

**MABADILIKO NI MAUMBILE YENYEWE:  
THE THEMATIC AND STYLISTIC DYNAMISM IN S. A. MOHAMED'S  
NOVEL UTENGANO<sup>1</sup>**

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**Introduction**

The Swahili novel, a literary genre lately appeared in Tanzania, has undoubtedly found a brilliant and mature expression in the works of the Zanzibarian writer Said Ahmed Mohamed

His novel *Utengano*, published in 1980, is a unique work in the Swahili literary production of the Seventies and Eighties, with regard to both the themes treated and the very elaborated style of the author, who has given a dense and homogeneous quality to this genre, which is by definition open and composite, totally different from the short story, the organisation of different elements representing a challenge to the capacities of a writer in terms of composition.

In this paper I will focus on a feature of *Utengano* which, in my view, points out to the good achievement of a novel, namely the author's utterance of a *leitmotiv* or general abstract idea creating cross-references and symbolic relations between the different levels of a literary text.

The *leitmotiv* I found in *Utengano* is the idea of dynamism, in other words motion, energy that produces changes, which permeates the whole work unifying the different levels of expression. These latter will be analysed separately to allow a clear exposition, but the dialectical relationship between the "what" and the "how" represents the key to the reading of this novel.

**The thematic point of view**

Differently from the majority of Zanzibarian contemporary works, the milieu of *Utengano*, even if never explicitly declared, is the post-revolutionary society of Zanzibar.

But this choice does neither imply a narrow perspective nor a sort of loose realism: one of the most fascinating aspects of this novel is actually the complex, integral vision of human life, the connection between individual and community, between interpersonal and social relations, between present and memories of the past.

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Core of the narration is the fall of Bwana Makuudi's family. Makuudi is a pious and tyrannical man at home, luxurious and corrupted outside: two women, Farashuu and Kazija, victims of his abuses, carry out a plan to destroy the whole family, particularly his daughter Maimuna, directing her towards alcohol and prostitution. Lonely and abandoned, Makuudi is also defeated at the parliamentary elections: Kazija destroys him by revealing publicly all his abuses of power, helped by the incorruptible policeman Fadhili, who arrests him

Makuudi's character is perfectly painted by the author, at the same time symbolic and extraordinarily human; the violent, cynical man suddenly collapses, awakening to a new, mercilessly awareness that reveals the fragility and despair of the man.<sup>2</sup>

Aggressive behaviours in the novel are basically the cause of dynamism. These latter, very frequent in most Swahili contemporary prose, are mainly the result of negative behavioural patterns spread through the family to all human relationships, provoking other aggressive reactions, such as Mussa's immorality and boast, the masochism of Maimuna, the hate and revenge of Kazija and Farashuu.<sup>3</sup>

Makuudi's authoritative and aggressive actions characterise also the manner in which he conducts his public life. Corrupted, hypocritical, keen to get money and power, he has betrayed the basic ideals which first lead the people of Zanzibar to fight for Independence and then against the political and social unequal system at the post-independence era<sup>4</sup>

Actually Makuudi exercises the same despotic power that typified the Colonial and Omanite Rule, because he has not inwardly worked out the idea of a new model of society, based on respectful relations among individuals: egocentric and materialist, his discourses refer to "modern" or "traditional" values as persuasion strategy in difficult situations, as when, already accused of corruption, he tries to convince Fadhili to bury the inquiry before the elections.<sup>5</sup>

It appears as a very critical evaluation of the post-independence politicians, ideally socialist, but too much tempted by the urban, western lifestyle and at the same time too

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<sup>2</sup> Makuudi reminds me of the *sayyed* Ahmad Abd el-Gawwad, a character of *Cairo's Trilogy* by Naghib Mahfuz, a writer esteemed by Said A. Mohamed. This man, conformist and apolitical, like Makuudi has a two-sided behaviour, severe and religious at home, relaxed and immoral outside.

<sup>3</sup> The formative period in Swahili novels is very important for the transmission of behavioural patterns, as stated by Mlacha: " . . . what can be seen in the novels is that most of the characters spend their formative years with their families which in most cases include aggressive individuals, mainly the father. As a result, rather than it being hereditary, they tend to learn not only how to react to an aggressive action but also how to become aggressive " (Mlacha, 1987: 77)

<sup>4</sup> "Makuudi alikuwa mchochole na ni wazi kwamba anatokana na ukoo wa kifanyakazi na kulima. yeye ndiye aliyekuwa miongoni mwa waasisi wa Chama cha Mwafrika . Alitaka kuona kwamba anajigomboa, na wanyonge, wafanyakazi wakulima wanajitawala : uhuru ukapatikana, mkoloni akatoweka. Lakini kumbe nia ya Makuudi ilikuwa nyingine kabisa. Makuudi aligombania uhuru wa nchi yake kwa tamaa kwamba wakitoka wale watu weupe. yeye atakuwa mmojawapo atakayekamata nafasi zao " (Utengano. 17)

<sup>5</sup> "Lakini nilitokwita hapa linazidi kuliko habari ya uchaguzi. yaani ni jambo la kidugu, jambo la damu. Unajua kuwa mimi mwaka huu nitasimamia uchaguzi wa bunge. Na pia unaelewa kwamba kuna kesi mbaya ya magendo inayonikabili mbele yangu, ingawa najua nyinyi polisi hamna ushahidi, lakini pindi ikitoka habari na kuisikia kesi hii wananchi jambo hilo litaniharibia kura zangu kwani hivi sasa ninatamaa ya ushindi " (Utengano 74-75).

conservative to accept other aspects of social change which, apart from the rhetoric of political discourses, would imply the substantial revision of class, generation and gender relations.<sup>6</sup>

In *Utengano* women are the first promoters of changes. Kazija, Biti Kocho, Farashuu, all rebel personally to male supremacy. Their fight comes from the awareness of injustice in a system that alienates women<sup>7</sup>, but unlike other Zanzibarian novels, their efforts are successful. Following the fall of Makuudi, a new family will be born, far from the conflicts generated by male aggressivity.

At the end of the novel, like in a tale, Maimuna meets Kabi, young crippled fisherman. The two characters are humble and anti-heroic<sup>8</sup>, their relationship is based on true love and respect, and there is no space for dominance: Kabi, a quite, generous man, does not need to affirm his maleness through aggressive actions nor is afraid of showing his deep feelings. Maimuna, on the other hand, is a woman who has rediscovered her dignity, neither submissive nor hateful, active and involved in social life as much as her husband.

The events of this novel, a blend of realism and utopia, suggest that changes, individual and social, are the natural dimension of the history of human beings and of the whole universe.<sup>9</sup>

The critic Mazrui once claimed that *Utengano* and *Asali Chungu* "are repleted with feudalist metaphysical twists in their social analyses" (Mazrui 1984: 198). In my opinion, contrarily, the cosmic dimension of dynamism represents the most fascinating feature of this novel: individual and social transformations, natural and rational transformations are dialectically connected to each other. The complexity, the fluidity of human relations and historical processes is wonderfully expressed by the whole design of the literary work and by an elegant, fluent style.

<sup>6</sup> Biti Kocho, servant of Bi Tamima, Makuudi's wife, reproaches Makuudi for this contradiction: "*Ala mbona mnapokaa kwenye vikuza sauti mnapiga kelele wanawake wasitawe. wanawake hivi. wanawake vile Alaaaa mkuki kwa nguruwe. kwa binadamu mchungu.*" (*Utengano*: 51).

<sup>7</sup> Like for instance Kazija: "*Kwanza, anachukia mwanamme. Mwanamme anamchukia kwa sababu dhahiri, nayo ni kuwa amekwa mbele, ingawa Kazija hajui na nani. Pili anaichukia nafsi yake -nafsi iliyolemaa na kuridhi siku zote kumpembejea mwanamme ambaye ni kiumbe kama yeye. Anachukia hali yake, anachukia jamii yake. anachukia anachukia kila kitu kila kitu.*" (*Utengano* 1).

<sup>8</sup> The theme of a new society that characterises the majority of Swahili modern prose works has been re-elaborated in contemporary "formative" novels (*Shida, Mtu ni Utu*) into a realistic, less heroic form. See Mbughuni 1980: 113.

<sup>9</sup> "*Mabadiliko ni maumbile mwenyewe. Kutokea kwa mabadiliko ni sheria na kanuni inayoendesha ulimwengu huu. Na papo mwanadamu huyaonea mabadiliko ajabu. Huringia uzima wake, kazi yake, cheo chake na hadhi yake. Na katika wio huu mabadiliko hujiri hatimaye. aliye juu ukamkuta chini. Na hapo mwanadamu hukumbuka kuwa dunia ni mabadiliko na kwamba ni kawaida isiyopingikankuwa madhila hutawala na kuondoka.*" (*Utengano*: 97).

### The stylistic point of view

The idea of dynamism is implicitly reflected by the whole narrative structure, which will be analysed under different aspects, mainly the story-telling strategies, the fiction (characters, time and space), and some linguistic features of the text.

In *Utengano* the narration of events is expertly engineered: in the thirteen chapters of the novel the author has built a thick plot of episodes arranged in a very peculiar way, a play of temporal and spatial planes and intricate relationships among the characters which let continuously grow the interest of its reader

Said A. Mohamed skilfully alternates *mimesis* (the events are mimed by the characters) and *diegesis* (the events are told by a narrator). The summary, where the voice of the narrator clearly appears, can help to link different episodes, to give information to the reader, to outline a character or historical events (e.g. the second chapter begins with an *excursus* (p.17) resuming Makuudi's political career)

Time factor is essential in the building of this work. Often the single episodes are not presented in chronological order but in *medias res*, giving more details to the reader step by step. Some events, simultaneous from the point view of the *fabula*, like the actions in the first part of the novel, all happening during one night, are linked through opportune backgrounds or anticipations, and dilated through the abundant use of dialogues. On the opposite, in the second half of the novel a period of many years is narrated mixing summaries and meaningful, dramatic scenes

The able manipulation of time is evident not only at the macro-textual level, but also in a single scene, where time can pass by more or less quickly. The subjective experience of time can be rendered by stylistic and syntactic means, like varying the length of sentences or the verbal tenses. Let's see the description of Bi Tamima and her servant Biti Kocho who are leaving home (p. 104):

*Tamima na Biti Kocho waliingia katika pirikapirika ya kufunga virago vyao Wakafunga waliyowahi kufunga Walipomaliza walikuwa tayari kutoka Wakaaga watumishi wengine waliokuwa bado hawajachangamka Kwa heri, kwa heri ya kuonana Hao wakatoka*

The sensation of haste and confusion is communicated through many elements: the short sentences, the use of tense markers LI and KA, the choice of words (like the onomatopoeia *pirikapirika*), and the free direct style (underlined).

The opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, as focused by Chatman, is not a rigid antithesis; it defines a spectrum of possibilities. In *Utengano* the narrator is generally covert, but reveals his presence in the text through characters, environment and narrative style

This novel has a very choral dimension, but offers to the reader a great variety of characters; the main characters, Maimuna and Makuudi, are surrounded by other well characterised figures (Kazija, Biti Kocho, Farashuu). Characters are living, human, and

contradictory. Their physical description is very dynamic, showing not only their appearance, but also their gestures and actions. Another technique is to describe a character through the eyes of someone else. See for instance when Biti Sururu observes Maimuna's withered body (p.135):

*Biti Sururu alimtazama Maimuna, akaona jinsi alivyokupwa mwili Kwa wakati huu alikuwa kavaa gwaguro. Biti Sururu aligundua kuwa ngozi ya Maimuna ilikuwa ikifichua mikunjo midogo midogo ya siri ambayo bado ilikuwa inastahi kudhihiri kwa uwazi...*

The description of the environment, natural or artificial, helps as well to outline the atmosphere of current events and offers another opportunity to the narrator to let his voice be heard. An example is the ironic description of Makuudi's villa (p.19):

*Jumba la Bwana Makuudi tuliite "Kasri la Watawa". Ni kasri kwa kimo chake, heba na uzuri uliolistahili. Na ni la watawa, kwa sababu ya kukimwa kwa waliomo humo, mbali ya mwenyewe Bwana Makuudi aliyenjekea kutoka nje kwa kazi tu, au pale alipokuwa na shughuli muhimu ya kibinafsi iliyohitaji usimamizi wake*

Places very often are correlated to the physical and psychological condition of characters, like Makuudi's ruined house or Maimuna's dirty hut in the further development of the plot. Sometimes they play a premonitory role, like at the end of the novel Shawe's shore that cheers Maimuna up

Another means employed to let the narrator's voice come out, is the utilisation of the free indirect style; Said A. Mohamed uses frequently this style to express the inner life of his characters; an example of these mixed perspectives can be seen in the description of Maimuna's state of mind before leaving home without permission:

*Maimuna alikuwa katiwa kati baina ya mambo mawili mazito. Alivumbikwa ndani na babaake na kwa kweli sasa ameshaiva. Amenyimwa uhuru wa kutoka, naye amemtii babaake siku zote bila ya swali. Akikumbuka huona maonevu, hasa akisoma na kusikia kwenye redio jinsi wanawake wenziwe wanavyopiga hatua katika maendeleo ya nchi yao. Babaake amemtilia kila starehe alizohitaji yeye na mamaake, lakini hili halikufidia uhuru wake...*<sup>10</sup>

The interference among different points of view is a further element of mobility in the novel

Syntax and vocabulary also contribute to the creation of a dynamic style. The writer pays great attention to sophisticated syntactical constructions but first of all to the lexical research. Often at the end of his novels – like in this case – there is a glossary for dialectal, rare or invented words.

Moreover, Said Ahmed Mohamed has the ability to take into account the different language registers in the dialogues. The recording of the spoken language comprehends the

<sup>10</sup> *Utengano* p.23 Free indirect style is underlined

English-Swahili codeswitching, typical of the young generation, like in Mussa's talks (e.g. "Come on, wacha tustareehe", p.9). It also includes the varieties of Swahili spoken by Indians and Arabs, like the shopkeepers Ganji and Ashuru (let's take an illustration from the Arab's dialogues: "Lete besa, safanya mshezo, tashkuwa fitu burre?" p.150).

As a final remark, Said A. Mohamed has exploited in a very creative way the idiomatic richness of the Swahili language.<sup>11</sup> Similarly to other Zanzibarian writers, he has manipulated with great effectiveness the Swahili sayings, experimenting different literary functions beyond the didactic aim. In *Utengano* the narrator rarely tells proverbs, they appear in character's speeches or thoughts, in unabridged form or modified for stylistic purposes. A saying may synthesise in an expressive manner the thoughts of characters; it can be an implicit knowledge to understand an allusion of the text, be paraphrased in different ways<sup>12</sup> or elaborated in the following sentences<sup>13</sup>.

### Conclusion

Believing in the semantic property of all aspects in a literary text, in the above reported analysis I employed a sort of eclectic criticism, whose gravity centre appears to be the idea of dynamism. In my interpretation of the novel I have actually focused on some stylistic features which have been achieved by the author to create a remarkably organic literary work.

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<sup>11</sup> "The main stylistic effectiveness of Zanzibarian writings consists of the mastery of manipulating phraseological and idiomatic renderings" (Ohly 1990: 162).

<sup>12</sup> For instance. Kazija asks herself: "*Mwanamke ni nani mbele ya mwanamme? Ni pambo lilioko ndani...*" The underlined sentence implicitly refers to the saying "*Mke mzuri ni pambo la nyumba*". (*Utengano*: 7)

<sup>13</sup> In a nightmare Maimuna sees a monster with the face of his father who shouts: "*Mbio za sakafuni huishia ukingoni (...) mbio zako zimefika wapi?*" The second question refers to the image of running contained in the proverb allusion to the crazy life of his daughter. (*Utengano*: 133)

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