

# Towards Re -defining the Institution of Marriage: New Historicism Approach to Kiswahili Prose

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## Abstract

*This paper aims at analyzing specific Kiswahili novels in the quest to show that the definition of the institution of marriage has changed and there is thus need to redefine it. The study seeks to explore the themes of marriage and religion for the last two decades as depicted in the Kiswahili novel. In the discussion, examples shall be based on two novels; Paradiso (Habwe, 2005) and Kala Tufaha (Babu, 2007). The paper shows that marriage is a vital institution of society. It is, however, argued that the institution is undergoing momentous changes mostly caused by varied interpretations that are occasioned partly by globalization, science and technological developments as well as social-cultural and religious changes. Marriage is seen as being a key factor to societal existence and therefore any change to it affects and threatens not only its very existence but indeed that of the entire society. Although our reference is fiction, it is true that one cannot interpret the meaning in a creative work independent of societal context in terms of time, space and place.*

**Key words:** Marriage, prose, new historicism, society

## 1.0 Introduction

Religion, tradition and marriage are intertwined and influence each other on many fronts. In a way, religion and social-cultural issues in Africa are opposed to each other and this causes confrontations. By use of creative works, this paper aims to show the importance of the institution of marriage in the existence of the family and society. All family values are germinated and passed over to future generations through the family and this makes marriage very important institution. As Chowdhry (2000) points out, the future of the family is based on the values whose basis is marriage. Literature is a product of the society and the mirror on which the society views its progress and marriage is one such product among the many that literature seeks to focus on.

Wellek and Warren (1949:94-5) state that literature is an institution that uses language creatively to mirror on the society. Though the Kiswahili novel is the work of fiction, the themes explored by authors as in the

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case of Habwe in *Paradiso* and Babu in *Kala Tufaha*, point out the truth in regard to the institution of marriage and other facets of the society. Indeed, Wellek and Warren confirm that the work of literature might not point out to the entire truth, but to a large extent, the content will attest to it; marriage represents the family and eventually the society.

As stated later,<sup>2</sup> one cannot interpret the work of literature outside the paradigms of the society in which that literature originated. Each generation sees and interprets issues differently. For example, a careful look at the novels written four decades ago such as Abdalah's *Kisima cha Giningi* (1968) would show that indeed the institution of marriage has been changing so much that there is need to re-define it.

The main objective of literature is to awaken the society to the fact that its very existence is tagged on the values and issues around the family. Marriage thus is not just an issue of creativity in literature but one of reality as well. An author's experiences, or indeed that of his society, are what motivate the kind of writings they do and in the manner they do it. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: how is the institution of marriage interpreted in the selected Kiswahili novels? What is the societal interpretation of Christian and Muslim marriages in the selected novels? What is the interpretation of marriage in the changing world in the light of the selected novels? The objective of this study is to bring out the various interpretations of the institution of marriage in the socio-religious environment depicted in the Kiswahili novel, to explore the institutions of religion and tradition and to show the effects of the varied interpretation made in the Kiswahili novel. This paper intends to show that in the selected novels, all the conflicts in the society, whether political, social, religious or marital, have basis in the marriage. The paper shows that in the novels, religion and culture play a vital role in propagating positive family values and in dealing with challenges there in.

The issue of religion and marriage in Kiswahili novels has not been given much weight. Many researchers have mentioned it in passing. Among such researchers are Waweru (2006), Momanyi (1998, 2001) and Ndung'o (1985). Most of these works were on the subject of violence against women and general gender inequalities but not on religion and the institution of marriage.

## 2.0 Literature review

Mulokozi, (1999:111) says that religions and traditions train its members to accept and respect power that be without questioning because it is God given. He points out that this leads to tendencies that bring about gender segregations. Momanyi (2001) agrees with Mulokozi in her exploits in Kiswahili poetry and points to Holy Scriptures; both Muslim and Christian and her general observations is that a woman is disadvantaged. It is with this in mind that the New Historicism school of thought sees change as historical and different moments in history can characterize the way we view things. The varied interpretation of the institution of marriage is based on what values the society harbors at that moment in time.

Lorun (2005) asserts that religious faith affect how people live in marriage in two ways: on one hand it aims at strengthening it and on the other hand, it brings in pressure from outside; from sermons by the pastor on imani to the congregation and faith visa avis the societal values that oppose among others, divorce. The characters of Salome and Musa in *Paradiso* (2005) and Joshua and Lona thus go contrary to socio-religious values. Though religion opposes adultery and fornication in marriage, hypocrisy, greed, wealth and lying among couples still persist in marriage.

Stark and Finkel (2000) say 60 percent of those in marriage still value religion as an important institution; an institution that inspires couples. This observation is a subject of debate as Cullaugh *et-al* (2000) state. Others like Dollahite (2004) see religion as affecting the family whether positively or negatively. They point out specifically the fact that children brought up in strict religious environment have negative feelings towards

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<sup>2</sup> See subsection 2.0 on theory.

marriage and are withdrawn from the matter. The effect of what they are saying is seen through the character of Nice whose life is ruined due to illicit behavior although she was the daughter of Bishop Joshua, a very senior religious post.

And as noticed by Runkel (1998) the quilt felt by those that are put under strict religious care like Kibibi in *Kala Tufaha* (2007). Kibibi does not want to engage in any sexual relationships with Kimini before marriage because religiously, this is wrong. Traditionally however, this would not have any meaningful effect as in some societies, parents marry off young girls; are forced in to early marriage with the knowledge of everybody. Does religion therefore act to strengthen the institution of marriage as Cornwall (1990) and Chadwick (1995) found out? Erickson's holds a different view. The socio-religious relationship thus is at self conflict. As Chowdhry found out, marriage is a responsibility, faithfulness, respect and truthfulness.

His views are in agreement with Kibibi's in the *Kala Tufaha* (2007) who agrees to share her property and still honor and respect Salala her husband. There is only one explanation to this; that religion and values go hand in hand and viewing this through the character of Lona, *Paradiso* (2005) excesses need to be checked in order to maintain good values without necessarily justifying which side is better, Chowdhry (2002).

Ngozi (1990:55) alleges that the attempt to interpret the institution of marriage in the exclusion of other family issues such as children and inheritance, education, cultural issues and general global changes will only further complicate matters of definition of this institution. That is why Mbele (1985) says cultural matters pitted against religious values would only result to alienation and gender conflicts and leave the woman vulnerable, Chacha (1980:43).

Traditionally, society had certain values that guided marital life, Mulokozi (1999:112-3) whose values were taken from one generation to the other. Chiragdin, S (1974:39) indeed confirms that girls were trained (*walifundwa*) and prepared for this noble task before really engagement.

### 3.0 Theoretical perspectives

This paper applies the theory of New Historicism based on the American School of Thought. This theory recognizes the importance of understanding the historical context in the analysis of creative works. Understanding the context of time during the reception of a work of art, its future audience, the objectives and area of criticism is deemed as vital in the interpretation of the content of the work. The theory further holds that the author's intentions have a direct effect on the historical background of the work under scrutiny. As a result, it is very important to any critic to try and understand such intentions. Such principles of this theory will guide our analysis in this paper. New Historicism asserts that one cannot adequately interpret a work of literature outside the paradigms of the very society in which such a work originates. The argument here is that, the way one generation views and interprets matters is understandably different from how the next generation is going to see and interpret same. It is also different from how the previous generation understood and interpreted the same issues. This is so because as the society changes, so do the literary writers as well as the issues they address and how they address them. As Wafula (2004) points out, interpretations of literary works are supposed to be done in the context of time and situations of the author at the moment of writing. However, this should not be confused to mean every interpretation is positive and leads to success in analysis.

What Wafula is saying can be interpreted in two ways; firstly, that for the society to bring any positive changes in the institution of marriage, it must look behind in time and see what has changed and secondly; weigh how the change would affect one's interpretations of the institution. Such a caution is vital given the varied interpretations that surround the institution of marriage today. Indeed, New Historicism suggests that an era in history affects the actions of the societal members as well as the way they view change. This has some effect on the future interpretations they give and it affects the mindset of future generations.

## 4.0 Discussion and Results

In discussing the issue of marriage, using new historicism, this paper will concentrate on two key areas. The first one is the interpretation of marriage seen through the eyes of the two chosen texts. Secondly, the paper discusses the various marriage themes that are apparent in the two texts; Hebwe's (2005) *Paradiso* and Babu's (2007) *Kala Tufaha*.

### 4.1 Various interpretations of marriage

There are different interpretations on marriage depending on the parameters applied and at times depending on who is doing the interpretation. The interpretations given in this paper are drawn from the texts being analyzed.

#### 4.1.1 Marriage as responsibility

This is evident in the texts that are reviewed in this paper. In Habwe's (2005) *Paradiso* for example, Bishop Joshua and the committee of the New Jerusalem church put pressure on Pastor Michael to marry in order to be effective in his duties and for the society and congregations to trust his morals. Joshua argues that:

*“Wajua mhubiri hawezi kuaminika kuwa mhubiri mpaka uoe. Watu wataanza kitubandikia mambo na itakuwa vigumu kujumuika na wake za watu”* Joshua alisema. (44):

“You know a preacher cannot be accepted as one until he marries. The society will start suspecting us and it will be difficult to interact with married women.” Joshua said.

Hegedon (1983) sums it up well when he says that for the society, marriage is a very vital responsibility. Pastors have the greatest task of ensuring fidelity, faithfulness and trust. Family values are thus imperative for all. Babu's *Kala Tufaha* is emphatic about this fact. He especially emphasizes the role the children play in ensuring the continuity of the society. This is evident through the character Ma Asha whose barrenness causes her pain always and when she realizes that Kibibi was about to abandon her child because he was deemed fatherless by the society; she comments thus:

*“Kama mtoto hutaki, nipe mimi nitamlea. Mimi sikujaliwa kuitwa mama kama si nyanya!”* (2007:11).

“If you do not want this baby, give it to me; I will bring it up. I was personally not lucky and as a result I was never referred to as a mother or grandmother to so and so.”

We here learn that marriages are supposed to bring forth children. From Ma Asha's words, one can deduce that bringing up children is not an easy task and that may be one reason why Kibibi seems to dread the prospect.

#### 4.1.2 Marriage as power

The fact that marriage is power is illustrated well in *Paradiso* when Lona divorces her husband Mganga because he is poor and because they live in her mother's house. This change in traditional set-up upsets this marriage. It seems that it is no longer a man's prerogative to send his wife away to her parents. This “honour” now belongs to the one who has economic ability. This is the person that holds the power to terminate the marriage. Lona and her mother thus converse:

*“Hiyo ndoa mama siitaki”, Lona alimkata mama kauli.*

*“Kwa nini huitaki hali umeitaka mwenyewe?”*

*“Sitaki tu. Sina sababu,” Lona alisema kwa ukali ambao kwao mamake hakumzoea.* (2005:34).

“I am no longer interested in this marriage mum”, Lona said, cutting short her mother's comments.

“Why are you not interested while you went into it out of your own volition?”

“I am just not interested. I have no particular reason.” Lona said in a fury that was very unlike her.

The other form of power Habwe expresses involves satisfying a woman in bed. A man who is able to do this has power. In this regard Lona states that:

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

“... that’s a real man”

The power demonstrated in the above context is two dimensional; ability to satisfy the woman in bed as well as the ability to provide for her.

#### **4.1.3 Marriage as an institution surrounded by hypocrisy**

In *Paradiso*, Habwe illuminates this hypocrisy through some of his characters especially Lona, Musa and Salome who not only engage in extra marital affairs but do worse. Lona, for example, goes further to consult a witchdoctor because she wants her legally and religiously married husband to be turned into her slave at home. Lona thus tells the witchdoctor:

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

“*Umekuja na picha yake?*”

“*Ndio ni nayo.*” Lona alisema. (2005:107).

“I would appreciate if I just kept him in the house, keep him on the palm of my hand and turn him round and round as I like.” Said Lona.

“Have you brought his photograph?”

“Yes I have.” Lona answered.

This discussion suggests that witchcraft is practiced in marriage even where the spouses pretend to subscribe to modern religion. It shows that at times the spouses are so unsure of their marriages that they at times resort to unorthodox means to make it succeed. This may also seem like search for power and control in a marriage.

#### **4.1.4 Marriage as a man’s domain**

Marriage is portrayed as a man’s domain and he controls it using his might. There seems to be some functions and obligations that can only be undertaken by men in marriage. In *Paradiso* for example Habwe writes:

“*Kama ni Mango kuja nyumbani ataletwa na mkasa .... labda masuala ya mashamba ambayo yeye mume ilikuwa lazima kuwepo.*” (2005:01)

“If it’s about Mango coming home, he will do so as a result of an unfortunate happening ....

Maybe issues to do with land about which he, the husband, must be present”

So, while a man may be away for long and would be of no use to the family, when it comes to the issues of land and inheritance, then he is of utmost importance. Such issues would not be handled by the wife.

Strobe (1979) says the African woman is oppressed because of male domination which leads to segregation and gender insensitivity. An African woman does not own property and a husband is not bound to consult his wife on any issues at all. If he has to consult, then it has to be with fellow men. In *Paradiso*, Mango tells Zuhura:

“*Ninataka ushauri kutoka kwa wanaume,*” alisema. “... *wewe si mume. Kwa hivyo usinishauri.*” (2005:004)

“I would take advice from men only,” he said. “... you are not a man, therefore, do not offer me any advice.”

Indeed, Babu writes of marriage as a prison and a place where a woman is tortured and discriminated upon. Women are denied education, (2007:12) and however much they try to excel, they remain in the grip of a man. Bi Habiba notes:

... *hata afike wapi, (mwanamke) mwisho hurudi katika twaa ya mumewe. (2007:22)*

... no matter how high she goes, she eventually gets back to be beholden to a man.

“... *elimu atapata lakini mwisho wake ni nini?*” (2007:29)

“... yes you will get educated, but what will be the end of it all?”

Through Habiba, the author seems to hold the view that whatever a woman’s social/economic position she will end up residing with a man and therefore she will always play second fiddle to the man.

## 4.2 Marriage themes explored in the selected novels

The selected texts explore many themes related to the subject of our paper – marriage. Such themes include tradition and marriage, marriage and family, marriage and education, marriage and gender freedom, marriage and economy as well as marriage and adultery. However, this paper will mainly analyse three broad themes and these are marriage and religion, marriage and culture as well as marriage and change. It is important to mention that while exploring these two broad themes, the other aforementioned themes will be alluded to in the discussion when necessary.

### 4.2.1 Marriage and religion.

In exploring this subject, this paper looked at the content in both novels. In Babu’s (2007) *Kala Tufaha*, the character Kibibi recalls the advice given to her by her namesake on how to live honorably with her husband. The indication is that a woman is supposed to respect and obey her husband unquestioningly and lavish him with love and at the same time recognize his role as the head of the family. Traditionally it is observed, this means that the woman had no honour and was seen as a lesser being compared to the man. In the novel, Kibibi recalls being told by her name sake thus:

*Mumeo mbembeleze daima. Akikwita mwitikie labeka! Anaposema usimkatize, mnyenyekee siku zote. Wajua tena wanaume ndio wasimamizi wa wanawake!* (Omar, 2007:170).

Mollify your husband always. When he calls you, answer respectfully at once! Never cut short his speech. Be humble and respectful to him always. You understand well that men are the masters and women the servants.

In Chiraghdin’s words, (Chiraghdin 1987) the Waswahili culture and Islamic religion go hand in hand and what they teach about marriage is very similar. The same kind of treatment to women applies to Christianity. In Habwe’s *Paradiso* (2005) for example, Mango is forced to divorce some of his wives (save for one) for him to aspire to be a church elder in the New Jerusalem Church. Njozi (1990) observes that the subject of marriage cannot be discussed outside the context of the family, culture and religion as they all have a role to fully play in the marriage. The local chief tells Mango that:

“*Hii ni mila, lazima mila ... usipofuata ikibidi tutakuchapa viboko na tukuachie mkeo umzike mwenyewe.*” Habwe (2005:03).

This is tradition, and tradition has no exceptions ... should you not follow it, if we must, we will cane you and leave you to bury your wife alone.



#### 4.2.2 *Marriage and culture*

Culture involves a peoples' way of life and their belief system. Iribemwangi (2013:111) states that:

The cultural practices ... include, but are not limited to, people's beliefs, their behavior, their objects as well as other aspects that are common to a specific group or society. These and many other aspects may be said to be the culture of that given society. The cultural aspects that are connected either in temporal or geographic terms are both tangible and intangible. Culture is important to every social grouping for it is through culture that people and groups define themselves, conform to society's shared values, and contribute to their society.

In *Paradiso*, it is notable that although Mango is a Christian, when his first wife dies, he is forced to sleep in the same house with the corpse of his late wife in line with the culture of the society of his late wife. As noted earlier, Mango (2005:93) is reminded that:

“...*hii ni mila. Lazima ufuata mila yetu hapa*”.

“... this is the tradition. You must subscribe to our tradition.”

In African culture, one of the traditional roles of a woman has been to nurture children and wean them up. Women have had almost the sole obligation of molding girls into responsible wives. Any failure on the part of a mother is met with harsh criticism. It is in view of this that Sister Ann (Babu 2007) is in shock when Kibibi is found out to be pregnant while she was under the watch of the experienced Ma Asha! Sister Ann wonders out aloud:

“*Iweje hukujua kwamba bintiye alikuwa mjamzito?*” (Babu 2007:9)

“How could it be that you (Ma Asha) had no knowledge that she (Kibibi) was pregnant?”

Other than the dangers that a baby girl is exposed to, the above quotation shows that “failure” on the part of women on a task they are supposed to carry out is met with shock and hostility. As Wamitila (2003:33) points out, traditions form a peoples experiences in life and gives them their identity.

#### 4.2.3 *Marriage and change*

Wamitila (2007) argues that the main issues in marriage are based on the kind of interpretations that are made concerning the traditional marriages and co-habiting. It is noted that co-habitation is quickly replacing the old set-up the institution of marriage and it seems that neither the church nor the mosque has control over this change. Indeed, children have become more independent than before. This independence is manifest even in girls who were very subdued in the traditional society. This independence is depicted in Babu's *Kala Tufaha* where he points out that contemporary children are more and more engaging themselves in worldly affairs at the expense of the religious and cultural set-rules. Babu (2007:140) states that:

... *hivyo ndivyo uhusiano kati ya Tufaha na Salala ulivyoingia katika awamu mpya. Mwanzoni ilikuwa vigumu kwao kulikubali hilo lakini waligundua kwamba tangu hapo wote wawili wakipendana. Mahaba yalikuwa yamewakolea wakawa hujidhulumu nafsi kwa kujizuia.*

... that is how the relationship between Tufaha and Salala opened a new page. Initially, it was hard for both to believe the reality but they later realized that they both loved each other. Their love was so deep that they were only hurting themselves by denying it.

While traditionally women were supposed to get married after a certain age, in contemporary society, some women are opting to remain single. In Habwe's *Paradiso* for example, Sakina's case suggests that times have changed. Sakina was content on living alone as a single lady. Habwe (2005:1) states that:

*Kwa kuwa Sakina alikuwa ametoshea kuishi peke yake alikaa Magongo...*

For Sakina was content living as a single lady, she lived at Magongo ...

From the above quotations, it is obvious that the institution of marriage has experienced change. Traditionally, the expression of love between Tufaha and Salala would have been not only unacceptable but also unthinkable. In the second case, singlehood was never an option for women even after death of their husbands. This is what lead to the phenomena that is frequently referred to as “wife inheritance.”

## 5.0 Conclusions.

Our observation of the Kiswahili novel, deduces that religion alone cannot sustain a marriage. Adultery, fornication, cheating and use of witchcraft exist in the institution as portrayed in the . This is evident through characters such as Fumbwe, (Omar, 2007) Musa, Salome and Lona in Habwe, (2005). This is contrary to the observations made by Chowdhry (2000) that faithfulness, truthfulness and honesty are the basis on which marriage is sustained.

Indeed rape exists in today’s marriage. Fumbwe rapes Kibibi, his house help and even impregnates her, (Omar 2007). The social fabric that kept the family together and preserved its values seem to not to draw respect any longer. For example, Kibibi is initially engaged to Fumbwe’s younger brother and traditionally Fumbwe should have had nothing to do with her sexually.

Traditionally, there always was some social distance between the young and the grown ups. What therefore is witnessed at the Country Club, (Omar, 2007) where grown up men and women take their age mates daughters and sons for playmates is worrying and begs the question what the future holds for marriage. Nice on the other hand, Habwe (2005) has had amorous relationships with men of all caliber and nationalities and to her marriage is but a bother and therefore one wonders what is left of the institution.

Our thesis here is that there is need to re-define the institution of marriage in order to salvage it. According to the two texts reviewed, the existence of single parenthood, unfaithfulness in the church and the fact that children are no longer under the watch of their parents and society after attaining the institutional age, spells death for this noble institution.

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