



Reflections on the Place of Children's Literature in Kenya

Barasa Remmy Shiundu*

Kaimosi Friends University, Kaimosi, Kenya

Abstract— Children literature is an important strand of literature that inspires and nurtures a whole generation of young people in appreciating their society's creative and artistic values. What children read and interact within their environment inform their behavior pattern and personality. Kenya's historical past of colonial experience has influenced its children's literature in terms of its content, style and quality. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the journey that children's literature in postcolonial Kenya has undergone. The paper reflects on the theory of children's literature and proposes a renewed focus in this subgenre with a view to providing quality literary experiences to the Kenyan child.

Index Terms— Reflections, Children Literature, Kenya.

1. Introduction

Childhood is an important phase in a person's life. Childhood is a time when, ideally, the child's slate of mind is vacuous but quite receptive to new experiences learnt from its immediate environment. Indeed, it is a crucial period for character formation and society has the onus duty to ensure that this formation is virtuous, valuable and validated. A child who is malformed becomes a misfit and sometimes a disgrace to society. A child is prepared for life in society in many ways. Religious outfits, through their multi-faceted teaching strategies, are important agents in the spiritual growth of children. The family, through parental care, is responsible for the social and spiritual nourishment of the child. Literature is important to the growing child in a multiplicity of ways. What children read or visualize builds or destroys them. A child who reads about positive hardworking and peaceful characters grows up conditioned in the best way; and one who reads literature-espousing negativity grows up embracing negativity. Ismail (2023) argues that the books children read impacts on the young generation's personal development.

For this reason, society must take stock of what we have given our children to read over the years. This is useful in two senses: if it is bad literature, society must quickly change to prevent further destruction of the Kenyan child; if it is good, then society must continue to feed them on this literary diet.

During the pre-colonial period, oral literature was the only form of literature that was available to children. This was accessed via narratives, poetry, riddles and tongue twisters. This literature was valued as one of the means through which

these societies educated, instructed, and socialized their younger members (Alembi, 1991). They also learnt about such vices as greed, disobedience and lies, and their consequences. The children thus learnt what society considered good and evil; and how to relate and take care of their immediate environment.

2. Children's Writing and Policy Since Independence

In 1963, Kenya got independence and many people hoped things would change fast, particularly with regard to culture. Nevertheless, with the cultural conditioning which the African had gone through, this was not to be the case. Long after independence, there is still no official policy guideline on what children should read and what they should not.

It is then not surprising that books used by colonialists to condition Africans, and other similar books, are still common in Kenya. These are books the colonialists used to alienate the youth from their traditional ways of life and make them helpless distant of their own culture. A book like *King Solomon's Mines* by sir Rider Haggard is by all definitions a racist book that would make African children not to like themselves. The book perpetuates stereotype images of the black person. Other books with Western backgrounds that have persisted in Kenya include *Thirty Nine Steps* by John Buchan, *Around the World in 80 Days* by Jules Vern, Enid Blyton books, among others.

Odaga (1985) observes that there is a greater need to heed the wise words of Joerg Becker when he asserts:

The great number of children and young people's book about Africa have perpetuated the old cliché of the white master and the coloured servant. Young people's literature could propagandise this image of the Negro African people as inferior and obedient to the white people.

Even if some of the books are not on Africa, it is important to note that these books perpetuate Western values through white settings, characters and themes. As Achebe has rightly observed, the child reader internalizes the themes since the characters and style easily imprint on their young minds. The poison, as Achebe notes, works in very subtle ways and over a long period.

It will not be right to state that all Western children's literature is negative. Some European children's writers have provided balanced presentation of the experience in their books. A good example is Cynthia Hunter who wrote *Pamela the*

*Corresponding author: rshiundu@kafu.ac.ke

Probation Officer in which she explores the impact of colonial experiences on Africans at the socio-economic and political levels. Africans are portrayed as helpless victims of the fast changing world. That said, everyone has individual and group destinies in their hands, and no one should be denied this by being labelled a victim of circumstances.

3. Publishers Contributions

Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) has taken an encouraging direction particularly in vetting of books to be included in the 'Orange Book'—the official list of textbooks and readers approved for Kenyan schools. This is useful insofar as purchase of books using Ministry of Education (MoE) resources is concerned. Schools with funds from other sources are officially allowed to access books other than those recommended by the KICD. Hence, more needs to be done by the MoE to ensure children read only literature that helps them develop positive attitudes and values towards themselves and their country.

Shortly after independence, Kenyans started writing for children. Among the very first writers was Pamela Kola who collected and translated Luo tales, which are published in three anthologies: *East African How Stories*, *East African Where Stories* and *East African When Stories*. John Mbiti collected and translated Kamba stories, published as *Akamba Folk Tales*. Kuguru (2022) has published other collections of the Kenya oral literature for children. The emphasis on oral literature by these researchers and writers is to announce to the world that Kenya has its own traditional literature, which is rich in messages and aesthetics.

After these early efforts by Kenyan artists, the interest has grown and the reading menu for the Kenyan child diversified. There are now non-folkloric genres in form of the short story, poetry, plays and more recently biographies.

Little attention, however, seems to have been paid to children's poetry and drama. This is in spite of the fact that these two genres are popular with children in their informal settings (Alembi 1991). There is the mistaken notion among publishers that poetry and drama do not sell, on the basis of which they have shied away from publishing them. Oxford University Press and Phoenix publishers, however, have been responsive and productive in this regard. They have so far published many poetry anthologies and plays.

There is greater need to publish more and quality religious children's books. The few titles that exist seem to lay emphasis on the message and not the style. To put it bluntly, they are preachy and not interesting to read. It is important to heed Flora Nwapa who observes that writing for children is a work that must be done with a great sense of understanding and appreciation of the world on children. She insists that creating this literature must be approached with the same excitement and enthusiasm that the child feels about (the) world which is progressively unfolding and exciting...

There has been a major boost in the field of children's literature in Kenya especially since the authors who made their name writing for adults have also written for children. These include Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Francis Imbuga who have

given the area the necessary intellectual and professional focus. Writing for children has now become fascinating and sensational as writing for adults.

Another major contribution to the flourishing of children's literature is that it is now studied in almost all the public universities in Kenya. Distinguished scholars in the country have written myriad theses on the various genres of children literature. Mwanzi (1982), for example, wrote her MA theses on children's literature. Other scholars who have written on children's literature include Ezekiel Alembi who prolifically published before he passed on in 2010, Joan Akoleit, Oyoo Weche, among others. This literature is not only about books anymore; it is about serious intellectual investigation.

4. The Children's Book Fair

The book fairs organized by CHISCI and then by the Kenyan Publishers Association (KPA) have been an arena for promotion of children's literature in Kenya and Africa. Through the fairs, publishing houses in other parts of Africa and the world have bought rights to publish Kenyan books abroad. In this way, Kenyan children's literary works have found a market beyond the borders of the country.

KPA also runs the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature. This has children's category in which three writers of the best children's books awarded, a further incentive to the writers. Due to the category's competitive nature, children's writers and publishers in Kenya strive to produce books that can earn them prestigious awards. Themes take cognizance of the age of the children and their literary interests. The writers are challenged to employ technique's that enable powerful communication of the messages to the contemporary child.

Since the Jomo Kenyatta prize for Literature is not just about the richness of a story but also considers the way it is packaged, it puts pressure on the publishers to produce quality books in terms of editing, illustrations, design, paper, and finishing of the books. Children's books in Kenyan are, in this regard, increasingly becoming attractive and highly readable.

Another positive development in children's literature in Kenya is publishing of books in Kiswahili. Children hence get variety and an important opportunity to read in the national language, balancing the overexposure to the English language.

Society's challenge to children's literature today in Kenya is the near addiction to smartphones and the emergence of Sheng', a pidgin form of communication that borrows from Kiswahili, English, and local languages. Sheng' is a threat because it has no grammatical rules. This ill-defined form of communication is like weeds, eating up all the legitimate languages. It needs concerted efforts by all those who care for vernaculars, English and Kiswahili in discouraging it out. Quality and attractive books in Kiswahili and vernacular are a good step towards this end.

However, a scrutiny of the Kiswahili and vernacular books available for the Kenyan child leaves a lot to be desired. Most of these books are written entirely from the adult's point of view. They have adult themes and use style that would not attract the child reader. Many of them have not embraced current trends in writing. They either are narrative or take

narrative structures; not that narratives are bad. But traditional tales are more entertaining when presented orally. This way, the narrator is able to manipulate the audience and the events in the tales for a lasting impression on the reader. Lifted from their contexts and retold as narratives, the author must adapt the tales to the new medium of communication. The author must then ensure that characters and characterization works, images and symbols are consistent, the stories are at the targeted age group level, and the language is appropriate for the target reader. Many Kiswahili and vernacular authors may just need to enhance these factors.

The problem is compounded by many publishing houses who appear to be in a rush to churn out children titles in Kiswahili and local languages without due consideration to quality. The publishers spend huge sums in production of the books as evident from the illustrations, design, and paper quality. However, these mechanical aspects cannot salvage or even be a substitute to a badly written and edited story.

Serious measures should be put in place to ensure the Kenyan child is well catered for by local literature. Local authors and editors need to pay more attention to the contents of books published for children.

The media in Kenya has helped in the growth and development of children literature. There are programmes on local television stations that focus on children literature, and this has helped attract children to literature. However, the television stations can improve by involving the children more in the programmes and by advertising children literature books. For example, books that portray Kenya's heroes can be advertised free, or the government can meet the costs as promotion of Competence Base Education and free primary education.

This will help inculcate a reading culture amongst the future populace and make authorship and publishing of children literature more profitable. Kenya will benefit because writing and reading about heroes is writing and reading about virtues. The socio-economic returns to the country will be invaluable.

It is noteworthy that the *Sunday Nation* newspaper has contributed significantly to the promotion of children's literature. The *Young Nation* section of the paper runs stories and features for children, at times inviting children to write stories and duly rewarding them. The newspaper also has a section where new books published locally are reviewed. Parents and children are thus aware of the books available for children. Writers must adhere to the same criteria that apply to selecting good children's books— the literature elements of plot,

characterization setting, style, theme, and point of view which must be interplayed to create compelling stories suitable for the targeted group.

5. Conclusion

Despite the achievements made so far in children literature, authors in Kenya today have the challenge to write quality books that trigger children's creativity and imagination as well as help children visualize new concepts. There is the need to venture into new viewpoints by letting the child reader escape from the restrictions of the physical world. Intensified use of information technology and pictures is a good strategy towards achieving this. Having a farcical element in the works captures the attention of the child. Heroes and villains in humorous and fanciful books can be personified animals, toys or anthropomorphized objects.

The books should reflect the diverse groups of people in the changing world, so the children can develop respect for self and others. Literature should be both a mirror in which the children see themselves, and an opportunity for the children to explore the world around them.

Multicultural children literature is ideal for Kenya which has various ethnic and racial as well as social economic groupings. This type of literature helps children understand their differences as people and nurture feelings and aspirations that include love, sadness, fear and desire for fairness and justice.

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