

ARTISTIC CHOICES AND GENDER PLACEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF
NGUGI wa THIONG'O AND GRACE OGOT

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ABSTRACT

This study is a stylistic investigation of the intersection between gender and artistic choices. Its purpose is to position gender as a discursive presence upon which writing is contingent. Emphasised throughout the thesis is that gender is a social construct. But while accepting the invalidity of physiological determinism in the study of literature, the thesis demonstrates the centrality of gender in determining the content and form of a work of art. The particularity of the work in terms of gender, place, and time does not occlude the text's universal appeal across gender, historical and geographical divides.

Focussing on the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot, the analysis interrogates the contention that female and male writers use linguistic and narrative signs differently. Through a practical and critical appraisal of specific texts as opposed to abstracted theorising within which the debate on gender and writing has largely been executed and polemicised, the study attempts to locate the role of an author's gender in creative choices made in the texts. Comparing the two artists, the study pays particular attention ~~is paid to~~ to the themes predominating in their works, the patterns of characterisation, and the stylistic and technical devices each artist deploys to concretise the message of the text.

Recognising the centrality of language in aesthetic production, the study primarily uses critical stylistics in a theoretical framework that is largely deconstructive and semiotic. We offer linguistic account of the ideologies masked in the text. The aim is to appreciate the aesthetic effects the selected devices generate while concretising the texts' gendered messages. Drawing on deconstruction and semiotic textual theories, the analysis at the reveals textual aporiae and blind spots that express duplicity in the artist's perspective on themes and characters. This is especially when the self-deconstructive efficacy gestures to gendered positions.

In the aggregate, the study finds out that in their works Grace Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiong'o treat universal themes and attempt to draw round characters. Nevertheless, the over-arching universal imperatives notwithstanding, there are localised choices that

reveal gender differences in the writers' choice of themes, narrative perspectives and the intertextual relations that they establish with prior writing. The texts they create end up being sites of struggle in which gender ideologies are reflected, contested and mapped out. Whether gender is a thematic concern in a text or not, it reveals its subversive potential in the contestatory politics of rupture and resistance the writers have staged in their writings.

Careful to avoid a male/female binary split, the study keeps within its sights the junctures when Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Grace Ogot problematise gender polarity by strategically deploying the choices that would be associated with the opposite gender. We demonstrate although Grace Ogot avoids artistic choices that predominate in Ngugi's works, she occasionally uses devices and treats themes more peculiarly associated with Ngugi, and vice versa. This signals that although gender is a discursive structuring principle in art, narrative and linguistic signs in literature cannot be compartmentalised into a rigid male/female binary opposition. The fact that these variances between the choices Grace Ogot and Ngugi wa Thiong'o make are mutable expresses that gendered differences in creative writing are not absolutes but perpetually negotiated positions.