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## EPOCHAL RELEVANCE OF SELECTED POST MILLENNIAL SHORT STORIES IN EAST AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

Literary writers in Africa have used different genres of art to reflect and critique actions in the society at different points of history. Apart from entertaining and preserving culture, works of art have a role in creating awareness among the audience and proposing action in the society. The pre-colonial, colonial and pre-millennium texts have received significant literary attention with reference to their concerns. Most studies in Africa for example tend to focus on canonical writers and their contributions to the political and economic developments in the society. However, many post millennial short stories have received minimal critical attention. This paper, therefore, examines the socio-cultural and economic resurgence in selected post millennium short stories in East Africa in order to find out the kind of society that upcoming writers are yearning for, thus revealing the major concerns of short stories written in the 21st century. Post-colonial theory guides the analysis done in this paper and helps in demonstrating how the Millennium Development Goals influenced the thematic concerns in the five (5) short stories under discussion, which are all written by emerging post-millennial writers. The paper argues that 21st Century writers are sensitive to issues affecting their society and they, in the process of writing, attempt to propose ways of societal transformation through literature. The paper gives variety and contributes to the existing reservoir of literary analysis in East Africa.

**Keywords:** Epoch, Themes, Post-millennial, MDGs, Resurgence, Short story.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

There is an intricate relationship touching on literature, history and the society. Maina (2018) states that literary texts are created in specific historical epochs which shape them and which they respond and speak to. This study highlights how the period of operation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) shaped the production of literary materials by analyzing five (5) short stories produced after 2000 in East Africa. These stories include: 'Weight of Whispers' (2003) by Yvonne Adhiambo (Kenya) 'When the Sun Goes Down' (2012) by Goro Wa Kamau (Kenya), 'Legal Alien' (2013) by Crystal Rutangye (Uganda), 'The Stone Baby' (2016) by Adelina Mbekomize (Tanzania), and 'Fanta Blackcurrant' (2019) by Onjerika Makena (Kenya).

Despite the fact that the MDGs went defunct in 2015, their relevance is still pertinent in literature because literature and history are intertwined. According to Klimkova (2015), literature is not only a medium that reflects the social reality, but also a creative process conditioned by historical social forces and pressures. The study of MDGs is, therefore, pegged

on the assumption that literature is a historical phenomenon. It is a creative reflection of, and a reaction to, the political, economic and social environments in which it was produced. Different literary elements are shaped with the occurrences within the historical epochs.

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted during a United Nations Conference - the "2000 Millennium Summit" - which took place in New York in 2000. MDGs are international objectives that were agreed upon to foster a commitment to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity. The Declaration resolved to put in place actions that would lead to striking enhancements in the human conditions by 2015. The Eight (8) MDGs became the world's greatest promise to the world's most vulnerable people.

A reading of literary genres from different parts of the world reveals that writers strive to transform their societies through their creative productions. In the works of world renowned writers like Charles Dickens, poets like William Wordsworth and playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, several issues of human reawakening are exposed. For instance, Charles Dickens exposes ills of industrialization in the Victorian era in his works *Christmas Carol*, *Great Expectations* and *Hard Times*. Wordsworth, in his poems, creates an ecological consciousness to protect the natural environment (Zhang, 2017) while Henrik Ibsen in his play, *A Doll's House* reawakens the patriarchal society on gender roles. (Charan, 2020). All the foregoing works depict writers as societal consciences.

Some of the studies done on the world literature, especially the short story genre published before 2000, also highlight areas of resurgence as at that time. For instance, Leo Tolstoy in his three short stories: 'God Sees the Truth but Wait,' 'Three Questions' and 'What Men Live by,' reveals how literature can be used as a tool to achieve social consciousness as these stories depict that the value of human life relies on how much they are aware of their environment and that this awareness is an important component of human survival (Alkayeed, 2019). Kusuma (2019) in her study of J.K Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, demonstrates that literature is an important tool for shaping the psychological and social development of children as it stimulates their imaginations and creates awareness of the world around them. Perumal and Natarajan (2018) posit that the Short stories of Langston Hughes contributed significantly to the resurgence of the black community during the Harlem renaissance; that Langston sounded the wakeup call to the black American society to stand up to the struggle to achieve their much needed freedom and rights.

In the African continent, different genres of literary works (drama, novels, and poems) have also created awareness on different issues in different periods. Odaga (2010) posits that in the pre-colonial Africa, oral literature was used as the main tool for the dissemination and preservation of culture. It was utilized to create awareness among the youths and sensitize them on their responsibility to live a morally upright life for the continuity of the society.

During the colonial period, Europeans subjected Africans to different inhuman acts. According to Nunn (2008), before colonialism, Europeans and Arabs had indulged in slave trade that led to slackening of African unity, cultural bonds and trade. The witnessing of colonial atrocities gave rise to poets and novelists who wrote against the ills of colonization. For instance, Mongo Beti expresses the role of Christian missionaries in paving way for colonialism in his novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* explores how colonialism supplanted African civilizations and Southern Africa poets like Denis Brutus and Agostino

Neto also express their concern on brutality and oppression meted against the colonized people by the colonial powers. In East Africa, Ngugi expresses his dissatisfaction with colonialism. In *Weep not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, for example, Ngugi illuminates the involvement of Africans in the fight against colonialists and the torture that came with it, leading to deaths of people. Ebrahim Hussein in his play, *Kinjeketile (1970)*, reveals the encounter and great conflict between the German colonial administration and natives as the locals struggled to forge a national consciousness.

After independence, many African states faced new ills such as neocolonialism, which brought about frustrations and disillusionment on the hopes that Africans had on their new leaders. Different writers emerged to express their dissatisfaction with the turn of events at independence, thus sensitizing the masses on poor governance and neo-colonialism. In this way, post-colonial writers in Africa took to writing as the best possible tool to express their experiences about independence and the leadership styles that their new leaders adopted. They narrated the state of events immediately after independence and decades later as they underscored their reformist visions for the independent states. For instance, Ousmane Sembene in *God's Bits of the Woods* uncovers the poor working conditions with low salaries in Senegal, West Africa. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe too engages with political betrayal by the very leaders trusted with public resources in Nigeria. In East Africa, Ngugi wa Thiongo in his novel, *Devil on the Cross (1982)* demonstrates the wide rift between the haves and the have nots.

Most literary works produced in the post independent African Nations rallied a revolt that consisted of both the peasants and the proletariats against the middle class, who Frantz Fanon (1952) refers to as petty bourgeoisie. According to Banik (2016), Ngugi's *Petals of Blood (1977)* inspires national consciousness among the peasants. David Mulwa proposes a break of class barriers in the society in his play *Redemption* through Pastor Manela who takes over the leadership of the Church of Old Traditions and brings everybody on board including Kitaka - the outcast and an excommunicated member of the church. To create a new consciousness in the church, Manela outdoes the status quo that Bishop Muthemba had created. His Sermon, "thou shall not kill" (p.67) re-awakens the congregation on the many ways through which the society destroys hopes and lives of their fellow human beings.

Different scholars have examined the socio-political and economic functions of different genres of literature. For instance, in popular fiction, Maina (2018) analyses how two popular fiction novels, *Three Days on the Cross* by Wahome Mutahi and *Black Gold of Chepkube* by Wamugunda Geteria, are based on historical events Kenya. Maina concludes that viewing popular fiction as an inferior piece of art on the perception that it escapes from social and political concerns of the society has no basis. Since popular fiction writes history from the perspective of the masses, Maina opines that there is need to reevaluate attitudes towards popular fiction which often blind readers.

In poetry, Amatashe (1979) explores the social function of poetry in underdeveloped societies of East Africa. His thesis examines poetry by prominent East African poets in order to determine the extent to which they understand various social contradictions in the society. Amatashe argues that poets should not look at form and content as separate entities if they wish to achieve a meaningful communication. This study also strives to explore the extent to which form and content work together to achieve socio-cultural and economic reawakening through short story genre.

In drama, Njugi (2010) examines the cultural celebration in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's plays: *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother Sing To Me*. The study deals with highlighting how the Gikuyu cultural forms are presented in the selected plays and explores the past struggles of the community including the endorsement of freedom fighters and portrayal of land as a show of masculinity which was a core belief of their life. The study comes to a conclusion that the two plays acknowledge some Gikuyu cultural practices while critiquing those that do not fit in the contemporary society. Whereas Njugi's study focuses on drama, this study contributes further on the studies done on social aspects explicated in literature by looking at short story genre which is under studied.

Decades after independence, many African independent states are suffering myriad problems socially, politically, or economically thus, intensifying the need to re-evaluate the state of Africa in this post-independence dispensation. The emerging state of many African countries calls for a review on African socio-cultural issues. In East African context, this urge to re-narrate the state of the nation has produced postmillennial writers like the ones under this study. Their artistic works address issues affecting the society, decades after independence. Most of the studies done on such post millennial literary works concentrate on novels and plays, and thus this paper finds the need to examine these issues from the short story perspective. The paper starts by examining how poverty, ignorance and maternal health are treated as thematic issues in the selected short stories in relation to the millennium development goal 5. The second section explores the relationship between the MDG 6 and the thematic issues addressed in Kamau's 'When The Sun Goes Down.' Basing on the assumption that literature is a historical phenomenon, this examination implies that the short stories selected are therefore, creative reaction to and reflection of the socio-cultural, political and economic environments in which they are produced.

## **2. SIGNIFICANCE OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGS) TO THE EAST AFRICAN SHORT STORY**

About two decades have passed since leaders of the world came together and established goals and targets to help save humanity from hunger, life-threatening poverty, illiteracy and disease. These leaders came up with the Millennium Declaration from where the MDG framework for accountability was derived. The framework has inspired development efforts and helped world nations set global and national priorities.

According to the United Nations Report (2011), there are eight Millennium Development Goals but these goals are no longer operational as they were replaced by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are meant to carry the momentum generated by the MDGs and fit into a global development framework beyond 2015. Despite the MDGs being obsolete, this paper is interested in finding out how much the MDGs influenced the thematic issues of literary materials in East Africa thus demonstrating how literature relies on the epoch within which it is produced. This study focuses only on goal number one, two, five and six, which are classified into the health related MDGs and the Economic related MDGs.

The paper is guided both by the Post-colonial theory Homi Bhabha's strand. The theory helps in highlighting the postmillennial issues in the contemporary society and how they are portrayed in the selected works of art. The paper begins with analyzing how the health related

MDG influenced the themes in the selected short stories, then moves on to analyze how the Economic related MDGs influenced the thematic concerns of the selected stories.

### **2.1 Health Related MDGs and their Influence on the Post Millennial Literature**

Health is one of the factors that determine the stability of a nation. A healthy society is prosperous in many fronts. In order to understand the position of the emerging writers in the health matters of their society, this paper examines the thematic concerns of the selected short stories in relation to the health related MDGs. The focus is directed on three short stories: Mbekomize's 'The Stone Baby,' Onjerika's, 'Fanta Blackcurrant,' and Owuor's 'Weight of Whispers' since they are texts that emerged during the time when the MDGs were operational and their setting is in East Africa; a society that the MDGs are meant to elevate.

Mbekomize in her story 'The Stone Baby,' portrays a society that suffers poverty and ignorance which are issues that have diverse effects on maternal health. The story is set in a post-millennial society at a time when many people still believe on religious dogmas and archaic traditional practices that are detrimental to the reproductive health of mothers. It is during this time that the Millennium Development Goals were operational and attempted to ease the challenges of humanity in the third-world countries. MDGs were designed to find solution to problems related to maternal health and diseases. Some of these issues are treated as themes in the selected short stories; an indication that literature, history and the society are interlinked.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals Report (2015) indicates that cases of Maternal deaths are high in the Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, which together accounted for 87 per cent of such deaths globally in 2008. Southern Asia recorded steady progress in improving maternal health. Between 1990 and 2008, the region had achieved a 53 per cent decline in maternal mortality. In contrary, sub-Saharan Africa recorded 26 per cent decline. The report further indicates that the chances of maternal death increases among women who are poorly educated, have many children, are either very young or very old, and who are subjected to gender discrimination. This observation therefore indicates that factors limiting the achievement of reduced maternal death include but not limited to ignorance, age and gender discrimination.

In 'The Stone Baby' Mbekomize exposes how maternal health is still an issue of concern in the contemporary world. The story demonstrates how many people in the society believe in traditions and religion to cure their reproductive related ailments. The characters in the text are shown to be ignorant of modern ways of curing diseases, and instead, they resort to prayers and private meetings with men of cloth despite the life-threatening nature of their health burden. The narrator, a teenage girl, is suffering from unknown disease which is threatening her reproductive health. All her mother does is to attend to prayers for months and pray feverishly for healing. The reader learns about these prayers through the following quote:

My mama and I have been attending the Saturday prayers for about four months now. From ten in the morning to four in the afternoon we feverishly beseech God for a miracle. And while our mustard seed faith has not driven my sickness away, it's filled us with confidence that the things we pray for shall come to pass. (p.2).

The narrator and her mother believe in divine healing and have so much hope in miracles that they have not gone for any medical checkup, which points to the extent of ignorance evident



in the society where the story is set. The narrator needs proper health care but is blinded by religion which does not reveal the nature of her sickness. During the church service, the narrator gulps draught of air and shouts, “Blood of Jesus, heal me! Heal me! Take this sickness from my body and this darkness from my womb!” (p.2) but the healing does not come forth. After the church services, the narrator and her mother book further appointment with the pastor only to find the room filled to capacity, mostly by barren women who fill pastor’s office in need of prayers and redemption. The women believe that bareness and their reproductive health can be restored through prayers and consider going to the hospital when it is a little too late for cure. Like the proverbial hyena which tried to attend two different feasts at the same time and ended up dying, the narrator’s mother is not sure on what to do. She wants to follow religion, go to the hospital and take traditional remedies at the same time; a concept Bhabha (1990) termed as double vision. The characters want to be part of both cultures; their native culture and the new cultures thus find themselves in a conflict interest. The study argues that since this story emerged at a time when the world was in a campaign to end ignorance and improve maternal health, it captured issues that ail the society as elucidated in the Millennium Development Goals. The authors are therefore considered to be sensitive of issues that bedevil the society they live in.

Poverty is another theme in the selected short stories that we can argue has been adopted from the MDGs based on the setting of the stories. In Onjerika’s ‘Fanta Blackcurrant,’ poverty is treated as the main issue contributing to poor maternal health which is a setback to socio-cultural and economic resurgence. According to Kenya Millennium Development Goals Status Report (2011), the rising cost of living resulting from the high fuel and food prices has negatively affected the individual’s ability to cover medical expenses. Mothers would rather spend the money on food than spend it on health related needs. This is likely to contribute negatively to utilization of maternal health services. Onjerika seems to pick the strand of narration in, ‘Fanta Blackcurrant’, which demonstrates how poverty leads young girls into early/pre-marital sex which may in turn endanger their lives. In this story, Meri, a street girl, together with other girls suffer many challenges and lack basic needs in a harsh slum environment where they live. They grow up in very hostile conditions and are begging to survive. Things toughen as they grow up into mature ladies and they have to find ways to adapt to the changes:

Days followed days and years followed years. But no one came to save Meri. We finished being totos and blood started coming out between our legs. And Meri, from staying in the sun every day, she changed from colour brown to colour black just like us. Jiggers entered her toes. Her teeth came out leaving ten spaces in her mouth. Breathing glue, she forgot her father’s name and her mother’s name. (p.2)

According to Diaw (2005) “As literary works are rooted, to a large extent, in a precise setting, at a given time, literary critics tend to take into consideration the space, the time, the political, cultural, social and economic background of any work of art to better interpret it.” (p.17). the story captures the struggles of street girls in the society at a time when the MDGs are operational thus showing how literature connects to the society and the notable occurrences. The young girls, do not feel anything wrong with their begging for survival. From desperations, police brutality and killings they face, they pray and hope someone may come and save them from all the suffering someday but they are wrong. They become adolescents and their suffering worsen. The stage comes with more responsibilities and need for much better

nutrition which the street family do not get. Life's challenges and frustrations push the teenage girls into prostitution. They become too shy to continue begging on the street, life becomes tougher and tougher but they cannot go on begging for money as they did when they were young. The narrator recounts:

All of us were now big mamas. When we prayed people for money in the streets, they looked how we had big *matiti* hanging on our chests like ripe mangoes. We felt shame because they were seeing we were useless. In the end, all of us stopped praying people in the streets, even Meri. She followed us at night when we went to see the Watchman at the bank (p.3)

The social status of the street girls has changed but their economic level cannot cater for their needs. According to the societal constructs, at their age, they are too big to beg on the streets, they should find something to do with their lives. Begging is left for lazy people. With no education, they cannot land any good job so the adolescent girls end up in prostitution which exposes them to more challenges like early pregnancy. Meri becomes pregnant at an age that she is unable to take care of herself and the developing baby. In as much as the fellow street girls try to support her both morally and financially, they get tired and advise her to try prostitution in her pregnant state. Through this episode, Onjerika highlights the risky sexual behavior that the poor girls engage in while trying to make a living. With no roof over her head and poor diet, Meri gets more addicted to drugs to an extent of failing to remember her parents' names and who made her pregnant. The story thus shades some light on the need to eradicate poverty as one of the main goals of the MDGs that still lower the living standards of the society.

Considering the advice from her fellow girls, Meri tries her luck in prostitution again but no man is interested in sponsoring a pregnant lady. No help comes her way, any attempt to beg for food in her pregnant state earns her no mercy. While some people close their doors on seeing her, others look and walk away when she stretches hands to beg. Being unable to handle all the suffering brought by poverty, Meri resorts to theft. She steals and forces money out of people through dubious ways; an act that sends other criminals into envy, they beat her to near-death leading to the loss of her child. Onjerika uses this short story to highlight the challenges faced by the town dwellers in the post-colonial state where everyone sings civilization. Since poverty is one of the challenges that the MDGs is out to decimate, the short story becomes a better avenue to direct the audience towards achieving a society with zero or minimal poverty cases. One can argue that poverty and maternal health are thematic concerns treated in Onjerika's 'Fanta Blackcurrant' that must have been influenced by Millennium development goal 5. The short story thus sensitizes the readers that in order to achieve socio-cultural and economic resurgence, maternal health can be improved by eliminating poverty.

The Millennium Development Goals Report (2011) indicates that the world's population estimates that about 300 million women are age 15 to 19 with sub-Saharan Africa and the least developed countries expecting the fastest growth rate overall. As the number of women of reproductive age in developing regions continues to rise, increasing by nearly 50 per cent since 1990, family planning programmes and healthcare services are scant. There is need to invest more on contraceptives and better healthcare services to help keep pace with the growing number of women wishing to use contraception.

The report further indicates that in sub-Saharan Africa, the use of contraceptives among adolescents is significantly lower than that of all women of reproductive age. Thus, the percentage of adolescents who have the demand for contraceptive is high but their satisfaction is much lower than that of all women aged 15 to 49. It is therefore evident that the scant progress in improving access to reproductive health care for adolescents puts them to risks of maternal deaths. Short story genre, becomes a conduit that disseminates the challenges facing the society to the wider audience that consumes them. The selected short stories have captured such challenges as espoused in the MDGs as discussed herein.

Muindu (2006, p. 18), states that the setting of a text has overriding significance in the analysis of the text because it brings out the societal realities of the text. Fanta Blackcurrant having been set in the post-colonial society captures issues affecting the society in the post-millennial era thus getting influence from the MDGs. In 'Fanta Blackcurrant,' Onjerika points out how the teenage girls living in poverty and slum areas are at risk of endangering their lives due to their inability to access the contraceptives they may need. Not only does the teenagers lack access to the contraceptives but they also lack knowledge on their proper use. Meri, after becoming pregnant with unidentified father contemplates abortion but has no knowledge on how it can be done. Together with her friends they seek help from a watchman – unskilled person – who chases them away and calls them devils. After failing to get help from various people, they resort to very dangerous methods of family planning which can lead them to excessive bleeding and eventually death. The narrator says:

All of us felt mercy for Meri. Maybe one time after a customer finished, she had forgotten to wash herself down there with salt water. Some of us said we knew a way to remove the toto using wires; some of us knew a way using leaves from a tree in Jevanjee gardens; some of us started crying, fearing even us we had a toto inside our stomachs (p.1).

The use of these uncertified methods of procuring abortion leads young and poor mothers to their early grave. Poverty and ignorance, superstition, and religion are some of the themes covered in the selected stories that must have had their root in the millennium development goal. The selected authors identify the challenges affecting their community and sensitize the readers about them with the aim of achieving socio-cultural and economic resurgence.

HIV/AIDs is an issue that Goro Wa Kamau adopted from the Millennium Development Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDs, Malaria and other diseases. Many nations have suffered the ravaging effect of HIV/AIDs. According to the World Bank's Global Monitoring Report (2007), about 39.5 million people world over were living with HIV by end-2006, and an estimate of three million people had died from AIDS. According to the Millennium Development Goal Report (2015), new HIV infections are on a steady decline with the sub-Saharan Africa leading in the fight. People receiving antiretroviral therapy for HIV or AIDS has increased in number considerably from 2004 to 2009. By the end of 2009, about 5.25 million people were on ARV treatment in the low - and middle- income countries. Consequently, over the same period, the number of AIDS-related deaths dropped by 19 per cent.

Basing on the statistics given on the MDG report (2015), Many nations strived to achieve the millennium development goal of combating HIV/AIDs, Malaria and other diseases, whereby improved health care services and changed behavior among the masses contribute largely in



combating the spread of the disease. The report also shows that a number of people have accepted to take HIV tests, accept their status and live a responsible lifestyle. Even though there are other challenges hindering its achievement. Notable strides have been made to free the world of this menace.

‘When the Sun Goes Down’ depicts a society that is struggling to live with HIV/AIDs by taking appropriate measures to curb related deaths and minimize new infections. The story highlights how stigmatization affects HIV patients in the post millennial East Africa. The characters in the story depict a people aware of what they are facing and their responsibility to take ARV thus preventing mother to child transmission too. The story thus sensitizes the society that HIV/AIDS stigmatization is a threat to socio-cultural and economic development and should be eliminated, borrowing largely from the MDGs which are aiming to reduce HIV/AIDs related deaths.

Kamau uses ‘When The Sun Goes Down,’ to highlight the strides made in the post millennial Africa to curb the spread of HIV/AIDs. Steve and Maureen are taking ARVs after Maureen is infected by her first husband then she infects Steve. Because of guilt, Maureen stops observing the diet and taking her drugs all together and she dies. On the other hand, Steve has accepted his status and takes ARVs therefore lives on to take care of his son.

The short story shows that in as much as people still die of AIDs, the number of deaths have greatly reduced. Steve and his family however become the “demonic other” (Bhabha 1990); friends disappear from them despite his wealth status. His family is alienated because of AIDs but he remains strong and steadfast to beat the disease and stigmatization. Steve represents the world’s population that has come to terms with the reality of AIDS and are in need of ARVs. Such people have accepted to live on drugs and proper diet hence portraying the extent to which the author of the text is on a mission to rid the society of this menace so does the MDG 6 hence the relationship between the society, MDGs and literature. Steve does not care how many friends he loses but ready to go it alone despite the loneliness.

Despite being HIV – positive, Steve is optimistic that the coming generation will be free from this epidemic – HIV/AIDs. Goro Wa Kamau’s short story, ‘When the Sun Goes Down’ therefore highlights themes of HIV/AIDs, its transmission, stigmatization and how to live with it responsibly. The story thus sensitizes the society on the measures to take in order to reduce the effects of HIV/AIDs on socio-cultural and economic development thus responding to the issues of concern as highlighted in the MDGs. After Maurine’s burial, Steve walks away currying his son Kimotho who waves to the backbiting crowd. The waving can be interpreted as a walk from the dark painful era of HIV/AIDs and stigmatization to a world free from the disease.

## **2.2 Economic Related MDGs and Post-Millennial Literature**

The economic status of a community determines its wellbeing. Poverty and ignorance are some of the indicators of a good or poor economy. Some of the themes adopted from the MDG 1 and 2 are violence, plight of the refugees, poverty, extreme hunger, corruption and education. This section interrogates the extent to which the selected short stories responded to the issues in the writers’ locality in the 21<sup>st</sup> C and how much the writers strive to achieve the socio-cultural and economic betterment.

Extreme poverty and hunger have been major issues of concern in African continent for long and the selected short stories are not left behind in highlighting them. Ngugi (1972) opines that literature cannot be separated from socio-historical processes therefore, a writer's work cannot be divorced from the history of their society. The selected short stories were written at a point of history when the MDGs were operational hence the need to examine the extent to which the stories under study incorporated their issues of concern.

Millennium Development Goal 1 (Eradicate extreme Poverty and Hunger) had a target of halving, the percentage of people whose income is less than one dollar a day by 2015, and halve the number of people who suffer from hunger, between 1990 and 2015. The United Nations Millennium Development Goal Report (2015) states that however much the nation has recorded significant progress in the achievement of the MDGs, there is general consensus that poverty remains a major challenge for Africa even after 2015. 'Weight of Whispers,' captures the theme of conflict as hindrance to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger thus not only shows the link between the short story and the MDGs but also sensitizes the society on the path to its betterment.

Owuor in her short story, 'Weight of Whispers,' captures the plight of refugees, both within the borders of their countries and in their host countries. She exposes how violence send refugees out of their nations and how corruption exposes them to extreme poverty and hunger. The narrator, Kuseremane, flees Rwanda together with his family after the outbreak of violence and seek refuge in Kenya with an aim of flying to Europe where they would stay until normalcy returns in their country. While in Kenya, things take a negative turn, as they are faced with a corrupt system that drains money out of them. The quote below is an evidence of a corrupt system forcing the asylum seekers into untold poverty:

"Aya! Toa kitu kidogo". I did not understand the code. Something small, what could it be? A cigarette. One each. It was a chilly evening. The cigarettes were slapped out of my hand. I placed my hand up and the second policeman said: "Resisting arrest" (p.23)

Failing to offer bribe to the police officers, Kuseremane is manhandled and arrested for being and 'illegal alien' in a country that is supposed to offer refuge to him and his family. It thus demonstrates that corruption is among the threats of achieving MDG 1. He decides to use the little amount he has bribing the police and end up with no food to feed his own family.

The narrative demonstrates how the 1994 Rwandan genocide left several families displaced and many others killed or disintegrated. The tribal clash between the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda led to loss of lives, separation and displacement of people. It left Rwandan and the East African economy shattered. The story thus portrays how conflict contributes to the high poverty rates in the Sub-Saharan Africa just as highlighted in the MDG 1.

Kuseremane and his family run out of money and their friends abandon them. The one-time diplomat with apartment in Paris, loses everything to war: his job, his bank account details, his academic papers and all his savings: "The bank? Burned down. The money? Missing from the safes. And once, the sound of a name accused, accursed." (p.36). As their poverty levels escalate; the family sneaks out of Hilton hotel in Nairobi without paying so that they can

acquire a cheaper house at River Road. With a family to feed, Kuseremane ends up selling his valuables to make ends meet.

After trying all that is possible to make ends meet, Kuseremane decides to seek asylum at UNHCR in Nairobi. He and his family become part of the statistics of people living with poverty and hunger. The author, carefully settles on her settings to advance her thematic concerns. Moreover, Nairobi being at the centre of the UNHCR operations, Owuor has made a deliberate attempt to represent actual conditions of the refugees and the victims of war and their hunger stricken status. For instance, locating Kuseremane and his family in Nairobi and the harsh realities of life they face act as a hint towards making the reader desire to identify with her tribulations and the consequences of their choices. The readers get to learn the poverty level of these refugees and their inability to fit into their host nations both socially and economically. The challenges they face hinder the achievement of the MDGs as Kuseremane, the protagonist, states:

We woke up early, Agnethe, Chi-Chi, Lune and I. walked to Westlands, forty-five minutes walk away from our room just before River Road. We reached the gates of the UNHCR bureau at 10:00 a.m. We were much too late because the lists of those who would be allowed entry that day had been compiled. The rest of us would have to return the next day. We did, at 7:00 a.m. We were still too late because the lists of those who would be allowed entry had already been compiled. We returned at 4:00 a.m. But at 2:00 p.m. we discovered we were too late because the lists of those who would be allowed in had already been compiled. I decided to ask the guard at the gate, with long, black hair and an earring, a genuine sapphire (p.22).

The occurrences at the UNHCR are suspicious because however early Kuseremane and his family arrive they never make it to the list. They become victims of the corrupt systems in Kenya because in order to appear in the list one had to speak to the registration officers. Life becomes a double tragedy for the Kuseremenes because despite their poverty level, the corrupt officials still extort money from them so that the family can be registered as refugees. Such incidences demonstrate that the short story writer in East Africa is keen about the occurrences that take place in the society. Housing of refugees is a common occurrence in the Kenyan nation and the writer uses fiction to take the reader into the corruption that takes place even in the refugee camps where ironically run-aways are mistreated instead of being assisted. It can be deciphered that corruption is one of the issues that hinder the achievement of the MDGs since the society is not keen on carrying out its activities within the desired integrity.

On eradication of hunger, projections for the 2014–2016 period indicate a 23 per cent undernourishment rate in sub-Saharan Africa (MDG Report, 2011). In as much as the hunger rate has fallen, the number of undernourished people has risen by 44 million since 1990, in line with high population growth rate in the region. The situation varies widely across the sub regions. The number of undernourished people in East Africa has doubled since 1990. The short story, 'Weight of Whispers,' shows that wars and clashes in the society are major contributors of hunger cases in African states. The displaced war victims are subjected to cruel conditions that they cannot get enough to eat. From the story the reader gets to learn the how hunger is biting on the refugees and the internally displaced:

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I slept so deeply that when I woke up I thought I was at home in my bed and for a full minute I wondered why Roger had not come in with fresh orange juice, eggs and bacon, croissants and coffee. I wondered why mama was staring down at me, hands folded. Lune looks as if she has been crying. Her eyes are red rimmed. She has become thin, the bones of her neck jut out. Her fingers are no longer manicured. There! Chi-Chi. Her face has disappeared into her eyes which are large and black and deep. I look back at Agnethe-mama and see then that her entire hair front is grey. When did this happen? (p.18)

The royal family has been reduced to beggars and hunger stricken refugees due to wars. Mr. Kuseremane is nostalgic of the delicacies he could enjoy at the comfort of his bed which he no longer enjoys. He and his family are forced to feed on cold maize mixed with beans which is far from satisfying them. His account is drained that he has no money to feed his family on a proper diet. He is forced to feed on foreign meal; a misfortune that faces the asylum seekers and the writers of the selected short stories are keen enough to capture such. Owuor has therefore demonstrated to the reader the type of society they live in where the refugees are hunger stricken because of mistakes that can be avoided.

Education is another issue of concern that the selected short stories share with the MDGs. Millennium Development Goal 2 (Achieve Universal Primary Education) intended to improve the enrolment of children to school by 2015. Rutangye too, in her short story, 'Legal Alien' treats education as a theme and demonstrates the kind of education that is good for African children that can ensure proper growth and development.

Since the inception of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the rate of primary school net enrolment rose to 91 per cent in 2015 in the developing regions; a rise from 83 per cent in 2000 (MDG Report, 2015). The number of children of primary school age out-of-school has fallen by almost half globally. By 2015, the number was estimated at 57 million; a fall from 100 million in 2000. According to the report, Sub-Saharan Africa recorded the highest improvement in primary education worldwide.

Taking a look into East African literary field, Crystal Rutangye appears to have captured the events surrounding the enrolment of students in primary schools in East Africa in her short story, 'Legal Alien.' The narrator, a grade two pupil, enrolls in Nakasero Primary school in Kampala, Uganda only to realize that the school is over packed. Comparing it with his class in Australia, she finds it a bit strange for a school to be that big. The narrator states:

The school was so big. The road from the main gate led up to a roundabout. On the left side of the road was the lower primary section, made of primary one and two (referred to as P.1 and P.2). The rest of the school was on the right side of the road. This included the school kitchen, administrative offices, main hall and staff room. Each class had five streams; N, P, S, K and U, derived from N-akasero P-rimary S-school K-ampala U-ganda. When daddy and I had reported to the headmaster's office that morning, the headmaster asked which colour I liked best among yellow, blue, red, green and white. "Green", I had said, because I was in green house in my school in Australia. So he allocated me to P.3K because all the K classes were in the green building of Eland house. Whoever designed the school was very organized, because each block of classes had five classrooms for the five streams.

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And the classes were huge; accommodating over a hundred pupils per stream (p.27).

The narrator joining a new school opens a new avenue for learning. She gets to learn a lot more than the book knowledge could offer. Other than acquiring new language that is Luganda, she learns a new culture that brings her back to her roots. Through education she gets to socialize with a lot of new things that she might not have acquired if she remained in Australia. The contrast between Australian schools and Ugandan schools, is an evidence of improved enrollment in the East African schools in the fight to achieve the MDGs. The post millennial East African writers are therefore in touch with their surrounding and report what affected the society during their historical epochs.

In as much as a Sub-Saharan Africa has made considerable progress in expanding primary education enrolment since 1990, mostly since the adoption of the MDGs in 2000, some developing countries still have many children of primary education age that do not attend school, and another good number of children who begin primary school but do not complete it. In the short story, 'Legal Alien,' Rutangye identifies some of the supposed causes of school drop out in the East African schools. The narrator finds her new school hostile and takes long to acclimatize. The English teacher is harsh and insensitive to the narrator, and at one point slaps her for not doing homework- work that was given before she joined the school. The narrator recounts:

I thought I would find peace in Uganda like he said, but instead, the English teacher had just slapped me. I tried hard not to pee in my pants in terror of it all. I resolved never to come back to school again. But then, as soon as the teacher ended her class, the children sitting around me started saying sorry and offering me sweets and telling me how I'd get used to the beatings and all. Suddenly, I was making friends. The children were no longer scared of talking to me. This began my orientation into my country, Uganda. (p.29)

Peaceful and conducive environment is one of the factors necessary for a good learning environment. Hostile environment in schools deprives the learners free environment to learn and socialize thus the narrator feels displaced when she realizes that teachers in Uganda beat learners. Such hostility drive most of the learners away from school thus limiting the success of MDG 2.

Rutangye further identifies other challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa, and hindering its progress in achieving the universal enrolment. One major challenge she identifies is the political instability, which is shown through numerous demonstrations against the sitting president. Everyone is on strike because of one reason or the other. There is a walk to work demonstration that leaves almost everything at a standstill. Because of unfavourable political environment, education sector is affected in that students do not get to stay in school for the stipulated time. Most of their time is wasted by the strikes. Some pupils also get injured during the demonstrations. As the report further indicates that Sub-Saharan Africa faces overwhelming challenges including high levels of poverty, rapid growth of the primary-school-age population (which has increased 86 per cent between 1990 and 2015), armed conflicts and other emergencies, so does Rutangye highlight how political instability affects education in the East African nations. 'Legal Alien' shows that political instability is one of the threats to poor



enrolment in schools because it hinders smooth travels of students to school and at the same time encourages teachers' strike; lack of teachers in school means paralyzed education.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates that, like any other genre of literature, the short story is fashioned from the society and produced within a social environment and a historical period. It further proves that literature does not only reflect the experiences of the society but also seeks to influence the same society towards its betterment. The paper has majored on demonstrating how the Millennium Development Goals shape the production of literature in the post millennium era and how the authors utilize the short stories to demonstrate the need to transform the society to better.

On health related MDGs and the short stories, Mbekomize in 'The Stone Baby,' demonstrates how religion, superstition and ignorance affects maternal health and sensitizes the society on the need to improve maternal health as highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals. 'The Stone Baby' and 'Fanta blackcurrant' therefore borrows from Millennium Development Goal 5: Improving Maternal Health by highlighting the possible challenges in meeting the goal like hunger and ignorance. It is thus, evident that societal occurrences influence literary texts and therefore a proof that literature, history and society are connected. Most of the themes captured in the post millennial short stories have their roots in the MDGs. In 'When the Sun Goes Down,' Goro wa Kamau highlights themes of HIV/AIDs, stigmatization that comes with it and how the East African nations have adapted to the situation.

Owuor in 'Weight of Whispers,' displays the influence of the MDGs on the thematic concerns of the story by highlighting themes of poverty, hunger, corruption, violence and the plight of refugees. The story, 'Weight of Whispers' is therefore used as an avenue to portray how civil wars affect the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 1: Eradicate extreme Poverty and Hunger which is among the major challenges on societal development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Literature therefore proves to be a tool for guiding the society towards identifying its shortcomings.

In 'Legal Alien,' set in 2011 it is evident that Millennium Development Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education influenced the thematic concerns in the post-millennial texts. The discussion in this chapter thus maintains that the short stories under study borrows from the MDGs and seeks to address the societal issues affecting socio-cultural and economic development during their historical epoch. It concludes that the MDGs influenced the thematic issues in the East African Short story form showing that the post-millennial short story writers are not blind to the occurrences in their immediate society.

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