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## Treatment of Nature in Mohamed S. Mohamed's Novels and Short Stories

Said A. M. Khamis

### Abstract

*Nature, for its 'predisposition' to human traits, actions, reactions, interaction and psychological motivation—appears widely and variedly in world literature. It is used as strategy for the construction of both formal / (artistic) and thematic designs, accentuating and giving force to effect and meaning(s) of a given literary work. In analytical terms the 'workings' of nature in literature can be conveniently construed in oppositional dichotomies as 'beauty versus ugliness', 'mercy versus cruelty' ... etc., thus highlighting the effect and meaning more vividly. This is an attempt to describe the mechanism of nature in the novels and short stories of Mohamed S. Mohamed, one of the leading novelists in Swahili literature. The focus in this case is on how the treatment of nature in these works is realised and how it affects the works stylistically and meaningfully.*

*"Catching the very note and trick, the 'strange irregular rhythm of life,' that is the attempt whose strenuous effort keeps fiction on her feet."*

Henry James

James' '*strange irregular rhythm of life*' is overloaded with nuances and 'nature' being the essence of life is at the core of its semantic embodiment. 'Nature' has therefore, profound<sup>1</sup> influences over literature as evidenced by numerous examples of world literature(s)<sup>2</sup> in which writers have always looked at nature from different perspectives – not only as a source of inspiration and exploit, but also an inexhaustible repertoire of literary strategies for fiction and creative writing in general.

In treating nature for literary purposes, writers – depending on what they want to portray – stand as observers both in nature itself and outside it for a vintage position to perceive, personify and comment on it in a given literary work at hand. However, the summation of 'notions' and 'roles' of nature in literature tends to appear in 'binary oppositions' as nature's beauty to its ugliness, its mercy to its cruelty, its peaceful refuge to its dark recesses, its stagnation to its changes, its tranquillity to its agitation, influencing and signifying moods of characters, and in Cartesian terms – nature as an object to the human subject (human nature?) – the object of the human gaze, and 'others' to self-conscious, rational human subjectivity (Kerridge 1988:149) or the Darwinian perception of ecological interdependency to destructive evolution (150). Terry Gifford (1995:16) in an analogical tendency, puts the whole phenomenon more succinctly as ... '[t]he poem (*hence literature*<sup>3</sup>) is a site where writer and reader negotiate that dialectic of personal and social meanings'.

The purpose of this essay is therefore to show how consciously<sup>4</sup> Mohamed treats nature for the construction of semantic and stylistic designs in his two novels, namely *Kiu* (Thirst) 1972 and *Nyota ya Rehema* (The Star of

Rehema) 1985 – and also his three short stories – *Mateso*<sup>5</sup> (name of the main character, meaning ‘one who inflict pain to others’) 1970, *Uhuru wa Siku Moja*<sup>6</sup> (The Freedom of One Day) 1981 and *Kicheko cha Ushindi* (The Laughter of Victory) 1981.

Though Mohamed S. Mohamed has written ‘only two’ novels, namely *Kiu* and *Nyota ya Rehema*, ‘one’ anthology of short stories, entitled *Kicheko cha Ushindi* and other short stories featuring here and there in serialised collections under the title *Hekaya za Kuburudisha* (Tales of Entertainment), published in the 1970s, he is a leading Swahili novelist in that his works stand out to be the best example of Swahili ‘modern tales’ comparable to any in world literature. His novel *Kiu*, won a literary prize in Tanzania and has been compared to the works of Balzac and described as one of the earliest examples of the full-blown realist novel in Swahili literature (Philipson 1992:90).

The story of *Kiu* revolves around six main characters. Bahati, a girl infatuated to Idi, yielding to his pressures to sell her body to Mzee Mwinyi in order to win Idi’s love. Idi, driven by narcissistic urge, craves for Mwinyi’s money hence plots to get it through cheating him and blackmailing Bahati. He uses Bahati as a bait in the name of love and happy marriage only to finally dump her. In the end, Idi ruins himself through alcoholism, womanising and extravagance, but not before he destroys Bahati.

Mwinyi, a sixty two year old man, cannot live without Bahati. He is therefore ready to use all his wealth to win her love. Rehema, Mwinyi’s daughter, studying abroad during the ‘love fizzle,’ returns home to avenge her father who has died of frustrations, having lost everything after being cheated by Idi and Bahati. Mwajuma, Mwinyi’s faithful maid watching every step of Idi’s deceitful game, joins forces with Rehema to plot and execute the vengeance. Cheusi, Bahati’s mother is from the beginning bent at fighting to save her daughter from Idi’s seemingly bad intentions but never succeeds.

*Nyota ya Rehema* is a story of Rehema born of Arab mother and father, but inherits a darker complexion from her great grandmother. Rehema's genetic and colour atavism proves to be disastrous to her life. As a result, she faces a succession of calamities. Her true mother dies when she is a child. Her stepmother will not leave her alone. She flees home only to be raped by Sulubu,<sup>7</sup> a man who picks her up in the bush where she faints. After staying in Sulubu's hut for days, she goes to town where she is tricked into joining a brothel but soon finds a job as a housemaid. She escapes another attempt of a rape, this time by her employer. After finding that the town is even more hostile to her she goes back to Sulubu and gets married to him. She acquires a piece of land from her father and leads a peasantry life with Sulubu.

This reminds us of George Eliot's characters shown to be in a similar predicament. Kerridge (1988:151) describes them as being moved by... a powerful drive to escape the physical and intellectual confines of provincial rural places. The provincial in Eliot's works is often an Arnoldian provincial, narrow and intolerant, showing a lack of vision identified with animal insensibility. But having fled the rational, liberal, cosmopolitan sensibility, he turns attention back to the place the character has left, both in nostalgic desire for re-absorption and in an idealistic search for an all-inclusive imaginative sympathy. This, as we shall see, is a pastoral cycle – a flight followed by a return, a cycle in which nature signifies at different times in *Nyota ya Rehema*, 'lost harmony,' 'repressed passion,' 'childish egotism,' and 'destructive ignorance.'

But it looks as if Rehema will not find peace anywhere. She is assaulted by misfortunes wherever she goes. Karim, her brother-in-law, can no longer get money from his father-in-law through blackmailing his wife Salma and Rehema's younger stepsister. At the same time Karim's quest for gambling cannot be quenched, hence he turns to Rehema's land now fully developed into a farm and plots to take and sell it on the grounds that she

is not a legitimate daughter of Fuad. Rehema and Sulubu give up their farm following a court injunction dubiously secured by Karim. They move somewhere else to begin life afresh, now having to take care of their newly born baby-boy. Not long after they succeed to manage a lucrative farm, Karim revisits them with the same intention of dispossessing them of their land. This is now too much for Sulubu. He kills Karim in the same way he has killed his dog, Simba. He is jailed but set free in the wake of a revolution.

Mateso, the name of the main character of Mohamed's short story *Mateso*, is an evil child born of a poor father and mother. Signs of his atrocities have been showing since his childhood. He kicks his mother into the eye and ruins it. Mateso is thus described as possessing qualities of an epic hero: the 'mysterious birth,' 'mysterious growth,' 'tribulations,' 'his flight and return' and 'having a huge body and Herculan strength.' He is in short a menace who enjoys killing animals and destroying plants and crops of their neighbours. He does not spare anyone who dares challenge him. His parents, suffering a lot from having to pay compensation for his destruction, do not live long. After his parents die he moves to live in the bush where he often comes back to the village to loot animals and crops of the farmers. The villagers' attempts to kill him is unsuccessful. At last, Chausiku the daughter of a witchdoctor in the village, gives herself to the cause of removing Mateso, but when she meets Mateso in the bush she falls in love with him. They decide to live as partners for a while. Later when Chausiku learns that Mateso has killed her father and taken two of his goats, her anger and revenge rekindle. She goes to the village, and with the help of the villagers build a trap. Mateso is then tricked into falling in it and is killed instantly. Chausiku, overwhelmed by the deaths of her father and lover, throws herself into the same trap to die with Mateso.

In Mohamed's short story *Uhuru wa Siku Moja*, the main character Mambo, a peasant who enjoys living

closer to nature, is unjustly accused of cultivating 'hashish' (bhang/Indian hemp) and is condemned to two years imprisonment. But prison life proves to be too much for him. After an unsuccessful and seemingly foolish attempt to escape on the last but one day before being released, he dies of a broken heart.

Subira, in *Kicheko cha Ushindi*, wants to go somewhere to pass the night. This is unacceptable to her husband Rajabu. But Subira adamantly and threateningly tells Rajabu that if he dares stop her, she will teach him a lesson. In total infuriation and without due vigilance, Rajabu the husband, utters the unbecoming words: 'Okay, and you'll know the worthiness of a husband (like me) ... If you do not come back to my house till day-break, I'll no longer be your husband, not your husband!' (1).

According to the author, though Subira does not in fact go anywhere, this statement is enough to make an Islamic marriage fall apart. Rehema just decides to test Rajabu's love. She pretends to go away, but comes back to hide herself under the bed. Meanwhile, Rajabu imagining he has lost his wife, desperately goes out in search of her everywhere he thinks she has possibly gone. When he totally loses hope of finding her, he comes back to his house and sobs bitterly. Suddenly Subira appears from under the bed laughing—thus, 'The Laughter of Victory.'

Mohamed's novels and short stories have a tendency to depict class distinctions<sup>8</sup>—hence always written in scenic and episodic contrasts to capture the distinctions. In *Nyota ya Rehema* for example, Fuad's vast richness based on agro-economy is meticulously described using an 'enlisting technique' that reads like a botanical inventory. This is apparently distracting as it slackens the narrative pace to an extent that a reader may dismiss it as unnecessary superfluity. Stylistically, Mohamed normally shuns such 'stack descriptions,' preferring to hold the narrative details up and meting them in pieces to create suspense. In this particular case however, he delves

into a description that is remarkably long to underline Fuad's agro-richness ... [N]ear these two bungalows, variety of small plants spread out. Parallel to a stoned wall connected to the reception room along the road, 'mitufaha ya kizungu'<sup>9</sup> whose flowers during this time of the season were falling off in showers inviting birds that are fond of their nectar. Then, there followed a courtyard of short-sized 'midafu ya kitamli'<sup>10</sup> weighed down by clusters and clusters of the fruit, too heavy that they had to be supported by poles. Master Fuad used to enjoy quenching thirsts of his guests with 'kitamli' coconut milk as he was relating to them the art of hunting, explaining different types of dogs' barking, the skill of using a gun, the how of laying in wait for the speckled guinea fowls and gazelles, the tricks of hiding and stealing upon a prey and the pleasure of being in the bush. After the 'midafu', a dozen of rambutan-trees, very productive and sweet in taste, yielding the best of its fruit whose flesh easily separates from the seeds, now recovering after a bumper crop which caused them to be treated badly through the picking up of the fruit. Beyond these, started a zone of mixture of trees: custard apple trees, avocado trees, 'michenza kangaja' (*small mandarin orange trees*), 'michenza ajemu' (*Persian mandarin orange trees*), litchee trees, fig trees, orange trees, pomegranate trees, and of course 'mipera marashi' trees of special aromatic guava fruit – the trees that were in turn producing fruit(s) continually, making Fuad's household never run out of delicious fruit(s)... Near the iron gate leading to the front yard, vine was creeping up the wooden support... At other side of the stoned wall there were large trees whose fruit(s) were used as main food. A score of bread fruit trees reign in the first piece of land... After the bread fruit trees, there came productive jack-fruit trees that were taken on lease. And then followed 'midoriani' (*trees that bear foul-smelling fruit*)... In front of the bungalow, after reception room, there started a slope well taken care of and luxuriant coffee plants; the slope that ran as far as it could till where it met a valley of rice fields and far



beyond, the wilderness. At the rear, after passing Adila's garden, coconut trees grew and running closely together to a distance of three miles...' (4).

A careful reader however, sees this description (running from page 4 to 9) not as an empty masquerade but one that needs be deciphered through a close scrutiny of the items of nature featuring in minute details in relation to Fuad's agro-property and leisured life. It is only through this scrutiny that we see the need for the exuberant presence of items of nature in the description. But to give the idea of 'bounteousness' more force, the author juxtaposes it with an opposing scene of deprivation and scantiness ... '[H]er hut (Bikiza's hut) that stood a short distance from their palace was the only school she had seen, and was the garden in which she played. Although the roof of that hut was grass-thatched, not made of clay tiles; its naked stick-bound walls like the ribs of a hungry dog, not plastered of cement; its doors made of weaved coconut leaves, not from the teak tree wood; its mattresses dusty clay, not carpets – Rehema would have liked to live in here than living in their palace. Hundred times she would have chosen to be the daughter of Bikiza and her husband Mzee Juma, poor fellows who lived on preparing 'makuti ya kumba' (*grass-thatched roofing material*). Ah, how these people were attached closely together so as to face their life in a better way and how they depended on each other in their small world devoid of amenities. She loved them and they loved her' (23).

It is not accidental that this scene is not built on items of nature. It is designed to create a sharp contrast between the simple life and humble dwelling of Bikiza and her husband mzee Juma to Fuad's palace and leisured life.

In yet another scene in the novel, the same enlisting technique is used to portray 'crop-variety' and by implication the 'bounteousness' depicting Sulubu's agricultural expertise, resolve, energies and diligence that

made him turn a neglected farm into a productive one. This time the enlisting technique is construed in syntactic balances ... '[I]n spite of that Sulubu was not happy with the farms they bought from other people, though now they literally own them. They were 'totally useless', he said. Where there were cassava plants of the type 'mtotoshoo' (literally 'a beautiful lady'), he thought there should been grown 'kigilasi' type (literally 'the glass type'); where there were 'wayani' type (literally 'leafy type'), there should have been 'kigoma' (the type of cassava imported from Kigoma in Tanzania mainland); where there were sweet potatoes of the type 'halimtumwa' (literally 'not to be eaten by slaves') there should have been planted the 'kwata' type (literally 'the parade type'); where there was 'kizimbani' type, (Kizimbani a palce in Zanzibar where agricultural station is situated) 'julfa' (yellowish or violet sweet potatoes) should have been grown instead; where there were banana plants of the type 'mjengamaau' (literally 'full of flowers') there should have been grown 'mjengatongo' (literally 'of poor quality'), where there was 'mzungumweupe' type (literally 'a white European type'), 'kijakazi' type (literally 'a female slave type') would do; where there was 'kiguruwe' type (literally 'pork type'), 'n'twike' (literally 'burden me') should have come, where there was 'koroboi' (a banana type of poor taste), 'mzungumwekundu' (literally 'a red European') should have appeared, where there was 'mzuzu' (literally 'a simple minded'), 'mkono-wa-tembo' (literally 'an elephant's trunk') should have replaced it; and where there was 'mkono-wa-tembo', 'pukusa' (literally 'make fall') should have been planted...' (101).

A case of 'personified nature' playing a double role to the main character, of 'hindrance and cruelty' on the one hand, and of 'helper' on the other, is shown in *Nyota ya Rehema* when Rehema flees home to find refuge to an unknown destination. The idea of what lies in store for Rehema is expressed in a strong premonitory tone couched in 'plant/animal' imagery and reinforced by variation of metaphors of 'darkness,' 'light,' and

'coldness'... '[M]other!' Rehema called after finding herself embraced by guava and *bridelia*<sup>11</sup> bushes. The light was now very faint and the open air cold. A narrow path was criss-crossed by bushy trees. The obstinate branches jutting out in the middle like hands set to strangle necks of passer-bys. Deep into the darkness of the bushes white-browed coucals were exchanging their voices pouring like water coming out of a bottle's mouth. Civets were crossing the path before her, some stopping to wonder about her, and then vanishing. Skunks dropped the fruits they were holding and ran away. Big burrowing lizards dived into their holes. Rehema found herself amidst numerous creatures that were not of her kind [...] And when finally the day had moved to finish the other half, and the heaviness of evening started to descend, Rehema popped up with anger akin to madness, realising that her life was in danger. She was extremely exhausted for she had covered more than ten miles. When she stood to take a deep breath, she gained her consciousness fully, and saw from every angle signs of bad omen mocking her. A dark web was hanging in the air, starting to cover the trees and animals including herself. And so, she gathered all her energy to fight for her life and then suddenly rushed into the bush, knocking herself against this trunk and that trunk, and finally fell down on stumps and thorns and lost consciousness' (24-25).

The effect is 'awe-inspiring,' especially when combined with the psychological tension Rehema is in – having to abandon home and her parents without knowing where to go. It works perfectly for the anticipation of something ominous about to happen to her. As if that is not enough, later on we see Rehema's legs being badly torn by thorns of the protruding branches – a suggestion that the 'arm-like' branches are reaching out to prevent her from fleeing home and save her from the imminent danger. Later when a series of misfortunes befall her – the immediate one being the 'rape' perpetrated by Sulubu – we are not surprised. We only recognize how terrible 'human nature' can be ... 'A short

while of quietness, and then she suddenly felt some unknown tremors on her body working down towards her feet. Her muscles were caressed and hard pressed; some creatures were creeping over her body. She gathered strength to give out a shriek as loud as she could, but no sound came out. She indeed felt all her mouth opening, but could not even breathe. And now the tremors climbed up to her thighs, belly, breast ... Suddenly, she was afflicted by severe pain in her ribs. She wriggled, and the shriek stuck out her throat. And then constant pain was registered in all parts of her body. As she opened her eyes she saw a human body, tall, black, stooping over her<sup>12</sup> (25).

Again, the technique is not just a decorative artifice, rather an essential literary design for both semantic and artistic purposes of the novel. The oppositions Rehema versus her parents, Rehema versus nature and Rehema versus what is in store for her, call for our attention to perceive the negative side of human nature.

In the treatment of nature of this kind, a sequence of 'extended metaphors' are employed, mostly from nature implicitly standing for what is tacitly implied to happen in the subsequent pages. Kerridge (150), referring to Wordsworthian intimations, puts this phenomenon this way: '[l]andscapes in novels both influenced and signified the moods of characters. After romanticism, these landscapes became an expression of the unexpected, unconscious, in articulating potential of characters, often in plots building up to explosive tragic climaxes. Places (usually mountain, moorland or craggy coast, the only plausibly wild terrain remaining in England, but sometimes fenland or woodland) came to dominate some novels, as a way of representing the complex relations between the external world and the unconscious forces at work in the characters. Setting in this tradition is both commentary and extended metaphor.'

The extended metaphors in *Nyota ya Rehema* are built from actions and stillness of the psychic, involving

Rehema, Sulubu and Karim (Rehema's brother in law) in collaboration with Simba (Lion) and Kapepo (Gentlewind) their dogs. The author plays on the relationship of love and loyalty between the dogs and their master and mistress on the one hand, and disloyalty between at least one of the dogs and their master and mistress on the other. The disloyalty of Simba the dog is the cause for the violence in which Simba is slain by its master. This is indeed a way of creating a premonition of an impending tragedy to befall Karim. Here is how it builds sequentially – the elements of nature showing more frequency towards the end of the expressional thrust. The scene begins when Rehema feels sad and uneasy for no reason at all ... '[A]fter a long interval of happiness had passed, suddenly came a time when Rehema for no reason at all, felt that her heart had changed. She did not like playing cards or engaged in the conversation before bonfire or talk to Mzee Pongwa and Sulubu. It was as if her heart was full of sadness for nothing. Soon after making sure that all the animals they kept were securely locked in the coop, she complained of fatigue and went inside where she lay down awake...' (108).

Then something happens ... '[I]t happened one of those days when she stayed awake in the dead of the night that she heard *buburububuru* sound (sound of commotion) outside. Simba was barking continually in more agitation than it usually does, that Rehema decided to wake her partner up...' (109).

Sulubu's motivation to act violently appears clearly in the following scene ... '[H]e took a spear and torchlight and went outside at the open yard while Rehema nervously following behind him... the voice of Simba was behind the house now and was heading down the slope... It was running after something... And then they suddenly heard it coming back and soon appeared at the open yard snarling and looking at its master...' (109).

Later Simba leads them to the chicken coop where they find fresh blood dripping from its top and with the

help of the light, they see half of the chicken lying dead, their heads chopped off ... '[S]ulubu stuck the spear into the ground with indignation and then kicked his dog' (109).

The paradox is that the very dog that does the night watch and exposes the first culprit, turns out to be a culprit itself after tasting blood of a chick given to it by its own master. And then one day Sulubu and Rehema suddenly find more chicken missing in the coop. Mzee Pongwa thinks he knows who is behind it ... '[H]e saw Simba last evening eating a chick... Simba had tasted blood nothing can stop it from continuing' (115).

For Sulubu the endless loss of their chicken is too much of a blow to take. He therefore kills his once faithful dog ... '[S]ulubu stood up with infuriation aiming his machet right onto the body of Simba lying at the open yard and let it go right at the middle of it with all his force. The last voice of agony vanished into the air as Simba's body split into two on the ground... The last thing that Rehema saw was Simba's tongue licking sand... and she fell down unconsciously...' (110).

This horrible scene hints at yet another one to come, but not without first the author putting finishing touches to it. Through Kapepo, Rehema recalls the death scene of Simba that reinforces her premonition as well as a reader's ... '[I]t was at this time that she saw ominous signs in the sad face of Kapepo who was standing at the open yard panting, its tongue jutting out (*reminding her of Simba's death scene* – my emphasis) as he moved about nervously. Rehema was struck with inward fear. She had never seen a dog so sad like that except Simba, a short moment after being killed (167)' (*a conscious recall of the image by the author* – my emphasis).

The author's accomplishment in the use of this technique is brought about by a combination of recurrent 'sombre' and 'violent' images: the subsequent death scenes running in succession, the repetitive spilling of blood, the

ill omen that haunts Rehema, Simba's loyalty and its ultimate betrayal, Sulubu flaring temper and his readiness to kill, all build the extent of Sulubu's psychological motivation. In the end we are not shocked when Sulubu executes another murder, this time of a human being. At this point, the preparation has been completed and now we have a clearer picture of what is to come. Everything has been worked out for a logical conclusion. Finally, there goes up Sulubu's hand with the same machet and comes down with all the force to chop Karim's head off. '... Shshap! (*He was split* – my addition) into two pieces ... A-a-a-gh-gh, heard Rehema. She instantly dropped the flat basket full of vegetable and ran towards the far end of their farm. Running (*and*) running (*and*) running ... And then she suddenly stopped and called upon her prophet (*as Muslims do in distress or danger*). Dark mist shrouded her eyes as she fell down and was unconscious ...' (167).

In *Kuu*, the technique is less overt and dramatical, but with the same intent and effect – except this time the author meticulously works it out using mainly plant life, though again not without complementing it with varying effect of light and darkness. A dimension of wetness, stickiness and slipperiness of the clay hampering the movement of the car is added to emphasize the uncertainty of the plot that Idi and Bahati are to execute against Mzee Mwinyi and the ultimate self-destruction symbolically precluded to them but not discerned at this point. The personified 'nature' seems to be warning them against their extortionist drive. Idi, specifically, does not take signs of impending doom seriously, but the reader does by carefully deciphering the intricacies of the imagery of nature ... '[T]he car left the tarmac road and followed a side road of sticky red clay, passing through the darkness caused by giant mango-trees. There was a rustling sound and the branches of mango-trees were swaying vigorously with the wind. The road had a lot of potholes and the car moved with some difficulty. The 'Vuli' rains (relatively short seasonal rains during September

to November in Zanzibar) had already passed, but their impact was lingering. The wet clay was slippery, especially where water had settled in pools and where mud had not dried up well' (10-11).

By presenting items of the 'cash crops' (i.e mango and coconut trees), again the author captures Mwinyi immense richness about to be misappropriated by Idi with the help of Bahati. The quietness and seclusion of the place they choose to discuss the plot go very well with the desired secrecy belying the plot, though the quietness and seclusion are at the same time ominous – especially when the author combines these images with those of 'stickiness' and 'slipperiness' of the clay preventing the car to move with ease, plus the potholes, pools of rainy water, mud left after the rains, the darkness caused by giant mango trees whose branches sway vigorous with the wind, the ruins that were left behind by the rich owners of the place who died many years ago<sup>13</sup>. Idi and Bahati, their eyes and ears totally transfixed into the prospects of getting amenities of life through illegal means are oblivious of the warnings of scenic silent. What they do not realize at this point is the fact that the future may not look as bright and smooth as it now looks to them ... '[T]he land beyond this point was dry and farther on sandy. The car stopped at the end of the road. Before them was a sharp slope full of coconut palms that had grown up haphazardly, spreading down to the beach. The wind that was reaching them had a salty smell, and when they cast their eyes amidst the palms, they could see the ocean glittering with the 'kaskazi' sun (kaskazi is 'dry season'). Beside them there were ruins of old buildings overgrown with bushes, standing and counting years. On the other side there were mango-trees that were planted disorderly, perhaps by the deceased who had once upon a time owned this place. That place was a mixture of natural beauty and solitariness [...] For a short while the young lovers had forgotten the thing that brought them there stupefied by the scene...' (11).



In another pattern of treatment of nature, the author selects items from both plant and animal life and combines them with items of material culture to create repetitive complex images for a situation in which characters' emotional and psychological moods and tensions are shown to heap up before erupting vigorously. In the following extract, Bahati is in a gloomy, sad and miserable situation, having been deserted by Idi. Items of nature are brought into the scene to emphasize the philosophical tenet that nature is itself fickle and unreliable. Life is described as being a vicious cycle in which one species fights another – man against man, birds against worms and worms against other minute creatures ... '[e]verything she looked at outside was covered with mist. The trees were on standstill, calm as if they were feeling the morning cold. So were children swings and merry-go-rounds; all she was looking at seemed to be dead. This stillness brought back to her the feeling of loneliness and solitude...' (19-20).

The prominent device now is 'metonymy' featuring in items that are contiguous rather than similar. As if a word with a composite meaning of 'sadness,' 'gloominess,' and 'dejection' is lacking in this language; and so the author concocts a metonymic remedy to represent it. The items and their attributes chosen, all allude to the composite meaning. The emphasis being distress and affliction of pain to Bahati from Idi's blackmail and his threat to shun Bahati if she does not cooperate in his plot. But at the end of it all, Bahati realizes that life has to go on despite the odds – despite recognizing the order of the day that creatures do oppress one another – hence, just for a while, she momentarily sees light of hope in her life before she experiences another spell of darkness and hopelessness ... '[B]ut afterwards birds started to fly here and there and sang on trees, just to remind her that life must go on...the morning light appeared and the number of people on the way increased. Sunrays falling on trees and on roofs of houses started to change the

scene and brought back life. Now drops of morning dew on trees were glittering. Birds started to land in the sunlight as they picked up insects that were in turn flying here and there looking for food. Bahati looked at those birds, and those insects and was shocked to see how God's creatures were oppressing one another...' (20).

Another example of treatment of nature of this kind comes also from *Kiu*. The scene now is that of trapped tiny fish in a pond created by Bahati who is whiling away her sadness after being ignored and left for months by Idi who has now obsessively turned to womanising and alcoholism ... '[I]n that sizeable pond (*she created*), the water was clear and Bahati saw three fish of the size of her ring finger moving in agitation to avoid the shadow of the giant bending over them. After Bahati stopped moving for a long time, those fish as if convinced that she was just their friend, started to move slowly. Bahati looked at them and liked them. Suddenly she had an urge of wanting to touch one of them and embrace it in her fingers so that she could feel how slippery it was. She moved her hand towards the pond, but the fish saw her shadow moving towards them and started again to move fast in agitation so as to save their lives. Bahati felt pity for them that she was actually treating them cruelly. Quickly she moved her hand away...' (94).

Bahati, who at one point, viewed as a 'giant' by the tiny fish, is herself shown to be in the same boat as viewed from her relationship with her deceitful and ungrateful husband Idi, (the giant). The undertones based on wily approaches of Bahati and the scarry responses of the fish are parallel to Idi's approaches to Bahati – so cunning, and Bahati's ultimate surrender, disappointments and frustrations so obvious. Her desire to touch the fish and feel its slipperiness is likened to her desire to closely explore the uncertainties of her marriage. She is obviously panicking in the hands of Idi the way the fish are when she moves her hand towards them.

Mohamed's short story *Mateso* is wholly written to show how mysterious human nature can be – the emphasis being on 'man' as part of 'nature.' *Mateso* symbolizes the like of us when the bellicose 'seed' is allowed to sprout out. Actually every description of *Mateso* in this story is geared at showing man as an evil creature. All epithets and attributes about *Mateso* emphasize man's brutality and destruction. *Mateso* is not only dangerous to his parents and his neighbours, but to nature itself – in fact to the whole village and what is in it. Here is how the author describes *Mateso* ... '[H]is name was *Mateso*, and he was *Mateso* by name and *Mateso* by deeds. His parents gave him that name because he was an evil child since when he was carried in the calico. When he was just two years old, as his mother was washing him, he kicked her in the eye and destroyed it. *Mateso* was different from other children. He took no time to crawl, no time to walk, grew up very quickly and his body showed abnormal development of muscles for his age. When he could run he liked the game of killing animals and neighbours often came to his father with carcasses of their animals strangled by *Mateso*. Troubles caused by this child to the neighbours increased when he started to steal his father's knife and cut people's crops. Because of this his parents had to leave the village with their child to save people from his menace. After a few years the father and mother of *Mateso* died leaving him with his world. The young boy grew up in the bush and the bush complemented his barbaric ways. He did not like mixing with other people nor playing with his agemates. His preoccupation was to hunt and harvests other people's crops from their fields ... '[W]hen he was seventeen, *Mateso* was already a giant of a man, huge in size with strength of three people together. He now started to reach all corners of the village to rob people of their animals. People were scarred of him and therefore shunned him. His name started to raise terror such that when mentioned, it started to cause blood run cold with fear. Women could not go to pick up firewood in the

bushes; children were forbidden to play far away from houses; and men walked with machetes (17)' (My translation).

Mohmed's short story, *Uhuru wa Siku Moja*, is also a story in which 'nature' is given 'full exploration' as a theme instead of a mere literary device for a theme or ornamentation of the story. Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková (1996:63) correctly describes this short story as structured on the oppositions 'freedom' to 'reclusion,' 'countryside' to the 'town,' or 'open' to 'closed' spaces – the former linked with 'nature' being safe and good, and the latter (the school, the office, the law-court, and above all the prison) being menacing, distressing and evil. As a result of this the countryside, more favourable and friendly, is given more space in the narrative movement between the countryside and inside the prison – nature items featuring abundantly in the presentation of the countryside than in the prison. This is how 'shamba' (countryside) is described when Mambo, the main character, fancies his release... '[H]e obeyed the urge and returned (*hypothetically* – my emphasis) to the countryside where he was born, where he had innermost freedom and utmost joy... His soul opened only when he was outside that wall. The light had another colour outside, and the air smelled differently...' (51).

Later on, in a pensive mood, Mambo reverberates and responds in a nostalgic and romantic way to the scenic beauty of the countryside – always in bright images of nature, always with a sense of joy and relief and in an enthusiastic and participating inclinations ... '[T]he water of the stream is sky-blue in the morning when the sky clears and the mist flutters in the air; it becomes a blend of gold and yellow at midday when the sun lights up with its blazing beams; it becomes green in late afternoon when mahogany trees shade it from the direct glow of setting sun; it is silver in the night when the full moon pours out its cold light; it is just something; pleasant to look at, hidden, singing tunes of a lonely traveller when

the darkness reigns... He started to follow it (*the tiny stream*), now and then plunging into its waters, sometimes crouching on the bank to admire small fish living inside and to envy them; other times drawing water with palms of his hands, to drink without being thirsty or shower himself with it to cool himself down... Then the urge invited him to return to his origins, under the green trees, and the river valleys, and the singing birds; to enjoy the first dew at daybreak, and the look of the fruit(s) hanging on the trees, and the fireflies glowing in the dark of the wood ...' (47).

The urban setting however, is depicted as unfriendly and hence painted with dark colours. Here is for example how the confinement in a jail in town is reviewed in Mambo's thoughts by the author – just in simple short sentences, cropping up and merging alternately with the long windy ones that describe the open free space of the countryside... '[F]ar away in his thoughts, he felt he was in an evil place, following evil orders from evil people... He observed the sick creatures with sickly faces... 'Why?' he asked himself. 'Why?' he asked fellow prisoners. 'Why?' he shouted... Mambo remained silent, painfully silent... Its large, ugly gate (*of the prison*) was closed. Mambo stared at the gate with fear and disgust as if he faced the opening of the furnace of pain... Its walls (*prison's walls*) grew angrily out of the earth ...' (52).

Rajabu, Mohamed's main character in *Kicheko cha Ushindi*, sees 'time' not only as mysterious, but also an obstacle – time being the master and him the slave. Subira his wife has sworn never to return to a rude and ungrateful husband. And now after his wife has gone away, he realizes that he cannot live without her. What about if she takes his words at their surface value and decides never to come back? What about if she comes back home after daybreak, the deadline Rajabu himself sets; the dividing line between the continuation of their marriage and divorce? What about if the 'ifs' become too many to allow 'time' to play tricks with him? The question

whether Subira comes back home or not haunts him and becomes an enigma straining his mind. He therefore muses over time and its ambiguities ... '[T]here, his eyes wide opened, he started to stare at what he called 'the time wearing his wings and flying in the air'... What a wonderful thing 'time'! How many times he had seen it running past him like a gazelle with four legs and wished it would stop so as to enjoy (*watching*) her (*beautiful*) body... How many times, time had crawled by with a disturbing slowness and swagger like a millipede with hundreds of legs and wished he could drive it away?... And that lady-magician (Subira darling), who has the ability to command time to turn into a gazelle or millipede, was now not at home. Behind her she left Rajabu with the face of the clock (*and with*) a mocking mouth throwing secret innuendoes that bitterly touched his inner feelings. Rajabu did not pay attention to anything else but the rush of time. The minute hand ran so fast that you would think it was racing towards the line that separates his happiness and perpetual sufferings. Cha! Cha! Cha! Cha! Cha! he heard the clock like a gazelle on a wilderness of dry grasses. Ti! Ti! Ti! Ti! Ti!, his heart was chasing ... and suddenly the clock stopped. Rajabu popped up from the couch. Alas! He would not let his heart stop too. He started to pace about nervously in his room – up (*and*) down, up (*and*) down ... and then stopped suddenly to look outside to see how it was. Through the window he saw the west painted with the colour of blood. The setting sun hid itself behind a cloud, perhaps playing tricks with him not to see it when it was completely immersing into the sea. Nature also wanted to mock him ... Nature?' (2).

By means of analogy in this 'language game', the author selects very carefully, items of nature to express the ambiguities and mysteries of time as perceived by Rajabu, the main character. And for the same purpose, and perhaps to give the technique more force, the author, in metonymic and personified way, merges the 'man-made items' in the description to assume nature-like role.

In a concluding remark, we would say that in the West one rarely reads a Swahili novel or perhaps any of the novels in African languages – the barrier being language ofcourse. In the West too, critical literary discourses either leave out works written in these languages or simply brush them off as 'infantry' or 'lowly' (See Bernth Lindfors 1977). However, literary works in African languages of more or less the same merit as those of other languages and cultures are forthcoming in Africa South of Sahara, written not just haphazardly from the compulsion of the talent, but consciously, through training and grasp of the knowledge and theory of literature. It is written by those who have mastered 'poetics' and 'techniques' of various literary genres to create works of universal standard.

Though we have dealt with a narrow topic – 'the treatment of nature' – in few selected novels and short stories of a certain writer, this essay is meant to also give an 'inkling' of what is inside the Swahili literature in general, with the target of inspiring other scholars to turn their eyes to it and positively assess it vis a vis literatures of other languages and cultures. Hence the essay informs of the author's profound power of observation and articulation that makes him see nature not only as it is – dormant and static – but also in its capacity to behave favourably and adversely in relation to human beings, their motivations and actions. This is considered to be one of the qualities of an outstanding writer. The essay also establishes Mohamed's artistic idiolect as being one of the most captivating in Swahili literature; a style of a novelist who writes not only with deliberations and thoroughness of the subject matter, but also with linguistic mastery that facilitates the exploitation of the enormous literary potentials for various thematic and artistic designs. Mohamed is one of the most conscious writers, who researches and plans his work thoroughly well before he commits himself to writing.

And finally, this essay affirms once again (as Henry James does), that literature is affinitive to life

and nature is certainly part of it. By drawing analogy between nature and characters (human beings), or nature and characters' motives and drives, the novelist constructs a clearer and sharper world of his work as he also simultaneously presents to his readers a fascinating account which is digested by delving into its underlying levels – the linguistic depths.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The profundity of nature over literature however, goes beyond pastoral writings as nature can also be shown to be beneficiary to literary forms with urban settings.

<sup>2</sup>D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* to name a few striking examples.

<sup>3</sup>My emphasis.

<sup>4</sup>The word 'consciously' emphasizes the fact that the author knows and deliberately chooses nature for his literary strategies and semantic build-up.

<sup>5</sup>Published in *Mapenzi ni Kikohozi* (Love is Coughing) 1970, one of the serialized collections under the title of *Hekaya za Kuburudisha* (Entertaining Tales), short stories written by different authors and published by Longman Kenya, Nairobi.

<sup>6</sup>Published in a collection entitled *Kicheko cha Ushindi* (The Laughter of Victory) 1978, Shungwaya Publishers, Nairobi.

<sup>7</sup>The writer of this essay is aware of two interpretations of this fact. One holds that Rehema was raped by Sulubu and the other was not. Both interpretations are justifiable, since the scene (25) of the alleged act of rape is symbolically 'highly' obscured. However, as far as he is concerned, the unravelling of the symbolism, especially in the light of specific cultural milieu and deeper psychological dimensions to do with 'symbolic Phallus',



he has come to the conclusion that indeed Rehema was raped.

<sup>8</sup> *Kiu*, with its urban setting, reveals a tension between merchants against labourers whereas *Nyota ya Rehema* shows the opposition 'landlords versus poor peasants'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Mtufaha' (sometimes 'mtufaa' or 'mtofaa') is a kind of tropical apple tree whose fruit(s) exist in various sizes, shapes, colours and tastes. The reference 'mtufaha wa kizungu' (literally meaning European apple tree) is only used to differentiate it from other types which are more ingenuous – but has nothing to do with European origin.

<sup>10</sup> A type of coconut known for its tasty milk, hence grown only for drinking purposes and hence is not harvested for any other purpose.

<sup>11</sup> This plant is known for its sharp and dangerous thorns.

<sup>12</sup> This scene (25), though quite obscured, appears to present a case of a rape. The symbols, tropes and epithets (*tremors working towards her feet ... her muscles were caressed are hard pressed ... some creatures were creeping over her body ... the tremors climbed up to her thighs, belly, breasts ... As she opened her eyes she saw a human body, tall, black, stooping over her ...* so pervasive, insistent and sometimes violent; and the pain so hyperbolic that they lead one to this conclusion. The reason why Rehema goes back to Sulubu after being used by men in the city is (may be) a sign of recognising Sulubu as the only man who had shown her respect; but is just one of the interpretations. It can conversely be there is 'always' a psychological bond that finally pulls the raped to the rapist as part of man's Phallus symbol and masculinity imposed upon women as expressed by the writer who is himself a man. It is also a common belief or fallacy in Zanzibar, the setting of this novel.

<sup>13</sup> This echoes the theme of 'otherworldiness' found in *Al-inkishafi* (The Soul's Awakening) in which the poet Sayyid Abdulla bin Nassir takes it as the cause of political and economic collapse of the Pate Sultanate.

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the author's own work, and the book is a valuable contribution to the study of the history of the English language. It is a well-written and informative book, and it is a pleasure to read it. The author's knowledge of the subject is evident, and the book is a valuable addition to the literature on the history of the English language.

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