

MASCULINITIES IN KISWAHILI CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN KENYA

JAMES OGOLA ONYANGO

"Everything we read ...constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men."

— Fox (1993)

Children's literature affects the child's socialisation process, including the shaping of gender roles. But despite this, up to now children have featured less in gender scholarship. Against this background, this paper seeks to critically interrogate the physical, social, economic and political manifestations of masculinities in selected Kiswahili children's books from Kenya. By analysing these works, we hope to demonstrate that power and ideological aspects of masculinities are rooted at childhood. Since special attention will be paid to the ideological and power basis of the masculinities, the analysis of the selected works is done in the encompassing prism of Critical Discourse Analysis revealing hegemonic masculinities.

1. Introduction: Masculinities in the perspectives of Critical Discourse Analysis and Hegemonic Masculinities

Since the inception of serious gender studies in Sub-Saharan Africa about thirty years ago, remarkable strides have been made especially on the side of the creation of gender awareness. A number of issues have been tackled, for instance, violence against women in homes, in war, in work places and so on. Overall, the dominant approach has mainly focused on women and rightly so because they are underprivileged in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The following objectives that address the women's emancipation agenda have been persistent in a number of gender forums: abolishing illiteracy, increasing female life expectancy to 65 years globally, promoting women's self sufficiency, passing laws of equality to ensure a truly equitable socio-economic framework, launching public campaigns to abolish discrimination, and governments adopting national policies to abolish all obstacles women face. In addition to this agenda, the idea of empowering women through information technology and ameliorating the disproportional impact (compared to men) of HIV / AIDS on women in Sub-Saharan Africa have also become necessary in line with our times.

Although for a long time gender studies have predominantly targeted women in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is of course a truism that gender is both about femininities and masculinities. Indeed CODESRIA's¹ Gender Institute theme for 2005 was "Contemporary Masculinities in Africa". Although some meaningful gains have been made on the side of gender consciousness in Sub-Saharan Africa, masculinities still remain a dark shadow in women's emancipation

¹ CODESRIA: Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa

agenda (Onyango 2006). In the light of this argument therefore, there is need for critical theories to analyse gender questions such as masculinities.

It is interesting to note that most of the gender scholarship has not adequately addressed children, although childhood is an important phase in life. Indeed, Fox's opening quotation above fully captures its relevance. Child psychologists have demonstrated that fixation in adulthood can be traced back to childhood. Moreover, children should not always be seen in the shadow of adults. As Bloch (2000) states, childhood itself is a valid phase in life and not only a preparation for adulthood.

It is out of the points outlined above that we critically engage the salient canons of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) and the Hegemonic Masculinity perspective to analyse selected Kiswahili children's books.

1.1.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The versatility of CDA rests in the fact that it is first and foremost a critical theory. CDA as a critical theory does not only aim at describing and explaining phenomena but also enhances critical thinking. One of the aims of CDA is to demystify discourses by describing ideologies (Wodak 2002).

CDA rests on some assumptions. For the sake of this paper, the following are underscored:

- Language is a social phenomenon
- Not only individuals but also institutions and social groupings have specific meanings and values that are expressed in language in systematic ways
- Texts are the relevant units of language in communication

Readers / hearers are not passive recipients in their relationship to texts (Kress in Wodak 2002: 6).

From these assumptions it is clear that language is not merely an instrument of communication, but more than this, ideologies and power are indexed in language.

There are three important pillars in CDA, namely, criticality, ideology and power. Criticality basically entails taking distance from the data and thus be as critical as possible about an utterance, for example. Ideology, which is the way meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds (Wodak 2002), in the realm of CDA, is seen as an important aspect of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations. The importance of ideology in shaping a people's worldview is emphasised in Mumby's words below:

“...ideology does not simply provide people with a belief system through which they orient themselves to the world, but that instead it plays a much more fundamental role in the process by which social actors create the reality of the world in which they live.” (Mumby 1988: 71).

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On power, CDA is interested in interrogating the construction of gender as attributed with unequal values. In the context of language, CDA aims at analysing the language of those in power, who are responsible for unevenness and those who have the means and opportunities to improve conditions (Wodak 2002: 10).

1.1.2. Hegemonic Masculinities

It has been observed that masculinities exist only in relationship with femininities and that they are constructed in everyday discourse in various versions (Frosh et. al. 2002: 3). It is further argued that men and boys do not create themselves out of nothing or in any way that they wish, but rather there are popular and culturally specific ways of positioning boys and men which for example emphasise their toughness and propensity for "action", whether it be harmless, responsible or disruptive (ibid.). This is the general trend of masculinities in many areas of the world (cf. Uchendu 2005).

According to a study done by Uchendu among Nigerian undergraduate youths at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka (Uchendu forthcoming), masculinity among the young male respondents was associated with physical, biological and psychological characteristics. Physically, boys desired to have a deeper voice, short hair, body hairs, socially approved male attire, and they laid emphasis on the male sexual anatomy, versatility in martial arts and so on. Psychologically, they desired to be: fearless, decisive, emotionally tough, principled, in a dominant position, brave. They wanted to have the ability to protect the weak and to take risks, the propensity to conquer, high social status, a sharp mind. The young female respondents associated masculinity with: being violent, authoritative, stoic, independent and being fatherly; that is, being protective and affectionate. Uchendu (ibid.) however notes that the male respondents did not agree with the aspect of being fatherly.

Thus, it is against this background that, hegemonic masculinities have been defined as a dominant form of masculinity that influences boys' and men's understanding of how they have to act in order to be acceptably male and that this dominant male is associated with heterosexuality, toughness, power, authority, competitiveness and subordination of gay men (Frosh et. al 2002: 77).

It is against this theoretical insight that we make an exploration into Ken Walibora's three children's books namely: *Mtu wa Mvua*, *Ndoto ya Amerika* and *Mgomba Changaraweni*. Generally, these books correspond to Early Childhood, Middle Childhood and Early Teens, respectively.

Ken Walibora is a very prolific prose writer in Kenya. He has authored *Siku Njema* and *Kufa Kuzikana*, in the novel category. On top of the short stories outlined above, he has written *Tuzo*. *Siku Njema* has been a Kiswahili literature set book in Kenya.

2. Mtu wa Mvua ('The Rain Man')

Mtu wa Mvua contains three short stories namely *Sungura Hasara*, *Mtu wa Mvua* and *Charo na Watoto Watoro*.

2.1. Sungura Hasara ('The Harmful Hare')

Sungura Hasara's story revolves around the activities of a male boy character called Fumbo Amutala. Fumbo Amutala wants to be in position one all the time. Here one finds an echo of Mohamed's *Utengano* that says:

"Kuna mengi ambayo Kazija anayachukia. Ndiyo, anachukia...Kwanza, anamchukia mwanamme. Mwanamme anamchukia kwa sababu dhahiri, nayo ni kuwa amekwa mbele, ingawa Kazija hajui na nani. Daima atamchukia mwanamme kwa sababu hiyo" (Mohamed 1980: 1).

"There are many things that Kazija detests. She detests them completely... Foremost she detests a man for an obvious reason of putting himself in number one position all the time and she does not know who has put him in that position. For that reason she will detest a man forever."²

Fumbo Amutala does not want to be defeated in anything. He hits his playing mate Musa with a stone when he has scored many goals. He also uses deceit to emerge temporarily as the leading painter in school. He desires the name *Simba* (lion), the king of the African savannah. Further, in this story the valued positions of responsibility are held by men. The headmaster of the primary school where Fumbo Amutala goes to school is a man. Even the real hero of the story, Fumbo's elder brother, is a male character. The boys in the short story are adventurous as they engage in hunting and also have some leisure time that they use to play football. The institution of authority revolves around male figures. For example, when Fumbo had hit Musa with a stone, and claimed that it was not him who hit Musa but the stone, it was his father who got furious, although his mother was also present.

The female characters in this story are portrayed either negatively or passively. Rita, Musa's sister, is portrayed as very unreasonable. She is the one who starts fighting Fumbo's brother, Masika, because Fumbo had hit her brother with a stone. When she reaches Fumbo's home she starts fighting Masika without any warning (p.12). The mother of Masika and Fumbo is portrayed without authority, at best called *mzazi* (parent) and her role depicted as *mwosha vyombo* (washer of dishes) (p.24). The third female character in this short story is Mama Timna which also means that she had a daughter called Timna. Nothing much is said about her save that she had a prized hunting dog (implied male) called *simba* (lion). Thus, in sum the male characters overwhelm the female characters and more important, not just in terms of numbers but in structural power and the social positions accorded to them.

² This translation and the ones that follow have been done by the author.

2.2 Mtu wa Mvua ('The Rain Man')

In this story the female child character Dora features, but not in active terms. The fantasy element of the story revolves around a mysterious male character, a herdsman, Okungu, who has two distinct magical powers: he can stop the rains and he also cannot be rained on. It is said that Okungu inherited these powers from his grandfather. This is indeed in tandem with the dominant male ideologies in many patriarchal Kenyan societies where the good magic comes from the male relations, but for example if it were to be sorcery then it would be associated with maternal relations. Even in normal parlance one can talk about a soccer wizard but rarely about a soccer witch. Okungu also has the power to see the future. For example he predicts that something bad is going to happen in the family of Dora and indeed after one day rustlers come and steal cattle from Dora's homestead. But again his larger than human status prevails when he uses his magic to get the cattle back. This is after Dora's father and other villagers had tried to get the cows; but in vain. The symbol of Okungu's magic is also masculine, that is, the walking stick. In Kenya, the walking stick is a rarity among women, save for cases of physical support, for example in case of a disability.

Succinct in this story therefore is the fact that although the young female character features prominently in the story, the song that Dora repeatedly and reverently sings underscores her acceptance of the dominant male ideology:

*Mtu wa Mvua! mtu wa mvua!
Hawezi kamwe kunyeshewa
Hata kwa mvua ya matone makubwa
Kufumba na kufumbua anaifukuza mvua.
Mtu wa mvua! mtu wa mvua! (p.45)*

The rain man! the rain man!
He cannot be rained on at all
Even if it is heavy rain
In a blink of an eye he chases away the rain
The rain man! the rain man!

Looking at this song critically, the young Dora is initiated into the culture of acceptance of the dominant man. It looks as "normal" and that is the reason why she sings with remarkable enthusiasm in praise of the rain man. In this context, the young Dora is socialised to accept a subject position by her society. It is clear that this story employs a very important element of fantasy that is crucial in children's stories. This could indeed make this story to be very popular with children. But deep in this story are the ideological and power structures that are entrenched in many Kenyan societies, and that are overwhelmingly patriarchal.

Apart from Dora we have other female characters in this story, like Dora's mother. She is nonetheless framed in the archetype of the mother who is the home caretaker and the family cook (p.30). On the other hand Dora's father has an employment (p. 35). Dora's mother is also described as the one who succumbs to crying when the family cattle are stolen (p. 40). It is important to note that the writer says that Dora was very surprised when she saw her mother crying because she thought that it was only children who cried. To the converse, al-

though Dora's father was saddened by the loss of the family cattle he remained stoic (p.41). Hence here crying indicates the weak femininity in contrast with the supposed strong masculinity that is associated with being stoic.

In this story, Okungu rescued Dora from a major setback. Before Okungu came, Dora was not going to school. She had to look after the cattle, because the family's first herdsman had gone to see his sick mother. What is implicit here is that Dora's parents did not care much about their daughter's schooling. It is important to add that this story has the imprimatur of the Kenya Institute of Education. Under these circumstances, the inspectors of the Kenya Institute of Education most likely looked for age of the characters, the level of the language, the font size, the illustrations and so on. On the other hand they seem not to have critically looked at the masculine connotations in the story.

2.3 Charo na Watoto Watoro ('Charo and the Other Street Children')

The third short story in *Mtu wa Mvua* is *Charo na Watoto Watoro*. This is a story that highlights a burning issue in the Kenyan society: the street children. Charo, a male character is portrayed as a liar who is ready to put blame on his mother when he goes to school late. Charo says that he was late because his mother gave him many dishes to wash. The harsh teacher who makes Charo shiver and who characteristically punishes errant pupils is Halima, a female teacher. After Charo is told to go and call his mother, he opts for the street rather than being found out. The reason that the writer gives for Charo's entering in the streets is rather superficial in the light of the root causes of children going in the street in Kenya. The major cause of children running into the streets in Kenya is arguably the severe economic hardships in the homestead rather than the harshness of a teacher in school.

Although the story adequately highlights the dangers and the dehumanising conditions that street children are exposed to in Kenya, Charo's story still portrays some elements of hegemonic masculinities, namely, boys being truant, and boys being prone to violence. Again this story is not very representative of the Kenyan situation, because it emphasises the problems of the boy child on the street. The truth about Kenya is that there are almost as many street girl children as there are street boy children. But the street girl child is more exposed to the street dangers than the street boys. Furthermore, on cases of gang rape, they fall victim to sexually transmitted infections and early pregnancies.

Charo's mother is portrayed as compassionate, when she talks to Charo in hospital, after he had narrowly survived the tragedy of poisoned meat on the streets. In her words she is the one who is greatly touched and full of emotion compared to Charo's father. Even when Charo is asking for forgiveness from each of his parents, that is, his father and mother, it is apparent that it is only his mother who says in plural that they have forgiven him (p.56).

3. Ndoto ya Amerika ('The Dream of Going to America')

This is a story that has a very strong element of fantasy. It dwells on a theme that is very popular in Kenya: that of going to America. At the heart of the story are two young boys, Isaya Yano and Madoa, who are constantly caned by their mothers. Here we face the topos of definition. The fact, that the mothers of Isa and Madoa cane them thoroughly and for no apparent reason (p.14), runs against the society's role model of the compassionate and caring mother. Whereas the boys' mothers are derided, the fathers are not mentioned at all. Because of their brutal mothers Madoa persuades Isa to run away from home. Before they leave home they steal two hundred and thirty shillings from *mzee* Zakayo Wekesa (p.28). Then they venture into the city of Nairobi to meet Madoa's friend Rock Mwamba, who is a robber. Rock Mwamba is a name that depicts masculine toughness, that is, a rock. Apart from that Rock Mwamba has a deep voice and a macho aura. Rock Mwamba's and Madoa's adventure in crime is stopped by the police officers in the nick of time. Overall, the story portrays boys who are ready to take risks and toy around with their lives when they are totting guns as they engage in violent crime. Indeed in Kenyan newspapers, we have had reports of young gangsters who have been gunned down by policemen. Although Walibora set out to show the dangers of youngsters engaging in violent crime, however, such a name as Ninja (Madoa's crime name) could unintentionally enhance a positive image of a hero gangster. Ninja is adopted from a name of a very tough male film star of some martial arts film series that was common in Kenya in the last decades of the last century.

In this short story again the characters are predominantly male. The only two female characters are the mothers of Madoa and Isa who are so overwhelmed by events that surround their children that they can only take solace in a Kiswahili proverb: *Asiyefunzwa na mamake hufunzwa na ulimwengu* (he who takes no heed of his mother's advice is taught by the world).

4. Mgomba Changaraweni ('The Banana Plant in the Pebble')

This is a story that could pass in the category of early teens. It is about a hero herdsboy called Chongameno and a villain girl called Alice. In short, the story is about Alice who is madly in love with the reasonable Chongameno who turns down Alice's advances. Eventually, Alice turns to arson, bringing untold loss and suffering to her community because Chongameno refuses to marry her. The fire that she lit caused a lot of destruction in her community. But the community at first thought Chongameno was the arsonist. He is remanded and then imprisoned. At the end he is proved innocent because of the suicide note that Alice leaves behind, after killing herself. Therefore from the title, Chongameno is the treasure, because, *mgomba* (the banana plant) is very treasured indeed in poor soils. Further, the banana fruit is sweet and a fancied too. Apart from its fruit, the banana plant is also versatile in that its leaves can provide shelter. And it has no thorns. This is the positive metaphor that is associated with Chongameno.

The story has other children's literature characteristics such as short chapters. It is divided into seven chapters which makes it reader friendly to the teen child. It also has got illustrations, it is written in a big font and the language is commensurate with the level of teens. However, this notwithstanding, in terms of perpetuation of a dominant male, it is the one that does it most in Walibora's books in the children's category.

Chongameno is described as physically strong: he has a broad chest (p.9). It is also said that he has a radiant smile and that this radiant smile was like a magnet over girls who could not resist admiring him (ibid.). He is also socially likeable. It is said he has a clean heart (ibid.). The writer also describes him as hardworking and a reasonable man who has respect for Alice. The writer puts him almost to the level of an angel who does not get bitter even when the society has offended him by unfairly sending him to jail.

Although the writer comes from a society in which it is the men who approach women, he opts for the archetype narration of a rich man's daughter who is ready to die for the sake of a herdsboy. The whole ideological and power positions can be vividly reconstructed from Alice's letter to Chongameno that has portended Alice's tragic future action. It reads:

Sahibu Chongameno,

Mbona unijirahisi hivyo? Unasema wewe ni maskini. Hilo mimi silikani asilani. Lakini niambie: ni mali gani iliyo na thamani bora zaidi ya adabu njema? Ni mali gani inayozidi utamu wa mapenzi bora?

Umekataa katakata kunioa ati kwa sababu ya ufukara wako. Lakini yakupasa ujue kuwa pendo la kweli halitegemei mali wala uluwa. Ninakuenzi kama mboni ya jicho langu. Nikikukosa sitakuwa na sababu ya kuishi. Una moyo safi na sera nzuri ya maisha.

Dhumuni la barua hii ni kukuarifu kuwa nataka jibu lako mwisho uniambie kesho. Lau hunitaki kabisa kabisa na nia yako hutoghairi, nitatenda jambo nisilolitaka na wengine wengi watadhurika.

Sahibu wako,

Alice Kesho (p.11-13)

Dear friend Chongameno,

Why do you look down upon yourself so much? You say you are poor. That is indeed true. But which treasure is better than good character and true love?

You have refused to marry me completely on the ground that you are poor. But take heed true love is not about wealth or position in the society. I treasure you like the very core of my eye. If I do not marry you I will have no reason to live. You have a clean heart and a good orientation in life.

My aim in this letter is to tell you that I need your ultimate answer tomorrow. And take heed if you do not want to marry me I will do what I do not want to do and others will be adversely affected too.

Your friend,

Alice Kesho

In this letter we see Alice literally on her knees for the reason of wanting Chongameno to marry her. And she again affirms what the writer thinks of Chongameno, that we discussed in the beginning of this section. The letter goes ahead to give weight to the archetype narrative of the rich man's daughter who is dying for the love of the peasant's son. So in this prism it is not just the love but the dominant narrative ideology that is being expounded. In the concluding part of the letter, Alice talks of the dire consequences that she is ready to mete on herself and to others if Chongameno does not accept her proposal. Indeed as Chongameno remains stoic, Alice follows up her letter with an act bordering on extreme desperation by meeting Chongameno physically and when he turns down again Alice's love advances (p.26), she lights the fire that ravages the whole village and later takes her life, thus fulfilling what was portended in her letter.

Just like in the other stories the powerful characters are men like Mzee Masaba, Chongameno's employer. Alice's father is also described as rich. The magistrate is a man and even the police inspector. Although this is in line with the social reality in Kenya, it nonetheless points out the dominant position of a man. Once again *Mgomba Changaraweni* is a work of children's literature that passes as "normal" (it has the imprimatur of the Kenya Institute of Education) despite the glaring gender unevenness with wide political, economic and social ramifications.

5. Conclusion

The stories we have analysed have qualities of children's literature: the characters are children, the texts are written in larger fonts, they have illustrations, the language is commensurate with the different stages of childhood, and so on. These stories are also written in Swahili which has an easy advantage of connecting children to their unique cultural institutions (cf. Alexander 2003 and 2004). However, critically speaking, the number of male characters dismayingly overwhelms the number of women characters (or girl characters). The boys are typically portrayed as adventurous, strong and independent. The converse is for the girl characters. That what is considered normal in the context of the Kenyan society backgrounds the stories.

From the analysis of Walibora's children's literature books above, we can conclude that the dominant masculine ideology functions in such a way that it recruits female characters as objects (Althausen in Janks and Ivanic 1992: 308).

It is with the above in mind, that *Short Stories Across Africa* (Staaf), an agency of the African Academy of Languages is now insisting that when short stories are written, the number of female characters is important. Moreover, the way female characters are portrayed should be critically done in tandem with critical gender perspectives of our times.

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