

Visions of the Future in East African Fiction: A Comparative Exploration of Selected Works in Kiswahili and English

Mwenda Mbatiah

Abstract

In his essay entitled: "The Social Responsibility of the East African Writer", Peter Nazareth argues that a writer has to respond to life around him/her. This means that a writer has to talk about the problems afflicting the people and how to cope with them. It is with this understanding that we talk about vision in this paper. A writer who is committed to serving the society by helping it to deal with its problems often provides the hope of a better tomorrow. Such a writer depicts the problems afflicting the people and then foretells of a future in which such problems are overcome. This is what a writer's vision is about. It is like a prophecy of a better society. Vision, therefore, in a literary context like this one, may be defined as the ability to foresee future developments and to communicate the same in literary works. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Katama Mkangi are important Kenyan writers whose visions of a new Kenya come out clearly in their novels. Comparison of their works gives us a clear view of their visions.

1.0 Introduction

The written literature of East Africa is produced in many languages such as Gikuyu, Dholuo, Luganda, Acholi, etc. There is no doubt, however, that the two dominant languages are Kiswahili and English. In spite of the linguistic differences, there are many factors that unite East African literatures. For instance, they explore the same socio-political realities and deal with the same historical experiences such as colonization, the struggle for independence, and the emergence of new African nations. Their audience is also more or less the same. Most of this literature is also recent, having been published after independence in the sixties.

This paper examines, through comparison, the similarities of fiction written in the two dominant languages: Kiswahili and English. The two authors whose works are focused on are Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Katama Mkangi. Ngugi's two works in English which we refer to are: *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1982). Mkangi's two works in Kiswahili are: *Mafuta* (1984) and *Walenisi* (1995).

We explore the circumstances that make the writers in question dream of a future reality which is better than the present one, and describe the kind of societies that they think would serve humanity better. For example, both writers decry the class structure of their societies and portray this as one of the main causes of the problems that afflict the people. The question is what they propose as the solution to this problem. When we explore the answer to this question, it will become apparent that both Ngugi and Mkangi are politically committed writers in the sense that the solutions that they provide for the problems they raise are pro-people and strongly against the ruling elite.

Both Ngugi and Mkangi are prominent writers whose works are widely-read and studied in East Africa and beyond. The two writers are also scholars, though in different fields. Ngugi is a literary scholar-cum-writer, while Mkangi is a sociologist. Mkangi was born and brought up at the coast, while Ngugi was born and brought up in Central Kenya. Nevertheless, the two write as Kenyans, portraying the suffering of the people, their dreams and aspirations. Most importantly, the two writers share the same political ideology which heavily leans towards Marxism. They

were both arrested and detained by Kenyan authorities for being suspected to be working to bring down the government. Although, they were later released, they were not allowed to go back to their teaching jobs at the University of Nairobi.

2.0 Ngugi and Mwangi's Portrayal of Contemporary Kenyan Life

One of the dominant themes in the four novels mentioned above is the suffering, exploitation and oppression of the poor who constitute the majority class. In *Petals of Blood*, we are presented with a remote and backward community called Ilmorog. The people are poor peasant farmers and pastoralists. They are vulnerable to weather fluctuations because it affects the land on which they depend for their crops and pasture. We see the devastation that is caused by the long drought that leads to the disappearance of pasture and the drying of crops. This invariably leads to famine and deaths. Ilmorog symbolizes the underdevelopment of rural Kenya as compared to the urban areas. There are no roads and other infrastructure, no services such as health and education, and no market for the crops and animals of the rural folk. Thus, they live in a poverty trap from which they are unable to escape. Munira, the lone teacher in the only school in the area ponders over the suffering of the people. His thoughts are described in the following words: "A few roads and a reliable water system would have improved their lives. A dispensary might have been a useful addition." (p.24) Another character, Karega, sees Ilmorog as "...this poverty – and draught-stricken, depopulated wasteland...." (p.110).

Bad economic policies and poor leadership are the factors that contribute most to the poverty and backwardness of Ilmorog. Resources and services are concentrated in the urban areas where the rich live. We are told that Nderi wa Riera, the area M.P., lives in the city and hardly ever visits his constituents. He is unaware of the drought ravaging the population until the people form a delegation which treks to the city to present the people's problems to him. Another problem is that the government has left matters of development to individual investors. In this kind of situation, a remote place like Ilmorog will not attract investors because there are no resources to exploit.

Ilmorog changes radically when the rich discover the potential of the local drink called "Theng'eta". A whole industry, which attracts foreign investors, is created out of it. The poor are marginalized as the investors take over everything including their land. Even after the transformation of Ilmorog into a city, the lot of the poor does not change. This is because development is not geared towards transforming their lives for the better, but enriching the rich even further.

The same theme mentioned above is repeated in *Devil on the Cross* where unemployment, especially among women, is shown to be the main cause of their dehumanization. Wariinga narrates the story of her harrowing experience at the hands of her employer, Boss Kihara, who demands to have sex with her so that she can keep her job. When she refuses, he fires her. Wangari is another jobless woman who narrates the story of how she got arrested in Nairobi while looking for a job. These are the two major characters in the novel who represent the suffering and exploitation of the poor in a capitalist system.

Like Ngugi, Katama Mwangi paints a picture of abject poverty among the majority population in his novels. He does this, in *Mafuta*, for example, by using a strategy of characterization that

Ngugi also uses a lot: a character narrating his or her past experiences to an audience of one or more people. Matope narrates how he used to fight at the dump with other destitute people over waste. Then he concludes by summarizing the dire situation of the poor and the source of all the problems. He says:

*Tumezaliwa matopeni, tumezaana matopeni, tumekufa matopeni na tutazikana matopeni.
Mmefanya uongo ukawa ukweli na ukweli, uongo...Mmepindua hata sheria za maumbile,ili kumamatia enzi yenu. Mafuta ndio thawabu na maji ni mauti...Si maji ni uhai? Ni maisha na ni chanzo?* (p. 40- 41)

We were born in the mud, we've given birth in the mud, we die in the mud and we get buried in the mud. You have turned lies into the truth, and the truth into lies... You've overturned even the laws of nature, so that you can maintain your dominion. Oil is a blessing and water is a curse. Isn't water the source of life?

After the first sentence where the suffering of the poor is metaphorically described as getting stuck in the mud, the speaker blames the bourgeois class for the situation. They have subverted the laws of nature in order to gain advantage at the expense of the majority population. The motif of ubiquitous groups of unemployed layabouts (*malofa*) is used to emphasize the general poverty in which the people live.

In *Walenisi*, the tribulations of the poor in a capitalist system are portrayed through the experiences of Dzombo, the main character. His problems begin when he reveals to his brother the root cause of their plight. He tells him that the workers are poor because they are exploited by their employer. For exposing the truth, Dzombo is labeled an inciter ("*kuwachochea wafanyakazi watiifu*") and sacked. He opts for self-employment and becomes a farmer. He raises a maize crop from which he hopes to get food and satisfy his other needs. But by doing this, he goes against the policy of his government, which directs farmers to grow cash crops like coffee, tea and sisal, which are exported to Europe and America, thus earning the country foreign exchange. This policy is based on the conditions that, have been set for Dzombo's country by the World Bank, which is an agent of Western capitalist powers. Dzombo is punished by having his crop destroyed by the government. Subsequently, he complies by growing the recommended crops. However, he is not paid on delivering his harvest to the relevant department. The explanation he gets is that the prices of such crops in foreign markets have gone down. Dzombo refuses to accept this explanation and protests what he believes to be exploitation by the government. Consequently, he is arrested, tried and sentenced to death.

This brief account of the lives of the poor as portrayed through Dzombo of *Walenisi* reveals a number of other major issues that are treated in all the novels under discussion. One of them is neo-colonialism. Dzombo lives in a post-colonial African country which is economically dependent on the former colonial masters. As a result of this dependency, its economic policies are not tailored to meet the needs of the people but rather to conform to the conditions set by the former colonial master. This means that even after independence, the majority of the people continue living under the same conditions of poverty, exploitation and marginalization that existed during colonial rule. In both *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, the theme of an emergent African bourgeois class collaborating with foreign capitalists to continue robbing the poor is prominent. This class is represented by Kimeria, Chui, Mzigo and Nderi wa Riera in the

first novel, and Mwireri wa Mukiraai, the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, Kihaahu wa Gatheca and Gitutu wa Gataanguru in the second one.

Another important issue is about the truth and its purveyors. Ngugi and Mkangi portray a society in which the ruling elite deliberately suppress the truth and persecute those who expose it. We have referred to Dzombo's punishment for speaking the truth above. In *Mafuta*, Matope is also victimized for speaking the truth that is contained in the passage quoted above. His fate is similar to that of Dzombo, for he is sentenced to death through the following pronouncement: "*Mahakama haya yamekata kuwa ni unyongwe ili uwe kielelezo kwa wengine*" (p. 45). This court rules that you be hanged so that you can serve as an example to others. In *Petals of Blood*, the lawyer who later becomes a parliamentarian, and who has chosen to fight for and with the people is eliminated.

Mafuta further develops the theme of the nature of truth by using the strategy of narratives that the poor exchange among themselves. For instance, Mbeyu narrates a story (pp. 66-70) about a child who was severely punished by his parents for stating the truth that workers contributed in the production of the food they eat. Another example is Gweni's story (pp. 70-74) about the king who desired to be different from his subjects. His tailor offers to help him realize his dream by making for him a gown that could not be seen by ordinary people. When the tailor finishes his work, the king walks around proudly showing off his gown. His ministers and other top officials are full of praise for the king's attire. It is a child that ends this charade by exclaiming that the king is naked. These two narratives drive home the point that children can perceive and articulate the truth because they are innocent and not as hypocritical as adults. The same work also uses powerful allusions such as those of Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King to show that the persecution of those who speak the truth is an old tradition in all human societies at all times.

Another important theme that pervades the works of both Mkangi and Ngugi and which gives us an insight into contemporary life in Kenya and East Africa in general, is that of the dehumanizing character of capitalism. This theme is related to the issues that have been discussed above. In all the four works, the capitalist economic system that East African nations adopted after independence is portrayed as a dehumanizing one in the sense that it produces people who worship money and property and who lack moral values. These characteristics are mostly seen in the bourgeois class of Africans who inherited the top echelons of the colonial administrative and economic system. This class is portrayed very negatively in all the novels. Some of the evils associated with it are immorality, corruption, hypocrisy, exploitation and seeking to maintain the status quo to its advantage. The actions of members of this class are mostly driven by greed to accumulate more and more wealth, and the desire to acquire and maintain power. Emmanuel Ngara (1985:76) describes the effects of capitalism on the lives of the main characters in *Petals of Blood* in the following words:

Capitalism is responsible not only for the poverty and misery of Abdulla and others, but also for the fact that Wanja becomes a prostitute. She is completely alienated from herself not just for selling her labour, but by selling her body as a commodity. For her, life in Kenya has been reduced to the principle of the survival of the fittest. You exploit or you are exploited. 'You eat or you are eaten.' (p. 293)

The African bourgeois class does not only want to perpetuate the colonial (capitalist) economic and administrative system for its own advantage but also the pillars of the colonialist's culture. In other words, this is a class of people who ape the white man's culture. It equates that culture with progress and modernity, while it looks down upon the culture of its people as backward. Three key pillars of the colonialist's culture are Christianity, education and the English language. Hence, members of the class in question profess to be Christians though their actions do not conform to Christianity. Members of this class got their education in missionary schools, and they seek to create institutions that replicate the missionary school. They also send their children abroad so that they can get as much of the white man's education as possible.

While the class in question manipulates the entire socio-political and economic system to its advantage, the poor continue to be exploited and marginalized. The activities of the African bourgeois do not only dehumanize it but also the poor. Girls become sex-objects to be used to satisfy the sexual needs of their employers. This is illustrated through the life of Wariinga, who is the main character in *Devil on the Cross*. After losing her first job following her refusal to sleep with her boss, she struggles to get another one, but it is in vain because all prospective employers are like her former boss. In the end she gives up looking for employment. Young women like Wariinga find themselves in such difficult circumstances because the only employment opportunities that are open to them are in private firms which are owned by greedy and immoral men like Boss Kihara. The government does not seem to have any plans to help them. So they end up having their lives messed up by their bosses, for instance, by getting impregnated and abandoned.

The tourism industry which is a major pillar of the economy engenders the dehumanization of women by turning them into objects of tourist attraction and prostitutes. Ngugi is particularly critical of this institution which he castigates for giving foreigners free rein to turn Kenyan women into playthings. It also cheapens and kills the cultures of Kenyan people by turning it into a culture for tourists. The author's anger at all this is captured in the words of the man who rescues Wanja from a German tourist in *Petals of Blood*. He says: "This is what happens when you turn tourism into a national religion and build it shrines of worship all over the country" (p. 134).

3.0 The Vision of a Better Kenya

After briefly examining the portrayal of contemporary life in Kenya in the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Katama Mkangi, the next stage is to describe the kind of society that the two writers would like to see and their proposals as to how such a society should be created. From what has been said above, Ngugi and Mkangi's critique of contemporary Kenyan society amounts to a condemnation and rejection of the capitalist system which is portrayed as the root cause of all the evils in society. A better Kenya of the future means a society that has dismantled the capitalist system and replaced it with a form of socialism. The words of Karega, the leader of the worker's movement in *Petals of Blood* carry the dream of a new society. After succumbing to the new capitalist order that has taken over in the New Ilmorog, Wanja tells her friends: "This world...this Kenya...this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you..." But Karega rejects this defeatism and asserts: "Must we have only this world? Is there only one world? Then we must create another world, a new earth" (p. 294). Later on, he articulates this vision in greater detail when he says: "...We must

create a world...in which the wealth of our land shall belong to us all, in which there will be no parasites dictating our lives, in which we shall all be workers for one another's happiness and well-being" (p. 327). There is no doubt that these words are talking about a future socialist Kenya.

Katama Mkangi shares this vision which is powerfully expressed in *Walenisi*. In this novel, he creates a socialist utopia which bears the same name as the book's title. When Dzombo is taken for a tour of Walenisi after miraculously landing there in a "Sayari" which is meant to kill him, he concludes that this must be paradise. This is because it is devoid of all the evils of his society such as poverty, oppression, social stratification, marginalization of women, etc. It is made very clear that, this ideal society has been built on the foundation of socialist principles, especially equality and fair distribution of both work and resources. For instance, when Dzombo attends the meeting of the committee that runs the "Trimi" Industry, he reads the preface of the booklet distributed to all those in attendance which says as follows:

Nchi hii ni yetu na uchumi hauna budi kuwa wetu. Kati yetu, hakuna mwinyi, kabaila wala bepari. Sote tuko sawa. Kwa hivyo, tupandacho ni chetu; tuvunacho ni chetu; tuvumbuacho ni chetu; tuzalishacho ni chetu. Utajiri wote na mali yote ni mali yetu sisi Umma. Na Umma ni wewe usomaye haya.... (p. 139).

This country is ours and, therefore, the economy belongs to us. Among Us, there are no feudalists or capitalists. We are all equal. So what we plant is ours; what we harvest is ours; what we invent is ours; what we produce is ours. All the wealth and all the property belongs to us, the Public. And the Public is you who is reading this.

Both Ngugi and Mkangi make it very clear that, the creators of the new socialist society are the workers, peasants and all the downtrodden of the capitalist system. It is for this reason that all the words that contain the vision of a better future are uttered by members of this class or those who have aligned themselves with it like the city lawyer who was referred to above. This class is shown to be committed to the eradication of all the evils perpetrated by the bourgeois through the capitalist system. One such evil, as we saw earlier, is the marginalization and even dehumanization of women. The works under discussion express the dream of a future society where women are no longer discriminated against; a society where they are equal partners with men in productive labour and in the enjoyment of its fruits.

4.0 Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Katama Mkangi portray contemporary East African life as hell for the poor majority and heaven for the rich minority. This situation can be described as neo-colonial. This is because, capitalism was imposed on the countries in question by colonialists. After independence, the new ruling elite perpetuated the system so that they could continue enjoying the same lifestyle as the former colonial masters. Moreover, they sustained this system as a way of ensuring that the interests of the former colonial masters are safeguarded. In other words, the former colonial masters continue to exploit the newly independent East African countries because the comprador class of African rulers facilitates this exploitation. In the meantime, the majority poor continue to sink deeper into poverty. The two novelists whose works we have

examined are completely opposed to the status quo. Moreover, they do not hesitate to articulate the kind of alternative system that would put an end to class differences and lift the poor out of their misery. Both writers advocate the dismantling of the neo-colonial system that exists and the setting up of a form of socialist system. This would lead to the total decolonization of African nations. It would end the dependency that characterizes the relationship between Africa and Europe. This is the only way that Africans can regain their dignity.

The problem of a writer being politically-aligned is clear in the works discussed above. The two writers give us what can be described as a Marxist vision of society and the possibility of social transformation through revolution. One of the problems here is that a reader who is not sympathetic to the Marxist ideology would find very little value in such literature. Another problem is that, sometimes art is sacrificed in order to communicate an ideological position. In Mkangi's novels, there is not much character-development because most of the characters are categorized according to their ideological orientations. The good ones are those who agree with the writer's ideology. The bad ones, on the other hand, are those who are opposed to it. Simon Gikandi (1987:140) makes a similar critique of character-development in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. He singles out the lawyer who is an important character in the novel, and says:

As a character or persona, the lawyer in the novel is not well-developed. He has yielded too much of himself to the authorial ideology. We hear the voice behind the man and adore his idealism, but we are never invited to relate to him as a man with a vital link to a problematic context.

The problem of characters lacking credibility because of being mere mouthpieces of the author is pervasive in all the novels we have examined. Nevertheless, they are significant works whose insight into contemporary East African life cannot be doubted.

References

- Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G. and Tiffin, H. (2000). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Gikandi, S. (1987). *Reading the African Novel*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
- Kwambai, M. (2016). "Walenisi and Mafuta: Depiction of Class Segregation" *Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics* Vol. 26: Egerton University.
- Mbatiah, M. (2003). *Mwongozo wa Walenisi*. Nairobi: Longhorn.
- _____ (1995). "Mapitio ya Walenisi" *Kioo cha Lugha*. Idara ya Kiswahili: Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam.
- Mkangi, K.C.G. (1995). *Walenisi*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- _____ (1984). *Mafuta*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Nazareth, P. (1978). *The Third World Writer: His Social Responsibility*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.
- Ngara, E. (1985). *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*. London: Heinemann Educational

Books.

Wa Thiong'o, N. (1982). *Devil on the Cross*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books.

_____ (1977). *Petals of Blood*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Wamitila, K.W. (1998). "Towards Unlocking Katama Mkangi's *Walenisi*: A Case of Parabolic Narrative?" *Kiswahili* Vol. 61. TUKI: Dar es Salaam.