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Mini Devils: Dynamics of Power in a Community of Laughter

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Abstract

This article examines the role of humour in Wilson Kaigalura's novel, *Mini Devils* (2006) primarily because humour and laughter are among the most cherished traits of human being. Yet, what we laugh about, why, and how, are questions of serious concern. Using Susanne Reich and Mark Stein's (2005) explication of the notion of communities of laughter, this article situates literary humour-laughter relationship within the stimuli-response framework and reads the characters as constituting a community of laughter that functions as an infrastructural site of sociability and socialisation. Drawing upon the theories of power, the article analyses the political and social aspects of humour that come in subtle ways, and yet serve major ways through which to access meanings that reveal, stabilise, or destabilise notions of power in society. This shift, from analysing humour and laughter as aesthetic devices to analysing them as deliberate political acts, can illuminate on our understanding of power dynamics and differentiation in society. The analysis shows that the characters' performance of humour and its appreciation are goal-oriented and forms of power that are not always monopolised by particularised groups of people but can also be manipulated by all and sundry regardless of their social status in society.

Keywords:
Humour, Laughter, Mini Devils, Power, Community of Laughter
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Introduction

Despite being the only Tanzanian Anglophone novel that commits itself wholly to humour, there is hardly no study that explores the role of humour in Wilson Kaigalura's (2006) *Mini Devils*. With humour as its central narrative strategy, the inspiration for this article lies partly in the apparent lack of critical interest in this text. It is, therefore, crucial to explain this lack of interest and show why it is problematic. The dearth of studies on literary humour in general revolves around the problematique inherent in the question of whether humour, let alone literary humour, is a subject worthy of scholarly attention. In his preface to

A Sub-treasury of American Humour, White (1941) decries the general lack of scholarly respect for the comic. He notes that the stigma against literary humour is so common that a poet would rather sign "his real name to his serious verse and a pseudonym to his comical verse" lest the public associates him with flippancy and levity. This fear is based on the age-old assumption that associating writers' names with the flippant "would hurt their reputation" (xviii). In their introduction to *Cheeky Fictions*, Reichl and Stein (2005), observe that the perception of humorous texts as "uneasy bedfellows" stems from the misconceptualisation of the nature of laughter, which is often seen as either slighting a serious subject matter or simply indicating a light-hearted entertainment" (p.2). Challenging this perception of the value of humour, White cautions that a text that has humorous "story doesn't [necessarily] mean it is less than great" (xviii). He argues that in such a text, humour might act as a strategy to communicate more serious matters. Implicitly, a text can be comic and serious at the same time. So theoretically, as a genre, the sidelining of humour appears linked to this age-old tendency to discriminate serious from non-serious texts, with the former relegating the latter to the margins of scholarly inquiry and discourse.

Looked from a broader Tanzanian literary and language landscape, irrespective of the subject matter, Tanzania's literature in English is usually sidelined in literary scholarship. Eliah Mwaifuge (2008) notes, for example, that critics such as Albert Gerard (1981), Rajmund Ohly (1990), and Msiska and Hyland (1997), are on record claiming that in Tanzania, "there is limited presence of what is considered "serious" literature in English" (p.7). As I have noted in my paper, "Tanzanian Anglophone Fiction: A Survey", such claims only exacerbate the problem and contribute to further marginalization of Tanzania's Anglophone fiction. To compound the problem, in terms of readership, Tanzania is predominantly Swahili, and writing in English, has been, to use Lindfors' (1997) statement, like "speaking only to a tiny elite, some of whom have no desire to listen" (p. 125). These are some of the theoretical and contextual factors that warrant the study of *Mini Devils*.

Mini Devils is a story of a boy called Saulo and his adventures when growing up under the guardianship of a nonsense grandfather, Mzee Mugurusi. In the first part of the story, Saulo is pitied against this hard-nosed grandfather Mugurusi who prides himself in having 'seen action' in

the Second World War. A war veteran, Mugurusi handles his grandson with his iron-fist. Mugurusi believes that, as an ex-soldier he must turn his grandson into a mini-soldier. He wants the grandson to grow up into a macho 'man' like him—disciplined and enduring. Yet, Mugurusi's high-handedness against his grandson, the typical grandparent-grandchild relationship is not completely forgone. In fact, this grandparent-grandchild playful hostility constitutes the first part of the story both humorous and absorbing. In the rest of the text, Saulo, the mini-devil, interacts with other characters. In this part, Saulo's playfulness and apparent stupidity of other characters in the text are central textual strategies that combine with other devices such as satire, irony, hyperbole, subversion, buffoonery, and jokes to enrich the text's humorous value.

In what follows, I examine the portrayal of the relationship between humour and laughter in *Mini Devils*. Specifically, I examine the deployment of humour as a political rhetorical strategy that illuminates on and interrogates the power dynamics in the fictionalized society. I argue that literary humour is more than just a form of entertainment and aesthetic strategy; it is also a rhetorical strategy crucial in understanding textual interrogation of notions of socialisation and social power. The article begins with an exposition of the concept of humour and the theory of humour in general to provide a context for discussing textual use of humour. I then situate the analysis in relation to the theory of power and show its potency in engendering the understanding humour and laughter as political expressions that stabilise and or destabilise the notions of power dynamics in society.

Community of Laughter: Theory of Textual Humour

In their introduction to *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial,* Sussane Reichl and Mark Stein (2005) claim that there is wide disagreement on what defines the relationship between humour and laughter. Moreover, the truism that humour is both contextual and relative further complicates this problem. Furthermore, laughter is not the only reaction to humour, which is also relative. After all, one man's wit, is another's joke. Humour is also contextual since it is connected and appreciated against a given socio-cultural background. As such, what amounts to humour in one context may be offensive and even in bad taste in another. Also, there a lack of consensus on features that define humorous expressions. As a result, it becomes tricky discriminating humorous from serious expressions. To compound the

problem even further, organising a humour taxonomy does not work. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg (1997) define humour as "any message—transmitted in action, speech, writing, images or music—intended to produce a smile or a laugh" (p.1). This definition is consistent with the requirement of the theory of stimuli-response, hence its appropriateness and application in this article. Specifically, my interest is on textual contexts in which characters react with laughter.

Any production and appreciation of humour depends, to a large extent, on what Stanley Fish (1980) calls *interpretive communities.* An interpretive community, Fish claims, is "made up of those who share interpretive strategies for writing texts, for constituting and assigning their intentions" (Fish 1980, p.171). Drawing insights from Fish's notion of *interpretive communities,* Reichl and Stein in *Cheeky Fiction* suggest a concept that is central in this study—*communities of laughter.* Communities of laughter, Reichl and Stein (2005) note, presuppose "shared worlds, shared codes, and shared values" (p. 13). In other words, any production and appreciation of humour is shaped by shared experiences among the teller of the humour; the target of humour; and the audience. What Reichl and Stein call "community of laughter" approximates what Laurent Mellet (2016) calls a "laughing community". In a laughing community, Mellet claims, laughter brings people together as a community. Indeed, new communities are created through shared laughter. In "Early Modern Laughter" Indira Ghose (2008) calls this phenomenon "community of laughers". A community of laughers, she claims, defines insiders and outsiders and the victim of humour is usually an outsider. Implicitly, a community of laughers exists at the chagrin of another. These related concepts can be collapsed to define a community of laughter as one sharing references, values, and expectations.

This theorisation of the notion of communities of laughter avails two possibilities for analysis of the role of humour in *Mini Devils:* Either treating the author and the reader as belonging to the same interpretive community, or the characters (textual producers and consumers of humour) as a community because of their shared cultural norms. This article adopts the latter approach; it assumes that the producer of humour, the target of humour, and the audience must share the same interpretive strategies for humour to materialise and achieve its intended purpose. Thus, for this analysis I find Reichl and Stein's equation of humour and laughter to

stimuli and response functions, respectively, useful and apt for application in this analysis. Laughter, they reason, should be "regarded as the response to a stimulus but also as an effect that is deliberately pursued by a text" (Reichl & Stein 2005, p.4). The analysis, therefore, focuses only on the humour stimuli, leaving other stimuli of laughter aside, which entails understanding the relationship among a triad of the performer of a humorous act, the target of the act, and the audience.

From a theoretical perspective, humour is vital and many people would want to possess a sense of humour. Simply put, humour plays both social and political functions. In his theory of the ideal state, Plato (see Tate 1939) notes the corruptive, malicious, and aggressive role of humour against the state. Plato's negative view against the comic and the humorous summarises its political function. Kulka (2007) builds on Plato's idea to propound the superiority theory, which holds that "the comical is perceived as inferior and our laughter is an expression of the sudden realisation of our superiority" (Kulka 2007, p.321). Since Plato treats laughter as a realisation of superiority by the citizens against their state which is a dangerous preposition, particularly because the humour and laughter directed at the state constitutes a form of attack. Thus, in *Cheeky Fictions*, Reichl and Stein (2005) endorse Sigmund Freud's logic that humour is a "socially acceptable form of attack" (p.10) and proceed to show how Helen Cixous' (1975) "The Laugh of the Medusa" shows how, as a form of attack, humour can be liberating, joyful, and redeeming (p.10).

On the other hand, the relief theory presupposes that laughing to humorous instances allow people to release tension. In this connection, Tomás Kulka, treats laughter as a "discharge of surplus energy which alleviates psychic tension" (Kulka 2007, p.321). Finally, the incongruity theory holds that incongruities are funny, with John Morreall (1987) contending that "humour always involves the enjoyment of a perceived or imagined incongruity" (p. 136). As such, laughter results from surprises and reversal of expectations. In short, the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory summarise the functions of humour in society.

In literary studies, humour has multiple functions. In *Cheeky Fictions,* the contributors analyse humour as a "vital textual strategy of postcolonial cultural practice," arguing that laughter in postcolonial texts is usually "self-consciously employed and strategically positioned in textual

constructions" (Reichl & Stein 2005, p.1). They implore literary critics to engage with laughter and humour by going beyond the equation of humour with light–hearted entertainment. Adele Marian Holoch's (2012) *The Serious Work of Humour in Postcolonial Literature* identifies satire and irony as important modes of humour. She shows how literary humour "opens new spaces for historically marginalized individuals to be heard" (Holoch 2012, p.1). This insight informs the analysis of the textual humour to establish how marginalised characters deploy humour and laughter to resist victimisation.

This theorisation of humour and laughter is handy in reading and analysing how characters in *Mini Devils* use humour to endorse or perpetuate identity hierarchies, on the one hand, and how they use the same to challenge the imagined hierarchies, on the other.

The stimuli-response framework of understanding humour and laughter may reveal power dynamics among characters. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault (1978) theorises about the ubiquity of power, arguing that is "everywhere" and "comes from everywhere". This dispersion of power lies in how "power is exercised from innumerable points" and may result from the "interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations". This multi-directionality of power means that power and resistance go together: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978, pp. 93-97). This theorisation of power allows us to see humour and laughter as deliberate performances of power that can reveal actual power dynamics in characters' lives. Similarly, Nicholas Holm (2017) underscores this point in his study of humour. Holm invites us to see, how humour, in all its forms questions our "structures and systems" as well as "social rules" (Holm 2017, pp. 3-4). Admittedly, humour does all this with the "logics of doubt, dissent, and disruption" (Holm 2017, p.15). Together, these insights are crucial in attending to the focus of the paper—the analysis of what humour does and the politics of humour. What Foucault sees as the unidirectionality of power, in my opinion, approximates what James Scott (1990) calls 'Infrapolitics' in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* Infrapolitics, he suggests, is an elementary form of politics and includes acts, gestures that are political but not easily recognised or considered as such. In other words, humour and laughter do not only define relations, but also function as Infrapolitics whose domain include acts that are political but are "not quite political enough to be perceived as such" (Scott 1990,

p.183). I use the concept to show that humour and laughter can function in the same way.

Humour and laughter are only limited in certain contexts and relations. To illustrate this point, Alexander Herzen (2012) cautions that "If inferiors are permitted to laugh in front of their superiors, and if they cannot suppress their hilarity, this would mean farewell to respect" (p. 223). Indeed, as political acts, humour and laughter have can disrupt power structures. The tendency for humour to disrupt power contours in relationships is consistent with what Reichl and Stein (2005) call interventionist stance. Interventionist stance uses humour and laughter as devices and strategies for the marginalized to create agency. This view emphasises the subversive and satiric side of humour and laughter. When humour and laughter threaten social boundaries, they function as political acts that destabilise social boundaries. Illustratively, Amy Billingsley's (2017) "Laughing against Patriarchy" demonstrates how women can use humour as a "means of breaking silence" and articulating their concerns. She distinguishes between "silencing humour" and "humour that breaks silence" with feminists preferring the latter as a way of fighting patriarchy. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous (1975) discusses the power of laughter and how women can use it to "smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth'" (p. 888). In fact, she argues for the limeratory power of humour and laughter. These studies illuminate on how characters regardless of their gender, use humour and laughter to speak out.

Between sociability and socialisation: Humour and Laughter in *Mini Devils*

Socialisation defines the identity of men and women through socially constructed gender roles of male and female, respectively. In *Mini Devils*, socialisation initially crops up when Saulo, the narrator, interacts and converses with his grandfather, Mugurusi. Set in North-western Tanzania among the Haya, onomastics suggests that the name Mugurusi literally means an old man. United by kinship, the age and social differences between Mugurusi and Saulo is such that whereas the old man is slowly retiring from active social life, Saulo is in the process of entering into full participation in social life. It is thus the duty of the old man to prepare the young man for respectable social life.

Mugurusi insists on Saulo learning to display acceptable male attributes. To be specific, he must emulate his grandfather's macho attributes— aggressiveness, assertiveness, and domination. A hard-nosed old man, Mugurusi is very 'economical' with his jokes because he considers his grandson's generation of boys to be too weak to be masculine. In the incident, Saulo has been pricked by a thorn. His cry disappoints his grandfather, Mzee Mugurusi, who prides himself in having 'seen action' in Burma during the Second World War. He proudly relates how he was struck by a bullet from enemy fire during the war and never yelled nor shed a single tear. He therefore wonders why his grandson should cry after being pricked by a mere thorn. Yet, biologically, crying is part of expressing human emotions and, according to Fischer (1993), it is a form of communication that differs according to gender. Women's cry usually solicits consolation and support whereas that of men usually attracts rebuke and negativity. Context notwithstanding, "Males who cry are viewed as weak and perceived more negatively than females" (p. 11).

Mugurusi is a product of this age-old gender socialisation. According to him, by weeping and by being humbled by a mere thorn, his grandson is a disappointment, meaning he has reason to doubt his masculinity. Rather than feel sorry for the young man, Mugurusi jokingly asks: "So you have decided to become a girl?" making his best friend and war veteran Kushindwa laugh so excitedly at the humiliation that he produces tears (p.16). Kushindwa's laughter is based on Mugurusi's description of Saulo as girlish. His excitement and laughter centre on both the humour and the resultant humiliation that the boy suffers. This humour and the laughter that follows remind Saulo that he should not behave like a girl, for as a boy, he is not expected to cry due to such minor pains.

The old men expect the young ones to learn from them. Traditionally, the old men know more than the young men, hence agents of the socialisation of the latter group. Impliedly, society's cultural expectations constitute a form of inter-generational continuity in social behaviour of the older generation and younger ones. Such a social set-up reduces learning to a display of the attributes displayed by the older generation. In this incident, Mugurusi, who is the teller of the joke combines his efforts with Kushindwa, who is the audience, to undermine the young boy, the butt of the humour. Thus, Mugurusi and Kushindwa form an alliance since they belong to a post-figurative culture. Laughing transforms Kushindwa into

someone who shares Mugurusi's feelings towards his grandson. His laughter also endorses Mugurusi's remarks. Kushindwa's laughter means that it is funny for a boy to cry due to a mere thorn pricking his feet. As a case of power-differentiated interaction, the asymmetrical relations between Saulo and the old men implies that the deliberate use of humour and laughter serves as a control mechanism, showing either approval or disapproval of certain patterns of behaviour including behaving accordingly. As a disciplinary technology, humour, and laughter function as a means for disciplining slackening off young men. The idea is to force the young man to conform to the social norms.

The incident shows a close affinity between humour and aggression or "aggressive humour". In humour studies, aggressive humour "takes pleasure in others' failings or discomfort" and it is "used to victimize, belittle, and disparage others" (Scheel 2017, p. 19). On the one hand, Kushindwa's laughter amounts to mislaughing—laughing when one should not—because it is ironical for him to laugh at the misfortune of the young man. Kushindwa's mislaughing finds ready explanation in the superiority theory of humour. His laughter directed at Saulo is malicious and because he is an inferior, who cannot hit back at his superior—the elder social sages. Here, the paradox lies in brutality of both the humour and the laugher. Mugurusi's brutal humour maliciously humiliates the boy. As a matter of fact, perceiving the boy's act of crying to be funny does not make the prick any less painful. This direction of the humour and laughter at the boy's misfortune, consistent as it is with superiority theory of humour, does not only ridicule the boy, as a victim, and exposes his effeminate frailty, it also alludes to power disparity between the boy and the old men. In short, the joke and the resulting humour from Kushindwa buttress and uphold the power imbalance between the old men and the boy. This darker side of humour and laughter explicates the relationship between humour and aggression. In fact, such verbal aggression is one of the traits in the Aggressive Communication Model or ACM (Infante 1987). Verbal aggression, Infante claims, is a form of destructive communication that leaves one partner in a communication network dissatisfied and weighed down by negative feelings about the self. Such laughter, in other words, is a form of disguised aggressiveness, a deliberate choice of subtle over crude aggression.

Humour and laughter bring the teller of the joke and the listener together. This alliance, even when unknown to the victim of the humour, shows that the butt of the joke is a lonely figure. This coalition is between Mugurusi, who tells the joke and the third person, Kushindwa, who listens to and laughs to it at the expense of the second person, Saulo. In this incident, Kushindwa's laughter confirms Mugurusi's indictment of the young boy. Kushindwa, the listener, is a judge who confirms the defeat of Saulo. Kushindwa symbolises the victory of the teller, Mugurusi. The outcome of this humorous verbal exchange is the consolidation and justification of generational hierarchy: The old men belong to a superior level in the traditional social hierarchy; the young man belongs to a lower level. This social segmentation is problematic since it associates male weakling behaviour with effeminacy panders to and further reinforces gender stereotypes. This way, humour and laughter help to maintain social hierarchies and reinforce gender stereotypes.

In *Mini Devils*, physical violence permeates many of the humorous contexts. Like in the real world, male characters dominate physical violence. This pre-eminence is consistent with men's domination of violent acts in the real world. This association of men with violence means that in incidents where women are involved in violent humour, gender becomes an important element in the appreciation of the humour. Mariamu, a no-nonsense woman restores discipline on a man called Otanyiba. The humour of Otanyiba, as a Haya name, lies in its literal translation. Onomastically, Otanyiba means 'don't steal from me'. Ironically, Mariamu suspects Otanyiba of stealing from a passer-by. She accuses him of colluding with the thieves by staging an event to distract the audience so that the thieves can escape. Otanyiba is a patriarchal man, who believes that women are not expected to speak out against him in any way. As a patriarch, he is the law unto himself and he decides to punish Mariamu for daring to challenge him as a man.

What ensues is a showdown and public display of fighting skills between the two—Miriam, a woman, and Otanyiba, a man. When examined against a background the socialisation that equates superiority and inferiority with male and female genders, respectively, the depiction of a woman (a supposedly weaker sex) as exchanging blows with a man (supposedly a stronger sex whose upbringing is steeped in masculinity) is humorous and elicits laughter. This fight challenges the taken-for-granted superiority-

inferiority equation. After all, Mariamu, *a mere woman*—according to the spectators, is victorious, hence humbling Otanyiba, the patriarch. The Mariamu, a woman, beating Otanyiba up attracts laughter from the spectators. The anticipated gender role reversal is what causes laugher: The man is a *woman* and the woman is a *man.* To save his face, Otanyiba ought to ask for forgiveness. Mariamu takes him for a victim not only of the beatings but also of the humour: "Okay, say Mariamu is a great woman three times and I will let you free." Otanyiba complies and she loosens her grip on the poor fellow (p.126), for him to decamp.

This laughter stemming from something incongruous—something that contradicts or violates social prescriptions is consistent with the incongruity theories of humour. Social deviations and anomalies feeds into such laugher. In the Otanyiba-Mariamu lopsided fight, the spectators witness a woman beat up and silence a man socially constructed to embrace machoism. The incongruity lies in inversion of men-as-perpetrators of violence against women and women-as-victims of that gender-based violence. Adding to this absurdity is the female tormentor asking the victim to apologise to get reprieve. This feat of apologising before a woman emasculates him completely. Finally, also laughable is the content of his atonement. Otanyiba must recite three times Mariamu's prescribed penitential prayer. Like in the Roman Catholic's Penitential Act, the aim is to make Otanyiba confess to Mariam by showing that he has wronged her. This display of power over Otanyiba is the victory of Mariamu over Otanyiba. It is humorous to see an adult man repeating the same words three times to apologise. Here, atonement doe not only mean saying something nice to the tormentor but also saying it as a way of making amends for a wrong. In this context, this is akin to reparation for one's sins. Otanyiba is hereby proclaiming himself to be a wrongdoer.

However, the approach Mariamu takes divides the spectators in two groups: men and women. For men, it is demeaning to see one of their own humiliated by a woman. For the women, it is spectacular that one of their own is instils discipline into a patriarch. Their laughter is not only derisive but also in unison. This laughing-together-approach is maliciously employed to show that, as a group, they like what they see and that they side with the perpetrator of violence. Their laughter is a symbolic display of unity between them and Mariamu. It symbolises the collective victory of women over men, which is an inversion of what is expected to occur in real

life, particularly in a patriarchal society. By laughing they also endorse Mariamu's decision to beat up the man. The condone beating, as a form of punishing. The coalition between the combative Mariamu and other women in this context is a pointer on how laughter functions to bring people together and to create in-group social solidarity. The laughing spectators (mostly women) indicate that it is okay for a woman to beat up a man especially when she has a good reason and power to do so.

On the surface, the showdown is between Otanyiba and Mariamu, to the spectators; symbolically it is between women and men, which in turn illustrates the notions of brotherhood and sisterhood. A sense of fraternity, solidarity, and shared experience define these male and female characters. They feel accountable to a member of their gender—male to Otanyiba, female to Mariamu. Consequently, by succumbing to a woman's beating, Otanyiba is no longer a 'man'. He has let down and offended all the men who witness the emasculating showdown. What kind of a man is Otanyiba to accept such humiliation from a woman? As a brotherhood, their duty is to cheer Otanyiba up. Otanyiba's defeat symbolically means defeat for the men as well. Crucially, if women have shown their sisterhood by laughing out loudly at the defeat of Otanyiba by Mariamu, it is crucial that the men should also do the same—support one of their own.

For Kwikiliza, a male spectator, the humiliation of Otanyiba is too much to bear: He "feels as though a bit of his manhood has been assailed" (p.126). Kwikiliza feels that he has the duty to defend the pride of men, which Mariamu challenges. He must do something quickly to recover the lost male pride through Otanyiba. Thus, he readies to cover up for Otanyiba's humiliating defeat, to take on Mariamu, for after all she is a "mere woman" (p.126). Comically, what follows is a showdown of fighting skills between Kwikiliza and Mariamu. Once again Mariamu wins the battle of the sexes, and she asks her victim to perform another penance: "Say I am the toughest woman you have ever encountered, and I will let you free" (p. 127). Hearing Kwikiliza recite the atonement prayers three times, with Mariam sitting astride his back, provokes further uncontrollable laughter. Finally, Kwikiliza goes free following a humiliating bout of penance and chastising fight. Here the thrust of the humour is the liberal way Mariamu beats up her male victims, on the one hand, and the humorous content of the penitential prayers. Mariamu is convinced that what she is doing is part of reforming the society. She claims that "having two loose, ugly things

suspended between your legs …doesn't make" "Kwikiliza a superior human being" (p128). Mariamu's humour is rebellious in that it mocks and challenges the existing societal expectations. Her satire also highlights generalised assumptions about men's supposed superiority. By humbling the second man whose macho-ego she crushes, she invites the onlookers to question the normalisation of men's superiority. This way, the audience can reflect on consequences of these often-unquestionable assumptions and beliefs. The potency of Mariam's humour and the resulting laughter also lies in its ability of not only revealing the prevalent gender stereotypes but also of challenging them.

In this event, the three theories of humour outlined earlier overlap. To begin with, the female spectators enjoy the violent humour directed at the male victims by a victorious female because this is contrary to social and cultural expectations. Second, their derisive laughter also confirms that something incongruous occurs. This kind of laughter makes Mariamu feel better. It is thus a relief for both Mariamu and her female onlookers. By showing that she can defeat Otanyiba and Kwikiliza and crack a joke thereafter shows that she is superior.

That Kwikiliza, the victim of the beatings and humour also against himself laughs, needs to further explanation. The narrator finds Kwikiliza's laughter funny: "Laughter burst out from the people around" and "…incredibly, even Kwikiliza, notwithstanding his situation, laughs" (p.128). This mirth falls between mislaughing—laughing when one should not laugh or evasion laughing—laughing whose aim is to hide emotions. Both *mislaughing* and *evasion* laughter are deliberate performance acts meant to endorse what the joke communicates. The first possibility is that Kwikiliza is laughing at his pitiful distress away as a way of distracting himself from the pain and non-belief that he has been vanquished by a female character, when his sole purpose fir engaging in the fight was to redeem the macho image. If Kwikiliza is laughing at the attack as a way of dispelling its effects, he shows that he is not ready for more attacks. This fake laughter aims to please Mariamu and is atypical of the superior-subordinate relationship. Fake laughter operates on the understanding that one should laugh at something that is not funny at all and it is common in power-differentiated interactions.

Caught in this traumatising situation, Kwikiliza must do something dramatic to make amends. To regain his masculinity, he must try again to

challenge Mariamu by paying her in her own currency: Combine violence and humour by beating her up and teasing her later: "yes, come over and attack me, and if you beat me this time, I will ask any man in here with a sharp knife to cut off the organs on which my manhood is anchored, because I will have ceased to become a man" (p.128). Apparently, both Mariamu's and Kwikiliza's humour revolve around the question of manhood. In this context, when men and women engaged in such diatribe, gender becomes one of the crucial elements for humour. Instead of feeling sorry for Mariamu for losing part of her ear after being bitten by her male victim, for the female spectators, it is something to cheer them up for it has been done by a man to a woman. In other words, it is a laughable cowardly act and a sign of weakness for the man to bit off a woman's ear during a fight. Therefore, surprise, absurdity, irrationality, and playfulness of the characters account for the humorous nature of the interaction. Overall, a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood among female and male characters ensues because of the humorous laughter and violence.

In the world of *Mini Devils*, drinking alcohol is a masculine trait. All drinking sprees exclude women characters, so goes this unwritten rule. It seems some men drink so much that they fail to fulfil their conjugal obligations. This excessive *Lubisi* drinking by men is a concern for the women characters, whose lamentations reach the village pastor, Rev. Shaba Oikye. The pastor decides to make this the subject for his Sunday sermons. He jokes that some men "drink so much brew that at the climax, they laugh like hyenas" (p. 74). This remark evokes laughter from the women. First, the thought of hyenas laughing; secondly, the men laughing during climax; and, thirdly, that excessive *Lubisi* drinking causes laughter during climax. Although the church is associated with seriousness with jokes and humour dismissed trivialities, the pastor's cracking of the joke is a direct affront on the men. As a subversive humour, it disturbs and disorients the men while relieving the women. By laughing in unison, the women join hands with the pastor in speaking against excessive alcohol drinking. By laughing out loudly, the women endorse what the pastor's teaching. This feminist humour produces a coalition —a coalition of the church women and one man, a pastor, who wants to change things around. Feminist humour in this regard functions to bring together the two genders in the text. Joking so incisively about excessive *Lubisi* drinking by the men hints at a price the pastor must pay for betraying and humiliating his fellow men. As a result, the men start plotting to have him removed: "At some other corner of the

compound, a group of old men are condemning the pastor as being against them. One of them floats an idea of mobilizing other worshippers to pass a vote of no confidence in Pastor Oyike, and petition the Bishop to transfer him" (p. 75). This turn of event demonstrates how humour can be a divisive tool, particularly for those at the receiving end.

Nevertheless, the magic of humour lies in its power to go beyond the context in which it was performed. One of the manifestations of this power is when laughter is renewed after a time lapse or continues beyond the context of performance. In the text, this prolonged or extended laughter takes place outside the church. The pastor's attack on men has not only sparked laughter but has also initiated further discussion outside the church. Since the discussion is in-group, the women are free to speak up their minds about the problem. Specioza, a victim of her husband's excessive drinking in a tell-all exposure trashes her husband's alcoholism much to the amusement of her female circle: "Only last week, I had a terrible experience. The urinary bladder of my husband Rutakojoa loosened up in the dead of night and our bed was turned into a mini-pond" (p. 55). The image of a man wetting his bed and creating a mini-pond is hilarious to the listeners but humiliating to the victim. Understandably, the women burst in uncontrollable laughter. When she adds that "in that state [her husband] is not capable of rendering matrimonial bedroom service" (p. 57), they laugh even more hilariously. This dark humour communicates messages that could otherwise be difficult to convey directly under normal circumstances. Thus, the humour empowers Specioza who uses it as an offensive weapon.

What is particularly instructive here is that the importance of humour for the oppressed, marginalized, and the powerless cannot be overemphasized. Implicitly, they can weaponize humour and laughter. As such, humour and laughter can constitute a form of resistance. Scott (1990), who explores how resistance can be an art, contends that when resistance is artistic, it becomes difficult for the superiors or powerholders to understand it as resistance. Throughout history, the weak, he advises, have resorted to using this approach. This recognition of the power imbalance between the subordinates and their superiors is also fuelled by fear of reprisals or repercussions.

In *Mini Devils*, humour also serves as a line of defence for the characters. Saulo is interested in Alice, a village beauty. Since Saulo is a mini-devil, it

becomes difficult for Alice to openly show her lack of interest in him. She resorts to dilly-dallying. On the material day, Saulo is one of the football stars playing for the school football team. Hoping to catch the attention of the girl he so admires, he resorts to excesses, including dramatizes things on the pitch. During such exploits he hits head against the woodwork. This mishap presents a golden opportunity for Alice to discourage him from further attempts at her. During the consolation she openly describes Saulo's head as "cabbage-shaped" which causes laughter.

The girls' laughter results from their 'judging eyes' that mercilessly revel in the analogy between a human head and a cabbage. The girls' voyeuristic inspection turns Saulo into the epicentre of shameful inspection by zeroing in on his bodily defects and confirming them, hence putting him literally at their mercy. The girls' laughter indicates their feelings of superiority towards Saulo. The brutal joke and laughter directed at him coupled with his self-laughter have an instructive and didactic value. Firstly, by laughing, Saulo tries to confront shame with self-laughter. Secondly, Saulo's laughter can also amount to a show of disrespect towards the humour itself and underplaying the significance or effect of the humour on him. Both possibilities make laughter a deflective device for the cushioning off or neutralizing an otherwise unpleasant state. In other words, Saulo's unacknowledged shame is channelled through laughter.

From Saulo's mishap on the football pitch and the brutal humour and laughter that follows, we can draw several conclusions. Firstly, Alice is indirectly spurning Saulo's advances because she finds him count him largely ugly and unpresentable. The laughter from spectators also confirms Alice's unfavourable view of Saulo. After all, Alice's humour paints Saulo as an ugly boy and the resultant laughter affirms the claim. In other words, Alice seeks to create a distance between Saulo and herself, and in so doing, she also marks a boundary between Saulo and other girls as well. The laughing of both the victim and the spectator at the joke double-edged nature of humour: It can simultaneously be both scathing and consoling. In other words, the lack of feeling for the victim of violent humour as evidenced here is made even more humorous when the victim resorts to self-directed laughter to belittle and normalise the verbal abuse directed at him.

Conclusion

Humour and laughter in *Mini Devils* support the following prepositions regarding the role of humour in a fictionalized community of laughter. Firstly, characters' performance and appreciation of humour are shaped by and reveal existing power dynamics and relations in the fictionalized interactions. Whereas sociologically, the popular belief is to associate humour with friendliness, the analysis shows that performance and appreciation of humour may also relate to hostility, which accounts for the use of concepts such as aggressive humour and aggressive laughter. Secondly, the performance of humour and its appreciation are performative and deliberate impression management techniques. In other words, characters' humour and laughter are conscious and goal-directed attempts aimed to influence characters' perception of one another. Portraying humour and laughter thusly is crucial in separating real from fake laughter. Admittedly, this is difficult to achieve, because when performed deliberately and smartly, fake laughter can be difficult to distinguish from the real one. Yet the text provides examples that approximate fake contexts of laughter. As the analysis has illustrated, such contexts include characters laughing at things that are not funny or when victims of aggressive humour laugh. This elasticity of humour and laughter means that they can be pulled in different directions to anyone's advantage. Even though most of the humorous stimuli are often performed by the powerful, in this case, to show disrespect to their inferiors, there is an ambivalence in the use of laughter since both the powerful and the powerless can manipulate it to their respective advantage. Overall, there is both negative and positive power, in both cracking jokes and in the resultant laughing. In short, humour and laughter as presented in *Mini Devils* affirm or challenge the existing power dynamics in society while, in various ways, supporting or even questioning the privileged societal moralities.

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