

## NAGONA AND MZINGILE - NOVEL, TALE OR PARABLE?

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Since the very moment of their appearance two recent works of Euphrase Kezilahabi - *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991) - hold a very special place in the whole development of Kiswahili literature, giving a lot of puzzles for the reader and a lot of material for the scholars of literature. I'm going to dwell upon only one aspect of the book - its generic origin; for I think that this question will sooner or later arise. To this effect, I would dare first narrate - very briefly - the contents of the book. I would refer to it as "the book", although it actually consists of two parts - but these parts are so closely related to each other, that it seems possible to speak of *Nagona* and *Mzingile* as one piece of work.

The book gives the story of a main character - *mimi* - who is brought to this world with the mission to save humankind, which is suffering from its own ignorance and moving rapidly towards inevitable disaster. The humankind is portrayed allegorically as the inhabitants of a certain city, who have burned their books, forgotten human speech and live in the world of fruitless dreams. The main character, as it turns out, should save the human world not by himself; he only must bring in the Second Saviour - *Mwokozi wa pili* - who will forgive the world and give it a new life. The Second Saviour must descend to the world on the day of a Great Dance - *Ungamo* or *Ngoma Kuu*. Actually *Nagona* ends up with the description of this very day - instead of a ceremonial dance *Ngoma Kuu*, with the help of a certain *Kizee mwenye fimbo*, who happens to be God Himself, turns into a wild orgy, which grows into the world catastrophe. After it very few people manage to stay alive - among them the main character, *mimi*, who is now bound to take care of a little girl, born on the day of *Ngoma Kuu* by the woman who initially was supposed to bear the Second Saviour.

In *Mzingile* the author narrates the events that followed the day of *Ngoma Kuu*. The girl, born on that day, actually turns out to be the long-awaited Second Saviour, but all her attempts to save the humankind, already revived, go in vain - she is killed, as her predecessor, and the main hero, *mimi*, is now supposed to find God, her father, and to bring him to his daughter's funeral. The hero finds God - the same *Kizee mwenye fimbo* - as a very weak old man, preparing to die. He refuses to leave his *kibanda* on the mountain, so the hero returns alone to the human world - only to discover that during his absence several centuries have passed, the power on Earth had been taken by a certain totalitarian government, which once again drove the world to the catastrophe, this time a nuclear one. The main character, *mimi*, decides to settle down among the ruins of his native village, and, to his surprise, finds in his demolished home the same *Kizee*, God Almighty - his hut on the mountain had also been burned, so he descended to die among the remnants of the human world. The hero feeds him and treats him

in every way; and one day string rain falls, the nature, nearly finished by the war, starts to revive, and the hero meets a magic girl, whom he marries, and it is clear that they are bound to become Adam and Eve of the new and better mankind. In the final scene of the book the God climbs back to his mountain - it is understood that the world is forgiven and life will start anew.

It may be difficult to judge by this brief narration about the literary merits of the book, but those familiar with the text, I think, would agree that the work possesses a pretty high level of literary skill. It is ripe in style, full of philosophical, historical and religious allusions; moreover, Kezilahabi seems to give a full embodiment to his own original philosophic views. The symbolism of the book is so rich and varied, that it is merely useless to try to say even a few words on it in this short paper. Besides, I think this task has already been fulfilled brilliantly by Marianne Chenou in her paper named "Zwei Romane des tanzanischen Autors Euphrase Kezilahabi" (Chenou 1997) and by Kyallo Wadi Wamitila in his article "Kezilahabi's methaphysics" in one of the latest issues of "Kiswahili" journal (Wamitila 1991).

All these praises, however, do not help us to answer the following question: to what literary genre shall we ascribe the latest work of Tanzania's leading writer?

I would dare to come forward with such a question, because within the structure of the book there seem to be at least four more or less easily tangible stylistic plans. The first one I would call a folkloristic plan, for Kezilahabi uses widely and vividly the elements of African folklore - from mythological concepts to folklore plots, inserted into the narration. For example, in order to perform his task the main character is bound to get hold of a magic gazelle - so his quest is described by Kezilahabi as a typical African folktale, where the hero overcomes four obstacles - a forest, a desert, a river, the mountains, acquires four magic assistants - *Nabii*, *Mtume*, *Mfuasi* and *Mtenzi*, solves four puzzles suggested by a king, and so on. Another example of a folktale inserted into a plot is the hero's journey to God in *Mzingile*, where he overcomes seven impediments traditional for African folktales - again a river, a desert, the mountains and the like; the road is shown to him by a lady fortune-teller, the time itself is quite characteristic for a folktale - the journey lasts seven days while on Earth there pass seven centuries. As for the mythological images and concepts, Kezilahabi, for instance, uses widely the mythology of his own people of Wakerewe. The text is also filled with "universal" mythological images - such as life as a circle, knowledge as the light, and others.

The second stylistic plan of the book can be called that of a parable - a parable in the sense of a self-contained story conveying didactic message to a reader or a listener. The book is full of such stories - suffice it to recall the story of three specialists (named Ego, Id and Alter Ego!) inspecting the factories of an imaginary country, where one of the factories produces nothing, the second one used to make bicycles without brakes, and the third one makes nuclear missiles, which later brings the world to catastrophe. Apparently the story tells about the destructive character of human activity - destructive first of all to the humanity itself. Another example of a parable is the story of the hero's short stay in paradise, where he is bound to sit in the circle

and to clean up his own soul; it is noticeable that his neighbours in the circle are the well-known scholars and philosophers, such as Plato, Socrates, Marx, Freud and others. They are also cleaning up their souls - so the author's notion about the futility of human knowledge is obvious. There are several other stories of this kind in the book - so the parabolic plan of it is rather evident.

The next stylistic plan one can call that of science-fiction - or, I would rather say, of anti-utopia, for the author draws apocalyptic pictures of the world after the nuclear war, implying the technique inherent to science-fiction novels. He uses dark and gloomy colours to depict the life of the people who have survived the catastrophe, convincingly pictures the totalitarian rule that had caused it, even the description of *Ngoma Kuu* bears the scent of apocalyptic mood.

This, for example, is how one of the survivors - who after the catastrophe lives in a grass hut, hunts the scarce animals with bow and spear, but feeds himself mostly with large grasshoppers, which he calls "fish of the sand" - renders to the main character the story of the catastrophe:

Mambo yalianza kama mzaha. Baada ya ukame, mvua linyesha kwa wingi. Chakula kilikuwa kingi mwaka huo. Nchini kote kukawa na matumaini. Katika hali hii ya kula na kusaza, pakatokea balaa. Viongozi wakataka sifa kwa yote yaliyotokea... Wakataka watu wote nchini wawe kama vikaragosi wao. Waandishi walitakiwa kuandika juu ya sifa ya viongozi. Wasanii walifungiwa mahali wakaambiwa watunge nyimbo za kuwasifu viongozi. Walimu wa vyuo vikuu wakawa pia vikaragosi vya viongozi. Utaalamu wao ukawa hauthaminiwi.

Pesa ikawa haina thamani. Chakula kikakosekana. Watu waambiwa wasichague chakula, wale chochote kilichopatikana. Msemo ukawa "mkubwa haibi, anachukua".

Ukame ukaanza tena. Watu wakiuana, wanyonge wakifa njaa. Ukame ukaongeza ukakasi. Vifo vikazidi kuongezeka. Haukupita muda bomu la nyuklia likadondoshwa na mataifa makubwa yaliyoanza kutupiana zana hizo za kivita. Watu walikufa kama panya. Waliobaki, wote walidhoofu. Hawakuwa tena na nguvu wa kuchimba makaburi marefu. Fisi wakawa wanazifukia maiti na kula, maana walizika bila majeneza. Fisi nao wakafa. Mvua haikunyeshwa. Ikafikia hatua ya binadamu kumla binadamu wenzake. (Mzingile, pp 44-45)

It all began like a joke. After the draught, the rain started to fall. Food was abundant that year. There was hope all over the land. But no one thought about anything but food, so the mischief came. The leaders demanded praises for everything that happened. They wanted all the people of the land to become their puppets. Writers were forced to write hymns about the leaders. Artists were locked up to make songs about the leaders. The university teachers were also treated like puppets. Their wisdom was no longer appreciated.

.. Money started to lose its value. Food began to grow scarce. People were told (by the leaders - M.G.) not to look for proper nutrition, but to feed themselves with everything they could find. Even a saying emerged: "the leader doesn't steal - he just takes".

.. So the draught started again. People began killing each other, and many died of hunger. The draught went on, and more and more people were dying. Soon the first

nuclear strike was made, and the big states began to throw bombs at each other. People were dying like mice this time. Those who survived were so weak, that they could not even dig graves for the dead. The corpses were eaten by jackals, because they lay unburied, without the coffins. But the jackals also died. There was no sign of rain; and people started even eating each other.

The same method is used by Kezilahabi to describe the revival of the world - only here he uses radiant and joyful paints, reminiscent in some way of utopian motives in European literature.

Baada ya mwezi mmoja matunda ya kila aina yamekuwa yameiva. Tulikula matunda kwa wingi, nao ndege walikula tani yao. Yale matunda madogomadogo tuliyaifanyia mchezo wa kutupiana na kudaka kwa mdomo.

Bondeni, katika mwanga wa jua la machweo, tuliona wanyama wengi wakichunga kwa pamoja. Wote walikula wakila majani, hata simba, fisi na chui. Twiga na ngamia wakitazamana kwa tabasamu. Simba na kifaru walikuwa wakifanya mchezo wa kupimana nguvu. Wanyama wadogowadogo walikuwa wakichunga pembeni kidogo. Bila kuogopa tulitembea katikati ya wanyama tuliwapapasa manyoya. Mwenzangu alikwenda mbele ya simba, akaanza kuchezeachezea manyoya yake ya shingoni. Mimi nilivutiwa zaidi na pundamilia.

"Tazama!" mwenzangu alisema kwa mshangao akielekeza mkono wake kwenye kilima. Juu ya kilele cha kilima tuliona watoto wawili wamekaa. "Twende tukawaone!" nilisema.

"Nitakupeleka", punda milia alisema.

"Na mimi nitakupeleka", simba alimwambia mwenzangu. (Mzingile, pp 68-69)

After a month fruit of all kinds have ripened. We ate them abundantly, and the birds ate the fruits even more. We played with small berries, throwing them at each other and catching with our lips.

In the ravine, lighted by the rays of a setting sun, we saw a lot of animals, pasturing together. All of them ate grass, even lions, hyenas and leopards. Giraffes and camels looked at each other, smiling. Rhino and lion were jokingly wrestling, measuring their strength. Smaller creatures pastured a little farther. Without fear we walked among them, caressing their furry skins. My girlfriend played with lion, caressing his thick mane. I enjoyed more playing with a zebra.

"Look!" my girl friend said suddenly with a surprise, pointing at the nearby hill. On the top of the hill we saw two children sitting. I said, "Come, let's look at them!"

"I'll take you there", zebra said to me.

"And I'll take you", the lion said to my girlfriend.

Finally, another stylistic plan of the book can be called realistic - for the author gives, for example, the descriptions of modern city, where the Msichana-Mwokozi dwells, or of an African village, when he tells about the childhood of the main character, using the traditions of east African realistic novel, portraying shortly but vividly urban and rural life. I would say that this realistic plan takes smaller place than the other three - but it is by no means less noticeable.

That is how the author describes the journey of Msichana-Mwokozi, arrested by the police, to the palace where they wanted to make her appear in the strip-show:

Kesho yake jioni, kama saa moja hivi, alijiwa na gari la aina ya mini-bus Polisi hawakuwamo. Alipoingia ndani ya kibasi hicho aliwakuta wanawake wengine wanne Wote walikuwa wamevalia vizuri Kutokana na maumbile yao aliweza tu kubahatisha kuwa walikuwa wa mataifa mbalimbali. Dereva na kondakta walikuwa wanaume, wote wawili suriama. Hakuweza kujua mchanganyiko wao maalumu ila weusi ulionekana dhahiri.

...Kutoka kwenye kijumba waliingia barabara kuu Hii ilikuwa barabara moja pana ambao ilikwenda moja kwa moja wima. Ilikuwa na njia mbili, kwenda na kurudi na kila njia magari manne yaliweza kupita. Magari mengi yalikuwa yanaelekea walikokwenda kwa mwendo wa kasi sana kufuatana na spidi iliyotakiwa.

Njia waliyofuata ilipita kwanza kwenye sehemu ya majengo ya zamani ya Waarabu, halafu ilipitia sehemu zenye makanisa yaliyokuwa na mjengo wa majumba ya zamani za ulaya Karibu na kilele nyumba za kisasa zilianza kuonekana.

Gari lilisimama mbele ya jengo kubwa lenye taa nyekundu madirishani Juu ya jengo hili palikuwa na maandishi yaliyosomeka, "Jengo la starehe Olympus". Jengo la starehe la Olympus lilikuwa la tajiri mmoja wa Kigriki ambaye wakati amelewa alidai kuwa alitokana na ujukuu wa Socrates Kwa sababu hiyo, ndani ya jengo hilo palikuwa pamepambwa picha za wanasayansi mashuhuri, waimbaji na waandishi" (Mzingile, pp. 36-37)

Next day, in the evening, she was led into a small mini-bus; inside there were no policemen. When she got in, she saw four other women, well-dressed and beautiful. By their outlook she managed to guess that they belonged to different races. There were two men also - the driver and the conductor. Both were Mulattos, and although she could not tell their mixture, the black blood in them was unmistakable.

Leaving the house, they entered a wide street, going straight, with four lines of traffic one and four lines the other way. Lots of cars were going rapidly the same way as they did, and they had also to increase the speed to catch in line.

The street led them first to the quarter of old Arabian buildings, then to the quarter with churches and old European houses. Nearer to the top they saw new, modern edifices.

The car stopped before a big house, red light gleaming in the windows of it. There was a sign above the roof - "Olympus Palace of entertainment". This palace was owned by a rich Greek man who, under a booze, claimed to have Socrates himself among his ancestors. For that reason, he decorated the palace with the portraits of famous artists, singers and scientists.

All the listed plans are equal to each other; it is hardly possible to say that folklore, parable, utopian or anti-utopian fiction or realism is predominant in the book. Moreover, they are carefully woven into each other, comprising together extremely subtle and complicated tissue.

It seems that actually Kezilahabi employs the interrelation of these plans as his main artistic device, using them to change the time and space - or, using the well-known term of Mikhail Bakhtin, to alter the *chronotope* of the book in accordance with the logic of the action. For instance, when he wants to insert Msichana-Mwokozi into human life, he uses the realistic plan of the city; when the hero is supposed to perform some important tasks, Kezilahabi sticks to the fairy tale; when the book deals with the things of cosmic scale, the text expands into the vastness and depth of a myth or to the imaginary world of utopia, and so on.

So the question remains: is *Nagona* and *Mzingile* a novel, a tale or a parable? My answer is: neither. To my mind, this book is the first conscious attempt in modern Kiswahili literature to create some kind of synthetic genre, blazing the new trail for the future development of Kiswahili writing. I believe professor Bertoncini was the first one to say in one of her recent articles these magic words - "a postmodern novel". Probably I would not agree with the term "novel", since the generic origin of the book is synthetic; but Kezilahabi's inclination towards postmodernism is evidently worth discussing.

There is also one more reason that prompted me to choose these two outstanding works of Kezilahabi for this paper. There still are discussions among specialists "Is Kiswahili fit for modern terminology?" - hence it is also born in mind "Is it fit for modern literary forms?" I believe that Kezilahabi in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* has answered this question brilliantly, with a definite "yes", showing that the pace of growth in modern Kiswahili fiction can exceed even the brightest expectations.

#### References

- Chenou, Mariana 1997 "'Nagona' und 'Mzingile'. Zwei Romane des tanzanischen Autors Euphrase Kezilahabi" Paper presented at 10<sup>th</sup> Swahili-Kolloquium, Bayreuth, 1997
- Wamitila, Kyallo Wadi 1991 "Kezilahabi's methaphysics" *Kiswahili* 58.