

# The Position of the Formal Essay in Kiswahili Literature in Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the position of the formal essay vis-a-vis other literary genres from the perspective of genre hierarchy. In order to get a clear picture of any literary genre it is advantageous and practical to conduct such a survey in institutions of learning because this is where there will be a concentration of consumers of reading materials. In Kenya the organization that decides the materials that will be consumed in Educational Institutions is called Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development. Decisions made by K.I.C.D. in regards to selection of texts that are used in institutions of learning has a serious ramification in terms of encouraging writing in the said genres or even competence in the same since learners cannot in the first place understand what they have not been exposed to. K.I.C.D. has a broad mandate to oversight curriculum at the level of Pre-School, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools and Technical Institutions. In regard to curriculum issues universities both public and private have their own mechanisms which are over sighted by the Commission for Higher Education. This paper posits that the Kiswahili Formal Essay should also be included in the curriculum at the secondary school level so as to expose learners to more diverse expressions from writers who have chosen to do so in a genre that has not been popularised by the regulating authorities. The Formal Essay in Kiswahili Language that has not had the advantage of being an examinable literary type in the Kenyan system. From the foregoing explanation this is what has led this genre to be less conspicuous than the other genres such as the novel, the play, the short story and poetry. The decision on what genres or texts will be used in the school curriculum has far reaching effects as we shall see in the discussion on this paper.

**Keywords:** Formal Essay, Fringe Literature, Mainstream Literature, Genre Hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

Artists choose their vehicle of expression so that they can effectively reach their audience. That is why Oral Literature although still maintaining its importance in society had to partly transcend to Written Literature. In Kiswahili literary expressions all the known genres are well represented and are ever on a positive trajectory. The same cannot be said of the Formal Essay. Like a flash of lightning that interrupts a dark skyline, a few works have been written in this genre followed by a great silence. This paper argues that there is no justification for treating this genre as fringe literature while mainstreaming other genres by examining them in educational institutions.

Kiswahili Scholars in the literary world have over time continued to express themselves in the known genres that are in existence. However, some genres seem to be consigned to insignificance while authors are very productive regarding certain genres. The Formal Essay in Kiswahili Scholarship has not received as much attention as the other genres. This paper attempts to explain the reasons behind this attitude that brings to the fore the idea of mainstream literature and fringe literature. Gualtieri (2018) explains that:

The history of the essay as a literary form has its origins in the Cultural Revolution of the Renaissance and is closely linked to the emergence of the new kinds of writing about the self and new ways of thinking about the world that was part of it. From its very beginning, the genre spanned a variety of forms of writing, styles, and themes that included both the literary autobiography of Montaigne's essays (1580-88) and the point-

like maxims of Bacon's *Essays* (1597), digressions and directness, informal reflections on old age and friendship as well as political analysis of the conflict between science and religion. (49-67).

Gualtieri's reference to the essay form refers to this genre as contributed to by writers who used the English Language it is a much newer form in Kiswahili Literature and additionally it is not as widespread as the other genres.

Hedberg J quoted in Lohaffer (1989) posits that: "Essays differ from short stories in that they consist of facts sifted through the author's imagination and have an unlimited scope in terms of subject and form" (29) Holman defines the essay as: "A moderately brief prose discussion of a restricted topic. Because of the wide application of the term, no satisfactory definition can be arrived at; nor can a wholly acceptable classification of essay types be made." (86) Nonetheless, Winchester and Weathers (1968) goes ahead to discuss various essay types such as the Popular Article, the Professional Essay, The Personal Essay, The Critical Review, and the Formal Essay that is the focus of the discussion of this paper. They associate the Formal Essay with a serious purpose, orderliness, and a dispassionate style.

This observation by Hedberg is in tandem with the protean nature of this form. Unlike its broader cousin the novel, the Formal Essay can weave through many small issues that affect both the writer and his society. The issues under focus would be factual as seen from the author's perspective unlike in the novel where factual issues are treated creatively.

The East African literary scene regarding Kiswahili Publications has generally been very dynamic. At the onset of independence in Kenya (1963), the publishing houses were quite few. The most renowned publishing house that catered for the region was called the East Africa Publishing House. When the East African Community collapsed in 1977 each of the three East African countries started their publishing concerns. In Kenya, the void was filled by the Kenya Literature Bureau which continued with this mandate and was soon joined by other albeit private publishing companies.

The growth of Kiswahili Publications in Kenya was spurred by policy changes that made Kiswahili a compulsory subject to be examined in Secondary Schools throughout the Republic of Kenya. This created a big demand for Swahili books as class readers and texts to be examined in national examinations. Initially, there was a phenomenal growth in the novels, plays, and poetry. The Short story genre was a latecomer in these dynamics as it was included in the secondary school syllabus years later. This policy shift of examining the short story genre at secondary school level created a big demand for this genre and soon many short story anthologies were written to address this need. It is notable that at no time did the Swahili Formal Essay become an examinable subject in the national examinations at either the Primary or Secondary school level.

In a region where reading culture is not very entrenched, these policy decisions affected the growth of the Formal Essay because there was no ready audience for the genre and the authors had to release their works to a liberal audience who were spoilt for choice.

Swahili Scholarship has easily embraced particular forms of essays like the popular article, the professional article, the personal essay, and the critical review. This has been made easy by the fact that this type of essays can easily be produced in journals whose readership is guaranteed or daily newspapers where they can be tucked in amidst other head-line grabbing issues.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Swahili scholarship, the Formal Essay as a genre has not been given much attention. This is unlike in other societies where the essay, in general, has been a prevalent and popular vehicle of expression.

To illustrate V.S. Naipaul a renowned author wrote tens of essays that were very well received by the reading Public. Some of these famous essays are: *The Return of Eva Peron with the killings in Trinidad* (1974), *North of South-An African Journey* (1978) amongst others.

Another Essayist who is more recognised as a novelist is Ngugi wa Thiong'o. To his credit are two powerful volumes of Essays namely; *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and *Writers in Politics*. (1981) In Kiswahili Literature the Essay as a genre has not attracted artists as compared to the forms like the Novel, Play or even Poetry. The authors who have written in this genre are Shaaban Robert, Mohammed Said Abdullah and Faraj Dumila.

Shaaban Robert has written *Insha naMashairi* (1967) and *Kielezo cha Fasili* (1968). However he is more famous for his novels such as *Kusadikika*, (1960) *Kufikirika* (1967) and *UtuboraMkulima* (1968) and his biography; *Wasifuwa Siti Bint Saad* (1960). Similarly Mohammed Said Abdullah who has written Several Essays in an anthology titled: *Insha kutoka Tanzania* is more famous for his detective novels such as *Duniani kuna Watu* (1973), *Kisima cha Giningi* (1960) and others. And finally Faraj Dumila confined himself to the essay penning *Insha za Hekima* (1979) which received lukewarm reception from the reading public.

### Theoretical Perspectives

This paper is anchored on Genre Theory. The fact that it is focused on a specific genre and makes argument around it, it becomes necessary to position the said genre in its cosmos. This will enable the argument to be properly grounded. Upstone(2017)explains:

The idea of genre-the grouping of texts by their essential properties-has been central to literary studies from their earliest beginnings. The ancient Greek Philosopher Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in around 335 BCC ...is the earliest text to consider how we divide literary works in order to outline their essential features (pg24)

After this foundation was laid other scholars like Fowler (1982) and others went ahead to write on theories of genres and types. Among the contributors to the debate on genres was Todorov (2000) who made this apt observation:

Genres are thus entities that can be described from two different Viewpoints, that of empirical observation and that of abstract analysis. In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is Institutionalised and Individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification (pg 198)

Authors have thus endeavored to define the essay in a general sense while others have classified them. Arege (2007) describes the essay thus

An essay is a creative work that has been written. The work can focus on any issue and can be written in a variety of ways and in different contexts depending on the author. In the context of a school an essay is a small text that is written as an exercise to be marked by a teacher (.pg 16)

Arege delves into details and expounds on many types of essays that are basically constrained within the secondary school curriculum in the Kenyan Education System. In the school system there is no collection of essays that are considered for critiquing like other genres such as the novel, the short story and the Play. This is paper however argues for the inclusion of the Formal Essay to be read and examined like other literary genres as opposed to the present scenario where as explained essays are written exercises, where creative abilities of learners are tested.

### DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Swahili Scholars have generally used other genres apart from the essay to express their ideas. The three essayists that are focused in this paper are Faraj Dumila who was a journalist and is credited for writing several essays in a collection called *Insha za Hekima* (1979), Shaaban Robert who has written several essays and books and Mohammed Said Abdullah who has written several essays in a collection called *Insha kutoka Tanzania*. It is notable that both Shaaban Robert and Mohammed Said Abdullah are more famous for their novels and not for their essays.

This sub-genre is likely a victim of Genre Hierarchy. This has to do with how different genres are ranked in importance from a cultural position. This of course has changed over time. During the Renaissance paintings were highly ranked and as society continued changing and social-economics dynamics came into play the issue of generic hierarchy lost its gleam.

In the Kenyan context, curriculum development is very key in popularising a genre. This in turn affects the reception that a particular genre receives from the reading public. This is so because publishing entities are businesses and would therefore not produce works that are stillborn in terms of marketability and reception by the reading public.

This is what has afflicted the formal essay in the Kenyan context. The results are that this sub-genre is seriously underrepresented in the literary sphere. This problem is accentuated by the very nature of this sub-genre whose style is unconventional when compared to the more familiar genres.

Winchester and Weathers (1968) remarks as follows about the Formal Essay:

The formal essay is characterized primarily by its serious purpose, its public orientation, its orderliness, and its dispassionate style. The serious purpose of the essayist is actually what brings the formal essay into being. The form emerges from the desire of the writer to speak lastingly and meaningfully to a serious-minded audience on a subject of some importance. An essential aspect of this serious purpose is the essayist's desire to educate rather than to entertain; to stimulate intellectually rather than simply to delight (107)

The nature of this sub-genre then makes it difficult to endear it to the majority of the reading public outside the constraint of learning institutions because most readers would be intent on being entertained or thrilled by creative works. In the Kenyan context, this fact is explained by the initial encounter of essays in the school context. Mbonde (1974) explains:

*Jamii ya watu hawana au wametokwa na hamu ya kusoma Insha kwa sababu aghalabu ya insha walizopata kuzisoma, Hata zile zilizoandikwa na waandishi maarufu wa Kiswahili, ziliandikwa kwa ubaridi wa uzembe uliosababisha wasomaji waone kuwa insha kama ni kisomo maalum, ni chapwa wala hakiileti faida.....labda vile vile kwa sababu insha ni sanaa ngeni katika Kiswahili-maandishi yenye uenyeji mzuri tangu hapo zama na dahari ya Waswahili yalikuwa sanaa, mashairi na tenzi.(97)*

The reading public in Swahili Scholarship have lost interest in the essay form likely because of the kind of essays they have encountered that have not elicited any excitement from the readers because of the cavalier attitude displayed by the writers. He avers that lack of interest in this genre (among Kiswahili readers) is likely because it is a newer genre that is unfamiliar to readers unlike poetry that has existed for centuries. (Translated)

Mbonde argues that most readers in Swahili scholarship are not so familiar with the Formal Essay and are more attracted to poetry which because of its long history they find it easier to relate to.

However, the formal essay cannot be ignored in terms of its thematic contribution to the East African Literary Scene. Three Essayists stand out conspicuously in this regard. They are Shaaban Robert, Faraji Dumila, and Mohammed Said Abdulah. The trio is more famous for their work in other genres but their contribution in the Formal Essay is worth to be noted.

A very brief survey of selected essays by the aforementioned essayists illustrates the relevance and dynamism of this genre. In Kiswahili Scholarship this genre has proved its worth thematically and stylistically as a brief revisit of the works of the selected authors will illustrate.

Besides the many novels that Shaaban Robert has written, he has, also, authored several essays. In his collections in *Kielelezo cha Fasili*, he delves on many issues such as etiquette, reputation, and attitude towards

work. He cautions those in authority against using language that can cause discord in society or ignite hostility. In addressing this issue, he uses the analogy of the bee and the way it is selective to flowers when looking for nectar. He explains that bees naturally avoid poisonous plants that would destroy them instead opting for flowers with nectar that will sustain them. Robert uses this analogy to explain that leaders should avoid toxic speech that can create problems in their country.

Regarding fake news that have caused a lot uproar in many countries Roberts (1967) comments as follows:

*Bahari moja ya hatari katika dunia ni uongo Mwongo mmoja huweza kupoteza na kuangamiza Watu kadhaa wa kadhaa .Baadhi ya madhara hutokea Duniani kwa sababu ya uongo.(pg1)*

One great danger facing the world is fake news One liar is capable of misleading and destroying several people. Some problems and commotions In the world are as a result of fake news (translated)

Fake News have become a global concern. They have been used as campaign tool to malign competitors with a view of denying them good will and popularity from the public. At the social level prominent personalities have been maligned when falsehood has been peddled against them with the ultimate aim of ruining their public standing.

Regarding shylocks Roberts (1967) explains:

*Kila mtu hufahamu habari za hila zake chafu, Ukatili,ubaya na ukavu wa moyo wake.Ana Umaskini wa tabia,moyo wa wema,kweli na uaminifu(pg16)*

Everyone understands his cunning ways, his ruthlessness and heartlessness. He suffers poverty of the heart, good habits and honesty (Translated)

Though writing in the last century Roberts acknowledges the havoc that has been visited upon individuals by shylocks. With the advent of technology and ease of borrowing coupled with difficult economic situations in most developing lands the problems visited on individuals and families by shylocks is phenomenal.

Dumila in his part also implores his readers to have a positive attitude in their work. Besides this subject, he also remarks on family relationships cautioning parents against giving their children conditional love. He argues that this attitude can be the genesis of future rebellions from young ones.

One of Dumila's essays (1979) is on healthy competition. He avers:

*Kweli ushindani una faida yake na pia kuna dhara katika kushindana.Ushindani ukichukuliwa kwa njia nzuri huleta faida nyingi katika kufaninikisha nchi lakini ukichukuliwa kwa njia isiyofaa huleta madhara chungu nzima.(pg10)*

It is true that competition has its benefits but it also has disadvantages. If competition is well done it bring about many benefits to a country. Unhealthy competition though can be very harmful to a country. (Translated)

This is indeed a timeless issue. Even in the present world unhealthy competitions in the political arena has caused a lot of friction in some countries and in some cases resulting to bloodshed. Even at the community level this has led to needless strifes that would have been avoided if competitors accepted that not everyone can be a winner.

Mohammed S.M. in Mbonde (ed)1974 has written several essays ranging from marriage issues to the environment. He expounds on these issues quite competently and makes a great effort to use figurative language to endear himself to his readers.



In ‘*Mchuchu si mchumba wa kuo*’ Mohammed dwells on the issue of morality and marriage. He decries the wave of liberalism in regard to dressing styles and remarks that presently the prevalent mode of dressing among young people is not endearing to the old generation.

It is notable however that in Swahili Scholarship the Formal essays require to be invigorated so that it is not frozen in time in terms of the issues that it addresses. This is rightly so because it's a form that addresses issues directly and there is no shortage of issues to be addressed such as tribalism, nationhood, culture, globalisation, and so on.

From the foregoing discussion it is quite evident that this form like its counterparts the novel, the play or even poetry it can address a multiplicity of issues in both an effective way thematically and stylistically.

This analysis leads to the question why is this genre not as vibrant as the novel, the play or even poetry in Kiswahili Scholarship? The fact that the Formal Essay has not been integrated in the school’s system is a serious setback. At both Primary School level and Secondary School level what is available is the composition where students are required to express themselves on a given subject. The Essay as a genre in its formal manifestation where an author delves on a given subject is not present at this level. This is significant because when a subject area is examinable automatically ready readers are available and consequently writers and publishers will definitely warm up towards the subject and make it a dynamic aspect of the curriculum. The reverse is true that is if a certain genre is not examinable in the school system and therefore not available in the curriculum it automatically will not attract significant number of the readers at the school level consequently students will not be acquainted with aspects of the said genre.

This can easily be illustrated by a study carried out by the writer in the year 2000. At this point in time the Kiswahili Short story was not examinable in Secondary Schools in Kenya. The objective of the researcher was to compare competencies in three prose genres namely the short story, the novel and the play amongst university students taking Kiswahili in selected Public Universities.

The researcher prepared a simple questionnaire where he required the students to indicate the numbers of the books they know in each genre and the ones they have read. They were also required to indicate the salient features of the genres in regard to structure and thematic scopes. The results were tabulated and the students’ scores rates at percentages. In regard to competencies concerning the genres the scores were as follows: Novels 70% Plays 80% and short stories 68%.

The researcher concluded that the insignificant numbers of short stories available to the target audience at the time of the research compared to the other genres resulted in them having scanty information concerning them. They therefore ended having poorer scores in that genre compared to the others. One can confidently hypothesis that if a similar study is carried out today likely the scores will vary significantly since the short story genre is now entrenched in the secondary school curriculum and is examinable. It is therefore available and familiar to the students.

The same can be concluded about the formal essay. The fact that they are not examinable in the Secondary school system means that they are unfamiliar to students at that level. This also means that publishers are unwilling to republish formal essays as they are unsure whether the venture will be profitable to them.

This study analysed publication and republication where relevant of Novels and Formal Essays of the previously cited authors and came out with the results indicated below:

Table 1.3.1 Publication records of selected formal essays and novels by three authors cited in this study

AUTHOR	Genre type and title	Publisher	First Published	Subsequent Publications
Faraj Dumila	<i>Essays-Insha za Hekima</i>	Kenya Literature Bureau	1976	1979

Shaaban Robert	Essays-Insha na Mashairi	Nelson East Africa	1971	-
Shaaban Robert	Novel- <i>Kusadikika</i>	Evans Brothers	1951	1971,1974,1978,1989,1990
Shaaban Robert	Novel- <i>Kufikirika</i>	Oxford University Press	1967	1968,1969,1972,1974,1976,1978

The above table clearly indicates that Kiswahili Formal Essays are not usually republished after their initial publication. This is explained by the fact that publications are demand driven and therefore where readers for a particular genre are hard to come by a natural attrition will follow. As noted from the Table the two novels by Shaaban Robert enjoyed several subsequent re-publications. This can be explained by the fact that the novel is an examinable genre and therefore it is in high demand from readers and consequently its re-production become possible. As for the Formal Essays they end up not being re-produced because they are not in demand from the reading public.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing discussion, one can effortlessly conclude that the Swahili Formal Essay is not fringe literature in the sense of being less dynamic than other genres. The fact is it has been consigned to its insignificance by a reading public that is unaware of its dynamism and by curriculum experts who have not been innovative enough to dig deeper into this generic mine and discover a true gem.

It is important that Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development adopts an open mind and considers this genre for teaching at the Secondary school level. This action will echo what happened to the Kiswahili Short story that was largely unknown before the year 2000 and the present reality where it is a dynamic genre that is ever being produced by publishing houses. It can therefore be argued that a decision to have this genre in the curriculum will in a matter of time make publishing entities to produce works in this genre in big quantities thus enriching the curriculum by allowing learners to enjoy diversity in terms of style and thematic concerns.

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