

## The impact of the depiction of children in selected Swahili children stories

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### Abstract

This research paper interrogates the portrayal of the boy child and the girl child in selected Kiswahili Children's Stories with a view of investigating the likely impact of the manner in which this has been done. Children's Literature in Kiswahili is very rich. There are very many story books especially targeted at children. This paper will restrict itself to prose works in this area and investigate the manner in which the writers of the following children stories have portrayed the boy child and the girl child: *Mwepesi wa Kusahau na Likizo ya Mkosi* Whereas the authors have narrated on various issues surrounding children, this paper will focus on the manner in which children of both genders have been portrayed. Many authors have portrayed children of both genders in a balanced manner but some have tended to portray one gender exclusively in a negative light. These Paper opinions that this can have negative impact on the targeted readers This paper is anchored on the theory of sociology of literature with a view to using this approach to show how vulnerable members of society are affected by the way children are portrayed in children's literature. Children are easily swayed by what they read unlike adults who can evaluate issues effortlessly. The dangers that is inherent in children internalizing negative thinking is what has motivated this study

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Sociology of Literature, stylistics, affirmative action, impetus

## 1.0 Introduction

Swahili literature is very rich in its many genres. It is undisputable that the earliest writing were on Poetry. Other genres such as drama, the novel, the short story and children's stories that are the focus of our study came in at a later period.

It is likely that the proliferation of this genre was more on the creative works than on the critical works as far as the Kiswahili Childrens' literature is concerned. This is what has led to the production of many children's story where the focus has been entertainment without a consideration of the impact of the depiction of various characters on the intended audience.

This paper while appreciating the creative effort put into the production of these stories also cautions on the likely impact of skewed representation of characters.

## 2.0 Literature review

This section reviews some previous studies by other researchers on Kiswahili Children's Literature. According to Musau and Ngugi (1997) research in Kiswahili children's literature does not have a long history. Ngugi (2009) says that studies in children's literature in Kiswahili in Kenya has been scanty and one of the earliest studies that contributed significantly to the field of children's literature in Kiswahili was that of Mpesha (1996). Mpesha focused on the growth and development of children's literature in Tanzania. Most of the other researchers that have focused on Kiswahili children's literature in Kenya are in the years after 2000. They include Karuga (2005), Muthubi (2005), Kairu (2005), Matundura (2007) and Ngugi (2009). Apart from Matundura, all the others mentioned as having been interested in children's literature happen to be women.

Most of these studies focused on literary criticism particularly on style and the thematic aspects of children stories. Mpesha surveyed Kiswahili children's stories from Tanzania. She recognizes the great role that children literature plays in the society. She argues that children's literature is not just a record of social events but also an instrument for socialization. Mpesha's study provides impetus for this work because it recognizes that children's stories are a reflection of realities involving children in society.

Karuga (2005) examined children's response to the story books that they read. She analyzed selected children story books used in primary schools in Kenya by looking at factors such as style, themes and characterization. She found out that through use of appropriate style, an author is able to communicate effectively to the children. She observes that characters in a story book determine the child's choice of a story book. Her findings were important in this study on depiction of children as she emphasized the importance of characterization in children's stories. However, the study is different from Karuga's as it examines depiction of children while hers analyzed children story books on style, thematic concerns and characterization.

Muthubi (2005) explored the strategies used in books that have been translated and simplified from adult books to children books such as *Mkasa wa Shujaa Liyongo*. Although her study is

quite different from this one it informed this study especially on the qualities to consider when selecting children's stories for the study.

The study by Kairu (2005) examined style and how realism is realized in Ken Walibora's children's stories. She found out that Ken Walibora's works are a reflection of reality in the life of children in the community. Her study is different from this one in that hers focused on style and realism while this study looks at depiction of children. It was however useful to us in studying how community realities determine the depiction of children in the stories.

Ngugi (2009) investigated the state of children's literature in Kiswahili in primary schools in Kenya by examining the reading habits of pupils both in school and at home. It focused on aspects such as attitude towards reading, amount of reading materials available for pupils, accessibility of reading material, frequency of reading for pleasure, reading environment and the role played by other stakeholders in developing and enhancing reading habits in pupils. Such stakeholders include head teachers, Kiswahili teachers and parents. Her study, though different from ours, was useful to us in identifying the pertinent issues to investigate in children's literature.

Matundura (2007) looked into gender stereotyping in Kiswahili children literature. His objective was to investigate how and to what extent authors of children's literature perpetuate gender stereotyping in their works. He wanted to find out if the depiction of gender stereotyping was done intentionally or if it was incidental. He investigated if there was gender equity and if one gender was discriminated against in selected texts. His findings established that authors of children's literature perpetuated gender stereotyping in the works that he had sampled. The girl was portrayed as weak while the male was portrayed as a hero.

He argues that it is important for authors to put into consideration how children are portrayed in their works. This study is different with Matundura's in that ours looks at depiction of children characters in story books while his looked at gender stereotyping in general and involved women characters while ours confines itself to children characters and not adults. Our study in a way also seeks to assess if there are changes in gender depiction brought about by new trends and developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century society. It samples story books written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The literature review has revealed that though research in Kiswahili children's literature in Kenya was scanty some years back, it is gaining momentum with more researchers taking interest in it. However, there are still gaps such as in depiction of children in children stories. This study therefore is an attempt at filling this gap by assessing the impact of the depiction of children in selected Kiswahili children stories.

### **3.0 Theoretical perspectives**

This paper is anchored on the theory of Sociology of Literature and takes cognisance of Zhadnov's position that: "Literature is a social phenomenon the perception of reality through creative imagery" (pg 94). This means that Literature is given impetus by social interactions. It

therefore follows that authors derive their attitudes and portrayal of characters from the society that surrounds them.

As far as the issue of Portrayal is concerned the author has a free hand. But this freedom has to be used responsibly because of the likely repercussions as this paper will show.

It is indeed true as Witte (1978) explains that ‘social institutions act as a mould that shape an individual in the society’ literature has a powerful effect on its readers. Specifically children’s Literature is what informs them about their world. Whereas adult readers can read with an evaluative mind children are likely to believe almost everything they read. The world of the writer and their world as readers easily merge with no clear lines of demarcations.

This therefore means a writer of children’s literature has to be cognisant of the effect of his work on the audience he or she is targeting an audience that is likely to be influenced in a more profound way than an adult audience

#### 4.0 Discussion and results

In this study we examined the impact of the depiction of children in selected Swahili children stories. In order to carry out the research, two story books were selected namely *Mwepesi wa Kusahau* (2005) and *Likizo ya Mkosi* (2014). Both were written by Bitugi Matundura. The objectives which guided the study were to establish the depiction of the girl child on one hand and on the other the boy child in *Mwepesi wa Kusahau* and *Likizo ya Mkosi*; the study also sought to assess the attitude of girls towards boys in the selected texts.

*Mwepesi wa Kusahau* is a story involving two main characters, Maria and Juma, who are identical twins but whose character is totally different. Maria, who is a girl, is depicted as responsible, smart, hard working and self directed both at home and in school. At school she is brilliant. She is liked by both parents and teachers. We are told:

*Maria alikuwa mwanafunzi makini, safi na mwenye bidii za mchwa masomoni. Hakusau jambo lolote kwa urahisi. Walimu na wazazi wake walimpenda mno kwa kutosahau. Wanafunzi wenzake walimtania kuwa akili zake zilinasa kila kitu kama vile sumaku inasavyo wembe. Maria alikuwa mwerevu. (Uk 9)*

Maria was a conscientious pupil, clean and as hard working as an ant.

She would not easily forget something. Her teachers and parents liked her very much for not being forgetful. Her fellow pupils teased her that her brains captured everything like a magnet attracting a razor blade. Maria was quite brilliant. (Page 9)

Juma, who is a boy, is portrayed as irresponsible, lazy, disobedient, dirty and generally one careless both at home or school. He is depicted as one with a myriad challenges. He is very forgetful. For example, he is seen looking all over for a pen having forgotten that he had tucked it in his hair.

*Juma alikuwa na matatizo mengi. Mosi, hakutilia masomo maanani. Pili, alikuwa na tabia ya kusahau haraka mambo mbalimbali aliyoambiwa afanye. Juma alikuwa mwepesi wa kusahau. (Uk 9)*

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(Juma had many problems. One, he was not keen on studies. Second, he had the habit of forgetting quickly the different things that he was required to do. He was quick at forgetting.) Page 9

Indeed even the title of the story book is derived from Juma's negative trait of being forgetful and absent minded.

The story revolves around one Friday when Juma continued sleeping after cock crow while Maria who was up early, unsuccessfully tried to wake him up so that he does not get late for the school assembly. Eventually Juma wakes up late and is left behind by Maria. That morning Juma wasted more time at home because he even forgot where his comb was. He arrived at school late, hid in a bush behind the school fence but he was discovered by his teacher. When called by the teacher to get out of his hiding place, he runs away and the teacher runs after him. He is caught and frog matched to the school where he is paraded in front of the others in assembly. At that time, his uniform was dirty and his hair unkempt. This was quite unlike his sister Maria who had a smart uniform and was early to school. Maria is requested by the teacher to give some advice to the pupils who by that time appeared to be comparing and contrasting the twins.

The research revealed that the girl child was portrayed very positively while the boy was portrayed negatively in *Mwepesi wa Kusahau*. Looking at the story from a sociology of literature perspective, one can draw parallels from the story and real life in the community where the children live. In the author's community (Kenyan), there have been media reports (Saturday Nation June 20, 2015) that there have been many campaigns to promote the welfare of girls while the boy is neglected. There have been many affirmative actions in education that are meant to consider the girl child more favourably than the boy child. This has resulted into a situation in the community where girls top the class and boys drop out of school. This has triggered an alarm on the effects of decades-long campaigns to promote the welfare of girls.

In the story *Likizo ya Mkosi*, the girl child is does better than the boy in nearly everything including decision making. The girl is represented by Kerubo while the boy is represented by Otambo. In the story the two children are busy preparing for a visit upcountry to see their grandparents. Before they set off they have to decide on the gifts to carry to their grandparents. Eventually they make the long awaited visit but it is short lived as they had to cut it short following press reports of a road accident involving their father. This is the lead story in the collection which literary translates as *A Disastrous Holiday*.

The most outstanding depiction in this story is that of the girl being better than the boy in nearly everything especially in decision making. The girl appears to be making the major decisions in her interaction with the boy. For instance, when they did well in school Kerubo was the first to remind their mother to fulfill the promise that they would travel upcountry to visit grandparents. Again, when preparing for the visit, Kerubo is the one who decided the gifts to take to their grandparents whereas Otambo appeared unable to make a decision:

“Umefikiria kuhusu zawadi tutakazowapelekea nyanya na babu?” Otambo akamuuliza Kerubo.

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Kerubo alinyamaza kwa muda mrefu kisha akajibu, “Nafikiri nyanya atapenda sana ufagio. Tunaweza kumtengenezea ufagio kwa kutumia matawi ya Mchikichi.”

“Na babu je?” Otambo akauliza.

“Tutamnunulia fimbo umbo la nambari ‘7’ atakayotumia kutembea,” Kerubo akajibu. Otambo alikubaliana na dada yake kuhusu suala la zawadi ambazo wangewapelekea nyanya na babu yao. (Uk 13)

“Have you decided on the presents that we shall take to grandmother and grandfather? Otambo asked Kerubo. Kerubo was silent for some time then she answered, I think grandmother would appreciate a broom. We could make a broom for her using branches and leaves from Oil palm tree (*Mchikichi*).”

“What about grandfather?” Otambo asked.

“We shall buy for him a walking stick shaped like number ‘7’ which he will be using when walking.” Kerubo answered. Otambo agreed with his sister on the issue of gifts which they would take to their grandparents. (Page 13)

Kerobo suggested that their grandmother should be given a broom while the grandfather would receive a walking stick.

The girl is also portrayed as quick in taking actions as need arises. This trend was also found in other children’s stories of 21<sup>st</sup> century read during random sampling for this study though not finally included in the purposeful sampling because they illustrated the same concepts. Such a story is *Hazina ya Zuena na Makombo* (2013)(Zuena’s and Makombo’s treasurer) by the same author. In this text there is a girl by the name Zuena and a boy called Makombo. The two had kept some treasure which they one day decided to use to buy a pet animal. In the story, Zuena appears to be making better decisions than the boy. For instance, when they ended up spending all the money on impulse buying of other items in the market before they had achieved their objective which was to buy a pet, it is Zuena, the girl, who recommended that they take home a dog that was following them on their way home:

“*Mbona tusimchukue mbwa huyu tumtunze?*” akapendekeza Zuena.

“Why don’t we take this dog we go and take care of it?” Suggested Zuena.

This suggestion by Zuena not only brought to a fruitful end the search for a pet which had earlier appeared fruitless, but also saved the dog.

This depiction is quite different from the one observed in story books of 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *Bonde la Wafu* (Manji 1996), *Atendaye Mema* (Maillu 1997) and *Tajiri Mjanja* (Omolo 1967) where the boy was portrayed as a champion and a hero while the girl played peripheral roles. In fact, in some cases like in the titles just mentioned, the girl was not a main character at all.

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The findings from this study paint a grim picture of the prospects of boys who fare badly in school and find themselves in conflicts at school and home.

#### 4.1 Conflict at home

At home, Juma's mother seems not to be keen on this boy child. For instance when Maria turns up for breakfast the conversation between Maria and her mother over Juma goes like this:

*“Juma yuko wapi?” Mama alimkata usemi (Maria). “Nimemwamsha akakataa katakata kuamka. Amelala na kukoroma mithili ya chura,” Maria alisema huku akimwangalia mama yake aliyekuwa kavaa tabasamu usoni. “Mwepesi wa kusahau, hajui kwamba leo ni Ijumaa? Mwache achelewe shuleni apate adhabu,” Mama alisema huku akimpisha Maria...(Uk 19 – 20)*

(“Where is Juma? Her mother cut her short. “I have called him but he has completely refused to wake up. He was asleep and snoring like a frog.” Maria said looking at her mother who had put up a smile on her face. “He is quick to forget, he doesn't remember that today is Friday? “Let him get late to school so that he is disciplined,” Maria's mother said as she gave Maria way who was heading to school...”) Page 19 – 20.

Juma later on gets into trouble with his mother at home when he wakes up late and is unable to trace his pen. The mother wonders what Juma is looking for all over. She finally points out to him that he had forgotten that he pushed the pen into his hair. She laments about Juma's behavior:

*“Waona jinsi uzembe na usahaulifu ulivyo mbaya... kalamu yako iko kichwani mwako.”*  
(“Can't you see how bad laziness and forgetfulness is ... you pen is in your hair.”)  
Page 30.

At home therefore, Juma is in conflict with his mother because he is seen as lazy and forgetful. He is seen as one who likes sleeping and wakes up late for school when his sister Maria is already done with breakfast and about to leave for school.

*Maria alipokuwa anamalizia kunywa chai yake, ndipo Juma alipoamka. Ilikuwa saa mbili kasorobo.*  
(When Maria was finishing taking her tea, that is when Juma woke up. It was quarter to eight) Page 22.

This also puts Juma into conflict with his sister at home who decides to proceed to school leaving Juma behind to face the music on his own when he arrives to school late.

#### 4.2 Conflict at school

At school the boy child is depicted as being in conflict with teachers. The boy is disobedient and has gross indiscipline. For instance, in *Mwepesi wa Kusahau* when Juma is called by his teacher to come out of his hiding place behind the school fence, he disobeys the teacher and runs away. This forces the teacher to run after him.

*Juma alijifanya kutosikia na kukimbia kadiri miguu yake ilivyoweza*  
(Juma pretended not to hear the teacher and run as fast as his legs would allow him) page 37.

When the teacher finally got hold of him, he paraded him in front of the whole school at the school morning assembly when looking extremely dirty with muddy school uniform and unkempt hair. The teacher does not seem to understand the boy or to be keen in assisting him to reform. The teacher's action really humiliates the boy and depicts him as quite different from Maria, the girl, who is depicted as a very disciplined pupil. The boy is actually seen as if he is a disgrace even to his sister who is depicted as smart and obedient.

#### **4.3 Conflict with peers**

In the two stories there are conflicts between the boy and the girl but interestingly the two appear to resolve their conflicts amicably by the boy being submissive and listening to the girl. For example, in *Likizo ya Mkosi*, Otambo accepts all the decisions made by Kerubo for instance when they had to decide on what gift was apt for the grannies. In *Mwepesi wa Kusahau*, Juma eventually accepts Maria's advice and as the story comes to an end he resolves to change his ways by emulating Maria's good character. From sociology of literature perspective, this represents a situation in the author's community where girls are becoming decision makers as boys listen and comply. Indeed there has been an outcry among the Kenyan community that men are abandoning their roles and women are taking over and this trend as reflected in the children's stories could have far reaching implications in the community as Matundura (2007) argues that the children who read the stories are likely to adopt the trends they observe in the stories that they read.

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

From the results of this study, the girl child was found to be depicted more positively than the boy child. From Sociology of Literature perspective, this is a result of decades – long campaigns for the rights of the girl child. Our opinion here is that if this depiction continues for a long period of time, it might have an adverse impact in the society because boys who read the stories might take the boy characters to be their heroes thereby adopting the bad behaviour of the male characters in the texts they read.

From the findings of this study, it is suggested that quick and decisive action should be taken to save the boy child from the imminent danger of becoming a victim of negative social depictions.

The impact of depiction of children in these books indeed illustrates the significant role children's literature play in shaping the lives of children when they are young. This means that children's literature has the ability to articulate children's issues and concerns just like other



genres such as the novel, short story, drama and poetry and therefore it should be recognized as a genre and scholars encouraged to venture into academic criticism of children's stories.

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