THE CROSSING OF BOUNDARIES IN SWAHILI FICTION

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Swahili popular writing and élite literature are two distinct currents although there cannot be a definite and discrete boundary between them. Nevertheless, the differences between "major" literature and the literature of escape, which in terms of output by far outmatches the former, are well marked. Popular fiction targets readers with a medium or low level of education. Its works have linear subjects and one-dimensional characters, a simple syntax and a limited vocabulary; moreover, they are characterized by a strong didacticism. On the other hand, "serious" writers, most of them university graduates, target well educated readers of the middle class. They aim to create a work of art with a complex plot, rounded characters, high stylistic qualities and often a refined vocabulary, as well as a serious social concern.

Both currents, albeit with differing degrees of complexity, often present conflicts between individuals or groups from different backgrounds, generated by the crossing of boundaries – physical or social. In this paper various types of conflicts are discussed: those caused by different backgrounds which' "often explode in mixed marriages, as well as those caused by a generational gap, presented as a clash of tradition versus modernity, the refusal of arranged marriage or the ingratitude of educated children. All of these conflicts are illustrated by examples from novels, short stories and plays by Tanzanian and Kenyan writers, both "serious" and popular.

Key words: Modern Swahili literature, popular and élite fiction, Tanzanian and Kenyan writers.

Introduction

Modern Swahili fiction is traditionally divided into "popular" and "élite" ("intellectual" or "serious") literature; these two literary currents can be distinguished since the 1970s. The former adheres to the three main forms of popular fiction – the love story, the thriller and the didactic (educational) story – and the latter follows the realistic or the experimental trend.

[1] Prof. Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková, a prominent Arabist and Swahili scholar, passed away quite suddenly in October, 2018.

Obviously there cannot be a solution of continuity, a sure and concrete boundary, between the "major" literature and the literature of escape. However, the differences between the "intellectual" authors and the popular novelists are well marked, and as early as the 1980s the rupture between these two groups became evident. On the one hand, intellectuals, especially students and academic researchers, most of whom want to create important works of art and not only to obtain an easy success thanks to the captivating subject, or to give readers a lesson in morality.[2] They aim to create novels with a complex plot, rounded characters, high stylistic qualities and often a refined vocabulary, as well as a serious social concern. On the other hand, popular writers prefer simplicity of writing and its function over the plot; usually their syntax is linear and the vocabulary more or less limited. Moreover, they are characterized by a strong didacticism.

In terms of output, popular fiction by far outmatches the "serious" trend. In fact, a large part of all published fiction titles are spy and detective thrillers, followed by educational stories dealing with issues such as love and marriage. Popular fiction targets two major groups of readers: the middle class and lower social groups with a much lower level of education. The "inferior" type of popular writing is characterized by a strong didacticism, simplified intrigues and one-dimensional characters; the books are of poor quality and therefore cheaper, more affordable for the poorer readers. On the other hand, popular fiction for the middle class is usually marked by higher artistic qualities, such as more sophisticated characterization and intrigue, which requires more pages and, as a result, higher prices. The language and style of these stories are still generally simple; complex periods are avoided, and language is almost exclusively an instrument of narration. The subjects are linear and the characters one-dimensional, but exactly these characteristics allow authors to get their messages across to the public, which could be considered as not sophisticated enough to enjoy "intellectual" novels. [3]

At the same time, among experienced writers of escape novels there is the tendency to turn this genre from a mere means of entertainment into an instrument of social and psychological analysis. Conversely, some intellectual writers wanting to reach a wider audience present serious problems disguised in a popular form such as the thriller.

Right from the beginning, both currents have depicted, albeit with differing degrees of complexity, conflicts between individuals or groups from different backgrounds – conflicts generated by the crossing of boundaries. The

[2] BERTONCINI ZÚBKOVÁ, et al. *Outline of Swahili Literature,* pp.3–4.
[3] GROMOV, M.D. *Swahili popular literature*, p. 7.

boundaries may be spatial (or physical) as well as social, be they ethnic, religious or generational.

Leaving the place of origin is mostly connected with a change in personality leading to social conflict. We will see how various literary characters cope with this permanent change. This problem becomes especially evident in cases where the protagonists marry partners from other places outside the country or even outside the continent, who consequently have no knowledge of and experience in the local cultural constraints.

What are also interesting are the examples that revolve around generational conflicts. In fact, the pattern seems to be that the rebellious son or daughter abandons the house, but then finds himself or herself in trouble and eventually returns home, having learnt a lesson. Not all the stories examined, however, end in this manner: we will see that in a few of them apparently it is the parents who have learnt a lesson, especially when the cause of the conflict is a forced or a hindered marriage.

These themes are dealt with most often and in a most straightforward manner in educational stories whose main motifs are, generally speaking, repenting one's mistakes or wrongdoings, or being punished for not repenting.

The educational story is well exemplified by the eight booklets of the Kenyan author Leo Odera Omolo, published between 1968 and 1972. The majority of them are variations on a single pattern: the main character is usually a country boy of the Luo ethnic group, educated thanks to the many sacrifices of his family; when he moves to the town, he is dazzled by the pleasures of urban life and his moral decline leads him to commit various crimes, from theft to murder, until the inevitable final punishment. Apparently the main concern of the author is to convey his message embedded in an interesting plot.

Conflicts caused by different backgrounds

The Tanzanian writer Agoro Anduru in his novelette *Kukosa radhi* (Missing the Parental Blessing, 1983) presents a conflict caused by the different backgrounds of two young lovers. Jonathan is a Christian Luo boy who has grown up in an up-country village and Mwanaidi is a Muslim girl from the coast, so the differences between them are both religious and ethnic. None of their relatives accept their civil marriage and Jonathan's parents try forcing him to abandon his city wife Mwanaidi and marry a village girl, Anna, but in vain. It seems that nothing, not even a series of misfortunes, is able to destroy the young couple's love. Eventually, however, Jonathan becomes a drunkard and abandons his wife for his former village sweetheart; Mwanaidi takes revenge by stabbing Anna to

death. She is only sentenced to three years of imprisonment, while Jonathan falls into utter degradation.

Apparently the author suggests that the mixed marriages not approved by the parents are destined to fail, however great the couple's love is, but at the same time he does not really condemn Mwanaidi. He seems to be torn between two opposite forces: his duty to illustrate in a moralistic story that children must obey their parents at all costs, and his sympathy for his heroine.

On the contrary, Abdallah J. Saffari in his novel *Harusi* (Wedding, 1985) in a similar situation puts all the blame on the conservative parents. Doctor Mustaffa's love for Jane, Catholic and a single mother, is fiercely opposed by his rich father, while his younger brother's Muslim fiancée is gladly accepted. A splendid wedding is organized for the latter couple, but they separate soon after. Mustaffa's and Jane's marriage instead is a happy one. Eventually the father realizes his error and is reconciled with his elder son.

In G. M. Uhinga's play *Rejalla* (1969) the differences between the young couple are both religious and racial. The play is centred on the African boy Juma and the Indian girl Rejalla. Both of their families oppose their love. The Indian father considers Juma not worthy to marry his daughter, while Juma's mother fears that the different customs and traditions would not allow Rejalla to worship properly their ancestors. The young couple, however, does not give importance to the differences in their modes of life and marry against their parents' will. Eventually a newborn baby brings forgiveness and peace.

The married couple described in Ebrahim Hussein's play *Kwenye ukingo wa Thim* (At the Edge of No Man's Land) encounters problems due to their different ethnic origin: Herbert is a Luo and Martha a Kikuyu. The play was inspired by a real event, the so-called Otieno affair of the 1980s: after the death of a well-known Luo lawyer, both his clan and his Kikuyu wife claimed the right to bury him and so to get his inheritance. Ultimately Mrs Otieno lost the lawsuit and hence the inheritance, although on the basis of Christian matrimony law, the widow has total authority to bury her husband. The magistrates, to whom she appealed, decided against her, agreeing with Luo customs.

The renowned Tanzanian playwright Ebrahim Hussein does not concentrate on the events, well known by his audience, but concentrates instead on their interpretation. According to him, Martha was defeated and later died because she and her husband had broken off relations with their respective families, who did not approve of their marriage.

The author depicts the tension between customs and modernity, between marriage and respectability using the Luo concept of Chira, similar to the Greek concept of Nemesis.

At the beginning of the play the ethnic differences are discussed jokingly:

> HERBERT: Ben! (*He looks slightly tipsy*) Where is that sister of yours who is also my wife, that Kikuyu who is also a Luo?
> BEN: (*Dismissing him with his hand*) Since that lady married you, didn't she cease to be my sister? Maybe she is simply your partner.
> HERBERT: Aren't you ashamed of being such an ethnic chauvinist? (*They take their drinks*.)[4]

But after Herbert's sudden death the situation becomes serious.

> MARTHA: (…) Do you know the meaning of being left holding the eggshell? You don't know. Your father left us holding the eggshell. We struggled together. He gave his relatives both the yolk and the egg-white and left us with nothing. Now I understand why he never signed the document. The chairman is arranging the funeral right now. He wants to give Herbert a Christian burial. That is our wish too. I also want it. He wants to bury Herbert and make Umma Klan the beneficiary. Everything! You may not know this but we are poor people. That's a woman's life. You are widowed. You lose your life. You lose everything. […] My close relatives alienated me since my wedding day. The only person to support me has been Ben. My in-laws also dissociated themselves from my husband on our wedding day.[5]

It seems to be evident that for Hussein the merging of Kenyan ethnic groups in a national melting-pot is an unachievable dream. In the early 1990s, only a few years after the publication of the play, ethnic divisions encouraged by the Kenyan government of the then president Daniel Arap Moi, led to violent ethnic clashes.

A quite unusual theme is the relation between black Americans and Africans, discussed in the novel *Mwenda kwao* (Going Home) by the Tanzanian writer Cuthbert Omari; the author himself studied in the USA. During his stay in New York, the Tanzanian student Stefano meets Debi, an American girl who has always considered Africa her true homeland. They get married and Debi agrees to settle in Stefano's hometown, but she is not prepared to face the many problems that life in an African society entails. Stefano makes no effort to understand Debi's difficulties or to consider things from her point of view. Unfortunately, the author does not tell us how their marriage will go on. He stops short at the first conflict between the young couple, without proposing a

[4] (Hussein – Njogu 2000:10)
[5] (Hussein – Njogu 2000:23-24)

solution. It seems, however, that according to him a marriage between two persons from such different cultures cannot be successful. The notion of belonging to a continent (Africa) by virtue of ancestral "roots" or skin colour might add a very interesting dimension to the novel, but unfortunately the author did not elaborate on it.

The posthumously published work by Thomas R. Kamugisha, *Safari ya Mwalimu Katoto* (Teacher Katoto's Journey, opens with the description of another conflictual relationship. A nurse from a small village in Western Tanzania returns after a long period of study in the U.K. with a Jamaican husband, a Rastafarian. His improper behaviour due to his ignorance of local customs offends his in-laws.

> I still remember well the day when Karo returned home with my brother-in-law Rasta whose head, covered with dreadlocks, looked like a big cuttlefish. That man was terrifying and amazing! His hair and clothes made him look in our eyes like a buffoon. Many people stood open-mouthed in astonishment. Children's fear and wish to run away were evident. The Rastafarian himself did not demonstrate the perplexity or shyness that is normal for a man who is visiting his in-laws for the first time. To our amazement, he dared to embrace mother and even had the nerve to kiss her on her two cheeks – one after another! This act of kissing mother made me, and perhaps many of those present, feel that the man was a fool. I must say that in our Ha culture, it is taboo to approach or touch one's mother-in-law, let alone to kiss her![6]

Nevertheless, the narrator's family is ready to pardon the foreigner provided he pays the dowry, but he refuses to do so. For him, any payment for a human being means selling him as a slave, so he cannot accept it. This misunderstanding causes an irreducible disagreement between the young couple and the rest of the family.

The differences between Western and African culture are humorously expressed in Farouk Topan's play *Aliyeonja Pepo* (A Taste of Heaven)[7] set in Paradise. Because of a bureaucratic mistake, a poor Swahili fisherman, Juma Hamisi, has been put to death instead of a rich Englishman from Bournemouth. The "Great Lord", very upset, orders the angels responsible for the mistake to return Juma Hamisi back to life. Juma's corpse has already been buried, so the angel of death, Ziraili (Asrael), and his "colleague" Sirafili propose reviving him in the body of the Englishman who is still alive by mistake; but poor Juma

[6] Translated by Elena Bertoncini.
[7] Translated into English by Martin Mkombo and published in 1980.

vehemently refuses to be forced into a life which is contrary to his religious and moral principles. He prefers to spend his last year of life turned into a cat in his native Tanzanian town.

> J. HAMISI: […] Our culture in Bagamoyo is different from theirs. I am an African, they are Europeans. I am Moslem, they are not. This man keeps a dog, dogs are taboo for me. He sells wine, that is also taboo to me. I was a fisherman. Everything that is mine is so different from this man's. So, my Lord, don't you think it will be Hell for me?
> SIRAFILI: But culture does not really matter, what matters is nationality.
> J. HAMISI: Even in that, Sir, we are very different. I am Tanzanian. We Tanzanians have our own political beliefs which are very different from theirs. Ours is Socialism and Self Reliance. Theirs is capitalism, isn't that different? I cannot get used to it at all. How can I go to a place where I shall start exploiting other people? People are not the same everywhere. I am for socialism. They are for capitalism. The two are immiscible. I have a socialist heart. I don't want to go against your orders. No, but everything has its place.[8]

The generational gap: tradition versus modernity

A source of disaccord – present also in some of the plays discussed above, e.g. in *Rejalla* – is the generational gap. Tradition and modernity are exemplified, respectively, by often uneducated parents and their children, and the clash that arises may take various forms. Modern clothing and the refusal of permission to go out with a boyfriend is the starting point in Ebrahim Hussein's drama *Wakati ukuta* (Time is a brick wall)[9], one of the most popular and discussed Swahili plays in the Seventies. The author analyses the antagonism between the old and young generations as concretized by the modern girl Tatu and her mother. The conflict between them explodes one evening when Tatu wants to go to the cinema with her boyfriend Swai against her mother's will.

> TATU: Mum (*soothingly*), in these days all girls go out with their male friends, there's nothing wrong.
> MOTHER: Isn't this a Western custom?! It means imitating the Europeans. Well, we are not Europeans. The European and the African

[8] (Topan-Mkombo 1980:19)
[9] Before being published in a book form, this play appeared in the student literary magazine *Darlite* in 1967.

> are different. Our customs are different. They have no shame, a woman can go out with this man or that without any trouble.
> MOTHER (*goes on*): These are their manners. They have been brought up like this. For us, these ways are foreign. Don't think that I don't love you or have something against you. If today you go out with Swai, eyes will watch you, lips will whisper. Tomorrow with Musa, the next day with Said, people watch you. Even if they are, as you say, only friends. We Africans don't think so. You will taint your reputation for nothing.
> TATU: I don't care what people think.
> MOTHER: I do care – I don't want any shame. What you do, doesn't only affect your reputation, but the reputation of us all, me, your father, the whole family. I was brought up well by my parents, when I came of age, they gave me a husband. I didn't know him, he didn't know me, but we have been living together in harmony till now. And this is what I expect from you.[10]

In an access of anger Tatu's mother drives her daughter out of the house and, out of spite, Tatu marries Swai without informing her parents, but their marriage fails soon after.

The main topic of the play is the fight against time – time which is changing even in such traditional societies as the Swahili coast. It is, however, a slow process, too slow for young people like Tatu and Swai and, on the other hand, too fast for most elders like Tatu's mother who fear any change. According to Tatu's father – the author's mouthpiece – time is like a brick wall: he who fights against it will hurt himself. That is what happened to Tatu's mother who was deprived of the joy of attending her only daughter's wedding, and also to Tatu and Swai who married in a hurry, without asking the permission of their parents and without being sure of their mutual love. After the break with Swai Tatu returns home and the play ends there. The question as to what the characters learnt from this experience remains open.

The refusal of an arranged marriage

Another bone of contention is the younger generation's refusal to agree to arranged marriages. Thus the girl Matika from the novel *Shida* by Ndyanao Balisidya flees home because her parents are forcing her into an unwanted marriage. In Dar es Salaam she becomes a prostitute and changes her name into

[10] Translation by E. Bertoncini.

Shida. When she becomes pregnant and cannot "work" anymore, she returns to her village and probably will marry her childhood boyfriend Chonya.

The eponymous protagonist of the play *Huka* by Ngalimecha Ngahyoma is an eighteen-year-old girl coming from the Tanzanian hinterland and studying in Dar es Salaam. She refuses to marry the man chosen by her parents, preferring her city lover Kambanga, who turns out to be an elderly man, married and with grown-up children. Eventually he makes peace with his wife and throws Huka out. In the last act she returns home pregnant, but determined to abort.

Even the eponymous heroine of the Kenyan writer Clara Momanyi's novel *Tumaini* is a schoolgirl. She runs away from home to avoid circumcision, knowing that soon after her father would marry her off without allowing her to finish the primary school. Determined as she is, Tumaini manages to finish her studies graduating in medicine and marries the young man she loves.

The ingratitude of educated children

The ingratitude of children – educated at the expense of great sacrifices by their parents and often the whole village and who, once they have a good job, reject their parents – is one of the *topoi* in Swahili literature. Thus in Kezilahabi's novel *Dunia uwanja wa fujo* (The World is a Battleground), the teacher Kapenga humiliates his elderly father when he comes to ask for money. Kapenga points to his small son saying: "Ask him; if he agrees, I'll give you the money." The outraged father returns home immediately.

Faraji Katalambulla's novelette *Unono* is an educational story about an ungrateful son, Unono, who rejects his poor and uneducated parents. But when various misfortunes happen to him, he returns to his parental home, impoverished and remorseful.

The main character of Bernard Mapalala's novelette *Cheo dhamana* (High Office Demands Integrity), Shija alias Smith Chalkie, a manager believing that his university degree has ensured him never-ending prosperity, also scorns and disclaims his poor father. Later Shija becomes more and more arrogant and negligent at work, until he is fired. Eventually he has a car accident causing the death of several people and is sentenced to five years' imprisonment. He leaves the prison completely changed and returns repentant to his village, welcomed by his father.

A frequently depicted conflict arises when children return from their studies overseas and reject the traditional way of life. This important theme was introduced into Swahili literature by the already mentioned G. M. Uhinga in his play *Martin Kayamba*, illustrating how a western-oriented education estranges

young people from their families and from their traditional background. The main character[11] after only six months of studies in the U. K., returns home completely transformed, looking down on his parents and former friends and disdaining his home. But when he is rebuked by his best friend he realizes how wrong his behaviour is and changes.

This theme has been later taken up, e.g., by the Zanzibari writer Said A. Mohamed. In his short story *Tumba iliyovia* (A Withered Bud), the ungrateful child is a young woman, Saada, who returns from her studies abroad after six years and is completely estranged from her family and friends. The author describes her as seen through the eyes of her former fiancé Miraji:

> Miraji, who was standing in front of everybody as he wanted to be the first to greet Saada, was dumbfounded. He looked at Saada. Her hair had changed: instead of being curly, it was now unnaturally straight; her black face was now white like a devil's; her thick eyebrows were now as thin as a thread; her full lips, naturally pink, had red lipstick on; and around her neck hung a shell necklace which reached her waist. [...]
> Is this really Saada?
> When she moved from there, Saada hurled herself into the hut, going past her father, her mother and Miraji without caring for them.
> After a short while, the crowd that had come to welcome their guest with cheerfulness, dispersed in silence, reluctantly. All were demoralized. Joy changed into sorrow. Why! Saada did not even go to kneel down in front of the village elders: a great offence for the inhabitants of Bumbwisudi.[12]

Saada does not want to eat the delicacies that her mother has lovingly prepared, but prefers tinned food instead. She even sleeps in her car, disregarding their humble hut, and leaves before daybreak without saying goodbye.

S. A. Mohamed takes up again this subject later in his psychological novel *Mhanga nafsi yangu* (I Have Immolated My Soul). His young heroine Afida leaves Africa (called ironically *Motoni* – Hell), going to study in Europe (*Peponi* – Paradise). She is accompanied to the airport by all her relatives full of expectation; they imagine that in Europe Afida will automatically become rich and will be able to fulfil all their desires which range from paid medical care in Europe to the purchase of a bus. Once settled abroad, Afida realizes that she will never be able to satisfy even a small part of these expectations and hence to

[11] The historical Martin Kayamba is one of the key figures in early 20th century East African politics.
[12] Translated by E. Bertoncini.

return. She breaks off contact with everyone at home, even with her fiancé, the only one who did not ask her anything except love, and who dies from heartbreak. Afida will never forgive herself for having left him. She tries to integrate into her new country, but her life is not happy; after many ups and downs one day she disappears without leaving a trace.

Conclusion

Both "serious" and popular writers often present conflicts generated by the crossing of boundaries – physical or social – though with a differing degree of complexity. In fact, the same themes of popular fiction are treated by serious writers with more depth. We have discussed various types of conflict: those caused by different backgrounds which often explode in mixed marriages, as well as those caused by a generational gap, presented as a clash of tradition versus modernity, the refusal of arranged marriage or the ingratitude of educated children.

As we have seen, most writers not only present a conflict, but propose a resolution as well. The resolution may vary from one author to another if the sources of the conflict are religious or ethnic differences. In the case of modernity versus tradition on the other hand, even young authors opt rather for tradition. A good example is a Kenyan school play, *Ng'ombe akivunjika guu* (When a Cow Breaks a Leg) written by the students of Matunga Girl's Secondary School. The play illustrates the proverb *Ng'ombe akivunjika mguu hukimbilia zizini* (When a cow breaks a leg, it goes back to the stable) through the misfortunes of the girl Liz who, after various unlucky experiences in Nairobi, returns home just in time to see her mother dying. Thus the emancipated heroine is held to be in the wrong. Probably, however, the students decided to punish the girl because that is what they were expected to do.

We may also remember the above-discussed play *Wakati ukuta*, where Tatu's marriage fails after three months and she has to return home. Ebrahim Hussein was still an undergraduate student when he wrote the play.

Furthermore, the authors are unanimous in condemning the young generation's ingratitude. The ungrateful sons and daughters are often punished in some way: Kezilahabi's Kapenga is even transformed into a zombie. Others lose their job, or other misfortunes befall them, and their only salvation is returning home to seek their parents' pardon. This approach confirms the fact that the role of the teacher, attributed to the writers in the past, is still felt as relevant.

As a matter of fact, the concern to transmit the rules of life is one of the main preoccupations of ancient and modern African authors and the triumph of human virtue over evil in their works is essential. The possible explanation why contemporary writers, especially the most popular ones, display such an attitude can be found in the intended readership. Many Swahili writers, especially in Kenya, have a strong school focus, mainly for economic reasons. They must therefore produce books that can be accepted for school programs and hence their task is primarily educational.[13]

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