

The Kenyan Novel in the End of the Century: New Outfits or Unveiled Masks - in: Africa at the Threshold of the New Millenium

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Abstract:

There appears a peculiar turn in the Kenyan novel writing at the end of the 80s - beginning of the 90s: the authors who previously acquired their fame in developing a particular form of novel writing (social novel, popular novel, etc.), in the later period drastically diverged from their novelistic "orientation". Thus the masters of the Kenyan social novel of the 60s and 70s now employ forms traditionally characteristic of the popular literature: Meja Mwangi writes a "spy" novel "The Weapon of Hunger" (1988), his later novel "The Return of Shaka" (1989) obviously employs some features of detective story; "Matigari" by Ngugi wa Thiongo (1989) could be named as a certain type of "picaresque anti-utopia". A similar turn in a writing manner takes place in the works of some less known "social" writers, such as Wahome Mutahi. Such divergence in "orientation" is also manifested in the works of those novelists who received in the previous decades a wide acclaim in Kenyan popular literature. In the 80s and 90s they turn towards multi-faceted, complex form of narrative - particularly epic novel, which allows for depiction of a larger scope of events. The novel by the well-known popular fiction writer David Maillu "The broken drum" (1988) encompasses four centuries of precolonial, colonial and post-independence history of Kenya. The novel by Yusuf Dawood "Water under the bridge" (1990) is the epic covering three decades of Kenyan independence, and "Dedan Kimathi" by Sam Kahiga, previously known as love story writer, recreates in a grand scope one of the most dramatic events in Kenyan history - Mau Mau uprising (1952-56). The naturally arising question is to what such "change of masks" among Kenyan writers in the last decades attributes to? To our view there exist two major underlying reasons. Firstly, the reading public in Kenya has gradually been losing its interest in the social fiction, written in the manner typical for the 60s and 70s, - which mainly was associated with the mood of disappointment in the current socio-political situation in the country, where socially committed literature failed to carry its own social potential into practice. In order to retain the audience acquired in the previous decades, the veterans of Kenyan social fiction have begun exploring new means of expression (moreover - not only in popular literature; for example, Meja Mwangi in "Striving for the wind" adapts to the local material the traditions of the English satirical prose). Secondly, creative abilities of the most distinguished writers of popular fiction have considerably increased. They have outgrown rigid frames of adventurous and matrimonial themes of popular fiction. Striving for the opening up new themes enables these writers to rise to socio-historical problems of a higher level. Nevertheless, the writers manage to preserve recognisable features of their respective creative styles: in the novels of Mwangi and Ngugi we detect a familiar mastery of episodes and careful character depiction; Maillu, Dawood and Kahiga in their experiments with the epic form incorporate devices characteristic of popular literature - such as erotic scenes, dramatic plot collisions, circumstantial coincidences. Therefore, the "unveiling of masks" and acquisition of "new outfits" in reality

amounts to the search of new means of expression, that eventually leads to the drawing together - in respect of the artistry - the two branches of the modern Kenyan prose: the "elite" and the "popular".