

THE PORTRAYAL OF MASCULINITIES IN A KISWAHILI NOVEL: THE CASE OF NYOTA YA REHEMA

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ABSTRACT

Although the themes of fate and class struggle have been profoundly explored in the critical analyses that have been undertaken on *Nyota ya Rehema*, however, in Critical Discourse Analysis and Hegemonic Masculinity perspectives, the question of masculinities is no less vital. Therefore, this paper seeks to give a critical insight into varied shades of masculinity that are manifesting in *Nyota ya Rehema*. Focussing on relevant texts, we uncover the disproportional masculine ideological and power positions that are explicit in sexuality and socio-economic spheres such as marriage, prostitution, employment and property inheritance that depict the disadvantaged position of female characters. The exploration of masculinities in islands Kiswahili novel that has mainly focused on class struggle may be a welcome departure.

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INTRODUCTION:

Interrogating Masculinities

A number of analyses on the novels from the islands of East Africa have remarkably dwelt on the theme of the class struggle (for example Mazrui 1980, Njogu 1997 and Zaja 1988). The examples of novels that have been put in this category are: *Nyota ya Rehema* and *Dunia Mti Mkavu*. Evidently, these analyses were undertaken during the hey day of Marxist theory in social science scholarship in Africa. Under this rubric, Mazrui (1980) could assert that *Dunia Mti Mkavu* is the highest form of a marxist treatise.

The theme of fate has also been explored alongside the theme of class struggle in *Nyota ya Rehema*. In this context Rehema's suffering is seen as an act of fate in the fashion of a Kiswahili saying: *Liandikwalo ndilo liwalo, mja hana hiari* (a human being has no power in the wake of fate) (Mgeni 1987).

However, as the Marxist theoretical influence has withered in the last few decades one is persuaded to focus on the novels from the island in a new prism. It is a truism that for the last

three decades, gender issues have received a remarkable focus in Sub-Saharan Africa. We can infer that on the front of creating gender awareness, some mileage has been gained. However, there is still a lot to be done because women still face a number of obstacles in the political, economic and social spheres when they are compared to their male counterparts. For instance, in the National Parliament of Kenya, the number of female Members of Parliament women are still few. Although Tanzania has made remarkable strides in female representation but the percentage is still below that of men. On the economic side, the backbone of all the East African economies is land and yet many women face discrimination in areas of land ownership and inheritance too. On the social side, many of the East African communities are patriarchal thus many men are accorded a more favourable social status than women. The dominant status of men in the political, economic and social areas is also reflected in the psychological area. In patriarchal societies men are socialised to strive for position one in relation to women (Mohamed 1980:1), have propensity to protect the weak, be brave and so on (Uchendu 2005).

It instructive to observe that the dominant position of men over women, in the hegemonic masculinity sense is rooted in the ideological and power structures of the patriarchal societies. Thus the dominant belief systems help in perpetuating the relations of difference between men and women.

Since masculinities, in the hegemonic sense, are informed by ideological and power structures of the society, it is inevitable that they are reflected in language. Wodak (2001) vividly captures the relationship between language and power below.

Power is about relations in difference, and particularly about the effects of differences in social structures. The constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and the long term. Language provides a finely articulated means for differences in power in social hierarchical structures. Very few linguistic forms have not at some stage been pressed into the service of the expression of power by a process of syntactic or textual metaphor. CDA takes an interest in the ways in which linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power. Power is signalled not only by grammatical forms within a text, but also by a person's control of a social occasion by means of the genre of a text (Wodak 2001:11).

Language is definitely entwined with societal structures that embed unequal power relations such as sexuality and varied socio-economic areas that are manifested in a novel as *Nyota ya Rehema*. In this context, a text from a novel can be critically analysed to uncover its disproportional ideological and power import. This is indeed what has made Critical Discourse

Analysis a versatile theory for analysing language that has discriminatory import. More mileage in analysis is gained when the Discourse-Historical Approach that is committed to Critical Discourse Analysis is used because it uncovers the historical context of a text.

Masculinities and Sexuality in *Nyota ya Rehema*

According to the World Health Organization (quoted in Dialmy 2005:3), the distinction between sex and sexuality is based on the following definition. Sex refers to the sum of biological characteristics that define the spectrum of humans as females and males. Sexuality on the other hand is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, juridical, historical, and religious and spiritual factors.

Clearly the study of sexuality transcends the biological. It is in line with this that Dialmy (ibid) suggests that the study of sexuality must consider the following themes:

- Masculinity and femininity
- Circumcision
- Gender
- Virility
- Virginity
- Marriage
- Fertility
- Contraception
- Abortion
- Erotic love
- Pleasure
- Diseases
- Impotence/Frigidity
- Prostitution and so on (Dialmy 2005:4).

To this list of Dialmy, we add rape because as Onyango (2007) has argued in the context of a society that is informed by very strong discriminatory masculine practices, the difference between normal sex and rape is very fluid indeed.

Marriage

All the marriages in *Nyota ya Rehema*, save for the marriage between Rehema and Sulubu depict the dominant position of a man over a woman. The marriage between Rehema's mother, Aziza and his father, Fuad is one that was full of pain for Aziza. Things went very wrong for Aziza, when her daughter Rehema was born. Fuad was not happy because Rehema did not resemble him. Also when Fuad married his second wife, Adila he abandoned his first wife Aziza.

When Rehema was born Fuad did not visit his wife to celebrate, as would be the normal case, but instead he went to inspect her (kumkagua) p.15. His reaction in hospital was that of a disgusted parent:

Nam, alipokifunua chandarua juu ya kitanda cha mtoto uso wake ulibadilika... 'Huyu ni mtoto wako peke yako', alisema kwa hasira na kuelekea alikotoka.

When he opened the canvas cover of the child's bed his face changed... 'This is your child alone,' he scoffed as returned where he came from (this translation and the subsequent ones have been done by the author of the paper)

The reason that the writer gives for Fuad's reaction is that Rehema did not resemble any of her parents. The writer says that when Rehema was born she was weak, with unattractive hair, a short nose, unattractive face and thick lips (p.15). But why was Aziza to be blamed for this? It is true that in patriarchal societies that have also remarkable misogyny, when things go wrong in a family, it is the woman who is blamed, but when things go well, the credit is given to the husband. Thus it was beyond Aziza's control that the child did not resemble

any of her parents. Fuad preferred to place the blame on his wife.

The second thing that brought pain in the marriage between Fuad and Aziza was Aziza's co-wife, Adila. Although Fuad's religion (Islam) allowed polygamy, but it was the source of great pain to Aziza. The pain was too much that she thought that it were better if she was not alive (p.18). The pain was aggravated by the actions of Fuad. When Fuad married the second wife, he treated Aziza with contempt when he assigned her the worker's house (p.14). Secondly Fuad abandoned Aziza completely and this kept Aziza in painful suspense:

Siku ...miezi...miaka...wakati ulikuwa ukipita katika hali ya kutaraji. Labda kesho imani ya Fuad itarudi. Labda kesho kutwa mambo yatabadilika. Lakini mtondogoo haukuwa na mwisho. Aliyekwenda tezi na omo hakurejea ngamani (p.20).

Days...months...years...time elapsed as Aziza anticipated the return of Fuad. May be Fuad would come back the next day or the day after. But this did not happen. Fuad did not come back.

At the end of it all, Aziza died because of the pain and the bitter happenings that were inflicted on her by her husband and the masculine institution of bigamy. In Aziza's bitter tribulations the only person who gave her solace was her mother. However, her mother's advice was one that depicts acceptance of a subject position that is informed by the powerful masculine ideology:

'Unajitia kiwewe cha bure, mwanangu; watu hawa ndivyo walivyo. Baba wako alioa wake watatu, na mimi ndiye wa kwanza. Kipya kinyemi ingawa kidonda; siku za awali lilianguka shindo la ndovu kumla mwanawe; mimi nikatupiliwa mbali. Lakini nikaubana. Najua, mwenda tezi na omo msubiri ngamani. Unadhani ilikuwa nini? Aliwatupa mmoja mmoja akarejea kwangu? Na leo yuko wapi? Huyu hapa..., 'mama wa Aziza

alinyanyua mguu kuonesha unyayo wake (p.19).

You are troubling yourself for no good reason. Men are like that my daughter. Your father married three wives and mark you I was the first one. In initial days of polygamy, he completely kept away from me. But what goes round comes round. Guess what? He distanced himself from them one by one and came back to me. And where is he today? Here...' Aziza's mother pointed at the sole of her foot.

The argumentation fronted above, though coming from the mouth of woman is still a very sorry state of victim-victimiser reversal, where the woman wants to portray herself as the victor who is in full control of the unfair events around her. Two succinct points come out in this connection. One is that male oppression is acceptable and is forgivable (men are mightier beings?). The second one is that patience pays. What happens to the pain in the process of waiting? Therefore, the argumentation is a fallacy surrounded in: the end justifies the means.

In sum bigamy was very painful for Aziza that she eventually died because of the traumatising pain that comes from bigamy. Emanating from this tragic repercussion of bigamy, we locate the pitfalls that befall Rehema later in life.

The other marriage that is given in this novel is that of Mansuri and his wife Rozi. Mansuri was a businessman and his wife worked on night and day shifts. When Rehema was employed in Mansuri and Rozi's house, Mansuri used many tricks until finally he was able to assault Rehema sexually. At first he bought Rehema three *buibui* 'gifts.' Actually, these were not gifts because Mansuri was only using them as baits to trap Rehema sexually. Here the portrayal of Mansuri is very much in line with the masculinity characteristic of men being associated with multiple sexual relationships.

The marriage between Rehema's step sister and Karim also weighed down on Salma. Although Karim, had a good job in the government, but he was however very corrupt. In his marriage,

he was his wife's oppressor. He viewed his relationship with his wife mainly on dimensions of money. He viewed his wife as a provider of money that he used for his selfish ends. He had a way of coercing his wife to get money from her parents. He would disappear from his matrimonial home for days if his wife did not meet his monetary demands. On one instance when he had disappeared from his home for days after his wife had struggled to get him he was full of spite in his conversation with her:

*'Hukuja nyumbani tangu juzi,'
alisema Salma.*

*Kimya...Karatasi tu zikifunguliwa.
'Karim?'*

*'Nije kufanya nini?' aliuliza Karim.
Katika sauti yake mlikuwa na kedi ya kike, bezo la kibwana, na deko la kitoto; juu ya hayo ilikuwa ni sauti yenye kumwathiri Salma (pp.127-128).*

'You have not been at home since the day before yesterday,' inquired Salma. Silence...only papers were being raffled.

'Karim?'

'I come home for what?', asked Karim. In his voice, there was a combination of feminine intonation, masculine spite, and childlike voice and above all it was a voice that adversely affected Salma.

However, Karim came back to talking terms when his wife told him that she had gotten the ten thousand shillings that he was demanding and after that he agreed to go back home.

Karim is not interested in having a child, but was more interested in having fun and leisure. He is a liability to his family because all that he is interested in is squandering all the money that he earned and also constantly putting his wife under financial pressure to the point that she even steals from her parents. Because of extravagance, Karim is constantly in debt and even at his work place there is a litany of complaints on his financial offences against citizens who need any service from his offices. After the death of Salma's father, Fuad, Karim inherited Salma's share and it helped him fulfil

his extravagant dream of going around the world on a leisure trip (p.129).

However, despite these cruel conditions that surrounded Salma, it was evidently a *cul de sac* situation for her. Her marriage to Karim was an arrangement by her mother, who idolised her son in law as a valuable treasure to her daughter and held him in very high social status (p.122). And Salma also loved her husband madly. In a masculine prism Salma, could not easily pull herself out of this misery because in a patriarchal society a premium is placed on a woman being married.

Evidently, from the actions of Karim in the novel, his name was an ironical allegory because Karim denotes generosity, however, in word and indeed Karim stood for the ultimate opposite of generosity.

The last example of marriage in *Nyota ya Rehema* is the one between Sulubu Nguvumali and Rehema. This is portrayed as an ideal marriage where understanding and caring are portrayed as the hallmarks between husband and wife. The genesis of this marriage is when Rehema was running away from home and she was rescued by Sulubu in the forest. And Sulubu was totally humane to Rehema since he did not assault her in any way. He was able to take care of her until she regained her strength to continue with her journey to town. However, in a critical perspective, Sulubu is still portrayed as Rehema's saviour. The story reads in a summary as, when Rehema was tired with the tribulations of town, she remembered one kind man who was almost like an angel:

Ala! kumbe kutembea kwake kote na watu wa kila namna, hakupata kukutana na mwanamume mwingine aliyefanana na Sulubu. Hapana kati ya hao aliyemsaidia bila tamaa, au aliyempa pasi na kutarajia-isipokuwa Sulubu. Hapana kati ya hao aliyekaa naye faraghani muda mfupi tu asidhihirishe uchu wake wa kinyama-isipokuwa Sulubu (p.90).

Ghosh! In all her life, she had not met any man like Sulubu. She never met any other man of Sulubu's calibre.

There is no man who helped her without having hidden lust or any man who gave her anything without expecting something in return except Sulubu. There was none of them who ever stayed with her for a short while in private without his beastly lust coming to the surface, except Sulubu.

Here, Rehema's vertical meditation brings to bare the sexual shade of masculinities that resembles a specific turn on in the presence of a woman when a private opportunity avails itself. However, even in the reasonable case of Sulubu, a critical reading reveals Sulubu as a saviour to Rehema. When Rehema had been betrayed by many men she is still rescued by Sulubu, a case similar to Kabi's "rescue mission" to Maimuna in S.A. Mohamed's *Utengano* (1980).

Prostitution

Apart from marriage, the other shade of masculinity is manifest in prostitution in *Nyota ya Rehema*. When Rehema ran away from her father's house after the death of her mother when she reached town, she ended up in a whorehouse of three prostitutes namely: Kidawa, Ruzuna and Chiku. For all the three prostitutes the question of economic deprivation was an important denominator in explaining how they plunged in prostitution. Rehema also eventually ended up in prostitution but she was lucky to have found a point of self judgement which made her make an about turn before she had reached a risky peril. We illustrate briefly how masculinity contributed to Rehema's stint in prostitution.

After the death of her mother that was caused by bigamy, Rehema was mistreated in the hands of her father and her step mother. She was like a prisoner in her father's and step mother's house, where she toiled and was a target of verbal abuse from her step mother and the workers in the house (p.22). When she could take it no more, she decided to run away to nowhere, whether it meant life or death.

When she ran away from home she landed in the house of prostitutes. And when she found a job at Mansuri's house it was Mansuri who plunged her in her first step towards prostitution as all the 'good' that he tried to give her had a

hidden motive that targeted a sexual payback from Rehema. Eventually Mansuri was able to force Rehema into sex. After that she discovered that her body was an important resource for her livelihood (p.75).

Just like it was in the case of Kidawa, Chiku and Ruzuna, in the case of Rehema it was the men who were the providers of money as the ladies gave in their bodies in return. Chiku's venture in prostitution was caused by her husband who had made reach a climax of love only for him to break her heart by engaging in an extra marital affair. This made her move out her matrimonial home and from then on she engaged in prostitution with a revenge motive in her mind.

Thus, the question of the economically able man and the economically less privileged woman is the logical dialectic of the prostitution question in *Nyota ya Rehema* as it is the case even in the real-life situations outside a work of art in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The socio-economic context in *Nyota ya Rehema* is a vivid illustration of the economically and socially privileged man in contradistinction with the socio-economically less privileged woman. Fuad, Rehema's father was empowered economically. To the contrast Rehema's mother lived squarely under Fuad's mercy.

Karim was a man of high standing in government service coupled with outright oppressive masculine practices that are more in line with extremist patriarchy. This is the plausible explanation to the fact that Salma did not revolt against Karim's excesses in marriage

Although Sulubu is portrayed all through as a flat character, but all the same he comes out as Rehema's rescuer. He is portrayed as the linchpin of their economic success because of his dedication to farm work. In Sulubu's case masculine energy is portrayed as an important means to economic success.

There are other instances of economic power that is associated with masculinity. For example, the cruel land lord to Chiku, Kidawa and

Ruzuna though not explicitly identified but is implied as a man in the description that is given (p.43). In patriarchal societies, ownership and inheritance are associated more with men than women. The governor of Ramwe state who played Rehema out of her inheritance was also a man (142-148) and also the principal assistant of inheritance too (p.136). The driving force that drove Karim to pursue Rehema's inheritance, though not explicitly shown, could be attributed to the fact that in patriarchal societies, land inheritance is mainly a preserve of the male offspring. Actually, this is still an important issue in law in East Africa.

CONCLUSION

Although it is true that because of historical reasons the theme of class struggle is important and relevant in the island novels of East Africa, it is also equally true that because of the ideological and power positions that inform the island novels of East Africa, masculinities in the hegemonic sense where men are socialised to dominate women in all spheres of life are no less vital (cf. Onyango 2006).

In this paper, we have demonstrated that uneven masculine powers that start at home, in bigamy have far reaching repercussions on the aggrieved woman (Aziza) and her daughter (Rehema). The tribulations in the life of Rehema and her stint in prostitution have their genesis in bigamy. Masculinities are also an important denominator in the other cases of prostitution in *Nyota ya Rehema*

In the patriarchal society, marriage is more and more a pleasure to a man and a misery to a woman as the cases of Rehema's mother (Aziza), Mansuri's wife (Rozi) and Rehema's step sister Salma demonstrate. Further, in patriarchal societies, property ownership and inheritance are more a preserve of men than of women.

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