

A rhetorical study of Kiswahili classical poetry: An investigation into the nature and role of repetition

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Abstract:

The novel and the play as literary genres in Kiswahili literature are products of a time as recent as the twentieth century, compared to the rich poetic tradition whose first written and preserved texts go as far back as 1517 (Mulokozi and Sengo 29). One feature that is distinctly marked in Kiswahili poetry, classical and modern—though more pronounced in the former—is repetition. A quality that is nearly axiomatic about repetition is its ubiquity in all aspects of human existence (Fischer 9). Repetition is defined differently in the many areas where it features, as a cursory view of its many and varied guises in the dictionary shows. In morphology one talks of "reduplication of morphemes"; in analysis of prose works like the novel, repetition is discussed under "cohesion." When sounds recur, one talks of "geminating." Any critic of Kiswahili poetry will have noticed the special feature or quality that repetition seems to have in the whole gamut of poetical texts. The situation is glaringly noticeable in the Kiswahili classical poetry in which repetition in various forms—metrical patterns, rhythm, alliteration, internal echoes, refrains, words, phrases, strophes, or syntactic structure—is central to its structure. In spite of the frequency and the attendant role repetition seems to play in Kiswahili poetry, no work has hitherto examined its significance, despite the growing volume of criticism. One only comes across some generalizations, some of which may be based more on failure to understand the nature and the role it plays. Most of the available works lack a detailed look into the structural features of this poetry, and it is therefore my objective in this paper to attempt an in-depth analysis of repetition as a structural element of Kiswahili classical poetry. One can approach the issue of repetition in a number of ways. It is possible to talk of lexico-structural repetition where repeated lexical items occur in identical positions in a repeated sentence structure, or lexical repetition where a word can be repeated as many times as the poet wishes; the sentence or place of appearance need not be identical. Other forms of repetitions are evident through metric, phonic, phrasal, or syntactic patterns. One of the most noticeable cases of repetition is a recurrence of certain lexical items or lexical reiteration. One of the most repeated lexical items in poetical texts handling religious themes is *shetani* or *ibilisi* (the devil). This is a lexical item that recurs a good deal in *Barasisi*, where the main character, *Barasisi*, is misled by the devil into killing a young woman brought to him for treatment by her relatives, at the suggestion of the devil in disguise. *Barasisi* kills the young woman upon realizing that she is pregnant. It is once more the devil in disguise that suggests this to him and thereafter goes to inform the brothers in an effort to negate their picture of *Barasisi* as a religious monk. The repetition of this particular lexical item is crucial in achieving lexical and thematic cohesion in the text. Another example is the word *kilabu* in *Utenzi wa Rasil'Ghuli*, by Mgeni bin Fagihi, where the word is used 127 times. In a number of cases, there is repetition of words in the form of what is called *geminatio*,

the immediate listing of one or more synonyms, or what I prefer to call synonym repetition. This type of repetition can be exemplified by the following: