UMMA, Volume 12 (1), 2025: 161–179

Imagining Step-motherhood in Deus Lubacha's *If She Were Alive*

Andreas Mauruce Komba
Department of Languages, Jordan University College,
andreaskomba1996@gmail.com

Abstract

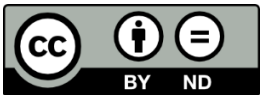
This article examines the concept of step-motherhood in Deus Lubacha's If She Were Alive. It specifically examines the effect of step-motherhood's negative characteristics on stepmother-stepdaughter and step-sibling relationships. Using the psychoanalytic approach (specifically Juliet Mitchell's psycho-feminism), the article accentuates the various ways in which step-motherhood impinges upon step-mother-stepdaughter and stepsibling rivalry and relationships. The article argues that, at the core of the disruptive stepmother-stepdaughter and stepsibling relationships in the context of step-mothering is the incompleteness of the institution of step-motherhood, primarily because, unlike biological motherhood, step-motherhood displays fewer positive traits in the process of family socialisation and development. In this regard, psychoanalytic theorists contend that the characters in a literary work are projections of the author's psyche. This psyche, however, is perceived differently in life and literature. Notably, a violation emerges in the representation of step-motherhood, as the novel under review further illustrates. The breach in this article may include disruptions to the family, aggressive behaviours, favouritism, hatred, and anger. All of these are the results of the actions and characters of step-motherhood within and outside the familial settings.

Keywords:
Step-motherhood, Stepmother-stepdaughter and Stepsibling Relationships, Step-family, violation, Bildungsroman, madness, Psycho-feminism

https://dx.doi.org/10.56279/ummaj.v12i1.8

Introduction

Generally, it is argued that "when two parents live with their children, fathers contribute to their children's development in important ways" (Lewis & Lamb 2003, p. 211). In the context of step-mothering, step-children can suffer discomfort stemming from the step-mother's actions. Drawing on the rich array of studies on family units and



structures, I similarly contend that biological families are likely to enjoy the autonomy of family unity, peace, and love more than stepfamilies (See also Case, Lin, and McLanahan 1999; Evenhouse& Reilly 2004). Vehemently, this results in what Caroline Sanner and Marilyn Coleman see as the creation of a motherhood hierarchy in which biological mothers are superior to step-mothers (2017). This article, therefore, explores the concept of step-motherhood and its impact on the stepmother-stepdaughter and step-sibling relationships in Lubacha's *If She Were Alive*. However, in this article, the step-motherhood is treated as a myth.

While biological motherhood, "is one of the most enduring and consequential rites of passage to adult femininity for women" (Whitehead 2016), [in many literatures] step-mothers are perceived and treated as less affectionate, good, fair, kind, loving, happy, and likable, and more cruel, hateful, unfair, and unloving (Dainton 1993). In other words, step-motherhood insinuates an 'incomplete institution' (to borrow Andrew Cherlin's phrase). I refer to step-motherhood as an 'incomplete institution' because step-mothers are "less family oriented and have fewer positive personality characteristics (e.g. patient, caring, dependable, wholesome) and more negative personality traits (e.g., unkind, unreasonable) when they are compared to biological mothers" (Sanner& Coleman 2017). Thus, there is no doubt about the mythical nature of step-motherhood: an evil character, whether in this article or elsewhere, and even beyond the discussion of step-mothers' characters, behaviours, and attitudes. Speaking of the stepmother's relationship with children, Glenn Clingempeel, Eulalee Brand, and Richard Ievoli (1984) state that "stepmothers have more difficult relationships with children," even with their husbands. One among the women interviewed by Sanner and Coleman (2017) promulgates that "the stepmother is never a good character, always evil, *always to damage the children*" (emphasis mine). What I may observe is that being a stepmother is not a justification for family damage; rather, one's inner behaviour and attitude result from day-to-day socialisation. However, changes may occur within a family, especially when the first wife does not accept the second wife.

Situating remarriage in the African context, it brings about changes in the lives of many adults and children (Willerstein& Kelly 1980). Of note, however, children in step-families are more traumatised and suffering from repressed feelings and anxieties (Webber 1988). There is evidence that inadequate studies have examined stepparent-stepchild relationships and

child development in stepmother families, where the child lives with a biological father and stepmother. Research indicates that children are particularly vulnerable to the stresses associated with remarriage (Clingempeel, Brand, & Ievoli 1984; Wallerstein & Kelly 1980). Building on the work of Clingempeel, Brand, and Ievoli, Andreas Komba and Davis Nyanda (2022) argue that familial space influences the formation of children's social identities in various ways. The dilemma of stepmother identity is evident in both private and public dichotomies. Subsequently, stepmothers often find themselves in the paradox of having an inconsistent identity (Dianton 1993). Using familial space, where the step-mother (Mama Kabula) mostly socialises with her biological daughter (Kabula) and step-daughter (Wema), the narrative reveals the 'paradox of inconsistent identity' of a stepmother. It is an inconsistent identity because the stepmother's character and/or actions are dynamic; her character and/or actions change depending on the circumstances, needs, mood and ambition at the moment. It is impossible to predict a stepmother's actions or character. For example, there is a scene in the narrative where Mama Kabula acts very humbly to her step-daughter. Yet, unexpectedly, Mama Kabula changes her mood and starts beating her step-daughter as soon as she doesn't find what she wanted from her stepdaughter, Wema (p.146).

The representation of stepmother's character – 'as less affectionate, good, fair, kind, loving, happy, and likable, and more cruel, hateful, unfair, and unloving' on the side of her step-daughter and more affectionate, good, fair, kind, and loving on the side of her biological daughter on other hand in Lubacha's *If She Were Alive* embodies what Sanner and Coleman call 'motherhood hierarchy' in which biological mothers are superior to step-mothers (ibid.). In literature, parent-child interpersonal processes are represented by four types of parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indulgent (Fine & Kurdek 1992). In the context of step-mothering, Mama Kabula, being the primary agent of socialisation, parents her daughters (both biological and step-daughters) authoritatively with sorts of favouritism. Nevertheless, the incompleteness of the institution of step-motherhood is a valid reason behind such treatment. Christy Williams points out that a stepmother finds herself competing with her stepchildren for the very resources for which she married (2010). In this article, therefore, I explore the effect of step-motherhood in stepmother-stepdaughter and step-sibling relationships, referring to Mama Kabula (a stepmother). Nevertheless, Mama Kabula's attitude towards her stepdaughter (Wema) can be seen as a stepmother's way to ensure survival for her own biological

daughter (Kabula). This is revealed in the text where Wema insists that Kabula go home so that they can eat together. However, Kabula's response, "I have mom, I don't have to worry" (p. 36), attests to her assurance of survival in the presence of her biological mother. It is Wema who has no mom, so she has to worry about food (ibid.). In this context, the implication is that a child experiences less difficulty in a stepfather family. This is even noted in the circulated *memes* in social media (TikTok) where in one of the accounts, there is a statement posted which states that: "Stepfather can raise you, but stepmother can chase you out of your father's house". Here, within the context of step-fatherhood, Kabula is equally well raised (by Daudi, the stepfather) as Wema, whose Daudi is her biological father. In contrast, the situation is worse for a stepchild in a stepmother family, especially a girl child.

In this bildung narrative, Lubacha uses a third-person omniscient narrator who recounts a miserable life experience story of a young female child (Wema) in her stepmother-father family. Here, my claim resonates with Andrew Cherlin's (1978) that family relationships become more complex because the new kin in a remarriage do not replace the kin from the first marriage. Always, remarriage allows new members in the biological family, which means "the child must share the parent with new adult and perhaps other children" (Webber 1988). The new members in the biological family often destabilise the old family unity and structure due to the increasingly complex step-sibling relationships at a tender age. The belief that stepfamilies should instantly love each other is mistaken because, unlike biological families that have family trees, stepfamilies have family forests (Visher & Visher 1978). Anger, tension and painful episodes in day-to-day socialisation always characterise the transition.

Furthermore, Øivind Varkøy (2010) explains that "bildung is about venturing away from oneself into the unknown, stretching one's limits to properly find one's true self […] it is a continuous development of a life-long journey". From the beginning of the narrative, we see Wema trying her best to discover her true self, despite her stepmother's character, which acts as a stumbling block to achieving her dreams. Wema escapes the tyranny of her evil stepmother as soon as she sees there is no other way, given her father's absence of almost two weeks (p. 54). Here, it is essential to note one thing about father-absent girls, despite the scarcity of studies on their relationships within and outside the family setting. Father-absent girls are believed to be harmful to the girls' social and emotional development,

especially within a step-mothering family. Focusing on father-absent girls, the social and emotional adjustment in father-absent children "reflect[s] stress and conflict at home rather than the effect of a missing father, *per se*" (Hetherington & Jan 1971). In this context, thus, fatherlessness is probably disadvantageous to children, especially girls. Throughout the narrative, we learn that Wema is experiencing hardship, particularly when her father is absent. There are different areas where the narrative reveals that Wema feels relieved in her father's presence. That is, her stepmother pretends to care and love in the presence of her biological father.

Similarly, as I critically examine the selected text, I notice how the author employs myth in his narrative. The representation of step-motherhood throughout the narrative is treated as a myth of the evil step-mother. Here, my observation aligns with Dainton's belief that there are two generic myths associated with step-motherhood. The first myth is that of the wicked stepmother, a concept propagated through fiction of all forms (1993, p. 93). Specifically, the myth used in this narrative is that of "Cinderella" by the Brothers Grimm. Let me now provide a succinct comparison between Cinderella and Wema's life in a similar context of a stepmother-father family. The story of "Cinderella" portrays Cinderella's happy life with her biological parents. Then her biological mother became ill and died. Her biological father remarried a second wife who already had two daughters with her first husband. The daughters had beautiful features, but were proud, nasty, and had wicked hearts. After the wedding had now been celebrated, and all three entered the house, *a difficult time began for the poor child* [Cinderella] ("Cinderella" p. 69; italics mine). Wema's miserable life started the moment her stepmother stepped into the house (p. 29). Her life is no different from that of Cinderella in the classic fairy tale. Cinderella's step-siblings are similar to Wema's stepsiblings in their characterisations – proud, nasty with wicked hearts. These similarities (both about Wema and Cinderella and their stepmother's relationships and their step-sibling characterisations and relationships) drive me to think through this line in the usage of the myth of Cinderella in my reading of the selected text. With the myth of 'Cinderella' in Lubacha's *If She Were Alive*, I think, it is better to discuss its effectiveness in the formal structure of the story as a whole. It is important to understand its significance in the development of the characters and organisation of the events in the narrative.

Modernist literature employs myth in a manner distinct from its earlier use, as a discipline for belief or a subject of interpretation, but rather as an

arbitrary means of ordering art (Beebe 1974).By myth, I mean not only the occurrence of traditional mythic stories and concepts derived from intertextuality, but also and more importantly, the specific evasive quality of the best artefacts, in modern terms, their "plurality"[1]. On the other hand, myths "are the imaginative distillation of its descriptions and prescriptions about what life is and/or should be" (Segal, 1983). From the outset, the narrative describes the background and environment in which the old and new wives reside. The narrator says: "Her [Wema's] home consisted of three houses that were built around a small lot. Two were grass-thatched; one was used as the kitchen, and the other, which was the oldest, was where Wema and her mother lived. The third house had a corrugated iron roof, and that is where Mama Kabula, her father's second wife, lived" (p. 3). This description in the narrative suggests the myth of the stepmother's power, abusiveness and selfishness in the stepmother-father family. The stepmother's power, instead of being a crystallisation of the hopes of the ill mother and her poor young daughter, Wema, who is burdened by domestic chores, is only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of the father's expectations. The fault that the father commits is that he does not know that "remarriage fathers are more marginal" (Hobart 1988) in the context of the stepmother-father family. Hobart further points out the reasons behind such marginalisation. He notes that "remarried fathers are marginalised because of having the outside attachments" (ibid.). The narrative portrays the father's (Daudi) attachment to *Bodaboda*[2]. Being his basic economic activity, Daudi tends "to be either inattentive or disengaged" (Skeen, Robinson & Hobson 1984) in family-related matters. This is a reason why Daudi does not know much about his daughters' socialisation during his absence (both biological and stepdaughters). In consequence, Mama

[1] I borrow Cornelius Buckley's definition because it helps build my argument. See Buckley's "Myth, Structure, and Significance in Literature", *Bethlehem University Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1984, pp. 32-47.

[2] According to Basil Ibrahim and Amiel Bize (2018, p. 77, the boda-boda [the name is commonly used in Tanzania] is a "means of transport, labour category, and economic subsector in the mid-2000s". For more information, also read Basil Ibrahim and Amiel Bize's "Waiting Together: The Motorcycle Taxi Stand as Nairobi Infrastructure", *Africa Today*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2018, pp. 73-92.https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.65.2.06 and Neema Urioh's *Contribution of bodaboda Business on improving the Standard of living among Youth in Tanzania: A Case of Ubungo District in Dar es Salaam*. 2020. Mzumbe University, MA Dissertation.

Kabula, a step-mother, takes advantage of her husband's unawareness of his daughter's socialisation to disrupt biofather-daughter and stepsibling relationships.

The concept of madness in Lubacha's *If She Were Alive*' also requires specific attention. It is essential to revisit the issue of psycho mapping of the idea of madness by situating the narrative within the context of a stepmother-father family. Children are often confronted with situations that conflict with prohibitive rules (Lagattuta,2005). Once young and hopeful, Wema has withered in the hands of the evil stepmother. As a result, Wema's escape appears necessary to her survival. Unfortunately, Wema's desire to return to school after her escape seems to reflect her madness in the face of her father's negligence rather than a full realisation of her dreams. Thus, her father insists that she not worry about schooling, as she indirectly compensates for the costs she causes at Mr. Mayala's house (p. 63). The head teacher, on the other hand, expels her from school (p. 81). Yet Wema's trick of getting back to school is simultaneous with guilt, as, acting mad, she is credited with her determination in fulfilling her dreams. There is no hope for getting back to school unless she acts mad. Since Wema is determined, she knows exactly what she wants to fulfil her dream. She has only one mission ahead, she thought: *by hook or crook, she must go back to school*. People's actions are motivated by their desires. Children's [Wema] willingness to refrain from doing what they [she] want in prohibitive rule situations is arguably grounded in their [her] beliefs about how people feel after obeying versus disobeying (Lagattuta 2005, p. 726). Once prohibited and expelled from school, Wema's angry fear of her stepmother and biological father has a cathartic effect, which demonstrates her madness but does not, in the proper sense, help her until she returns in reality with the help of the psychologist. Not only was madness fuelling her mission, but it also awakened the adults' understanding of children's needs, desires, emotions, and feelings. Ruth Webber notes that "[the] children go through the mourning process, whether or not they show it outwardly" (1988, p. 4). At this stage, Wema shows her anger and sadness outwardly in the form of madness.

Stepmother-Stepdaughter Relationship in Step-mothering Context

The Cinderella metaphor provides a benchmark for my discussion in this section. Here, the stepmother is treated as evil. In the context of evil step-motherhood, "step-children would [are] likely to exhibit mental, emotional

and interpersonal problems" (Ganong & Coleman 1984). Within the realm of this novel, I also contemplate the relationship between Wema's mental, emotional and interpersonal problems, being a stepchild with her stepmother's actions/character. Although the narrative portrays the stepmother (Mama Kabula) as employing "preventative strategies" (Goffman 1963), it reveals that the myth of the evil stepmother is commonly used to understand and conceptualise step-motherhood characters, actions, or behaviours. Lubacha's use of third-person omniscient point of view seeks to reveal the frustrations of stepchildren. From the onset of the narrative, the author creates an atmosphere that foreshadows the kind of life this young girl (Wema) will encounter. Before presenting the exact type of stepmother-stepdaughter relationships, the author teases out the bio-mother-daughter relationships. The bond between Wema and her biological mother suggests that the old family was a happy one. This is why [biological] motherhood is seen as a sign of achievement (e.g., able to make peace and unity for her family) and superior to step-motherhood.

Wema's family is distorted, and her miserable life starts as soon as the new mother enters their house, or else as soon as her biological mother dies. In an exploration of step-motherhood, the stepmother is often represented as less family-oriented. This less family-oriented connotation is a result of their failed first marriages and their characters. In consequence, they are regarded as unkind, less caring and unreasonable compared to bio-mothers. This is revealed in the narrative when Wema's *new* mother (a stepmother- Mama Kabula) bawls at Wema when arguing about washing dirty clothes soon or later: "But what? I am not like your mother who pampered you like a little pumpkin […] it was obvious to Wema that her step-mother was going to be a bush fire to her" (p. 29). This statement implies that a stepmother is unreasonable and less caring. Mama Kabula, a stepmother, does not want to listen to her stepdaughter's excuses. Mama Kabula's reaction to Wema's accident – breaking a plate during washing is to exclude her from eating (p. 53). For her, those excuses are like noises; whether they are reasonable or not, that is not her business. Wema had already presumed the fate which would befall her (ibid.). Through this statement, the novel reveals the evil character of step-motherhood at the onset after the death of Wema's biological mother.

In her "Introduction" from *Stepmothering* (1990) Donna Smith notes that in the context of step-mothering, the family is affected by the broader context in which it exists – society and its members may experience more or less

discomfort as a result, either in the small private context or the larger, public social context, or both (p. 2). In the context of family or private space, Asante Lucy Mtenje's "Patriarchy and socialisation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy Marang*" (2016) notes that mothers are the primary agents in children's socialisation (p. 63). Within the familial space, "children learn and acquire values and morals of society" through mothers who spend a lot of time with children (Komba & Nyanda 2022). Notwithstanding, Wema wonders whether Kabula's hateful behaviour is a coincidence or influenced by her mother (p. 32). The novel appears to portray Mama Kabula, a stepmother, as revealing the evil character of step-motherhood. As I noted earlier, Mama Kabula socialises her biological daughter (Kabula) and stepdaughter (Wema) differently. As a result, in one way or another, she impacts some of the hateful behaviour that ruins the stepsiblings' relationship.

The story of "Cinderella" reveals the evil stepmother myth as a global phenomenon. The story tells that a stepchild, Cinderella, had a miserable experience as soon as her stepmother entered the house. The narrator says: "After the wedding had now been celebrated, and all three entered the house, *a difficult time began for the poor child*" (emphasis mine). As Smith (1990) notes, in the context of step-mothering, family members may experience more or less discomfort. As soon as Wema's biological mother dies, she starts experiencing pain in her own biological father's house. Being aware of the reason behind her husband's changing behaviour – that is, stepmother's character, Wema's biological mother (Mama Wema), through a piece of a letter written before she dies, warns Wema not to hate her biological father. Mama Wema wrote:

> To you daughter,
> Your father came to visit me this morning. I am grateful for that but it's too late. I had already decided […] you asked me why we are poor. Your question broke my bones because I have no clear answer that would satisfy you. May be your father might have one […] please be a nice girl. *Don't hate your father. He loves you*! (p. 28; italics from the source).

Mama Wema knew her husband (Daudi) very well. She knows that Daudi's negligence, abusive and cruel behaviours are not his, but rather influenced

by his *new* wife. Here, I return to Goffman's concept of 'preventative strategies'. According to Dainton, preventative strategies are behaviours an individual uses to avoid negative perceptions (1993). Mama Kabula knows how to play with Daudi's mind and heart. Even when Wema complains to her father that her stepmother has stolen the 200,000/= left by her late mother, Mama Kabula calms him down and gives him thirty thousand shillings (p. 50). To avoid negative perceptions such as selfishness and theft, Mama Kabula decides to provide the money to her husband, Daudi. Mama Kabula has already declared that she would do everything to win Daudi's heart (p. 29). At this juncture, Mama Kabula knows Daudi's weakness. The narrative represents the father, Daudi, who appears to be unaware of his wife's behaviour, actions, or character, which are concealed under the guise of the *best second love from the second wife*.

Mark Fine's (1986) findings presented in "Perceptions of Stepparents: Variation in Stereotypes as a Function of Current Family Structure" (1986) suggest that "stereotypes of stepmothers are stronger than those of stepfathers" (p. 542) in the context of both step-fathering and step-mothering. Thus, the socio-emotional relationship between a stepmother and her step-daughter (Wema) is likely to be conflicting throughout as a result of the stepmother's stereotyping. This is because stepmothers are often portrayed as evil, a monstrous parody of the good mother (Jessica Hanselman Grey 2016, pp. 509-10). As expected within society, a biological mother is often considered a *good* mother. The narrative reveals that Wema had already heard [evil] stories about step-mothers (29). This implies that, from the onset, Wema constructed some stereotypes about her step-mother, Mama Kabula. The scene that reveals the [evil] stories about step-mother is "[…] when Wema accidentally bumped into her [Mama Kabula] making love to a man in the bush" (29). That is when Mama Kabula declared war against Wema and her biological mother (ibid.) as a way to protect her reputation and status in the face of her husband.

Some scholars argue that, in stepfather families, girls experience more difficulty with stepfamily living than boys (Amato & Keith 1991; Aquilino 1991; Hetherington et al. 1985, among others). However, in this section, I argue that the fundamental problem in these studies centres on the myth of Oedipus and the Oedipus complex, which leads to "father-daughter (brother-sister) incest and the victimisation of women" (Dorothy Willner, 1982) in families where a father is the head of the household. But, in the children's socialisation process, mothers play a significant role. In other

words, in the context of step-mothering, I plausibly argue that girls experience more difficulty with stepmother-father families. Convincingly, Norejane J. Hendrickson, Deborah Perkins, Sylvia White and Timothy Buck (1975) note that the father-daughter relationship is positive and consistent. This is what we observe: the positive relationship between Daudi and his daughter, Wema. Extrapolating from Jill Scott's conception of *the Electra complex, the stepmother conflicts with her stepdaughter* to win her husband's heart. The father's heart is always dedicated to his daughter. Willner discusses the myth of Electra and her mother (mother–daughter relations) from a feminist perspective. She notes that Electra is abused, hungry, and in rags. *Her mother hates and fears her*" (1982, p. 68; italics mine). This means that the nature of [step] mother- [step] daughter relationships is always characterised by hate, fear and competition. Their relationship is always problematic and complex. It is unpredictable. Joanna Courteau defines the *Electra complex* as:

> [t]he development of a girl's fixation upon her father [is]simultaneous with the development of an antagonism and hate toward her mother. In Freudian psychology, the Electra stage in female development is equivalent to the Oedipal stage in the male development, in which the mother becomes the ultimate object of a son's attachment, while the father becomes the source of envy and hate. The original attachment to the mother experienced by both males and females prior to the Oedipal/Electra stage, considered by psychologists as pre-Oedipal attachment, affects the Oedipal/Electra stage with results that are quite different for males and females. *The female child comes to hate the mother whom she is unable to conquer because of a deficient anatomy*, for which she blames the mother, while the male child comes to hate the father because the latter becomes the direct rival for the mother's affection. (p. 1; emphasis mine)

In this context, the stepmother's hate and fear are a result of her infidelity and abuse in the family. Similarly, [Wema's] hostility toward her stepmother is explained as a result of an attempt to reveal the infidelity of her stepmother, who had an affair with a man in the bush. Probably, apart from many other evil stories Wema had heard about her stepmother, the one about infidelity increased their hostility because Mama Kabula was determined to protect and win Daudi's love at any cost. Thus, the step-

mother (Mama Kabula) had to suppress all signs of social relationship between Wema and her biological father (Daudi) that would, by any means, reveal her infidelity. In "Spending Time with His Kids: Effects of Family Structure on Fathers' and Children's Lives" (1996), Elizabeth C. Cooksey and Michelle M. Fondell observe that fathers may be less involved in the lives of their children [daughters] for a variety of reasons (p. 693). One good reason is marginalisation in stepmother-father families. Fathers are marginalised in different ways, such as being denied access to socialise with their children. Hence, he becomes unaware of what is going on in the day-to-day socialisation of his children or family in general.

Stepsibling Relationship in Step-mothering Context

By using a third-person omniscient narrator, the narrative effectively represents the complex and problematic nature of stepsibling relationships within a stepmothering family. Wema and Kabula's relationship is complex from the onset of the story. Their relationship, in most cases, is influenced by their mother, a stepmother. As Williams (2010) points out, the actions of Stepmother remain consistent with those identified in the fairy-tale canon stories, such as "Cinderella". But in changing the context of those actions, stepmother (Mama Kabula) favours her biological daughter (Kabula) and mistreats her stepdaughter (Wema). Consequently, their relationship is characterised by competition, rivalry, and threat (Duberman 1973). There is evidence that the stepsiblings' relationship is the outcome of their mother's actions/character. Wema admits that Kabula's silly tendencies didn't just prevail at home but also at school. They act vengefully toward each other as if they did not belong to the same father (p. 8). In school, for example, Wema and Kabula frequently fight. There is a scenario in the narrative where Wema and Kabula have a serious fight (p. 36). The influence of a stepmother is identifiable in step-siblings' aggressive behaviours toward each other because, according to Paula Fomby, Joshua Goode and Stefanie Mollborn, "aggressive behaviour occurs more frequently among children residing in stepfamilies" (2016, see also Webber 1988; Person et al. 1994; Ram & Hou 2002). However, in most cases, Kabula exhibits her aggressive behaviour because she has experienced what Fomby and Cherlin call "multiple transitions in family structures" (Wema 2007). Fomby and Cherlin add that the multiple transitions may include "parents' separations; a cohabiting romantic partner's move into, or out of, the home of a single

parent; the remarriage of a single parent or the disruption of a remarriage" (Fomby & Cherlin 2007). Some of these elements are evident to Mama Kabula. Instead of becoming a *good* stepmother to Wema, she mistreats her stepdaughter and worse, she disrupts the peace, love and unity that existed before she was welcomed into the house.

In presenting the theme of the stepsibling relationship, the novel underscores the influence of step-motherhood as one of the driving forces that perpetuates the rivalry and hate between these stepsiblings. Kenneth Corvo's and Kimberly Williams' findings reported that 79% of students [children] are living with their mother or stepmother. This finding awakens society to think about the dynamics of parental influence and substance abuse that may be associated with aggressive behaviours (2000, pp. 2 & 7). Through Mama Kabula, the stepmother, the narrative reveals the significant influence a stepmother can have on the entire family. Knowing the power of influence she has on these stepsiblings and their father (Daudi), Mama Kabula suppresses all the attempts made by Kabula to inform her father about the fight they [Wema and Kabula] had at school as well as between Wema and Mama Kabula at home. On the other hand, the narrator seems to blame the father, who does not care about his daughters' day-to-day socialisation during his absence. For example, whenever Kabula tries to hint at something about the fights at school, Mama Kabula interrupts. Here, the strategy applied by a stepmother (Mama Kabula) aims to deceive her husband (Daudi) into not realising the nature of the relationship between his daughters (the stepsiblings' relationship). For the stepmother, this is a 'preventive strategy' which helps her to hide her true self. To borrow Wallenstein's and Kelly's phrase, the "ameliorative impacts [behaviours]" of a stepmother influence the continuing negative quality of stepsiblings' relationships. Bulks of research show that many children in stepfamilies struggle with "issues of loss, separation-individuation, allegiance and self-worth" (Stanton 2004, p. 203). To compare these struggles with the age of a child, one may conclude that the representation of Wema's plight in the context of step-motherhood is obvious.

Along these lines, the plight of a child, especially a girl child, in the context of step-mothering cannot be ignored. It is argued that children in stepfamilies feel more rejected than those in biological families. This rejection leads to the plight of the child (ren) in the context of step-mothering. In complex families such as stepfamilies, the rights and responsibilities of family members are less specific, argues Laura Tach

("Family Instability and Complexity", 2015, p. 86). The narrative portrays Daudi as an irresponsible father, especially on the matter of his child's education. He even let Wema (his only biological daughter) work like *a donkey* in Mayala's house as a way to pay gratitude for the help they offered – they hospitalised Wema (p. 65). Moreover, when Wema escapes the tyranny of her stepmother, her father (Daudi) is satisfied with the simple explanations given by his [evil] second wife (Mama Kabula). Mama Kabula deludes her husband, knowing that he would not take any further action to find out Wema's whereabouts. As a result of his negligence, Wema is exposed to dangerous environments, such as the housemaid at Mayala's house and later at Sister Mihayo's room, where she ended up being raped by Sazulu. Wema's life experience in/Sister Mihayo's room is unbearable. It sometimes reminds her of life in Mayala's family, where she was chased away during the night. In Sister Mihayo's room, Wema witnesses a sex business conducted by her sister (Mihayo). It is an unbearable experience that Wema is only fourteen years old. Sometimes, Wema slept alone all night when the men took Sister Mihayo for a one-night stand (p. 95). This implies a kind of insecurity in young children, such as Wema, resulting from the father's absence. Visher and Visher admit that there are custody issues and issues of visitation, child support and alimony (1980). The father (Daudi) does not seem to care about his daughter. For example, when Wema had fully recovered, she had never seen anybody or even smelled someone's scent from home (p. 65). In a situation like this, one may expect Wema's father (Daudi) to visit his daughter several times. Unfortunately, three months passed without seeing anybody, even her father, whom we expected to care for his biological daughter. Wema was utterly flabbergasted by the kind of treatment she was receiving from her father. Wema had a feeling of abandonment and displacement, which is now so strong in Mayala's house. Here, there are two things to consider before concluding regarding Daudi's behaviour towards his biological daughter. Firstly, engaging in outside activities, such as *bodaboda*, was his primary economic activity, and secondly, the poverty in Daudi's family, where letting his daughter live in Mayala's house provided a chance for relief.

Furthermore, Wallenstein and Kelly noted that school-age children are vulnerable to the stresses associated with remarriage (see also Webber 1988). The day-to-day life with her step-mother at home includes many problems, which in turn are revealed in a public space (school as a public space). And, since members of a remarried household often have competing

or conflicting interests (Bernard 1956), the lack of consensual solutions can exacerbate these problems (Cherlin 1978). As a result, Wema's school life is full of misfortunes. For instance, Wema has already been labelled as a latecomer in her school (p. 13). However, this labelling is a result of the challenges associated with rivalry, competition, and conflict within the step-mothering family. One day, Wema arrived early at school and cleaned her portion of the school compound before parading. Since her life is full of misfortunes, Wema was sorted out among students who were dirty and punished three strokes (p. 34). Her appearance is a result of the blasphemous stepsibling relationship. Kabula tricked her stepsibling by not waking her up for school preparations, unlike Wema. Wema's misfortune reflects her plight, which suggests a significant loss in the context of remarriage. Thus, Webber advises teachers and schools to play a vital role in the life of a child experiencing the trauma of entering a new stepfamily (1988, p. 4). Teachers must understand students' traumatic experiences of any kind. Punishing a student for the same mistake every day sounds abnormal from the teacher's perspective.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the representation of the institution of step-motherhood as evil, hence incomplete. Owing to the idea of incompleteness of the institution of step-motherhood, it is necessary to rethink our general understanding and perception about the notion of 'evil stepmother'. The problem with society is that it tends to listen to and believe one story from one side. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in one of her TED Talks in 2010, reminds us about the danger of a single story. She says: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. *They make one story become the only story*". To connect it to the general understanding of the myth of step-motherhood as evil, I maintain that every biological mother is someone's stepmother as a result of death, divorce, and polygamy. The point I am making here is this: step-motherhood should be seen as an alternative to biological motherhood, where death, separation and divorce become the factors that lead to remarriage. The implication is that it is time to accept stepmothers as good second mothers. The evil character of one stepmother should not be a justification for the evil of all stepmothers.

References

Beebe, M., 1974, Introduction: What Modernism Was? *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 3, no.5, 1974, pp. 1065 – 1084. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3830997.

Bernard, J., 1956, *Remarriage, a Study of Marriage,* Dryden Press, New York.

Cherlin, A., 1978, Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 84,no. 3, pp. 634 – 650. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2778258**.**

Clingempeel, G., Brand, E and Ievoli, R., "Stepparent-Stepchild Relationships in Stepmother and Stepfather Families: A Multimethod Study", *Family Relations*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1984, pp. 465 – 473. https://www.jstor.org/stable/584718.

Cooksey, E. C., &Fondell, M. M., 1996, "Spending Time with His Kids: Effects of Family Structure on Fathers' and Children's Lives" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 693 – 707. https://www.jstor.org/stable/353729.

Corvo, K. & Williams, K., 2000, Substance Abuse, Parenting Styles, and Aggression: An Exploratory Study of Weapon Carrying Students, *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2000, pp. 1 – 13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45092283.

Dainton, M. 1993, The Myths and Misconceptions of the Stepmother Identity: Descriptions and Prescriptions for Identity Management", *Family Relations*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 93 – 98. https://www.jstor.org/stable/584928.

Duberman, L., 1973, Step-Kin Relationship", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 35, no.2, pp 284 – 292. https://doi.org/10.2007/350657.

Fine, M. A., &Kurdek, L. A., 1992. Adolescents' adjustment in stepfather and stepmother families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* vol.54, no. 4, pp. 725–736. https://doi.org/10.2307/353156

Fine, M. A., 1986, Perceptions of Stepparents: Variation in Stereotypes as a Function of Current Family Structure, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 537 – 543.https://www.jstor.org/stable/352039.

Fomby, P.,&Cherlin, A. 2007, Family Instability and Child Well-Being," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 181 – 204. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25472457.

Fomby, P., Goode, J. A. &Mollborn, S., 2016, Family Complexity, Siblings, and Children's Aggressive Behaviour at School Entry, *Demography*, vol. 53, no. 1,2016, pp. 1 – 26. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24756855.

Ganong, H. L. & Coleman, M., 1984, The Effects of Remarriage on Children: A Review of the Empirical Literature", *Family Relations*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 389 – 406. https://www.jstor.org/stable/584710.

Goffman, E. 1963, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Simon &Schuster, New York.

Grimm, W,& Grimm, J., 2014, *The Original Folk & Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm,* edited and translated by Jack Zipes, vol. 1, chapter 20(pp 68 – 77), Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Hendrickson, N. J., Perkins, D., White, S. & Buck, T.1975, Parent-daughter relationships in fiction, *The Family Coordinator*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 257 – 265.https://www.jstor.org/stable/583175.

Hetherington, M. & Deur, J., 1971, The effects of father absence on child development, *Young Children*, vol. 26 (4), 1971, pp. 233 – 248. http://www.jstor/stable/42643357.

Hobart, C., 1988, The family system in remarriage: an exploratory study, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 649-661. https://www.jstor.org/stable/352635.

Komba, A. M. &Nyanda, D., 2022, Familial Space and Children's Social Identity in Elieshi Lema's *Parched Earth: A Love Story*, *UMMA*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 115–134.https://dx.doi.org/10.56279/ummaj.v9i2.6.

Lagattuta, K. H., 2005, 'When you shouldn't do what you want to do': Young children's understanding of desires, rules, and emotions, *Child Development*, vol. 76, no. 3, pp. 713 – 733. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3696461.

Lewis, C,& Lamb, E. M, 2003, Fathers' influences on children's development: The evidence from two-parent families, *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 211 – 228. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23420449.

Mtenje, L. A., 2016, Patriarchy and socialisation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, *Marang*: *Journal of Language and Literature,* vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 63 – 78.

Ruth, W. 1988, Step–families. Item 12, *Research Information for Teachers*, no. 1, pp.1 – 4.

Sanner, C,& Coleman, M., 2017, (Re) constructing family images: Step-motherhood before biological motherhood, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 79, no. 5, pp.1462 – 1477. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26646070.

Segal, C., 1983, Greek Myth as a Semiotic and Structural System and the Problem of Tragedy, *Arethusa*, vol. 16, no. ½, pp. 173 – 198. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44630727.

Smith, D., 1990, "Introduction" *Step-mothering*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York.

Skeen, P., Robinson, B. E. & Hobson, C. F. 1984, Blended families: Overcoming the Cinderella Myth, *Young Children*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1984, pp. 64 – 74.https://www.jstor.org/stable/42724254.

Stanton, G. W., 1986, Preventive Intervention with Stepfamilies, *Social Work*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp 201 – 206. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23713196.

Tach, L. 2015, Social Mobility in an Era of Family Instability and Complexity, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 657, pp. 83 – 96.https://www.jstor.org/stable/24541793.

Varkøy, Ø, 2010, The Concept of 'Bildung', *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, pp. 85 – 96. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/pme.2010.18.1.85.

Visher, E., &Visher, J. 1982, Stepfamilies in the 1980s, *Conciliation Courts Review*, vol. 20,no. 1, pp. 15 – 24.

Wallerstein, J. S., & Kelly, B. J., 1980, *Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*, New York: Basic Books Publishers, New York.

Whitehead, K., 2016, Motherhood as a gendered entitlement: Intentionality, 'Othering', and Homosociality in the Online Infertility Community, *Canadian Review of Sociology*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2, pp. 94 – 122. https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12093.

Williams, C., '2010, Who's Wicked Now?' The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine, *Marvels &Tales*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 255 – 271. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41388955.

Willner, D., 1982, The Oedipus complex, Antigone, and Electra: The woman as hero and victim, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 84, no. 1, pp. 58 – 78. https://www.jstor.org/stable/675950.