

THE SWAHILI NOVELIST AT THE CROSSROADS: THE DILEMMA OF IDENTITY AND FECUNDITY

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“Are there any national literatures in black Africa yet? The simple answer is no. Judged by any standard criteria for measuring a ‘nationality’ – of a literature language, subject matter, style, ideas, audience, quantity and quality of output, integrity of world view – modern African literatures fall far short of qualifying for full scale literary independence. [...]

If one examines the development of the African language literatures that do exist, one is struck by certain recurring tendencies. Many of the books produced, particularly the early works, are of a predominantly moralistic nature. Sometimes they are retelling of folk stories or Bible stories, sometimes imitations of European religious literature, sometimes both. The first works of fiction in Southern Sotho, Yoruba and Ibo were episodic narratives modeled on John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* but modeled from traditional motifs and materials [...]

In African language literatures influenced by Arab culture – Hausa and Swahili, for instance – the same kind of heavy moral emphasis was often present, though the literary models were far more likely to be Arab than Western, with Koran and *The Thousand and One Nights* displacing the Bible and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as the most influential texts.”

Bernth Lindfors (1997: 121; 123f)

1. Perception of African Literature – An Introductory Note

Certain anomalies are obvious in the above extract – not to mention the ‘eurocentric’ ring that goes with them. First, the question of ‘language’ is as usual, put in a ‘totalizing’ terms, when in fact some African languages like Swahili have always been associated with national literature(s), some of which are widely read and taught not only in one country but several.

Second, Swahili written literature with its long-standing tradition, dating far back to the 17th century, has relatively gathered its own aesthetic criteria, values and sensibility, hence ‘own’ integrity and world view.

In fact, Arnold was one of the first critics who saw the impropriety of sidelining African language literatures when drawing a literary map in East Africa. For Arnold the literary fertility or barrenness in East Africa can not be judged on what is only produced in English, but must be the sum total of all literary activities here: oral, written or their interface. He has thus defended the holistic notion of East African literature in the strongest terms possible:

“To those scholars and apes of snow, daffodil and apple tree poetry written in the ivory tower of *Pen-point*, the Makerere English Department magazine, the ancient written Swahili literature and the multitudinous oral literatures and their riches were barren dunes [...] Shaaban Robert, now called the Shakespeare of East Africa, had also bloomed unseen in a country whose human and material infrastructure for production and consumption of written literature needs to be elucidated.” (Arnold 1984: 60)

Third, ‘recurring tendencies’ (especially in the novel) have, in different contexts, been shown to be universal², the difference being only a matter of degree. Yes, compared to the Western novel³, the Swahili novel seems to have emerged recently from chrysalis of proto-development. Nonetheless, its expanding thematic scope and formal complexity is no longer a matter of contention, rather of how successful it locates itself inside the universal literary topography in comparison to novels of other languages.

Fourth, one cannot compare any emerging literature with the already highly developed literature without due vigilance and consideration to its own feeding philosophy, feelings, ethos, and sensibility – not to mention the strides it takes in competing with literatures of other languages and cultures.

I dare say that Lindfors will be surprised to learn today, how fast the Swahili novel has developed since when he had left it when he read Andrzejewski et al (1985) and Gérard (1981), who (by the way), themselves did not then see their works as presenting a complete picture of African literatures in African languages.

2. The Etiology of the African Language Novel: The Example of the Swahili Novel

My response to Lindfors’ criticism on African literature(s) in African languages notwithstanding, his commentary to a certain degree exposes the ‘etiology’ of the African language novel, especially in the way this particular novel is looked at vis á vis novels of other languages and how it copes with what Brenda Cooper calls “social patchwork and cacophony of design in Africa” (Cooper 1992: 15f). Or more precisely, in the way the modern Swahili novelist is judged in his/her role of articulating, not only the state of human condition in Africa, but also his/her avant-garde disposition in changing the fictiveness of modern Swahili novel.

How, for example, does the Swahili novelist choose his/her material with or without a tendency to provide solution(s) so as to provoke serious debate(s) on essence and verity of (mod-

² To have a full grasp of the idea of the novel is no longer novel, read Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (Bergonzi 1972).

³ In *African Textuality: Texts, Pre-texts and Contexts of African Literature* (Lindfors 1997), Bernth Lindfors observes that most of the African language literatures are “too young and too small” to develop their own distinguishing characteristics. Does this consider the fact that some of them, like Swahili literature, dates as far back as 17th century, long before African literatures in European languages were conceived? Does he consider the fact that Swahili literature is read in the whole region of East African and outside where it is taught as a subject? One also doubts whether some of the African literatures are read or read thoroughly and seriously by scholars like Lindfors, with full competence of the languages and without pre-conceived notions about them. So far, it seems that a lot of bias still lingers on.

THE SWAHILI NOVELIST AT THE CROSSROADS

ern) life? How – to borrow Malcolm Bradbury’s words (cf. Bradbury 1982: 19) – is s/he poised to exploit the ‘magicality of invention’, the infinite magical power to invent, the power used to interrogate the novel itself and its primary fictiveness?

The artist may, as far as possible, want to render his art, his aesthetics, as being derived from the wealth of local repertoire of which s/he is cognizant. This is the case with Fugunwa’s *The Forest of Thousand Daemons* in which we see the author drawing heavily from Yorùbá folktale.

Or, depending on the kind of audience the novelist aims at, s/he may opt to shun elements that ingrain national and specific cultural codes by focusing largely on the ‘universal tropes’ at his disposal.

Or for reasons of achieving certain thematic or/and stylistic preponderance, s/he may widely allow him- or herself be carried away by fictive and artistic adventurism aiming at a complex fusion arising from local and global elements. This, is especially more amenable in a situation described by Burgin as

“a teleimagistic global collage, forever in movement [...] composed of fragments ripped from their contexts, their serrated boundaries advancing and receding in an unending deadly dance with neighbors, their imbricated times violently, clashing, diverging – only to collide again.” (Burgin 1996: 185)

3. The aim of this essay

This essay aims at showing the predicament of the Swahili novelist at the crossroads⁷ and how, in a contemporary situation, s/he works out his or her strategies towards resolving the impasses.

The dilemma engulfed in the idea of ‘crossroads’ is, on the one hand, about being caught up between loyalty to African sensibility and aesthetics by writing the type of novel that is inscribed within ‘national’ or ‘Pan-African’ topography, and on the other, securing condign Occidental (/Western) standards for constructing form and content of a novel that can be considered both Swahili/African and universal.

A challenge indeed, since the whole venture must be gauged in terms of political, social and cultural relevance, with an assumption that ideas and aesthetics evolving from one culture may not necessarily be relevant to another, though in any divergent case of two societal realms, there should be a correlation of social, cultural and aesthetic concomitants.

After all, artists dip their hands in human experiences (warm or cold) which may ultimately correspond, if not closely interrelated. To some extent human beings, wherever they are, conceptualize their world(s) in slightly similar ways.

⁷ The *idea* of the novelist being at the crossroads is borrowed from David Lodge’s article “The Novelist at the Crossroads” (Lodge 1982 [1969]).

4. Occidental Standards

But securing condign Occidental standards is not the same as outright imitation. It is rather a cautious act of ‘gauging’, sieving, applying analogy, recognizing relevance of the inputs, discerning convergence and divergence of different resources and believing in the pertinence of what one is doing as a creative activity.

Besides, depending upon what an artist wants to convey, even local fictive ‘potentials’ may sometimes be hard to come by in a given culture⁸. Reasons are obvious. Firstly, as hinted above, the African language novel is in an emerging form. Secondly, its quality is inevitably prescribed in all-domineering Western standards, though is largely read by African audience(s). Inevitably, the African language novelist must draw on ‘poetics’ of the bourgeois triumphant genre – the novel. However, sitting at the core of a longstanding post-colonial debate, the tension between the Occidental and African seems always to have disparate contentions.

We would, nonetheless, agree with Midiohouan that this tension is frequently a misread reality, since we unconsciously adopt certain *schemas* that prevent us from correctly identifying all the dimensions of the culture upon which we propose to act. Midiohouan is blunt about this:

“Since the colonial period, an anthropological vision of Africa has characterized European discourse about our continent. It has even been taken over by Africans themselves. This vision depicts Africa as a land of immutable traditions, a ‘cold society’ that lacks the internal dynamism and functions according to unalterably fixed rules, precepts, customs and habits.

In opposition to this image of an Africa imprisoned in the quicksand of its own past, and so to speak, mummified, this same anthropological vision, brandishes the image of the West, an area of modernity and perpetual movement, a society where the vigor and constant renewal of creativity bear witness to the existence of a lively and dynamic culture [...]

For them [Africans who adopted this discourse – SAMK], tradition became more than a stalking horse to divert attention from the problems and blunders, the dramas and hopes, of the present while inviting us to believe that our current difficulties can be reduced to a confrontation between Africa and the West, between blacks and whites. (Midiohouan 1991: 93f)

Thus, the ‘continuity’ in literature often advocated in the *nativist* position and associated with ‘African languages’, ‘orality’ and ‘tradition’, must not be taken with an absolute sense of ‘passing on’ since these do not always stand in direct opposition to ‘European languages’, ‘Western artifacts’, ‘writing’, ‘modernity’ and ‘post-modernity’. Entertaining such an opposition shows a failure to comprehend the complexity of literary life in contemporary Africa as Mongo Beti affirms:

⁸ I am *comparing* for example, the richness of Yoruba indigenous cultural space and say, a Zanzibarian one which has been substantially obliterated by Arabo-Islamic and Western cultural influences.

“Like every other society, African society is a living organism whose inherently unstable equilibrium constantly renews itself by combining its elements dialectically in different ways or at least by transforming some of them to achieve a novel synthesis. If African society hopes to survive, it, like every other society, is therefore destined to transform itself – either by renouncing certain traditions or by modifying them.” (Beti 1979: 22)

5. The Modern Swahili Novelist

The modern Swahili novelist, like any African novelist, be it in European or indigenous languages, is faced with a peculiar situation – a very dissonant economic, political and cultural situation which produces human, moral and spiritual instability if not tragedy; a situation that can by no means be idealized as ‘pure’, ‘quaint’ or ‘exotic’. In her definition of magic realism in the West African novel, Cooper (ibid.) correctly underlines the correlation of magical realism as a literary strategy and current African socioeconomic and cultural scene as follows:

“Magical realism strives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in post-colonial societies, and where there is the syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created ... at the heart of the emergence of magical realism in the Third World is the fact that these countries encountered Western capitalism, technology and education haphazardly. Communications – road and rail – were set up where raw materials required transportation; elsewhere areas remained isolated and only indirectly transformed by new economies. Cities grew widely from rural origins, and families were divided between members who were Western-educated and those who remained inserted in pre-colonial economies and ways of seeing the world, with any number of positions in between these extremes. This social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design, is the cloth from which the fictional magical carpet is cut, mapping not the limitless vistas of fantasy, but rather the new historical realities of those patchwork societies.” (Cooper 1992: 15f)

The situation described by Cooper is perhaps augmented many-fold in Tanzania, which, in the last three decades before the introduction of ‘unchecked’ liberalization policies and the encroachment of ‘globalization’, was aspiring for an egalitarian and morally sound society.

In a disparaging and declining way, this situation provides to a conscientious writer, poignant comparative parameters as *harmony* versus *chaos and disorder*, *hope* versus *hopelessness*, *national pride and love for one’s country* versus *apathy* and *laissez-faire*, *nationhood* versus *disintegration*, *security and stability* versus *anarchy and confusion*. Behind all this is the weakening of every sinew of life and resilience of society and the sinking to the bottom of most echelons of everything worthwhile to the Tanzanian people.

In *Dunia Yao (Their World)*¹², Mohamed epitomizes the situation in a metafiction as follows:

¹² *Dunia Yao* (2006) is Mohamed’s recent novel. However, Mohamed also happens to be the writer of this essay, therefore the author deplors the fact that he has to provide a citation from his own novel. This is because he has no choice but to use this citation as it is the most telling regarding the point made.

“She [Muse, the goddess of art] is showing me another garden. And now it is as if I am looking at it through a black magical goggle. The left lens shows the dryness I have just described. The right lens captures a garden that we all know. In fact, I am looking at one and the same thing. One thing that has two faces, depending upon the side of the goggle one looked at.

Nonetheless it is a stunning garden. Everything in it has a half-caste appearance, of Tshombe-appearance, of mulatto type. Everything has been transplanted and remodeled to be a hybrid. Big trees are at once drying and sprouting in a fresh condition. They are growing in metallic dilapidated and out of use frames of buses and cars dumped in the city. Suffocating flowering plants are covered by paper and plastic sheets. Dust sticking on leaves and flowers of the plants. When you open your eyes properly, you can see men zipping off their trousers and women, legs wide open, squatting along pavement to sprinkle over flowerbeds. Sometimes they pull down their underwear to deposit unwanted manure for plants. The mixture of smell is startling. Perfumes from Europe. Smoke from vehicles causing nose irritation. Evil-smelling perspiration looms more and more among the congestion of people. Skyscrapers from foreign lands that are now transplanted here stand side by side with *vibanda-vya-mgongo* (crumbling huts). The dwellers in the garden are incarnation of Satan strolling aimlessly. People are there indeed! But they are treading through their lives differently. Some are quiet-goers. Others are tied with mainsprings that make them trot faster. There are those who run non-stop the whole of day time and night without realizing what they are doing. The cunning are there too. Also the fooled. The imbecile, the idiot, the crazy and lunatic are also roaming about. The cheat and the cheat of the cheat. The unskilled cheat of the past and the professional cheat of today. The beggar and the obstinate swindler.” (Mohamed 2006: 66f; my translation)

In capturing the above mentioned situation, the Swahili novelist from the 1990s, sets out to subvert the realist method by exploiting well his range that offers boundless strategies and fecundity to deal with what Philip Roth calls “[t]hings that fill us with wonder and awe, with sickness and despair; the scandals, the insanity, the idiocy, the piety, the lies, the noise [...] Things that are unreal but real” (Roth 1982: 33).

In achieving this, the Swahili novelist capitalizes certain avails. First, s/he takes advantage of the fluid, amorphous and protean nature of the genre ‘novel’. Second, s/he has in mind the obsolescence of the realist novel suggested by Scholes (1967) that should leave realism to other media, such as film, which can imitate reality more faithfully. Third, s/he has the opportunity to merge the global and the indigenous to secure both universal characteristics and own identity in his or her work.

All these avails are indicative of how aesthetically complex the modern Swahili novel is. Its idiosyncrasies deserve a more copious and meticulous analysis than this mere outlining. We will concentrate on the features that procure the fusion between the Occidental and the indigenous, which are *fragmented self and society*, *mixed tropes*, *magical realism*, *narration*, *voices and perspectives* and *characterisation*. Of course, the formal elements and technique are so intertwined in the novels. Our attempt to explicate them individually is ‘only’ for descriptive convenience.

6. Fragmented Self and Society in the New Swahili Novel

Various methods are used to underscore the similitude of the ‘fragmented self’ and ‘fragmented society’ in the new novel. First, the novelists use a narrative technique that constantly disrupts the spacio-temporal linearity of the novel.

In Euphrase Kezilahabi’s *Nagona*, for example, this is done by subverting the relation of *ergon* (i.e human action) to *logos* (i.e speech as the expression of the reason, thought order, plan that informs the action to follow) hence violation of especially the rules of *analogy* and *cohesion*.

In *Nagona* there is no story mediated to us in coherent (chrono)logical sequences, but only in disjointed chunks of stories within a story, of African mythology, of treatises on Western philosophies (e.g of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche etc.) and of comments about psychology (e.g Freud’s), science (Darwin’s), religion (e.g Christianity and Islam represented by Yesu [Christ] and Muhammad), history and politics (cf. Kezilahabi 1990: 15) – all intricately co-joined by a journey motif in which the main character *mimi* (‘I’) is seen to move from one place to another to discover the *magic gazelle* (truth?), that may ultimately lead him/her to discover the *second redeemer* (Khamis 2002: 2).

In Mohamed’s *Babu Alipofufuka (The Resurrection of Grandpa)*, the disruption of narrative linearity is rendered by uncertainty about where reality starts and where it ends. The line that separate sobriety and hallucination is very narrow as the following extract from the novel shows:

“Where he was lying, he was not sure whether he was asleep or awake. He just felt he was half-asleep -- awake but too heavy to stand up. [...] A span of silence cropped in. Time passed. Air conditioner was humming even louder. A clock was ticking rhythmically on the wall. A television merged with a video appendage to run a film of death. A huge double bed on which K was lying was narrowing into a half-person bed. Water in the bath-tub was on the verge of pouring out, threatening to fill in the room. The whole room was in darkness, except for many red candles that were drowsing on a loop-hole. Doggy was barking and scratching the next door with its nails. K wanted to stand up to incessantly pour his complaints about Bamkubwa, but a certain force came to weigh him down on the back and pressed him on the bed. The bed now narrowed more and more. Even that huge room was now narrowing. The walls were shortening and dwindling. He felt he was out of breath. He tried to open his mouth to scream but it did not open. He just found himself breathless and his eyes full of darkness.” (Mohamed 2001: 62; 79f; my translation)

In *Dunia Yao* the fragmentation of the discourse is based on labyrinthine and broken circular movements of the narrative in flashbacks and flash-forwards, propelled by Ndi-’s actions, dreams and hallucination. Part of it is also caused by metafictional intrusions in which the essence of art and poetics of the novel are discussed with Muse, the Greek goddess of art, being the inspiration and driving force behind artistic venture in a novel within a novel. Here is an example from *Dunia Yao*:

“When Lady Muse comes to lift you up by the magic power of her beauty – like a wonderful necklace, you put together a sound and a sound; the same sounds or different ones and you come up with a syllable. Then you get a word! And then words. A sentence. And from a sentence a paragraph. A text ... All these are integral parts of narrative writing. A vertical relationship ensures a selection. A horizontal relationship, the grammatical placement. You obey linguistic rules or you violate them at the same time. You start building from the bottom-most units to the uppermost ones. Or you can rank-shift some downwards from the top. The aim is to construct meaning(s) by deconstructing meaning(s).” (Mohamed 2006: 9; my translation)

Ndi-, the main character, is trapped in his own small room where he is experiencing psychological tension. At one point, we find him lamenting about what he himself, his family and society have been going through. At another time, we find him contemplative, musing over the status quo in complete frustration gradually building up to the level of a serious depression, causing in turn bouts of naked infuriation. Here is his anger:

“They’ve taken everything: *I continued*; they’ve become our thinkers, our speakers, the doers on our behalf; those who feel for us. They are everything: teachers, doctors, philosophers, economists, sheikhs, padres, our security guards – in short they run all our lives, they are part of our bodies and brains, they are everything to us.” (Mohamed 2006: 43; my translation)

7. Mixed Tropes

Moreover, the merger between what is derived locally and what fluxes from outside is seen in sometimes turbulent tropes and disconnected images associated with the polarity of tradition and modernity. In William E. Mkufya’s *Ziraili na Zirani (Pilgrims from Hell; 1999; lit.: The Angel of Death and Zirani)*, the theme is about Islam versus Christianity and about God’s authority and human struggle for mundane temptations, precipitating abstract and concrete items such as *Nabii Muhammad, Ukhalifa, Uaskofu, Ushehe, Upadri, Raheli, Matayo, Allah Akbar, Ziraili, Alfa, Omega, Iblisi, Ariel, Azazel* etc.

Mkufya starts to paint the picture of the longstanding antagonism between Christianity and Islam in the following discourse full of Oriental and Occidental words, concepts and images:

“Do you remember Rome? Rome of Julius Caesar before the birth of Christ and Rome of famous statues and paints of *Michelangelo*. Rome of *Vergil* and *Niccolo Machiavelli*. The culturally acclaimed Rome of *Dante Alighieri* who wrote the *Epic of Paradise*. It is indeed the same Rome of today, famous for commerce, art, politics and the threat of Mafia gangsters. It is the same Rome in which the soldier of salvation army, Marcus lived in 1099.” (Mkufya 1999: 4; my translation)

In *Nagona*, one of the thematic lines is also about Islam versus Christianity and about Christianity versus African traditional religion(s) (cf. Kezilahabi 1990: 9-12). The mention of ‘Koran’, ‘Bible’, *Yesu* (Christ), *Muhammad*, ‘candles’, ‘books’, *ungamo* (confession), ‘light’, ‘blood’, *Gabrieli* (Gabriel), *ashab, talibin, tafsir* and ‘second redeemer’ is explicit about the borrowed tropes from the two World religions, Islam and Christianity.

However, the mythic icons like a ‘weird cat’, ‘forest’, ‘trees’, ‘river’, ‘mountains’, ‘val-

THE SWAHILI NOVELIST AT THE CROSSROADS

leys', 'boulders', 'bow', 'arrows', 'gazelle', *ngoma kuu* (great dance) and *babu* (grandfather) represent African cosmology, traditional culture and religion(s).

Western history, philosophy and psychology are part of the author's private discourse meshed with Occidental icons, symbols and typical vocabulary like *Sphinx*, *ego*, *id*, *superego*, *Cogito*, *causa ultima*, *disciplina voluntatis*, *Politica*, *Metaphysica*, *De Poetica*, *Totem*, *Oedipus Complex* and *Neurosis*.

In *Babu Alipofufuka*, the words 'globalisation', *ofisi* (office), *limonsin* (limousine), *ma-apples* (apples), 'computer', *Nintendo*, 'CD-Rom', *macho ya kamera* (camera eyes), *Nike*, *Hauschuhe*, 'air-conditioner', 'video', 'film', 'bath-tub', 'basin', 'sink', *lifti* (elevator), *Neo-casino*, *Mona Lisa* are common recurrences constituting the writer's mixed tropes and reflecting tension between tradition and modernity. The word *Proteus* (a Greek mythological sea god) recurs abundantly marked by graphic variations to underscore the fickle nature of the African politician.

For the same purpose, in *Dunia Yao*, a series of imports mingle with Swahili tropes in the discourse: *winji* (winch), *swichi* (switch), 'computer', *baruameme* (trans. electronic mail), *Muse* (Greek goddess of art), 'CD', 'video', 'TV', *The Collector* (allusion to Fowles's novel), 'cider', 'nonentity', *kizoro* (reference to the film *Zorro*), *Sodom na Gomorrah* (Sodom and Gomorrah), 'robot', 'chip' (computer chip), 'Hillman', 'Vauxhall', 'Aristos', *Superboys-wawili* (two super boys – referring to the USA and USSR during cold war era), 'Rap', 'carnival', 'Paradise', 'Marc Anthony', etc.

8. The Fantastic and Magical Realism

Another technique that fuses the modern (Occidental) and tradition (African) appearing in the new Swahili novel is the fantastic and magical realism. Magical realism has three main traits:

- the presence of supernatural beings or acts that destroy the harmony of a world ruled by the norms of reasons as seen by Western eyes – anything that is contrary to Western conventional view of reality;
- the presence of what is considered logical and rational by European standards; and
- the creation of fictitious world that is not entirely divorced from reality either.

In the words Amaryll Beatrice Chanady:

"It is a synthesis of realism and fantasy, the mingling of drab reality with phantasmal world; the fusion of the pre-scientific and the scientific with the supernatural often attributed to the traditional or magical Indian (in Latin America) or African mentalities which coexist with European rationality." (Chanady 1985: 18f)

We would maintain that in *Nagona* there is abundant use of 'the fantastic' than of the magical realism due to the fact that the author does not incorporate much of the items of Western capitalist technology that ascribes fully to modernity or post-modernity.

The novel is just set at the transition mode of operation, a nameless physical location or

setting which is largely rural. This somehow precludes the sublimation of dizziness and cacophony associated with city life. Though dusty and pot-holed, *barabara kuu* (the main road) is there (cf. Kezilahabi 1990: 3), but not as famished as Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. The forest is just as iniquitous, awe-inspiring and calamitous. It laughs (cf. *ibid.*: 1). It shrills. It swallows the living and the dead – even books (cf. *ibid.*: 5)! The old man dips his hand in a river of blood.

Contradictory scenes and events are also framed in the fantastic. The radiant white flower and fruit(s) are so slippery that they cannot be picked up (cf. *ibid.*: 13). Beautiful buildings of bicycle factory are surrounded by mosquito-breeding filthy pools (cf. *ibid.*: 21) – a factory produces bicycles without brakes (cf. *ibid.*: 22). Cattle and sheep graze in freshly sprouting rice fields (cf. *ibid.*: 26). Philosophers, psychologists and prophets re-incarnate and then disappear again. Mountains are removed by bare human magical hands. Items lost in foreign lands are retrieved by mere extension of a leg. A gazelle transform into a human being and then back to a gazelle. As Khamis observes,

“[t]he contradiction in *Nagona* transposes itself in the general and very complex metaphoric and metonymic frames creating a fiction in which meaning is never captured but deferred.” (Khamis 2001: 124)

In *Babu Alipofufuka*, magical realism is often procured by the appearance of the ghost in K's palace, in his limousine, on the way when driven by his chauffeur to various chores, in big executive hotels and casinos. Right from the beginning, as Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková observes,

“[t]he novel proceeds at two levels: K's level and the ghost's level. But from the moment the ghost starts to interfere with K's life, strange things happen, like the dog's food disappearing, and K's persistent diarrhoea. Even more disturbing is the increasing number of spirits that haunt him; they resemble the persons he wronged in the past and for K they are very real, but nobody else can see them.” (Bertoncini-Zúbková 2002: 30)

More magical in this novel perhaps is the flight of K's limousine when he is threatened to be attacked. Other magical elements are the subterranean and submarine journeys, the suicides and reincarnations, the transformation from humans to insects and back to humans, the immortality of some of the characters, the frothing of the scum, personal computers entering human life by giving commands to servants, and

“the mysterious Proteus, the invisible but ubiquitous and immortal chief who has the destiny of the country in his hands and who can transform himself into a snake, a rat, a hyena or any other creature.” (*ibid.*: 32)

Ndi-, the main character in *Dunia Yao* experiences weird events and mishaps. The mere illusionary visions that are recurring are a subject of magical realism. The illusion of movements in space and time is almost domineering. It is often suggested that Ndi- moves around from place to place but the reader sees him most of the time confined to his own room (cell), where he is psychologically imprisoned. Time also freezes in many ways. We are told in the first paragraph of the first chapter of the novel as follows:

THE SWAHILI NOVELIST AT THE CROSSROADS

“Perhaps I exist. Perhaps not! What is the difference? Yes, my heart is still throbbing. This is perhaps the only sign left. A rotating fan revolving without electric power. A small piece of a candle is diminishing, exerting all efforts to make me fall asleep peacefully. But I can not recall time. Which year? Which month? Which day? Hours? ... Time can no longer be perceived; no longer solid; it is detached from the logic; it has lost meaning! The clock is ticking on a table. Time is moving forward. How elusive is time! It is just a thing with numbers. A sign of how time speeds forward. Faster, faster ... with limitless speed!

But where is forward? And where is behind? What I know is that time is in one’s head, not on the face of a clock. Time is frozen these days. And unfortunately the head is being erased of sense of space and time.” (Mohamed 2006: 1; my translation)

The complexity about this sense of time and space is augmented by the happenings of a number of queer things. Ndi-, the narrator-cum-novelist, interrupts the narrative discourse with his ‘metafiction’, underscoring the essence of art and novel writing under the guidance of *Muse* who gives him the necessary inspiration.

Chunks of the supernatural also disrupt the continuity of the narrative discourse. For example, the disappearance of parts of the body: legs, thighs, knees, waist, buttocks, chest. Ndi-claims to see the disappearance of all these (cf. Mohamed 2006: 5). He also claims to wake up with a crocodile’s torso hanging on his body (cf. *ibid.*) or being held up on his bed and pulled downwards to the bottom of the earth by its magnetic force; a powerful pull towards the *fa-luda* (molten part) of the earth. The computer is fully personified in the novel with the power to befriend Ndi- who is totally dependent on ‘Him’ (the computer) in his solitude. They penetrate each other, converse, cry together, soothe each other and even oppose each other as partners – Ndi- and the computer of course!

Different categories of characters (female and male) emerge from an album to speak out, each defending her or his gender position and personal stories. This is a way of negating the author’s single-opinionated male chauvinism and to take up an identity of new liberal life in which daughters, sons, mothers and fathers have their own says. Each one of them takes his/her own path towards his/her own world for betterment or worse – and this, according to each one of them, is the meaning of ‘freedom’.

To this we should add the elements of *orature* complementing the presentation of magical realism in the novel. The carnival and grotesque making the mockery of poverty, superficial democracy and liberalism and development which is in fact retrogression: “[w]e have retrogressed thousands of years behind into the pre-history” (*ibid.*: 74). The passing out of parade of *carnival ya globalisation* (globalisation carnival) is described in a hyperbolic disgust:

“Those who were leading the carnival were the army, police, navy, reserve army, young pioneers and fire-fighters, marching in Chinese or Russian military precision. Between these regiments were paraded new army-tanks of the 1800s. Behind all these army units, there followed a procession of the ministry of agriculture showing selected crops to please the onlookers: pumpkins as big as boulders filled with air. Cassava roots that were too long and thick like the enormous hollowed roots of baobab tree filled with rags and dry leaves.” (Mohamed 2006: 174; my translation)

The rituals of purification that follow the carnival – one to cleanse Ndi- of his class prejudices (cf. *ibid.*: 101), another to get rid of his gender bias (cf. *ibid.*: 180-186) and another to recruit him to join the forerunners in the fight for social justice are other elements of orature used.

9. Narration, Voices and Perspectives

According to Bakhtin 1981,

“[i]n the (realist) novel voices or the speaking persons required by the novel to bring in own unique ideological discourses and language(s) are let loose by bare logical patterns as conflicting centres of authority in which human voices are dominant.” (quoted in Hawthorn 2001: 110)

In the Swahili fantastic novel however, the patterns are less logical and more disorienting, for they are not just human voices with ideological dimensions, but voices of daemons, Satan, goblins, angels, spirits, gods, or simply voices as abstract representations of alternative narratives, histories, politics, philosophies, and religious doctrines.

Here is an example from *Nagona* in which the voice of the main character *mimi* embodies multiple meanings, which affirms Bakhtin’s notion of different voices that can be isolated even in a narrator’s or a single character’s words; a range of different voices, each of which carries its own values, such that an utterance can represent a veritable war or different viewpoints and perspectives:

“[...] What you see in this circle is a small group of people who were argumentative about the search for the right way. That one over there is Plato, and that is Socrates. This is Aristotle. That is Hegel. Here is Darwin and those near you are Marx and Freud. And this one is Nietzsche [...] All sang dance-songs but could not remain at the centre of the circle, the source of light appeared; the navel erupted and there resulted a hole into which next generation fell.”

[...] “All the heroes have been buried on this hill; here! What you see here as a cave, is said to be the grave of Jesus. That heap of clay over there is Muhammad’s. That place you are standing on is near Marx’s grave and that one over there is Socrates’. You know these cows of ours here, have no respect for prophets. They never stop eroding these graves by their hooves and knock them down with horns. Marx’s grave has been so eroded that it is about to disappear. And dogs also have no reverence. There is no single day that passes by without these dogs urinating on these graves. It is said that they leave their marks so as not to loose track on their way back.” [...] “An amazing thing is that thieves, gangsters, the destitute, the blind, sodomites and lunatics are the ones who visit here every year to clean up the graves.” (Kezilahabi 1990 [1987]: 15; 19; my translation)

In both Swahili realist and fantastic novels, the means by which a character’s speech can be rendered are heavily derived from the modern European novel through *diegetic summary*, *less purely diegetic*, *indirect content paraphrase*, *indirect discourse mimetic to some degree*, *free indirect discourse*, *direct discourse* and *free direct discourse*.

However, the Swahili fantastic novel specifically, has, in a combined whole, a mixture of polemical styles ranging from the elements of romanticism, realism, surfiction, metafiction, fabulation and post-modern tendencies – all having a direct bearing on how voices are trans-

fused in a given novel.

Like Fowles's post-modern novels described by Mahmoud Salami as being complex (cf. Salami 1992: 159), the Swahili fantastic novels are equally complex. Their complexity stems from often self-reflexive narrative, from constant and misleading shift between first and third person narrators, from shifts in tense and disruption of chronology, from the use of flashback, flash-forward, flash-aside, flash-frame and from the principle of intertextuality. The novel's complexity is also embodied in its circular structure, the 'multifacetedness' of its narrator-character, and the deployment of personal history and its relation to real history.

In *Nagona* for example, as in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (Rulfo 2000 [1955]), the voices, actions and events are presented in a simple and plain language, but are largely detached from the logic of the story. They are, in other words, loose and incoherent from a point of view of grammar or *syntagma*. The textual thrust simply trickles and throwing off a multitude of voices, actions and events that float around loosely cohered. This is how Said A. M. Khamis describes it:

"The voice of *mimi*, the main character or the author himself, engaging in a quite private language; the voice of a four-century old padre who welcomes and gives *mimi* wine to drink since in their town, century old evils have turned all the water into blood. The voice of an old man who dips his hand in and out of a river that has turned into blood; an old man claiming that all his tragedy-depicting creative works have been thrown away, leaving only comedies. The voice of *mimi*'s grandfather, who holds on to tradition and from whom *mimi* often receives reaffirmation, guidance, encouragement and support to pursue his mission. The god-like voice inviting *mimi* into a circle of dead philosophers and prophets." (Khamis 2003: 87)

10. Characterisation

The fact that in the Swahili fantastic novel characters' attributes are vagueness, abstraction and flatness, they are likely to have been drawn from African repertoire where the oral tale as myths, legends, fables and parables reside in that endowment. Elsewhere (cf. Khamis 2001: 126), I described the characterisation in *Nagona* as being minimal and the characters, the vaguest figures the Swahili novelists have ever drawn.

This also true of all characters in the other novels of this type where they are used as the writer's precepts and concepts or as vessels to carry his/her ideology. They are often neither drawn in terms of their traits, nor with some kind of human elements that would show them eating, drinking and pursuing everyday chores. They are simply directed to perform certain tasks which they have to concentrate on without time to stand and stare – thus,

- journeying to discover the truth (*mimi* in *Nagona*),
- journeying to discover the follies of modern African society ('K' in *Babu Ali pofufuka*),
- journeying into life after death and back to real life after reincarnation in order to re-instruct the African being as the problematic (Babu/Mzuka in *Babu Alipofufuka*),

- journeying in one's psychic forcing the main character to resign and take time to reflect on the individual and collective history, before one plunges into revolutionary spirit (Ndi- in *Dunia Yao*),
- journeying through religious philosophy as the main character passes through fights and religious wars, dying and dodging the Angel of Death as he organises to overthrow God (Zirani in *Ziraili na Zirani*), and
- journeying into space looking for the perfect world (Dzombo in *Walenisi*).

11. Conclusion

Though we opted to discuss five cases of fusion of the Occidental and the indigenous, other features such as story, plot, psychological motivation, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, rhythm, psychology and bourgeois individualism that make the novel a genre in its own right are by no means relegated. These features should be the topic of further studies.

We just have to emphasize here that in the Swahili fantastic novel even these do not follow the simple Forsterian descriptiveness (cf. Forster 1985 [1927]). They mainly lean on modernist and post-modernist trends which are again a Western invention. Nevertheless, there are always abundant private, national and Pan-African entries with orature or oral tradition in general playing a major role.

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THE SWAHILI NOVELIST AT THE CROSSROADS

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SAID A. M. KHAMIS

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