

## TANZANIAN PROSE IN THE EARLY 90s

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Taking a closer look at Tanzanian prose in the early 90s, it can be said that it has preserved the main structural features which had taken shape within the previous two decades of its development. One of these features is a more or less rich system of genres (short story, novelette, novel). Another is a traditional division into "popular" and "elite" literature. This division had already been noted by many researchers in the 70s and the 80s, although they used different terms for it; e.g., *popular* and *serious* literature (Bertoncini 1989), *popular* and *standard* literature (Ohly 1990), *riwaya-pendwa* and *riwaya-dhati* (Mlacha and Madumulla 1991), and others.

The "elite" branch of Tanzanian prose in the early 90s still plays its historically defined role as the avant-garde of literary development. Such authors, aiming at the most "advanced" reading audience - in the early 90s still consisting mainly of university graduates - usually possess rather high literary skill, which allows them not only to perfect their technique in already well-established prose genres, but also to experiment with new literary forms. One of the most interesting such experiments of the kind was, to my mind, made by the pace-setter of Tanzanian "elite" culture, Euphrase Kezilahabi, who enriched Tanzanian literature with such forms as the fantastic parable in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* (1987 and 1991, respectively). Unfortunately, in this brief paper I cannot in detail dwell upon these works, which no doubt, require more careful consideration. To my mind, these two pieces can be compared, in quite general terms, to postmodernistic writing. Such comparison scarcely reflects their real essence; it does, however, show that Tanzanian "elite" literature has preserved its aspiration towards maximum freedom of form and experiment. Tanzanian "elite" literature of the 90s prefers not to "meet" readers' expectations but to go beyond them, "dragging" the reader up to the achieved level of writing.

Equally interesting, however, are certain tendencies that arose in the early 90s in the development of popular literature. First of all, the Tanzanian literary market is still filled with the kind of pop fiction that generally is classified as "didactic", or "educational", aimed at the widest possible urban and rural audience. The conflict in these books continues to be based on the choice between good and evil which the main character is forced to make, where "good" lies in obedience to the present-day rules of social life and "evil" is an attempt to break them. In the 90s the majority of these books still consists of "Ndanda Mission press" productions. Ndanda books show the reader vividly how disobedience to social ethics leads to negative consequences. The heroes are punished for the refusal to apply modern medical care (*Tumwoko Tumaini*, Frederik Iiti, 1991), for dishonesty in love (*Ladha ya maisha*, Meinard Nyandindi, 1992), for yielding to the temptations of an "imported" way of life (*Tamaa ingeniponza*, Charles Sijaona, 1992), and so

forth. And, just like the 70s and 80s, the authors of these books use the same artistic means - straight didacticism, black-and-white characters, and simple plots

Alongside "didactic" or "educational" literature, the most familiar kinds of pop fiction of the 90s remain the crime novel and love story. Many authors specializing in crime stories stick to a well-tested scheme, following in their writing the technique of cinema thrillers; they are mainly interested in unexpected turns of plot, suspense and action - all of which dominate, for example, in *Tufani* by Baker Mfaume (1993). However, some writers have tried to expand the traditional frame of the detective story, giving it new and previously uncharacteristic features.

The novel *Almasi za bandia*, written in 1991 by the well-known writer C.S. Chachage, may at first glance be taken for an ordinary detective story. However, the further we follow the narration, the clearer it becomes that the author is chiefly seeking not to entertain the reader but to reveal the social roots of crime - and moreover, crime committed in the name of government. The main subject of the novel is the helplessness of ordinary people when faced with the criminal tyranny of high-ranking state officials. The author shows the evolution of Merton Mpwite, the negative character, from an ordinary student into an unscrupulous state official, misusing his high rank for all kinds of criminal deeds. When his old college-mate falls victim to his schemes, the friends of the unfortunate, headed by the protagonist Yakini, try to seek out the truth. Here they clash not only with the villainous Merton but with the whole machine of state criminality, and they are bound to be destroyed by it. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the author has designed his novel for a wider reading audience, because in its final part the book gives in to the laws of pop fiction. The positive character cannot perish - and that is why Chachage has to save his heroes, appealing to a good old "deus-ex-machina": the members of Merton's gang, high police officers, die in a sudden car-crash, so the protagonists remain safe and sound. It does not matter that their salvation runs counter to the whole logic of the novel - the reader is provided with the beloved happy ending. Such attempts to combine social criticism with the detective story have already been made in Tanzanian literature - suffice it to recall the novel *Pepo ya Mabwege* by Harrison Mwakyembe (1980). However, Chachage consciously and convincingly brings out the social theme, where his previous literary experience stands him in good stead - he is the author of such novels as *Sudi ya Yohana* (1981) and *Kivuli* (1982).

Social problems in the 90s are also dwelt upon in another wide-spread kind of pop literature, the love story. The main theme and the main conflict in love stories of the 70s and 80s was the same choice between the good and the evil. Here again "good" lay in conformity to social rules, this time connected with love and marriage. In form, the love story has until now remained practically unchanged. Its most characteristic form is the "set" of a few recurrent *clichés de sujet*, or plot motifs. Among these are usually the mystery of the protagonist's birth, his or her accidental separation from relatives (brother or sister) and the beloved; immigration to town, where he or she enters into a life of crime or prostitution; and accidental reunification with relatives and the loved one. A tragic ending is also possible: the main character dies, either punished for his or her sins or in despair at not being able to reunite with the sweetheart.

All the above listed plot motifs are present in the latest novel of the popular writer Ben Mtobwa, *Dar es Salaam usiku* (1990). The plot of this novel can be called to a certain extent classical.

A young girl Rukia, mistress of a businessman named Peterson (who picked her up in the street), meets a young boy named Hasara, a streetbeggar. They fall in love, and Rukia wants to leave Peterson and marry her boyfriend. The day comes where Peterson finds the young lovers in his flat. A quarrel follows, and Hasara and Peterson are about to fight - but this is interrupted by the sudden visit of an old couple, Nuna and Rashidi. As it turns out, all three, Rukia, Hasara and Peterson, are brothers and sister, and the old couple are their long-lost parents.

At first glance this novel can be taken as a perfect example of the love story, but there are features in it that provoke the reader to consider it more carefully. First of all, the novel lacks traditional "good" and "evil" characters. All the heroes are presented by the author as products of their social environment, of the vices of the society they live in. Such social determination of character is still very rare in Tanzanian pop fiction. Equally atypical for pop literature are the artistic means used by the author. Mtobwa skillfully uses two contrasting planes of action and space, a complicated composition, and colourful and vivid descriptions of urban and city life. Also interesting is Mtobwa's interpretation of one of the main plot motifs, reunification of the lost relatives. While in ordinary love stories this reunification is pictured positively, as the heroes' reward for their trials and tribulations, in Mtobwa's novel it destroys their lives: Hasara and Rukia lose all hope for marriage, Peterson is burdened for life with the feeling of guilt for having kept his sister as his mistress and his real father as a servant in his home. The closing scene of the novel provides no answers to the reader's questions. Mtobwa gives his book an open-ended conclusion, quite uncharacteristic for an ordinary love story. The novel gives no advice to the reader, but provokes him to reflect on all the problems it has touched on.

A similar ambiguity, i.e. whether the work properly belongs to popular or to "elite" fiction, is found in the latest novel by the outstanding Zanzibari writer Said Ahmed Mohamed, *Tata za Asumini* (1991). This novel also has a characteristic plot - a young female student named Asumini suddenly gives up her studies at the university in spite of protests from her young admirer Sewa; but, afraid to return home, she goes to live at her girlfriend Zaina's place in the outskirts of the city. In the course of the action Zaina turns out to be Asumini's long-lost sister; a bit later Asumini re-meets her old sweetheart Sewa, and their feelings start up anew.

In reading the novel, a particular point strikes one immediately - the depicted events as such arouse very little interest on the part of the author. What really lies in the focus of his attention is the psychological motivation for these events, the internal background of the deeds of Asumini and the other characters, their thoughts and emotions, even the sphere of the subconscious. In reconstructing the spiritual life of the heroine, the reader gradually comes to understand that the uncomplicated plot actually masks a story of moral tragedy. Asumini's trials are not the caprices of a disobedient youngster; she seeks for harmony in a world which definitely lacks it. *Nataka*

*kusafisha moyo wangu na wenu*, she tells her neighbours, who try to curb her "strange behaviour". The reunion with her lost sister, normally a rewarding event in an ordinary love story, in Mohamed's novel only adds the last drop to Asumini's tribulations. It turns out that Asumini's father kept Zaina's mother as a mistress; thus Asumini loses her last positive image of a man whom she thought to be free of mean aspirations. And the encounter with her old sweetheart Sewa happens in the asylum, where Asumini is thrown after a nervous breakdown - Sewa turns out to be her psychiatrist. In definite contradiction to the laws of pop fiction is the final scene of the novel: arriving for a date with Asumini, Sewa finds only a piece of paper, in which Asumini begs him to pardon her for going away. She is not able to keep alive their love in a world that would kill their feeling surely. A few days later Sewa finds Asumini's dead body on the seashore. I would venture to compare this book to the famous novel *Fragments* by the Ghanaian author A.K. Armah (1971) - like Armah's hero, Asumini is killed by society, where noble aspirations and clean feelings are of use to no one.

In previous decades this division into "elite" and "popular" has also applied to historical writing. The "popular" version of historical writing often bears the features of a folktale. It chiefly narrates the life of an orphan or only child, whose wonderful powers - strength, intelligence, and skills - help him not only to succeed, but to bring liberation and a better life to his people. We can recall to this effect such novelettes as *Baada ya dhiki faraja* by Jonathan Mushi (1972), *Dunia ngumu* and *Gongo la umma* by Murray Chiume (1969 and 1980), and others.

"Elite" historical fiction has oriented itself towards the style of the European and West African historical novel. It has tried to convey a realistic picture of the precolonial and colonial past of East Africa, in such books as Olaf Msewa's *Kifo cha Ugenini* (1971), Adam Shafi's *Kuli* (1979), etc.

An attempt to combine these two kinds of historical writing seems to have been made in the novel *Kwaheri Iselamagazi* (1992) by Bernard Mapalala. This novel consists of three parts, each of which follows a particular style of narration, according to its content. The first part, which recounts the hero's childhood in an African village, has the style of a folktale. The main character, Lumbesi, is the only son of the village's best hunter and a princess from a far-away land; since his very early years Lumbesi has possessed unbelievable intelligence, skills, and strength (he even kills a lion while still a child). The second part of the novel, where Lumbesi is captured and taken to a town of Arab slave-traders, contains motifs common in Arab tales, such as when the wife of a ruler falls in love with a beautiful male slave, who in turn loves a slave girl and dreams of escaping with her. Finally, the third part of the book follows the style of realistic writing, giving a very lively description of the life of the Nyamwesi tribes, united under the rule of the mighty *mtemi* Mirambo. Lumbesi is invited to Mirambo's palace (called *Iselamagazi*) and very soon becomes one of Mirambo's closest associates. Here the story could have concluded with the desired happy ending, but the author decides to stick to realism and the logic of history. After Mirambo's sudden death on the battlefield, his antagonists drive all Mirambo's former supporters to their death, and

Lumbesi among them. I would assume that such a combination of "folktale" beginning, "romanticized" middle part, and realistic ending is also an innovation in Tanzanian historical prose

Naturally, the question arises: do all the above-considered pieces of writing belong to "elite" or to "popular" literature? My answer is: both. And in Tanzanian prose they reflect a tendency which is one of the most significant in the world literary process nowadays - the integration of "elite" and "popular" literatures. The social and political changes of the last decade have made many Tanzanian authors seek a wider reading public for their books: they want them to be read by the urban and rural lower middle class, as well as *wasomi*. Thus a new type of writing has emerged, which provides the "advanced" reader with serious social problems considered deeply and thoroughly, while the mass audience, lured with the familiar accessories of pop fiction, discover that literature can be more than just an instrument of entertainment or straight didacticism. Such "synthetic" writing may well prove to be the most promising development in the contemporary literatures of Africa. But only time will tell.

#### References

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