

LIMINALITY AND REGENERATION IN WAHOME MUTAHI'S *THE HOUSE OF DOOM*, FRANCIS IMBUGA'S *MIRACLE OF REMERA* AND MORAA GITAA'S *THE CRUCIBLE FOR SILVER AND FURNACE FOR GOLD*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is a critical interrogation of three Kenyan HIV/AIDS novels: Wahome Mutahi's *The House of Doom* (2004), Francis Imbuga's *Miracle of Remera* (2004) and Moraa Gitaa's *The Crucible for Silver and Furnace for Gold* (2008). It examines how the enactments of illness by the diseased characters in the three texts relate to their quest for meaning. The paper has drawn primarily on the existentialist notions advanced by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the Foucauldian postulations on the politics of and the care of the self and de Certeau's thoughts on liminality. These paradigms have the self as a shared feature and are useful in focusing the analysis to the individuality of the diseased subjects and their relationship with themselves and the complex social world around them. The paper emanates from the need to foster understanding of the ontological issues surrounding AIDS experience.*

Keywords: Meaning, Liminalit, Ontological, Politics, AID

INTRODUCTION

Coined by Van Gennep, the term liminality was expanded and popularized by the anthropologist Victor Turner who used it to refer to 'an intermediate state of being 'in between' in which individuals are stripped from their usual identity and their constituting social differences while being on the verge of personal or social transformation (cited in Shure, 2005,p.24). His perspective is that interstices are necessary sources of resolution and induce meta-explorations beyond the fixed, the finished and the predictable pregnant margins. For him, liminality offers the necessary thresholds of dissolution and indeterminacy through which socio-cultural order can be (re)constituted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her study of the representation of illness in Jane Austen's canon, Gorman (1993) notes that Jane Austen presents physical illness with awareness that though infirmity is arbitrary and comes to all, there are lessons to be learnt from illness experience. For her, illness in Jane Austen's novels is used as a mechanism for the transformation of characters where diseases symbolize cleansing fires and physical weakness or where suffering metamorphoses into moral strength, survival and harmony of the characters. Her reading of Austen canon emphasizes the value of suffering in transforming people into more benevolent creatures that people's hearts are open when they overcome pain and that recuperation enables people to empathize with fellow sufferers.

Though acknowledging that illness is not necessary for regeneration, I argue in this paper that in spite of it, characters experience inner development. In real life, however, there is neither moral reason for illness nor a definable pattern of its occurrence, but in literary representation, the literary artist may draft a universe where illness does not signify meaninglessness but

demonstrates clairvoyant consciousness of the diseased towards a more enlarged meaning of life. In this regard, Gorman notes that in Austen's canon, illness does not occur randomly but is skillfully employed to organize plot, enhance themes and further the exploration of characters. He points out Austen's essential humanity as it is embodied in her juvenile and mature novels. He identifies with her insightful observation later in her life that though the body is frail and 'illness cannot be completely avoided...., it can be dealt with and endured with dignity' (p. 124).

Frankensberg (1990) discusses the implication of AIDS to the literature of disease and the body, picking up earlier debates about the usefulness if any of inscribing the concomitants of ill health in literary art. He picks as starting point Jeffrey Meyers' *Disease and the Novel* in which he makes a case about textualizing disease. He argues against Virginia Woolf and the German Romanticists that:

Disease in an individual is too arbitrary to make a worthwhile subject of literature. It is natural and uninteresting, like the wind, it bloweth where it listeth; only personal development and change in spirit is interesting. If King Lear had Alzheimers's Disease or Othello and Julius Ceaser epilepsy, that was arbitrary; our interest lies in their reactions and interactions with others.(cited in Frankenberg, 1990, p.353)

On his part, Camus was of the conviction that illness and other debilities are not permanent impediments to the search for meaning, but can become sources of meaning for both the victims as well as their loved ones. We proceed from the premises that the literary texts under study represent AIDS as a humility creator and as an "Accelerated Inner Development Syndrome" (cited in Frankenberg, 1990, p. 353) that transforms the individual towards greater spirituality as the diseased subjects confront its enormity and struggle not to reject themselves but to find meaning in its meaninglessness.

Lansing (2003) advances the Foucauldian view, arising from Foucault's ideas about the need for critique, that:

in terms of smallness in the universe and the limits of mortality, the often obscured reality remains that every human on this earth is equal. We will all die eventually, as will our Earth, and no individual is exempt from it. Recognizing this limitation and questioning one's socially-formed limitations are the first steps toward building ... an *ethos* (Lansing, 2003, p.5),

towards constructing 'a personal philosophy of morals and values' (*ibid*) within liminal spaces created by illness and which can be relied upon in the individual's quest for existential meaning.

METHODOLOGY

The article is a library based qualitative study where the selected novels are subjected to critical analysis. The analysis was illuminated by the existentialist notions advanced by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the Foucauldian postulations on the politics of and the care of the self and de Certeau's thoughts on liminality.

Discussion and Findings

In *The House of Doom*, AIDS illness is presented as a marginal category out of which individuals reconstruct their selfhood as they enact their illness. In his heterological thinking, de Certeau 'recovers unexpected resonances of effectiveness in even the powerless' and 'urges us to look for capabilities on the margins where ordinarily ideology suggests we will find only dependency and subservience' (Terdiman, R., 2001:416). On his part Foucault proposes that 'we escape as much as possible from the type of relationship that society proposes for us and try to create, in the empty space where we are, new relational possibilities' (1.160 Essential works). Foucault perceives of the void such as that engendered by terminal illness as 'a space at the threshold of constituent praxis' (ibid) and insists that an experience is something that one comes out of transformed.

In *The House of Doom*, Mbela conjures epiphany from his illness experience as he endeavors to quest through chaos. He disrupts hegemony by boldly exposing hypocritical response to AIDS rife in the society. Not taking life for granted any more, he is out to live his day as if it were the last one in preparation for the inevitable. Before this day of his corporeal extinction, he seeks what will quarantine him continuity. He wants to love and to be loved, and Wambui's appreciation of him makes his life worth living. Like Lavina and Giorgio's relationship in *The Crucible*, Mbela and Wambui's romantic rebirth is meant to affirm life and postpone doom and death. He invests in the fulfilling intimacy with Wambui, the only person who understands and empathizes with his predicament to transcend the apocalypse associated with his condition. As mentioned elsewhere, their bold public declaration of love and marriage plans infuse an anti-apocalyptic temper that privileges life where doom and death compete for supremacy. His enactment of illness after the narrow escape from contrived accident seem to tally with de Certeau's idea of the 'epistemological status of alterity' where meaning arises from the margin as the disadvantaged reconstruct their selfhood.

His illness experience leads to acute awareness of his impending destruction, its decomposition, its explosion and enables 'its conversion to something else' (p. 247), a conversion that marks the shift from destination to constitution. In reconstituting himself, Mbela is inclined to more altruism and quests for continuity beyond his inevitable physical extinction by arranging to bequeath his books to a local secondary school, which can be read as an attempt to 'create order out of the chaos and thereby render[his] life meaningful' (Becker, G., 1998:4).

AIDS diagnosis can be read as an immersion into Joseph Campbell's mythical innermost cave from where a hero comes back with an elixir in form of a treasure won on a quest, or a realization that a special world exists and can be survived, or sometimes it is just coming home with a good story to tell. The diseased subject may not be entering the Campbellian labyrinths to combat mythical beasts but may enter his innermost cave by going into their own minds as they quest through the disruption wrought in their lives by HIV illness.

For Ezra Maiyo in *Miracle of Remera* for instance, an HIV diagnosis prompts heightened interests in intellectual pursuits beyond LLB, the degree of his choice, as he tells Kefa, with a clairvoyance gained out his liminality as a sero-positive:

knowledge ought to be truly fluid... The compartments in which we put it are artificial. I mean if a doctor writes an engaging novel about human nature, should we look down

on it because the author did not do literature at school? It is within this spirit that I am now getting interested in medical research” (p.187).

Armed with this new found conviction, Maiyo:

became a frequent visitor to the main library of Mengo University. He was interested in traditional medicine to the extent that he virtually spent free time buried in that section of the library. It was at the time at the peak of his new interest in herbal medicine that he was transformed into a goat in his third dream (p.182-3)

Maiyo seems to be ventriloquizing for the author in advocating for the ‘decompartmentalization’ of knowledge and putting a truce to the constructed antagonism between hard sciences and social sciences, urging a compromise and complementarity in all branches of knowledge, especially in the fight against AIDS. The series of dreams that he has in a short period following his sero-positive diagnosis testify to his preoccupation with matters existential and it is notable that the optimistic dreams dovetail with the anti-apocalyptic structure of the novel. Meditating upon his dreams, ‘he eventually reached the conclusion that through the dreams, something inside his mind was passing a special message to him. He saw a direct relationship between the dreams and his life (p.189).

All social knowledge, de Certeau asserts, ‘is enabled from the margin and all understanding arises in difference, as a result of privileged comprehension that can arise in any situation of social inferiority, exclusion, or disadvantage’ (Terdiman, R, 2001:). Seizing the advantage of the disadvantage to view life from the perspective of the victim of the virus, Maiyo arrives at the conviction that ‘each one of us humans has a sort of anti-viral device akin to the anti-virus devices in modern computers’ (p.188), a conviction that has a far reaching impact in the way he successfully manages his AIDS condition through experimenting with curative herbs and miraculously curing himself of the virus. The novel closes with an anti-apocalyptic, optimistic note with Maiyo confirmed cured of the virus by Dr Nimrod and with a breakthrough to AIDS cure in the offing. Like the Campbellian hero, Maiyo goes home with good news that he is HIV negative.

Saved from suicide by the swift intervention by Georgio Santini, Lavina in the *Crucible* is able to journey through her soul amid the reality of her condition. Through the encouragement of Georgio, she realizes the defeatism of suicide as a panacea to her current indignity and embarks on her quest for the worth of life in the glaring end of it. She seeks meaning of life in adversity to get her out of the quagmire of existential ennui which is exacerbated by her feeling of worthlessness and hopelessness. She is forced to wear a social mask, to create another self around herself in order to hide her inner pain and suffering and also to fortify herself against verbal attacks and innuendos from the likes of Kamundes who personify the general tendency in the society to inculcate those with HIV disease by constructing AIDS as a moral metaphor. She realized that these kill joys had to be avoided if she had to succeed in a will to meaning. She has learnt the hard way that self-pity destroys and sympathy enervates, she sets out to resist both, preferring the rewarding company of the Munges, her significant others whose accommodation of her deepen her understanding of life’s purpose. She is able to mitigate her sense of loss and transcend her debilitating reality by confiding in them. This choice of this existential pathway enables her to avoid isolation and alienation.

The Munges play an important role in Lavina's existential well being for they are the ones who match- make her with Georgio, the Italian tycoon also engaged in search for meaning of life out of the void and emptiness of affluence and materialism. Lavina and Georgio both aspire for quality and meaningful living as opposed to superficiality. The writer describes the intensity of their relationship as if they were fated for each other and their lives became complete by meeting, insisting that without each other, their lives would have been less meaningful. The writer utilizes the romance genre to redefine the diseased body, portraying it as flawless and capable of love, thus dismantling its conventional construction as repulsive and condemned. Though they have different motivations in their quest for meaning, their love testifies to loving through the minefield of AIDS and it is significant that it blossoms in the space of the novel, culminating in a colourful wedding. Despite the fact of HIV/AIDS, the novel presents a picture of a secure and happy couple, a couple with money galore to buy all they could possibly need, including the expensive but much needed anti-retroviral therapy. Their state- of- the art wedding with Lavina finally in safe hands is a triumph over stigma and discrimination of those diagnosed with AIDS, a celebration of life and love in the era of AIDS. In the novel, Lavina is not entirely defined by suffering, she circumvents her initial alienation to integrate herself in her unfortunate surroundings, she enjoys the social attachment to Georgio and the Munges, the alternative family she has forged, and also pursues sculpturing as a creative activity.

Georgio's reification of Lavina dispels pernicious AIDS stigma and the conflation of HIV disease with immorality and death, emphasizing that AIDS wasn't drawn to obsessive sex or meaningless sex. The novel reinforces the understanding that sex itself, pure and simple, was the medium, and the world was ravenous for it ... , gay men are not sick because of sex, they are sick because of the virus. Sex is not the cause of disease, and sex is still possible, even when one has it.

The blossoming romantic rebirth between the two eclipses AIDS and its consequent disruption of life, with the affluent Georgio committing to channel his wherewithal towards Lavina's medication. Georgio is successful in protecting Lavina from the insensitive people in the society such as Tony Kamunde and steers her into productive treatment. His determination to take a bullet to save her life in the botched bank heist is compatible with De Rougemont's assertion that 'the lover can reach self-awareness only by risking his life and being on the verge of death'(De Rougemont, Denis,1956:50-51) and that 'romance heroes seek a death passion that will act as a goad to sensuality'(cited in Eisner,D, 1997:216).

Risking death for her sake lifts their love into a new heightened state of passion, itself an alternative way of representing AIDS. The tone of the novel changes to one tinged with hope, Lavina has found a lover who cares for her and she gets the child she had given up on after her infection, a gesture that communicates hope against the angst that characterize sex in the times of AIDS. The novel has Lavina and Georgio celebrate their marriage and their sexuality, despite the reality of AIDS.

Tested through this minefield, the two feel like brand new snakes that have emerged from the slough, they have passed through the furnace of loving through the precarious times of AIDS to become the pure gold alluded to by the title of the novel. Their success story and 'condomization' of sex, emanating from self discipline, love and mutual understanding between the two is a statement of the triumph of love over its negation by AIDS. The successful herbal ministrations that reduce Lavina's viral load, finally reversing the apocalyptic trajectory of AIDS, allows love, not AIDS related death, to have the last chance. This is not merely

hypothetical, for several studies have shown that Zidodu Vine Therapy (AZT) can prevent HIV infection in babies born to HIV positive women.

The novel's title derives from Proverbs, Chapter 17: 3: 'the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart'. This testifies of a soul tested by the reality of illness but which eschews the easier but vegetating path of hedonism to embrace one that enlarges life and guarantees existential worth as a strategy to transcend the limitations of diseased corporeality. This existential path in questing for meaning is endorsed by the author against the Rawal's licentiousness. Like Biblical characters Modeccai and Daniel who endured insurmountable feats, she summons strength of spirit to circumvent the challenges imposed by her clinical syndrome. While she invokes Biblical insights to embolden the soul against adversity, her physical strength is buttressed by proper diet and avoidance of stress. This and the formidable camaraderie offered by the Munges, strengthens her will to seek meaning out of the meaninglessness thrust on her life by her HIV positive condition. She also transcends her unfortunate situation by preoccupying herself with carving and sculpting not purely for pecuniary gains but as a search for the elusive meaning of life.

Her sense of the artistic and creative enables her to appreciate the idyllic setting of the beaches, which mitigates the apocalyptic temper summoned by these sad reminiscences. These include a tranquil atmosphere, flight, and her memories of her home back in Kericho and an imaginary, idyllic past of her grandmother.

The writer does not however, downplay the enormity of HIV disease and the disruption its mere diagnosis causes to the life of the individual, she intertwines optimism with melancholy by depicting Lavina rapt in apocalyptic meditations, identifying with literary characters like Sohie Mol in Arundati Roy's *The God of the Small Things*, lying on the byre at the funeral. She lapses into nefarious mood swings and nightmarish dreams of funerals, but still in such melancholy, all hope is not lost. She is able to envisage Georgio writing an epitaph extolling her good fight with AIDS. The overarching tendency of the text however, is to affirm meaning amid the existential impediments of illness. In *Crucible*, AIDS has been reinvented and the tragic inevitability of AIDS deaths has been replaced by the prospect of living positively with HIV.

The AIDS narrative in *The Crucible* is not driven by the experiences of those who are defeated by the disease but by those who defiantly make a life for themselves in spite of it. In the portrayal of Georgio and Lavina, the novel does not merely allude to the love among people living with HIV disease but graphically depicts, sex as what that love entails. Lavina falls in love and rediscovers her sexuality. In its eschewal of spectacular images of the abject people living with AIDS, the novel is unique in the celebration and representation of the sexuality of people living with HIV/AIDS, depicting how the HIV diseased can live a productive life with AIDS.

CONCLUSION

A striking finding of this study is the philosophical quest for meaning in illness manifested in the selected texts. This redemptive and regenerative dimension of AIDS experience is discussed in chapter five where diseased subjects are depicted as engaging in efforts to transcend the limitations of their diseased corporeality by embracing perspective transformation. Spirituality in its broad sense becomes the essence through which these

characters rediscover a purpose of life as they adjust to the disruption in their lives caused by AIDS. The care of the self and the concomitant quest for meaning is essential to the identity of the diseased subjects against the stigmatizing normativity constructed for them by the society. In coupling the theme of the quest for meaning with illness, the writers discussed in this study go beyond the meaninglessness wrought by AIDS by presenting the quest as possible.

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