

Gender balance Struggles in Tanzanian Swahili children's Literature

L. H. Bakize

Abstract

Globally, women's liberation efforts have prevailed for a long time. Through different mechanisms, these efforts have to some extent been a success. We have been seeing the efforts taking place through the media like TV and Radio stations, Magazines and social media networks. We have also been seeing strong efforts in literary works for adults such as plays, novels and poetry just to mention a few. All efforts exerted in different angles aim at maintaining gender balance and changing social perceptions towards women status in the society. This paper explores the women's liberation efforts that have been invested in children's literature. Literary artists seem to believe that if efforts are not vested in children, there is a danger of having a bad future society that will not prolong the gender balance. Due to the vastness of literary works, only five Tanzanian Swahili children's literary works have been selected to represent the rest.

1.0 Introduction

Gender balance is one of the burning issues in the world today. Gender inequalities still prevail in many spheres of life. Due to social perceptions and life styles men are given the first priorities in all important social, economic and political areas. That is why currently we are seeing the efforts in many countries being invested in giving women important roles in order to balance gender status. In literary works, gender inequality is portrayed through struggle. When portraying characters, authors mould women in accordance with society's beliefs and acts. However, literary authors tend to show how they wish things to happen in the society even if things are not in the way they should be. It is through this perception that this paper reveals the struggles authors exert in their literary works in order to affect children positively for the good future of their societies.

2.0 Background to Gender balance Struggles

Globally, gender balance struggles has a long history. In short, women have been struggling for equality for a long time since human creation. Theoretically, feminist issues started in the 19th Century and gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, when women especially in Europe started to address gender equality formally i.e. in writings (Wafula, 2007). Feminism initially emerged as a political movement whose mission was a struggle for a total emancipation of women from oppression, repression, marginalization, and asserting their right of expression

(Mshengyezi, 2003). This was due to the negative social attitudes towards female gender. Women were considered to be weak and inferior compared to men in important spheres of life.

2.0 Data Collection and Sampling

The data for this paper was collected randomly. Children's literature is so broad like other literatures. It incorporates novels, plays, poetry and other genres of oral literature. The only criterion used in selecting data was content. Henceforth, five Swahili literary works were selected. These are *Ngome ya Mianzi* by Mulokozi (1990), *Safari ya Mzimuni* by Mateso (2001), *Neema Jasiri* by Chimbambala (2005), *Wema na Albino* by Mkufya (2008), and *Sara na Kaka Zake* by Msuazi (2009). In all these literary works, a girl as an icon of women has been portrayed equally as men. She struggles and faces whatever is faced by men and at the end she remains a giant.

2.1 Synopsis of the Selected Swahili Books

Ngome ya Mianzi (the Bamboo Stockade) is a short children's historical novel. It portrays the history of early African resistances waged by the Hehe against the Germans in Lugalo area in 1891 in Tanganyika by then. The novel narrates about the torments that a certain Hehe family passed through during the wars of resisting the Germans. Two young children Mugoha (a boy) and Nyawelu (a girl) found themselves in the midst of the torments unwillingly. Hence, they were forced to abandon their childhood and carry adult responsibilities in order to save themselves and their nation at large. They used their inborn abilities to fight the invaders despite their tender age.

Safari ya Mzimuni (A Journey to the Hell) is an interesting story about Sara and Chidi who saved the Wasifwe people from the danger of getting perished by the ghosts. The citizens of Wasifwe were being alleged by the ghosts from abandoning their culture and traditions, practicing deforestation, not maintaining peace and caring sick persons. By abandoning those, the king of Wasifwe (Tibasa) was cautioned during the night that he and his citizens had only three days before they got perished. The king decided to call an emergence meeting. All his citizens attended the meeting. During the meeting the king exposed all the threats from the ghosts and asked any two persons to volunteer to go to the king of the ghosts to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the country. Everyone kept quite. No one was able to volunteer. Hence, king Tibasa said that since no volunteers found, the country was going to be destroyed in three days to come. Everyone departed sadly waiting for the torments. When all the people departed, a girl child called Sara convinced

her fellow child Chidi that they should volunteer in order to save the country. Chidi agreed and they went to tell the king that they were ready to sacrifice themselves for the country. The king refused though the children kept insisting and finally he agreed hesitatingly. Sara and Chidi faced a lot of challenges on the way but because they were innocents they passed all the examinations posed to them. Eventually, the children succeeded to see the king of ghosts and got the absolute forgiveness for the Wasifwe country. It is the courage and innocence of Sara and Chid that saved the Wasifwe country.

Neema Jasiri (Audacious Neema) is a short children's story that encourages girls to be courageous. The story starts by narrating about one old man nicknamed Mtembezi (the walker) who used to walk through villages while telling stories to children. One day he narrated a story to school children about Neema. In Neema's village there used to be unknown drum beats during nights. Neema asked her father about the people who used to beat traditional drums and songs during night. Her father said that the forefathers said that the voices heard during night were the unknown monsters that killed the nearby villagers. Neema could not agree with the answer. One day after school, she asked her mother to cook enough food that she could eat for many days. Her mother agreed and cooked her enough food. Neema started the journey towards the destination where the noises were heard during the night in order to prove the rumours about the monsters. Neema walked for a long time and when it got night she slept on a big tree in order to avoid wild animals. While on the tree she heard the voices coming towards her. The cloud that was beating drums came towards the tree where she was sleeping. While singing and dancing under the tree Neema unexpectedly saw an old man climbing the tree towards where she was sleeping. Majestically, Neema grabbed the moustache of the old man and asked him who they were. The old man said that he was the king of Mtakuja village. Also, he said that they were coming from Mtakuja village and they used to go there to pay homage to the forefathers' spirits. The old man invited Neema to visit Mtakuja village. Neema went with him. The old man prepared good food and gifts for Neema. He announced that Neema was a hero that she was to be respected by everyone in Mtakuja. Neema gained a lot of respect and went back home with many gifts that she received from Mtakuja villagers.

Wema na Albino (Wema and the Albino) is a children's novel that is about two lovely friends i.e. Wema (a girl) and Noa (a boy). Wema was a normal girl child while Noa was a child with albinism. The albino child (Noa) faced stigmatization from his fellow pupils, teachers and the society around him in general. Wema developed a friendship with the albino in order to disapprove the social beliefs she had been hearing that albinos during night they become demons; that they can suck human blood and that they are good baits for attracting precious minerals. Being a

close friend to Noa, Wema faced a lot of challenges, especially when the Albino was kidnapped by the mineral seekers. Wema was forced to help the police to find the Albino and at last the Albino was found due to the courageous role played by her. Eventually, because of Wema, the hospital doctor came to Wema's school to educate the pupils, teachers and other people about albinism in order to let everyone understand that albinos were just like other people though they have skin disabilities.

Sara na Kaka Zake (Sara and her Brothers) is a children's story that is in a poetry form. It is about Sara and her brothers i.e. Kashinde and Kayonde. During their childhood they had never seen their father. They were being reared by their mother. One day they broke silence and asked their mother to show them their father. Their mother was not willing to reveal the truth about Mr. Shekifo who disappeared in the forest while hunting. Kashinde, Kayonde and Sara together decided to false their mother to speak out where the father was. At last their mother had no alternative. She revealed that she kept quite because of their tender age but because they forced her she was obliged to say everything. She said, Mr. Shekifo (who was her husband) was a hunter. One day he went to hunt as usual but surprisingly he did not come back. She decided to report to Mtemi Jafari. Mtemi sent three people to look for Mr. Shekifo. Marvelously, all those three people also disappeared. Mtemi Jafari finally guessed that there would be some demons in the forest. He asked his people to continue with normal life otherwise many would disappear too. Kashinde and Kayonde asked their mother to give them permission so that they could go in the forest to look for their father. Their mother refused that if Mtemi and his people failed to save the lost, no other person could manage to do that. Kashinde and Kayonde kept insisting and finally hesitatingly, their mother allowed them to go. Kashinde and Kayonde went in the forest and faced a lot of challenges. During the attempts in the forests, Kashinde and Kayonde were arrogants and henceforth they were also captured by the demons. They did not come back. Sara and her mother mourned sadly. One day Sara asked her mother to allow her go in the forest to search for the lost ones. Her mother refused strongly by saying that she was a girl and she was still young. Sara kept insisting and later her mother agreed and sadly gave her a permission to go. She blessed her. Sara started the journey to the forest. On the way she was attempted many times but because of her respect and good discipline, eventually she saved her father and brothers. Sara was praised because of her courage and discipline as she managed to do marvelous things.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by the Feminist theoretical framework. Feminism is a theory that tries to solve problems that women face in the society which is dominated by men. These women's problems are caused by their female gender (Mushengyezi, 2003; Ntarangwi, 2004; Wafula, 2007). By being women the society sets some duties and perceptions towards them. The main tenet of this theory is to struggle for the salvation of women from the captivity of cultural, religious, social, political and economic aspects. In pinpointing some of the aspects above, Simon de Beauvoir contended that religion humiliates women by teaching them to be humble, and marriage is conceptualized in the superiority of men compared to women (Wafula, 2003). Furthermore, women are usually associated with a weaker and negative symbolic order while men are associated with strong and positive symbols (Mushengyezi, 2003). The concern of this paper is to show how some literary works have portrayed women as characters who are models in the society; women that do not rely on men for their recognition. But also women who believe that if men and women work together they can advance more in many aspects than the way it is now.

4.0 Social Misconceptions towards Women Vs Revelation of Women's Strength

In many African societies, people do believe that women are only for simple and minor tasks. Men are for hard and tough duties. Men are generally responsible in making sure that women are protected because they are weak and they cannot defend themselves. The selected literary works reveal that our societies shape children from the beginning to believe that men are superiors. In *Ngome ya Mianzi* pg. 17, for instance, the author says,

Nilikuwa wa kwanza kupinga. Huwezi kwenda mwenyewe! Ukikamatwa na mahabithi au kuliwa na wanyama wakali nitaeleza nini nyumbani? Msichana mdogo hivyo-utawezaje kazi hiyo ya kiume?" Na mwanamume ndiye yupi?" Bibi alicheka kwa taabu. Si mimi!" Nilisema.

I was the first to reject. You cannot go alone! If you be harmed by bad persons or wild animals what am I going to say to your family? A young girl like you, how will you manage such a manly task? And who is such a man? Bibi smiled with pain. "I am the one!" I said).

It is with this perception that boys are reared with the idea that they are gifted to hold better positions in the societies than girls. The author in trying to create his desired world of gender equality, he portrays Nyawelu (a girl) as a character who holds the same position with Mugoha (a boy) in fighting for the Hehe against the

Germans. They both cooperate in fighting against the Germans and eventually they both prove to be heroes.

The unequal gender balance situation is now understood by women as they try their best to tell men that in spite of being deprived from golden chances they can stand and struggle with them and manage to withstand. Though women are being misconceived by men that they are weak, they still believe that they can work with men even in hard times and achieve the goals prospected. In *Sara na Kaka Zake* pg. 8, the author says,

Na mimi niwe kundini,	I, also to be in a group,
Tuwe sote safarini,	To be together in the journey,
Msinitenge jamani,	Do not segregate me my brothers,
Si tatizo jinsia.	Let not my gender be a hindrance.

Sara was defending herself that even if she is a girl; she is able to collaborate with her brothers and eventually save their father who was kidnapped by the unknown powers. Being a girl is a hindrance in collaborating with boys especially in dangerous situations. Sara knew this that's why she defended herself so that her brothers could give her the chance to collaborate with them.

In many African societies when a woman does something marvelous and come up with heroism, people get puzzled. They see it as something unusual compared to normal occurrences. In *Neema Jasiri* pg. 10, when Neema showed that she was not a coward but brave and giant, Mtemi got astonished and praised her before all his subjects as it was not normal. The author says,

Mtemi alimkaribisha Neema kijijini kwake. Akamwandalia chakula na kumpa zawadi nyingi sana. Mwisho aliwatangazia wanakijiji kwamba wamheshimu Neema, kwani ni mtoto jasiri. Amegundua kuwa wao siyo majitu kama wazazi wake walivyodhania, bali ni watu wema.

Mtemi welcomed Neema in his village. He prepared food and many gifts for her. Lastly, he announced to his subjects that Neema should be respected because she was a hero. She had discovered that they are not monsters as it was believed by her parents but instead they are good people.

Neema went beyond her society's expectations. She didn't believe that women are weak. After being told by her father about the night drum beats she decided to go beyond the belief by making research in order to know the truth. At the end,

Neema discovered that what was being heard at nights was not the voice of monsters but people from Mtakuja village who used to go under the tree for paying homage to their spirits of their ancestors.

Due to false beliefs towards women in the societies, women have been assigned "lower" duties like cooking, washing clothes, taking care of children, satisfying men and taking art subjects in schools, to mention a few. Men are assigned "important" and heavy duties like holding good positions in leadership, controlling the family economy, owning family properties, making last decisions and the like.

Different from what the society believes, once given the chance women can do skill and marvelous jobs like men. Some women trust in themselves that they can defend themselves and win whatever battle towards them and their society. The author in *Ngome ya Mianzi* insists on this by saying, "*Kabla hajatoka nje aligeuka kunitazama, akasema: 'Mugoha, mchunge Bibi. Mimi nitajichunga mwenyewe. Nitarudi.'*" Pg. 18 (Before leaving she glanced and said to me: "Mugoha, protect Bibi. I will protect myself. I will be back."). Despite of being a woman Nyawelu, believes that she can protect herself and her society. She assured Mugoha that she is going alone and whatever happens she will be able to fight and win the battle. This reveals the hidden strength character within Nyawelu quite different from social conception towards women. In many African societies the society distorts the minds of people. Even women themselves, sometimes don't believe that they can do like men. This perception made Mugoha to be astonished when Nyawelu performed like men. He said, "*Nyawelu ni jasili,*" *nilimwambia Bibi. "Sasa umekubali?" alinikejeli, "Tabia ya kweli ya mtu utaijua wakati wa dharura," Aliongeza.* Pg. 19 ("Nyawelu is brave," I told Bibi. "Now you have realized?" She joked, "The strength of a person is seen in an emergence," she added.)

In *Safari ya Mzimuni* Sara believes that women can perform like men. Women can fight and win any battle. Women are able to die for their societies. This goes beyond the social conception towards them as societies do not believe that women can be patriots of their societies. Sara rejects this belief by standing in a front line of saving her society from being destroyed by the ghosts. In pg. 7 she says,

Chidi ni lazima sisi twende huko," Sara alisema na kuendelea, "Lazima tuwe tayari kufa kwa ajili ya nchi yetu." "Sara mimi niko tayari kwenda. Sasa twende kwa Mfalme tukamweleze nia yetu." Chidi aliafiki.

Chidi, we have to go there.' Sara said, and she continued, "We have to be ready to die for our country." I am ready to go, Sara. Now let us go to tell the King our idea. Chidi agreed.

In this literary work the author reveals that the strong idea of saving the Wasifwe society started with Sara and then she convinced Chidi and later they agreed to cooperate. Eventually they saved their nation despite of the torments they faced.

Wema (a girl) in *Wema na Albino* showed heroism. After the entire social hear says she indulged herself in a personal research in order to disapprove the social belief towards albinos. Despite the worries she experienced due to the social hear says, she courageously decided to do a silent research by making friendship with the albino (Noa). On the move, she faced a lot of the challenges but due to her strong intention she persevered and eventually knew he truth that albinos were just like other people. The only difference she discovered in all her personal research is that albinos were only having a skin disability. Wema was praised by everyone for being the catalyst for change in her society. After receiving the right education from the doctor, people understood what albinism meant. The social misconceptions towards albinos were weakened because of Wema. Wema did a courageous thing that even boys failed to do. Wema (a literarily creature) is shaped by the author in a way the society should be. The society that Wema created was the one that was created by the author; Wema was portrayed as a creature that was not weak but strong like boys. This is a world of gender equality that the author would want to see.

5.0 Discussion

In all efforts to attain gender equality we should ask ourselves, who are the enemies behind it? In this paper, it should be noted that the first enemy of gender equality is society. Society is made by individuals who have culture and customs. Culture and customs can specifically be accused of being the enemies of gender equality. Authors are individuals who can fight for the better of the society. This can be achieved only if what authors write or display changes the society positively. Social misconceptions towards women affect women at the first place as they get blinded on the reality. Nowadays, it is not surprising to see women not trusting themselves in elections that they can compete with men and come up with good results.

Moreover, due to false social ideologies it is obvious to find women believing that men are superior to women and hence all the good posts and chances are snatched by men in that advantage. It should be noted that culture is like a blue print. Women shy away because of being affected by cultural ideologies. Women should stand and prove that they can perform better. This is what we saw in the constitutional parliament of Tanzania in 2014 as women try their level to convince

the parliament that they want the electoral posts to hold 50:50 candidates. Eventually, this may result into 50:50 in all important areas like in education, employment opportunities, just to mention a few. The mechanism of achieving the desired goals is first to change people's minds. Obviously, that is what is being done through different media like TVs (for example, the *Wanawake Live* forum in ITV Tanzania), Magazine, Radio broadcastings, and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and the like.

6.0 Conclusion

The paper has addressed gender balance struggles as ongoing efforts. Literary works for children should show the gender balance and erase false ideologies. If children are shaped positively in this aspect there is a possibility of forging a gender balanced society. As noted earlier literary works can affect children (readers) positively or negatively depending on the author intentions. Furthermore, gender balance struggles can be attained if the efforts are vested both in women and men. If women take initiatives only, the possibility of having a society with equal opportunity is low.

References

- Chimbalambala, D.J. (2005). *Neema Jasiri*. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam University Press.
- Mateso, C. (2005). *Safari ya Mzimuni*. Dar es Salaam: Readit Books.
- Mkufya, W.E. (2008). *Wema na Albino*. Dar es Salaam: Mangrove Publishers.
- Mulokozi, M.M. (1990). *Ngome ya Mianzi*. Dar es Salaam: MPB Enterprises.
- Mushengyezi, A. (2003). *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*. LIT. 224: Literature. Kampala: Makerere University.
- Njogu, K. na Wafula, R.M. (2007). *Nadharia za Uhakiki wa Fasihi*. The Jomo Kenyatta Foundation. Nairobi.
- Ntarangwi, M. (2004). *Uhakiki wa Kazi za Fasihi*. Augustana College, Rock Island (unpublished PhD thesis).