

## WHAT'S IN A NAME: TOWARDS LITERARY ONOMASTICS IN KISWAHILI LITERATURE.

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A mention of name in literature is almost always likely to recall the question Juliet posed to Romeo about his family name Montague in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

In reading creative works we tend to identify characters basically by the names given to them. It is on this basic premise that some character analysis methods tend to define characters by taking recourse to their names and sometimes identifying them in metaphorical terms or as speaking names. Names play a very central and important role in any reading exercise and so would certainly the names given to characters be of importance to us. These are linguistic or semiotic signs that play a very crucial role in the overall linguistic structure of a literary text or its signification. Decoding of the names therefore becomes an important critical engagement in as far as it helps the reader in his deciphering of the text in which the names are

There is an interest among critics in the names of characters that tends to go beyond the narrow limits and confines of seeing them as mere tags that distinguish one fictional character from another into the broader figurative import and implication of those names. Character names can be used as expressions of experience, ethos, teleology, values, ideology, culture and attitudes of varying shades. Nesselroth notes:

It is not surprising that theorists pay so much attention to naming in fiction (literature) since proper names are the nodal points through which actions and descriptions are interconnected (Nesselroth 1996: 133).

Characters' names, as this article will show, can be used artistically to achieve a number of goals like encoding a central trait in a particular character's signification, embracing crucial thematic motifs, ideological toning as well as even showing the particular writer's point of view. Some of these qualities are easily lost in translation, something that is captured in the formula *traduttori traditori* (translators are traitors).

In the Kiswahili *Utenzi wa Nguvumali*, (The Epic of Nguvumali) we notice a polarisation of the two main characters Shambi bin Dima (the foul and nasty) and Nguvumali (power is strength) which is lost in the translation by Leinhardt. This element of polarisation of characters is one of the most striking markers of characterisation in Kiswahili creative writing and a key device in the moral exemplum motif seen in majority of Shaaban Robert's novels. It is worth noting that a good number of Kiswahili creative writers like Shaaban Robert, S. A. Mohamed, Mohamed S. Mohamed actually engage in onomastic games in their works that remind one of Western writers like Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka.

One of the primary premises of this essay is the realisation that some characters' names besides individualising the characters, have important semantic, pragmatic, allusive and symbolic import that must be seen in the perspective of the overall structure of a particular work. Implicit in this is the classical or Sense theory of proper names that sees a name as naming by describing the object it names. This is in contradistinction to non-sense theory that argues that names represent or stand for objects or referents and nothing more. The central thesis in this essay will be that names in Kiswahili literature are not just merely deictic but rather have specific meaning that integrates character into its fictional life, and that can also imprison it there (See Bal, 1985: 73).

The names we come across in reading Kiswahili literature are usually full proper names. We however have instances of hypocoristic forms, where there are variants normally through abbreviations, reduplication addition of diminutive suffix. We have an example of this particular case in Mohamed Said Abdulla's detective story, *Mwana wa yungi hulewa*. This is a story about the fate of two twins, Amanullah and Sichana, illegitimate children of a rich Goan and an Arab princess. The core story revolves around the search for these two children by the detective character Msa, a Dupin archetype, after a wily attempt is made by the foster parent to deprive them of their inheritance plunging them into despicable lifestyles.

In this story we come across a character, a lover of Sichana, called Juma. This name is changed by people to Juma Jeuri (Juma the rude and foul) on account of his evil character which is later shortened to Jeejee which in itself imitates his belligerent mannerisms.

In analysing names as expressions of experience, attitude and senses, one is in a way engaged in a linguistic analysis with social, political and ideological considerations predominating at various points. It therefore possible to subject names of some of the characters to a linguistic analysis. This can be shown in the names of the protagonist in S. A. Mohamed's *Kiza katika nuru* (Darkness within Light) and Mtu Bint Fikirini in Mkangi's *Walenisi*.

Mohamed's two novels examine the socio-economic and political realities in post-colonial African states where the gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening. The writer examines the rise of the class of grabbers in a post colonial state, questioning the betrayal of the essence of freedom. Mkangi's *Walenisi* can be said to ironically invert the Biblical Parable of The Prodigal Son. Its protagonist, Dzombo, is expelled from his country because of his persistent attempts to oppose the neo-colonial structures. It symbolically encodes a need for socio-economic rebirth of an independent African state, and the need to establish a just and egalitarian state. It can also be said to examine the issue of constituting and defining nation as well as postcolonial identities, with special focus on women identities.

- 1 Mvita
- M-Vita
- Cl.1 (prefix) - fight/ war/ strife (noun)

## 2. Mtu Bint Fikirini

M- tu – bint - fikirini.

Cl 1 (prefix) man/humane being-lady-fikirini (lit. ponder/think-pl )

The two names may be interpreted in a number of ways i.e. the semantic possibilities are varied. In the case of Mvita, it is possible to see the name as encoding the traits of fighting, rebelling, questioning and being ready to take up arms to defend oneself and his like- in the case of the novel, class. The writer's very choice of this name therefore seems to foreground the theme of fighting unjust systems which is a central thesis in the novel.

It is even much more clearer considering that the villain in the story, the hero's own father, has a name that invites such a reaction, Bwan Juba (Mr./Sir Arrogant). Another equally significant reading can be based on Zawawi's rendering the name Mvita as "full of life" though in her context it is a woman's name. The reading draws parallel to the Latin word for life *vitas* though this does not mean I imply an etymological connection, although I would not rule it out anyway. By naming the character as it does, the text points or comments upon its fabula from the point of view of the narrator/ author.

The same can be noted about E. Hussein's eponymous hero Kinjeketile. E Hussein's characterisation of his protagonist is based on the historical Kinjeketile who played a big role in the Maji Maji Rebellion in Tanzania (then Tanganyika) in colonial times

One of the most basic qualities about a name is the relationship with a particular culture, this is what can be termed as the social contextuality of naming. The choice of names reveals the ethnic society which inhabits the fictional works' recognised setting. Most cultures attach a lot of significance to names. A number of African societies have aphorisms, proverbs and proverbial sayings that say the name reveals the child. The Yoruba believe that *Oruko ni ro omo*, the name reveals the child (Adejare 1992: 44) In literary analysis, one can talk of the name revealing the fictional character.

A creative writer may use a name that situates a particular fictional character within a specific and identifiable cultural setting. This is a fact that constitutes an important structural element in achieving fictional verisimilitude of the work. In certain cases, characters are given names that reflect on certain physical features in them, reflect particular nuances or tell us something about the birth. A good example of the latter is in Farsy's cultural-ethnographic novella, *Kurwa na Doto*. (Kurwa and Doto)

This is a story whose plot is built around the lives of twins. The first is called Kurwa while the second is Doto. The Kiswahili name *Kurwa* means the first of twins while the second is named *Doto*. The tendency in Kiswahili to use creative names that reflect outright the character traits of the individual fictional characters has actually become one of the defining markers in literary characterisation and one that can be said to reflect the polarisation of good and bad identified with by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of criticism* and associated with the what he identifies as romantic, or what I would prefer calling urmimetic

Kezilahabi's choice of a number of his characters' names in his fictional works helps situate them in his native Kerewe island in Tanzania as does Aniceti Kitereza's magnum opus *Bi Bugonoka na Bwana Myombekere*. (Mrs Bugonoka and Mr Myombekere) equally set in Kerewe. The latter is a cultural novel that revolves around the lives of Myombekere and his wife Bugonoka and their continued attempts at begetting children.

The encyclopaedic story later shifts to the children they later get. Kitereza narrates this epic story against the background of the rich Kerewe customs and traditions. In the case of Kezilahabi, the name *Nagona*, used in his *Nagona* and *Mzingile* (Labyrinth), refers to a beautiful and attractive lady imbued with some trickster elements something that is noted in the very characterisation of the figure in the two works. Kezilahabi's two works, *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, are polymorphic novels with the metaphysical quest for self-knowledge, meaning of life and understanding as the main structural principle. The meaning of the name *Nagona* is crucial in the characterisation of this Nietzschean figure

In some cases, a character's name may serve as an important plot device. This is an issue that was raised by Aristotle in *Poetics* by commending that in comedy the writer constructs the plot on lines of probability, and then inserts characteristic names while writers of tragedies keep to real (historical) names. It is arguable that the deciphering and comprehending of the name *Rosa Mistika*, in E. Kezilahabi's *Rosa Mistika*, as rose mysticus or mysterious rose sets the reader asking questions that border on causality and hence plot related questions. The argument here is that the very name itself is a hermeneutic enigma which raises certain suspense on the part of the reader. The writer actually encapsulates the vicissitudes of his protagonist's name in the very name he chooses for her.

If we take an example of Kezilahabi's *Nagona* in his novel referred to earlier, we as readers may ask ourselves who *Nagona* is, what did she do, why and what happened. These questions can be answered in the plot of the work because they, as we have noted, by their very nature imply the principle of causality.

Another important aspect of names is related to the concept of place or setting. Setting refers to the spatio-temporal circumstances in which the events of a narrative occur. One can approach names of literary characters as pointers to the social, economic and political setting in which they find themselves. In this particular case the name becomes a marker of particular quality associated with a fictional character.

The name *Dude* in S. A. Mohamed's oxymoronic *Asali chungu* (Bitter honey) belongs to this particular group. It helps situate the protagonist within the poor environment in which he is raised as well as, by extension, ingraining markers of the poor. It is possible to see this particular name as a strategy that also helps the writer to create or set the general tone and mood of this novel. Mohamed's choice of characters in a number of his works seems to point towards social realities in the actual settings of the works. For example in *Zanzibar and Pemba*, the writer's native home, the use of a name that has Arabic connection or with a heavy Arabic toning is important in social categorisation.

One can therefore see naming in this context as an important signifier or seme, to use Semiotic term, that contribute into the stylistic as well as thematic isotopes which the writer uses consciously or subconsciously. We notice this particular quality in *Dunia mti mkavu*, (The World is a dead wood) a novel whose story revolves around five brothers of the Jaku family. One of the brothers however drops his name adopting Farouk Hilal, a name that he feels commensurates with his present socio-economic setting, compared to his poor brothers.

The choice of the new name enables him, at least he thinks so, to shed the murky image of his brothers adopting a different *weltanschauung* as it were. In this particular case, the name becomes an important class tag, to say the least. This is also noticeable in Mohamed's slow moving *Kiza katika nuru*. In this novel the second wife of the story's villain, Bwan'Juba, is called Bi Khatilyy compared to the first poor wife condemned to isolation and her fate after being neglected by the husband something encapsulated in her very name Kudura (Fate/ God's wish)

In the introductory part of this paper, I referred to Katama Mkangi's satirical novel *Walenisi*. The choice of the names in this particular novel is reflective of the issue discussed in the foregone. This is however much more apparent in the strange land-Walenisi- where the hero is condemned to by his native cruel land. The writer's desire is to portray a society in which there is complete freedom, no discrimination based on either class or gender, there is equality. In short, the writer wants to show a complete opposite, or much more precisely antithesis, of the hero's native home metaphorically referred to as hell. In order to foreground this particular quality, the writer chooses names that reflect on some of these qualities. The name provided in the introductory part provides an apt example

In the foregone, I mentioned that there is a tendency by writers to use allegorical names that reflect on important traits of a character. The same can be said or observed with irony and humour. Lanham makes a very important observation that can serve as the point of departure. He notes:

From the literary critic's point of view, irony and allegory ought to bear some relation, since irony is clearly a particular, 180-degree reversed, instance of allegory's double meaning. That is, the ironist depends on an allegorical habit of mind in his reader, a habit that will juxtapose surface and real meaning (Lanham 1991: 93).

If we juxtapose the meanings of names as Lanham notes, we will certainly see how Kiswahili creative writers use irony in their naming of fictional characters. A good example is Kezilahabi's *erziehungsroman*, *Rosa Mistika*. In this novel, one name strikes us: Deogratias, the old man who at one time is Rosa Mistika's lover.

This name can also be seen against that of the anti-hero in Kezilahabi's second novel, and maybe Kiswahili literature's first intellectual novel, *Kichwamaji* (Idiot): Deusdedit Kazimoto. These names remind us of what in psychology is called bi-stable or perceptual illusion, in which something appears different depending on what angle you look at it. The bi-stable illusion in these names lies in their seemingly merely showing mere Catholicism in their

surface structure, while their deep meaning point to something else. Deogratias is derived from Latin (*Deo*-God and *gratias*-thanks). The name therefore can be translated as Thanks to God. If we were to take this particular name as an attribute of the character, we notice the irony implied by looking at his immoral habits of enticing young school girls like Rosa Mistika, the protagonist of the novel.

Kazimoto's name - Deusdedit - provides a much more interesting, if intriguing, case. The forename has a Latinate etymology meaning an "addicted god." We as readers are likely to ask ourselves to what this character is addicted. Is it the pursuit of the meaning of life within the existentialist view in the novel? Does he really live up to the attributes of a god or even match the robustness captured by his second name Kazimoto (Lit: Tough and quick work). The answer to these questions is in the negative considering how the character loses faith in life so easily ending up in committing suicide. These two names can therefore be seen as part of the pathetic pattern in the novel, they form an element of the pathetic plot structure.

We also notice this particular case in Kezilahabi's in his choice of names fourth novel *Gamba la nyoka* (A snake's skin). The main characters in this novel are Mambosasa and Mamboleo, young revolutionary graduates of the University of Dar Es Salaam who are eager to participate in the implementation of Ujamaa villages. They are however depicted as naive and ignorant of even the most current issues in their Tanzanian society. In the same work, we are struck by the name of the religious hypocrite Padre Mandevu- allegorically called Pastor Emptyhead- who makes out that he understands the African mind as well as politics well, something which the writer negates by showing character.

A case of humour is seen in the choice of the name Makoroboi in Kezilahabi's aesthetically powerful *Dunia uwanja wa fujo* (The world is a stage of chaos). This is a petty village thief who steals and seeks refuge from Tumaini (the name ironically means 'hope') the main character of this novel that examines the implementation of Ujamaa mode of socialism in Tanzania. The humour implicit in this name is provided by what can be called its phonolexical quality. This refers to the inherent quality of the name to recall in the reader's mind words that sound the same or are closely related in terms of the sounds. Some of these include *korokoro* (prison/ remand) *koroga* (intermix) *korofindo* (an old type of a gun). It may be instructive to note that this particular name relates with a word used in a number of Bantu languages for a poor traditional tin lamp (*koloboi*). This name, as one may note even about a number of others, therefore brings with it some humour, making it a comic - better still grotesque name irrespective of what it describes. The name can naturally be taken as pointing to the background of the character. There is also the sense in which one can argue that the choice of name may serve to show, or maybe remind us, of the author's feelings about this particular character.

In literary works written within what I would call, following Michael Foucault, moralist episteme like the first generation of Kiswahili prose works, a character name serves as a very important device of theme or articulating the central thesis of the work. This is what I prefer calling the teleological principle in naming.

In such works, which can be exemplified with the moralist tales of Shaaban Robert, the central theme is to show that the good defeats or overcomes the bad. In order to foreground this particular thesis, characters tend to be clearly divided into two main groups, the good and the bad. In fact some of the works that fall into this category highlight this particular element in their very titles. A good example of this quality is Ali Jamaadar's *Mui huwa mwema* (The bad becomes good).

Most of the characters one comes across in these works, for example, Shaaban Robert's, have names that point to the moral divide in which they find themselves. In *Kusadikika*, we have Karama (miracle/ God's actions) Buruhani (power of God, one who gets whatever he prays for), Fadhili (kindness, favour; benefit) Kabuli (sanction; assent) and Ridhaa (contentment; acquiescence). Karama in this novel, is condemned for his desire to institute legal studies, while the other characters are all imprisoned after undergoing strenuous journeys in service of their country. They gather progressive ideas that are castigated by the regime in their native country Kusadikika. The story's denouement ensures that the good characters overcome the bad actualising the teleological principle mentioned above.

Katama Mkangi's choice of names in his post-colonial novel *Walenisi* resembles Shaaban Robert's *Walenisi* as noted, examines oppression and dictatorship in a post colonial setting against a background of a successful, Marxist -socialist state. This is the country where the hero of the story, Dzombo, lands after he is condemned to die through a rocket in his native home. The name of the novel is actually the name of the "strange country" and is itself an acronym meaning "they are like us or we are together with them "

The characters we come across in this strange land, have symbolic and allegorical names reflecting on their humanity, care, love and understanding. The ethos of classlessness is captured by the prefixing of *mtu* (human being) to all the names. This is an ideological strategy that the writer uses to show how the people in this society have redefined their self-identity as it were. It therefore serves to show both psychological as well as linguistic detachment from the previous regime as well as rejection of its description and perception of human beings.

One can actually argue that the failure to stick to normal naming system may be questioning the very basic (mis)use of the power of naming. It is instructive to note that the new mode of naming in *Walenisi*, symbolised by the affixing *mtu*, come after the society has undergone a transformation. This is therefore an element of what can be seen as post colonial re-writing of history. Seen from this point of view names therefore become a site of empowering self-definition, [re]asserting one's identity by abnegating imposed descriptions.

A character's name can be used as a motif in a particular work. In Kezilahabi's works, names tend to encode certain philosophical or ideological ideas that are central in the existentialist thinking permeating his creative writing. In majority of his novels, Kezilahabi portrays life as a complex labyrinth that cannot be understood easily. This labyrinth motif recurs in the writer's works right from the first, *Rosa Mistika* to the most recent polymorphic *Mzingile*, in which it is actually encoded in the very title itself.

We can actually identify the name Rosa Mistika (which may be interpreted as mysterious rose) as encoding this particular motif. However, this is not the only interpretation we can have for this name. The choice of the name may reflect the author's attitude to Catholicism. It may be worth noting that the writer spent 14 years in the seminary. Seen in this light, this name acquires a heavy ironical tone, considering the position of Rosa Mystica in Catholic church.

A similar case is seen in Shaaban Robert's *Utubora mkulima* (Utubora the farmer). This is a bucolic romanticist novel in which the main character, Utubora Mkulima, opts for life in the country side rather than staying in the town. The farming occupation is echoed by his second name Mkulima (Lit: Farmer) while the first encodes an important thematic motif of humanity that informs all his creative works.

All narratives or stories, whether literary or otherwise, are told from a perspective of a particular person. The issue of point of view in literature has been discussed expansively by Russian Boris Uspensky in his *A poetics of composition*. In discussion of point of view, critics make a difference between external and internal point of view. This is in relation to the story or narrative. The perspective may therefore be internal to the story or external to it.

Striking examples of the use of names *vis a vis* point of view variation are offered by Gabriel Ruhumbika's *Miradi bubu ya wazalendo* (Invisible enterprises of the patriots), a historical novel that scans through Tanzania colonial and post-colonial realities. The approach adopted in this novel however tilts it into a documentary novel. In this novel the name of one of the central characters changes to reflect the different viewpoints. The story's villain Nzoka Mwakulanga adopts different names at different times to reflect his socio-economic placing at a particular time. The very choice of the different names for this character points to the use of names as a sarcastic or even satirical strategy, a feature also apparent in E. Kezilahabi's creative writing.

In the foregone part, I mentioned the change of names in the strange land that Mkangi's hero, Dzombo, in *Walenisi* lands. The most striking element as noted is the prefixing of *mtu* to all the names, including Dzombo's. The point of view adopted here is internal and one that also reflects ideological elements seen on the broader context of the novel.

Earlier I mentioned the case in *Mwana wa yungi hulewa* in which a character's name-Juma is changed to Juma Jeuri then later clipped to Jeejee, a fact that would show a different point of view from some of the characters who use the original names. The choice of the clipped form of the name shows that the addresser is adopting a different point of view from the one who uses the neutral form Juma.

The discussion in the foregone has been confined to works of literature that have characters with clear proper names. However, we have instances of experimental works in which characters remain names through out. A classic example in African literature in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The beautiful ones are not yet born*.



In Kiswahili literature a good example in Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. These are polymorphous novels which examine the quest for truth and meaning in life. In both novels, the character that personifies the search is simply "mimi" (I). In this novel we therefore have only pronominal presence in place of proper name. It may be possible to explain Kezilahabi's opting for anonymous character on the basis of the universalistic nature of the question that informs the search in this novel. In fact the hesitancy and reluctance which a number of writers show in making authorial pronouncements is reflected in the penchant to suppress names. Kezilahabi's novels can actually be considered as experimental fiction in their preference of anonymity and the high pronominal presence, a case of pronominal foregrounding

In the discussion, we have noted the tendency to polarise characters into good and bad and give them characteristic names. This is not confined to Shaaban Robert's creative works but features in works of a number of Kiswahili creative writers in varying degrees. This method is a useful symbolic device and has an important thematic role. It may however be worth noting here that when a writer describes and names a character in a given way, the fixed nature of the may end up endangering the freedom to change of the individual character character as already noted in the foregone. A character may be more than the name encapsulates.

In this paper an attempt has been made at showing how the use of names in Kiswahili literature is crucial. This becomes even more apparent considering most of the Kiswahili creative writers come from societies that attach a lot of significance to names and naming. An understanding of the meanings of characters' names conveys better theme, events as well as adding characterisation. Names play a big role in the general framework of the whole story. The use of meaningful names appears to be teleologically, thematically and, sometimes even, ideologically, significant serving a foregrounding or a defamiliarising role. They do allow the write to weave and create a more powerful symbolic strategy.

In conclusion, we can therefore note that the method as well the process of naming or coming to recognize a name is intimately and intricately associated with not only the production of the individual narratives but also with the subsequent process of reading the resultant narrative. Names of literary characters in majority of Kiswahili literary texts are important nodal points where aesthetics and teleology come to converge.

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