

Integration of Culture into Teaching of English: A Case of Ole Kulet's *Blossoms of the Savannah*

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Abstract: Globally, no single culture is perfect or self-sufficient. Cultural development involves building on the positive cultural aspects and discarding the negative ones, mostly through inter-cultural contacts. Kenya being a multicultural country has learners from diverse cultural backgrounds, something that needs to be taken care of by teachers. However, there is little research in this critical area. The purpose of this paper was to find out the cultural norms, values and practices inherent in modern Maasai culture that impede girl-child education as seen in the set book *Blossoms of the Savannah*. The paper adopted a qualitative design and case study research methodology while utilizing radical feminism as the main theoretical framework. The raw data was collected using content analysis of the novel due to the fact that it is a set book in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (K.C.S.E) English course. The findings include unemployment in families, materialistic nature of modern society, school drop-outs due to early marriages, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), domestic violence against women among others. The findings are useful to curriculum developers, parents, teachers of English language, and students. The study recommends that the curriculum should incorporate even more culture-related novels to provide a wider forum for discussion of such issues in education as well as cater for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Key words: misogyny, girl-child, beliefs, practices, education

I. INTRODUCTION

Kenya is a multicultural country with close to 62 ethnic and linguistic cultures ((Gudu et al, 2016). Culture is hence a resource to Kenyan people because of rich cultural heritage. Teaching of the diverse cultures to secondary school learners helps to inculcate intercultural competence. However, culture can also be destructive to education due to inherent retrogressive beliefs and practices.

Factors inhibiting girl-child education have for a long time been attributed to traditional cultures, especially in African settings. Indeed, modernity (precisely modern education and urbanization)) as seen in texts such as *The River and the Source* (Ogolla, M.) and *Coming to Birth* (Oludhe, M.) has been depicted as the best solution towards emancipation of women from repugnant cultural beliefs and practices.

The new Kenyan secondary school set book *Blossoms of the Savannah* presents issues inhibiting girl-child education with special reference to Maasai culture in Kenya. This is important because it gives students an opportunity to discuss not only the problems but also possible solutions. The modern setting of the story serves as a reminder that it is not time to

relax and assume everything is okay for problems facing women keep on re-inventing themselves as societies develop.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Radical Feminism

Before understanding radical feminism, it is important to first of all come to terms with the meaning of feminism in general. Vukoic (2013) asserts that feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies that seek to advance welfare of women. This definition indicates that feminism is a very broad concept that is also in constant change. Indeed leading theorists have christened these changes “waves” pointing to plurality of the concept.

There are other critics like Hannan (2007) who look at the waves as branches of feminism seeking to foreground different aspects of the larger feminist movement. The first one seeks to reverse gender roles assigned to women by patriarchy. Patriarchy controls rules and regulations governing many societies and women in particular. While it is good for any society to have rules, feminists disagree on idea of assigning women second-class status hidden in gender roles governing those societies. For instance, Adichie (2016) believes that all gender roles are social in nature and hence can be performed by both men and women. If it is a home, both men and women should be involved in all domestic chores such as cooking, sweeping etcetra. The only roles that may not be shared are those that are biological like child bearing.

The second branch is more or less a re-assertion of the first one since it advocates for change of the gender roles. Feminists note that the roles are socially conditioned and, therefore, the same conditioning can be applied to change them. The third branch looks at women as independent individuals, that is, they can make it alone if well empowered.

Towards the end of 1960s and beginning of early 1970s, another group of feminists harboured the view that the aforementioned plurality had bred confusion about the real meaning and objectives of feminism. Led by theorists like Simone de Beavour, they sought not to define feminism further but to reassert its original meaning and intentions. During a conference held in New York in 1968, these feminists stated that women were the first human beings to be enslaved and hence denied their humanity by men. All other forms of slavery such as colonialism, capitalism, slave trade etcetra were offshoots of that slavery (The Feminists, (1969).

The resultant philosophy of this group was known as radical feminism.

Radical feminism, therefore, is what Thomson (2001) calls feminism per se, that is, an unwavering struggle to achieve human status for women in male-dominated societies while respecting the rights/humanity of other community members. The prime focus of radical feminism is elimination of male supremacy/patriarchy because it is the source of female subjugation. It can be noted that radical feminism is a kind of middle ground the feminists struck between the various strands of feminism that were threatening to distort the whole concept. Radical feminism has also helped to restore a consistent focus in the activities of the feminist movement, that is, the fight against patriarchy.

The novel *Blossoms of the Savannah* presents a number of female characters engaged in this kind of struggle against male domination in Maasai community of Kenya – the setting of the story.

III. EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

One of the greatest African writers is Chinua Achebe who has beautifully raised the issue of patriarchy as seen in the cultural communities he has created. Beginning with *Things Fall Apart*, it is clear that the pre-colonial African community of Umuofia is intolerably patriarchal to women. The male supremacy symbolised by Okonkwo's physical power and ruthlessness is a clear vindication of what feminists have been saying against male supremacy.

Hassan (2016) notes that even in Achebe's later novel, *Arrow of God*, women are simply men's slaves. They compare very well to Okonkwo's young wife in *Things Fall Apart* who receives a thorough beating for delaying to prepare the evening meal. Through a woman like Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart*, the reader realizes that women do not even have control over their sexuality. The masculine Okonkwo has no time to seduce her when he regards her as a potential wife. He simply finds her on the village path, carries her to his hut and from there on she becomes his wife.

In an interesting reading of Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Lubungu (2020) observes that women characters are portrayed both negatively and positively. On the negative side there is Niakoro who has accepted her feeble second-class status the male dominated society has assigned to women. When she realizes Adjibidji is showing signs of getting involved in the struggle for workers' rights alongside men, she asks: 'why are you always poking your nose in the affairs of men?' (Sembene, 1962).

On the positive side there is Penda who leads women in a workers' strike just like a man. Her leadership qualities and especially her fearlessness in the face of soldiers also compare quite well to those of men. It dismantles the patriarchal belief that women are weak and cowardly. Even though to some degree Penda's bravery injects romanticism in the story, it helps to drive the feminist agenda the narrative is propagating.

The novel *Blossoms of the Savannah* has adopted the same dual view of women in its handling of the feminist project. There are those who have accepted subjugation of men and those who vehemently oppose it.

IV. CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IMPEDING GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN BLOSSOMS OF THE SAVANNAH

The central problem in Henry Kulet's novel is a bizarre socio-cultural tussle between a father named Ole Kaelo and his two young daughters, Resian and Taiyo. On one hand, the girls are holding firmly onto their dream of attaining university education while on the other, the father wants them to abandon the dream, undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and get married to old men. What are the motivating factors behind the father's behaviour? As the story unfolds, answers to this question reveal a host of issues undermining girl-child education in both modern and traditional settings.

Ole Kaelo's retrenchment at the beginning of the story positions unemployment at the centre of factors impeding girl-child education. By all standards, Ole Kaelo has been a modern, hardworking and responsible father for the "thirty or so years" he has lived and worked in Nakuru (p.11). He joined Agribix Limited Company as a clerk and rose to the rank of Commercial Manager before his retrenchment. He drives a pick-up and loves reading newspapers, his reading glasses "perched upon the tip of his nose" (p.180). As a civilised father, he has always known what to do for the daughters: "bring them up, care for them, educate them and guarantee their safety at all times" (P. 111). He hates repugnant cultural beliefs and practices. For example when clan elders pour scorn on his monogamous status, he dismisses them as "megalomaniacs" (P.13).

What the story reveals here is that whenever unemployment strikes in a family, parents (especially fathers), begin looking at their daughters as sources of wealth. That is why Ole Kaelo has lined up his daughters as the next sources of livelihood. Rather than sell his pick-up or any other asset and invest in his new business interests, he chooses to marry off Resian, his nineteen-year-old daughter, to a rich criminal by the name Oloisudori. This decision is so despicable that after taking the dowry, the truth behind the horrible step he has taken starts haunting him. He realizes that he has dimmed the girl's dream of attaining university education besides exposing her to a murky world of corruption and murder (Oloisudori is a poacher, robber, and an assassin besides other shadowy activities). The father starts experiencing sleepless nights, crying "silently and bitterly" (p.108).

Closely connected to the above is the materialistic culture bedeviling modern Maasai society. Ole Kaelo's decisions may, at face value, be attributed to joblessness but that is just part of the problem. His interaction with the immensely rich Oloisudori reveals his veneration for such rich people. This prospective son-in-law has "business interests" in agriculture, finance, tourism, import and export, mining, and motor trade.

He still gets time to be a poacher, smuggler, robber, and extortionist. All these are common sources of wealth in today's world. Few people who subscribe to "today's life" like Ole Kaelo see any problem with that. That is why the father justifies his actions by arguing that there is nothing wrong with his daughter getting married to a criminal. He shamelessly rationalizes that even those who have looted the country through corruption scandals like Anglo-Leasing and Goldenberg are still "enjoying fruits of their labour" (p.194). Therefore as a typical Kenyan, he is simply following suit.

It is no wonder when Oloisudori visits the would-be parents-in-law, he displays a rare show of financial might. He arrives in a convoy of four four-wheel drive cars and a pick-up. He is dressed in "a blue pin-striped designer business suit" (P.177). He adorns many ludicrous items like a golden watch, bracelet and brooch. One of the men accompanying him is even said to have a golden tooth. The materialistic Ole Kaelo is awed so much that he stammers as he welcomes Oloisudori thus: "Welcome to the humble abode of your friend and bro...er er...fa...er." (ibid). This humour helps to paint modern Kenya as a world where immense wealth is a passport to anything you may wish to have or do. The climax of this ostentation comes when Oloisudori drives the prospective parents-in-law around his six palatial homes scattered in various towns (he has set aside one for Resian). The mesmerized parents get fully convinced that their daughter is no doubt going to lead a wonderful life.

Ole Kaelo's bewilderment and awestruck state before Oloisudori, therefore, leaves the reader convinced that the girl-child is often a victim of today's moral decadence couched in materialism. Modern wealth as a product of western civilization is ironically fuelling beliefs and practices that undermine girls such as F.G.M., forced marriages, sexual abuse and physical violence. Resian, for instance, is assaulted by the father for refusing to marry Oloisudori.

Perhaps the most interesting factor imbedding girl-child education that emerges from this story is distortion of traditional culture. Primitive acts such as early and forced marriages have for a long time been attributed to traditional culture. Here the story blames them on activities of greedy individuals masquerading as cultural purists. Mama Milanoi (Ole Kaelo's wife), recalls that in ancient days, authentic Maasai culture was sensitive to the welfare of the girl child. It would not have been possible for the husband to marry off the daughter to a man old enough to be her father. Upon receiving her complaint, community elders would have "fined him together with his purported son-in-law" (P.117). This is a clear demonstration that as time moves, some cultures actually deteriorate in terms of girls' welfare. It is a very strange phenomenon indeed.

Due to low status accorded to girls in many African societies, provision of education is still skewed in favour of boys. Few people believe that girls can excel in anything beyond the domestic scene, and on their own. That is why Maasai parents

like Ole Supeyo have taken their sons to school (two are university graduates) while all the daughters have been "circumcised and married off to prominent elders in Nasila." (p.21). The narrator further says among the Maasai, the term "children" always refers to girls irrespective of their age (p.175). Even when they become adults and marry, women still display "childlike dependence" on husbands like the case of Mama Milanoi (p.29).

The presence of *Emakererei*, a successful and independent woman in the story, deflates this rather absurd cultural assumption. She is well educated (a veterinary officer), a ranch manager and gender activist. Apart from saving disadvantaged girls such as Ole Kaelo's daughters, *Emakererei's* work is a clear testimony that if given equal opportunity, the girl child has potential to contribute significantly to development of the society.

V. CONCLUSION

Curriculum planners made a wise decision to incorporate this novel in Kenyan secondary school English course. It provides students with a chance to expand their knowledge of the gender equality debate as well as develop positive attitudes towards girl-child education. It is hoped that teachers will take this opportunity to elucidate fruitful discussion of this topic in classrooms. It is worthwhile to incorporate even more books of this kind in secondary school English courses.

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