



Relationship between Abstinence from Retrogressive Sociocultural Practices and Secondary School Students' Levels of Moral Growth and Development

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Abstract: Education is one way to impart moral consciousness in individuals. One of the marks of moral growth is abstinence from retrogressive socio-cultural beliefs and practices. The study investigated the relationship between reasons given by teachers and students for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices and their levels of moral development, based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The retrogressive socio-cultural practices were identified from Henry Ole Kulet's novel *Blossoms of the Savannah*, which was selected purposively. The research was descriptive comparative by design. The study targeted 2227 Form Three students and 620 teachers of English from national secondary schools from Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Elgeyo Marakwet Counties. From this population, 339 students and 59 teachers were sampled using Taro Yamane's formula and selected using simple random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires, focus group discussions, classroom observations and content analysis. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (version 25) program. Qualitative data was analysed thematically. From the novel, four retrogressive practices were identified, namely female genital mutilation, polygamy, patriarchy along with male chauvinism, and arranged or early marriages. From the findings, majority of students and teachers' reason at the post-conventional level of moral development, as evidenced from the various explanations they gave for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices. Therefore, teachers and students' reason beyond the perspectives of society and recognize that laws must be consistent with individuals' rights. Consequently, the government should select and approve literary texts as set-books that promote conventional or post-conventional level of moral reasoning in their readers.

Keywords: Teachers, Students, Retrogressive socio-cultural practices, Moral growth, Development

Koskey, J., Amimo, C. & Mooka, E. (2023). Relationship between Abstinence from Retrogressive Sociocultural Practices and Secondary School Students' Levels of Moral Growth and Development. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 7(2), 223 – 233. <https://doi.org/10.59765/ziek3941>

1. Introduction

Literature provides knowledge that is not stated in a subtle way (Tella & Akande, 2007). In an English Literature class, literary texts serve as an aid to teaching, help learners think for themselves, to be creative and are a means for imparting positive values in learners (Buckingham, 2015). According to Cherryholmes (2018), the textbooks approved for schools reflect the intended curriculum, as well as the promoted pedagogical approaches, either explicit (e.g., by presentations of concepts to be grasped)

or implicit (the nature and arrangements of exercises), and the hidden curriculum such as the values and meanings of dominant culture.

The manner in which teachers approach the subject of retrogressive socio-cultural practices in the English literature set books depends a lot on their perceptions of these practices. A study by Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy and Jusoff (2009) suggest that teachers should introduce their own points of view without forcing them on their learners, and allow students to have their own varied but reasonable

opinions. Accordingly, the teacher acts as a bridge and facilitator to better understanding because literature reflects social, cultural and economic values of the people residing in the geographical setting of the book. From the foregoing, a lot of effort has been made to examine retrogressive socio-cultural practices in literature, albeit less focus has been given to the reasons given by teachers and students for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices, and how these reasons reflect the students' level of moral development.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Various retrogressive socio-cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation, early marriages, circumcision and its associated teachings, virginity testing, thigh sex, polygamy, and other forms of initiation, continue to thrive in different regions of Africa (Rumsey, 2012). These practices are ingrained in culture and threaten the well-being and educational progress of especially girls and women (Oketch & Somerset, 2010). In Kenya, the government has outlawed such practices, and continues to use educational strategies to sensitize individuals and communities on the harmful effects of retrogressive practices. These educational strategies include the teaching of English literature in secondary schools, one of whose aims is to sensitize students against negative socio-cultural practices. It is unclear, however, if this aim is realized properly. No studies have sought to evaluate the relationship between the teaching of English literature set books and the moral development of learners in Kenya. According to Gachari (2012), often, the reading and interpretation of set books in Kenyan schools are grounded less on critical social issues and arguments than on theoretical or abstract concepts about literature. In light of this, the study sought to establish reasons the relationship between the reasons given by the teachers and students for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices and these respondents' levels of moral development according to theory of moral growth and development advanced by Lawrence Kohlberg (1975).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teachers' and students' attitudes towards retrogressive socio-cultural practices

Anastasi (2017) defines attitude as a state of mental being that involves beliefs and feelings and is a crucial concept in understanding human behaviour. Additionally, it is an emotion that has the capacity to make one react in a certain way when exposed to some stimuli. Abidin, Pour-

Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) aver that literature helps students to give an interpretation to life, understand the social and economic trends that shape their societies and helps them adapt to their different environments. Therefore, the manner in which teachers approach the subject of socio-cultural practices in English literature classrooms depends a lot on their perceptions of these practices.

Kemboi, Onkware and Ntabo (2019) studied socio-cultural factors that contribute to the spread of HIV among women and young girls in Keiyo, Kenya. They identified female genital mutilation as one of the leading contributors to HIV spread. Majority (60%) of the respondents affirmed that FGM was a major contributor to HIV spread among women and young girls. A significant number (40%) of the respondents believed that the removal of the clitoris reduces libido in a bid to prevent promiscuity and 23.5% believed that the clitoris is a source of deviant behaviour. The reviewed study underscored how FGM and related beliefs exposed women to health-related risks, which is of interest to this study.

Lotwel, Ongori and Gervasio (2021) examined socio-cultural practices that impair with women's participation in social development in Turkana County, Kenya. The study found that socio-cultural practices such as early marriages, polygamy, restriction of women from land ownership, marital status, and gender roles impeded women from participating in development. Lotwel *et al.* recommend that government and privately-owned organizations collaborate with the Turkana Community leadership and development groups to create sensitization and awareness of the importance of women's participation in development activities. The study further recommended that the Turkana community needs to abandon some beliefs that hinder women from participating in development and embrace new paradigm shifts and good practices for their social mobilization and participation in issues of socioeconomic wellbeing. The study was undertaken in Turkana community while the present study is based in the Maasai community as depicted by H.R. Ole Kulet in *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

Mtey (2017) studied the impact of socio-cultural constraints on Maasai girls' educational aspirations in Northern Tanzania. This was an ethnographic study that involved 30 participants drawn from the Maasai community. The study found that most Maasai girls and some members of the community perceived girl-child education positively. However, girls' aspiration to access education was constrained by various retrogressive socio-cultural beliefs and practices, such as early marriages and FGM.

Banks (2017) recommends that teachers should assist their learners to find balance within their national or local and global identities. He notes that among other problems facing the teacher of English literature, one of the common ones is to help students to identify, appreciate and relate with the cultural diversity in a literary text. He advises teachers to set the need to teach cultural diversity as one of the goals of literary arts education. Similarly, activities in the classroom should be done in such a way as to stimulate student's self-esteem and feelings of acceptance and inclusivity. It is therefore one of the duties of a teacher of literature to promote cultural awareness and diversity.

Obisesan (2020) examined student-teachers' attitudes, their cultural beliefs and problems they encounter while teaching children with disabilities in Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that the student-teachers' gender, educational background and nature of the school they attended were important variables that shaped their attitudes to teaching children with disabilities. The student-teachers' cultural beliefs also affected their attitudes. However, the problems they experienced in their teaching did not significantly shape their attitudes. Munyi (2012) also studied the influence of socio-cultural factors on teachers' attitudes to pedagogies in literary arts education. The study identified socio-cultural factors such as ignorance, negligence and superstition as influencers of pedagogical approaches in literary studies. These factors varied from one culture, region and community to another. These findings confirm the view that there is an implicit or explicit relationship between culture and attitudes vis-à-vis teaching methodologies (United Nations Division for Social Policy Development, 2012).

Chowdhury (2018) avers that the teacher is the agent who implements the contents of moral reasoning and, as such, promotes the continuity of values held dear by the community. He, however, observes that there is still no standardized measure that the teacher can use to ascertain students' attainment of moral values. Therefore, the teaching and learning of moral values is infused within main subjects such as science. The present study examined the teaching of morals through literary education, specifically the use of set books like H.R Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*.

According to Gallagher (2011), the teaching of moral values through literature makes it easy for the learner to acquire the desired moral skills and to integrate well within family, society, country and worldwide domains. Gallagher holds that literature promotes independent thinking among students, helps them distinguish right from wrong and guides them in making informed, mature and reasonable decisions. As such, morality is that aspect of life that is concerned with an individual's interests placed side by side with the interests of others. Moral competence,

according to Wachira (2014), is a person's ability to solve conflicts through in-depth thinking, the application of moral principles and discussions rather than through violence or trickery.

Beane (2012) is of the opinion that individuals should have knowledge of government, the constitution and civil rights. Further, it is imperative that students need autonomous thinking and open-mindedness to cultivate a culture of critical thinking (Turkkahraman, 2012). Nahmias, Coates and Kvaran (2007) also add that debates on morality, free will and determinism in schools help students to learn moral lessons by taking and defending diverse positions regarding emerging issues. However, Githaiga (2018) warns that students must be taught that personal freedom and free will come with consequences for which they must be ready to take responsibility.

Teachers should acknowledge – even if they disapprove of – students' motives or intentions (Noddings, 2017). Therefore, teachers should encourage students to express themselves freely and engage them in meaningful discourse. According to Boostrom (2018), students are part and parcel of the teaching-learning process and, as such, they should have a say in what and how they are taught. Therefore, it is important to give students a chance to think and speak freely about learning, which is one way to promote their independent thinking and reasoning. Lickona (2011) states that schools must be responsive to the needs of society; scholars cannot just sit back and relax while society is rotting away. He urges schools to help mould the character development of students, which will in turn create a morally upright nation. In a study in the United States, Lickona reported that a teacher in charge of discipline lamented that parents apportion blame on schools for students' indiscipline. Therefore, whenever students engaged in acts of indiscipline, parents would pose questions like: *What's happening to all the values you are teaching? When is your effort in the class going to be seen?* However, as Lickona argues, a child's first lessons happen at home. Therefore, it takes the combined effort of the parents, the community and teachers to shape children into morally upright members of society and citizens.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The research was hinged on the theory of moral growth and development as advanced by Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1975). He identified six stages of moral development and grouped them into three levels. These levels are universal, cross-cultural and represent transformations in thought (DeSantis, 2020). Those levels, according to Kohlberg (1975) depends on the way the individual understands norms, standards and expectations of society. The term conventional is derived from

conventions, which means rules, standards, norms and expectations. He based his theory on constructive, systematic stages of development, with each level sufficiently responding to moral dilemmas than its predecessor (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975).

3. Methodology

Descriptive comparative research design was used in this study. The target population was all public secondary schools in Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Elgeyo Marakwet Counties. There were 365 public secondary schools in Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Elgeyo Marakwet counties, with a total of 255,500 students and 620 teachers of English (Ministry of Education Uasin Gishu County, 2019). However, the study targeted 2227 Form Three students and 59 teachers of English from national secondary schools within the region. The three counties were purposively sampled. Stratified sampling was used to partition the schools into four categories: National schools, Extra-County, County and Sub-County schools. Purposive sampling was then used to identify all the national schools in each of the three counties. For the study, six national schools were purposively selected from the three participating counties. Each of these counties had two national schools hence the reason for purposive sampling. A sample size of 339 Form Three students was obtained using Yamane (1967) formula and selected using simple random sampling technique. The study used a questionnaire for students and teachers, focus group discussions for students and classroom observations to collect data. Face and content validity of instruments were ascertained with the help of university research experts.

from the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Kenya. A pilot study was also carried out to pre-test the feasibility of the instruments. The pilot study was carried out at two national schools, which were not involved in the main study. The researcher administered 180 questionnaires to students and 7 teachers at the two selected national schools which represents 10% of the sample size (Burton & Mazerolle, 2011). The results of the piloted research instruments enabled the researcher to determine the consistency of responses to be made by respondents and adjust the items accordingly by revising the items in the instruments. Data was coded using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the collected quantitative data. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Qualitative data was analysed and presented thematically. Ethical considerations made in the study included voluntary participation, anonymity of participants, confidentiality of the data gathered, originality of information and proper acknowledgement of cited sources.

4. Results and Discussion

The students and teachers gave various reasons for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices. Their reasons were then matched with the learners corresponding levels of moral growth and development based on Kohlberg's (1975) theory, namely: pre-conventional, conventional or post conventional. Table 1 presents the findings.

Table 1: Students and Teachers' Explanations for Abstaining from Retrogressive Socio-cultural Practices

Level of Kohlberg's moral growth and development	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-conventional	30	26%
Conventional	23	20%
Post-conventional	61	54%
Total	114	100%

Pre-conventional level of moral growth

From Table 1, 26% of the students' explanations fell under the pre-conventional level. From the observations, finding revealed that 30% of the students and 20% of teachers' explanations fall under the pre-conventional level. From the focus group discussions (FGDs), it emerged that 32% of the students are categorized as at the pre-conventional stage of moral development.

Concerning FGM, the students mentioned the following reasons for abstaining: *FGM causes mental and physical pain to the victims; I would not allow my younger sister to be forcefully circumcised or get married early because of trauma associated with such practices, and the thought of FGM is too scary. I do not want to undergo that pain and emotional trauma.* On their part, the teachers had this to say: *exposure to other Kenya cultures while studying at University has taught me that some practice such as FGM demean a woman and expose her to an early grave; the*

risks involved with FGM outweigh the benefit, no need to awaken sleeping demons; all lives matter, including the girl child's. She must be protected by all means from archaic social practices, as a teacher and mentor, I will stand by this rule and principle.

In regard to planned or early marriages, the students had this to say: *planned marriages make young girls vulnerable to early pregnancies and death during the childbirth, and parents who sell off their young children in exchange for cows and goats are selfish and should find other ways to enrich themselves.*

On polygamy as a retrogressive practice, the students said: *polygamy brings hatred, jealousy and enmity in the home among wives and their children; polygamy leads to poverty because it drains the family resources, especially if it is only the husband providing for his family. On their part, teachers gave the following explanations: polygamy is acceptable in African traditional system yet outlawed in civic law. Despite this confusion my self-worth and self-discipline cannot allow me to engage in a polygamous [marriage]; polygamy is a source of constant squabbles, raw envy and outright back-stabbing among family members. I do not have the emotional and mental energy to be part of this kind of arrangement; the shame and embarrassment that accompanies a second wife. I do not want to find myself playing second fiddle in polygamous marriage and being a laughing stock among my peers; polygamy is an open invitation to terminal diseases like HIV/AIDS. Women will also lack sufficient emotional security in such unions. Monogamy is the way to go; the frictions that is in polygamous marriage will put a drain on my mental well-being. I love my peace of mind and no marital union will spoil this for me; as a woman, I love attention and security and protection, I cannot get this in a polygamous marriage where these attributes are shared; I can get all I want in one wife, polygamy cannot work for me; men were created to provide, not to share love in polygamous marriages, monogamous marriage is easier to provide for in terms of basic need, and constraints arising from polygamous homes and marriages lead to poverty like long diseases such as hypertension, mental issues like stress and depression and also sibling rivalry because of competition and trying to out-do each other.*

Conventional level of moral growth

Additionally, 15% of the explanations given by the students were within the conventional level. The results from the observation showed that 21% are at the conventional level. From the FGDs, 18% of the students' and 22% of teachers' explanations corresponded with post-conventional stage of moral development.

Concerning FGM, students had the following to say: *we have been taught by our teacher that FGM is wrong and should be done away with. The teachers also had this to say for abstaining from FGM: FGM is outlawed in Kenya and the world over. I did not go through it, will not allow my daughters to get cut; FGM is illegal in Kenya and so is across the County; I would not accept it on matters principle; I love live. I would not accept any call to get genitally mutilated. There is a logical and legal reason why it was changed from female circumcision to female genital mutilation.*

As reasons for abstaining from early and planned marriages, the students mentioned the following: *children are protected by constitution and therefore should get married at the legal age, and women's rights are human rights – no one should forcefully marry off an underage girl until she is ready and within the legal age frame. The teachers also gave the following explanations: early marriage means marrying off a girl who is below 18 years legally, this is still a child and it is an offence in the laws of Kenya, and children should at least complete high school as basic in Kenya is free before they can even think of marriage. The constitution and Children's Act is clear on this.*

Regarding abstinence from patriarchy and male chauvinism, the teachers had these to say: *Male chauvinism is a social evil. It is classic example of an emotionally immature man. This makes it wrong, it must be buried and forgotten; chauvinisms and patriarchy do not define me. I respect women and believe in equality for both gender where both the male and female voices have an equal opportunity to be heard; by nature, man was born to lead, however he should realize that a good leader incorporates all those under his charge; he seeks their opinion and brings everyone on board. This should apply within the home-front so that patriarchy and male dominance are considered a case of closed files.*

On why they would abstain from polygamy, the learners had this to say: *the bible says one man, one wife; the society I live in is very judgmental and will not approve of my decision to get married early since I do not want to be talked about, and man and woman are created in God's image, and society should adhere to this concept and live by gender equality rule for all in marriages and within the family concept. On their part, teachers mentioned the following explanations for avoiding polygamy: As a firm believer in Christianity, the bible warns against polygamous unions. I do not want my children, though I am not married yet, to be cursed like the children of Hagar in the Bible; the law is very clear on marriage: polygamy is unrecognized in the Kenya legal law.*

Post-conventional level of moral growth

Lastly, the majority of the students (52%) gave explanations that showed they were at the post-conventional level of moral growth, in line with Kohlberg's (1975) theory of moral growth and development. The findings from the researchers' observation revealed that 49% of the students are at post-conventional level. From the FGDs, the majority of the students (50%) and teachers (58%) gave explanations that were classified under the post-conventional stage of moral growth and development. Therefore, majority of the students were at the post-conventional level of moral growth and development.

Among these explanations, those touching on FGM were: *FGM has been outlawed' it is illegal in Kenya to carry out FGM; FGM is a depravation of one's basic human rights because it is often forced, and FGM deprives girls of their childhood because they are forced to woman up before their time. On their part, the teachers had these to say: FGM is still practiced in my community/native village. I have seen it destroy lives of young girls. It is all wrong. I had to relocate to urban setting to escape FGM I cannot tolerate it and none of my children is getting mutilated.*

Explanations given by students touching on patriarchy and male chauvinism were: *male chauvinisms indicates that there is a lot of inequality in the home and this is not right; patriarchy is a sign of gender imbalance, women need to be heard in the home, just be seen; a husband who is chauvinist will turn his family against him and the family may thrive in chaos; male chauvinists are selfish, they must know that women too have a right to be heard and speak out, and as a male child I should be able to control my ego and not let it go beyond the normal because it will bruise the dignity of my future wife and daughters.*

The teachers also gave their explanations for avoiding patriarchy and male chauvinism as follows: *as a man I didn't believe in male superiority. I can still show my manliness and yet still have some respect for the women/girl child; male chauvinisms and patriarchy always have a tendency to gravitate towards gender-based violence which is wrong; men should stop looking at women as immature and incapable of reasoning on their own. This is why I cannot clap for male chauvinists and patriarchy family set up; I made a vow to myself not to subject my family to the unnecessary evil of patriarchy and male chauvinisms. Only a sadist would do that; male chauvinisms and patriarchy are for weak men. A man worth his name will change the narrative and treat his women better; chauvinism and patriarchy no longer define the modern man. A 50/50 relationship between both genders in marriages should be encouraged; nowadays*

families define the middle-path, a combined effort of both patriarchy and matriarchy. This doesn't mean that man as the head of home has been disgraced; it takes too much energy and masculine strength to exhibit male chauvinism to vulnerable and undeserving women. I will not let chauvinism make me a bad man. Women deserve at most respect and should equally be seen and heard in the home; it is right to teach the boy-child to show their emotions and not to cry behind closed doors, this will help foster positive masculinity and eventually erase chauvinism and the deep-rooted patriarchy in our Africa homes.

Concerning, early or planned marriages, the following explanations were given by the students: *everyone should use their intellect to decide for themselves who they should get married; early and forced marriages will make children grow old physically too fast and deprive them of their childhood; I will marry when I want; not when my parents, family or clan decide for me, and I was not brought to this world to be forced into marriage. I have bigger plans and ambitions than this. I must first graduate then get married to a man I love. On their part, the teachers had this to say: early forced and planned marriages demean the dignity, intelligence and value of girl child; girls have the capacity to decide for themselves who to get married to, this is what I teach my students and all young people whom I mentor; parents are not right all the time. Children should be allowed to make their own personal decision in matters regarding marriages when they are of age. As a parent I can only guide not enforce my rules on my daughters; planned marriages are no longer viable. It has been overtaken by time. It belongs to past and should remain buried in the past. What worked for the old generation no longer has its place with the current new – breed generation of technology-savvy children; early and forced marriages is wrong because it means denying the child their right to enjoy childhood. It deprives the child of the treasured things as childhood memories. I would have missed this had I been married off while still young; early forced or planned marriages takes away one's freedom of choice and associations. Nothing justifies marrying off a girl at a tender age; I would not want to marry off my children while still young because I want them to grow into confident empowered and focused women before they can decide on their own when and who to get married to; it is unjust to marry off a girl while she is underage to a man she has no feeling for marriage should be a mutual agreement between two consenting adults and should be based on love not hurried or forced; early and planned marriages means early pregnancies and early child birth. This exposes the young mother to childbirth risk such as fistula, obstruction of labour, infantile mortality and even loss of the young mother. This practice of marrying off children while still young should be curbed; forced marriages lowers the self-esteem of the girl, worse it is in*

young/bellow 18 years old. She loses confidence in herself and in these who forced her to get married against her wish. No woman should live her life in such a manner.

Students' explanations given on avoiding polygamy were: *we are living in modern times, people should embrace modernity and stop marrying many wives who they cannot provide for; I love myself too much to get married as second wife, and polygamy and forced marriages are archaic and no longer applicable in today's world, this is a digitalized era and we should move within the family concept.* On avoiding polygamy, the teachers said the following: *I am a product of a polygamous home, my father showed us how to live in harmony with one another. However, such kind of arrangement has no place in this present moment; it is out place and moribund. As a role model to many young men and women. I feel it is my duty to lead from the front and stay in one-man-one-woman marriage; maintaining more than one wife is expensive, considering how crazy the economy is. I would prefer one wife when I can easily provide for without straining myself too much, and polygamy wears down the husband physically also suffers too much financial drain because he has to provide for many mounts all at once.*

Discussion

Henry Ole Kulet, in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, interrogates various retrogressive practices that were prevalent in the traditional Maasai community. A close reading of the text revealed four practices, namely FGM, polygamy, patriarchy along with male chauvinism, and arranged or early marriages. Majority of the study respondents showed disdain for these practices for a number of reasons. It was shown that these practices inflict trauma on women and expose them to health risks. They also deprive women of their human right, especially the volition to make decisions regarding their bodies, whom to love and marry. Other practices such as polygamy contribute to instability of the family and society.

The above findings affirm those of other scholars. For instance, in a study in Keiyo community in Kenya, Kemboi *et al.* (2019) also found that FGM exposes women to risks of HIV infection. Among the Turkana people in northern Kenya, Lotwel *et al.* (2021) found that socio-cultural practices such as early marriages, polygamy, restriction of women from land ownership, marital status, and gender roles impede women from participating in development. Similarly, among the Maasai people, Mtey (2017) found that girls' aspiration to access education was constrained by various retrogressive socio-cultural beliefs and practices, such as early marriages and FGM.

Ideally, the findings of the study suggest that the least number of the respondents and at the conventional level where they pay adherence to rules, norms and social conventions of the home, society, county and international conventional, for example human rights and gender equality movement. It was also shown that a significant number of respondents reason at the pre-conventional level. Here, they act out of fear of punishment if they indulge in retrogressive socio-cultural practices such as infertility, fear of death, being ridiculed by their peers for getting married as second or third wives, fear of rebuke from God and the church, the fear contracting HIV/AIDs and the post-trauma effects of these practices. Nevertheless, majority of respondents were categorized under post-conventional level. This is the highest level of reasoning, according to Kohlberg (1975). The respondents are aware of their rights and act because it is the right thing to do. They choose to abstain from retrogressive socio-cultural practices because they want to embrace modernity, are focused and determined, believe that these practises are archaic/outdated, are demeaning to their victims, they believe in freedom of choice and association and they embrace human dignity and respect for all.

From the findings based on the reasons for obtaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices, a significant number of the students and some of the teachers were categorized as falling under the pre-convectional level, according to the Kohlberg's (1975) theory. This stage marks the time prior to an individual's fully understanding the expectations of the society in terms of norms and standards (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). These students and teachers are more focused on the consequences that their right behaviour will bring to their own interest. At this level, individuals show a little or no interest in the needs for others and, even so, only to the extent where it furthers their own personal interests.

The perspective is individualized as more of 'scratch my back and I will scratch yours' (DeSantis, 2020). Students and teachers who fall under the pre-convectional level, therefore, act because they want to avoid punishment; their interest in others is not due to loyalty or an inborne kind of respect for their rights or dignity. All their actions are done in order to first serve their own personal interests and needs. Based on Kohlberg's (1975) theory, society has social rules and regulations aimed at guiding the individual to exhibit the preferred values and norms. Those who break these rules and regulations are punished by the society. As such, individuals will try to be self-disciplined because they fear punishment, not because they understand the expected values. For such individuals, physical consequences determine their goodness or badness (Setiawan, 2018). The author uses pre-conventional reasons to show how deeply rooted these practices are and

the punishments alongside the rewards that come with adherence to the practices.

The second level of Kohlberg's theory of moral growth is known as the conventional. From the findings of the study, based on the reasons given for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practices, a number of students and teachers were categorized as falling under the conventional level. According to Blatt and Kohlberg (1975), individuals at this level judge the morality of an action by taking into consideration what the general society has to say and its expectations concerning the actions. The individual has full basic understanding of conventional morality and appreciate that norms and connections are necessary for the continued existence of the society (DeSantis, 2020). Based on the findings, students and teachers who are at this stage of moral reasoning will first judge the morality of an action by critically evaluating its consequences regarding the person's relationship. In so doing, they may get inclined to exhibit values such as mutual respect, a grateful attitude and abide by the 'Golden rule'.

The determining factor for the conventional level is what the action is intended to achieve. It contributes greatly to moral reasoning (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). Further, students and teachers who are at this level fully understand, appreciate and conform to the expectations of family and peer groups. Their level of moral reasoning, therefore, beyond the need to be approved by others. They recognize that the needs of society transcend those of the individual and adhere to the expectations of the laws and social conventions because of the role they play in keeping a functional society (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). Teachers and students at this stage can develop a more abstract understanding of their experiences through self and social reflections and reading extensively to gain more knowledge. Additionally, community meetings convened to discuss human and moral values with an emphasis on how to establish collective norms to live by would help. Teachers and students should be given a chance to participate in such meetings to air out their views on their experiences and discipline in schools. According to Nucci and Ilten-Gee (2021), community meetings would help elevate rules and social norms that are concerned with justice and enforcement of rules.

The findings, based on the reasons given by teachers and students for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural practice, indicated that majority of the students and teachers reason at the post-conventional level. Ole Kulet (2008) uses characters such as Taiyo, Resian, Nabaru and Minik to highlight post-conventional reasoning. These are the female characters who contested the retrogressive socio-cultural practices mentioned in *Blossoms of the Savannah*. All through the novel, these characters are

portrayed as assertive and refuse to undergo the cut or get married off as second and subsequent wives. Minik in particular is labelled the 'wasp' and 'desperate spinster' for choosing to embrace modernity. These women, as portrayed by Ole Kulet, stand by their principles, act in fulfilment of morality and choose to do what is right in relation to their conscience. They can thus be classified as reasoning in the post-conventional level of moral growth. Therefore, as students read the novel, they can imbibe moral lessons from these female characters and opt to reason like them, thus exhibit good morals.

According to Blatt and Kohlberg (1975), the individual at the post-conventional level realizes that they are a separate entity from the society and their own perspective is viewed before that of the society. Similarly, at this level, the individual fully understands the rules and standards as expected by the society and their ultimate implications, begins to have an autonomous attitude towards matters of morality by developing a personal reflection on the universally accepted norms and values and their applicable essence (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). In addition, autonomous moral reasoning is attained, where the individual turns to trans-cultural universal values either in the form of abstract principles of justice and respect or sentiments such as compassion and empathy (Huan, 2006).

The post-conventional level is also known as the principled level, and is made the fifth and final sixth stage of moral development. In this stage, individuals exhibit differences in opinions and values, which must be respected and honoured without partiality. Laws are looked upon as social contracts and those which do not work for the common of the individual should be changed to meet the needs of the majority (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). In stage six of moral development, according to Kohlberg (1975), moral reasoning is based on abstract whose foundation is the universal ethical principle. Laws have a grounding towards and committed to justice and there is an inclination to disregard unjust laws. Moral decisions are made in an absolute way, not hypothetically or conditionally.

Additionally, an individual at this stage acts because it is the right thing to do, and not because it is expected of them, it is legally right, or it had been previously agreed upon. Kohlberg (1975) noted that though stage six of the post-conventional level exists, he could hardly find individuals who consistently applied it, indicating that people rarely reach this stage (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). It appears then that most of the teachers and students in the study have attained stage five of this post-conventional level of moral development. In this stage, an individual accepts rules and regulations because of the moral principles behind these rules, and acts in relation to their conscience (Kohlberg, 1975). The teachers and students at this level are capable of reasoning beyond the perspectives of the society. The

principles they have are applicable to all situations and societies. In tandem with this, such individuals have realized that their reasoning is separate from societal expectations and they can thus view their own perspective before that of society. Kohlberg (1975) aptly described this mode of reasoning the nature of self before others.

The majority of the respondents clearly indicated that they are capable of reasoning beyond the perspectives of society because the principles they hold are applicable to all situations and societies. They have realized that the laws that governed traditional societies, which permitted such practices as FGM, planned, forced and early marriages, polygamy, female insubordination to men, intolerance to gender parity and male chauvinism, are no longer viable because they are not consistent with the individuals' rights and the interests of the majority. Similarly, the major characters in *Blossoms of the Savannah* prefer education over retrogressive socio-cultural practices. Aspin and Chapman (2007) state that education should help individuals grow to the highest level of moral consciousness. Various scholars suggest that books approved for use in school should contain values that inspire moral development and humanness in learners (Setyono & Widodo, 2019; Pattiwael, 2019). Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah* sheds light on retrogressive socio-cultural practices in the Maa community. In so doing, the novel encourages both the students and teachers to discard retrogressive practices and instead adopt sound moral values that uphold and promote human rights and dignity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Henry Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah* interrogates various retrogressive socio-cultural practices that were prevalent in the traditional Maasai society. These include female genital mutilation, polygamy, patriarchy along with male chauvinism, and arranged or early marriages. Based on Kohlberg's (1975) theory of moral development, majority of students and teachers reason at the post-conventional level of moral development. They reason beyond the perspectives of the society and have realized that laws must be consistent with an individual's rights. This is evidenced by the explanations they gave for abstaining from retrogressive socio-cultural behaviours. These explanations include the fact that FGM has been outlawed and that it deprives girls of their childhood. They also regarded the presence of patriarchy in society as a sign of prevalent gender imbalances, and that male chauvinism is rooted in selfishness. Most teachers view patriarchy and male chauvinism as archaic and outdated practices. Similarly, they consider early marriages as forms of child

abuse, and that planned marriages deprive the individual the right to make decisions about the partner to love and marry. They also find polygamy demeaning to women, a source of unnecessary family feuds and financial struggles. The teachers and students instead extol education as means to liberating women from FGM, patriarchy, polygamy and planned early marriages.

5.2 Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development should select and approve literary texts as set-books that promote conventional or post-conventional level of moral reasoning in their readers. Such texts will go a long way in promoting optimal levels of moral development among students. The government should also strive to sensitize communities on the adverse outcomes of female genital mutilation, polygamy, patriarchy along with male chauvinism, and arranged or early marriages. Individuals and community-based organizations that work at the grassroots to fight such practices should be supported by the state and human rights agencies. The government should also enact and enforce more laws to curb the prevalence of retrogressive socio-cultural practices. County governments and local political leaders should be at the forefront in the fight against practices such as FGM and forced or early marriages. The Ministry of Education should institute programmes to encourage more communities to abandon retrogressive socio-cultural practices.

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