

# American Journal of Literature Studies (AJLS)



**The Thematic Concerns Addressed by Gikuyu Secular  
Popular Artists on Feminist and Gender Concern: A  
Critical Literature Review**

*Josiah Mutembei*



## **The Thematic Concerns Addressed by Gikuyu Secular Popular Artists on Feminist and Gender Concern: A Critical Literature Review**

**Josiah Mutembei**

School of Education, Kenyatta University.

Email: [josimutembei@gmail.com](mailto:josimutembei@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The Agĩkũyũ people of Kenya are one of the largest people groups in Kenya. However, systematic repression of Gĩkũyũ culture led to many traditional elements being forgotten, put aside, if not lost completely. The overall objective of this study was to assess the thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern.

**Methodology:** The paper used a desk study review methodology where relevant empirical literature was reviewed to identify main themes and to extract knowledge gaps.

**Findings:** This study concluded that contemporary popular Gikuyu secular artists appropriate the language used in Gikuyu folklore to build their ideas on issues affecting women and men in society. So the linguistic styles of various epochs of literary traditions have proved to be valuable. The contextual analysis of various song-texts earmarked in this study indicates that literature is not only important as a form of entertainment but it is used for purging unpleasant feelings that come from starred relationship between men and women in love relationship, thus prompting of use of images that affect both genders..

**Unique Contribution to Theory and Practice:** This study limited itself to three artists and a sample of eighteen songs in exploration of images of women emanating from gender relations espoused in members of the Gikuyu community of Kenya. There are other premiere and also upcoming artists who sing in Gikuyu language. The researcher recommends research on other artists and their song-texts to help shed more light on other aspects of images of women centering on feminism and gender issues in the contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Thematic Concerns, Gikuyu, Secular Popular, Artists, Feminist and Gender Concern.*

## INTRODUCTION

The literature review explores the centrality of oral poetry as a societal weapon for addressing sensitive issues, challenges, and problems or conflicts afflicting women and men in the African continent but narrowing down to images of women in Gikuyu popular song in Kenya (Sommer, 2018). African oral poetry has a commonality in that the challenges faced by women from Western, Central and Southern Africa are experienced by their counterparts in Eastern Africa. In most ancient African societies, composition of folkloristic materials was done by anonymous composers. The introduction of formal education in Africa mainly after European powerful nations partitioned Africa saw the emergence of the popular modern song genre in Africa. Historically, the shift from informal to formal education appears to have eclipsed the role of traditional teachers of African values as eschewed in oral literary genres. Nevertheless, the role of an artist remained central in rural communities as the artist was still the mouthpiece of his or her own community. Achebe Chinua believes that an artist is the teacher of his or her society and as such even with the coming of formal education, Africa's oral art remained relevant to the African community (Achebe, 2003). According to Isidore Okpewho African oral poetry performance continues to occupy a very central position in the social concerns revolving around sex, love and marriage as well as gender domains of the African's life experience (Guse, 2019).

In Southern Africa, popular song is used widely to reflect the relationship between women and men in contemporary society. For instance, Brenda Fassie, a popular artist addresses gender issues in her African music (Kwate, 2018). In addition, she got involved in the struggle for liberation of women through composing of freedom songs that show the treatment of the disadvantaged black women and the general populace. Yvonne Chaka Chaka in her songs on social concerns addresses gender interrelations as voiced in her number: "Last Night a DJ Saved My Life." The DJ in the song is a male counterpart in the music industry. There is a pronounced interconnectivity between written poetry and oral poetry emergent in the South African song and dance genre (Letsela, 2018).

The centrality of oral poetry in post-independent Kenya appears to have gained centrality the moment oral literature was introduced into a subject of study in the national curriculum via the defunct Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) now referred to as Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) (Ndege, 2019). The premiere African scholar at the University of East Africa, today's Makerere University who proposed and implemented the teaching of oral literature in secondary schools, colleges and universities lay the ground work for shifting focus from English literature to literature in English. The moving of the center of the canon of literature whereby African literature was made a core subject of study boosted the position of oral poetry scholars' pursuance of formal education. Earlier on scholarly studies in oral literature tended to group all artists under a generalized category of performers. The new breed of scholars enabled artists of various artistry orientations to be separated in terms of creation and performance (Wanjohi, 2021).

Songs rendered by relatives and friends around the foot of the tree generally pertain to sexual knowledge. This is to give initiates an opportunity of acquainting themselves with all the necessary rules and regulations governing the social relationships between men and women (Holtzman, 2022). The search for independence in Kenya started as early as the 1920s. The social historical and political conflicts are stored in the song genre and dances composed by traditional oral artists, British colony, now called Kenya. The crafting of traditional songs bearing the allegory of sex and

marriage in terms of composition and rendition of Muthirigu poetry appeared to display gender bias and political interrelations.

Even in the nuances of the struggle for independence the position of women appears to be negated by oral poets who were involved in political activism as they used images of women to drive home their messages as regards political, social and economic freedom (Meyers, 2022). Poetically, women tend to be used allegorically to be representative of a diversity of conflicts between the white colonizers and their black subjects.

The Gikuyu are an ethnic community which lives mainly in the Central Province of Kenya and the Gikuyu diaspora the oral history of this community is recounted poetically in the songs known as the Gikuyu Muthirigu and Mwomboko (Mwangi, 2019). These lyrical genres recapitulate the myth of origin of the the people. The Muthirigu is a song genre that emerged due to political upheavals in Kenya (La Rue, 2016). It was an expression of protest against the colonial power's suppression of African traditional values and practices. The oral poets use images of women to satirize colonial iniquities and forces of imperialism (Ndege, 2019). It is against this background that the study intended to examine the thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. A critical literature review

### **Statement of the Problem**

The participation of performing oral artists in advancing and re-appropriating the art form is a significant element in raising the importance of oral literature in addressing social issues in contemporary society. There appear to be missing documentation on thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern , studies done have addressed different thematic concerns Kabira (1990) conducted a study on celebrating women's resistance: A case study of women's groups movement in Kenya. Mutunya (2006) conducted a study on the politics of everyday life in gikũyũ popular music of Kenya. Larue (2016) conducted a study on the GĪKŪYŪ MŪTŪRĪRŪ: Preserving a piece of Kenya's agrarian past through flute music. The study presented geographical, conceptual and contextual gaps that our study intends to fill by looking at thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. A critical literature review.

### **Objective of the Study**

The overall objective of this study was to examine thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. A critical literature review

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is inspired by the lacuna left by our predecessors in the study of popular secular art and gender concerns not only among the Agikuyu but also among other Kenya communities. The current engagement examines thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. This is a nation-state that is formed out of ethnic states or communities of Kenya. Recently, two other communities the Makonde and Asians have been included as people of Kenya. The study considered it significant to carry out a study of a genre of Gikuyu popular music artists of present times as an avenue for addressing sensitive issues in the society like images of women in the Kenyan contemporary society. In this literature review the researcher uses stylistics, feminism and performance theoretical orientations to explore gender concerns in the selected texts. The position of oral poetry has continued to be significant and



pronounced as a vehicle of voicing gender in post-independent Kenya. This therefore underpins the need for this study that allowed for exploration of thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. A critical literature review.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

This study will benefit from feminist literary theory proposed by Vansina Jan 1994 and Stylistics and Performance Theory (Bauman, 1975).

### **Feminist Literary Theory**

This study mainly deals with the stylistic, feminist, thematic and performative creative aspects of popular music of three selected popular performing artists. It focuses on the diversity of socio-political meanings that are emergent and espoused in song-texts by three selected popular artists. One of the guiding lights in examining the phenomena therein is liberal feminism. Tong Rosemarie claims that “Liberal feminism emerges as an appropriate strand of feminism that has guided...the offshoot of African feminism (Eagleton, 2014). Liberal feminism, the school of political thought from which liberal feminism has evolved, is in the process of reconceptualizing, reconsidering, and restricting itself, which makes it difficult to determine the status of liberal feminist thought.” There are varied views on what motivates the growth of gender roles in any given society. Every society has its own informed reasons for appreciating or not the social construction of gender.

Vansina Jan 1994 advances the argument that social construction of gender is an end result of the process of socialization—a process through which the values, norms, beliefs, wisdom, philosophy, customs, skills and practices of the community and the society—are learned, accepted and internalized (Humm, 2015). There is a kind of revelation of aspects of social constructionist tenets in the interpretation of the data evident in song-texts. In this study, a major focus of social constructionism is geared towards uncovering the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. Through the eyes of the secular songs artists, the approach involves looking at the ways social phenomena are developed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by the human web. Among the three strands of feminism: Liberal, Socialist/Marxist and Radical, the study applies liberal feminism with a bias on African feminism. In this light the study uses some of the standpoints advanced by (Davies, 2014). *Studies of Women in African Literature*. Though the study does not incorporate interviews and/or meetings with the artists to collect data, it borrows some insights hinging on applied and cognitive aspects of ethnography as a paradigm for exploring various aspects of knowledge of an indigenous community as seen in ethnopoems by select music artists presupposed to be expressing a cultural phenomenon in contemporary society.

### **Stylistics and Performance Theory**

Secondly, the study uses points of analysis hinging on the strand of performance theory embraced in the works of Elizabeth Fine, as reflected in, from performance to print. The two theoretical orientations are a point of departure in the researcher’s endeavor to interpret and analyze data formulated from the recorded CDs of the selected music artists. Further, the researcher examines the linguistic stylistic elements that touch on the changing gender discourse that concerns voices of contemporary popular Gikuyu artists in Kenya. As such, the study borrows ideas of performance theories (Elizabeth, 1984) in language and attempts to relate to how it connects with performative elements within the domain of socio-linguistic parameters of language use as evident in works

featuring cultural and popular performances. For example, Richard Bauman (1975), in his study of popular art forms and relevance on performance approach usage observes: Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience in the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content.

From the point of view of audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation in the way it is done, in the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence. Richard Bauman (1975) appears to focus on the monumental outcome of a performative text which is determined by the part played by a gifted performer working in partnership with an informed active audience. In discussing verbal art as performance" he centers his concern on the communicative elements that are realized in a performance of a given genre, for instance, the experience manifested in the popular art form. Further, the study applies stylistics insights by Richard Bradford as a means to capture aspects of history and stylistics in the literary song-texts. In his Chapter on "Gender and Genre" he points out: Carved along with this pattern are images of sexual pleasure, freedom and command: Women are 'Cyphers', child bearers who increase the dynastic 'numbers', and they are also the source of more straightforward sexual 'delights', an adverb surrounded by the Phallic double entendres of 'increase', 'swell' and 'amount.' As Barton (2016) puts it, at times it is essential to use theory and also movement in the direction of culture, history, politics, society and institutions as the social contexts of the production of texts. This view allows the researcher to situate analysis of the selected song texts within their social, economic, political and cultural network, interpreting them as a form of signification and discourse within the entire totality of forces operative in society.

### **Empirical Review**

Ibrahim (2019), conducted a study on establishing how women participate in decision making in the implementation of Kenya's foreign policy between 2010 and 2017. The study analyzed literature review on studies that have examined the relationship between women and international politics and how the contribution of women in the implementation of foreign policy can be theorized. Literature was organized into three key themes. An explanatory research design was employed. A total of 143 women working in the foreign affairs ministry in Nairobi formed the study's target population. A sample of 72 was done using purposive sampling. A questionnaire was used to collect data, with data analysis being done using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study found that women's decision making, leadership, capacity building, political participation all have significant influence on implementation foreign policy. The study concluded that women in Kenya are not fully involved in capacity building, decision making and politics, which hinders them from fully participating in the implementation of foreign policy. The study recommended that on the establishing standing or ad hoc committees and other statutory bodies on gender equality and empowerment of women, with cross-party representation, to monitor the review and the implementation of existing laws and constitutional provisions, budgets and policies from a gender perspective, as well as recommendations. The study however presented a methodological gap as it utilized explanatory in nature while our study will utilize desktop review approach.

Kimani (2012), conducted a study to investigate factors influencing female enrolment in private universities in Kenya. To achieve this objective, the study used descriptive survey design. From 14 private universities in Kenya, the researcher employed purposive sampling technique to select

a sample of three private universities that were located in Nairobi to form the base of the study. The findings showed that private universities had attained gender parity unlike in public universities. Female enrolment at Daystar University, for instance, was 51 % in 2010, while in USIU and KCA it was 54% and 52%, respectively. The study found that the following were the major factors influencing gender parity in private universities: 95% of the respondents joined private universities because of flexible selection of degree programmes; 85%, choose private universities owing to shorter period of degree completion; proximity to the university and good facilities were cited by 84% and 70% of the respondents, respectively. The study presented a conceptual gap as it focused on factors influencing female enrolment in private universities in Kenya while our study will focus on examining thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern

Bullindah (2012), conducted a study that examined the implications of gender upon music composition and performance among the Isukha people, a sub-tribe of the Luhya community of Western Kenya. It addressed explicitly, two central questions. First, to what degree does the Isukha community's gender ideology and resulting gender related behaviours affects its musical thought and practice? And second, how does music function in the Isukha community to reflect or affect people's attitudes towards women musicians. The study, in the long run, outlined the role played by women in music and articulated their values in music making. In the endeavor to achieve the above, a descriptive research design was adopted. Questionnaires, interview schedules, and observation schedules were used as research tools to get people's views, expectations and attitudes towards female musicians in the Isukha community. The study revealed that the community members appreciated the music culture performed by women of the isukha tribe which both directly and indirectly affected these women's music making activities. The study however presented a contextual gap as it focused on Luhya community music while our study will focus on Gikuyu secular popular artists.

Njeru (2011), conducted a study on how Ngcobo in the novel and they didn't die (1999) depicts the rural women characters' digression from what was considered to be the norm. The study employed four strands of feminist theory: the social eco-feminist, radical feminist, Marxist Feminist and African Feminist Theories. In engaging the social eco-feminist theory, the study portrayed the relationship between the exploitation of women and that of nature. The study also demonstrated the author's use of symbols, some of which were related to nature and to some extent they were a backup in highlighting the characters and the conflicts in the story. The use of radical feminist theory helped in interpreting patriarchy as illustrated by apartheid and African culture. The Marxist Feminist perspective helped in analyzing the capitalistic nature of apartheid and highlighted how the women characters subverted the system's schemes. The African feminist perspective created a fair gender rapport between females and males and attempts to appraise literature by using African's aesthetic standards, worldview and experience. Apart from examining the deviation of rural women characters from the perceived norms of apartheid, patriarchy and environment, the study finally appraised the women's endeavours in overcoming the challenges. The study however study presented a conceptual gap as it focused on how Ngcobo in the novel and they didn't die (1999) depicts the rural women characters' digression from what was considered to be the norm while our study will focus on examining thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop literature review method (desk study). This involved an in-depth review of studies related to examining thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. Three sorting stages were implemented on the subject under study in order to determine the viability of the subject for research. This is the first stage that comprised the initial identification of all articles that were based on examining thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. The search was done generally by searching the articles in the article title, abstract, keywords. A second search involved fully available publications on the subject on thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern. The third step involved the selection of fully accessible publications. Reduction of the literature to only fully accessible publications yielded specificity and allowed the researcher to focus on the articles that related to thematic concerns addressed by Gikuyu secular popular artists on feminist and gender concern which was split into top key words. After an in- depth search into the top key words ( thematic concerns, Gikuyu, secular popular, artists, feminist and gender concern), the researcher arrived at 4 articles that were suitable for analysis. This were findings from:

Ibrahim (2019), who conducted a study on establishing how women participate in decision making in the implementation of Kenya's foreign policy between 2010 and 2017. The study analyzed literature review on studies that have examined the relationship between women and international politics and how the contribution of women in the implementation of foreign policy can be theorized. Literature was organized into three key themes. An explanatory research design was employed. A total of 143 women working in the foreign affairs ministry in Nairobi formed the study's target population. A sample of 72 was done using purposive sampling. A questionnaire was used to collect data, with data analysis being done using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study found that women's decision making, leadership, capacity building, political participation all have significant influence on implementation foreign policy. The study concluded that women in Kenya are not fully involved in capacity building, decision making and politics, which hinders them from fully participating in the implementation of foreign policy. The study recommended that on the establishing standing or ad hoc committees and other statutory bodies on gender equality and empowerment of women, with cross-party representation, to monitor the review and the implementation of existing laws and constitutional provisions, budgets and policies from a gender perspective, as well as recommendations.

Kimani (2012), who conducted a study to investigate factors influencing female enrolment in private universities in Kenya. To achieve this objective, the study used descriptive survey design. From 14 private universities in Kenya, the researcher employed purposive sampling technique to select a sample of three private universities that were located in Nairobi to form the base of the study. The findings showed that private universities had attained gender parity unlike in public universities. Female enrolment at Daystar University, for instance, was 51 % in 2010, while in USIU and KCA it was 54% and 52%, respectively. The study found that the following were the major factors influencing gender parity in private universities: 95% of the respondents joined private universities because of flexible selection of degree programmes; 85%, choose private universities owing to shorter period of degree completion; proximity to the university and good facilities were cited by 84% and 70% of the respondents, respectively.



Bullindah (2012), who conducted a study that examined the implications of gender upon music composition and performance among the Isukha people, a sub-tribe of the Luhya community of Western Kenya. It addressed explicitly, two central questions. First, to what degree does the Isukha community's gender ideology and resulting gender related behaviours affects its musical thought and practice? And second, how does music function in the Isukha community to reflect or affect people's attitudes towards women musicians. The study, in the long run, outlined the role played by women in music and articulated their values in music making. In the endeavor to achieve the above, a descriptive research design was adopted. Questionnaires, interview schedules, and observation schedules were used as research tools to get people's views, expectations and attitudes towards female musicians in the Isukha community. The study revealed that the community members appreciated the music culture performed by women of the isukha tribe which both directly and indirectly affected these women's music making activities.

Njeru (2011), who conducted a study on how Ngcobo in the novel and they didn't die (1999) depicts the rural women characters' digression from what was considered to be the norm. The study employed four strands of feminist theory: the social eco-feminist, radical feminist, Marxist Feminist and African Feminist Theories. In engaging the social eco-feminist theory, the study portrayed the relationship between the exploitation of women and that of nature. The study also demonstrated the author's use of symbols, some of which were related to nature and to some extent they were a backup in highlighting the characters and the conflicts in the story. The use of radical feminist theory helped in interpreting patriarchy as illustrated by apartheid and African culture. The Marxist Feminist perspective helped in analyzing the capitalistic nature of apartheid and highlighted how the women characters subverted the system's schemes. The African feminist perspective created a fair gender rapport between females and males and attempts to appraise literature by using African's aesthetic standards, worldview and experience. Apart from examining the deviation of rural women characters from the perceived norms of apartheid, patriarchy and environment, the study finally appraised the women's endeavours in overcoming the challenges.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This study concluded that contemporary popular Gikuyu secular artists appropriate the language used in Gikuyu folklore to build their ideas on issues affecting women and men in society. So the linguistic styles of various epochs of literary traditions have proved to be valuable. The contextual analysis of various song-texts earmarked in this study indicates that literature is not only important as a form of entertainment but it is used for purging unpleasant feelings that come from starred relationship between men and women in love relationship, thus prompting of use of images that affect both genders. The loss mutual love leads to painful experiences such as death, loss of property and betrayal, thus reconciling the person with nature. Still, literary works as perceived in the song-texts are an avenue for preservation and transmission of culture as evident also in various genres ad subgenres of oral literature. The application of stylistics, feminist and performance theories is a valuable means to explore the images of women in popular secular music studied in research work in cultural studies.

## Recommendations

This study limited itself to three artists and a sample of eighteen songs in exploration of images of women emanating from gender relations espoused in members of the Gikuyu community of Kenya. There are other premiere and also upcoming artists who sing in Gikuyu language. The researcher recommends research on other artists and their song-texts to help shed more light on other aspects of images of women centering on feminism and gender issues in the contemporary society.

## REFERENCES

- Achebe, C., & Gikandi, S. (2003). *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Bauman, R. (1975). Verbal art as performance 1. *American anthropologist*, 77(2), 290-311.
- Davies, C. B. (2014). Pan-Africanism, transnational black feminism and the limits of culturalist analyses in African gender discourses. *Feminist Africa*, 19, 78-93.
- Eagleton, M. (2014). *Feminist literary criticism*. Routledge.
- Guse, T., Vescovelli, F., & Croxford, S. A. (2019). Subjective well-being and gratitude among South African adolescents: Exploring gender and cultural differences. *Youth & Society*, 51(5), 591-615.
- Holtzman, L., & Sharpe, L. (2014). *Media messages: What film, television, and popular music teach us about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation*. Routledge.
- Humm, M. (2015). *A readers' guide to contemporary feminist literary criticism*. Routledge.
- Kwate, N. O. A., & Goodman, M. S. (2015). Racism at the intersections: Gender and socioeconomic differences in the experience of racism among African Americans. *American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 85(5), 397.
- LaRue, J. (2016). The GĪKŪYŪ MŪTŪRĪRŪ: Preserving A Piece of Kenya's Agrarian Past through Flute Music.
- Letsela, L., Weiner, R., Gafos, M., & Fritz, K. (2019). Alcohol availability, marketing, and sexual health risk amongst urban and rural youth in South Africa. *AIDS and Behavior*, 23(1), 175-189.
- Meyer, A. E. (2022). *From Wallflowers to Bulletproof Families: The Power of Disability in Young Adult Narratives*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.
- Mwangi, P. M. (2019). The Origins, Nature and Development of Gikuyu Erithi Poetry. *Hybrid Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, 1(1), 61-77.
- Ndege, S., Mwai, W., & Mbugua, W. (2019). The Language of Kikuyu Popular Artists as "Community Spokespersons" On Ethnic Cleansing in Kenya. *Journal of African Studies and Ethnographic Research*, 1(1), 5-19.
- Ndege, S., Mwai, W., & Mbugua, W. (2019). The Language of Kikuyu Popular Artists as "Community Spokespersons" On Ethnic Cleansing in Kenya. *Journal of African Studies and Ethnographic Research*, 1(1), 5-19.

Sommer, M., Munoz-Laboy, M., Wilkinson Salamea, E., Arp, J., Falb, K. L., Rudahindwa, N., & Stark, L. (2018). How narratives of fear shape girls' participation in community life in two conflict-affected populations. *Violence against Women*, 24(5), 565-585.

Wanjohi, D. W. (2021). *Images of women in selected songs of contemporary Gikuyu secular popular artists* (doctoral dissertation, Kenyatta University).