

The Heterogeneity of Swahili Literature

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The *naming* of literatures has been traditionally reposed in the geo-cultural analogy. In consequence, we talk of established categories like German literature or Chinese literature as geo-culturally bound national literatures. But with the emergence of *new literatures* and new literary theories focussing on writings that evolved in former colonies, other ways of naming literatures are nowadays in use. These new ways defy compartmentalization, evade definition, and by corollary are not easily accessible to non-initiates (Ghosh-Schellhorn 1993: 37).

The term *post-colonial literature* for example, carries the sense of the aftermath or of the expansion of Western influence in its former colonies south of its centres. The term *third world literature* with its aggregate tendency started with a demographic emphasis, only later to acquire bad connotation in its currency. Or the terms *resistance literature*, *emerging literatures* and *new literatures* which are also expanding, but with a sense of *combat* or *infancy*. The list is long, but a common and salient characteristic in them is the 'totalizing embodiment' which presupposes both convergence and divergence.

For a long time now the term Swahili literature has been used with this totalizing tendency. This has been made possible by the elastic nature of the term. The word Swahili refers both to the narrow sense of regionalism and provincialism and also to the wider sense of supra-ethnic and cosmopolitan milieu of East Africa. Is the term 'Swahili literature' then as homogeneous as it seems to be? This is the question we intend to answer in this paper by re-examining the term 'Swahili literature' with an aim to show that there has never been a clear notion of it that can be viewed along lines of relative homogeneity. We maintain that the notion 'Swahili literature' is composite, constituting of works produced from different historical, cultural and socio-/geolectal backgrounds¹.

Conditions for the formation of literatures that ascribe heterogeneity or ambiguity are not unique to Swahili literature. Mazrui and Shariff (1994: 87), though referring to literatures other than Swahili, ask relevant questions whose answers are not readily forthcoming:

¹ Note that the author prefers to use the terms "geolect" and "sociolect" to "dialect" to refer to new Swahili varieties that have evolved from expanding use of the language in recent times

The prevailing debate on the language of African literature is a good demonstration of the fuzziness of this supposedly inalienable relationship between language and literature. It is a debate that poses some important questions about the essence of both European and African literatures. What is English literature? Is it the literature of the English people? Or would it include other literatures written in English language? And need literature be composed in African languages for it to be African? Or would African authorship and African substance be sufficient to delineate an African literature irrespective of the linguistic medium of composition? This line of inquiry of course raises a host of other questions: Who is an African? Is there an African literary substance? Would the literature written by South African Boers in Afrikaans be regarded as African?

And in the same vein, Topan (1968: 161) asks pertinent questions closer to the core of our topic. These questions are not simple, either:

Is Swahili literature that literature written only by the Waswahili? If so, who is a Mswahili? - itself a controversial question. Is Swahili literature that literature that deals with the Swahili or the East African way of life? Or is Swahili literature (the literature) written by East Africans?

One of the conditions for the emergence of such an encompassing term as Swahili literature is the spread and acceptance of a particular language to cultures and locations where, prior to its spread, it was not accepted and used at all as a major language. In its movement from a centrifugal point to wider concentric zones, the Swahili language has never been homogeneous at all. This is true not only of speech, but also of samples of texts which approximate closely to a standard variety. Stains of colouration from Kiamu, Kimvita, Kipemba, Kiunguja, Kimrima, Kimtang'ata and now perhaps *Ki-Dar-es-salaam* and *Ki-Nairobi* are found in varying degrees in the discourses. Besides, the traditional notion of *primary dialects* is gradually being eclipsed. There are enough pointers now to the fact that a process of cross-fertilization is taking place, as imports from various ethnic languages percolate into Swahili, as this language is used for wider inter-ethnic communication(s). The varieties of Swahili hastily researched and documented by Lambert and Whiteley in the 1960s must, in one way or another, have transformed themselves into new varieties with degrees of modernization with variations in the ways in which how modernization is couched and expressed in Swahili in the different urban areas. This, however, does not mean that pure dialectal remnants are no longer in existence. They do exist and have in fact their overseers². Given a high degree of inter-ethnic mingling in urban areas, we can discern a more complex situation of imports in Kiswahili than we are used to accepting as fact.

² Read Mazrui (1992: 67-76) and Mazrui and Shariff (1994: 17-55) for more discussion of this.

But heterogeneity is characteristic of all literatures. Names given to literatures are mere labels that encapsulate some of the general features of a literature, such as the geo-linguistic, cultural and political. On closer scrutiny however, literatures differ as individual works and as groups of individual works. We ought therefore to categorize them according to their individual and group styles. Individual styles are defined from the point of view of the manner in which writers uniquely reveal themselves linguistically and in the manner they use their raw material to create and shape various forms and modes of art. In group styles we normally take the sum total of all of the characteristics of writings on the basis of either diachronic/synchronic criteria or thematic/artistic delineations. But group styles can also be geographically or culturally determined, as evidenced by the oppositions *American literature* versus *Australian literature* or *Nigeria (English) literature* versus *South African (English) literature*. It is on the group styles in Swahili literature that I wish to focus.

When one reads the works of (even) modern Swahili poets like Nassir (1974), Abdulla (1973) and Nabhany (1977), one immediately notices that they are enclosed in a geo-literary contour of their own as compared with the works of Mohamed (1980) and of Khatib (1982; 1988), which represent a different contour altogether. The differences between these two groups can be seen at various literary and linguistic levels. The present constraint on space does not, however, permit a full account of the massive contrast. Suffice it to summarize the situation in the following way.

From Pate, Lamu and Mvita (Mombasa) we have a very strong poetic tradition whose origin can be traced as far back as for as the 17th century. These zones seem not to offer much when it comes to Swahili prose. Why is this the case? This is certainly a research question - however, one of the reasons envisaged is that Swahili prose is more strictly subjected to the dictates of the prevailing norms than Swahili poetry. Swahili poetry, especially from Pate, Lamu and Mvita, who achieved a high degree of excellence, has with time, come to form its own 'poetic rules and norms' which up to this day are generally accepted as 'standard'³. Swahili poetry is thus (as the statistics show) found to be written and published with more provincialisms compared to prose. Swahili prose is a new genre in Swahili literature, which has emerged and established itself along with Western education and with the creation of a standard form of Swahili. This must have had a very serious repercussion on Swahili prose. It is more difficult to publish a novel or a play which shows laxity in the demands of 'standardness' compared with publishing

³ Mazrui (1992: 71) emphasized this point this way [...] With the spread of the religion (Islam) came a new scholastic tradition, and the Island of Lamu on the northern coast of Kenya established itself as the seat of Swahili-Islamic learning. For this reason, the Swahili dialect of Lamu gained prominence as the dialect of 'high culture', profoundly affecting the Swahili religious and poetic, discourse especially in Kenya. This compares with Latin as a language of literature and Rome as center of classical tradition in Europe in the Middle Ages.

a poetry anthology⁴. This imposition has perhaps undermined the prospects of some of the would-be novelists, who prefer to shun a strict purity in the use of a standard language, which is thought to make Swahili prose and poetry stale and stunted⁵. Any literary artist feels comfortable in using an 'idiom' that best captures, not only his or her cognitive but also emotional and psychological awareness; it needs to be an idiom that can accommodate and conceptualize not only the external world but also the inner spiritual and psychological one. Such a cumulative build-up of the experiences of individual writers who emerge from different milieu set apart historically, socially and culturally needs first and foremost, be studied in comparative terms and not to be brushed off as not conforming to a standard variety. A comparative approach to individual and group styles in Swahili literature is more objective and realistic. This is true of Swahili writers from the coastal area as it is of writers from mainland Kenya and Tanzania. They all necessarily tend to tap the cultural, linguistic and other resources of their immediate proximity before they reach out for what is more remote.

Apart from Abdulla's anthology, *Sauti ya Dhiki*, (*The Voice of Agony*) 1973, which is politically laden, poetry written in Pate, Lamu and Mombasa has been largely phenomenal, didactic and moralistic. But why? The answer cannot adequately be given in a paper of limited length such as this. What needs to be stressed here, however, is the fact that even in a highly politicized poem like Abdulla's *N'shishiyelo* (1) the linguistic and compositional techniques remain essentially *Mvitan*, distinctive from all other group styles. The poem *N'shishiyelo* is very representative of the *Mvitan* school, marked by a certain degree of sound contrast such as *n'shishiyelo/n'nalolisisitiza*, *utungu/uchungu*, *aswilani/asilani*, *katwaani/kataani*, *moya/moja*, *nde/nje* (p1). It also exhibits contrast in contractions like '*ndu/ndugu*', '*kwetewa/kuletewa*', '*wanati/wananchi*', '*Mn'gu/Mungu*' and '*natetema/natetemeka*'. There are also many words that contrast shapes with their equivalents in the standard variety such as *burangeti/blanketi*, *pisa/pita*, *wangi/wengi*, *lilo/hilo*, *mwendani/ mwandani*, *hini/hi-i*, *kattu/kat-u*, *wingine/wengine*, *apawapo/apewapo*, *yakwe/yak-e*, *yiyo/hiyo*, and *tamma/tam-a*. Some grammatical contrasts can also be found. For example, the copula {*i*} contrasts with {*ni*} and the compressed pronominal/conditional form {*hi-*} in *hinena* with {*niki-*} in *nikinena*. A copula plus -a of relationship compound form {*nda*} in '*nda kuumiza mtima*' compares with {*ni ya*} in '*ni ya kuumiza mtima*', the plural *nyoyo* with *mioyo*, and the old perfect marker {*-ile*} in '*atwambizile*' with {*-li-*} in *alitwambia*. And the use of foreign words which are not in currency in the

⁴ This is not to say that it is easier to publish Swahili poetry than prose in East Africa. We emphasize the fact that a list of the poetry anthologies published to date is indicative of more violations of 'standardness' compared with the lists of Swahili novels and plays. Prose is therefore more subjected to the dictates of standard form than poetry.

⁵ Prose is therefore more subjected to the dictates of standard form than poetry. See Khamis (1992).

standard variety (e.g. *menibaidisha/menitenganisha*, *bilhaki/kwa haki*, *simiti(ni)/saruji(ni)* and *aili/laumu*).

Swahili literature in Kenya has generally been characterized as being apolitical compared to that in Tanzania. The reasons may lie in the fact that these two countries have, in the post-independence era, evolved differently in terms of the philosophical models they have chosen for their economic, political, social and cultural development. Mkangi is one of the few Kenyan Swahili novelists whose works are politically inclined. Stylistically, Mkangi tends to mix Swahili with imports from his mother tongue and sometimes ignore the rules of grammar of standard Swahili. The reason behind this can be attributed to the need to capture local colour or to write in a style that is deliberately geared to subverting the oppressive rules of standard Swahili. The following items from Mkangi's two novels, *Mafuta (Oils)* 1984, and *Walenesi (They-Are-Us)* 1995 are a case in point. In *Mafuta* we notice sound, lexical and grammatical contrasts from page 1: {visibo vya soda}, {*wauparage* kwa haraka na *kujitundia*}, {*siku hii* haikuwa tofauti na *siku zengine*}, {*kuyagurisha* yale mafungu}, {*wamechanjamaa* na mchezo wa kamari}, {kukopeshwa *ni* wengine}, {kutofadhaishwa *ni* mtego ...}. In *Walenisi* we come across non-Swahili words like {kulima *kachatapani*}, {*bato la kizalia*}, {ungetaka *kupweya* au kutembea kwa miguu}, {*walinifyanda* lakini *sikufyandika*}, *alombwaye* ni nani, {kimya *kilichowazoga* wateja wenzake} ...

Zanzibar novels distinguish themselves from their counterparts in mainland Tanzania in many ways, too. Thematically, as Ohly (1990: 19) observes, Zanzibar novelists are not interested in the pre-colonial setting but, in the colonial, pre- and post-revolutionary setting in Zanzibar - the latter being still feudal but not tribal in its character. Swahili novelists from the Tanzanian mainland are preoccupied with traditional and town-migration themes and at times the Ujamaa theme based on the Arusha Declaration and 'Villagization' in Tanzania. It is interesting to note here that none of the authors seems to accept a portrayal that covers a broader national setting. The theme may be of national magnitude, but the limits of its treatment and actualization remain related either to the mainland or to the islands or at micro-level, even within the confines of Ukerewe/Usukuma or Pemba. The reason behind this is the fact these two parts of Tanzania evolved differently in a linguistic, historical, political, cultural and religious sense. For example, Zanzibar has always been a monolingual and 'one' religion entity. The Tanzanian mainland is a multilingual and multi-ethnic entity in which the two world religions, Christianity and Islam have almost equal footing. Prior to the revolution, Zanzibar was under British rule and under the domination of an Arab oligarchy at the same time. The Tanzanian mainland was mandated to the British by the United Nations. Earlier, Zanzibar also maintained relations with the far East, the Middle East, and the whole of Western Europe. The extent of that relationship prior to independence was less in the case of mainland Tanzania. In Zanzibar the policies of nationalization and the control of the major means of production were already implemented in 1964, soon after the revolution, three years prior the inception of Azimio la Arusha. For

example, land was then nationalized and distributed amongst the peasants, with the politicians taking the lion's share. Since Zanzibar consisted of two small islands, it did not have the problem that gave rise to 'villagization' on the mainland - i.e., the need to move villagers from their traditional premises to new places considered by the government to be more productive and therefore to have more potential for economic growth and efficient social services. Until the 1980s Zanzibar did not have the problem of people migrating to its towns. Zanzibar had four strong political parties before the revolution - including the Umma Party - a Marxist party. The Tanzanian mainland from the outset had started with one-party politics after TANU overwhelmingly defeated the smaller parties. All these factors and others contributed to the present literary landscape as it now is between Tanzania mainland and the islands.

Zanzibar novelists distinguish themselves in the rich idiom they use as a group style. Even in the seemingly plain and transparent language of Shafi in *Kasri ya Mwinyi Fuad (The Palace of Landlord Fuad)* 1978, and *Kuli (Collie)* 1979 one discerns a unique style, marked by the use of rich synonymy, idiomatic expressions, the formation of complex imagery, a tendency to capture the right tempo and tone in the text, the creation of euphony and music, and an inclination to build intricate nuances and the finest shades of meaning for the required semantic depths. The following is an example from Suleiman's *Kiu* (79-80) which shows the typical idiom of the Zanzibar novel at its best:

Miaka mitano ikapita, na ingawa wanadamu ni werevu wa majira, si mno kuziona siku zinavyopita. Hata saa walizojiunda, na kalenda walizozipanga, kaskazi zitokapo na kusi ziingiapo, miungo igeukapo na kuathiri hadi sahani za vyakula, na hata wajitazamapo viooni na kuona wabadilikavyo - yote hayo hayatoshi kuwakumbusha. Siku zinapita. Mara chache tu hutanabahi na kusikika watu wakisema: Ah! Juzi hapa kazaliwa, mara leo tunamtia arusi? Na hao hukakikisha kwamba siku zinapita bali hawazioni ... Kiu haipiti, na kuwapo kwake kwa milele katika kila chembe ya maumbile ya kiumbe ndiko kunakomfanya kiumbe huyo asizione siku zinavyopita. Tumbo hutaka kujaa, kukupwa na kujaa tena, mikono hutaka kushika, kuacha na kushika tena; pia macho, masikio, miguu na vyote. Mwanadamu yumo kuitosha kiu yake isiyotosheka na siku zinapita ... Kwa yote hayo, mwanadamu hakushauriwa ikiwa azaliwe au asizaliwe. Hujiona keshafika duniani, kiu imemtamirira.

In this extract there is a display of a linguistic game not only for adornment and ornamentation, but also vividness and clarity. It is important however to emphasize the utilization of the restricted geographical milieu as a source from which Zanzibar authors usually draw their images. Here, for example, we have the use of monsoon winds (*kaskazi na kusi*) whose history has affected the psyche of the people of Zanzibar deeply. The Indian Ocean has also been, directly or indirectly, a major source of authors' imagery, allusions and symbolism. We can see in the extract for example, a sense of the tidal wave in { *Tumbo hutaka kujaa, kukupwa na kujaa tena*

...) which connects with religious undertones of an abhorrence of material lust and lust for the flesh. Such a linguistic game, imagery and ideas cannot be said to be emanating from a general environment - they are as culturally specific as they would be in any other Swahili novels written elsewhere.

A contrastive and overview description of Swahili literature such as this may perhaps be regarded as raising a false alarm - the fact is however, it can be shown to have very negative consequences for the future of Swahili literature. The question of writing in the standard variety and/or in plain simple language has been very frustrating for some of the would-be or already established Swahili writers. To clarify and substantiate this, we would like to present the case of a Swahili playwright 'X' who wrote a certain play 'Y' and received the following report from the reader of a certain publishing firm 'Z'.

Lugha iliyotumika hapa ni ya kimazingira (??). Maneno mengi na tungo(??) hazifuati kanuni za Kiswahili sanifu (??). Na huu nauona kama udhaifu hasa iwapo kitabu hiki kinanuwiwa kusomwa na wanafunzi wa fasihi katika shule zetu(??). Kuna matumizi machache ya methali (??). Baadhi ya tungo ni mafumbo ambayo yanahitaji fikra ili kufahamu maana halisi (??). Tamathali zingine kama vile tashbihi, taashira (??), chuku, tashihisi n.k zinatokea kwa nadra sana. ... Kwa maoni yangu, kitabu (??) hiki kina udhaifu hasa upande wa lugha na maudhui (??). Kama nilivyotaja hapo awali, lugha iliyotumika haina mvuto (??). (*question marks used to make queries about the writer's use of language*)

It would be very difficult, of course, in a short essay like this, to provide evidence of whether or not such a text has been written in a standard or non-standard form of the language. However, we will select the most extreme case of what the reader might consider to be a deviation from the norm:

Bi. Tukaije: Bibi ... nd'o 'ivyo, nimekuja kukualika arusi. Inaanza kwa kutia hina. Sare khanga za kisutu na kanzu kitambaa cha hoshi kilichoingia mjini siku hizi: rangi ya feruzi na mapakupaku ya maziwa. Siku ya akdi tumeshaitazamia ... Ni Ijumaa baada ya isha. Basi kuanzia Jumatatu sherehe ya kumsinga biarusi ... Jumatatu na Jumanne yake na Jumatano arusi itaendelea mfululizo. Sare nyengine khanga za magharibi sampuli mpya. Jumatano usiku ... na mkasha wake kuamkia alhamisi, mapishi na maandalizi. Baada ya akdi, kuibia hapohapo ... Tuombeane Mungu Bi. Shoga, maana katika arusi zetu hatuwezi kutulia mpaka mtoto ahongere ... inapokwisha julikana mbivu na mbichi ...

As if this was not enough, the reader adds this when he/she gives a thematic evaluation of the manuscript:

Maudhui si mengi (??) na yale yanayojitokeza vizuri hayana uzito sana (??) katika jamii ya leo(??) (*question marks used to make queries about the writer's use of language*)

The question of a standard variety of Swahili apart - which may provoke an endless debate - the following reader's statements reveal the kind of readership we can expect from some of our publishers:

/kuna matumizi machache ya methali/, /baadhi ya tungo ni mafumbo ambayo yanahitaji fikra ili kufahamu maana halisi/, /tamathali zingine kama vile tashbihi, taashira, chuku, tashihisi n.k zinatokea nadra/, /maudhui si mengi/, /na yale yanayojitokeza vizuri hayana uzito sana katika jamii ya leo

Need a literary work be written strictly in a standard variety? Should it be fully laden with proverbs? Is it not a merit of a literary work to make the reader think before he/she can digest a certain imagery? Must figures of speech fully permeate a work of art for it to be considered as having literary merits? Is it a taboo to use some dialectal forms or foreign words to create a certain atmosphere, or infuse a certain mood and create a certain tone? We can only conjecture that the reader of the manuscript is overwhelmed by the specific and culturally bound images because he/she is also not aware of what is happening in his/her immediate surrounding. The question of free sex especially among young boys and girls (which by the way, only forms the surface meaning of the play) is definitely a very serious theme of our time. If however, we take this problem in its wider perspective and relate it to AIDS, then it becomes not only a serious problem of Kenya and Tanzania but of the world at large.

So what then is Swahili literature? It is, as we have hinted, a composite term that embraces all artistic works written in a standard form or a certain degree of standard form or in a mixture of standard form and one of the other varieties of the language. It includes any work that deals with East African themes that are regional and/or national and/or transnational in character. It may deal with universal or global theme from an East African perspective. This definition considers the fact that we can now use the totalizing method of naming literature and the fact that the Swahili language has not only become a supra-ethnic language but also a vehicle of a cosmopolitan culture which is still in the making, especially in our towns and cities. Schipper (1987: 280) emphasizes the heterogeneity of such a literature:

Literature as a semiotic model of human communication constitutes a heterogeneous, open-structured system, dynamic rather than static, conditioned by historical aspects ...

Taking the conservationist/liberalist debate on Swahili poetry further, Njogu (1995: 139) stresses the fact that there already exist accommodation and coexistence that enrich the two camps in Swahili literature. Though this essay does not confine itself to that debate, it has the dialect/standard Swahili divide as its main concern. Our stance finds a parallel in Njogu's compromising tendency which also seems to tie in

with Njogu's contention that the linguistic constraints and structural dictates of the genres compel writers to seek a mode of expression that would best serve their artistic and communicative needs. Literary genres demand a lot from the writer. They demand not only the observance and recognition of the inner structures of the forms and how the aesthetic rules operate within them, but also how they ought to change their faces. They demand to be nourished from both regional and national grazing grounds. They demand both relativist and universal treatments, often at the same time. The genres themselves thrive on mutual oppositions: contractions and extensions, cognition(s) and emotion(s), rhythm and music, personal and public metaphors and metonyms, symbols and allusions. They also dictate whether their constituents should move variably in quick tempo or with slackness, in sombre or in cheerful tones: everything that is connected with the control of lineation both at syntagmatic and paradigmatic planes. Especially at its present stage of standardization, the official variety of the language is not fully adequate to fulfil all of these demands. The standard variety is not static and therefore a writer doesn't need to operate within its restrictive and limited confines. There is no obligation to do so.

If we propose a definition that permits pluralism in Swahili literature, then insistence a pure standard form - whatever that means - will be very unfortunate and oppressive indeed. It seems to us that the Swahili audience has been robbed of works of good quality on the pretext that they cannot be published because they do not measure up to the criterion of 'standardness'. This is even more unfortunate when writers' manuscripts get into the hands of evaluators who are not professionally qualified to read them.

The implications of this problem are, firstly, that critics must be aware of the fact that Swahili literature from any corner of our countries is not and should not be written in the so-called pure standard form. Secondly, in the words of Tauli (1968: 13-14) [...], in the development of languages chance plays an essential part: the various linguistic changes depend on numerous extralinguistic conditions and psychological, geographical, social and historical factors which have no logical connection with each other. An important part is played by interlingual and interdialectal contacts and blendings. It would be absurd to assume that languages form logical, harmonious or perfect systems, or that every element in every language and dialect is the most efficient one.

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