

African Literature in a Structural and Linguistic Jail: Acknowledging, Apprehending and Advocating for Prison Break

Dr. John Mugubi, PhD

Chairman

Department of Theatre Arts and Film Technology

Kenyatta University

P.O. Box 43844-00100, Nairobi, Kenya.

“Matter is expressed in manner”

The above words by Wordsworth succinctly capture the inextricable relationship between form and content. That is, as much as we may want to harp only on the ideas being disseminated as if Literature were merely a cluster of messages, content cannot be expressed through nothingness. Content cannot just mysteriously fall from heaven like manna. Content in Literature can only be expressed through utilization of particular linguistic and extra-lingual items in a particular way. This means that without form, there is no content. On the other hand, you cannot just have a form that conveys nothingness. Style has to convey or be made of some content. Many a times, we emphasize on one of the two aspects at the expense of the other. We virtually become blinded to “what” or “how”. For instance, while in Literature many of us have a predisposition to what is being said rather than how it is being said, in other areas of life, we tend to emphasize on the form. Think of the mother who purchases cheap, adulterated/diluted, unprocessed, back street milk simply because of the amount given for a few shillings. At this juncture, this mother does not care about the nutritional value of the milk. She is merely gratified by the fact that she is buying ‘a lot’ for very little. In this regard, her obsession is on the quantity (form) rather than quality (content). In similar areas of life, we do the same.

We will spend a fortune on that eye-catching or flashy pair of shoes, dress, cell-phone, car or whatever else that seems really physically attractive only to regret later that the physically fascinating item belied some shockingly inferior material. We are easily cheated because we are more interested in exquisite form, uncaring about the content. As human beings, we are so weakened to the “how” that even in really weighty issues like selecting a lifetime partner, we end up making the same mistake. Many of us have a weakness for physical qualities to the extent that we wouldn’t care for anything else. Beauty, slimness and symmetry on one hand and tallness, darkness and handsomeness are all that seems to count. Being seen with a good-looking partner is all we may care for. That is all we need to gratify our bloated egos and raise our heads high. Innumerable people have been forced to either ‘suffer peacefully’ at the hands of their gorgeous Jezebels and Jeroboams just to gratify their befogged egos, or have been forced to swallow their pride and seek a less attractive but compatible spouse.

The errors we make in literary analysis are therefore ‘normal’ mistakes that percolate into other spheres of life. In spite of this, we do not have to continue making such mistakes. We have to tutor ourselves to consider both aspects in all decisions we make. This is because everything that exists has a form and content. Many a times, we have to think of the balance between the form and content of whatever we fancy. Just like in Literature, an aesthetically beautiful text would be that which is delightfully woven so that the marriage between the form and content is impeccable, so it is in life. A beautiful house is remarkable in both the physical design and the material employed. If the architectural design is spectacular yet the material is calamitously defective, such a house cannot constitute anything close to the essence of the word ‘beauty’. If the material is reputedly good yet the design is detestably horrific, again such a house cannot be considered beautiful in whatever regard. It is in the same respect that a gorgeous woman would not be the angelic face out-rightly devoid of a speck of moral uprightness or ‘the queen of the universe’ exterior but with intellectual emptiness that can only fathom FGM (female genital mutilation) as the acronym of some quaint wild vegetable found in the Amazon forest.

We cannot therefore over-emphasize the importance of both the “what” and “how” in all that we do.

However, it is in the area of form in Literature that we are in a rut. We have remained intransigent while the world strides ahead. We have refused to grow and still sheepishly believe in three Eurocentric main genres: Poetry, Drama and Prose Fiction. We have imprisoned ourselves in the three genres that we are still brooding literary dinosaurs, structurally speaking, while rapidly establishing gene-banks to conserve the sperm and ovaries of these literary animals for future survival. Our fears have been heightened by proliferation of ‘non-conventional’ art in all regards yet what actually risks extinction are not the three literary fossils but our own indigenous literary types which we only quietly acknowledge. No wonder Taban Lo Liyong’s accusation that East Africa is a literary desert still applies many decades on.

Whereas art just like life ought to have some symmetry, who said symmetry can only be realized in three ways established by Europeans and Americans? For such executive literary monuments, expression is often tempered by restraint. We need to do what is appropriate within our own context. Our insistence on awkwardly adhering to Western types of Literature is our undoing. But even where the West has moved a step forward and wholly embraced non-fictional literary prose as a “fourth genre”, we have gladly chosen to mark-time, berating any literary art that grossly transgresses the traditional conventions of the three genres. It is this regard that works by some African writers that entail literary experimentation have not been seen as serious literature.

Just as Sabbath was made for man and not man for Sabbath, we should not let man-made conventions stunt our art. Can’t I seriously create anything that is not prose fiction, poetry or drama? The genetic material for art that is well adapted to our local personal and communal conditions, resistant to the socio-literary, politico-literary, econo-literary and histo-literary and other literary ticks and tsetse-flies and a host of literary ‘diseases’ can only be found in a gene ‘manufactured’ locally. For instance where do we truly place African choric chants that entail both poetry and drama? What about the literariness of the Akan’s talking drum or the Samia *Adungu*?

Whereas Poetic license has enabled us to borrow intra-generically and still classify a cocktail of genres as one of the three depending on what structural features preponderate over the others, can we just have genres ‘officially’ acknowledged as: ‘*Prosoetry*’, ‘*Prosodrama*’, ‘*Poetrodrama*’, ‘*dramoetry*’, or ‘*poetrose*’, ‘*prosopoetrodrama*’, ‘*toiletrature*’ and the like? Whereas Oriental Literature has advanced to the extent that books of random thoughts, travel accounts, diaries, and graffiti are studied seriously as Literature in Japan, and unique traditional genres like the ‘renga’ has been taken to another level, we have chosen to be enclosed in western literary museums. Where are the Noh dramas and Kabuki’s of Africa? Why haven’t we developed Bushman plays, Mande Comedies or Kalabari’s since Finnegan’s assertion (1970) of lack of a truly developed indigenous Africa drama more than three decades ago? Whereas the Dylan Thomases, T.S. Eliots, G.M. Hopkins and Taban Lo Liyongs of the worlds, those ‘eccentric’ pioneers shattered the jail doors, showed us how to proficiently engage in structural and syntactic onomatopoeia that enhances communication, we have retreated to our historical monuments and deride anyone who tries to destroy, remove, injure or alter these relics.

Changes are only permitted if they leave the character and structure of these literary vestiges intact. One would think that genres have owners so that we should seek permits to allow changes to these monuments. Little wonder the Kenya national dress trials in 2002 failed miserably. The event was meant to produce a combination of various cultural dress styles of the country’s ethnic groups which was expected to bring about a common identity for Kenyans. But all that was lost because we love our Western clothes (second hand) to the extent that in a radio advertisement for a detergent in Kenya, a company boss is heard advising his employee to “leave the traditional wear for the weekend”. Indeed, we desire everything second hand. It is this second hand mentality that we ought to shed. We have nothing to define our African-ness as Kenyans ‘Stylistically’ be it in Literature, dressing, demeanour, ideologically, politically and in many areas of our social life. We delight in apemanship in all respects that we are in essence American sheep.

Misguided government policies with regard to even selection of set-books in many African countries are driving creativity and our own indigenous forms of Literature into extinction where neo-imaginative writings are systematically ignored while the Eurocentric breed is replaced by a similar exotic breed in the name of literary education. It is instructive that there has been little encouragement towards creation and preservation of contemporary indigenous literary forms.

Whereas other art forms such as music have blossomed among the young generation with the creation of peculiarly indigenous genres such as ‘*genge*’ and ‘*kapuka*’ and ‘*Kapungala*’ in Kenya and ‘*Bongo*’ in Tanzania, where are the literary counterparts? We love nursing literary vegetables that ought to undergo Euthanasia.

Thematically, East African literary artists have hit the right chord, following in the dictum of Chinua Achebe (1975) of not sprinting after a rodent fleeing the flames of a burning hut in lieu of concentrating one’s energies in putting out the flame. It is Nadine Gordimer who said that during the apartheid regime, for the South African writer the themes chose him or her and not vice-versa. There was therefore no question of choice. Indeed, with its litany of problems, Africa needs writers who will: articulate the problems while castigating the source of the troubles; mediate between conflicting issues in our continent; guide morally at such a time when a plethora of ‘ethotechnological’ advancements have rendered our future vulnerable to all kinds of bad influences. Also, Africa still needs writers who will show the way forward as social philosophers.

However, we need not over-emphasize didacticism at the expense of creativity. Literature begins with spontaneity. Literature is also a source of psychological ventilation to its creator. Let us therefore not stifle creativity. Let us allow spontaneity to be nourished as long as it demonstrates order. Zen Buddhists argue that inspiration may spring from any form of sudden perception so that the smell of perfume or croaking of a frog may motivate one to write a poem or even a novel. Just like in the Fine art where abstract art is nurtured, let us have a branch of personal nonrepresentational cathartic Literature. Spontaneity is the mother of invention and together with apt cultural orientation can only engender ultra-modern literary genres that are socially responsive, fit within our context, function well, and that represent the aspirations, dignity and confidence of our people. Whatever form takes, Literature upholds a people’s self-discovery and embodies ideals as it reflects man’s spiritual yearnings and development in a dynamic society.

The over-reliance on just a handful of literary species is causing loss of would-be literary forms every other day. Little wonder we accuse Kenyans of not reading unless it is set literary texts. We need literary “mapping” techniques to predict which literary types are best suited to our environment (tastes) and the circumstances around our world. Indeed, we need to encourage writers to work towards a generic diversity. In any case, we will not even know the true value of an invented form until we pay maximum attention to it. There is serious need to open up the space. Our own imagination is threatened with extinction because our creativity is ever being supplanted by literary ‘Friesians’ which are said to be more universal. Now, who decides what is universal? Shape / Structural patterning can be employed fruitfully (Deviantly or by conforming to norms) in poetry to enhance meaning. As in the employment of onomatopoeia, those words that imitate sound, poets may choose shapes that have definite aesthetic appeals for their interpretation as reflecting an aspect of reality.

New and innovative structures in Literature can therefore powerfully contribute to semantic interpretation of the work. Writers use diverse, ‘abnormal’ and exclusive types of structures depending on the issues at hand. In this respect, Taban Lo Liyong’s play **Showhat and Sowhat** is not really a play per se as we conventionally conceive of drama but a philosophical dialogue; an absurdist exploration of life through quasi-afro-drama. Indeed, the bizarre characters, most of who even have parodic names in the traditional African fashion of names being used as “a succinct and oblique way of commenting on their owners or on others” (Finnegan: 1970:470), cannot stand the verisimilitude test in terms of their humanity. Names such as: ‘Showhat’, ‘My Show’, ‘Shiney’, ‘Miss Show’, ‘Sowhat’ and ‘Shone on’, express ideas, aspirations or philosophical comments. Through the pseudo-dialogue, Lo Liyong powerfully satirizes both the egotism and haughtiness of the affluent and the myopia and cynicism of the poor. That the play cannot pass as drama in the strict sense of the word notwithstanding, Lo Liyong blends aspects of dramatic mimicry, parody and oratory common to many African traditional societies where “oratorical displays appear to afford great enjoyment” (Finnegan: 1970:444), to create an afro-centric *poetro-drama* whose definitive value is in the adroit synthesis of a Western pattern with African literary rich sage-like proverb-riddle rhetoric, amalgamated with humour and play. In this way Lo Liyong comes up with not a literary “bat” (that cannot belong anywhere in terms of genre), but a new, fresh and exciting mode that magnificently combines aspects of western drama with aspects of African literature. The result is a formation that is a source of schooling and hilarity at the same time. We learn pleurably through such a configuration.

Language has also been a controversial issue in Literature. Should we aspire at some universality or just aim at particularity? Should we embrace both so that we employ language that takes care of particularities while remaining universal at the same time?

Whereas many writers globally have ensured that they employ the English language in Literature in a manner that captures linguistic particularities and yet remain comprehensible globally, many ‘serious’ African writers save for the Ngugis, Achebes and Wole Soyinkas of Africa have chosen to deny the social dialects of place and time by using language that is artificial in many regards in as far as characters’ dialogue is concerned. Many African novels in English are good examples of ‘bad’ books in this regard. Ngugi avers that: “The languages of African Literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue and a problem calling for a resolution” (Wa Thiong’o: 1986). However, countless African literary texts are still disappointing in the palpable penchant for a cosmopolitan linguistic approach that renders the issue of context immaterial. The yearning by some African writers for linguistic cosmopolitanism in all regards in order to seek some kind of universal literature is a disservice to the vision, philosophy and psychology of Africa. It is traitorous to the literary affluence of our own oratory.

When many African writers employ foreign tongues in the enunciation of their works, their overriding aspiration is at a syntactic density that equals or outclasses the language owners’ syntactic rigmarole. An example is the persistent use of Anglo-specific terms such as “lordship” or “Lord” in an African text such as *Lwanda Magere*. Even though the writer, Okoiti Omtatah succeeds in delineating a picture of an African set up through impeccable use of considerable African idioms, such foreign concepts, akin to Anglo-definitive “Knighthood”, weaken his art in terms of linguistic verisimilitude, since there were never and have yet to be part of a true African oral culture even as our own politicians now clamour to be addressed by such obnoxious terms as: “Your Excellency”, “Right Honourable” and “Your Most Gracious”.

Afro-Caribbean Literature offers us examples of how a foreign language can be indigenized beautifully for plausibility. Aime Cesaire’s *Return to my Native land* has been acclaimed for knocking over established systems of grammar and traversing linguistic norms in order to communicate the Caribbean experiences credibly. In *Arrivants*, Edward Braithwaite adroitly marries African linguistic forms such as choric chants with English. Braithwaite’s poetry also vibrates with the rhythm of Caribbean and African speech:

A single word o’ English
But uh doan really know. All you know
Is that one day suddenly so
this mountain leggo one *brugg-a-lung-go* (p.66)

Whereas serious West Indian writers have no qualms extensively employing Pidgin and Creole in their works to not only credibly reflect on the characters while at the same time reinforcing the poetic and figurative quality of their works, we in Kenya dread to imagine that “Sheng”, that local equivalence of Pidgin or Creole, could be used in serious Literature. We pooh-pooh “Sheng”, contending that it is not a proper language. We erroneously but snobbishly maintain that “Sheng” is principally spoken by the little educated, indolent, downright careless, drug-pushers or the unruly and still make these illiterates, lazy, utter slapdash, narcotic-peddlers and rowdy in our literary texts mouth impeccable English. The contention that is “Sheng” is only spoken by a particular class of people is purely bourgeoisie *ad-hominem* argument. Speaking “Sheng” just like Pidgin, Creole or the African-American slang (which Alice Walker uses extensively in *The Color Purple* without any apologies) is in most cases a question of choice. In cases where it is not premeditated, the speakers fathom that it is different from the standard forms of language.

“Sheng” is a language with clear bone (read-grammatical) structures and a visible face. If not, how would one be able to learn and master sheer vapour? We aver that “Sheng” is fluid and keeps on changing; which languages remain stagnant anyway? History demonstrates that languages metamorphose. Otherwise we would still be persecuting our tongues with ‘betwixts’, ‘dosts’ and ‘thous’ of the Shakespearean epoch. “Sheng” is only more versatile and dynamic compared to other languages. With time, it will find its place and settle down in a more discernible pattern. “Sheng” is who we are and not what Ngugi Wa Thiong’o asserts – reverting to our mother tongues as media for our writings in order to express who we are. While our ethnic tongues are in for inevitable doom or condemnation into some linguistic museum or some departments at our highest institutions of learning, “sheng” will triumph. In the aftermath of the 2007 Post-election violence in Kenya, Sheng is a good thing. “Sheng” is manna from heaven; it is God’s answer to the polarization, compartmentalization and alienation that our natives tongues engender.

If we have to deal with the cancer of ethnicity that defines our politics and socialization, we must encourage literary art that will dissuade our children from mouthing Kikuyu, Kihulya, Kikamba, Kijaluo or whatever tribal tongue. “Sheng” transcends ethnic fences and therefore forges unity among the speakers. Vernacular is a virus worse than Ebola. “Sheng” can play a momentous role in unifying us. “Sheng”—that blend of many of the languages prevalent in Kenya—is who we are and ought to be reflected in our art.

The way to go is to foster “Sheng” in our literary works while making the boundaries of its usage unequivocal, for now. “Sheng” won’t just vanish into thin air! And yet ignoring it in our literary works would be tantamount to denying our very existence. The most significant element of development in the Pidgin and Creole used in Caribbean Literature is the tendency towards standardizing these ‘languages’ so that they can be understood throughout the West Indies. Agents of standardization are writings such as **Jamaican Talk, Dictionary of Jamaican English**, “Barbadian Dialect” and “St. Lucia Patois”. Other agents are the Caribbean Examination Council with the adjunct preparing material to be used throughout English speaking Caribbean. Education on each Island is another most potent agent.

There is therefore in the West Indies a language harmony of slang, a harmony hardly enjoyed in other parts of the world and yet Caribbean Literature remains a powerful yet unique kind of Literature. This is a pointer to the possibility of standardizing our local ‘slanguages’ like “Sheng”. Language is more than a mode of expression. Language is a safe-guard against feelings; the knife that slices emotions that may threaten to suffocate a person if not verbalized. We should use “Sheng” in literature to validate our own experiences against the snobbishness of those who forced their foreign tongues down our throats, having contemptuously considered us cultureless. Just as the black people in America and West Indies came up with a ‘black language’ to revolt against using a pure slave-master’s language, we should be true to ourselves and employ a language that reflects who we are.

References

- Achebe, Chinua (1975): Morning Yet on Creation Day. London: Heinemann
- Aristotle (1934): Poetics. Ed. R.C. Jebb. New York: Books for Libraries press.
- Arp, T.P. (1998): Perrin’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.
- Bonheim, N. (1990): Literary Systematics. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- Cesaire, Aimé Return to My Native land.
- Dalphinis, Morgan (1985): Caribbean and African Languages. Karia press
- Davies, W. (1986): Dylan Thomas. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Dorsch, T.S. (1965): Classical Literary Criticism. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Finnegan, R. (1970): Oral Literature in Africa. London: Oxford University Press.
- Forster, E.M. (1927): Aspects of the Novel. New York: Harcourt.
- Harris, W. (1967): Tradition: the Writer and society. London: New Beacon Books.
- Janheiz, Jahn (1968): Neo-African Literature: A History of Black writing. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
- Liyong Taban Lo (1972): Popular Culture of East Africa. Nairobi, Longman Kenya Ltd.
- (2007): Showhat and Sowhat. Nairobi: Longman Publishers Ltd.
- Lucas, F.L. (1961): Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle’s Poetics. New York.
- Macgoye, O.M. (1986): Coming to Birth. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- Mugubi, J (2006): “Sheng is the Slanguage of the Future”. “Daily Nation”, 6th October, 2006. Nairobi, Kenya
- Ngara, E. (1982): Stylistic Criticism and the Africa Novel: A Study of the Language, Art and Content of African Fiction. London: Heinemann.
- (1985): Art and ideology in the African Novel. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational books.
- Richards, I.A. (1967): Principles of Literary Criticism. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Sinclair, A. (1975): Dylan Thomas: Poet of His People. London: Michael Joseph.
- Van Peer, W (1986): Stylistics and Psychology. London: Croomhelm.
- Wordsworth, W. (1969): Poetical works of Wordsworth. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. London: Oxford university press.