

## Configuring Thematic Tropes in Kiswahili Literature: Translating Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* as *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*

J. Omboga Zaja  
University of Nairobi

### Abstract

The scholarly explications of literary translations in Kiswahili have for long been predicated on a paradigm which homogenizes and explicates all translations as unvarying in meaning, habitually focused on the transposition of literary value from English into Kiswahili. This paper contends that the translation of *Song Long a Letter* into Kiswahili as *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* affirms Venuti's assertions and demonstrates a conscious rewriting that variously configures literary themes in Kiswahili literature. It further contends that literary translation is a cultural undertaking that enables the rendition of literary and cultural material in target paradigms. By foregrounding the social and cultural significance of the source text, the translation is a *tour de force* that reinvigorates feminist writing in Kiswahili literature, underprops knowledge creation, and refocuses the centrality of translation as enabling the perception of difference and presentation of alternative possibilities.

**Key Words:** thematic tropes, concepts, genres, devices, literary translation, rewriting

### Introduction

There is a disconcerting reality that available scholarly writings on literary translation in Kiswahili hardly interrogate the social and cultural significance of translated texts. This is a scholarly lacuna meriting explication and one plausible approach to do this is to interrogate literary translations predicated on the conceptualization of translations in terms that are thematically conscious and socially responsive. This enables a cross-examination of diverse aspects of the translated text that are usually taken for granted (Mukherjee, 1996). For instance, there is a supposition that Kiswahili literature has demonstrated discernible reluctance in canvassing gender and feminist writing as constituting critical social themes. This study perspective is critical in enabling the study of translated texts in Kiswahili in ways that eschew adherence to formalism and instead foreground social pedagogical essence so as to uncover hushed feminine themes embedded in given literary translations. It further enables the deconstruction of the hegemonic

and pedagogical orientation in which source texts are assumed to be materially and culturally superior compared to target texts, normally assumed to be surrogates. There are numerous demonstrable examples in this particular translation that affirm literary translation contributions in the configuration of new literary themes and knowledge creation in target paradigms (Engber, 1996).

Literary translations in Kiswahili have been critical in uncovering incontrovertible evidence of the existence of literary lacuna characterized by unavailability of literary genres, unexplored taboo themes, fictional devices hardly experimented with and shunned forms of literary expressions. There is also observable nonappearance of literary themes which one would expect to find in the literature given the historical realities of Kiswahili literary development. For instance, the nonappearance of political agitation for independence written in Kiswahili “during” the struggle for freedom from colonialism, though there are a number of revisionist writings of that struggle after independence. There is a virtual non-existence of genres such as travelogues, autobiographies, memoirs as well as dynamic feminist writing. There is an unacknowledged fact that where there are apparent absences of themes in Kiswahili literature, such absences are recompensed in the form of translations. Notwithstanding all these observations coupled with the fact that in spite of the long history of translation in Kiswahili, there is a non-visibility of literary translation in terms of its utilization in conversing contemporary literary and cultural issues as well as its absence in Kiswahili cultural consciousness.

### Translation and Literary Signification

One critical interest which underscores scholarly interests in literary translation is what Venuti (ibid) calls “signification chains” whose overall assertion is that, translation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitute the source text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation. This is essentially what Clement Maganga has done in the translation of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, that’s providing signification enabling the realization of thematic and cultural significance. Literary translation, it must be noted, is the rendition of meaning in a target paradigm and on its part, meaning is an effect of relations among signifiers along a potentially endless chain, which is distinct and contextualized, as such meaning is never present as an original unity. Source texts and their translations are replete with diverse linguistic, thematic and cultural materials that neither the source text writer nor the translator originates, however, these pre-existing materials are made manifest by the contextual imperatives operative in the target language which underprop any translation. A source text is a site of diverse semantic and thematic possibilities that are fixed only provisionally in any one translation. These possibilities are made manifest on the basis of specific social situations, cultural assumptions, interpretive choices and historical determinants, meaning that *Barua*

*Ndefu Kama Hii* is a thematically multi-layered text that cannot be read only in a specific sense. This is so because its thematic mosaic is plural and contingent on its contexts of reading. Just as Allen (2001) asserts, meaning is always evoked and perceived through inter-textual interactions which *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* animates and allows multiple interpretations.

The implications of these postulations are that translated texts cannot be explicated only by or through mechanistic concepts of equivalence and formal correspondence. The pejorative notions of accuracy, adequacy, fidelity and fluency which are invoked in reading translations, are always contextually determined, and as such are not always useful in proffering critically nuanced explanations about “mistranslations”. Sometimes “mistranslations” are innovations arising out of interpretive perspectives, particularly “conscious mistranslations” of source texts. Mistranslations in literary texts may thus turn out to be intelligible and momentous in the target language given their locus in new “apposite” contexts of literature and culture. Their new contexts of reading inevitably imbue mistranslations with significance and therefore deconstruct the erroneous notion that mistranslations do not always arise out of inability to grasp the spirit of the source text. Mistranslations may be conscious projections of alternative views of knowing things or of things known. This is why the viability of a translation is always established by its relation to the cultural and social conditions of its production and utilization. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*’s feminist thematic mosaic is made manifest on the basis of the cultural and social conditions of Kiswahili literature. Toury (1995) has asserted that translations are realities of one system only, the target system, they are facts of target cultures, on occasion facts of special status constituting identifiable (sub)systems of their own, but of the target culture in any event, consequently *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* as translated, is a reality of Kiswahili literature.

### **Purpose and Process in Literary Translation**

Though it is not overly acknowledged in literary translation scholarship in Kiswahili, the purposes and processes underpinning literary translations are neither passive nor neutral, translations are always embedded with both conscious and spontaneous intentions. The source texts from which they draw inspiration, have always encountered Kiswahili literature in unequal terms of power relations predicated on the assumption that source texts are thematically and culturally exalted. This notwithstanding, critical re-readings of translated texts inevitably demonstrate that source texts are habitually re-contextualized and reconstituted in the translation processes in order to accord with the values and representations pre-existing in Kiswahili literature. Such reconstitution entails re-contextualizing source text thematic hierarchies of dominance and marginality so as to enable their production, circulation and reception as recognizable texts in the target contexts. This affirms Venuti’s assertion that, “translation is a subtle replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the source text with a text that is intelligible to

the target language reader” (:18). This replacement trajectory explains Maganga’s deliberate shifting of “*housewife*” in the source text to “*mama wa jikoni*” in Kiswahili, knowing that “*mama wa nyumba*” and “*mama wa jikoni*” have distinct hierarchical cultural positions. This single translational instance is replicated in the translation generally thus underpropping “conscious mistranslations” that strongly echo the “cannibalism” metaphor alluded to Augusto de Campos (1992) of appropriating and positively re-energizing the target literary archive through translation.

Maganga’s translation, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is inspired by Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* in several senses. However a critical re-reading of this translation shows that it is not a mechanistic rendition of the source text, rather it is a thoughtful re-working of the source text which foregrounds critically nuance feminist themes. There is no doubt about the phenomenal successes that *So Long a Letter* has had in African literature in terms of animating discussions and mainstreaming feminist issues with attendant vibrant conversations of the same. These successes have been hailed by Eldred Jones as, “offering a testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth”. Maganga’s translation, as such, presents profound insights on feminist writing generally and its varied thematic tropes in particular. This allusion to depth and insight acquiesces to the assertion that, when women turn to writing history and literature as well, a third element appears on the scene—that issues that are traditionally ahistorical (a literary), that are conventionally marginal are placed center-stage (Jain, 1996). Maganga’s translation is acutely attentive to these considerations, and is therefore rendered in subtle ways which, while not compromising its literary originality, it prioritizes and foregrounds feminist writing and in many senses enables the rephrasing of Spivak’s assertions for the subalterns to speak.

My reading of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* in view of the foregoing, is an attempt to the literary status and contributions of this translation in reconfiguring the feminist writing in Kiswahili literature, bearing in mind that it was actualized in a context where feminist writing was marginal, at least in the decade of the 1990s. Its rendition purposely sought to transmit the literary capital of the source text into a literary and cultural environment that could then be considered unreceptive, antagonistic and insidiously competitive in the sense of its belated entry into a literary system already dominated by patriarchal themes. Although there was a vibrant feminist consciousness sweeping through Africa in the 1960s, awakening women and feminist scholars to the inequalities and limitations placed on women’s lives both in the traditional and modern African society, written Kiswahili literature had remained largely untouched by this wave of consciousness. The existence of a marginal feminist writing tradition in Kiswahili literature till then was a paradox, given that when this novel was first translated into Kiswahili in the early 1990s, there were hardly any critically nuanced feminist novels, plays or

poems championing the feminist agenda, yet the rest of African literary experimentations were preoccupied with these issues.

### *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, The Synopsis

It is prudent to acknowledge that translated texts, no matter how radically shifted they may be from the source texts, are in several ways dependent on source texts for their realization. This is a fact that Maganga's translation is cognizant of, that the rendition of texts in target literary paradigms inevitably creates genres, thematic tropes and theoretical worlds of their own. The translation of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is quite instructive on this. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, first published in French in 1979, though written in a genre considered ideologically marginal and marginalized, has made tremendous contributions to the growth of Kiswahili feminist literary writing. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is written in the form of a letter, a long letter indeed. It is about Ramatoulaye, an urban Senegalese woman, who is recently widowed, writing to her friend, childless Aissatu. In the letter, Ramatoulaye tells Aissatu about Modu's death, her experiences during the *eda*—the Muslim religion's period of mourning. This period of mourning and confinement accords Ramatoulaye an opportunity to reflect on her life, her husband's decision to marry another wife and how that decision affects her and her family. She juxtaposes her status as a co-wife against Aissatu's husband's polygamous liaisons. She parallels her victimhood arising out of polygamy with that of Aissatu, though their responses to polygamy are diametrically opposed. Whereas Aissatu walks out on Maudo, Ramatoulaye remains in a polygamous marriage in spite of her children's advice to leave the marriage.

Ramatoulaye's letter also tells of her experiences as a widow; the mischief of being treated as an equal of her co-wife Binetuu, the mistreatments from her in-laws, the decisions made about her life without her being consulted and her rejection of several suitors. It tells of her struggle to survive the period of confinement socially, culturally, religiously and above all emotionally. Though she craves for love, she nevertheless rejects potential suitors. It is in the process of rejecting suitors that she makes her most assertive statements.

1a) *Toba ya Rabi! Azimio gani hili la mapenzi lililojaa majivuno na linafanywa katika nyumba ambayo hata haijamaliza msiba! Kujiamini kupi huku kusikokuwa na tahadhari! Namkasia macho Tamsiri. Namtazama Maudo. Namwangalia Imamu. Shela yangu nyeusi naifunga vema. Naendelea kuvutatasbihi. Safari hii nitazungumza. Sauti yangu ilijua miaka thelathini ya kimya na miaka thelathini ya kazi ngumu. Ikalipukana ukali ama wa kejeli au wa dharau (77).*

b) *(What a declaration of love, full of conceit, in a house still in mourning. What assurance and calm aplomb! I look at Tamsir straight in the eye. I look at Mawdo. I look at the Imam. I draw my shawl closer. I tell my beads. This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of*

*silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous).*

In the closing chapters of this letter, Ramatoulaye portrays herself as a dignified and independent woman, organized and ready to deal with issues as diverse as her son's broken arm and a pregnant unmarried daughter. Her dignity is reflected in the number of diligent choices she had to make throughout her life including the choice of career, husband, the choice of remaining in a polygamous marriage a second wife and finally remaining single after Maudou's death. This letter presents a personal account and "a perceptive testimony of the plight of those articulate women who live in social milieu dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their proper place" (Champagne, 1996:26).

### Reading *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* in Kiswahili Literature

Many scholarly researches that have gone into literary translations in Kiswahili are characteristically intuitive, always orientated towards ascertaining the upholding of the structural and linguistic sameness of the source in the translated texts. Thus, the critiquing of literary translations has equally been explicated predominantly in terms of ascertaining attainment of equivalence and the preservation of the textual fidelity of the source text, which are insistently perceived as sacred icons to which translations can only be approximates. This stance is overly emphasized notwithstanding the fact that what precisely equivalence and fidelity amount to and what they seek to explain in these studies, have remained oddly muted. Nevertheless, in many of such studies available in Kiswahili hitherto, there is a discernible peculiar preoccupation with these issues where many scholars seem persuaded that the source text, in the words of Abdul Jan Mohamed, is "ordered and rational and the translated text is chaotic and irrational". Such perspectives intimate that translated texts are read and explicated in terms of how approximate they reflect source text. This is what explains the persistent preoccupation with collating linguistic mistakes of commission and omission in the available studies. While there are many perspectives of reading and interpreting a given translated text, a reading of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* that seeks to uncover the text's feminist thematic mosaic, will inevitably prioritize the exploration of discernible cues underpropping feminist literary essence, its translational exchange and cultural introspection.

*Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*'s presentation of the feminist thematic trope, as I will gradually affirm, is critically conscious of the stereotypical portraiture of women in Kiswahili literature, both in terms of literary creativity and scholarly elucidation. Consequently, the translation makes the invisible woman visible, the muted and voiceless woman audible (Davies, *ibid.*). Overall, this translation deconstructs the obvious and familiar and demeaning feminine stereotypes and in their place projects alternative positive feminine portraiture. It eschews the banal issues of ascertaining textual uniformity, the uncritical upholding and privileging of the

source text, instead it reworks and rewrites the source text in a way that projects “alterity”, thus engendering an interpretation that is positively subversive to the patriarchal canon emblematic of Kiswahili literature. On a broad perspective, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* subverts the North-South translational trajectory which purveys patriarchal hegemony and influence inequality and instead projects a West-East exchange that is imbued with constructive cognate meaning. The consequence of this translational shift is that the explication of this particular translation necessitates explanatory trajectories that explicitly facilitate the deconstruction of patriarchal power and knowledge inequalities. The translation mutes the centrality of the source text but subtly prioritizes the exploration of its feminist literary import with the potential to redirect the experiences and the realities of the Kiswahili reading audiences to these issues.

In terms of thematic transference, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* transmits more than the feminist literary essence that is discernible throughout the source text. Given that the source text is infused with inheritances of colonial and postcolonial experiences evident in the exploration of post colonialism, urbanization, modern education, and modern life styles upon which most of the relationships in the source text are predicated, these issues have been transmitted into Kiswahili literature as well. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge that literary translation has potential to project perceptions of reality that may be hushed in target paradigms. This is critical in mainstreaming alternative realities rather than denying, minimizing or opposing their existence (Bongasu, T. K, 2001). For instance, whereas there is no denying that the binary oppositions of male-female, oppressor-oppressed and order-chaos do exist in Kiswahili literature, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* makes them even more manifest. This is the translation is framed in terms of these binaries which portray the daily and routine agony that women are subjected to, it exposes the unacknowledged reality that, over and above women being oppressed as citizens, they are again oppressed as women on the basis of their gender, being circumscribed by cultural and religious institutions and strictures (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997).

#### *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii's* Thematic Significance

The thematic significance of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* in Kiswahili literature is predicated on the cognition that literary translation is an activity which in practice initiates a rewriting of the source text within the constraints of literary quintessence and cultural sensibilities operative in the target literature. Just like Nyerere whose translation of *Mabepari wa Venisi (The Merchant of Venice)* was patently a rewriting of Shakespeare's ethnic and mercantile politics so as to reflect capitalistic and class politics in its rendition in Kiswahili, Maganga's translation of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is similarly an ideological rewriting that debunks female subjugation and objectification in Kiswahili literature. As translator, Maganga recognizes his multiple roles as a reader, critic, interpreter and knowledge creator and, therefore, pays attention to the contextual historicity of the source text-So

*Long a Letter*. His rendition of the text into Kiswahili is thus a rewriting informed by a re-reading and re-interpretation intended to make discernible a multiplicity of feminine themes. His rendition of the source text whiling transposing literary material it also enables knowledge creation. This is because it subtly avoids a mono-logic rendition emphasizing systemic correspondence but instead foregrounds the transmission of multiple meanings and interpretations of gender in Kiswahili literature.

The thematic issues prioritized in the source text are re-contextualized in the translation process and made discernible in the Kiswahili context. As such *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is responsive to the dire circumstances and plight of marginalized woman in East Africa, its thematic import facilitates a re-examination of the dehumanizing cultural images of women—marginalized as literary characters and as people. It makes manifest the insidious and hushed machinations of acculturation underpinning the processes of marginalization. Whereas the source text's meaning and knowledge imperatives are not entirely blurred and distorted, the overall rendition makes them discernible in the Kiswahili literature, because it is rendered in ways which enable constructive reconfiguration of feminist writing in Kiswahili. On another level, the translation defies notions of presumed order and common sense attributable to source texts and instead foregrounds cues for its reading that take cognizance of target literary forms, traditions and knowledge systems. By shunning notions of order the translation provides cognition and appreciation of alternative feminine portraiture, ultimately making the translation seminal in imprinting a clearly nuanced conceptualization of a feminist discourse that is thematically and stylistically enriching.

The rendition of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* was executed at a time when the feminist writing, particularly by women writers in Kiswahili was virtually non-existent. The portraiture and depiction of the woman persona, the plight of her situation and her representation in structures of power and knowledge creation, were extremely stereotypical, condescending and parochial. Although there were literary writings in Kiswahili literature canvassing feminists ideas, such wrings were merely ethical didactic apologies. The images of female characters as depicted by male writers at that time were less than whole, thus making feminine portraiture to inadvertently buttress degrading and dehumanizing patriarchal traditions. When *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is read in view of these assertions, its thematic mosaic in Kiswahili is certainly a critical counter portraiture which reshapes the interpretation of feminist themes in Kiswahili literature. Its thematic thrust is not an idealization of some lost feminist glory or sense of nostalgia; rather it is an interrogation of the current and prevalent material circumstances circumscribing women's lived experiences.

Maganga's translation potentially challenges the long standing erroneous notion that translated texts are inferior compared to their source texts. There is no



doubt that the translation rewrites the source text in ways that call into question the supposed superiority of source texts overall. At the time of its translation, very few Kiswahili literary texts had pursued the theme of female subjugation with such vigor as Maganga's *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*. The cogency of this pursuit is perceivable in terms of foregrounding the feminist theme and its epistolary presentation which enables the protagonist to consciously project alternative and positive feminine portraiture, a depiction which retrieves and mainstreams women's sense of being. It presents a counter rethinking of patriarchal portraiture of women as subservient and passive objects of men's reality, which also subtly counters the feminist literary persona in Kiswahili literature always presented as wife-mother, girlfriend-mistress or as mothering-prostituting and sporadically as heroines.

Because of its overwhelming female presence, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* presents a counter reading of the feminine persona which deconstructs the idealization and romanticization of the African woman in terms of fertility and motherhood, an idealization which adversely affirms the subordination and subjugation of women's roles overall. The feminine portraiture enabled in this translation is neither an elevation of women as goddesses nor a demeaning of women as prostitutes and appendages of male whims, it a depiction of women with autonomy, status and not as homogenized group. In *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* women are not spoken for, they are the speaking subjects whose locution is on and about women. Perhaps this is one of the most compelling reasons why readers who are interested in a positive feminine portraiture in Kiswahili literature will find *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* appealing; it portrays speaking subjects who are capable of making choices. Ramatoulaye and Aissatu are true examples of these speaking subjects who make decisions and choices. In her letter to Maudo, Aissatu speaks,

- 2a) *Kama unaweza kuzaa bila mapenzi halisi, ati kwa ajili ya kuyapoza majivuno ya mama anayezeeka, nakuona kama unayo dharau. Tangu sasa utaporomoka haraka sana kwenye wadhifa wa juu ulio na heshima, ambao siku zote nimekuwa nikikupa. Hoja unazozitoa hazikubaliki; huwezi kunihusisha mimi niliye "uhai kwako, pendo la chaguo lako" (42).*
- b) *If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of a declining mother, then I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I always placed you. Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me, "your life, your love, your choice" (31-32).*

*Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is, thus, consciously constructed to accord voice to women shackled by social and cultural institutional structures, it seizes the translational opportunity to present self- portrayals of women and by women that are dignified and representative. Ideally, the translation contradicts the uniform generalizations about African women and womanhood generally. The positing of

women as active and speaking subjects shatters the erroneous and uniform generalization about women in Kiswahili literature.

The thematic, ideological and stylistic elements of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* as transposed and in Maganga's translation to inspire a departure from the source text in order to recreate their own relevance in Kiswahili literature. The text's epistolary style accords Ramatoulaye the opportunity to speak and articulate her position, trials and triumphs, thus symbolically opening speaking opportunities for feminine portraiture in Kiswahili literature focusing on issues afflicting women (Nfah-Abbenyi, *ibid.*). Though the women depicted in the novel are still circumscribed by tradition, their roles are more critically problematized as they seek to subvert and demythologize the patriarchal portraiture of women. This is seen in Ramatoulaye's symbolic breaking of tradition and religious restrictions to assert herself as a human being, potentially enabling women define themselves on the basis of their lived experiences. The translation is thematically momentous in encouraging positive feminine portraiture and realistic depiction of women's real life experiences. This is so because at the time of its advent in Kiswahili, the literature was inundated with works predicated on populist didactic themes which hardly threatened the patriarchal structure. The feminist depiction advanced by the protagonist in her letter is ground-breaking in foregrounding feminist issues that are sociological, cultural, political and economic. It deconstructs the power play between men and women in diverse contexts and instead presents female-male portraiture of relationships entailing the naming and construction of space identities, locations and locutions. This portraiture further deconstructs archaic traditions, cultures and stereotypes and while advocating the abolition of obstacles that hinder access to freedom as emphatically asserted here;

- 3a) *Safari hii nitazungumza. Sauti yangu ilijua miaka thelathini ya kukaa kimya na miaka thelathini ya kazi ngumu (77).*
- b) *This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment (57).*

*Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* transmits copious material from the source text to Kiswahili literature, thus subtly enriching the target text thematically and making it responsive in calling out the cultural, religious and institutional contexts in which African women live precariously. The translation is socio-politically consciously in foregrounding contemporary Swahili women's struggles without sacrificing the aesthetic vigor of the original text. As such, it is a constructive critiquing of culture, religion and social strictures inhibiting and exploiting women; it is a canvassing of women's struggles that forcefully interrupts their masculine portraiture. This is because there are several initiatives in the text undertaken by women in making decisions to better their lives, particularly those decisions that deconstruct the domineering male presence. On this issue, Maganga reworks the source text as follows:

- 4a) *Kwa hakika tulikuwa kama kina dada wa ukoo mmoja wenye lengo lile lile la kujikomboa. Kututoa katika ung'ang'aniaji wa mambo ya jadi, ya ushirikina na kimaadili; kutuwezesha kupenda tamaduni nyingine bila ya kuzikana zile za kwetu; kuinua mtazamo wetu wa ulimwengu; kujenga utu wetu; kuimarisha maadili mema, kuzalisha katika nafsi zetu maadili bora yanayothaminiwa na kila mtu (21).*
- b) *We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal morals in us (15).*

### **Barua Ndefu Kama Hii and Knowledge Signification**

Both the source text and its resultant translation in Kiswahili are actualized within the context of post-colonialism where each is imbued with certain autonomy. Consequently, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is autonomous in enabling the retrieval of marginal and muted feminine voices, it is a reversal of women's exclusions critical in underpropping patriarchal hegemony and its perpetuation. It is a cognizant endeavor in reclaiming relegated "knowledges", routinely occluded and silenced in patriarchal knowledge systems. It is a purposeful portraiture of disregarded and subjugated "knowledges" that are disqualified as inadequate, insufficient and under elaborated (Leela, 1998). In essence, this translation facilitates the recognition of "knowledges" that have been violently marginalized yet they are "knowledges" that embody fundamental forms of thought and culture. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, presents in Kiswahili literature a radical reclaim of feminine subdued knowledge while at the same time reinvigorates the feminist writing. This is observable in relation to re-examining the prevailing poetics on feminist writing in the literature. For instance, Ramatoulaye's concern about the quality and quantity of female representation in her country's legislative assembly is a reality that resonates with the East African situation;

- 5a) *Wanawake wanne, Dauda, wanne miongoni mwa wabunge mia moja. Uwiano gani huo wa kimzaha! Wala hakuna uwakilishaji wa kimkoa (81).*
- b) *Four women, Dauda, four out of a hundred deputies. What a ridiculous ratio! Not even one for each province.*

The thematic thrust of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is also predicated on the understanding and recognition that the disempowerment of women is enabled through their exclusion from the spaces and centers of knowledge creation, codification and dissemination. Feminist disempowerment and exclusion are not specific to Senegal alone; they are noticeable everywhere in African. Consequently, Maganga's canvassing of feminist issues in the translation, is aptly relevant to the East African situation in its assertive campaign for women to access

the means and centers of knowledge creation. It is a campaign for equal and active participation of women in knowledge creation that is favorable and representative. Women's participation in knowledge creation is constrained by prejudiced patriarchal structures and institutions, as such, the translation's thematic mosaic is a purposeful intrusion and disruption of the dominant male knowledge systems. These concerns are aptly captured when Ramatoulaye voices her concern:

- 6a) *Wale kina mama wanaoitwa "kina mama wa jikoni" nao pia wanastahili sifa. Kazi za nyumbani wanazozifanya na ambazo hazilipwi kwa pesa taslimu zina umuhimu nyumbani humo. Malipo wapewayoni lundo la nguo zilizopasiwa vizuri, sakafu iliyotengenezwa kwa mawe mororo yang'aayo na kuifanya miguu iteleze, na jiko zuri mnamonukia aina mbali mbali za viungo (85).*
- b) *Those women we call 'house wives' deserve praise. The domestic work they carry out, and which is not paid in hard cash, is essential to the home. Their compensation remains the pile of well ironed, sweet-smelling washing, the shining tiled floor on which the foot glides, the gay kitchen filled with the smell of stews (63).*

Ramatoulaye's voice in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is critical in making women active participants in constructive knowledge creation which disabuses women of the demeaning labeling as reified objects of knowledge. This voice further discounts women's passivity and docility as attributes responsible for the perpetuation of their oppression (Dubek, 2001). The epistolary narrative style of the text is apropos in addressing itself to women consequently making them the central plank in the overall structure of the narrative, mainstreaming the centrality of the roles played by women in society:

- 7a) *Kushiriki kwako katika maisha yangu hakukuanza kidharura. Hata nyanya zetu walikuwa wanawasiliana kila siku ingawa walikuwa wakiishi mbalimbali. Mama zetu nao walikuwa wakali kwa wajomba na shangazi mintarafu ya utunzaji wao wa vitu (1).*
- b) *Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts (1).*

Ramatoulaye's letter first addresses Aisatu and then goes on to bring to the fore grandmothers, mothers and aunts, all of them women, a subtle foregrounding of women's centrality in all social and cultural contexts. This is a critical feminist theme transposed into Kiswahili literature where the diversity of women characters depicts their disadvantaged circumstances. The diversity of circumstances is evident, for instance, when Maudu's mother coerces her son to marry a second wife so as to assuage her self-esteem and status, she is complicit in supporting polygamy. Equally, when young girls are cajoled into polygamous marriages by

fellow women, their sense of complicity is inescapable. In spite of all these misgivings, the text is fairly objective in presenting a positive portraiture of women's plight in real lived circumstances. Maganga's translation renders this thus:

- 8a) *Mimi si peke yangu ninayesisitiza umuhimu wa kuleta mabadiliko katika sheria zilizopo ili tuweze kuingiza nguvu mpya humo bungeni. Mwanamke asichukuliwe kama pambo au chombo unachoweza kuhamisha, au mwenzi unayeweza kumsifia au kumpoza kwa ahadi mbalimbali. Mwanamke ndiye mzizi wa awali na msingi wa taifa. Mambo yote mazuri hutokana na mzizi huo. Sharti mwanamke ahimizwe ili ajishughulishe zaidi katika malengo ya taifa lake (83).*
- b) *I am not, in fact, the only one to insist on changing the rules of the game and injecting new life into it. Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country (61-62).*

This assertion does not portray women as objects and passive recipients of knowledge; they are active creators of knowledge. Consequently, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is thematically momentous in the exploration of the hindrances that exclude women from knowledge creation such as the confinement symbolically portrayed in Ramatoulaye's period of exclusion, during which time she is excluded from any decision making processes even when such decisions are about her very existence. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* renders this as follows:

- 9a) *Kipindi hicho ndicho kinachoogopwa sana na kina mama wote wa Kisenagali. Ndicho kipindi ambacho mke hutoa mali yake yote kama sadaka na zawadi kwa wakwezwe, na lililo baya zaidi ni kwamba licha ya mali anayojitolea, hata thamani ya utu na heshima yake inakuwa duni, anakuwa chombo cha kutumiwa na mume aliyemwoa, babu, nyanya, baba, mama, kaka, dada, mjomba shangazi, mabinamu na marafiki wa mume huyo (:5).*
- b) *This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possession she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his mother his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends (4).*

### **Reconfiguring the Feminist Theme in Kiswahili Literature**

It have already argued that *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is a conscious rendition that unmasks the unstated patriarchal assumptions underpinning the exclusion of women from the centers of knowledge creation. In several senses, therefore, this

translation is an exploration of cultural and religious exclusions which restrict and sideline women. Ramatoulaye's culture is intertwined with religion such that exploitative cultural practices are justified as religious practice. The transposition of this thematic trope into Kiswahili literature intimates that *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* provides opportunities for the exploration of cognate practices in Kiswahili culture. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, in the words of Hebermas (1972) is "emancipatory" in the sense that it potentially reclaims the historical traces of suppressed feminine knowledge. It also, theoretically, reconstructs that history in ways that allow intrusion and ultimately deconstruction of an-all-male knowledge system in the literary canon (Kumah, 2000). This translation is a constructive portraiture of women's self-images and insights of their lives as portrayed in the lives of the heroines of the story; Ramatoulaye, Aissatu and the French school teacher. This is a portrayal of women's repression that is imbued with insight, feeling and force. Unlike the male writers' portraiture of the woman persona in the literature lacking in depth of feeling on issues such as co-wifery, polygamy, restrictive seclusion and exclusion, the translation makes the same deeply felt. The heroine character structure and the epistolary narrative style facilitate a portraiture that acknowledges women's circumscribed lives from a woman's point of view, it presents such experiences to the reader as stated facts and testimonies. The overriding contention is that women authorship is critical in the subversion of patriarchal structures, ideologies and institutions that prejudicial to women.

### **Education and the Portraiture of Women in Literature**

One critical theme that is canvassed and which runs through this translation, is the role of modern western education in understanding the plight of women's lives. This entails understanding how education inscribes western values of self and their implication in isolating educated African women from their uneducated sisters. How education is implicated in facilitating modern urban lives which enflame conflict of interest between the economically privileged and western educated and their less affluent but no less class-conscious women, and finally how modes of modernity inscribed by western education marginalize women. Consequently, it can be affirmed that the maltreatment and betrayal of Aissatu and Ramatoulaye by their husbands, are a consequence of the tensions between "modernity", western education and traditional tenets of probity. It will be noted that culturally and religiously sanctioned practices such polygamy and widow inheritance, as practiced in African contexts, constantly clash with western concepts and practices of monogamy. Men's and husbands' lifestyles as depicted in this translation, are exploitative as they are an affirmation of patriarchal tenets. The portrayal of western education and its aftermath is a subtle exploration of a wide range of oppressions ranged against African women, such as the sociopolitical patriarchal order that insidiously appropriates aspects of western education to buttress oppression. Thus, education is critical in a dual sense, it enables the recognition

that the African man—father, husband, son—is privileged with access to education more than the African woman. The other set of repressions that education uncovers are cultural and religious practices that constrain women’s freedom and entrap certain categories of women to work in cohorts with men to subjugate fellow women. There is evidence of women oppressors in the translation, namely Aissatu’s mother-in-law and Ramatoulaye’s lady-mother-in-law, who scheme and entrap their daughters-in-law into polygamous marriages. The exploration of women’s complicity in their own subjugation can be considered as objective and forthright in presenting the true material circumstances in which African women live.

The depiction of male characters in this translation is subdued, the leading roles are dominated by women who have had exposure to western education. In this sense, education has imbued them with patterns of behavior which have capacity to deconstruct the patriarchal order. For instance, the depiction of women declining marriage proposals, taking courage to walk out of unsatisfactory marriages, and venturing on boldly with life on their own terms, makes this translation a symbolic struggle against the patriarchal order of exclusion and disempowerment. It is also symbolic of women’s struggle for independence, freedom of choice and life. Equally the translation is a demonstration of the possibilities available for women to choose as Assiba d’Almeida’s (1986:171) asserts:

“In *So Long a Letter*, Aissatu and Ramatoulaye have made different choices in similar situations. However, what is important is that choices have been made. For too long a time women have been denied to choose the course of their lives, even though choice is at the center of what gives significance to human existence. In this novel, the author shows clearly that women have a deep consciousness of the options opened to them and that they are willing to make choices that will make their lives more wholesome, no matter what the consequences might be”.

These choices are discernible in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, and therefore place it within the broad conversation of feminism, humanist values and women’s struggles. Generally, feminism as canvassed in this translation entails foregrounding women’s identity, authenticity, independence, equality, justice and decency. This translation, as such, enables a conversation of analogous issues in Kiswahili which resonate with what Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) has called bringing to the forefront “their own (her)stories and the expression of their points of view”, a rejection of the totalizing conceptualizations of women”. Thus, education is transposed as an integral aspect of the thematic mosaic which makes conspicuous the unacknowledged and hushed constraints of women’s oppression in their literary portraiture. The many revolts occasioned by women in the source text and which are eventually rendered in Kiswahili, are instructive in defining and extending the meaning and representation of “woman, female, sex and gender”, not

in a generalized and totalizing sense but rather in terms of social, political and economic viability.

### **Continuities and Discontinuities of Literary Significance**

Whereas it is true that the thematic and cultural peculiarities inherent in the source text cannot be entirely erased in translational processes, such particularities nevertheless do suffer significant reductions and exclusions which occasion conscious and sometimes unconscious positive insertions in the target text. Whatever thematic or cultural peculiarity that a particular translation conveys, there are possibilities that such particularity will be imprinted in the target language culture, its canons, codes and social ideologies. Such insertions may disrupt or redirect the target literature's taboos. The renditions of literary translations that are responsive to target context sensibilities have potential to bring into the target paradigm a thematic or cultural "other". This may entail wholesale domestication of the source text in the target context, thus enabling the emergence of recognizable or familiar thematic value. It is not unusual that a source text's translation may be consciously projected to serve explicit domestic agendas encompassing literary, cultural, socioeconomic or political interests. These imprints are observable in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* given that in several senses it acquiesces to the truism that "cultures resort to translating precisely as a way of filling in gaps, whenever and wherever such gaps manifest themselves in target literatures" (Toury, *ibid.*). This translation does indeed reveal such gaps including the neglect with which a feminist writing tradition has been handled in Kiswahili literature. *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* can also be read as an affirmation of the "feminization" of Kiswahili literature, freeing Kiswahili literature from restrictive patriarchal structures. The translation may also be read as a disruptive intrusion that deconstructs the existing poetics of written feminist literature in Kiswahili given that the construction of culture, worldview and knowledge is not always a masculine construct; there are other alternative understandings that impact cultural and knowledge constructions (Lye, 1998; Tymoczko, 1999; Sherry Simon, 2000).

### **The Continuity of Colonial and post-Colonial Thematic Signification**

During the colonial period and even much later after, literary translation in Kiswahili was unidirectional, flowing from English to Kiswahili. Though such translations were considered overly literary, they were nevertheless deployed in a variety of complex ways as education to inscribe western culture and values. Throughout the colonial period, literary translation was used in indirect ways to imprint western concepts of reality, social conventions and notions of knowledge. Translation was intensely embedded in the education system and deployed to construct a colonial subject representing a person of particular version and particular version of reality. Such constructs facilitated the inscription of disjointed concepts of reality, notably the reality of one's self, consequently creating



erroneous assumptions about masculine and feminine realities of self. Translations were subtly embedded with deceitful machinations, hushed patriarchal beliefs and attitudes which excluded women from spaces of knowledge creation (Davies, 1986). By translating exclusively from English texts, translation was utilized as a strategy of containment which subtly constructed colonized subjects and representations of reality devoid of the history of the colonized, a truncated reality.

Unlike the translations undertaken during the colonial era, the translation of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is markedly different and is focused on thematic tropes that are critical in configuring literary and lived reality. Translations executed during the colonial period constituted a covert cultural engineering which produced incoherent enculturation. The translations of texts such as *Treasure Island (Kiziwa Chenye Hazina)*, *King Solomon's Mines (Mashimo ya Mfalme Suleimani)*, *Robinson Crusoe (Robinson Kruso Kiziwani)*, *Safari za Gulliver (Gulliver's Travels)*, is illustrative of this social scheming. Such translations succeeded in inscribing concepts of capitalistic greed, resource plunder and exploitation as well as portraying a dominant male as the norm. This is in accord with the truism that translation shapes and takes shape within asymmetrical relations of power at the textual and cultural level. These asymmetrical relations of power are critically implicated in the various forms and strategies of female-male relationships in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*. However, given that this translation is executed within a post-colonial context where it is not obliged to underprop the transposition of alien concepts and notions of reality, it transposes knowledge responsive to African realities and representations. It underwrites conceptualizations of African history, culture and reality insinuating that these are not static and unchanging realities but rather, realities in flux. Though there is strong feminine presence in the translation, the female-male binary is also discernible, thus providing evidence that accounts for the asymmetry of inequality of in male-female relations. This binarism further portrays the practices and processes of marginalization routinely presenting a blurred history, smudged language and inordinate representation (Niranjana, 1992). The translation further foregrounds the underestimated psychological hold of patriarchy in the various forms of feminist interactions thus making markedly noticeable the thematic quintessence of the translation overall (Gentzler, 2002; Mule, 2002).

#### ***Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* as an Advent of Discontinuity of Literary Signification**

The actualization of literary translations in target contexts is a legitimate form of knowledge creation even when executed under contexts of unequal power relations. It is assumed that literary transpositions from “superior sources” to presumed underdeveloped literatures ultimately imprint literary value. Literary transfers are normally positional and skewed because the “superior sources” always encounter target contexts in unequal terms. This is the reality underpropping the rendition of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* in terms of the themes it transposes into a predominantly patriarchal milieu that hardly acknowledges

feminist existence. This translation is thematically bounteous in the conversations of constructive gender identities, revision of cultural prejudices as well as figuring out institutional bigotry against women. One recurrent and noticeable trope running through the reading of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, is the extensive presence of female characters asserting and reaffirming themselves in specific ways. The forceful feminine characterization is embedded throughout the text and as such subtly disavows dominant and prejudiced forms and systems of masculinity in Kiswahili literature. The translation as such affirms that “translation is a cultural and political practice that critiques ideologically embedded identities as a way of constructing more representative identities” (Venuti, *ibid*). Given these assertions, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is a translation instance which deconstructs doctrinaire and patriarchal literary signification and at the same time mainstreams feminist conversations that are constructive and objective. The translation forms the avant-garde of disrupting the dominant masculine cultural codes prevailing in Kiswahili literature while at the same time bringing to the fore issues of reformation, re-institutionalization, recognition and repeal of oppression as well as restructuring processes that sustain women’s exclusions, victimization and marginalization (Davies & Graves, 1986; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Harrow, 2002).

#### **Configuring Thematic Tropes -*Barua Ndefu Kama Hii***

Lefevere (1992:26) has argued that there are two general constraints that translators have to deal with when translating literature. Translators have to be attentive to their own literary ideologies, “the poetics” prevailing in the target culture such as the order of operative “literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters, situations and symbols” as well as “the concept of what role literature serves in the social system as a whole”. This is well captured in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* given that it foregrounds themes that question the dominant male writing tradition in Kiswahili, it is not a happenstance because its structure as predicated on the potential of a marginalized writing tradition—epistolary narration—accords the narrator a first person narrative account which is strategic as it avails potential for literary innovation and cultural intervention that gives voice to women.

Ideally, *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* demonstrates that a source text is not an unchanging cultural phenomenon or monument to which a translated text must forever be an inadequate equivalent. The source text is not an artifact to which the translated text is an ephemeral copy, notwithstanding the kind of roles it may play in the target system or even the kind of dynamics it may raise. The source text, “is a text in transit, never stationary which presents potential for appropriation” (Venuti, *ibid*). The source text and the meanings it evokes are neither unique nor permanent, they can be reworked and redirected as has been done in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*. The translation strategically appropriates the source text as preexisting material into which it breathes cognate meaning (Allen, *ibid*). This multiplicity of meaning discernible in the translation is predicated on the cognition that “the

translation of literature means the translation of a literary work's interpretation, one which is subject to the literary traditions in the target culture"(Gentzler, 1993).The relevance of *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*'s overall thematic mosaic is established on the basis of its "situatedness" in Kiswahili where it is interpreted in terms of the material determinations, the cultural practices and the prevailing literary norms.

### Conclusion

The appreciation of the intricacies of how literary translations are implicated in the facilitation of literary and cultural transfer, are predicated on the fact that literary translation is not an act completed by the translator's personal preference, but rather an act influenced and impacted upon by various forces operative both in the source and target contexts. These include operative ideology, contemporary poetics and benefaction in the overall literary environment. Further, the conceptualization of literary translation as a rewriting enables the realization that culture-oriented translations are not simple conversions of linguistic materials between two languages, but rather are activities closely correlated to extra-textual factors entailing culture, ideology and pedagogy as well as operative politics. Consequently, in translating *So Long a Letter* into Kiswahili as *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, Maganga was also inevitably involved in the transmission of other organizing principles of the source literature comprising forms of expression, characteristics of genre and modes of composition. In this sense, this is a rendition of thematic significance and transposition of literary devices, genre, motifs, prototypical characters, situations, and symbols. It is a translation that makes manifest what literature may perform in a given social system such as drawing attention to some social re-awakening. The conceptualization and consideration of the social functions of literature are influential in determining what themes are relevant to a social system if that literature has to make sense or get noticed at all. This is one way in which the relevance of feminism, as embedded in *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* is considered relevant in Kiswahili literature because "it is a tremendous system-forming influence on the development of a literature". *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii* introduces new thematic perspectives into Kiswahili literature which affect the normative interpretations of the patriarchal writing tradition, it canvasses and mainstreams thematic values previously hushed in Kiswahili literature, notably the enablement of knowledge creation, codification and dissemination. This is besides enabling the transmission of literary images, metaphors, themes and narrative plots that advance a feminist writing tradition in a proactive and innovative way. In *Barua Ndefu Kama Hii*, literary transfer is intricately intertwined with the transmission of issues of context, history, culture, knowledge and representation thus creating new dimensions enriching the feminist writing tradition in the literature. It disrupts the effacement of feminine representation by creating an alternative narrative that defies homogenization of the feminine portraiture.

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