

From Oral Narration to the Publishing House: An Examination of Thematic Development of Kiswahili Short Story

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Abstract

The short story genre has not been given as much academic attention in the Kenyan, and indeed in the East African literary arena. This is in contrast with the other genres that have for a long time enjoyed attention from both writers and critics. This paper traces the thematic development of the short story genre from its traditional setting by the fireside where it was narrated mostly in the evenings with the main audience being children, to the publishing house where the readers are unlimited in space and time. Because of this development, it is argued here that there has been profound change in the content (themes) of the short stories. This paper explores the growth of this genre by highlighting the thematic changes that have occurred. To do this, the paper applies the sociological approach in its analysis. This paper also notes that together with these developments in content there has also been phenomenal growth in terms of the quantity of creative works produced as well as growing critical interest in the genre. Stylistic aspects have also undergone massive development.

Key Words: Short story, themes, oral literature, published, anthology.

1.0 Introduction and definition of terms

In its earliest form, the short story merely involved narration by older members of the society to the younger ones. It only involved word of mouth and is therefore what may be referred to as *orature* or what Finnegan (1984:2) refers to as *oral literature*. Finnegan describes it thus: “Oral literature is by definition dependant on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion - there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product.” This is of course true of all genres of literature, however, Finnegan (1984:7) further elaborates that: “even within the same culture there may be many set of styles to suit the different literary genres recognized in the culture.” In as far as story telling is concerned it is recognized that this activity was a past time that took place late evening ideally by the fireside and was meant to provide edutainment.

As far as the short story is concerned, scholars are in agreement that it was preceded by other forms. According to Warren (1982:14), “the modern short story may well pride itself in being ‘heir of all the ages’ in the foremost files of time.” Like all heirs, the short story has its ancestors. Rollins (1983) enumerates some precursors to the modern short story; he mentions the *kisa* (narrative), *hekaya* (fable / tale), *kioja* (oddity) and *simo* (proverbs). Whereas these are short prose forms they do not have full attributes of a modern short story. Ohly (1977) attempts to create demarcating lines between these short prose types by providing elaborations that are meant to reduce ambiguity in regard to their definitions. These efforts were necessary because the modern Kiswahili short story was preceded by other modes that had a close resemblance to it though a little different. However, for now, Kiswahili short story has moved from the fireside to the publishing house.

1.1 Oral/Written Interface in Kiswahili Short Story

The dichotomy between oral literature and written literature does not always hold. This is because written literature has borrowed many aspects from oral literature. Such aspects include character types; that is the use of animal characters some of whom have super human powers. In terms of structure some stories also have a formulaic beginning, referring the reader to an indefinite time but at the same time handling modern thematic issues.

Some critics have classified some of these stories as falling in the category of magic narratives. Concerning them Levi-Strauss quoted by Jameson (2000:182) explains:

... Human characters are ceaselessly transformed into animals or objects and back again: in which nothing like narrative “point of view” let alone ‘identification’ or ‘empathy’ with this or that protagonist, emerges, in which not even the position of an individual (storyteller or sender destinaire) can be conceptualized without contradiction.

There are very many stories that have characters created in this manner. Kezilahabi’s *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi* (Mayai (eggs) the Minister for Ailments), Mohammed’s *Sadiki Ukipenda* (Believe it if you feel like) and many other stories have utilised this style. The characters in these stories have superhuman abilities; a feature associated with oral narratives. The motive behind this approach is not only to raise the level of style in regard to characterisation but also to achieve thematic goals albeit in an unusual manner.

2.0 Results and Discussion

In this section, this paper explores how the published short story in Kiswahili emerged and then traces its development thematically. The paper explores the themes that were found in the first published Kiswahili short stories and then traces how those themes have grown, developed or changed over the years from 1924 to the present time.

2.1 The Emergence of Printed Kiswahili Short Story

It has been indicated in section 1.0 that stories were basically narrated and therefore a feature of oral literature, however, in time, short stories started appearing in print form. Mohochi (1995) noted that newspapers played a big role in the emergence and growth of printed Kiswahili short story in both Kenya and Tanzania. He cites some short stories that were printed in the newspapers in the 20s such as *Mwarabu na Wagogo* (The Arab and the Wagogo) in *Mamboleo* volume I of 1924 and *Hadithi ya Koti yangu ya Kupima* (The Story of my Tailor made Coat) in volume IV of 1926. It is notable that even in the current century, Kiswahili newspapers continue to be a useful medium of publishing short stories.

It may not be possible to point out precisely which short story was first published in Kiswahili. However, it is quite clear that initially writers began by putting the oral stories to the written form by turning over existing oral narratives to publishing houses. There are a number of short stories that have definitely been written from oral sources; for example Mnyampala's *Kisa cha Mrina Asali na Wenzake Wawili* and Baalawy's *Hadithi za Bibi Maahira* amongst many others.

2.2 Thematic development of Kiswahili short story

In 1962, the Sheldon Press published animal stories entitled *Hadithi za Esopo* (Aesop's Fables) These are collections of animal stories written in very simple language that are said to have been credited to a slave who lived in Ancient Greece between 620 and 560 BC. The Kiswahili translation has sixty six short tales on diverse issues. As the introduction by the author indicates, his goal was to educate his readers by means of his tales. To illustrate, one of his story that has been retold in many languages concerns the often cited dangers of "crying wolf". It narrates how a shepherd boy had developed the habits of giving false alarms about being attacked by a wild dog. Eventually he was indeed attacked and killed by a wild dog as people in the neighborhood thought that his cries for help were his usual jokes.

Another collection from the Sheldon Press is *Hadithi za wanyama* (1966). Like the preceding title, this too is a collection of simple animal stories. In the preface the author explains that he collected the stories normally told by the fireside in the old African society with a view of entertaining children from the Western world.

Between 1965 and 1966 the Sheldon Press of London published twelve simple anthologies translated from Arabic by Hellier. The anthologies were in a series that was entitled *Malimwengu*. The anthologies were written in a very simple language and the issues and themes discussed were drawn from the Arabian Society. The themes were quite varied and they include issues of kinship, religion, superstition, heroic characters among others.

Majaliwa's (1966) *Kichwa Upande na Hadithi Nyingine* shows a departure from the earlier simplistic rendering. The stories in this anthology have human characters and are much longer. The

author has written four stories all of which have a moral for the reader. They have strong themes on physical challenge and mental abilities, overcoming adversities and perseverance.

The British Broadcasting Corporation in conjunction with the Longman Publishers launched a short story writing competition in 1967 among its listeners which were published in 1970 and 1972. The anthologies which were edited by both the BBC and Longman Publishers under a series named were entitled: *Pavumapo Palilie*, *Mapenzi ni Kikohozi*, *Kinywa Jumba la Maneno* and *Vituko Duniani*. These four anthologies set the pace for the *realist tradition* in the writing of Kiswahili short stories. The anthologies tackled issues that were topical then in a realistic manner. The themes that were tackled in these short stories included crime, marital infidelity, superstition, love as well as politics and leadership among other themes. This series by the BBC and Longman catapulted the writing of many other anthologies and for a certainty the short story genre had come of age in the East African literary scene.

The mid 1970s and the 1980s saw the thematic concerns becoming more diverse and better developed. Although social issues continued to be focused upon, the major thematic concerns of the period were political. Politics had started to become a recurring theme among many authors especially given that these were the decades that followed immediately after independence from colonial powers and there were momentous political events taking place in the East African region.¹ Ruhumbika (1978) wrote *Dua la kuku lilivyompata mwewe* (How the fowl's curse afflicted the kite) that was an allegorical account of a political struggle between the weak and the strong represented by the perennial fights between the hawk and the fowls. Mwakyembe's (1976) *Zaka la Damu* (A sacrifice of blood) is an account of how politicians can go to any length to ascend to political power or to sustain themselves in power by vanquishing their foes regardless of the relationships between them. In this particular case, a father was ready to destroy his son who had the courage to oppose him in an election contest.

Ruhumbika's (1982) *Wali wa Ndevu (Beard's Rice)* is a political satire that revisits the exploitation of the local people in Zanzibar by the political elite that comprised of Arabs that had initially colonized the island and continued to have a big influence in the social and economic affairs of the island. In the story the local population is not only exploited economically but they are also humiliated by being made to undertake dehumanizing tasks.

Mohammed 's (1978) collection *Kicheko cha Ushindi na Hadithi Nyingine (the victor's laughter)* dwells on diverse social issues such as problems in the marriage institution, crime and the role of education in making the society better. In the lead story, Rajabu's trivializes his marriage by constantly threatening his wife that he would divorce her. The wife shows her importance by hiding

¹ In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Kenya had moved from its colonial status to a Parliamentary system with a bicameral parliament, to a multi-party Republic and eventually ending up as a single-party Republic. Tanzania had moved from colonization to a Western-based democracy eventually ending up as an Eastern friendly Socialist Republic before turning back to Capitalism. Uganda moved from colonization and monarchic traditions to a Republic before falling to military dictatorship followed by coups and counter-coups ultimately settling as a "party-less" Republic.

from him for a while prompting Rajabu to search for her in earnest. Other works that exploit social issues include Salimu's (1976) *Sikudhani* which delves in the issue of alcoholism and abusive marriages. The issue of alcoholism is later developed further by Ruhumbika (1978) in *Kisa cha Mlevi wa Gongo na Mchwa (the tale of the gongo drunkard and the ants)*

The issue of alienation and exploitation has also been addressed well in Ruhumbika's (1982) *Juma kamwaka mkewe shikamoo akidhani ni mama mwenye nyumba waliyopanga (Juma's Mistaken salutation of his wife as a result of confusing her with their landlady)*. The theme of alienation is also evident in Mohammed's (1985) story *Tumba Iliyovia (the pod that busted)* where a character who comes back from studies abroad despises the humble gestures of her parents and community to give her a fitting welcome.

From the late 1990s to present, Kiswahili short story has experienced a phenomenal growth in terms of the quantity and diversity of issues covered. This period has witnessed the style of a single author writing an anthology by his own dwindling.² Many anthologies written in this period are remarkably different from those of earlier period in many ways. They show a break from the past in style, content and approaches both to issues and publication. For example, the anthologies now embrace contributions of many and diverse authors. Such contributors are drawn from all over the world. This brings a rich combination in terms of themes and style in the anthologies.³ During this period, different contributors have explored diverse issues in greater depth than in previous cases.

For instance, social immorality, political parodies and satirical rendering of the excesses of the political class are subjects that have been discussed boldly and artistically by several authors for instance in the short story *Mwendawazimu (The mad man)* by Shake, Iribemwangi's *Mheshimiwa Gavana (His Excellency the Governor)* and Wamitila's *Shingo ya Mbunge (The Member of Parliament's neck)*.

In *Mheshimiwa Gavana*, the author uses the example of one individual to narrate how some people are motivated by greed to ascend to political power. They use their ill gotten wealth to get to power and therefore are unwilling to help their electorate because they never intended to do so in the first place; their goal was to protect their wealth. In *Shingo ya Mbunge*, the author satirically narrates how one individual who initially was quite skinny became of generous built. His neck became quite

² However, a few single author anthologies like Said A. Mohamed's *sadiki Ukipenda na Hadithi Nyingine (2002) Mfuko Mtupu na Hadithi Nyingine (2005)* and *Arusi ya Buldoza na Hadithi Nyingine (2005)* have been published.

³For example, the following anthologies published in Kenya and edited by the indicated writers have all been published in this century: *Mwendawazimu na Hadithi Nyingine (Mbatiah: 2000)*, *Damu Nyeusi na Hadithi Nyingine (Mohamed na Walibora: 2007)*, *Alidhani Kapata na Hadithi Nyingine (Iribemwangi: 2007)*, *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi na Hadithi Nyingine (Wamitila: 2007)*, *Kiti cha Moyoni na Hadithi Nyingine (Walibora & Mohamed: 2007)*, *Mimba Ingali Mimba na Hadithi Nyingine (MCONyango: 2008)*, *Kopo la Mwisho na Hadithi Nyingine (Babu: 2011)*, *Sina Zaidi na Hadithi Nyingine (Walibora & Iribemwangi: 2011)*, *Gitaa na Hadithi Nyingine (Arege: 2011)*, *Kunani Marekani? na Hadithi Nyingine (Iribemwangi 2011)*, *Takrima Nono na Hadithi Nyingine (Momanyi & Timammy: 2012)*

huge. The author satirize the individual because initially he had claimed that his neck was flexible allowing him to easily turn it around to focus on the issues facing the area he wanted to represent in parliament. The story details how he got involved in plundering public resources and therefore he not only increased his wealth but his physique and therefore going by his claims he lent himself unable to focus on the needs of his electorate.

This period has also seen authors tackling emerging issues that have hitherto not been discussed. Examples are Iribemwangi's *Kunani Marekani?* that tackles the tribulation of Africans who venture to foreign lands looking for greener pastures only to be disappointed; Habwe's story *Mkimbizi* that addresses the plight of refugees and Mbuthia's story *Anga Kavu* that focuses on the plight of nomadic communities.

Some of other prevalent themes currently include love and marriage, environment, upbringing, HIV/AIDS, civil wars, patriotism, discrimination (on grounds of age, disability, race, sex, ethnicity etc), religion and more bold political excursions among others. Short story writers continue to be prolific and it is likely that they will continue keeping their audiences engaged on the many, varied and topical issues that are emerging.

3.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that the themes and content of Kiswahili short stories has changed much over time. The first such stories were told beside the fire side to children. While such stories had some teachings, they were basically meant to entertain and essentially had children content. At that time, the stories mostly had animal characters. When the first published stories appeared, they were pretty much like the oral ones. Later, as has been seen, many translated short stories got into Kiswahili. Such stories had foreign themes and content that was not very useful to Kiswahili users. However, in the 1960s, more serious stories with adult content started to emerge. In the 1970s and 1980s, the short stories dealt with themes that concerned the society and were no longer children's entertainment tales. Getting to the current century, the stories deal with topical and serious issues concerning the society.

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