

# FRAGMENTATION, ORALITY AND MAGIC REALISM IN KEZILAHABI'S NOVEL NAGONA

SAID A. M. KHAMIS\*

*University of Bayreuth, Germany*

## ABSTRACT

This article is a response to Gromov's article entitled *Nagona and Mzingile: Novel, Tale or Parable?*. Contrary to Gromov's thesis on the structural ambiguity of the novel, we posit that the structure of this novel is discernible if we consider the fluidity of the genre 'novel' and if we bring in elements of socio-cultural patchwork and chaos characterising contemporary African societies. This article argues that the idea of fragmentation which is revealed at the level of an individual and society in the novel, goes very well with its fictional devices. In fact the fictional devices render the discourse of the novel disruption. It is a double-edged design pregnant on the one hand, with religious, philosophical, political and social rhetoric for its literary substance and on the other, 'orality' and 'magic realism' for its fictional strategies which seem to cause 'fragmentariness' that challenge the traditional method of narration with simple temporal linearity.

*Keywords: fragmentation, orality, magic, realism*

In his essay *Nagona and Mzingile: Novel, Tale or Parable?* Gromov (1998) is baffled by the generic ambiguity that Kezilahabi's two fictional narratives seem to engender. Theoretical views of the novel as a genre have, however, frequently articulated the notion of the novel being a versatile and unstable form, rendering it relatively unsusceptible to strict or rigid criteria. Firstly, the novel is seen to be located within the received topography of forms (Levi 1978: 19–20) in terms of its family resemblances as well as its essential differences from, say, the romance, the epic, *contes philosophiques* and the novella.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the novel is 'usually', and perhaps 'grudgingly', known to have risen amidst the mercantile bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century, and has since then been reaching out to unpredictable realms for its formal and thematic repertoire. To this should be added the detail that new fictional narratives emerging from non-bourgeois cultures in the post-colonial era also claim to be inscribed within its generic range<sup>2</sup>. And thirdly, philosophers credit the novel with greater

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<sup>1</sup> The Germans have an entire quantitative spectrum for this: *Skizze, Märchen, Erzählung, Novelle, Kurzroman, Epopöe* etc.

<sup>2</sup> The term *genre* itself offers no way out of the predicament. In addition, Harold Scheub has demonstrated its protean nature by criticizing the common assumption that the novel evolved first in the West only to be later transported to the rest of the world. Describing this view to be as blind as it is arrogant, Scheub concludes that the early literary traditions were

eclecticism by assimilating it to the epistemic structure of the natural flow of human experience as anatomized in the common distinctions which we construct between 'internality' and 'externality', inward-lookingness and outward-lookingness, subjectivity and objectivity (Levi 1978: 19).

On the one hand, fragmented and pregnant with religious, philosophical, political and social rhetoric for its literary substance, and on the other, with *orality* and *magic realism* for its fictional strategies, *Nagona* (1990) seems to challenge the possibility of an 'absolute' generic definition. Nevertheless, *fragmentation*, orality and magic realism, we would argue, are the peculiarities that make this a unique – if structurally not the most idiosyncratic – novel in Swahili literature.

The neat synopsis normally given for a realist novel is unattainable for *Nagona* – the reason being that in this novel the *chrono-logic-al* narrative strategy is deliberately disrupted. In *Nagona* there is no story mediated to us in coherent sequences, but only through loose and often disjointed plots and pieces of stories intricately conjoined. *Nagona*, therefore, consists of several stories within a story – of the main story with a journey motif and with digressions that are philosophical, sociological, psychological, historical and religious in their discursive origins. The thread, in a sequence of sporadic happenings throughout the whole stretch of the main character's journey of discovery, runs and weaves its way along, tying together the scattered and floating story lines, events and diffuse episodes. There is a story of 'mimi' (*I*) placed at the centre of the novel and subsequently interconnected with stories of other characters. Sequences of stories, episodes and even treaties move from an apparently local setting (perhaps Tanzania or Africa) to a global one. The main character, 'mimi', who is shown to be on the move, travels from an ambiguous starting point to an unknown destination to accomplish a mission to discover the *magic gazelle* (truth?) that may ultimately lead him to the *second redeemer* who is to save this world from annihilation.

There is also the story of 'babu', mimi's grandfather, who is bent on conserving the African tradition. The story is about *Ego* (mimi himself), *Id* and *Superego*, all of whom are economic experts sent by their government to investigate the collapse of the industrial sector in the Third World. Another story is that of a naked woman taking a bath near a spring which is shown as a source of inspiration and motivation for 'mimi' to accomplish his mission of discovering the meaning of life, death, and truth, and finally of meeting the second redeemer.

There is also a story about the search for the magic gazelle, the incarnation of a woman or the elusive truth itself. The gazelle is guarded by a powerful chief who, in order to win it, gives 'mimi' three impossible tasks, namely to move the mountains, to till a dry piece of land in a place where there is no water, and to

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beneficiaries of the oral genres, and there is no doubt that the epic and its hero are the predecessors of the African novel and its central characters. (Cited in Mazrui and Mphande 161)

retrieve King's lost pipe swiftly from a distant place. 'Mimi', with the help of prophets and a follower, succeeds in getting the gazelle but because of its elusiveness cannot retain it.

There follows a dialogue about the increasingly frequent practices of womanizing and corruption which takes the form of a confession made by an unnamed character to a priest. The final two chapters are devoted to preparations for, and the actual occurrence of, a 'grand dance' (*ngoma kuu*), the carnival and its aftermath. Though painfully, Africans at last dance in their own style, succeeding in attracting others to its recognition, and thus implying hope in the grand finale. Embedded in all these plots, stories and incidents, however, are the author's treatises on the inefficacy of the philosophical and scientific outlooks of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche.

Obviously, there is always a sense of conflict in any work of art aiming at breaking away from established norms<sup>3</sup>, which in the case of *Nagona* takes the form of a *robust realism*, which is now apparently undermined by a new trend which has more affinity with the contemporary situation<sup>4</sup>.

One of the new features associated with *Nagona* is the *fragmentation*<sup>5</sup> which is to be found in the narrator's voice, engaged in a kind of *self-reflexive* creative freedom through fantasies that challenge the *reality* of the everyday world. At the centre of the linguistic game, revealing images and events beyond rational

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<sup>3</sup> *Nagona*, with all signs and intent, is such a work.

<sup>4</sup> I have argued elsewhere (See *Khamis 1999*) that [...] the liberalization policies and openness brought about by post-cold war conditions have created an opportunity for literary artists in Tanzania to explore other settings both artistically and thematically. Not only have both the older as well as the newer breed of Swahili authors started to muse over artistic adventurism but they have also grasped the opportunity to revisit their role in society. Instead of being merely passive defenders of a nationalist agenda, they are becoming increasingly eager to venture into forbidden territory or simply to choose to no longer glorify what is in fact shameful. They have lost interest in the narrow sense of what Said (1993: xxvi) calls the *narrative of emancipation*, but they have begun to expand the range of their criticism and to concentrate on the more depressing and frustrating internal situation. In his *Creative Writing in Swahili* (1985: 24) Kezilahabi himself provides a critical observation about the Swahili realist novel as being, in his opinion, the least developed of the genres, which had started with the existence of an over-determined primary text that dislocated the balance between illusion and reality. According to Kezilahabi, Shaaban Robert provided a good starting-point, but the advent of half-baked socialist principles gave it a weak first-brick layer. The idealistic, one-dimensional hero, who seeks an imaginary enemy, persists from 1967 (this is the year of the inception of Azimio la Arusha) to the 1980s. The hero, after pruning away the feelings and cultural elements from his revolutionary spirit, is seen fighting imperialism with his bare hands. The most radical seek to solve economic problems through the barrel of a gun. Oversimplification of the human character combined with social class lines is both the model and a major setback. The writer has dreamt up names for the characters, has slotted them into one of the social classes, and has then moved them around to create conflicts based on class struggle within a framework of historical materialism. In the end, predictably, the proletariat wins.

<sup>5</sup> We are here using the term *fragmentation* not necessarily in the postmodernist sense, but only as a major feature to markedly distinguish *Nagona* from other Swahili realist novels.

power, resides the problematic relationship between the *fragmented self* and *society*. The fragmented self epitomized as a broken identity, the identity that is otherwise ideally seen as being autonomous, integral and continuous, but now more and more threatened by an all-powerful hostile post-colonial situation and exacerbated by global tendencies. Nothing holds any longer in a world that has lost its *morality*, and hence there are a number of subsequent ramifications. As a result of the falling-apart of the 'balance of power' and the diminishing role of the contesting philosophies and ideologies in the cold war situation, nothing is dependable:

What you see in this circle is a small group of people who were argumentative about the search for the right way. That one over there is Plato, and that is Socrates. This is Aristotle. That is Hegel. Here is Darwin and those near you are Marx and Freud. And this one is Nietzsche ... All of them sang dance-songs but could not remain at the center of the circle, the source of light; the navel erupted and there resulted a hole into which the next generation fell (15) ... All the heroes have been buried on this hill; here! What you see here as a cave is said to be the grave of Jesus. That heap of clay over there is Muhammad's. That place you are standing on is near Marx's grave and that one over there is Socrates'. You know these cows of ours here, have no respect for prophets. They never stop eroding these graves with their hooves and knock them down with their horns. Marx's grave has been so eroded that it is about to disappear. And the dogs also have no sense of reverence. There is not a single day that passes without the dogs urinating on these graves. [...] It is said that they leave their marks so as not to lose track of their way back ... An amazing thing is that thieves, gangsters, the destitute, the blind, sodomites and lunatics are the ones who visit here every year to clean up the graves ... (19). (*My translation*)

In *Nagona*, Kezilahabi sees the auspiciousness of the African dilemma as situated beyond the moral injunctions of Senghor, Kaunda, Nyerere and the like<sup>6</sup>: not from utopias based on emotions, ethics and humanity, but from existential and phenomenological experiences in which man is obliged to shape his own destiny and to perceive his world in its harsh realities. Thus, existentialism in *Nagona* is expressed in a complex combination of images, allusions and symbols drawn from natural, social and cultural spaces in objects that signal the main character's tendency to pay attention to 'externality' rather than inner self-images, allusions and symbols that are made to flash and pass by in a succession, as perceived by 'mimi'. The whole set of tropes contrast one another and contravene against the natural and logical law and order of things. In fact, the whole world of *Nagona* is unrealistically real, jumbled up and incongruent – trickling by in an amorphous and ephemeral state: the roaring of the river that is heard but not seen, a black boulder jutting out amidst emptiness.

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<sup>6</sup> See Kezilahabi (1985: 278–284).

The coughing of unseen beings, trees laughing, the main character's sense of being walloped on the buttocks and back, the lingering silence suddenly broken by laughter and discordant reading sessions staged by invisible people (1). Grass-thatched and dilapidated houses, a dusty main road and decayed books. A corpse engulfed in darkness holding the Bible in one hand and the Koran in the other. A weird cat (a mythic icon?) supposed to be the guard of death (2–3). A garden with white slippery light-emitting flowers and fruit impossible to harvest (13). A group of famous philosophers, biologists, sociologists and psychologists resurrected (15)<sup>7</sup>. Such bizarre images and allusions assault the reader's perception constantly. The idiosyncratic and sometime hideous manner in which the writer describes his world is geared at creating an 'abhorrence' if not an 'abomination' of the status quo. A revolution is tacitly hinted at towards the end of the novel<sup>8</sup>, where the author symbolically asserts that in order to re-discover and find their 'identity', Africans must dance in their own style, however haphazard, probing and painful it may be. It is only through this that the world will reciprocate and recognize them favorably:

When everything was ready, it was our turn to enter the circle. It seemed that the spectators were looking forward to seeing what the dance of lunatics was going to be like. The spectators started to laugh when they heard the whistle for starting the dance and the voices that sang discordantly. Suddenly, the whole atmosphere burst into laughter. We sang ... *We have come to dance the 'zeze' dance. The dance of 'zeze' is the dance of disorder. We are putting a full stop to a century-old order. Laugh till your ribs ache. Laugh with life so that you can live it. The one who robs you of freedom is dead (God??)*... Slowly the spectators started to shake their heads and after a short while, they found themselves dancing disorderly. And that was the beginning for all of the troupes to play their drums and dance without following their initial plans ... We were all tired. We all felt piercing pain. Most of us held our ribs with pain, but we continued dancing despite all the difficulties ... (59) (*My translation*)

In line with the 'fragmented selfhood', 'mimi' as the main character is presented as having a vague and ambiguous identity – confused and greatly baffled by his environment. Everything appears elusive for him – including *mwokozi wa pili* (a second redeemer) whom he has a mission to discover. Everybody and everything is shown awaiting salvation at the hands of the second redeemer. But the guise of the second redeemer is protean and quite vaguely described as descending somewhere in this world on the day of *ungamo* (a confession) or *ngoma kuu* (a great dance) – a great dance that is to take place somewhere on earth so as to save it from cataclysmic annihilation.

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<sup>7</sup> The whole novel abounds in these signs – every chapter, every page.

<sup>8</sup> Just a hypothetical ending, for this novel's ending is open-ended.

To fulfill his mission, 'mimi' journeys on probing, looking for the second redeemer, but sees nothing more than total decay and destruction. This arouses his skepticism about almost everything, making him more pensive and explorative about the second redeemer himself, God, truth (the magic gazelle), and about being an African and being a world citizen. He also muses metaphorically throughout the novel on the meaning of life and the meaning of existence. At the core of his delving questions is the 'fragmented-self' presented as *blurred identity* – an identity that is ever in doubt, especially in contradiction with the hostile environment and with the ever-polarized world of stark globalization. We thus see him from the outset as unsure of his own self, of losing his sense of time and place and of what he sees and hear. His faltering voice, representing the personal literary idiom of the author, is partly reflexive and partly inquiring in its tone:

Perhaps it was an evening, for the valley I was in revealed golden twilight. I do not remember having seen the sun or another person. Perhaps, it was through hallucination and obliviousness that I reached this place. Not very far away from the spot where I was I saw a river. In fact I just heard it roaring; I did not move near to see it for fear of snakes ... Whether or not that was the beginning of my journey, I am not sure. But I just felt exhausted. I saw a black boulder in front of me. I dragged myself to go and sit on it. Before I sat, I heard someone coughing. Scared as I was, I stood erect and started looking here and there. There was nobody. Still confused, I heard footsteps of someone walking behind me. I was startled. Behind me, I saw no one. Where was I? I walked hurriedly out of there. I heard the voices of people reading books. They were reading discordantly. Everybody was reading in his own way. There were neither people nor a school ... I started to feel a piercing pain in my ribs. I knelt down. Painfully, I started to crawl on my knees. I heard people laughing. I tried to hasten on. I heard laughter from almost every tree. The whole forest started to laugh at me ... (1) (*my translation*)

Another aspect of 'fragmentariness' in *Nagona* is found in 'mimi's narrative thrust interwoven with loosely connected and distantly interrelated chunks of philosophical and socio-political utterances articulated by 'others'. Thus, the narrator – in his fragmented self – embeds his personal opinions with fragments of discourses of 'others' not immediately related to his personal language, but which he needs to demonstrate their defects, virtues, barbarism and shortcomings<sup>9</sup>. Thus, in the words of Salami (1992: 59), the narrator constructs,

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<sup>9</sup> This is in line with Edward Said's argument (1978) that a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts is a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw. But rather it is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political ... power intellectual ... power cultural ... power moral.

deconstructs, analyzes and rearranges the real world's fragmented discourses in his own discourse. Here are a few cases of embedded discourses depicting the *politics of destruction* and *culture of fear*, silence, apathy, hypocrisy and death, the most revealing instance of the politics of destruction being in the padre's words:

Did you not pass into a forest? ... That is where the national library is. They decided to dump all their books there. They let them rot there and so trees have overgrown them. Those who pass there say there is a mystery. Writers are crying to be read so as not to die ... (5) (*my translation*)

The culture of fear is encapsulated in a scene of an isolated, deserted and hellish suburban town where silence reigns and people are rarely seen outside their dwellings, except for a peep through a window. Grass-thatched and dilapidated houses add a touch to the culture of fear through the depiction of the abject impoverishment of the people. Lifelessness is shown by the fact that 'mimi' sees no footprints even on a dusty main road. Or when a black cat is described as anticipating the approach of 'mimi' with a mixture of acceptance and rejection – thus running into a house when 'mimi' moves towards it. Myriad scattered wings of swarming white ants, symbolize imminent *massive death*. Even 'mimi' is terrified:

When I approached the town I was struck by the silence that surrounded it. I started to see the wings of white ants scattered everywhere. Few birds were flying here and there ... Silence reigned in this town. It was a small town with one main road that was open. There was not a single creature to be seen ... The main road was not a tarmac one. The wind had blown sand that formed small dunes. There are no footsteps to be seen. I walked as I listened to my own steps. When I looked back I saw something like a head peeping through the window of one of the houses I had passed by. But the head moved back quickly. In the middle of the road, the only marks left were of my own footsteps ... The first creature that I met was a black cat sitting beside a house. It was staring at me intently. When it saw me looking at it, it stood up. It stretched itself. It looked at me again and produced the only voice that welcomed me in this town. It twisted its tail as if it had understood and relied on me. But as I moved to approach it, it quickly jumped and climbed the wall of a house and went into the house through an open window. The window closed immediately after it went in ... When I turned back I did not see any one, across the road at the other side, I saw a window of one house closing slowly. Shall I run! No! My heart was throbbing, but I collected up my courage ... (2). (*my translation*)

Silence stands as a metaphor of death in *Nagona*. Images of silence recur with sinister implications. The recurrence is deliberate as the word 'kimya' (silence) is repeated six times – four times as a single word in one paragraph. The effect

is intensified by the juxtaposition of 'kimya', the relative time 'you have taken only one century to reach here' (4), the preserved dead body holding the Bible and the Koran, and the cat as the guard of death. Here is the culmination:

Silence reigned in this town [...] There was not a single creature to be seen [...] Inside (the house) there was darkness, but when my eyes had got used to it, there appeared enough light for me to see things [...] The whole house was full of books covered with dust. The ones lying at the bottom of piles had started to be eaten by white ants. The cat was still sitting on the body that appeared to be of a human being [...] Having stooped to look at it closer, I found it to be indeed a human body. Possibly it was smeared with oils to preserve it, for it did not emanate any stench of decay [...] Silence everywhere [...] there was no water here. The evils of one century have completely turned water of this country into blood [...] silence [...] *why doesn't she speak? Who? That woman.* She is not the only one [...] The people of this town never speak. The only person who speaks in this town is me, and perhaps one old man who lives near the river. Both of us are called crazy in this town. When they see us they flee. *Because you talk!* Because they think we don't know how to talk. *How do they communicate?* The language they know is that of silence. *Do they understand one another?* Very well. For a century now there has been no disorder of any kind ... (2-5) (*my translation*)

But a society plagued with silence is also a society engulfed in hypocrisy and apathy, a society in which nothing comes out of it but scarcity and want:

Silence. *What do people in this town eat? I see no crops anywhere!* ... Here they do not eat the kind of food that you know. Only the old man and I near the river literally eat and drink. I have piles and piles of food to last centuries and centuries ... *What do others eat?* They consume their hopes that they say multiply day after day [...] *Where do those hopes come from?* ... From dreams [...] They say thoughts shroud consciousness ... *Are those people dead or alive?* If death means absence then they are alive. Moreover, the life we know can be the dream of one person with many heads. There is no simple answer [...] Silence ... *I heard laughter on the way.* All the people in this town like laughing very much. They say it is the only way to overcome death, and coughing is a way of ensuring they are alive and existing. They cough even when sleeping, enjoying the sweetness of dreams ... (5-6) (*my translation*)

The creation of a character with fragmented selfhood and with an existential mission entails the use of language of the kind that would appropriately capture that effect. Such an effect must come from the manipulation of language by a conscious writer described by Kezilahabi (1985: 222) as an *onto-critic* – able to break through the rigidity of mummified metaphors, symbols and rituals by molding them to fit the contemporary African condition, seemingly a 'topsy-



turvy' one. Kezilahabi's idiom in *Nagona* is deliberately geared at imbibing such a role. Indeed, the characteristic strategies of such innovative fiction tend towards the aggressive disruption of language, private and recondite metaphors, 'aleotory' images, loose syntax and other idiosyncratic structures:

All this started like a joke and now it is a tragedy. The western tragedy starts at a tree and ends in another tree in a place towards the sunset. This tragedy affected more than half the world [...] A snake coming from nowhere entered the living room. Since then knowledge has been obscured and truth covered with mist. But some say that since then knowledge has been made naked [...] Finally I ended up being hanged on a tree on top of a hill with infamous robbers [...] I put a full stop after the last word at the end of a chapter. Now a new chapter ought to begin ...  
(26). (*my translation*)

Apparently such a language tends to be obscure through the incongruent analogy of its metaphors, as is the case in '*western tragedy that starts at a tree and ends at another tree towards sunset*'. Also the cohesive elements that tie units beyond the sentence are scanty. Hence, co-references and semantic correlation do not come off vividly. The discourse is rendered even more opaque by the frequent recurrence of words and groups that function as metaphors, symbols and allusions. Such repetition of words serves as a thematic emphasis on apathy, environmental ruin, exploitation, idiocy, hypocrisy and death in its many facets. Some of the repetitive words and groups are:

[...] ukweli (*truth*), mshumaa (*candle*), vichaa (*lunatics*), vicheko (*laughter*), angamo kuu (*the great confession*), ukimya (*silence*), njia (*way*), barabara (*road*), mto (*river*), paa (*gazelle*), ndege (*birds*), mti (*tree*), msitu (*forest*), milima (*mountains*), mabonde (*valleys*), duara (*circle*), vitabu (*books*), ukosefu wa watu (*shortage of people*), paka (*cat*), mkombozi (*redeemer*), ajali (*chance*), ndoto (*dreams*), maluweluwe (*hallucination*), uta (*bow*), mshale (*arrow*) [...] (*my translation*)

In the predicament that he faces in ascribing a generic categorization to *Nagona*, Gromov (74) delineates the folkloristic motif as one of the four stylistic plans whose culmination makes it problematic to identify the novel. Such a motif is shown to draw strength from mythological concepts and plots inserted into the narration, for example, the use of the '*journey motif*' common in African oral narratives. The heroic hunt undertaken by 'mimi' to capture the magic gazelle with a bow and arrows indeed comes from the repertoire of oral narratives. The overcoming of the four obstacles, a forest, desert, river and mountain, by 'mimi' look much the same as the task of an epic hero. The magic help given to the hero (mimi) by four mythical beings, namely the *Nabii* (a prophet), *Mtume* (a messenger), *Mfuasi* (a disciple) and *Mtenzi* (a doer), is normally one of the criteria of the epic.

Perhaps an expedient question at this juncture would be – why the folkloristic plan in the first place? A general answer is apparent – that is in African literature, as has often been demonstrated, the feature ‘orality’ is conflated with the written form to imprint it with ‘Africanness’ for authenticity<sup>10</sup>. Secondly, like Kezilahabi’s previous novels, *Kichwamaji* (1974) (*The Obduracy*) and *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (*The World is a Chaotic Ground*) (1975), *Nagona* leans, at least for its philosophy, toward the Western existential novel. The abundant use of ‘orality’ is therefore seen as a remedy in that it attempts to submerge, at least in its stylistic inclination, the influence of Western modernist and post-modernist novels.

That apart – the oral plots and mythologies incorporated in the narrative thrust in *Nagona* are not randomly inserted as if they were ‘fossilized pastiche’ – not at least in the sense of Mazrui and Mphande’s ‘*academia frozen in time and virtually closed to organic growth*’ (162), but rather as organically blended bod(ies) with the rest of the narrator’s narrative discourse in a way that is vibrant and full of vitality. Thus, though *Nagona* is written as a tale-like narrative with the voice of someone who appears to be speaking (Cuddon 1977: 954), it is by no means simple, for the voice of ‘mimi’ intermingles with other voices in a complex manner. It is, however, the folkloristic journey motif and the straightforward chrono(logical)ly tale-like narrative that act as a thread binding the story-line to some of the scattered episodes and incidental digressions, giving the narrative its cohesion.

The voices are many. The voice of a four-century old padre who welcomes and gives ‘mimi’ wine to drink since, in their town, century old evils have turned all of the water into blood. The voice of an old man who dips his hand in and out of a river that has turned into blood; an old man claiming that all his tragedy-depicting creative works have been thrown away, leaving only comedies. The voice of ‘mimi’s grandfather, who holds on to tradition and from whom ‘mimi’ often receives reaffirmation, guidance, encouragement and support to pursue his mission. The god-like voice inviting ‘mimi’ into a circle of dead philosophers and prophets. All of these are ‘intertextualized’ with mythological motifs from Ukerewe – (*the author’s home island on Lake Victoria*). The chase of an elusive magic gazelle with a bow and arrows by the main character, the reliance on the part of the main character on traditional rites, magic, witchcraft, wisdom and guidance from his elders (i.e., *features akin to the epic*) and the myth of water of everlasting health are testimony of this:

[...] Welcome! Welcome! Welcome and take a seat. We were waiting for you. (*A voice that was emanating from the light*) ... Put down your bow. A bow without my arrow is just useless. I distributed enough arrows to

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<sup>10</sup> This applies to African literature in both indigenous and foreign languages. Mazrui and Mphande (1993: 160) observe that as a result of ahistorical dichotomy between the writing West and ‘oralizing’ Africa, many Africans came to see the advance of writing in the Roman script in Africa as an aspect of the continent’s capitulation to European imperialist designs.

you all, but none hit the target. And I cleared the path but you found and trod your own paths ... You were lucky to have seen the chaos of centuries and centuries, but you never helped your colleague. Instead, you accompanied him to be beheaded. The first redeemer was only crucified, but you and the second redeemer were totally annihilated. I did not even have a chance to resurrect you (14) ... You have to accept your soul as it is. Do not think that your soul will be clean in only a short period. These people you see came here thousands of years ago, but they are still arguing with their souls (15) [...] (*my translation*)

Magic realism as employed in African literature is often seen as having as much affinity with the tradition as with the change that is taking place here and now<sup>11</sup>. Cooper (1998: 1) describes it succinctly as [...] fictions characterized by the powerful, restless reincarnations of myth into magic and history into the universal. [...] Magic realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites. It contests polarities such as history *versus* magic, the pre-colonial past *versus* post-industrial present and life *versus* death. Elsewhere<sup>12</sup> we have shown that a new novel in the making, spurred by both extra- and intra-literary factors, would often take advantage of the optimal condition for its thematic and stylistic change. In the creation of *Nagona* the external optimal factors are anarchic and surreal, having to do with Cooper's 'social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design' – the cloth from which the fictional magical carpet is cut, mapping not the limitless vistas of fantasy, but rather the new historical realities of those patchwork societies (16). At the heart of the social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design, lie both the micro- and macro-politics affecting third world countries. Roth (1982: 33) covertly describes it in this way:

[...] things that fill us with wonder and awe, also with sickness and despair. The fixes, the scandals, the insanity, the idiocy, the piety, the

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<sup>11</sup> In her book *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, Cooper (37) writes that African writers tend to reject the label of magical realism. One reason for this perhaps is that it implies a slavish imitation of Latin America. It suggests a denial, in other words, of local knowledge and beliefs, language and rhetoric; it seems to perpetuate imperialist notions that nothing new, intellectually or spiritually, originated from Africa. But, as I argue, [...] local context is of central importance in magical realist writing. Marquez was deeply influenced by the worldviews and ways of life of the mixed populations of African, Indian and Spanish descent of his tropical Caribbean zone of Columbia. Salman Rushdie's fictions can only be partially appreciated without a deep knowledge of India's religions and attendant politics. Likewise, the West African novels (*as well as the East African ones – my emphasis*) [...] are molded as constructed out of West African (*also East African – my emphasis*) cultural and religious heritages.

<sup>12</sup> Such a new Swahili novel is also exemplified by Mbogo's *Vipuli vya Figo* (1996)/(*Kidney Spare Parts*), Mkangi's *Walenisi* (1995)/(*Those are Us*), Kezilahabi's *Mzingile* (1990) (*The Circle*), Mkufya's *Ziraili na Zirani* (1999)/(*Names of characters*) and Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka* (2000)/(*When Grandpa Resurrected*) and *Dunia Yao* (2001)/(*Their World*). For further elucidation see Khamis (1999).

lies, the noise ... they are unreal but real, [...] and the power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere.

The intra-literary factors surface out of the need to find expression and literary strategies to capture the anarchic and fragmented external world – the surrealist world. *Nagona* therefore opts for fabulation, fantasy and ambiguity to accomplish that. However, its setting is mainly rural – hence there is less flux of the urban and modern hobnobbing with the traditional and the pristine – unlike Okri's *The Famished Road* (1992), where the 'tarmac road' serves symbolically as a two-way traffic for the flux of tradition and modernity. However, the fantastic and bizarre have in *Nagona* the same aesthetic effect and semantic role of emphasizing extreme poverty, apathy, neglect, bafflement, wonder, confusion, chaos, ruin, anarchy and death. In *Nagona*, for example, invisible people move and laugh for no cause or reason at all. Forests and trees laugh at 'mimi'. But this laughter is intermittent, allowing silence to reign, symbolizing lifelessness. Death in its many facets is envisaged in the metaphor of the oil-smearing preserved corpse holding the Bible on the one hand and Koran on the other. Death is also couched in an image of a town that cannot offer water to its dwellers, for all the water has turned into blood and in a town where people never speak and regard those who speak as lunatics. Still worse is that people in this town have no food to eat. They only survive through 'hope' in a place where there is no hope. But if in *Nagona* people can live without food but with hope, dead philosophers, psychologists, prophets and messengers of God can be resurrected and some of them may even move mountains, suck and vomit rivers or extend their limbs, miles and miles to retrieve the King's lost pipe. The effect of the portrayal of bizarre and grotesque therefore, goes on and on endlessly.

Occasionally however, we are made to see a remote village transformed through an overreaching infrastructure – an extending hand of 'globalization' placed to exploit whatever there is to be exploited. Such a structure would majestically but awkwardly stand in an impoverished environment creating the polarities of the tradition and modernity inherent in magical realism. Here is a scene in which three economic experts – Ego, Id and Superego visit factories to determine their performances:

When we came closer to the buildings we were surprised. They were beautiful buildings, all of them surrounded by pools of dirty water. It was difficult to gain access to them. They were all enclosed in a barb-wired fence and there was only one entrance leading to them, watched by a bony guard standing with a gun. Moreover, when we approach the buildings mosquitoes started to attack us (21). (*my translation*)

The novel as a generic term is thus an unstable and elusive form whose literary substance and structure are vaguely contoured. Its vagueness lies, on the one hand, in the fact that it shares with the tale, the fable, the short story and the novella, features of narration, story, characterization and plot in its spacio-temporal movement, and on the other hand, in its 'open-endedness', which

allows for the accommodation of history, philosophy, politics, sociology, psychology and religion. *Nagona* is therefore a new Swahili novel seeking to have a place in world literature by taking advantage of both African sensibilities and the flexibility provided by the novel as a genre. It thus deliberately co-exists with other members in the 'family', utilizing 'orality' and 'magic realism' to define its own 'uniqueness', generally as the 'African novel' and specifically as the 'Swahili novel'.

\*Said A. M. Khamis is a professor of African literatures in African languages with a tenure at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. He is currently engaged in a research project *Local and Global Aspects of Taarab: A Popular Music Entertainment in East Africa* under the umbrella topic 'Lokales Handeln in Afrika im Kontext globaler Einflüsse' funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Apart from this he is also researching on the Swahili novel and poetry.

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