Of Kitche Magak and the Modal Variations in East African Poetry

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Abstract: There is need for development of novel critical tools in the appreciation of modern poetry in East Africa. Contemporary literary productions in the modern age present a certain degree of peculiarity that demands a diversified critical approach. There are variations in the modes of presentation and it is no longer tenable to rely on traditional tools to critique modern East African poetry. This paper uses Kitche Magak’s poetry as experimental data to demonstrate the unsuitability of traditional modes of literary criticism in the assessment of poetic materials drawn from the East African region and consequently the need for adoption of a broad-based, ethno-cultural approach to the criticism of modern East African poetry.

1. Introduction

Literary scholarship, more specifically investigation into literary productions in East Africa, has not been responsive to the inevitability of re-evaluating critical methodologies and tools adopted in the appraisal of East African literary writings, specifically poetry, to determine their aptness in view of the peculiarity of the East African literary experience. This is particularly pertinent as no informed assessment of cultural productions in the postcolonial world should underestimation the essentiality of the cultural peculiarities in these literary productions. ‘Critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture dependent. Therefore critical standards must derive from culture’ (Okpaku 53). It is therefore important for a modern critic to acknowledge the perilous nature of adopting or adapting assumptions and paradigms which are designed for use in other cultural milieus. The adoption of such critical assumptions would easily engender impair a practical assessment of literary works drawn from a different environment as has been the case in the criticism of modern African poetry. Maduka, in the same vein, has cautioned against ‘[a]n uncritical assimilation of foreign theories is inimical to the African’s justifiable quest for cultural identity’ (186). The foregoing arguments demonstrate that critics have not paid adequate attention to the fact that some of the assumptions informing the privileging of such social units as the nation-state in the description of literary traditions are both questionable and invalid, so long as ethnic formations are by far, more influential socio-cultural units in contemporary Africa. Most African states are, at best, constructs of the colonial powers that would cease to exist if the constituent nationalities fully assert themselves.

Chidi acknowledges that ‘traditionalist thought and perception,’ which was ‘a dominant mode in pre-colonial African societies still features in post-colonial Africa and can be identified in specific formations even within advanced industrialised societies.’ He recognises the existence of the inherent ‘ambiguity,’ ‘indeterminacy’ and ‘contradictions’ in traditionalist aesthetics and identifies three dominant tendencies: ‘(1) a pseudo-universalist idealism which takes a pan-Africanist view of African literature and seeks to see that literature in terms of a universal world culture; (2) a narrow ethnocentric particularism which distils the aesthetic values of a particular ethnic culture and uses knowledge derived therefrom to pontificate on African literature and art; and (3) a crusading neo-negritudist polemic that correctly identifies the need for the decolonisation of African literature but conceives of that process in romantic idealist terms to the exclusion of the vital determinants of culture’ (41).

2. Kitche Magak and the New Face of East African Poetry

This scholarly investigation of modern East African poetry has drawn attention to the urgency of producing relevant knowledge in the criticism of African poetry, especially as the critical engagement with African poetry stands to benefit from the critical assumptions that are associated with the emergent postcolonial literary theory, which recognises the peculiar socio-cultural experiences in the postcolonial world.

A suitable starting point in the critical appraisal of the evolving form and content of East African poetry is Kitche Magak. While there are only five
of his poems in Arthur Luvai’s and Kwanhetsi Makokha’s anthology, Magak is an important proletarian poet from the point of view of ideological import and style. His poems are about the less advantaged – the workers, the poor and vulnerable children, the unsuspecting girlchild, women and generally the citizens of nascent African nations who are under the new yoke of black oppression. Some of his poems cannot be distinctly labelled, but there is one characteristic that runs through them – protest against the inhumanity of post-independence leadership, exploitation of workers, disillusionment and the unfeathered ambitions of youthful expeditions. These themes are sufficiently captured in the five poems that represent Magak in *Echoes Across the Valley*.

‘The Birth of a Stillborn,’ to begin with, paints a bleak picture of post-independence Africa. It is replete with colonial epithets. Here, Magak allegorically employs the story of a barren woman’s dashed hopes of bringing forth a healthy child after ‘long painful years of barren unmutilal wedlock’ to demonstrate post-independence disillusionment in East Africa. The title of the poem, laden with contradiction, is oxymoronic as it gives the impression of the birth of a dead child so that no birth ideally takes place. The poem reads like an indirect allusion to Imbuga’s *Betrayal in the City* where the collective sense of disillusionment is captured by Moses when he says: ‘It was better while we waited. Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and are busy killing our future’ (Imbuga 31–32). The poem reads like a mockery of the long history of painstaking struggle against imperialist occupation and exploitation. The colonial conquest was characterised by erosion of African values and disruption of traditional order. Those who championed the anti-imperialist rebellion envisioned a better future for the African society upon the exit of the coloniser.

The decades of colonial hold on power was indubitably a painful one, punctuated by ‘prayers,’ more like the religious undertones in Imbuga’s play, ‘curses’ pronounced on the imperialists, audacious ‘hope’ and a legally binding determination to reach the most desired destination of independence as suggested by the word ‘swearing.’ Like Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Magak’s poem seems to suggest that political upheavals in Africa have emanated from incongruent marriages of convenience (‘unmutual wedlocks’) that were arranged by the former imperialists. It is little wonder that many African nations still see themselves as conglomeration of tribes. One of Adichie’s main characters in the novel, a university lecturer identified as Odenigbo questions the rationale behind the constitution of colonial boundaries. In his view, and Adichie’s for that matter, tribe seems to be the only unifying boundary that has been in existence for long and other colonial boundaries were created then for the purpose of quenching the thirst for European leaders’ scramble for partition in Africa. Achebe, in his autobiographical work *There Was a Country*, shares Adichie’s sentiments and acknowledges that the formulation of colonial boundaries is the genesis of the political problems bedevilling the continent. He opines:

The rain that beat Africa began four to five hundred years ago, from the ‘discovery’ of Africa by Europe, through the transatlantic trade, to the Berlin conference of 1885. The controversial gathering of the world’s leading European powers precipitated what we now call the Scramble for Africa, which created new boundaries that did violence to Africa’s ancient societies and resulted in tension-prone modern states. It took place without African consultation or representation, to say the least. …Africa’s postcolonial disposition is the result of a people who have lost the habit of ruling themselves. We have also had difficulty running the new systems foisted upon us at the dawn of independence by our ‘colonial masters.’ Because the West has had a long but uneven engagement with the continent, it is imperative that it understand what happened to Africa. It must also play a part in the solution. A meaningful solution will require the goodwill and concerted efforts on the part of all those who share the weight of Africa’s historical burden (Achebe 1–2).

Magak, like Adichie and Achebe, appears to submit that the birth of a new Africa calls for a new delimitation, one that would integrate the needs of indigenous African communities. That marriage of tribes to form nations was not based on mutual consent is the genesis of the problems that continue to bedevil the continent. The health of the unborn child was not guaranteed; turbulence of tribal waves adversely threatened the life of the child. Its death was inevitable as it was predetermined. The coloniser’s élanour for political convenience and expediency has thrown the continent into an intricate web of crises. African nations were condemned to barrenness from the very beginning so that what was left of Africa was a burdensome misery:

*Long painful years of barren unmutilal wedlock*
*Waiting.*
*On buttocks benumbed by the sterile weight*
Of our burdensome black misery
Making love to the land in mocking heat
That the strangers who husbanded us
Overlive and bemoan our barren barbarity.
In the middle of our colourless despair
The womb stirred unwillingly, uncertain...
Heralding an overdue pregnancy
Then our shrouded spirit did a maternal jig, then two,
And forth burst a joyous song of motherhood
From souls brimful with nothing
Then our beloved lords, those mixedanthropes
Deprived of our primitive worthlessness
Pleased for a philanthropic dignified retreat

Ethnic formations constitute significant cultural units in the East African context. The assertion of ethnic identities within the context of nation-states in East Africa in recent times is adequate proof of their influence not only in the sphere of politics but also in the making of the cultural identities of various nation-states. In the context of literary criticism, the suppression of the ethnic factor has taken the form of erasing the ethnic presence in the literary history of individual countries. At best, there has always been a vague reference to oral traditions, a label that neither properly designates the complex literary resources of diverse people groups nor reflects their nature. Identifying and clarifying ethnic traditions in literary productions from Africa may be a major step towards developing a feasible and practicable alternative to the prevailing Eurocentric approach which does not offer a holistic platform for the critical appreciation of the African literary experience. Reliance on Eurocentrism undoubtedly demonstrates the partiality and the insensitivity of critics of modern East African poetry. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the development of an ethno-cultural approach to the study of modern East African poetry. The adoption of a diversified outlook would go beyond the facile exploration of the recourse to the oral which has, oftentimes, underscored modal variation to the neglect of such major factors as the ideological import of poetic form, artistic philosophy and social utility. Gerard has averred in *Four African Literatures* that ‘African literature ought to include within the compass of its definition the ethnic literatures of Africa’ (31-32). But an informed outlook would also recognise the necessity of situating such literary traditions, as this paper proposes, within the growing discourse of post-coloniality. This at once acknowledges the conditioning impact of the colonial experience on modern African poetic traditions and enhances the formulation of a relevant critical tool. The essential link between colonialism and modern East African writing cannot be ignored.

If colonialism changed forever the course of Africa’s political and economic history, it also profoundly altered its literary destiny. To date, colonialism represents the single most disruptive factor in Africa’s history. It is to this epochal intervention that Africa owes the emergence of its contemporary nation-states. Modern African literature also owes its existence to the phenomenon of colonialism (Williams 16).

‘The Birth of a Stillborn’ is riddled with images of lifelessness and fruitlessness. The rumps, the closest metaphor for birth, is ‘benumbed by sterile weight of burdensome misery,’ defying the love making process. But even more disparaging are harsh conditions under which marriage is consummated: the ‘mocking heat’ and ‘the colourless despair.’ The mocking heat, it appears, does not give room for the growth of new life, regeneration or fecundity. On the contrary, pervasive symbol of the mocking heat suggests destruction and death. Any seed that is planted in this union is bound to die. The colourless despair is suggestive of cluelessness so that that love making itself constitutes a fruitless trial-and-error expedition. Laying claims to the possibility of a healthy child is a wild dream for the union is presided over by ‘strangers.’ Africa remains the subject of the white man’s pity and Magak alliteratively describes this as the ‘bemoaning [Africa’s] barren barbarity.’ The womb, which holds the long-awaited life, stirs unwillingly, suggesting unpreparedness, uncertainty and lack of clarity of vision. The use of ellipsis demonstrates the heavy weight of improbability, the inability to discern what the future holds. What is particularly interesting is that the pregnancy itself is overdue, carried beyond the normal term yet labour pains are not forthcoming, heralding gloom for the future of the marital partnership. The long wait does not dampen the spirit of the daringly hopeful Africans. When a child is finally born, Africans burst in joyous songs. Underlying this joy is the birth of a new continent. Our ‘beloved lords’ are symbolic of the former colonial masters. Independence of African nations only ‘deprived’ the former colonisers of ‘our primitive worthlessness.’ This sarcasm gives the impression of ‘good riddance’ as primitive worthlessness is really nothing to yearn for. Consequently, they (the imperialists) actually plead for a dignified retreat. The imperialists played what looked like Pilate’s washing of hands.

Declaration of self-rule was characterised by greater uncertainty and fear. The exit of the white man leaves the African citizens lonely, fearful but expectant. The anxiety about a rebirth of a first
born coupled with the ‘sweet pain of parturition’ relives hope but the ‘final push’ only leads to the birth of a ‘mistake.’ The black leaders to whom leadership was bestowed displayed scanty leadership skills and evidence of failure was writ large on their faces. Like the ‘overfed python’ in ‘Jolly Good Boss,’ the second poem that is critiqued in this paper; the baby exhibits repulsive traits like fatness, corruptibility, smelliness, spite and greed. These are clear indicators of the fruitless struggle for liberation and despite the fact that Magak’s poem is condensed into two stanzas (almost recondite and inaccessible to the ordinary reader in a number of lines); it comprehensively delves into the evils perpetrated in independent East African society by the black imperialists. The stillborn’s physical description invites disgust: ‘A fat lifeless smellily violation that overpaid our wish.’ Evidently, the outcome of this union sank Africa into greater depths of disillusionment.

On the whole, Magak intimates that the ethnic entities and/ or formations that existed before colonialism were constructed on the basis of mutual understanding. Yet he avoids the subjective idealism of the Sedarian school of Negritude which romanticises traditional African reality by, among other things, implying that the black people are bequeathed with unique positive qualities that other races do not have. He deals with the cause of the problems bedevilling the African continent and shuns such notions as a utopian past or the idealisation of the black race.

Magak’s ‘Jolly Good Boss’ casts a harsh light on the ineptitude which grips the modern East African leadership. The poem deals with a foul subject, that of incompetence and ineffectuality, in a blithe, almost jocular manner. A most important device which Magak has employed to demonstrate this sense of ineptness, which is widespread in the East African society, is that of satire. Though the poem deals with a serious matter of the frailty of leaders, Magak makes fun of his subject. Thus satire is used to make the issue of incompetence clear and prove how retrogressive it really is. Written in an independent style and delivered in a passively sarcastic tone, this poem is a potent comment on society.

The title speaks of a virtuous leader who is happy and cheerful and so he ‘is a jolly good boss.’ His glee, it appears, arises from physical comfort, complacency and the trappings of power. He ‘sits behinds a shiny mahogany desk,’ which indicates an ostentatiously impressive and colourful display that comes easy to people of a certain social calibre. This is a ‘dreamy’ world, matter-of-factly utopian, perhaps because it is beyond the reach of the plebian majority who only live it in their wishful thoughts. In stratified East African societies where the rank and file struggle for economic survival, the elegance displayed in the boss’s office remains a pipedream. His contentment is likened to that of an ‘over-fed python/ That has swallowed a bearded goat.’ This simile not only demonstrates the complacency of leadership in contemporary East Africa, but it also accentuates the greed and avarice that characterises it. The choice of diction in this poem is deliberate, particularly ‘swallowed’ and ‘bearded goat’ which are indicative of unpremeditated boundlessness and unsparing crudity. To show the stark reality of greed, Magak consciously shuns the use of euphemism that would suggest a refinement in character.

The second stanza of the poem introduces a new adjective ‘good-natured,’ which paints the picture of a pleasant kindly disposition. Ironically, the boss’s amiability lies in his wont to sexual harassment. He has, it seems, a high affinity for physical pleasure. He is least disturbed by his victims’ daring stunts. In this poem, just like the other poems selected for this study; there is a strong indication that Magak might be speaking from a personal experience, judging by the raw emotions that this satric poem faintly conveys: those of disdain, rage, shame and an acute sense of disgust at the indifference and cruelty of male bosses who won’t judge a book by its cover, men whose perceptions of women are least influenced by social realities but would recklessly indulge in sexual expeditions. In the contemporary world where sexual permissiveness and bizarre predatory advances are frowned upon, the boss’s foolhardiness is something of a serious concern; but that does not mean that such streaks of licentiousness, especially among people of considerable influence, has been diametrically exterminated. The world is ever-evolving and significant efforts have been made to realign the social framework; however, powerful people continue to derive a lot of pleasure in sexually harassing women. In fact, women exhibit some of element of socio-economic vulnerability that still persists in young democracies. Even western societies that boast of progressive constitutional provisions are not spared. Thus this poem carries a universal message for all of us, as Magak manages to convey just how absurd all predatory advances are by highlighting the plight of socially vulnerable women who cannot speak against such vices. The secretaries’ disregard for marital institution arises from the stereotypical thought that a woman’s upward mobility is not guaranteed in a society that marginalises on the
basis of sex. They believe that social placement determines the stability of marital institution and it would be foolhardy for a man with a certain measure of economic power to ask a woman who is economically less powerful for a hand in marriage. The woman, in this sense, is relegated to a passive spectator and a resigned victim of male dominion. This stereotyped woman psyche equates economic prosperity to ‘body peddling.’ Men would not dare them, they presume. Sadly, this presumption is mere misapprehension. The boss, a typical sexual pest, derives pleasure from sexual notoriety for he ‘laughs absent-mindedly and sinks back into dear oblivion.’

In the third stanza, the poet ridicules the boss’ industry. He ‘gets dog-tired early in the morning.’ The metaphoric image of the dog suggests extreme exhaustion from a night-long duty. Here, Magak raises a pertinent question about equal pay for equal work, a debate that has preoccupied the minds of socialist thinkers for decades now. The creation of lofty titles is a superstructural strategy employed by the capitalistic class to deprive the low cadre employees of what is rightfully due to them. Job placement is not even based on merit. This raises a serious doubt on the prevailing reward scheme and whether there is a genuine correlation between meritocracy and placement. It also calls for a reassessment of the reward scheme in post-independent African societies. The boss signs papers whose contents he has very little idea about. Besides, he displays a sense of sloth that is irritating as it is unproductive. He leaves for lunch and for the day at 11:30 a.m. His lethargy, a brazen form of laziness, speaks very loudly. He lacks the moral authority to steer the institution to any form of growth.

He is a humorous chap, the non-partisan voice of the observer adds to the list of adjectival qualifiers. This stanza reveals the hypocrisy of post-independence African leaders. He claims that he is underpaid and overworked, yet he does very little as a boss. He uses pay as an excuse to cover up his clumsiness and laziness. Evidently and ironically so, it is his juniors, the low cadre employees, who genuinely deserve a salary raise. Instead they only laugh at his jokes because he seemingly holds some authority over them. Thus their laughter is borne out of subservience. Thinly embedded in this laughter is indignation. The writer is raising serious questions about social inaction; workers are poorly paid yet they are unwillingly to speak about it for fear of victimisation. The use of the expression ‘grudging envy’ portends a darker picture for the post-colonial leadership, one in which those who are eying senior positions only do so to take their turn in economic plunder. Their grudge is engendered by the feeling that the greed with which the powers-that-be are plundering available resources might leave them in a rather awkward position when they finally take turn. This relationship presents a predator-prey scenario.

The fifth stanza presents a ludicrous form of generosity. Here again, the conception of generosity is contrived. He ‘brags about his Christ-heart,’ an element of immodesty that is antithetical to Christian virtue of humility. Laughably and ridiculously so, he prides himself in sexually predating upon guileless girls. He capitalizes on the susceptibility of minors to derive sexual pleasure. Sarcastically, the poet paints this as a ‘God-sanctioned mission/ That dates back to Abraham.’ This portrays an element of objectification of women. There is a sense of boundlessness in male leaders’ chauvinistic tendencies and a misguided notion of procreation. Power bestows upon them a sense of entitlement that makes defilement, which is a serious sexual offense, a spiritual duty and they speak so unashamedly about it. One gets the feeling that sexual exploitation is a social achievement.

The final stanza, which is composed of two lines, summarises the ironic nature of the poem. The last line, in spite of its superfluity, emphasises the poet’s indictment on poor and irresponsible leadership.

Overall, ‘Jolly Good Boss’ is an interesting poetic rendition, both for its excellent use of rich language and the timeless message it conveys. It is undoubtedly a very rich poem and it is an indictment on the post-independence Africa. It is a satirical commentary on neo-colonial thinking of the leaders of East Africa. The target of Magak’s criticism, Boss, is representative of this class. Using positions of leadership for material gain is the bane of leadership in Africa. The elite do not derive economic power from ownership of the means of production; they are not directly involved in the production of wealth. Instead they are petty and parasitic. They see leadership as the only means by which they can rake in substantial material gain. Magak is not blind to the fact that while those in positions of leadership capitalise on these opportunities to enrich themselves, the common people, like junior works in the poem, bear the brunt of the economic problems wrought by the ineptness of the leaders. Magak provides a realistic exposition of the East African social formation and ridicules the bestiality of materialist societies; modern African societies have lost touch with spiritual values and the result is a chaotic leadership.
'The Last Monologue’ (Echoes 176 – 177) is by far Magak’s most natural poetic rendition. The quietness and gentleness of the language employed in this poem moves the reader and makes this a very emotionally touching poem. It is a monologue presented in a conversational style. In this poem, Magak recognises the contradiction that the use of colonial language in expressing the African experience poses. The dilemma that this contradiction produces is manifest in this poem. In this poem, Magak adopts Achebe’s integrationist approach to the use of English language. In his essay, ‘The African Writer and the English Language,’ Achebe submits:

The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience’ (61).

‘Last Monologue’ displays Magak’s awareness of this dilemma from the onset. Magak diverges into different directions. He uses a relatively casual tone and deliberately avoids the linguistic complexity that is witnessed in ‘The Birth of a Stillborn.’ Be that as it may, he exercises control and strives to retain the communicative potential of the colonial language.

The poem deals with piety, human suffering and justice. Magak draws from a personal experience. Sabina’s uncle, presumably Magak, lightheartedly declares that he has not mastered the ‘trick of prayer’ and wants a talk and not necessarily a prayer. He expresses deep thoughts so freely and naturally so that the reader is moved to pity. One easily identifies with the genuineness of a spiritually distant man who is unafraid to admit to having very little mastery of the art of prayer. It is at this point that one begins to feel the compelling power of the persona’s plea. The poem deals with a plangent subject matter of life and death in humorous manner, in what appears to be the writer’s idiosyncratic style. The persona makes a personal plea for God’s indulgence: he would want to talk to him ‘man to God.’ He presents a proclamation of spiritual distance and avoids the piousness associated with artful churchliness of a devout Christian. He does not want to be interrupted seemingly because such interruption would interfere with the natural flow of his thoughts. Yet he understands just how important his monologue is; he ‘might never talk to [God]/ Like this again.’ Sabina is on the verge of her death.

To establish his close relationship with Sabina, he identifies her as ‘the daughter of his brother’ and later says, ‘My niece.’ The architecture of English language dilutes the significance of kinship. Therefore, he presents it as a formality, parenthetical information as it were. Sabina is lying in a hospital bed in a poor people’s infirmary. Her uncle’s helplessness over the situation, perhaps because he too cannot afford a medical facility that would boost her hope of recovery, complicates the situation. He is watching helplessly as she slowly dies. The choice of words is deliberate; she is not fighting for her life but ‘slowly dying,’ an indication of resignation to an ill fate. The patient’s uncle too is not doing anything about her situation; he is hopeful that God would understand the necessity of her life ‘For there is no reason/ For her dying.’ Thinly veiled in this natural prayer is the precariousness of poverty.

The third stanza focuses on the youthfulness of the victim. The poet employs thematic framing, a special type of repetition, to depict the direness of the situation: ‘She is young, very young.’ She has been married for only one year and has had very little celebration of her matrimony. Besides, her marriage had come ‘a bit earlier than necessary.’ Poverty is one of the primary causes of early marriages in this society. Yet the person believes that even sinners have a certain measure of entitlement to grace and ‘one year of wedlock is too short.’ Irrespective of age, it is unfair for anybody to ‘be lying in a hospital/ Waiting for death.’ Here again, in Magak’s meticulous diction, which is characterised by accuracy and tightness, there is a definitive prognostication of death; Sabina’s fate has been sealed. The speaker does not give even a flicker of hope that Sabina would be afforded a new lease of life.

The delicate nature of the situation is aggravated by the presence of a baby boy who needs the emotional support of a mother. The baby boy, Sabina’s very first child, is ‘left with her grandmother.’ The hospitalisation of the boy’s mother leads to his premature death so that youthfulness is dealt a double blow. In case of the boy’s mother, the persona observes that death seems to be winning the battle, giving very little hope for the possibility of survival. The boy’s death is described as his ‘final protest/ Against being denied maternal love.’ The ailing mother does not have an idea about the death of her only son. This misery is presented in the form of a rhetorical question. The life of the baby boy, the persona is convinced, is the only thing that is keeping her alive. Like many a young mother, she hopes to raise her baby boy to maturity. Disclosing the news
about the death of her son is tantamount to a death penalty.

The last stanza adopts a defiant tone. The persona openly declares that he believes that the current state of affairs is unjust. The couple does not deserve this devastating experience. He appeals to God to take the mortal human form and try Sabina’s husband’s shoes. In God’s omnipotent state, He is incapable of experiencing the pain of mere mortals. The fact that there is no consolation for Sabina’s husband is demonstration of grim nature of the predicament. Perhaps it is the comparison of poverty to a starving child that depicts an attempt at questioning religious authority. Social stratification is man-made and it is within the jurisdiction of the Supreme Being (God) to overturn the social injustice that stratification brings forth. The poor have suffered for a long time as a result of class differences and it is high time divine intervention was sought. One is tempted to argue that underlying this natural plea for life is the dire situation of social disparity in post-independence East African states, the precariousness of social class and the urgent need for social re-orientation. The class division in the society is absolutely out of hand.

What emerges from this poem is that Magak is a partisan writer, the voice of the voiceless. In an obviously simple manner of representation, he depicts the image of the underprivileged members of the society. His class position is fairly clear; he is the voice of those who are at the lower echelons of the society, the rank and file of the society or the plebs. This position qualifies him as a proletarian writer and this is evident not only in his subject matter, the social background of his commonest protagonist, but in his style, which is demotic, devoid of erudition, almost oversimplified but deeply evocative. The poem presents a frail voice; it portrays people who are powerless against the forces that dehumanise them. The voice of the persona in this poem is a cry of hopelessness, the lament of a miserable proletariat who has no idea of how to end his misery. Religion offers some respite. Besides its exploration of the plight of the proletarians, it alludes to Africa’s traditional spiritualism where divinity (supernatural being) is invoked whenever socio-political and economic complications arise. Magak is obviously a contemporary East African poet but he cannot completely detach himself from this traditional African worldview (the idea that divine power overrides practical solutions to problems Africans encounter).

‘Do Not Cry for Me’ also reads like ‘The Last Monologue’ in its reflection of the vulnerability of proletariats, the difficulty of living a morally chaste life in a destitute family, the unthinkable survival antics, the inability to have a fulfilling romantic relationship and the burden of being a woman.

It is the power of Magak’s characterisation of the persona that strikes the reader. She is treated with immense sympathy, more like the characterisation of Sabina. One sees in the speaker an indomitable woman who exhibits admirable and unwaning strength in the face of adversity. She remains extremely defiant in her grief. In his usual predilection for trigger poetry, Magak invites his audience to analyse the speaker’s character critically and to see in her a reflection of the society’s wrong values. She repeatedly declares that she does not want any of her relations to show her pity (cry for her). She seems to believe that offering herself for sale is the only available path towards the redemption of her family. In doing this, she pays no attention to the moral question of prostitution. She is determined to salvage her family from its economic woes yet she cannot and indeed does not want to see that it is her vulnerability to sexual exploitation that causes her anguish. The speaker’s messages for different members of family are packaged methodically so that each stanza deals with a specific member or group.

In stanza one, she address her mother. In a chauvinistic society, women have no right to ownership of property; consequently, what they truly own is their body. To survive the economic rigours of life, prostitution presents itself as viable option. That social marginalisation puts women in a precarious situation is writ large and she does not have to be discreet about it. She wants her mother to ‘spare her those piteous eyes, yet her mother’s pity reflects ‘the depth of her concession.’ It would appear that her moral consciousness is awoken by these piteous eyes. This image of shame haunts her. No amount of moral persuasion would dilute her resolve. The last line of this stanza reifies her quest for material possession. She makes a declaration that cements her moral inattentiveness. The substance of the stanza is presented below:

Do not cry for me mom
When I tell you in open sincerity
That I have to do what has to be done
Selling the only thing I truly own.
Spare me those piteous eyes
For too much, they mirror the depth of my concession
And you too know that we cannot live on morals
The second stanza specifically addresses the persona’s ‘dad’ (father). It deals with the frustrating nature of male chauvinism. Fathers perceive daughters as their primary source of wealth so that any indication or discovery that wealth would not be forthcoming invites pain. This stanza exposes the materialistic nature of traditional African societies. Male dominance projects itself as a potential threat to a woman’s (a proletariat’s) existence. The woman is objectified as she is presented as an item for sale. The presence of a daughter who is not materially promising is equated to a burden. If they cannot attract good bidders (to assure their fathers of the ‘cows’ they cherish), a father must be prepared to nurse the frustrations of fatherhood. The persona’s resolve is laced with sarcasm. She does not want the father’s pity yet she wins the reader’s sympathy. What is particularly painful in this stanza is that her defiance does not give any clear indication that there will be an end to women objectification. Her decision to leave reinforces male dominance as it lifts the man’s ego. The persona’s resolution puts her at the mercy of even more materially advantaged men whose primary objective is to derive sexual pleasure from unsuspecting female ‘preys.’ The poem, in this regard, paints a very bleak future for women. Her prayer at the end of the stanza does not make the situation any better. It ironically gives the impression that the quest for material success will eventually supplant the spiritual values in the African society.

Magak’s ‘Next Time You See Jane,’ presents the power of the first love and ‘nude’ youthful ambition. The persona is a victim of ‘pernicious’ youthful adventure. It is presented in a much more stronger and eloquent voice. In manner and temperament, it is the antithesis of ‘The Last Monologue.’ It is devoid of the nearly deceptive simplicity of ‘The Last Monologue.’ It is presented in a dispassionate voice and gentle manner. He depicts the kamikaze nature of youngsters’ adventures with characteristic power and intensity of feeling. Like in ‘Do Not Cry,’ Magak uses a mantra at the beginning of each stanza. The persona is sending a message to Jane, who is apparently his first love. It is a powerful indictment on youthful expeditions.

In the first stanza, he confesses that ‘nude ambition and pernicious youth’ held him captive and clouded his judgment. He had a compulsive desire to explore the world and genuine love was going to be an obstacle in this pursuit. It ‘was a burden’ he ‘could not bear.’ This stanza sets the stage for an exploration of the detriments of youthful ambitions. True love is deterrent to social adventure.

The second stanza reveals the outcome of the persona’s conquest. His verdict is that the world is too wide to explore in its entirety and one who embarks on this journey is bound to fail. He imagines that he has conquered the world, yet he can still ‘see millions of more worlds to be mastered.’ Ironically, ‘they laugh at [his] trivial conquest.’ Youthful adventure is a wild-goose chase.
The third stanza illustrates the ignorance, fear and anxiety that characterise youngsters’ first encounters with pure romance. Oblivious and fearful of their destinations, they become hesitant to give true love a chance. The poet establishes a feeble attempt at enhancing rhythm by using repetition and end rhyme. Yet like all other poems discussed in this paper, the writer displays a penchant for free verse, a characteristic that is typical of modern East African poetry.

He admits that in his desire to explore the world, he had met Samantha, Judy and Aura. These women metaphorically represented ‘the stunning of groping love’ that ‘derailed [his] juvenile universe.’ This confession is a testament to his conviction that what he had with Jane is something that was worthy of protection. But the juvenile universe is characterised by ignorance and his exposure to ‘groping love’ did not make things any better as it ‘sparked off extreme selfishness that prevailed over good sense and unfeigned passion.’ The juvenile universe, it is evident, is characterised by senselessness and pretentiousness; selfishness clouds youngsters’ minds and blur their vision.

The fifth and sixth stanzas reveal that the juvenile universe is characterised by some form of captivity. One is not free to make independent decisions because they ‘live a death cage of [their] friends’ virulent opinions’ yet ‘breaking free from this cage then was a taboo that went deeper than social suicide.’ The youth are socialised to believe that any attempt to chart a new destiny to separate one from existing social circles. The world of the youth is a form of slavery as sophistication chains one’s ‘nascent horizon’ and ‘quiet refinement’ is mistaken for ‘indelicacy which time curves into irrevocably lost ideas’ (Echoes 56).

In the last stanza, the speaker confesses that he is still in love with Jane and so he is ‘still laden with guilty love.’ He regrets his actions and still finds it difficult to express it openly. He is deeply sorry for hurting Jane yet he understands just too well that her actions are unforgivable. He does not deserve Jane’s forgiveness and ‘she has no right to forgive [him]/ For having transgressed against all that is good and pure.’ It is this final stanza that confirms the persona’s commitment to ‘good and purity,’ characteristics which are at the heart of African traditionalist aesthetics. The speaker is yearning for a return to spirituality. It would appear that the outcome of worldly adventures is vanity, a position that renders a radical verdict on materialism.

3. Conclusion

The colonial administration, whose establishment was reinforced by the machinery of colonial education, proffered the perfect fodder for the emergence and growth of modern East African writing and this equally conditioned its critical reception. Ironically, the growing decolonisation of the East African poetic imagination has not been matched by a corresponding re-evaluation of the tools for its assessment. The process of recovering from the corrupting influence of the colonial engagement should naturally involve a gradual restoration of values and traditions which were either disposed of or relegated to the periphery as the Western value systems took centre stage. This position draws its impetus from the consciousness that East African literary scholarship in the postcolonial era should be both proactive and reactive to the hurdles of the contemporary age by taking up the responsibility of illuminating the process of collective self-discovery. The poems that have been selected for this discussion give enough proof that reliance on traditional tools of literary criticism may not be fruitful.

Kitche Magak’s poems exhibit a rich diversity in form and content. Each poetic rendition produces a particular effect on the reader and it would be un rewarding to lamp them together and assign a general critical tag. Magak makes a feeble attempt at conforming to Eurocentric literary traditions. He entirely relies on free verse to communicate his ideas. His poems demonstrate that spirituality still defines modern artistic productions in Africa. He deliberately breaks away from the escapist idealism of Negritude poetry yet he demonstrates that idealism still informs the writing of modern East poetry. Magak employs both demotic and sophisticated style; there are overt variations in word choice or diction.

4. Works Cited


