2009) also explains that the usage of beads is multifold. The waist beads accentuate her femininity or beauty, and have the power to provoke desire or deep emotional response on the opposite sex.

These maxims can be spoken during weddings or dance performances where a woman, for example, dances wriggling her waist and or exposing her waist beads so that the audiences see them. They are also spoken by a woman who is selling waist beads and trying to lure customers, especially women.

In this paper, we argue that maxims that insist women should decorate their waists like a fan and should wear waist beads not only stress femininity and beauty but also, to some extent, situate a woman as a sexual and pleasurable object. Women's maxims, like many Kiswahili literary genres, generally depict a woman as a sex object and article for consumption (cf. Senkoro, 1988; Kayoka, 2000). Interestingly, woman participates in her self-creation and recognition of her role to her husband or partner. This is because, as El-Maawy (2011:70) notes "there is no woman who wants to be seen as unskilled at treating and pleasing her husband. The joy of women is to know that they are capable of attracting their husbands" or partners. Maxims on *shanga* also show the value of *shanga* in Swahili society. Kent (1990:121) notes that "imported goods such as beads are highly valued by the indigenous African (the Swahili) and which were received in exchange for slaves and ivory." They culturally set female roles and how to be a good woman in sexual affairs.

Another popular theme in women's maxims is a gossip. "Gossip is a type of conversation stereotypically associated with women" (Talbot, 2003:81; Hegland, 2005:211). Notable examples are the maxims: Gossip is for a woman to be charged publicly is a commendable deed (*mwanamke umbea kusutwa suna*) and to gossip is easy but a difficult part is to be charged publicly (*Umbea si kazi kazi kusutwa*). These maxims are mainly spoken when a woman revealing a secret of another woman to other women, or when one sees a woman is being jeered publicly. Hence, these maxims are used as a form of encouragement among the gossips or legitimization of one's gossip behavior.

Gossips also “serve the function of establishing and nurturing relationships” between women (Holmes & Marra, 2004:381) to build “solidarity and identity of women as members of a social group” (Jones, 1990:244 in Talbot, 2003:81) and to keep someone updated of the one’s affair. Sunna according to the Islamic teachings refers to a commendable deed. Although Quranic teachings forbid gossip/idle chat (Quran, 49:12) surprisingly some Tanzanian women even associate themselves with gossip and think that their participation in it is a sunna. These maxims insist that gossip is really a woman’s trait. These maxims can be used by any woman regardless of her religion.

Furthermore, in their maxims, the emphasis is also put on the issues related to marriage and procreation. These include a woman has to get married (*mwanamke kuolewa*) and have kids (*mwanamke kuzaa*). These maxims can be used in various contexts such as at a wedding ceremony or when partners are planning for their future life, when people see a woman is pregnant or getting married, and when one goes to visit someone who has a new born baby. They can be used as congratulatory remarks, one’s expectations or when emphasizing on the issues of marriage and having children in life. These maxims agree with the African philosophy, whereby “For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity: without procreation marriage is incomplete” (Mbiti, 2011:133). In some African societies, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children for, whatever other qualities she might possess (Mbiti, 2011:110). In African traditional world-view, bearing children gives the woman the security and joy of a family, of being taken care of in her old age, of being respected by the husband and the wider society (Mbiti, 1988; Pandey, 2004). As a result, the image of the woman as a mother is most common in many Kiswahili literary works. And the greatest single cause of divorce and separation in African societies is sterility and barrenness especially on the part of the woman (Mlacha & Madumulla, 1991; Mbiti, 2011).

Although in modern African societies, Tanzania is not an exception; some people don’t give marriage and childbearing a high priority yet these maxims perpetuate the African philosophy of their importance. It is in these maxims that one may discern what Ide (2004:182) terms “the language function of women as markers of role identity”. The maxims reveal how the institution of marriage and the position of man in society put woman in the position that would have her blamed if such marriage produces no children. These maxims dictate that childless woman or unmarried one can be scorned or humiliated. The outlook contained in the maxims tallies well with the observations of Kayoka (2000) who states that in Kiswahili literary works when a woman is barren she becomes an object of mockery, reproach and hate from the husband, in-laws and neighbors alike.

Another theme addressed in these maxims is business and politics. Maxims of this kind have surfaced recently, from 1990s. Such maxims in which women portray themselves as assertive and conscious human beings who are fighting for their economic freedom and prowess are still few. Those maxims talk about a woman has to work hard (*kufanya kazi*), do projects and business (*miradi na biashara*), have education (*elimu*), money (*pesa*) and be confident (*kujiamini*). A woman sees herself as a being who can engage in several activities. Nowadays, women are busying themselves in doing jobs which were considered masculine such as being a commuter bus mates/conductors, long distant bus or truck drivers, masons, food stuff vendors on the street and road sweepers. They are also becoming confident as they largely come out in vying for various political posts such as the presidential and parliamentary.

The instances of these maxims are varied. They can be spoken at political rally when a

female candidate is vying for a certain position, at women's associations meetings, at one's graduation ceremony, at the markets when women selling products, and other entrepreneurship activities that involve women. They are used to encourage and sensitize each other that woman should not rest idle or rely on man. With regards to education, Tanzania, like in many other African societies, is mainly patriarchal; hence men are understood to be more privileged than women. Thus, historically Tanzanian girls and women did not have the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts. Also, in the past, some families were not willing to send their female children to school. This is attributable to the fact that a woman's destiny is marriage where she will be taken care of by her husband in terms of shelter, food, clothing and so forth. Also it was considered that adolescent girls may get pregnant before they finish school, so sending them to school is a waste of money and time. As a result, their maxims today insist on women to go to school. They fight for equal opportunity in school/education. Since the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, both education and gender equality have been recognized as fundamental requirements for development.

In addition, in the 1980s Tanzania encountered economic crisis which had been induced by a number of factors, including the rise in oil prices, increasingly unequal exchange relations, drought and the war with Uganda in 1978-1979 (Caplan, 2007:684). Paradoxically, it was this period of economic difficulty in the late 1970s and early 1980s which allowed some women new opportunities, as wages in the formal sector declined in real value and households had to engage in projects to obtain second incomes (Swantz & Tripp, 1996; Tripp, 1997, in Caplan, 2007:684). Also, in the early 1990s, Tanzania adopted political liberalization; this shift from one party to multiparty system facilitated greater freedom of the press and freedom of association. Consequently, throughout the 1990s the number of nongovernmental organizations were established and increased exponentially. Women's organizations were particularly important (Meena, 1997:7 in Tripp, 1997). These women's organizations focused on income-generating activities, advocacy, education, and the protection of women's rights. These organizations use the independent media that mushroomed from the 1990s to raise public awareness of such issues as women's rights, children's rights, environmental concerns, and human rights (Tripp, 1997: 207-208). The organizations such as Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) etc. began to play a leading role in mobilizing women's nongovernmental organizations for the 1995 United Nations women's conference in Beijing (Tripp, 1997:197-200).

Also today, in rural and urban East Africa socio-economic change, unemployment or low incomes prevent men from fulfilling their male roles as head of household and breadwinner. Women's roles and responsibilities have increased. Today women have increasingly become the support of their families and breadwinners. Thus, they realized that many men in Tanzanian cities, "although their historical patriarchy places them as the head of household, the lack of employment or adequate wages makes it impossible to support their families and thus fulfill their masculine roles" (Silberschmidt, 2001). Likewise, in this postcolonial time women are fighting hard for their social and economic well-being. It is no longer a time to wait to get married or a husband to bring food home.

It is due to these various factors such as political pluralism, social changes and movements (establishment of nongovernmental organizations, free independent media, and Beijing Women's conferences) which made Tanzanian women gain greater awareness on what today's women can achieve. In their maxims, women have begun to encourage themselves to participate in various political, educational and economic endeavors. As time goes by the womenfolk adjust to their

social environment. “Gender roles like any other social construct are supposed to change with time as people acquire more skills and knowledge” (DeBiaggi, 2002:43, in Wafula, 2011:154). Given the fact that many maxims look self-marginalizing, inferiorizing, dehumanizing, objectifying these few new maxims (hopefully many more will emerge) can be read as women are proposing new images and roles with which to negotiate and advocate/emphasize their ‘new’ roles in society. By introducing these new maxims they create “new meanings through which the female *position* and identity can be viewed and possibly understood” in present era (Pro'Sobopha, 2005:123, my emphasis) and the process of “gendering” individuals is clearly an ongoing, dynamic one (Holmes & Marra, 2004:392).

Maxims Referring to Men

In order to get a better understanding of the meanings of the women’s maxims it is also important to examine maxims about men, which are also constructed and uttered by women. Because “The construction of identity is a process of differentiation, a description of one’s own group and simultaneously a separation from the ‘others’” (Wodak, 1996:126, in Hussein 2009).

One important area of this depiction regards to wealth and business. Their maxims reveal that a man has to have a car (*gari*), house (*nyumba*), farm (*shamba*), job (*kazi*) and money (*pesa*). Also man should be highly educated (*mwanaume shule*) and work hard (*mwanaume kushughulika*). These maxims may occur in the women’s discussions of achievements of one’s male partner or when discussing about characteristics of the ideal man or husband they prefer. Not all women are interested in those kinds of men but the use of these maxims indicates their preferences in men. As said above, historically and culturally men are the breadwinners and heads of the family. Even if nowadays both men and women may own cars, houses and have highly paid jobs, there is still insistence on men to be rich or economically capable to run their families. So some women establish their expectations on possible husbands or partners. The maxims also insist that a man’s money needs to be siphoned out (*mwanaume kuchunwa*) by a woman, a man is not identified/loved by wearing trousers only (*mwanaume si suruali tu*) but it is only money that is loved in a man (*hapendwi mtu pochi tu*). These maxims show not only material and money mentality in the contemporary world but also poor living conditions by some women. Due to this some women are prone to HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

Man’s physical appearance is also treated by these women’s maxims. With regard to this theme women’s maxims emphasize on men to have a pot-belly (*kitambi, kifriji*)⁷, be strong (*ngangari*), muscular (*misuli*) and a well-built body. Also they insist that man is not loved for his facial look (*mwanaume hasifiwi sura*) but has to be smart (*mwanaume utanashati*). Women may use these maxims in their discussion of one’s husbands/partners or ideal man to marry. While a woman’s beauty is directed to her face, on the contrary man’s attractiveness is not on his face but his money, as we have seen above. With reference to these maxims on men, it is obvious that women portray themselves as lacking physical strength. They “reinforce the assumed physical fragility of women and the myth of male superiority”. The background of these maxims is “the patriarchal society’s discursive divide, insisting that women are incapable, fragile, or mindless in general” (Hussein, 2009:102). The maxims about the men’s strength are uttered even when a mother is soothing her baby boy or encouraging him to uplift something, you can hear her saying, “Hush boy, a man supposes not to cry” or “as a boy you have to be strong”. “It is through language that relationships with others are negotiated and social identities constructed” (Freeman and McElhinny 1996 cited in Pandey 2004), as it can be seen above, the women’s maxims do elevate

⁷ Man’s pot-belly (*kitambi, kifriji*) may be associated with wealth or having money rather than inactivity or sickness.

men. There are none that humiliate or look down upon men. Most of the maxims referred to, show man has to be strong and muscular, own properties, work hard, pursue education to the highest levels and, as a consequence possess money, which will, ultimately, be siphoned out by woman.

The Role of Women's Maxims in Society

Women's maxims are an important space where women can express and represent themselves and their relationships, and contrast themselves with men. They are used to demonstrate, persuade, encourage, advocate and represent their presence to the public arena. They are also used to emphasize, enhance, affect or appreciate an activity, behavior, appearance, performance etc. Their maxims represent the statuses, roles, perceptions, and identity of women as well as how a man should be. Through them, one can see how, as Talbot (1998:7) states, "people are 'gendered' and are actively involved in the process of their own gendering". They not only reflect woman's place in culture and society but also help to create and reinforce that place and her development over time. As these maxims are coined and used by women, they sometimes articulate their subordinate's position in family or society⁸. They construct themselves as an object of sexual pleasure, as well as marginalize and empower themselves. Through these maxims women represent themselves in different roles and positions in society; as mothers, breadwinners, sex objects, and economic and political participants. Also, it is through these maxims that we understand the perception of the women regarding various issues such as beauty, romance, childbearing and so forth. In general, these maxims are very useful as some of them perpetuate African traditions and culture, African philosophy, foster economic and political change, create group identity, as an arena for self-expression and appreciation. As these maxims are orally transmitted and publicly performed, they might also have negative impact on the bringing up of children, especially girls. It is very likely that the female child will perpetuate what is practiced by her seniors.

Although these maxims are created by women however the positive image of women does not appear to a great extent. This is attributed to various reasons such as traditional cultural values and attitudes (Mbughuni, 1982:15), the historical and legendary origins of women civilizations (Lihamba et. al (2007:1) and the economic and political changes that have taken place in East Africa, which have made money more valuable than human dignity. Such depiction of woman is also caused by the patriarchal system in which the author is brought up, in an environment where a woman is considered inferior to a man (Momanyi, 2001; Senkoro, 1988). Indeed, women's maxims are a genre where gender role and identity are expressed, reflected and enhanced and perpetuate gender stereotypes in the society. They are the result of three cultures in Swahili East Africa, "indigenous, Islamic, and Western traditions" (Mazrui et. al, 1993:275).

Conclusion

This paper investigated women's maxims in order to discover their role in imaging women in Tanzania. It has been found that these maxims deal with various issues such as beauty and physical appearance, sexuality, tradition and culture, marriage and procreation, business, economy and politics. These maxims play a significant role for women and for Tanzanian society. They show women's interests and identity construction and emphasize their roles in various issues. They

⁸ This brings to mind the work of Lakoff (1975) who, writing about women in the United States, states that women's subordinate status is reflected in the language they use and the language used about them.

also highlight women's traits, and both encourage and ridicule recipients, with respect to particular attributes. Thus, they can be used as congratulatory remarks, or one's expectations or perceptions pertaining to women and men. Indeed, women's maxims are a genre where gender role and identity are expressed, reflected and enhanced, and perpetuate gender stereotypes in the society. The construction of a woman's image blends with traditional and cultural norms, philosophical, political factors as well as economic situations and women rights movement. Their maxims have thus powerless and powerful facets; they render inferior and marginalize their roles, as well as empower and give them new outlooks in contemporary society. Incorporation of new themes in these maxims such as business, property ownership, education and politics shows the tendency of literature to reflect society and changes over time. Hence, these maxims reflect women's transformative places in society and help to create and reinforce those spaces and their development within them. The new maxims' contents (e.g. education, business, property ownership and politics) in contemporary Tanzania demonstrate how women are proposing new images and roles in society. However, such maxims in which women portray themselves fighting for their economic freedom and prowess do not appear to a great extent. These maxims show that Tanzanian women's perceptions towards themselves change over time due to internal and external factors such as political pluralism, international declarations and social movements (such as the presence and roles of non-governmental organizations, free independent media, and Beijing Women's conferences) which increased women's awareness of their potentials. This paper asserts that, generally, it is not an issue of gendered authorship alone, that determines the portrayal of women in a work of art; rather, such portrayals are partly determined by the social forces operating in a given society. These include African traditional worldviews, cultural contexts, political and social change taking place in the society and the like. The authors hope that the findings in this paper will contribute further research on Women's Studies in Swahili society.

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Appendix: Swahili Women's Maxims

1. Attributes for Women

a) Cosmetic Attributes

- *Mwanamke deki* (A woman has to apply skin lightening crème on her face; literally woman has to mop her face).
- *Mwanamke mkorogo* (A woman has to apply a locally made skin lightening crème).
- *Mwanamke hina* (A woman has to paint henna).
- *Mwanamke kuwa soft* (A woman should have soft face/body).
- *Mwanamke manukato/udi* (A woman has to apply fragrant perfumes).
- *Mwanamke poda* (A woman supposes to apply facial powder).
- *Mwanamke saluni* (A woman has to go to beauty and hair salon).
- *Mwanamke vipodozi* (A woman has to apply cosmetics).
- *Mwanamke wanja* (A woman has to apply eyeliner).
- *Mwanamke mvuto* (A woman has to be attractive).

b). Outfit Attributes

- *Mwanamke pamba/kuvaa/mapigo/mavazi* (A woman has to wear beautiful and fashionable outfit).
- *Mwanamke dhahabu* (woman is gold).
- *Mwanamke kimini* (A woman should wear a mini skirt).
- *Mwanamke kitopu* (A woman has to wear a top).
- *Mwanamke kitenge kanga umbea* (A woman has to wear *kitenge*, *kanga* incites gossip⁹).

c). Physical Attributes

- *Mwanamke choo* (A woman has to have big bottoms; literally woman is a toilet).
- *Mwanamke taarab*¹⁰ (A woman has to have big, attractive bottoms).
- *Mwanamke tako/wowowo* (A woman has to have big bottoms).
- *Mwanamke dimples* (A woman looks attractive when she has dimples).
- *Mwanamke jicho* (the beauty of the woman is in the eyes).
- *Mwanamke mwananya* (A woman looks pretty when she has a diastema).
- *Mwanamke sauti* (A woman has to have good voice).
- *Mwanamke shepu* (A woman is supposed to have an attractive body shape).
- *Mwanamke usafiri* (A woman has to have shapely legs; literally a woman has to have transport).
- *Mwanamke nywele* (A woman is hair).

d). Sexual and Sensual Attributes

- *Mwanamke nyonga* (The beauty of woman is in her pelvis).
- *Mwanamke kiuno* (A woman's attractiveness lies in her waist).
- *Mwanamke feni* (A woman should turn her waist like a fan).
- *Mwanamke kachumbari* or *Mwanamke chachandu* (A woman should wear waist beads).

⁹ This is because *kanga* normally has words written on it while *kitenge* has not.

¹⁰ Although *taarab* would normally refer to the type of music, the terminology acquired another meaning due to the way women would shake their bottoms while dancing to *taarab* music, so much that the word became synonymous with a woman's buttocks.

e). House Chores Attributes

- *Mwanamke mapishi* (A woman has to know how to cook).
- *Mwanamke usafi* (Cleanliness is synonymous to a woman).
- *Mwanamke mazingira* (A woman has to take care of her environment).

f). Gossip Attributes

- *Mwanamke umbea kusutwa suna* (Gossip is for a woman to be charged publicly is a commendable deed)
- *Umbea si kazi kazi kusutwa* (to gossip is easy but a difficult part is to be charged publicly).

g). Marriage and Procreation Attributes

- *Mwanamke kuolewa* (Being a woman means being married).
- *Mwanamke ndoa* (Femininity is marriage).
- *Mwanamke mume* (A woman has to have a husband).
- *Mwanamke kuzaa* (A woman has to give birth to children).
- *Mwanamke watoto* (To be a woman means to have children).

h). Business Attributes

- *Mwanamke kujishughulisha* (A woman should not be idle).
- *Mwanamke kuchakarika* (Femininity means working hard).
- *Mwanamke kazi* (A woman has to work).
- *Mwanamke biashara* (A woman has to do business).
- *Mwanamke miradi* (A woman has to do projects).
- *Mwanamke shule* (A woman needs to have education).
- *Mwanamke pesa* (A woman needs to have money).
- *Mwanamke kujiamini* (A woman needs to be confident).

2. Attributes for Men

a). Economic Attributes

- *Mwanaume gari* (A man has to have a car).
- *Hapendwi mtu pochi tu* (It is only money that is loved in a man).
- *Mwanaume kazi* (A man has to have a job).
- *Mwanaume kuchunwa* (A man's money needs to be siphoned out; lit. "Man has to be skinned").
- *Mwanaume nyumba* (A man has to have a house).
- *Mwanaume pesa/kipato/pochi* (A man should have money).
- *Mwanaume shamba* (A man has to have a farm).
- *Mwanaume shule* (A man should be highly educated).
- *Mwanaume kutafuta* (Being a man means working hard).

b). Physical Attributes

- *Mwanaume kitambi/kifriji* (A man has to have a pot-belly).
- *Mwanaume bodi/kifua* (A man should have a well-built body/chest).
- *Mwanaume hasifiwi sura* (A man is not loved for his facial look).
- *Mwanaume kugangamala* (A man has to be strong).

- *Mwanaume ngangari* (A man should be strong).
- *Mwanaume misuli* (A man should be muscular).
- *Mwanaume mustachi* (A man should wear moustache).
- *Mwanaume utanashati* (A man should be smart).
- *Mwanaume suti* (A man has to wear suit).
- *Mwanaume si suruali* (A man is not loved by only wearing trousers).