

## DARING TO BE DESTRUCTIVE EUPHRASE KEZILAHABI'S ONTO-CRITICISM

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This paper illustrates the ways in which Kezilahabi's 1985 dissertation makes its own daring contribution to the field of aesthetic criticism through the proposition of a new critical approach to African literature. Kezilahabi's starting point for the elaboration of this new critical approach is the realization of a prevailing tendency among literary critics to read African literature against formal and aesthetic paradigms deeply rooted in the Western literary and philosophical traditions. Opposed to the adoption of interpretative frames that do not acknowledge the philosophical implications involved in literary analysis, Kezilahabi affirms the importance of approaching literary production from within the artistic and philosophical tradition it stems from. Inspired by hermeneutic philosophy, especially in its "ontological turn" embodied by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Kezilahabi's focus is on literary interpretation as an ontological enterprise aimed at "situating" literature within a horizon of understanding where its proper universe of references can be disclosed.

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The title of this article is inspired by the closing paragraph of Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi's PhD dissertation "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation" (1985) that reads: *This dissertation is only a loud midnight Howl – Try Being Destructive! or a soft whisper into a neighbor's ear – Dare to be Destructive!* (Kezilahabi 1985: 361) This paper illustrates the ways in which Kezilahabi's 1985 dissertation makes its own daring contribution to the field of aesthetic criticism through the proposition of a new critical approach to African literature. Kezilahabi's starting point for the elaboration of this new critical approach is the realization of a prevailing tendency among literary critics to read African literature against formal and aesthetic paradigms deeply rooted in the Western literary and philosophical traditions. Opposed to the adoption of interpretative frames that do not acknowledge the philosophical implications involved in literary analysis, Kezilahabi affirms the importance of approaching literary production from within the artistic and philosophical tradition it stems from. Inspired by hermeneutic philosophy, especially in its "ontological turn" embodied by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Kezilahabi's focus is on literary interpretation as an ontological enterprise aimed at "situating" literature within a horizon of understanding where its proper universe of references can be disclosed. Onto-criticism thus features as a project of destruction and construction, as it proposes to dismantle inauthentic readings of African literature and to open new avenues of interpretation. In order for this to happen, African literature has to first and foremost "be at home."

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### Introduction

Euphrase Kezilahabi was born in 1944 in Namangondo, Tanzania. He has written numerous works of literature in Swahili and is considered one of the most prominent contemporary writers in Tanzania (Diegner 2002).

Diegner divides Kezilahabi's oeuvre into two creative periods. The first period comprises the early novels *Rosa Mistika* (1971), *Kichwamaji* (1974), *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (1975), *Gamba la Nyoka* (1979), the drama *Kaputula Marx* (written in 1979 and published in 1999), the collections of poetry *Kichomi* (1974) and *Karibu Ndani* (1988) and the short stories *Wasubiri Kifo* (1976), *Mayai-Waziri wa Marahadi* (1978) and *Cha Mnyonge Utakitapika Hadharani* (1985) and is characterized by "a relatively simple style" that may be termed "realism," where the aim is to "transport complex themes in a simple language so that he will be read and understood by as many people as possible" (Diegner 2002: 45). The caesura between Kezilahabi's two literary periods is the novella *Nagona* published in 1990 and soon followed by *Mizingile* in 1991. In these two works "Kezilahabi deepens his studies of philosophy and psychology and changes his style completely so that these novellas are much more difficult to understand. The setting is no longer a realistic one, but a description of symbolic landscapes beyond space and time." (Ibid: 46)

Following Diegner's classification of Kezilahabi's oeuvre, it is interesting to note that his doctoral dissertation falls precisely between the two periods. It is particularly interesting to read the shift in his writing in terms of "symbolic landscapes beyond space and time" in connection with his philosophical theory of onto-criticism in "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation" that strongly links the question of knowledge to aesthetic expression and interpretation. Breaking with the Western epistemological tradition, which according to Kezilahabi lies at the heart of all literary criticism, he proposes a "dismantling [of] the resemblance of language to the world" (Kezilahabi 1985: 217) thus strongly challenging the philosophical validity of realism in literary production.

Kezilahabi sees literary criticism as rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, particularly in the elaboration of the concepts of time and subject and object. By critically engaging with this tradition he opens a new critical space not only for Swahili and African literature but also for aesthetic theory in general. In his article "Signs of New Features in the Swahili Novel," Khamis writes that "[...] a number of Swahili novels written from the 1990s to date, have detached themselves in various ways from hitherto Swahili novels written following the mainstream realist mode. This "new" novel seems to "pervasively" adopt the fantastic, magical, and postmodernist tendencies that [...] adequately capture the cacophony and decay of the East African societies" (Khamis 2002: 91). Though Khamis attributes this shift mainly to political, economic and social events taking place in Kenya and Tanzania, it would be inter-

esting to analyse the measure in which Kezilahabi's ontological stance may have contributed to new features in Swahili literature, though this will have to be the subject of another paper.<sup>1</sup>

### **Literary interpretation and the question of time**

Kezilahabi uncompromisingly asserts that the prevailing notion of time in Western philosophy and literature has been a linear and progressive concept. This concept is clearly manifest in the centrality of the journey motif in the Western literary tradition, which Kezilahabi traces all the way back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, through the Homeric poems, the Bible and up to contemporary literature such as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

Kezilahabi also associates this concept of time with what he describes as the Western world-view, based on the four pillars of Judeo-Christianity, economic control, science-technology and bureaucracy. This interpretation highlights the link between a progressive conception of time and hegemonic power, a fact that makes it all the more problematic to read African literature against a Western concept of time.

Kezilahabi describes the journey motif in literature as *value laden* - "an idealistic form of progress and amelioration" (Kezilahabi 1985: 179) - where the future dimension represents an ideal state of being towards which the characters of a literary work *should* tend and where states of being are judged against an ideal.

Against linear and progressive notions of time, Kezilahabi upholds philosopher John S. Mbiti's concept of time as cyclical and existential. Mbiti's notion that "time has to be experienced in order to make sense or become real" (Mbiti 1969: 17) is exemplified in his idea of "phenomenon calendars" that link time to events. If time is constituted by lived experience and by the manifestation of events, the present moment is held to be of the utmost importance because the now is the time of lived experience. Being and Becoming are thus not separated by time but are lived in the present moment and it is precisely this non-separation that constitutes what Kezilahabi calls "the eternal now," which is realized in aesthetic experience through ritual, magic, music and poetry.

Critics approaching African literature who fail to understand the aesthetic tradition that the literature is rooted in will never gain a deep understanding the literature, as aesthetic canons

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<sup>1</sup> I presented this paper at the 2012 Swahili Colloquium in Bayreuth and the debate that followed raised the question of the relationship between Kezilahabi's philosophical position and the emergence of the genre of magical realism in Swahili literature. There seems to be a very interesting link between Kezilahabi's proposition to break with linear conceptions of time in literature, for example, and the settings of many of the Swahili novels that were discussed in the course of the Colloquium, such as his own *Nagona* and *Mizingile*, his former student Said Ahmed Mohamed Khamis's *Dunia Yao* and Kyallo Wamitila's *Ziraili na Zirani* where characters traverse temporal and spatial dimensions in an almost magical fashion, in defiance of the constraints of physics and logic. Unfortunately, my own lack of knowledge of Swahili has prevented me from making further connections between Kezilahabi's theoretical writings and his creative writings, though it is something I would like to look into in more depth.

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are not only revealing of preferred genres, styles and literary devices but also of profound philosophical conceptions such as those of time.

Kezilahabi's notion of "bifocalism" is another essential aspect of time in African literature. On the one side Kezilahabi upholds the idea that a proper critical engagement with African literature should take into account the philosophical and literary tradition the literature stems from, for without this "situatedness" the piece will not be truly revealing. Just as European literary criticism engages with texts by applying major philosophical, psychoanalytical and stylistic interpretations from its own tradition, so African literature must be read within its horizon of references that includes a tradition and a history prior to any significant encounter with the West. At the same time, contemporary African literature is very much produced in a situation of encounter and this is where the idea that African literary criticism has to be bifocal is so fundamental.

Kezilahabi believes that one of the major challenges for African writers and critics has been that of acknowledging tradition without turning it into a reified and static "essence." He holds this to be "one of the greatest errors of our age" (Kezilahabi 1985: 356) which has been perpetuated by the ethnophilosophers.<sup>2</sup>

What African philosophers and African writers have been dealing with for a long time past is a philosophy of the residuum based on what Theodor Adorno has called "concept mummies." [...] they have been searching for African essences buried in the past and brought them forward to the modern world as residues and as living remains that can regenerate the present generation. To them, colonialism, monopoly capitalism, are mere appearances that may pass and go leaving the African essence intact. (Ibid: 356)

Kezilahabi calls this attempt at preserving essences "a fascist enterprise" (Ibid: 356) because it tries to fix the spirit of a people into simplistic and romanticized elements drawn from the past. Moreover, these simplistic elements do not prove useful in grasping and resolving the present day challenges facing the African continent.

Africa will, therefore, have to settle for a concept of time which is both linear and cyclical and keep in the race while at the same time doing violence to everything that suffocates free will and will to power, or even "will not to will". Modern African literature will have to take this course as well, and be counter-hegemonic in nature. Time in modern African literature is time of reaction and response [...]. (Ibid: 182)

Contrary to these claims of one-dimensional African life, Kezilahabi proposes that African literary criticism be *bi-focal*: inward and outward looking - centered on the African experi-

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<sup>2</sup> The term ethnophilosophy is used in African philosophical scholarship to denote the works of certain writers in African philosophy (particularly the early ones such as Placide Temples, Alexis Kagame, Leopold Sédar Senghor) who are seen as constructing ontological, epistemological and moral theories on ethnographic grounds. Samuel Oluoch Imbo defines as ethnophilosophers as those according to whom "philosophy is to be found embedded in the mythical, linguistic, and religious world views of different cultures" (Imbo 1998: 8). Among ethnophilosophy's strongest critics are Paulin Hountondji and Marcien Towa.

ence that *includes* the encounter with the West. This means understanding and living two different concepts of time, not only because Western time has de facto entered the African landscape, but also because failing to recognize this would result into an impossibility to challenge it.

### **Literary interpretation and the question of subject and object**

The other fundamental Western philosophical concept that Kezilahabi sees as reflected in literary criticism is the subject and object dichotomy.

This is a central theme of much of the early African philosophical inquiry,<sup>3</sup> particularly in the philosophy of Négritude and in the thought of Leopold Sédar Senghor, which viewed the Western philosophical tradition as having alienated the two terms in question from one another, creating a deep tear between the human subject and the surrounding world. Senghor criticizes the Western epistemological tradition for basing the possibility for knowledge on the separation of subject and object (Senghor 1965).

This epistemological stance is seen as exemplified in the modern philosophical tradition beginning with René Descartes and enshrined in the ideals of the Enlightenment that upheld the Cartesian concept of “clear and distinct ideas” where understanding is achieved through the purging of subjective elements from objective data, and knowledge is attained through the isolation of essential qualities from sensorial interference.

Against the belief that knowledge is obtained through such a dichotomy, the Négritude philosophers proposed a more “humane” epistemology that is intuitive and empathic and that gains its epistemological validity precisely in the *non*-separation of subject and object.

In “African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation,” Kezilahabi traces the link between this philosophical category and literature in the use and interpretation of the literary devices of metaphor and symbol. He criticizes their employment as “elements of conceptualization that organize perceptions of reality in a given society” (Kezilahabi 1985: 208). The interpretation of literary elements as *modes of perception* implies a separation of subject and object where the apprehension of the world is mediated by cognitive tools. This is seen as creating different levels of alienation: between the writer and literature and between the writer and his/her creative and responsive horizon - the world - in what Kezilahabi refers to as “the tragic epistemology of Western man.” This tragic epistemology is embodied in Western philosophy’s centenary long attempts at bridging the separation of subject and object with a variety of theories and approaches.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “early” is used in accordance with the widely adopted definition of African philosophy as relating to contemporary, written philosophical works concerning mainly sub-Saharan Africa and mainly in European languages. See for example Hallen 2002, Imbo 1998, Masolo 1994, Wiredu 2004.

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It is the interpretation of literary devices such as metaphor and symbol that marks the difference between what Kezilahabi calls the “techno-critic” and the “onto-critic.” The techno-critic privileges a scientific form of knowledge that aims at equating man’s cognitive tools with the manifestation of reality. This form of knowledge is limiting as it confines the entirety of the human artistic expression to pre-defined aesthetic mediums, thus severing the work of art from the world, where the world is potentially a constant source of inspiration and meaning. As Kezilahabi explains:

Literary techno-critics of African literature have personalized African life by setting it on paper and then analyzing it like biological data. It is for this reason that data from the African continent has come to be appropriated as personal property and not as life to be lived and understood. [But] whatever theories we may use in unraveling the nature of narrative, novels and plays, these theories cannot claim to understand the events of which they are theories. (Ibid: 220)

Similar questions had been raised by Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) in relation to African drama. In this book Soyinka analyses the shift in African drama from ritual *experience* to theatrical *representation*, which occurs as part of the transformation of the arts in Africa with the advent of colonialism. He writes that:

The serious divergence between a traditional African approach to drama and the European [...] will be found [...] in what is a recognizable Western cast of mind, a compartmentalizing habit of thought which periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or “truths”) sustained by a proliferating super structure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes. (Soyinka 1976: 37)

The powerful opening line of the book - “I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature” – illustrates the dilemma of representational theater that entails the end of the sacred and magical elements contained in ritual: once featured as characters of the dramatic *pièce*, the gods lose their divine quality and are turned into mere symbols.

The shift in Yoruba dramatic expression also entails a transformation of the collective dimension of ritual where the whole community would be made to experience the ephemeral essence of human life constantly subjected to divine whims through one member’s battle with the gods.

Soyinka writes that this “communal ecstasy or catharsis” is lost in the process of re-staging, leading to the

perennial question of whether ritual can be called drama, at what moment a religious or mythic celebration can be considered transformed into drama, and whether the ultimate test of these questions does not lie in their capacity to transfer from habitual to alien environments. (Ibid: 45)

Soyinka’s reflections on the transformation of Yoruba drama can be read closely to those of Friedrich Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy*, where the German philosopher attributes the end of

Greek tragedy to the last of the tragic poets, Euripides,<sup>4</sup> who replaces the *tragic* element of the tragic heroes – their powerlessness over their own destiny that is in the hands of the gods – with elements of self-consciousness that lead the heroes to a sense of control over their actions. Greek tragedy ends the moment in which the rational element is introduced onto the scene. The rational element is also the moral element as it presents the hero with a choice between right and wrong. With the end of tragic representation, Greek tragic *life* is also lost to make way for philosophy, which was spreading in Athens at the time of Euripides through Socrates' invitations to reflect on the nature of things and on good and bad actions (Nietzsche 1972).

The important question that *Myth, Literature and the African World* raises is whether the Yoruba gods are bound to die away like the Greek ones – sacrificed to the altar of literature as the Greek gods were sacrificed to the altar of reason - or whether literature can still reserve them a place within its contemporary creative horizon. This brings us back to Kezilahabi's question of what aesthetic canons are referred to by literary critics. The importance of reading African literature with a consciousness of African aesthetic paradigms – past and present – lies in aesthetics' profound connection with broader philosophical meanings and worldviews.

Kezilahabi's own search for a new literary dimension calls for an ontological approach to African literature and literary criticism that can overcome the subject and object dichotomy contained in the epistemological approach that “places faith in alienation as a necessary condition for objectivity” (Kezilahabi 1985: 194). He refers to the epistemological approach as turning literature into “a body of knowledge that signifies” (Ibid: 194), a “corpus,” evoking the idea of a corpse - a literary piece that lies like a dead body for both writer and reader. Against this objectifying glance, African literature has to be *liberating*. The conceptual liberation Kezilahabi advocates for is from what has been famously discussed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida as “logocentrism” (Derrida 2007). In “African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation” the use of the term *logos* connotes a Western conception of life whereby the experience of Being is perpetually mediated by *reason as rationality*.

Logocentrism for Kezilahabi also means placing the West at the centre of all discourses and upholding Western morals as universal and unquestionable. This is where the idea of “value ladenness,” previously introduced in relation to the concept of time, returns to occupy a central position in Kezilahabi's philosophy.

The question of value accompanies the notion of time as a linear progression pointing to the future, as it places the West well ahead in the race and Africa far behind, struggling to catch up. The notion of value also goes beyond the idea of progress as scientific, economic and technological advancement and comes to encompass moral and ethical ideals. Logocentrism has meant for Africa placing the West at the centre of its cognitive and moral universe

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<sup>4</sup> Significantly, one of Wole Soyinka's plays is the re-adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*.

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and attributing the embodiment of all values to the Western world. One of the most powerful ways through which this has happened in Africa is through the spreading of the Christian faith.

Kezilahabi's philosophy aims to "desacralize the logos," to "de-centre logocentrism so that a space may be created for another kind of language" (Kezilahabi 1985: 107). He proposes that African writers:

[...] emancipate themselves from the constraints of Western logocentrism and take a new direction by doing violence to the logos and stripping off all the hypocrisy that surrounds it. This means that African literature will have to do violence to all forms of codification and signification, all forms of Western style and genres, and take a direction of its own. Only by doing this can there be any hope of transcending Western norms of literary creativity. (Ibid: 107)

Kezilahabi calls this kind of desacralizing activity in African literature the creation of a space "for the possibility of the establishment of a new point of self-referentiality through the transgression of a value-laden Western philosophy." (Ibid: 111)

An example he gives of desacralization of the logos is a passage from Ugandan writer p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*:

Maria the clean woman  
Mother of the hunchback  
Pray for us  
Who spoil things  
Full of graciyal (Ibid: 110)

Kezilahabi writes that "calling Christ a hunchback is more than a deconstruction, it is a desacralization that is destructive of Christ in denying him divineness. Christian morality is no longer a point of reference for African behaviour." (Ibid: 110)

Language plays a major role in the onto-critic's quest for truth, as an important aspect of onto-criticism is the liberation of words from convention. For Kezilahabi, the liberation operated on behalf of literature lies in its potential of "dismantling the resemblance of language to the world" (Ibid: 217). Dismantling the resemblance of language to the world entails the rejection of "articulate, rationalized speech" as the medium of all communication and the medium of all experience (Ibid: 217). This desacralizing activity allows for other meanings to be accommodated into the realm of literature and thus of human discourse.

Kezilahabi rejects a literary approach that completely "dries up" the writer's creative horizon. This creative horizon potentially includes infinite possibilities that may stand in contradictory terms with one another: such as the logical and illogical, the rational and non-rational, the real and the spiritual, God and Gods, eternal, cyclical time and linear time - the possibility for contradictions and co-existence of opposites.

A creative horizon of infinite possibilities *can* appear in literature; in fact, literature (and all artistic expression in general) may be its privileged dwelling place. The Gods *can* come to

be in literary creation, time *can* be eternal, cyclical and progressive *simultaneously*, defeating rational, scientific discourse. Good and evil needn't be resolved but may continue to coexist and just *be*, defeating moralistic interpretations.

The coexistence of opposites may also be a particularly significant element in African literary criticism as it reflects the profoundly African experience of "keeping together" diverging worlds as an outcome of colonialism. The ability to keep together worlds and worldviews that are in apparent contradiction with one another can be seen as an infinitely precious contribution of African literature and African philosophy to universal aesthetic and intellectual heritage.<sup>5</sup>

The limitlessness of expression invoked by Kezilahabi is essential in countering the tendency to what he deems to be value laden literary interpretations that turn literature into a *moral enterprise* - a ransacking of the text in search of values. Kezilahabi also uses the term *transparency*, which evokes an even stronger metaphysical sense of value. If the tragic epistemology of Western man is the separation of the subject from the world, then it is also the history of metaphysics intended in the Nietzschean sense of the constant suppression of the existent in light of an abstract and overarching truth. Reading African literature as transparency means impeding the work from telling its story freely while attempting to organize it *in light of* or *in view of* something else – the future, moral values, symbolic meaning, etc.

To dismantle the "language of *techne*," Kezilahabi calls for "the language of thinking," which is the language of Being. But what is the language of Being? How can this Being be attained without the mediation of accurate tools? And finally, what is this Being?

The influence of Heidegger is evident in this part of Kezilahabi's writing. According to Kezilahabi, Heidegger is one of the few Western philosophers who has "looked at the Western world in a critical manner" thus making him a "anayeondoa ukungu"<sup>6</sup> (Ibid: 6). Heidegger's philosophy was centered on the idea that modern, Western man for the most part lived in-authentically. Authenticity for Heidegger concerns the relation to Being and the authentic life is the one most in tune with the manifestation of Being. The inauthentic life is the one that conceals Being, mainly through the covering up of death as man's truest existential possibility and through the dwelling in the world in an exploitative, self-referential manner (Heidegger 1970, 1997).

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<sup>5</sup> In her paper "*The World is Like a Dancing Mask: Representations of the Igbo Worldview in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God*" presented at the SOAS Research Students Society Worldscapes Conference on March 10, 2012 Louisa Egbunike spoke of Achebe's portrayal of co-existing diverging elements in Igbo society, such as the acceptance of the Christian faith and the maintenance of non-Christian religious elements. Egbunike pointed to the ability to keep multiple experiences in dialogue as a characteristic element of the Igbo worldview. Though these are my own elaborations of the paper and these are not the presenter's own words, I wanted to mention it here as I found the paper very interesting and touching some of the themes that have come up in my readings of Soyinka and Kezilahabi.

<sup>6</sup> Swahili phrase meaning "one who takes away the mist."

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Heidegger's influence on Kezilahabi is in the idea that Being is truth that needs to be uncovered, disclosed. Authenticity is defined by Kezilahabi as

[...] that primordial ontological basis that seeks to uncover the relation between the essence of man to the truth of Being through pre-oriented understanding, and disables a subject to make use of what is present at hand, to project possibilities and potentialities and hold on to it by not letting out of memory. (Kezilahabi 1985: 227)

The ontological approach thus calls into question literature's relation with an original sense of being, beyond the formal and mundane aspects analyzed by critics. Kezilahabi believes that many African writers have lost sight of the ontological scope of their work and have to reconnect to it by grounding their literature into a proper horizon of meaning, which includes memory of the past and of tradition.

The notion of pre-oriented understanding that Kezilahabi derives from Heidegger's *Vorgriff* (pre-conception) plays a major role in the ontological grounding of literature. Pre-oriented understanding is a pre-determined conceptual and anticipatory scheme foreshadowing what is to be understood. Kezilahabi also denotes this with the profoundly phenomenological term of "the horizon of the unsaid."

The horizon of the unsaid is the universe of meaning we are always grounded in, like an archive of experience. It is from this ground that we continually make new experiences and incorporate them into our horizon. The way we experience things will be determined by that horizon, as all experience includes former experience and thus a pre-understanding of things. Being grounded into a horizon of meaning and understanding means being at home.

The feeling of literary homelessness is thoroughly described by Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*, where he explores the challenges involved in being an African writer in contemporary Africa. Ngugi passionately describes the sense of alienation from his own people that is caused primarily by his writing in English, which is what ultimately leads him to the definitive abandonment of English as his artistic medium (Ngugi 1986).

Rettova defines philosophical discourse as "the discourses that are the medium of philosophical reflection in a given culture" and identifies African literatures – especially in African languages – as carrying the leading role of philosophical discourse in contemporary African societies because: "It is in those that both foreign and indigenous, both modern and traditional influences get reflected, elaborated, and creatively appropriated or rejected" (Rettova 2004: 48). This point is further elaborated by Rettova when she writes that "Modern Afrophone literatures (literatures in Afrophone languages) are a perpetuation of the traditional and intellectual discourse, they use the same words and operate within the same conceptual frame, they refer to proverbs, too, and they bend traditional wisdom according to the conditions and requirements of the present day" (Ibid: 48). The differentiation between Europhone and Af-

rophone literatures invites to further reflection on the relationship between language and literature's "horizon of the unsaid."

Does writing in the mother tongue place the writer closer to that ontological home from which truth can be disclosed? Does it reflect the importance of the bifocal stance, encompassing the new languages and new horizons of meaning that have entered the African landscape? These questions continue to be posed by different writers, critics and philosophers, some of which from the time of Kezilahabi's doctoral work have come to constitute the growing field of post-colonial studies, which is focused on answering these questions as particular to the colonial experience.

Rettova's specification of different Afrophone literary and philosophical dimensions also contributes to the above debates by discerning different realities within what Kezilahabi broadly refers to as "African literature" in his dissertation. The use of the term in such a broad sense is certainly controversial as it generalized problems and challenges that have not necessarily been experienced in the same manner across the entirety of the African literary sphere.<sup>7</sup>

The obstacles encountered in seeking broad thematic categories are also illustrated by Barber and Furniss' difficulty in identifying uniquely defining characteristics of African language literatures, besides their being written in African languages (Barber and Furniss 2006).

## Conclusions

While on the one side general statements encompassing the whole of the African literary tradition are advanced, on the other side the whole of the Western literary tradition is seen as centered on the journey motif and significant Western literary genres that subvert the conception of time as linear and progressive are not taken into account.

Further, what Kezilahabi negatively terms as the ethnophilosophical stance is being turned unto the West through assertions such as "the Western conception of time" and through the association of the epistemological approach to literature to a *Western mode of being*. This is particularly curious given Kezilahabi's profound connection to Western philosophy in his search for an authentic dimension for African literature and given that the subject and object dichotomy that he describes as rooted in the Western *Weltanschauung* has also been problematized by Western philosophers whom he traces inspiration from. Kezilahabi's profoundly heideggerian notion of truth as the disclosedness of Being stems from the German philosopher's life-long critical stance towards an epistemological conception of truth as correctness, based on the separation of the knowing subject and the known object (Heidegger 1970, 1997).

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<sup>7</sup> I am particularly grateful to Martin Orwin for highlighting this point through the example of the Somali poetic tradition where he has not found mention of the challenges that Kezilahabi has generalized to the whole of African literature. It seems that the literary reality he describes in this dissertation is of the particular kind that has had significant contact with Western readership and/or criticism. What is important to point out is that not all of the African literary production is necessarily implicated in the dynamics and problems put forth in Kezilahabi's dissertation.

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Finally, by associating the Western world with a *Weltanschauung* that Kezilahabi clearly identifies with hegemonic power in the form of colonial conquest, economic and political dominance and technological tyranny, he seems to disregard the *plurality* of Western *Weltanschauungs* - many of which are quite discordant with the dominant ideology and may in fact be extremely close to "African quests" for conceptual and material liberation.

Why does Kezilahabi uphold an Africa-West dichotomy when he himself is tracing inspiration from Western philosophers attempting to overcome the obstacles he sees on the road of African literature? In associating a world-view, a conception of time, an epistemological stance with an entire section of the world - The West - is Kezilahabi doing justice to the complexities present on "the other side"? Is this not a "making an essence" out of the West?

One possible answer to these questions could be that Kezilahabi upholds this dichotomy because he holds Western philosophy to be unable to resolve its tragic epistemology as it is too deeply rooted in the separation of subject and object and cannot escape it - even in its attempts to reconcile the two elements, the separation remains as a point of departure and something that must constantly be reckoned with. It may well be that African philosophy is free from this particular epistemological problem while Western philosophy is unable to free itself from the tragic dichotomy that has characterized so much of its inquiring activity. But then it is also true that African philosophy is called into question by Western philosophy to address this matter. These two philosophical traditions become engaged with one another to resolve philosophical themes that belong to *universal* human thought - though necessarily rooted in different traditions that rightfully need to be recognized and acknowledged, if not for the sole motive that it is often through the acknowledgment of *different* knowledge systems and traditions that questions of philosophy find their richest and most innovative resolutions.

The theories advanced in "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Criticism" can be read and applied well beyond the field of African literature because they address philosophical questions that do not concern Africa alone. Kezilahabi's critique of techno-criticism and of epistemological approaches to literature can be applied to any literary discourse and also to wider discourses in aesthetics.

Whereas regarding literature Kezilahabi tells us that it is impossible to *live* it without an aesthetic and moral grounding into its proper horizon of the unsaid, philosophy bridges that impossibility because it is explicative of its own grounding and pertains to the world of ideas - which are communicable and, as such, universal. Given the profoundly philosophical nature of this study, the abandonment of the Africa-West dichotomy appears to be particularly desirable in order for the ideas advanced by Kezilahabi in the field of aesthetic criticism to gain universal breadth. While advancing these critiques to "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation," it is important to contextualize this work in order to gain perspective on Kezilahabi's philosophical theory as one that is also permeated with a sense of historical

urgency: to free language; to bring authenticity to the African literary discourse; to conduct this in a spirit of self-loyalty. All of these imperatives carry important political implications.

The liberation that Kezilahabi augurs from the standpoint of literature - liberation of literary genres, styles, themes and interpretive tools from Western literary criticism - is directly connected to material liberation in society, culture, economics and politics. This is because Kezilahabi sees the underlying language that holds its grip on all these dimensions of African life as being the same: one that to a large extent is still the language of colonial domination.

Kezilahabi's description of a value-laden literary interpretation that fixes meanings for literature and for Africa calls for activism on the part of African writers to contribute to the unmasking of these inauthentic dimensions. That is why another one of Kezilahabi's propositions for African literary criticism is that it be *creative* - as artistic expression but also a socially responsible force. Writers' responsibility lies in interpreting reality and generating meaning for their readers as well as being faithful to the cause of African economic and political liberation. Placing the West at the centre of the universe of meaning has entailed the unshakable hegemony of the West's material and moral superiority and it prevents African philosophers and writers from unveiling the truth of the African situation: that Africa is still colonized. What is needed is that African writers and philosophers perform an

uncovering of false consciousness [which] is definitely one of the vital aspects of liberation. It means violating the moral principles championed by the establishment; it also means negating the ideological deceptive language of the ruling class. (Ibid: 111)

The urgency of this stance also lies in the re-claiming of an African aesthetic tradition that risks being completely disregarded by interpretations of African literature that uncritically apply paradigms from Western literary canons and miss out on the universe of references contained in African literary works. The power that this kind of criticism continued to exercise well beyond the official end of colonialism and during what was an extremely critical time for African writers to narrate their experiences and thoughts was certainly felt as a very real threat by Kezilahabi at the time of his writing "African Philosophy and Problem of Literary Interpretation."

This precise feeling of power discrepancy in the field of literary studies is narrated unequivocally by Jeyifo in his 1990 article "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory" when he writes that:

Behind the claims and counter-claims the 'foreign' scholar-critics and 'native' claimants of 'natural' propriety rights to critical insights lies a vastly displaced play of unequal power relations between the two camps. [...] Only rarely ... does the Africanist scholar acknowledge the vastly unequal relations of power and privilege between African and non-African scholars and critics of African literature [...]. (Ashcroft et al 2006: 65)

## KEZILAHABI'S ONTOCRITICISM

In "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation," literary criticism features as possessing the dual aspect of reflecting hegemony and at the same time constituting a philosophical tool with the potential for liberation.

The project of onto-criticism is thus the laying of this projective ground for philosophical and cultural liberation, which are in turn directly connected to political, social and economic freedom.

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