

A JOURNEY THROUGH CREATIVITY AND UNORTHODOX LITERARY CRITICISM: LESSONS FROM THE MASSES OFFERING CRITICISM IN A VERNACULAR LANGUAGE IN KENYA¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

I cannot boast of being a literary critic of any shade - neither am I well tutored in the literary world - but I read and enjoy literature and have incorporated others into my reading world. I, therefore, feel greatly humbled standing in front of this grand gathering of academic and language greats to express my brief and non-academic wandering into the world of literature. Being a linguist, what I present here today is not an academic treatise on literary criticism and creativity but thoughts, recollections and experiences I have had in my dalliance with literature.

Allow me to digress. In March 2000, the first 24-hour wholly vernacular station in Kenya opened its doors. It was, and still is, known as *Kameme FM*. Being a lover and an ardent advocate of the use of vernacular languages, I frequently tuned into the station and was elated. I promptly wrote an application (in Gikuyu) requesting to be given time to air an academic programme which I christened “Book Review” in the application. The objective of the programme would be to “read” and “review” literature books in Gikuyu. Since there were not many books written in that language, I proposed to “read and translate books written in English and Kiswahili into Gikuyu” in keeping with the station’s goal of broadcasting in Gikuyu. I had in mind a programme along the lines of “Books and Bookmen”, which I had tuned in to for quite some years. At that time, the programme was presented by now Professor Egara Kabaji of Masinde Muliro University and, among its pioneer participants, Professor Chris Wanjala of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi.

But I did not have the intention of having a replica of Kabaji’s programme. I had thought of ways of making the programme interactive and I was lucky, given the current advancements in communication technology. I did not want to lecture as Kabaji did. My intention was to go through the book as written and then give listeners a chance to call in and give a critique, however uneducated the response would be. I intended to start with a review of school set books on offer then. When the then station’s owner - Ms Rose Kimotho -

¹ In this presentation the speaker shared with the conference participants an aspect of the rich experience he has had in the last fifteen years emanating from literary engagements with the masses in a vernacular radio broadcast.

heard about my idea, she liked it. The station was in the process of looking for new and fresh programmes and talents and she thought my proposal sounded unique and fresh. But there was skepticism all over: *how could one possibly review English books in Gikuyu?* All the same, some had some sort of faith in “this young university lecturer ... maybe he has a way of doing it.”

2. THE BEGINNING OF THE UNORTHODOX LITERARY JOURNEY

So, one afternoon in July 2000 after a lecture on Kiswahili phonology to my second year students, two lady students followed me to my office. They identified themselves, and one was Sabina Chege. She had been sent by the station to ask me to go for an audition regarding my proposed programme. I needed to prepare for a two-hour programme, she told me. It so happened that Sabina - who then worked with Kameme (and now an M.P representing Murang’a County women in Parliament) - and one Evans Wanyoike (still working for Kameme) were some of those who made sense of my proposal.

After that piece of information, I sat and re-read George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. I also re-read *Shamba la Wanyama*, its Kiswahili translation. I then prepared, read and internalised my notes. Later that month, I went to the studio with a clear image of how I wanted the programme to proceed. It worked. After just three days I was called to go and do a second, and more thorough, demonstration programme. This too worked and I was then instructed to prepare to air the live programme. I got a contract. I started airing “Book Review” on the first Thursday of August 2000 at 2 pm with Evans Wanyoike (himself a lover of literature, a composer and a musician) as my host. I went through the first chapters of *Animal Farm*. The response was astounding when at 3.30 pm we opened phone lines for the interactive session. Common folks took us through what to this day I call a *critique* of the pages so far read. We got multiple interpretations of episodes, people gave parallels of what we had read and their real life experiences and by the end of the programme I could not wait for the next Thursday to continue. Such interaction continues to this day.

The following Thursday I continued with my review of the chapters in *Animal Farm*. The response was the same - overwhelming. Next we read *The Trials of Brother Jero* by Wole Soyinka, then *Utengano* by Said Ahmed Mohamed and all the time our listenership grew. After some time, the ‘Book Review’ listeners wanted to form a team. We thus changed the name of the programme to ‘Kameme Book Club’, whereupon we recruited members live on air and via the short message service. Within three months, we had registered over 500 members and the number kept soaring. In the mean time, we had moved from just reviewing school set books to general literature.

2.1 The masses and unorthodox criticism

Then we read Euphrase Kezilahabi's *Rosa Mistika*. The programme picked beyond my wildest dream; the fan base shot to unimaginable proportions and we had to let go of the club dimension, we no longer could talk of "members" since numerous and diverse people were calling in live, sending text messages, emails and even letters offering different dimensions about various characters, themes and sub-themes. It was obvious to me that this particular novella offered many listeners a setting they could identify with. Zakaria, the drunken father, was a figure many could easily "pinpoint" in their neighbourhoods, so were his wife and daughters, more so Rosa. Zakaria's behaviour: mumbling drunkenly in the mistaken belief of being a music maestro, violence against his wife and daughters, idling and a false sense of self-importance, all seemed to be so familiar that many listeners stopped short of mentioning names of Zakaria's character mates from their neighbourhoods. The demand to read more of Kezilahabi's books was so high that I soon found myself reviewing *Kichwamaji*, another novel that received acclaimed critique. The mysterious disease described in the novel written in early 70s was quite easily likened to the AIDS pandemic. Just like AIDS, the disease killed many people, caused stigmatisation and was contagious. While Kezilahabi's rendition may have had a deeper socio-political symbolic meaning carried in his rich imageries, our critics picked that message as something they could identify with and one that they witnessed in their midst.

Another book that we reviewed early and was received well, at least according to responses, was *Kisima cha Giningi* by Mohamed Said Abdulla. This is an investigative piece with Bwana Msa (an acronym for Mohamed Said Abdulla?) as the main detective who cracked every nut including the death that occurred at Giningi Well. This pipe-smoking detective has an assistant named Najum who marvels with the readers about the sheer wizardry of Bwana Msa. Due to the good reception, I got to read other investigative books by the same author such as *Duniani Kuna Watu* and *Kosa la Bwana Msa*. These books showed that the masses appreciate deep thought and logic both of which are displayed by Bwana Msa.

Matigari ma Njirungi by Ngugi wa Thiong'o also received acclaimed criticism from the masses. This may have resulted from several factors. Firstly, this was the very first book written in our language of presentation - Gikuyu - and as a result people were able to identify with the names, symbols, the setting and general language. Secondly, the fact that the main character, the enigmatic Matigari, was similar in character to Jesus Christ of the Bible may have caused great interest in the mainly Christian community. Matigari's story was followed keenly in real life as it was in the fiction itself. I once over-heard a hawker narrating the story to his colleague along River Road in Nairobi and wishing he could see the "Mwalimu" who narrated the story, and well, just like Matigari, the reviewer was just a few feet away but the man could not

recognize him! Through technology, the information about our programme got to Ngugi, the author in his US abroad. He sought me out and when he visited Kenya, we hosted him in Book Club for two hours where he talked about literature and his writing, and interacted with the listeners. He could not believe that literary scholarship had at last gone to the masses and that both the authors and the masses could discuss literature so freely. To him, this emphasised the point that the masses understood and appreciated literature even where they had not stepped into a literary class. We were to later read more of Ngugi's books.

Sometime in 2004, I decided to make another experiment with books. I reviewed G. G Kariuki's *The Illusion of Power: 50 Years in Kenyan Politics*, an autobiography. In his own words, the review "built (his) name to heights similar to a sky scraper." This further emphasised the fact that the masses like stories they identify with, be they fiction or reality. G. G. narrates his story from childhood, through colonialism to his life in government, rising to become a member of the "inner cabinet" to his fall from grace and his eventual "rehabilitation" back to the corridors of power. The success of this review of an autobiography leads to the review of many other autobiographies. One of those that touched the listeners greatly was Wanyiri Kihoro's *Never Say Die*. Kihoro basically narrates the horrendous torture he and other so called dissidents underwent during a past dictatorial regime in Kenya. He narrates about life in the torture chambers, courts and prison. The book captured the listeners' imagination and they sent numerous comments. When we eventually hosted the author to respond to issues, 2 hours were not enough and we had to recall him for another two-hour session. Njenga Karume's *Beyond Expectations: from Charcoal to Gold* was also received well. From the interactions, we learnt that people like to be inspired, they appreciate when they hear that one can surpass their expectations, that it is possible to move from being a mere charcoal burner to being the owner of gold ingots. This is even more appreciated when it comes from one who has walked through that path which listeners understood to be narrow, long and tedious.

Other autobiographies and biographies that have been reviewed include Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*, Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, Joseph Ngunjiri's *Henry Wanyoike: Victory despite Blindness*, Evan Mwangi's *Bildad Kaggia: Voice of the People* as well as Peter Kuguru's *Trailblazer* and Lay Canon Gideon Numa's biography among others.

Apart from this experiment, there have been other experiments with books and the masses. The other experimentation phase was ignited by my review of Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*. When I read the small but powerful book, the listeners were able to identify with each and every chapter. They localised the chapters and could easily talk of tribalism, corruption, indiscipline, lack of patriotism, false images of African leaders, social injustice, bad leadership et cetera. Along these lines, I also read Maina wa

Kinyatti's *The Pen and the Gun*, Koigi wa Wamwere's *Towards Genocide in Kenya: the Curse of Negative Ethnicity* and Wanguhu Nga'ng'a's voluminous *Kenya's Ethnic Communities: Foundations of the Nation*, among others. I also read Wahome Mutahi's *How to be a Kenyan* written tongue in cheek. The listeners commented on the different behaviours that Mutahi talks about and which in a different setting other than his would be categorically termed "bad manners". Another unique book we went through in several shows is the pioneer *Kenya Book of Records* by Kondia Mwaniki Wachira. This book covers records in all spheres of life up to December 31, 2007. The listeners were interested in their history and their heroes and heroines and asked questions regarding them while at the same time giving critical comments on some entries. They mentioned some important records that had been left out - like the most published Kenyan author in Kiswahili - but they mostly identified with the work.

The trilogy of Francis Imbuga's plays: *Betrayal in the City*, *Man of Kafira* and *The Green Cross of Kafira* were texts that most listeners offered their critique on. They identified not only with Kafira but also with the actions that took place in that fictional country. They felt part of that country and were angered by the actions of the Boss and fellow rulers. They were quite unhappy with sycophants like Mulili. I also read his *Game of Silence* which was also given some good critique.

From the West, apart from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, we also went through Nikolai Gogol's *Government Inspector*. Although these books are set far from Kenya (both in time and space), listeners responded positively. The indication here is that the happenings of the "other world" are very similar to those of Kenya. At the time of this presentation, we are reviewing Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and although most of the story and setting seems distant, the listeners enjoy the stories all the same.

In this journey spanning about one and a half decades, I have had many discourses with many voices of people whom I haven't seen and I may never see. I have interacted with mechanics, politicians, taxi drivers (these have been ardent listeners), scholars, watchmen, students, the old in the society, youth ... name them. I have received calls from up-market suburbs of Nairobi, from central Kenya, from the informal settlements, from Embu, Meru and Mbeere and from local and international Diasporas who understand Gikuyu and I have always appreciated the depth of their critiques. It is for this reason I would not be doing justice if I failed to mention Corny Gichuki's *Hollow Bridges* and its sequels *Courting Trouble*, *Shadows in the Mist* and *The Teen Bash*. These are books for the teenage readers aimed to fight against the use of drugs. Mathew, Patrick and auntie Gatheru engage in vicious fights against drug peddlers and lords, fights which they always win. The books make for an entertaining read, but it is the parents and teachers who would call in to participate in the discussions about the story line, setting and content.

Being a live call-in programme, any pre-recording of Book Club is not permissible. It has therefore taken a lot of dedication to make sure that the programme is aired once a week at a set time and day. Currently the programme is always on air between 10 pm and 12 midnight every Tuesday. Whenever I happen to be out of town or country, one Samuel Gichia presents the programme and it is at such time that books authored or edited by me like *Alidhani Kapata na Hadithi Nyingie*, *Kunani Marekani na Hadithi Nyingine* and *Sina Zaidi na Hadithi Nyingine* (co-edited with Ken Walibora) as well as the translation of *Othello* (co-translated with Ayub Mukhwana) have had a chance to be presented. It is also important to mention that numerous short stories have been reviewed.

3. LESSONS FROM THE UNORTHODOX CRITICISM

One of the lessons learnt from my interactions with listeners is that published literature is for all. The main handicap has been the inability to read by some of the masses. Once stories are read to them, then they are able to critique them with very deep insights. The other bottleneck has been the unavailability of books due to diverse reasons. Through the programme, we encourage listeners to buy the various books we read. Due to the popularity of the programme, we have been able to attract partnership with different publishers at different times. These publishers offer books that we then give as awards to call-in participants who answer questions from the book under review. Book publishers like Focus, East African Education Publishers, Oxford, Kenways, Bookmark, Jomo Kenyatta Foundation, Sasa Sema and Target/Spotlight among many self-published authors have been very helpful at different times. Some of these publishers offer as many as five books per programme. These books go to the masses and it is hoped that they assist in enhancing a reading culture in the country.

We have also learnt another lesson that may not be music to the ears of some in this gathering: that one does not necessarily need a university degree to understand, appreciate and critique literature. The masses do give critical appraisals of the written word and what a university education can do is assist put such appraisals into perspective and give them theoretical under-pinning. By so doing, the scholars will give the critiques an academic angle.

The cliché 'literature is a mirror of the society', gains life in the reviews and critiques done by the masses. They are able to identify with almost every action in fiction. They are able to mention a setting, an action or a character in their surrounding similar to the one appearing in a work of Art. From their responses, one can safely conclude that the more things change, the more they remain the same. As mentioned above, this may be proved from the fact that even books written centuries ago like Nikolai Gogol's *Government Inspector* still appear much alive in the ears of the masses. They easily identified a

“Mayor”, a “Hlestakov” and even a “Dob” from their midst.

From the political texts, we learnt that according to the masses, “rebels” of the 70’s, 80’s and even 90’s had a cause. The masses identify with them and they know their stories and are able to distinguish myth from reality. This is what came out from our reading of writings either on or by Ngugi, Wamwere, Kihoro, Kaggia and Kinyatti. They “felt” the writers’ pain but most readily admitted that they were in no position to join them in their struggles then either due to fear or lack of the wherewithal. They see this cause as an extension of the rebellion against colonial rule by the likes of General Bahati in Ngummo’s *A Walk in the Fire* or by Kimathi in Sam Kahiga’s *Dedan Kimathi* or even by the fictitious General Haraka in Meja Mwangi’s *Carcase for Hounds*. While most seemed skeptical about the political dimensions taken by G. G. Kariuki and Njenga Karume in their autobiographies, they, nevertheless, appreciated as factual many of the episodes stated in their books. One could easily pick the masses’ sarcastic tones while commenting on the torments that such politicians underwent from time to time in the course of their political careers. One clear lesson from a reading of biographies, autobiographies and books such as *Kenya Book of Records* is that Kenyans love their heroes and heroines. They greatly appreciate their role in the society.

It has been clear to us that Kenyans love books and the content therein. They enthusiastically participate in the reading and critical appreciation process offering their views and thoughts. More often than not, they give us suggestions about the books which they think we should review. Clearly, the publications are ample both at present and in the past. It is pretty obvious to us that there has always been plenty to read for anyone interested in the written word.

We have here gone through a fifteen year journey which is still going strong, making Book Club the oldest and longest aired programme in the history of Kameme FM. In those years, we have reviewed many books and it is, therefore, not possible to mention all the titles in this brief presentation. We have read and reviewed books of yester years such as John Ruganda’s *The Burdens*, Elechi Amandi’s *The Concubine*, Al Amin Mazrui’s *Kilio cha Haki* and Grace Ogot’s *Land Without Thunder*. We have also read some books that are quite unorthodox like Ndiritu Njoka’s *Coup de Grace: Gender Apartheid*.

John Habwe’s *Pamba* is very critical of our university teaching profession with Professor Pamba portrayed as a destitute despite his being a leading scholar in his field of specialisation. He is a laughing stock of his uneducated age mates and he is even unable to sustain his own family. Out of frustration, Pamba ends up committing suicide. I could hear a tone of pity (most probably directed at me) as callers empathized with Pamba while at the same time castigating politicians who made sure the likes of Pamba were consigned to abject poverty despite their critical role in the society.

Phillip Ochieng’s *I Accuse the Press* stood in a class of its own as the callers

discussed its various complex philosophical expositions. We have also read books of the current times such as Wanjiru Waithaka's *The Unbroken Spirit*, Kingwa Kamencu's *To Glance at a Star*, Wanjiku Manyata's *The Innocence Predators* and Onduko Bw'Atebe's *Verdict of Death*. K. W. Wamitila's *Bin'Adamu* appeared to be hard to appreciate and responses were minimal. We have also read many motivational books such as Mbugua Mumbi's *Excuse Me, Your Dream is calling You* and books by Bonny Kim. Popular literature has been much appreciated with books like Mwangi Gicheru's *Across the Bridge*, Mwangi Ruheni's *Mystery Smugglers*, Meja Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick* and David G. Maillu's *Benni Kamba 009 in Operation DXT* getting much acclaim.

One other lesson is that people appreciate literature more when it is relayed in a tongue they understand well. This is not only in the case of the old and those unable to read, it applies to high school students, undergraduates, dons, and the young. When people understand well, then they are in a better position to offer a critique. It is this understanding which, I believe, lead to the event of September 26, 2008.

4. PARAMETERS FOR MEASURE OF SUCCESS

A logical question that may be asked would be: *what is the measure of the success of this programme?* My most obvious answer would be 'its longevity.' Book Club is the oldest programme in the station, having been on without a break for 15 years. This is so despite the fact the station has changed ownership (from the previous owners, Regional Reach Ltd to the current owners, Mediamax Ltd). A broadcaster only retains a programme if it is successful. Credible and scientific polls by the likes of Steadman, Synovate and currently Ipsos Synovate have consistently placed the programme at the top. Many publishers and writers have also been willing to support Kameme Book Club.

Many kept wondering what a university don was doing in a vernacular station. This question was to be answered in September 2008. As usual, Nairobi was hosting its annual Book Fair during the National Book Week organised by National Book Development Council (NBDC). On the sidelines of the book fair, the NBDC had planned an awards gala for various players in the literary world. From what I heard, scientific research had been carried out to determine the winners of the various categories.

In these awards, there was one category dubbed *Certificate in Media Excellence*, the description read: "Best nationally in promoting literature and language in the media category." Now, one would expect this category to be won by a national broadcaster, one using Kiswahili or English, but no; in 2008, the award was won by a programme broadcast in a vernacular language - Gikuyu. To add to this, the award was won not by a journalist but by a university lecturer of linguistics, not literature, speaking in Gikuyu - not English

or Kiswahili! This was on September 26, 2008.

From where I stand, I realize that literature is not meant for the elite and educated only but it also belongs to its real owners, the masses. I am also alive to the fact that the masses can best tell their stories and appreciate other people's stories and illustrations when those stories and illustrations are told in a language they understand well. Despite of their not being schooled in theoretical orientations and standpoints, the masses can still appreciate and critique literature using their own tools, devices and wisdom. That is why a university don sat (and still sits) behind a microphone in a vernacular station talking about books.

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