



## Popular Kiswahili Fiction: An Overview of Characteristics and its Development

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### Article Information

Submitted: 9<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Accepted: 5<sup>th</sup> October 2019

Published: 27<sup>th</sup> December 2019

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was reported by the authors

Funding: None

Additional information is available at the end of the article



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ISSN 2707-2150 (Online)

ISSN 2707-2169 (Print)

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### Abstract

In the history of Kiswahili literature, it is possible to identify a number of traditions. For example, we have what is generally categorized as popular literature on the one hand, and serious or scholarly literature on the other. As far as fiction is concerned, both traditions emerged in the 1950s and 1960s when the works of pioneers such as Shaaban Robert and Muhamed Said Abdulla were published. The former represents what can be categorized as serious fiction while the latter represents popular fiction. Shaaban Robert and the tradition he represents has received a lot of critical attention in the form of scholarly articles, books and dissertations. The same cannot be said of M.S. Abdulla and the tradition he represents. This is because of the prevalent view among scholars and students of Kiswahili literature that serious fiction is more important, and, therefore, more worthy of study than popular literature. This paper is a contribution towards rectifying such thinking.

Keywords: *Kiswahili literature, popular fiction*



## 1.0 Introduction

Popular fiction is part of the broader category of popular literature which is distinguishable from serious or scholarly literature. Some people regard the former as highbrow, and the latter as lowbrow. Such categorization is problematic because of the high frequency of overlap and also because of the potential to mislead. Nevertheless, classification is often necessary in literary studies, hence it is inevitable in this discussion. To paraphrase Frye, Baker and Perkins (1985), popular literature has the following characteristics:

- It is immediately popular and widely-read.
- It is quickly forgotten, meaning that its appeal is not long-lasting.
- Its appeal is limited to a segment of society rather than the entire society.
- It is unsophisticated in form and content.

Another attribute that is often mentioned by other scholars is that popular literature is read purely for pleasure rather than for enlightenment or for provoking thought and action. These characteristics reinforce the negative view of popular literature that most literary scholars tend to have. While one may not agree with all of them, they give a general idea of what popular literature is about. In this brief study of popular Kiswahili fiction, we shall limit ourselves to the genres of love, crime and detective fiction. These genres are represented in the works of major writers. This study is based on six texts that are selected from each of the major writers. The texts are as follows:

- *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale/ the shrine of ancestral spirits* – by M.S. Abdullah
- *Simu ya Kifo/ the phone call of death* – by F.H.H. Ktalambulla
- *Mtaka Yote Hukosa Yote/ one who wants all loses all* – by L.O. Omolo
- *Mwisho wa Mapenzi/ the end of love* – by J.M.S. Simbamwene
- *Doa la Mauti/ the sign of death* – by P.C. Geranija and A.S. Muwanga
- *Najisikia Kuuu Tena/ I have an urge to murder again* – by B.R. Mtobwa

Our analysis of these works is intended to reveal the salient characteristics of popular Kiswahili fiction and to give a rough idea of how it has developed. We shall focus on themes and motifs, setting and characterization.

## 2.0 Themes and Motifs

The genre of detective fiction is exemplified by the novels of Abdullah, Katalambulla and Mtobwa. It is important to note that although crime fiction is identifiable as a genre which

is distinct from detective fiction, there is considerable overlap between the two. Hence crime plays a big role in the three detective novels by the authors mentioned above. Similarly, there are considerable detective activities in the crime novelette written by Omolo. Even the love stories of Simbamwene, Geranija and Muwanga, deal with crime to a significant degree. In all the three genres, one of the dominant themes is that crime does not pay. Those who engage in various crimes for various reasons are eventually caught and punished or even killed. In Omolo's novelette, the main character, Joseph Juma, dodges the police for a long time and even fights and overpowers them but in the end he is arrested. He is arraigned in court, tried, found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. In Abdulla's novel, Ali Bomani gets murdered in the process of stealing his step-son's inheritance and sneaking out of the country. His murderer is also arrested as he tries to flee. In Mtobwa's novel which deals with the crime of treason, the culprits commit suicide after getting exposed and the ring-leader is shot dead by the police. In *Mwisho wa Mapenzi*, Patrik Moss, who is the main character and narrator, steals from his employer to obtain money for entertaining the many women he has love affairs with. One of them, Hadija, blackmails him by threatening to expose his thievery to his employer unless he agrees to pay her three hundred shillings every week. He agrees to pay in order to avoid losing his job. However, it is very painful for him, and he vows to kill Hadija to free himself from the extortion. After several unsuccessful attempts, he manages to kill her by stabbing her with a dagger. In an attempt to flee to Zanzibar to escape the consequences of his crime, he is cornered by the police. He commits suicide by jumping into the sea, rather get arrested. The last example is from Katalambulla's *Simu ya Kifo*. Agnes wipes out his uncle's family to avenge the murder of her parents and the loss of her inheritance. In the end she is overpowered by the police and arrested.

Closely-related to the theme discussed above, is the moral that those who engage in crime are enemies of society. Their activities are doomed because they are individuals fighting the entire society. All this shows that although popular literature is widely-viewed as purely meant to entertain, popular Kiswahili fiction tends to be didactic. This means that it tries to correct social ills in the same way that serious literature does. The view that popular literature is inferior may, therefore, be untenable. Greed is another theme that writers of Kiswahili popular fiction treat quite often. Greed is portrayed as the main source of crime and a number of other social evils. In Abdulla's novel, it is greed that motivates Bwana Ali's actions. He is portrayed as both a very greedy and a very mean person. We are told that long ago, his foster-father, with whom he was living in Congo, left him a fortune to take care of on behalf of young Ahmed. Afterwards, Ali migrated to Unguja and settled among people who did not know his background. His neighbours assumed that all the wealth belonged to him and Ahmed was his son. It is the detective,

Bwana Msa, who reveals the whole truth. Bwana Ali sells the property secretly and makes arrangements to leave the country, but he is murdered before he does this. This is how the property formerly assumed to belong to him is restored to Ahmed, its rightful heir. Greed is also the root-cause of the crimes that Katalambulla's novel deals with. Jacob who is an employee of the railways, feels that he needs more money, and the only way he can get it is by killing his rich brother-in-law so that he can take his money. After doing this, he also kills his own sister to get the money she inherited from her husband. These murders are what lead to his death.

Revenge is a common motif in the three detective novels, and it is one of the major causes of crime. In Abdulla's novel, Bwana Ali is killed by a visitor from Muscat who comes to Unguja to purposefully hunt for him. His reason for killing him is that many years ago when they both lived in Congo, Bwana Ali broke his marriage by fornicating with his wife. In *Simu ya Kifo*, Agnes kills Mzee Jacob because he killed her parents when she was a kid and took their money which she feels rightfully belongs to her. In Mtobwa's novel, the main crime of treason is not related to revenge, but still we find elements of this motif in the narrative. At the beginning of the novel, a ragtag drunkard called Machozi appears in Kitenge's home and declares that she is going to kill him. We learn that she was his boyhood girlfriend who now lives in abject poverty while Kitenge is doing very well as a writer and publisher. Her reason for wanting to kill him is that she claims he ruined her life by impregnating her. She has to kill him in revenge.

In both Omolo's and Simbamwene's works, it is greed that leads the main characters to steal from their employers. The work that develops the theme in question to the highest level is Ben Mtobwa's *Najisikia Kuuu Tena*. In this novel, an unnamed Western government that wants to control Tanzania for its own political and economic interests attempts to use a group of avaricious locals to overthrow the government. The group is led by Brown Kwame whose real name is Joe Kileo. This criminal who disguises himself as the MD of Snow Fund – a big prosperous company in Dar es Salaam, orders his agents to kill several prominent people in order to create fear, uncertainty and confusion, thus creating the opportunity for his group to overthrow the government. His greed for wealth and power has no bounds, and he is ready to shed the blood of as many innocent people as possible, in order to seize power and have access to all the country's resources.

The two love stories: *Doa la Mauti* and *Mwisho wa Mapenzi* deal with the theme of the dire consequences of irresponsible love affairs. Such relationships often lead to crime and end tragically. In *Doa la Mauti*, Pili travels from Tabora to Musoma to see his boyfriend, Moddy, under the pretext of visiting her aunt. The two lovers keep their whereabouts secret and enjoy themselves while Pili's parents are desperately looking for her. They report her disappearance to the police who start investigating the matter. Pili ends up

getting pregnant, and because she can neither go back to school in her condition nor face her parents, she commits suicide. Moddy tries to avoid getting in trouble by secretly throwing her body into a river. However, it is discovered by fishermen who alert the police. In an attempt to cover his misdeeds, Moddy murders the taxi driver, Pencho. All these efforts turn out to be futile because he is eventually arrested and tried. In *Mwisho wa Mapenzi*, Patrik's multiple love affairs land him in trouble. He begins his love life by going with Anna who is a married woman. She is also a criminal who gets jailed for stealing from her husband in cahoots with his other boyfriend. After her release from prison, Patrik takes her in, and they live as husband and wife for a while. He soon discovers that she is a spendthrift, a drunkard and a prostitute, and so he decides to chuck her out. But she preempts his action by robbing his house while he is at work and running away. Hadija, the other woman with whom Patrik has an affair is such a spendthrift that she forces him to steal in order to meet her needs. As we saw earlier, he is eventually forced to murder her, and this lands him in trouble. Like crime, irresponsible love affairs go against social norms apart from leading to suffering and loss. Moddy and Pili, the two main characters in *Doa la Mauti* keep their love affair secret because they are not ready to follow the customary procedure of getting engaged and informing their parents. If they had followed the custom, they would have avoided their tragic end. In *Mwisho wa Mapenzi*, Patrik's love affairs are doomed because the women involved are criminals who eventually lead him into crime.

Another theme that is prevalent in the love stories is moral decay. Prostitution and promiscuity are common vices in the towns where the stories are set. In *Doa la Mauti*, promiscuity is exemplified by the relationship between the two main characters as pointed out above. Their immoral relationship leads to an unwanted pregnancy, suicide and murder. In the same novel we find that prostitution is rampant in Musoma town. Prostitutes go about their business of soliciting and exploiting men openly as if they are engaged in legal work like teaching or nursing. We see the same situation in Dar es Salaam as depicted in Simbamwene's work. One of the women that Patrik regularly sleeps with is Asha, who is his landlord's wife. She turns out to be a prostitute who is ready to sleep with any man who is ready to buy her drinks and give her money. Hadija, who is Patrik's other lover is also a prostitute and a member of a criminal gang.

In the love stories, the motif of regret is used to emphasize the wrongdoing of the main characters and their weaknesses. In Simbamwene's work, the main character often regrets his misdeeds whenever he finds himself in soup. As we have pointed out above, his problems are related to his love affairs. His father had warned him not to go with married women, particularly Anna, but he disregarded his warning. Whenever he gets into trouble, he remembers his father's warning regretfully. At one point he narrates as

follows: “*Mara nikakumbuka maneno ya baba yangu ya kunikataza nisimfuata Anna kwani baba yangu alijua Anna ni mwovu*” (38). /Suddenly, I remembered my father’s words advising me not to go with Anna because he knew that Anna was evil/. In *Doa la Mauti*, Moddy regrets his wrongdoing after the terrifying discovery of Pili’s death. He remembers his mother’s warning against plunging into a life of luxury. He says tearfully: “*Marehemu mama yangu aliniusia nisijizamishe katika maisha ya anasa, mimi niliyadharau...Muda wa ulimwengu kunifunza umefika* (p. 42). / My late mother warned me against plunging into a life of luxury and I ignored it....The time has now come for the world to teach me a lesson. We note that even after Patrik and Moddy express remorse, they do not stop their misdeeds. It is as if they know what they are doing is wrong, but they are unable to stop it.

### 3.0 Setting

“The overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs,” (Abrams, 2005). Setting affects the other elements of a work such as characterization, narrative and theme. For example the setting of Mtobwa’s novel is in Dar es Salaam, the capital city of Tanzania. The activities of the main characters such as working in offices that are located in multi-storey buildings, the use of well-organized public transport systems including travel out of the country by airplanes are all related to the setting of a capital city. Even the crime of treason around which the narrative revolves is related to the capital city which is the seat of government. The crime of high treason which is being planned by Kwame and his associates involves interaction with senior government officials who work and live in the city. In terms of temporal setting, it is during the Ujamaa era of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and after the 1978-1979 Kagera War which involved Uganda and Tanzania. The novel tells of the economic difficulties that Tanzanians faced after the war. The historical explanation is that Tanzania had to foot the bill of invading Uganda and waging war to liberate the country from Dictator Idi Amin. It was during the period of economic hardships which was a consequence of the war that the gang of traitors in Mtobwa’s novel hatches a plan to topple the government. The reasoning behind this timing is that it would be easy to mobilize the people to rise against a government that is unable to provide for their basic needs.

The setting of Omolo’s work is in Kenya’s capital city of Nairobi, although some of the events also take place in nearby Thika. The time is during colonial rule when Africans were not allowed to set foot in Nairobi without a *kipande*. This was an identification document which was used to control the movement of Africans, and which was made compulsory for them to acquire. Thus Juma is promptly arrested as soon as he arrives in Nairobi from Kakamega because he does not have a *kipande*. It is only after obtaining it

that he gets a job in Thika. After stealing from his employer, he goes into hiding in his concubine's house in Shauri Moyo, Nairobi. The city provides him with a suitable hideout from where he continues engaging in crime including theft, impersonation and assaulting police officers.

In both Omolo's and Mtobwa's works, the city is portrayed as a magnet that attracts dangerous criminals. Consequently, it is in the city that the most serious crimes are committed. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that in the city, it is easy for criminals to disguise themselves. This is because of the pervasive anonymity of city life. It is unlike in the rural villages where it is easy to identify every person. Criminals are also attracted to the city because this is where the richest people live. These are the people who are usually targeted by criminals who rob, car-jack, mug and kidnap them. It is also easy for criminals to obtain and hide dangerous weapons including firearms in the city. Another important factor is that in the city, all sorts of luxuries are available to the rich and also to the criminals who lead flashy lifestyles with their ill-gotten wealth.

Simbamwene's novelette is also set in Dar es Salaam but this does not affect the other elements of the work to the extent that we see in Omolo's and Mtobwa's works. Katalambulla's novel is set in Tabora town while Geranija and Muwanga's novel is set in Musoma town. The effects of this setting on the characters, themes and narratives, is significantly less than what we find where the setting is in large cities like Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. Abdulla's detective novel is set in the outskirts of Unguja city before the Zanzibar Revolution of 1964. Other than the fact that the narrative revolves around the events that take place near Bwana Ali's house, the semi-rural setting plays a minimal role in characterization and thematic development. The focal point of the entire work is the detective work of Bwana Msa as he strives to find out the motive of Ali Bomani's murder and the culprit.

#### 4.0 Characterization

In the three detective novels under discussion, the main characters are the detectives, the police officers they collaborate with to apprehend or flush out criminals, the criminals themselves and the victims of crime. Thus Bwana Msa is the main character in Abdulla's pioneering detective novel. He is portrayed as a very highly-skilled detective who unravels serious crimes and identifies the criminals behind them leading to their arrest. Because of his unusual abilities, the police come across as incompetent. Most of what we learn about Bwana Msa is directly narrated to us. For example, we are told that he derives his skills from the book known as *Kinyume cha Mambo*/the opposite of things, which he reads frequently. Another strategy that is used in developing this character is revealing the kind of person he is through what he says and does. For example he explains his detective strategy of investigating the opposite of things in the following words: "*Ukitaka kujua asili*

ya mwangaza ingia kizani, ukitaka kujua raha ya mtu aliyesoma, tazama taabu ya mtu asiyesoma (p. 3). If you want to know the source of light get into darkness; if you want to know the joy of a literate person, look at the troubles of an illiterate person. Bwana Msa's trademark is the pipe which he is always either smoking, struggling to light or clean. It is suggested that tobacco stimulates his mind and he cannot work effectively without smoking. In other words, he is an addict.

Because of Bwana Msa's extraordinary ability as a detective, his friend, Najum, jokingly refers to him as Sherlock Holmes. This allusion to the main character of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective fiction is important in the way M.S. Abdulla develops Bwana Msa. It is quite clear that Sherlock Holmes is the model that Abdulla used in creating Bwana Msa. This is because there are striking similarities between the two. For example, Bwana Msa is a private investigator, who like Holmes, regularly outwits the police in solving crimes. In Doyle's work entitled *A Study in Scarlet*, it is Holmes who solves the mystery of the murder of Enock Drebber and Joseph Stangerson by identifying Jefferson Hope as the murderer. In the same manner, Bwana Msa solves the mystery of the murder of Bwana Ali in *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale*. Again, in Doyle's novel, Scotland Yard police detectives who had been unable to catch the murderer, are astonished at the success of Sherlock Holmes. Similarly, in Abdulla's novel, Inspector Seif is very impressed by Bwana Msa's success in solving the riddle of Bwana Ali's murder. At the end of the story, he confesses as follows: "*Hata mimi mwenyewe... nakiri mbele yako kuwa wewe umenishinda kwa upekuzi na upelelezi wa mambo*" (p. 85). *I confess to you that you have outdone me in searching for information and investigating things.*

The likeness of Bwana Msa to Sherlock Holmes does not end there. Just like the main character in Doyle's fiction, Bwana Msa is a tobacco addict who is always smoking his pipe as pointed out above. As a strategy of illustrating the extraordinary abilities of Sherlock Holmes, the writer uses a foil. This character is Dr. Watson who is a retired army surgeon. In works such as *The Sign of Four* and *A Study in Scarlet*, Dr. Watson is the first-person narrator. This is the vantage point from which he reveals the great abilities and achievements of Sherlock Holmes. He has an intimate knowledge of the same since he always accompanies Holmes when he is doing his work. In developing Bwana Msa, Abdulla uses the same strategy. The foil in *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* is Najum. He is Bwana Msa's friend, and he accompanies him wherever he goes to do his detective work. His role is to keep Bwana Msa company, ask the detective questions on his procedures, utterances and achievements. He also marvels at Bwana Msa's success which he aptly compares to that of Sherlock Holmes as pointed out above.

This brief comparison between the detective characters in Doyle's and Abdulla's fiction is not meant to portray the Zanzibari writer as an inferior artist because he derived



his literary model from the famous British author of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In literary history, the use of source-books is a common phenomenon, and it is not necessarily a disadvantage. The comparison here is invaluable in tracing the development of Kiswahili detective fiction.

As a pioneering writer of Kiswahili detective fiction, M.S. Abdulla has influenced many writers who came after him, particularly with regard to characterization and narration. We see such influence in Katalambulla's novel which was published five years after Abdulla's *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale*. The crime is that of the killing of Mzee Jacob who dies after smoking a poisoned cigarette. A mysterious person who calls himself Fambo telephones the police to inform them about what has happened. He does this to tease and mislead the police and does not reveal his identity. The regular police led by Inspector Wingo launch investigations but their efforts to catch the culprit do not bear fruit. Meanwhile, several other murders take place, and every time the same Fambo calls the police to inform them that a murder has just been committed. In the end, Inspector Wingo admits that he cannot solve the crime riddles and seeks the assistance of the plain clothes police detective, Tojo. All that Tojo does is to rescue Wingo from the criminals who have kidnapped him. In the process, the culprit and the motive of the crime is revealed.

The similarities as well as the differences between Abdulla's and Katalambulla's novels are unmistakable. Despite the obvious influence of Abdulla, we note that in Katalambulla's novel, it is a plain clothes police detective who helps the regular police to solve the mystery of the crime in question. On the other hand, Bwana Msa who plays the same role in Abdulla's novel is a private detective. Another difference is that while in Abdulla's novel the detective begins investigating the crime at the beginning of the story, in Katalambulla's work the detective comes towards the very end and plays a minimal role in the narrative. In fact this is one of the weaknesses of Katalambulla's novel. First of all, Inspector Wingo enlists the assistance of Tojo as an afterthought. We are told:

*Baada ya kuwaza sana, Inspekta akaona kuwa ameshindwa kumpata yule muuaji. Basi Inspekta Wingo akakumbuka kuwa angaliweza kupata msaada mwingi kama angalimwajiri askari kanzu Tojo, mpelelezi maarufu (p. 83).*

After thinking hard, the Inspector realized that he was unable to catch the murderer. Then he remembered that he could have got a lot of help from the plain clothes policeman, Tojo, the well-known detective.

The question that arises here is why Inspector Wingo did not involve Tojo in investigating the crime when the first victim, Mzee Jacob was murdered. The belated invitation of the detective is done when Mzee Jacob and his entire family have been murdered. Most importantly, Tojo is brought into the narrative too abruptly, and only to perform the task of rescuing Wingo after which he disappears.

Ben Mtobwa whose novel was first published in the 1980s has borrowed from both M.S. Abdulla and F.H.H. Katalambulla in developing his characters and narrative. For example, Joram Kiango who is a young, successful and famous private detective in Dar es Salaam, is his version of Bwana Msa. He is introduced into the narrative towards the middle when three consecutive murders, evidently committed by the same criminal, have taken place. The police led by Inspector Kombora are completely unable to catch the murderer. In the end, it is Joram Kiango who uses his superior investigating, fighting and other skills to track down the killer. He also succeeds in exposing the criminal gang which is behind the murders. Although he collaborates with the police the same way Bwana Msa does, he exposes their underbelly by completely outsmarting them.

Joram Kiango is a more convincing character than Bwana Msa because his background is provided and his methods of solving crime riddles are more realistic. Concerning how he acquired his skills, we are told that he was trained in the US where he lived with his parents and also attended school. He worked as a CID for a while before returning to Tanzania where he was licensed to practice as a private detective in Dar es Salaam. He has his own office complete with a personal secretary. This implies that he does detective work for a living although it is not clear whether he expects payment by assisting the police to combat criminals. Like Bwana Msa, he is motivated in his actions by altruism and patriotism rather than material gain. The question that arises is how both characters earn their living. The works of Doyle do not have this problem because it is made clear that Sherlock Holmes is hired and paid to do his detective work.

Katalambulla's influence is noticeable in the way Mtobwa has developed Inspector Kombora. This character is portrayed as a diligent and dedicated law-enforcement agent. These are the same qualities which we see in Inspector Wingo who is the main character in *Simu ya Kifo*. Even the way Kombora and Wingo learn of the crimes they are involved in investigating is similar. Wingo gets a telephone call from a mysterious person every time a murder has happened informing him of the same. Kombora is also informed by a mysterious caller every time a murder is about to be committed. In both cases the telephone calls are a trick the criminals are using to mislead the police.

## 5.0 Conclusion

Although popular Kiswahili fiction is usually regarded as light reading meant to provide pleasure, our brief study of this tradition within Kiswahili literature shows that it is actually didactic and meant to correct social ills. For example, the theme that crime does not pay recurs in all the genres of this tradition. Criminals are portrayed as enemies of society who must be eliminated. Love stories warn against the consequences of irresponsible love affairs. By studying characterization, themes and motifs of selected works of Kiswahili popular fiction, we have brought out the salient characteristics of this literature. At the same time, we have given a general idea of how it has developed since the time of pioneers like M.S. Abdulla and F.H.H. Katalambulla to the emergence of more recent writers like Ben Mtobwa. We have established that Abdulla was influenced by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In turn, he influenced writers who came after him such as Ben Mtobwa. Such influence contributed greatly to the development of popular Kiswahili fiction.

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