THE ENIGMATIC BLACK BIRD'S POEM AND ITS PERFORMANCE IN WILLIAM MKUFYA'S *ZIRAILI NA ZIRANI*

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This paper applies a post-structuralist literary framework when looking at the philosophical implications of William's Mkufya's novel *Ziraili na Zirani*. The analysis focuses on a free-verse poem performed by a black bird in hell. Moreover, there is a focus on the different genre forms at play, such as free-verse poetry and the novel, and an acknowledgement that an understanding of the text relies upon a consideration of these different genre conventions. Ultimately the paper shows how a reading of the text as it is presented in the novel, as a performance, demonstrates a realisation of the different genre conventions at play, thus taking their significance onto a different plain of analysis. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the application of a post-structuralist framework and the various contributions this theoretical model can make to a reading of the poem, notably an emphasis on the resistance to fixed meaning in favour of instability. This results in an exposition of the relevance of a post-structuralist literary framework to Mkufya's critical reflection upon epistemology as it is portrayed in the black bird's enigmatic performance, and the novel as a whole.

Introduction

This paper applies a post-structuralist literary framework when looking at William's Mkufya's critical commentary on the nature of truth in his novel *Ziraili na Zirani*. The general post-structuralist move towards a critique of stable meaning in favour of an acceptance of fragmentation and contingency is expressed in the novel's reflection on epistemology, exemplified in the free-verse poem I will focus on, performed by a black bird in hell. However, rather than focusing solely on one poem, I hope to demonstrate how a consideration of the different genre forms at play, such as free-verse poetry and the novel, cannot be neglected as the choice of discursive genre exercised significantly impacts the production of meaning. This focus on the different formal constructions is also supplemented by an analysis of how these forms are enacted through performance, and I hope to demonstrate the importance of this element when considering the effectiveness of a text. My attempt to present a genre sensitive analysis will employ the method of looking at texts "through their specific textuality" (Barber 2007: 5). This entails considering the history and specificity of different textual genres in order to gain a better understanding of their characteristic textual conventions, thus hoping to illuminate the different textual layers in the production of meaning, before concluding that a genre sensitive analysis is essential when elucidating meaning in a text.

Context of the novel

Ziraili na Zirani published in 1999 by Hekima Publisher, Dar es Salaam and written by William Mkufya, a Tanzanian author born in Lushoto in Tanga Region in 1953, began writing novels in English before publishing novels in Swahili. Mkufya constructs a fictional reality in his experimental novel *Ziraili na Zirani*, and the action takes place partly in heaven and hell. The protagonist of the novel is called Fikirini Zirani[1] and he rejects Christianity and Islam and embraces a form of materialism including elements of traditional African philosophy and religions (Mkufya 1999: 35). Fikirini dies prematurely in a war and is taken to hell, where he becomes acquainted with the Camp of the Manifesto, which embraces the philosophy of *udhahiri*, which can be translated as "manifestness" (Rettova 2007: 251). The Camp of the Manifesto is an organisation established by materialist thinkers to fight against heaven, and after being subjected to training in this "hardcore communist ideology"[2], the protagonist becomes an instrument in this movement's fight against heaven. His involvement in this struggle causes Zirani to destroy God's throne, which in turn causes the destruction of the world.

Free verse and the novel

During a meeting of the *wanadhahara* (those who support the philosophy of *udhahiri*) a devil appears in the guise of a black bird to mock the group for their dogmatic belief. This mockery takes the form of free verse poetry and is important because it foreshadows the shortcomings of the materialist philosophy behind *udhahiri*. The intention of the black bird to mock and entice his audience is clear in the use of word play, such as the repetition of the word '*kweli*' in the line "*Kweli si kweli, kwelikweli. Kweli hubadilika ukweli*". This was translated by Rettova, who deals extensively with Mkufya's novel *Ziraili na Zirani* in her book *Afrophone Philosophies: Realities and Challenge* (2007) as "the truth is not truth, truly. Truth changes factual being"[3]. Mkufya himself introduces the black bird in the English translation of the novel, entitled *Pilgrims from Hell*, by saying that the bird "talked in quick sentences; riddles joined in metrical patterns and sounding like a parrot" (forthcoming: 125), further demonstrating the black bird's intention to baffle and irritate his audience.

The task of presenting a genre sensitive analysis becomes even more important when attempting to elucidate philosophical arguments, such as Mkufya's commentary on truth, because this necessitates an understanding of the "choice of discursive genres by which philosophy is exercised" (Kresse 2007: 236). Swahili free-verse was originally a response to formal Arabic

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[1] The name is, literally, an imperative in the plural, meaning "think (and) reject/abstain" (Rettova 2007: 224)

[2] *Ibid.* 225.

[3] *Ibid.* 261.

influenced poetry, and this led to a "generation of new aesthetic norms" (Mazrui 2007: 64). The free-verse tradition was influenced by English poetry, and placed greater emphasis on "abstract metaphors"[4] which indicated a "move towards the abstract and multiple ambiguity"[5], thus demonstrating how different stylistic features can significantly impact the production of meaning.

The black bird's free-verse poem appears in the context of a novel, and an analysis of the genre of the novel is also crucial, for example the fact that the text is written for an imagined audience means there is a "distance from reality" which "emancipates the narrative from true or false" (Rettova 2007: 265). In this sense fictional literature can be seen as "experiential philosophy" and a form of "enacted ontological experimentation"[6]. The meaning of the poem can only be considered within the contexts of these two specific genres, and I would argue that there is potentially a third genre which also features in the poem - the oral, proverbial genre.

The oral and the proverbial

In considering individual lines extracted from the black bird's poem, their proverbial potential becomes evident. For example, one such line reads "*Kweli hukejelikejeli, bongo zikaapo kuijadili*" (Mkufya 1999: 110). This is translated by Rettova as "truth mocks brains that persist discussing it" (2007: 261). Proverbs constitute an oral text genre, and are given meaning in their moment of utterance. Therefore, considering the different contexts in which they are enacted is an integral part of the analysis. Finnegan makes this point when she states, in her exposition of oral texts, that performance is "not mere context but of the essence" (1992: 12). One justification for taking this line from Mkufya's novel and suggesting it has the potential to function as a proverb would be the possibility of its application in everyday life as a critical reflection upon the transiency of truth. The immediately preceding line shares this proverbial quality: "*Iwapo kweli yawa kweli, kisha huwa si kweli*"[7], translated by Rettova as "Even when truth is truth, afterwards it is not truth anymore"[8]. By examining the meaning within these lines it is possible to unravel the question of truth in Mkufya's novel. For example, both lines seem to suppose the inherent malleability of truth, as something elusive that still has the potential to be concrete and fixed. This potential for truth to be fixed is demonstrated by the claim that 'truth is truth', even though it's unlikely to remain this way. In considering these proverbs as a critical reflection on the nature of truth, I am implicitly supporting the claim that proverbs contain philosophy, and for this to be the case they must "operate on the level of second-order discourse" according to Wanjohi (1997:

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[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.* 269.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

90). In order to operate on the level of second-order discourse proverbs must contain within them the ability to be reflexive and self-critical, and I would argue that these lines have this quality, evident in their concise illustration of truth as something which is simultaneously available and elusive.

A further argument in favour of considering these lines as individual proverbs would be their aesthetic construction - their use of word play, repetition, and rhyme - which they share with other Swahili proverbs, such as "*Asiyesikia mkuu, huvunjika guu*" (he who doesn't listen to the elders will break his legs) and "*kupotea njia ndiko kujua njia*" (to lose the way is indeed to know the way). In considering the inherent proverbial quality in Mkufya's words, my attempt to create a genre sensitive analysis necessitates a focus on proverbs as an oral text genre, in contrast to the two other genres I have considered so far, free verse poetry and the novel, which lay an emphasis on the written word. Although the performance takes the form of free-verse poetry in a fictional novel, its constitution as an oral text genre means that the element of performance is "of the essence", and the effect and overall meaning of the text cannot be taken out of the context of its original performance, in front of the *wanadhahara* in hell.

Barber advocates the approach to "text as utterance" by proposing a consideration of what a text does in society (1989: 3), and this reference to utterance is a response to the work of Bakhtin who was highly influential in post-structuralist thought. For Bakhtin, the utterance is an expression within a living context of exchange, and thus it is necessary to address the performance as the key moment on which meaning hinges. Roland Barthes emphasised this point when he wrote that a "text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (1977: 148), reinforcing the need to consider the effect produced by a text, such as a proverb, rather than placing importance on its unity in origin. Thus it's clear that a text's performance is "not mere context but of the essence" (Finnegan 1992: 12) and the meaning itself is gleaned from the moment of utterance. Barber describes this as the "intensely fluid and dynamic realisation of the text in performance" (2005: 276). The moment of utterance therefore has a distinctly transitory quality, as each performance is unique and cannot be quoted or re-enacted with precisely the same meaning, demonstrating the general post-structuralist critique of stable meaning. Furthermore, the inherent transitory nature of the moment of utterance can be related to Mkufya's message about the transiency of truth more generally, as he presents truth as something which is unstable but which nevertheless 'is truth' in a particular moment. Therefore, as Mkufya writes in his English translation of the novel, truth has a "relative relevance" depending on the "circumstance" (forthcoming: 126). Here it's clear how the emphasis on the contingency of knowledge which is a defining feature of post-structuralism is reflected in the black bird's words.

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Barthes and the 'death of the author'

A further element of Barthes' post-structuralist interpretation of texts, which has significance for my analysis of the black bird's poem, is his writing on myth. Barthes understanding of myth as a form of communication which operates at the level of second-order discourse strongly relates to my analysis of the proverbial overtones in the black bird's enigmatic poem, as it demonstrates the potential of different speech acts to contain within them the potential to be reflexive, and to reflect meaning which isn't immediately apparent. Barthes describes myths as operating at the level of "second-order discourse" because "that which is a sign in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (1957: 114). Here, Barthes is referring to how signifiers in society, whether they are images, written or oral texts, are made to stand for the value system of a particular culture, and this demonstrates the way that a culture adds meaning to the world around it. Barthes explains that anything can become a myth, and that myths must be understood as a "specific form of communication" which have "already been worked on so as to make them suitable for communication" (ibid). In referring to myths as a "form" of communication, which operates at the level of "second-order discourse" there are strong similarities with the genre of proverbs, as Wanjohi also stresses the necessity of proverbs operating at the level of second-order discourse. Furthermore, Barthes' claim that myths exhibit a "worked on" character relates to the characteristic of proverbs as being critical of their subject matter (Wanjohi 1997: 90), which is evident in the proverbial overtones of the black bird's poem which emphasis a critical reflection upon contingency. Crucially, the "worked on" character of myths in Barthes' exposition implies their circulation within a certain milieu, as opposed to individual production.

This area of Barthes' theory is directly related to another area of post-structuralist thought which has significance in my analysis of the black bird's poem, which is the theory of intertextuality. Intertextuality, originally theorised by Julia Kristeva, proposes an understanding of texts, whereby they are always building upon and calling forth other texts, thereby under-mining their unity outside of this milieu. The intertextual significance in Mkufya's *Ziraili na Zirani* has already been noted by others (Diegner 2005), as he consistently draws upon other writers in the philosophical history of the West, the East and Africa[9]. As Diegner also notes, another crucial contribution of intertextuality has been to undermine the "auctorial intention"[10] and this is the element of intertextuality which has implications for my elucidation of the black bird's proverbial words, as proverbs by their nature resist the limit of an author and instead continue to evolve within the collective ownership of the community in which they are circulated. Due to the fact that texts cannot be considered outside of their production within a wider

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[9] *Ibid.* 29.
[10] *Ibid.* 28.

circulation of signifiers, there is inherent within them a sense of a collective construction of meaning, which underlines their undermining of the authorial intention. This impact of an inter-textual reading relates to Barthes description of the "worked on" character of myths, as I have stated early, as well as explicitly relating to his theory of the 'death of the author', whereby writing is described as "space where our subject slips away" (Barthes 1977: 143). Hence, Barthes statement that a "text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination"[11] which demonstrates that the significance of the authorial intention is diminished in the face of the different meanings attributed to a text by the active participation of different readers, a feature of a post-structuralist literary framework which is epitomised in the proverbial genre.

The endless deferral of meaning

Another example of post-structuralist thought whereby meaning is presented as elusive is Derrida's concept of *différance*. The concept of *différance* is a deliberate play on the word difference - they are pronounced identically, highlighting the fact that its written form is not heard, thus serving to subvert the traditional privileging of speech over writing that Derrida believes exists. *Différance* plays on the fact that the French word *différer* means both "to defer" and "to differ", and with this concept Derrida is propounding the notion that words and signs can never fully summon forth what they mean, but can only be defined through appeal to additional words, from which they differ. Thus, meaning is forever "deferred" or postponed through an endless chain of signifiers. This understanding of meaning as indeterminate and reliant on deferral in the future resonates strongly with the black bird's words which I analysed earlier for their proverbial potential: "*Iwapo kweli yawa kweli, kisha huwa si kweli*" (Mkufya 1992: 12), translated by Rettova as "Even when truth is truth, afterwards it is not truth anymore" (2007: 261).

This semantic openness which is inherent in all texts when applying a post-structuralist literary framework, and which is well illustrated in the case of proverbs in which the authorial intention is completely absent, further reinforces the belief in the malleability of truth as some-thing which is liable to change depending on the circumstance. Interestingly, Barthes continues in his seminal essay to describe writing as a "truly revolutionary" and an anti-theological activity "since to refuse to fix meaning is to refuse God"[12]. This message resounds strongly with *Ziraili na Zirani* as the black bird's poem explicitly mocks the idea of fixed meaning, and the whole novel arguably takes an anti-theological stance as the *wanadhahara* destroy God's throne, which causes the end of the world. However, Rettova reads the novel as "critique of atheism" (2007: 262) because we are made to stop our questioning when faced with the "paradox of faith: the

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[11] *Ibid.* 148.

[12] *Ibid.* 147.

absolute certainty of God's presence, while He also remains unknown"[13]. This paradox of religious faith proposed by Rettova in her reading of *Ziraili na Zirani* arguably reflects the paradox of the black bird's commentary on truth; as simultaneously having the quality of elusiveness and fixity, but which is arguably ultimately endlessly deferred.

Oral text genres and elaboration

According to Barber, a further characteristic which can be attributed to the oral text genre is the requirement of "elaboration" (2005: 272). In this case Barber is referring to oriki, a complex form of praise poetry among the Yoruba, where their allusive and cryptic nature is essential to their exegesis in the present. In other words, the references alluded to in each oriki require reflection in the present, during the performance (the moment of utterance), in order for those present to sufficiently comprehend the meaning being conveyed in each text. The elaboration of a text requires a level of abstraction which seemingly contradicts the immediacy of the text in performance (the moment of utterance). However, Barber does not see these elements as contradictory, instead preferring to view the performative utterance as proceeding "hand in glove" with exegesis and entextualisation (Barber 2005: 276). In this sense Oriki are understood as quotation, as they draw upon references from within their own particular oral genre, but they are also realised in the moment of performance for a specific purpose. This relates to the simultaneous exegesis and utterance evoked in the use of proverbs, because if they are to constitute philosophy according to Wanjohi they must operate on the level of "second-order discourse" (1997: 90), by which their abstraction at the "second-order" level proceeds in unison with the realisation and the purpose of the proverb in performance.

The black bird's poem could also be described as an oral text, which requires elaboration in the present. For example, following its enigmatic performance, Mkufya writes "*alizusha mchanganyiko wa makelele ya ubishani na mijadala*" meaning that "he (the black bird) instigated a mixture of argument and discussion" (1999: 110)[14], suggesting that the *wanadhahara* present during the performance are unable to agree on the meaning of the black bird's poem. Instead, Mkufya writes that "*kila mtu akisimulia kwa jinsi alivyomuelewa*" - meaning that "each person told the way that they had had understood him"[15], and in this reaction to the enigmatic performance Mkufya makes it clear that the complexity of the poem requires elaboration on behalf of the audience. This evidence supports the proverbial quality of the black bird's words, as we have seen that this genre necessitates exegesis and abstraction at the level of "second-order discourse".

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[13] *Ibid.*

[14] My translation.

[15] *Ibid.* My translation.

Free verse and metaphor

Earlier we looked at how the metaphor employed in Swahili free-verse poetry indicated a clear "move towards the abstract and multiple ambiguity" (Mazrui 2007: 67), and therefore the illusive nature of the black bird's poem is arguably typical of Swahili free-verse poetry more generally, as this genre can also be looked at as necessitating elaboration and exegesis in the sense that Barber describes when discussing oriki. Mazrui continues by saying that the "aesthetic appeal" of this use of symbolic imagery in free-verse poetry lies in its potential to be interpreted in "multiple ways"[16], and it is here that Mkufya's choose of discursive genre in elucidating his philosophy becomes evident. The "multiple ambiguity" which constitutes a feature of free-verse poetry directly corresponds to the ambiguity of truth as it is presented to the *wanadhahara* by the black bird: as simultaneously transient but which nevertheless retains the possibility of being fixed, thus making its status at any one given moment ambiguous. The openness to interpretation which Mazrui described as a characteristic of free-verse poetry is also reflected in the instigation of discussion amongst the *wanadhahara* immediately following the enigmatic performance, as I noted above.

Kezilahabi, one of the proponents of Swahili free-verse poetry, reinforces the emphasis placed by free-verse poets on ambiguous metaphors in response to formalised Islamic poetry when he states that the "poetry of our ancestors used to place greater emphasis on metaphor [*mafumbo*] than rhyme or meter" (c.f. ibid). Kezilahabi's translation of the word *mafumbo* as metaphor is significant as *fumbo* (the singular form of *mafumbo*) is translated in the Awde dictionary as "riddle, mystery, metaphor, puzzle" (2000: 53). Similarly, Knappert translates *fumbo* as 'enigma' (1967: 86). Therefore, it is clear that there is a diverse range of words in English signified by the Swahili word "mafumbo" which all correspond to an insistence on ambiguity. Barber states in regards to verbal text genres that they are "set up to be interpreted: as challenge, a puzzle or demand" (Barber 2007: 5). The 'puzzle' referred to by Barber, which is also one of the possible definitions of *fumbo* in Awde's dictionary, supports the idea that oral text genres often require elaboration in order to be 'solved'. This point is further emphasised by Barber as she writes that the "riddle-like, provocative and challenging playfulness of textual obscurity in African genres is foregrounded to the point where it becomes the raison d'être of the piece" (Barber 2007: 231). This foregrounding of "textual obscurity" and "challenging playfulness" are undoubtedly key components of the black bird's poem. As the Swahili word *fumbo* may not be as equally polysemic as its English translation, perhaps the meaning of the word and the poetic practice it expresses may be best understood as not directly corresponding to an established poetic practice in English. Nevertheless there is an explicit move away from fixed meaning in favour of

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[16] *Ibid.*

ambiguity, further demonstrating how the guiding principles of a post-structuralist emphasis on contingency are reflected in the black bird's poem.

In addition to the similarity between oriki and proverbs and their constitution as oral text genres, which necessitate elaboration, they also share the quality of being able to transgress across different genres. As such, their role in an attempted genre sensitive analysis becomes more important. For example, proverbs often feature in other genres, such as poetry, literature and plays. Thus Bertoncini writes in relation to proverbs in East African literature that when they are "introduced to the discourse more smoothly, the aesthetic pleasure increases" (1998: 13). This implies that instead of the proverb explicitly standing alone, the value of their addition is heightened when it remains covert, and is integrated into the text unsuspectingly. This interpretation of the application of proverbs in others genres is supported by my analysis of certain lines from the black bird's poem constituting stand-alone proverbs in their own right, as their integration into the wider discourse is 'smooth'. This ability of the proverb to transgress different genres relates to Barber describing oriki as operating "across numerous genres" (1991: 3). The application of oriki across numerous genres possibly reflects their intrinsic value in Yoruba processes of identity construction, and the retelling of history. Thereby we see in this potential to transgress genres the importance of these oral text genres in the construction of meaning from texts in other genres.

In analysing Kezilahabi's use of allegory, Diegner describes an enigma as an allegory which "remains to a certain extent not understandable" (2002: 48), and which is "characterised by semantic openness that constitutes its great aesthetic potential"[17]. Therefore here we see the similarity between Diegner's explanation of enigma in Kezilahabi's work and Mazrui's claim that the "aesthetic appeal" of Swahili free-verse (such as that produced by Kezilahabi) lies in its potential to be interpreted in "multiple ways" (2007: 67). Diegner also states that this aesthetic technique is "frequently used to create narrative tension" (2002: 48), which is significant because the enigmatic black bird's poem is arguably an attempt by Mkufya to create narrative tension. The tension produced by the black bird's words is evident in the reaction of the *wanadhahara* half way through the performance; they begin "*kuokota madongo ya moto kutaka kumpiga*" meaning that they began "to pick up bits of burning earth from the floor because they wanted to hit him" (1999: 109)[18]. This reaction to the black bird's poem contributes towards the context, outside of which the overall meaning of the performance is lost. Furthermore, the black bird's words are intended to foreshadow the downfall of the *wanadhahara* for their dogmatic belief, and foreshadowing is a literary device used to increase narrative tension in anticipation of the conclusion.

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[17] *Ibid.*
[18] My translation.

As Diegner writes, there are at least two different readings of a text, which may contradict or even negate each other, but this unreadability of texts "should not be misunderstood as meaningless" (2002: 48). Interestingly, this emphasis on multiple ambiguity which does not imply a lack of meaning, is also reflected in Mkufya's words from the English translation of the black bird's poem in the novel 'Pilgrims from Hell'; where the bird states that truth "seems strong, with causes manifest" and can "lead to profound effect" (forthcoming: 126). This possibility of leading to "profound effect" implies that the truth cannot be misunderstood as meaningless, as it contains the potential to have a significant impact, despite the fact that it eventually "dwindles to nonsense"[19]. Mkufya continues by describing truth as "mirage of ideas" which "tricks" humans into a "host of potential grounds"[20], and in the "host of potential grounds" we are further made to believe that the 'truth' is likely to influence the ways thing proceed, by causing new outcomes. Therefore, although truth may have been a "mirage" all along, it is not completely arbitrary.

Diegner describes this post-structuralist move towards not limiting a text to a single reading as a "critical reflection on epistemology" (2002: 48), and this statement is personified in *Ziraili na Zirani*. Mkufya uses the narrative of the story and the black bird's poem to reflect upon the nature of 'truth', with an overall emphasis on the transiency of knowledge, demonstrating Mkufya's critical reflection on epistemology. Crucially, Diegner's proposed application of post-structuralist theory leads to the critical framework whereby texts must be understood as having an "unsolvable polysemy of meanings" (2002: 48), and this 'unsolvable' element to the black bird's poem reflects its puzzling nature. By interpreting the poem in relation to the novel as a whole we can view its resistance to being 'solved' as an example of Mkufya's approach to the "paradox of [religious] faith", whereby "the absolute certainty of God's presence" is asserted, while "He also remains unknown" (Rettova 2007: 262). The multiple ambiguity and semantic openness to interpretation, which is a defining feature of a post-structuralist literary framework is further exemplified by Rettova's conclusion to her reading of Mkufya's novel, when she writes that "a good work of art lends itself to more than one reading" (ibid).

Conclusion

Through my focus on post-structuralist literary theory, with specific attention paid to the genres at play and their influence on the construction of meaning, I have shown how these genres, free-verse poetry in particular, carry with them an inherent ambiguity and openness to interpretation. This insistence on the contingency of knowledge remains a defining feature of a post-structuralist framework and one which resonates with Mkufya's critical reflection on epistemology. I have attempted to show how the poem recited by the black bird in Mkufya's novel *Ziraili na Zirani*, on

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[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.* 127.

top of being considered as a poem and embedded in a novel, must also be read as text containing proverbial statements, and one which is presented in a performance and described in the novel. Only when we duly consider the conventions of these three textual genres, as well as performance as an actualising of genres, can we illuminate the different textual layers in the production of meaning. This approach attempts to sensitively contextualise the poem and its performance in the novel, whilst considering aspects of literary history, Swahili poetics, and philosophy, thus resulting in a multi-faceted reading of the poem, and of the whole novel which can lead to a reconceptualization in the analysis of this genre.

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