

New Historicism Approach to the Swahili Novel

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the Swahili novel in the quest to show that the definition of the institution of marriage has changed and so there is need to redefine it. The paper seeks to explore the themes of marriage and religion in the last two decades. In our discussion, we base our examples on two novels; Paradiso (2005) and Kala Tufaha (2007). The aim of the paper is to show that marriage is a very vital organ of society and due to its varied interpretations occasioned by social – cultural and religious interpretations not forgetting changes brought about by globalization and technology, we assert that the effects to this institution are enormous. Marriage is key to societal existence and any change to it affects and threatens its existence and indeed the rest of humanity. It is with this understanding that we cannot separate the work of fiction and realities in this institution. Thus, the thesis of this paper is that we cannot interpret meaning in creative works independent of societal context in terms of time and place. In this paper the theory of New Historicism which recognizes historical contextuality is used.

Keywords: Marriage, New Historicism, Kiswahili Novel, Paradiso, Kula Tufaha

Introduction

Religion, tradition and marriage are intertwined and influence each other on many fronts. It is bold to also point out that Western religion and social-cultural issues in Africa are opposed to each other and the confrontations are enormous. Indeed in this paper we seek to show the importance of the institution of marriage in the existence of the family and society. All family values are germinated and passed over to future generations through the family and this makes marriage a very important institution. Whether religiously as evidenced in Ephesians 5:1-33 and as Chowdhry (2000) points out, the future of the family is based on the values whose basis is marriage. Literature is a product of the society and the mirror in which the society views its progress and marriage. Wellek and Warren (1949:94-5) say that literature is an institution that uses language creatively to mirror on the society. Though the Kiswahili novel is the work of fiction, the themes explored by the authors as is in the case of Habwe and Omar Babu in Paradiso and Kala Tufaha respectively; point of out to the truth that is in the society. Indeed Wellek and Warren confirm that the work of literature might not point out to the entire truth but to a large existent the content will attest to it. New Historicism asserts that we cannot interpret the work of literature outside the paradigms of the very society in which it is originated. The argument here is that, the way one generation views and interprets matters today, is not synonymous with how the next generation is going to see the same. This is so because as the society changes so is the way literary writers and the issues addressed there in. As Wafula (2004) points out, interpretations of literary works is done in the context of time and situation of the author but this should not be confused to mean every interpretation is positive and leads to success. What Wafula (2004) is saying can be interpreted on two fronts namely; that for us to see any change at all in the institution of marriage, we must look behind in time and see what has changed ; and two, how the change is going to affect fiction in the interpretations of this institution.

The caution is vital. It is important in the exploits of the varied interpretations that surround the institution of marriage to day. A look at the novels written three decades ago would show that indeed the institution of marriage has been changing as evidenced in the novel of M.S Abdalah, Kisima cha Giningi (1968) so much so that the presence of television programmes on the local channels in Kenya like: Wacha Mpango Wa Kando, Weka Kondomu Kwenye Mpango.(stop extra-marital affairs and put condom in your

programmes or rather use condoms) clearly shows that there is need to re-define this institution of marriage to rid it of promiscuity. The main objective of literature is its goal to awaken the society to the fact that its very existence is tagged on the values and issues around the society, and in this context the family. Marriage thus is not just an issue of literally creativity but reality as well. The author's experiences are what motivate the kind of writing they do and in the manner they do it. This paper seeks to answer the following questions namely; How is the institution of marriage being interpreted in the selected Kiswahili novels? What is the societal interpretation of Christian and Muslim intermarriages in the selected novels? and lastly, what is the interpretation of marriage in the changing world in the light of the selected novels? The objectives of our study is to bring out the various interpretations of the institution of marriage in the socio- religious environment in the Kiswahili novel, to explore the institutions of religion and tradition and to slow the effects of the varied interpretations via the Kiswahili novel.

In the exploits of the content in the selected novels, this paper seeks to state that all conflicts that arise from the family whether political, social, religious or marital, have their basis in the marriage. This paper is out to show that religion and cultural practice have vital roles to play in affecting the family positively and in dealing with challenges there in (Swat-ti-rum, sura ya 30 and Ephesians5:-2-33). In unpublished script, Muusya (2010) writes in reference to the youth in the changing society like this:- "Walisalimiana, wakapigana pambaya, wakabusiana na hata kunyonyana midomo pamoja na ulimi.. bahati mmoja baada ya kunyonyana na Mwasiba akanirukia na mimi... huu ni upotofu wa nidhamu miongoni mwa vijana au ni ustaarabu wa kizazi kipya?... Je, jamii iko tayari kukaribisha misingi mipya ya ndoa miongoni mwa vijana?". This quotation is translated thus: "They greeted, they hugged, they kissed and even licked each others' mouths besides tongues... luckily after one kissing Mwasiba she jumped onto me...this is immorality among the youth or is it a sign of civilization in the new generation? Is society ready to embrace new trends of marriage among the youth?" The above citation is evidence that a lot has changed in the way courtship and marriage is viewed and that the youth are alienated due to the Western culture and influences and this kind of conflict in the institution of marriage suggests the fact that change is happening. There is disillusionment and confusion in the marriage institution with the passage of time. Indeed New Historicism asserts that an era in history affects the actions of the societal members and the way they view change; the same has effects on the future interpretations and on the generations to come. Attempts have been done in the past to explain Kiswahili novels but not much has been done on the subject of religion and marriage. Many researchers have mentioned it in passing and among them is Waweru (2006), Momanyi, C(1998, 2001), and Ndung'o (1985). Their main exploits were on the subject of violence against women and general gender inequalities. Their areas of concern were never necessarily on the Kiswahili novel. From the selected novels we find women like Omar Babu's Kibibi owning a lot of property and so is Lorna in Habwe's Paradiso and this act negatively impacts on their religiosity and marriage. Although our paper is limited to the two novels that represent the thought over years of the Kiswahili novel, our conviction is that the paper offers direction and the extent of how the institution of marriage should be viewed today.

Theoretical Perspective

The paper uses New Historicism Theory from the American school of thought. The theory recognizes the context of society in the written works and says that literature and society are inseparable and in analyses of creative works. It also recognizes the importance of understanding the historical context in the analyses of creative works. It further recognizes the context of time during the reception of the literary works, present and future audiences and the objectives in the interpretation of the content as important during analyses. The theory also holds that the author's intentions have a direct effect on the interpretation of the historical background of the creative work under observation. Wafula, R.M (2004) asserts that one cannot adequately interpret a work of literature

outside the paradigms of the society from which it originates. The understanding here is that the way one generation views and interprets matters is arguably different from the other generation; thus time and space are key in the way literary work is analyzed. The way one generation interprets an issue is totally different from the way the future generation is going to interpret it. Caution should be taken however because not every interpretation is positive and leads to successful analysis.

Literature Review

A brief overview on what has so far been written on the topic of marriage in the Swahili world should be in order. Mulokozi, (1999:111) says that religions and traditions train members of society to accept and respect power that be without questioning because it is God given. He points out that this leads to authority train tendencies and gender segregations. Momanyi (2001) agrees with Mulokozi in her exploits in Kiswahili poetry and points to Holy scriptures; both Muslim and Christian, and her general observation is that a woman is disadvantaged in the institution of marriage. It is with this that the new historicism school of thought sees change as historical and that different moments in history characterize the way we view things. The varied interpretation of the institution of marriage is based on what values the society harbors at that moment in time. The cited works differ from the present paper for in this paper we see women divorcees when marriage does not work well for them. Lorun (2005) asserts that religious faith affects how people live in marriage in two ways: on one hand it aims at strengthening it and on the other hand, it brings in pressure from outside; from sermons by the pastor on imani faith to the congregation and faith visa avis the societal values that oppose, among others divorce. The characters of Salome and Musa in *Paradiso* (2005) and Joshua and Lona thus go contrary to socio-religious values. Though religion opposes adultery and fornication in marriage, hypocrisy, greed, adultery and lying among couples still persist in marriage. This observation by Lorun (2005) will go a long way in shaping this paper as it redefines the institution of marriage in the Swahili world.

Stark and Finkel (2000) say 60 percent of those in marriage still value religion as scholars institution. The truth about this is subject to debate as MC Cullaugh et-al (2000) found out. Other scholars like Dollahite (2004) see religion as affecting the family whether positively or negatively. They point out specifically the fact that children brought up in strict religious environment have a negative relation to marriage and are withdrawn. The effect of what they are saying is seen through the character of Lona in *Paradiso* (2005) whose life is ruined due to illicit behavior- though the daughter of bishop Joshua a very senior religious post. Just as has already been pointed out the statistics quoted herein are difficult to ascertain. However the other observations by the above scholars will strengthen our argument on the topic of redefining marriage as an institution using New Historicism approach. And as noticed by Runkel (1998), there is quilt felt by those that are put under strict religious care like Kibibi in *Kala Tufaha* (2007). Kibibi does not want to engage in any sexual relationships with Kimini before marriage because religiously, this is wrong. Traditionally however this would not have any meaningful effect as in some societies young girls are forced in to early marriage with the knowledge of everybody. Does religion therefore act to strengthen the institution of marriage as Cornwall (1990) and Chadwick (1995) found out? Erickson's holds a different view. The socio-religious relationships are conflicting. And as Chowdhry (2002) found out, marriage is a responsibility that goes with faithfulness, respect and truthfulness. His views are in agreement with Kibibi's in the *Kala Tufaha* (2007) who agrees to share her property and still honor and respect Salala her husband. There is only one explanation to this; that religion and values go hand in hand and viewing this through the character of Lona in *Paradiso* (2005) excesses need to be checked in order to maintain good values without necessarily justifying which side is better, (see Chowdhry 2002).

Ngozi (1990:55) observes that the attempt to interpret the institution of marriage in the exclusion of other family issues such as children and inheritance, education, cultural issues and general global changes will only further complicate matters of definition of this institution. That is why Mbele (1985) says cultural matters pitted against religious values would only result to alienation and gender conflicts and leave the woman vulnerable (see Chacha1980:43). The present paper borrows a lot from Ngozi's observation on marriage as an institution. Traditionally, society had certain values that guided marital life (Mulokozi 1999:112-3) whose values were taken from one generation to the other. Chiraghdin (1974:39) indeed confirms that girls were trained and prepared for this noble task before really engagement. We in this paper try to fit in what Mulokozi and Chiraghdin say so as to find out points of convergency or divergency as to we redefine marriage as an institution in the present day world.

Selected Themes Explored in the Selected Kiswahili Novels

In this paper we pursue the following themes on whose our interpretation of marriage as an institution is discussed in the selected Swahili novels.

- a) Marriage, religion and culture
- b) Tradition and marriage
- c) Marriage and change

The choice these three themes is purposive.

Marriage and Religion

In the pursuit of this subject, we looked at the content in novels which are Kala Tufaha and Paradiso. In Omar Babu's Kala Tufaha the character Kibibi recalls the advice given to her by her namesake concerning how to live honorably with her husband. A woman is supposed to care for, to respect and obey her husband totally and lavish him with love and recognize his role as the head of the family. Traditionally then the meaning is that a woman had no honors and was less human compared to a man. Indeed this is what she is told: "Mumeo mbembeleze daima. Akikwita mwikie labeka! Anaposema usimkatize, mnyenyekee siku zote. Wajua tena wanaume ndio wasimamizi wa wanawake!" (Omar Babu 2007:170) Translation: "Respect your husband always and when he speaks do not speak back. Any time he calls you respond with humility. Remember men are the heads of women!" In Chiraghdin's (1987) words, the Waswahili culture and Islamic religion go hand in hand and what they teach about marriage is one and the same. The same applies to Christianity as witnessed of Mango who is forced to divorce his other wives if he indeed aspires to be a church elder in the New Jerusalem church as is put in Paradiso (2005). Ngozi (1990) thus concludes by saying that the subject of marriage cannot be discussed outside the context of the family, culture and religion as they all have a role to fulfill in shaping it.

Indeed we read:

" Hii ni mila, lazima mila.. usipofuata ikibidi tutakuchapa viboko na tukuachie mkeo umzike mwenyewe." (Paradiso 2005:03). The translation of the above goes thus: "This is the tradition..if you cannot follow it we shall wipe you and leave you to burry your wife (alone)". Refer also to Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona.

Marriage and Culture

Traditionally, one of the roles of a woman is to nature children; wean them up, more so girls into responsible wives. Any failure on the part of a mother on this responsibility is met with harsh criticism. This is why Sister Ann in Omar Babu's Kala Tufaha (2007:09) is in shock when Kibibi is found pregnant under the watch of the experienced Ma Asha! "Iweje hukujua kwamba bintiyo alikuwa mjamzito?" (Omar Babu 2007: 09) translated as:"How come you were not aware that your daughter was pregnant?" Other than the dangers that a baby girl is exposed to, the citation above shows that curbing pregnancy

is the work of women, and it is a task they should not fail to carry out. As Wamitila (2003:33) points out, traditions are peoples experiences in life and give them identity and a mouth piece to air themselves out.

Marriage and Change

Probably Wamitila's (2009) sentiments bring out to the fore the underlying emotions in the changes happening in marriage. Wamitila observes that the main issues about marriage are based on the kind of interpretations concerning the traditional marriage and co-habiting that is quickly replacing the old set-up and that the church has no control at all over this subject. Indeed, Gicuku, (2011) observes that children have become more independent including girls. In Kala Tufaha,(2007) Omar Babu points out that children are more and more engaging themselves into sexual affairs at the expense of the religious and cultural set-rules. "...hivyo ndivyo uhusiano kati ya Tufaha na Salala ulivyoingia katika awamu mpya. Mwanzoni ilikuwa vigumu kwao kulikubali hilo lakini waligundua kwamba tangu hapo wote wawili wakipendana mahaba yalikuwa yamewakolea wakawa hujidhulumu nafsi kwa kujizuia." (Omar Babu 2007:140). The above is translated as below: That is how the love between Tufaha and Salala blossomed into another level. Initially it was hard for both of them to admit it but eventually they realized that there was nothing they could do about it but give in. They were both deeply in love with each other. The above demonstrates that more and more children, and more so girls are getting liberal every day and are defiant of traditions.

In Habwe's *Paradiso*, Sakina affirms indeed that times have changed. We read:

"Kwa kuwa Sakina alikuwa ametoshea kuishi peke yake alikaa Magongo", (Habwe, 2005:01): Sakina was now old enough to rent a house of her own; thus she went to live at Majengo. Sakina thus serves to confirm our worst fears that indeed the youth are getting more liberated and defiant of their cultural ties. Senkoro (1982) notes that ordinarily social life is characterized by matters such as parameters. This is what we deduce from the citations above.

Various Interpretations of Marriage

Marriage as Responsibility

This is evident in the novels we have cited in this paper , thus Omar Babu's *Kala Tufaha* (2007) and in Habwe's *Paradiso*,(2005) Bishop Joshua and the committee of the New Jerusalem church put pressure on pastor Michael to marry in order to be effective in his duties as pastor and for the society and congregations to trust his morals. We read: "Wajua mhubiri hawezi kuaminika kuwa mhubiri mpaka uoe.Watu wataanza kitubandika na wake za watu" Joshua alisema. (Habwe, 2005:44): You know for a preacher to be trusted as a servant he needs to have a wife of his own. Otherwise people will start speculating whenever they see you with another person's wife. In essence what Joshua is saying is that a wife is merely for winning the worshippers confidence; thus a PR figure and not a subject of faith nor for the job of a preacher. The church is also at a lose about this institution. About marriage, Hegedon (1983) sums it up well when he says that marriage in the society is a very vital responsibility. Pastors have the biggest task of ensuring fidelity, faithfulness and trust. Family values thus are necessary for all. Omar Babu's *Kala Tufaha* is emphatic about this role of marriage as responsibility and the issue of children for the continuity of the society. This is evident through the character of Ma'Asha whose barrenness always causes her a sore heart and when she realizes that Kibibi is about to abandon her child because is fatherlessness; this is what she says: "Kama mtoto hutaki, nipe mimi nitamlea mimi, sikujaliwa kuitwa mama kama si nyanya!" (Omar Babu, 2007:11): If you do not need the child, give him to me. I will bring him up because I was never lucky to be a mother leave alone being a granny. Children are no longer the subject of marriage but rather a burden; more so if they are born out of wedlock. The young mothers are even ready to dispose them off for the sake

of their dignity. But the story is still the same with the old generation as witnessed above. Kezilahabi, (1971) agrees with the authors.

Marriage as Power

The above responsibility of marriage is illustrated better in Paradiso, when Lona divorces her husband Mganga because he is poor and because they live in her mother's house. This change in traditional set-up upsets this marriage. It is no longer a man's prerogative to send his wife away but the one who has economic ability holds the power to terminate a marriage.

Habwe writes:

“Hiyo ndoa mama sitaki”, Lona alimkata mama kauli.

“Kwa nini huitaki hali umeitaka mwenyewe?”

“sitaki tu . sina sababu,” Lona alisema kwa ukali ambao kwao mamake hakumzoea. (Habwe, 2005:34). This is translated as follows:-

“Idont want that marriage again” Loona said.

“Why now when you desired it yourself?”

“ I just dont want it, I have no explanation for it.” Lona said with a tone that even scared her mother for the first time.

The power demonstrated here is two dimensional; ability to satisfy the woman in bed and the ability to provide for her. The above also demonstrates that parents are no longer in control of their children nor do they make decisions for them in matters such as marriage which traditionally was their mandate-choosing a man or a woman for their sons and daughters. Thus, in Habwe we also read:

“...huyo ndiye mwanamume wa kisawasawa”, (Habwe, 2005:35).

: ..that is the type of man that is desirable.

The above statement thus relegates the main purpose of marriage and family as the basis of the society. Women want proper sex not marriage and children.

Marriage as An institution of Hypocrisy

Habwe discovers this through his characters, Lorna, Musa and Salome who not only engage in extra marital affairs, but Lorna even goes further by consulting a witch doctor because she wants her husband of the church to be her slave in the home. She tells the witch doctor thus:

“Nitashukuru nikimweka kwangu katika kiganja mchezeshe kama tiara nitakavyo,” Lona alisema.

“Umekuja na picha yake?”

“Ndio ninayo,” Lorna alisema.

(Habwe, 2005:107).

Translation of the above goes thus: “I will be glad to put him under my spell and play with him like a kite whenever I feel like.” Lona said.

“Did you bring his snap?”

“Indeed, I have it.” Lona said.

The citation above is proof that witchcraft is practiced in marriage even with those that subscribe to modern religion. So unsure so much that believers resort to other means to make marriage succeed. And although Mango is a Christian, when his first wife dies, he

is forced to sleep in the same house with the corpse of his late wife in line with the traditions of the Budalangi traditions. Mango is told by the villagers thus:

“...hii ni mila. Lazima ufuata mila yetu hapa”. (Habwe, 2005:93) .

:...this is our tradition and you have to abide by it.

What this means is that for those who still pursue cultural ties, it is not an option; religion or no religion. This is a way of life.

Marriage as a Man’s Domain

Marriage is portrayed as a man’s domain and that he is mighty.

“Kama ni Mango kuja nyumbani ataletwa na Mkasa.... Labda masuala ya mashamba ambayo yeye mume ilikuwa lazima kuwepo.” (Habwe, 2005:01) The only time Mango would come back home(in the village) would probably be because of a case of land which traditionally required a man to be present. A man has accorded himself a superior role of managing wealth and matters considered trivial are the domain of a woman! Strobe (1979) says the African woman is dominated because of male domination which leads to segregation and gender insensitivity. Strobe notes that an African woman does not own property and a man is not at liberty to consult his wife on any issues at all. If he does, it has to be a man. Thus Mango tells his wife: “Ninataka ushahuri kutoka kwa wanaume”, alisema.“.....wewe si mume.Kwa hivyo usinishauri.” (Habwe, 2005:004) Only a man can advise me and you are not a man...you are not a man so do not advise me. Indeed A woman is not considered a grown up to speak wisdom to a man as shown above. So how can marriage then survive? Marriage is seen as a trope for a woman and where it is legalized to fortune her without limitation.

Conclusions

Our observation of the Kiswahili novel contents that religion cannot sustain a marriage. Adultery, fornication, cheating and use of witchcraft exist in this institution. This is evident through characters such as Fembwe, (Omar Babu 2007), Musa, Salome and Lorna (Habwe, 2005). This finding is contrary to what Chowdhry (2000) says regarding faithfulness, truthfulness and honesty as being the basis on which marriage is sustained. Indeed rape exists in today’s marriage. Fumbwe rapes Kibibi, his maid and even gives her pregnancy (Omar 2007). Social fabrics that kept the family together and preserved its values are no longer respected. Kibibi is initially engaged to Fumbwe’s younger brother and traditionally he should not have ruined her marriage. What therefore is witnessed at the country club where grown up men and women take other peoples daughters and sons for play mates is worrying about what the future holds for marriage (Omar Babu 2007). Nice on the other hand, in Habwe (2005) depicts one who has slept with men of all caliber and nationality and to her marriage is but a bother and so the question that comes to mind is: What is left of this institution called marriage?. Our concluding view is that there is need to re-define this institution of marriage in order to salvage it. The existence of single parenthood, unfaithfulness in the church and the fact that children are no longer under watch of their parents and society after attaining the institutional age, spells death for this noble institution called marriage. We need to invest and research further into role of marriage if we should save the family unit and sustain marriage.

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