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Women's Agency for Political Power in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's Novel Kintu

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the representation of women in Makumbi's (2014) novel, Kintu. I explore how two female characters, Nnabulya and Nnanteza, defy patriarchy by transforming their nominal statuses of queen mother and courtesan into avenues for political power. I premise my analysis on a controversy in scholarship concerning women and power in Buganda. While some scholars assert that women exercise political power in the spaces Buganda tradition allocates them, others reduce women's roles to ceremonial and powerless positions. I argue that women strategically exploit their stereotyped weaknesses, positions of marginalisation, and gaps in Buganda's male-dominated power structure to assert political agency. I draw on Nnaemeka's nego-feminism and Goettner-Abendroth's motherhood as a force of political order, and shared leadership between men and women. The article reveals that women's wielding of power is a historical reality and fosters a new look at notions of social common good and gender interdependence.

Keywords: Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Kintu, Women's agency, political power

Introduction

In this article, I examine the intersection between women's agency and political power in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's (2014) novel, *Kintu*. Makumbi is a prominent Ugandan-born novelist and short story writer based in Manchester. Besides *Kintu*, she has authored *The First Women* (2020) and a short story anthology, *Manchester Happened* (2019). Alongside other women writers, such as Attah (2019) and Serpell (2019), Makumbi is labelled as a post-nationalistic writer for responding to male-dominated post-colonial literary nationalistic concerns (Kwanya, 2022). In addition, she is defined as an Afrofeminist for interrogating gender power dynamics specific to African realities (Ligaga, 2023). Therefore, I situate Makumbi's *Kintu* and analysis within the emerging tradition of African women writers who use fiction to interrogate patriarchal narratives and foreground women's silenced and distorted experiences and contributions to

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society. My study engages this tradition with particular attention to women's political agency and its transformative impact on patriarchal political structures. I discuss *Kintu*'s representation of women's access to and exercise of political power as queen mothers (*nnamasole*) among the Baganda. I argue that Makumbi uses the traditional culture of Buganda Kingdom, in Uganda, as a backdrop for her exploration of how women can subvert patriarchy to assert their agency. I am aware that there are conflicting anthropological debates about the identity, status, and political power of women in the political hierarchy of Buganda kingdom. One perspective asserts that while some royal women, such as queen mothers and queen sisters (*Lubuga*), were accorded special status, they never held supreme sovereignty and their power was largely ceremonial within the political hierarchy (Schiller, 1990). Another view holds that queen mothers exercised substantial power alongside kings because they were consulted on the selection of chiefs, military decisions, and the formulation of laws and policies. They also offered advice to the kings and regulated their excesses (Hanson, 2002). A common denominator in the above two contrasting views is that Buganda tradition allocates spaces and status of power to women in the kingdom. However, patriarchal tendencies have deliberately relegated women's statuses to mere ceremonial and powerless posts (Hanson, 2009). Hanson attributes this marginalisation to the nineteenth century slave trade, early twentieth century colonial governance and education, and Sir Apollo Kaggwa's self-centred historical framing of Buganda.

Political power, in this article, encompasses the ability of women to challenge and penetrate the androcentric hierarchical political power structure in order to exert influence over those in positions of political power whether they are men or women. However, women's active participation in politics in traditional and patriarchal society like Buganda is complicated by stereotypical biological and societal edicts that place a woman in a position of subordination. This is why I place the notion of women's agency at the centre of my discussion of representations of women as political leaders in Makumbi's *Kintu*. Women's agency here refers to women's strategies for accessing and asserting political empowerment. I am aware that Makumbi in *Kintu* deals with different configurations of women's agency in the precolonial and postcolonial Ugandan society. In this article, I read *Kintu* as a revisionist literary text that spotlights women's agency by showing how women in precolonial Buganda exercised political power in different roles and using different strategies. I argue that women's access to and exercise of political power is represented in *Kintu* as a dynamic phenomenon. This dynamic nature is characterised by women circumventing traditional barriers by leveraging their stereotyped weaknesses and positions of marginalisation into strength, on one hand. On the other hand, the women adapt creative alternative paths to political power such as strategic exploitation of gaps and/or weaknesses within the male-dominated power structure of Buganda to assert their agency in exercise of political power.

I develop this argument in two sections. First, I explore how a woman transforms her nominal social status into political authority through ruthless strategies. Second, I examine how a woman skilfully uses her physical attractiveness (body) as a tool to bargain for and secure political power within patriarchal structures.

I draw on African feminist theoretical lenses, in particular Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism. Nnaemeka (2004) argues that nego-feminism is "the feminism of negotiation" and "no ego" (p. 377). Thus, it is a feminism that involves moving from extreme gender binaries to a mid-way discussion and understanding in order to build a consensus and reach an amicable resolution by both genders. To Nnaemeka, the most defining feature of nego-feminism is a deep and realistic understanding of patriarchy by women. This distinguishes nego-feminism as a calculated adaptability and compromise between the two genders, rather than aggressive confrontation, in order to advance women's goals. Nego-feminism is supplemented by Goettner-Abendroth's (2007) matriarchal presuppositions: motherhood as a sovereign force shaping social and political order, and leadership as a shared domain between men and women. Goettner-Abendroth argues that through maternal practices, women embody an inalienable right to make decisions and determine governance of society. She further argues that cooperation and consensus between the genders, rather than domination of one sex over the other, are the basis of social structure. Goettner-Abendroth's principles reveal how women can reinvigorate maternal values to assert political agency, while Nnaemeka's highlight strategic, relational negotiation of patriarchy. Together, they underpin my analysis of how Makumbi scripts female characters who challenge patriarchal structures to claim political power.

Kintu and Its Critical Reception

Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014) is set-in the historical Buganda Kingdom (1750) and the present-day Uganda (2004). The plot of this multi-generational tale of the eponymous Kintu family is centred on a curse that Kintu Kidda, the patriarch and governor of the Buganda province of Buddu in the eighteenth century, unwittingly provokes when he inadvertently kills his adopted son Kalema. He conceals the death from everyone including Ntwire, the boy's biological father. Consequently, Ntwire suspects some mischief and places a curse on Kintu and his descendants. The curse first manifests itself in the eighteenth century with the sudden and mysterious death of Kintu's favourite son, Baale; the suicide of Kintu's favourite wife, Nnakato; and eventually with Kintu's lunacy and the end of his rule as governor. The curse causes similar maladies in Kintu's subsequent generations. These include: the impulsive death of Kamu Kintu, the mental disorders of Suubi Nnakintu and Misirayimu Kintu as well as the incest between Kanani Kintu's twins (Ruth and Job). These catastrophes compel the twenty-first century descendants to come together to appease Kalema's spirit and consequently break the curse.

The epic character of the novel perhaps explains why *Kintu* has received a great deal of critical attention. For example, critics such as Kemboi (2020), Bwa Mwesigire (2015), and Gagiano (2021) read the novel as a national historical and political allegory. Kemboi and Bwa Mwesigire on their part look at the novel as a metaphor of Uganda's painful historical experiences due to poor governance fictionalised through Kintu whose egotistical mistake unleashes suffering of the entire family(nation). In the same

vein, Gagiano reads Uganda's tragedy of unceasing suffering in the curse running through successive generations of the Kintu family. Like Kemboi, Gagiano avers that the exorcism of the family curse after 250 years is symbolic of national attempts to end collective protracted suffering.

Other critics, such as West-Pavlov (2021), Nabutanyi (2019), and Adeniyi (2021), acknowledge that the novel underscores neglected facets of what constitutes Uganda's history and identity. West-Pavlov reads the multi-generational curse as a portrayal of multiple histories that coexist in pre- and post-colonial Uganda. He argues that the novel interweaves diverse incantatory and environmental somatic histories to challenge conventional history. West-Pavlov's exposition resonates with Nabutanyi's, who argues that the novel's location of homosexuality at the court of the most consequential Buganda king demonstrates that while homosexuality in not foreign, homophobia is alien to Uganda. The novel's unearthing of multiple coexistence of experiences in Uganda is extended by Adeniyi, who concentrates on the novel's language. To Adeniyi, the novel skilfully blends Luganda and English languages to showcase Luganda's depth and complexity as well as its capacity to enrich people's perception of the world. My reading of Kemboi, Bwa Mwesigire, and Gagiano shows that the novel is relatable to Uganda's historical experiences and aspirations. For West-Pavlov, Nabutanyi, and Adeniyi, the novel challenges the confinement of Ugandan history to conventional documented accounts, the assumption of heterosexual exclusivity, and the dominance of the English language. My argument in this article builds on the position advanced by West-Pavlov, Nabutanyi, and Adeniyi to demonstrate how *Kintu* challenges patriarchal marginalisation of women by underscoring alternative perspectives of women it engenders (Gagiano, 2021). My interest is, therefore, to explore the novel's recognition of how women access and assert political power.

My exploration of how women challenge patriarchy and assert political agency recalls Ezinwanyi (2021) and Lipenga (2017) for their gendered reading of the novel. Ezinwanyi establishes that cultural and traditional aspects of marriage, sex, and motherhood oppress women. For Lipenga, society puts weighty and exaggerated masculine responsibilities on men. Ezinwanyi's and Lipenga's arguments echo Makumbi's claim in an interview with Underwood (2017) in which she states that:

> ...the major thing for me was that feminism, for a very long time, has talked about the oppression of women by men, and then the repression of women by the patriarchy [...]. We have failed to see that the patriarchy also oppresses men, that there is oppression sometimes in privilege. (p.4).

One can note that Makumbi agrees with the two critics cited above that the novel draws attention to the consequential harm of patriarchy to both women and men. The critics look at gender roles and expectations as predetermined and static. However, my reading of *Kintu* reveals that societal norms can be redefined, challenged, and negotiated into possibilities of empowerment and agency.

The novel is a multi-layered narrative that foregrounds different configurations of women agency. In pre-colonial Buganda, for instance, Kintu's first wife, Nnakato, decides on Kintu's sex schedules with his multiple wives as well as their social and economic responsibilities. Contrary to the belief that women are sexual objects, to be used and discarded by men, the example of Nnakato illustrates how women exercised real power over both women and men. In deciding for Kintu, in whose bed he is to spend a night and what social and economic role the various wives of Kintu must play; it is arguable that Nnakato exercise profound power that contemporary discourses of gender disregard. In another example of contested gender roles, a teenage girl, Zaya, flees her forced marriage to an elderly man, Gitta. In doing so Zaya demonstrates an agency that most discourses of gender ignore. The discourses include the view that young girls forced into marriages are either submissive to male authority or passive victims incapable of self-determination. In fact, her sexual games with Baale further demonstrate her agency in deciding with who she is intimate. Furthermore, Nnabulya, the queen mother, pragmatically chooses which of her sons is to reign as king. Similarly, twenty-first century women characters such as Bweeza and Kusi contest patriarchal edicts. For example, Bweeza installs herself into the elder's council. Kusi joins the rebels when she is only 12 years old, fights through the Ugandan struggle of liberation, and eventually rises through the ranks to become a renowned army commander. The novel concludes with Misirayimu's (Miisi) unprecedent appointment of his daughter Kusi as his heir and a leader of the entire Kintu lineage.

This article seeks to add to the growing scholarship on this great Ugandan novel. I build on and extend the arguments on the gendered stance of the novel by focusing on the central representation of women in Kintu. My focus on women brings to mind Kakoma's (2014) assertion that: "the power and role of the women in Kintu is pleasantly surprising. There is no single woman [...] that does not stand out. The women in this novel stand tall" (p. 2). Kakoma's assertion concurs with Bwa Mwesigire's (2015) comment that "If there is a hero it is the women in the book, a heroine then, or rather many heroines" (p. 39). The two critics I have just cited read Makumbi as a feminist writer whose novel, Kintu, challenges the marginalisation of women and recognises them with agency and social significance.

Nevertheless, this perspective shared by both Kakoma and Bwa Mwesigire contests Makumbi's stance that Kintu is not a feminist novel since five out of the six main characters are men and deals with masculinist oral tradition (Underwood, 2007). I argue that Makumbi's claim seems contradictory because the text is also populated by many strong women characters. Perhaps, it is this contradiction that authorises Kwanya (2017) to argue that "Makumbi take[s] a masculinist approach while at the same time fronting a feminist view with strong female characters" (p. 46). I extend Kwanya's argument by showing that, although Kintu might have a strong cast of male characters, it also has interesting women protagonists. In my view, the novel contests the idea of gender binarism across historical space in the depicted world. Therefore, Makumbi's female characters located in pre-colonial Buganda debunk Uganda gender myths that have been fronted hitherto. Focusing on two female characters, Nnabulya

and Nnanteza, I argue that Makumbi presents to readers powerful women characters whose performance of political roles defies patriarchal practices that elevate the male gender at the expense of the female.

Women's Exercise of Political Power through Ruthlessness

In this section, I explore the representation of how women exercise political power despite patriarchy's apparent disavowal of their agency. I posit that Makumbi's women use their traditional nominal statuses and close proximity to men, whom Buganda patriarchy invests with political power to exercise political power. I argue that Makumbi presents women defying patriarchal subjugation by ruthlessly transforming their nominal status into actual power centres that determine leadership. I base the analysis on one female character, Nnabulya. She is initially a wife to prince Musanje who is gruesomely murdered by his brother, King Kagulu. To protect her life and that of her young children including three sons: Mwanga, Namugala, and Kyabaggu, Nnabulya disappears from the kingdom. She resurfaces during Mawanda's reign when her sons are mature enough to take power. The mother and her sons overthrow Mawanda; the sons become kings in subsequent turns and Nnabulya serves as queen mother during their reigns.

I claim that although Nnabulya assumes a traditional status of queen mother when her sons become kings, their status and hers are primarily derived from her self-willed and determined character, which Kintu defines as "ruthlessly ambitious" (Makumbi, 2014, p.6). For example, Nnabulya decides when and how her sons should assume power. This powerful agency is exposed through the narrator's internal focalisation of Kintu's thoughts that "Nnabulya had sowed yearning for the throne in all three young princes. Kintu saw her hand in the malicious slander questioning Mawanda's royal lineage" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 6). The metaphorical use of the words 'sowed' and 'yearning' highlight Nnabulya's active and deliberate political machination for her children to take over as kings. Nnabulya manipulates essentialised motherly roles when she turns her sons into political instruments for acquiring and maintaining political power. Nnabulya demonstrates what de Certeau (1988) describes as "a way of turning [the system] to [one's] advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first" (p. 30). In line with de Certeau, Nnabulya repurposes her maternal roles and her sons' political status to assert her agency within a male-dominated power structure.

Furthermore, the extract exposes Nnabulya's calculated deployment of defamation as a deliberate strategy to assert her political agency. This is underscored by the phrases "her hand" and "malicious slander", which explicitly suggest Nnabulya's calculated role in the overthrow of Mawanda. The word "slander" points to Nnabulya's subversion of not only Mawanda's character but also his power. The crafted defamation arouses royal paternity prejudice against Mawanda and instils urgency in Nnabulya's sons to overthrow him. By overthrowing Mawanda, they redress a disgrace to the

throne and gain legitimacy with the subjects. In due course, Nnabulya and her sons demonstrate reciprocal roles in the political stratagem, highlighting the necessity of gender cooperation (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 319). Therefore, it is plausible to argue that Nnabulya defies patriarchal inclinations that make a queen mother totally deferential and dependent on the position of a reigning king. The representation of Nnabulya, at this point, reinvigorates the nominal roles of a queen mother. According to Hanson (2009), these roles include checking the king's power and choosing the next king. Makumbi's fictional Nnabulya instils overriding agency, intuition, and craftiness within the roles in Hansonian fashion.

Nnabulya's political emancipation, through the status of a queen mother, can be explained using the matriarchal and African feminist conception of motherhood as a source of empowerment for the mother (see Goettner-Abendroth, 2007; Nnaemeka,1997). This argument of motherhood as a source of empowerment dovetails neatly with the Buganda tradition that assigns a king's children their mother's clan; and explicitly expects the queen mother to rally her clan and others to support her son's ascension to the throne (Adjepong, 2015). It is also important to note that the queen mother is traditionally and ceremonially addressed as *kabaka* (king) (Tripp, 2020). These ritualistic precepts for a queen mother in Buganda tradition are practically transformed through Nnabulya into active political roles. The political power of Nnabulya's sons as kings, especially that of Kyabaggu, is derived from and radiates back to her. This is so because she exercises power in an even more measurable way than her sons since she perpetually retains her political status and influence in each of their successive reigns.

In addition, Nnabulya exercises political power when she practically rules the kingdom during Kyabaggu's frequent absences on his missions of conquest. She effectively preserves the throne for the king, as the narrator observes: "there had been no royal uprising [...]. Potential upstarts, nephews by former kings [...] were firmly in the control of their grandmother, Nnabulya" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 52). While the ironic understatement in the phrase "firmly in the control" suggests Nnabulya's covert but decisive political authority, the terse description of male political contestants as "potential upstarts" underlines her strategic mastery of political manoeuvring. In this ironic contrast, Nnabulya reinscribes her familial roles as a grandmother to exercise political suppression. The contrast not only links authority and decision making to a senior maternal figure (Goettner-Abendroth, 2007), but also discloses a woman's tactical and relational negotiation of patriarchy to wield political influence (Nnaemeka, 2004). Whereas Kemboi (2020) underlines the negative effects of Nnabulya's wielding of power, including disintegration of the royal family, death of incumbent princes, as well as instilling fear in the process of succession to the throne, I contend that Nnabulya is centred and empowered with substantial political authority to contravene patriarchal tendencies of power struggle and domination. Her confident exercise of political power during her son's absence brings to mind the historical exploits of Nakibinge's queen Nannono, possibly before the eighteenth century. It is narrated that Nannono ruled the kingdom for a year and a half as queen regent after Nakibinge's death in battle (Kaggwa

& Kiwanuka, 2021). The historical case of Nannono and the fictional case of Nnabulya embody the societal trust of women's leadership during moments of crisis. Additionally, the same case shows women's exceptional political agency characterised by decisive action and effective leadership. This scenario is underscored by the name Nnabulya from the Luganda phrase *Nnabulya obwami*, loosely translatable as a woman's boastful seizure of political power against patriarchal disavow. The name signals women's intentional agency for political power characterised by the ability to exploit a political vacuum to assert power, gain political trust, and execute political decisions effectively.

At this point, it is plausible to argue that Nnabulya's active involvement in subduing all political adversaries of her sons not only limits the king's absolute authority but also helps her carve out power for herself. Subsequently, her actions reveal the matriarchal principles of shared and balanced leadership between men and women (Goettner-Abendroth, 2007). Contrary to the principle, Kwanya (2017) has argued that:

> Even though Makumbi places women in central roles in the novel, their centrality does not give them any power above the men. They are pawns in the patriarchal power games, which is typical of benevolent sexism. (p.67)

I argue that Kwanya underrates women's exercise of power because it is not moulded on the patriarchal show of domination or, as Newell (1997) puts it of "being conflictual or competing for the same positions of social and political power" (quoted in Udofia, 2012, p. 334). I maintain that Makumbi recognises the possibility of women wielding power alongside men. This is a position that Hanson (2009) and Dipio (2019) refer to as "heterarchy" and the "mutuality" of power, respectively (pp. 180-181; p. 5). For Hanson and Dipio, the two genders have separate but linked roles and spheres of authority. In other words, Makumbi foregrounds a fact earlier delineated by Amadiume (2015) that "men never ruled completely anywhere. The claim of patriarchy remains valid only if what women do in society and culture is denied and they are treated as invisible" (p. 302).

Makumbi further advances the complexity of women's influence and agency for power through Nnabulya's shrewd political manoeuvres. For example, to monopolise the space of the queen mother and the power it enjoins on her, Nnabulya not only vanquishes other princes contending for the throne with her sons but also ruthlessly uses her sons to maintain her power. The omniscient narrator informs us that "Nnabulya who had held rivalling courts during Namugala's reign, had feared that half-brothers would easily depose her weak son and orchestrated the abdication story. In Kyabaggu, Nnabulya had a third chance to be king mother" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 6). The extract reveals Nnabulya as an opportunistic, aggressive, and cunning character who subverts her supposedly nominal position to amass and consolidate power. These traits enable her to use her centre of power to plot and execute the dethronement of her weak son, Namugala, and the enthronement of the powerful son, Kyabaggu. Nnabulya's fabrication of the abdication story is a metaphor of her political machination. Nnabulya's political

machinations resonates with what de Certeau (1988) calls "microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude "tactics" articulated in details of everyday life" (p. xiv). Following de Certeau's argument, Nnabulya's agency emerges from inserting into the male political structure her own tactical narrative that redirects the logic of male leadership into an instrument for her exercise and subsequent consolidation of power.

It is worth noting that the depiction of Nnabulya as an ardent political actor in the fictitious Buganda Kingdom in the novel is emphasised through contradictory yet faithful allusion to some of Buganda's historical facts. Nnabulya's position as prince Musajje's wife and a mother of three kings refers to the historical figure of queen mother Nnabunnya Nnaluggwa (Kaggwa & Kiwanuka, 2021). However, Makumbi exaggerates Nnabulya's shrewdness in the novel by implicitly involving her in Namugala's fearful handover of the throne to his brother. Yet, Nnabulya's narrative evokes a real-life eighteenth-century Buganda queen mother, Nnanteza, who used her power and resources to perpetrate the dethronement of her infamous son, Jjunju, and the enthronement of a popular son, Ssemakokiro (Kaggwa & Kiwanuka, 2021; Hanson, 2002). Although the cause of the dethronement of the two sons by the mothers is different – fictional Namugala's ineptitude and historical Jjunju's brutality – the underlying motive for the two queen mothers is the preservation of their political power as queen mothers. I argue that Makumbi adeptly recreates Buganda historical facts to artistically write the agency and political acumen of the fictional Nnabulya denied to the historical Nnaluggwa. For example, Nnaluggwa's recognition in real Buganda Kingdom's history is brief and limited to mere mention of her being a wife to Prince Musanje and a mother to three kings (Kaggwa & Kiwanuka, 2021). Therefore, by rewriting the historical Nnaluggwa, Makumbi aims, as Nnaemeka (1994) urges, to reinscribe women by foregrounding their often-downplayed political negotiations.

Makumbi's (1994) complex representation of women and their exercise of power in pre-colonial Buganda brings to mind Nnaemeka's appeal to African women writers to reinscribe women on their own terms. This, as Adeniyi (2021) in a different context argues, "affords writers the opportunity to dispel insinuations and negative stereotypes" (p. 89). The essence of Nnaemeka's and Adeniyi's arguments is explicit in the depiction of Nnabulya in the novel. She is represented as a character with a high sense of discernment, foresight, and intelligence that enables her to change leadership roles between her sons (kings) without using violence. In other words, Nnabulya challenges what Kailo (2012) calls the "conquest-oriented logic" (p. 3), that typically characterised changes of leadership by male actors in ancient Buganda Kingdom (Raid, 2004). It may be easy to criticise Nnabulya for discriminating against her weak son. However, it is important to praise Nnabulya's actions as a representation of the difficult decisions a politically oriented woman must make in order to survive intense political pressure. Since "if the Nnamasole outlived her son, her position became very humble and her estates were much reduced" (Schiller, 1990, p. 459), Nnabulya's fear of becoming invisible and powerless consciously inspires and directs her actions in pursuit of power.

The manner in which Nnabulya redefines herself by setting Kyabaggu

against Namugala is interesting because she challenges the patriarchal construct of idealised motherhood – which Rich (2021) and Nnaemeka (1997) call "institutionalised motherhood" (p. 42) and "Sweet mother" (p.146), respectively – in order to act in her own best interests to elevate her life. Nnabulya embraces motherhood as an experience with joys and pains as well as sacrifices and rewards. She synthesises the complex experiences of motherhood to achieve political self-actualisation as a queen mother with formidable power that she wields together with Kyabaggu. In other words, Nnabulya's ruthless actions cultivate an ethos of female agency and subjectivity. Furthermore, Nnabulya's deed of sacrificing the kingship of one son in preference of the other is part of her repertoire of, to use Nnaemeka's (1997) words, "wilful acts of resistance" (p. 11) against relegation into political oblivion in case her feeble son is dethroned by a prince born of another woman.

In addition, Nnabulya asserts and protects her position and power through her right to choose marriage partners for her king son enjoined on the queen mother, mirroring Buganda tradition (Schiller, 1990). This is underlined by Nnanteza's lament to Kintu: "I didn't even get a royal viewing! [...] I didn't make it past the king mother. Nnabulya decides who goes into his presence" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 35). While the hyperbole in "royal viewing" spotlights the supremacy of the king, the situational irony in "I didn't make it past the king mother" foregrounds Nnabulya's overriding mediation of the king's formal authority. Thus, Nnabulya becomes a metaphor of hidden political bureaucracy through which access to formal power is determined. Makumbi uses Nnanteza's emphatic negation "I didn't" to highlight Nnabulya's use of her prerogative to impede Nnanteza's contact with Kyabaggu. Through Nnabulya's actions, female solidarity that is key to African feminists (Mekgwe, 2008) is, to use Nnaemeka's (1997) words, "recast in different, complex, and different way" (p. 1) to weigh female subjectivity for self-fulfilment over female solidarity to serve patriarchy.

Consequently, I perceive Nnabulya's side-lining of Nnanteza as a tactical manoeuvre in de Certeau's (1988) sense. de Certeau argues that a tactic "constitutes the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organised by techniques of sociocultural production" (p. xiv). Nnabulya manipulates the internal decisions of the very system meant to control her. Subsequently, she subverts the repressive patriarchal expectations of a queen mother and consolidates her political power. This contradicts Kwanya's (2017) argument that in deciding wives for their sons, queen mothers "were accomplices in the protection and continuation of the male hegemony" (p. 64). I argue that Nnabulya's actions are not limited to complicity, but reveal her strategic ambivalence to patriarchy. She transforms her complicity with patriarchy into a strategic assertion of agency to safeguard her position of authority. In a hierarchical political context that bestows onto the queen mother powers to influence the king (Sheldon, 2016), Nnabulya perceives the beautiful and intelligent Nnanteza as her contender for Kyabaggu's attention. Nnabulya unprecedentedly uses her position as a queen mother to manipulate the system to her advantage. She upholds her prominent position and power, and destroys her competitors. Here, her agency is both complex

and paradoxical because it is exercised through skilful manipulation of patriarchy rather than outright opposition. This aligns with Nnaemeka's (2004) nego-feminism, which "knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy" to advance women's interests (p. 378).

I argue that Nnabulya dismantles the patriarchal demarcations of political power and leadership as a preserve for men. The strategic manipulations and opportunistic exploitations through which Nnabulya wrests power are contextual logics shaped by the patriarchal power structure in which she operates. Therefore, Nnabulya embodies the ethics of contextual politics and her actions are a response to the gendered constraints of patriarchy. Nnabulya demonstrates how an agentic woman can tactically subvert a complex power structure through personal struggle. She takes the power allowed her as a queen mother by patriarchy to extend and exercise unrestricted power not only for her own advantage but also for the benefit of the entire kingdom. She becomes a prominent player in the deep state of the fictionalised Buganda society recreated in Kintu. In fact, the novel shows how Nnabulya's covert whims and not the overt acts of the kings ensure good governance. Nnabulya contests the folk wisdom as suggested by Ppookino Kintu when he muses that the "the instability of Buganda's throne [was traceable to the actions of] the women" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 6). In other words, the explicit actions of kings in the daily running of the affairs of the kingdom emanate from the implicit desires and decisions of their mothers.

Women's Acquisition of Political Power Through Body Strategies

Let us now turn to how Makumbi depicts women in the fictitious Buganda Kingdom skilfully using their physically sexualised bodies as tools to bargain for and win political power and social status. The discussion focuses on the representation of Nnanteza in Kintu. I argue that Nnanteza's body, which is at first seen as a victim of cultural and patriarchal prospects of imprinted inferiority and discrimination, is used as a bargaining chip in power negotiations with men. In other words, the female body hitherto conceptualised as a tool for men's political manoeuvres is conversely used by a woman as a means to subvert patriarchy and access political power.

Makumbi presents Nnanteza as a beautiful and intelligent young courtesan woman in King Kyabaggu's palace. She is initially brought to the palace by her parents to become one of Kyabaggu's queens. However, the queen mother, Nnabulya, who is traditionally empowered to choose wives for her son, does not even shortlist her among the contestants. Instead, Nnanteza is relegated to a demeaning position of a courtesan girl whose role is to sexually entertain royal guests. But she overcomes the obstacles before her and becomes a queen and later on a queen mother. Therefore, Nnanteza overcomes obstacles against her to access and exercise political power.

My reading of Kintu shows that placing Nnanteza in the demeaning position and identity of a courtesan girl for "casual use of royal guests" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 35), as

the omniscient narrator informs us, may seem like Makumbi frames her as a mere sexual object for erotic gratification of royal guests. While the phrase "casual use" functions as a metaphor for Nnanteza's sexual objectification, its derogatory tone reveals the patriarchal domination and exploitation she is subjected to. In this respect, Nnanteza's identity as a 'palace slut' to royal guests demonstrate, to use Nfah-Abbenyi's (1997) description in another context, the patriarchal power of males to possess and control a woman, her body, and sexuality. Nfah-Abbenyi's argument essentially resonates with the act of assigning Nnanteza to Kintu for sexual gratification upon his arrival at the palace. This case for sexual gratification is further underscored by the question Kyabaggu poses to Kintu: "Did the girl entertain you sufficiently?" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 39). The question aptly speaks to gender relations in two ways. First, it illustrates the callously condescending attitude of men towards women whom they perceive as mere sexual toys for sexual pleasure. Second, it reveals men as dominant and selfish, while women as inferior and self-denying in relation to sex. Nnanteza's instant mechanical conduct of caring for and enticing Kintu accentuates the male sexual chauvinism. She immediately flaunts her seductive body features in Kintu's full view: "a long ringed neck, gapped front upper teeth, dimpled cheeks, large happy eyes, an aubergine skin, a wasp waist, and a firm earthen-pot bottom" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 35). Nevertheless, I argue that the elaborate portrayal of Nnanteza's physical attributes under an objectifying patriarchal gaze redefines women's bodies, in the novel. Additionally, the same portrayal challenges what can be termed as men's narrow perception of women's bodies as mere avenues for marginalisation.

The patriarchal perception is foregrounded through Kintu's attention to Nnanteza's body and movements. The critical third person narrator reveals Kintu's thoughts as he stares at Nnanteza, thus:

> Kintu stole a closer look: she had those rare breasts that are so wide at the base that there was almost no space between them – yet, they don't glut out. Five sons would knock them up and down and those breasts would bounce back, erect, Kintu thought. (Makumbi, 2014, p. 35)

Kintu's gaze objectifies Nnanteza's sexuality. It also concentrates on breasts that symbolise male eroticisation of a female body and its reproductive function, namely, suckling the valued male infants. While women's mothering roles including suckling are highly cherished and respected, it is through such roles that women also accumulate power as some African feminists consistently uphold. Nnaemeka (1997), for instance, observes that mothering roles provide women with a sense of empowerment, purpose, and fulfilment. Nonetheless, one can perceive that women's autonomy and agency as well as political visibility are undermined when women's entire potential and worth are limited to motherly responsibilities in order to uphold patriarchal hegemony.

It is evident that through Nnanteza, Makumbi criticises patriarchal restrictions that confine women to pleasuring men and reproduction. This criticism is illustrated through Nnanteza's attempt at seducing Kintu. The omniscient narrator notes that

when Nnanteza becomes privy to Kintu's admiration of her body, she studies his objectifying gaze and relentlessly prompts him by stealing a disarming smile at him. The omniscient narrator discloses thus: "Nnanteza caught him [Kintu] staring and smiled" (Makumbi,2014, p. 35). I argue that Nnanteza's smile operates as a form of subversive agency that disrupts Kintu's attempt to objectify her. The smile is a means of sly confidence through which Nnanteza overcomes Kintu's patronising and sexualised gazing of her body as a mere object of sexual desire. In other words, the smile challenges the function of the exclusive male gaze as a tool of visual control and sexual domination of women. This reading resonates with Sabala and Gopel's (2010) remark that women can utilise their bodies as a tool to survive a difficult daily life and to develop a sense of identity and recognition. One way to connect Sabala and Gopel's point is that Nnanteza's smile shifts the status quo between her and Kintu, making Kintu the victim and Nnanteza the subject in-charge, who takes pleasure in seeing Kintu dangling on her hook.

Metaphorically, Nnanteza's smile in response to Kintu's intense stare disrupts the power structure between the two, thereby enabling Nnanteza to gain access to political authority. The smile provokes Kintu to speak to Nnanteza on almost equal terms. He testifies to Nnanteza that her superior beauty is beyond casual and ordinary use of chiefs like himself. He asserts: "You know you're not only beautiful, Nnanteza, but you're blazing'/ 'True – you belong in the arms of the kabaka" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 35). He offers to assist Nnanteza access the king as the omniscient narrator reports: "given the chance, he would mention her to Kyabaggu" (p. 36). Kintu's use of an overtly flattering tone and diction in phrases such as "you're blazing" underline his strong admiration for Nnanteza's beauty. In contrast, the verbal irony and self-deprecatory tone when Kintu confesses to Nnanteza: "True – you belong in the arms of the kabaka" spotlights the instrumentalisation of Nnanteza's beauty by aligning it with high political status. Kintu's offer to assist Nnanteza access the king reinforces Kintu's use of Nnanteza's beauty as a tactical vessel for political power. It is credible to argue that Nnanteza's body mediates gender and power dynamics between her and Kintu as, to use Nnaemeka's (2004) argument, a negotiation with a dual nature of "give and take/exchange" (p. 378). For Nnaemeka, negotiation is a process of mutual compromise that benefits all parties involved. Following Nnaemeka's postulation, it can be argued that there is a gendered transaction between Kintu and Nnanteza. Kintu promises to help Nnanteza overcome her social debasement as a courtesan on an implied understanding that when she comes into power as a queen or queen mother, she would return the favour. Here, we see the principle of gender complementarity as advocated for by African feminists in practice (Arndt, 2002). We are presented with a scenario that challenges popular gender stereotypes that propagate gender binarism in which, as Aboh (2018) observes, men are perceived as sole perpetrators of acts of women subordination.

Kintu uses the stunningly beautiful Nnanteza to gain political leverage on two scores. First, to prove his loyalty to Kyabaggu. This is revealed by Kintu's confession before Kyabaggu: "one look at her and I thought, is the kabaka testing

me?" (Makumbi,2014, p. 39). The essence of this utterance is Kintu's recognition that Nnanteza may be a political trap which must be cleverly sidestepped. Therefore, he strategically turns her into his ally to cover up for his abstinence as well as show his allegiance to the king's greatness. Second, Kintu exploits the alliance with Nnanteza as bait for political mileage. Nnanteza transforms into a tool Kintu uses to allay his initial fears about "getting to know Kyabaggu, negotiating his moods and whims" (p. 34). The discussion of Nnanteza during Kintu and Kyabaggu's official meeting serves to augment Kintu's political standing before Kyabaggu in two ways. First, it assuages the king's misgivings about Kintu's allegiance, which is the reason why he wants to put Kintu to the test through Nnanteza. In order to accomplish this, Kintu bluntly informs king Kyabaggu that because of his inferiority to the king's might and majesty, he is undeserving of the magnificent Nnanteza. Otherwise, he would be desecrating Nnanteza's beauty and demeaning the king. Second, the discussion establishes trust between Kintu and Kyabaggu, enabling the two to have productive discussions henceforth.

Furthermore, Kintu wants to use Nnanteza to achieve political posterity for his family. This is illustrated by the omniscient narrator's focalisation of Kintu's thoughts about the possibility of the future political collaboration between his son, the future governor of Buddu, and Nnanteza's sons. This thought is underlined by Kintu's stream of consciousness after his encounter with Kyabaggu, as disclosed by the omniscient narrator: "Kintu was sure that his grovelling had worked" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 40). Thus, the alliance between Kintu and Nnanteza represents a strategic exchange of dominance between the two characters and a means of negotiating political power from Kyabaggu. The encounter also reveals the complex patriarchal use of women to consolidate men's power, which Nnanteza ironically navigates to climb the social ladder and access power for herself.

Therefore, it is important to stress that in order to achieve political position and power, Nnanteza skilfully and ironically takes advantage of Kintu's and Kyabaggu's intention to utilise her body as a tool for their own political benefit. Stated differently, Nnanteza becomes a trickster who, as Nnaemeka (2004) puts it, "know[s] when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (p. 378). For instance, Nnanteza meets the king because of Kintu's reverence of her beautiful body. So, I read Nnanteza's body as, to use Sabala's and Gopel's (2010, p. 50) words, "a resource" for social advancement and self-actualization. At the end of it all, Nnanteza uses her body to subvert patriarchal power, as it is clearly demonstrated through the third person narrator's pictorial description of Nnanteza's facial expressions and manner of walking in response to Kyabaggu's commands as follows:

> Nnanteza cautiously enters the room, moves backward as she faces Kyabaggu. Upon his command, she turns but continues to walk away, visibly trembling. At Kyabaggu's prompting, she turns and kneels in the middle of the room and fixes her gaze on the floor. She briefly holds Kyabaggu's gaze when he orders her to look at him. (Makumbi, 2014, p. 40)

From the vivid description above, Nnanteza's well-calculated body movements not only enhance her beauty, polite character, and good upbringing but they also endearingly disarm and make a profound emotional effect on Kyabaggu. Accordingly, Kyabaggu's brief commands coloured by romantic undertones portray his subdued ego and profound emotional frailty and total absorption in Nnanteza's beauty. This position is further illustrated when Kyabaggu agrees with Kintu's earlier remark that Nnanteza is "luxuriant beauty", as he gasps: "I see what you mean" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 40). I contend that through her tactful body language, Nnanteza overcomes both Nnabulya's malice and Kyabaggu's condescending attitude towards her as a mere sexual object for entertaining royal guests. Nnanteza's body becomes an "enabler of agency and the mediator between the world and the self" (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018, p. 11). I conclude that through Nnanteza, Makumbi fictionally depicts how women can use their bodies and body language to seize their goals from the grip of patriarchy.

It is significant to note that Nnanteza negotiates for political power through purposeful and cunning exploitation of expected norms of femininity. Nnanteza uses the traditional stereotypes that a woman does not look a man in the eye and must generally act shy before a man to downplay Kyabaggu's commands in a way that appears to radicalise her body and will power. Nnanteza's tactics dovetails neatly with de Certeau's (1988) argument that "the users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their own quests [...] while at the same time blinding [their] proprietors to this creativity" (p. xxii)]. de Certeau's claim that ordinary people repurpose norms imposed on them for their benefit is evident in Nnanteza's ability to transform power relations between her and Kyabaggu in her favour. She manipulates Kyabaggu's policing of her body to enact an ironic twist to his character. Despite his aggressive masculinity and authority, he is publicly exposed as desirous and a captive of Nnanteza's arresting beauty. Kyabaggu's tumbling down from his lofty position to Nnanteza's level exemplifies the "blinding" effect of power, which makes him unable to see Nnanteza's subversive tactics. It is plausible to argue that Nnanteza's wilful body actions redefine her physical identity and enable her to gain control over her body. Is she not the winner in this context?

Subsequently, Nnanteza strategically uses her physical body endowments to elevate her status. She accesses Kyabaggu sexually and gains political power as a result, first as a queen and later as a queen mother. Nnanteza's meticulous achievement in the political power game is metaphorically likened to securing a win in an equally mental exacting board game by Kintu. This likening is expressed through a non-restrictive narrator who informs us that "Nnanteza had played her mpiki better than Kintu had hoped. She had found favour with Kyabaggu and so far, she had borne two sons, Jjunju and Ssemakokiro" (Makumbi, 2014, p. 52). Mpiki is Luganda word that denotes beads obtained from a Muyiki tree and used in a board game, mancala (omweso). To Bwa Mwesigire (2015), the word mpiki in the novel is aimed at centring Baganda, Ugandans, Africans, and Black people generally in the novel. However, in my view, the concept and the word mpiki as used in relation to Nnanteza at this point in the novel, highlights the elevation of Nnanteza to powerful political positions of a queen and

queen mother. Tamale's (2005) interpretation of the word mpiki, in another context, is instructive. Tamale argues that the word mpiki is a sexual metaphor which connotes sexual skilfulness. I prefer to use Tamale's nuanced version of mpiki to point to the apparent transformation of women's expected sexual efficiency for men's pleasure and reproduction of male children to strengthen patriarchy into a tool for the reclamation of their agency and political power. In other words, I relate the word mpiki to women's ability to restructure their sexuality and bodies into strategic tools to gain and solidify political position(s). Although mpiki re-echoes the wrestling game in Soyinka's (1963) The Lion and the Jewel and Baroka's conquest of Sidi, I argue that in Kintu it is used as a metaphor for a woman's assumption of political power and position by using her femininity. I argue that Nnanteza reminds us of Besong's (2021) argument that "both genders are human and possess the same human characteristics, strength, and weaknesses" (p. 99).

Conclusion

In the introduction to *The Paradox of Gender*, Lorber (2018) notes that "much of what we take for granted about gender and its causes and effects either does not hold up or can be explained differently" (p. 5). Echoing other gender scholars such as de Bouvier (2023) and Butler (1988), Lorber argues that gender is a performative identity. In other words, people actively construct and express their gender identities through their actions, behaviour, and interactions with others. The critic's perception of gender resonates with my exploration of how the two female characters: Nnabulya and Nnanteza in Makumbi's *Kintu* (2019) claim and assert their agency in the exercise of political power.

In the first part, Nnabulya espouses a callous identity that allows her to convert the queen mother's ceremonial position and authority into an active centre of power. I have argued that through Nnabulya's conformity to Nnaemeka's principle of nego-feminism and Goettner-Abendroth's theorisation of maternal practices as a source of women's political empowerment, she subverts her marginalisation and exerts political influence in a patriarchal society. That is to say, she rules alongside her sons and decides who reigns as king among them through tactical ruthlessness. She practices and preserves her power by refusing to choose a beautiful wife for her son who might rival her status. While this contravenes the African feminist sensibility of female solidarity, it signals her refusal to be defined as a willing participant and perpetrator of patriarchy at her own expense.

In the second section, I have argued that Nnanteza deftly employs her body, after realising its power, to subvert patriarchal patronising sexual objectification of women and to obtain political positions. I have demonstrated that it is in the men's (Kintu and Kyabaggu) attraction by Nnanteza's body and intention to use it to subdue each other's and/or consolidate each of their power, that the author crafts strategies for

a woman to access political power. This crafting aligns with Nnaemeka's (1994) call for the reinscription of women, a call that is fictionally answered through Nnanteza's reimagined and recreated body from being a tool of marginalisation and men's power engraving to an avenue of a woman's self-definition and political advancement. Like Nnabulya, Nnanteza challenges patriarchal expectation of women. The two women characters strategically transform their socially ascribed positions into intersecting forms of subversive power. Both their strategies – Nnabulya's ruthlessness and Nnanteza's calculated use of her body – reveal how women can challenge patriarchal control from within and reconfigure marginality into political advantage, using different means.

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