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Growth and evolution of Swahili short story: a generic approach

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Abstract

Literary works the world over continue to grow in numbers and also continue to evolve and develop with the passage of time. It is a fact that different literary works manifest certain traits that identify them and place them in a specific genre. In order to be cognizant of growth and evolution of a genre it becomes necessary to understand generic features of the genre in focus. In this kind of study therefore the theory of genres would occupy a central position. It is apparent however that this theory seems to have been relegated to the back ground given that generic boundaries are now well known. Ordinarily therefore, researchers do not refer to it in their quest to analysis literary works. This paper interrogates this trend taking the position that the theory of genres has not outlived its relevance. In order to advance this argument this paper will revisit the argument surrounding this theory and also use it tracing the growth of the Swahili Short story taking the position that genres are bound to overlap with others leading to the issue of generic hybridity that clearly indicate that genres cannot be strait jacketed as they are dynamic entities.

Key words: Genre, modernism, post modernism, morality, hybridity

1.0 Introduction

The Literary Scene in Kenya and indeed worldwide has seen a phenomenal growth with the advent of written literature. It is a truism that all societies have an oral past. So, to say Orature preceded written literature. The significance of this truth is that written works to some extent can be said to be off shoots of Oral forms. In Swahili Literature this is very true of the short story and other literary forms like poetry.

Rollins (1983) has analysed earlier forms of the short prose that preceded the short story. He has isolated 'kisa' a short story whose resolution becomes apparent at the end, 'hadithi' a true account of an event and 'ngano' that refers to an oral tale. Some of these sub genres of Oral Literature were captured in the written form. Examples are *Hekaya za Abunuwas* and *Hadithi za Bibi Mahira* amongst others. Interestingly The written literature in as far as the short story is concerned did not depart entirely from the oral tradition of the preceding sub genres thus an oral/written interface became inevitable thus underscoring the need to use a generic approach to highlight the growth of the short story genre in Kiswahili. What is the Swahili Short story is as defined from a generic perspective? How is it best classified? Is it by clustering short forms and classifying them as short stories or focusing on attributes? These are some of the issues that will be addressed by this paper.

2.0 Literature Review

Msokile (1992) Examines key issues in the short story genre; the question of ideology, style and thematic issues. He also makes a comparison of written and oral stories. In as far as his work is concerned the point of intersection will be on style since this aspect correlates with generic issues.

Evans (1977) sheds light on an important aspect of the short story. He Comments on the fallacy that a short story is a shortened novel. He points out that a short story writer has from the onset decided on the genre that he will use to express himself. It is not that he is deficient of thematic or structural issues as some would imagine. The issue of length is an inescapable aspect when focusing on generic issues.

Kibera (1988) agrees with Evans (ibid) in regard to the issue of length in the short story and in addition points out that this aspects calls for special skills from the author to enable him navigate the issue/s he is tackling. This paper is in agreement with this position.

Reid, (1970) is of the opinion that the definition of the short story is hazy. He re-echoes Poe's position on the unity of impression as a cardinal quality of the short story. Thus;

The chief formal property of the short prose tale "is unity of impression", which he regarded as a product of conscious artistry; the author first "conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, and then devised an appropriate narrative vehicle for conveying that.(54)

It is a fact that artistic unity is very important in any type of literature however it is quite pronounced in the short story since the writer does not have an opportunity of digressing like authors do in longer works.

Lohaffer and Clarey (eds) (1989) have brought together many critics who have critiqued the short story from different perspectives. Among the issues discussed in their work in regard to this genre are: problems of definition, the genre question, recalcitrance in the short story among other issues.

Mwanzi (1995) doctoral Thesis entitled "The Style of the Short Story in Kenya: An analysis of short stories by Ngugi, Kibera and Ogot", is a significant contribution in the study of the short story She analysed stylistic issues and came to a generalised opinion of these genre from the Kenyan Perspective.

3.0 Theoretical Perspectives

Theory of genres have to do with the attributes associated with different literary forms. The most obvious is length. Referring to short stories Friedman (1989) explains

..it follows that shortness is the differentiating trait which allow us to subdivide the class into at least two subclasses, according to length-short and long. Also, since the facts seem to warrant it, we can add medium (for the novella) (pg 15)

The criteria of length as a distinguishing feature have to do with how many words make up a short story—an old debate that was originated by Edgar Allan Poe and taken up by others who varied his approach.

It is notable that this approach of classification is tedious and unrealistic and can only generate controversies. For this reason, it is better to rely on a cluster of attributes that identify the short story.

This subject-of generic identification of the short story has attracted many scholars a notable one according to Friedman (1989) being Bonheim who analysed ‘six hundred short stories and three hundred novels as a way of testing out short story theories’ (pg 18) In focusing on the attributes of the short story Wright (1989) observes:

A definition satisfactory to all, agreeable to formalists structuralists, post structuralists, feminists, individualists, and all the various splinter groups, is impossible..... A definition of the genre as a cluster of conventions, may facilitate not only discourse among critics but continuing insight into the art itself (pg 53)

From the foregoing arguments it is clear that in order to place the short story in its proper generic space it is better to establish the attributes that define this genre. At the same time, it is important to realizing that demarcating the short story is a challenging exercise because the boundary is porous as expected because genres can grow and evolve.

The attributes of the Swahili short story as elaborated by Msokile (1992) are as follows:

- i) A narration of one episode that is set within the culture of the Kiswahili Language
- ii) The episode should be narrated in a brief manner and should not have many characters one or two should be enough.
- iii) a short story should be a creative work. In this case creativity does not mean a fabrication of lies but instead should be events drawn from real life situations.
- iv). a short story should not have a wide domain
- v). a Kiswahili short story should not have a complicated narration
- vii) The setting should not be complicated (pg 36)

These definitions do not vary from others made by different experts. Other critics have elaborated on some of these issues. Prose (2000) for example on the issue of length he remarks thus:

We know that a short story is a work of fiction of a certain Length, a length with apparently no minimum. An increasing Number of anthologies feature stories of no more than a humble page, or a single flashy paragraph and one of the most powerful stories in all literature, Isaac Babel’s Crossing into Poland, less than three pages long, is capacious enough to Include a massive and chaotic military campaign, a soldiers Night of troubled dreams, and the report of a brutal murder. Similarly, Cynthia Ozick’s ‘The Shawl’, is only four pages long. But nearing the opposite end of the spectrum Robert Boswell’s ‘The Darkness of Love’ is over forty pages long (pg 3).

It is therefore clear that the aspect of length in the short story cannot be fixed on its own it must be viewed together with other aspects. And apparently it is a factor that is very pervasive because it affects other external factors such as plot, setting and narration.

Apart from structural issues stylistic issues are also significant. In regard to style this paper will focus only on the issues that create a distinction between the written and the Oral short stories.

4.0 Discussion and Results

The growth of the Swahili Short story can be divided into two significant epochs. The first phase is that of the written oral tales, the second is that of the modern and post modern short stories whose creations were original and not the rendering of oral narrations into the written form. Some of these short stories have broken the prescriptive rules that define this genre and hence have evolved into what some critics would define as post modern short stories.

It can be rightly said that the Oral past of Swahili literature is the precursor of Modern Swahili Literature. Knappert like Rollins (op cit) has also commented on Swahili Oral Traditions. Both are in agreement that Swahili literature has a rich literary past that has been the spring board of the current Swahili Literature. Some of the sub genres that he has alluded to are; the Tales, Songs proverbs and the epic. The one that comes closest to the short story is the tale.

The significant issue herein is that these Oral forms were published and therefore they reached a wider audience and also modern short stories developed and later through interfacing with oral forms in the sense of involving features that were hitherto the preserve of the oral form have created hybrid forms that can be viewed as postmodern stories. An analysis of a few selected written oral tales, modern and post modern short stories will illustrate the growth of this genre. A generic perspective will create more luminance to the issue as it will highlight how stories have evolved.

4.1 Written Oral Tales

Swahili Literature is replete with written Oral Tales. The most famous is *Hekaya za Abunuwas na Hadithi Nyingine*, (*The Stories of Abunuwas and Other Stories*) *Lila na Fila* (*Good and Evil*) *Hadithi za Esopo*, (*Aesop's Fables*) *Si Watu?* (*Are they People?*), *Hadithi za Bibi Mahira* (*Stories by Grandmother Mahira*) and many others.

It is notable that some of these stories were translated from other cultures and got assimilated into Swahili Literature. It is notable however that they have common underlying features. Some of these features are; use of animal characters, Super human characters, reference to an indefinite past. One such story is *Wafadhili wa Mnguto*. (*Mnguto's Benefactors*)

This story is about Mnguto and his mother. The mother was a widow who worked hard to ensure that the family had something to eat. Despite her hard work life was very challenging for the mother and her son. This disturbed her son so much that when he was grown up he decided to try his father's occupation-hunting.

One day he set several traps hoping that he will trap animals that can be used for meat. The following day when he went to check his traps he encountered animals that were unsuitable for eating. In one trap he found a porcupine, in the other he found a monkey. All these animals pleaded for mercy promising to help him one day and Mnguto forgave them reasoning that they would not be good for food. The last trap had trapped a human being! Mkumbo was trapped as he spied on Mkumbo's traps with a view of stealing his catch. He pleaded with Mnguto to forgive him. Mnguto released him only to be wrestled to the ground by the stronger Mkumbo.

The cries of Mnguto attracted all the forest residents. His friends came to his rescue. The monkey rained stones on Mkumbo, The porcupine hit him with his spikes. Mkumbo had no choice but to ran away. Mnguto now understood that a promise is a debt.

This is an oral tale. It has an indefinite beginning. Animal characters freely interact with humans.

It has an ending that can be predicated to the opening of the story. Clearly it is a moralizing story. Moralising stories characterised Oral Narratives. Typically, they would have a three-tier structure thus;

- i) A philosophical issue that will form the basis of a moralizing lesson
- ii) Conflict between evil and good. In this case between Mnguto(Representing Good) and Mkumbo(Representing evil)
- iii) Conclusion-Inevitably good triumphing over evil as was the case when Mkumbo was subdued by Mnguto.

There are many Stories in Swahil Literature that follow this trend including novels by Shaaban Robert, Ali Jamaadar and Ali Hassan Njama. There are also numerous written short stories that follow this trend.

4.2.0 Modern and post modern short stories-an introduction

The Swahili Short story has experienced a phenomenal growth which has been catapulted by the great expansion in the number of education institutions. There are very many Swahili short story anthologies. The stories that are not directly drawn from Oral Literature may display conventional attributes while others may have features that are associated more with Oral literature than written Literature.

For the purpose this paper we shall restrict the concept of modern short stories to mean stories that were freely created by authors as opposed to the ones that are rendered to the written mode from the Oral form. These stories will be the ones that have the attributes enumerated earlier by critics.

As for the post modern short stories these will be the ones that have the same attributes as the modern ones but have broken generic barriers by drawing thematic or stylistic aspects from the oral form. In addition, these stories deviate from the prescribed parameters that delineate the short story from the other genres in terms of structure and style.

As earlier mentioned, modern stories are the ones that are freely created by authors and are not Oral forms rendered into the written. These stories are not necessarily homogenous stylistically. There are those that are simplistic and tend to be prescriptive in nature advising the audience on what course of life to take just like the oral tales. Examples of such stories are *Hadithi za Bibi Mahira* (1991) and *Hadithi za Furaha* by Kingei. (2016) Others have broken the umbilical cord between them and Oral Tales and embraced modernity by discussing philosophical issues and leaving the readers to take their standpoints on the issues that have been raised, these are the majority. For the purpose of these work we shall analyse a few namely *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi*, *Shingo ya Mbunge*, *Jamila Mpenzi* and *Sadiki Ukipenda* . These stories manifests features that can be viewed as post modernist in the sense that they deviate from the established generic boundaries

4.3.0 Using the Generic Theory to analyze Modern and Post modern short stories

Todorov T. (2000) aptly describes genres thus:

Genres are thus entities that can be described from two different viewpoints, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual

texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification. (pg 198)

It is this codification that identifies the various genres in existence such as the novel, the play, poetry and the short story that form the basis of our paper. In our case we shall rely on the two approaches as we shall make reference to the generic attributes spelt by literary critics while at the same time we shall subject the stories to the set boundaries in order to appraise them from a generic perspective.

This study is in cognizance of Fowler's (2000) standpoint that:

Literary genres are dynamic rather than static entities-that they change evolve across time-is the single most important factor separating modern from earlier genre theory(pg232)

In tandem with these facts our study will analyze the short stories that respect generic boundaries before proceeding to critique the ones that deviate from the established parameters. This second category can be broadly viewed as falling under the tradition of post modern short stories. The so called dynamic short stories in some cases will have attributes that are associated with longer pieces of prose.

These attributes are many and varied. They can easily be highlighted by an analysis of short story that inclines towards Orality.

Among the many modern stories that make use of the Oral traditions is Balaawy's *Hadithi za Bibi Mahira*. The preamble to this anthology sets the pace for the prescriptive stories that unfold. we are told that Bibi Mahira a grandee was tasked with the role of bringing up her grandchildren after the death of their parents. Her realization that the social environment had the influence of impacting negatively on her children gave her the impetus to create these stories as a vehicle of advising them and counseling them.

All the nineteen stories in the collection have a headline of an idiom. The author uses these idiomatic expressions to create interesting stories with a view of shielding her grandchildren from negative influences from their neighbours. One of the stories is; '*Wajinga Ndiyo waliwao*' (Fools are usually taken advantage of by cunning people).

In this story a lazy villager takes advantage of people by pretending to be a witch doctor. He observes his victims closely and from these observations he is able to extract information about them and therefore appear to be possessing super natural abilities. For example, he observes the complexion of one man and concludes that he must be having a relative that has the same complexion. He proceeds to cheat him that a light skinned individual is the person behind his tribulations. The person believes him as he has no idea that the witch doctor has tricked him by observing him and drawing conclusions about his relatives.

The adage of these stories is that some people are cunning and we do well to be wary of people who promise unusual things as they could take advantage of the naïve and cheat them out of their properties.

The post modern stories in focus cross the generic boundary in three aspects; characterization, setting and length. *Sadiki Ukipenda* (*Believe it if you wish*) and *Mayai Waziri wa maradhi* (*Egg head the Minister of Diseases*) both have characters that have super natural abilities a feature found in oral tales, *Shingo ya Mbunge* (*The Parliamentary representative Big Neck*) has a broad and diverse setting besides having several well developed characters while *Jamila Mpenzi* is inordinately long for a short story.

In *Sadiki Ukipenda* Mzee Siwa has the magical ability of protecting his friend, Mussa from being sacrificed by his father who was a wizard. He magically transforms a banana stem into a 'person' who resembles his friend Mussa. He is laid on Mussa's bed while Mussa hides to watch the ensuing drama. In the dead of the night his father leads the purported 'Mussa' away while his son watches from his hideout. Without wasting time Mussa is given a death blow. In the morning a banana stem is found outside Mussa's house and coincidentally his father dies that very night. As neighbours theorize about the cause of his death Mussa flees to a foreign land scared of being sacrificed by his fellow villagers led by his own father- in order for them to achieve their evil goals.

In *Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi* the main character who is a member of parliament receives very surprising visitors in the dead of the night. His son who had died four years ago surprisingly turns up in his house. Together with him are emaciated companions nine in number who systematically take tea and bread. They later wash the utensils they had used before disappearing in the darkness and leaving the house owner flabbergasted. The two foregoing stories make use of magical characters whose abilities can only be explained from the perspective of Oral Literature. The issue of plausibility does not occur because the underlying motive is to convey an idea but not to create characters in a realistic perspective.

'*Shingo ya Mbunge*' has a diverse setting that is unusual of a short story. Characters set out on an journey to search for their member of parliament. They pass through very challenging terrain. They scale a hill and pass through a dense forest where they are attacked by jinis. They later emerge in a degraded landscape that is difficult to pass through before finally emerging before the palatial home of their member of Parliament. The author gains thematic mileage by the diverse setting that is rather unique for a short story because of its diversity.

Jamila Mpenzi is an interesting story structured in an unusual way. For a start it does not begin with the main issue. The Writer starts by reminiscing his childhood. The story is divided into nine sections and it is until section four that we encounter the main character Jamila. This style keeps the reader in an anticipatory mood as he awaits the unveiling of the main character that is the subject of the title.

All the stories alluded to in this section manifest growth in style and thematic concerns. Their typology becomes apparent when they are viewed from a generic perspective.

4.4 Conclusion

Some critics are of the opinion that the genre theory stifles the growth of literature. For example, Croce (2000) is of the opinion that:

Theories of genres, he claims, especially when codified into definitions and rules, impoverish artistic creation and criticism alike, inhibiting originality, setting up erroneous standards of judgments and belying the tendency to break rules and violate norms (pg 25)

This claim is disapproved by other critics who are of the opinion that boundaries are necessary. In order to judge a literary kind with its kind. Furthermore, when writers transgress generic boundaries there is growth. Todorov (2000) explains:

The fact that a work 'disobeys' its genre does not mean that a genre Does not exist. it is tempting to say 'quite the contrary' for two reasons. First because, in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law-precisely the one to be violated. We might even go further and observe that the norm becomes visible-comes into existence- owing to its transgressions (pg196)

These works commenced by relooking at the generic boundaries in regard to the short story that have been set up by critics. Thereafter an analysis was made of stories that adhere to these boundaries and the ones that transgress them.

Therefore, one can confidently say that the growth and evolution of the short story can be seen clearly from the perspective of the generic theory. This theory then is not an impediment but the looking glass that enables the reader to see the growth of a genre and in our case the Kiswahili Short story.

Some of the questions that this theory has answered have to do with generic purity. For example, is there a genre that can be said to be completely pure? And is transgressing generic boundaries retrogressive?

The answer to both questions is a loud no. From our analysis we have focused on the issue of length and structure, setting and characterization and in all these cases we have seen growth and evolution of the Kiswahili Short story. It is therefore quite clear that the generic theory is suitable in analyzing the growth of Literature it is not an impediment as some critics have claimed but a vibrant instrument that can enable a critic to observe the growth and evolution of the short story from many perspectives.

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