

'Men Are Not Taken as Lightly as That': Power and Male Sexual Promiscuity in David G. Maillu's *Unfit for Human Consumption*

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Abstract

Guided by the hypothesis that there is an association between the concepts of power and sex in the minds of sexually aggressive men, this reading of Unfit for Human Consumption (1973), the first of the 'mini novels' that launched David G. Maillu's career on the path to the notoriety that it enjoyed in East Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, argues that the text shows that the sexual promiscuity of the male mwananchi (plural: wananchi) – that member of 'the masses of the people' – of the first decade of Kenya's Uhuru, political independence, is a doomed and wrong-headed attempt to assert a sense of the significance of the self, to be 'man,' in an environment in which the gender regime in place defines him as a 'no man.' The reading thus locates itself among a rich body of recent work that urges the serious examination of Kenyan popular literature.

Introduction

"I would like you to sleep and reconsider your decision. Men are not taken as lightly as that" (1973: 34), Jonathan Kinama, the main character in David Maillu's *Unfit for Human Consumption* (1973), tells his roommate Maruka. Kinama's demand to Maruka to be cognizant of the fact that he is a man comes after Maruka asks Kinama to move out of the room they share. Maruka, who is the legal tenant in the room, spells out what is in effect an eviction notice upon finding out that Kinama has slept with his girlfriend. Kinama refuses to move out. He feels mistreated at being evicted at such short notice that does not give him sensible room to find alternative accommodation. This is not the only instance in the 'mini novel' (this cataloguing of the work is provided in the para-text of the work) when Kinama and other characters in

Unfit for Human Consumption bring up the notion of being 'man.' In the opening scene of the mini novel, which is set in a banking hall, immediately after Kinama has withdrawn his salary the narrating voice reports: "Kinama counted the notes with trembling hands. It was correct. He pushed it in his tweed coat pocket. He sighed as he walked out thinking of the girl [he had been ogling a few moments ago]. He coughed and thought, 'Now I've become a man again, where's she?'" (1973: 8). Much later in the mini novel, when Kinama's village-based and much neglected wife turns up at his work place, which is in the city, and causes a scene, a colleague's voice asks him to control the situation: "'Kinama, please, be a man – this is shocking, settle this please!'" (1973: 66).

From these three instances it is readily apparent that 'man' is for Jonathan Kinama and other characters in *Unfit for Human Consumption* a matrix of ideas. Beyond unpacking these ideas this article relates the notion of 'man' that is held by Jonathan Kinama and other characters in *Unfit for Human Consumption* to a second prominent feature of the mini novel, which is sexual promiscuity. Right from the opening passage of the mini novel Jonathan Kinama is presented as a character who consistently perceives the women he interacts with, including those that he merely sees in public spaces, as either "fit for human consumption" (1973: 7) or not – that is, as sexually desirable or not – and whose ambition, which he achieves to an impressive degree, is to have as many sexual encounters as he can. The narrating voice also indicates that most of the other characters in the mini novel are sexually promiscuous, regardless of their gender.

The argument developed in the article is that in *Unfit for Human Consumption* David Maillu shows that Jonathan Kinama's sexual promiscuity, which is inextricably linked to his obsession with the notion of 'man,' is a doomed and wrong-headed attempt by the Kenyan male *mwananchi* – (Kiswahili: literal, 'child of the country', plural: *wananchi*), that is, a member of 'the masses of the people' – of the first decade of the country's political independence, *Uhuru*, to assert a sense of the significance of the self, to be 'man,' in an environment in which the gender regime in place defines him as a 'no man.' It is shown that the mini novel proposes that political action holds the sensible answer to the devaluation of the *mwananchi*'s worth.

Power and Sex in the Minds of Sexually Aggressive Men

The theoretical frame for the argument is provided by the hypothesis that there is an association between the concepts of power and sex in the minds of sexually aggressive men. 'Sexual aggression' is here extended to include philandering. In this article, that which is perhaps the simplest formulation of the hypothesis that there is an association between the concepts of power and sex in the minds of sexually aggressive men is used as the base of the theoretical frame. This is the formulation that was put forward by some feminists who held that patriarchal "culture teaches men that sexual aggression is acceptable to demonstrate power, anger, and male 'supremacy.' They learn that they are 'entitled to goods and services, including sex, from women as a class' (Bart & O'Brien, 1985: 103) and that women enjoy sexual aggression" (Burt, 1980 in Parrot and Bechhofer, 1991: 232).

Other ideas are built onto this base. Following Kamphuis and colleagues it is inferred that the socialization of men in a patriarchy that is referred to in the feminists' formulation then leads to an automaticity of an association between the concepts of power and sex in the minds of sexually aggressive men. Having internalized the ideas that they are superior and they can use sex as an instrument to underscore that status, the men engage in sexual aggression without having to think about it. This is a point that Kamphuis *et al.* capture in the following words: "Much mental life (including motivation) occurs without intention, effort, or conscious awareness – is automatic, or under automatic processes" (2005: 1352). The man in a patriarchy who engages in an act of sexual aggression does not have to be conscious that he is using sex to convey both to himself and to his victim the message that he is 'man' and therefore powerful.

The second idea that is loaded onto the feminists' formulation of the hypothesis that there is an association between the concepts of power and sex in the minds of sexually aggressive men is the idea that men are particularly motivated to demonstrate their power in situations where that power is either challenged or not recognized. The postcolonial Kenyan male *mwananchi* of the first decade of the country's political independence, *Uhuru*, was an economically and politically powerless individual. As such he would be motivated to display power. The point is given added significance by the consideration that in the postcolony the power-infused, hierarchical gender regime that was either established or reified by colonialism (Lugones, 2008; 2010) continues to hold sway. In this regime 'man' is a privileged category.

There is the real man, who is the white man. The man who is part of the African ruling class "who took over from, or Africanised, the colonial state hierarchy" (Freund, 1984: 241) follows closely. The male *mwananchi* becomes a 'no man' of sorts. For this reason he is referred to as 'boy,' no matter his age. In his iconic roles he is the houseboy (never a manservant), *shamba* boy (never a grounds man), mine boy (never a miner), etc. Living in a society that privileges the notion of 'man' and yet denies him the recognition that he is one in spite of his biological sex and age, the male *mwananchi* is tempted to achieve the definition by other means – by violence and sexual aggression.

I ease into the reading of *Unfit for Human Consumption* by summarizing the mini novel and bringing to view the three broad groups of responses that it has elicited from readers.

Unfit for Human Consumption and its Readers

The story (the fable, not the plot) in *Unfit for Human Consumption* runs as follows. Jonathan Kinama, a Nairobi-based, sex-and-alcohol obsessed junior civil servant, sleeps with Anita, who is his roommate Maruka's girlfriend. Maruka, who is the legal tenant of the room, finds out and gives Kinama an eviction notice that Kinama regards as disrespectful because it is too short. An altercation arises between the two. The ensuing fight results in Kinama being hospitalized for close to two months. In hospital Kinama resolves to change his riotous lifestyle. When he is released from hospital, his "lifest" (1973: 44, italicized in the original) – that is, hedonistic – drinking buddy Tito Kimenye takes him in, to share a room, in the understanding that as soon as he gets paid his back salary (he has not been paid all the time he has been in hospital) Kinama will pay up his debts to Tito and do everything that is expected of a man who is back on his feet. Kinama's resolve to change weakens in Tito's room, in the face of Tito's womanizing ways. When he finally gets paid, Kinama puts off meeting his obligations and instead goes out to drink. He ends up in a cheap lodging house with a sex worker who robs him of all his money. The next morning he goes to work, drunk, and tells his boss a tall story about his child having died while trying to borrow some money off him, only for his long-suffering and much neglected wife to show up from the village, their twin children in hand. That causes a scene, and the miserable family finally leaves for Kinama's room. When he goes back to work the next day Kinama learns of his punishment by suspension. His life falling apart, Kinama commits suicide.

Out of this fable, Maillu constructs a fairly tight plot – the ‘present’ being comprised of the eventful last three days of Jonathan Kinama’s life, with all other events that are in the story but do not happen within the three days being brought in via flashback and memory – that structurally divides the ‘mini novel’ into two parts. The novel starts with Jonathan Kinama in a crowded banking hall waiting to get paid. With only a few (sex-filled) flashbacks and fantasies the narrative moves briskly, in four chapters, to the night Kinama spends with the sex worker, Lily. That night brings the first part to an end. The second part starts the morning after the night with Lily, when Kinama discovers that she has robbed him of all his money, and moves inexorably, in five chapters, towards his suicide – and the ferrying of his body to his village for burial.

A limited omniscient point of view is deployed in the telling of this story. The reader therefore perceives almost all that happens through the eyes of Jonathan Kinama. The notable exception is the last chapter of the mini novel when Kinama’s body is being ferried to his village for burial. In this case the event is seen through the eyes of Kinama’s wife.

Unfit for Human Consumption was the first of the self-published mini novels that launched David G. Maillu’s career on the path to the notoriety that it enjoyed in East Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. (For reports on Maillu’s notoriety at the time, see Wanjala, 1980: 204-250; Lindfors, 1982; Kurtz and Kurtz, 2002: 124). What was most striking about these novelettes is that coitus is frankly described in them. For this reason, most of (especially the early) responses to the novels do not get over the sexual content. The novels strike one group of readers as being wholly about sex. And that impression, apparently, gave the novels their popular appeal in the 1970s – as Siganga Makwato recalls:

And soon after, some of his [Maillu’s] other books made their way into the pockets of many Kenyans who thought Dr Maillu’s writing bordered on pornography and believed that he was mainly riding on the sex-sells wave at a time when anything that threatened to reveal the slightest bit of flesh, in pictures or words, would be assured of an audience. (2013: 23)

Not all readers share the excitement. Many readings agree with Kalu Ogbaa that Maillu’s “works, for what they are worth, cannot be appreciated more than those of a writer pandering to popular taste by portraying Nairobi as a city of

self-destructive sex” (1981: 66). This was an important reason behind the disparaging of Maillu’s novels – and others of their kind – as ‘pulp literature’ (1980) by Chris Lukorito Wanjala, who was the foremost Kenyan literary critic of the 1970s and 1980s. Understanding the mini novels in the same lines, the Tanzanian government banned the books in 1976 (Lindfors, 1982: 130). The condemnation of Maillu’s mini novels as immoral is best articulated by Kalu Ogbaa whose comprehensive judgment takes in the work’s artistic merits, or lack thereof:

Maillu’s works could be easily dismissed as being too pornographic and formless. The author may not be given any credit for the few creative devices that sympathetic critics glean out of these works because such devices are purely accidental and the currency and importance of the themes in contemporary society are vitiated by low artistic taste. That Maillu’s writing is amateurish is a truism[.] (Ogbaa, 1981: 57)

There are a number of readings of the mini novels that answer back the readings that condemn the books as immoral. These readings more or less agree with David Maillu’s summary of what he understands – and wishes his readers to understand – his mini novels to be about. In a 2013 interview Maillu stated: ‘*Unfit for Human Consumption* ... was about a family man who fell from his moral high horse to a rather immoral existence, at least by his previous standards’ (Makwato 2013: 24). Tom Odhiambo has picked out this moral angle of the mini novel, commenting on the title: ‘In an ironic twist, the novella’s title “unfit for human consumption” makes a resounding warning about the dangers of excesses in the city’ (Odhiambo, 2007: 658). In the same vein, Lindfors summarizes *Unfit for Human Consumption* and Maillu’s other mini novels in these words:

It was this kind of story – the opera of civil servant self-destruction – that Maillu made his own in his first mini novels and long poems. Sometimes he would focus on men, sometimes on women (usually working women – secretaries, schoolgirls, prostitutes and the like), but his stories seldom ended happily. The protagonist would have to suffer for having over-indulged in the fleeting pleasures of the bed and the bottle, pleasures which Maillu paused to describe in elaborate and zeisty detail. (1982: 133)

As was obvious in Ogbaa’s criticism of Maillu’s work there are readings that take issue with Maillu’s work on artistic grounds. Arlene A. Elder’s reading,

which finds a mismatch between the formal characteristics of the mini novels ("sensational style and subject matter" – in Owomoyela, 1993: 59) and their thematic import ("moralistic intent" – in Owomoyela, 1993: 59) is an instance of these. In her conclusion Elder writes:

[A] more valid criticism [of Maillu's mini novels] might be that his books do not hold together as either popular entertainment or cautionary tales, precisely because Maillu lacks the skill to bring together seamlessly two such divergent impulses. (Owomoyela, 1993: 59).

Whereas it generally aligns itself with the readings that answer back the readings that condemn Maillu's mini novels as immoral, and mostly point out the author's moral project, the present reading differs from them with its argument that in *Unfit for Human Consumption* the root cause of the male character's indulgence "in the fleeting pleasures of the bed and the bottle" (Lindfors, 1982: 133) is his relationship with power. In other words, in this article *Unfit for Human Consumption* is read as showing that the male *mwananchi* engages in excess, self-destructs, falls off his high moral horse, etc. in – as has been stated above – a wrong-headed, misguided and doomed attempt to assert a sense of the significance of the self, to be 'man,' in an environment that renders him a 'no man.'

'Man' and Male Sexual Promiscuity in *Unfit for Human Consumption*

The starting point in the process of unpacking the meaning of the notion of 'man' that is held by Jonathan Kinama and other characters in *Unfit for Human Consumption* is a consideration of the three instances cited at the beginning of the article. From these instances it is obvious that 'man' is not a biological category. And that is despite the point that both Kinama and Maruka also define the notion of 'man' through its contrast with the notion of 'woman' (1973: 34) and difference from the notion of 'boy' (1973: 36). There are instances in the mini novel when physiological characteristics are brought up to reference the notion of 'man' but even in such instances it remains clear that the notion is not to be equated to the biological phenomenon that is the adult male human being. In this vein, 'man' in Kinama's view must have "a penis that functioned properly" (1973: 17) – and must definitely not be a eunuch (1973: 49). Sexual potency therefore becomes part of the definition of 'man.' Although, as shall be shown below, the attribute that is being emphasized here is power in its more generalized form rather than in a

meaning that is restricted to the ability to mate and procreate. For Kinama, yet again, 'man' is the one with the testicles (1973: 36, 73). But here Kinama is obviously using the organs metaphorically, referencing attributes that are other than biological – like nerve, courage and authority.

From the three instances, also, it is possible to short hand the notion and state that it is a cluster of the ideas that define the proper human being. Thus, to run through the instances one after the other: 'man' is he who must be treated justly, and with respect; 'man' is he who has money, and therefore has the agency that having money means socially and culturally in this context; and 'man' is he who is in charge, who has control both over himself and over those that are under his authority. An extension of this last sense of 'man' is the one that Kinama has in mind in his response to Anita's question on whether he, Kinama, thinks that Maruka will still make it home to their shared room:

She asked him, "Do you think that he is still coming?"

"Can't tell."

"What's the latest time he comes home in the night?"

As a man, he could come back at any time, but I do not remember one time when he came home after one or two o'clock. I hope you do not underestimate the dangers of this estate in the night." (1973: 18)

In paraphrase: being 'man' Maruka makes decisions for which he is responsible, and which nobody has the right to question. There are, then, in the notion of 'man' ideas of individual autonomy, sovereignty and agency, and of the proper responses they should elicit in other individuals.

I now bring up sexual promiscuity in *Unfit for Human Consumption*. Even though there are only two instances when the reader is invited to peep at Kinama engaged in the sex act in *Unfit for Human Consumption* – when he has sex with Anita for the first time, which is described to some detail, and when he has sex with Lily, which scene is cut out at the point of the insertion of the penis – the mini novel makes it abundantly clear that the character is sexually promiscuous. In the very first paragraph of the mini novel the narrating voice informs the reader that Kinama is an "expert" who "had great experience in women" (1973: 5). There are numerous references to Kinama's women, which taken together with his sexualized perception of the woman and his constant fantasies can only mean that the women are his sexual partners.

Other details that get their value from their use as popular literary conventions reinforce the point. For example, the women that Kinama has sex with are either directly (Lily and the many unnamed others) or indirectly (Anita) engaged in sex work. The use of the figure of the man who has sex with sex workers to convey sexual promiscuity is a popular literary convention. As is the figure of the married man who has extra-marital sexual adventures, as Kinama does. Sexual promiscuity is also suggested through the point that Kinama perceives sexual desirability and even the sexual act in images that are related to food and its consumption. The perception in its turn constructs the image of a character who is permanently on the prowl in search of sexual prey and indicates that Kinama not only considers sex a necessity but also that a variety of sexual partners is required. Kinama "calculat[es] the amount of sweetness" (1973: 10, 31) in women's genitalia more than once in the mini novel; he recalls that he had "tasted" (1973: 13) Anita. And, as has been mentioned, already, Kinama consistently perceives the women he interacts with, including those that he merely sees in public spaces, as either "fit for human consumption" (1973: 7) or not – that is, as sexually desirable or not – and his motivation is to have as many sexual encounters as he can.

The narrating voice indicates in various ways that most of the other characters in the mini novel are sexually promiscuous, regardless of their gender. Tito is a womanizing "lifist" (1973: 44); Kinama's immediate boss Ochwada is keeping their colleague Susy as a "secret girl" (1973: 44); Susy herself has a boyfriend, the university student Wellington Macanyengo Ogotu – who in turn has a "Luhya girlfriend"; Anita is Maruka's girlfriend but also sleeps with Kinama; many female characters are sex workers; and so on.

A question that arises in the wake of the establishing of Jonathan Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity is: Is there a connection between these two fixations of the main character in *Unfit for Human Consumption*? The focusing on Jonathan Kinama is determined by an appreciation of the point that the use of the limited omniscient point of view in *Unfit for Human Consumption* also encourages the reading of the character as the quintessential *mwananchi*. In the village he is a peasant. In Nairobi he is a junior civil servant.

My answer to the question of whether there is a connection between the two fixations of the main character in *Unfit for Human Consumption* starts with the noting of the point that Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his

sexual promiscuity are features of his life in Nairobi, and are absent in his life in the village in Ukambani, Mbiuni Location, where he lives before he moves to the city. This much is clear from the cameo images of Kinama's life in Mbiuni that are placed in counterpoint to the narrative of his life in Nairobi. Whereas in Nairobi Kinama is a self-disrespecting, sexually promiscuous, alcohol-loving, thieving and financially wasteful man who totally neglects his immediate family, in Mbiuni he "was the model of a good Christian" (1973: 41-42) who was in control of his finances: "He had been earning less money [than he later did in Nairobi], but he had always had some saving" (1973: 41-42). Kinama also provided for himself and for his own: "There were a few fruit trees in the garden and many bananas which Kinama had planted" (1973: 16-17).

The contrasting of Kinama's life in the two settings suggests that whatever caused his obsession with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity either happened in Nairobi or on the way to the city. Since there is no transitional space 'on the way to Nairobi' in *Unfit for Human Consumption*, it must be taken that the change happened in the city.

Character developments like Jonathan Kinama's – his becoming sexually promiscuous in the city – lead to conclusions such as this one by Chris Wanjala: "An urban proletariat has since developed in East African cultural life. It is not accountable to the customary law of the rural chiefs and African systems of values" (1980: 205). It is important, when considering deductions like Wanjala's, to pick out the detail that in *Unfit for Human Consumption* the values of the rural countryside are Christian, and not traditional Kamba. (The mini novel frequently identifies characters by their ethnicity, and Jonathan Kinama is ethnically Kamba, as are the people in Mbiuni). The point rebuffs the straight-forward 'modern corruption' versus 'traditional morality' argument implied in Wanjala's statement. By so doing, it also suggests to the reader that the cause(s) of Kinama's sexual promiscuity lie(s) elsewhere.

The moment(s) when Kinama starts obsessing with the notion of 'man' and becomes sexually promiscuous is (are) not identified in *Unfit for Human Consumption*. Neither does the mini novel overtly give the reason(s) why the changes happen. The omissions direct the reader to look closely at the Nairobi environment as (re)presented in the mini novel to find whatever is responsible for both Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity. Logically, whatever is responsible for both Kinama's obsession

with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity will be present in Nairobi, and will be absent in Mbiuni.

The narrating voice in the mini novel does not dwell on descriptions of place. Place and street names are simply mentioned. Indeed, the reader gets the impression that the narrating voice assumes that s/he knows the places the characters traverse. This is markedly different from the amount of space that the narrating voice gives to, say, the description of the women characters as perceived by Kinama or of "the fleeting pleasures of the bed and the bottle, pleasures which Mailla pause[s] to describe in elaborate and zeisty detail" (Lindfors, 1982: 133). The effect of the narrating voice's refraining from giving detailed descriptions of place is the suggestion that it is not the space that motivates the aspects of character thought and action that is being traced here.

The most pronounced of the aspects differentiating city from village in the mini novel is the social universe. In Nairobi individuals of different racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds jostle with one another in the streets, hotels and offices. In the short walk back to the office from the bank, for example, Kinama "collide[s]" with an "expensive and sophisticated man in a grey suit" (1973: 9), is almost run over by an Alfa Romeo and has his face banged by a toilet door that is opened by a white man. In the office his colleagues are Kenyans of different ethnicities (one of them is white). This is quite unlike the situation in Mbiuni where, as it has been noted above, everyone is Kamba, and everyone is a peasant – even if that peasantry is internally differentiated in terms of who has more food.

The significance of this point is that in Nairobi the power-infused, hierarchical gender regime that was either established or reified by colonialism (Lugones, 2008; 2010) is readily evident. In this city Kinama operates in the same environment with the 'real man' in the postcolony, that is, the white man, and with the 'second class man' – that member of the African ruling class "who took over from, or Africanised, the colonial state hierarchy" (Freund, 1984: 241). Interactions with characters who belong to the higher classes – and even with those who have real prospects of joining these classes – constantly remind Kinama that he is a 'no man.' Kinama reads disdain for himself in their faces, words and actions: the "expensive and sophisticated man in a grey suit eye[s] ... [him] with angry eyes which seem ... to put a dog's value to Kinama" (1973: 9); "Bugger!" the driver [of the Alfa Romeo] barks[s] at him"

(1973: 9); and his colleague Susy has been so influenced by her university student boyfriend that she has "adopted his phrase for low class people [like Kinama, who she] now called ... 'Certain type of natives'" (1973: 32).

Even though he resents their disdain for his person, Kinama at the same time looks at these figures as his betters. This is clear from his telling response to the 'real man' in the following instance. Kinama is in the toilets at the Hilton Hotel where he has just had a pee:

He headed to the door and from outside loud laughter reached his ears. He hadn't touched the door when it jerked open and hit him hard on the face. A stupid looking European met his face. "I'm terribly sorry," an American voice came out of the thickly set and tall man carrying a bull's neck. "I'm very sorry, guy," the man added.

"Never mind," Kinama replied imitating the accent and went out. "Fuck you!" he whispered as he left the door. He massaged his face and then put his hand in the pocket to feel the money. [He has just withdrawn his backdated two months' salary from the bank.] The touch of so much money took away the pain in his face and he began thinking about the valuable things he could buy with that money. (1973: 11-12)

Several interesting things happen in this brief encounter. This *is* the only instance in *Unfit for Human Consumption* when Kinama takes in the physical stature of a man. Significantly, what strikes him most about the man is his strength. One needs to keep in mind that Kinama is a brawl happy character to appreciate that his getting intimidated, as he obviously is here, is so rare it should be put down to something other than a reaction to the physique of the white man in front of him. I am suggesting that it has something to do with race (in the power-infused, hierarchical gender regime that was either established or reified by colonialism race is yoked to socio-economic class) and with the place where the encounter happens – the Hilton Hotel. The narrating voice has informed us just before this incident that Jonathan Kinama is aware that his back-dated two months' pay of two thousand and forty shillings, a sum that he had never handled before (1973: 12), can only cater for a night's stay at the expensive Hotel (1973: 10).

To return to the encounter. The intimidated Kinama thereafter imitates the American's accent. He does not do so sarcastically. It is not in parody. He

thereby psychologically subjects himself to the American, who he desires to be like. The ambivalence continues when to the American's face Kinama minimizes his hurt, only for him to curse the American when the American is out of ear shot. The curse is both at the author of his injury and an expression of Kinama's unhappiness that he has had to bow to the American who he looks up to – literally and psychologically.

The last detail in the encounter is the effect that the feel of money has on Kinama. It is a balm to Kinama's hurt. That is because in Kinama's mind money is not simply a medium of exchange; it also symbolizes power. *Unfit for Human Consumption* underscores this significance of money to Kinama in the scene in the banking hall scene that the mini novel opens with. As he is getting sexually aroused by his fantasies about the girl he is ogling, Kinama thinks he hears a teller call out his name. And the narrating voice says: 'His erection died of the excitement because he thought that the cashier had called out his name' (1973: 7). The thought that he is about to handle money countermands Kinama's sexual excitement. Having money helps turn an adult male into a 'man.' But one of the characteristics that define the *mwananchi* is his poverty, which often presents as a lack of money.

A second feature of the social universe in Nairobi contributes to the provoking and sustaining of Kinama's masculine anxieties: the presence of the modern African woman. This is the figure that arrests Kinama's attention in the opening scene of *Unfit for Human Consumption*. It is not the mere fact that she is liberal – a point that she emphasizes with her dress style – that challenges Kinama's sense of masculinity. This character has agency. She controls her body. The modern African woman in *Unfit for Human Consumption* is single. She chooses to make capital out of her body (as a sex worker) or merely to experience in it pleasure (as Anita does when she seduces Kinama). This "good time girl" (Ligaga, 2014) is quite unlike the peasant woman of the village, who is best defined by roles that yoke her, in a subservient position, to man: as wife and mother. The structure of this relationship between man and woman defines the gender categories in patriarchal cultures.

Kinama is unable to control the modern African woman. His desire to impose such control explains his otherwise inexplicable proposal to the sex worker Lily that she become his girlfriend. The same desire to possess the woman accounts for Kinama's longing for Anita. The interaction with the independent

and therefore uncontrollable modern African woman consolidates Kinama's hurtful definition as a 'no man.'

The social universe in Nairobi, then, supports a notion of 'man' that stresses to Kinama that he is a 'no man.' In the gender regime that upholds and is affirmed by the social universe in Nairobi to be 'no man' is not only to be powerless; it is also to lack a significant self, to be nothing. In this manner the social universe in Nairobi births and/or fuels Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man.' It also motivates Kinama's sexual promiscuity. In reaction to his being defined as a 'no man,' Jonathan Kinama automatically activates behaviour that he – like other men in patriarchal culture (Malamuth and Dean in Parrot and Bechhofer, 1989: 232) – has been socialized into understanding demonstrate 'man-ness.' He engages in sexual aggression and violence. It matters little whether he does so to stake a claim to the status of 'man' or to express anger.

There is, thus, a connection between Jonathan Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity. They share a ground and are sustained by the same source. Jonathan Kinama's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity are fruits of his powerlessness. The sexual promiscuity is also, simultaneously, an attempt by Kinama to (re)claim power, to demonstrate that he, too, is 'man.'

The pity is that the more Kinama tries to prove that he is 'man' using sex the further he moves away from the notion. To sponsor his sexual promiscuity Kinama must raise money, as his junior civil servant's salary cannot underwrite it. In an attempt to raise money he pilfers things at the workplace and turns a blind eye to what should be his obligatory expenditure. He neglects his family. And he loses self-control. The lifestyle that has sexual promiscuity at its centre creates its own momentum, and starts reproducing itself. Kinama becomes painfully conscious of the fact that he has lost control of self when he is in hospital after his fight with Maruka. (This is brought to the reader as a flashback.) He reflects:

While at the hospital, he had felt so awful about his fallen life. It was so surprising how someone could change from grace to disgrace. He realized that just as man was capable of growing physically and spiritually strong, he was capable of growing weak. His spirit had suffered much distortion. He felt deformed, crippled. *He was no longer the Jonathan Kinama he used to know and have control over.*

A new Jonathan Kinama had been born at the death of the old one.
(1973: 42, my emphasis)

Control is, as has been noted above, one of the ideas that constitute the notion of 'man.' Instructively, it is only when Kinama is hospitalized, when he is isolated from the social environment of Nairobi that he resolves to change his riotous lifestyle. It does not surprise that the resolve weakens once Kinama is released from hospital. In my reading of the weakening of Kinama's resolve, the "lifist" (1973: 44) Tito Kimenye's womanizing ways trigger the collapse of Kinama's resolve, but they are not the root cause. The root cause is the social environment in Nairobi, of which Tito's womanizing ways are – like Kinama's own sexual promiscuity – consequences and also part.

Unfit for Human Consumption shows that since it is inefficacious in as far as correcting Kinama's problem, which is his being defined as a 'no man,' sexual promiscuity is wrong-headed. Being based on some precepts of patriarchal culture, it is misguided. And, ultimately, it is doomed. The total failure of sexual promiscuity as a solution to Kinama's problem is shown in the character's death by suicide and the events that precipitate it. Kinama loses his money in the course of yet another attempt to demonstrate that he is 'man' via the means of sexual 'conquest.' Lily, the sex worker he engages, robs him after a session of drunken sex. The morning after, still reeling from the loss of the money, Kinama is confronted with evidence of his irresponsibility when the wife and children he neglects as he attempts to be 'man' come looking for him at his workplace. The next morning when Kinama reports to work he discovers that his seniors have taken the ugly scene that arose when his family went to look for him in the office as sufficient to warrant his suspension. Unable to handle the situation, Kinama commits suicide.

So, rather than strengthening him sexual promiscuity makes Kinama vulnerable. It also takes away the only thing that works as a balm for his many hurts in this social environment – money. The reason why the night Kinama spends with the sex worker Lily is placed at the centre of the mini novel becomes clear. This is the climactic point when the problem that sets in motion the narrative trajectory is definitively dealt with.

In Kinama's death I read a compound judgment that also is a protest. Even though *Unfit for Human Consumption* indicts the social environment of Nairobi and shows that Kinama is a victim, the mini novel also judges the

character. The insistence seems to be that regardless of the circumstances Kinama is a human being and is as such responsible for his choices. The mini novel emphasizes the point of Kinama's human status in the last chapter which is set in the bus ferrying his body to Mbiuni for burial. The chapter is structurally odd. The plot proper comes to an end with Kinama's death in the penultimate chapter of *Unfit for Human Consumption*. But in this 'superfluous' last chapter Kinama is mourned not as a 'no man' but as a human being and, most importantly, a husband. Which point both interrogates the rightness of the gender regime that upholds and is affirmed by the social universe in Nairobi and takes issue with Kinama's manner of confronting his powerlessness. By confronting his powerlessness in the manner he does Kinama 'takes himself lightly.' He disrespects all, himself included.

This is not a simple 'Thou shalt not fornicate' or 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' moralizing. Given the imbrication of power in Kinama's sad story, it is difficult not to read politics in the mini novel's message. And, indeed, the mini novel directs attention to its political message.

The Political Message in *Unfit for Human Consumption*

There are only two scenes in *Unfit for Human Consumption* in which politics is directly referred to. The first is after Kinama has withdrawn his backdated two months' salary and is absent-mindedly walking in the streets of Nairobi undecided on whether he should go back to the office. A car almost knocks him down:

The car had really terrified him, but it was a busy day for his mind and he could not hold on to such things. A European girl about three-quarters naked was heading to him. She wore a micro-mini with the back removed and her breasts partly on display ... She was without argument a beauty. "Angel in the daylight," Kinama thought, "walking beauty. But by the way, how do they look like naked in bed?" She was drawing close and he had the courage to smile at her. "If only I had a car, Jesus!" She caught his smile. She screwed her face, turned her nose and snorted. But he didn't get the message because he was calculating the sweetness lying between her legs. He stood to let her pass and he followed her buttocks with his eyes twisting behind her with what he would describe as "Pride of ownership." He thought, "What devil on earth has denied me a car? How can I lay a bird like that one?" As she disappeared turning the corner, he began feeling his goatee beard which he had trimmed

nicely into a symbol of political leaning and awareness. Especially with his two thousand and forty shillings in his pocket, now he was very much conscious of himself. (1973: 9-10)

The second scene in which politics is directly referred to in *Unfit for Human Consumption* is a bar:

By eight o'clock that night, Kinama had knocked off a number of bottles. But now he was only starting to be in the mood and friends were pouring into the bar. He sat among his beer mates telling stories and talking politics. "Who could be the next president?" That was the big question and they went through a few names of some prominent politicians. "I don't care who is the next president," Kinama said, "because I shall always be ruled whether I like it or not." (1973: 47-48)

Unfit for Human Consumption makes fun of Kinama's attitude to politics. In the first instance Kinama is shown to have reduced politics to fashion. The statement that the money in his pocket made Kinama self-conscious in a sense that is also political, however, suggests that power lies in money. In the second instance Kinama voices his fatalistic acceptance of his powerlessness in a context where he is busy proving that he is 'man.' Kinama is a victim of his political ignorance. Even though the fact that virtually all male *wananchi* in *Unfit for Human Consumption* are leading the same hedonistic lifestyle, Kinama does not come to understand what he is up against – a hostile socio-economic and therefore political environment. By extension, Kinama does not come to understand what needs to be done to correct the situation. Kinama therefore keeps up his sexual promiscuity and fights with other male *wananchi* who he perceives in terms of their ethnicity. In this vein, it is lost on Kinama that, in his sexualized logic, by sleeping with Maruka's girlfriend he has "taken Maruka lightly," not treated him as a man. But maybe Kinama is subconsciously also saying that by sleeping with Maruka's girlfriend he has 'de-manned' Maruka, and Maruka should recognize the fact and act accordingly – deferentially, if not submissively. Kinama dies still mistakenly thinking that his problem is only moral – and that he has a weak will.

Unfit for Human Consumption shows that this political ignorance is a pitfall in the way of the male *mwananchi*'s felt desire to reclaim a sense of the significance of the self, to be a human being in his eyes and in the eyes of others. On the flip side of this demonstration is the articulation of the call to

the *mwananchi* to correctly recognize the source of his devaluation, and to do something about it.

Conclusion

The argument in this article is that in *Unfit for Human Consumption* the root cause of the male character's obsession with the notion of 'man' and his indulgence "in the fleeting pleasures of the bed and the bottle" (Lindfors, 1982: 133) is his relationship with power. The obsession of Jonathan Kinama – a representative Kenyan male *mwananchi* of the first decade of the country's political independence – with the notion of 'man' and his sexual promiscuity are fruits of a powerlessness that devalues his life. *Unfit for Human Consumption* has been read as showing that the main character lives the hedonistic lifestyle in a wrong-headed, misguided and doomed attempt to assert a sense of the significance of the self, to (re)claim a sense of his worth, in a social and political environment that defines him as a 'no man.' The novel's indictment of the social environment that devalues the male *mwananchi* and its judgment of the same *mwananchi* for responding to the social environment in the way he does are read to constitute a call to the *mwananchi* to correctly recognize that the solution to his problem lies in political action. The reading of this elaborate project of political conscientisation in a work of Kenyan, and therefore African, popular fiction is a call to look again, this time more carefully, at the "non-elite, unofficial and urban" (Newell, 2002: 4) locally published African fiction targeting non-elite African readers for, as Isabel Hofmeyr reminds us, "popular cultural production ... [is] a privileged site for making visible demotic imaginaries and understandings" (2004: 128).

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