



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 6, Issue 2, 2023

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

ENSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.6.2.1464>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

27 September 2023

Keywords:

Hegemonic Masculinities, Urban Women, Postcolonial, Urban Novel, Gender Roles.

This work focuses on the role women play in the declining masculinities as it emerges in Meja Mwangi's *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) and *Rafiki Man Guitar* (2013). The increased empowerment of women over the years has continued to affect shifting gender roles, a situation that has come to pose a big threat to hegemonic masculinities, especially in the postcolonial urban setting. In its quest to empower women and achieve gender equality, feminism has played the role of subverting expressions of masculinity in a number of ways. The conditions of the postcolonial city have adversely subjected men to a foray of social, economic, and political challenges, creating a reversal in which the traditional perceptions of manhood have been repudiated. In a number of situations, the female counterparts have come to occupy the dominant position. Using theories of gender in relation to the dynamics of the postcolonial urban culture, this study is an exploration of Meja Mwangi's representation of the circumstances that have contributed to declining masculinities in his two novels above.

APA CITATION

Lpariyan, L., Mwangi, M. & Chetambe, M. (2023). Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 139-147. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.6.2.1464>

CHICAGO CITATION

Lpariyan, Lengereded, Macharia Mwangi and Mark Chetambe. 2023. "Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 6 (2), 139-147. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.6.2.1464>.

HARVARD CITATION

Lpariyan, L., Mwangi, M. & Chetambe, M. (2023) "Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 6(2), pp. 139-147. doi: 10.37284/eajass.6.2.1464.

IEEE CITATION

L., Lpariyan, M., Mwangi & M., Chetambe "Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi". *EAJASS*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 139-147, Sep. 2023.

MLA CITATION

Lpariyan, Lengereded, Macharia Mwangi & Mark Chetambe. "Women's Contributions to Declining Masculinities in the Urban Fiction of Meja Mwangi". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 6, no. 2, Sep. 2023, pp. 139-147, doi:10.37284/eajass.6.2.1464.

INTRODUCTION

The drive for gender equality has seen more and more women actively involved in what has previously been perceived as men's fields. Meja Mwangi's *The Cockroach Dance* (1979) and *Rafiki Man Guitar* (2013) depict Women who are seen to be challenging these hegemonic boundaries through their increasing involvement in workplaces, politics, physical dominance and the changing nature of family structures. Male characters in the aforementioned fiction feel threatened and subsequently powerless as women have come out to compete and seek to dislodge men from traditionally male-dominated fields. A close examination of Mwangi's two novels has established that the realities of the postcolonial city have increasingly contributed to shifting gender roles and the attendant threats to hegemonic masculinities that have led to men occupying positions subordinate to women.

Bhabha has observed that modernity and civility have largely contributed to the "feminization" of society (6). He identifies what he calls "an *in-between* space" in the urban setups where cultural meanings and political authorities are negotiated (4). This space overturns boundary limits and gives women an opportunity to explore new frontiers both socially and politically. Women have subsequently gone ahead to take advantage of this space, broken hegemonic masculinity boundaries, and created new identities for themselves. During the postcolonial era, men faced numerous challenges that undermined their traditional notion of masculinity. These challenges often result in a loss of their perceived masculine qualities, creating a sense of vulnerability and inability to fulfil their societal expectations. Consequently, women have increasingly taken on the roles traditionally associated with men. Chimaraoka has highlighted the economic strains that men face in their effort to sustain family (28). In urban postcolonial settings, many men experience low wages or unemployment, which prevents them from fulfilling basic responsibilities such as providing

for their families or establishing a decent household.

According to Bird, women significantly contribute to the construction and understanding of masculinity. She argues that masculinity is often defined in opposition to femininity, leading to the rejection of any behaviour or trait associated with women, which makes men strive to distance themselves from femininity and adhere to the dominant standards of masculinity (125). The interaction between men and women plays a crucial role in defining and shaping gender roles, which in turn influences the power dynamics between genders. In some instances, women themselves challenge traditional boundaries by assuming positions of power, which can compel men to step outside these boundaries. Thus, the focus of this discussion is on the impact of women in the transformation of masculinity rather than simply labelling men as "womanly".

Page has noted that the women's movements have actively challenged traditional forms of masculinity, particularly in the patriarchal systems (16). These movements have sought to dismantle the existing power structures and encouraged women to take the initiative and strive for gender equality. This pursuit has led to the collapse of established gender boundaries, with men losing their privileged positions and women assuming roles traditionally reserved for their male counterparts.

Folke observes that urban setting presents certain opportunities while closing others, leading to the emergence of new social relations. He terms this phenomenon "democratization of women" (210). In this context, gender equality is celebrated through women's access to education and employment, as it contributes to greater gender equality (218). This is a reality that emerges in the two novels in this study as they are set in urban environments characterized by the influx of job seekers from rural areas. This influx results in limited job opportunities, low wages, and intensified competition. The harsh realities of city life compel women to compete for the limited opportunities as they, too, require financial means

for survival. The demanding nature of urban life pushes women to disregard traditional gender roles and break free from hegemonic boundaries.

SETTING

Mwangi skilfully employs settings to depict the suffering and hardship endured in the urban environments in modern Kenya (Kehinde, 230). In *The Cockroach Dance*, the setting of Dacca House serves as a representative example of a postcolonial urban slum. The rooms in this house are small, lacking proper sanitation, and overcrowded. It is the dwelling place of the urban underclass, individuals who cannot afford better housing options. The protagonist, Dusman, experiences a mental breakdown due to the dire living conditions and numerous challenges prevalent in the city.

Similarly, in the text, *Rafiki Man Guitar*, Meja explores the struggles faced by men as they strive to conform to societal expectations despite the present economically challenging conditions. The story takes place in Majengo, a slum located in Nanyuki town. The main character, Rafiki, can hardly assert his manhood as traditionally expected of him. Harsh economic conditions have emasculated him, making him lose control of his wife. Mwangi effectively portrays the harsh realities and complexities of urban life, shedding light on the difficulties faced by individual men in these postcolonial urban settings.

Women in Politics

Politics, as a practice in which power is exerted over others, has traditionally been the domain of men. However, the urban Kenyan women have dispensed with this norm and come out to compete with men for political positions. In the text, *Rafiki*, Rafiki's wife, actively engages in politics, aspiring to secure a gubernatorial position in Laikipia County. Firstly, her desire to become a governor is a challenge to hegemonic male authority. Essentially, she seeks to put all men in Laikipia under her jurisdiction and thus wield power over them. She indeed blackmails Rafiki, her husband, to support her when a group of women brandishing daggers and hammers

confront him, pressurizing him to support her candidature. He is intimidated, left feeling powerless and ultimately acquiesces to their demand.

In expressing their solidarity with fellow women, the women also seem to embark on establishing hegemony, unlike that of men. Rafiki finds himself confronted by an angry group of women who have chosen to back his wife's political campaign. Their collective unity grants them the power to control men. Conversely, men are portrayed as having lost their authority.

Rafiki, in many instances, stands alone and confronts his challenges in isolation. He becomes overpowered by the women campaigners. The lack of solidarity among men renders them vulnerable in the face of shifting gender positions. Women prove to be outspoken and defiant of their culturally prescribed submissive roles. Their participation in politics provides them with a platform to voice their concerns and advocate for improved services that cater for their specific needs as women. It is in this liberated spirit that they demand that Rafiki apologize for any mistreatment he has ever inflicted upon his wife.

Change in Family Structure

It is further evident in *Rafiki* and *The Cockroach* that men have been deposed from their position as family heads and their attendant roles, such as the provision of basic needs, protection and decision-making. They are no longer the sole breadwinners since women have actively carved out these roles for themselves (Granqvist, 386). In *Rafiki*, the protagonist experiences emotional turmoil as he loses power in his home. This situation is precipitated by his inability to secure stable employment, which hampers his ability to provide for his family or educate his children. He becomes a target of verbal threats from his wife, who harasses and intimidates him. For instance, he averts his gaze when his wife threatens to beat him up. Eventually, his wife leaves him, citing his failures as a husband. By taking their daughter along with her and almost all of the household appliances, she not only deprives him of his

fatherly responsibilities but also leaves him feeling helpless and distressed. This situation dispossesses him of his property and subverts the traditional gender convention that men should be self-reliant and subsequently relied upon by the 'others'. The wife therefore, asserts her independence and contributes significantly to the issue of declining masculinities in the novel.

The same fate befalls Joeli, whose wife also leaves him homeless and impoverished. He is forced to reside under a tree in the dumpsite. In a conversation with Rafiki, he reveals that his wife has taken all his possessions and children. He is hungry and emaciated and has to beg for food. Similarly, the Patels' biggest concern is reviving their business, as they fear that their wives will leave them if they fail. Sukumawiki, a vegetable vendor, is also pressured by his wife to buy her a dress, leading him to resort to stealing water meters, which leads to his imprisonment. These instances exemplify what Dunja refers to as the "masculinization" of women, whereby a woman assumes all family responsibilities as the man's authority diminishes (665). The loss of authority leads to self-doubt, feelings of inferiority, and a sense of inadequacy, which ultimately shatters a man's sense of masculinity.

Women in *The Cockroach* are portrayed as the primary decision-makers within their families. The Bathroom man seeks his wife's approval before signing the Dusman's petition. Initially, he refuses to sign when his wife indicates her disapproval, but eventually agrees to sign towards the end of the text after receiving her consent. This cooperation dynamic between the Bathroom man and his wife reflects a sense of balanced power within their relationship (Bird, 124). The Bathroom man is depicted as dependent on his wife, contrary to the expectations of hegemonic masculinities.

Streetwise Women

The two texts also depict streetwise city women striving for financial independence. Among them are the commercial sex workers who use their bodies to wield control over men. Nicci has

observed that "Women in some of the postcolonial urban novels are depicted as manipulative; they use their sexual attractiveness to entice and lure men" (148). This is true of a few men in Mwangi's novels. In *The Cockroach*, Dusman's encounter with a woman on the street leaves him economically impoverished. Despite having only a few coins left for his supper, he is convinced by the woman to spend it on her services. His vulnerability is exposed when the lady leads him to do it at one of the hidden street corners since he cannot raise money for a suitable location. Additionally, sex workers have a tendency to engage in altercations with men at bars. Dusman's friend, Toto, has been a victim of bar brawls multiple times, and his description reveals that women are actively involved and sometimes instigate these incidents. It, therefore seems like there is a shift in which city women are using their sexual and physical power to keep them under their control.

Similar situations abound in *Rafiki*. Rafiki's former girlfriend recounts to him how she manipulates men to amass wealth. She takes pride in her acquisition of properties, emphasizing that she has obtained them without taking out a loan. All her possessions have been purchased by her affluent, older white boyfriend. She also reminds Rafiki how she used him for her amusement during their past relationship. She says that she is determined to own an estate in the future. In comparison to the sex workers in *The Cockroach* who exchange sex for minimal financial gain, this woman uses the trade for more ambitious accumulation of wealth, leaving the men impoverished while she herself acquires economic independence.

Rafiki's ex-girlfriend subjects him to sexual harassment in what is a daring contravention of the norm. She entices him into her house and locks him inside. Rafiki appears helpless and concerned that his actions might be discovered, particularly by his wife, which could further complicate his situation. In contrast, the woman assumes the dominant position. Rafiki's virility fails, which, as Ronald E. Hall would argue, is a signifier of the

failure of his physical dominance (400). The woman boasts about the comfort of her bed and offers him a cup of tea and snacks. This woman is an archetype of the corrupt urban women and liars who emasculate men (Nicci, 149). Generally, the two novels present strong women who are ambitious and aggressive in their quest for economic independence. The city women are portrayed as aggressive, daring, and ambitious in their pursuit of material gains. Conversely, the men are portrayed as passive, weak and hopeless. Such men as Rafiki and Joeli have become casualties in circumstances in which women have used their sexuality to control them and, in effect, diminish their masculinities.

Women and Education

Access to education is often seen as a manifestation of “patriarchal dividends” in power relations, where men control the means of institutionalized power (Demetrius, 341). Mwangi’s *Rafiki* subverts this reality when we find education freely available to women. In the case of Rafiki’s family, his daughter secured admission to Dar-es-Salam University to pursue a medical degree. It is incongruous that Rafiki’s son does not receive due mentorship from his father as expected, while his daughter receives significant support from her mother and grandfather. It is evident that the daughter will have a bright future as a doctor, capable of supporting herself. She will be authoritative in her workplace and, therefore, less susceptible to manipulation by her male counterparts. Conversely, the son will find himself unable to reign over an empowered woman. Educated girls will indeed have the opportunity to compete in the job market on an equal footing with men. Rafiki’s son might take the same path of disillusionment as his father, which will ultimately be a challenge to his sense of masculinity.

Working for a pay provides women with a sense of freedom and independence. The entry of women into the workforce is perceived as a threat to men. Traditionally, men are used to competing with fellow men and may not embrace competition with women as it threatens their

continued dominance (Bird, 128). When women enter the workforce, they are elevated to the same status as men. Job opportunities are limited in urban setups, and the presence of women in the workforce is a threat to men’s positions. Traditionally, women were expected to stay at home and be provided for by men. However, when women work, they gain the ability to provide for themselves, leading to increased independence – a characteristic often associated with masculinity. Women in the two texts are depicted in minor job positions, such as secretaries and cleaners. Despite these roles being considered less significant, the women in these positions are able to earn a living and support themselves. This demonstrates their ability to achieve independence and financial autonomy through their work. This “masculinization” is a result of the changing socioeconomic realities which have occasioned the necessity for women to fill the gaps left by men.

Physical Dominance

Andersson has observed that men resort to violence as an expression of masculinity. The victim is perceived as a powerless and passive recipient, while the perpetrator is seen as holding power and freedom (142). Mwangi’s two novels in this study portray instances of women engaging in violence, predominantly targeting men. For example, Rafiki’s wife threatens to strike him during an argument about his failure as a family man. In this scenario, Rafiki appears to be the helpless victim, which demeans his masculinity, while the reverse is true of his wife. Similarly, Dusman experiences a severe beating when fighting for Charity, the prostitute he is involved with. He is attacked by the Hell’s Gate gang, who also claim a share in her. The gang overpowers him and leaves him seriously injured, crushing his masculinity.

Women in the bars are also prone to violence. Toto recounts an incident to Dusman where he witnessed a woman engaging in a bar brawl, using her handbag to strike a man. These women in the bar often fight in groups, granting them greater power during such altercations. The narrator

specifically describes one of these bar women as physically imposing, drawing a comparison to the slender figure of Toto. This physical contrast indicates a shift in physical prowess and serves to explain the dominance of women in the bar brawls. Toto and his fellow men at the bar are portrayed as weak, likely due to alcoholism and, to some extent, poverty. The urban man here is a victim of his own repressive behaviour (Granqvist, 387). Men like Toto have succumbed to excessive consumption, resulting in their progressive physical and emotional deterioration over time.

Rafiki finds himself in a precarious situation when he visits Manu's house to retrieve a fridge. Manu's wife vehemently refuses to part with the fridge and resorts to violence. She hurls a cooking pan at Rafiki, narrowly missing but drenching him in the process. He has to plead with the woman in order to get the fridge. Manu's wife bears herself as a modern woman, fiercely protecting her possessions. She takes up the role of safeguarding family property, which would have been normally reserved for men. Rafiki's wife campaigners possess a collection of weapons, including daggers, hammers and wielding and gelding tools (*Rafiki* 327). These tools are weapons meant to threaten Rafiki, rendering him defenceless as he is unarmed and all alone. Leveraging their dominance, they dictate terms to him, demanding that he sing for his wife during campaigns or face confinement at home, herding goats. These women strip Rafiki of his masculinity as they force him to kneel down and seek forgiveness for all the wrongs he has committed against his wife. In what is evidently a case of violence against men, we are told that "He had to first swear to never again look at another woman with his lustful eyes.... he dutifully raised his hand and swore to go neuter all his original male genes (*Rafiki* 326)".

The woman who approaches Rafiki to inform him of his wife's political aspiration is referred to as "big *mama*". She exudes authority in her interaction with Rafiki, dismissing his opinions; she reminds him that "You are here to be told" (319). Her 'bigness' is a symbolic portrait of her

domineering character. She effectively silences all the men in the room when she announces her intention to run for county senator. Toto also fights a woman for calling him a small man and recounts the incident of the bar brawl with his lips visibly swollen from the encounter. He says the woman is as big as their room (*The Cockroach* 74).

Women on Men's Mental Health

Mwangi has also delineated male characters whose harassment by women has caused them to decline in mental health. These men's failure to meet their traditional masculine obligations often leads to stress and eventual depression. As they attempt to compensate for their perceived loss of masculinity, men may compromise their mental and physical well-being. Trauma and anxiety generate in them the fear of losing their masculinity comparable to oedipal anxiety (Kavak, 59). As Kilshaw also argues, such psychological problems contradict masculinity, which advocates for strength when under pressure, where men are expected not to crack under stress (205).

Rafiki experiences mental distress as a result of the constant threats he receives from his wife over the phone. She insists that he must find a stable job or face the possibility of her leaving him. However, finding employment proves to be exceedingly difficult. Rafiki's music career no longer provides a reliable income, and his new job as a debt collector is inadequate. His inability to secure a job leads to his inability to fulfil the basic needs of his family. Whenever he receives phone calls from his wife while engaged in his daily struggles, he becomes visibly unsettled. He is haunted by his wife's metaphorical 'ghost', a constant presence that seems to follow him everywhere, even in the shop and other locations. Eventually, his wife leaves him, and upon discovering her departure, he experiences a profound sense of devastation and hopelessness. The narrator conveys Rafiki's frustration through the perspective of a taxi driver, who observes him leaning against a wall and staring at the empty house. The taxi driver understands that this is not

an opportune time to request repayment of debts. Rafiki's frustrations are also evident in his futile attempts to reconcile with his wife. His phone calls go unanswered, and he has completely lost access to her, further deepening his sense of despair.

Manish's mental illness becomes apparent through his daily fixation at the door, suggesting a state of psychological distress. Initially, he even expresses thoughts of suicide. While the decline of their business and the mounting pressure from the banks to repay the debts can be seen as significant factors, the overwhelming pressure from his wife also takes a toll on his mental well-being. She threatens to return to India if their house is seized by the banks, fuelling Manish's fear of losing his family. This fear consumes him, causing him to withdraw and remain silent most of the time, often fixated on the door. He appears devoid of hope and takes little action to improve his situation. Similarly, Manu faces similar threats from his wife, leading him to spend much of his time using a calculator in a futile attempt to balance the shop's books of account. The mental vulnerability experienced by both men can be attributed, at least in part, to the roles their wives play as their business struggles amidst the challenging conditions in the country.

Joeli's mental state is severely unstable, leading him to isolate himself and live in solitude within a dumpsite. The loss of his possessions, as mentioned earlier, has deeply affected his mind. When Rafiki encounters him, the narrator says, "To see a man who was once the envy of the Nanyukians reduced to a half-naked mad recluse was freighting" (*Rafiki*, 104). Joeli's mental imbalance has caused him to completely lose touch with his sense of masculinity. He openly admits to having lost his ambitions and the will to fight for what is rightfully his. This signifies that victimhood has eventually denied him agency (Odhiambo, 180). All of his misfortunes, as previously mentioned, are attributed to his wife. She has taken everything he had, leaving him to live in misery while she enjoys a life of affluence. Resigning to his fate and admitting to being

satisfied with his current state signifies his complete loss of mind. It is also a hallmark of the loss of masculinity (Izugbara, 46).

Dusman's mental state can be described as unstable, as he experiences hallucinations of ghost water meters all over. This mental disturbance stems from his dissatisfaction with his current job as a water meter reader, which comes with unfavourable working conditions. The only time he had a good job was when he worked at the Sun Shine Hotel. He had even bought a car at the time. However, he lost his job after being falsely accused of sexual assault by a woman. He was forced to move to a more affordable housing option at Dacca House. Unable to secure a good job afterwards, Dusman finds himself trapped in a cycle of financial struggles, unable to afford a decent home. The poor state of his current dwelling, which he refers to as a cell, along with the challenging conditions of his job, gradually pushes him towards a state of madness.

Toto becomes a victim to a group of individuals, including a woman, who deceives him into participating in money laundry. The woman plays a pivotal role in enticing Toto by feigning love and taking advantage of his position at the bank to steal money. Toto sees this as an opportunity to escape poverty and begins making plans for a wedding and for purchasing a car. He envisions a better life for himself, including relocating to a suburb. The desire for financial security and societal expectations of having a wife and a home as a man contribute to Toto's vulnerability. However, it is ultimately the woman who manipulates him and makes him agree to the plot of stealing money from the bank. She eventually absconds with all the stolen money, including Toto's share, leaving him even more vulnerable as he finds himself imprisoned. After achieving their goals, the woman and her criminal associates flee the country, leaving Toto to face the consequences alone. He loses his job at the bank and receives a seven-year prison sentence. As Toto realizes that he has been manipulated and deceived from the start, his mental health suffers a significant blow.

The realization that it was all a con contributes to his shaken state of mind.

Toto, overwhelmed by the weight of his actions, breaks down in front of Dusman, crying and displaying visible signs of distress. His hands shake uncontrollably, and he even resorts to banging his head against the cell wall. These emotional outbursts defy societal expectations of masculinity, as men are often discouraged from openly expressing grief. Toto's breakdown serves as a reflection of the profound impact the con woman had on him. He feels disillusioned and deeply ashamed of his failure to gain anything from the scam. Dusman exacerbates these feelings by berating Toto for his perceived stupidity. For Dusman, Toto would have proved his manliness if he had reaped benefits from the crime.

The emergence of *Nylon*, a sexually transmitted virus, poses a significant threat to the physical health of men. Dusman, along with many other urban men, find themselves queuing for treatment at Dr. Patel's clinic. This virus is directly linked to urban promiscuity, with men contracting it from encounters with urban prostitutes. The shame is evident in how they conceal their identities when seeking medical assistance. When men feel ashamed, it shows their awareness and internalization of the 'otherness' associated with their actions (Mckinly, 91). They feel inferior, recognizing that they are not meeting the moral standards expected of men. Dusman, in particular, is known by the doctor for using various names during his visits to the clinic. No man wants to be associated with the illness as it not only signifies a loss of morals but also eats into their finances as they spend their limited income on their medication and undermines their masculinity.

The *Nylon* outbreak is also symptomatic of a society facing the risk of moral collapse. Odhiambo says the reason behind men's promiscuity is an attempt to cope with the changing social reality (53). Urban men can hardly set up a family as they cannot meet its expectations; this prompts them to look for alternative ways to exercise their masculinity. These men seek self-gratification in sex but end

up suffering. Although men are expected to have multiple sexual partners, it is agreed that men cannot be "men" without good health (Izugbara, 48).

CONCLUSION

Mwangi's two novels are an exploration of the role of women in challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity in the fast-changing social, economic, and political landscape of the postcolonial city. The urban women here are portrayed as dangerous and capable of destroying men (Nicci, 150). Through increased participation in the workforce, engagement in politics, and redefinition of family roles, women have been instrumental in challenging traditional masculine identities and power structures. The interactions between characters like Dusman, Rafiki, Toto and their female counterparts portray men as weak and unable to fulfil their expected roles. In comparison, women characters continue to gain power while men experience a loss of status. *Rafiki* concludes with a notable shift in the power hierarchy, as Rafiki's wife aspires to become a governor while Rafiki himself is reduced to being her entertainer and a tool for her campaign.

The portrait of skinny men who are forced to act at the behest of big women is evidence of declining masculinities. There is a power shift in which women have come to exercise authority over men. In both texts, women challenge patriarchal structures and strive for gender equality. Their pursuit of power may, in certain cases, diminish men's masculinity and undermine their traditional roles as men. The women have effectively subverted the existing patriarchal structures in a quest for gender equality that has undermined the traditional roles of men.

In contemporary urban settings, men have faced numerous challenges that have rendered traditional ideals of masculinity unattainable. Urban men have struggled to uphold the traditional notion of manliness, which has remained elusive without financial resources. They have been confronted by the struggle to afford good housing, feed their families, and

sustain their dignity in society. Women have seized the opportunity to redefine their own roles and fill the voids left by men. This situation is indeed the case in *Rafiki*, where women have taken full control over men and asserted themselves more forcefully in the traditionally 'masculine spaces. When comparing the publication timelines of *Rafiki* and *The Cockroach*, we observe an increasing interest among women in assuming roles that were previously reserved for men as time progresses from Kenya's Independence Day. The march of modernity brings forth greater challenges to men's traditional expressions of masculinity.

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