

## Emerging Trends in the Building of Characters in *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao* Swahili Novels by Said Ahmed Mohamed

**Manoti Naomi Moraa**

Laikipia University, Kenya

### Abstract

Characterization is a very important aspect of any novel. It is through a character that we derive our themes, characters of other characters and life skills. It is in this context that this article seeks to analyze the emerging trends or styles in the developing of characters in the Kiswahili novel by focusing on Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao*. This study had the following objectives; to analyze the functionalism of characters used in the novels and to find out if the character description is realistic. The research sought to answer the following questions; how have the characters in *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao* been developed? What is the functionality of the characters in the designated novels? Are the characters depicted in the designated novels realistic? The study used Deconstruction and Magical Realism theories due to their practical approaches, perspectives and analytical tools. Purposive sampling, which entailed critical reading of designated novels by Said Ahmed Mohamed and sampling the characters was done, guided by the study objectives. The data was analyzed descriptively since this was a qualitative research. The study findings will benefit other literary scholars, researchers and other readers of literature.

**Key words:** Deconstruction, characterization, magical realism, functionalism, reality.

### Introduction

Swahili novels in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are characterized by new features or experimental styles of writing. These emerging styles of writing in literature are marked by tangible elements of post-modern elements as stipulated by Gramov (2004). The novels have portrayed a departure from the previous tradition of novel writing in Swahili. Unlike the previous traditional Swahili novels which had a touch with reality and contemporary issues affecting the developing countries, the "new novel" is characterized by magical realism, intertextuality, unique plot and "new" character depiction which makes it hard for someone who is not learned to understand the novel (Bertoncini, 2006; Khamis 2003). Mwamzandi (2001) notes that most of these novels suits scholars with a background in the literature research theories.

Many Swahili writers have incorporated these features of postmodern writing in their works. For example: "*Mke Mmoja Wanaume Watatu*" (*One Wife Three Husbands*) by Said Abdulla, "*Walenisi*"; (*They are Us*) by Katama G. Mkangi, "*Babu Alipofufuka*"; (*When Grandfather Resurrected*) by Said Ahmed Mohamed and "*Watu wa Gehenna*"; (*People of Gehenna*) by Tom Olali. The "new" or experimental phenomenon of writing is becoming popular among many 21<sup>st</sup> Century Swahili authors when building characters in their literature works. This study concentrates on the emerging trends or styles in the building of characters in Swahili novel by focusing on Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka*; (*When Grandfather Resurrected*) and *Dunia Yao* (*Their World*).

Although the emerging trends appear to be the most remarkable phenomenon in the recent Swahili Literature, it should be noted that they are basically applied in the building of plot, characterization and themes. This study focuses on only one of these features of the "experimental" novels: characterization, and will analyze the emerging trends in building of characters based on S.A. Mohamed's two texts *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao*. The selected texts are deemed to

belong to the realm of the “experimental” Swahili novels. We will deliberately exclude the analysis of various stylistic elements of the texts written using the emerging styles such as the plot and intertextuality because they are not directly related to the topic of this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employed Deconstruction theory and Magical Realism theory. The theories are significant in helping us realize our objectives which include; to analyze the emerging trends in building of characters, to analyze the functionalism of characters used in the novels and to find out if the character description is realistic. Deconstruction theory was pioneered by Jacques Derrida (1973). Deconstruction is a technique of analysis that regards meaning as resulting from the differences between words rather than their reference to things they stand for. Different things are discovered by taking apart the structure of the language used and exposing the assumption that words have a fixed reference point beyond themselves.

Deconstruction is derived from the verb deconstruct, which means to destroy or deviate from the norm. Mwamzandi (1997) says that deconstruction as a theory aims at destroying all the boundaries which were held dear by the ancient writers or philosophers about writing in literature. Such boundaries include those between light and darkness, true or false, good or bad among others. The boundaries are self-created by people and can always be broken anytime. Carter (2006) believes that these boundaries are imaginary. People tend to favor the positive forgetting that the negative also exists.

Applied in the analysis of different literary texts deconstruction can have varied meanings. The main tenets of this theory that will guide this study are meaning, binary opposition and structure. The theory argues that every text can be interpreted in different ways depending on the context. Wafula and Njogu (2007) aver that because of deconstruction we cannot have the last edition of any literature work. Deconstruction aims at breaking the structure that was initially held dear by most people. Binary opposition (opposites) is central in the deconstruction theory and undergirds all the metaphysical discourse of language.

Magical Realism was a term that was initially used by Friedrich Schlegel Von Hardenberg 1772-1801 and later expounded by Franz Roh in 1921 (Christopher, 2006). Magic means mystic or a wonder. Franz used Magical Realism to describe one of the German's expressionist painting. The theory was later applied in literature by an Italian novelist, Bontempelli in 1927 to characterize modern fiction. Later on Magical Realism was embraced by writers in 1940s and spread all over the world in the 1970s (Christopher, 2006). Franz referred to the new realism magical instead of mystical.

Magical works of art or literature are characterized by the use of unique features that differentiate their work from the rest of the authors. It segregates itself from the reality that was used by most authors in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This is clear in their themes, characters, the context they use and the use of fantasy. Walibora (2010) states that Magical Realism should be understood as a method of breaking from reality that used to be held dear by

most authors. Magical Realism theory in summary has the following tenets: the use of dreams of fantasy, illogical descriptions and lack of clear boundaries between reality and fantasy among others. The two theories have been used in this article to complement each other so as to achieve the study objectives.

### Method

The data of this study comprised of characters from Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao*. The characters were identified through critical reading and analysis of the two texts and handpicking the ones which are relevant to the research. The research therefore selected the characters purposefully and analyzed them qualitatively. Mugenda (2003) states when one is using purposive sampling, it is important to handpick the subjects because one will only be picking the subjects relevant to his/her research. The results of this research have been presented descriptively.

The characters were selected according to the way they have been described, their roles and characteristics. The characters were then grouped according to their roles in the texts i.e. the major and minor characters. Only those descriptions that were in line with the current study's objective were considered. In the analysis, the researcher paid attention to answering the following research question: How have the characters in *Babu Alipofufuka* and *Dunia Yao* been developed? It's worth noting that characters are a vehicle by which authors articulate their message to the readers through the themes highlighted.

### Results and Discussions

#### ***Babu Alipofufuka* "When Grandfather Resurrected"**

*Babu Alipofufuka* is a novel that talks about an imaginary world where people live but can't see. The main character in the novel is K. The story revolves around K who once worked for the government of a country purported to be Tanzania in East Africa. The story starts with K demonstrating that there is a big difference between him and his resurrected great grandfather; Babu or Bwana Faki. Babu is annoyed by K's attitude of looking down upon the poor in the society. Babu decides to steal the food that is given to Doggy and shares it with the poor because he believes that the life of a human being is more important than the life of an animal.

Babu takes K on a long journey in form of a dream just to make him picture how life was in the "good old" days and compare it with the life K and this generation are living. Babu's main objective is to teach him the importance of being humane. Babu feels that the current generation has "raped" the environment by destroying the natural resources that were there and consequently risking the lives of the future generations. During the long journey with Babu, K is made to meet a council of elders called "Judges of time" (Mahakimu Wakati) who summon him to a meeting in the middle of the sea. K faces judgement for risking the lives of the future generations and the verdict passed is that he has to commit suicide by hanging himself. K hangs himself and this becomes a changing point in his life where he starts viewing life from a different perspective. K starts respecting other people's lives and preaches about the importance of being humane and respectful of other's lives.

### K

K is the protagonist or the main character in *Babu Alipofufuka* novel. K is a mysterious character. His name is spelt using one letter unlike in many cases where characters are given full names. The author deviates from the norm by giving the character a unique type of name. This style of naming a character leaves the reader in suspense making him/her to start imagining the complete version of

the character's name. Madumulla (2009) while referring to Kasper and Wickel (1982) says that a character is a picture created in literature and is a basic of all the new things in literature. He also says that there are two sides of a character: first is the part of creativity of the author and second is the human image. The creativity part is the one that gives the author the freedom to create characters the way he chooses. It is the creativity part that has given the author of *Babu Alipofufuka* freedom to name the character K.

The author has therefore deconstructed the naming system of the characters by giving the character a one-letter name. Mohamed has also deconstructed the social construction of the society by portraying K as a character who values the lives of animals more than fellow human beings. Binary of reality and fiction is equally presented in the story. K lives in an imaginary world, a palace with one hundred rooms and hundreds of workers whom he doesn't meet one on one, rather, he writes them mails every time he wants to communicate with them. At the beginning of *Babu Alipofufuka*, K appears to be a realistic character who leads a normal life just like any human being. We start doubting his personality when the spirit of his resurrected grandfather (Babu) enters him and everything in his life changes completely. For a whole month the food that is given to his dog (Doggy) starts to disappear mysteriously. K starts hearing sounds of laughter that resemble his own laughter. The laughter fills his own house; as if K is laughing at himself.

K's life becomes mysterious in that he goes into a deep sleep that takes a whole year, (p7). During the long deep sleep, he experiences many things that change his thinking and views about life. Dream is part of the tenets of Magical Realism theory where an author creates a character in a totally different world. Carroll (2015) says that magical realism alters the world where people exists and makes a new world. Said Ahmed Mohamed therefore builds another world in the story where K lives for one year.

K carries different "persons" in him in that he is K and the spirit of his resurrected grandfather also lives in him (p.8). The spirit is able to control K's body and enables him to change his form from a human being to an ant before visiting the underworld. K also calls himself PROTEUS and believes that he has the power to control the whole world like a god, and that if he is not there people cannot "survive" or lead a normal life. The name PROTEUS keeps on changing in the novel from PROTEUS, Proteus, pRoteus, PROtEUS and porteus. The changing of names symbolises the unique powers that K processes as a character.

*"Proteus hawezi kufa, anaweza kujigeuza tu. Kwa kweli mara ngapi mwenyewe PROTEUS anasemma hafi? Anaweza kuwa mti mkubwa badala ya bahari ya Hindi. Anaweza kuvua ngozi ya nyoka na kuvaa ya panya au ya fisi na kinyume chake....." (Uk 11).*

#### Translation

"Proteus cannot die. He has stated several times that he can only change his state; he can change into a big tree that can replace the Indian Ocean instead of India he can change his skin from that of a snake to that of a mouse or hyena..." (p. 11)

**Resurrected Grandfather (Babu / Mzuka / Bwana Faki)**

Babu is one of the main characters in *Babu Alipofufuka “When Grandfather Resurrected”* novel. Babu is the great grandfather of K. His spirit visits and even enters K. The spirit of K enters his driver, Mzuka, so that he (Mzuka) can lead K. Babu takes K on a long journey to a different world where people live but do not see. The different places K is made to visit symbolise the current state of the world, especially Africa.

Babu is not a human being but a spirit of a dead person whom the author makes to speak and narrate the whole story. The way in which Babu is able to narrate the whole story is mysterious. No one can see or feel Babu. At the beginning of the story Babu says that he has made all the efforts to make K see him or even feel his presence but in vain. Mohamed (1995) says that when an author is creating characters he/she fabricates them according to the literature that he/she writing; not necessarily the characters that live in our normal world. He adds that these fabricated characters might not necessarily fit in the contemporary world. Babu is the creation of the author because normal humans do not die and resurrect.

The author has created a unique character deconstructing the characters that we are used to. He has used a spirit ghost of a dead person and created a new world for the existence of this character. D’Haen (2005) says that magical realism is able to create a different world from the normal world to fill in the gap that realism is not able to fill. Khamis (2005) calls this method of writing trial method in literature which helps the authors to discuss and ridicule the problems in the society that can’t otherwise be discussed or mentioned publicly. He adds that this method of writing is aimed at showing lack of stability in most African or developing countries.

Babu is portrayed as a ghost who exists around K’s life and who actually invades his life. He can read the mind of people whom he is interacting with like K, Miyawaza, Delpiero and Tujuri. (p. 14) He would read K’s mind before K took any action. He would answer K when he had a question disturbing him. Through the mysterious powers that he had, he made K to change into an ant before taking him on a journey to the underworld. K was taken to the year 1940s when he was born and the future year; 2089 when everything in the world was totally different. The main aim was to show him the importance of taking care of the environment.

**About “Their World” (Dunia Yao)**

*Dunia Yao* is an “experimental” novel. (Riwaya za majaribio) according to scholars like Bertoncini (2006); Khamis (2003); Mwamzandi (2001) and Walibora (2010). These scholars agree that such novels have detached themselves from the Swahili novel written using the realist mode and have adopted magical and postmodernist tendencies. The author uses the title “*Their World*” meaning a world that he himself does not belong. This could be a method that the author uses to dis-associate himself with the world that he is referring to that is the world of the likes of Ndi- the protagonist in the novel.

This novel is about Ndi- who decides to lock himself in one of the rooms in his house which he calls a “cell”. He locks himself in the cell because he is trying to run away from the reality around him including his own household. Inside the “cell” Ndi- who is an aspiring writer starts losing his mind because he is stressed about all that is happening around him. In his little world, Ndi- only communicates with his favorite daughter, Mtima, who had left her country and now resides in the United States of America, pretending to be a refugee from Somalia. She had gone to look for greener pastures abroad.

Ndi- meets Muze/Mize who is one of the Greek goddess during his visions and helps him in his dreams of becoming a writer. Muse helps Ndi- by opening his mind about different ways of writing. She takes Ndi- on a journey to different worlds and shows him images of different worlds; hostile world that we have today and the wonderful world that was there many years ago before globalization came into existence. Muse opens Ndi-’s mind to see how globalization is negatively affecting people more than it is positively building them. Ndi- is one of the people who are affected by globalization because he has lost touch with the reality. Since Ndi- is not in his right state of mind, Muse takes him through cleansing traditions/rituals according to the Swahili culture where he is made to join women dance called Kunguia. This dance was meant to ridicule him and to open his eyes so that he starts assuming his duties in his family as the head of the family.

During this dance Ndi-’s eyes are opened and he starts developing sexual feelings towards women starting with Mize who escapes his advances. He ends up having an intercourse with a woman whom he thinks is Naima, but it turns out that it is his wife M who conceives and delivers Bisudi, a baby girl. Bisudi is believed to be a reincarnation of Kilua who had died after being raped by her brother Jitu. Bisudi is a mysterious child because at only three months she can talk, eat, walk and read. Muse leaves after the reconciliation of Ndi- with his family.

#### **Ndi-**

Ndi- is the main character in *Dunia Yao* (Their World) novel. Ndi- once worked as a senior government officer in a country which from the description is possibly Tanzania in East Africa (p9). He has a wife called M and seven children: Yungi, Kilua, Mtima, Jitu, Bori, Dubwa and Bisudi. Ndi- loses his mind because of the stress from his work and the inhuman practices that he observes his colleagues commit against humanity.

The author uses Ndi- as the narrator of the story, yet the same story talks about him. Ndi- is narrates the story in a very unique way. Wamitila (2008:379) calls this style monologue where a character narrates a story by talking to himself and the reader gets the information from what he/she is saying. Ndi- in the *Dunia Yao* novel narrates the story by way of monologue. As a narrator of *Dunia Yao* (I), Ndi- confuses audience because he is “insane”. He is not in his right senses and can’t even talk. He has locked himself in one of the rooms in his houses to escape the reality of the things happening around him (p 15). O’Neill (1999) while talking about *The Tin Drum* argues that the problem of this novel is that the narrator is Oscar and the storyline is about him. The narrator confuses the story because of his confession that he is not in his right mind.

*“.....watu wanafikiria kwamba mimi ni mwendawazimu kama si chakaramu, hisia hii hunijia kila mara....sasa basi ninapojaribu kukusanya nguvu zangu zote ili kuinuka na kuketi, ninahisi nimekamatwa barabara! Tokea kuniingia ule wanadhani wazimu” Uk 3*

#### **Translation**

“... people think that I am insane, this is a feeling that keeps on haunting me... now that I am trying to gather all the energy to stand up and even sit I feel there is something trying so hard to pull me back since that time when they started speculating if I am insane. (Dunia Yao P 3).

Ndi- while locked in one of the rooms in his house which he calls a cell communicates only with Mtima his daughter who lives abroad through e-mail. The relationship between Ndi- and the family shows the problem of globalization or modernity that is breaking families apart. Antony Giddens (1990) in his book called *The Consequences of Modernity* calls it the mystery of modernism that triggers many questions than answers.

The author has written Ndi-'s name in unique way: Ndi-'s name has been ended using a dash or hyphen contrary to the way many characters are given their names. Using a dash means that the name is not complete and therefore requires other letters to make it complete. The name can open a debate because it leaves the reader in suspense and makes them want to find out more about this character. This style of naming characters deconstructs the old and "normal" way of naming characters. This style of naming is one of the characteristics of Magical Realism one of the post modernism theory. Fredric Jameson (1986) while referring to world colonials, says that Magical Realism creates a strange attractiveness in any literature work to attract a reader.

Ndi- the main character in *Dunia Yao (Their World)* explains why his name is ending with a dash or hyphen. He says that many years ago he was Shaib and was a different person. He says that Shaib was inside of him before "he" left him when he lost his mind. Moreover, Ndi- was also once "-Ye", this -Ye still lives in him and sometimes corrects him or helps him to see some things which he is not able to see in his state of mind (p 47). Ndi- goes on to explain that inside him there are two contradicting "persons" who keep on arguing. This answers our question about what Ndi-'s complete name could be: "Ndiye". According to Stephanie Carolle (2015) magical realism beefs up the story's climax because it presents ideas in a unique way. This can be seen in the way the author of "*Their World*" has done while describing the main character Ndi-.

### **Kilua**

Kilua is the daughter of Ndi-. She is a little girl with a unique talent of reading people's minds she reasons like an adult. She is the only one left in Ndi-'s family who talks with him because Ndi- is not speaking with other members' of his family, (p 92). Kilua reads the mind of Ndi-and is able to know everything that Ndi- is thinking about and even answer him accordingly. Kilua's ability to read peoples mind is a feature in magical realism. According to D'Haen (2005) Magical Realism aims at breaking the boundaries, whether geographical, ontological or social. The author has broken the boundaries' that exist between a child and an adult. Kilua has been portrayed to be smart in that she can even advise her own elder sister Yungi and help in reconciling her parents who are not in good terms.

Towards the end of the novel, Kilua dies after being raped by her biological brother Jitu. After the death of Kilua the author deconstructs people's belief about death. It can be compared to a cat that has nine lives. She is reborn in form of a different person; Bisudi. Being reborn in a different personality, Bisudi becomes a mysterious baby who at three months can walk, eat by herself, read and reason like an adult. At three months old she already understands everything that is happening in her family. The author could have used this element purposefully to give us an allegory of rebirth of a new nation in Africa. She is used to give hope that a new nation will be reborn without problems like the ones that exist in the contemporary society.

### Conclusion

Several characters have been described in the “When Grandfather Resurrected” (*Babu Alipofufuka*) and “Their World” (*Dunia Yao*) novels by Said Ahmed Mohamed. Some of the characters have been deconstructed by the author by being described in a totally different style from the one used by majority of the authors in other novels. For example, some characters have been given names with only one letter which is contrary to many names given to characters in literature. There are other characters with mysterious descriptions or behaviors unlike the realistic ones used by the authors in the 1980s and 1990s. The author has used mysterious characters in these two novel giving his work a unique taste. For example, some characters, even protagonists like Ndi- in “Their World” is not in his right mind but has been used by the author to narrate the whole story in the novel. Some characters are ghosts. For example the ghost of Babu (the resurrected grandfather) is used in “When Grandfather Resurrected” novel as the protagonist to narrate the whole story. Moreover, the characters have unique traits such as ability to read the minds of other characters whom they are interacting with. In a nutshell, the author of these novels has explored the possibilities of his imagination in a unique and totally different way.

### Recommendation

This study was not able to exploit all the emerging trends in modern literature due to its scope and time. We would recommend more research to be done in other areas such as plot building and give more light on the emerging trends that the authors are using in the 21 Century. We would also recommend the same study to be conducted focusing on the plays and short stories using other post-modernism theories.

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