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The Contribution of African Literature in the Preservation of Culture: The Case of Kiswahili Literature

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Introduction

There is a symbiotic relationship between language, culture and literature. This is because each one of these aspects reinforces the other. Oral literature has served to enlighten, educate and portray the African world view, practices and problems. It was largely used to pass on African values and way of life from generation to generation. This significance of literature has not changed even with the coming of written literature and western education. African writings such as Achebe (1988), through using the English language, have weaved African culture through their creative writings.

Chinua Achebe, who is regarded by scholars as the father of African literature in English, declared that an African writer has a responsibility different from that of his/her western counterparts. This is because African literature is different from other literatures since it has its own traditions, models and norms. Achebe (1988) further notes that African history and culture imposes upon it preoccupation which at times are quite different from those of other literatures. Achebe's argues that, literature reflects the value system and exceptions of the society from which it springs.

African culture is diverse and dynamic. It encompasses the totality of attitudes, behavior, beliefs and world view. According to Ameh (2002: 165), culture is that "complex pattern of behavior and material achievement which are produced, learned and shared by members of a community." Culture is therefore an integral part of human society and all human communities are characterized by it. This then means that, every human community has its unique cultural patterns. One of the main components of culture is the language through which it finds expression; thus there is no culture which does not have a linguistic basis. The totality of attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and world views find their expression through language. Literature on the other hand is defined as any piece of writing that expresses human experience and feelings through imagination. These writings become African due to the fact that they address aspects of African life, society, philosophy and experiences regardless of whatever language it is written in. This paper investigates aspects of African culture as presented by selected authors of Swahili texts.

Ojaide (1992) asserts that, there is no art for art's sake in Africa and that every literary work has a social significance. Achebe (1988:44), speaking about African literature, argues that his agenda in writing is to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complex of the years of degeneration and self-abasement. Achebe further categorically states that no African writer can be excused from the duty of educating through their writings. What Achebe seems to stress is that the foremost duty of an African creative writer is to teach African culture. In order for a writer to fulfill his mission, language is key. The African writer has to get his/her message across a wider readership but without losing the cultural aspect of the African people and their language.

Whereas African writers writing in European languages have to contend with brewing old wine of African ideas and expressions in new bottles of English language (Achebe 1973), writers in Kiswahili, an African language do not face serious challenges in expressing African culture in an African language. African literature endeavors to describe the lives of traditional Africans. African people are portrayed like other people of the world with their unique dreams, values, customs and practices.

Theory and Method

This paper perceives any literary work as being part and parcel of a socio-cultural context. Tomashevsky (1965) in his study of 'thematic material' considered factors that evoke and maintain interest in a theme. Among other things, he mentioned its relevance to reality of the contemporary social conditions. These conditions include social and historical conditions under which the work is created or published (Mose, 1989). Borrowing Tomashevsky's perspective this paper recognizes the centrality of extra-linguistic and social factors in the understanding of the selected works of Kezilahabi and Mohamed. Thus, the works are viewed as carriers and reservoirs of African culture.

This paper aims at highlighting some aspects of African culture as depicted by the author's choices of defamiliarization techniques. Defamiliarization is a literary term traced back to a Russian formalist. Shklovsky (1965) coined the term 'ostranenie' which was rendered in English as 'making strange' and later 'defamiliarization'. Shklovsky believed that it was the function of art to render the familiar in a new way (Stacy 1977). 'Ostranenie' includes all techniques through which the writer portrays or describes something familiar in a fresh way. These techniques include metaphor, symbolism, simile, irony, metonymy, analogy, dream and magical transformation. When these techniques are used in literature, they make the reader to see phenomena from a different and unusual point of view. Therefore, they are employed for the specific purpose of creating a specific perception. This paper views literary language as a social event. Therefore in analyzing how the defamiliarization techniques portray preservation of African culture, this inquiry should be viewed within a social and communicative context. For this reason, the paper adopts the Critical Discourse Analysis theory (CDA).

CDA is viewed as a shared perspective encompassing a range of approaches having different emphasis. Some of the proponents of CDA are: Kress (1989), Fowler (1986) (1991) (1996) Fairclough (1995) (1989), van Dijk (1981) and Wodak (1989). All of them, though stressing different aspects, treat language as a social discourse. Through CDA, this paper sees a relationship between language and society as being complex and multifaceted. Literature being a discipline that utilizes language artistically is regarded as a kind of discourse which reveals social ideology and social construction of reality.

Language is hence viewed as a form of social practice (Fairclough 1989). CDA focuses on how social and political domination is reproduced in both written and spoken text. CDA studies the structures of texts and considers both their linguistic socio-cultural dimensions in order to determine how meaning is constructed. The theory proposes that relations of power in our society affect and shape the way we communicate with each other and create knowledge. In this regard the paper argues that by analyzing the literary devices used in the selected works, the ideology, world view and African culture comes to the fore. CDA is a deconstructive reading and interpretation of discourse hence in the analysis of the contribution of African literature in preservation of African culture, the paper aims at deconstructing concepts, belief systems and generally held social values and assumptions as depicted by the said authors.

Aspects of Culture

Marriage

In African tradition, marriage was constituted as a permanent union between a man and woman or several women (Kenyatta (1978:163). Through the marriage ceremony a man acquired the sole right of conjugal rites from his wife. The woman is also married to the entire clan of the husband hence they had a duty to procreate to enlarge the family. Most African societies practiced arranged marriages where the father entered into an agreement with the man who was to marry his daughter regarding dowry. The aspect of arranged marriages is alluded to in Mohamed's (1980) *Dunia Mti Mkavu*, when Kazija tells Fumu:

Amesema dada umsamehe, ameshaolewa kwa nguvu; ameuzwa na baba (p. 26).

(My sister has said she is sorry. She has been married off by force. She has been sold by our father).

The above utterance depicts the fact that a daughter is the property of her father who decides who becomes her husband. The verb 'sold' insinuates that Kazija's father has given her daughter for marriage in exchange of financial gains. This instance depicts the immense power and authority that the traditional African society bestows upon a father regarding his daughter's choice of spouse. This depiction has roots in patriarchal ideology.

Marriage is also metaphorically depicted as a permanent union. In reference to the exchange of vows during Kazimoto and Sabina's wedding in *Kichwamaji*, Kezilahabi (1974) writes:

Kanisani mambo yalikwenda sawasawa. Yale maswali ya maana tuliyajibu bila kusita tukapata pingu za maisha. (p.166).

(Things went on smoothly in church. We answered those important questions without reflecting on them, then we were handcuffed for life).

In this description, the joining of Kazimoto and Sabina in marriage is compared to being put into 'permanent handcuffs', referring to the fact that in African societies marriages was meant to be permanent. Divorce is not an alternative.

Gender Roles in Marriage

In African traditional communities, gender roles were and are still clearly defined (Kenyatta, 1978). From early childhood, learning was geared towards informal training that was gender oriented. Men were considered as heads of the family and were charged with the responsibility of meeting material needs of the family. Women's roles were tied to their primary role of reproduction. The place for women was the home and like Salim (1978) puts it, in a typical Swahili home, women spent most of their time around the home doing house chores, such as sweeping the compound, cooking, washing dishes and clothes, pounding grain, grinding and weaving.

The issue of gender roles is addressed in *Asali Chungu* (Mohamed 1977). In this text, Zuberi the landlord wants to kick Omari out of his farm because he has not honored the agreement in which he is to surrender part of the proceeds from the farm to Zuberi. While pleading for understanding from Zuberi, Omar says:

Tafadhali bwanangu usinione mimi, ila waone walio mgongoni pangu. Nikitoa mazao yangu yote niliyopanda matumbo manane nitayalisha nini mimi? (p. 18-19).

(Please my lord, do not look at me but those on my back. If I give you the entire produce, how will I feed the eight stomachs?).

In the above utterance, the author withholds to mention the number of Omari's dependants (children and wife) and instead metaphorically refers to them as 'eight stomachs'. In African traditional societies, the number of children is referred to discreetly. It is a taboo to mention the number of children one has for this would portend a misfortune. The metaphor also alluded to gender roles in the sense that Omari understands that he is the provider of his family. The role of providing for his family cannot be relegated to anybody, even his wife.

Women and Submission to Male Authority

The idea of whether or not women have to submit to male authority has a lot to do with gender roles and relations. The way men and women confront each other ideologically and politically depends on the existing social relations of gender. Social relations of gender draw from the social ideology that exists in a society. Mohamed depicts patriarchal ideological underpinnings in *Utengano* (Mohamed 1980). In this text, Makuudi becomes violent when he arrives home only to find his daughter, Maimuna missing. He suspects that his wife, Tamima, has been helped in delivering a baby. The worker, Biti Kocho, tries to intervene by reminding him that Tamima has just delivered a baby. Makuudi retorts:

Mwanamke huyu anataka nini? Mbona unakuja kwa meno ya juu? Sasa ameshaingia bahari nyengine na mazungumzo yake kayaelekeza pabaya: Wanawake kama hawa wameenea siku hizi... Wanajuaje siasa hawa wajinga, watu. Eee, katafute kifuu na mchanga uchezee (p. 51).

(What does this woman want? Why is she loud? Now, she has moved into an unfamiliar domain... Her talk is headed in the wrong direction. Women such as this one are all over nowadays. How can these idiots have knowledge of politics? Eh! Go and find a coconut shell so that you can play with sand).

In this instance, Makuudi cannot stand a woman arguing with him. In fact he does not address her probably because she is a woman. It is ironic that he does not understand why Biti Kocho is stopping him from battering his wife. He believes he has the right to discipline his wife. He is uncomfortable with the emergence of such women like Biti Kocho who can dare hold an argument with men. He is even sarcastic in asking how such women can possibly understand issues pertaining to politics. Makuudi is motivated by patriarchy. Women are to remain quiet, submissive and respectful before men. They should not argue with men for such actions could be construed to depict lack of respect of authority.

In *Gamba la Nyoka*, Kezilahabi depicts a similar scenario. Chilongo is admitted in hospital after being shot at by a policeman while resisting forceful relocation to ujamaa villages. He demands that a nurse attends to him and as the nurse explains to him that she is still attending to another patient, he quips:

Funga domo lako! Nina wanne nyumbani! Hawasemi neno nikikohoa! (p.53).

(Shut your mouth! I have four (wives) at home. They do not say a word when I cough).

In the above utterance, the author depicts polygamy in traditional African societies. Notice that Chilongo says he has four of them effectively withholding to mention the word 'wives'. The

wives do not say anything when he coughs. Coughing is symbolically used to mean scolding. Again it shows that those women are not allowed to have verbal exchanges with men.

Parenting and Punishment

In African traditional societies, punishment for children was regarded as a primary method of instilling discipline. Discipline, as a way of making children to obey instructions, was taken seriously in raising children. This kind of punishment is depicted in *Kichwamaji* by Kezilahabi. In this text, Kalia's father believes in the traditional practice that the cane is for corrective purposes. He believes caning will stop Kalia from bad habits such as stealing. Kezilahabi describes vividly:

Nilipotoka nje niliona baba akifukazana na Kalia. 'Kazimoto, nisaidie kushika kidudu hiki' Baba aliniomba... 'Ninasema vua nguo!' Mara nilisikia fimbo inamramba. (p. 103).

(When I came out (of the house), I saw my father running after Kalia. 'Kazimoto help me to catch this 'insect'', my father requested me... "I say remove your clothes (shorts)!" Then I heard the cane 'licking' him.)

In the above, Kalia's father metaphorically refers to his own son as an 'insect' to indicate traditional power relations between children and their parents. Insects can be crushed effortlessly. This signifies the father's attitude towards his son whom he believes is too young to challenge his authority. The child is undressed and punished by being caned on his bottom/backside.

Father's authority over his children is also depicted in *Utengano* by Mohamed. Makuudi in *Utengano* is the epitome of a traditional father. His family members are not allowed to move out of the palace. The members of Makuudi's family live under restriction. As a result of the restriction, Maimuna yearns for freedom. She imagines that whatever is outside is better than what is in their palace. Maimuna sees herself as a slave as the author states:

Moyoni mwake mlikuwa na simango lililomdadisi kwa nini mpaka leo hajakata pingu za utumwa (P. 24).

(In her heart, there was something she could not understand, why is it that up to now she had not freed herself from the handcuffs of slavery).

The symbolic reference to Maimuna's situation as being handcuffed like a slave reveals the image of a prisoner who has been denied the right to socialize freely and seems to highlight the African practice of raising a girl child. A girl child needs to preserve virginity up to the time of marriage and one of the measures undertaken was to cut her off from association especially with the opposite sex.

In raising children, the discipline to respect elders was also instilled. In *Gamba la Nyoka*, Kezilahabi (1978) seeks to stress the fact that children were to respect the elders through the following:

Sisi wazee tunashangaa kuona unampa mtoto nafasi ya kubwatabwata mbele yetu. Baba zetu walisema, mtoto hulia miguuni mwa babake... Vile vile waliposema aliyetangulia usimwambie akupishe... sikio haliwi refu kuliko bega ...huyu kijana anajua nini juu ya ulimwengu licha ya nyimbo zake za chura za aaa- baaa... ukiona kongoni mwenye pembe, amejitunza, usituone sisi tumefika umri huu ukafikiri tulikuwa tunacheza dansi (p. 17).

(We, the elders are shocked that you are giving this child an opportunity to speak nonsense in our presence. Our forefathers said, a child eats while sitting (on the floor) at the father's feet...they also said, do not ask the one who was born before you to let you pass. The ear does not overbear the shoulder. What does this boy know about the world except those (childish) aaa-baa songs about frogs? Do not see us in this age and be deceived that we have been dancing).

In the above excerpt an old man is communicating through proverbs and sayings. In traditional African culture elderly men and women are known for using proverbs, metaphors, idioms and parables. They are the custodians of creative use of language through which they dispense wisdom. Kezilahabi's choice of language in this context evokes African traditional belief on the issue of parenting, attitudes and images of the youth in the eyes of the elderly.

The expression '... mtoto hulia miguuni mwa babake...' focuses on table manners. In African societies, age distinction was clear and rules of respect of the elderly observed. Children were never found sharing the same table with their fathers or old people their father's age. If it happened it was treated as a sign of disrespect. Fathers could only share a meal or a table with fellow elders. The implication is that young people needed to be patient to acquire wisdom and knowledge which was believed to be acquired.

The saying, "alijekutangulia usimwambie akupishe" (Do not ask the one who was born before you to let you pass) reveals the great divide between the young and the old. To the old man, old age is synonymous with wisdom. In other words, a young person must be patient to acquire wisdom with age and should not talk before elderly people because he has not yet acquired it. The same meaning is expressed through 'sikio haliwi refu kuliko bega' (the ear never overbears the shoulder).

The expression, 'huyu kijana anajua nini juu ya ulimwengu licha ya nyimbo zake za chura za aaa-baa' (what does this boy know about the world except those childish aaa-baa songs about frogs) reveals a condescending attitude. The implication of the rhetorical question is that it is not possible for a child to comprehend serious issues since this arena is a preserve for the elderly who have accumulated a wealth of knowledge over a period of time.

In the same novel above, there is an old man who storms out of the villagers meeting unhappy with a young man who was trying to explain the significance of ujamaa villages. He says:

Sitaki kusikia maneno ya ulimi ambao haujakaa kinywani miaka hamsini (p. 38)

(I do not want to hear anything from a tongue that has not been around for fifty years).

The old man above believes that the young man has nothing to contribute in the serious discussion where elders are in attendance. All the above expressions draw from the African traditional perception of reality in which elders were to be revered because of their level of wisdom and understanding of the world.

In *Gamba la Nyoka*, Kezilahabi reinforces the significance of nurturing good character in children. Mambosasa tells his father:

Baba...wazee walisema ukinyoa mtoto nywele za utotoni naye atakunyoa mvi za uzeeni
(p. 130).

(Father...the elders once said, if you shave a child his/her childhood hair, she/he will shave your grey hair).

Shaving in the above context symbolizes eliminating undesirable behavior. When the child is brought up in a disciplined way, the parents enjoy in old age by reaping the fruits of their labour. The analogy of shaving underscores the importance of proper upbringing. This stems from the African belief and practice where children are expected to take care of their aging parents.

Virginity

In African traditional societies, virginity is valued. Girls who maintain virginity are regarded as morally pure. On the contrary, boys are not supposed to maintain virginity. This has its roots in patriarchy. While girls are socialized to maintain virginity, boys are free to indulge in sexual acts after circumcision in communities that practice circumcision as a rite of passage. Among the Gikuyu, a girl had to maintain virginity until marriage (Kenyatta, 1978). The importance attached to virginity is depicted in *Rosa Mistika* (1971). In this text, Kezilahabi depicts Rosa who ironically has to lie that she is a virgin in order to earn respect, approval and acceptance from her suitor, Charles. She says:

Charles - *Mimi ni bikira. 'Wewe ndiye msichana ambaye nilikuwa nikitafuta kwa muda mrefu. Rosa, nitakupa heshima yangu yote'* (p.78).

(Charles - I am a virgin. (Charles responded) 'You are the girl I have been looking for a long time. Rosa I will truly respect you')

Through dramatic irony, the importance of virginity is foregrounded. Charles promises to respect Rosa after she reveals to him that she is a virgin though the reader knows that it is a lie. The relationship breaks soon after Charles discovers that Rosa is not a virgin.

Rape

As already stated, in African culture sexual intercourse was to be practiced responsibly between married couples. Rape is unacceptable. In *Asali Chungu*, Mohamed describes Zuberi's unfortunate act of rape graphically:

Alianza kunyatia kwa ustadi mkubwa. Mungu bariki, alikuwa amefunga matambara miguuni. Sasa malaika yamemsimama yu tayari kukamilisha unyama wake (p. 10).

(He tiptoed towards her. He did it carefully. Thank God he wrapped his feet in rugs! His hair stool, he is ready to perform his beastly act.)

The above extract is of a defamiliarized description in which rape is alluded to discreetly, it is associated with animals. The underlying message is that rape is animalistic and lowers the worth of a human being and should be abhorred.

Sexual Discipline

In African cultures, sexual discipline was observed. Sex was regarded as sacred with the primary goal of procreation. Members of society who practiced sexual acts irresponsibly were excommunicated from society and shunned by other members. In *Asali Chungu*, Mohamed (1977) depicts a scenario in which a young man, Dude falls in love with Shemsa who is Amina's

daughter. Before this, Dude had a sexual relationship with Amina. After discovering that Shemsa was Amina's daughter, Dude gets worried. Mohamed describes his state of mind:

Atakuwa vipi Bi. Amina atakapomwona amerejea, na katika kurejea huko anakwenda kumposa mwanawe Shemsa? Hata yeye mwenyewe Dude aliona vibaya. Inauma kufikiri kuwa hatimaye itambidi kula kuku na vifaranga (p. 143).

(How will Amina feel on seeing him back and this time to betroth her daughter, Shemsa? Even Dude himself was uncomfortable. It hurts to imagine that finally he will be forced to 'eat' the hen with its chicks).

The image of 'eating' refers to sexual intercourse. In African culture the act of sexual intercourse is referred to discreetly through euphemisms. Through the image of eating a hen and its chicks the author's underlying message is that it is unacceptable for mother and daughter to share a sexual partner.

In *Asali Chungu*, Mohamed compares irresponsible sexual intercourse to animalistic behavior. Dude succumbed to his lust towards Latifa his sister-in-law. Mohamed (1977) writes:

Dude alikumbuka kuwa kulikuwa na mvutio fulani baina yao. Labda mwanzo mvutio huo haukuwa na maana kwa sababu palikuwa na hofu...pengine ingehitaji nafasi na faragha...unyama ulimvaa, ghafla akapigwa na msisimko (p. 168).

Dude remembered that these was some kind of attraction between them...perhaps in the beginning the attraction was not so strong because there was some degree of fear...probably it needed time and space to manifest itself...suddenly his animal instinct engulfed him and he was now emotionally charged).

The above graphical description exposes the lust between Dude and his sister-in-law. The author describes the action as animalistic since it is not acceptable by society and it is considered immoral. According to Kenyatta (1978), during the seclusion period after circumcision, young men were taught essential information on the laws, regulation and customs of society. Among the rules were those governing sexual indulgence, for example sex between members of the same family or close relatives was not allowed (Mbiti, 1969). All forms of erotic relations were not allowed and were highly punished. In most cases, they could even lead to excommunication.

The offenders sometimes had to undergo ritual cleansing: Mohamed makes this clear in *Asali Chungu*. Zuberi's worker who was aware of what was happening between Dude and his sister-in-law are depicted, finding it hard to come to terms with that reality. They muttered

'Tuyafungie milango. Mtu na ndugu yake wanakula chungu kimoja' (p. 168)

(Let us not tell anybody, sisters are eating from one pot).

Mohamed depicts Dude as a person with a high sense of sexual indiscipline which he started even before he married. It is clear that such behavior should not be condoned because when such people are not dealt with firmly, they continue committing the same crime.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the contribution of African literature in the preservation of African culture through analysis of defamiliarization techniques utilized by Said Ahmed Mohamed and Euphrase Kezilahabi in their novels. The analysis has revealed that the selected authors have

exposed African philosophy, ideology, attitudes and world view. Through metaphors, irony, symbolism and imagery the authors have discussed the concepts of marriage, gender, roles, parenting and punishment, virginity, sexual discipline and rape. The analysis has clearly shown that the authors through their works have highlighted the African philosophy.

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