

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIREBRANDS AND THE WICKED WALK: A THEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This article presents a comparative thematic analysis of Sahlesilasse Birhanemeskel's "Firebrands" and W.E Mkufya's "The Wicked Walk," examining major themes within these works from different East African countries: Ethiopia and Tanzania. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study employs a content analysis checklist as the primary tool. Despite the differing colonial and liberation experiences of Ethiopia and Tanzania, common themes in the novels have often been misconstrued. This study aims to address the research gap in the examination of Ethiopian literature in English. Through thematic analysis, it is found that both novels address themes of political corruption and social class stratification, while presenting distinct perspectives on the portrayal of women in their respective societies. The article concludes that both authors employ similar thematic elements, offering insights into Ethiopian and Tanzanian perspectives.

Keywords: Thematic analysis, comparative study, Ethiopian literature, Tanzanian literature,

1.1 Introduction

African literature stands as a vibrant tapestry woven with the threads of diverse cultures, languages, and historical experiences. It emerges from a continent rich in its multiplicity of voices, offering narratives that reflect the intricate tapestry of African life. Renowned African writers have utilized Western languages to bring forth the nuanced complexities of African societies, illuminating themes ranging from cultural heritage to colonial legacies, from political disillusionment to the resilience of the human spirit.

Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and Dangachew Worku are among the luminaries who have penned their literary works in English, offering insights into the social, political, and cultural landscapes of Africa. Through their writings, these authors bridge the gap between Africa and the international stage, providing a platform to showcase the diverse experiences of African peoples.

The literary panorama of Africa is deeply rooted in its history, with writers chronicling the traumatic experiences of colonialism, the struggles for independence, and the challenges of post-colonial nation-building. Themes of political disillusionment, social injustice, and the quest for cultural identity reverberate through the pages of African literature, reflecting the continent's tumultuous journey towards self-determination.

In East Africa, literature serves as a vehicle to explore the legacies of British colonialism, with writers from Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya delving into the complexities of their shared history. Makerere

University in Uganda emerges as a pivotal institution nurturing a generation of East African writers, whose works resonate with themes of cultural diversity and political upheaval.

Tanzanian literature, deeply influenced by Julius Nyerere's vision of socialism and cultural revival, flourishes in both Swahili and English languages. Authors like Peter Palangyo and Gabriel Ruhumbika enrich the literary landscape with narratives that reflect the complexities of Tanzanian society.

In Ethiopia, a country uncolonized but not untouched by external forces, literary traditions evolve from ancient roots in Ge'ez to contemporary expressions in English. Writers like Sahle Sellassie Berhane Mariam navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity, crafting narratives that capture the essence of Ethiopian life.

This study endeavors to delve into the thematic resonances of two seminal novels, "Firebrands" by Sahle Sellassie Berhane Mariam from Ethiopia and "The Wicked Walk" by W.E Mkufya from Tanzania. By undertaking a comparative analysis, it seeks to uncover the common threads that bind these narratives, offering insights into the shared experiences and divergent trajectories of African societies. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the richness and complexity of African literature, celebrating its power to inform, inspire, and provoke thought.

1.2. Statement of the Problem:

The common themes depicted by the two East African novelists have often been misconstrued due to their differing backgrounds: Tanzania as a British colony and Ethiopia as a free country. While there is an expectation among readers for the authors to present a negative portrayal of social class within each society, residing in distinct societal contexts may lead to contrasting depictions of women in their respective Eastern African societies. Additionally, previous thematic analyses of African literature have predominantly focused on works by authors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, potentially overlooking valuable contributions from other authors writing in languages other than English. This oversight extends to Ethiopian literature, which, despite its unique historical trajectory characterized by independence and a non-British colonial experience, has received minimal scholarly attention, especially in English-language studies. The absence of research on Ethiopian literature in English creates a notable research gap. Therefore, this article aims to address this gap by selecting two novels that offer themes from distinct East African perspectives and developing a framework for their comparative analysis.

1.3. Research Questions:

The general objective of the study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the themes present in two novels: "Firebrands" by Sahlesilasse Birhanemeskel and "The Wicked Walk" by W.E. Mkufya. The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What criteria were employed in selecting "Firebrands" and "The Wicked Walk" as representative novels from Ethiopia and Tanzania, respectively?

2. What theoretical framework will guide the thematic analysis of the selected novels?
3. What are the predominant themes portrayed by the two East African novelists?
4. How does each author conceptualize the theme of social class within their respective novels?
5. How are women represented in the two East African novels?

These research questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the thematic elements present in the selected novels while contextualizing them within the broader literary and sociocultural landscapes of Ethiopia and Tanzania.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Related Works

This section aims to review relevant literature concerning the thematic analysis of East African literature in English, particularly focusing on works related to the selected research topic: a thematic analysis of Sahlesilasse Birhanemeskel's "Fire Brands" from Ethiopia and W.E. Mkufya's "The Wicked Walk" from Tanzania.

Bayleyegn (2013) conducted a study on two novels by Sahle Sellassie Birhanemariam written in English, titled "Warrior King" and "The Afersata." Bayleyegn's research focused on the realism depicted in these novels, exploring themes such as family, bravery, political corruption, social insecurity, and economic woes. While Bayleyegn's study provides insights into the thematic elements of Ethiopian literature in English, the current research expands upon this by comparing themes across East African countries.

Linda Yohannes (2012) conducted an MA thesis on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works, categorizing her as a post-colonial writer dealing with the postcolonial condition. Although Adichie's works are not directly relevant to this study, Yohannes's research highlights the importance of understanding authors' perspectives within a postcolonial framework.

Dagne Alemu's (2010) MA thesis focused on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels "Petals of Blood" and "Devil on the Cross," exploring themes of post-independence disillusionment, political corruption, social class stratification, gender inequality, resistance, and liberation. While Alemu's study provides insights into East African literature, it primarily focuses on Kenyan literature, unlike the current research, which compares themes across Ethiopia and Tanzania.

Tewodros Bogale (2002) conducted research on the thematic analysis of Ethiopian poetry in English from 1944 to 1967. Bogale's study identified themes such as death, love, and hope in Ethiopian poetry during this period. While Bogale's research contributes to understanding Ethiopian literature in English, it primarily focuses on poetry rather than prose fiction.

East African literature encompasses literary works produced in countries such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and South Sudan. It reflects the diverse cultures, languages, histories, and experiences of the region. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a prominent East African author, has significantly contributed to the development of East African literature through works such as "Weep Not, Child," "Petals of Blood," and "Devil on the Cross," addressing themes of colonialism, post-colonialism, and social change.

Considering Ngugi's works would provide valuable insights into East African literature and its thematic elements.

While the literature reviewed provides valuable insights into thematic analyses of African literature in English, the current study extends this research by comparing themes across East African countries, specifically Ethiopia and Tanzania. This comparison offers a nuanced understanding of East African literature's diversity and richness, shedding light on commonalities and differences in themes across the region.

3. Major Findings

Synopsis of Firebrands

According to Tadesse Adera, the novel *Firebrands* was published after the five years bloody Ethiopian revolution. The novel was written on the setting of Emperor Haile Sellassie regime. The novel starts by the conversation between Bezuneh and his brother Worku in which they were arguing to go to a party at Benzene's boss house. But Worku was refusing to go with Bezuneh. The party was taking place at a villa where Ato kebret and his family live. The party was prepared to congratulate the former government official Ato kebret that he was appointed as a managing director with the rank of a mistier.

Basic themes in Firebrands

The novel *Firebrands* delicate several themes from the major ones are selected for analysis. As it is stated above on his novel, Sahle Sellassie employed themes which are expressive of the situation of the imperial time. On the analysis three major themes are analyzed in detail, first corruption then, social class stratification and the image of women.

Corruption in Firebrands

On his novel Sahle Sellassie has presented corruption in detailed manner through the characters he created. They all play their part clearly in a way that can show the theme. The novel highly enhanced the issue of corruption in the imperial time. The theme of corruption is mainly reflected on the second part of the novel. In which the theme of corruption having its own subtitle *The Corruption*. Sahle Sellassie fictionalized the reality in which taking place during the imperial time. According to the novel

most high post workers during this time uses their position as a means of getting what they want. At the begging of the second part of his novel the outers started by pointing out the thinking of many high post workers.

"This is his opportunity," Azbete heard his wife say to Tarikua. "Sishom yalbella sishar yikotchewal." She was reminding her friend of the old Ethiopian adage that 'he who does not enrich himself while in office regrets it when removed from office'. Appointment to a high post meant many different things to many different people." (p.17)

"His house, like the house of the entire upper bourgeoisie, was well detached from the surrounding shacks of the poor by a low stone wall topped by a row of iron spikes, the sharp ends of which sparkled in the sun during the day." (p.13)

Social class stratification in Firebrands

On his novel Firebrands Sahel Sellassie employed the theme social class in the time of the imperial regime. His novel shows the life difference between the high post government officials and the low paid employees. By enhancing the house they live in the cars they drive and the like. In Ethiopia, during the centuries of imperial ruler depended on ones land holdings which provided the basis for class formation and stratification. The emperor, the nobility, and the land lords occupied the social hierarchy's height position.

"His house, like the house of the entire upper bourgeoisie, was well detached from the surrounding shacks of the poor by a low stone wall topped by a row of iron spikes, the sharp ends of which sparkled in the sun during the day." (p.13)

"The house itself was made of stone and placed on a high, above- ground foundation so that the street outside the fence, and the houses beyond it were visible from both the wide verandah and the drawing-room of the house." (p.13)

The image of women in Firebrands

In Firebrands Sahle Sellassie enhanced women in several directions, on the novel women are drown as a back bone of the family who push their husbands to do something good or bad like to commit corruption or other as an example the next extract we can see this situation clearly.

"'You have to influence him, dear. That is why you are his wife,' Kassech said, lifting the glass to taste the liquor. 'I know that kebret is a little reserved about such matters, but you have to urge him not to be bashful, you know what I mean, dear,' she giggled more." (p.18)

Synopsis of The Wicked Walk

The Wicked Walk is a story of a young girl named Nancy, and her prostitute mother who used to live in a poor village. Nancy was a beautiful school girl, but who faces several difficulties to survive in life. The novel opens with the death of Maria hanging herself. Maria is the mother of Nancy and the story

continues showing the cause that leads Maria to hang herself. Nance was the only daughter of Maria in which she was born from the brother of Maria in which Maria has no idea. Maria and Nance got in quarrel several times. Maria always tries to protect her daughter from following her footsteps. And Nancy did not like that. Suddenly Nancy meet an old man who is a manager in company his name is Magege and she was seduced by his money at the same time she fall in love with a young handsome man who was employed in the company of Magege his name is Deo. Deo was willing to marry Nancy ignoring the bad names given to her. Unfortunately she gets from the old manager and he forced her to abort and after an illegal abortion she dies of hemorrhage and this situation led Maria to kill herself.

Major Themes in the Novel

There are numerous themes in the novel *The Wicked Walk*, namely: prostitute, image of women' asocial class stratification and corruption. But the focus of the study will be on the three basic themes of the novel corruption, social class stratification and the image of women.

Corruption

In *The Wicked Walk*, the character Magege corrupted the villagers of Livingstone which is the village Nancy and her mother live and the employee who worked in the company he works as a manager. Magege does not pay the wages for the workers on the time. The employees suffer hunger due to his irresponsibility. Magege only focuses on his personal interest. Magege is known by corruption he uses the company resources to get money and young girls from school and Nancy was one victim.

"Sugar daddies,' said Frank, 'are a few irresponsible government bureaucrats, who are with no good political justification, privileged to occupy high posts and obtain large sums of money. They make money through big salaries and underground business or through naked corruption. They make more money than they need, and use the extra to seduce women and destroy young girls, school girls. They forgot their high ranking position in the government and become more dirt, betraying the society which put them into leadership. These are sugar daddies.'" (p.67)

Social class stratification in *The Wicked Walk*

In the wicked walk (1977) Mkufya presented the issue of social class stratification very broadly in Tanzania in the 70s. The life difference between the high class society and the poor society is well presented.

"Most of them were roofed with coconut palm leaves; and those made with iron sheets were full of rust making them look like triangular anthills. The windows were purposely made small to stop some unfaithful from escaping in the night, paying for the services. The walls of the houses were unflustered." (p.1)

The image of women

The wicked walk (1977) manly enhances the image of women prostitutes and the life they live. On the

novel women are drawn mainly in the character of prostitute. Prostitution is the business or practice of engaging in sexual relations in exchange for payment or some other benefit prostitute sometimes called as a commercial sex work. On the novel *The Wicked Walk* mainly circulates on the life of a woman and her daughter. The main characters Nancy and her mother Maria suffered a lot in their life. Being a daughter of a prostitute is on challenge for a young girl like Nancy.

"She remembered the times a man would come- hot, charging like a bull racing towards grass in the fields- and this man would hand Maria the money and rush her to bed. She had to handle such men to control their wild jerking's, their urges to make her feel pain, otherwise they would hurt her. When she was still new to the profession and a young girl, such men made her whimper or scream." (The wicked walk p.2-3)

Conclusions

This section draws attention to the summary of the comparison of the themes between *Firebrands* and *The Wicked Walk* and finally gives conclusion. Both novels enhance corruption, social class stratification and women in fact this is not the only themes those novels contains but the focus of the study is on those three basic themes.

The major findings of this comparative study reveal that both novels, *Firebrands* and *The Wicked Walk*, prominently feature themes of corruption, social class stratification, and the image of women. In *Firebrands*, corruption is exemplified through characters like Ato Kebret, who abuse their power for personal gain, while in *The Wicked Walk*, corruption is embodied by characters like Magege, who exploit their authority to manipulate and victimize others. Social class disparities are vividly portrayed in both novels, with *Firebrands* illustrating the divide between the privileged elite and the lower classes, and *The Wicked Walk* depicting the stark contrast between impoverished villagers and those in positions of power. Furthermore, the portrayal of women differs significantly between the two works; *Firebrands* emphasizes women as influential figures supporting or resisting corruption, while *The Wicked Walk* primarily depicts women as victims of exploitation and societal neglect. Despite these differences, both authors effectively utilize these themes to convey their respective messages. Overall, while *Firebrands* delves deeply into the theme of corruption throughout the narrative, both novels provide insightful commentary on social hierarchies and the role of women in society.

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