

Magical Transformations and the Subjugation of Nature in Said Ahmed Mohamed's *Babu Alipofufuka*

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Abstract

This paper examines magical transformations and the subjugation of nature in Said Ahmed Mohamed's novel, Babu Alipofufuka. It presupposes that through magical transformations, the co-relation between magic and artistic expression is evident. When magical transformations are utilized in literary works, they foreground meaning. It is in this context that the paper seeks to analyze magical transformations in the above mentioned novel. The paper argues that the author borrows from his social perspective of magic to attempt to give an interpretation of phenomena. Specifically, it is apparent that magical transformations are utilized as a way of acknowledging other ways of seeing the world other than science in an African context. Magical transformations cannot be analyzed by examining one element, but an entire discourse of the magical phenomenon. It is in this context that the paper utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis Theory (CDA) in interpretation of meaning.

1. Introduction

I wish to examine how magical transformations are utilized in the novel *Babu Alipofufuka* by Said Ahmed Mohamed. It is important, however, to first engage the problematic concepts of magic and magical transformations. According to Bronowski (1977:20) magic is defined as having power over nature. Magic simply depends on hitting the right key. He says that there is a way of having esoteric power which does not depend on generally accessible knowledge. He points out that one of the aspects of magic is its tendency for the rituals to turn nature upside down. In order for magic to work, nature has to be subjugated. Therefore, the subjugation of nature is the theme of all magical practice.

This paper is guided by central tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an interdisciplinary approach in the study of discourse. CDA views language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1989). It focuses on the ways social and political domination is reproduced in both written and spoken texts. CDA studies the structures of texts and considers both their linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions in order to determine how meaning is constructed. It holds that discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure and culture. This means that integration of the use of language should involve choices made and their relationship with the socio-cultural context. The analysis examines discourses to show the operation of constrained identities. In the analysis of magical transformations, attempts are made to draw a connection between the authors' choices, socio-cultural context and systems of beliefs and knowledge.

Charney (1975), underscores the long history of magic. He says that far back before the building of the pyramids, magic was a reputed art in Egypt. Egypt was the 'Cradle of Magic'. The magicians of Egypt contended against Moses at the Court of Pharaoh as recorded in Exodus 10, 11, and 12. It was an art cultivated by the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Jewish, Roman and Grecian priesthoods. Most societies of the world practiced and still practice magic as a process by which spirits may be invoked and commanded. This was only available to a few members of society who had been born with peculiar physical temperament. Most of those who practiced magic were viewed with awe and fear because they were believed to engage in supernatural acts while under the influence of certain spirits. (*The Oxford Book of the Supernatural*, 1994). Magic can hence be viewed as a process used to influence the course of events by bringing into operation secret or occult controlling principles of nature. Although most of the writers who write about magic talk about it as a thing of the past, Strassberg (2005) in fact sees magic as part and parcel of everyday life. He writes:

Magic, religion, science, technology and ethics are components of cultures that co-exist at every stage of the evolution of societies and cultures and are interconnected and intertwined with each other within the web of relationships with other components of social life and culture (Strassberg 2005:307)

Strassberg sees the components of social life as undergoing changes under the influence of each other and social and cultural factors that co-evolve with them throughout the history of humanity. To him, magic and religion are systems that operate within the realm of human faith – that is, a belief in a reality, which cannot be scientifically tested. To those who believe in magic and religion, there is no need for testing. Strassberg further argues that magic, religion, science, technology and ethics are components of culture. They satisfy specific individual, social and cultural needs with different intensity and with varying awareness of their operation. The complexity and fluidity of human experiences allows for a fusion of magic, religion, science, technology and ethics into a single impulse for action. Malinowski, just like Strassberg, believes that magic, religion and science had co-existed since the beginning of human society and that each has its own task. He maintained that there are no people however primitive without religion and magic (Malinowski 1974:1). Malinowski advocates for a holistic approach to the study of society where society should be analyzed as a whole, with the objective of understanding how all the existing cultural elements were interrelated. He believes that both magic and religion grew out of emotional stress and functioned as escapes from difficult emotional situations that offered no solutions by other scientific means.

From the foregoing discussion it is possible to see a co-relation between magic and artistic expressions. Artistic expressions, including literary works, mirror social conditions. They express the world view of the society within which they are situated. Folkloristic forms heavily rely on magic to build conflict. Folktales, for instance, appeal to us because of their fantastic qualities. In building fantasy, the performers rely on magic and magical happenings. There is, therefore, a relation between the practice of magic and magical transformations. In this paper, magical transformations will refer to supernatural changes of events and characters from one state of existence to another. I want to argue that modern writers including Said Ahmed Mohamed also borrow from social perception of magic to attempt an interpretation of phenomena. This is why they utilize magical transformations as a way of acknowledging other ways of seeing the world other than those prescribed by science. It is also a realization of the inability of familiar ways of writing to tackle issues peculiar to the African society. When magic is introduced in literature, it becomes a technique of defamiliarization in the sense that it deliberately attempts to present a situation in a strange manner thereby offering a new way of visualizing reality. I interrogate the text under study to see how literature represents multi-dimensional realities such as the African faith in the living dead.

2. *Magical Transformations in Babu Alipofufuka*

Khamis (2005) acknowledges the fact that there is a new crop of Swahili writers who seem to adopt magical realism and post-modernist tendencies that ‘adequately capture the cacophony and decay of the East African societies’ (Khamis 2005:92). Among the texts he mentions that have embraced this kind of writing is *Babu Alipofufuka* which is central to this paper. According to Khamis, these novels show a shift in aesthetics and thematic orientation. This is in fact an indication that a drastic socio-economic and cultural change in a society may influence artists and impel them to innovate so as to subvert a mode that may have become inadequate in capturing the contemporary situation (Khamis 2005:92). In essence, this is a form of defamiliarization or deviation from the usual mode, aimed at making society to examine itself more critically.

Babu Alipofufuka is a story of a character called K who was born in a poor family and whose mother and father worked for a certain rich man. As an adult, he was elected as a member of parliament. He is depicted leading a very comfortable life while his people continue to languish in extreme poverty. He is individualistic, oppressive, boastful and insensitive to the plight of his people. K is symbolic of those who hold leadership positions in the African continent. Nothing seems to remind him of his moral obligation to his fellow human beings or even those who elected him. The author utilize magical transformations to depict the character of K. In this way, the author interweaves the African way of interpreting life whereby the dead often interact with the living in order to give direction in certain matters. It is within this perspective that Mohamed tells his story in *Babu Alipofufuka*. In this novel K’s grandfather, Faki Mzuka comes back to life to deliver a message to K and by extension to other African leaders.

In the story K's grandfather, Mzuka is reported to have resurrected and come back to life after dying a long time ago. Mzuka wants to speak to his grandson K. Initially, there is a problem because K does not believe that the dead can come back to life and talk to the living. It is problematic for Mzuka to get K's attention. He tries to call him by name, by gestures and even to hold his head and make noises to attract his attention, but all this does not work.

After failing to catch K's attention, he decides to use another method. K has a big dog called Doggy, which is well fed. Mzuka is aware that there are many hungry people going without food while this dog is eating well. So, he decides to be stealing the dog's food and taking it to the hungry. This is done mysteriously. K is disturbed by the strange happenings. His dog remains hungry yet he buys enough food for it. He dismisses his workers under the belief that they are feeding on the dog's food. The fact that Mzuka comes back to steal the dog's food to feed the poor is a strong indictment of the unequal distribution of resources where a few rich people have plenty, even for their pets, while majority suffer the indignity of hunger. Mzuka tries to remind K in this scenario that in African culture dogs are fed only after everybody else has eaten. In our society today, things have changed where a rich man's dog is more important than a fellow human being. This is what has annoyed K's grandfather.

The fact that K's grandfather has to come back to life in order to address K is symbolic of the rich people's blindness towards the poor. K's grandfather does not give up on trying to catch his attention. On his way to Neo-Casino, where he is to meet his friends from other countries, Mzuka appears and this time 'enters' K's driver, Mzula. He then announces to K that he is now the one driving the car, but K refuses to accept because he says he knows that he died and cannot be alive. Finally, he reveals to him that he is his grandfather who has come back to life with an important message to him. He insists that he would keep on pestering him until he finally listens to him (Mohamed 2001:22).

Later in the novel Mzuka gives his reason of coming back to life. He has come with an express goal to offer some advice to K who seems to be lost and unable to think about other people. He mentions some of the vices which K is guilty of, such as land grabbing, K's grandfather disapproves of such acts. ((Mohamed 2001: 72-75). Incidentally, it is Mzuka who drives K's car all the way to Neo-Casino. Here is a character who has undergone some magical transformation from the dead and back to life in order to speak to society. It therefore means that both the living and the dead are aware of the injustice committed against humanity by the likes of K. Mzuka is sounding a warning that he will not leave until K sees the sense in the message he has brought to him. Mzuka is endowed with supernatural powers. He can hear everything spoken even in his absence. At Neo-Casino, K and his friends discuss about building a club where the members will be meeting naked. Again Mzuka warns K against associating with this kind of plan but K does not listen to him. Mzuka represents the voices of reason. He is the embodiment of progressive forces championing for justice, fairness and equal distribution of resources. At K's office Mzuka is strangely aware of all that is in the files and tells K about the various complaints lodged against him by the poor. These include complaints about unfair grabbing of land, bribery, inequality in education and insincerity of the leaders. K and other leaders are blind to these complaints. This has forced Mzuka to come back to life and attempt to make the leaders responsive. Through Mzuka, the author reveals how difficult it is to make African leaders to be concerned about the plight of the poor.

In a scene that interweaves dream and reality, Mzuka spends some time with K. He asks K to join him on a journey to his birthplace. Incidentally, K seems to have forgotten his birthplace. This is symbolic of the leaders who after being elected into their big offices, may never remember the electorates. Mzuka asks K to "kill himself" before they can start the journey. The act of killing oneself is a form of transformation. In essence, K has to be transformed from his physical body and from his current thinking. He adheres to the instructions and "kills himself". The two are then transformed into termites and they enter the roots of grass. The transformation of K from human to spirit signifies his change of heart. He can now accept to take instructions from his grandfather. Entering the roots of grass could symbolize K's resolve to get to the root of the problem of his society. The two go for the long journey. On the journey, K learns the difference between town life and the life of the villagers who voted for him as their Member of Parliament. On the journey, Mzuka reveals to K about the paradoxes between the living and the dead:

Si mbali wala si karibu. Dunia zenu zinapakana, lakini zinaachana. Ni papo kwa papo lakini mbali kiasi cha kwamba wakisema mnawasikia, lakini hamuwasilizi. Na wao wanakusikieni mkisema lakini hawakueleweni (It is neither far nor near from here. The two worlds neighbour each other although they are separated. It is just here but a bit far. When they speak we hear all they say but they (the living) do not hear us. But these ones here (the living dead) hear you but they do not understand you (the living) (Mohamed 2001:88)

It is paradoxical that the two worlds are so close to one another, but yet so far away. The dead are aware of everything that goes on in the world of the living. This state of affairs vindicate our earlier assertion that the living and the dead are believed to intermingle in African cosmic understanding of the universe. Mzuka tells K that town life and village life are different. In town there is wealth and luxury while in the village there is poverty and misery. Through the journey motif, the author underscores the betrayal of the people by the elite leaders. From this journey, K discovers that the environment in the village and the people have changed from the time he visited last. The bushes, which he used to see while growing up, are no more and the place has turned into a desert. A 30-year-old man looks like a 60 year old.

These changes signify the deterioration of the natural resources of the African continent due to poor leadership. K is shocked at the turn of events and starts reflecting. The fact that he starts reflecting on the plight of the poor is an indication that there is hope for change if the other leaders are made to see the roots of the problem. It is notable that K only starts thinking about the poor in his transformed state. It is in this state that he rediscovers himself and realizes that he is useless (Mohamed 2001: 91). As he moves around in his home, he continues to search himself. For the first time, he is remorseful for his past deeds such as when he took away Sururu's wife and married her. All along, he is in the company of Mzuka who keeps reminding him of the oppression of the poor by the powerful and rich members of society. In this transformed state, he remembers his hypocrisy. He pretended to be fighting for justice and yet he is unjust in his deeds. We see him remorseful and sorry for those who fought for justice, like his brother, Juba but are languishing in misery. The author seems to suggest here that for the new crop of leaders to change from their oppressive tendencies something supernatural has to happen to them. This is depicted through K's change of heart in his transformed state.

While on the journey, K witnesses declined economy, collapsed basic infrastructure, infringement of human rights and deterioration of physical and social life. He is made to see his own shortcomings both as a person and as a leader. He visits his grandmother's house from which he is reminded of his childhood. In his childhood, he always wished that he could live in affluence like the Khalifa family whom his parents worked for as casual labourers. This serves to remind him where he came from. His wishes came to pass when he landed into leadership. Instead of him acting better than the Khalifa's who oppressed his parents, he became one of the oppressors. Through K's realization, it seems apparent that it is only through transformation of the oppressive members of society that they can see the reality of their injustice against unfortunate members of society. K is able to come face to face with the poverty in the countryside and the misery of the poor.

While still in his transformed state, he visits family members. Some food is prepared for him. He is shocked to find they are poisonous potatoes. K is disturbed to imagine that people can actually feed on such things. It dawns to him that things have worsened since his childhood days. He realises that there are no drugs and hospitals in the village. One of his relatives, is stitched with normal stitching needle without anaesthesia after attempting suicide. All these shock K because he cannot understand how these people survive under such conditions. This realisation only comes to him in his transformed state. In his normal life he was not aware of this reality. In his transformed state, Mzuka takes him into the future. The situation is so scaring and frightening. There are houses made of paper, tins, carton boxes and all manner of strange things.

K is made to witness corruption and how deep rooted it is in the society. This is unveiled to him by making him use public transport. In his normal life as a leader K cannot experience the problems associated with public transport. Leaders have government vehicles and drivers. The public transport vehicle which K is made to use is in a very bad condition. The irony is that the public transport vehicles have to be inspected before and during the journey. Some of them have serious mechanical problems and cannot start from the check up stations. Nevertheless, they are allowed to proceed with the journey. The driver has to bribe all the way to avoid arrest on the journey. The roads are dilapidated. All these signify the rotteness and collapse of structures of governance in Africa. The author seems to insinuate that the African continent is headed nowhere with such leaders as K.

While still on the journey, Mzuka announces to K that his time with him is over. He then hands over K to a judge to answer charges of all the crimes he has committed. The judge asks K whether he accepts that he is guilty or not. K denies the charges. The judge throws him into an ocean. K's refusal to accept responsibility reflects the stubbornness of African leaders in accepting their failures. The verdict passed on K points to the fact that one day these corrupt leaders will be answerable for their evil deeds.

K stays beneath the water for sometime. When he comes to the surface, he finds himself in the year 2058 (Mohamed 2001:148). This transformation enables K to experience life in 2058. The environment is uninhabitable for K. There are no means of transport and the place is deserted and inhabited by only old people. The young people have all run away to Europe and America. This creates a new form of slavery for Africans in Europe and America. By depicting life in Africa in 2058 as he does, the author reveals his pessimism of Africa's future. The author therefore attempts to reveal to African leaders the repercussions of their mismanagement of the continent of Africa. After K's long journey, he is magically transformed back to his original self. On coming back to his house, he finds that he has lost his job. He has lost everything; house, workers, cars, and office. Because of this state of affair, he has nowhere to stay. His former house worker, Biye, takes him back to his village. Two days later, his body is found hanging on a tree that had been planted on his grandfather's grave. This is an indication that K commits suicide. K's mysterious death, after knowing the reality of the poor and coming back to life, is an anti-climax. He dies with all the knowledge learnt on the journey. This knowledge would have been useful in changing the system of governance and correcting the wrongs committed by the leaders in bringing down the continent..

Mysteriously, after his death, K appears to his family members; his children, Kidawa and Bamkubwa who are now destitutes living on the streets. Like his grandfather, he tries to talk to his children about serious issues of life but they dismiss him. He even visits his old colleagues to talk to the leaders just like his grandfather did, but they do not listen to him. This signifies doom for Africa. There seems to be no hope since the leaders who get enlightened like K do not live to change the situation for the better. The author seems to be suggesting that there is need for those in leadership to undergo a kind of transformation in their thinking and their way of doing things. The transformation needs to be drastic if the evils in society have to be done away with. But ironically the leaders are not willing to listen and change. They have no will power to deal with the problems that bedevil the African continent. Throughout the texts, the author reveals that K gets strange and mysterious stomach upsets, diarrhoea, emits bad smell and stinks underneath his arms. All this could be viewed as symbolizing the rottenness of his life and that of the other leaders of the society. The author has depicted the situation in the African states where crude capitalism has been adopted. This has resulted in political and economic pressure. The repercussions are catastrophic as revealed through K's view of the year 2058. Through this exposition, Mohamed manages to reveal how the African elites have lost identity and instead embraced European culture. There is a lack of cultural self-understanding especially among the class of Western educated and acculturated Africans.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed magical transformations as a literary technique to give an alternative means of depiction of the African situation. Mohamed the author of *Babu Alipofufuka*, utilizes African mythology to reveal the African cosmic perspective. He specifically gives the African understanding of the relationship between the dead and the living. The philosophy behind this is that, death is not the final separation between the living and the dead. The living, the dead and those yet to be born continue to interact. It has been shown that through magical transformations, the author has succeeded in depicting the social, economic, and cultural decay of his society. This has been revealed through the sharp contrast between K's lifestyle and that of the rest of the people as revealed by his resurrected grandfather. The author thus, has succeeded in utilizing magical transformations in delivering his message more forcefully and symbolically.

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