

INVESTIGATING TOPICS AND STYLE IN *VUTA N'KUVUTE* BY SHAFI ADAM SHAFI

FLAVIA AIELLO TRAORE

Introduction

In the last decades many literary critics have appraised the works of Zanzibarian writers; referring to the prose of Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed, Said Ahmed Mohamed and Shafi Adam Shafi, M. M. Mulokozi wrote in 1985: "The most significant, and certainly most spectacular, development in the Swahili fiction of the Seventies and Eighties has been the emergence of Zanzibar as the producer of the best Swahili fiction to date, and the apparent torch bearer for the Kiswahili novel of the near future" (Arnold 1985: 174).

The same enthusiasm was shared by R. Ohly who, confronting the novels written by Zanzibarian writers and those by Tanzanian and Kenyan writers in a time span going from 1975 to 1981, has defined the Zanzibarian prose a challenge to the artistic competence of other Swahili writers (cf. Ohly 1990).

Although I found the comparative pattern used by Ohly debatable, having concentrated for the up-country literary production only on popular short novels - to be better evaluated not following negative, contrastive clichés but within the context of that particular trend -, obscuring moreover other talented writers like Euphrase Kezilahabi or Claude Mung'ong'o, his criticism has nevertheless the merit of having highlighted the main qualities of Zanzibarian novels, namely a deep interest for historical and social matters, along with an extremely rich and colourful language and a serious concern for stylistic features.

These attributes of Zanzibarian literary style fit very well to the last novel by Shafi Adam Shafi, *Vuta n'kuvute*, published in 1999; in the following pages my aim is to explore the way the author of this work artistically manipulates themes, literary suggestions and stylistic devices, re-elaborating thus the experience of Kiswahili and Zanzibarian prose in a creative way.

Main themes

Zanzibarian authors have often written historical novels, locating their narratives in the colonial or pre-Revolutionary period on the islands.¹ Following this trend, the events of *Vuta*

¹ Like the novels *Kuli* by S. A. Shafi (1979) and *Dunia and Mti Mkavu* by S. A. Mohamed (1980), echoing events happened during colonial times, or the works *Nyota ya Rehema* by M. S. Mohamed (1976), *Asali Chungu* by S. A. Mohamed (1977) and *Kasri ya Mwinyi Fuad* by S. A. Shafi (1978), all seeing their dramatic conclusion in the outburst of revolution.

n'kuvute happen upon the last phase of colonial experience in Zanzibar. The plot of the novel is very complicate, the tormented lives of the main characters are exposed through a great number of events, secondary characters, thrilling actions, *coups de théâtre*, all unified, in my perception, by a common motif, the love for *uhuru*, for freedom and independence, at various levels, individual, social and political, thus significantly inheriting the emancipatory spirit of *Ujamaa* literature² in a more global vision.

The reader is first introduced to the story of a young Indian girl, Yasmin, who, following the tradition of arranged marriages, moves to Mombasa with her husband, the old businessman Bwana Raza: unhappy and lonely, she finally rebels and flees back to Zanzibar.

Depicting the consequences of a wrong up-bringing is a typical theme of Kiswahili literature, the writers often illustrating negative familiar milieus which affect the life of young people, especially girls, either defeated to death by mental and/or physical aggressions, like Rosa Mistika or Asumini³, or escaping the authoritarian context like Maimuna⁴ and Yasmin, both unconsciously driven to a new life.

Once in Zanzibar Yasmin is rejected by her uncle, and she asks for help her only friend Mwajuma, a Swahili girl living in the poor quarter of N'gambo, who takes care of her unconditionally. In contrast to her generosity, Yasmin's mother refuses to forgive her daughter, not only for having ashamed her family abandoning her husband, but also for mixing with the Swahili people, breaking thus the refractory habits of her community, and the social / cultural distinctions so well exploited and stigmatised by colonial policy in terms of race relations.⁵

Oppressed by social constrictions and racism, Yasmin recovers while staying at Mwajuma's place, where she is puzzled by a more relaxed living style, including alcohol abuse, starts to go out to music performances, and more importantly falls in love with a young man called Denge.

Denge is a young intellectual, returned from Europe with no money but a Russian degree and a strong engagement for liberating his country from British Protectorate. He and his companions are persecuted by the police for doing political propaganda, introducing in the country books and newspapers banned by colonial censorship. Yasmin becomes reluctantly involved in the struggle between Denge's group and the policemen, who try to force the girl

² And specifically the proletarian perspective adopted in his first works, cf. Blommaert 1999: 145.

³ Respectively in the novels *Rosa Mistika* by E. Kezilahabi (1971) and *Tata za Asumini* by S. A. Mohamed (1990) Both girls are victims of their father's obsession with sexual purity. Cf. Bertoncini-Zúbková 1996: 10.

⁴ In the novel *Utengano* by S. A. Mohamed (1980)

⁵ The small and heterogeneous Asian community of Zanzibar was involved in the British Administration (as subalterns) during colonial times, thus accentuating its social and cultural isolation from the rest of the population. See A. Crozon, "Les groupes sociaux avant la révolution", in *Zanzibar aujourd'hui*, ed. Karthala, Paris 1998, pp. 113-139

to betray her “communist” and “atheist” lover, but she decides to help the activists, believing that they are only discredited because they fight for independence. As explained by Denge, the British authorities attempted to isolate the promoters of independence from their fellows, pursuing the strategy of divide and rule:

“Sikiliza Sista, hawa wakoloni na vijibwa vyao ni watu wapumbavu kabisa, kwao kila mtu ni koministi. Ukidai haki yako wewe koministi Ukisema kweli wewe koministi Ukipinga kutawaliwa wewe koministi... Kila anayedai haki kwao ni koministi, na sumu yao kubwa wanayoitumia ya kutaka kutenganisha watu kama hao na wananchi wenziwao ni kusema kwamba watu hao wanaowaita makoministi hawaamini Mungu.” (Shafi 1999: 68)

The continuous fight between colonial officers and freedom combatants transmits to the novel the sense of thrilling and suspense typical of detective stories, literary genre first imported to Kiswahili literature by Mohamed Said Abdulla⁶, but in this case the policemen are negative characters, obtusely serving the colonial state.

As explained by Pazi, another partisan, in the struggle for *uhuru* it is often necessary to perform illegal actions:

“Wakati tunapambana na adui lazima tutumie mbinu zote tunazoweza kuzitumia. Pale inapoyumkinika kutumia mbinu za dhahiri basi tuzitumie kwa kadri ya uwezo wetu. Pale ambapo hapana budi ila kutumia njia ya siri kwani mapambano yetu ni ya vuta n'kuvute Wao wanavutia kule na sisi tunavutia huku na katika mvutano huo hapana suluhisho linaloweza kupatikana isipokuwa kuwa huru. Uhuru ndiyo suluhisho, kwa hivyo lazima tutumie mbinu mbalimbali katika kutafuta suluhisho hilo.” (Shafi 1999: 113)

Interestingly though, protest and resistance in this novel do not include violent actions against human beings, but demonstrations, attacks to the symbols of colonial power (like segregated restaurants), diffusion of illegal literature, redaction of a local newspaper – named *Kimbunga* -, all destabilising strategies in the *vuta n'kuvute* – trial of strength – for independence.

Here too, like in many Zanzibarian works, we find an explicit reference to the title, whose semiotic is contingent to the text but at the same time highly symbolic, soliciting the reader to a harder commitment in the interpretation of this historical novel (cf. Ohly 1990: 30)

In *Vuta n'kuvute* freedom of thought and expression is the premise to singular and collective fights, but sometimes the two dimensions enter in an insoluble conflict. To affirm one's own right to love is sometimes a luxury when the defence of your country is the first urgent imperative, as confessed by Denge to his lover:

“Yasmin mimi najua kama unanipenda, na mimi nakupenda vile vile, lakini kuna kitu kimoja napenda uelewe, kuna mapenzi na wajibu wa mtu katika jamii. Kila mtu ana wajibu fulani katika jamii na mimi wajibu wangu mkubwa ni kufanya kila niwezalo kwa kushirikiana na wenzangu ambao wengine unawajua na wengine huwajui, ili kuona kwamba nchi hii inakuwa huru. Hii ni kazi ngumu, ina matatizo mengi na inahitaji kujitolea muhanga na mimi ni miogoni mwa hao waliojitolea muhanga kufa, kupona, potelea mbali. Tupo wengi tuliojitolea namna hiyo, tena wengi sana, maelfu.” (Shafi 1999: 145)

⁶ After the famous *Mzimu wa watu wa kale* (1960), he published a series of stories linked through the figure of the detective Bwana Msa. Cf. Bertoncini-Zúbková 1989: 55-60.

Denge's life is sacrificed to his cause, involving being arrested or in exile, and Yasmin has to accept his destiny of loneliness, going her own way. Once again she is confronted with racist biases. The marriage with Bukheti, her former neighbour in Mombasa, is opposed by both families, showing their fear and despise for *the other*, the intruder, de-humanised with various verbal aggressions.

"Iko wapi heshima ya binadamu, ikiwa Muhindi anamwita Mswahili golo na Mswahili naye anamwita Muhindi ponjoro?" (Shafi 1999: 254)

The mediation of old and open-minded family friends helps to put aside the prejudices; the novel ends with this happy union, sometimes shadowed by Yasmin's melancholy. The last, powerful scene of the novel is signed by an Indian song that Yasmin listened to in Mombasa, dancing alone to calm her soul – there, and also singing in a *taarab* group in Unguja, she had always experienced music as personal rescue –, and the notes of that song remind her of the sweet and sour taste of liberty.

Stylistic devices

Hereafter I will focus on some aspects of the narrative structure of the novel *Vuta n'kuvute*, investigating mainly the organisation of the story, the strategies of discourse⁷, and the use of speech differentiation in the text.

Like most Zanzibarian works, this novel is engineered with great artistry, being composed by a great number of brief chapters (precisely eighteen), functional to an intricate plot of events and existents, with a fast and sometimes thrilling rhythm, which lets continuously grow the interest of the reader.

Time sequence in the novel is generally progressing – flashbacks are rare, like in the digression about Denge's past experience in Europe. The pattern is alternating the different life stories, sometimes parallel, sometimes intertwining, of the main characters; most episodes are indeed crucial to whole comprehension of the plot, only a few episodes can be considered as satellites (Chatman 1998: 52-53), giving more aesthetic quality to the narrative but not interfering with the logic of the story line, like for example the circumstance of Roger and Salum visiting Mwajuma and the quarrel between the two men. The novelist skilfully balances the techniques of *showing* (where the events are mimed by the characters) and *telling* (where the events are told by a narrator; *ibidem*: 30).

As observed by Chatman, the opposition between overt and covert narrator is a spectrum of possibilities within a literary work (*ibidem*: 211): from the very beginning of this novel a heterodiegetic narrator appears, with various degrees of visibility.

⁷ I follow here the distinction between story and discourse made by Chatman, in other words between the *what* and the *how* of narrative. Cf. Chatman 1998.

Vuta n'kuvute abounds with dialogues - where the narrator is almost imperceptible -, not only colloquial speeches, but often longer pieces of reasoning, very important in conveying information about the characters and/or some crucial messages, like the above-mentioned quotations by Denge and Pazi.

At an intermediate stage one finds the use of the indirect free speech, where the words or thoughts reported by the narrator remain closer to the character, with a subtle effect of ambiguity, like when disclosing the first impressions of Denge registered by Yasmin:

Kwa Yasmin huyo alikuwa n'do Mwafrika wa kwanza kuambiwa ametoka Ulaya. Shilingi mbili za kununua ukanda wa kufungia suruali yake zinamshinda, na ile suruali isiyokuwa na pasi aliyovaa imezuiliwa kiunoni kwa tai, labda aliyorudi nayo kutoka huko Ulaya, na hivyo viatu alivyovaa, karibu vidole vingine vinataka kuchungulia nje. (Shafi 1999: 49)

Often the narrator reveals his omniscience, describing both the physical appearance of characters and their inner thoughts and feelings, like at the beginning of the novel presenting the beautiful Yasmin, sad for marrying the old Bwana Raza, but too young and too shy to oppose her parent's decision.

Only rarely the narrator goes one step further, telling not only what the characters know, but also what they do not know, like Koplo Matata, the police man, in charge of collecting information about Yasmin:

Ilimbidi kwanza afikiri pa kuanzia Lakini ataanzia wapi? Yasmin si mtu ambaye alimjua hapo zamani kwani wakati Yasmin alipokuwa akiuza duka la Bwana Raza hapo Mtendeni, yeye hakuwa na shughuli naye. (Shafi 1999: 77)

The description of the environment offers another opportunity to the narrator to let his voice be heard; this novel abounds with descriptions of outside environment (e.g. the airport ... or the old town of Mombasa) and inside spaces, often contrasted with the physical and psychological condition of characters, like Bwana Raza's magnificent flat in Mombasa where Yasmin feels lonely and desperate, whilst experiencing freedom and humanity at Mwajuma's humble place. In one case two places are explicitly related to each other under a symbolic point of view, precisely the prison where Denge is arrested and Shihab's rich house in Tanga where Yasmin feels trapped in by her jealous husband:

Wakati Denge amefungwa gerezani kumbe Yasmin naye amefungwa na mumewe. (Shafi 1999: 196)

The use of verbal parallelism helps to stress the analogy between a physical place and a mental condition; to note also the exclamation *kumbe*, revealing a participating narrator.

All the above-mentioned techniques concur to build a mobile narrative structure and striking, convincing characters. In his work *Kunga za Nathari ya Kiswahili* S.A. Mohamed has distinguished three typologies of characters, namely the round character (*mhusika mviringo*), the flat character (*mhusika bapa*) and the caricature (*mhusika kinyago*; cf. Mohamed 1995: 73-75).

Following this useful classification, I consider Yasmin and Denge as round characters, because they are living, thoughtful, contradictory. Bukheti and Mwajuma, the two other well characterised personalities in the novel, are less deep and complex, but their relative flatness is a deliberate choice by the author, insisting about particular human characteristics, in the first case about passion and determination, in the second case about openness and joy of life. Inspector Wright and Koplo Matata are more grotesque caricatures, typifying the negative features of colonial system, but still quite likely, like even the minor characters of the novel.

Important requisites in the building of realistic novels are the language used and the ability to take into account speech differentiation in the dialogues. Similarly to other Zanzibarian writers, Shafi Adam Shafi not only has employed a vivid language, marked by dialectal features, but also succeeded in rendering different language registers, different language awareness, different verbal attitudes. The most striking example is the contrast between Denge, the engaged intellectual, and Mwajuma, the humble, uneducated woman; the two characters speak in a complete diverse way, the first one sometimes bookish and slightly formal, like in the above-cited passages, the second one using a very colloquial vocabulary and a very straightforward tone, like in the following conversation:

- (D) "Tokea hapa nilikuwa nimechoka, nilikuwa natafuta pass time tu."
 (M) "Umechoka umefanya kazi gani?"
 (D) "Lo! Leo nilikuwa na kazi kubwa kwelikweli."
 (M) "Kazi gani? Kwani wewe una kazi, Denge?" ... "Kila ninapokuona unaranda na baiskeli tu."
 (Shafi 1999: 196)

Mwajuma does not understand what kind of job Denge does and she naively expresses her surprise, with a humorous effect, but a further implication of her observations is that not only Denge's job is actually mysterious, but that to her political activism, like the word *koministi* that she once erroneously confuses with *msaliti* (Shafi 1999: 67), is a too abstract, vague idea, whereas she and Yasmin act in name of a more empirical sense of justice.

The use of speech differentiation is thus functional to the creation of an actual polyphony, citing Bachtin's definition (cf. Casadei 2001: 85), that means different world's visions confronting each other in the novel.

Speech differentiation also includes the varieties of Kiswahili spoken by Asians, like Yasmin's mother (*Umekujisha kufenza nini hapa wewe mwenaharamu*; Shafi 1999: 43) and Europeans, like Inspector Wright (*Nafikiri nini juu ya hii book?*; Shafi 1999: 76), which add much more than local colour and humour to the narrative. These distorted varieties of Kiswahili are objective correlative to the mental attitude of the characters; not casually Yasmin's mother is the only Asian in the novel to use a deficient language, manifesting her profound closure, her refusal of the external world. The Englishman Inspector Wright too does not put much care in speaking Kiswahili with Koplo Matata, and the impoverishment of the language reflects the debasement of human relationships, reduced to the master/serf paradigm.

Conclusion

In the above analysis I evidenced some thematic cores and stylistic traits of the novel *Vuta n'kuvute* that assess it as a mature contribution to the development of Kiswahili and Zanzibarian prose. The various themes were linked through what appeared to be a salient *leitmotiv* of the narrative, namely the defence of freedom at any level, personal, social and political. With regard to the stylistic devices, I emphasised the novelist's ability in the construction of a carefully engineered narrative structure and of well characterised personalities.

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