

THE THEMATIC CONCERNS OF KENYAN FEMALE FICTION WRITERS: A CASE OF WAIRIMU KIBUGI'S *PAINFUL TEARS* AND *THREE INSTEAD OF ONE*

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to find out the thematic concerns of Kenyan female fiction writers, with a particular emphasis on Wairimu Kibugi and her two texts *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*. Three research questions informed the investigation: first, was the major themes addressed by Kibugi in her inspiring texts, second was the unique style Kibugi employs in passing her message across, and third was on how Kibugi's texts become a tool of commentary on the contemporary society. The study was conducted through qualitative research, employing a library-based critical textual analysis of primary texts, journals and other relevant literary material arrived at through careful sampling. Majorly the findings of the research study revealed that Kibugi employs a simple style to pass across serious thematic concerns surrounding love and romance, broken families, abuse of women, forgiveness and reconciliation, and women excelling in careers. Kibugi's texts were also found to be a commentary on the contemporary society, highlighting two principal matters challenging the community, namely, the abuse of women and the place of women in industry. The study recommended that future studies can focus on other themes from the same texts that have not been highlighted in this project. It further recommended that literary critics be creative, original and open-minded, and look into other less well-known Kenyan female writers to investigate some other issues of concern to the contemporary society.

Key Words: Thematic Concerns, Female Fiction Writers, Themes, Style, Social Commentary Society

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kenyan literature, like most African literature, spawns from a long history of oral tradition. According to Finnegan (2012), long before writing, Africans participated in oral literature by doing such things as engaging in songs, proverbs, riddles, myths, legends, trickster stories, among others. Literature in Kenya was thus first realized through orature, particularly during pre-colonial times.

During the colonial period, Africans became exposed to Western education and learned to write in the languages of their colonizers (Sande, 2016). Their writing handled such themes as independence, liberation and identity. Novels like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* discussed the effect of colonialism on the traditional African society (Marie, 2013).

Post-colonial literature addressed such themes as bad governance, corruption and the rights of women. It is during this time that African (and Kenyan) women wrote more prolifically. Today, there are more female African writers that are published as compared to pre-colonial and colonial times. Women have added their voices to the literature pool, and have demonstrated that they, too, have issues that they would like to address through their own writings.

Over the years, female African writers have addressed several themes and subjects in their writing. For example, Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi in her book *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi* (1999), discusses how the boy child in Egypt was more valued than the girl child. She says that boys would be taken to school and educated, while girls would be groomed to be the wives of men multiple times their age. Senegalese writer Mariama Ba in her book *So Long a Letter* (1979) discusses issues such as polygamy and the neglect by husbands of their first wives and their children.

In Kenya, some of the best known female writers include Grace Ogot, Margaret Ogola, Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye, Rebeka Njau and Micere Mugo, to mention but a few. These writers have addressed many themes and ideas in their books such as the following: Grace Ogot, in her novel *The Promised Land* (1990) raises questions about what the ideal African wife is: is she supposed to be obedient and submissive to her husband, and committed to non-materialism, for example? Margaret Ogola, in her novel, *The River and the Source* (1994), addresses the value of the girl child in a home. Ogola sets to show that girls are valuable, and that indeed "A home without daughters is like a river without a source." Of Rebeka Njau's text *The Sacred Seed* (2003), Evan Mwangi says that the author "delves into the minds of her characters to reveal the psychological wounds they have suffered under patriarchy...The narrator...points to ways women's power can be restored through the demolition of class hierarchies." (2013).

Kenyan female writers have thus put across a number of themes through their literary works. They have used fiction as their means to pass across their messages. The themes they have addressed in their books have been a true reflection of reality, albeit varied. It is from this background that the researcher chose to draw attention to the two texts of Wairimu Kibugi, *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*, as a means to highlight as well as add to the scholarly pool, additional themes addressed by Kenyan female writers.

This study set out to explore the thematic concerns of Wairimu Kibugi's *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*. Specifically, the study sought to analyze the themes of love and romance, broken families, abuse of women, forgiveness and reconciliation, and women excelling in careers. The study also examined the style used by Kibugi to bring out the themes mentioned above, with the assumption that style is critical in putting forth a writer's message clearly. Additionally, the study highlighted the ways in which Kibugi's texts were relevant in the contemporary society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were:

1. What are the crucial themes portrayed in Kibugi's texts, *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*?
2. What style does Kibugi employ to pass across the message in her texts *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*?
3. What are the ways in which Kibugi's texts become a vital tool for social commentary on society?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sociological Theory

The sociological theory, literature always serves a particular purpose in society. It is part and parcel of our day to day life. The two cannot be separated. As a result, sociological theory is crucial to society because the individual and society are at the heart of an issue. It sees literature as a mirror of the society. Therefore, under this theoretical framework, literature is gifted with the ability to tell much about a given society.

Since literary writers are part and parcel of any given society, they draw their material and reality from society. They are informed by the society, influencing much of their writing. Literary writers do not just write from without, but they write with a purpose reflecting all the aspects of a human person, that is, socially, economically, politically, education only to mention but a few. Works of art are not produced in a vacuum but surrounded by what might be called its artistic field such as political and social structures. All these may influence the work of art (Hermeren, 1975).

This sociological theory guided this study by encouraging interpretation of literature from the point of view of its societal importance. Writers as members of society are influenced by the values that their societies uphold and this is reflected in their works. Other scholars like Albrecht have made their contributions to this theory by acknowledging the role of literature in society as a reflection, influence and social control (Albrecht, 1978). His observation supports the view that literature is a reflection of society but that it also influences and controls society.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Kenyan female writers have addressed several themes and ideas in their literary works. Constantakis, 2012 found that one of the major themes addressed in Ogot's works is that of the traditional Luo folklore and traditions. This theme is quite prominent in her short story, *The Rain Came*. Another common theme in Ogot's works is that of womanhood and the role of women in society. In her stories, Ogot displays an interest in the gender roles of her female characters (Chukukere, 1995). Ogot thus presented the themes of tradition, womanhood and gender roles (among other themes) in her literary works.

Ilieva (2015) found that Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's works have themes mainly revolving around Kenya's dispossessed and downtrodden. In one of her famous poems, *Freedom Song* (1971) she talks about how a young village girl is taken to work as a domestic help in the home of her urban

relatives. The girl is mistreated, until she dies. Her book *Street Life* (1987) addresses the theme of street children living with disabilities. Similarly, the major theme in *Chira* (1997) is HIV/AIDS. Macgoye therefore handles a variety of themes in her various works.

Kenyan female fiction writers therefore have written on a variety of themes over the years. However, how do they come to write these stories? And this question was answered by Grace Ogot, as quoted in Lindfors (1979), “Many of the stories I have told are based on day-to-day life.” Ogot states that her stories were based on life occurrences, which are a blend between traditional and modern beliefs.

Mukhuba (2005) observed that “A writer does not write in a vacuum. The writer cannot divorce himself from his environmental influences, and these influences more often than not manifest themselves in his work.” Kenyan female writers have addressed themselves on real issues taking place in society. Their works have been influenced by the environment and their surroundings. They have written on themes and issues that impacted their lives.

In the process of bringing out their themes, female fiction writers use style –unique manner of expressing herself – in the writing of their texts. Kenyan female writers have used fiction as their means to putting across their messages. The themes they have addressed in their books have been a true reflection of reality, be it the reality of national corruption or the gender roles of women in society, amongst many other realities. Wairimu Kibugi’s texts have largely dealt on the themes of love and romance, the building of families, as well as the place of women in society. This study focused on the main themes in the texts, *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*, namely: love and romance, broken families, abuse of women, forgiveness and reconciliation, and women excelling in careers.

The social commentary value of Kibugi’s texts was also examined in this research. According to Word Finder (2016), “Social commentary is the act of using rhetorical means to provide commentary on issues in a society...[It] is often done with the idea of implementing or promoting change by informing the general populace about a given problem and appealing to people’s sense of justice.” Social commentary is often done through various forms of communication including in printed form, and through television, radio and film, to mention but a few means.

Social commentary has been done through literature (fiction) over the years. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) can be interpreted as a social commentary on racial issues. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1946) is also a commentary on rogue leadership. Literature thus plays a big part in promoting change in the society by making the populace aware of issues or problems that appeal to their sense of justice. The researcher found that Kibugi’s two texts *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One* are tools for social commentary on two major issues, namely the abuse of women and the place of women in industry and careers.

While much study into the works of famous and well known Kenyan writers is important and commendable, it should not however be done at the expense of studying the works of less well known writers like Wairimu Kibugi. A constant study of the works of famous writers narrows the literature to few works. It was therefore the intention of the researcher to introduce new writers and new titles into the field of study in order to increase not only the depth, but also the breadth of the

scope of knowledge in Literature. The researcher in this study thus looked at Kibugi's thematic concerns, her style, and the social commentary of her books, with the aim of adding to the library of what has already been done by other researchers.

3.0 METHODS

This study adopted a library-based research. It therefore falls under the category of qualitative research (otherwise referred to as content analysis), because it called for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data produced in the form of words rather than numbers. The data provides descriptions of social events. It is textual and was collected from reading various books, journals, literary criticism texts, and content from the Internet. The research was thus based on textual analysis, and the selected texts were arrived at through careful sampling. Qualitative research is appropriate when analyzing and interpreting data in the form of words, while quantitative research is useful when collecting, analyzing and interpreting data that is in the form of numbers. This study used word, rather than numerical data, and therefore qualitative research was most suitable in the carrying out of the study.

Sampling and Data Collection Tools

This research focused on a sample of two texts written by Wairimu Kibugi, namely, *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*. Being a student who greatly appreciates African literature, and with a growing interest in Kenyan literature written by women, the researcher opted to concentrate on Kenyan female fiction writer Wairimu Kibugi's two texts mentioned above, in a bid to understand better the issues that Kenyan female fiction writers are putting across through their work.

Data Analysis

This study used qualitative research, thus it did not provide numbers and statistics to analyze. However, data analysis was done through a thorough reading of the two primary texts by Kibugi, as well as a comparison of the themes presented in the texts. The author's style was also identified and interpreted to show how it works to portray the various themes in the texts. Finally, the value of Kibugi's texts as a tool for social commentary was also analyzed.

Results

The first research question of this study was;

Research Question 1: What are the crucial themes portrayed in Kibugi's texts, *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*?

The study findings revealed that love and romance feature prominently in the texts *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*. In *Three Instead of One*, Pauline and Gerald are presented as a young couple whose relationship began in courtship and culminated in marriage. Their relationship is portrayed as being one in which the two are in love and enjoy spending time together. In *Painful Tears*, John is presented as having strong feelings for Lilian, and he wants her to marry him. Kibugi shows that John is attracted to Lilian and desires for her to be his wife. The theme of love is thus displayed vividly as feelings of desire are expressed by John to Lilian.

The study found that in *Painful Tears*, Lilian and John's marriage is broken by the marital infidelity of John. John has many concubines, and he decides to settle down with one named Wendy. The discovery by Lilian that John is seeing Wendy causes her to bring up the issue with John. John kicks Lilian out and asks her to leave their home and their children.

The finding also revealed forgiveness when Pauline gives pardon to her in-laws for wanting to take her to court in order to possess her late husband's property. Reconciliation comes when Pauline's in-laws summon her as mentioned in the quote above, and the two parties become cordial to each other again, to the extent that Pauline's father-in-law blesses her and allows her to marry a new man, James.

Most unfortunate was that the study revealed the theme of abuse of women. The study revealed the Kibugi focused on physical abuse, financial/economic abuse, sexual abuse and psychological abuse.

The second research question of this study was;

Research Question 2: What style does Kibugi employ to pass across the message in her texts *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One*?

The study found external structures of Kibugi's texts as follows: *Painful Tears* is divided into twelve chapters. It is structured in the form of a novel – it is not a short story, or poem or drama, but rather a novel. Its title (*Painful Tears*) is appropriate and effective in the following ways: first, it reveals that the contents of the book will be quite difficult or 'painful' – it does not however give a hint of what exactly will be painful, only that whatever it is will in fact be painful. Second, the title is effective in carrying the message because it carries with it added stress. Tears are generally shed during painful events; for the writer to stress that the tears are 'painful tears' only goes to show the extent to which the events of the book are painful and difficult. The title is thus quite effective in capturing the primary concerns of the text.

On *Three Instead of One*, the study established that it is also structured in the form of a novel. Its contents are arranged in eighteen chapters. The title deviates from the norm because it does not sufficiently describe the contents of the book. It therefore creates suspense in the minds of potential readers, who are left feeling obliged to read the book in order to quench the thirst of their minds.

Finally, the study observed that the internal structure of the texts is such that ideas are developed from sentence to sentence, from paragraph to paragraph, and from chapter to chapter in prose form.

The third research question of this study was;

Research Question 3: What are the ways in which Kibugi's texts become a vital tool for social commentary on society?

The study found that Kibugi's two texts are a social commentary on two major issues namely the abuse of women and the place of women in industry and careers. Both *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One* portray very vividly the abuse of women in society. Women are shown clearly in the texts to go through blatant psychological, physical, verbal, economic and sexual abuse. The texts display a wide variety of examples in which women experience abuse at the hands of men.

Kibugi's texts are also a social commentary on the place of women in industry and careers. In both texts, Kibugi sets to show that women can have careers that can help them sustain themselves independently. The texts show that women can be secretaries, award-winning writers, government officers, ministers and leaders in society. Women can hold powerful positions and succeed in them.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found that the major themes addressed by Kibugi in the two texts were love and romance, broken families, abuse of women, forgiveness and reconciliation, and women excelling in careers. The study showed characters falling in love and engage in intimate, romantic relationships that often culminated in marriage. The finding also revealed families were broken through death, separation and squabbles and misunderstandings. Most unfortunate was that women were abused by men sexually, economically, psychologically, physically and verbally. Moreover, the study observed that the author highlighted the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation by showing various characters forgiving each other for wrongs done, with their relationships being restored through reconciliation. Finally, the finding showed women excelling in careers by detailing the lives of women who succeeded in school, got prominent jobs, wrote award-winning books and engaged in leadership positions to bring positive change to their communities.

The study revealed that the themes were brought out through Kibugi's unique style. Kibugi used her exclusive structure, plot, characterization, mode, setting and language to carry the storylines forward in order to create innovative stories that have plenty to offer a keen reader. Kibugi's style was paramount in bringing out her thematic concerns. Her style carried her themes and drove her messages home.

Finally, the study revealed that Kibugi's two texts are a vital tool for social commentary. The texts are a social commentary on two major issues namely the abuse of women and the place of women in industry and careers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the thematic concerns of Wairimu Kibugi's *Painful Tears* and *Three Instead of One.*;

The study found evidence to conclude that there were five major thematic concerns of Kibugi's texts, namely love and romance, broken families, abuse of women, forgiveness and reconciliation, and women excelling in careers. In addition, there is confirmation that Kibugi used a unique, simple style in her texts and employed her distinct structure, plot, characterization, mode, setting and language to carry her storylines forward in order to weave tales that have great educative purpose to readers. Finally, the study concludes that Kibugi's texts proved to be powerful tools for social commentary.

Since the study dealt with only a few themes from Wairimu Kibugi's selected texts, future studies could focus on other themes from the same texts. Literary critics are also encouraged to be creative, original and open-minded. Critics are encouraged to pay attention to Kenyan female writers that are not so widely known, but whose works nevertheless carry pertinent content that is useful for generations to come.

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