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Critical Artistry in Utenzi wa Shufaka*

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 150 years studies on Kiswahili language, literature and culture have engaged the scholarly attention of many researchers (Hauner 1979). In their analyses of Kiswahili literary works, however, most critical studies have, generally, tended to neglect the aspect of artistic design. Instead, the central focus has primarily been on two interlocking aspects of these works: (1) their content, values or thematic messages and (2) their cultural and socio-historical contexts (Dorsey 1988).[1] This widespread tendency to undervalue the importance of artistic design in Kiswahili literary works is not surprising as it was largely promoted by some of the earlier European authorities who popularised the idea that Kiswahili literature is not of literary interest and that social, cultural, and historical commentary by anthologists are more relevant to this literature than literary study (Biersteker and Plane 1989: 451). Commenting on the literary worth of Kiswahili epics, for example, Harries (1970: 37) says:

> The success or failure of such verses did not lie so much in the field of literary excellence as in the fulfilment of a purpose to propagate and expound Islamic teaching and example. Appreciation was in proportion to the religious zeal of the hearers and this was quite considerable.

In this regard it is quite instructive to note for example that the author's original title of *Utenzi wa Shufaka* was actually *Chuo cha Utenzi*, which means *A book of poetry in utenzi metre*, a title which seems to foreground the work's literariness and to veil its theme. This title was changed by Büttner, the anthologist, to *Das Gedicht der Barmherzigkeit*, which means *The poem of Mercifulness* (Knappert 1967: 133), a title which seems to emphasize the epic's theme.

It is encouraging to see, however, that in recent years more and more scholars, like Mlamali (1980), Fiedel and Shariff (1986), Biersteker (1991) and Mbele (1996), to mention but a few, address issues of artistic design in their critical appraisals of Kiswahili literary works. This article is a modest attempt to follow their example by looking at Utenzi wa Shufaka as an object of design; how the poet

[1] Although Dorsey noted this tendency with reference to the criticism of African poetry written in English, the same tendency is even more pronounced in the criticism of Kiswahili works of art.

has used the technical instruments of verbal craftsmanship in his bid to elicit an aesthetic response from his audience.

Utenzi wa Shufaka, unlike other classical works, such as *Inkishafi*, *Utendi wa Mwanakupona*, and *Utendi wa Tambuka*, has not, as far as we are aware, received any significant attention from scholars. Knappert (1967: 133) has described this epic as a rare specimen of Swahili literature, because there is only one known manuscript of it, which is in the Library of the German Oriental Society (Deutsche Morgenlandische Gesellschaft) in Halle . According to him the manuscript was sent there by Dr. Ludwig Krapf with a letter which appeared on page 567 of **Zeitschrift** (1854). It was first published in **Zeitschrift für Afrikanischen Sprachen** (1887) and its transliteration in Roman script was first published in Dr. Carl Gotthilf Büttner's *Anthologie aus der Suaheli-Litteratur* in 1894. In stanzas 291-292 of this epic the lineage of the author has been mentioned but his or her exact identity is not known. Nor is the place and the precise date of its composition. The objective and possessive cases 'him' and 'his' with reference to the author of this epic are therefore used herein in the generic rather than in the masculine sense.

In 1967 Jan Kappert published this epic along with its English translation in the **Swahili** journal. There are several but minor variations between the text published by Büttner and that of Knappert. In Büttner's text, for example, the poet has invoked five Qur'anic references to support his arguments, only two of these references appear in Knappert's text. Compare also for example the sequence of lines in stanza 3 between the two texts:

Büttner's text	Knappert's text
Kisa, uje ukaribu,	Kisa uje ukaribu,
mbele I utakarabu	tamukalo ukutubu,
tamukalo ukutubu;	mbeleya utakarabu,
ukihifadhi makaa.	ukihifadhi makaa.

When I compared the two texts with the original manuscript in Arabic script by Krapf (1887) I found that it was Büttner's arrangement which was correct. It is evident, however, that in terms of meaning, the arrangement followed by Büttner is decidedly better. Knappert deserves commendation for his well-meaning attempt to make this epic accessible to non-Swahili speakers. It is only unfortunate that his translation is marred with a number of mistranslations, some of which are very crucial in understanding this epic. While a detailed study of these mistranslations is important, such a task is beyond the scope of the present article. Unless specifically sated, therefore, our discussion of this epic depends on our understanding of Büttner's text.

In the introductory remarks to his English translation of this epic, Knappert (1967: 133) described it as important on two grounds; because it is old and because it is one of the most remarkable pieces of Swahili literature . Since Knappert did not elaborate, he has denied us the benefit of knowing why he considered this work

remarkable. And in another brief appreciation of this epic, Werner (1920: 29) wrote:

> It is difficult to relate this [epic] seriously in English but strange as it may seem it has certain pathos in the original. The emotions of the parents are dwelt on at great length, and the poem is enormously popular especially among Swahili women.

We suggest that Utenzi wa Shufaka is indeed remarkable in terms of its critical artistry, and it was probably this quality which made this work enormously popular. In our appreciation of this epic we shall begin by giving a brief summary of the story along with the skeleton of its narrative structure.

1. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

A long time ago, in the course of their conversation, two angels of God, Gabriel and Michael were in agreement that human beings who lived in the distant past were extremely kind and considerate towards one another. However, a conflict of opinion arose between them on whether those noble sentiments of compassion and kindness which characterized human beings of the past were still observable in the people who lived on earth at that particular point in history. Gabriel maintained that human beings of that age were also kind and compassionate enough to help their fellow human beings who were ill-circumstanced. This was disputed by Michael who insisted that the people of that era were bereft of all fellow-feeling towards others.[2]

To settle the dispute Gabriel proposed, and Michael agreed, they descend on earth in the form of human beings and put man to the test. They descended in the town of Madina; Gabriel at the mosque in the figure of a man suffering from a painful, strange ailment and Michael at the marketplace in the form of a competent healer. The townsfolk who were at the mosque pitied Gabriel, but since they knew there was no physician in that town, they volunteered to give him all the silver and gold in their possession to enable him to get a cure elsewhere. Gabriel told them that there was a healer at the marketplace and took them to Michael. Michael examined the patient very carefully and then declared that he was capable of curing him, but cautioned them that the price of that cure was very dear. The patient could only be cured by anointing him with the blood of a young man who should be sacrificed for that purpose. And not any young man. The young man must be the seventh son, and the only surviving seventh son born of parents whose earlier six sons had died during their infancy.

[2] It was Michael who disputed the existence of compassion on earth, not Gabriel, as suggested by Alice Werner (1920) in her article.

The people of Madina reaffirmed their willingness to undertake this sacrifice for the sake of the sick man. In the whole town only one young man by the name of Kassim, matched the healer's description; he was the only surviving son of the wealthiest man in that town. They presented the whole case to the father of the child. He agreed to sacrifice his son but requested them to seek the consent of the mother of the child as well. She also agreed but advised them to get the consent of the son, who also agreed. So they presented the son to Michael for the sacrifice. At that point Michael put forth another condition: that the son must be killed by his own father. This was the most painful moment for the father, the son, and all the townspeople who were all in tears as the father killed his only surviving son. Immediately after the killing, Gabriel and Michael vanished into thin air, and the townspeople had no recourse but to make preparations for the burial of the deceased. Back in heaven, the dispute was settled. Michael agreed with Gabriel that there was still exemplary compassion on earth. This time Michael tells Gabriel to seek God's leave to resurrect the dead young man. This permission is granted and both of them go back to the same town in the form of different persons who are hungry and thirsty. Once again the bereaved father tells his wife to prepare food and drinks for them. Gabriel makes a supplication to God to bring back to life all the seven sons and the whole town is overjoyed. When they return to heaven, both Gabriel and Michael prophesy that human beings who shall inhabit the earth in the distant future will be hard-hearted creatures who will show no compassion to their fellow human beings and their sole preoccupation would be the physical and material gratification of their own selves. And the poet concludes by testifying that indeed that prophecy of the angels has already come to pass.

2. The Structure of the Story

A. Introduction (stanzas 1-46)

stanzas 1-14	Conventional formula of asking the scribe to search for a pen, a piece of paper and to write legibly.
stanzas 15-42	Praising God and invoking His blessings upon His Messenger and the Companions of the Prophet.
stanzas 43-45	Conventional formula of ascribing the story to an Arabic source and the need to tell it in Kiswahili.
stanza 46	The title of the epic is mentioned.

Part I - Desis (Involvement)

B. The First Test (stanzas 47-168)

stanzas 47-52	The dispute between Gabriel and Michael
stanzas 53-59	Decision on how to resolve it and they descend upon Madina as a patient and a healer.
stanzas 60-72	Gabriel speaks of his ailment and identifies the healer.
stanzas 73-86	Michael examines the patient and spells out the requirement of a human sacrifice.
stanzas 87-168	They search and identify the young man; they seek and get the consent of the father, mother, and the son; they submit him to Michael.

C. The Second Test (stanzas 169-209)

stanzas 169-173	Michael presents a new condition, the son has to be put to death by the father. The townspeople approach the father.
stanzas 174-194	A moving farewell between father and son amid tears from all the people as the father kills his own son.
stanzas 195-209	The angels disappear to the anguish and perplexion of all the people as they make burial arrangements.

D. The Last Test and Victory (stanzas 210-259)

stanzas 210-214	The dispute is settled. Michael agrees that there is compassion on earth, and says he shall testify about it on the Day of Judgement.
stanzas 215-219	Michael tells Gabriel to seek Allah’s permission to restore the life of the sacrificed son.
stanzas 220-259	Both of them go to Madina in different faces, they ask for food and drinks and they are served by the bereaved family. Gabriel prays for the resurrection of Kassim, and he is restored back to life along with all his six elder brothers.

Part II - Lusis (Resolution)

E. The Verdict and Prophecy of the Angels (stanzas 260-269)

stanzas 260-263 Both Gabriel and Michael bear testimony to the admirable compassion demonstrated by the people of that age.

stanzas 264-269 Both of them concur that in the future, men will lack compassion even between a parent and a child, let alone between two unrelated human beings. They will be shameless, and will prefer sexual promiscuity to marriage.

F. The Prophecy has been fulfilled (stanzas 270-285)

stanzas 270-273 The poet says the prophecy of the angels has come to pass in his society.

stanzas 274-285 The poet admonishes his people to strive to be compassionate human beings who fear God.

3. CONCLUSION (286-295)

The poet says he is not a gifted poet, mentions his lineage and asks for forgiveness.

With a view to evoking an aesthetic response from his audience, and one which would correspond with the pre-set purpose of composing the epic, the poet has pressed into service several artistic devices. To begin with, as we have indicated in our summary above, the epic is structurally divided into two main parts, herein referred to as the desis (involvement) and the lusis (resolution)[3]. In the first part of Utenzi wa Shufaka the scheme of the poet is to enkindle and sustain the emotional and intellectual involvement of the audience. This artistic enterprise is achieved by a careful selection of the details of the story coupled with a skilful pattern of presenting those facts and events. The story begins with dramatic irony in the form of a clearly marked out discrepancy between the knowledge held by the human characters in the story and that of the audience (or in most cases now, the reader). The reader, right from the outset, has been granted access to privileged information which is not accessible to any of the human characters in the story. The poet has enabled the reader to eavesdrop on the conversation of the angels. The reader is

[3] In appropriating these categories which Aristotle used in analyzing tragedies, I have taken my cue from David Dorsey (1988) who defines desis in poetry as `the whole section which engages the reader emotionally and intellectually, describes, narrates, argues, raises an expectation of the poem s inclusive meaning , and lusis as that `section which consummates that engagement by its generalization, specification, reversal, surprise, rumination etc. (p.34). See also Aristotle (1958).

therefore aware of the raging dispute between the two angels and their irreconcilable positions about the moral worth of human beings. While Gabriel is unshakeable in his conviction about the benevolence of man, Michael is inflexible in his certainty about man's callousness. The reader is also aware of the empirical method of resolving this dispute agreed upon by the two angels.

By divulging this information first, the poet has activated the moral and psychological involvement of the reader. As a member of the human race, the reader, naturally, becomes an interested party in this dispute. He would wish members of his race to emerge victorious no matter how difficult the test. It is noteworthy that the poet has specifically identified Gabriel as the proponent of the idea of subjecting man to the test. On the face of it, it might appear to be of little consequence whether the proposal came from Gabriel or Michael. We suggest that the specific identification of Gabriel is not a superfluous detail. It is by design, and has immense psychological value. Gabriel has such a high estimation of man's moral excellence that he boldly puts forward what would appear to be a highly risky proposal of a random sample test. This detail functions to intensify the reader's desire for man s victory in the forthcoming test, at least so as not to let down Gabriel! Probably, as so powerfully dramatized by Oscar Wilde (1995) in his play, The Ideal Husband, it is psychologically more traumatic for a person to betray the trust and confidence of someone who has a very high opinion of him or her than to confirm the views of someone who, after all, regards him or her as contemptible. The emotional engagement of the reader is further heightened by the fact that at this point, the poet has withheld from the reader both the nature of the test and its outcome.

Another important function of this dramatic irony is not only to justify its narrative structure but also to highlight the overall moral concerns of the epic. The reader's prior knowledge about the disagreement of the angels, his awareness that the people who are administering the test are actually angels in human form, his knowledge that the examinees are not aware of these facts and his psychological wish to see human beings pass the test no matter how demanding it might be, have prepared him to approve the otherwise absurd willingness of the people of Madina to sacrifice a healthy young man in order to cure an ailing stranger. Moreover, in consonant with the overriding message of this epic, this rather weird and difficult test the reader wishes them to win, at a crucial moment in the lusis of the epic, is turned against the audience by illustrating so poignantly the extent of man's moral degeneration. Nevertheless, the contrast, sharp as it is, is presented sympathetically as a spur for moral upliftment. As if to say, in the past, human beings like you were so compassionate towards others that they were willing even to lay down their lives, if need be. You are not required to sacrifice your lives. Is it too difficult a test for you to give some financial assistance not to an unknown foreigner, but to the sick and the poor in your community?

After arousing the interest of the reader, the poet maintains and even intensifies it by keeping the reader in perpetual suspense using a carefully devised pattern of revealing and withholding information. The reader, for example, comes to know

about the herculean nature of the test only when Gabriel takes the people to Michael. After the test is spelled out, the reader keeps wondering whether the people will ever pass the test and that thrill is kept up to the end of part one, the desis.

In Utenzi wa Shufaka the critical blending of message and technique is quite impressive. All the details are provided to suit the overall critical plan of the epic. It should always be kept in mind that Utenzi wa Shufaka is an artistic commentary about the moral degeneration which had set in the poet's society. More specifically it is a description of the miserliness and greed for wealth shown by the rich and their apparent indifference to the sufferings of the poor. The poet's central concern is not to condemn, but to reform them. The epic is therefore outstanding in its psychological insight and maturity. Indirectly, for example, the fierce dispute between Gabriel and Michael does function also as a psychologically refined way of inviting the readers, especially the well-to-do, to inspect their consciences.

Quite significantly, in Utenzi wa Shufaka, whenever an appeal for compassion is made, a certain recurring pattern is noticeable in connection with the people's willingness to contribute monetary assistance. When Gabriel appealed for mercy (stanza 64), the response of the people (stanza 67) was to put at his disposal all the silver and gold they possessed. Gabriel declined the offer, for what he needed was not money, but a cure for his disease. When the townspeople approached Michael in his capacity as the physician, they told him (stanza 75) to pity the stranger and assured him (stanzas 76-77) that they would pay him whatever fee he wanted. Again, Michael demanded, not money, but a human sacrifice. When the father of the son who was to be sacrificed was enjoined by the townspeople to show mercy to their foreign guest (stanza 97), even before their request was specified, the father was overjoyed at having the opportunity of helping the needy, and right away pledged to give money, clothes, silver, gold, and servants to serve him(stanzas 98-103). Once again what was needed was not money but his only surviving son. When they approached the wife, she also volunteered (stanza 126) to give him gold and silver, if that was what was needed. And finally the son (stanza 149) gave a similar response.

Apart from the suspense which the reader may experience as a result of the discrepancy in knowledge between the reader and the characters approached, this style of presentation is also meant, as Alexis de Tocqueville (1971) does in *Democracy in America* to discourage excessive love for wealth by impressing upon them that any person endued with understanding would not regard the acquisition and enjoyment of material wealth as the sole or major purpose of human existence. And to reinforce his message to the rich, the poet has carefully chosen the qualities of the young man suitable for the sacrifice. In the whole town there was only one young man who matched Michael's description. And it is obviously by artistic design that the young man to be killed is the only surviving son of the wealthiest man in town. Sacrificing one's own son is an extremely difficult test even to a poor man who has many children. It was therefore much more so to this particular rich man, whose lineage would also come to an end. And yet, he was not only willing to

have him killed, but actually said (stanza 110) were it that he had a thousand sons and all of them were required for the sacrifice, he would have offered them all. The same statement is echoed by the mother of the son (stanza 132). This seems to underline the fact that if one wishes to help others the determining factor is one's attitude of mind and not the amount of wealth at one's disposal.

Michael's new condition requiring the father to kill his own son is significant, both in terms of craftsmanship and message. In terms of art, this seemingly unexpected condition serves to intensify the suspense of the reader engendered by a reasonable fear that the test has now become just too difficult to pass. This condition which is mentioned after the son has been handed over to Michael, serves another purpose. Parental love is inborn in man. Under normal circumstances no parent would agree to sacrifice his or her child. Since in this epic both parents have agreed to sacrifice their only surviving son, this highly unusual episode may create some doubts in the mind of the reader as to whether there was any love lost. To dispel such doubts, the poet has touchingly dramatized the deep anguish experienced by the sobbing father as shown in the scene of his farewell conversation with his son (stanzas 174-194), both of whom are in tears. In terms of message, this highly moving event is probably meant to impress upon the audience that like his love for his offspring, man's love for wealth is also natural and innate. Under normal circumstances men's acquisitive tendencies would prod them to cling to their wealth. This underscores the fact that when a man shares his wealth with the poor it is not certainly because he hates the money but because he realizes the supreme importance of undertaking the financial sacrifice.

Predictably, it is in the second part of this epic (the lusis), that the poet's concerns are crystallised. The artistic merit of this part lies in the deceptively simple way the epic has resolved the dispute of the angels. To perceive its aesthetic brilliance one must bear in mind the pattern it has used in discussing the history of man s moral performance on earth, as seen and foreseen by angels. This pattern is as shown below:

(1) Both Gabriel and Michael agree that in the very distant past human beings were very compassionate towards each other.

(2) After the elapse of so many years, Gabriel was still positive about man's compassion towards others, a view which was strongly contested by Michael.

(3) The results of an empirical test, specifically administered to settle the matter, had shown that human beings were still indeed very merciful towards others.

(4) Both Gabriel and Michael are in full agreement that in the distant future, human beings will have no compassion at all even towards their close relatives let alone towards strangers. They will hate marriage and sexual promiscuity will be rampant.

(5) The poet intervenes by concluding that the prophecy of the two angels has come to pass in his part of the world.

From the above pattern it is tempting to conclude that the epic's philosophical stance is devolutionary because it assumes that man's golden era was in the past; man's moral values do not progress but degenerate with the passage of time. The epic may therefore be seen as suffused with pessimism about the future. Harries (1970) suggests that virtually all classical Kiswahili epics, and Muslims in particular, subscribe to this view of human history. It would appear to us that such a reading is inappropriate, at least as far as Utenzi wa Shufaka is concerned. We suggest that the statements of the angels about the future are not prophetic in the sense of expressing a genuine fear or certitude that as a matter of course in future human beings cannot be morally upright. They are rather reformatory in the sense of inspiring them to improve themselves. In Utenzi wa Shufaka the poet has clearly shown that man's capacity to cultivate and develop those sterling qualities of sacrifice, kindness, generosity and compassion is not only a theoretical possibility but a historical fact. Even the narrator's statement confirming the fulfilment of the angels' prophecy in his society is presented as an ironic hyperbole aimed at encouraging the audience to thoroughly examine themselves and to measure up themselves against the standard presented in the story. And the poet has deliberately chosen a standard which is virtually inimitable to discourage slackness or complacency. At any rate, the overall spirit is not pessimistic. The narrator's cemented certainty about man's depravity recalls Michael's stance in the earlier dispute. It is an elegant way of challenging the members of the audience to prove him wrong by their practical behaviour. And the knowledge that, if Michael, an angel, could be so widely off the mark in his evaluation of man s moral capacity, acts as a source of hope and encouragement.

Commenting on the role of Swahili poetry Shariff (1991: 54) says:

> Swahili poetry is a functional art. The idea of art for art's sake is practically alien to the society. It is a public performance tradition. Even written poems are designed to be performed by being either sung or chanted. Almost all important, life-addressing issues that need to be eloquently articulated are presented to society in poetic form.

We gather therefore from the testimony given by Werner (1920) that Utenzi wa Shufaka was indeed `enormously popular in those public performances. Again commenting on what drove poets to compose their poems, Fiedel and Shariff (1986: 496) say, `Swahili poetry is often impelled by an occasion. Many people in the culture respond to an emotionally moving event by composing a poem. In Utenzi wa Shufaka the immediate occasion that prompted the poet to write this epic is not mentioned, but it is strongly hinted in stanza 288 that at a personal level, the poet underwent an experience which caused him or her deep emotional anguish. It is evident, however, that at a general level, as we have attempted to show, the poet is deeply concerned and is criticising his society, and particularly the rich (i) for

their selfish, grasping greed for wealth as manifested in their deepening indifference to the sufferings of the poor and (ii) for their inordinate preoccupation with illicit sexual indulgencies. The poet's primary interest is not merely to describe but to encourage his audience to change their life-styles.

In his insightful work, *On Authority and Revelation*, Kierkegaard (1955) makes a distinction between a genuine and a false author. The former is like a physician who provides remedies to the people by presenting to the members of his or her audience and age what they need not what they demand, whereas the latter makes use of the sickness of the people of his or her age by gratifying their wishes and demands. In stanza 290 of Utenzi wa Shufaka the poet says his responsibility is to speak up without fear or favour, which he has done. By courageously addressing burning issues of his day, the author of Utenzi wa Shufaka may qualify to be included in Kierkegaard's list of genuine authors.

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