EXISTENTIALISM AND FEMINISM IN KEZILAHABI’S NOVEL KICHWAMAJI

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1. Introduction

In this essay, I would like to analyse the novel Kichwamaji (‘Empty-head’; 1974) by the well-known Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi against the background of two philosophical theories: existentialism and feminism. I will first discuss existentialism and the existentialist elements in the novel. Then I will present feminist theory and focus on the female characters in Kichwamaji. I will argue that a feminist reading of the novel is impossible due to its predominant existentialist character.

2. What is existentialism?

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that analyses the concept of human existence in the world taking into account the subjective states of an human, i.e. anxiety, alienation, awareness of death. The influential French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) writes that existentialism:

…is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and human subjectivity. (Sartre 1948: 24)

Existentialist philosophers believe that human life is too intricate and complex to be defined by philosophical theories and definitions, rather it should be lived. They propose that existence precedes essence, which means that before anything can have an essence it has to exist. Accordingly nothing can have essence before its existence thus only after coming to existence, it will become what it is, as “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (Sartre 1948: 24).


2 Existentialist philosophy has been dealt with in a number of Swahili literary studies hence the present paper only includes some of the core aspects of existentialism. For further readings about existentialism in Swahili literature see Mulokozi (1983), Ricard (1988), Diegnner (2002 and 2005), Wafula (2003), Mkufya (2005), Rettová (2007), Rehak (2007).
As a consequence an human being has the freedom to shape his/her life whereas he/she is the only one responsible for his/her deeds. In Sartre’s words:

…the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. (Sartre 1948: 31)

Consequently a human will be overwhelmed by immense responsibility for his/her choices while during all his/her endeavors s/he is limited by his/her death (cf. Diegner 2002 and 2005, Mkufya 2005). Under these circumstances he/she will be hopeless, anguished, lonely and alienated.

In Kichwamaji Kezilahabi uses the expression ‘[-]kufa polepole’ (‘dying slowly’; Kezilahabi 1974: 206)³ in illustrating the concept of life which is directly imbedded in the philosophy of existentialism. Nevertheless, existentialist philosophy in total is much more complex and intricate.⁴ For the reason that we propose to apply the existentialist ideas to a narrative, we first employ the idea of impartial observation.

From the light of the previous discussion we could draw that existence is the series of appearances which manifest something that is, while all the manifestations are equal. This means that in describing people or things, an impartial observation is used. According to Sartre:

… the appearances which manifest the existent are neither interior nor exterior; they are all equal, they all refer to other appearances, and none of them is privileged. (Sartre 1943: 1)

Consequently, existentialist philosophy observes that which exists as it is without verdict and judgment; hence no characteristics are advantaged in relation to others.

2.1. The individual and society observed in the light of existentialism

An outstanding characteristic feature of existentialism is the "first-person perspective", the description of the world from the perspective of the individual. Part of this approach is the fact that existentialism insists on the description of life with all its different faces without obligation to embellish what we would rather deny or avoid. As existentialism also deals with aspects of the social context of the individual person, Sartre has developed

…a theory of social action in which the individual actor, his social group, and the field of his practical action are interconnected. (Hayim 1980: XII)

Evidently, an individual is a part of his/her social framework whereas his/her existence is shaped and influenced by that.

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³ In the following, Kezilahabi (1974) will be referred to as KM (Kichwamaji).

⁴ The most important existentialist philosophers are Heidegger, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Beauvoir, Berdyaev and others. Existentialist ideas have also been presented in the works of numerous writers and filmmakers, e.g. Beckett, Camus, Saint-Exupéry, Hamsun, Kafka, Miller, Pinter, Bergman, Pollock.
2.2. The life of an individual in *Kichwamaji* observed using existentialist principles

*Kichwamaji* was published in 1974 and is considered to be the first existentialist novel in Swahili literature. Kezilahabi himself has made known that he has been influenced by existentialist authors such as Camus and Beckett. Equally Bertoncini elaborates:

> It was written at the time when Kezilahabi was reading existentialist authors (such as Beckett and Camus) whose influence is clearly visible in his novel. (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1998: 108f)

The main character of the novel is first-person narrator, a university-educated intellectual Kazimoto. He goes to the district commissioner, who is his childhood friend Manase, asking for a job. After he fails to get the job he turns to his native village to spend his holidays there. Having returned home he progressively feels more alienated from his parents, friends and other villagers. After his sister Rukia is raped and impregnated, she dies. Her death is followed by her mother’s. Kazimoto falls into despair and seeks revenge towards his previous mate Manase. He plans to kill Manase’s father. Then he settles on seducing Manase’s sister Sabina but falls in love with her. They get married. Meanwhile his brother Kalia has been killed.

Subsequently his wife Sabina gets pregnant. Kazimoto seems content and anticipating their future. Yet the newborn baby has an enormous head and dies. As it turns out, Manase and his wife have also a child with a gigantic head. Both Manase and Kazimoto have gotten a venereal disease from a prostitute called Pili. Accordingly they infected their wives so that they gave birth to babies with huge heads. After all these disasters, Kazimoto looses hope and kills himself.

We are following Kazimoto’s reasoning and motivations which do not fall into clear-cut categories of “good” or “evil”, “right” or “wrong”, rather the world is observed and described without judgments. Even when he has negative thoughts of revenge about his childhood friend Manase, or his attempt to kill Manase’s father, the detached descriptions of situations help us understand his motivations.

As existentialism tries to understand what a human being is, questions such as “Who am I?”, “What is life?”, “What is death?” are acute to the main characters. In *Kichwamaji*, Kazimoto is constantly questioning the meaning of life. He is confronted with constant hardships like his sister’s and his mother’s death, guilt about his brother Kalia, the birth of his deformed child and the sickness he has passed on to his wife etc. These emotionally powerful events make him even more inclined to meditate about life and its meaning.

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5 While Swahili scholars agree in recognizing it (Bertoncini-Zubkova 1989, Diegner 2002, Řehak 2007), Diegner points out that “this aspect has been given too much attention neglecting Kezilahabi’s originality”. He refers to the fact that the concept of death as exposed in *Kichwamaji* and other works by Kezilahabi is not only apparent in existentialist philosophy (Diegner 2002: 61).
According to Sartre, the main principle of existentialism is to show the world as it is and indeed, Kazimoto’s entire life is described accordingly. We could view him as a human being with his faults and virtues.

If we apply to the novel the other dispositions of existentialism such as the burden of free will, alienation from the world and death we can observe Kazimoto’s “questioning the sense of man’s earthly existence” (Bertoncini 1989: 9) jointly with his bleak views of life.

As there are many deaths in the novel, the reflections of death are frequent. In contrast even the observation of a small child learning to walk inserts only negative thoughts into Kazimoto’s mind. He contemplates:

\[\text{Kwanza alitambaa. Halafu nilimwona anajaribu kusima ma. […] alipigapiga mikono hewani, halafu alianguka tena na kutambaa.} \text{(KM 215f)}\]

At the beginning it was crawling. Then I saw it trying to stand up. […] it was waving her hand on the air and then it fell and was crawling again.\(^6\)

This scene of a small child exploring the world and learning to walk could represent hope but Kazimoto chooses gloom and desolation instead. He continues in the same mood:

\[\text{Kwa muda mfupi huo niliona mwanzo na mwisho wa binadamu. Nilimtazama mke wangu…} \text{“Mke wangu,” nilimwita.} \text{“Bwana’ngu,” aliitikia.} \text{“Sijui kwa nini ninaishi.”} \text{Nimechoka na maswali yako ya kijinga,” alisema.} \text{Huwezi kuishi kama watu wengine? Wewe nani”} \text{“Mimi sijui,” nilimwambia.} \text{“Hakika sikufahamu kwamba wewe ni kichwamaji namna hii! Sikufahamu!”} \text{(KM 216)}\]

During this short time I saw the beginning and the end of a human being. I looked at my wife.

“My wife,” I called her.
“My husband,” she responded.
“I do not know why I live.”
“I am tired of your silly questions,” she said. “Can you not live like other people? Who are you?”
“I do not know,” I told her.
“Actually, I did not know that you were such an empty-head? I did not know!”

Kazimoto’s introspective contemplations are pessimistic and hopeless following the principles of the perception such as ‘life is dying slowly’ which is characteristic to existentialist thinking.

\(^6\) All translations mine.
Likewise Manase’s reflections are illustrating the existentialist approach to the life as miserable and hopeless:


The truth is that we human beings are dying slowly. Many people think that death comes unexpectedly. This is not true. Since a human is born he/she begins to die slowly even if he/she considers him/herself being well. His/her days are being cut off one by one. The grave is just our last step. Kazimoto, while we are living we are dying slowly, therefore to die is to live.

### 2.3. Society observed using existentialist principles

‘Kichwamaji’ (‘Empty-head’) in Kezilahabi’s novel could additionally be taken as a metaphor for the life in the postcolonial East-African society. Right after independence, Tanzania needed local educated officials, thus the young men who had just finished their degrees, were promoted to be high officials. Western education was the key for success whereas the wisdom of elders and experiences in life were losing their significance. _Kichwamaji_ then refers to the condition of young Western-educated intellectuals being alienated to their culture of origin.

This theme of the relationship between the young and the old generation, surfaces several times in the novel. In the following example we see how an old man is thrown out from the office by the young official:


When the elder was thrown out he was like a mad person. He was trembling with fear. He walked quickly outside. I was perturbed by a combination of anger and grief when I saw the elder running away from his Government. When the elder was going outside, I did not see anything else except that elders are running away from us. The relationship between them and us was broken. I saw parents running away from their children who were now like lions.

Another character, a traveler talking to his friend in a bar, is telling how he feels about being asked by a young official to look for a girl for him:

_Ni jambo ambalo mara nyingi liliniudhi. Heshima yangu yote kwenda kuipoteza mbele ya msichana mdogo! Na mvi zangu kichwani!_ (KM 16f)

This is a matter that has offended me many times. Go and lose all my dignity in front of a young girl! And with my gray hair on my head!

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Above and beyond the title “Empty-head” is referred as a representation of society in the form of the disease: Accordingly, after consulting with the doctor Manase is describing the progress of the disease as follows:

 [...] ugonjwa huo ulikuwa hauwezi kutambulika kwa ura hisi. Alisema kwamba ugonjwa huo unaingia ndani ya damu na kukuza bila kumdhuru mhusika. Baada ya miaka kumi na minne hivi au zaidi unaanza kumdhu ru mhusika, lakini kabla yake ni vigumu kuusikia. (KM 213)

 [...] it is not easy to recognize this illness. He said that the illness gets into the blood and stays there without harming the person. After about 14 years or more it starts to damage the individual but before that it is hard to recognize it.

Manase and Kazimoto continue their conversation about the doctor who knew the remedy to cure the illness but according to Manase he is now dead. Apparently the ‘doctors’ who could help the one suffering the disease are the elders whose wisdom could lead youth gone astray back to integrity and to their roots. As it is characteristic for existentialism, it does not give solutions to or ways out of difficult circumstances; rather it just observes while the protagonists are free to make their decisions. Taken within the context of existentialist philosophy life should not be simplified and trouble-free.

At the end of the novel Manase asks Kazimoto about the future:

“Unafikiri nini juu ya kizazi kijacho?” nilimwuliza.
“Sijui,”alisema, “lakini naona watoto wetu wanakuka na vichwa vikubwa. Sijui kunaweza kuwa na nini ndani ya vichwa hivyo.” Manase alitingisha kichwa chake kwa huzuni. (KM 214)

“What do you think about the future generation?” I asked him.
Manase bent his head. He was thinking. Then he raised his head. “I do not know,” he said, “but I see our children coming with big heads. I do not know what can be inside those heads.”
Manase shook his head with sadness.

The hopelessness and despair leave Manase and his wife in apathy and indifference whereas Kazimoto kills himself.

3. Feminism

In the following, I would like to discuss the novel from a feminist standpoint. If one of the fundamental presuppositions of existentialism is impartial and neutral observation, then feminism requires a very different approach. Feminism is an umbrella term for a range of views about injustice perpetrated against women. It can be defined as a movement that seeks equal rights for men and women; hence its basic conviction is that women are disadvantaged with respect to their rights in society.

However, as feminist philosophy is variable and wide-ranging it is unfeasible to talk about feminism without specifying the particularities of a given group of feminists or individual scholars. In this regard, Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka states that:
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[...] aside from the basic common objectives of feminism to end the oppression, powerlessness, and patriarchal exploitation of the women, each feminist must identify, define and adopt strategies of resistance within its cultural confines. (Ajayi-Soyinka 2003: 168)

Even though the specifics of feminism differ according to a given cultural context, the main principle, to help women to liberate themselves from gender based oppressions, is universal.

3.1. Western feminism and African womanism

There is skepticism among some African female activists towards the concept of feminism in the African context. Their argument is that the feminists in the West have different motives and means compared to African women. In the light of that contemplation, Mikell states:

The new African-feminist approach differs radically from the Western forms of feminism with which we have become familiar since the 1960s. African feminism owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. It has largely been shaped by African women’s resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African culture. (Mikell 1997: 4)

She specifies further the differences between Western and African women:

Western women were emphasizing individual female autonomy, while African women have been emphasizing culturally linked forms of public participation. (ibid.)

Therefore even the term feminism seems inappropriate to many African female theoreticians; as they prefer to use the term womanism. As Hudson-Weems writes:

The African womanist is significantly different from the mainstream feminist, particularly in her perspective on and approach to issues in society. This is to be expected, for obviously their historical realities and present stance in society are not the same. African women and white women come from different segments of society and, thus, feminism as an ideology is not equally applicable to both. (Hudson-Weems 1998:154)

Marie Pauline Eboh specifies the difference between Western feminists and African womanists further:

[B]lack womanists, unlike white feminists, eschew bitterness in their confrontation and relationship with men. They do not negate men, rather they accommodate them; men are central to their lives not merely as husbands but also as sons and brothers and their continuous presence is assured. (...) The success of African womanism derives from the discovered awareness by women of their indispensability to the male. (Eboh 1998: 335f.)

Not all African female activists oppose the term feminism albeit their endeavours differ from Western feminism.

I would argue that African ‘womanism’ is not entirely different from the Western ‘feminism’, especially in the light of modern life where the African woman is more or less facing the same challenges as the Western one; domestic violence, rights of single mothers whose numbers are rising daily and discrimination in the work place. We not only need to focus attention on the traditional African woman who is the real custodian of her culture, but one
that has also undergone immense transformation and is facing globalization challenges and demands modern living just like the Western woman.

Nonetheless, both Western feminism and African womanism are theories which favour one group in society, that of women, and a feminist perspective is thus an essentially biased one.

3.2. Women in African literatures

If we look into the examples of oral literature, women are often portrayed only as ‘positive’ or only as ‘negative’ and receive very little character improvement. This image is perpetuated also in written Swahili literature.

According to Mbughuni, the general image of women in Swahili prose fiction is that “[t]hey serve either as representatives of the evil elements in human nature or make a quick entrance as a model domestic” (Mbughuni 1982: 15). Mbughuni labels these prototypes of women “Marys” – being ideal models of female representation – and “Eves”, who are the source of temptation and evil in the man’s world.

Similarly, Bertoncini in her anthology about women in Swahili literature fiction finds that women are often portrayed as either ‘vamps’ or ‘victims’ (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1996: 7), ‘vamps’ being classified as ‘negative’ – living at the expense of men – and ‘victims’ being women abused by men.

There are various reasons why and how such characters have been molded. If we consider the rules of patriarchal society that is manifested in many African countries, we can see the origin and reasons of their actions and manners. Bertoncini argues:

The sad predicament of Swahili literary heroines can usually be traced right from their childhood. They have been often seduced or raped as young girls, and this traumatic event leaves its mark on them for their whole life. (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1996: 10)

Another explanation Bertoncini gives (cf. ibid. passim) for the lack of varied representation of female heroines in Swahili literature is that there are very few Swahili female writers. A similar thought is elaborated by Mbughuni:

Perhaps because almost all authors are male, women receive very little character development. […] The image of woman, therefore, will tell us more about the cultural values and attitudes which shape the stereotype than it will about the actual situation of women. (Mbughuni 1982: 15)

3.3. Women in Kichwamaji

If we consider Kichwamaji, can we apply such black-and-white categories to the female characters in the novel? In Kichwamaji there are several female characters: prostitutes, lovers, mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, etc. Whereas some female characters appear to comply with a black-and-white moral framework (especially the good characters, such as Kazimoto’s mother, his sister Rukia or his wife Sabina), other characters resist such simple judgments.
Are prostitutes, such as Pili, ‘vamps or victims’? Is Salima, the spoilt town girl who snatched Manase for herself in spite of the pregnant Rukia and in spite of his fiancée Vumilia, good or bad?

According to existentialism as an impartial observation and open consideration of people and things, there are always reasons and motivations why people are who they are and why they do what they do. In Kichwamaji we could see how victims become vamps and vamps become victims. There is no clear cut between the right and the wrong; we just observe life with its many faces. However if we covet for the reasons behind the deeds and motivations of the heroines we could see that they all are the products of the male dominated society. Even Rukia, Kazimoto’s sister who was sent to study independently fell eventually into Manase’s trap or Tegemea\(^8\) who has been quite independent during her whole life but finally ends up in the village and submits herself to Kabenga as “there is always a husband, a lover or a superior to whom she must submit” (Bertoncini 1996: 11).

If we apply the existentialist approach to these female characters we see that indeed the adversities of life and unavoidability of death are chiefly presented in the novel hence there is no meaning in life but hopelessness, and that as we live, we are actually dying slowly.

4. Conclusion

If contrasting feminism and existentialism, the discrepancy is obvious; feminism as well as womanism, sees women as victims of men or of society. Existentialism, on the other hand, is an impartial observation of life and open consideration of people and things. Therefore I would argue that one approach excludes the other.

Euphraise Kezilahabi’s existentialist novel Kichwamaji is a profound and fascinating novel. Existentialism and feminism are only one possibility to analyse the book therefore we believe that due to its multifaceted themes and symbols it is far from being exhausted.

5. Bibliography


\(^8\) Ironically, in Swahili the word means to ‘rely on’ or to ‘depend on’. For further reading on onomastics in Swahili literature cf. Wamitila (1999), Poeta (2008).


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