

**WHEN GRANDFATHER CAME TO LIFE AGAIN:  
SAID AHMED MOHAMED'S NEW NOVEL BEYOND REALISM<sup>1</sup>**

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I would like to present the latest novel by Said Ahmed Mohamed, *Babu alipofufuka* ('When Grandfather came to life again'), published at the end of the last year.<sup>2</sup> The mine will be only a first, preliminary and very inadequate attempt as, I am sure, this work will challenge us for quite a few years.

In fact, after five realistic novels the author has adopted a new technique, turning to magic realism as he himself defines his work, but perhaps it is a too limitative definition. He depicts our world in a near future, when Tanzania and other African countries will have already undergone the process of globalization. The results are disastrous: impoverished and dulled masses are governed by a handful of immensely rich, powerful and arrogant persons mostly of foreign origin, deprived of all human qualities, who have thrown away any inhibition and deliberately sunk in all sorts of physical and moral debasement; nothing embarrasses nor frightens them anymore as they feel unpunishable.

The main character is named simply K; K stands for Kibwana and has nothing to do with Kafka's well-known hero. He is one of the richest and most powerful men in the country who has suppressed all his good feelings; he is only interested in his own well-being, in multiplying his wealth, increasing his comfort, expanding his power. He wants to be number one, to climb up to the top, 'up to the sky'; he wants to be envied and feared. He has abandoned his wife for a mistress whom he lured away from her husband and covered with riches. But the only being he really loves is his dog, while he does not care at all about his children Bambukbwa, a son, and Kidawa, a daughter; in his cynicism he is indifferent to the fact that Kidawa sells herself in order to get the money for drugs.

All K's things must be unique and showy – his actions, his limousine driven by a chauffeur, his house. K lives in a sort of enormous science-fiction-like castle, called by his friends Dracula's castle, with hundreds of rooms and hundreds of servants where everything is run by computer. (Anyway, we mostly see him in his bedroom and in the bathroom.) We are not told what kind of office K holds, but it must be an important position in the government as his bureau takes the whole top floor of a modern building and has a private entrance. Besides, his driver and other servants are paid by the government. Heaps and heaps of files lie on his desk since years, but no sanctions for neglected duties are applied to him.

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The second most important character of the novel is Mzuka – the ghost or spirit of K's late grandfather who wants to warn him against his scandalous way of life, to rouse him from his unconcern towards the others. The ghost takes K, against his will, on a journey, actually a sort of quest; they visit two parallel worlds that K has always tried to avoid or refused to see, wearing sunglasses and hiding himself behind dark windows of his car – i. e. the world of his childhood and his present world, but seen from the perspective of the poor.

In the former country, called Kataa, people refuse any progress; they cling stubbornly to the past and so they are more and more impoverished. However, in the other country, Amani, also reigns poverty, but people seem not to mind, not even to notice. They have accepted uncritically the pseudo-progress arrived from the West.

At the end of the journey, near the sea, the ghost – that until now was faceless – takes the appearance of K's grandfather and then, having fulfilled his mission, he disappears in the ocean. Subsequently five venerable old men emerge in order to pass judgement on K and as he denies his faults, he must be sworn in a traditional oath. Afterwards K also disappears in the ocean.

He is flung back home, but his country is altered beyond recognition – baked by sun and utterly impoverished. He soon discovers to have lost his job as well as his privileges and all belongings, and with them also his friends. He goes out of his mind, so he is taken to his native village by the only servant remained faithful to him and after a short time he hangs himself.

These last events of K's life are narrated only after his death, after a lapse of time, when K has also changed into a spirit and has to materialize in order to admonish young generations. The circle closes when K addresses a director of his former bureau trying to convince him with the same words used by his grandfather in the incipit of the novel. –

The book is divided into fifteen chapters. It starts with the inner monologue of the voice the reader will soon identify as that of the ghost – the late grandfather of the main character – explaining his efforts to enter in contact with his grandson. One of the first effects of his interfering with K's life is that the food of his beloved dog disappears continuously because the ghost takes it to the poor, and K blames servants for it and fires them one after another.

After the first apparition of the ghost, K starts to suffer from violent attacks of diarrhoea: the evil in him has to be expelled. The author writes of it with great naturalism. K is presented in his environment – his magnificent house, he himself only just bathed and perfumed, but he cannot help soiling with excrements himself, the thick carpet of his luxury bedroom and the shining bathroom.

In fact, K and his friends are entirely perverted. This perversion is represented also with K's delight in picking his nose and even his friends' noses.

1. *Na hata moyoni alijisokomeza takataka ili zizame kusafisha nafsi yake ya ndani ... Dunia yao ndivyo ilivyo, si hii yetu. Kwao taka husafishwa kwa taka, na uungwana husafishwa na utumwa* (p. 10)

Inside K is full of dirt, and so the ghost causes his attacks of diarrhoea to purify him.

The first time the ghost gets visible to him is in his luxurious car during the way to the casino where K meets every evening a group of friends. The ghost takes the driver's place for it is much easier to him to enter the body of a simple man like the driver, whereas the world of his grandson is too far from his own, he cannot enter into his perverted heart and mind. "Mwili na roho yako inaoza" (p. 21), he says. The ghost explains to his grandson, who listens to him reluctantly, that his world is not alive. K and his friends fear the surrounding world, they do not feel to be part of it.

2. *Uhai gani huo? Wakati wa uhai wetu, hata wale wabaya hawakuwa na sababu ya kujificha au kujitenga au kukimbia au kulindwa, kwa sababu walikuwa, kwa namna fulani, sehemu ya watu wetu ...* (p. 23)

K's friends whom he meets in the evening are greedy and shameless like him. Only a few years ago he called them *mazimwi* – as we are told by the ghost – but now he sees that they are similar to him.

3. *Sasa amemaizi kwamba macho ya mazimwi ni matafutizi kame yake. Vichwa vyao vijanjuzi kama chake. Nyuso zimechunika haya kama wake. Vifua havipumi wala kupumua huzuni na huruma kama chake. Damu zao nyekundu zimekunywa utashi uleule wa kuhozi na kupangatia (hoard) pasi na kikomo! Midomo yao haisiti kusema na kuathiri vibayavibaya bongo za wengine ...* (p. 12).

They have already succeeded in morally subjugating the masses to the point that they have forgotten the good and the evil, they do not remember shame or disgrace, poverty or misery; not even that they are human beings.

Who are these *mazimwi* who have the destiny of the country in their hands? Their names are Delpiero, Miyazawa, Von Heim, Di Livio and so on – the foreigners are those who decide and the natives follow blindly without understanding what happens.

4. *Hii ni kanuni mpya na muhimu ya wakati huu wa ufunguzi wa milango. Wageni walikuwa muhimu kuliko wananchi, kwani walikuwa na hazina ya uzowefu wa kufungua milango ...* (p. 42)

These new leaders form a heterogeneous group.

5. *Kilikuwa kikundi cha ajabu kwa hakika. Hakijapata kuwoko duniani. Hakijapata kutokea. Kilikuwa na waswalihina, na wendao makanisani, na wanywapombe. Hata wasioamini Mungu kamwe. Mna wenye kuchukia haki na wenye kupenda haki. Mna wanaotaka usawa na wanaopinga usawa. Wenye kukereketwa na Uafrika na wenye kupenda Uarabu na Uzungu ... wote wakienda kwa dira moja, dira iliyowakutanisha pamoja kuimba nyimbo za kusifu nafsi zao. Nyimbo za kung'ang'ania ... za ubinafsi!* (p. 46)

K is one of the few natives admitted into the group and moreover he receives a triumphal welcome every time he joins the others at Neo-Casino – a modern skyscraper overlooking arrogantly the whole town.

K and his friends break all taboos and commit all sorts of crimes, getting away scot-free. To relieve the boredom, they keep inventing new entertainments and pastimes, anything unusual and outrageous. Neo-Casino offers them every evening new food and new girls. The

banquet described in the novel consists of snakes and lizards, dogs, raw meat and fish, even beetles and other insects.

This time, however, K is not in his usual good mood because of the ghost's voice he cannot get rid of, but he feigns cheerfulness and displays an 'ice-cream smile' (*tabasamu ya aiskrimu*) which fades away at once – *tabasamu ambayo kila mtu siku hizi hujaribu kupasua nchini humu* (p. 31).

K and his influential friends propose to open a club where everybody will be naked. Some members are shocked, while K supports enthusiastically the project. By the way, he will be later punished for it: during his journey his clothes are stolen and he is ashamed to be naked. On the contrary, when he gets mad, he undresses shamelessly.

The German Von Heim justifies the nudist club.

6. *"Ili muweze kutambulikana na kuheshimika, mkubali mambo yatayokuwa yanakuja hatua kwa hatua. Mkubali biashara kwa upana wake na utamaduni wa msingi wa kufungua milango. Msingi wa haki. Na haki si haki za kawaida tu, bali pia haki za maraha, haki za watu kufanya wapendavyo ... haki ya kuvaa wapendavyo ... haki ya mwanamke kuzaa na mume maiti, haki ya kuzalishwa watu kwa sindano ... haki na haki na haki ..."* (p. 44)

Mzuka intervenes, warning K against what awaits them in the future.

7. *"K mengi yanakuja, inafaa mjitayarisha. Msiwe tu mnavaa miwani ya kutoona kesho. (...) Ardhi na viwanja vyenu vitauzwa na jambo hilo litaleta matatizo makubwa. Vijana wenu watakoga na kujitapakaza unga na mtakosa mabarubaru wa kufanya kazi. Jambo hilo litaleta msiba mkubwa. Watoto wenu watakaokuwa wanazaliwa wakati huo watakuja kamatwa kwenda kucheza unyago kwa kinyama huko ng'ambo ..."* (p. 47)

But K is not concerned at all with the consequences of their foolish behaviour.

8. *"Tunavyofanya ni sehemu ya utashi wa kujimudu kwa mwanadamu yeyote ... Nani anayetjua kesho kunakuja nini?"* (p. 49)

Mzuka continues his warning in the night on the way from the casino to the house of K's mistress, while he takes again the driver's place.

9. *"Kila siku kuna watu wajanja waliokaa mifuko wazi kungojea kuingiza utajiri unaotoka kwa mabwege walio tayari kufungua bongo kuzisokomeza udanganyifu unaoitwa dhana za kilimwengu kuhusu mwanamke bora, mwanamme bora, pua bora, mdomo bora ... nywele, rangi, kimo, mwendo, nguo, viatu, manukato ... Ndio! Lugha inayozungumzwa ni tamu: 'globalization' – uhuru wa kibiashara – lakini uhuru huo umo katika mshawasha wa vyombo wanavyovimiliki na kuvidhibiti wao. Na kwa hivyo bongo haziwezi tena kuzuiwa zisinajisike na kufuata ubora na uzuri wanaoufinyanga wao." (...)*  
*"Na hiyo ..."* aliendelea mzuka, *"imekuwa mirathi, kizazi ingia kizazi toka. Na kila kizazi kinaona hivyo ndivyo hasa. Sawa kabisa. Kuthubutu kumesagwasagwa Kipawa cha kufikiri kimeuliwa. Udadisi haupo, umefifilizwa. Hatukuzaliwa nao kabisa. Hatukukua nao. Tumejikuta tu tumezaliwa na kukua katika dunia isiyo dira yoyote. Dunia ya kubururwa na kufwata tu. Mkiendesha uchi, haya! Mkiwalishwa majukwaa miguuni, ndivyo! Mkipachikwa magunia, ohoo! Mkitogwa na kutiwa waya za ndonya, masikio, midomo na videvu na toba. Ya Rabbi, sijui nini, sawa! Mnarejeshwa nyuma kwenye ule uliokuwa ukiiitwa ushenzi, kwa kile kinachoitwa usasa na feshini. Na ubaya wa mambo hayo yote mnyanunua kwa bei ahasi na kwa sababu mifuko yenu mitupu, tayari kufanya dhambi yoyote ile kuigundua fedha ya kununulia."* (pp. 50-51)

In the second part of the novel K, guided by the ghost, is forced to undergo a fantastic journey. After changing into ants and putting a mask on their faces, they enter under the earth. The journey is full of danger and difficulties, but at last K finds himself in an environment he slowly recognizes as the village where he was born but where he did not return for many years, only it is now in much poorer conditions. He is naked – all his clothes have been stolen – so someone lends him a pair of his late grandfather's trousers. He meets his grandmother, his brothers and other relatives (all grown old even beyond their age), but they are hostile to him, refusing to recognize him.

Under this country, called Kataa, is disguised the author's homeland Zanzibar and Pemba and its vicissitudes of recent history, marked by strong opposition to the official policy. It seems that in the Seventies there was a project to famish the inhabitants of the islands – the government did not send provisions of food except for the leaders with the motivation that people should be self-sufficient.<sup>3</sup>

After some time the ghost reappears to lead K to the country called Amani. The new journey is equally difficult and dangerous, but eventually they emerge in a town sunk into decay and full of people who walk backwards holding a calabash, streaming in millions into an enormous ground; on a platform there is a dozen of leaders in the same attitude. All of them are turned to three idols: the Japanese cat, the American eagle and the Euro. The ghost's voice rouses them from their amazement and there breaks out a war of religion. Amani is our world, full of violence, urban criminality and exasperating bureaucracy.

Now Mzuka and K must reach another province on the coast. To get there they take a crowded bus which is several times stopped and delayed by corrupted policemen and clerks. Finally, after being sworn by five old men emerged from the sea, K also sinks into the sea and when he recovers his senses he finds himself back home.

It is the year 2058, but we do not know – and neither K knows – how long he has been away. During his absence, after a catastrophe, all infrastructures and public facilities have been demolished. The natural resources are finished. All people are old, skinny and ragged; the young have emigrated to the USA and Great Britain 'to sell their muscles in a new slavery'. People walk aimlessly and hopelessly, as if they were looking for something invisible. The few well-off persons do not care at the least for the poor. But surprisingly, the poor themselves look as if not caring either, they seem not to suffer the pangs of hunger, they do not mind diseases or the loss of their memory and human dignity. They only remember the promises of a better future, plenty of food, job for everybody etc. they still believe blindly.

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<sup>3</sup> The inhabitants of Pemba are the only people that openly refuse the rule of the chief party of CCM, therefore the government punishes them denying them progress. As my students who visited Pemba report, any modern facility – like running water, schools, hospitals, even food – is hardly available or completely missing. However, the Wapemba persist in their opposition in spite of the derision and scorn of the continental Tanzanians; metaphorically the author represents this attitude as if they chose death. In their turn the Wapemba look down on the other Tanzanians because of their servility and uncritical acceptance of anything coming from the West.

At last K finds himself at home, in his bed. All the house is strangely quiet, only his dog jumps all over him, happy to see him again. The first thing K thinks about is a party for the dog – as if the journey did not teach him anything! But soon he is overcome by other worries. Nothing works in the castle: there is no water or electricity, a heap of dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen, and the only two persons left are his driver and his maid Biye. The things are not better in his office where nobody treats him with respect as before. The worst happens in the evening in Neo-Casino. All his friends are there, enjoying themselves with his daughter and his mistress, but when K wants to join them, he is brutally thrown out. In fact, he has been dismissed from his office and so has lost his privileges. He must even leave his house and all his belongings. This last shock drives him mad to the point that he undresses completely on the street. The faithful Biye, who actually is his niece, takes him and his dog to her village where he is haunted by his spirits until they drive him to suicide.

This last part is revealed only after K's death, when a certain period of time has passed and it is now K's turn to materialize in order to reprove his children. After some efforts he succeeds in taking human shape and appears in a town that looks like Hell: full of rags, waste paper and plastic bags, but with no place where to get some food. People with nothing human left fight over rubbish heaps with stray dogs. His daughter and his son, disfigured by misery, fight for a piece of stale bread, refusing to listen to K's admonitions or to recognize him; in the same moment their mad mother passes by. –

Summing up, after describing K's daily activities, the central part of the novel is devoted to his travelling in space and time, and concludes with his return, miserable death and finally the catharsis in an afterlife. Let us consider briefly the space-time dimension.

*Space:* Even if K undergoes a long and difficult journey, geographically he does not go very far from his domicile, it is rather as if he went to another dimension.

*Time:* The temporal coordinates are not well defined. We are told that K was born in 1940 and he returns from his quest in 2058, but we are not told when his journey started. Actually he is not sure how long – and if at all – he has been away. The last part of the story takes place some time later, but not after a long period because K's wife and children are still alive. We may say that the story is situated in a near future, it might even be in our times, but transformed by the author's fantasy. Thus the time also has another dimension.

Right from the beginning the 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 persisting 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. At the beginning they limit themselves to look at him angrily, but as the time passes, they become more and more aggressive and finally they will drive him to death.

So K's certitudes slowly vanish, as his world seems more and more surreal. On the other hand, the ghost explains the facts (to us and to K), so finally his level is more logical and realistic than K's level. Besides, the ghost presents us with the real situation listing actual misdeeds and vices, whereas at K's level the same facts are transformed by the author's fantasy into concrete forms such as diarrhoea, revolting foodstuffs, or haunting spirits.

The ghost is the author's voice who points out the dangers of economic and cultural globalization, of unbridled liberalization of commerce, of "the opening of the doors" as he puts it. He criticizes all the shortcomings, flaws and faults of the modern way of life, but without clinging uncritically to the traditional one. He invites the Africans to accept themselves as they are, without imitating other peoples, and also touches sore spots that trouble the wretched of the world.

10 *Kujiachia na kukubali kupandwa juu ya mabega .... Kukubali kufunguliwa kichwa na kuchotwa akili zote, kuchotwa na kunyang'anywa hata mazinduzi ya kuishi .... Hili ni kosa la dunia mliyonayo (p 79)*

In front of the evil ones is put a deforming mirror with exaggerating effects which transforms, e.g., a drug baron is a winged monster able to swallow pieces of land, or a shady businessman is another monster whose claws are a mile long. However, the reader is well aware of the fact that these people really exist and are already grabbing, devastating and destroying our planet.

While in Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* the whole atmosphere is dream-like, and so the reader is not involved, in *Babu alipofufuka* magic and surreal scenes alternate with realistic ones stirring emotional involvement. The whole book is a desperate protest against wastefulness, plundering and ravaging of the Earth, against a progressive destruction caused by a handful of the rich with the complicity of the poor – a protest that cannot leave anybody impassible. –

The style of the novel deserves a careful analysis that cannot be done in this paper; I will limit myself to a few hints.

Said Ahmed Mohamed's language is, as usual, very rich and needing a glossary, but this time his vocabulary contains – besides Zanzibarian words, expressions, idioms and sayings – also borrowings from other languages like Nyamwezi (*kinehe* "exaggeration"), Hehe (the proverb *Ch'ubede, ch'ulya*: "Unachokidharau, ndicho utakachokila siku moja"), German (*Hausschuhe, Faflukta! – Verfluchter* "damned"), and especially English (*mabetishiti* "bed sheet", *keebodi* "keyboard", *henkachi* "handkerchief"). There are words invented by the author, like *kimvumeme* "hairdryer" or *kurongofywa* "be cheated by false words" (from *urongo*), as well as great many compound words like *mfuhai / maitikwenenda* "living dead", *watamaduniwavya*, *wenyekingazao* "those with natural sleek hair", *kizamoto* "dark red", *nywelemaiti* "wig", *waduhushibustani* "gardeners" etc. etc.

He even employs slang words like *kasheshe*, *kwa mabavu*, *bwege*, *vigogo*, or *mshikaji*.

11. *Ni dhoruba inayopiga vitawi na vichanje, si vigogo na magogo kama yeye. (p 155)*

In this example the author skilfully exploits both the concrete meaning of *vigogo*, *magogo* “trunks” and the metaphorical one “important persons”.

Worth mentioning are his vivid descriptions, sometimes nostalgic when they are connected with the memories of K’s childhood, sometimes rather crude, when concerning K’s present life. In fact, there are several scenes connected with excrements and evacuating. Thus in the first part of the novel K suffers from repeated attacks of diarrhoea, and later, returning from his journey, one of the first things he does is to sit on his toilet bowl, but there is no water nor toilet paper. He realizes that his world is utterly disrupted.

In the next excerpt the author describes vividly a dusty road of a poor suburb while K’s limousin (*limonsin*) pushes its way domineeringly through the crowd; the scene finishes with the personification of the celestial bodies disturbed by the intrusiveness of modern world.

12. *Limonsin* likachukua kasi tena; kama nalo lilikuwa limepandwa na wazimu. Mbele ya safari sasa, harakati zilizidi. Magari mfufulizo yalipishana Mapikipiki. Vitututu (mopeds) Skuta Baiskeli. Wenda-kwa-miguuu ... Pembeni mwa njia vibanda na vijumba huku na huku, vimejinamia kwa machofu, vimejifunika gubigubi guo la giza Hapa na pale, au mara nyengine mfululizo, vilimi vya vibatari vikisinzia au kupiga vikambi (be blown) kwa kipepo kilichopunga wakati watoto wauza samaki, ngisi, pweza, vitumbua, maandazi na mahamri (kind of maandazi), wanagotesha vichwa na kusujudia vumbi ardhini kwa kusinzia. Juu nyota zimemezwa na anga la taa lililokweza juu hewani kwa ghadhabu zote lililoweza kukweza nazo Na ule mwezi ulijazbika (lost its temper) na kukimbia juu zaidi, kujificha nyuma ya wingu kwa hasira (p. 25)

There are several other examples of personification, as well as of euphony achieved, e.g., by horizontal rhymes, as in the following sentence:

- 13 *Na sasa K aliwaona watu walikuwa wakitembea ovyo bila kazi wala bazi; pasi na dhamiri – ingawa kwa dhahiri wote walionekana kutafuta kitu kisichoonekana.* (p. 146)

It is important to say that the author uses great many devices to disrupt realism. He purposely subverts grammatical rules in order to represent the chaos reigning in Tanzania and in the whole world. So he modifies Swahili grammar for his needs, putting *kompyuta*, *lifti* and modern devices in cl. 1:

14. *Bahari ya Hindi alikuwa hanong’oni* (p. 138); *uwanja-wa-ndege-wa-kimataifa alisimama* (p. 29); *air-conditioner alikuwa akinguruma na ubaridi ukizizima* (p. 70)

The print is also meaningful: he often uses italics, bold characters or both; it is deliberately disturbing, but this is also part of his strategy. Everything, even the printed characters, help in showing perversion, disorder, the break-up of our world. Thus 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, is written on one page in six different forms in order to present his Protean nature:

15. *Proteus, PROTEUS, prOTeus, pRoteus, Porteus, PROtEus.*

So the author wants us to ponder every word, every utterance, every sentence, every step of the novel. I hope that in the course of time it will be done.



I conclude saying that *Babu alipofufuka* represents a qualitative leap in Said Ahmed Mohamed's writing and major achievement in modern Swahili literature.

**Reference**

Mohamed, Said Ahmed. 2001. *Babu Alipofufuka*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.

