

READING THE KENYAN SWAHILI PROSE WORKS: A *TERRA INCOGNITA* IN SWAHILI LITERATURE

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Introduction

Kenyan Swahili creative writing has been in the shadow of Tanzanian creative works for a long time. Infact some critics even end up claiming that one cannot really talk of Kenyan Swahili prose creative writing. This is notwithstanding a number of commendable works some of which belong to the very first generation of Swahili literature. The only recent attempt at redressing this critical neglect and imbalance has been Elena Bertoncini's work *Outline of Swahili Literature*. In her work, which is mainly targeted at a European audience, she discusses a number of Swahili works emanating from Kenya. However, one still notices the inclination and preponderance of seeing the Kenyan works through the Tanzanian mirror by her classifying Z. Burhani's novel *Mali ya Maskini* under the Tanzanian mainland sub-group (1989: 122). Understandably, Bertoncini had to deal with a number of works about which there was little or scanty biographical information. However, the outcome is an important sign of the fate of the Kenyan prose works. Some of the early prose works in the Kenyan scene are *Kuishi kwingi ni kuona mengi* and *Alipanda Upepo na Kuvuna Tufani* written by J. N. Somba and published in the late 1960s. The two works seem to celebrate the importance of Christian faith, the former dealing with this against the background of Kamba cultural life. The embracing of the Christian faith is seen as *sine qua non* of a good pious life; infact, the two works appear ecclesiastic. Another early work is *Kaburi bila Msalaba* by Peter Kareithi, a work centering on the Mau Mau liberation struggle of the 1950s, a recurring motif in Ngugi wa Thiongo's works. *Kikulacho ki nguoni mwako* by Peter Ngare handles a similar theme to Kareithi's work. The latter, however, lacks the narrational and structural simplicity of the former. One of the commendable works of the 1970s is Katama Mkangi's *Ukiwa*, a love story centering on Matano and his girl friend, Lila. After the publication of *Ukiwa* there seems to have been a dormancy in the Kenyan Swahili prose writing. However, in the 1980s one notices a proliferation of works, most of which are simplistic lowbrow novellas targeting a school audience¹. This does not however mean that there are no mature and commendable works at this time. Mkangi's *Mafuta*, Z. Burhani's *Mali ya Maskini* and *Mwisho wa Kosa* belong to this group as may Yusuf King'ala's *Anasa*. Burhani and King'ala's works deal largely with socio cultural issues whereas Mkangi's *Mafuta* is a political satire. In the late eighties and nineties,

¹ Here one thinks of Yusuf King'ala's novellas *Likizo*, *Majuto*, Muaka's *Ushuhuda wa Mwanachuo*

one notices an increased activity in Kenyan prose writing. Besides the already published works, a good number of them are forthcoming².

The Corpus of the Present Article

In this paper my intention is to focus on a number of Kenyan Swahili works. It is not possible to discuss the whole gamut of works in a short article like this one. I will, however, limit my scope to manageable levels. The works under study are: *Mafuta* and *Walenisi* by Katama Mkangi, *Haki Haizami* by Ali Njama, *Nyongo Mkalia Ini* by Rocha Chimera, and *Siku Njema* by Ken Walibora. Mkangi's works largely deal with socio-economic and political issues as does Chimera's novel. Njama's novellette is a popular work dealing with teenage pregnancy in the criminal novel tradition. Walibora's *Siku Njema*, an *Ich-Erzählung* novel, deals with an archetypal theme of a protagonist in search of his father and reeks a lot of the moralistic tendencies and inclinations of Shaaban Robert, the writer's idol. It is my conviction that these works will provide a broad spectrum on which I can discuss a number of issues. I must, however, hasten to note that here and there I will draw parallels with other works in as much as that helps me to explicate my observations.

Sequencing of Events

One of the issues worth investigating in the works under study is the manner in which narrational events are presented. Njama's *Haki Haizami* and Walibora's *Siku Njema* have a rather common style of narration in which a reader can very easily identify what event follows which. In the case of the former the story unfolds with the discovery of Mwanaidi's body by fishermen and the reporting to the police who start investigations into the cause of the death which leads to the unearthing of the role played by the deceased's naive and cruel teacher, Baya. The denouement is the court case involving Baya. However, an outright poetic justice is absent and one may be left thinking that the right (*haki*) hinted in the title as not getting lost actually does. This introduces an element of teleological indecisiveness which is apparent in a number of works, an area that may attract critics' interest³. One is reminded of *Kisa cha Mwanaisha* by Suleiman Omar Said in which the reader is left wondering about who killed Mwanaisha. Walibora's *Siku Njema* is a biographical work centering on Kongowea Mswahili, a son of a talented *taarab* singer who dies before confiding to the son about his father, a former university teacher living in Western Kenya. However, a confidante of the late mother to whom the secret was confided later discloses to him after making a futile attempt in cahoots with the jealous wife of the hero's uncle. The hero has to embark on the search of his father from Tanga, where the work unravels. The search ultimately ends up in his discovering that his

² Mkangi has a number of manuscripts that are likely to come out soon. Habwe has a forthcoming work *Maisha Kitendawili* (Jomo Kenyatta Foundation). Wamitila's *Nguvu ya Sala* will be published soon by Longhorn. Another work likely to come out soon is Mwenda Mbatia's sociological *Upotevu*

³ Toolan defines Teleology as "a goal or ultimate purpose- the intellectual or the moral destination to which the text wishes to bring the reader ... the concluding point or message" (Toolan 1988: 266).

childhood poet-idol is actually his father. Understandably, the events in *Siku Njema* follow a chronological path without too much premium being attached to motivation. The case is however different in Mkangi's and Chimerah's works. As we will show later this is attributable to the subject matter. Structurally, Mkangi's *Walenisi* is similar to its precursor, *Mafuta*. Both have two narrational levels: a primary and a secondary narrative. In the case of the latter, however, the secondary narrative is elevated to so high a level that one literally forgets that there is a primary narrative. The events in the secondary narrative in *Walenisi* are heavily stair cased. The events in *Mafuta* can be summarized as follows:

1. Zuka and Kazamoyo playing.
2. The old man dozes off.
3. A stranger takes a bite at a jujube fruit.
4. The jujube owner (old man) is incensed.
5. The stranger throws his coat and runs.
6. Zuka and Kazamoyo pick the coat.
7. The coat is inspected.
8. A manuscript is found.
9. They start reading a story called *Mafuta*.
 - i. Mtue wanders.
 - ii. Finds a ragamaffin asleep in mud.
 - iii. Later meets Ti.
 - iv. Mtue initiated into the special class.
 - v. A case in court-efforts of initiation blocked.
 - vi. The ragamaffin in court because of being involved in (V).
 - vii. The sentence.
 - viii. Mtue ridicules the partial court.
 - ix. Mtue sentenced.
 - x. Ti changes.
 - xi. Ti wanders.
 - xii. Ti's eyes re-opened to reality.
 - xiii. Popular uprising.
 - xiv. Mtue and the ragamaffin saved- societal change.
10. Zuka and Kazamoyo are awakened to reality.
11. A change in the society.

The events enumerated in the Roman numbers constitute the secondary narrative or the embedded narrative. The others make up the primary narrative. The latter events are only in an introduction and chapter 10; the rest make up the secondary narrative, a kind of pseudo-primary narrative.

Whereas one can sketch the events in *Mafuta* with relative ease, it is not so easy with Chimerah's *Nyongo mkalia Ini*. In the latter it is sometimes hard to establish any causal link between the events. This does not necessarily mean that causality is a cardinal rule in writing as can be seen in *Alice in Wonderland* where the experiences of Alice do not show discernible causal link but the strength of the work still remains. One would be ill advised to use this criterion in judging Chimerah's novel.

Chimerah's *Nyongo mkalia Ini* is a story revolving around corruption. It is narrated by Juma Mumanyi, a jobless youth later employed in a company headed by the corrupt and cruel Khalifa. The latter had joined hands with Amur Zeid who inherited a lot of wealth from his

Arabian foster parents. The duo engages in different ventures. While Amur Zeid becomes a medicineman, Khalifa gets into business dealing in ivory and peddling drugs. The ambitious Khalifa is determined to get rid of all those who stand in his corrupt way. The story's denouement is the arrest of Khalifa and the unravelling of his business. The events in this novel tend to be tied together in episodic manner, giving the novel a some sort episodic plot. However, Chimera uses powerful imagery and exhibits some dexterous language use which in a way recalls Mbega's innovative and creative language in his *Wasia bora na hadithi zake*.

The narrative enigma / suspense hook

A crucial element in a work of art is suspense. In most cases a narrative enigma is posed at the very beginning of a story. The first part of the story is meant to serve as an exposition. In this part a background of characters or a character may be given. The direction of the story is set or hinted, there is a theme grounding as well as setting of suspense. A criminal story is likely to have an apparent suspense hook at the very onset of the story. Njama's *Haki Haizami* is a case in point. The reader is gripped by the introduction of the story.

Ilikuwa siku ya Jumamosi mnamo saa tisa unusu za mchana, Mzee Fadhili alipokuwa mbele ya Inspekta Kombo na polisi wengine waliomzunguka wakimhoji mwaswali.
(Njama 1995:1)

It was on a Saturday, around 3.30 in the afternoon, when Mzee Fadhili stood in front of inspector Kombo who together with his colleagues interrogated him.

The opening of *Mafuta* does not set forth a suspense when compared to *Walenisi*. In the latter, Dzombo's appearance in court sets events and expectations that serve to attest to a narrative enigma which the reader gets curious about. For example, what will happen to Dzombo? The absence of an early suspense hook in *Mafuta* tends to make this particular work somewhat drab; one does not feel impelled by the work to go forward. The situation can even be more intriguing in a case where a particular work tends to lack a powerful narrative force making it a slow reading-kind of work. This is the case with Kemoli's *Zahara Mage*, a story revolving around a youthful love affair between Zahara and Chimi who hail from different tribes and have differing religious affiliations forming a base for the parental opposition to their intended marriage. Another work that seems to suffer a similar fate is Githere's *Mwana Maji na Mrembo* whose readability is not only affected by its structural flaws but also by its linguistic ineptness. *Siku njema* and *Ukiwa* are two works whose narrative style mode grips the reader rather firmly; the former's language is aesthetically powerful. Mkangi's *Ukiwa* is arguably his best narrated work this far. Some critics feel this may be so because the work has some autobiographical frame, at least according to the writer. Walibora's work has some autobiographical infusions.

Chimera's *Nyongo mkalia Ini* does not seem to have a discernible narrative, or what in narratological jargon may be called hermeneutic enigma. Omari's sickness which is described at length in the opening of the novel may seem to serve any substantial role. Infact, certain readers may get tempted to grope for indicators or pointers to the fact that it may be an event

with deferred or postponed significance as is the case of the bird with a broken leg in Kezilahabi's *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* but that may not be the case, at least directly so. However, one can see it as part of the novel's verisimilitude. It is also possible to perceive this sickness as an implication technique element for the moral sickness in the society. Chimerah's story starts acquiring narrative suspense when some mysterious deaths start occurring, but as is the case in a number of situations the suspense is prematurely broken by the narrator. Chimerah's mode of narration resembles Ndumbu's in his *Mbio za Sakafuni*.

Theme, motifs and emplotment

Most of the Swahili prose works from Kenya deal with cultural and social issues such as immorality, urban life, theft, witchcraft and sorcery, teenage pregnancy, cultural conflict and juvenile delinquency and recently suppression and discrimination based on gender and race (see John Habwe's *Maumbie si Huja*). Very few works have attempted to tackle political themes ; the few one comes across deal with political events and occurrences of the distant past. A case in point is Kareithi's *Kaburi bila Msalaba* and Ngare's *Kikulacho ki Nguoni Mwako* which deal with Mau Mau freedom struggle. Kasenge Syambo's *Utawala Dhalimu* deals with colonialism but the writer approaches the topic from a folkloristic standpoint distancing the suffering of the poor from present times, echoing a common saying (often made by dictators) that the colonial times were so bad that one dare not compare them with the present realities. Syambo's folkloristic approach to political theme is evident in Yuda Komora's *Usininyonye*. The only works that handle political themes per se are Mkangi's *Mafuta* and *Walenisi* and Chimerah's *Nyongo mkalia Ini*. It must be noted here that a number of other works have some political motifs. Whereas Mkangi's *Mafuta* deals with class differences and satirizes African leadership exhorting mass liberation, Chimerah's novel handles a number of thorny issues in the Kenyan political scene. However, given the stringent and sometimes punitive censorship and control of literature by the government none of the works has a concrete setting in Kenya. Infact, Mkangi's (a former detainee himself) *Mafuta* is so much steeped in allegory and symbolism that few readers are able to draw parallels between it and the political realities of post colonial Kenya. Chimerah's *Nyongo mkalia Ini* is equally not outrightly set in Kenya very much Francis Imbuga's *Shrine of Tears*, but a keen reader can identify a number of historical events emplotted in the novel: Mau Mau freedom struggle (*Majimaji*), political assassinations- *Vidzo* (Ronald Ngala), tribal animosities and conflicts and university riots. The setting of the novel is Gongwa (a name used by Muyaka in his poetry for Mombasa). Chimerah also deals with the issue of institutional corruption, a theme that has nearly become an archetypal one in African literature.

Symbolism, imagery and allusive language

In the foregone, I have mentioned that Mkangi's *Mafuta* and Chimerah's *Nyongo mkalia Ini* pervade a lot of images. In *Mafuta* one comes across the image of mud symbolising the down trodden and the wretched and that of oil (*mafuta*) that symbolises the rich. We read that one had to graduate into the rich class by acquiring some oil without which one would not be able

to sleep on the bed of the Haves, and hence approach the level of the Chosen Ones. We learn later that the oil or the special oil that one needs in order to be able to sleep on the bed is actually a cat's urine. Mkangi is not only exposing the hypocrisy of the ruling classes but also reminding us of the dirt, sleaze and decay in which they writhe. It turns out that none had actually slept on the bed of the Chosen Ones; they are all ordinary mortals who ought not be treated as gods. Mkangi is actually questioning the basis of the indoctrination and the misleading philosophies propagated by some of the African dictators and their cronies or accomplices

In Chimera's novel darkness (*giza*), rot, bile (*nyongo*), dogs' and cats' corpses, disease and boil (*jipu*) are some of the symbols the writer uses for corruption and moral decay in his society. The people who endeavour to work and liberate the society are symbolised by bees (*nyuki*) while the outcome of their efforts is honey (*asali*). According to the writer, the honey made through collective efforts is appropriated by a few, the ruling class. While most of the images and symbols are effective, one may be ill at ease with the symbol of bile for corruption in society. It is axiomatic that bile makes the liver unedible if ripped open, but the inseparability and the interdependence of the two is quite telling. However, one assumes that the writer's vision of the society is positive considering the victory of light over darkness in the story's resolution.

Unlike the the works discussed above, *Haki Haizami* and *Siku Njema* do not pervade symbolic and allusive language. The latter is, however, rich in idiom and similes. The prevalence of similes reminds one of John Habwe's *Maumbile si Huja*, a work with a relatively high frequency of similes. The greatest strength of Walibora's *Siku Njema* is, however, its effective use of repetition through variation and the writer's choice of words which gives it a powerful narrative force. The work is a fast reading type of work very much like Zein's *Mbio za Maisha*.

Reconstructing characters

The issue of literary characters in Swahili literature is becoming tricky with every new publication. The literary character has undergone an evolution from the early one-faceted allegorical figures of Shaaban Robert showing alot of influence of oral traditions to well rounded characters in a good number of works like Said A. Mohamed's *Asali Chungu*, Kezilahabi's *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo*, Burhani's *Mali ya Maskini* and *Mwisho wa Kosa* among many others. However, Kezilahabi's recent works *Nagona* and *Mzingile* seem to introduce a new concept, a modernist or postmodernist one, in characterisation in Swahili literature. Traditional critics wont to demarcating literary characters into groups by invoking Forsterian dichotomies are faced with new challenges. Kezilahabi's characters defy the commonly expected norms though still remaining very convincing. The comprehensibility of the two works is yet another engaging issue (see my article in *Kiswahili* Vol. 58)

A number of Kenyan prose works show well developed literary characters, with elaborate and broad character background and good motivation. The number of such works is high; however, one can mention some characters like Hawa in King'ala's *Anasa*, Monika in Burhani's

Mwisho wa Kosa, Matano and Lila in Mkangi's *Ukiwa*, Dzombo in *Walenisi*. A number of works still show the propensity to opt for one-faceted allegorical characters. These include Hassan Mbega's *Wasia bora na hadithi zake* which shows a lot of similarity with Robert's *Adili na Nduguze*. Mbega appropriates some fables published in an earlier work⁴. Most of the works with this mode of characterisation tend to have a moralist thinking, of good overcoming the bad, and seem bent on serving didactic functions. The characters are grouped into two clear cut divides: the bad and the good. Such characters have allegorical names that point to their foregrounded traits. A number of Mkangi's characters in *Walenisi* have this quality as do others in Walibora's *Siku Njema*, Ali Jamaadar's educational novel *Mui huwa Mwema*, a much more mature novel compared to the earlier *Nahodha Fikirini*, and Leo Odera's novettes. This bi-polar mode of characterisation serves to strengthen the writers' themes by foregrounding specific traits.

Some of the characters' traits are also strengthened by intertextual parallels. For example, Amina in Habwe's *Maumbile si Huja* seen against Amina in S.A. Mohamed's *Asali Chungu*, and Zainabu Makame in Walibora's *Siku njema* compared to Siti in Shaaban Robert's *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad*. We also notice a similar intertextual link between Somba's *Kuishi kwingi ni kuona mengi* and Leo Odera's *Ya Mungu mengi*. In a number of cases one notices little character development. A number of the characters in Chimerah's work are not developed and one is left feeling that the writer puts more weight on the events or actions without considering the actors as is the case in *Zahara Mage* in which a number of characters are not convincing as literary figures. It may, however, be argued that the characters are being subordinated to the action something that may not be altogether surprising. One work that could prove quite challenging in characterisation is Ngugi's remorseful autobiography *Miaka 52 Jela*, where he discusses his life as a criminal. The number of characters one comes across in the novel is very high; maybe the title (lit. 52 years in jail) points to that!

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight a number of issues pertaining to Kenyan Swahili prose writing. Its basic intention has been to draw attention of Swahili literary critics to this hitherto neglected area. Understandably, one cannot encompass all aspects of a whole genre in an academic paper. A lot needs to be done and it is my hope that critics will take up this challenge to show that Kenya, that has always been hailed for its accomplished poets like the revered Muyaka, Nassir, of the venerated *Al-inkishafi* fame, has also made a commendable contribution to Swahili prose writing. One point that is apparent from this paper is that the Kenyan prose works do not seem to show one particular theme recurring and hence it is not easy to group the works into definite categories as one easily do with the thesis novel in Tanzania. Swahili prose works in Kenya have remained in the shadow of the English novels but the situation seems to be headed for a change with an upsurge of young talented writers and a

⁴ A glaring example is the story of the three words worth three thousand *reales* in Carl Büttner's *Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur* (1894: 125-130)

more robust approach of Swahili at all academic levels. Kenyan Swahili prose writing has reached a mature stage since the publication of James Mbotela's novel *Uhuru wa Watumwa* in 1934. Mbotela's novel is an African articulation of a colonial ideology which legitimizes and exonerates them (colonialists) of any blame⁵. It is my hope that this paper will reactivate critics' interest and zest in this area.

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⁵ See Mazrui and Shariff (1993: 107). This is a book that raises some important issues but some of their claims especially on Swahili literature are misinformed.

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