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## Economic Perspectives in East African Literature: A Study in Selected Novels in Kiswahili

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### Abstract:

This paper examines economic perspectives in East African Literature with a particular focus on one author who wrote his works during the colonial times and two others who created their works in the postcolonial period. Whereas Shaaban Robert wrote his novellas in the 1950 when East African countries had not attained their independence, Euphrase Kezilahabi and George Katama Mkangi wrote in 1970s to 1990s long after the formation of East African States. From reading their literary pieces, it becomes increasingly clear that the society which Shaaban Robert depicted was hierarchical in which economic points of view and attitudes depended on the class in which a person belonged. On the other hand, Kezilahabi and Mkangi portray a highly adversarial society in which economic attitudes are defined by the binary model of social description.

**Keywords:** Economic, snobbery, dialectic, ethnography, east Africa, capitalism

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify and analyze economic perspectives and attitudes in East African society with specific reference to Kiswahili literature. The works under discussion are prosaic and were written by some of the mainstream Kiswahili authors. This paper focuses on three artists namely Shaaban Robert, Euphrase Kezilahabi and Katama Mkangi. While first two are Tanzanian, the last one is Kenyan. Shabaan Robert, Euphrase Kezilahabi and Katama Mkangi have written more than three literary works each.

For the purposes of this paper, the author has employed purposive sampling to select one text per writer (Silverman, 2004). The variable to which the selected texts are drawn is linked to the specific question to be addressed in this paper, which is that works of art in the region that portray a theme or a character that has a message or an implication for economic and business attitudes are relevant in that they contain data for the present discussion. In this regard, Shabaan Robert's *Kusadikika* (1951), E. Kezilahabi's *Dunia Uwanjawa Fujo* (1975) and G.K. Mkangi's *Walenisi* (1995) were chosen. These works were read, relevant parts isolated and subjected to a content analysis with a view to identifying economic and business perspectives in them.

### 2. Critical and Theoretical Background

Much research has been undertaken in the United States and Europe on the relationship between fictional works, economic and business perspective. Colin (1994), Knezevic (2003), Mitchell (2007), Shonkwiler (2007), Goggin (2015) and Gael (2015) and Younkins (2016) have shown variously how works of literary art have explored diverse philosophical, political, social and ethical attitudes towards economics and business. The analyses range from a realistic portrayal of the economic and business ethos of an area and an era to a highly satirical depiction of characters who espouse certain attitudes towards business and economics. Theoretically, Baker and Wertheim (2006) have examined in detail the components of literary economic criticism. They point out that this form criticism is diverse and composite. Not only does it draw its content and inspiration from New Historicism; it is also intertextual and poststructuralist. Insights developed by these two theoreticians will be useful in the present discussion.

However, so far, such critical and theoretical study is largely lacking in Kiswahili Literature, let alone African Literature as a whole. What we have are fleeting comments on the sales of literary works without an in-depth review or analysis of their contents. To understand why the novel in Kiswahili could play the same role as its counterpart in Europe, the United States and Canada a few thoughts on its historical background are in order.

### 3. The Novel in Kiswahili in Brief

In its standard guise, the rise of the Kiswahili novel in East Africa was given impetus by European missionaries and colonial administrators (Ohly, 1981). Consequently and subsequently (especially at its inception), the characterization, themes and style of the Kiswahili novel were modeled along the lines of early European moral fables and abridged English classics. Works such as *King Solomon's Mines* (Haggard, 1963), *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883), and *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 2003) were translated into Kiswahili during the nascent stages of written Kiswahili prose fiction. *Kusadikika* and *Walenisi* are allegorical just in the same way as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

*DuniaUwanjawaFujo* was written in the modernist tradition with a large existentialist dosage thematically and stylistically. This is notwithstanding the fact that this work contains realistic content relevant to the East African Situation. The long and short of it is that despite the diverse time-spaces that separate the European novel and the Kiswahili one, it is not possible to erase some similarities between them as far as exploration of themes, portrayal of characters and the use of certain modes of expression are concerned.

Goggin(2015: 61-74) has observed with respect to England that the novel as a literary form came into being at the same time as capitalism. He further observes that as a distinctly commercial genre and as a product of the financial revolution the novel beckons the reader to credit its narrative with veracity and to invest it with a particular form of credibility as significant Literature. This is true of the Kiswahili novel as well. Before the economic perspectives of the works are discussed, an overview of their plots is important.

#### 4. Shabaan Robert: *Kusadikika*

Shabaan Robert's *kusadikika* is set in colonial East Africa. As pointed out earlier it was written in an allegorical mode. The title is taken from the name of a country, "Kusadikika" in outer space. *Kusadikika* carries semantic content. It literally means "believable" or "that which is capable of being believed". The country is ruled by a king. However, the day to day running of the affairs of state is carried out by a Prime minister called Majivuno. The name Majivuno implies "arrogance". The action of the novella reveals that Majivuno is impervious to any suggestion of economic reform or otherwise for the benefit of the citizenry. Six reformers emerge and after setting out on long journeys of exploration to other countries, return home, zealous to make recommendations that would improve the welfare of Wasadikika (citizens of *Kusadikika*) economically, socially and politically. The reformers are serially arraigned in court, accused of trumped up charges and sentenced to unlimited terms of imprisonment.

Finally, one and the last reformer Karama, "the charismatic one", surfaces, assembles disciples and begins to teach them the law as a prerequisite of implementing constitutional change. In his usual arrogant and snobbish manner, Majivuno accuses Karama. Before he finalizes his submissions, however, the accused makes a request to defend himself. In a very rare show of benevolence, the king allows Karama to respond to the accusations leveled against him. Karama takes the opportunity to regurgitate and ruminate the experiences of his predecessors. He, in other words, constructs his mission as part of the reformatory role of his forerunners.

In his testimony, Karama reports that a reformer named Kabuli visited Juju which literally means "the land of Djinn". This land, Kabuli ascertained has lost a sense of direction economically and morally. Djinn swallow up everything without due regard to the neighbors or kin. Djinn are shown to be voracious, egotistic and without any moral fiber. The greed displayed by djinn is essentially similar to the greed shown by the governors of *Kusadikika* and some of their citizens. Though allegorically expressed, Shabaan Robert is here lampooning ostentation. The reformer that Shabaan Robert employs as his mouthpiece is, in this instance, critical of an economic and social system which is not tempered with temperance.

Another reformer, Burhani makes an excursion to the Northern countries. In the North, he sees big cities, tarmac roads and wonderful bridges. Besides seeing these marks of economic progress, there is an attempt to practice egalitarianism in the distribution of wealth among citizens. He is impressed by what he witnesses. Auni, the next person to venture out of *Kusadikika*, visits two countries: Giza (darkness) and Iktisadi (good economy). In Giza, people are so disillusioned by the moral depravity of their surroundings that they have physically blinded themselves. They do not want to see the profusion of dirt, corruption and the moral ugliness that is in their vicinity. From Giza Auni visits Iktisadi where the economy is well planned, citizens well fed and political decisions made through consultation. Here, Auni relaxes. Ridhaa (rest, blissful) is the only messenger who goes to and returns from Paradise. There is perfect harmony in heaven and apparently the reader does not encounter conflicts that are replete in *Kusadikika* and some of its neighborhoods. Ironically, since *Kusadikika* is not Paradise as described by the major Abrahamic religions of the world, its citizens have to plan for their lives in all spheres of human endeavor. This is perhaps the principal lesson that Ridhaa brings from Paradise. The last messenger of *Kusadikika* to visit outer space Amini, visits Earth. Earthians, he finds out, have invented ships, flown airplanes and developed agricultural and medical sciences. Amini in this context is exhorting Wasadikika, who by extension are East Africans to embrace modern science and technology which is requisite to economic and business boom. Given that *Kusadikika* was written long before independence in East Africa, these aspects of economic development were still a pipe dream.

#### 5. Euphrase Kezilahabi: *DuniaUwanjaWaFujo*

Euphrase Kezilahabi is a postcolonial writer from East Africa. He set his work in the late 1960s and the early 1970s when Tanzania was experimenting with the socialist economic system. The book was published in 1975 about a decade after the Arusha Declaration. In that Declaration, the then president of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere introduced a policy with a view to underlining the fact that Tanzanians themselves were going to be responsible for constructing their country (Putterman, 1986). In addition to emphasizing the need for self-reliance, the Declaration demanded that the country's resources would be exploited for the benefit of peasants, calling an end to the exploitation of human beings by other human beings.

To understand why the introduction of a new economic order would breed conflict, a brief description of the plot of *DuniaUwanjawaFujo* is in order. The action of the story centers around one of the principal characters, Tumaini. Tumaini begins his life as a reprobate and a profligate. As a youth, he has respect for neither his elders nor peers. To crown it all, he is implicated in many cases of violating his village's morality. This is exemplified in his expenditure of his

inheritance on sex and drink. When Tumaini senses that he is about to be bankrupt, he looks for and finds employment as a spy. Although this engagement brings him some income, he is exposed to very dangerous situations. The bar owner where he drinks conspires with other accomplices to attack him savagely for scaring away clients. Through this harsh experience, Tumaini radically changes his way of life and gradually but inexorably, becomes a big time land owner and farmer. At the precise time when he begins to reap the rewards of his work, the economics of socialism sets in.

A determined government is intent upon educating the public about the new economics and commerce in the wake of socialist politics. It enlists the services of government functionaries and lackeys to indoctrinate citizens into socialism. Threatened by the strange economic policy, Tumaini in a rage, shoots a government official during one of these political rallies. Kezilahabi's novel captures those dramatic and evocative moments in the country's history when ideologues roamed the land, to various provinces of Tanzania in a bid to spread the gospel according to the Arusha Declaration and Socialism. Kezilahabi shows a pervasive disillusionment and pessimism with the way the policy of establishing socialist villages was introduced to the people. The author laments about the fact that no prior civic education and groundwork had been implemented in readiness for the new economic policy. Moreover, the political party officials that were responsible for disseminating policy issues were not well equipped for the assignment. President Nyerere and his supporters were in a hurry to impose their views on the people without deep introspection and reflection.

#### 6. G. K. Mkangi: *Walenisi*

G.K. Mkangi is the only Kenyan author among the three artists that this paper is dealing with. *Walenisi* is one of the three fictional works that Mkangi has written. Like *Kusadikika*, *Walenisi* is allegorical. Unlike *Kusadikika*, however, its theme is steeped deeply in the postcolonial politics and economics of the East African states. The title of the book in Kiswahili language implies "those are like us and us like them". In the context of the entire story the title adumbrates the controlling idea of the novel, which is that all human beings are equal. Furthermore, the title echoes the system of economics called Leninism, which was initiated by the onetime leader of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republic, Vladimir Ulyanov also known as Lenin. Leninism emphasized comradeship, collective labor and the equality of human beings in their endeavor to produce and distribute wealth among themselves (Lenin, 1972).

Mkangi adopts this idea of economic development in his work. He creates a character Dzombo, who is a fighter against all forms of exploitation and injustice. As a result, he becomes a victim of a totalitarian regime. The punishment that the regime metes on him is unique. Instead of the regime putting him in solitary confinement or exterminating him altogether as is the practice in postcolonial Kenya, he is placed in an unmanned spaceship and flown into the atmosphere with the hope that the occupant would be pulverized in due course once it explodes in the sky. Without any awareness of the technological know-how of maneuvering the spaceship, Dzombo's elimination is certainly assured. However, while in space, Dzombo's curiosity is aroused and he gradually discovers how to run the machine. The spaceship takes him to many countries which represent different times and places that were citadels of various forms of economic exploitation and oppression. Finally, he arrives in Walenisi, a country where social interactions among people are perfect and the economic system is based on equitable distribution of wealth.

#### 7. Discussion: The Perspectives of the Three Fictional Works

*Kusadikika*, *Dunia Uwanjawa Fujo* and *Walenisi* offered two distinctive perspectives of economic organization in East Africa in the colonial and postcolonial era. In *Kusadikika*, there was a king, the prime minister, councilors and the ordinary citizens. That the king was held in preeminence was testified by the fact that his pronouncements were beyond reproach. When Karama requested for self-defense, the king casually granted him permission to do so. The reader would have expected the prime minister to intervene albeit mildly by offering 'wise counsel'. He would have advised the king about the danger of letting Karama go scot-free. To the contrary he completely shut up, never to speak again. In point of fact it was the King who ruled at end by completely exonerating Karama and other reformers that came before him from all the charges they had been accused of. Majivuno was not remembered any more, not even in distant fashion, in the entire action of the novella.

In *Kusadikika*, there appeared to be a hierarchical model of social description. The councilors shared characteristics with the prime minister lexically and morally. They were egotistical, irascible and dictatorial. This was unlike the king who was calm and sense of justice was unmatched. During the colonial period it was commonly thought that the King of England was a benevolent monarch and it the officials who were sent to the colonies that displayed excesses in their exercise of power. With hindsight, this made the message of the novella very refractive in that it was addressed simultaneously to the local leaders of the indigenous population and the representatives of king within the colonies. That explains why the King in *Kusadikika* was able to understand and appreciate Karama's petition. From Karama's narration of the reformers' testimonies, it was evident that Shabaan Robert favored an economic system that was not rigid. That was why his protagonists argued that all sound economic policies from any part of the world were good for *Kusadikika*'s development. In particular, Karama was frustrated by the fact that technological modernization could be achieved without political and legal reform. On the other hand, the journeys of the reformers when read side by side with the history of Tanzania (Tanganyika during the colonial period) were not as remote and outlandish as they appeared; to the contrary, they had an intertextual link with some of the events that took place in Tanganyika at the time they were being narrated.

John Iliffe (1979) in his historical account reported that chiefs who were appointed by the colonial government in Tanganyika were loathed by the indigenous people. The main reason for the hatred and suspicion was that those chiefs often initiated feuds and disputes among the local populations. Particularly, people had grievances with regard to the

government's land utilization programs. This was exemplified by the evacuation of the Meru people from their ancestral lands. On being evicted those people protested. They formed the Meru Citizens' Union under the leadership of Japheth Kirilo. The union attempted to solve the land issue in vain. Consequently, Kirilo resolved to make many journeys to different parts of Tanganyika, informing other citizens of the injustices that had been perpetrated against the Meru.

The Meru case was in a sense a conflated narration of the various narrative episodes and situations of the reformers of Kusadikika. That the narratives of the reformers were fictional enabled them to be amenable to multiple interpretations. Moreover, poststructural (Barthes, 1968) and new historicist (Veese, 1989) perspectives became some of the possible renditions of reformers' narrations. While the Meru case according to the account of Iliffe may be addressed to the forces of colonialism alone, the testimonies of Karama was addressed both to the colonial governors in the colonies and to the retrogressive leaders of the colonized people. The colonial governors were called upon to allow their vassal states to develop their economies while the conservative, homegrown and retrogressive forces among the colonized were lampooned for resisting positive change. Put differently, not only were events that were narrated in *Kusadikika* embedded in linguistic practices other than fictional; the literary and the non-literary tended to inter-animate one another.

A distinctive behavior of the governors of Kusadikika who were allied to the prime minister and more privileged materially than the ordinary people was that they exhibited incessant snobbery. Majivuno was the perfect personification of this snobbishness. He was hawkish and condescending towards Karama because of the privileges that his social and economic class could afford him. Like William Thackeray's characters in *Vanity Fair* (2003), Majivuno gave the reader a glimpse of class ethnography, whereby persons who aspired to high places or had entitlements were designated by distinctive behavior patterns and were subject to scientific investigation just as any biological creature in the wild.

*DuniaUwanjawaFujo* and *Walenisi* emphasized the binary model of social description. According to Knezevic (2003), a binary model is identified with the dialectic nature of social order drawing on the differences based on culture, style of life, politics or economics. *DuniaUwanjawaFujo* put forth a binary and reductionist model of two groups of people, the poor and the rich. In the novel, when Tumaini became a big land owner and wealthy, he was designated as an exploiter of the common people and an ally of the erstwhile colonizers of Tanzania. The functionaries of the Tanzania African National Union (TANU) labeled him an enemy of the people for he had accumulated a lot of wealth. Specifically, the Provincial Commissioner lumped Tumaini together with the colonizers of Zimbabwe, Angola and South Africa. To him, Tumaini was the quintessential oppressor and exploiter of the people. In *DuniaUwanjawaFujo*, Kezilahabi was also in dialogue with surrounding strips of utterances. The government official who was killed by Tumaini was a fictional and imaginative rendering of the actual individual who was one of the civic educators of people in preparation for the adoption of the socialist program. The same character was eulogized by the famous Tanzanian musician, Mbarak Mwinishee in a song entitled "Dr. Krellu". His ideas were in favor of economic statism- a belief in state control of the economy and social policy. The fictional character was epitomized in reality by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and his strong supporters such as Rashid Mfaume Kawawa. Although the division of economic classes was binary in *DuniaUwanjawaFujo*, the various texts that represented the era of socialist politics were alterable and capable of being interpreted indeterminately.

*Walenisi* was written at the time when Ngugiwa Thiong'o had already established a tradition of postcolonial protest literature in Kenya through writing *Devil on the Cross*, *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Matigari*. *Devil on the Cross* narrativized and dramatized how seven richest men acquired their wealth in Kenya. Ngugiwa Thiong'o portrayed these characters in a grotesque manner taking every opportunity to pour scorn on them especially when they were described in juxtaposition with the poor and downtrodden people. The climax of the narrative was reached when the seven vividly described how they swindled common people. Although the swindlers were Kenyans they also represented the seven richest nations in the world at the time. The seven wealthiest and powerful people in *Devil on the Cross* (1980) were scoundrels and common thieves. In this work and later, in *I will Marry When I want* (1980) and *Matigari* (1989) Ngugiwa Thiong'o identified only two nations in Kenya, the haves and the have-nots.

Katama Mkangi followed this tradition in *Walenisi*. There were the propertied few and deprived and disinherited many. The author believed that it was through the sacrifice of the savior figure that economic equality could be achieved. It was against this background that Dzombo undertook a long mental and physical journey. During the journey he encountered experiences akin destitution: ignorance, poverty and disease. Moreover, as his journey progressed, he witnessed more exploitative and oppressive modes economic production. These modes of production divided people into two categories, the rich and the poor. It was by going through the rough school of necessity and education that the protagonist learned how to live humanely with other human beings and adopt an egalitarian perspective. The binary social description of *Walenisi* was fitting because its protagonist realized that the new country he visited was antithetical to his own. Whereas *Walenisi* represented paradise, his unnamed home country smacked of hell fire (Bodunde, 2001). Despite the fact that the social and economic issues that were narrated were real, they were presented in a non-realistic mode. This made the quest for the determinate interpretation of *Walenisi* untenable. Moreover, the events were communicated in a subgenre that was close to science fiction. The reader flew with Dzombo to different worlds. But he or she always encountered the same creatures- the exploiters and the exploited, except when he reached his imaginary heaven.

## 8. Conclusion

To conclude the three works of Kiswahili literature have shown that economic classes oscillate between hierarchical model and binary models of social description. The hierarchical model is more visible in *Kusadikika*, which was written in the colonial period in East Africa. However, in the postcolonial era, the writer as exemplified in the writing of Euphrase Kezilahabi and Katama Mkangi tends to favor a binary model of economic and class description. The authors identify and construct two diametrically antagonistic economic groups, the haves and the have-nots. In all cases, however,

since the language the writers use is full of suggestion and evocation, their works are equally open to provisional interpretations within systems of hierarchical and binary social descriptions respectively.

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