

Transformations in Kenyan Children's Prose Fiction

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ABSTRACT

My article aims at accessing how children's literature in Kenya helps in understanding the changes that have taken place in the Kenyan society since independence. The article samples a few texts since the early years of independence and accesses the thematic concerns. A reading of these texts reveals a concern with issues ranging from traditional forms of education, colonisation, modernity and its accompanying issues like establishment of cities, crime, disease, tribal clashes, and other concerns often associated with third world countries. The analysis done in this paper is crucial as it exposes the trajectory of Kenya's children's literature to both local and international audiences. Children's literature in Kenya is therefore seen to have been adjusting to, and embracing the transformations in the Kenyan nation. The paper concludes that children's literature is an important channel through which the activities, dreams, fears, failures and successes of people in specific nations can be understood.

1.0 Introduction

Odaga's (1985) text on children's literature in Kenya, which is a product of a research done between 1971 and 1974, laments the inadequacy of reading material for Kenyan children. Odaga (1985, p. xvii) argues that "the bulk of books for children and adults that are readily obtainable in bookshops, libraries and schools are western oriented", which she reiterates, continue to undermine what was local and African in tone. Odaga points to the lack of authors of African origin who would write appropriate books for Kenyan children and therefore suggests a need to correct both this situation, and some of the myths created by colonial writers. This scarcity of children's books noted by Odaga was however short-lived because in contemporary times, Kenya has become flooded with books for children and young adults. This paper examines the development of children's prose fiction in Kenya, and argues that this literature keeps adopting and adapting [to] the changes of time. Since these changes are the ones that constitute a society's history, writers of children's books in Kenya can thus be read as being involved in the process of reconstructing the changes in the society, and giving an alternative to the official historian's version through writing for children. These writers are committed to a cause rather than art for art's sake, and in this way, representing both creativity and social facts (Dipio, 2011). Although there are children's books written in Kiswahili and other native languages in Kenya, this study confines itself to books written in English, either originally or in translation. The paper will systematically analyze selected texts in a chronological manner, and at the same time compare the content of these texts with the social facts (changes) that have taken place in the Kenyan society. The analysis of these social facts has a backdrop in Butts' supposition that literature often evolves "in response to certain broad movements in the society and due to specific historical developments" (1992, p. x). Butts gives an example of the adventure story in children's books in Europe, which he argues was a reflection of European imperial process in the 19th century. My discussion is also informed by Odaga's (1985) assertion that writers are part and parcel of their societies, so whether they are writing for children or not, they must observe the transformations in these societies in order to write realistically and produce authentic literature based on the society. A scrutiny of issues that the texts under study raise will help us in visualizing these transformations that Odaga mentions.

The discussion is divided into three periods: 1966 to 1986, 1987 to 2000 and 2001 to 2008 - periods covering twenty (20), fourteen (14) and eight (8) years respectively. I have picked a longer span in the period immediately after Kenya's independence [1963] because this is the period when literacy and publishing was picking up. This is therefore a transition period in the history of writing for children in Kenya, where the Kenyan writer had to shift gears by slowly diversifying the kind of literature that was provided by the colonialist for the African child. The 2nd period represents the awakening into a vigorous

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writing process where Kenyan writers for children were beginning to establish themselves, discovering the changes around them in a postcolonial situation. The third period represents a fully developed stage of writing for children and in this literature; problems of modernity visible in the society are reflected. The selection of books published up to the year 2008 does not mean that publishing stopped then, but it is assumed that issues addressed in books published in 2008 are still relevant presently. In addition, although there are many books for children in Kenya, I selected ten (10) representative texts which I thought were the most informative and manageable number for this paper. I also wish to point out that in texts that are a collection of stories, I do not discuss all the stories in the collection; instead, I choose sample stories.

2.0 Assessing Transformations through Children's Books

2.1 The Early Years of Publishing for Children in Kenya (1966 – 1986)

During this period many of the stories for children were adopted directly from oral narratives; others were fictionalized societal experiences, while others looked back at the experience of colonialism and its consequences. Odaga argues that there was need to write such books in order to diversify the kind of literature that African children were exposed to at school because the earliest written literature for children in Kenya was in the form of "classics written by European writers for children with a Western upbringing and background" (1985, p.xvi). For example, African children may not have identified with alien settings and content of a book like *Cinderella* which was used in schools in Kenya. Although the jealous step mother figure in *Cinderella* is common in Kenyan oral/traditional tales, the ballroom dances and gold shoes that Cinderella is supposed to fit are rather alien to Kenyan children. In addition to such classics, there were other books designed solely for an African audience, and they carried notions of what Europeans thought of Africans. For instance, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972) argues that Karen Blixen, a white settler who had lived in Kenya for thirteen years, refers to "the natives of the land" as people who have got:

Old and mysterious simple cultural traditions, which seem to lose themselves in the darkness of the very ancient days,.... [and their] children seemed to come to a standstill in their mental growth at different ages (p. 9).

In such literature by European writers, everything foreign was imbued with a kind of civilizing magic and quality of perfection while the African was portrayed as barbaric, uncivilized and dirty; characteristics that would make African children hate their ways of life. Consequently this literature, according to Chakava (1996, p. 23), tended to produce "a new breed of black Europeans, who began to despise their own skin and background". Achebe saw such children's books as unhealthy for the African audiences and advised African writers to save the African child from what he called "the beautifully packaged poison, imported into the continent in the form of children's story books" (cited in Chakava, 1998, p. 4). Writers of books for children in Kenya therefore needed to give variety to this situation by writing books that would provide children with relevant theme, character and setting. Although some of the stories written during this period utilized animal characters because they were directly appropriated from the African oral tale, they nevertheless encompassed people's daily experiences through the activities of these animal characters. Such stories certainly represented the society's history, which some colonial writers tended to delete or manipulate (Dipio, 2011). Writing for children at this time therefore helped to salvage this history.

Dahal's *The Orange Thieves* (1995) is a collection of oral narratives which was first published in 1966, with one of the stories giving the book its title. In the story "The orange thieves" five girls go stealing oranges from a farm and decide to close their eyes as they picked the fruits. However, other than Muthoni, the other four girls conspire to open their eyes and Muthoni ends up picking only unripe oranges. She therefore goes back to the farm to pick better oranges, to a rude encounter with Kimakia, the giant – the owner of the farm. Muthoni's slim body saves her from being eaten by Kimakia, because he (the giant) says she is not fat enough. But worse still, he decides to make her his wife. Muthoni is later saved by two newborn baby boys who Kimakia brings home for food and, out of sympathy; Muthoni hides them and gives Kimakia two big rats for his supper. The two boys then grow up and kill Kimakia and his friends (giants). Muthoni's good hearted nature is shown when she gets back home and forgives her friends for having betrayed her. The other girls' betrayal of Muthoni in this story is a lesson to the readers concerning friendship – that not all friends can be trusted. Such stories were useful in traditional African societies in sharpening the sensibilities of the young. It is also evident that women were lesser beings than men in this society because the giant is male and he has a choice to either eat Muthoni or make her his wife; options that render Muthoni helpless. She is also saved by boys. The narrative could therefore be said to reflect the organization

of African patriarchal society, from where the story emanates. In many oral narratives in Africa, the ogre lures young girls to the forest, then either eats them or, sometimes, human characters (often men) outweigh the ogre and succeed in saving the girls' lives. Such tales served to entrench the societal African norms like patriarchy, which often disadvantaged women. Nevertheless "The Orange Thieves" has lessons for the readers because goodness is shown to be rewarded as the narrative is fashioned to allow Muthoni to live because she was a good girl. Generally, the other stories in the collection also borrow from the traditional set up, concentrating on the beliefs, practices and daily societal endeavors like blacksmithing, farming, hunting and gathering. Thus these stories from oral repertoire not only helped children to identify with the settings and the activities, but they were also channels that helped in maintaining good behavior and relationship between people in the society. These familiar settings and the themes are also important to African children, for as Butts (1992) argues; they may "reassure the reader psychologically that he or she is on familiar grounds" (p. xii).

In *The Children of the Forest* (2004) [1969], Makumi addresses themes like generosity, famine, parental responsibility and patriarchy; issues that were important and visible in many African societies. The narrative takes a formulaic opening of "once upon a time" (p. 1) and later indicates the passage of time with phrases like "the days came and went" (p. 5) – signaling a borrowing from the oral tale. In this narrative, two children Gathumbi-Keru (a boy) and Wamanjuruku (a girl) are abandoned in their homestead by their parents who go in search for food when famine strikes. However, when the parents come back to pick the two, they do not find them because they have been saved by another man and his son who were out guarding their cattle in the bushes/forest near the said homestead. We are told that when the old man finds the abandoned children:

He killed a goat from his herd and roasted the meat [which] he gave some to the two strange children before he and his son ate their share. The children ate hungrily and by evening they were strong enough to walk home with the old man and his son (p. 4-5).

The old man's generosity is noteworthy here because he subsequently adopts the two children, disciplines and brings them up as responsible human beings. His gesture demonstrates that individualism was shunned in the African traditional society. It is clear from the narrative that this was a pastoralist community, and that calamities like famine befell them. Such economic activities and occurrences were common in African societies, thus showing the realism and authenticity that Odaga (1985) emphasizes.

The arrival of the two children at the old man's home allows the readers to see the role of the man as the head of the family because while the wife initially refuses to accept the two, the husband commands her to do so. The motif of the mean and jealous step-mother (in this case foster mother) seen in African oral narratives is also utilized here because the woman does not seem to like the idea that she was supposed to feed some more two mouths:

As the old man approached the hut, his wife ran out shouting angrily and shaking her fists. "My son has told me about the children," she screamed. "I don't want wild creatures from the forest in my house. Take them back and leave them where you found them."
"They are little children," said the old man softly, "unwanted children left all alone with no one to care for them. You will look after them and bring them up as your own."
"I have enough with my own flesh and blood to look after," said the woman excitedly. "I don't want any children here that don't belong to me."
"But now they belong to you," said her husband. "You will do as I say and take them in and treat them as if they were your own."
The days went and came. The old man's wife was forced to look after the children, after a time she became quite fond of them (pp. 5-6).

Patriarchy is discernible here because it is the man's authority that controls the household. The roles are also stratified for men and women because while Gathumbi-keru and the old man's son are trained in many activities like hunting and looking after the animals, the girl is taught womanly chores like cooking, gathering firewood, weeding, fetching water, going to the market and weaving baskets (Makumi, 2004), to prepare them to take up their place in the society when they grow up. Child readers with an African upbringing would easily identify with such activities as opposed to foreign narratives as mentioned earlier. The appropriation of the oral tale into children's written stories therefore helped to slowly shift the content of these stories from a European version to an African version in postcolonial Kenya.

Captured by Raiders by Wegesa (2002, 11th ed.) is a single-story text, first published in 1969. It is set in a traditional society and contains aspects of realism about societal conflict like raiding and its consequences. The text is a narrative about Nanjala, an eight-year-old girl from the Bukusu community who is captured by Tondo raiders. Raiding is presented as a common practice between the two pastoralist communities, and like in "The Orange Thieves" and *Children of the Forest* discussed above; patriarchy is visible in both the Tondo and Bukusu community. For instance, in the Bukusu tradition, we get to know that there is gender discrimination/subordination especially when it is made clear that women are expected to stay at home and serve men, and they are also not supposed to eat certain kinds of delicacies like chicken, mainly meant for men (see p.14). And when the raiders invade they purpose to kill all men, while women/girls and animals are captured. Men who do not go to war are referred to as women because "all brave men should die in battle. It is only women who should die at home" (p. 32). Women suffer in the two communities because they occupy a rather subordinate position; they are like property, to be raided together with animals. The suffering of women under patriarchy is emphasized by grandma's words to Nanjala that if she is not killed after the attack, she should "[f]ight for the women ... to enable them to throw off the burden they have carried all these years" (p. 15). The writer therefore acknowledges that he is writing within a set up where women are subordinated by the societal practices and he uses the character of Nanjala to resist these practices in African communities. Nanjala's resistance comes clear after she settles in Tondoland, when one day she discovers that Tondo elders were planning to marry her off to an old chief as the 26th wife. The patriarchal hand of the Tondo gives Nanjala energy, wits and courage because she decides to run away. For Nanjala, running away was the only way to evade this trauma of a society that assisted one man, like the chief to surround himself with so many women. Although the author in *Captured by Raiders* is male, it is clear that he does not support the practice of having so many women satisfying the whims of a single man, and thus the text becomes a critique of such cultures in Africa, especially looking at the time when the text was first published (1969), when patriarchy was still strong in Kenya.

Being a Bukusu, the narrator (Nanjala) guides the reader in comparing the Bukusu and the Tondo cultures while she lives amongst the foreign community. For instance, while the Tondo exclusively rely on meat and blood for food, the Bukusu practice farming in addition to keeping animals, which supplements their animal products. More so, tribal marks like cutting/shaping of teeth, piercing the lower lip, facial marks and body tattoos, done among the Tondo are absent in the Bukusu culture. Wegesa seeks to reflect the differences between the two societies through literature, demonstrating the role of children's books in helping individuals think about themselves. Nanjala's life in this text can therefore be read like a cultural code through which people witness society's cultural practices and history (Quayson, 1997). Books like *Captured by Raiders* are thus tools that aid children in learning about history and culture, and in the process, appraise the transformations in the modern set up.

Apart from stories based on traditional society and oral narratives, the early years of Kenyan independence, saw the emergence of children's texts that looked back to colonization and its effects on Africans. Thus, like adult literature in Africa, children's literature in Kenya responded to the changes brought about by colonization. In 1986, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's children's books, *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* (1986a) and *Njamba Nene's Pistol* (1986b) were published, both set in colonial Kenya. These books were first written in the Kikuyu language in 1984 as *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi iri Mathagu* and *Bathitora ya Njamba Nene*, respectively, and later translated to English. The two cover issues like colonialism, collaboration and resistance, the role of children in the Mau Mau rebellion and the role of the school in the process of entrenching colonial rule in Kenya. The aim of colonial education in Kenya and supposedly elsewhere in Africa is addressed in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*:

The school, Tie and Tie African Primary School (TAPS), was started by a white settler called Pious Brainwash. He was commonly known as Hangbelly because he had a hanging belly... It was said he started that school to develop Africans who would think like Europeans and hold the same views of the world as they held (p. 5).

The name "Brainwash" in this quotation exposes the aim of the school; to brainwash Africans' minds. The image of the white settler in this text tallies with Schmidt's (1981, p. 24) argument that Europeans were secondary characters in books published in Africa after the 1960s and that they were "negatively stereotyped as hypocritical priests, exploitative administrators, misguided do-gooders, seekers of exoticism and arrogant educators". Disregard for African languages by the school system is also seen in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* when Njamba Nene is forced to wear a plate with the words "I AM AN ASS" (p. 2) for speaking in Kikuyu (his mother tongue). It is clear that there was a kind of adoration for western ways by

some characters like John Bull, and teacher Kigorogoru who tells Njamba Nene to “learn to speak civilised languages like English, French or German”(p. 2). The character traits of Njamba Nene on the one hand, and that of teacher Kigorogoru and John Bull on the other, represent the different and conflicting attitudes that Africans had towards the whole process of colonization.

Alienation from one’s country and culture is further evident in Njamba Nene’s class at TAPS, through the character of John Bull who prefers to speak in English, and claims to know the map of England like the palm of his hand (see p. 24), as opposed to the map of Kenya. John Bull’s ignorance of his country’s geography and culture is supported by a couple of other pupils and by teacher Kigorogoru. The text however argues for the supremacy of one’s culture and language through Njamba Nene who constantly refers to the wisdom of his mother, Wacu, and also says: “Language is language... no language is better than another” (p. 2). This assertion by Njamba Nene reflects the agency Ngugi has persistently emphasized should be given to African languages in an environment where they are at a risk of getting overshadowed by prominence of foreign languages. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) Ngugi views writing in Kikuyu language as “part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (p. 28). Emphasizing the importance of writing for children in their [children’s] native language, Ngugi declares: “I do not want to see Kenyan children growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the tools of communication developed by their communities and their history” (1986, p. 28). The fact however is that the school space in colonial Kenya seems to have been a demoralizing place for the African who was still battling to understand the imperialist’s foreign language and education. Mhlophe speaks of a similar experience in South Africa when she argues, “our teachers made it clear to us that Afrikaans and English books were more important than books in Xhosa or grandmother’s stories, that they were the key to our future” (2003, p.7). Such a situation presents the constant alienation that was prompted by western foreigners in colonial Africa so that the native would hate his culture.

Njamba Nene’s Pistol takes the reader through a journey into the fear and the risks taken by those who participated in the Mau Mau liberation struggle in Kenya, and also demonstrates that Africans betrayed each other during the war. Gaceru Mwendanda, the hooded informer, represents such traitors (see p. 28). The role of children in the Mau Mau war is shown through young Njamba Nene who is sent to take a pistol (lodged in a loaf of bread) to the fighters in the forest. Such episodes demonstrate some of the tactics used by the fighters to ferry guns into the forest, and also shows that issues of war are also children’s issues. Ngugi’s children’s books are comparable to his books for adult readers like *The River Between*, *Weep not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, where he explores Kenya’s colonial and liberation history. This demonstrates that the line between adult and children’s literature is very thin.

Many of the children’s books written immediately after independence like those discussed above, helped to recapture the experience of the society and also give lessons about societal life. The colonial experience was also important because it not only acted as a turning point with regard to the African way of life, but it also prompted African fiction writers to explore new directions in their writing. In the context of this discussion, it is right to argue that children’s literature in Kenya evolved in response to certain movements/ changes in the society and due to specific historical developments in the society (Butts, 1992), as pointed out at the beginning of this paper.

2.2 The Awakening Period: (1987 – 2000)

During this period children’s literature started changing to address issues that faced the Kenyan society in its transition to modernity. The Kenyan children’s writer became aware of things that were happening around him/her other than the colonial issues and the oral folktales. This however did not mean that writing/recording of traditional oral narratives stopped. Instead, the two forms existed side by side. For instance, Maillu’s *The Orphan and his Goat Friend* published in 1993 is an appropriation from the traditional society. The text contains lessons through which readers witness how evil is punished, while good deeds are rewarded. This comes clear when Kakuthi, a jealous step-mother digs a hole next to her step-son’s bed in order to trap and kill him, but she instead falls into the hole and dies. It is clear in this story that though the stepmother is usually associated with jealousy and cruelty, her character is two-sided. This is because while she has subversive intentions, her character often always leads the protagonist to better fortunes (Wittmann 2011). Maillu’s text has similar lessons with “The Orange Thieves” discussed earlier because like Muthoni who is rewarded for her kindness, the step-son does not fall into the hole as intended by his step-mother because he was innocent. The step-mother on the other hand dies like the giants that were planning to feast on Muthoni. As mentioned earlier, these stories help children in seeing life from other perspectives, especially of good and evil – coaching them to always be good to others to avoid being punished like the bad

characters in the narratives. According to Wittmann (2011), such tales have the power to not only influence the children's beliefs but they also have the ability to shape the under-aged recipients' perception of reality and the society even in the modern set-up.

With the penetration of feminist movement in Africa in the 20th century, which advocated for the liberation of the female figure from patriarchy and other forms of subordination in both the traditional and modern society, literature became one of the tools for suggesting these liberating paths. Children's literature in Kenya also started responding to such changes in the society through writing of books that could give the girl child, room to think outside the patriarchal box; creating characters that could battle the giants/ogres, and thus giving the girl child model characters. One such book is Isoka's (1995) *The Girl who became Chief*. It is a story of a small girl named Kadogo who manages to save the chief's daughter and the whole society from the troubles of Ang'ala, a notorious man-eating ogre, after all the men in the village are defeated. For this, Kadogo is made the village chief. Kadogo is a Kiswahili word meaning small or miniature in size and (in this context) in age but is given an adult role of becoming a leader and more specifically debunking the myth that women cannot be leaders. Using wisdom from her mother, she lures the ogre with beer and afterwards she and the captured daughter of the chief kill the beast. In this story women are empowered because it is their wisdom that helps in killing Ang'ala. Although the presentation of Kadogo in this text is a mere inversion of roles, such a revision of oral narratives for child readers is important in the modern society where the girl child must stand up to the contemporary dragons. Such changes in narratives for children indicate that, like adult literature, children's literature is keen to embrace transformations that allow women to empower themselves.

J. Makotsi's *The Boys in Kakamega* (1996) covers aspects like organized theft, petty pick pocketing and kidnaping; negative practices that were picking up in the Kenyan society in 1990s. Edward is travelling in a bus to visit his uncle and he hears a man explaining that he was attending a court hearing in which his bulls had been stolen and the thieves had been apprehended. From his seat in the bus, Edward also sees a young man snatching a purse from unsuspecting fish seller who had just alighted from the bus. Later, Edward and his cousins decide to go to the court to listen to the case of the stolen cows, where they encounter the thief boy and demand that he hands over the money he had picked from the fish seller. In the process, the boy injures Ben and it also turns out that he is a member of the gang stealing cows. In the labyrinth that follows, Edward's uncle engages his inspector friend to assist in uncovering the gang, and the book ends as Edward's cousin (Tim) and the Inspector's daughter are kidnapped:

... Edward looked back towards his cousin and was shocked to see both Tim and Jemima carried shoulder-high by two burly looking characters, disappearing back around the corner in the direction of Main Street.... Jemima and Tim were bundled into the back of a blue covered track which immediately drove off... (pp. 50-51).

This anticlimax at the end of the text could leave child readers wondering what happened next because it is important that children's books provide solutions to conflicts handled in the text to avoid confusing their young minds. However, this suspense is read as pointing to the mystery of kidnapping where subsequently kidnappers ask for money to secure the captives' release. *The Boys in Kakamega* also reveals the criminal activities that were on the rise in Kenya due to the fact that many people were becoming jobless and desperate. The text reflects the changing face (history) of Kenya, where due to increased population and poverty, crimes became prevalent because of the unequal wealth distribution that became apparent in post-colonial Kenya. Speaking of Kenya's situation after independence, Kimani (1995, p. 137) contends that at independence "the ruling class ... grabbed virtually anything that would lead to economic and political power, the masses of the people were betrayed and sidelined; the cause for which so many people lost their lives was forgotten". This inequality graduated into societal classification into the poor lower class and the rich upper class. It is such social stratification that caused increase in criminal activities, which are of concern not just in adult literature but also in children's literature. In *The Boys in Kakamega*, Makotsi unveils organized theft gangs, through the link that the pick-pocket who stabs Ben has with the cow thieves. The character of the unnamed boy is a type that represents desperate cases of young men who are jobless and frustrated and thus they turn to criminal activities, which represent the disillusionment evident among the majority poor. *The Boys in Kakamega* agrees with Odaga's (1985) point that regardless of whether one is writing for children or adults, writers should reflect the transformations taking place in the societies within which they write.

Monkey Bought a Bus (1998) [2001] by M. Makotsiborrows animal characters from traditional oral narratives and fits them into the present technological age, to produce a complex narrative that makes a commentary of modern human tendencies. When monkey buys a bus, the other animals are excited that they would get a lift to the river, which was far from their abode. Monkey is the bus conductor and buffalo is the driver. On the way to the river, monkey demands that the animals pay for the ride, to the shock of the sheep, chameleon and tortoise who do not have money. While some animals like Warthog, cow, ostrich, dog and Zebra pay, Chameleon camouflages by changing his colour and sneaks out of the bus unnoticed as other animals are pushing a log off the road. At this point the goat also runs away. The dog pays his fare but monkey does not give him the balance.

The bus in this story is a modern innovation which blends with actions of animal characters that are personified to make the story meaningful. This story serves two purposes: first, to explain to children why certain animals behave in specific ways when they see a moving car; and second, to critique some features of public transport industry in Kenya, otherwise known as the *matatu* industry, and the behavior of Kenyans involved in the industry. In the 1990s and early 2000s this industry was becoming a booming business and its growth brought various problems and uncertainties, explored in *Monkey Bought a Bus*. The river in this story represents a destination in the city or any of the towns in Kenya, which were becoming modern commercial centres and many people needed to travel to and from these centres. The reaction from the animals aboard the bus reveals specific characteristics of both the *matatu* operators and the passengers.

On the one hand, we are told that the reason why monkey often climbs up high on trees is to watch over the goat to demand for his money, and that is why goat runs away every time she sees a bus/vehicle because she thinks it is monkey's bus. On the other hand, dog always runs after vehicles to ask for his balance which monkey did not give, while the cow is not moved by the sight of vehicles since she paid. At another level however, these characters represent different kinds of people in the *matatu* business as mentioned above. First, there are those who faithfully pay their fares when they get into a public vehicle, like the cow and Zebra, and second, those naughty people who take advantage of crowded *matatus* in Kenya and fail to pay as represented by chameleon and goat who sneak out of monkey's bus. Conductors and drivers in the Kenyan public transport system also collude and con the passengers by refusing to give them back their balances either knowingly, or by sometimes waiting until the passengers forget to ask for the balance like what monkey does to the dog. Unfaithfulness and recklessness are common characteristics of the *matatu* industry in Kenya, which the author demonstrates through the animals. The presence of the log on the road to the river is symbolic of the bad situation of Kenyan roads. Like the animals in monkey's bus, passengers in public transport in Kenya are often asked to get off and push vehicles when they get stuck in muddy stretches on the road. The bad roads could be read as a critique of the failure by the government of this period to provide good infrastructure which was needed for economic growth. It could also be a reflection of the corruption by contractors who were probably doing shoddy jobs after being paid to recarpet the roads.

Capitalism comes out clear in this story because like the entrepreneurs who invest in public transport to take advantage of the booming business of people travelling to urban centres, Monkey buys a bus to take advantage of the fact that it had become rather hot and many of the animals needed to walk to the river to drink water. This merging of animal characters and modern situations is important because readers may notice the relationship between what happens in monkey's bus and what they witness daily in the Kenyan public transport industry.

This second period discussed above demonstrates that Kenyan children's literature was already an established entity in the 1990s, and rather than worrying about alien narratives that the Kenyan child was exposed to in the colonial period, the writer now needed to reckon with issues that were more relevant in the changing periods of history. In addition to issues of modern transport and establishment of towns that came up in the 1990s, other problems connected with urban centres surfaced in the twenty first century, which the next section discusses.

2.3 Reflections of the new Millennium – 2001 – 2008

Kenya experienced many changes in the 1980s and the 1990s, one of them being establishment of more towns and cities. Subsequently, the accompanying urban problems like prostitution, drunkenness, robbery with violence and disease came into the picture. While some of these issues were more reflected in adult literature in the 1990s, they only came into full focus in children's literature in the twenty first century Kenya. In addition, evident in both the urban space and the rural areas in the twenty first century were

other social evils like rape and tribal clashes due to the changing moral stance and outlook in life. In this part I examine two texts that concern the above mentioned issues.

Shida the Street Boy (2003) by R. Makotsi is the story of a boy named Shida and it addresses the urban obsessions and fears of the modern city of Nairobi (Kurtz, 1998), including drunkenness, prostitution, homosexuality, street life/homelessness, crime, death, orphans and orphanages, and life in the slums. Shida's mother (Byuti) is sent away from home by her father after getting pregnant from a rape by her school head teacher. Byuti's dilemma leads her to the city where she delivers her son and calls him Shida Kazuri. Afterwards Byuti joins prostitution to sustain their life in the city. At the beginning of the text the narrator (Shida) says:

My name is Shida. Shida Kazuri. I am a street boy. Shida means problem and *Kazuri* means nice. So I am 'a nice problem'. Mama gave me this name because although her problems started when she got pregnant with me, happiness began when I was born. She did not tell me this. I overheard her explain to Kenam one night. Kenam was our next door neighbor and mama's best friend.... Our house was a single mud room, like all other houses in Mathare. On one corner was the mattress in which I slept. Next to it, separated by a curtain, my mother's bed.... I decided not to draw the curtain that separated the mattress from her bed. I wanted them to think that I was asleep (pp. 1-2).

The narrator in this story represents what Lehman (2011, p. 34) calls "the pre-adolescent voice" where the narrator exposes issues from his/her own naïve understanding of the society. The above quotation reveals the poor/congested living conditions in Mathare slums in Kenya, which is among the biggest slums in the city of Nairobi. Byuti is a prostitute and her son is getting of age. However, the two must share a single room because of their poor economic status, forcing him to listen to conversations between his mother and her visitors/clients. Byuti is a type that represents desperate cases of young school girls who get pregnant and their parents are unwilling to take them in. Like Byuti, many such girls are forced to leave school to fend for themselves and their bastard children which makes them even more desperate.

Makotsi's text also explores issues of crime and diseases like HIV/AIDS that kills the narrator's mother, brought about by her indiscriminate sexual encounters with her clients. It is however clear that people/characters are forced into prostitution by desperate circumstances because Shida's mother says "[s]he hated her kind of work... but would do everything to take care of her son" whom she needed to feed and clothe (p. 2). The narratives shows that poverty in the Kenyan urban space breeds other crimes like prostitution and the results are rather fatal, for instance, the killer HIV/AIDS.

When Byuti dies, Shida goes to Lavington, an affluent suburb in Nairobi, to look for his father who denies and chases him away. The fact that Shida's father was a school head teacher, now turned rich/powerful politician, and living in the richer suburbs demonstrates how power is used to intimidate the less fortunate. As a head teacher he takes advantage of his position by scaring Byuti and raping her, and at this latter instance, he instructs his security guard to "GET HIM [Shida] OUT OF HERE IMMEDIATELY" when Shida goes knocking at his gate (see p. 36). Subsequently, the only home that Shida is left with is the streets of Nairobi, which in Kenya could be seen as the "home for the homeless". Often one finds cripples, sick people, mothers and their babies seated in the streets; begging. Street boys are the energetic lot in this "home for the homeless", and they are often involved in minor crimes like pickpocketing before graduating into serious crimes often forming criminal gangs. The activities of Shida and his friend Daku help readers in noticing the dangers of living in the streets where sometimes the more experienced street boys would force the younger boys "to sleep with men for money, which they would surrender to the big boys" (2003, p. 47). Such incidences can be read as a critique of homosexuality which seems to be on the rise in contemporary societies.

The desperate manner in which the lives of thieves and street boys in the city end is also explored. Shida's friend (Daku) and his father (Onyango) who was a watchman in the bank in the city are killed in a failed bank robbery, as Shida watches from the safety of a telephone booth:

I did not move. I could not. I stared in horror from the booth as four policemen jumped out of the car, cocked their guns all at once and began to spray bullets through the grills of the basement gate. I felt the warmth of my urine as it trickled down my legs. The last thing I saw was Daku falling at his father's feet. I woke up with a start and banged my feet against the booth. That reminded me immediately where I was.... Slowly I opened the door and slid outside. It was still very early in the morning. Everywhere there were policemen with guns.... "The boy is the man's son." One of the guards was telling a policeman.

"It is Daku the nice quiet boy, Shida's friend," a street girl whispered to another.... Daku and Onyango were laying dead...side by side, their eyes and mouths wide open. There was blood all around them (pp. 48-49).

This scene represents the scary and dangerous life the street boys live through. Like the narrator's name implies, street boys have many problems (*Shida* in Swahili). Through this text, young readers visualize the problems that are facing Kenya presently and this probably becomes like enlightenment as well as caution for them.

Shida the Street Boy also addresses the possible attempts to help the poor street children. For instance, salvation for Shida comes when he seeks refuge in a church after the robbery incident where a priest takes him to a children's home. The church here is represented as the refuge for the homeless in Kenya. The catholic nuns at the children's home help Shida and other children to refine their lives. The questions that reader is forced to ask however are: who will save the poor street children from their suffering? Or, can the church alone help?

This story contains relevant emergent issues in modern Kenya, which are important for young readers. Today's children's literature in Kenya can therefore be said to have actively responded to the changing situations in the society, and has freed itself from restrictions and strict moral code and taboos, to speak to issues like drugs, theft, sex, homosexuality, prostitution and death (McClue, 1995; Lehr 1995; Beckett, 1997).

My Mother's Voice by Kamundi (2008), published five years after *Shida the Street Boy* covers almost similar themes. Like Byuti in *Shida the Street Boy*, Kanana (the narrator in *My Mother's Voice*), is raped when their village is attacked by a neighboring clan. She not only contracts HIV from the rape, but she also gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. This story educates young readers on HIV/AIDS pandemic and the dangers of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which Kanana escapes, after joining the *Watoto Wetu* [Our Children] Children's Home which cares for children infected with HIV. In both *Shida the Street Boy* and *My Mother's Voice*, the girl child is portrayed to be in danger in the modern Kenyan society. Societal morals are declining and men seem to have lost their decency, often using force to satisfy their sexual appetite/lust with young girls. Unlike in the traditional set up represented in *Captured by Raiders* discussed earlier, where women are raided together with animals, and taken care of by the same men who raid them, things seem to have changed in the twenty first century because women are no longer seen as property in the changing economic times, where money is more important. Rape has become a rampant issue all over the world, and more dangerous especially with the advent of HIV/AIDS. According to a report on rape cases between December 30th 2007 and June 30th 2008, by the Crime Scene Investigation (CSI), Nairobi Task Group, there were about 40,500 estimated rape cases in Kenya within a six months' period (Internet source). While there is a general moral decline in the society, which accounts for the many rape cases, a few of those infected often want to spread the disease by raping unsuspecting innocent girls. Kamundi therefore uses children's literature to sensitize readers on the possible dangers that they may face, therefore projecting this literature as having come of age, and thematically adapting to the changing occurrences in the society. The friendship and care that Kanana gets from *Watoto Wetu* children's home demonstrate the author's suggestion that HIV infected people should be given a positive atmosphere for them to live positively. In this text therefore, the author is advocating for a paradigm shift for Kenyans to start owning and identifying with HIV/AIDS as a strategy to address the pandemic since for a long time Kenyans were known to stigmatize those affected which in turn fuelled the spread of the scourge.

The issue of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) also comes up in *My Mother's Voice*. There was a widespread displacement of people in Kenya after the 2007 national elections and Kamundi strategically reveals this displacement and the desperate conditions that followed:

Our houses were no more. The government had put up tents for the people who had been left homeless. The police guarded us every night. We depended on food aid from the government, charitable organizations and individuals. The clothes we wore were also donated to us. Some part of our school had been burnt. Bridges had been demolished. The village was in a pathetic situation (p. 10).

From the two texts discussed in this third section, human relations seem to be getting worse in the modern day Kenya. By exploring these relations through fiction, the two authors demonstrate that children's books are powerful mirrors of social facts; they contribute to the act of creating responsible behavior, for example, by narrating the suffering of the desperate like street children and the attitudes to adopt towards those affected by HIV/AIDS. These books can therefore be said to be responding to changing aspects of life in the Kenyan society.

3.0 Conclusion

This paper has taken a historical overview of the thematic concerns of children's literature in Kenya since independence: from oral stories adopted from folktales; to stories that aimed at redeeming the African image, which had been distorted by European colonialists; to concerns with the history of colonialism; all the way to modern developments like cities, and the problematic that accompany such developments. The analysis done in this paper reveals that as the Kenyan society changes, so does its children's literature; reflecting the activities, dreams, fears, failures and successes of its people. Therefore, as a genre, Children's literature in Kenya "offers its readers a multitude of representations and possible responses to the rapidly altering modern world in which they live" (Beckett 1997, p.x). It is a genre through which the Kenyan society can be understood.

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