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Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Kimenye's Moses Series and Implications on Societal Understanding of Pleasure, Neglect and the Child Reader: A Transnational Re-reading of Barbara Kimenye's Moses Series

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Abstract

The exclusion of Barbara Kimenye's Moses series from the Uganda Syllabi is striking, given its proven capacity to elicit laughter and sustained readership. Ugandan classrooms, however, continue to privilege didactic utility over aesthetic pleasure, framing literacy as preparation for examination. This orientation shifts attention away from texts that encode local experiences of corruption and gender stereotyping and contradiction through humour, so Kimenye's work is received for linguistic flair rather than critical potential. Juxtaposing Ugandan curricular documents with American Young Adult teaching notes, this article argues that the divergence underscores competing epistemologies of literacy. In Uganda, reading remains tethered to moral instruction and assessment metrics; in American classrooms, the same texts cultivate voice, timing, and reading for pleasure. We suggest that reclaiming Kimenye is therefore not merely canon recovery but a pedagogical intervention that repositions Ugandan learners as readers first, not test-takers, and fosters critical, pleasure-driven literacy that persists beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Reading for pleasure, Young Adult Literature; Transnationalism; Ugandan Literature; Gender stereotypes; Literacy pedagogy

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Introduction

The Moses books by Barbara Kimenye, long popular with young readers in Uganda, deserve more exposure outside their country. Published from 1968 to 1998, these 15 novels depict Moses and his friends and their struggles at boarding school. We argue that Kimenye flouted Ugandan expectations of the time—that books for the young should be didactic—and that her position is significant. We also argue that although Kimenye uses the familiar tradition of the school story, she moves beyond that tradition to challenge outdated attitudes and expose some of the corrupt practices of her time.

The wide variety of literature series has come into greater focus in the half-century since Cawelty, Radner, and others drew long-overdue critical attention to popular fiction. The importance of series fiction for young readers is now well accepted, starting from the Stratemeyer Syndicate and moving toward (but not ending with) modern-day television, film, and online series. Outside of the United States and Great Britain, however, literature series seems to have received less attention than it deserves from scholars of children's and Young Adult literature. One series that deserves a closer look is the Moses books, by Barbara Kimenye, whose popular Moses series offers much to readers across the globe.

Begun in the tumultuous post-independence period and continuing for over thirty years, these books drew many young readers into reading for pleasure—a goal that may seem obvious from a twenty-first-century Western point of view but that was, we suggest, not always the accepted attitude among Ugandan educators and scholars. We also argue for the importance of Kimenye's careful selection of topics in the Moses books—quite different from many of her other works, even those for children. Gender stereotypes and pervasive corruption are two such topics that we explore.

Kimenye's Background

Since many readers have never encountered Kimenye, some background is in order. (Noting that nearly all accounts of her life are identical and often verbatim, especially online, we lead off with an African reference work.) considered to be the grandmother of literature for young readers in Uganda (Gates, Akyeampong, & Niven, 2012) Kimenye is one of the very few writers in the mid and late 1960s who wrote for and about young adults as her target audience during the cultural, social and political upheavals experienced during the colonial and early independence periods.

Kimenye considered herself Ugandan, and she is regarded as her adopted country's most prolific children's and young adults' Anglophone writer. Born of a Jewish mother and a West Indian father in West Yorkshire in 1929, she studied nursing in London and subsequently migrated to Uganda in the late 1950s with her two children. (Her marriage to a Tanganyikan broke up before the birth of her second child.) Appointed as Secretary by the King of the Buganda Kingdom, Kabaka Edward

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Muteesa, she became the first female journalist in Uganda's then national newspaper, *The Uganda Argus*. In 1965, she moved to Nairobi and worked with *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard* Newspapers. After ten years in Kenya, Kimenye returned to Britain with her two sons. There, she supported groups from Uganda that sought asylum from the tyrannies of the Amin and Obote regimes (Fogarty, 2005). After Yoweri Museveni became President in 1986, Kimenye returned to Uganda from England "to help in the reconstruction of the country from the political and social upheavals" (Akyeampong, Gates, & Niven, 2012). In 1989, she went again to Kenya, then back to England in 1998, dying there in August 2012.

Throughout these migrations, Kimenye wrote a variety of short stories and books, of which the series we are examining has proved the most successful. The Moses books portray young adults in an African setting: Moses Kibaya (Holy Moses), his friend Sebastian Mlutu (King Kong) and other characters, nearly all male. The only exceptions are a few teachers and a single female student, whose role we will explore. In her non-series works, Kimenye broaches the subject of sexuality in young adults and addresses concerns that were normally frowned upon in Ugandan culture, such as same-sex identified human beings and sex between close relatives; these topics, however, do not play a part in the Moses books. The series contains 15 titles published over 33 years: *Moses* (1967), *Moses and Mildred* (1967), *Moses and the Kidnappers* (1968), *Moses in Trouble* (1970), *Moses in a Muddle* (1970), *Moses and the Ghost* (1971), *Moses on the Move* (1972), *Moses the Camper* (1973), *Moses and the Penpal* (1973), *Moses and the Raffle* (1986), *Moses and the School Farm* (1987), *Moses in a Mess* (1991), *Moses and the Movie* (1996), *Moses and the Man from Mars* (1997), and *Moses and the Gunman* (1999).

Statement of the Problem

The continued exclusion of Barbara Kimenye's Series from Ugandan syllabi underscores a deeper curricular tension. Ugandan classrooms privilege didactic utility over aesthetic pleasure, so literacy is framed as preparation for examinations rather than engagement with text. This orientation shifts attention away from narratives that encode local experiences of corruption and contradiction through humour. Kimenye's work is therefore received for linguistic flair and vocabulary, not for its critical potential to reposition learners as readers. The result is pedagogical. Pupils encounter texts that meet assessment metrics but fail to cultivate reading for pleasure. Juxtaposing Ugandan curricular documents with American Young Adult teaching notes reveals competing epistemologies of literacy. In Uganda, reading remains tethered to moral instruction and examination requirements. Elsewhere, the same texts cultivate voice, timing and sustained readership. We suggest that this divergence constitutes the core problem. When schools omit culturally proximate literature that elicits laughter and voluntary reading, they limit literacy to credentialing. Critical, pleasure-driven reading that persists beyond the classroom becomes difficult to foster.

Imagination, Response and Narrative Skill

Kimenye depicts her young adult characters almost entirely within a school environment and tackles issues related to young adults of school age, exploring secondary school behaviour, routines, and etiquette. She engages the boys (and, exceptionally, a girl) in power struggles: fights to attain autonomy in general, struggles against school authorities, and fights against parents and guardians. If it is true that "[v]irtually every adolescent novel assesses some aspect of the interaction between the individual adolescent and the institutions that shape her or him" as Trites (1998, p. 23) observes, the Moses' books sharply foreground this

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interaction. Elsewhere, Trites comments that “[t]he concept of school as a social institution is omnipresent in adolescent literature,” and here again the Moses books excel. In the direct line of such institutions as Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Kimenye offers Mukibi's Educational Institute for the Sons of African Gentlemen (known to its “inmates” as MEISAG).

All through the series, Kimenye portrays young adults trying to grow up and survive in a school setting under the strict rules of administrators, away from their equally authoritarian parents or guardians. The challenges they encounter and the lessons they learn are Kimenye's demonstration of what Trites. (2001, p. 473) refers to as “[growth] in adolescent literature which is inevitably depicted as a function of what the adolescent has learned about how society curtails the individual's power.” According to Trites, “the adolescent cannot grow without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness.” Kimenye's young adults in the Moses Series are constantly seen negotiating for power at school. They are surrounded by administrators at all levels: the proprietor of the school, Mr Karanja, the Deputy Headmaster, other teachers, the prefects and the gang leaders who are the background group characters that illuminate the actions of Moses and King Kong as introduced in the first of the series, *Moses* (1967).

Lessons about the realities of power, however, were not what many Ugandan scholars and educators had in mind as ideal lessons for the young. Nancy Schmidt comments:

The restricted settings of Kimenye's novels prevent them from having a strong didactic function. Even though Kimenye's novels are used as supplementary school readers, their function is more to make reading interesting than to teach truths about African life (Schmidt, 1976).

This critique shows one way in which YA literature was (and is) often marginalised by critics who would rather have it perform a particular function rather than simply further the enjoyment of reading. This point of view, all too familiar to YA scholars worldwide, seems to have taken on remarkable power in Uganda. Somewhat surprisingly, the expectation that YA books should serve a didactic purpose is echoed by Mushengyezi (2019), who, in an interview with “Author A”, had this to say:

Literature has a dual function: first, education, and second, learning informally or informally. Literature for young people must have a direct relationship with the educational goals of a society. [This means that] if in Uganda we say we have a thematic curriculum in primary schools, which has both mother tongue focus from P.1 to P. 3. (Primary One to Three) and English medium focus from P4. (Primary Four) Onwards, that is a goal whose books have to be deliberately created to address the themes. Second is imparting the values of society when we create these texts. Remember, the texts are not created in a vacuum; in Ugandan and African societies, we have certain values that we need to preserve. They may be universal, but some of them may be uniquely Ugandan or African. That is what writers for young adults wish to propagate and what they should have at the core of their minds as they produce their works. (Mushenyezi, 2019)

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Mushengyezi here echoes Schmidt's utilitarian expectation that literature for young adults should serve educational purposes—notably cultural preservation—or be used as a surrogate reservoir and conveyor of ideologies.

One commonly thinks of older series exemplifying this idea, notably G. A. Henty. One of us ("Author B") can actually remember the latter days of the Henty influence, having received a nearly complete set of Henty from a grandfather. I revelled in the arcane historical details, such as how Egyptian embalmers removed the brain through the nose (*The Cat of Bubastes*). I went to India with Clive and survived the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Eve in France. Presumably, I also absorbed the British imperialist code, though I do not recall that this made as much of an impact.

But before we assume smugly that this type of work died with the Victorians, we need to ask—what about recent descendants? The Magic School Bus books and accompanying television series have precisely the same objective: to convey information, thinly disguised as entertainment. The children are not true protagonists; they are in the books to see and absorb scientific facts. Even Mrs Frizzle is more of a spectator than an active character; her main role in *The Magic School Bus on the Ocean Floor*, for instance, is to drive the bus into the ocean. Perhaps the general passivity of these characters, though, is a complaint for another day. If ever there were books with Keats's "palpable design" on readers, these are those books. Didactic presentation of "educational" facts and precepts, then, was clearly not Kimenye's purpose. A gifted storyteller, according to those who knew her, she wrote to entertain—and thus, in the long run, to create young minds that could later absorb facts, precepts, and the necessary skills to interpret them.

For his part, while discussing "lessons of morality in children's narratives," Chinua Achebe also suggests that literature for young people should be geared towards sustaining the morals of young readers and providing an enabling environment in books for young readers to learn how to negotiate and balance their concerns with those of their communities. (in Smith, 1998). In effect, Achebe's assertion is a prescription for YA literature—a prescription which marginalises it and adversely influences the representation of the young adult in it. The notion that school series should redress societal issues or depict a general "truth about African life" as propounded by scholars like Schmidt (1976) is a thematic fostering and consequently critical marginality of young adult characters. Kimenye situates her characters in a credible school environment where they act and display typical adolescent behaviour. Susan Kiguli's comments shed more light on some aspects of the Moses Series:

I went to boarding school when I was nine, and some of the things she describes are exactly – they've been exaggerated, there's some hyperbole treatment, but it's really – the way boarding schools operated in High School and Primary level. [We] would read them and feel that this Moses is a little bolder than we are, but he's just like us – he's an abandoned kid trying to cope with authoritarianism, trying to cope with the way the adult world sees the child (in Oldfield, 2013, p. 202).

Kiguli's comments underscore Kimenye's appeal to young adults who, when they read the stories, see themselves in the world of the text and can identify with the characters. In a tone similar to Kiguli's, Hentoff, thirty years earlier, said that YAL should reflect.

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The reality of being young with the tensions, yearnings, and sometimes satisfaction; the resentments against the educational lockstep that makes young adults fit schools, the confusing recognition of their parents' hierocracies and failures (Hentoff, 1967, p. 3).

Kimenye, like many authors over the years, represents male young adult characters in a school environment with a focus on themes such as juvenile delinquency, adolescent disillusionment, disrespect of authority both at school and at home, hair-raising behaviour that puts the young adult at risk, bullying, and other behaviour bordering on criminality. All these tropes had been laid down by the time Kipling (1899) deployed them in *Stalky & Co*, a compilation of stories earlier serialised from 1897 and later augmented by several further stories. Reactions pro and con to Kipling's *Stalky* and his friends are still riveting today—foretelling, though far outstripping, objections to the Moses books.

At various points in the series, Kimenye pushes against its parameters. Her most daring example is her dissection of the masculine code that grounds the entire tradition. The general code of behaviour shown in the Moses books echoes that of many school stories from *Stalky* on down—a code that normally presupposes an all-male environment. (Note: of course, there were girls' school stories also, especially in England, but the codes displayed there were markedly different and hence not relevant to this discussion.) What we see in *Moses in a Muddle* (Kimenye, 1970) challenges this norm.

Juli Sekabanja climbs trees like boys, attacks Moses and Mulutu by pushing them from the tree branches on which they are perched, even before she meets them face to face, single-handedly catches Mr Kangi with a hunting net, and when he frees himself and holds her wrist tightly, punches him in the eye to set herself free. When Mr Kangi reports the matter to the Police and Juli Sekabanja is arrested, she is not intimidated: after Mr Kangi claims that Mr Mukibi must be taken to the police station because “[h]e's not fit to run a school – turning young people into savages, especially that one,” meaning Juli Sekabanja, she points a finger at him as she says, “You tried to shoot us with a gun – me and King Kong and Holy Moses!” In other words, she refuses to be intimidated by the police and her accuser. She remains defiant as the letter she writes to Moses and Mulutu shows:

The spy has been to see my father twice. He wants to bring his Youth Club to camp on another part of our land next year. I think he is only pretending to be a Youth Club leader so that he can send his signals without people bothering him. If he does come next year, please keep an eye on him. I still think he is very dangerous.

Juli Sekabanja's courage in the face of power (the police, her parents, the school administration and the Youth Club leader) demonstrate that she is not a young adult character who is pushed around by adults. Even among her age-mates, the male students at Mr Mukibi's Institute, she does not tolerate familiarity. When a boy tries to attract her attention “by shooting beans from his mouth to the other side of the table,” Juli Sekabanja empties her lunch over his head with the explanation, “I can't bear beastly table manners.” Similarly, she does not allow Moses and Mulutu to have an upper hand over her as they do with other students. On the evening before she reports to the school, the two boys speculate about the

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reasons a girl would come to their school, which is first and foremost a boys' school, and a very poor one at that. She is in the tree they have climbed, but they are not aware of this:

We simply sat and tried to guess why Miss Sekabanja was being sent to our particular school. At first, we were serious, but soon we were making up all sorts of improbable and impossible reasons which made us laugh helplessly.

'Perhaps she's wanted by the police for stealing cars, and her parents think nobody will look for her here! King Kong roared, slapping me heartily on the back.

No! I choked in my attempt to be more outrageous than he was. 'No! I bet she's an escaped convict disguised as a girl, who's paid old Mukibi to let him stay at school until...

The ellipses mark the moment when Moses and Mulutu hear "the creak of branches and the rustle of leaves close by", after receiving a hefty push that sends them crashing to the ground. Juli Sekabanja is the attacker: she does not tolerate gossip against her, even when the odds are clearly against her. It is night, and she is in a tree alone; she attacks two boys, one of whom, Mulutu (King Kong), is much stronger than she; and she is in their territory, for the tree in which she attacks them is the one they hang out in. An ordinary young adult, girl or boy, would have kept quiet, waiting for the two boys to leave. But not Juli Sekabanja.

The following morning, she threatens to blackmail Mulutu, the strongest boy in the school, and therefore the one person whose help she needs in catching the spies. She tells him that if he does not help her in her mission, he will write to Miriam Makeba, the woman Mulutu hopes to marry:

I'll say you're always being expelled from schools, that you don't wash and are always bottom of the class, and that you only want to marry her because she's rich and famous. I'll even tell her you're married already, with ten hungry children!"

Horried, Mulutu agrees to join in her mission, together with his friend, Moses. Here, the author neatly plays action against attitude. When Juli Sekabanja is telling the story of how she caught the spy with a hunting net and how he (the spy) set himself loose and manhandled her, Moses narrates, "Being a girl, she [Juli Sekabanja] didn't bother to start at the beginning. She began straight away describing how the spy she had captured somehow produced a knife and cut his way out of the trapping net" (38-39). When it turns out that Mr Kangi is not a spy, Rukia observes of Juli Sekabanja, "Just like a girl to jump to the wrong conclusions." Finally, after Moses and Mulutu have read Juli Sekabanja's letter to them in which she asks them to look out for Mr Kangi when he brings his Youth Club to camp at her father's land, Mulutu says, "You'd think she had learned a lesson, wouldn't you? But she insists that Mr Kangi is a spy. It's true what Kigali says about women – they are the stubbornest creatures on earth" (63). We suggest that Kimenye, in this volume of the series, is calling into question the received attitudes of the boys as compared to their female companions, who demonstrated skill and bravery.

That Juli Sekabanja challenges hegemonic models of gender identity is clear. I suggest that we read her as espousing what Jack Halberstam calls female masculinity, which "is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of

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misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach" (Halberstam, 1998). She does not climb trees or dare catch a spy to please her male colleagues, Moses and Mulutu; she does it because she is certain that she can do it. Of the three students, she is the most masculine if masculinity is understood from the perspective of bravery and daredevilry. Although the entire novel is narrated by Moses, it is clear that it is Juli Sekabanja's story from beginning to end, making the title – *Moses in a Muddle* – a misnomer, for there is very little that Moses contributes to the story, and he gets into very little muddle.

We suggest that Kimenye used this title ironically. The muddle Moses (and his friend Mulutu) is in is that his identity as the central character of the series is under attack since Juli Sekabanja outclasses him by far. Juli Sekabanja refuses to be silenced to the extent that even when she is removed from the school, she still has her voice heard through the agency of letter writing. She is not Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (Spivak & Riach, 2016) subaltern female whose voice is silenced.

The placement of Juli Sekabanja, a lone female student in a single-sex (male) school, is a significant departure from the norm. It shifts attention away from the usual protagonist and also suggests an entry point for women in an otherwise male domain. Before they meet her, the boys only think of her in terms of her sex as a woman; they do not think of her as a fellow student, peer and comrade. Kimenye describes their anticipation thus: "[T]hey were more interested in guessing what sort of person Juli Sekabanja was [...]. Because [her sweater] was clean, pink and smelt faintly of scent [...] she must be dainty and sweet" (9). When they, however, find her akin to themselves, they are shocked.

The shock underscores their thwarted stereotypical expectations. This representation of the female young adult character may be read as an act of reparation by the author for her many previous books that lacked a female young adult character. It is even possible that the dynamic character that Kimenye attributes to Juli Sekabanja is a sort of compensation for the previous omissions of female characters in the Moses Series, although the text does not offer us any foil to balance the equation. Juli Sekabanja's utilisation of her 'small space' (incidentally, this is what her surname, Sekabanja, translates into English from Luganda) is symbolic of the available effective use of power to make an impact and command respect from the boys. She starts with a meeting with Moses and Mulutu (King Kong) – a meeting she arranges using the boys' method of communicating, that is, surreptitiously passing a note to a particular person, Mulutu, as the teacher engages them in a lesson – and reveals its purpose: "All I need him for is to help me catch a foreign spy" (15).

Some might argue that by populating her Moses Series mainly with boys, Kimenye inadvertently subscribes to a male-controlled establishment. But if we remember that there were few girls in school in Uganda during the 1960s and 1970s, we see that she is reflecting the reality of the time; women's enrolment in educational institutions was less than 33%, according to Joy Kwesiga's influential book, *Women's Access to Higher Education in Africa: Uganda's Experience* (2002). The situation has improved so much that in the twenty-first century, there are sometimes more girls than boys completing secondary school and joining University, but there are still some issues about the courses pursued by women (usually "soft" ones like social sciences as compared to the technical ones like engineering pursued mostly by boys), as Tabitha Mulyampiti, Roberts Muriisa, and Catherine Kanabahita show in

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their informative study, *It is a Long Way to the Top: Increasing Women's Leadership in Ugandan Public Universities* (2018).

We further suggest that Juli Sekabanja's female masculinity makes her parents uncomfortable. Her mother is furious with Mr Mukibi, whom she addresses, "How dare you blame my daughter? She was a good, quiet child before she came to your school! And after one day here, she ends up in the hands of the police!" (58). It is clear here that Mrs Sekabanja does not know her daughter well, for whether or not she was a quiet girl before she came to Mr Mukibi's school where she has been for just a day, it is not his fault that the girl ends up with the police, even with the many weaknesses he has, for instance being interested more in money than in the welfare of his students. This incident in the novel also shows that young adults are capable of remaining an enigma to their parents, who may not know much about the goings-on in their lives (a constant theme for Kimenye).

There is no doubt that the decision made by Juli Sekabanja's parents to take her to England to study in a girls' secondary school is motivated by their desire to groom her into a well-behaved girl; in other words, it is to discipline her into gender conformity. The idea of studying in a first-world country like England excites her, which is why she tells Moses and Mulutu that she is going to a "very nice school for girls" (63) even before she sees it, but the fact that she keeps coming to the tree where she first attacked them for several evenings without seeing them, which is what induces her to write to them, shows that part of her will remain at the decrepit school where she spent a day, challenging the boys.

Moses makes it clear that he and Mulutu will not miss her, which is surprising since she is so much like them: she climbs trees, breaks school rules—even on her very first day in the school, when she empties her lunch on a boy's head. If identity is premised on the notion of sameness, one would expect that Moses and Mulutu would miss Juli Sekabanja a lot since she is so much like them. Perhaps the reason they shun her is that she is much smarter than they are, beating them at the game they are renowned for – making mischief and triumphing over adversity to the level of catching a spy single-handedly. This bravery sets her apart from the two stars at Mr Mukibi's school, which is why they exclude her from their circle to the extent of showing no excitement at all when they receive her letter, long after it has been left in the tree where they first met her.

Kimenye has other surprises in store. Dissecting gender assumptions in so traditional a school series as the Moses books is startling enough; in addition, Kimenye provides throughout the series a setting that is full of corruption and exploitative behaviour by adults. (Yes, there have certainly been wretched schools in previous literature, but seldom in school stories as such. Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* is not central to the story, nor is Lowood in *Jane Eyre*. The most scathing exposé that we could find was in Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, which is American, not a school story as such, and published just as the Moses series launched—hence, not an influence.)

A case in point is the behaviour of Mukiibi, the proprietor of the school (Mukibi's Institute for the Sons of African Gentlemen). The author makes him a microcosmic representation of the kind of corrupt atmosphere that was prevalent at the time of writing the series, especially in *Moses in Trouble*. (Kimenye, 1968). When Mukiibi uses schoolboys as cooks to cover for the entire kitchen staff, who were on strike due to low and irregular wages. Here we see a Kimenye who exposes gross moral decadence. The disclosure of corruption in privately owned institutions is a bare representation of the moral erosion that was widespread at the time Kimenye wrote. When the boys in their perplexity to have sumptuous meals prepared in time, end up making breakfast with expired milk, which "dropped from heaven,"

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and which breakfast lands some of them in the hospital, Mukibi's unscrupulous methods of managing the school are unearthed. The administrators are later apprehended, and the boys are exonerated of all blame.

The perplexity of the boys when they are told to be in charge of kitchen duty is a realistic response, even as it exposes the manipulative and insensitive adult. Kimenye's representations of young adult characters as people who are seemingly unaware of the world outside the school premises challenge the claim that at that age, adolescents are not bothered by the nation's political atmosphere, unless it directly impacts them. The reader clearly sees that, in fact, the situation outside the school does, indeed, impact the boys.

In *Moses and the Movie* (1996), one of the last books in the series, the whole environment in which the boys operate is toxic. Mukibi continues his ways, secure in the knowledge that the parents of his students see the school as basically a warehouse for their troublesome or learning-disabled students. The teacher assigned to sleep in Dorm 3 when the boys are more than usually out of control, Mr Wafula, is a known alcoholic. "He's generally sozzled by supertime, so you'll still be able to come and go as you please," advises a boy from another dorm. In an unwitting foretaste of one of the book's climactic scenes, he adds, "You'll be all right unless he starts being sick all over your dorm. Ha! Ha! Ha! (Kimenye, 1996)

What is striking about *Moses and the Movie* is the boys' grasp of, and *de facto* acceptance of, the widespread economic corruption of their environment. The school itself, obviously, is a parasitic fraud upon the families that supply it with students. Its employees are paid poorly and not often, though it is hard to say why anyone would pay the hapless Mr Wafula for anything. When the boys try to make some money by serving at a fancy party, the property owner pays them merely with a light snack, pretending to believe that they were volunteering to help. Most spectacularly, the film group that forms the centre of the plot turns out to be fraudulent. Instead of earning \$10,000 as extras for a movie "on Uganda's emergence as a democratic state after the trauma of 25 years of despotic rule!" – the promise dangled by Mike Kilroy of an imaginary American film company – they discover that Kilroy is a fake and a forger.

Conclusion

In confronting some of the major issues in Ugandan society at the time, Kimenye goes far beyond the norms of the school story. However, the series is not perfect. In contrast to the frequent inclusion of Western colloquialisms and slang in the boys' dialogue is the absence of phrases from the African tradition. Local Ugandan expressions and African proverbs are absent from these books, as is village life. Some critics feel that the lack of specificity in the Moses books' settings makes the books less relevant:

Occasionally, the boys show their profound ignorance of rural life, as when they are unable to care for cattle [*Moses in Trouble*] – but for the most part, neither rural Africa nor the nation-state of Uganda is part of Africa that is depicted in Kimenye's adventure stories. The ordinary people (i.e., children) about whom she writes live in a narrowly circumscribed segment of contemporary African society. While they live in a real African world, they are not motivated by the major concerns of ordinary African children. (Schmidt, 1976)

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Similarly, “very little of the educational functions of the school enters into the stories [since the] action usually focuses on dormitory life and extracurricular activities rather than on classroom activities” (Schmidt, 1976). Further, Kimenye uses stock character types in the Moses books:

Mr Lutu is a very nervous teacher who, on one occasion, drinks too much beer while in town and falls into a ditch on the way home [*Moses and Mildred*]. Miss Namukasa is noted more for her fear of ghosts than for her classroom activities [*Moses and the Ghost*], while Miss Nagenda is best known for her fear of snakes, getting in the boys' way at times when they do not want her present, and losing things (*Moses and Mildred*, *Moses and the Kidnappers*). As an attractive young teacher, Miss Nagenda causes Moses extreme discomfort by leaning on his arm after spraining her ankle [*Moses and the Kidnappers*]. (Schmidt, 1976)

Why are we even looking at these two supposed shortcomings—the lack of specificity in settings and the lack of particular African references—in a series that we are recommending for entirely other reasons? Neither of these problems affects any of our three main interests (promotion of non-didactic reading for pleasure, examination of gender assumptions, and exposure of rampant corruption). Here's why. The danger that lies in the use of stock character types is that some readers of the novels (particularly Western ones) might take the state of Mr Mukibi's school as typical of African, East African or Ugandan boarding schools. Simplistic? Unfounded? Remember, we are assuming a Western audience here, mostly American. Even relatively sophisticated Western readers may sometimes see African literature as a morality tale cast in a realistic mode, as Simon Gikandi's “Theory, Literature, and Moral Considerations” shows. In his experience of lecturing in American universities like Princeton, Gikandi notes that in teaching Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to mention just one African text, his classes' response to particular scenes of the text was sometimes surprisingly naïve: “Okonkwo's beating of his wife during the holy week (why do Africans beat their wives?) Or the killing of Ikemefuna (why are these people so cruel?)” (5). With this kind of reductive reading of African texts, Moses, his friends, and his school may come to be seen in an inaccurate and undesirable light. (We note, too, that the exact reverse also happens, judging by some experiences of Author B's husband and colleagues teaching in Africa.)

The Moses books, like other texts specifically written for young adults, have never appeared on any official Ugandan literature syllabus. They may appear in the class library reading boxes for learners to select from for random reading, they are sometimes seen on recommended lists, but they do not form a part of any central, organised reading or study program. While we wish that more materials for young adult readers were represented, we are subversively pleased that Moses and his friends remain outside any official canon and may still be read, by young readers and adults alike, just for pleasure.

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