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Emerging trends in Kenyan children's fiction: A study of Sasa Sema's Lion books

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Chapter One

General Introduction to Kenya's Children's Literature

Gikaro kimwe gitioyagwa mbui

[One place is never collected feathers][1]

This study is based on a project on biographies written for young readers, which was started in Kenya in the year 2000 by the *Sasa Sema* Publications. The *Sasa Sema* project is about famous historical and hero figures mainly from Kenya.[2] The personalities whose lives and deeds are reconstructed in these texts include politicians, an entrepreneur, a photojournalist, a Mau Mau freedom fighter, a poet and a prominent woman who was a political leader during colonial time in Kenya. A project on historical figures, like the one studied in this thesis, is certainly a unique one in the history of Kenya's children's literature. The study interrogates how the *Sasa Sema*'s Lion series of biographies makes a shift from what has earlier been written on children's literature in Kenya. Some of the changes that these biographies exhibit include: concern with the country's historical and hero figures, and thus with its history, evocation of cultural identity by use of oral art forms borrowed from the communities from which each of the personalities comes from, privileging of women voices which helps in interrogation of gender stereotypes in children's literature, interrogation of Kenya's history of nationalism, revision of the heroic narrative, and predominant use of real human characters rather than imagined human and animal characters, among other changes. I argue that these changes taking place in writing for children

[1] A Kithara proverb which is meant to explain that change is inevitable in any society; that one cannot stay at one specific place, or get engaged in similar activities for the whole of his/her life.

[2] *The Sasa Sema* publishers plan to include other important personalities who have significantly contributed to African history. Books on Nelson Mandela, Shaka Zulu and Julius Nyerere have already been published. However, I limit my study to those personalities that are from Kenya, as my aim is to interrogate children's literature in Kenya.

helps in broadening the scope of children's literature and criticism in Kenya – *gikaro kimwe gitioyagwa mbui*.

A brief background on Kenya's children's literature is necessary at this point in order to map out what has characterised this literature in the past, and thus understand the shifts that are made by the texts that the current study addresses. This background is twofold. First, I examine the historical development of children's literature in Kenya, and second, I briefly look at the kinds of children's books and projects that preceded the *Sasa Sema* project.

The Development of Kenya's Children's Literature

I look at Kenya's children's literature from a historical perspective with a view to understanding the transition this literature has undergone through time. Kenya's children's literature can be traced as far back as the pre-colonial times when the kind of literature that was available for children was mainly oral and unrecorded, in the form of poems, riddles, songs and stories. This literature was both entertaining and educating. Osayimwense Osa (2001) contends that in Africa, a didactic or moral stance has always been an integral part of literature for juveniles, from simple songs and jokes through well-crafted and sophisticated fiction (166). Therefore, in the context of this literature, a story would be told for pleasure and would include a song or dance not only to make children feel a sense of community solidarity/togetherness, but such a song would have a communicative role, for example, to praise the good and/or to ridicule the evil. In this case, the hare in African oral narratives who cheats the hyena and other animals could probably be a brother or a relative whom you live with under the same roof (Odaga 1974: 24). Stories with animal characters were, therefore, used as warnings, and as a reflection of some characteristics of people in the society.

Pre-colonial children's literature in Kenya was thought provoking, and it covered almost all aspects of life. It provided information about the world to

children and in some cases, explanation about some natural occurrences around them. "From its many genres, youths learnt to assess the feelings of their people towards their neighbours and their attitude towards each other" (Odaga 1974: 17). In this case, it was possible through this literature to sense when a person was friendly, tolerant or aggressive. In fact, sometimes a mother could sing a sorrowful song, and through it children could understand that she [the mother] was unhappy and [she] could probably punish them that day. A happy song on the other hand signified friendliness. For example, the following canto comes from a song in Kitharaka language, in Kenya.

Ndiumuthuru-i, ndiumuthuru	I am angry, I am angry
Ntikwenda kutheka-i, ndiumuthuru	I don't want to laugh, I am angry
Nwakana kiriro-i ndiumuthuru…[3]	Unless mourning/crying, I am angry…

(My own translation).

Such a song would usually not specify why the singer is angry. However, if a mother sang the song, it signalled disharmony and possible trouble for the children because of their proximity to the mother, and/or in case the children had made mistakes. Mothers sang these kinds of songs, for example, when the children let cows loose into the garden, or when they had not accomplished a task assigned to them.

Pre-colonial children's literature in Kenya also incorporated past events, which were hidden in riddles, tales or superstitions. Proverbs were used in conversations or in storytelling for clarifying points or for intensifying the meaning of what one said. Usually children learnt to use proverbs by observing and listening to how adults used them. All these genres of oral literature were mainly passed on to the young ones during leisure hours,

[3] Thanks to my grandmother Cianduga for teaching me this song.

mostly in the evenings as they waited for meals. This was done usually by grandmothers who were viewed as good orators and also as custodians of knowledge.

The characters in majority of folktales were human, ogres, ogresses, animals, or even birds. In most of these stories "human beings played the role of intelligent, heroic, life-saving characters while ogres were portrayed as brutal and cannibalistic" (Sam Mbure 1997: 4). Animals were classified as foolish, sly, dangerous or greedy. In almost all stories, the hare was presented as witty, confident, tricky, and always emerged as the victor even when pitted against big animals like the lion, hyena or elephant. For instance, the following extract about how the hungry hare turned a whole lion into a dinner is an example of how hare's intelligence reigns over lion's physical strength.

> The hare knew the lion was a strong and at times ruthless animal. But it also knew if teased or provoked the lion had no second thought; he became warlike and was ready to show his might. So when the hungry hare met the lion he provoked and teased him. The lion became very angry and ran after the hare. The hare took to his heels. He sped off and then passed through a narrow slot between two strong trees. The gap was not wide enough for the lion to pass through so he was trapped and squeezed in between. He could not move forward or backwards. The hare then stopped, came in front of the trapped lion and said, "I have always told you to think carefully before you make a decision. You have now made the wrong decision but you won't live to regret this time! Today I will feed on you." (Mbure 1997: 5)

While we know that the hare is not carnivorous, and could not possibly eat the lion, stories like the one quoted above were important in teaching children that size may not be the key to success. Through repeated storytelling

sessions, children could in most cases predict the outcome of the stories depending on what animals were involved, although some stories were complicated which sometimes became challenging to children.

With the passage of time Kenya's children's literature underwent various changes especially with the advent of colonisation and the subsequent introduction of literacy. The coming of colonialists saw the introduction of formal education and consequently, writing and publishing. Literature that was introduced to African children at this time was mainly written by European writers and it had a few shortcomings. Firstly, this literature contained material that was essentially meant for European audience and it was therefore alien to the African child. Most of it was classics written by European writers for children with a Western upbringing and background (Odaga 1974: 7). Secondly, there were books designed solely for an African audience, and they carried notions of what Europeans thought of Africans. For example, 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 (*Homecoming*, page 9).

In this literature everything foreign was imbued with a kind of civilizing magic and the quality of perfection while the African was portrayed as barbaric, uncivilised and dirty; characteristics that would make African children hate their ways of life. Consequently this literature produced "a new breed of black Europeans, who began to despise their own skin and background" (Henry Chakava 1996: 23). Chinua Achebe saw children's literature of this period 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 (Chakava: 1998: 4).

In the period immediately after independence (the late 1960s and early 1970s) children's literature by African writers in Kenya began to be published.[4] Most children's books that were published during this period drew from oral traditions. Nyambura Mpesha (1995) argues that the period of the 70s and 80s saw the publication of a number of books of fiction and volumes of poetry and drama in East Africa, in which oral tradition played an important part either in conceptualizing theme or providing a model of style (1-2). Commenting on Kenya's postcolonial literature Asenath Odaga posits that this literature in Kenya was "a product of, and a direct growth from the impetus and experiences of both oral and colonial literature. … [The two] existed side by side in forming the postcolonial literature that emerged" (7). Unlike colonial children's fiction writers who wrote literature that would make Africans despise their culture, postcolonial Kenyan/African writers produced works which children could identify with. However, only few texts were written in indigenous languages and the rest of this fiction was predominantly written in English, because English was carried over from British rule as a national medium of instruction in schools and as a language of official transactions.

[4] Commenting on writing for children in the whole of Africa, Nancy Schmidt (1981) argues that fiction written for African children began to develop in the 1960s, when European publishers established African offices with African editorial staff and when African-controlled presses began to proliferate and publish fiction for local African schools. Schmidt further shows that books published after this period had characters who exemplified African values and culture while Europeans were secondary characters and were negatively stereotyped as hypocritical priests, exploitative administrators, misguided do-gooders, seekers of exoticism and arrogant educators" (24). Europeans' weakness in these texts was attributed not to their race but to the socio-cultural context of colonialism. In other words African writers at this time were seen as writing back to the European writers who sought to give a distorted African image to children.

Following the entrenchment of the writing and publishing tradition, children's literature written by Kenyan writers has been characterized by African setting, themes and characterisation. Drawing on oral stories in their African folklore, writers have used familiar animal motifs that are meant to teach and entertain the young. Like the oral folktales, much of this literature for children deals with events, settings and characters, which are often outside the realm of possibility. In this literature we may sometimes find inanimate objects being personified so that they perform extraordinary acts. For example, in David Maillu's text titled *Looking for Mother* (1981), we encounter two children whose mother fails to return home when she goes out to visit a friend. As the children are wondering how and where to look for their mother, their family car (Miss Kasikasi) starts hooting and talking in the night; inquiring why the children are crying (12). In this instance the cat (Kapusi), the dog (Masika) and a rat (Kaplunze), all start talking and with their combined effort they look for their mother and find her. Many of the stories in early postcolonial children's books in Kenya can, therefore, be classified as animal fantasy because of the predominant use of animal characters that are often humanised.

The biographies studied in this thesis make a shift from this animal fantasy and characterisation to using real human characters, and also to speak to issues of national history and nation building. This nation building shows a contribution from various Kenyan communities and from different areas of specialisation. In addition, this narrative of nation building acknowledges the contributions made by some of the repressed heroes of Kenya's struggle for independence. The characters in these texts are also adults as opposed to child characters. There is also the privileging of women as important voices and heroes of the nation, an agenda that has not been previously accorded enough space in Kenyan children's writing. These changes in children's narratives, and others that surface in the course of the analysis done in this thesis are what I am calling the emerging trends in Kenya's children's literature.

Writing for Children in Kenya

In order to place the texts analysed in this thesis in the position they occupy in Kenya's children's literature, I will in this part give a brief overview of the kinds of projects and texts that have featured in this field.

Although the Lion Series of biographies is a unique one in the history of Kenya's children's literature, it is certainly not the first project on children's book series. There was an earlier project by the East African Education publishers that aimed at looking back to ethnic folktales and harvesting them for children in the modern context of literacy. These folktales were labelled the East African "When", "Why" and "How" stories, with each kind published in a separate book. Apart from the major aim of helping children in middle primary school improve their understanding of English language, these texts are also an important source of entertainment for children. The "why" stories are aimed at explaining some peculiar things that happen in the world that children might not easily comprehend. Stories like "why bats come out only at night", "why the hippo has no hair", "why crocodiles live in water" among others, are found in this text.[5] Similarly the "when" and "how" stories explain the time origin of certain human and animal activities, and how certain events started happening among people and/or among animals respectively. These stories are basically fictional tales handed down the generations, and they have been translated from various local languages. There is a lot of personification in all these stories where we see animals and inanimate things like fire speaking.[6] Each of these books contain about five stories and in my view these are extremely few given the fact that there are many communities in Kenya with numerous "Why", "When" and "How" stories, which could be produced in many more volumes.

[5] See Pamela, Kola. *East African Why Stories* (1991).
[6] See Pamela, Kola (1991: 18-23).

Apart from projects like this, there are numerous other kinds of books that have been written for children in Kenya since independence most of which focus on children's daily activities at home. Asenath Bole Odaga's writing for young people, for example, pays attention to moral teaching. Odaga has claimed that her books are an attempt to give children a clear scope and ideas about their world, by depicting modes of behaviour familiar to the communities that form their society.[7]

Ngugi wa Thiong'o who is a renowned adult fiction writer has also turned his pen to children's texts. His series on the character of Njamba Nene (*Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* and *Njamba Nene's Pistol*)[8] focuses mainly on the colonial era in Kenya and the Mau Mau war. Ngugi has attempted to move further than the other writers of children's books in Kenya whose works are mostly set around the home. Through Njamba Nene in *Njamba Nene's Pistol* (1986b), Ngugi takes the reader through a journey into the fear and the risks that those who participated in the Mau Mau liberation struggle took. Ngugi also shows how Africans betrayed each other to their white oppressors during the Mau Mau war. Gaceru Mwendanda, the hooded informer in *Njamba Nene's Pistol*, represents such traitors (see page 28). Although the superhero is invincible, Ngugi's presentation of the character Njamba Nene as the unfailing hero is realistically questionable, because I find it rather an unbelievable ability from young Njamba Nene when he leads other African detainees at the screening camp in overpowering the colonial soldiers.

One of the issues that Ngugi addresses in *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*, is the aims of colonial education in Kenya and supposedly elsewhere in Africa, which he shows was aimed at making Africans despise their culture:

[7] http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/cm/africana/odaga.htm
[8] There is also *Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief*, which I could not get hold of as it was out of print. I have therefore not made reference to it.

> 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 (5).

The name "Brainwash" in this quotation points to the aim of the school; to brainwash Africans' minds. In this text, alienation from one's country and culture is evident in Njamba Nene's class at TAPS, seen 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 (24), as opposed to the map of Kenya. Consequently, John Bull cannot help other pupils in finding their way home when they are lost in the forest. John Bull's ignorance of his country's geography and culture is supported by a couple of other pupils and by teacher Kigorogoru. Ngugi argues for the supremacy of one's culture through Njamba Nene who constantly refers to the wisdom of his mother, Wacu. And it is through Njamba Nene's knowledge of the environment that the pupils from TAPS eventually find their way back to school.

David Maillu is another famous Kenyan writer who is mostly known for his adult popular fiction, but he has also written over ten children's books. Maillu's children's books are mainly set around the home and its environs, covering aspects like relationships: between parents and their children[9]; between stepmothers and their stepchildren[10] and even between children themselves.[11] Most of the narratives in these texts contain lessons through which both children and readers witness how evil is punished, while good deeds are rewarded. For example, in *The Orphan and his Goat Friend* (1993), Kakuthi, a jealous step-mother digs a hole next to her step-son's bed in order to trap and kill him. However, she instead falls into this hole and dies. Maillu

[9] *The Priceless Gift* (1993).
[10] *The Poor Child* (1988); *The Orphan and his Goat Friend* (1993).
[11] *Journey to the Fairyland* (1992); *Atendaye Mema* (1997).

also pays attention to the need for children to heed advice especially from elders, and the importance and the value of friendship. In many of his books, Maillu utilizes personification and foregrounds the relationships between animals and human beings, a motif that can certainly be traced from African oral narratives. For example, in *Atendaye Mema* [S/he who does good] (1998), a snake tells Mbolea, a character in the book: "*Nilijua utajaribu kutoroka. Nilikupiga sindano ya kulegeza*" [I knew you would try to escape. I gave you an injection that would paralyse you] (29). In this story the snake had found Mbolea sleeping in the forest and had protected him from harm by other animals for a whole year. When Mbolea wakes up the snake demands payment for protecting him. In his attempt to run away from the snake, Mbolea discovers that his legs were so weak and numb.

Ezekiel Alembi, the author of the biographies of Elijah Masinde and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga in the *Sasa Sema* project has in the past written other children's texts. Many of his books contain stories that have their basis in traditional oral storytelling. For example, a story like "The Cry of a Goat", which features in a text called *The Cry of a Goat and Other Stories* (1997) is a common oral narrative in many Kenyan communities. In his texts, Alembi employs personification whereby animals perform activities similar to those of human beings, like holding meetings and taking minutes[12] - plots that tend to collapse the divide between the real and the imagined. Apart from stories based on African oral storytelling, Alembi has written children's fiction based on children's daily experiences from which other children can reflect on their own behaviour.[13]

There is also poetry written for young readers. Such poetry is evident in Sam Mbure's writing. Like many works by other writers for children in Kenya,

[12] See *The Scratching Egrets* (2000: 22).

[13] For example in *Don't be Long John* (1991), John is sent to buy a loaf of bread but he is carried away by his curiosity to explore the environment and gets late, contrary to his mother's warning not to get late. He runs all the way home and finds his father almost leaving, having given up on eating the bread for breakfast.

Mbure's poems focus on the daily activities in the homes and on peoples' lives. Most of his books teach children the concepts of teamwork, the need to keep promises, and the importance of taking care of one's actions in order to avoid trouble. In addition, Mbure's writing explores phenomenon that are taken for granted in the society. He does this through the creation of humour and the use of the absurd. For example, in a poem called "The Childless Father" he writes:

> …. "don't call me sir.
> …. When I greet you, you simply say
> we are fine father…."
> One of the pupils looked at him and asked
> "What's the name of your child?"
> "I have no son, no daughter, no wife, but I am father"
> And the children burst out laughing….[14]

In this poem Sam Mbure brings in the idea of the absurd (a father without a wife and children), out of the aspect of the Catholic priests (usually called Fathers) who do not marry and therefore are not supposed to have children.

The authors discussed here are not the only Kenyan writers for children. On the contrary, there are several children's books that flood Kenyan bookshops published by various publishers in the country. A major general characteristic of many of these texts is their reliance on fictional stories and characters, with a lot of personification, and friendliness amongst animals and human beings as already mentioned. It is important however to note that all children's texts in Kenya are not exclusively based on oral folktales, because there are other writers for children who write about crime and seeking solution to the

[14] http://www.sambure.com/owncoll2.htm

crime[15], drug trafficking and addiction,[16] and other family situations like jealous stepmothers[17] and jealous co-wives[18], to mention only a few.

Admittedly, my examination of children's fiction in Kenya in this introduction can in no way be perceived as exhaustive. I have only looked at a few of these writings in order to demonstrate how far the biographies studied here differ particularly in content as compared to these earlier children's texts. But this is not to say that writers of children's books have ceased from writing about these earlier issues. My argument is that the biographies give diversity to this literature.

An Overview of the *Sasa Sema* Project

The *Sasa Sema* project on biographies is about famous historical and hero figures. The authors of these biographies are motivated by the desire to reinvent Kenyan history for the sake of young readers, not through a historical project but through a literary intervention. This literary intervention is realised by the way the authors fictionalise history and through the use of a variety of literary elements and techniques – modes which help retell these hero stories in a manner not found in historical narratives. For example the use of dialogue/drama resonates in all the texts, which makes episodes livelier and accessible to children. There is also the use of the fantastic, imagery, humour, exaggeration, illustrations and description. These styles help to illuminate the characters' lives and the themes in the stories. These literary devices also prolong episodes and make the texts more interesting for children.[19] The persistent creation of illusion of reality and the pictorial

[15] For example, see Jimmi Makotsi's *The Boys in Kakamega* (1996) and Oludhe Macgoye's *The Black Hand Gang* (1997).
[16] For example, Juma Bustani's *Adeventure in Mombasa* (1988).
[17] See "Mwila" in *Cock and Lion* by Kalondu Kyendo (1994: 14-17); *The Orphan and his Goat Friend* by David Maillu (1993).
[18] For example, Esther Kavila's *The Three Sons* (1989).
[19] For example, a comparison between the biography of Jomo Kenyatta by the *Sasa Sema* and the same biography written in the Makers of Kenya's History series from a pure historical perspective portrays how literary devices make the story longer and I suppose much clearer. Kenyatta's early life where his father and mother die before he moves to live with his

images allow the possibility of young readers identifying with the characters' values and qualities and in the process get empowered through these characters' accomplishments. By focusing on motifs such as industry, perseverance and determination, which reverberate in almost all the texts, the authors in the end present these personalities as heroes in their own communities and also in the Kenyan society. These heroes are imbued with qualities of courage, sacrifice, selflessness and triumph; virtues that they adopt for their own benefit and also for the sake of the others in their communities and the nation at large. These narratives of various Kenyan hero figures from various historical periods, ranging from pre-colonial to the present, give the possibility of collapsing diverse and different historical periods into composite narratives that make up Kenya's history.

One interesting aspect of all the books under study that is addressed in this thesis is their interrogation and recuperation of the history of nationalism in Kenya through their treatment of both politically prominent and non-political figures from different communities in Kenya's colonial and post-colonial history. The fact that this recuperation of Kenyan nationalism is done through literature rather than pure history introduces an important element of literature competing with, and sometimes complementing these other discourses and forms of knowledge to "write" Kenya's nationalist historiography. Kenya's nationalist history has more often than not been characterised by the conflation with the Mau Mau historiography, and the privileging of the elite male voices. This situation has tended to ignore nationalism exhibited by minority groups, thus turning this history into the history of "them" and the sidelining of "us" or "other". On the one hand, I acknowledge that the texts under study are still embedded in orthodox formulations of nationalism, which present nationalism as the history of

grandfather takes only the first page of the text by the Makers of Kenya's History. And in contrast, in the *Sasa Sema* texts, the same information takes over ten pages – made bigger by the styles utilised and a couple of illustrations. These varied styles allow children to live through episodes, thus making history more fun to read.

leaders who make sacrifices on behalf of others in the nation. But on the other hand, the texts also register other "histories" of nationalism from minority groups, especially in relation to what historians call primary resistance, exemplified by Elijah Masinde's religious nationalism, and also by giving voice to the repressed female voices. The struggle for independence from British colonialists by women is exemplified by Mekatilili wa Menza, while Mwana Kupona's poetry has for nearly one and half centuries now served as an authoritative source of moral teaching for the youth (Kitula King'ei 2000: viii). Mwana Kupona's writing as we shall see later in this thesis is also read as helping to surface women writers in the African literary field, a field that has often been viewed as a male domain. Involvement of women in the Mau Mau is also partly seen through the biography of Kimathi, where we have the narrative told by Wangu, a female participant in the war. Scant research on women's accomplishments in Mau Mau has been done in the past, a good example being Margaret Wangui Gachini's M.A. thesis titled, "The Role of Women in the Mau Mau" (1986). My argument in this thesis concerning women's activities in the Mau Mau war, which is amplified in Chapter Six, is that the use of a female narrator in Mau Mau war helps the young to understand not only the activities of the Mau Mau freedom fighters, but also the contribution that women made in the revolt. Such a narrative voice also helps revise the way Mau Mau war has been presented in the past, usually through a male point of view.

The *Sasa Sema* books also address the contribution made by minority racial groups like the Asians to Kenya's history, through the biographies of Alibhai Jeevanjee [a businessman] and Mohamed Amin [a photographer]. The Stories of the two appear alongside stories of other prominent figures in Kenya. In the biography of Mohamed Amin, Edwin Nyutho argues for recognition of photojournalists as part of the national heroes. Amin's spirit of determination in his career is also important in shaping the young readers' ambitions.

The process of writing stories of individuals from different communities and races in Kenya, who contributed to the achievement of independence and the building of the nation in different ways projects and acknowledges the diversity of its configuration. This diversity of deeds communicates the fact that the history of decolonisation and nation building was/is not politically monolithic. It also takes the heroic narratives beyond the political touching onto other areas of achievement like business, religion, literature, and photojournalism. The *Sasa Sema* biographies are therefore multifarious in content.

The construction of the hero in the texts under study slightly changes from earlier representations of the heroic narrative in children's literature. Usually the hero in mythical stories is portrayed as one who does extraordinary things and one who has no weaknesses. Maria Nikolajeva (2002) argues that heroes in most fairy tales "know no nuances; they are 100 per cent heroic – they never doubt, never fear, never despair" (30). The hero is therefore a person [or a being] who succeeds where others have failed (Carol Ingall 1997: 80). Ingall's argument is reflected in most children's stories with the heroic character. For example, in Maillu's text, *Zawadi* (1998), the hare saves Mapango, the protagonist, from the threat of being eaten by an ungrateful crocodile where the horse and the cow had failed. Also in *The Girl who Became Chief* by Amos Isoka (1995), Kadogo kills the monster that had troubled and killed many people in her village after all the warriors from the village and the king's palace have failed. She therefore becomes the heroine of the day and she is made the chief. In the *Sasa Sema* biographies, there is a variation in the representation of the hero from an all-perfect, semi-godly person/character, to one that has both weaknesses and strengths; doing well on some occasions, while in others, the character meets obstacles, struggles, makes mistakes or even fails (Georgiou 1969: 418).

Generally, heroes in many children's stories are apparently small figures like the hare as seen earlier,[20] a young man who in most cases is thin, poor, crippled, leprosy infected,[21] or a tortoise.[22] Representations of the hero as a small being could be attributed to the fact that children learn by identification and since they are young and small, they need to be given hope of doing great things like these "small heroes". But apart from many of the heroic children's stories having animal characters that are predominantly small, it is also worth noting that in most writings for children where we have human characters, heroes are mainly men. Although there are traces of female characters that emerge as heroes like in Amos Isoka's text, *The Girl who Became Chief*, heroines have been characteristically few in fictional narratives. Donelson and Nilsen (1980) attribute this trend of men characters dominating the heroic narrative to the patriarchal standpoint that dictated that women stay at home and care for babies, cook and clean the home, whereas men took heroic adventures like hunting and thus they became the undisputable heroes (286). Heroines were therefore rare in many societies. Although it is possible that heroism occurred in the domestic space, women's deeds were seemingly overshadowed by men's activities. This can probably be attributed to patriarchal norms that saw the male as the leader with heroic accomplishments being attributed to this figure.

But these fictional presentations of the heroic are not wholly real because one can rightly say that heroes are not necessarily always small/tiny beings, and they need not be predominantly men, which is why it can be argued that children need to be given a realistic representation of the hero and not that of the perfect idealized hero who does not exist in real life. In the biographies under study, deeds that foreground the image of the hero are presented through predominantly real human characters and not through the traditional

[20] For more examples on the representation of the hare as the victor, see David Maillu's *The Lion and the Hare* (1996), and also *Zawadi* (1998), mentioned above; Ezekiel Alembi's "The Great Harvest" in *The Scratching Egrets* (2000: 8-19).
[21] For example, Maillu's *Mbengo and the Princess* (1989).
[22] For example, Alembi's "Monkey Business" in *The Cry of a Goat and other Stories* (1997: 11-21).

mythic heroes who typically descend from the gods possessing supernatural powers, or fictional animal characters. In addition, both men and women are shown to perform heroic deeds, in contrast to the repeated assumption and presentation of hero figures as men. The stories of these characters are traced from a young age, and their heroic activities appear in the course of their life.

The *Sasa Sema* texts also attempt to supplant collective heroism rooted in communal traditions by emphasizing individual heroism. Epic traditions among many communities in Africa had heroism straddling the line between individual heroism and the collective voice. Oral legendry stories in some societies represented heroes who were viewed as the main sources of inspiration, especially when need arose for people to carry out risky expeditions. Such figures were the guiding spirit for collective heroism where sometimes such figures led community warriors in successful battles against rival communities. However, in the *Sasa Sema* biographies, the authors seek to tease out individual deeds, which places these narratives within the context of modern narratives of individual heroism as compared to collective heroism.

Biographies are read in this study as inspiring examples of reality because children are presented with heroes who are human and not imagined abstract animal heroes. These heroes act as role models for the young who may be baffled by the characters' determination and in turn they may strive to work hard. For as Lonsdale and Odhiambo have queried, how can the plural new shoots have the confidence to grow without multiple past roots? (2003: 5). The shift from animal fables to human personages in the Lion series is important because somehow realism comes into the narratives rendering them more convincing. The use of human personages also demonstrates that literature is not exclusively about morality, which is the most predominant theme in animal tales. It is also important to give children stories in which they witness occurrences in history, which in turn help to shape their [children's] understanding of the world that surrounds them. Again, while sometimes

animal characters tended to be used in order to infantilise narratives and their ideals to bring them to the level of children, the *Sasa Sema* texts show that children's stories are not exclusively about being young.

The prescribed ages for the Lion books are at least from 9-15 years, mainly primary school children. However, this does not mean that these books cannot be read and probably appreciated by older children or even adults. The audience for these books therefore cuts across all ages because the authors themselves suggest that the books will aid the Kenyan youth and adults as well, to know the history of Kenya as closely linked to its heroes not only in the political fields but also in other areas (Clara Momanyi 2001: vii; Kitula King'ei 2000: x; Zarina Patel 2002: x; Elizabeth Mugi-Ndua 2000: vii). The books are therefore meant to be informative for all ages. In any case, a good children's book should appeal to both adults and children.

The fact that the *Sasa Sema* biographies deal with historical material that may supposedly not be of interest to children has certainly influenced their format. For example, as already mentioned, the storyline in the texts is supported by powerful illustrations, which are important in reinforcing the message in the narrative. These illustrations are carriers of meaning and they make the stories accessible to the readers. Although pictures in illustrated books may not necessarily be central in the interpretation of the material in a book, illustrations are essential to children because children are subject to the impressions illustrations create. They also make the book more appealing and may as a result engage the readers better.

We can certainly argue that the authors of the *Sasa Sema* texts had an imagined children's audience in their minds because of the intriguing paratextual features that beckon the child into the book. Paratextual features refer to the extra elements that are connected to the book but not necessarily integral to the book. Covers and blurbs form part of these elements, in

addition to prefaces, titles, author's name and notes among other features. Such features offer prospective readers the possibility of either choosing to read the book or turning it away. These features advertise the books and they frame children's interest right from the cover of the book. For example, all the Lion texts have colourful pictures on the covers. Such pictures can be viewed as both decorative, as well as, adding to the realism of the story. I believe both the cover graphics and the illustrations inside the texts help in making the story more attention-grabbing because, as Zimmer and Zimmer have said, seeing is believing (1978: 7). The totality of the information in the texts is transmitted by these two structures: the written and the illustrated, because visual representations of the written assist readers to understand and make sense of the world, although the two are not mutually exclusive.

It should be noted that illustrations are not a major concern in this thesis. This is because the subject on illustrations in children's books is too wide to be fitted in the current study. However, I have engaged them briefly here, and in some parts of the rest of the chapters because illustrations are undoubtedly important to children's reading, content comprehension and preferences. I suggest that further research is possible on illustrations employed in the *Sasa Sema* texts in relation to what they illustrate.

Another characteristic that make the *Sasa Sema* texts simple for child readers is the manner in which some difficult words, especially technical terms like "colonialism" are explained in the course of narration. This explanation ensures that the readers build vocabulary as they read, and also helps them to read without having to hesitate on difficult words. In addition, explanation of difficult words certainly increases children's interest and ability to retain facts because through the explanation, history is rendered in a simplified manner.

Again, each of the texts has subtitles that serve to introduce new ideas into the story and to provide a clear transition in a person's life, which in turn help the

young readers to grasp the storyline easily. Somehow these subtitles give the summary of the story. By way of example, Mekatili's story can be summarised by the subtitles in the book. The first is called "Kaya Giriama" which describes the Giriama way of life in the *Kayas* (villages), and Mekatilili's life as a young girl. The second subtitle "A Coastal Sea Port" is about the trade between the Giriama people and the Arabs at the coast. Mekatilili was involved in this trade because she used to accompany her father to the coast to sell salt. The other subtitles are "A New Home", "The First Resistance", "Across Kenya on Foot" and "The Giriama Uprising", which tell of Mekatilili's marriage, divorce, her involvement in the fight against British rule, her detention and escape from prison, and how she led the Giriama uprising against the British, in that order.

Having given an overview of the texts under study, I now briefly examine their distribution.

A Question on Readership

Mabel Segum (1992) has argued that it is one thing to produce children's books, but it is quite another, to see that the books reach the children. In the course of my research I visited a few bookshops in Nairobi to find out how well the Lion books are distributed and how often readers purchase them. In Savani's Book Centre in Latema Road in Nairobi, the books were displayed on the shelves alongside other children's books. The bookshop attendant informed me that the *Sasa Sema* publisher delivers the books to the bookshop. When asked how fast these books sold, he (the attendant) said that the books sold, but mostly at the beginning of the year.

At the Textbook Centre Bookshop in Kijabe Street in Nairobi, the supervisor of the children's section in the bookshop also said that the Lion books were mostly on demand at the beginning of the year. She however pointed out that books by Phoenix Publishers sold faster than those by *Sasa Sema* mainly

because the *Sasa Sema* texts were a bit more expensive. While the cheapest *Sasa Sema* text costs Kshs 180 [2.48686 USD], some books by Phoenix Publishers are as cheap as Kshs 60 [0.828953 USD].

An interview with Lila Luce, *Sasa Sema*'s managing director, revealed that she was trying to get the books to many parts of the country. She however pointed out that the texts were yet to get properly appreciated because "when some people see titles like *Jomo Kenyatta: Father of Harambee*, they think it is history and they don't want to read history".[23] But it is only through reading the texts that children can discover that the styles used are fairly interesting as compared to pure history books. According to Lila Luce, the texts were gradually making an impact because of their style of being in between literature and [hi]story books. She asserted that the biographies of Mekatilili wa Menza, Elijah Masinde, Jomo Kenyatta, Mohamed Amin and Mwana Kupona were already recommended for use in schools by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE). [24]

Although the *Sasa Sema* texts are new in the market, it is possible they will gradually be available for children all over Kenya because there are attempts to do so, demonstrated by the sales at the bookshops, and by the efforts being made by the publisher and the KIE.

Significance and Justification for the Study

I start this section by indicating the significance of biographies written on a country's heroes and historical figures. Karin Barber (1989) writes about history and narrative and informs us that what texts say is inseparable from history – in the sense of the past because to begin with, "*texts are produced in specific historical circumstances* the imprint of which they bear upon them", and

[23] Interview with Lila Luce in July 2004, Nairobi Kenya.

[24] I will not go into details of how the techniques to get books to the consumer can be improved; neither will I examine how the readers perceive these books because to me this requires another research which cannot be integrated in the current one.

secondly, "some indeed many texts are about the past in relation to the present, a relation which may be presented in a narrative or non-narrative form" (2) [emphasis added]. I find Barber's assertion that texts are produced in specific historical circumstances important because the publisher of the books under study claims that one of the factors that influenced the start of the series of biographies for children was historical. There was significant absence of historical material for young people in Kenya demonstrated by the fact that there were no literary books for children in Kenya about its famous people or heroes. Even those that were available were written by Europeans – for example Murray-Brown's biography on Jomo Kenyatta. There were also other biographies in Kenya that were written by Europeans about Europeans. Kenyan children therefore read books that were alien to them. They read stories that they may not have identified with because the personalities were far removed from familiar environments. Thus, there was need to fill this void that existed in children's literature, by having books written by Africans about other Africans whom children in Kenya would easily identify with. These biographies are important because through them children witness history through the eyes of an actual participant whose personality and talent contributed towards influencing and changing the world and time in which they lived (Georgiou 1969: 417). By reading biographies a child experiences a more personal link with the rich heritage of the past and comes to know the kind of people who have shaped his/her nation and the world.

As we have already seen, among the many children's books published in Kenya, very few divert from the familiar trajectory of having young characters and animal characters. If these stories move away from this trajectory, many end up as lessons concerning the kind of behaviour to emulate in the society. Literary biographies for children are therefore a novelty in Kenyan literary historiography. By writing biographies of prominent figures in Kenya the authors are making an intervention by creating new models for children's literature. These books make a statement

that literature written for children can go beyond basic moralising to speak to issues relating to history, nationalism and politics. My supposition is that while remaining deeply concerned with issues of moral behaviour, the texts under study do not do this through abstract ethical concepts but through identifiable personalities who have made contributions to the country's history. These texts therefore demonstrate that the story of the nation cannot be enacted outside the heroic struggles of the Kenyan peoples. Studying these books ultimately opens new avenues of research on Kenya's children's literature, and also adds onto studies on heroism in children's literature.

Although biographies meant for a children's audience have been published in other parts of the world in the past,[25] there is evidence that there has not been much critical discussion on literary biographies. In Kenya for example, none of the research that I have come across on children's literature focuses on literary biographies. Again, although biographies have been written in the past, few utilise literary modes and tropes like the ones used in the series under study. Studying these texts therefore makes an intervention both in children's literature as well as in the larger discipline of literature.

The *Sasa Sema* project is also significant because many writers of children's literature in Kenya, and in East Africa in general, write mostly about

[25] For example, publication of biographies outside Africa include those published in USA like *The Wright Brothers: Pioneers of American Aviation*, by Quentin Reynolds, published in New York in 1955; *Children of History: Charles Darwin*, by Brenda Clarke, published in Avon in 1988; *Great Scientist: Charles Darwin*, by Das Nandita, published in New Delhi in 1993, to mention only a few. As the titles of these biographies suggest, the writers are interested in amassing historical figures and scientists for young readers. Generally the biographies for children in the USA cover inventors like the Wright Brothers, Presidents of the United States, World leaders, artists, athletes, educators, explorers and women who have made a difference (http://www.gardenofpraise.com/leaders.htm). Mabel Segum says a few biographies have also been published for children in West Africa "by Longman, University Press and Onibonoje in their series *Makers of African History*, *Makers of Nigeria* and *African Junior Literature*" (1992: 34). The biography of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther appears in one of these publications. In South Africa we have biographies for children in the *Learning African History Series* started in 2003, with Chris Van Wyk as the author, and published by Awareness Publishers. The series covers mostly biographies of people who contributed in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, like Chris Hani, Oliver Tambo, Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela, to mention but a few.

childhood stories rather than historical figures. For example, Barbara Kimenye, a well-known author of children's books from Uganda writes books that are mostly about girls' and boys' adventure,[26] while children's fiction by Asenath Odaga, from Kenya, focuses on children's daily activities at home and at school, as already mentioned. The *Sasa Sema* biographies therefore give variety in terms of the setting evident in many Kenya's children's books because in many of the texts under scrutiny the setting shifts from around the home (and school) to outside circles like politics, religion, and real life adventure outside the home and outside Kenya's boundaries, like we will see with Mohamed Amin in Chapter Five.

Children's literature in Kenya and elsewhere has also been seen as aimed at teaching gender roles, and these roles are often presented in a stereotypical manner. More often than not, girls are portrayed [in children's literature] as meek beings that are providers of food and are meant to be industrious and caring in order to grow up to be good wives and mothers. I do not totally refute the importance of these representations but my premise is that this trajectory of children's fiction should change or at least be modified. This modification can help to give girls other role models rather than presenting them with characters whose roles are limited to housewifery. Some of the books studied in this thesis privilege voices of women by recasting cultural artefact into the public sphere through Mwana Kupona and re-constructing women political heroes through Mekatilili. The two women characters help to show that women have accomplished other activities over and above their approved role of a wife and mother. Mwana Kupona's biography represents struggle by a subaltern woman trying to stabilise herself in a male dominated patriarchal and literary tradition. She uses her space in the home by performing her motherhood roles, and at the same time, she exploits her literary skills. In the poem that she writes, she advises her daughter on how to survive in a male dominated society. Through the two women's biographies

[26] http://web.uflib.ufl.edu.cm.africana/kimenye.htm

in the series under study, there is an attempt to revise gender stereotypes in children's literature, which is a field that has not been explored in Kenya.

Thus my study contributes and/or adds to the criticisms of children literature in Kenya because of the shifts it addresses. In fact, very little research has been done on children's literature in Kenya, as the analysis below will show.

Children's Literary Criticism in Kenya.

Criticism on Kenyan children's literature is scarce compared to what has been done on adult fiction. Asenath Odaga's (1974) published dissertation on *Youth and Children's Literature in Kenya* is an important pioneer work on the condition of children's literature in Kenya. Odaga investigates how valuable the literature that was available for both the youth and children of Kenya in the late 1960s and early 1970s was for the targeted audience. She distinguishes four kinds of literature that was available for the youth and children during this period: First, there was the pre-colonial unwritten oral African literature for children, which was meant to teach lessons concerning children's behaviour, to warn and also to entertain. Second, there was the European children's literature written purely by European writers for children in Europe and America but which was read in Kenya. Third, she identifies colonial children's literature written by settlers in Kenya, which still had western-based characters, in this case alien to Kenyan children. And lastly, Odaga identifies the post independence literature that she calls the "emergent literature of the 1970s" by black Kenyan writers who aimed towards projecting an unbiased African image while at the same time revealing both the negative and positive developments in the society. This literature, she argues, depicts both urban and rural experiences of Kenyans. She asserts that this writing attempts to give children a clear scope about their world depicting modes of behaviour familiar to their communities that form their society (58). Odaga also notes that some of the writers who produced work for children used oral literature and the indigenous storytelling techniques,

and that they used the traditional experience as a background to their writing (64).

Although Odaga indeed gives children's literature a commendable analysis, her work is strictly on how appropriate or inappropriate the texts or the stories she analyses are for children. As such much of the literature she explores falls under the binary assessment of "good against the bad", usually with little critical evaluation. There is need to go beyond this binary assessment of children's literature and look at the variety of aspects that children's literature is concerned with, a gap I assert is addressed by the heroic stories under study. These stories expose children to real human heroes who help to raise ambition and inculcate into the lives of the young useful values like industry, determination and selflessness which the heroes portray. I argue after Joan Glazer that writing about lives is an appropriate material for children because the lives of these people bridge what the children already know and understand with what they need – and even want – to learn (1997: 452).

In her dissertation on "The Influence of Literature on Young Children's Concept" Barbara Githiora (1979) evaluates the various kinds of literature for children in Kenya, which range from oral narratives to written material. Githiora analyses the influence of literature on the young child's formation, and her study is important as it considers the socio-economic advantages enjoyed or suffered by children. She records stories, songs, riddles and proverbs enjoyed in different economic brackets in Kenya thus demonstrating that like written literature, oral literature too can show economic disparities among children.

Helen Mwanzi's thesis, "An analysis of Children's Prose Fiction" (1982) looks at imagery in Kenya's children's literature. Mwanzi examines Eurocentric literature used by children in Kenya, for example *Snow White and the Seven*

Dwarfs by Disaney, colonialist children's literature like Rider Harggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, and literature written by Kenyan writers, for instance, Wegesa's *Captured by Raiders*, just to mention a few samples. She shows that images used in children's literature persuade children to see issues from the author's point of view. Such a view, she contends, can have both negative and positive influence in the young minds. Mwanzi shows that Eurocentric literature is coloured with images that explore class and racial matters. For example, she asserts that in a tale like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by Disney, such a distinction is made clear through the portrayal of the black dwarfs who have to do the dirty job of mining, as contrasted with the white Prince who has servants to work for him, including the task of carrying the dead Snow White's body. I agree with Mwanzi's argument that poor children will tend to identify with blacks in Disney's text, who are also poor, while the rich children, who most likely have servants in their homes will identify with Snow White and the Prince, since children learn by identification (1982: 74-75). Mwanzi also demonstrates that the images used in colonialist literature portray the personality and experience of the colonized as negative, which is always contrasted with the colonizer's positive attributes (1982: v). This literature, Mwanzi argues further, aims at speeding the coloniser's values while assuming the inexistence of any culture or literature among the colonized (108-109).

In examining children's literature by Kenyan authors, Mwanzi sees the African writer as having the duty to repudiate the images presented by colonialist literature (168). In her analysis of texts written by Kenyan writers, Mwanzi preoccupies herself with showing the kind of attributes children are supposed to emulate. It is true, as she observes that the study of images in children's literature help in understanding the influence these images may have on children, but it is not enough to confine children's literary criticism to the portrayal of the good deeds versus the evil. Images in literature uncover other aspects like bravery, courage and determination, which I occasionally

refer to in this thesis. Examples can be seen in Kaggia and Kenyatta's biographies where the authors employ images that show how these characters brave various kinds of torture during their detention.[27]

Parita Trivedi (1991) also explores the role of imagery in children's written literature in Kenya. She pays attention to figures of speech that form images in children's literature like metaphors, similes, hyperbole and personification. Trivedi explores imagery in four selected texts.[28] She argues that imagery in children's literature plays a dual role: "that of providing pleasure and that of instructing the reader through the creation of mental and concrete images" (3). Trivedi points out that *Adventure in Mombasa* by Juma Bustani is important "as it highlights imagery which convey anti-human tendencies that are condemned in the society" (42). Such an assertion shows how she is bent towards analysing qualities of the good and the bad character in the society. She argues that by highlighting such imagery, the author emphasizes the need for morality in the society. Trivedi further analyses Ngugi's *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*, and superimposes the aspect of good/hero/accepted, exemplified by Njamba Nene against aspects of bad/villain/unaccepted as seen through the actions of teacher Kigorogoru, John Bull and Hangbelly. She touches on the theme of nationalism that is conveyed through mother Wacu (Njamba Nene's mother) and the freedom fighters, but briefly. Trivedi's analysis surfaces the fact that the texts present themselves as having the role of teaching what is good and bad in the society. She quotes a pupil interviewed during her research who says, "I enjoyed the story [*A Car named Safari*] because we have been shown how to be good and bad" (67). While such an analysis that Trivedi makes is important because it tells us what kind of books children read and the lessons contained in these books, I argue there is need to take this criticism further – beyond societal morality and virtues.

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[27] For more details on Kaggia and Kenyatta, see Chapter Four of this thesis.

[28] These are: Ngugi wa Thing'o's *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* (1986), Saleem Rana's *Courage to Dream* (1988), Juma Bustani's *Adventure in Mombasa* (1988) and Elijah Kariuki's *Car Named Safari* (1981).

Studies like those done by the critics discussed above show the shortcomings and limitations of criticism of children's literature in Kenya. It seems like imagery is the chief element that has been read in children's literature, and has therefore been analysed time and again. It is because of this past trend that I feel there is need to supplement this criticism by venturing into other areas of children's literary writing.

Theoretical Perspectives

In order to examine the emerging trends in Kenya's children's literature through the *Sasa Sema's* Lion books, this research has adopted a multifarious theoretical perspective simply because of the kind of writing interrogated. For instance, the texts demand that one deals with theories on biographical writing, nationalism and heroism, which are pertinent issues addressed by the biographies. In addition, in dealing with the issue of the way the authors appropriate oral forms in writing some of the biographies, I am bound to deploy theoretical protocols that deal with the interface between orality and the written.

The research has appropriated from theories of biographical and historical writing where necessary. Theorization on biographical writing has taken various shapes with many scholars examining the intersection between literature and history in biographical accounts. Ina Schabert (1990) posits that it is not really facts that establish the value of biographical writing; rather, "it is the representation of those facts" (9). Schabert suggests that authors of biographies expand ideas of what happened into full-blown narratives by means of novelistic devices (35). In the words of Pirandello (1968), facts are like a sock, which will not stand when it is empty.[29] In order that facts may "stand up" therefore, one has to put into biographical writing the reason and feeling that have caused it to exist. An imaginative dimension is in this case

[29] Quoted in Schabert (1990: 10).

needed in combination with facts in order to build up biographies. This imaginative dimension, Schabert argues, is provided by the act of writing, and that a biography's literary resources are manifested through its style, tone and point of view, which seemingly contradict the nature of its pure historiography (1990:10). Biographies are consequently fictional, and according to Schabert, the word fictional indicates that they employ essentially an imaginative approach to the task of re-enacting the reality of life. Schabert's argument is important in my study because a constant analysis has been done to the texts under study in order to discover the styles employed in shaping historical facts into narratives, and how the realities of life that he talks about are presented. For instance, in Chapter Two I look at how some authors utilise oral art forms as devices that aid in structuring the narrative.

Quoting Terry Eagleton (1980), James Kerr (1989) proposes that people cannot divorce history from literature because a novel may deal with real history and it may even be empirically accurate in its details but it remains a fictive treatment of history… an operation on historical data according to the laws of textual production (2). Kerr further argues that like literary writers, a historian's account depends on his emphasis of certain elements and repression of others. Kerr's argument that a writer's account depends on emphasis and repression of certain aspects is important in this study because references are made to other literature on the personalities under study, written by other writers other than those by the *Sasa Sema* Publications, for the purpose of examining emphasis and suppression of aspects in historical recreations.

Edward Said (2001) also supports the supposition that history cannot divorce itself from literature. Said argues that neither history nor literature are inert bodies of experience, nor are they disciplines that exist out there to be mastered by professionals and critics (457). The two terms [history and

literature], Said insists, are mediated by the critical consciousness, the mind of the individual reader and critic, whose work sees history and literature as informing each other. I agree with Said that the missing middle term between history and literature is the agency of criticism and interpretation.

Critical work on the relationship between the oral and the written is useful in my analysis given that among the literary strategies employed in the texts under scrutiny is the element of the oral tradition from disparate Kenyan communities. These texts show that elements of orality are infused in the texts either overtly or covertly. For example, Ezekiel Alembi and David Njeng'ere argue for a place for the traditional storyteller in the contemporary world in the way they fashion Elijah Masinde's and Dedan Kimathi's biographies respectively. In my analysis especially in Chapter Two, I draw on suppositions by scholars in the field of the relationship between the oral and the written traditions.

Many scholars have engaged with the question of orality in African literature. Among these is Eileen Julien (1992) who has shown that in recent years scholars of written literary texts have begun to consider the possible links of these texts with African oral traditions (3). Quoting Harold Scheub, Alioune Tine and Mohamadou Kane, Julien suggests that the term orality is used to refer to several types of phenomena that may sometimes overlap in a text. She asserts that for some people, the oral refers to "written narratives that retell narratives of oral tradition", while for others "the oral nature of African novels refers to the representation of everyday conversation or the inclusion of proverbs, tales, riddles, praises and other oral genres". Yet to others, she argues, "the oral nature of the novel is especially a question of narrative form, the adaptation of principles of oral narrative genres" (26-27). But Julien contends that as readers and critics, we should not aim to isolate orality, to see it as singular, or as inherently "first" or "other" in opposition to writing, and that neither of the medium is "the good guy" or "the bad guy" (24). The

two, she asserts, are modes of language and are ours when we have the means to produce them. Therefore, when critics examine the manifestations of the oral in the written it should be in an effort to appreciate literature as a social and aesthetic act. Julien thus argues that orality and writing are not two mutually exclusive realities but the two live together in a continuous interaction. This argument is important for this study because in this thesis I examine how orality interacts with the written form, not only to create a narrative structure, but also how this interaction helps to summon literatures from different communities, thus making them accessible to the young readers.

Craig Mackenzie's (1993) ideas on the s*kaz* narrative technique – a manifestation of orality in the short story narrative – are also useful in this study. Mackenzie posits that the introduction of fictional narrator into the written story form constitutes an attempt to simulate the spoken word on the written page. This deployment of an oral narrator within the written literature is what is called *skaz*. This narrative technique, Mackenzie shows, is associated with the Russian formalist Boris Eichenbaun who uses the term *skaz* (Russian for speech) to describe literature, which has "an orientation towards the oral form of narration (3). Banfield (1992) says a tale in s*kaz* cannot accurately be labelled "oral". Rather, it should be considered a written, literary imitation of discourse (Mackenzie, 1993: 3). *Skaz* according to Banfield is a kind of first person narrative, which takes the form of discourse and is distinct from classic first person narrative, where the narrator addresses the story to no one. In s*kaz*, Banfield maintains, "the first person addresses a second and the story is told formally as a communication" (quoted in Mackenzie 1993: 3). Bakhtin's definition of the s*kaz* narrative form [quoted in Mackenzie 1993] is more illuminating particularly because of the distinction that he makes. Bahktin distinguishes between simple *skaz* and parodistic s*kaz*. Simple s*kaz* has an orientation towards an oral speech but there is no attempt that is made to utilize another person's individual manner of speech. Instead,

the narrative is monologue in nature and therefore expresses the intention of the author directly (Bakhtin 1984: 191).[30] And in parodistic s*kaz,* Bahktin contends, there is an orientation towards another person's speech. Parodistic *skaz* introduces a storyteller figure because of individual attributes, attitudes and intonations that he brings to the story, which are distinct from the author's own. However the author's intention is refracted through the storyteller's art of narration (1984: 192). These two distinctions of the s*kaz* narrative form are crucial to analysis done in Chapter Two of this thesis where I look at the role of the storyteller and argue that s/he is represented in the texts as a repository of community's knowledge. I assert in this chapter that the storyteller guides the readers into understanding the story of the person whom s/he narrates as linked to that of the community from which he hails, which is seen through the cultural practices and folklores that are evoked in the texts.

Ato Quayson's (1997) suppositions on orality are also useful for this study. Quayson argues that orality is a cultural code rather than mere technological concept because the means by which people remember are ultimately tied to important cultural forms of coding. Quayson's supposition that every work of art has a cultural dimension, which discursively interacts with other aspects of the literary text to locate it in a particular field of relevance instead of another, is important specifically in Chapter Two where I argue that manifestation of orality in the texts under discussion places these texts in specific cultural backgrounds. Other scholars on orality and the written text are referred to in this study where their arguments shed light on the discussion.

One central idea that is evident in the biographies under study is their concern with heroism. A theoretical model on heroism therefore informs this study which helps us to understand the type of heroism the texts propose.

[30] In Mackenzie (1993: 4)

Joseph Campbell (1968) identifies the standard course of the mythological adventure of the hero as a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return (30). In this journey that the hero takes, he/she encounters obstacles that he has to overcome before he returns to the safety of the home. Generally, this study appropriates diverse suppositions on heroism across the chapters. But it is worth noting that the conventional understanding of heroism has been characterised by stories that feature brave men overcoming dangers, fighting dragons and saving people from risky situations. Sometimes heroism is mythologized and this often results in hero worship, with heroes occupying a zone close to, or similar to that occupied by gods. The classical idea of heroes is of rare persons, close to demigods who do extraordinary deeds and may have incomparable force on societies. In this sense the hero becomes an idealized mythical construct through which the society embodies its values, transmits them to the young, and celebrates what it wishes to believe about itself. In contrast, some of the heroes in the biographies become heroes not because of magnificent deeds, but rather through their ordinary customary activities. For example, Mwana Kupona is remembered not for any deeds of extreme valour but because of her respect for her traditions, which she passes over to her daughter, and the younger generation through the poetry she writes.

Margery Hourihan (1997) argues that in western culture there is a story that has been told over and over again which has tended to focus on the hero figure as a man and not a woman. This story, she shows, has the belief that "white European men are the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skilful, rational and dedicated" (1). European men are therefore conquerors of the world who seek to civilize other inferior races, a representation that clearly draws the distinction between "them and us". This distinction seeks to present the hero as man, and not any other man but men from the West, that are "naturally" superior to other men of the world. Stories

with such motifs celebrate the conquest [by these men] of nature as well as "savages" (6). Hourihan argues that

> [t]he hero is constantly confronted by enemies which he must overcome, so he is above all things a man of action. He is good at fighting, and he uses his club, or a sword or gun to telling effect. His history is celebrated by people he saves … (3).

This representation of the hero reinforces the idea of true manhood as prowess, courage, aggression, determination and sexual dominance. Hourihan shows that sexual dominance is often conflated with political dominance and therefore men always appear in specific places (3). As a result, women are rare in heroic stories and if they appear, it is only in relation to the hero, and are only part of the way manhood is defined. Women who attempt to transcend this ascribed position are seen as temptresses, witches and vampires who must be destroyed or controlled (Pearson and Pope 1981: 4; Hourihan 1997: 3). Women are consequently the "Other", and cannot share the role of the master for it is his destiny to be master – over all others. This conception of heroism, Miriam Polster (1992) argues, has led men and women, both in the West and elsewhere in the world, to inherit a misleading and intimidating picture of what real "heroes" are like (xii); with heroism being considered as a masculine characteristic and one to which only certain men could acquire. Women's quiet and courageous acts simply go unnoticed, or are submerged in a subsiding world of attachment and service to men. Pearson and Katherine Pope (1981) have attempted to question the prevailing bias that has given the impression that in literature heroism is for men. The two posit that "the first task of the female hero is to slay dragons (negative myths about women which are internalised through socialization that are a result of patriarchal myths and institutions) that oppress women" (viii), and that "for women to become heroes they must refuse to see themselves as the guilty or inadequate other" (17). Using suppositions like the ones above as a

backdrop, this study examines how some of the biographies under scrutiny attempt to give room, and argue for a place for the female hero in the heroic model.

I buy into Hourihan's suggestion that the story of the hero must be deconstructed. We need different hero stories that do not impose the culture of mastery upon the reader (203). In this thesis, I suggest that this revision of the hero story should also encompass the agreement that one does not have to be extra-ordinary to be heroic. This revision is evidently endorsed in the texts discussed in this thesis because the series shows that national heroes are not necessarily a homogenous class and sex. The main proposition is heroism goes with what one does with his/her life and for the society in which he/she lives, and this [what he does] does not necessarily or exclusively encompass hazardous adventures or fighting dragons. In other words, the hero does not have to take a journey into the wilderness where he encounters dangers before he returns to the safety of the home. I agree that some of the biographies follow this trend but such a trend is not the exclusive heroic inclination.

In summary, the heroic model adopted in this thesis is one that acknowledges the following: firstly, both men and women can perform heroic deeds; secondly, one does not necessarily have to be involved in dangerous encounters to be heroic; thirdly, heroes are not flawless; and lastly, heroism may occur in any type of environment. I am also thinking of modern heroes who are in no way romantic or bourgeois heroes, but ordinary heroes whose heroism may not reach the stature of gods (Robert Segal, 2000: 9). Segal argues that in modern times the traditional notion of heroism that was seen as courage and unfailing success has been replaced by the idea of heroism as persistence. I do not contest that heroes are exemplars of moral and physical action, but I prefer to use the word persistence, as it is important in the study

of the hero because heroic deeds are only visible through a character's persistence even when times are hard.

Tied to the idea of heroism is the notion of nationalism. In my view, a country's nationalists form part of national heroes because their deeds contribute to the building of the nation in various ways. As such, discourses on Kenyan nationalism are engaged with in this thesis because the project under study makes a case for nationalism to be viewed as success or contribution in multiplicity of ways. Although I borrow ideas from other theorists on Nationalism in Kenya like B. A Ogot (2003), Wunyabari Maloba (1993), among others, the study benefits especially from the suppositions of Atieno Odhiambo (2003) who theorizes nationalism in Kenya. Odhiambo posits that the issue of nationalism in Kenya is important because over the last forty years the question of who is a Kenyan nationalist or not has been an important one. He adds that in the Kenyan context, "a nationalist has been one who fought for freedom, *Uhuru*. And that last phrase is the beginning of our problems, for the claimants to that badge of honour have not been few" (38). Odhiambo identifies various movements and categories of people that have claimed association with the fight for independence, which he calls "The Seven Theses on Nationalism in Kenya". These theses are important in analysing the biographies under study because each of the personalities falls under one or more of the theses that Odhiambo identifies, which are in turn read as having a link with Kenya's historiography.

In Thesis One Odhiambo shows us that according to the Kenya African National Union (KANU) manifesto of 1963 and KANU leadership of the period 1960-63, those who fought for *Uhuru* were constitutionalists who had formed the successive parties of Kenya African Union (KAU) and Kenya African National Union (KANU). Odhiambo adds that one was better fighter and greater nationalist if one had been detained under the emergency laws of

1952-60 (38). This supposition is represented by narratives of characters like Kenyatta and Kaggia discussed in Chapter Four. In Thesis Two Odhiambo argues that according to Mau Mau tradition the freedom fighters were those who went to the forest led by Dedan Kimathi and other Mau Mau leaders (38-39). Such an assertion is supported by historians like Maina wa Kinyatti (1977) who sees Mau Mau war as the apex of nationalism. On the one hand, Mau Mau history has been at the centre of Kenya's historiography with some people viewing it as one of the major faculties through which independence was won, while on the other hand, it has been viewed as a tribal uprising that did not encompass nationwide goals. These divided images have brought mixed feelings concerning the true nature of the Mau Mau movement. I deal with this narrative of the Mau Mau in Chapter Six. In Thesis Three Odhiambo posits that according to the amalgamated tradition of Kenya African National Union (KANU) and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), which runs from 1967 to the present, everybody fought for *Uhuru* and each person is eligible to the fruits of *Uhuru*. This all-encompassing notion of nationalism is certainly adopted by the *Sasa Sema* project, and it is preferred in this study, because the combination of narratives being archived in this project argue for nationalism to be viewed from an angle that acknowledges one's effort to succeed in any field of performance, suggesting that each person's contribution is unique and important to the nation. Therefore characters from a minority background, like Jeevanjee discussed in chapter five, are read as nationalists because they certainly contributed to building Kenya in their own unique ways. Such an approach to nationalism seeks to refute the association of Kenyan nationalism utterly with the political elite and the Mau Mau.

In Thesis Four, Odhiambo argues further that there are those who feel that the Kikuyus fought hardest for *Uhuru*, sometimes joined by their Embu and Meru cousins, while for others the elite [those who were in distinguished schools like Alliance Boys, Mangu and others] were fighting for *Uhuru* in the process of learning (Thesis Five). Here one thinks of characters like Mwai Kibaki

discussed in Chapter Four, who attended Makerere University and London School of economics, where his political skills developed gradually. For instance, when Kibaki joins the London School of Economics, the author presents his ambition in liberation politics thus:

> Just as in his days at Makerere, he combined his love for studies with his commitments to politics. He was elected the secretary of the Kenya Students Association and joined the committee of African Organisations. Through these organisations, Kibaki helped the British people understand the atrocities committed by the colonial government against the Kenyan people (2003: 38-39).

Thesis Six intimates that the true nationalists are those who could serve the interests of the *Wanainchi* (citizens) rather than their own capitalist and neo-colonial interests (41). This supposition in Thesis Six is demonstrated by the biographies of Kaggia and Oginga Odinga in Chapter Four, where I discuss how the two attempted to fight for the rights of the masses before and after independence. Thesis Seven is apparently in the hands of creative writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Odhiambo shows that on the one hand, these writers see nationalism as synonymous with the struggle in which all Kenyan nationalities took part, and on the other hand, nationalism as the struggle in which the peasants and workers took part (42). While the Odhiambo's Seven Theses tend to be in opposition to each other, I suggest no nation has been born without having to face questions of who led it to victory or who is to be included or excluded in politics of its formation. Odhiambo's ideas are thus pertinent in analysing nationalism in Kenya.

Bethwell Ogot (2003) certainly amplifies some of the suggestions by Atieno Odhiambo through his analysis of Kenya's historiography. According to Ogot there is a much more complicated nationalist story over and above the Mau Mau story, and the political elite. Ogot shows that there are some people who

are important in Kenya's nationalists' historiography, judged by the fact that they truly took part in Kenya's fight for independence, and are therefore claimants of fruits of independence, but have nevertheless been taken for granted. Such heroes and heroines, Ogot argues, are condemned to what he calls a "second death" (see page 8-9). He therefore argues for the recognition of such people's effort. Ogot identifies people like Elijah Masinde, the founder and prophet of *Dini ya Musambwa*, people from the Asian community like Pio Gama Pinto [though recently recognition], among others, whom he asserts have not been given clear recognition as nationalists. I find Ogot's suggestions important for this study because although we could argue that the kind of nationalist history the *Sasa Sema* books attempt to recuperate is partly rooted in the mascularized nationalists' narratives and the Mau Mau historiography – what we could call history from above – the texts attempt to tell stories of other models of characters identified by Ogot.

Critical works on gender stereotypes in children's literature also inform this study. Critics like Bob Dixon (1977), Susan Lehr (1995; 2001), Shirley Ernst (1995), and others are very informative in this case. Manjari Singh suggests that studies indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms as well.[31] Girls [read women] are usually represented as sweet, naive, conforming and dependent on boys while boys [read men] are shown to be strong, adventurous, problem solvers, independent, capable and in charge of situations (Bob Dixon, 1977; Toshiko Sugino, 1998; Belinda Louie, 2001). In Chapter Three, I examine character portrayal in the two women's biographies included in the Lion series and contend that biographies are important tools in revising gender stereotypes because they give readers a real portrait of what women have done rather than vague and biased representation evident in fictional narratives that use fictional female characters.

[31] http://www.indiana.edu/-eric_rec/ieo/digests/d135.html

I would want to note that the above approaches are not at all conclusive perspectives that inform the analysis done in this study. I have borrowed theoretical formulations from other areas of study like history, sociology, and anthropology, where I feel these would be useful in making particular points clear in my research. Such an appropriation calls for any researcher to acknowledge the benefits accrued from having a wider gaze in his/her research.

Scope and Methodology

In this study I examine the texts that were readily available for this research; that is, those that were in the market (bookshops) up to May 2005. This limit was in consideration of the set time frame for my research. I however suppose that those other books in the series that were/will be published later are still important and can be considered in further research on this project of biographies.

A systematic textual analysis of the primary texts is done in this study for the purpose of uncovering the attributes the authors emphasize about the personalities under study, and other issues raised. This close textual analysis also helps in unearthing the styles and themes recurrent in the texts. Although similar themes and styles invariably cut across many of the texts, I have attempted to examine each writer's predominant strategy in each text and generally referred to those others related to it. A look at characterization in close textual reading is especially important because it is the main aspect of writing that assists the researcher to understand how the biographer intends to figure the subject in literature. The close textual reading also makes it possible for me to examine common aspects or differences in the biographies under study in order to appreciate how individuals' stories contribute to the understanding of Kenya's history.

References are also made to other materials like historical biographies and

autobiographies of the personalities under discussion. For example, I refer to the historical biographies by "Makers of Kenyan History", published by East African Educational Publishers. The autobiographies of Jomo Kenyatta and Bildad Kaggia were also available in University of South Africa (UNISA) library and they were useful for this study.

I also made consultations with Lila Luce, the managing director of the *Sasa Sema* Publications, and some of the authors like Ezekiel Alembi, who provided insightful arguments and suggestions.

My research has also been informed by various types of commentaries and reviews carried in Kenyan local newspapers and magazines either as reviews, commentaries or personal opinions concerning children's writing in Kenya in general, and the *Sasa Sema* biographies in particular. These were readily available to me through Internet search. The internet was generally an important source of information for this study.

As hinted earlier in this chapter (see footnote 24), I did not engage with the readers of the texts under study mainly because my concern was to examine the content of the biographies and how the authors represent this literature. Maria Nikolajeva (1996) posits that many critics have in the past seen the primary subject of research to be not children's literature but children's reading. She suggests that it is important for critics to widen the scope of criticism, by noticing, appreciating and focusing on literary aspects of children's books rather than concentrating mainly on pedagogical aspects of these books. I hope the approach to criticism adopted in this research gives variety to the kind of criticism that has been done elsewhere in children's literature, and specifically in Kenyan children's literary criticism which has often focused on the readers' perception [See for example Helen Mwanzi (1982) and Parita Trivedi (1991) discussed earlier in this chapter]. Again, a reader-response approach calls for another separate research that cannot be

incorporated in the current one.

Outline of the Study

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, which explore the various concerns that surface in the biographies. Chapter Two examines the use of orality in the biographies under study. It examines how orality as a stylistic device is used first, to create literary appreciation and second, as a means of summoning literature from different cultural backgrounds in which the texts are based. The chapter also examines the conjecture that the oral is used to evoke certain identities in the society through writing. These forms of identities are read as an expression of cultural diversity in the Kenyan nation.

Chapter Three examines the biography of Mekatilili wa Menza, written by Elizabeth Mugi-Ndua and that of Mwana Kupona by Kitula King'ei. Mekatilili was a woman political hero in Kenya, while Mwana Kupona was a celebrated poet. The chapter shows how biographies are used to quiz female heroism, and further examines how the two writers attempt to revise the way female characters have often been presented in children's literature as performing a fixed role of a provider and a good mother. Such a revision, I argue, provides girls with model characters that they can identify with, and also help them realize that they are not confined to performing certain jobs. The two women's biographies in the series also help to revise Kenyan nationalists' historiography that has often been linked to politics and has also given the impression that heroism is a male phenomenon.

In Chapter Four, I expound the point on heroism mentioned in Chapter Three further by looking at how biographies are used in children's literature in Kenya as an avenue to show how national figures emerge as heroes and also how these biographies are useful as modes of telling the [hi]story of decolonization to the young. I examine aspects that signify phases in individual's life and then read these aspects as portraying the history of the

whole nation, mainly the transition Kenya underwent in the process of decolonization, and the disillusionment that came with independence. The writers of these texts offer a unique access to history by skilfully blending historic information with literary art thus projecting an exciting means of writing and disseminating Kenya's liberation history to the young generation through stories of individual characters. This in a way opens up new paths through which Kenyan history of political struggle for independence and its complications are reconstructed and understood. The question of the place of memory in the act of writing people's lives is also briefly visited in this chapter.

Chapter Five looks at how the *Sasa Sema* project argues for the recognition of minority groups that have been marginalized in narratives of nation formation, while Chapter Six discuses the biography of Dedan Kimathi a Mau Mau freedom fighter. This chapter examines how Kimathi's story is interwoven with the Mau Mau narrative so that the text becomes like an avenue for teaching children about the colonialists' ills and the difficulties experienced by the Mau Mau liberation fighters. The female narrator used in this text also aids in giving a critical assessment of women's participation in the Mau Mau liberation struggle, because she is positioned as a participant in the war.

In Chapter Seven, I attempt to harmonize the conclusions reached at in the previous chapters concerning the trends in Kenyan children's writings in the twenty first century, and put forward the lessons learnt from the *Sasa Sema* project.