

**TALKING ABOUT ONESELF TO ACT IN THE WORLD:
A SWAHILI AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(SHAABAN ROBERT, *MAISHA YANGU NA BAADA YA MIAKA
HAMSINI* [“MY LIFE AND AFTER FIFTY YEARS”])¹**

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Shaaban Robert wrote three autobiographical texts at different times in his life. The first, which is lost, covered his childhood and had been written when he was 27; the second, which corresponds to the first part of this work, was written at the age of 37, covering the period 1936-1946. The last was completed in 1960, but covers the period 1946-1959. It must be emphasised that the poet's life cannot be compartmentalised into separate, successive stages. Over and above a chronological division of events, the two sections of the book can be differentiated by the different periods when they were written and thus the different viewpoints on what happened throughout his life. Philippe Lejeune's definition of an autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative made by a real person about their own existence, emphasising their individual life and in particular the development of their personality” (Lejeune 1996: 14), is a familiar one. This definition fits Shaaban Robert's text perfectly and yet, in the Swahili context, such an endeavour could have encountered many obstacles.

In 1960, when he finished compiling the last part of his autobiography, Shaaban Robert (1909-1962) was a noted author, a member of the East African Swahili Committee since 1946 and considered to be the most talented advocate of modern Swahili literature. Considering himself to be above all a poet, he knew that publishing literary prose was a critical issue in promoting Swahili as a modern language. It was not a question of reducing the value of the great tradition of Swahili poetry, but adding literary prose of the same merit. The literary competitions in which Shaaban Robert participated while writing the first two parts of his autobiography were in response to this concern about developing a literary language.

In fact, Shaaban Robert wrote three autobiographical texts at different times in his life. The first, which is lost, covered his childhood and had been written when he was 27. The second, which corresponds to the first part of this work, is called *Maisha Yangu* [My Life] and was written at the age of 37, covering the period 1936-1946. The last, with the title *Baada ya Miaka Hamsini* [After Fifty Years] was completed in 1960, in other words when the author was only just 50, but covers the period 1946-1959. It must be emphasised that the poet's life cannot be compartmentalised into separate, successive stages. Over and above a chronological division of events, the two sections of the book can be differentiated by the different periods when they were written and thus the different viewpoints on what happened throughout his life.

¹ This text is the English translation (by Lis Wilkie) of the French introduction to *Autobiographie d'un écrivain swahili* by Shaaban Robert, translated from Swahili by François Devenne (2010), Paris: Karthala, pp. 5-22.

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The Swahili world was familiar with the autobiographical genre since the very beginning of the 20th century, with the publication of “The Life of Tippu Tip Narrated by Himself”² in which the powerful merchant and caravan trader tells the story of his expeditions into the interior of Africa in search of slaves. However, Tippu Tip’s text is more concerned with his journeys than with his personality. Philippe Lejeune’s definition of an autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative made by a real person about their own existence, emphasising their individual life and in particular the development of their personality” (Lejeune 1996: 14), is a familiar one. This definition fits Shaaban Robert’s text perfectly and yet, in the Swahili context, such an endeavour could have encountered many obstacles.

The Swahili term that is used to describe others’ lives, to write a biography, does not include the word *maisha*, but *wasifu*, which must be linked to *sifa* ‘reputation’, ‘merit’. Personality only exists through what others say about it and it is our reputation that determines what will be possible to say about our personality and its history. This demonstrates the difficulty involved in undertaking Shaaban Robert’s autobiography: it would be impossible to define one’s own personality; no-one can build his own reputation without risking a descent into boastfulness (*majisifu*). Therefore it is other people, such as superiors in the hierarchy, poet friends and public opinion, who will be responsible for deciding who Shaaban Robert is. The attention that Shaaban Robert pays to the issue of his own reputation has to be understood in the context of the difficulty of speaking directly about oneself, his sensitivity and his concern about the world: concern about oneself is inseparable from concern about others.

Nothing affected Shaaban Robert more than the tribute paid to him by the inhabitants of his neighbourhood when he had to leave Pangani for a new position:

In the street, the citizens, men as well as women, rich and poor, known or unknown, waved at me as I left in the car. In response, I raised my fez. I was neither a leader, nor a legal man nor a council member. I was an ordinary man who lived with in peace with them. This farewell was one of my finest hours. Even if this brief burst of fame were to be my last, I would not complain because I would have had my share.³ (Robert 1991: 48-49)

The anonymity of the assembled crowd is an important aspect of the account. Shaaban Robert is acknowledged as an ‘ordinary man’ by a crowd that is also ordinary. Social status is not at issue as he is more interested in the human rather than the social level. This short passage demonstrates the difference between fame and social recognition which is at the heart of the

² The text was published in 1902 and 1903 by H. Brode in *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen* 5 (pp. 175-277) and *MSOS* 6 (pp. 1-35) under the title *Autobiographie des Arabers Scheich Hamed bin Muhammed el Murjebi, genannt Tippu Tip. Transcribiert und übersetzt von Heinrich Brode*”.

³ *Barabarani, watu wa mji, tajiri kwa maskini, mkubwa kwa mdogo, mwanamume kwa mwanamke, wakati nilipokuwa nikiondoka kwa motokaa walinipungia mikono. Nilijibu heshima yao kwa kuvua kofia yangu. Nilikuwa si jumbe, liwali wala diwani wa halmashauri yo yote. Nilikuwa mtu wa kawaida tu niliyekaa nao kwa wema na adabu. Siku ya maagano hayo ilikuwa siku ya fahari kubwa kwangu. Kama fahari ile ilikuwa ya mwisho katika maisha yangu sitanung’unika kukosa nyingine wakati ujao kwa sababu fungu langu nimekwisha kuchukua.*

whole autobiographical narrative. Shaaban Robert's life is not going to be fulfilled by his career and varied roles within the civil service. He has other ambitions.

Here is how he talks about his first 27 years: "[...] very little was written in the book of my life and the rare acts recorded there would neither serve as an example for others nor satisfy myself."⁴ At the beginning of his book Shaaban Robert introduces a metaphor that will stay with him: life is a book. Does writing his autobiography involve copying the book of his life? In that case, what does such an undertaking mean? Three propositions result from equating life to a book: only actions write a life; these actions must be exemplary; they are an achievement of life. The autobiographical account presented here is underpinned by a very specific philosophy of life, drawn from the meeting of multiple cultural and religious influences. It would be too hasty to characterise this philosophy overall as "Swahili", but the eminent Swahili poet and intellectual Shaaban Robert will be its spokesperson. The young Shaaban Robert's concern is to record pure actions in the book of his life and to avoid all blemishes. This is a collective challenge, with the integrity of the individual serving the happiness of all. Biography, literature and politics are part of the same ethical challenge which guides and gives meaning to the text.

If life belongs to no-one, then it is a blank page on which an individual can come and leave his mark. People are defined through their actions and action is the quintessential biographical indicator. It is of course possible to act badly, it is even an ever-present danger, but in that case action would not be an indicator, but rather a blemish or interference in the narrative. Bad actions are a hindrance to the narrative as they lead to a loss of meaning. Of course, Shaaban Robert is not so naïve as to believe that there are only good intentions and beneficial actions in this world, and he is even extremely preoccupied with evil and its consequences. His great work of poetry *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhuru* [The Poem of the War for Freedom], written during the Second World War, recounts in an epic style the allies' battle against the forces of evil. According to an epic tradition, bad actions exist to bring genuine, meaning-laden action into existence. They are a bad dream which the narrative must dispel.

This underlying philosophy of action distances Shaaban Robert's autobiography from the great Swahili epic tradition. The earliest existing examples of *tenzi*, dating back to the 18th century, are inspired by the wars of conquest by the first proponents of Islam. A text such as *Herekali* [Heraclius], one of the oldest manuscripts of Swahili poetry yet discovered, which dates back to 1728 and can be found in Hamburg, tells the story of a war waged in Syria against the armies of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius. In addition, *Rasi'lg'huli* [Ghul's Head], the longest *utenzi* discovered (4585 strophes), written around 1850, tells the story of a war in Yemen waged by Mohammed against the armies of an unjust and cruel pagan king nicknamed "Ghul's Head". The theme of these great, deeply religious, narrative texts is

⁴ *Maisha Yangu*, p. 1: *Kurasa za maisha yangu yaliyopita zilikuwa chache na matendo haba yaliyoandikwa hayawezi kuwatamanisha wengine kuyanakili wala kuniridhisha mimi mwenyewe.*

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conversion of the enemy rather than their extermination. The adversaries rather than being wicked, are locked in ignorance and error, and always responsive to being converted and changing sides. In the end, whatever their apparent strength, the enemy never acts, but instead allows and defines the hero's action.

A revealing episode is recounted in Chapter 8 of the first section of the autobiography when, while taking a short break in Tanga, Shaaban Robert has to sort out a case involving the settlement of an inheritance, in which he has an interest and which turns out badly because of the heirs' greed:

These endless disagreements filled my nights with nightmares and bad dreams. A firm man would have prevented, as far as possible, this chaos in the heart of the clan. I did not feel strong enough for the task. I did what I could. Therefore I suggested that each heir should choose the plot of his choice in the field that he wished and that the unclaimed lands revert to me and then to my children. This suggestion, as effective as an act of sorcery, was accepted unanimously. A splinter of wood cannot be removed without tweezers. The nature of the tweezers I used to settle this disagreement was such that no other suggestion was necessary to overcome it.⁵ (Robert 1991: 52)

The reference to nightmares and bad dreams is not anecdotal. It fits with an overall view of reality which is both Shaaban Robert's own and relates to the epic tradition, namely that conflicts are not real but can ruin life. The other heirs who caused the problem are noticeably absent from the chapter in question. They are shadows which must be dispelled by resolving the crisis. Shaaban Robert makes this assessment of his action in this story of inheritance: "I did not perform a great act which would have held the whole world's attention, but I strived for a possible resolution"⁶ (Robert 1991: 52). The action has a limited scope because the conflict was on a modest scale. Churchill's was much more magnificent, because the conflict was world-wide, but the principle remains the same: it is always a question of dispelling the bad dream and serving life.

This logic of action is very clearly presented in this autobiography although readers are far removed from the epic context of tenzi. Shaaban Robert spent his whole career working for the colonial government, firstly in Pangani in the Customs Service (1926 to 1944), then in Mpwapwa for the Department for Game Protection (1944 to 1946) and finally in the Tanga District Office (1946 to 1959, when he retired). Shaaban Robert's life was regulated by official decisions regarding his career and varied reports relating to the quality of his work. A colonial government civil servant's life is punctuated by events such as promotions, new post-

⁵ *Mashaka haya yalikuwa makubwa sana. Kila usiku yalikuwa yakiniletea mafuatano ya majinamizi na ndoto mbaya katika usingizi wangu. Kichwa baridi kilitakiwa kuzuia kama iwezekanavyo machafuko yaliyoonekana kutokea katika ukoo. Kichwa kama hicho mimi nilikuwa sina. Ilinipasa kutenda niwezavyo. Basi nilitoa shauri kuwa, isipokuwa mimi na watoto wangu, kila mrithi mwingine alikuwa na idhini ya kuchagua sehemu yake katika shamba apendalo na sehemu zisizochaguliwa zitakuwa haki ya watoto na mimi. Shauri hili lilisuhulisha mambo kama uchawi. Mti hauendi ila kwa nyenzo, na hii ilikuwa ndiyo nyenzo niliyotumia katika mashaka ya magawanyo ya mirathi hiyo wakati kila shauri jingine lilipokuwa halifai na kutuhumiwa na warithi wengine.*

⁶ *Sikutenda tendo kubwa la kuvuta dunia nzima kutazama ila suluhu ndogo ikiwezekana kutendwa.*

ings, periods of leave and retirement. In fact a good many of these purely professional ‘events’ give structure to Shaaban Robert’s autobiography, but they are not the important thing. Above all, these episodes in professional life serve as indicators of a person’s potential for struggle.

On several occasions Shaaban Robert was a victim of racial discrimination, for example when a conductor asked him to give up his seat to an Indian who had joined the train after him;⁷ when he took up his duties in Mpwapwa and he noticed that the racial pecking order affected position in the administration; and when an insurance company offered cover to his non-African friends but refused his own application.⁸ Each time, Shaaban Robert was appalled and took up the struggle for his rights. This autobiographical account bears witness to his indignation and reaction. It was always from his position as a civil servant that Shaaban Robert took up the struggle against discrimination, as the model of promotion through individual merit was the only one that seemed fair to him and he trusted administrative hierarchies. This is why official reports and documents are important in this autobiography. The notes and letters that Shaaban Robert shares with us are weapons in his epic struggle. Whenever there is a reference to the colour of his skin, he counteracts it with official documents, by nature colourless: assignment authorisations, activity reports and assessment records...

Shaaban Robert’s biography can therefore be read on two levels. The first follows the career of a civil servant and is therefore chronological and has no surprises, and the second bears witness to the obscure battles that he had to fight at the same time. These two perspectives are always interconnected and when he talks explicitly about his career, the reader must understand that the crucial issues are being played out on the other level, namely life. From this second perspective, Shaaban Robert exists as the ‘common man’. And this is where the quality that Shaaban Robert as a man and a writer prizes above all comes into play, namely fame.

“Life is limitless, but those who live it are not [. . .]” (Robert 1967: 32)⁹ are the first words of the poem called *Maisha* [Life]. By choosing *Maishu Yangu*, meaning “My Life” as the title of his autobiography, Shaaban Robert says much more than it seems. This life of his which he is going to record is a partial fragment of life and it is against the undifferentiated background of life that the account presented here takes on its full meaning. Shaaban Robert’s starting point is that we occupy a limited space in a life without boundaries. In other words, our life does not belong to us and for that reason writing his autobiography is a sensitive issue. The title *Maishu Yangu* must be understood as something like “What Life Brought Me”, or even “What Life Meted Out to Me”. The difficulty of this exercise is managing to tell the story of

⁷ Cf. *Maisha Yangu*, Part 1, Chapter 9 *Abira cheo cha pili* [A second class passenger] (Robert 1991: 53-55).

⁸ Cf. *Maisha Yangu*, Part 1, Chapter 10 *Idara ya utunzaji wa wanyama* [The Department for Game Protection] (Robert 1991: 56-60).

⁹ *MAISHA hayatakwisha, bali watu waishio [...]*.

one's life without giving the impression that it is our own work. The meaning of the strange chapter called "Insurance" which opens the second part of the autobiography can only be discovered from the perspective of this distinction between life and career. Shaaban Robert explains that an insurance company had contacted him when he was twenty to ultimately refuse him as a customer following a medical examination. Two non-African friends who had been contacted at the same time were accepted for insurance but died 10 and 15 years later. This memory evokes a mixture of emotions: indignation about racial discrimination, incomprehension about the arbitrary nature of an administrative decision and sadness over the death of his friends. The link between these premature deaths and the disgraceful policies of health insurance companies engulfs him with bitterness which is only resolved in his poetic writings:

At the time of our death life is broken
The grave throws a veil
Covering our filth and our stench,
It is not usual for man,
To know elegance in all situations!¹⁰ (Robert 1991: 74)

In other words, the most petty of human conflicts will be covered by death. This reflects the influence of the mystical philosophy of Omar Khayyam, the Persian poet whose work Shaaban Robert translated into Swahili.

Most frequently, however, action is limited to patience. He learns from these conflict situations caused by racial problems. Shaaban Robert is aware of his youthful behaviour, but understands that nothing will be resolved by superficial activity and that patience is the cardinal virtue of the modern epic battle, for a mystical logic is at work in this world which means that "suffering in the world must inevitably come to an end and contempt be rejected".¹¹ More generally, day-to-day human life is littered with frustration and dissatisfaction which Shaaban Robert shares with his readers, without the least constraint. On the horizon lies death, the great solution to all these personal stresses. Death is the event which circumscribes individual life and separates it from the undifferentiated flow of Life. It is therefore inevitably at the heart of all autobiography as an account of individual life. Shaaban Robert knows that he only exists as an individual on account of the restriction that his future death brings. He also knows that all the problems that he encounters during the course of his career will be resolved in the long run and that he only has to be patient. The death of his first wife is an opportunity for a quick, glowing portrait whose main function is to explain the pain caused by becoming a widower, and a poem which is a meditation on love and death. The suffering of bereavement is also in the realm of bad dreams:

¹⁰ *Wakati wetu wa ufu maisha kuvunjikiwa, / Kaburi hifadhi yetu / Ya kusetiri uchafu ; – uvundo watu mbaya, / si kawaida ya mtu, / Kudumu na unadhifu hali yo yote akiwa!*

¹¹ *Taabu za dunia ni lazima kushindwa na dharau zote kufumbiwa macho.* (Robert 1991: 59).

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My sadness is inexpressible, with every memory
I think of this or that, as if in a dream
Death I do not believe in you, it is not the end
The love that bound us, will never be undone.¹² (Robert 1991: 5)

This poem, dedicated to Amina, is a poem of bereavement, focusing on the self, and tells of the insubstantial nature of death, in spite of the suffering that it brings. Amina is intimately involved with the autobiography's subject, and when the poet talks of her, he is also talking about himself.

The poem's purpose of filling the space left by the absence of a close relative is even more obvious in the two long texts written to each of his two children at the time of this family tragedy, in order to attempt to compensate for their mother's absence. These two poems are actions with the aim of resolving the crisis caused by this death:

I deplored their mother's absence but I was unable to call her to make her come back. No-one had that power. I had to do something which could compensate for their loss of being brought up by their mother. I wrote two poems, one for each child. These poems would not replace their mother's presence, but as the saying goes: a child who has not tasted his mother's milk will be happy with dog's milk.¹³ (Robert 1991: 6)

This very common Swahili proverb illustrates one aspect of Shaaban Robert's positive philosophy, namely that no problem is doomed to remain without a solution. This absence, which may have established itself at the heart of the private world, summons a new presence. The importance of this principle will become evident in the dispute about being a widower which will feature in the second part of the autobiography.

Shaaban Robert passes on to his children the rules of behaviour that are necessary for a harmonious life with their family. Family life is at the heart of his preoccupations because this is where a pattern for relations with the world is developed. The family is not so much an enclosed, private domain, but rather a place of influence open to the world. Some lines of "Poem of Wisdom" addressed to his son, reveals to the reader a very interesting way of handling secrets: "Be cautious / Hide your secrets / So that few people / Have to know them"¹⁴ (Robert 1991: 33). This is Shaaban Robert's way of saying to the reader that a secret must be shared, but the issue is to take care how this is done. Everything happens as if a completely personal secret is impossible. What Shaaban Robert says here about secrets comes from his understanding of the private, namely that there is not a private space within which secrets can be confined. There is only a difference of degree between secrets and news to be broadcast.

¹² *Majonzi hayaneneke, kila nikikumbukia, / Nawaza kile na hiki, naona kama ruia, / Mauti siyasadiki, kuwa mwisho wa dunia, / Mapenzi tuliyo funga, hapana wa kufungua.*

¹³ *Nilisikitishwa mno kwa ukosefu wa malezi ya mama yao lakini nilikuwa sina uwezo wa kumwita arudi duniani tena. Uwezo kama huo sikunyimwa mimi peke yangu tu, hata watu wengine wote walikuwa hawana. Badala yake ilinipasa nijaribu kutenda jambo jingine bora nililoweza mahali pa malezi ya mama yao. Basi niliandika tenzi mbili mbalimbali, mmoja kwa kila mtoto. Tenzi hizi hazikutokea kuwa sawa na malezi ya mama ; lakini methali husema kuwa aliyekosa titi la mama la mbwa huamwa.*

¹⁴ *Hadhari usiache, / Siri yako ifiche, / Ila watu wachache, / Wapasao wajue.*

Secrets must be divulged cautiously and with care, in a controlled way. Step by step, they will make their way into the world, but with their own timing. In the same way privacy is in continuous relationship with the external world, with fluid boundaries, and when these boundaries are managed well, this defines the art of living. Whilst continuing to talk about himself, Shaaban Robert talks about the world and whilst continuing to talk about the world, he talks about himself.

The dispute about being a widower, which takes up the longest chapter in the book, is the true centre of gravity of this autobiography. Here Shaaban Robert records in epic terms the violent debate which was provoked by a poem he published in support of remarriage following the death of a spouse. The topic had already been broached in the 1946 text in a complicated chapter in which he justifies his decision to remarry from the point of view of the exemplary nature of his move.¹⁵ His personal distress is expressed and accepted as positive. Remarriage does not conform to the norms, and he has to confront a malicious rumour at this time. The poetic battle that ensues is decisive in turning the situation around. At issue in this fight, is making public a practice that is hidden out of respect for convention. By publishing an initial poem on this topic, Shaaban Robert adopts a public position which draws on his personal experience. At the same time, both his poem and he himself are immediately and unanimously attacked.

Shaaban Robert has to confront this adverse rumour for the sake of an existential truth that seemed obvious to him following his experience of being a widower. It is useful to refer to Michel Leiris' text "Literature Considered as a Tauromachy"¹⁶ to gain insight into the nature of the battle, simultaneously violent and ritualised, which will unfold in the shape of a poetic joust. Shaaban Robert could be criticised for not having included his detractors' poems in his account of events and for only giving space to those of the increasing number of people who joined his crusade in support of recognising remarriage.¹⁷ However such criticism does not acknowledge the epic perspective that was adopted. The enemy is in the wrong and their poems are nothing more than words without substance which will evaporate like dreams when faced with the inevitable weight of evidence. Shaaban Robert's autobiography is not a retrospective text whose function is to assess his life, but is entirely interconnected with that life and prolongs the battles which were fought over its course. In these circumstances, the account of the dispute about being a widower could not be impartial.

The chapter titled "Politics" is very revealing in this respect. Love of one's country is depicted as both at the very heart of any political engagement and also as an obscure, universal power:

¹⁵ Cf. *Maisha Yangu*, Part 1, Chapter 5 *Mke wa pili* [My second wife] (Robert 1991: 37-40).

¹⁶ Cf. Michel Leiris (1973) *De la littérature considérée comme un tauromachie*, added to *L'âge d'homme* in 1946.

¹⁷ The relevant chapter contains the poems of S.H. Kiwato from Kisiju, Mwanaidi binti Salim from Ujiji, Ahmad Kilimani from Ujiji, Mwinyihatibu Mohamed from Dar es Salaam and finally Sheikh Amri Abedi.

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The identity of a country is conveyed both by angels and genies, by the birds of the air as well as by the animals of the bush. It is found among the rare visible beings and in the host of invisible beings. Every luminous thing has its double in the shadow and for some this is revealed very quickly, for others, belatedly. For some this happens with force and for others in a discreet way, but it never fails to appear.¹⁸ (Robert 1991: 75)

In other words, there is always a private part within us, our other side, which we can reveal endlessly without it running dry. This is an original and fascinating concept of the individual. Our public persona (which is luminous, and therefore known) always has its double, a hidden side from which it gains its energy. This hidden self which is connected to the universe, is the source of our action. Action brings the dark into the light. According to Shaaban Robert's reasoning, the minutest action, the most unassuming poem, the most delicate point of view, is always likely to grow and upset the order of things. His autobiographical approach consists in making public that shadowy part of himself through the act of writing and so to accompany the inevitable march of history.

It is striking to note the degree to which, hidden underneath an apparent respect for hierarchies and order, Shaaban Robert has faith in a revolutionary future for the world. The most important part of his personality is in touch with the inevitable change in the world order. The last chapter of this autobiography, titled "In the History of the World", is evidence for this relationship between individual and collective history and how both timeframes move at the same pace. The achievement of independence by African countries was both a historical event and the culmination of personal aspirations. This is how the world evolves, with things that were part of individual, personal dreams moving into the light and becoming incontrovertible, historical truths:

It is pleasing to see that things that were mere dreams or seemed extremely absurd should have become certainties and that this country is taking great strides towards development. The negative image of the past when leaders and their supporters were considered to be criminals and rebels has been transformed in a surprising way, overtaken by the march of history of the Tanganyikan people.¹⁹ (Robert 1991: 77)

The distressing experience of bereavement and racial humiliation, but also the most petty, administrative irritation, all these personal injuries which are not neglected in his biography reveal equally, that dark side of the man Shaaban Robert. He has chosen to hide nothing because he knows that in so doing truth will be revealed. Throughout this book, it is the future that is at issue. When he indicates that the South African boycott is in operation as part of the

¹⁸ *Ari hii iko kwa malaika na majini; kwa ndege katika hewa, na kwa wanyama katika pori. Hupatikana kwa wanaoonekana wachache na kwa wasioonekana wengi: kila kilicho katika mwangaza maradufu yake imo kati-ka giza, kwa baadhi hutokeza mapema, na kwa wengine majilio yake huchelewa; kwa baadhi hupatikana nyi-ngi, na kwa wengine huwa kidogo; lakini haikosekani kuwako.*

¹⁹ *Hupendeza kuona kuwa ile iliyokuwa ndoto tupu, au upuzi wa mwisho, imekuwa hakika na yakini, na nchi ikawa katika mwendo wa maendeleo ya hatua kubwa. Sura chafu na mbaya ya zamani, viongozi na wafuasi walipotendewa na walipohesabiwa kama wahalifu na waasi, iligeuka kuwa safi na nzuri ya kuajabiwa kama ajabu kubwa katika historia ya watu na nchi ya Tanganyika.*

fight against the apartheid regime, Shaaban Robert does not conceal that this represents the loss of some royalties for work published by Witwatersrand University.²⁰ Reading his account conveys that he suffered a slight, personal frustration which he does not wish to hide and which appears in the text as if it was a lapse. This little, shameful secret finds resolution in the historical issue of a world-wide struggle against racism:

But if a small contribution such as mine could assist the struggle for independence and peace in South Africa, my loss would be nothing compared to the joy of the expected victory. This victory did not belong to the Whites, nor to the Coloureds, nor to the Blacks but would be everyone's victory and the pride of every nation in the world. Through this small sacrifice, I was helping to restore a little dignity to human beings.²¹ (Robert 1991: 111)

A paragraph such as this is not narcissistic and must be read literally. Great historical change is fed by these small experiences and all commitment must be paid for with pain.

The process of revealing what is secret as used in this autobiography is one of the keys to all of Shaaban Robert's writing:

I wrote all the time, night and day, in the middle of the night as well as on waking and if there was no doubt that I was writing too much – no-one knew this better than I did – I could not stop myself. Just like Kirama, the angel who records sins and rewards, I wrote about various topics: fiction, history, essays, articles, stories, autobiography, biographies in prose and in verse. My pen slid across the paper and unveiled secrets that I would never have revealed!²² (Robert 1991: 78)

Revealing secrets is an essential purpose of writing. It is this slow exposure of secrets that allows the world to move forwards. In the end nothing must be kept back. Shaaban Robert's autobiography is a deeply political act and is the fruit of his faith in the future of the world.

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²⁰ cf. Maisha Yangu, Part 2, Chapter 6: *Msuso* [Blockade], (Robert 1991 : 109-111).

²¹ *Walakini, ikiwa chango ndogo kama ilivyokuwa yangu mimi ya sadaka, ilisaidia kupatikana kwa ufanifu wa uhuru na amani kwa watu katika Afrika Kusini, hasara hii ilikuwa si kubwa ilinganishwapo na furaha ya ushindi uliotazamiwa kuja kwa watu mwisho; ushindi uliokuwa si wa mweupe, mwekundu wala mweusi, lakini uliokuwa na wote; na fahari ya kila taifa katika dunia. Nilikuwa ninasaidia kununua au kukomboa utukufu wa mwanadamu kwa chango ndogo sana ya sadaka.*

²² *Ilinilazimu kuandika katika wakati wote. Niliandika mchana na usiku, na kati ya kulala na kuamka siku zote. Hapana shaka niliandika mno – lakini hapana aliyejua hilo sana kuliko nilivyolijua mimi mwenyewe – lakini sikuweza kujizuia. Kama Kirama – mwandishi wa dhambi na thawabu – niliandika mara kwa mara juu ya mambo mbalimbali: Hadithi, Historia, Insha, Magazeti, Ngano, Tawasufi, Vitabu wasifu kwa mjazo na Ushairi. Sikupenda kufichua siri bali ghairi ya kusudia kalamu yangu iliteleza ikazifunua!*

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