THE QUEST FOR REDEMPTION IN THE KENYAN CRIMINAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The quest for redemption in the Kenyan criminal autobiography constitutes the gist of our discussion in this study. The study establishes that the criminal autobiography is unique because it explores aspects of criminology that are not normally spoken of or shared with the public because they are considered wrong and shameful. Thus, the criminal writers carefully craft out their stories in a bid to leave out incidents that would incriminate them. Despite this complex nature in the writing of the Kenyan criminal autobiography, there are hardly any studies examining the quest for redemption in the Kenyan criminal autobiography; this is the gap that this study fills.

In addition, criminal autobiographies enthrall the reader because of the human fascination with crime and criminals in fiction. Whether the criminal writers agree or dispute the criminal charges levelled against them, the criminal autobiography calls for analysis to explain why as a genre it has such an effect on the reader. The artistic choices that the autobiographers employ to reconstruct their past criminal lives and to render their texts meaningful and aesthetic have not been a subject of study for the growing number of Kenyan criminal autobiographies. Thus, the current study is justified on the ground as it focuses on this. The study aims at examining the artistry in the Kenyan criminal autobiography, exploring the autobiographical process as an avenue through which writers transcend the limitations of crime and punishment and interrogating the confessional mode as a strategy for self reconstruction in the pursuit of redemption.

The study investigates the hypotheses that the Kenyan criminal autobiography is lacking in the potential to edify the reader, that the criminal transcends the limitations of crime and punishment through autobiographical writing and that the autobiography accords the criminal the avenue and the courage to confess and seek redemption. Consequently, for its
methodology, the study has engaged in close reading of the eight autobiographies, analysis of
the works of scholars on criminal autobiography, reading of works by critics on
psychoanalysis and the autobiographical theory and an interview with one of the criminal
writers. For theoretical framework, the study has adopted the psychoanalytic literary theory
and the autobiographical theory. Psychoanalysis enabled us to determine the writers’
motivations, the psychological processes involved in confessions, aspects of guilt,
forgiveness and penitence. Lastly, the theory of autobiography guided the analysis on
retrospect, self-reconstruction and self-justification.

The thesis is organised in six chapters. The first chapter is the introduction comprising
the statement of the problem, objectives, hypotheses, rationale, literature review and
methodology. Chapter two is a review of prison writing in Kenya as an attempt to lay the
foundation of our analysis. Chapter three is dedicated to an investigation of the confessional
mode in the Kenyan criminal autobiography. Chapter four interrogates the narrative
techniques that the criminal writers utilise to render their life experiences before crime,
during crime and after crime. In chapter five we critique the verisimilitude of the Kenyan
criminal autobiography. Chapter six provides the summary, conclusion and recommendations
of the study.