



SIGNIFICATION OF HIV/AIDS IN BABU OMAR'S *KALA TUFAHA*

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ABSTRACT

Popular fiction takes literary ideas to the masses and 'is meant to fulfill the spiritual enjoyment of all, it preaches values of equality and material wellbeing for all' (Wanjala, 214). As a subgenre of popular fiction, Kenyan AIDS novels play a didactic role and are a useful literary intervention against a life threatening illness. Examples of AIDS themed novels in Kenya include Carolyn Adalla's *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* (1993), Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague* (2000), Wahome Mutahi's *The House of Doom* (2004), Francis Imbuga's *Miracle of Remera* (2004), Joseph Situma's *The Mysterious Killer* (2001), and Moraa Gitaa's *Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* (2008). Kenyan prose fiction written in Kiswahili has also made a significant contribution in representing AIDS. Babu Omar's *Kala Tufaha* (2004) and William Mkufya's *Ua La Faraja* (2005) are exemplary in their literary representation of the pandemic. While the novels written in English have received commensurate critical attention, for instance, (Muindu, 2014), there is a dearth of critical interpretation of the Kiswahili texts. The paper is an analysis of Babu Omar's *Kala Tufaha* which takes as its central problem the signification of AIDS in the novel. The examination of these significations through Judith Butler's concept of linguistic performativity, where discourses bring into being what they name, offers fresh insight into novelistic interventions against AIDS. The paper appropriates Butler's concepts to the discursive formation of illness identities and the construction of the diseased corporeality in discourse. It enriches the understanding of the function of the novel in fostering better conceptualization of the illness and it is a modest contribution to the existing scholarly interpretation of AIDS novels in Kenya.

Key Words: Signification, Discourse, Performativity, Corporeality

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INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of AIDS-related illness in the 1980s in Kenya, there have been efforts to sensitize people on how to deal with this illness. Although a high level of awareness has been achieved, this has not significantly curbed the spread of the pandemic. Granted, the use of condoms has proven to be an effective way to

prevent HIV infection but lamentably this approach is resisted by some religious faiths. There is also a general reluctance to use the condom because it reduces sexual pleasure. Male chauvinism, retrogressive cultural practices, sexism, ignorance and economic inequalities further impede the fight against AIDS.

AIDS has been immersed in discourses of apocalypse and morality as people try to understand and come to terms with the illness. The unstable meanings constructed around HIV illness is attested to by its fluid signification as "Gay Cancer", Wrath of God Syndrome (OGS) and Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disease (GRID) before it settled on Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (Schoepf, 2004). Cultural significations of the AIDS, itself a function of speech performance, continues to historicize the AIDS diseased body, refusing to see it as one infected by a biological virus, presumably because AIDS discourses focus not on the nature of the illness but on sex as a point of entry of the virus, hence the signification of AIDS as a metaphor of morality.

Material and Methods

Gachara (2005) studied the use of language in the campaign against AIDS while Kimani (2006) identified the close connection between image and text in AIDS posters. Kobia (2008) has examined the metaphors of AIDS among the Oluluyia speakers of Western Kenya and identified significations such as "pricking thorn", "dangerous animal", "worm" among others.

Ngoyani (2006) emphasizes the use of metaphor in mediating reality, positing that the message reaches the audience in a powerful and interesting way through metaphor rather than through prosaic language. Metaphorical communication of AIDS constructs powerful images which can change public opinion and foster humane attitudes towards the illness. Cienki (2005) attributes a demystifying function to AIDS metaphors in making a complex condition more clear to the public.

Mutembei (2009) comments on this ubiquity of AIDS in fiction and underscores the potentiality of literature to warn against the dangers of the pandemic. Literature is one of the ways used as a platform to sensitize the community about the contemporary existential issues such as illness. Imaginative literature is apt in educating society about AIDS as a biological illness and in disrupting fossilizing and retarding meta-narratives that exacerbate its stigmatization. Literary AIDS is a theme in virtually all literary genres.

This paper is an explication of the AIDS discourses in Babu Omar's *Kala Tufaha*, with a particular focus on the metaphors used to signify the pandemic. It borrows from these studies and transcends them to examine the way AIDS signification in circulation in the society is mediated in the selected text.

Discussion

Discourses participate in signifying practices. As signifying process, AIDS illness discourses in the society perform and construct illness identities and frame AIDS in various metaphors. The AIDS diseased body is not a passive facticity but one trapped in perpetual factitiousness, it exists as a culturally intelligible subject, which according to Butler, is 'the effect of rather than the cause of discourses that conceal their workings' (Butler, 19 :145).

AIDS diseased body is thus inseparable from the acts and expressions that constitute it, it is performative in the sense that it is not merely described by the metaphors and the significations it generates, but it is constituted by the acts of these descriptions. I proceed to analyze the performative nature of these AIDS significations in the selected novel.

The plot of Babu Omar's 2007 novel *Kala Tufaha* hinges around the sexual experience of its protagonist Fumbwe, who cannot resist the pleasure of sex and 'eats the infested apple', contracting HIV and finally dying from AIDS. The text presents the existential problems engendered by AIDS and deals with the constructedness of the illness in discourse.

There are various significations of AIDS in Babu Omari's *Kala Tufaha*. In the text, AIDS is perceived as witchcraft. The AIDS diseased Fumbwe cannot figure out the genesis of his affliction. His search for medication in various hospitals proves futile. He sees his disease as the work of a malicious person who might have cast an evil spell on him. He also views it as a curse for sexually exploiting the innocent and hapless Kibibi. He laments that he had a stream of women in his sexual escapades and there was no knowing who might have infected him. His turn to traditional healers proves equally futile and he finally succumbs to the illness. This futility of

traditional healing is the novel's attempt to situate AIDS as a biological illness quite apart from its cultural significations.

The signification of AIDS as witchcraft is pervasive in various communities. For instance, AIDS is called *chira*, curse or witchcraft in Dholuo patois, a notion that Oludhe Macgoye belabours to debunk in her novel of the same title. Babu Omari's *Kala Tufaha* joins Macgoye's *Chira* as a novelistic intervention against AIDS in Kenya. These novels participate in correcting misconceptions of HIV illness which are an effect of significations since, as Butler points out, discourses bring into being what they name (Butler, 145). The illness identities mediated in this text have an effect of denying the diseased body its pre-linguistic existence. The overarching tendency in the novel however, is to highlight the different ways of signifying AIDS illness in order to deny them or to explain them towards a better conceptualization of AIDS as a biological illness.

This conflation of AIDS with curse has a Biblical dimension. To extrapolate from the Bible: Jeremiah 29:18 the Lord says, 'I will persecute them with the sword, famine, and pestilence, and will deliver them to be removed and to all the kingdoms of the world, to be a curse, and astonishment, and a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations I have driven'. Because of its Biblical root, this AIDS- as -curse metaphor, is perpetuated by religious faiths who continue to frame the pandemic in moralistic discourse.

Kala Tufaha also incorporates the conflation of AIDS with death which is pervasive in the society. This propinquity of AIDS with death is in the novel seen in the way Fumbwe's diseased condition is viewed as a death sentence. His home people comment on his condition with fatality, expressing their collective readiness to bury his body since mere contraction of HIV was viewed as to a death sentence. Fumbwe is also resigned to his fate and prefers to die at home convinced of the irreversibility of his diseased condition. In *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1988), Susan Sontag castigates this coupling of AIDS with death, with apocalypse, insisting that this negative signification of AIDS evaporates whatever hopes that remain for the

diseased. Scientific advances in AIDS medicine have significantly reduced this signification and the AIDS-diseased are no longer viewed as sentenced to death. They are able to live longer and meaningfully as HIV infection continues to be viewed positively as any other terminal illness, thus redeeming the AIDS-diseased body from an oppressive cultural existence.

In the novel, AIDS also takes the metaphor of a deadly bug. Indeed this is the significance of the title of the Babu Omari's novel, which loosely translates as 'He ate an Apple', a metaphor for having a sexual intercourse with an AIDS diseased person oblivious of his/her condition since one appears healthy and attractive before being ravaged by the virus. While this interpretation of the title remains relevant to the entire novel where Fumbwe suffers the consequences of eating the infected apple, the writer puns on the title which derives from a media cartoon on a character by the name Kala who battles a deadly insect that kills those who tread on its path, and which feigns death to evade destruction, itself a powerful and apt metaphor of the deadly HIV. The media cartoon so fascinates Kibibi, the victim of Fumbwe's rape that, she decides to name her child, a result of this rape, Kala, who in the space of the novel becomes Dr. Kala Tufaha, a medical doctor, and begins the noble duty of combating the pandemic. It is significant that he has occasion to attend to his AIDS diseased father, Fumbwe, before he (the father) succumbed to the illness. This narrative event remains a compelling one in the novel since both Kala and Fumbwe were unaware of their biological relationship. The infested apple is a powerful image of the danger of irresponsible sex in the era of AIDS and at the same time the title emphasizes the centrality of Kala Tufaha as its protagonist around whose experiences the writer makes literary statements about AIDS.

This metaphor in the title is effective in its potential to warn people against irresponsible sex which would render them vulnerable to infection, since, like the deadly bug which only bites to death those who trespass on its premises, HIV virus is mainly infected through unprotected sex, making it, in this one sense, lamentably and paradoxically, a disease of choice.

The image of the deadly bug recurs in the novel at the hospital where Fumbwe is admitted. It appears in the poster pasted on the wall, part of the many warning posters common in hospitals to caution people against behaviour that is likely to expose them to HIV infection. There is a handwritten inscription in red in this poster as a sign of danger and the telling image of an ominous deadly bug biting at an alluringly ripe apple, a graphic and metaphorical communication about AIDS whose function is both to educate and to caution.

The apocalyptic plot of the text, in which Fumbwe dies from AIDS, is also a way of signifying AIDS in a moralistic discourse. The novel eschews presenting the innocent contracting HIV and instead dwells on Fumbwe's amorous escapades which make his contraction of the virus inevitable. The plot serves to accentuate the moralistic signification of AIDS as a disease of the morally loose, ignoring the fact that it is contracted through sex and that the entire world is ravenous of sex. The culpability of the AIDS infected, which the text seems to endorse, is a function of the constitution of the illness in discourse.

Conclusion

This article explored the various significations of AIDS illness mediated in *Kala Tufaha*. A striking finding of the analysis is that AIDS illness generates a host of significations most of which communicate its mysterious and ravaging nature and which speaks to the general fear and ignorance of the illness among the populace. AIDS significations such as AIDS as witchcraft, as a deadly bug, and as a death sentence emerge as a powerful metaphors in the novel.

It is also the finding of the paper that these AIDS labels are fluid and can therefore be destabilized. The text takes as its onus the mediation of these significations with a bid to show the factitiousness of AIDS illness and ultimately to reconstruct it as the biological illness it is. The text insists that it is in understanding the misconceptions of this illness through analyzing its cultural significations that the AIDS illness can be more humanely understood. An existential reading of the

text is likely to yield a renewed scholarship on the intersection of fiction and diseased corporeality

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