



## STIGMA AND ALIENATION IN WILLIAM MKUFYA'S *UA LA FARAJA*

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### ABSTRACT

The phrase AIDS has come to signal an almost apocalyptic level of devastation. These facets of AIDS have been represented in the media, film, novel and the images of the epidemic as it has progressed through sub-Saharan Africa are by now mind-numbingly familiar: painfully wasted bodies, haunted eyes, isolation, fear, imminent death. The words accompanying these images are also becoming predictable in their descriptions of 'plague', 'horror', 'calamity', 'conflagration' and deaths. Although AIDS is a biological illness caused by a biological agent, it has increasingly become a cultural disease. The pandemic's propinquity to death and its association with sex, has led to AIDS phobia, inculcation and stigmatization of the afflicted. This paper seeks to explore the representation of stigma and its alienating effects in Mkufya's novel *Ua la Faraja* (2005). We will utilize Tzvetan Todorov's narratological theory which emphasizes the crucial role of characters in literary representation.

**Keywords:** HIV /AIDS, Stigma, Alienation

### INTRODUCTION

The fight against HIV/ AIDS is a subject that is not about to die. Despite the many resources spent to educate the society on HIV/AIDS, many people living with AIDS succumb to the disease due to the stigma they undergo from the un-infected. Seven out of ten people believe those infected with the virus are being punished for being promiscuous, 55 percent cannot share a meal with a person they know is HIV positive while one in every two people cannot shake hands with such a person. The study further shows that most of those infected are living in denial. According to the survey, 'Extent and Impact of Stigma and Discrimination on Women and Children Infected and Affected by HIV/ AIDS,' 60 percent are yet to disclose their status. HIV/ AIDS experts say failure to disclose one's status especially when infected causes self stigma while disclosure (and/or discovery by others) leads to external stigma (Muiruri, 2010). Although AIDS is a biological illness caused by a biological agent, it has increasingly become a cultural disease. The pandemic's propinquity to death and its association with sex, has led to AIDS phobia, inculcation and stigmatization of the afflicted. This paper utilizes the narratological theory advanced by Tzvetan Todorov which emphasizes the crucial role of characters in literary representation, to explore the representation of stigma and its alienating effects in Mkufya's novel *Ua la Faraja* (2005).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980's, studies on the same are numerous. Mutembei (2009) researched on the role of poems in combating HIV. Shilts (1987) chronicled the discovery and spread of HIV/AIDS with a special emphasis on government indifference and political infighting in the United States. His premise was that while AIDS is caused by a biological agent, apathy towards those who were initially affected by AIDS allowed the spread of the disease. Mutembei (2011) did a comparative study of plays on AIDS plays from Tanzania and the USA. In his paper, he notes that unlike in the USA where the

initial cultural response to AIDS was through novels, plays and poems, in Tanzania the response was through oral literature made available through oral songs and lyrics. Bertocini (2005) analyzed William Mkufya's novel *Ua La Faraja's* commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Mawar et al (2004) compared the different forms of stigma associated with other diseases while Skinner and Mfecana (2012) focused on stigma and its concomitant discrimination as an impediment to combating AIDS. This paper builds on the extant literature to analyze how William Mkufya's novel *Ua La Faraja* engages with the alienating effects of stigma.

## **DISCUSSION**

HIV-related stigma and discrimination refers to prejudice, negative attitudes and abuse directed at people living with HIV and AIDS. The consequences of stigma and discrimination are wide-ranging. Some people are shunned by family, peers and the wider community, while others face poor treatment in healthcare and education settings, erosion of their human rights, and psychological damage. All these limit access to HIV testing, treatment and other HIV services. Effects related to stigma include use of discourse that brand the disease as death, isolation, accusation, separation, divorce, eviction from homes and deprivation of livelihoods and children and alienation among others. Seeman (1959:14) on the other hand defines alienation in terms of psychological state, as that which comprises the dimensions of powerlessness, meaninglessness and isolation.

Literature aims at deepening man's understanding of himself and his society 'through the process of imaginative identification'. This social purpose of literature implies a concern with the ways in which literature, especially popular fiction, reflects on and intervenes on topical social issues such as illness and in this context, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This is because when the disease was first reported; different societies responded in different ways to a disease they knew little about. For example, in African countries, the response was initially through oral literature made available through oral songs and literature. Later the pandemic was addressed through written literature.

Mkufya's novel, *Ua la Faraja* (2005), demonstrates his commitment in presenting how HIV/AIDS is perceived by the society. In this novel, Grace, who is Tabu's sister, is a modern woman of sound principles, sincere, kind hearted and faithful. Her visit to Tabu, Ngoma's wife, brings her attention to the devastating information that Tabu had been infected with HIV/AIDS by Ngoma. The narrator explains how these two sisters were left to ponder on Tabu's looming death. According to the narrator, when Grace went to church, the clergymen kept saying that the wages of sin is death and people believed this statement. Grace questioned herself whether it was true that sinners die and she wondered what sins her sister had committed. According to her, Ngoma deserved to die and not her sister (*Ua La Faraja* 2005: 94).

The fact that Grace's sister has contracted HIV/ AIDS means that she will definitely die. Coupling death with HIV infection aggravates and stigmatizes the condition of the diseased. Stigma and discrimination are usually based on ignorance and prejudice. There are many myths and misconceptions about HIV/AIDS that need to be debunked. The myth that HIV/AIDS is a death sentence can be valid if untreated but HIV/AIDS medication is highly effective. Schoepf (2004:19) posits that once individuals are placed in a risk category, they are separated from other sources of identity and are henceforth stigmatized and degraded. Creation of "alterity" or otherness" allows those in power to dehumanize, to scapegoat, to blame and thus to avoid responsibility for sufferers. Sufferers are regarded as morally contagious and often sexually polluting. They are inculcated and discriminated against. This stigmatizing discourse hinders the infected from seeking medical attention. Discourses used to describe the pandemic include death, curse and sorcery. Stigma also fosters social isolation which adds to the suffering endured by the seropositive and their families.

According to AVERT, a United Kingdom organization, stigma and discrimination from HIV/AIDS is a big impediment to combating HIV/AIDS, especially when it is women who are infected. Queen felt that she would rather die than suffer discrimination. Furthermore, she says she wouldn't wish to see her mother suffer the trouble of taking care of her. Apart from discrimination, the infected are sniggered at instead of being shown empathy and accommodation. For example, upon realizing that their mother had

contracted HIV from their father, Ngoma's children isolated him and rebelled against him. Grace and Omolo disdained him too. AIDS has been so commodified in the indifferent society of the novel that when he went for medication, the medical practitioners were reluctant to attend to him. They could only attend to wealthy looking patients with hopes of being bribed. People with HIV feel isolated, guilty, dirty and full of shame, which is then often incorporated into identity. Stigmatization generally restricts participation in the activities of life.

Stigma adds to the suffering endured by the diseased and their families by fostering social isolation. Women whose HIV status was known or suspected were evicted from their homes and deprived of livelihoods and children. As seen in the novel, the marriage between Ngoma and Tabu breaks as a result of HIV/AIDS. Tabu reverts to her religion, Christianity, which she had been forced to abandon by a masculine society which had compelled her to become a Muslim. AIDS emerges as a single most factor that threatens the family unit, in terms of the text, 'Although there are so many factors that contributed to the divorce of the marriage between Ngoma and Tabu, the major cause regarded HIV infection' (*Ua la Faraja*: 213). Mkufya disabuses the widely held view that women are more stigmatized by AIDS than men by showing that stigma affects all sexes as evidenced by Ngoma who suffers stigma the same as his wife.

AIDSphobia and the resultant stigma stifle the fight against the pandemic. At the level of the nation, stigma from HIV AIDS prevents the government from taking necessary action to combat the disease. At the level of an individual, stigma deters the infected from testing and seeking medication. Stigma occurs due to the fact that HIV/AIDS threatens the life of human beings; it is associated with promiscuity, homosexuality and drug abuse, which are pointers of moral decadence. Clergymen too believe that HIV AIDS is as a result of immorality and packages the infection as wages of sin. Queen sees the futility of living a long life with the HIV virus, for this protracted life in sickness is a kind of social death. There is no difference between the one dying immediately and the one dying five or twenty years later. She wondered why the infected are denied the suicidal path as an escape from the existential quandary occasioned by the reality of infection.

Queen's existential approach to life is due to the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Mamudi, her house help resigns to avoid the shame and pain of nursing her. Queen in turn doesn't want her mother to undergo the torture of nursing her. These are the consequences of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. The reality of HIV infection and the stigma surrounding the pandemic enmeshes the AIDS diseased in existential anguish and alienation.

Queen invites Omolo to her house after she got to know that she had contracted HIV /AIDS. Within four months, she is enervated, her cheeks were hollow, her breast withered, her skin was shriveled, dry and looked dusty. Queen had lost hope, she had become an existentialist as Omolo, to her, life had no meaning, she wondered why she had to work hard and after all her achievements, and she had to die. Her social life had come to an end. She could not visit her favourite pub for a drink. She had been isolated by her society. No one wanted to be associated with her. She could not work as she did earlier neither could she attend to her daily chores. This state brought her acute alienation.

Patients with end-stage illness report feelings of uselessness, inability to carry out daily activities from which they derive pleasure and self-esteem and question previously held spiritual beliefs. Persons with advanced disease grapple with these losses when they cannot expect to return to former roles in the ways to which they are accustomed or create viable new ones. No longer able to define or redefine the self within the roles that the individual, family, or society expect, the question becomes an existential one. What is the point or meaning of my existence? Why am I still here? What value do I have now? Some patients express a desire for quick death even when it is not imminent. Rather than suffering the ordeal of slow death, Queen commits suicide.

The diseased subject's sense of alienation and separateness is exacerbated by the inability to share personal experience with others. They occupy liminal spaces in which they reconstruct the meaning of their experience through narrative. Their quest for meaning in illness demonstrates liminality's dynamic nature within which identity is negotiated back and forth through stressful experiences.

## CONCLUSION

Stigma impacts beyond the individual infected with HIV, to affect all those associated with the disease. It can also impact on society more generally, by spreading the epidemic and undermining interventions against it. There is therefore a dire need to reduce stigma and encourage acceptance. To realize this, more openness about the pandemic is required as are painstaking efforts to combat it. Much as there is awareness created through different ways, this awareness is still not sufficient to eradicate stigma and change society's perception of HIV/ AIDS. This paper has explicated the alienating effects of stigma as a major impediment in combating HIV/ AIDS in Mkufya's novel, *Ua la Faraja* (2005).

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