

Literature and Society: A Reflection on the Youth's Health in John Habwe's Kiswahili Novels.

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Abstract

The youth face a Myriad of health related challenges. Progressive nations rely on healthy youths who can engage in national building. However, literature has shown that youths who are the most productive people in society have been greatly affected by health problems. Many countries have put in place bodies to facilitate intervention policies and programmes at the national and local levels that include life skills information and education that empower young people to make choices and decisions about their health. Stakeholders have also taken an initiative to develop accessible, available and affordable primary health care services of high quality including sexual and reproductive health care. This paper ascertains that youth health challenges in literary works unveil the author's perspective in his social setting. It's upon this ground that this paper is written by analyzing John Habwe's novels.

INTRODUCTION

Today the youth have become a familiar theme in literature with a view that literature mirrors society. The evocation of youths, whether real or symbolic in the African setting, is therefore a psychogenic impulse of self – assertion and self-search. Recalling youth time experiences through writing literary works amounts to revisiting and reconstructing the self, and remaking a world with its sensation and events. Youth period in its dim distant attraction is an alluring treasure house containing the best particles of their likes, dreams, love, passion; things that time has inexorably carried out of their reach. Man has a way of leaving part of himself behind in the events and experiences that initiate him into existence. In this way an author is able by this kind of archeological excavation of the past see what he used to be that he is no more, or seek deliverance from the shares of a hostile present. The evocation of youth health issues therefore helps to remold our existence in the modern society. One of the greatest implications of youths in literature is not its roles as a means of recalling the grander and valour that characterized people's past, but as a period of the youths into the mysteries of nature and existence. Hence, through literature, the youth can discover that time has come for them to 'live' seeing that they too will have to deal with a new world society where archaic values and practices will be stultified and bankrupt. This might help them solve their health related problems positively.

The depiction of youth health challenges is one of the core elements of literary works especially in the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century conveying all contradictions of social and cultural contexts related to the youth. Representation of youth health challenges in terms of behaviour (Traore 2008) reflects clashes between different generations and genders. Additionally, the image of changed youths like for instance Faridah, Juma and their children in the novel *Maisha Kitendawili (Life is a riddle 2000)*, shows how the youth can learn from the challenges they face and finally choose to live a better life inspired by hard work. Habwe's works show a characteristic element in the description of youth health challenges which is the memory of social, ethnic and cultural conflicts as the basis of an overall reflection of identity and power among the youth.

John Habwe has turned his attention to contemporary society and has continued to develop the idea of the youth challenges as a symbolic space where relationships between the characters articulate the inequalities and the conflicts within themselves. His literary discourse as will be discussed in the following pages brilliantly investigates the deep roots and the countless facets of youth health challenges.

Background and theoretical framework

The youth are associated with modern progressive life-styles, the ideologies and solutions of formal welfare that have therefore in many areas become more highly valued than traditional ones. As the globalization of youths progresses, they present an increasing challenge to customary law and practice in the conduct of family and community affairs (Boyden, 2002). The postmodernism literary theory in the view of Felluga (2002) and Gregson (2004), the recent time is historically referred to as postmodernism. Through their views, the role of traditions should be considered and how they affect the youth. The youth are more often than not associated with high self – reflectivity, the importance of referring to the past in the present era, existentialism and alienation as far as their health is concerned.

All too frequently, postmodernity is presented as a condition to embrace to celebrate and promote or equally problematically set up as that which needs to be criticized, dismissed or rejected (Lash 1990). More interesting in the view of this paper, are the contributions which consider postmodernity to be a matter of current concern, an idea that may have a bearing on our present conditions concerning the youth and health. It therefore means, postmodernity is a contemporary, social, cultural and political condition. Postmodernity hence becomes a form of life, a form of reflection upon and a response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity in literary works. Giddens (1990) presents postmodernity as a form of life beyond modernity. Postmodernity is seen as possible social future, a condition, a form of life that has yet to be realized. Yet the youth would want to be seen acting as they fight to enhance their health according to the authorship of John Habwe so that they can be seen to be at par with the changing society. Postmodernism then becomes appropriate and necessary for understanding current conditions as far as youth health challenges are concerned (Smart, 1993). It also describes important aspects of health conditions to which the youth increasingly find themselves subject (Harvey 1989, Bauman 1992).

Rouse (1991) describes postmodernism as openness of modernity. Also the diversity of configurations that may be articulated with it and the realization that there are other increasingly powerful non-western civilizations which affect the youths' health. It entails exercising a globally existence and growing influence over economic, cultural and political life. A notion that has been invoked suggests not the passing of modernity, not of history or politics nor a nostalgic retrieval of a valued past, but a different way of relating to modern conditions and their consequences to present circumstances and future prospects, especially youth health concerns in literary works. The postmodernism literary theory as propounded by Felluga (2002) and Gregson (2004) is strengthened by the fact that, literature as it emerges from and responds to historical, social and cultural moments, also to a large extend establishes it's own contexts through particular inflection it puts upon it's ostensible materials, themes and preoccupations. Therefore rather than offering a traditional major works, historical background and parallel contexts, the theory takes it's instigation from the ways in which literary texts have defined their areas of reference. It also deals with how the literary works are in active dialogue with key cultural ideas and events of their time. In this case, Habwe's authorship is a reflection of the various youth health issues that emanate from literary postmodernism theory.

The theory is premised upon a concept of literary history which depends upon a necessary simplification that divides history into distinct periods so that those periods are made to be self contained and internally consistent. Lyotard (1991) links his theorizing so closely to historical events. He draws attention to which is genuinely typical of the period in question and to how literature is shaped by the culture and events which are contemporary with it. This study reveals how the youths are faced by health challenges due to changing times and how they engage in careless sexual behaviour as also highlighted by Gromov (2008) in his discussion of Swahili popular literature in recent years. The present situation of youth health challenges is one in which exists a pervasive and irresistible questioning of the modern institutions, practices and forms of nationality that have eroded or displaced traditional forms. A thorough going reflexivity which leaves us with more questions than answers and in consequence, a conviction that postmodernism knowledge does not so much precipitate an accumulation of certitudes as a proliferation of doubts (Bauman, 1991).

However, it gives appropriate ideologies about the changing society and its effect on youth behaviour and how it contributes to their health issues either negatively or positively in literary works. To alleviate the threat of postmodernism conditions and promote the opportunities simultaneously associated with them is to achieve an acceptable and appropriate articulation of forms of diversity with communally chosen and communally serviced forms of life. This theory therefore unveils that in postmodernism world, it seems as though past, present and future co-exist in all discourse. Therefore the impact of the processes of globalization on national traditions, cultures and economies is new and acknowledged as an important focus for inquiry in the health challenges faced by the youth in John Habwe's authorship.

THE CONCEPT OF YOUTH

Youth has been seen as a transhistorical, transcultural category. It's as if it has existed everywhere and at all times in much the same way. This is in spite of the fact that anthropologists and historians have insisted, that the cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to 'youth have a valued great deal across time and space. (Hebdige; 1988) In short, 'youth stands for many things at once; for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospects of the future. (De Boeck, 2002). Foucault (1979) suggests, youth as they become defined as a concrete category of social – analysis become increasingly a socially problematic, category and studies of the youth are too often studies of deviance or of problems needing programmatic intervention.

Most researchers think of youths less as a specific age group or cohort but as a social shifter (Durham 1998). A shifter is a special kind of deictic or indexical term that doesn't work through absolute referentially to a fixed context, but one that relates the speaker to a relational or indexical context. Therefore as people bring the concept of youth to bear on situations, they situate themselves in a social landscape, power, rights, expectations and relationships indexing both themselves and the topology of that social landscape. Therefore youth as a term is frequently used simply as categorization of people based on their age. Being a young person does have real implications but it's meaning is tied to historical and specific circumstances and the ways in which relations of social division are played out. Youth then is a historical construct, which gives certain aspects of biological and social experience of growing up their meaning. Everyone grows up but 'youth' is a specific process in which young people engage with institution such as schools, the family welfare and any other societal responsibilities. The outcomes are shaped by the relations of power inherent in the social divisions of society.

Youth is a relational concept because it exists and has meaning largely in relation to the concept of adulthood. The concept of youth is idealized and institutionalized supposes eventual arrival at the status of adulthood. At the same time, youth is a deficit of adult state. This dimension of the concept of youth is evident in the positioning youth as people requiring guidance and expert attention to ensure that the process of becoming adult is conducted correctly. The challenge in this paper is to maintain a balance between recognizing the importance of physical and psychological changes which occur in young people's lives and recognizing the extent to which these are constructed by social institutions and negotiated by individuals. Importantly, it's also necessary to understand the extent to which categorical conceptions of youth have been central to denying young people their rights by cheating framework within which adults can judge some youths as normal; others as in need of intervention. The central issue addressed in the contradiction that youth do share in common their age but the social, economic and cultural significance of this physical is far from common. A relational concept which offers an approach of understanding the social meaning of growing up that can take account of the diverse ways in which youth is constructed through social institutions and the ways in which they negotiate their transitions.

THE YOUTH AND HEALTH

The effectiveness of community infrastructure for health policies and programmes that enhance the health of the youth and the way these are perceived and utilized by the youth, is a major factor in development. Ironically, the socio-economic crisis afflicting many societies has had a particularly devastating impact on the health sector causing the virtual collapse on the health infrastructure in many countries. The health of the youths has generally attracted neither concern nor attention and the health services are not attained to the special needs of the youths. As a result, youths themselves do not fully utilize the modest services that are available. Today, an overwhelming majority of the population especially the youth are afflicted by ill health and hence a need for well structured public health services and guiding and counseling facilities (Habwe, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011). The youths ill health perplexes everybody in their community because they are seen as the flag bearers.

In *Paradiso* (Paradise, 2005), Habwe's dialogue is situated within the overall discourse of Kiswahili novel in contemporary society. This is in agreement with Achebe's argument (1958) that "Writer and his society live in the same place". It's an interrogation of the role of society on the information of option on youths health issues as follows:

Michael alikuwa ameugua kwa muda mrefu. Ugonjwa wake ulikuwa Kitendawili kwa watu wengi. Baba yake ni mtu mwenye ujoji, lakini hakujua aizumbue vipi hali hii. Ndwele ya mwanawe ilimpa kiwewe ambacho miaka hii yote aliyoishi hajawahi kuwa nacho. (Habwe 2005:1).

Translation

Michael had been sick for along time. His sickness was a tough riddle to many. The father was shrewd, but this was a moment of reckoning. His son's sickness baffled him and put him in a situation he had never experienced since he was born.

This discussed how society dictates the behavioural pattern of youth characters towards health matters. It also questions why some characters accept society's conservative posture on health unquestionably and why others reject them in various ways. In as much as Michael's father is affected, he is not ready to take the doctor's advice. He believes there is a traditional way that can restore his son's health. This type of a decision highlights that although the past, present and the future co-exist, there is need to discard the past that may not be useful in the present times. Youth productivity is hence affected. Subsequently, the world view about the youth reduces their esteem because they believe in high self reflectivity. They would therefore wish to make independent decision if they are given the opportunity. In the same breath, through the novel *Cheche za moto* (Sparks of Fire, 2008) Fatuma takes all the precautions to have Mule's ill health restored.

In this work, Michael's father rejects the doctor's decision to have his son operated on. Michael had a swelling on his private parts. His argument being the operation would render Michael impotent. Michael's step mother Zuhra was overwhelmed and ready to take doctors' advice. However, the novel having been set in a rigidly hierarchical. Patriarchal society in which interests of men come first compared to those of women and children, she had to withdraw her decision. Mango scolded Zuhra for making such a decision.

*Upasuaji wa aina gani?...
Atakuwa mwanamume baada ya
huo upasuaji? Maana kama
hawezi kuwa mwanamume ni wa
kazi gain? Atakuwa bwege tu?
(Habwe, 2005:4).*

Translation

*What type of an operation. ?...
Will he be a man after the operation?
If he can't be a man, of what use will he be?
Will he just be a simpleton?*

This also shows how cultural conflicts with modern science and technology in solving health complications among the youth. Fear of the unknown is a cause of ill health among the youth. This is a time when parents and close friends need to support the affected. The family is the primary source of all experiences, both positive and negative. Disillusionment caused by a dream in *Paradiso* (2005) anchored on some family based mischance or experience. Lydia believes her dream that her husband Michael has a lover will come to pass. She had serious stomach pains which reminded her that psychological problems can cause poor health. She explained to her friend Patricia:

Mwenzangu nimekuita nikueleze suala ambalo linanisumbua. Sasa ni mwezi wa sita tangu nione ndoto ya kiajabu.... Naam. Nimemwona Michale na mwanamke mwingine. Tangu hapo sijakuwa na salama. Sasa nimeanza kuugua tumboni na najua mambo haya mawili yatanizidia (Habwe, 2005: 147).

Translation

*My friend, I have called you
to let you know a bout an issue
that is disturbing me. It's now the
sixth month since I had a strange dream... indeed,*

*I saw Michael with another woman.
I have started having a stomach ailment
And I know the two issues will
Surpass my capability.*

It's with the novel *Maumbile si Huja (Nature is not the issue, 1995)* that the writer's creativity starts to deal with a tragic expression of the failure to support youth in dealing with their sexuality hence high incidences of sexually transmitted diseases including the deadly HIV/AIDS virus among the youth. Aids is being reckoned as a disease of the youths – both male and female. Young females are vulnerable to HIV transmission in some communities where they are sexually exploited. Exacerbating the vulnerability of many female youths is the practice of older men seeking younger female sexual partners in an attempt to find partners who are as yet uninfected with HIV. Economic pressures on young girls who drop out of school indirectly contribute to early sexual activities and marriages. There is also a strong belief that Aids has affected especially those Youths who stay in urban areas. Sauda is saddened by the acts of prostitution by young females who drop out of school. They are at high risks of contracting Aids:

*Sauda alitazama dirishani na akaona
Njeri na Ambiyu... wakifuaana na
mabaharia wazungu. "Watoto hawa
wameasi skul, wanatakukimbizana
na mabaharia wa kizungu?..." mara
moyo ulimtesa kwa tuto zake
aliopokumbuka redio ikitangaza ugonjwa
hatari – ukimwi. Mawazo chungu nzima
yakipukutishe.... "Afadhali waishi shamba
labda hawa wamejitia umalaya kwa
kuwa Maisha ya mjini
yamewashajiisha kufanya hivyo. (Habwe, 1995:41)*

Translation

*Saudia saw Njeri and Ambiyu through the window.
followed by white sailors. "These children have dropped out of school
to move around with white sailors?..."
She got worried as she remembered the radio news broadcast on HIV/AIDS.
She was thrown in a myriad of thoughts.... "It would have been better for
the young females to stay upcountry. May be they were instigated by the town
setting to get involved in prostitution".*

Sauda's view foregrounds how the author reveals the influence of environment on character formation. The changing times have then affected the youths who stay in urban area. This means village life to some extent has control of youth behaviour.

In *Fumbo la Maisha (Puzzle of life, 2009)*, there is a space for regret regarding the Aids calamity. In this novel, the representation of the youths and Aids involves much more anguish. The author depicts how so many young females died of Aids such as Dama, Selume, Subira and Husna. As a result, one of the female youths Dora, championed a campaign to sensitize the Majengo slum dwellers about the killer disease as follows:-

*Dora alipita katika vilango vya watu siku chache baadaye.
Alihimiza watu kupimwa virusi vya ukimwi.
Alipopita kwangu, alivaa kitambaa kichwani
Akatia na kikofia cha chepeo chenye maandishi:
TAMBUA HALI YAKO YA HIV. (Habwe, 2009: 77)*

Translation

*Dora passed our doors a few days later.
She urged people to get tested for Aids.
When she passed by my door, she had worn a head scurf
and on top put a cape with the following writings:
KNOW YOUR HIV STATUS*

The role of Dora sensitizing fellow youths about HIV echoes both communal and individual initiative by the youths to eradicate the killer disease. The youths who hid to the advice were saved but those who ignored perished as shown above. It also shows how slums contribute collective youth social behaviour such as morality and discipline.

In the novel *Safari ya Lamu* (A journey to Lamu, 2011), the female youths seem to take precautions concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The author alludes the magnitude of HIV/AIDS and that youths alone cannot curb its spread even though they are the most affected. This paper outlines this situation through Habwe's authorship and proposes strategies and key actions to be undertaken to protect youths from infections. A young female in this novel had her own protectives in case of engagement in sexual acts. The author explains.

*Tulikaa kwa muda tukihadithiana.
Baadaye aliingia katika msala. Alipokomea
mlango nikafungua kibeti chake nikatazama
humo ndani. Katika hilo pochi mlikuwa
na hirizi, pakiti moja ya Trust condoms
na shilingi ishirini za sarafu (Habwe, 2011:24)*

Translation:

*We sat for a while chatting. Later on she got into the washroom.
When she shut the door, I opened her porch and checked inside.
There was a charm, a packet of Trust condoms and a twenty shilling coin.*

The contamination from the exterior world, personified in the novel *Maisha Kitendawili* (2000) is the starting point for the novel's dramatic action involving the youth and their tragic exploration of real life and freedom. Drug addiction, which has traditionally been seen as a problem specific to industrial societies has progressively spread throughout the world threatening all segments of society especially young people. The menace of drug abuse spread with frightening speed and frequently involving more than one drug including the use of alcohol. The kind of drugs used by youth and the magnitude of the problem vary. In as much as this has been in existence since time immemorial but it has been inflated by the changing times.

Many health hazards accompany the use of drugs particularly among the youth. Persistent drug use lowers immunity and the resistance to infection. It may also promote illusions, delusions, depression, confusion, alienation and hallucinations including some suicidal behaviour debilitating accidents and injuries and various forms of sexual behaviour. The use of one drug is more likely to lead to multiple drug use. Those who smoke cigarettes are more likely to progress to cannabis; problem alcohol drinkers are more likely than others to use illicit drugs.

Heavy drinking and the use of drugs aggravate antisocial behaviour including crime, prostitution and accidents at workplace which are a major cause of death and disability in youths. Added risks, connected with drug abuse is the lethal health hazard of HIV infection and subsequently Aids through sharing of needles with infected persons. Farida in *Maisha Kitendawili* (2000), had gone drinking with Kim her boy friend. They were joined with Papi who later took advantage of Farida's drunkenness took her to a big hall and forced her to massage a dead young female's body amid threats. With along sword in his hands Papi commanded:

*Kazi niliyokutakia ni hii. Chukua haya mafuta na pamba ile pale
Umpake huyu msichana umwonaye humu ndani katika kila pembe yake. Usighasi unapompaka wala
usifanye haraka na kuharibu. Kumbuka kitu kimoja. Tabasamu lazima uiweke. La sivyo utakuwa kama
yeye. Haya, anza kazi (Habwe, 2000: 22)*

Translation

*I wanted you to do is this.
Take this cotton and oil then apply all body parts of this girl. Neither should you get irritated nor do it
hurriedly and damage it. Remember one thing. A smile is a must. If not you will be like her. Now start
working.*

Farida got herself this dilemma due to the influence of alcohol. Use of drugs by the youths and therefore putting their life at risk is promoted by idleness, lack of jobs and at times lack of focus.

The youth often lack awareness of the harm associated with risk behaviours, and the skills to protect themselves as well as lack knowledge about how and where to seek help for their health concerns. By intervening at this early stage, many chronic conditions later in life can be prevented. Factors influencing health and wellbeing of the youth according to Habwe, include: environmental factors, socio-economic factors, community capacity, health behaviours and person related factors.

Some of the youth engage in risky behaviours that affect their health and therefore the majority of health problems are social. Many youths experience multiple problems. These behaviours are established as a young person and go on to become the life styles of adults leading to chronic health problems. Social, cultural and environmental factors are all important (Habwe 2011). The youth have specific health problems and developmental needs that differ from those of children and adults. The causes of ill health in youths are mostly social rather than biological. The youth often engage in health risk behaviours that reflect the processes of adolescent development. For instance experimentation and exploration, including using drugs and alcohol, sexual behaviour, and other risk taking that affect their health.

CONCLUSION

The writer has succeeded in casting light on emerging issues such the Youth and Health. Health issues impinging on the youths have been elaborated in his authorship which is a true reflection of the Youth in the society. Very few people recall their youth without a flutter of emotion. This magic world of innocence and care freeness echoes profoundly in African Literature. This privileged phase of growing up is often used as intimate passion-packed subject matters in fiction. In the beginning there is childhood, then youth time which makes the man or woman. It's therefore the foundation stone on which one's life is constructed. Habwe in his novels has clarified and highlighted on the myth rash, generalizations, patent untruths and ethnological insinuations about the youths personality and inner realities concerning their health.

Good health goes in hand with good life and attractive appearance. In this six texts, Habwe emphasizes that the society has a major responsibility of ensuring that the youth have a specific role in ensuring their own good health. Low socio-economic development, the high rate of population explosion and inadequate technological capability had contributed to the creation of enormous social problems which have also threatened youth's health. However it's evidently clear from the indicators examined in this paper, show that the youths are in the midst of deep-sated social crisis. The measurers taken so far towards solving these problems have been insufficient and ineffective and have had little impact on the health needs of the youth. Therefore John Habwe, in my reading of his narrative works has constantly elaborated the image of the youth and their health as a symbolic medium in order to depict and analyze Kenyan Society.

Youth constitute a major proportion of most countries. They are the parents and leaders of the future and will determine what happens in sustainable development, population growth, global security and all other matters. Their problems are hence a matter of great concern. Investing in their well being is thus a cornerstone to any societal sustainable development. The author then by presenting us with a series of youth health challenges, he symbolically criticizes the effectiveness of community infrastructure for health; policies and programmes that enhance the health of young people; and the way these are perceived and utilized by the youth.

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