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

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Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to interrogate the emerging trends in contemporary Kenyan children's literature within the confines of a series of biographies by the *Sasa Sema* Publications. The Lion Books series is certainly unique in the history of Kenya's children's writing in many ways, shown by the various issues these books address, including the concern with Kenya's history and nationalism, among other issues, which are novel in Kenya's children's writing. There is a predominant use of real human characters in these biographies which is important because it revises the conventions of writing children's stories, such as the privileging of the animal characters, and human characters that are mostly children. In my study, I do not underplay the importance of stories populated with children as the main characters because young readers easily identify with and learn from them. I have also registered the allegorical significance of the construction of animal characters. Nevertheless, what has emerged from my study suggests that it is also important to present children with realistic stories where they witness deeds of adult characters because life is not limited to childhood and its representation cannot be confined to moral fables alone. By writing stories of prominent figures in Kenya, the authors of the biographies studied in this thesis create new models for children. The setting in these biographies also goes beyond the home and school to other areas like politics, and adventures outside Kenya's boundaries. For example, in the biography of Mohamed Amin the narrative moves across many countries like Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and other parts of the world. Amin's biography also covers issues that are of concern to the world today like famine, war, terrorism and superpower conflict which I have argued demonstrate that contemporary Kenyan children's literature is responding to the changing world

in which the understanding of globalization is crucial to the survival of a developing nation like Kenya. The Lion series therefore argues that children need to be given materials that can help them learn other issues in the world rather than limiting their stories to the environs around the home and the school. These narratives are certainly a welcome alternative to "the universal story of adventure and success of a naturally good child that children's literature has delivered" (Roderick McGillis, 2003: 442).

I have also shown that a common feature of style evident in most of the Lion biographies is how orality is utilized in the written text for specific purposes. First, orality has been read as interacting with the written form in the texts under study not only to create a narrative structure that tells the stories of the personalities under study thus aiding the authors in furthering the themes in the texts, but this interaction has also been seen as helping to summon literature from different communities. Second, I have argued that through borrowing certain aspects of oral traditions, for instance, storytelling, songs, poems and other oral art forms, these narratives evoke certain identities, more specifically cultural/ethnic identities. By evoking these identities the *Sasa Sema* texts demonstrate to children that Kenya is a culturally pluralistic nation. Through this borrowing of oral art forms, the writers reconstruct Kenya's narratives, and situate them within accessible grounds for the young. Biographies on different Kenyan personalities also present children's literature as a means to promote understanding amongst various Kenyan communities because these biographies give children experiences different from their own immediate communities.

As already mentioned, the biographies studied in this thesis are concerned with recuperation of Kenya's history, and I have deduced that these texts argue for this history to be viewed as one made up of contributions by personalities from

various facets of life. Kenya's history, especially liberation history, has in the past been seen as that of the elite nationalists and partly the Mau Mau freedom fighters. But this study has established that contemporary Kenya's children's literature shows that to limit a country's history to a political doctrine is to narrow our understanding of it too minimally. I have asserted that the Lion biographies argue for the need to re-imagine discourses of Kenyan nation formation in order to include narratives that have been overshadowed by the story of the elite and the Mau Mau. This is in line with Benedict Anderson's (1991) argument that "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies but with the large cultural systems … "(19). Acknowledging of people's diversity of contribution in the process of imagining the nation salvages the marginalization of minority groups and disavows Kenya's history of nation formation as a minority history (Simatei 2001: 51) – showing how contemporary Kenya's children's literature strives to disinter knowledges that have been ignored or lost, which is a kind of revisionist history writing (Cloete 2002: 46). The texts studied in this thesis therefore help children to know the stories of both the elite and the minority – the kind of people who have shaped the imagined community that they share (Anderson 1991). The Lion books are also important because outlooks introduced and internalized in childhood hang on into adulthood and, sometimes through old age. Therefore by addressing nationalism through children's books, the texts help to entrench such discourses more effectively in people than when they are met for the first time in adult literature.

One central issue that is manifest in the texts studied in this thesis is their concern with heroism. These texts demonstrate that in trying to retrieve the heroes of Kenya, one should bear in mind that heroism, like nationalism, should be studied from different perspectives. I have argued further that while some of

the biographies portray the archetypal trend of heroic patterns of perseverance, success and exceptional courage, others show that working hard in one's career is a heroic gesture. For example, Mwana Kupona's persistence in writing poetry even when perpetually ill was read as creating in her, a role model that children can identify with. In addition, her work is seen as breaking the invisibility of women writers in African literary field which has been perceived as a male domain. Similarly, I have read Mohammed Amin as an archetype of a hero whose accomplishments in the field of news coverage helps in the recognition of photojournalism as an important career, thus presenting children's literature as an avenue that argues for the recognition of news collectors as part of national heroes and as makers of Kenya's history. By presenting many figures (politicians, journalists, religious leaders, literary artists) as heroes of the nation, the Lion books demonstrate that children's literature is a guide to how a country's past and present should be perceived. I also contend that these biographies argue for a new conception of heroism to be instilled in the young people's minds so that they may find tangible role models and have real-life heroes and heroines who are within their communities and nations – and also who are within their realities of life, rather than having narratives that have exclusively imagined hero figures. While many heroic children's narratives have heroes as small beings[1], the biographies studied here have mature adults who I have again argued help in revising the concept of the hero for children. According to these texts, Kenya is littered with heroes of various types since heroism is seen as taking a variety of forms, with abilities of these heroes being limited to specific fields. Although the characters discussed in this thesis may not and cannot be perceived to have completely catered for diversity and numbers of Kenyan heroes, I opine that the *Sasa Sema* has served to open up a channel for understanding this diversity of hero figures through children's literature. It is my assumption that the project

[1] For example Joanne Brown (1998) states that in historical fiction for young adults the protagonists are usually young adolescents. *ALAN Review,* 26. 1 Fall 1998: 2 in http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall98/brown.html

will go further and write the biographies of other political and non-political figures. For example, writing biographies on Kenyan local musicians and athletes could help in recognizing what is home-grown, and this would save parents, teachers and the public in general from importing role models and heroes from foreign literature.

As I have further attempted to demonstrate, children's biographies are a potential tool for revising gender stereotypes which have characterised many children's books, not only in the Kenyan context but also in an African framework. Such a revisionist agenda places female characters in a competitive ground against male characters, rather than viewing them as subordinate to the male figure. Although there have been attempts to revise the representation of the female character in adult fiction, stereotyped female figures populate many children's books. In such texts, girls are accorded roles of home makers (wives and mothers), and if professional, nurses and elementary school teachers; a presentation that is biased. In the *Sasa Sema* texts, there is an attempt to revise these stereotyped female roles by looking at real deeds that women have accomplished in the world. I have thus argued after Susan Lehr (2001) that in order to understand and appreciate women's place in the society, we must listen to their voices and watch their deeds rather than relying on fictional creations of female characters, which is often stereotyped. Children's biographical writing is therefore important in the exploration of real actions that women have accomplished. Mekatilili wa Menza's participation in politics was for example read as an attempt to record and to some extent revise Kenya's nationalists' historiography, which is mostly linked to men. Such books not only give girls positive role models but they also nurture boys into discovering that their female counterparts are not necessarily weak; and that the woman is also a performer, and not just a helper of the male who is mistakenly viewed as the conqueror of

the world (Pearson and Pope 1981). These biographies which examine women's deeds attempt to break hero myths, and consequently deconstruct the hero (Hourihan 1997). Such deconstruction is visible in this thesis through the biographies of Mekatilili and Dedan Kimathi where the authors utilise the motif of the courageous woman who takes perpetual risks to attain the desired goal. In Kimathis's biography, Njeng'ere deconstructs the representation of the Mau Mau narrative through Wangu, whose actions, as I have shown in Chapter Six, represent ways through which women took part in the Mau Mau war – showing that women were not just observers in the war but active participants. The examination of women's courageous deeds in Mau Mau through biographical writing not only helps in bringing African heroines to the fore, but it also inscribes the female model into Mau Mau historiography. I have also argued that by writing a biography about the Mau Mau war for children, there is a remarkable removal of the Mau Mau narrative from adult fiction to children's books.

The *Sasa Sema* biographies have been further read as equivalent to telling the story of Kenya's colonial experience to children. By addressing concerns like colonialism and the fight for independence, these biographies maintain that issues of freedom and history are also children's issues. These texts therefore bring Kenya's past close to today's Kenyan children through the stories of personalities that lived and experienced the tyranny of colonialism.

A political agenda is certainly visible in the *Sasa Sema* texts – evidenced by inclusion, and at the same time exclusion of certain characters in this process of recuperating Kenya's history for children. For example, whereas the biographies of Jomo Kenyatta [Kenya's first president] and Mwai Kibaki [Kenya's third president], occupy a place in this series of biographies as historic figures, there is a conspicuous omission of Mr. Daniel Arap Moi [Kenya's second president],

from the series. I am not suggesting that he has been completely omitted because the series still continues to archive these narratives, but my concern is based on the focus given to the third president just after he came to power. According to Lila Luce, the managing director of the *Sasa Sema* Publications, there was no preference on which personality writers chose to write about. She alleged that she only called upon writers to write a biography of a Kenyan hero and/or an historic figure. Apparently, according to her, there was nobody who came forward (was willing) to write Mr. Moi's biography up to July 2004.[2] We cannot take this omission lightly because there is a lot to be deciphered from it. It seems there is a political agenda in this omission. Is the omission of Moi from the series a reflection of a public expression that Kenyans had already had enough of Moi's rule long before he bowed out of power? The exclusion of Mr. Moi from the series and the strategic writing of Kibaki's biography immediately after he came to power may safely be done with the assumption that children are not critical. However, I contend that any child old enough to read and understand the *Sasa Sema* texts will question such exclusion that is easily noticeable. Such an omission of Moi from the series can be associated with periods of an interregnum where sections of the nation, writers included, have to think about the course to take. The alleged absence of volunteers to write Moi's biography becomes a question of intellectual opposition to his rule – where we now witness writers trying to move away from the moment of transition because in most cases an interregnum creates anxieties and desires for change, with no favor with the previous or the past. Probably this omission could also be a result of the freshness of the tyranny of Moi's rule in the memory of Kenyans. One cannot really pin point the real cause of Moi's exclusion but it is an omission that this study could not help noticing. Will Moi's biography be written in the near future? Or does not he count as one of Kenya's historical figures?

[2] Interview with Lila Luce in July 2004 at the *Sasa Sema* Publications offices in South B, Nairobi, Kenya.

Evidence abounds in the texts studied in this thesis which shows that although the texts discussed help children in learning Kenya's history, there is a tendency by writers to limit their narratives to certain aspects in the characters' lives. While the imperative to keep the books simple and brief enough for young minds places some constraints on the extent to which the author can delve into complexities (Garson 2003), I suppose readers who come across other texts that contain the excluded details might question the omission. Such readers become like passengers on a sightseeing bus that refuses to stop at certain junctions of attractions that they deem important. Nevertheless, this researcher maintains that the biographies studied in this thesis open up spaces for young readers to understand the characters' lives, and Kenya's history in general, because biographies are not required to tell everything known about a subject from birth to death. Instead they may focus on a few years in their subject's life and may sometimes fictionalise part of the account of those years, through utilising specific narrative strategies.

Overall the *Sasa Sema's* Lion books are indeed an important avenue for teaching history and an archive of historical personalities. These texts have gone a long way in broadening the scope of children's literature in Kenya. The Lion books infuse new energy into children's writing by introducing novel concerns discussed above. However, although I argue that this study on the emerging trends in Kenya's children's literature modifies and enriches the literature and research that has hitherto existed in Kenya, there is a sense in which my study will open up gaps for future research because the analysis done in this thesis may not at all exhaust fields of research in children's literature in Kenya.

Emanating from the current study is the concern with the readers because this thesis has only looked at the content and how the authors portray the literature

in the texts discussed. It would be important to carry out a separate research into the readers' perception and response to these texts.

I have also noted in this thesis that illustrations are important to children's reading, content comprehension and preferences. But the use of illustrations in the *Sasa Sema* texts has only been looked at briefly and only occasionally in this thesis. I therefore suggest that further research is possible on illustrations employed in relation to what they illustrate, not necessarily on the Lion books. This can be done in line with the question of the use of graphic art in children's books, colour symbolism, and their effects on the young reader, which is an under researched field of study in Kenyan children's literature.