

TOWARDS UNLOCKING KATAMA MKANGI'S *WALENISI*: A CASE OF PARABOLIC NARRATIVE?

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INTRODUCTION

Katama Mkangi is not a new name to Kiswahili literary critics. He has authored *Ukiwa*, a sentimental first person love story about Matano and his friend Lila, an early entry into the Kenyan Kiswahili literary scene, and *Mafuta*, a satirical political work that examines class differences and suppression in a society struggling with the realities of a post colonial setting. The subject of this paper is Mkangi's third prose work, *Walenisi* that also has satirical tone like its precursor *Mafuta*. The former is a work that makes a commendable contribution towards making Mkangi claim a place among committed and serious writers. One of the most captivating elements of this particular work that is heavily steeped in ideological thought is plot. Also of interest is the internal structure as well as narrative and characterisation. It is some of these features that have prompted this particular essay.

THE CORPUS

Walenisi is a story centred on Dzombo, a young almost-radical revolutionary who attempts to crusade self discovery, equality and liberation in his native country that is writhing under the whims of dictatorship in a post - colonial situation. The state machinery is invoked to subject him to frustration and suffering in an effort to make him kow-tow to the status quo of a few wallowing in immense wealth at the expense of many who choke in the quagmire of poverty. The climax (or is it anti-climax?) of Dzombo's struggle is when he is sentenced by a corrupt and impartial judicial system, an instrument of the ruling class, to death.

The sentence has to be effected through rocket that catapults one to his demise. However, unlike his predecessors Dzombo survives the precarious trials by piloting the rocket courageously and diligently and landing in a strange land which is a complete anti-thesis of his native country. Dzombo is convinced that he has landed in heaven while the humble and non- assuming humane inhabitants of his-perceived heaven think he is actually the one who comes from heaven. The implied irony is powerful as a contrast device. This metaphor of heaven as we will see shortly is a very crucial one in this novel, as much as its antithetical counterpart, hell.

Dzombo tours this strange land and later delves into its history to discover that it has evolved through the Marxist stages of development to the highest form of communism. This serves as a great eye opener for him. He later marries from there – 'Walenisi' – and with his pregnant spouse decides to go back to his country equipped with

new ideas ;hopefully to play a catalytic role in liberation to establish an egalitarian society as in Walenisi. In that country after a long time under the misrule and dehumanising dictatorship of Wachuna people, a just society was established. This is a society that does not condone inequality based on gender or race. The story detailing the history of Walenisi society, which forms the main part of the novel is heavily coded ideologically. In fact this one issue easily tilts the novel towards what Suleimán (1983) categorises as authoritarian fictions as I will argue shortly.

Narrative events in *Walenisi*

Narratological critics distinguish between two main events that are central in an analysis of a story: kernel events and satellites. Kernels are central or nucleus kind of events. Gerald Prince, one of the critics associated with narratology, considers kernels as being logically essential and central to the action in the narrative and one that, if it was to be eliminated, would destroy the sequential or chronological coherence of the narrative¹.

Kernel events in story set up, initiate, provoke or trigger alternatives or even expectations or a movement. The satellites are basically the ones that help to fill up the kernels, answer the possibilities or expectations raised by the kernels. Seen from this perspective therefore, kernels are the story's basic frame or skeleton whereas the satellites dress up the frame.

Dzombo's appearance in a court can be considered as the first kernel event in *Walenisi*. Ideally, this event would raise two alternatives or eventualities-release or conviction. The former is ruled out owing to the corrupt and partial nature of the judicial system. Actually, it is the very first sentence in the novel that points towards the outcome of the judgement. The sentence coming as it does acts as a persuasive or hortatory exposition that is taken further by the ideological nature as well as the tone of the novel.

The judgement of the partial and class-oriented court closes the first event while triggering another: how the death will be carried out. We learn that in this country death penalty is usually carried out through a rocket. This sets another kernel event that has a number of satellites. I have noted in the foregone that it is very hard to clip out the kernels and have the story as it is. It is actually in this kernel that the story's direction is set. The placing of this kernel is central in initiating an important proposition in the narrative.

All the events and accounts occurring thereafter are built or woven around the uncertainty raised by the question of what will happen to the hero, Dzombo, when he gets into the rocket. As is the case with the earlier ones, the principal possibilities are two: surviving or perishing. The satellite events that follow serve not only to postpone or delay the uncertainty but also to heighten its intensity; a crucial fact in narrative suspense. However, it is worth noting that these satellites can actually be seen as kernels considering their thematic leanings. It is possible to say a single kernel triggers eventualities that are imbued with a lot crucial information making them kernels on their own right.

Dzombo does not crash but arrives in a strange land that he perceives to be heaven. This eventuality closes the previous event while, naturally, triggering another. I will comment on this metaphor of heaven later in this paper. The socio-economic and political structures in this new land of 'Walenisi', a pithy acronym that means "they are like us or we are together with them²", are a complete anti-thesis of Dzombo's native country from where he has been castigated. There is gender equality, people have equal rights, there is individual freedom, humanity and no class differences.

The wish to understand the motivating factors and the evolving of the present state sets another kernel event. This kernel is beefed up by a long history of the society that traces its origin and development through the stages associated with Marxist-Leninist thinking. It is actually possible to say that in here a number of kernels and satellites are apparent. The history is narrated through a series of stories within stories; something that I will come back to shortly. This part however, has a number of satellites as well as kernels owing to a some sort of independence that the part enjoys. It actually constitutes a secondary narrative.

The last main kernel is Dzombo's wish to return home where his society is still under the misrule of dictators, something that the Walenisi people have already overcome. This kernel like any other raises possibilities. Dzombo may be appreciated, his ideas could be influential and trigger a change in his society. The story's denouement is the going home. We as readers feel that the society is headed for a change. I would buttress this point by considering Dzombo's perceived death as a symbolic representation of death of his country's old order in which case his re-appearance, a kind of rebirth archetype, is a symbolic marker of a change. The readers may have to decode the author's symbolism to arrive at such a conclusion.

The denouement of this story reminds one of romantic stories in which the hero almost single handily brings change in his society. Whether this can withstand the test of reality and verisimilitude is a question that may invite a polemical debate. I will commend on this in the conclusion of this essay. The narrative events in *Walenisi* can be summarised as follows:

1. Dzombo in court. (metaphorical **hell**)
2. Dzombo condemned to die through a rocket.
3. The rocket flight.
4. Avoiding the obstacles/ hindrances:
 - Ignorance hindrance.
 - Diseases' hindrance.
 - Imperialism hindrance.
 - Exploitation hindrance.
5. Dzombo lands in Walenisi. (metaphorical **heaven**)
6. Dzombo undertakes a revealing journey- about humanity.
7. Dzombo visits Mapenzoni - the legislative organ.
8. Dzombo's urge to know the history of Walenisi.
 - Stories about the founding tribes : Mabavu (force), Moto(fire), Mchawi (witch).

9. Dzombo marries.
10. Dzombo and his pregnant wife prepare to go back to Dzombo's home.

Narrative Levels in *Walenisi*

Narration in *Walenisi*, very much like that of *Mafuta*, can be seen at two levels: primary and secondary narrative. The latter is what is usually referred to as embedded narrative(s). Narratologists usually refer to the two levels as diegetic and hypodiegetic levels respectively.

Basing ourselves on this definition we would have a problem discussing Mkangi's novel owing to the fact that there are two distinguishable levels in which situations and events occur. We have what can be called a primary narrative and a secondary one, an embedded one as commonly referred to. It is the level of the primary narrative that is referred to as the diegetic level. The level of the embedded narrative is called the hypodiegetic or metadiegetic level³. More often than not the narration of the story at the diegetic level is done by an extra diegetic narrator; a narrator outside the diegesis, an authorial narrator. Traditional criticism refers to this narrator as the 'third person narrator.' It is also possible for the story to be narrated by a narrator in the diegetic level (diegetic narrator) or first person narrator.

In *Walenisi*, we identify the two levels mentioned above. The diegetic or the primary narrative level is the one about Dzombo's life, his experiences in his country, his fight against unjust system. The narration is done by a "third person" or it is anonymous. At the secondary narrative level, the level of embedded stories, the narration is done by Dzombo. It must be noted however that there is an overlap of the narrators in the novel and though we can pin the narration as character bound, we sometimes discern qualities of anonymous narrator. We witness a case of this when the narrator summarises what the hero observes in his research. It reads:

Dzombo aligusia mengi ndani ya daftari yake. Yale yote aliyoyaona kuhusu elimu isiyo na usawa; sheria zisizo za haki; uchumi usio na mapenzi; siasa zisizo ukweli...kisha akaendelea kuandika... (1995:163) Dzombo discussed many issues in his report. All that he found out about unequal educational system, unjust laws, suppressive economic structures, untruthful politics; he continued...

The narrative levels in *Walenisi* are marked hence it is clear when the embedded narrative begins. In other words the narration level shift is apparent or easily marked.

1. Ni baada ya kuchambua kwa muda... alipoamua kujiandikia mswada ufuatao...Na hivi ndivyo makala(sic) ilivyosema... **Diegetic level.** (1995:133)
(It is after a detailed research...that he decided to write the following manuscript. It observed thus:)
6. Mimi Dzombo wa Bedzombo, niliyehukumiwa kifo kwetu... **Hypodiegetic level.** (1995:134)

(I, Dzombo son of Bedzombo, sentenced to death in my native country...)

The shift in narrative levels is shown by the pronominal 'mimi' (I) and morpheme 'ni' (I) marking the so called first person narration from the morpheme 'a' (he/ she/ it) which alludes to a third person narration.

It will be important to note one fact in connection with embedding in this novel. We notice a number of embedded stories within the main embedded narrative or secondary narrative. The main embedded story is Walenisi's history which has other embedded myths, historical and etiologic stories. It is on this strength that I find Hawthorn's term "staircasing" an appropriate term because what we have here is a case of multiple embedding⁴ The case is quite different in Mkangi's earlier prose work *Mafuta*. In the case of the latter, the embedded narrative takes such a big part of the work such that the reader nearly forgets the primary narrative. This situation is noted by Mieke Bal:

When the embedded text presents a complete story with an elaborate fabula we gradually forget the fabula of the primary narrative⁵.

Some critics call this type of embedded narrative pseudo-diegetic. Looking at the narrative structure of this novel, and that of *Mafuta*, one may be tempted to see the embedded stories as a case of textual parts that replicate or even duplicate the main textual whole. This is a case of the so-called *mise en abyme*.

Rimmon-Kenan in her *Narrative Fiction* identifies three main functions of embedded stories: actional, explicative and thematic. Actional function refers to a situation where the embedded story serves only to advance the story without having any other major function as such. Explicative function refers to a situation where the embedded narratives serve to explain or explicate something raised at the primary narrative level. Here questions like what caused this reality, what contributed to this state of affairs are important markers or guides. Thematic function refers to where the embedded story or fabula advances a central theme of the work.

The narrative stair casing or use of *chinese box narratives* in *Walenisi* serves to answer a basic and fundamental question. What led to this present state? We know from the embedded stories that the dictatorship of Wachuna, the people who ruled then, was overthrown, their value systems were discarded their socio-political structure and the capitalistic economic base demolished and a just society established. One of the structural devices that Mkangi uses is contrast or what we will identify as anti-thesis. The society Dzombo meets at the end of his journey i.e. Walenisi is a just society, a free society.

The precursor of this society, Waleni, was characterised by brutality, imperialism, suppression, inequality and concomitant social ills. The relationship that exists between Walenisi, at the diegetic level and that of Waleni, at the hypodiegetic level is that of contrast i.e. Waleni is an anti-thesis of Walenisi. However, the one that ensues between the society seen in the embedded narrative and Dzombo's native country, at the diegetic and extra diegetic level is one of analogy. It is owing to the latter fact that the reader feels he gets a picture of the nature of society that Dzombo's is.

Walenisi is actually a paradigmatic metaphor of Dzombo's native home. The author does not discuss or present the realities in the hero's native home but as readers we feel that they are projected on this society. The reader can decode the cultural code in the writer's descriptions in view of the present historical realities of African countries. Hence the present historical state is an important frame of reference. On the other hand, Walenisi society is the complete anti-thesis of dictatorship. This is a projection of the writer's ideal society which may be somewhat unrealistic or even idyllic.

The Use of Metaphors in *Walenisi*

The two main pervasive metaphors that stick out in this novel are Heaven and Hell. Dzombo compares the country he lands in after getting expelled from his native country with heaven - an acme of freedom, while his native country is likened to hell. These metaphors serve very central role in encoding the message of the writer. Mkwangi's style as we will see in characterisation seems to hinge on antithetical pairings or use of diametrical opposites. This particular method enable the writer to graphically capture the political and socio-economic realities of his fictional world. One may however feel that the powerful symbolic force created by these metaphors is not directly attributable to the novel's aesthetic quality as much as from their innate archetypal force.

Metaphor of Hell

The word hell conjures a motley of images in many a person's mind. This is a place perceived as one of vices, misery, turmoil, severe censure and ruin. In Dzombo's native country the majority of people writhe in absolute poverty while a small clique of rich wallow in immense wealth. There is a lot of exploitation as exemplified by the employer of Dzombo and his brother whose continued exploitation is hinged upon the populace remaining ignorant of their rights. We also witness the same case of farmers who, after toiling so hard, get no reward for their toil. There is a lot of suppression, oppression, dictatorship. It is the worst place one can think of, it is simply hell.

The rule of the rich few is premised on the fear they instil using the organs of the nation-state, the ignorance of the populace and the force they use.

Metaphor of Heaven

Heaven is the antithesis of hell, at least that is what we are taught to believe. This is the dwelling place of God and the blessed; it is a place that is pure and one where supreme happiness reigns. The society in Walenisi is devoid of suffering. There is no racial or sexual discrimination. Class differences do not exist at all. However, the readers learn that this reality has not come easily. The populace had to awaken from their ignorance and fight for their rights; to liberate themselves from the misrule of Wachuna people, the parallels of Dzombo's ruling clique.

A central motif informing the story in Mkangi's novel is one of search of quest. The hero is forced to embark on a quest. The motivating factors are therefore not his own but rather of the unjust dictatorial post-colonial state which condemns him to death. It is possible to see the whole quest in the story as merely an introverted psychological scrutiny that the writer feels people in post-colonial states should subject themselves to. This will lead to an awakening to the realities besetting them.

Still on the quest theme, it is possible to see the rocket in which the hero travels as a metaphorical equivalent of the river voyage the hero undertakes in what Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* terms as *monomyth*. The hurdles that the hero faces on his way therefore constitute the precarious albeit inevitable trials that he has to overcome, if anything because of their providing a necessary test of his mettle as a heroic figure.

This foregoing view prompts me to compare the story presented in *Walenisi* with the parable of The Prodigal Son. However, in the Biblical narrative we see the son wanting to leave on his own account. There is little centrifugal force, if we were to borrow this term, applied on him. When the circumstances out there become unbearable, the prodigal son goes back home after undergoing spiritual, and certainly psychological rebirth. The case of *Walenisi* is different. Dzombo is expelled from his country by the unjust and dictatorial ruling clique- which serve as a centrifugal force, as it were. Later the hero returns to his native country after a psychological rebirth which is clearly foreshadowed by his supposed death. We therefore have a case of ironic inversion of the Biblical parable, something close to what Northrop Frye would call *demonic modulation*.

Characterisation in *Walenisi*

In any analysis of characterisation in a particular text, one always looks for textual indicators of the same. Critics identify two basic types: Direct definition and indirect presentation. The former takes the form of names that point to character traits. The names in this case would be used as allegorical tags. In most cases a particular name may directly signify a particular trait through what Cohan and Shires term as "paradigmatic metonymy"⁶.

The best examples of paradigmatic metonymies in Kiswahili literature are found in the prose works by Shaaban Robert. For example, Utubora in *Utubora mkulima*, Adili in *Adili na nduguze* and a motley of characters in *Kusadikika*. It is also possible to identify a character's traits through analogy of traits which are attributed to other characters. One of the best examples in Kiswahili literature may be Amina in Habwe's *Maumbile si huja* seen against Amina in *Asali chungu* as well Kopa and Mashaka in Mbogo's play *Giza Limeingia* against Mbunda Msokile's Chioko and Gonza in the short fiction *Usiku utakapokwisha*⁷.

A number of characters in *Walenisi* are directly defined. Most of these are the characters the hero encounters in the imaginary country he lands. These include: Mtu-Mwenzio, Mtu-Nasi; Mtu-Bint Fikirini. Traditional literary critics would most likely invoke the Forsterian dichotomy of flat and round characters; an approach that has been

found to be inappropriate⁸. In fact, readers of this particular work are likely to feel that Dzombo is the only character whose psychological depth is apparent. It is as if the author is not interested in other characters in as much as he feels Dzombo espouses and epitomises the central ideology. It is on this basis that the novel acquires what Northrop Frye refers to as high mimetic in his theory of modes. There are however elements of the romantic mode or what I call- following Gikandi (1987) and M'marete (1992)- 'parabolic as we will see later.

Direct definition has its flaws. It tends to tilt towards generalisation. For example, the above named characters attest character traits implicit in their names i.e. concerned, caring, brotherly and humane something buttressed by the prefixing of *mtu* (humane being) to their names. The failure to stick to the normal naming system may be a way of questioning the very basic (mis)use of the power of naming by human beings and hence the use of language in separating others. The people of Walenisi have taken the power of naming and hence of language which constitutes a central base of power as certain theorists like Michel Foucault argue. It is important to note that naming can function as a site of empowering self-definition or a means by which one revises one's identity and thus rejecting imposed descriptions of the self⁹.

The use of direct method of characterisation forces the reader to take the characters as the writer portrays them, exercising little, if any judgement on their traits. However, it is possible to argue that a number of characters in *Walenisi* are subordinated to the action. It seems that the only character who is presented in wider spectrum is the protagonist, Dzombo. The others, it would seem, represent a broad (or is it narrow?) social milieu within which the former acts.

The paradigmatic metonymies we witness in this novel find their archetypal antecedents in Shaaban Robert's works. A number of Kiswahili works show this quality. Most recent works however show an inclination towards indirect presentation where one reconstructs a character's traits by taking consideration of: action, character speech, external appearance or environment. A character trait can be inferred from an action that occurs once or that which is repeated. Dzombo opposes the unjust rule repeatedly, although the use of report rather than dramatic representation robs the character of an important facet of his characterisation.

In the foregone, I have noted that Mkangi makes use of contrast a lot in the structure of his work. This structure is most apparent in his characterisation. I have noted the inclination to use names that reflect on the particular traits of characters. These onomastic labels, or as I have called them allegorical tags, serve to introduce qualities that are consonant to parabolic narratives. I have noted this particular feature of characterisation in the works of Shaaban Robert, one of the most accomplished Kiswahili writers in the use of Manichean scheme of characterisation, the bad and good division. Structurally, this method links well with the general contrastive design seen in this work although it robs the characters a crucial base as characters in a realistic novel that the novel is.

Parabolic Tendencies in *Walenisi*

One of the most interesting facts about Mkangi's post-colonial novel may be noted in an attempt to classify it. The second part of the title of this paper poses a question that points to this fact. I use the term parabolic in place of what Northrop Frye calls romantic in his theory of modes. Reading this novel within this particular theory, one may be tempted to classify it as a high mimetic mode in which the hero appears superior to fellow beings. This can be arrived at considering the observation that all those that had been condemned to die through the rocket died but the hero, Dzombo, does not. However, we notice a number of other features associated with parabolic literature. One of this is, as we noted earlier, the theme of quest. The theme of search or quest is quite central in Mkangi's novel. In parabolic literature, the hero undertakes a quest in which a dragon-killing theme is apparent. We can actually read this dragon-killing theme in a displaced form in the nefarious obstacles Dzombo overcomes on his way to Walenisi.

A second parabolic element is noticeable when one examines characterisation in this novel. The characters seen in the strange land lack psychological depth associated with characters in realistic fiction. This is not surprising considering that, "the parabolic (as) a literary form (is) used to portray not life likeness, but life liveliness," the aim of which is, "to urge the reader in the direction in which the society should move."¹⁰

Mkangi does not only rely on the parabolic nature to achieve the urge noted above. He also does this through his ideological toning in which the writer makes an obvious attempt to persuade his readers about the correctness of adopting his way of interpreting as well changing the world¹¹. The toning is so strong in this novel that we can rightly call it an ideological novel.

A third element associated with parabolic literature though not a peremptory requirement is the ending with a marriage involving the hero. In *Walenisi* we see the hero departing for his native country with his pregnant wife, possibly to "live happily thereafter." We can decode from the primary narrative as well as flashbacks that this will not be easy nor will change come simply. Change is only possible symbolically or at least by what I will call parabolic projection, change by the fact of associating with the successful Walenisi country.

In spite of the already noted parabolic tendencies, we as readers feel that *Walenisi* can be regarded as a thesis novel that is written in the realistic mode. There is a clear base of the aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation¹². The work has outright signals as noted elsewhere in this paper which point to the rightness of a particular political or ideological doctrine. May be we can say that the parabolic is a counterpoint to a mainly realistic mode which is more overriding.

CONCLUSION

We have identified a number issues that can be important to a reader towards understanding *Walenisi*. As we have noted, the narration in this novel can be demarcated

into two levels. However, we must note that each of the levels has many other qualities that are worth studying closely. For example, the use of flashback as a structural element though not as successfully used as, for example, Mbogo does in his *Vipuli vya Figo*. The writer has used a number of metaphors and symbols that we could not deal with in this short paper. One area that may attract scholars is narration and point of view or what others prefer calling focalisation in Katama Mkangi's works and the issue of the character's language overlapping with the narrator's. Generally, *Walenisi* is a complex and mature novel heralding new trends in the Kenyan Kiswahili literary scene in particular and Kiswahili literature in general.

NOTES

- 1 Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, 1987. Pg 48.
- 2 See Kitula King'ei's review. The ethics of socialism in Weekly Review, May 10, 1996 pg. 32
- 3 See Gerald Genette, *Narrative Discourse*. Cornell University Press
- 4 See Jeremy Hawthorn *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. Second edition Edward Arnold. London 1994 pg 44.
- 5 M. Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. London/Buffalo/Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1985. Pg. 143.
- 6 Steven Cohan & Linda Shires, *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*, Routledge. 1988. Pg. 34.
- 7 I have discussed this in unpublished paper: Interfigural phenomena: A tentative investigation into the interdependence of characters in Kiswahili Literature.
- 8 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan discusses some of the flaws in Forsterian classification in her *Narrative Fiction Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge. London 1983 pg.40-42.
- 9 See J. Childers & G. Hentzi (Edtrs.) *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Columbia University Press. 1995. Pg. 199.
- 10 G. N. Mmarete, *An Anatomy of Third World Literature: Northrop Frye's theory of modes in Post colonial context*, New Zealand: Messey University, Ph. D Thesis, 1992. Pg. 28.
- 11 Susan R. Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions*. The Ideological Novel as Literary Genre. New York: Columbia University Press. 1983. Pg. 1
- 12 Suleiman, *ibid.* 7.

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