

Critical Thinking and Kenyan Women's Novel

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Introduction

Critical thinking, according to one of its numerous definitions, is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing information gathered from empirical experience. This process appears to be instrumental in literary research, which in this paper will be illustrated by the example of Kenyan women's literature.

Research problem

According to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, our educational system is supposed to teach skills in critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving. However, most of the students we admit at our universities lack these skills, presumably because of the way they are taught and examined with the emphasis being on rote learning, rather relying on "mechanical memory" than on analytical approaches. Universities further perpetuate this learning style, more enhancing "cramming" of information, rather than nurturing among the students the critical and creative approach to the studies material. This attitude is supposed to be changed for the purpose of bringing up a new generation of scholars and specialists with consciously inquisitive and creative lead-ups.

Rationale

In view of the above, this paper proposes an example of using an analytical approach in literary research, namely the selection and the use of critical theories pertinent to the material under study. For that purpose, the paper discusses as an example a research in Kenyan's women literature, using as the research material the works of an acclaimed woman writer.

Research Approach

Initially the scholar or student, undertaking the research, may start from a general definition of women's literature. Here it should be noticed, that generally women's literature may be defined as literature by women, about women and for women, for "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men" (Blain et al., 1990: 46), and "it is not a question of the subject matter or political stance of a particular author, but of her gender" (Smochin 2015: 94). However, it should be taken into account that this concept in the developing countries may be different from that in the, say, literatures of the West. As put by Audre Lorde already in 1980s, "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" (Lorde 1984:116). Thus, Gayatri Spivak in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts that "We should also welcome all the information retrieval in these silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology" (Spivak 1988: 295), meaning that the experiences of the "Third-World" women should be studied in the specific contexts of their respective cultures – which also applies to the reflection of these experiences in the works of women writers. A model of this culturally specific approach is proposed by Uma Narayan, who writes:

Issues that feminist groups in India have politically engaged with include problems of dowrymurder and dowry-related harassment of women; police rape of women in custody; issues relating to women's poverty, health and reproduction; and issue of ecology and communalism that affect women's lives. Indian feminist political activities clearly make feminists and feminism part of the national political landscape of many Third-World countries. I am arguing that ThirdWorld feminism is not a mindless mimicking of 'Western' agendas' in one clear and simple sense-that, for instance, Indian feminism is clearly a response to issues specifically confronting many Indian women. (Narayan 1997: 13)

As the beginning of the "empirical" stage, the researcher may choose the object of the research –

e.g., novels by a specific author. After getting familiarized with the primary texts, the next step is to gather, from various sources, information on two essential parts of the context of the writer's works – the historical environment of Kenya in the period corresponding to the author's creative activity (with an accent given to problems related to women) and (if possible) the biographical data on the author. After that, the available criticism on the chosen author should be collected and studied.

Conceptualization stage may be started with the selection of theoretical tenets, which, in case of women's literature, would most likely include historical, gender and sociological theories. Particularly, almost any research on the women's literature in the developing countries would involve the Post-Colonial Feminism theory. According to Raj Kumar Mishra, "The matter of fact is that postcolonial women refuse to remain passive and continue to bear male-oppressive environments. These women seek to emancipate themselves through education, struggle, and hard work. The postcolonial men re-colonized the bodies and minds of their women in the name of preserving their cultural values. Postcolonial feminism is primarily concerned with deplorable plight of women in postcolonial environment [...] Postcolonial feminists argue for women emancipation that is subalternized by social, cultural, or economic structures across the world." (Mishra 2013:132-3). And thus: "Postcolonial feminism [...] comprises non-western feminisms which negotiate the political demands of nationalism, socialist feminism, liberalism, and ecofeminism, alongside the social challenge of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by its institutional and legal discrimination: of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, child abuse". (Mishra 2013:130).

Along with Post-Colonial Feminism theory as one of the founding tenets, for the purpose of performing a culturally specific research (as called upon by the scholars quoted above), some other theoretical approach at prove to be instrumental – namely, New Historicism and Sociology of Literature. New Historicism, as put by one of its founders Stephen Greenblatt, "literature should be evaluated not in isolation but in the context of the times in which it was written and scholars must analyze a work of literature by understanding what was going on in the world at the time the work was written (69)". New Historicism allows to understand the work through

historical context (meaning also a wider context of culture) and to investigate the culture through its literature. It is directed at understanding literature in its larger social context and tracing how it works in society. According to Austin Harrington, works of art can serve as “normative sources of social understanding in their own right” (Harrington 2004: 207), since art is inevitably full of references and commentaries on the present day society. These references and commentaries would not only facilitate to comprehend better the social problems that the chosen works of literature are dealing with, but to attend to some other related issues – for example, they may be instrumental in tracing the specific audience of the works under research.

Applying these theories to the analysis of primary and secondary texts would enable the researcher to comprehend several cardinal issues: the author’s choice of specific thematic concerns in the context of a specific historical period; the general and specific audience that the author is targeting (Kenyan society – Kenyan women – specific age/professional/social group); the trend in women’s literature where the author belongs. This, in its own turn, would lead the researcher onto the higher level of conceptualization, where s/he will define the problems that the author addresses and the ways of solving these problems that she proposes, thus discerning the author’s message to the audience, her ideology. Comparative study of the works of other writers in the same trend would make it possible to outline the place/importance of the author on the general panorama of Kenyan women’s literature. The proposed method of research is illustrated in the paper by the example of the novels of Kenyan woman author Florence Mbaya.

Analysis of Mbaya’s works

The research on secondary texts – i.e., available literary criticism on Mbaya’s works – reveals primarily its striking scarcity; the only work found was the writer’s interview with the Kenyan reporter of the Xinhua news agency (see Relevant references section), there fore in this case the researcher’s analysis has to rely almost solely on the primary texts =====

A Journey Within (2008)

Mbaya's first novel, titled *A Journey Within*, actually sets up most of the traits that are developed in her later works. Although it features adult characters, the book mostly targets the younger audience, which was confirmed in an interview: "When the 52-year-old mother of three grown up children is not writing, she is giving talks to the youth, who her book *A Journey Within* passionately addresses. 'I visit schools and talk to students about career development and how they can make wise decisions in future. I am happy that they learn from my experiences,' she says." (Mengo 2011)

The book's plot is set in Kenya, and the story begins as Monika Saliku, the main character and a fresh Nairobi University graduate, is job searching. Like many fresh graduates, she hopes to get a job in one of the big government offices in Nairobi city, earn a good salary, and maybe later get to drive an official car.

She is rather shocked when she is offered a teaching job at Kostas Secondary School in Murwet, one of the remotest areas of the country. For a person who loves teaching, this would be a dream come true; but not so for Monika – she believes she is not cut out for a teaching profession, and, to make it worse, this is not what she trained for at the university. To Monika and her friends (and even her family), Murwet is really a no man's land. As people around her ask her what she is going to do (whether to take up the offer or not), Monika comes to a decision – she will go for the job if only to find out what is in it for her. She knows the time has come for her to make her own decisions. When asked why she would for such a job, she says: "I figured this was the point where I should start making independent decisions. Dilly-dallying on whether I like teaching or not isn't an issue until I can prove it to myself" (Mbaya 2008, 30).

But the story does not revolve only around Monika. There are other people in Monika's world – people she cares about and loves, like Stella her best friend, Miriam her sister and guardian, and later Max, with whom she will learn that true love exists after all. All these help her in the trying time she spends at the Kostas school. But the highlight of this story is Monika's ability to withstand the difficulties of living in a remote area, and she soon discovers she loves teaching, as

she later admits: “Teaching has become me... And perhaps what I needed was a little nudge to realize my potential” (163). Her determination to excel is also touching. As the head of the drama club, she helps put Kostas school on the national map when they win the national drama competitions.

It appears that the main idea that Mbaya advocates in her first book is that of gender equality, and, more so, inter-gender equity and support. A notable thing in the system of the novel’s characters is gender-wise equal distribution of their duties in terms of helping Monika. Thus, her elder sister Miriam provides Monika with constant and unrelenting support; her best friend and university mate Stella encourages her to her first and most important decision; colleague Elizabeth supports her efforts at the drama club; school matron Mama Lasei makes Monika’s life at school more comfortable. At the same time, men play no less important role in Monika’s life. Her colleague and future husband Max makes her life complete; school master Mulandi supports her career; Miriam’s second husband Mike, a European, gives her and Max new chances in life; local patriarch Mzee Ibrahim warmly welcomes Monika and facilitates her life in Murwet.

However, already in this novel Mbaya started to reveal her generally feministic standpoint, which will be considerably strengthened in her subsequent works. It becomes obvious in her daring attempts to fight the male chauvinism, still characteristic for contemporary Kenyan society. Monika’s junior sister Sarah, while visiting her at Murwet, “dares” to challenge a traditional preference of a boy child in the family. Speaking about Musungu, the son of their mum and their step-father, Sarah carpingly states: “Musungu is just a dumb-head... He cannot even spell the word “chlorophyll”, and yet he expects to join secondary school. Thanks God mother didn’t give birth to boys.” To her sister’s remark that “mama always hankered for a son”, Sarah replies nimbly: “Whenever she is enjoying her tea sessions with friends, they always compliment her [*for having only girls – AR*]. They tell her that boys just become rascals, or forget their parents as soon as they get married” (Mbaya 2008, 135-6). Later Monika herself has to put up a fight against the male chauvinism and frankpledge. When Mwendwa, one of the teachers in Kostas high school, is suspected of impregnating a student, his male colleagues, instead of starting the investigation, make feeble attempts to downplay the case. Monika

becomes furious: “I now realize how far men can go to save each other’s faces” (160), and under her scathing criticism the inquisition is finally made. Fortunately, the alleged culprit is proven guiltless – but this can not acquit the male gender in Monika’s eyes of its false self-esteem and aloofness, at last sporadic, to female problems (one of the “innocent victims” of her rage becomes even her sweetheart Max, whom she also reproaches severely: “Do I understand that you have no qualms about teachers seducing young girls? ... Sometimes I can’t believe I got mixed up with you!”).

Nevertheless, at the end of the novel Mbaya draws a picture of the life of bliss and happiness that all the characters well-deservedly enjoy – Monica and Max are getting married and advancing their education; Miriam starts successful business project with her Swedish husband Mike; schoolmaster Mulandi is re-united with his long-missing wife and two children. The novel ends with the summing sentence: “It had been a journey of sorts for Monika; a journey of challenges, heartaches, but best of all a journey of hope. There was hope for the staff and students of Kostas Secondary School, and the community at large.” There is hope for all Kenyans, if they follow the examples set by the novel’s characters, upholding gender parity, mutual respect and constructive relations – this seems to be the message that the writer puts to her readers (mostly young people).

Heritage High (2011)

Mbaya’s feministic sentiments become more obvious in her second novel *Heritage High* (2011). The action of the book is also set in a school environment – but this time it is a prestigious Heritage High School for girls (hence the title), two hundred kilometres from Nairobi, and the atmosphere in the school is rather far from the almost idyllic state of Kostas Secondary from the previous novel. The students of the school, from different regions and with different backgrounds, bring to the school their different problems – with one common trait: all these problems are caused by the letdowns of contemporary Kenyan society. The novel highlights the stories of four main girl characters, students of the Heritage High bound by friendship, and it is their friendship that helps them overcome the multiple challenges that society faces them with –

for, in fact, the stories of the four girls are those of four personal tragedies. Among those, the most notable are the stories of Jessica and Raelle – the oldest friends among the four, with “diametrically opposite” backgrounds and the respective problems caused by their social milieus.

Jessica, who grew up in the prosperous family of an NGO manager Jonathan Odari and his wife Grace, a nurse, suddenly discovers that the latter is her step-mother – her biological mother Lydia, currently a successful agro-economist, left her daughter in the hospital immediately after giving birth. Jonathan, the girl’s father, was hoping all along that he and Lydia would get married, especially after they had a child – but, despite all his pleas, Lydia declined his woos. She has just received a scholarship for continuing her education abroad, and this, as a pledge of her future career, is much more important for her. Of course, Lydia is punished for her cruel deed – several years later an illness rendered her childless, she does not have a family, and decides to look for her long-abandoned child. Her appearance in Jessica’s life causes the latter a lot of trouble, but with the help of her relatives and friends she is able to make her decision – her true mother is the one that brought her up; Lydia may be seeing Jessica once in a while, but she shall never pretend for the role of a parent. “There is a difference between giving birth to a baby, and nurturing, caring for her and protecting her from harm” (Mbaya 2011, 54) – this formulation, given by Grace to Lydia at their first meeting, and agreed by Jessica, defines not only the fate of Lydia as a failed mother, but also the maturity of the girl’s mind and character, despite her tender age.

Unlike Jessica, who is the older child in the family of only two kids, and the apple of the eye for her parents, her best friend Raelle comes from the family of six children in a coastal community. For the father of Raelle, his daughter is simply a commodity, which he intends to use for the increase of his wealth – since it is permitted (and even encouraged) by the community’s traditions. As Raelle confesses to Jessica, “I discovered my father had committed me to something without my knowledge... My parents have someone lined up for me for marriage already” (11). Mayeke, Raelle’s father, is not even stopped by the fact that his daughter is only fourteen years old. To Jessica’s comment, that this is against the law, Raelle answers bitterly: “My father is the lawmaker of our family, our clan actually, and he will use customs and

traditions to do and get what he wants” (12). As it turns out, what he wants is money – and he is even rather unwilling to waste it on his daughter’s school fees: “I think he is greedy,” Raelle said. “If it was not for my elder married sister, who was also married off at thirteen, I would not be in school. She paid for my first term tuition fees, and perhaps out of shame, or pride, my father has been paying, but reluctantly... When it comes to tradition, a girl’s education doesn’t count for much” (13). Jesse gives Raelle a valuable advice: “The only way you can refuse, or escape, is for you to strive to make it to university. Even the most entrenched tradition cannot survive the onslaught of an educated woman” (13). Raelle tries her best to follow her friend’s guidance, but her father has different plans – being afraid that his daughter’s university dream may one day become a reality, he simply kidnaps Raelle from school to the custody of her prospective husband. However, the idea of the “onslaught of an educated woman” is already deeply rooted in Raelle’s mind – she escapes from the shed, where her kidnappers keep her (in the process hitting one of them severely on the head), and reports the case to the police. Her father is arrested and imprisoned for 10 years; relatives disown Raelle, and she resides with her sister. She successfully passes the school examinations and hopes to make it to the university one day – her dream is to become a veterinarian.

As can be seen, in the stories of the two girls the author manages to outline rather clearly the main objectives of her militancy. Mbaya is obviously against the “over-heightened” feminism, demonstrated by Lydia, for whom her career is more significant than even the future of her child, and which in fact can rather be seen as the satisfaction of egoistic sentiments than “the road to empowerment”; in such cases, as she shows, the penalty is inevitable. At the same time, the writer is equally against the obsolete and ossified traditions that turn women and girls into a commodity of their husbands and fathers; of these, the writer is apparently has such a strong rejection, that she allows her character Raelle to resort to the violent actions and even to the help of the law. The recipe for success is the same – good education, further employment and stable family relationship, base on mutual respect and affection, as shown by the parents of Jessica, apparently the author’s ideal characters in the novel.

The educative value of the novel for the young audiences is really high, for, together with the illustrative stories of the main characters, the text is full of authorial comments (again, expressed through various characters) on different issues topical for today's youth – juvenile relationships, career matters, singlehood as an alternative, social role of women, women's share from the religious standpoints, arranged marriages, education, abortions, etc. The fact that all these issues are presented in a captivating and enjoyable manner, through the trustful voices of their age-mates and likeable characters of relatives and teachers, make the book a commendable contribution not only to the rapidly maturing Kenyan literature for adolescents, but to Kenyan women's literature as well – for it is the fostering of a new Kenyan women that Mbaya seems to set up as the principal task of her works.

Sunrise at Midnight (2015) ¹

A high-school student Abigail, heroine of Florence Mbaya's latest-to-date novel *Sunrise at Midnight* (2015), receives the first, and the harshest, blow in her young life from Richard, the elder brother of her best school friend Claire. "Richard has shown a lot of interest in her, and Abigail, happy to be appreciated, especially by someone she thought very handsome and from a good family, had accepted his amateurish advances" (Mbaya 2015, 10). Once, after a quarrel with her mother, Abigail ran to Richard's house – "She had felt he was the only one who cared" (13) – and he decided that the condition is ripe. Giving a poor girl a sleeping drug disguised as aspirin to cure her headache, Richard then took advantage of fully unconscious Abigail. The horror of teenage pregnancy was aggravated for Abigail, among other factors, by the fact that she did not know how it all happened.

The horror is later further exasperated by the fact that Abigail's schoolmates started to badger her, calling her names, of which a "mama-baby" was the most sparing. Richard, the cause of all her troubles, preferred to disappear – he allegedly escaped to Mombasa looking for employment (after failing at school), and Abigail's attempts to draw the attention of his parents to her distress were predictably unsuccessful.

For Abigail, salvation lay in the tender and understanding attitude of her relatives – first of all, her mother and her female cousin Constance – and her own determination to overcome all the hardships that befell her so suddenly, to bring up her newly born child and to complete her education. As put by Abigail’s mother Erica in one of her daughter’s hardest moments, “if you put your education on hold, you will end up giving up on it completely. Then, what will you do with your life? Get married?” (Mbaya 2015, 7). Unlike the old times, marriage is apparently no longer a panacea for the woman’s troubles – which Erica knows by experience, since her own husband Reuben deserted her when Abigail was a child – but education apparently is the remedy for these hardships. Erica herself went through almost the same plight as her daughter, but her situation was worse, because the times were different. “She herself had married Reuben when she got pregnant in school, but in her time such a misdemeanour had called for outright expulsion. She had been forced to abandon her education and get married, which she had regretted her whole life. She did not want Abigail to end up as she had, and going back to school was the only choice.” (40-41). Erica’s character itself is one of the role-model figures in the book – patient, caring and reasonable, she not only persuades her daughter to keep the child (“abortion is a murder”) and return to school, but also becomes her guardian saint in many other matters of life, from child-rearing to building the relationships with her supposed relatives.

Another guardian saint and role model for Abigail (and thus, as could be understood, for the readers) is her cousin Constance – a brave, determined, intelligent and highly modernised young woman (to the extent that she even uses a huge motorbike as her preferred means of transportation). She is focused on her work, she is single and does not hasten matrimony (“I am too busy with my work to have to worry about a boyfriend” – 83), highly educated and impressively self-confident. In fact, Constance’s character surprises even Erica, who asks: “I suppose that is what going to university does to you, not so? Makes a person knowledgeable and confident.” (78). On top of it all, Constance is a journalist, famous for her impartial and objective articles on burning social issues – some of these articles Abigail even pins on the wall in her room, because, as she confesses to her cousin, “I wish I could write like that” (84). Constance helps Abigail with securing a place in a new mixed school, where she is treated fairly and loved

by the classmates; she helps her re-acquire her self-esteem and confidence; and it is she who finds, through her newspaper, Abigail's lost father Reuben and helps him to get back home. "There seemed to be a gloom all over this house. Now, the sunshine seems to be coming back, thanks to you, Constance," says Erica in praise of her niece (107).

As in her previous novels, the author at the end rewards all her characters for their patience, determination and affection. Abigail's life is straightened up; her mother unexpectedly gets back her long-lost husband; even the prodigal Richard, hapless father of Abigail's child, appears in one of the last chapters – only to get a severe treatment from Abigail and be told that "you can visit the boy, sure, but for the moment it is all" (190).

It seems that feminist standpoint is expressed even more vividly in Mbaya's *Sunrise at Midnight*. "Women empowering women" – this slogan appears to run throughout the text; exactly her female relatives brought Abigail back to normal life (in fact, her male relations, such as brother Thomas, grandfather Herman and her father occupy a much more modest place in the text).

Again, the author creates a pleiad of likeable secondary female characters, like a fair and loving Madam Momanyi, deputy principal of the school, Abigail's friends Betty and Celina, and others. It must be noted that Mbaya does not idealise women – the novel also features a group of quite unlikable female personages, such as Richard's mother and aunts (in contrast to his more reasonable and courteous father), Abigail's good-for-nothing friends at her old school, and maliciously minded Misri at her new one. But those are the ideal woman characters that the author poses as role models – and among them, the heroine herself; as Abigail is told by her friend Celina on the novel's last page, "you are that role model that we grope around for in the wrong, far-off places" (206).

In the novel, the author also does not forget about the educational aspect as such – the characters (e.g., Abigail's mother and cousin) discuss the devastating consequences of adolescent sex, abortions, chemical addiction. It must be noted that this novel, as well as the previous one, were included in the *Pathfinders* series, specially designed by the publisher for younger reading audiences.

In view of the brief analysis above, it may be summed up that in her novels Florence Mbaya creates ideal characters which in fact embody the very essence of post-colonial feminist approach. Heidi Mirza, speaking about black women in Britain, asserts that:

“Cultural hybridity, the fusion of cultures and coming together of difference, the 'border crossing' that marks survival, signifies change, hope of newness, and space for creativity. But in the search for rootedness - a 'place called home'- these women, in the process of self-identification, disidentify with an excluding, racist British colonizing culture. They articulate instead a multifaceted discontinuous black identity that marks their difference” (Mirza, 1997: 16).

In our view, this statement is equally applicable to the heroines of the novels discussed above – the only difference is that these women are striving to disidentify mostly with the oppressive and obsolete aspects of traditional culture (e.g., forced and early marriage), similarly rejecting those “innovations” (such as abortions or self-centredness) that they deem harmful to the progress of women in modern Kenyan society, and advocate that kind of cultural hybridity which combines indigenous and traditional values that the writer, through her characters, sees as assisting this progress.

Findings and recommendations

The text above is an attempt to demonstrate, how critical thinking method may be used in the studies of Kenyan women’s literature. It can be used, for example, for teaching the critical thinking to the students following a well-known TAMPA scheme – Teach, Analyze, Model, Practice, and Assess (see, e.g., <https://www.teachingprofessor.com>). First, the students may be **taught** the theories related to Feminism, and Post-Colonial Feminism particularly. Second, they may be taught how to use these theories for the **analysis** of literary work. Third, they may be shown as a **model** the above-laid analysis of Florence Mbaya’s works. Fourth, they may be asked to **practice** the taught theories for the analysis of a literary work (e.g., a short story) of their choice. Fifth, the students’ analysis may be **assessed**, for example, at a class discussion. The above-described exercise may be recommended for the teaching of various general and

theoretical courses at literature departments for the purpose of developing the students' critical thinking.

Endnotes

¹ In 2018, Mbaya published a sequel to *Sunrise at Midnight*, titled *The Morning After*, where the plot is revolving around a male main character, Abigail's step-brother Amos.

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