

Imagi(ni)ng People with Special Needs through Literary Artistry: An Analysis of the Oral Narrative Motif of the Princess Who Could Not Smile

By

Prof. Wangari Mwai

Department of Literature
Kenyatta University
PO BOX 43844, NAIROBI

E-mail: mwaiwang@gmail.com, wangaridoc@yahoo.com

Phone: +254- 722- 653- 745

Accepted 7 November, 2012

Abstract- This paper is developed from research in the oral narratives of the *Agikuyu*. The paper revisits the portrait of persons with special needs in a selected thematic area in Oral Literature, the motif of *The princess who could not smile*. After observing that Literature is a mirror reflection of what happens in society, we argue that it should also be a guide as to how society was, is and should be. The portrait of people with special needs in Literature therefore, is significant to how this category of people was viewed, is viewed and should be viewed. With reference to the variants of the narrative *The princess who could not smile*, the discussion argues that the literary artist has a very unique portrait of persons with special needs. Through scrutiny of literary creations we observe that people with special needs have a reservoir of knowledge that can salvage society from various trials and tribulations. The analysis warns us that we often ignore the potentials hidden in these persons and hence society continues to grapple with problems that could have been addressed if these potentials were tapped. Society is therefore challenged to decipher these potentials and propagate them to all and sundry so that this often ignored wealth is utilized to the well being of the society at large.

Keywords: Literature, oral artistry, motif, disabilities

1.0 Introduction

Literature is a verbal artistry whose content is imagined reality. The concept of Literature has been used as a label for all creative works of the human mind expressed in words. Thus, it is a tool for expressing ideas (Bitek P' Okot 1978:20). It is also an expression of a people's values. It is an art that uses words as its raw material, hence we have written and oral modes of this art. Written Literature comprises; the Novel, the Play, the Poem and the Short Story. The novel is written in prose form. Its length is the main characteristic that distinguishes it from the short story. The Short Story is otherwise; terse, pithy and basically poetic. The play is written with the purpose of being performed on stage. It has stage directions, is written in dialogue form wherein characters are given own words to express. Among other characteristics, the playwright gives instructions on how the characters should dress and how the stage should be set. Poetry is the most emotionally charged genre. Traditionally, poetry used rules that made it into verse. This poetry was acatalectic and followed strict rules of prosody. Total numbers of syllables

and lines were stylo-statistically analyzed. However, contemporary poetry need not be so. Free verse which is an expression of freedom in self expression is now in vogue.

Oral literature, currently labeled Orature is the unwritten form of Literature. It encompasses that which is composed, performed and transmitted orally and usually at the spur of the moment. Orature texts are created from some skeleton parts of the genres. Artists are believed to be embellishing these skeletons. The gift each artist has and the audience, determine how the flesh added is to be. This skeletal part of the song, story or a sub genre of a short form is called the motif.

The motif includes an action or an object. It is that to which an oral artist adds embellishments and creates a story to tell. The oral narrator has freedom to create at will to suit the setting of her sessions. This flexibility is dictated mainly by the audience – age, gender, abilities and challenges. A character can also be a motif. Characterization in literature and Orature borrows heavily from society. Most characters are people we come across in society or relate to in the supernatural realms; hence the gods and the spirits. Thus, Orature was and remains highly inclusive as regards audience and characterization. Characterization is therefore an art which the narrator may use to encourage, educate, advocate, and challenge among others. In this discussion we focus on persons with special needs as characters in the Oral narrative. Special Needs is used to refer to disabilities.

A **disability** may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, and developmental or some combination of these. Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An *impairment* is a problem in body function or structure; an *activity limitation* is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a *participation restriction* is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. A disability may occur during a person's lifetime or may be present from birth (World Health Organization).

In summary, persons with special needs include those: -

- (a) With intellectually ,mental-, physical, other health, visual and hearing impairments, deaf-blindness, emotional and behavioral disorders, speech and language disorders, learning disabilities, autism and multiple disabilities;
- (b) Who are gifted and talented.
- (c) Who are in need of care and protection

Most research findings indicate that in most parts of Africa, People with Disabilities (PwDs) continue to face multiple discrimination at home, in the community and society at large. They are faced with low quality and segregated education, chronic unemployment; poor access to public facilities and coupled with poor attitudes and limited inclusion. Most disabled persons, regardless of their age and gender, are prevented from making decisions that affect their daily lives. They experience oppression and violation of basic human rights on a daily basis. This discriminations, has been observed to penetrate communication and creative scenarios in where they have been found to be are negatively portrayed in language and in diverse genres of oral and written literature.

It has generally been believed that the oral narrative has linguistically been manipulated to portray the physically, mentally and otherwise challenged negatively. A good argument in this line of thought is the fact that in most African languages through which all narratives were originally transmitted, terms and words describing people with special needs have been derogatory and demeaning. For instance, in Kiswahili, most of the terms referring to such people fall in the KI- VI class which is an object class. For instance, it has been observed that in Kiswahili and other African languages, these members of society are categorized alongside none living things such as ; Kitu- Vitu(things) ; Kiwete- Viwete (The Lame) ; Kiziwi- Viziwi (The deaf) ; Kiti- Viti (Chairs) among others.

Literature and Orature always reflect the happenings in the surrounding social and other environment. Thus, this verbal art is shaped and influenced by society. Literature is thus a social institution, which can also transcend time and predict what is to come and in this way, it ends up being prophetic. But most literary artists are inspired by what they observe, thus, the happenings in society. The politics, economics and other pertinent issues of the artist's times become part of the artist's re-creation (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981). Its involvement with issues that affect people in their day to day situations have made Literature part and parcel of the life of all human beings. Persons with special needs are a major component of the social environment.

Literature is functional, whether in its written or oral forms it has utilitarian value. For instance, research has revealed that Orature has as its major function the promotion of social knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices. The Oral narrator is thus a social commentator.

When a writing or oral artist observes a person with special needs in the midst of his or her society or audience, their creative domain is aroused. This is what this article is interested in. We ask ourselves what the oral artist has been observing in us in relation to these very significant others in our society.

2.0 The Discussion

Persons who are physically, mentally and otherwise challenged, are present and thus of importance in our cultures. This is clearly depicted in Literature and Orature, which are modes of social communication and interaction. Literature in general and Orature in particular has been used to speak of and for the challenged persons. In our discussion, we intend to address the motif of the princess who could not smile and look at how the oral artist uses this motif to comment on society especially in relation to the social status of people with disabilities. The discussion pegs its argument to two narratives that give prominence to the challenged in society.

Looking anew at Oral narratives that have the challenged as characters, we realize that the Oral artist imaginatively manipulates language to portray images of such characters as key players in society. Here below I analyze two examples of variants of the motif "**the princess who could not smile**" from the Agikuyu community of Kenya.

The Examples

Variant One: Johana Kerimo an equivalent of Foolish John in English

Synopsis: *The main character is a princess or the daughter of a paramount chief who could not smile. Despite her overwhelming beauty, she has never smiled since she was born. However, as she approaches teenage and thus towards marriageable age, her parents become all the more worried because they think that kings and princes might never seek for her hand in marriage and would thus remain unmarried and would be a disgrace to the royal family. To test the waters, the Father declares a contest for her hand in marriage. It is publicly announced that any young man who makes the princess smile will not only marry her but will also inherit the chieftaincy and all the chief had. However, anyone who presents himself for the contest and fails was to face death at the gallows. Many men tried; young, old, rich, poor, fat, thin, and clowns except those with disabilities, but to no avail. Many families lost their sons in this competition until mothers discouraged their sons from trying the feat. When everyone had given up on ever marrying the girl, Johana the fool emerged from nowhere. Foolish John is a mongoloid a Mentally Handicapped case. Thus he was with no critical nor creative thinking and could make no rational decisions. Examples abound in the village how he had carried butter on his head which melted before he could reach home. This he had done after his mother had told him that goods are carried on the head and this made them lighter. On arriving home with a buttered face and clothes, his mother*

taught him to be tucking things such as butter nicely in a basket so that the sun does not destroy them. The following day, Johana was given a puppy by his uncle and it reached home dead because it had been neatly tucked in a basket. And when his mother told him that a puppy is best transported tied to the end of a string and the owner tugging it behind as he whistled to it as encouragement to follow him, Johana obeyed by doing the same to a piece of choice meat he had been sent to buy. That day, the village dogs had a feast. Johana's mother was getting tired and angry with her son. One day, she decided to chase him away from home after she sent him to the butchers to sell a cow and when he got there, he refused to take the money and clung to a beautiful goose in the butcher's compound. Johana's mother could not bear the loss and so away went sad Johana with the goose tightly tucked under his armpit. In this mood and position, Johana walked through his home. He bumped into people who harass him in attempts to stop him. Unknown to Johana, the goose had some mystical powers which made anyone who touched him get stuck. Foolish John ends up dragging behind him a chain of able bodied people people in funny positions and situations. Accidentally John and his crowd pass by the window where the princess is always sulking. The Princess is tickled by the spectacle and bursts out in laughter. Johana marries the princess and the King gives them his kingdom and property as promised and the two lived happily ever after.

Analysis:

The oral artist who created this story wants us to laugh at the society that has named the character with special needs foolish. By the end of the story, the feat the person they have labeled so for a long time overcomes is beyond all of them. The feat proves beyond able and coveted people when it comes to make others laugh, such as clowns, they are defeated and some even lose their lives in the process. They thus end up foolish in this competition. Johana's mother tries her best to train him. Johana is very obedient and seems to acquire the skills quite fast. It is interesting that he never does the opposite of the mother's wish; he is thus very obedient and immediately puts into practice what he has learnt. **Johana** admires the mystic bird maybe because they share this nature, something that the mother is ignorant about and thus foolish at. And when the mysteries merge, there is victory. Now it was the mother's turn to be taken care of in a palace by King **Johana**. The artist educates us that those whose intelligence we may question and make fun of may bear knowledge and skills beyond human understanding.

Variant Two: Kimandura

The daughter of a chief has similar characteristics as the princess above. Kimandura is a Physically Handicapped case, he is severely lame. The villagers have been laughing at him and describing his feet as converging at the knees but quarreling seriously at the feet. His feet look like flaps and as he walks, he leaves the way so clear that anybody can easily know where he went through. Because of disability he is isolated and does not even participate in the contest. Various able bodied people try the feat in

attempts to make the princess smile but, they fail and they are persecuted. Accidentally, the neglected Kimandura walks just as is usual of him and as he does so he clears the morning dew along his path. Oblivious of the effect of his walking style, he passes by the window where the sad princess sits at as she sulks to the whole world. His walk amuses the daughter of the chief as she looks out of the window and she lets out a hearty laughter. The chief and his wife are delighted and they keep their promise. Soon after, a wedding feast takes place. The two marry and live happy ever after.

Analysis

Kimandura is a laughing stock. He is even given a symbolic name which suggests carelessness. It connotes one who is destructive, who leaves things in a lot of mess whenever he passes by. May be at home he was known for causing things fall and even break. When everybody was busy contesting for the hand of the chief's daughter in marriage, none of them would have considered Kimandura a contestant. However, as fate would have it, when all others are tired and have given up, Kimandura walks in at the nick of time. With his God given physical challenge, he tickles the girl to laughter and not only saves her from a long time misery of a life without laughter, but also salvages the parents from worrying about their mysterious daughter.

3.0 Conclusions.

The in depth analysis of the two stories generates a number of lessons to be learnt by all listening to these narratives. The oral narrator tells us about Johana's mother. She imaginatively portrays her as a character who makes attempts to be inclusive, she sends her son to fulfill diverse tasks at various places such as the market just like one would send a normal child. However, Johana does not measure up to his mother's expectation. But the fact that by the end of the story the narrator gives the image of Johana as one who accomplishes what ordinary people fail to do, then the Oral Artist is exonerating him from blame. It emerges that the artist is imaginatively asking those who are parents and guardians of such children to rise to their levels and prepare them through appropriate trainings.

So, therefore, it is not Johana who fails, but his mother and the society in general. We fail to rise to the level of the people with special needs; we blame them and label them foolish, and ostracize them from social activities. Yet, according to the oral artist, we are the foolish ones, for we do not take time to identify the wealth of knowledge, multiple intelligences, skills and competencies and abilities hidden in them and decipher the best ways and approaches of empowering them all the more in their areas of strength.

Thus, the Oral artist is satirical. By the end of the two narratives, she makes us laugh at ourselves when we realize that we might think that we are able but we are also unable and lack talent that can only be found in those we have neglected. The Oral Artist makes the challenged persons visible and heroic over the able bodied by overcoming tasks that seem insurmountable and even lead to the death of able

persons. The artist is also aware of what the challenged persons undergo in normal life. They are brought to the limelight and are utilized as a mirror through which we look at and begin to seek and devise ways of making life more inclusive of those with special needs and thus break the barriers. We are led to begin considering how to value the challenged persons for what they are and what they can do in and for society. The Artist empowers those with disabilities from a point of social powerlessness. Unlike some of us who normally give such people sympathy, the Oral Artist avoids such and gives them opportunities to exploit their potentials and play their roles. The oral artist also challenges our concentration on addressing issues and disabilities when they affect the high and mighty. The princess herself had a psychological disability which the whole society engages in addressing without thinking of the other with similar or worse challenges. They are only realized when they help salvage those in power and thus the society at large.

Thus, the Oral Artists becomes imaginatively inclusive of these people in a very strategic manner through sensitizing us on the presence and the capacity of the challenged. The Oral Artistry thus introduces us to the artist who is an educator with diversities who; considers the audience, diversifies characterization and is adaptive. People with special needs receive opportunity to feel worthy, acceptable, capable and included. The onus is now on us as educators to search ourselves and find out the extent to which we can also be inclusive by rising to the levels of the Johanas and Kimanduras of this world so that the wealth in their potentials is tapped to the benefit of entire societies. The two narratives are

therefore great lessons on disability mainstreaming in our societies.

Bibliography

1. Anyidoho, K et al (eds) 1985 Interdisciplinary Dimensions of African Literature Annually selected papers of the African Literature Association (ALA) 1982 Three continents Press, Inc. Washington, DC
2. Atkins, G.D. et al (Eds) 1989 Contemporary Literary Theory The University of Massachusetts Press U.S.A.
3. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
4. Gardner, H (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books
5. Musolino, G. M. & Feeban, P. (2004, Spring). Enhancing diversity through mentorship: The nurturing potential of service learning. *Journal of Physical Therapy Education*, 18 (1), 29 - 41
6. Mwebi, B. M., & Brigham, S. (2009, Fall). Preparing North American pre-service teachers for global perspectives: An international teaching practicum experience in Africa. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 55(3), 415-428.
7. Okpewho, I. 1992: *African Oral Literature*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP
8. Wood, D. (1988). *How children think and learn*. New York: Basil Blackwell.