



LIMINALITY AND REGENERATION IN MEJA MWANGI'S *THE LAST PLAGUE* AND JOSEPH SITUMA'S *THE MYSTERIOUS KILLER*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical interrogation of two Kenyan HIV/AIDS novels: Meja Mwangi's *The Last Plague*, Joseph Situma's *The Mysterious Killer*. It examines how the enactments of illness by the diseased characters in the two 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: liminality, HIV/AIDS, existential meaning, literature of disease

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).

Frankenberg (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.

DISCUSSION

Broker in Mwangi's *The Last Plague* represents a stoic diseased subject who resists despair and is out to embrace his borrowed time with altruism. Suffering has induced in him a complete metamorphosis of his character. His material wealth acquired in dubious ways and through stifling superciliousness can now be utilized to feed the burning desires of his soul. He has become magnanimous and is able to show kindred humanity to the beggar by giving him money and extends other humane gestures like buying him tea. Small gestures like asking Musa of the teahouse to keep change, elevating the beggar's status by allocating him sitting space, together with addressing him as 'Mayor', are benign acts that emanate from the need to redefine life and imbue it with meaning, to right earlier wrongs and save his soul. He has been deeply immersed in the present by his clinical condition to recognize the wisdom in the Foucauldian theories of the care of the self which postulate that:

the problem for the subject or the individual soul is to turn its gaze upon itself, to recognize itself in what it is and, recognizing itself in what it is, to recall the truths that issue from it and that it has been able to contemplate. (Foucault, 1979, p. 29)

In tending to the altruistic, Broker is seeking 'self-discovery as a means of obtaining salvation in the next life', a focus on the afterlife and an existential pathway that Foucault believes has 'drastic effect on how the individual relates to the self and society' (as read in Batter, 2003, p. 8). This illness induced altruism arises out of the realization that he is living on borrowed time. He extends the same altruism to Head Faru by paying off his debts and asking him to keep change and also to the Pastor by contributing towards the repair of the surging roof of his church. He pays off Faru's debt presumably because he does wish to die indebted, but also because these acts, however trivial, enlarge his meaning of life and give him fulfillment; it is a more rewarding way of living his borrowed time.

His philanthropy is hyperbolically depicted to underscore the obsession with matters of the soul as he tries to reframe his suffering: "The rest of the time was spent surveying Crossroad, assessing old buildings and making plans for their restoration. He had enough plans for a whole lifetime of rebuilding' (p.204). We get

the picture of a man who wants to lighten the burden of his diseased corporeality through acts of altruism whenever an opportunity lends itself, an existential pathway he embraces in his quest for meaning of life with AIDS, one which also demurs to the doom in his disrupted life and that of Crossroad in general. Similarly, he uses his remaining life to help in selling condoms to stem the spread of AIDS in Croasroads, and makes an impressive performance when visitors from South South tour Croasroads. Broker has undergone the experience described by Grof

in which individuals feel that their 'consciousness has expanded beyond the usual ego boundaries and has transcended the limitations of time and space, and criticizes forms of therapy that are characterized by 'by rigorous isolation of the problem from its broader interpersonal, social and cosmic context' (Grof, 1985, p.153)

That Broker has undergone transformation is also attested to by his decision to throw his weight behind Janet's condom venture despite their estranged relationship. He does this out of the realization that a communal problem needs concerted effort, an image of a man who has shed his individualism and can think and act in the interest of the entire society, itself a remarkable regeneration that becomes clear when contrasted with his initial indifference to human suffering.

On the same vein, the contrast between his heroic past of debauchery as a total man and his diminished present of physical debility speak of a man who has shed his recalcitrant masculinity as a stereotypical paterfamilias and is out to search for more meaningful relationship with himself and with his society. It can be argued that he is paradoxically richer in spirit than before because he embraces altruism to redefine a life shuttered by illness. He is presented as man with money galore, enough money to buy a fleet of cars but one who resists affluence as ephemeral to embrace the more immanent altruism as a way of questing for meaning of life with AIDS. Broker is thinking of his life without him when he toys with the idea of founding an orphanage to cater to the many children orphaned by AIDS, a paradoxical altruism akin to that of the sea pirate Mil Ali Bay who used to gave out his loot as alms to the poor.

Broker seems to have realized that the only hope for a person living with AIDS is to live life in the present which means making peace with one's past and recognizing one's future as limited but not dead. He realizes that it is only in living in the present that one can find love and appreciation, which he feels is the only reason to keep confronting AIDS and to continue living. He has thus redefined his disrupted life and enlarged his concept of a whole life and is cognizant of the insight that all that will matter in the end of your life is how much you've loved and how much you've given back. It is in this same quest for meaning that Broker proposes that he and Frank put up a condom shop and he proposes that the proceeds from the condom shop goes to the orphanage, he already has thought of the name of the orphanage he wants to construct in Crossroads: 'Janet Broker Home for Orphans and old Folk', a charitable venture that will outlive and survive him after he takes the final blow. He feels he has changed a great deal for the better and that he can spare a time in his moments in limbo to savour the fame that will emanate from these ventures shows of a man who has transformed from his materialist past to spirituality to secure honour for himself even in ill health and inevitable demise. He finds these spiritual gestures soul nourishing, they make his life worth living even in times of uncertainty.

The magnitude of his altruism marvels others in Crossroad, the cynical Uncle Mark for instance sees futility of it all and is certain that Broker will not be thanked for it, but Broker thinks otherwise and he tells Janet:

I've never felt better in my life, nobody would ever say, he - Bakari Ben Broker, had not lived a life. And if he could do it all over again, he would do it in exactly the same way, a clear indication that his philanthropy is deliberate and calculated to sooth his tormented soul (p.271).

These acts of altruism pass Broker as a person who has done "extensive work by the self on the self" required "for the practice of freedom to take shape in an ethos that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable and exemplary"(cited in Batters, 2011, p.5). Broker's illness epiphany has illuminated his path of spiritual development understood by Assagioli as "a long and arduous adventure, a journey through strange lands, full of wonders, but also beset with difficulties and dangers" (Assagioli 1991, p. 116).

In staging his heart-openness, the text seems to hold that though Broker's corporeality is enervated by illness and his whole identity interpolated into stigmatizing discourse, his inner self remains redeeming and is a beacon of hope in the face of all this adversity.

Illness has deepened Broker's understanding of the purpose of a human being's life on earth, he has a philosophical understanding of the Biblical rhetoric of "seeing the light" which has been born out of his suffering as a AIDS patient, so much so that he refuses to be consoled by tired litanies about Christian salvation. His baptism through disease has transformed him into an agnostic who finds humanism a more practical faith than institutionalized religion, the latter which has been criticized for discriminating the diseased instead of offering them love and refuge. Just as he resisted the baptismal name "Nebuchadnezzar" suggested by Pastor, Broker is steadfast in resisting any "otherizing" interpellation and wants to be his own man as he confronts his diseased corporeality.

His regeneration has so endeared him to all Crossroadians that his brief disappearance to the neighbouring Makutano is missed by all, and has in response to the premonition of his impending demise, he resurfaces in Crossroad with gifts for all; to wit: toys and clothes for his children, a dress for grandmother and an expensive Parker pen for Big youth, Uncle Mark-a droughts boar, Musa- colour magazines, presents for Janet- perfume and a text on AIDS and horrifying colour picture and a tombstone for himself.

Broker clings to his new found humanism as he prepares for his end and wins the admiration of all, so that when he departs, he is missed by all that his life had touched, including the beggar who, despite his non-compos mentis status, mourns his death. This is a testimony to Broker's richness of spirit. His enlarged spirituality has enabled him to live his limited time more meaningfully and is no longer afraid of death as can be attested to by his having bought a tombstone for himself, which he discreetly arranges to be erected at his tomb by Big Youth.

Butler, cited in Doka (2002) observed that:

The overall benefit of a life review is that it can engender hard-worn serenity, a philosophical acceptance of what has occurred in the past, and wisdom. When people resolve their life conflicts, they have a lively capacity to live in the present. They become able to enjoy basic pleasures such as nature, children, forms colors, warmth, love and humour. (Doka, 2002, p. 6)

The transformative and regenerative impact of HIV disease in the fictional characters in a number of the novels under study seem to engage in the kind of life review postulated by Doka and embrace meaningful relationships in their quest for meaningful living in the midst of existential disruption. In *The Last Plague*, Ben Broker, who has come back to Crossroad, his birth place, apparently for the last visit, has undergone illness induced renewal and exhibits remorse for abandoning his wife Janet for hedonistic pursuits at the coast. This remorse is tinged with lamentations since it is this decision that exposes him to HIV infection. His inner development is so total that it has vanquished his initial recalcitrant masculinity which he seemed to have personified in his pre-AIDS days. His mother is able to observe that Broker is "not the rampant bull he used to be. The fire is gone in him and he is as gentle as an old goat now" (p.180).

Broker is determined to make amends with Janet and will stop at nothing to win her rapprochement. His contribution to condom effort redeems his image in Janet's eyes and she begins to see him in a better light. It was a tactical move to secure her acceptance, a reconciliation he holds dear to himself because it is crucial to his quest for meaning in his fragmented life.

This tactic pays dividends when Janet, in spite of herself and despite her earlier avowals never to accept him back, begins to feel compassion for him and invites him home for tea and to bond with the children. This change of heart on the part of Janet is a result of empathy and commiseration with his condition, for "it was not just pity but something bigger and deeper, the primordial goad that drove poor people to take in injured animals and stray dogs they could ill afford" (p.352).Meja Mwangi uses illness to effect reconciliation between an estranged couple. The two get to understand themselves better, there is mutual understanding and are they are able to crack jokes together. Broker exploits the much needed reconciliation to bond more with his children and he not only takes them up from school but also plans a retreat to Soi hills with them and Janet has the presence of mind not to deny them a chance to experience their father, only assigning Frank to accompany them.

The meaningful relationship guaranteed by this rapprochement enables Broker to disclose his condition to his children as significant others, and a retreat back to Soi affords him an opportunity to lift a big burden from his soul by apologizing to Janet for wasting her life. Broker has invested wisely on establishing meaningful relationship with his immediate family and with Fundi. Even after his demise, his continuity is assured and as Janet and Fundi acknowledge, because Broker thought of everything.

Though his initial reaction is to abhor Frank Fundi (he threatens to cut his *makende*), whom he suspects to be cuckolding him, he has the clairvoyance to regard him as a reliable friend and a trustworthy estate administrator. He not only assigns him the duty of estate administration but also exhorts him to take care of his boys and to teach them to be cautious of the perils of their times. Rather than delighting on the hint that Fundi is also HIV positive, Broker is saddened because what motivates him at the moment is not ill feelings about a love rival, but the pressing quest for harmony and meaningful connections, especially when these can guarantee continuity. Existential issues, in the case of Broker, seem to override mundane rivalry, he is delighted on learning that Fundi's diagnosis was a false positive, for this gives him hope for continuity, for his life without him.

His rekindled need for camaraderie is evident in the meaningful relationships he establishes with Uncle Mark with whom he plays draughts at the teahouse. There is an absurdist streak in this repetitive game in which he is always losing to him, but it is not lost to the reader that, as a way of passing time, it gives him solace. His renewed value for human connection enables him to show kindred humanity to the tramp whom he invites to sit with them as they played, recognition that the beggar is a human being deserving respect and not social snobbery. It is significant that earlier, Broker had undergone a humbling experience when he spent a night in the fields after losing his way to the teahouse from Janet's place. Though he slept in his car, the scene is reminiscent of King Lear's experience after the storm at Dover and his lack of abode. Broker's experience, again, like King Lear's reconciliatory moment with Cordelia, engenders regeneration in purgation. Uncle Mark will continue to treat the beggar with indignity, but Broker is conscious of his finiteness and would rather appreciate the beggar as a fellow human being and a fellow sufferer. This spiritual epiphany is akin to Setel's argument that "the disordering effects of the pandemic are simultaneously creative of new meanings and revealing of long standing values surrounding social reproduction" (cited in Eves, 1999, p. 250).

Though ravaged by illness, Cecilia in Situma's *The Mysterious Killer* refuses to allow her corporeal vicissitudes to destroy her soul, she seems to have fortified her soul against the insulting stigma of her diseased physicality and still has the presence of mind, in spite of her distress, to care for and be concerned about her niece's safety in the hands of the philandering and libertine Yamo. She forgets her own distress to worry over her niece's safety and regrets that she had unreflectively accepted Hausa's idea to send her to Yamo. For Hillman the world of the soul is ever-present, inter-penetrating the visible, and "the co-presence of the visible and invisible sustains life" (Hillman, 1997, p. 111).

Within a year after she comes back from Busaki, Cecilia has grown even thinner and her condition is only temporarily ameliorated by the medication Rachel brings her from Busaki. On the verge of death, she is able to shower her children with love and confide more in Rachel. In her private musings and in constructing a future that resists the ebbing present, she is able to tell her niece that "I feel much better now, I think I may completely recover, when that happens, I will make sure that I do for you something nice" (p.144). She got worried about her niece's safety even when she was herself in a deeper distress. This not only speaks of her stubborn hope and an existential resistance to the apocalypse that AIDS threatens, it is also an overt expression of her altruism. She is a cast as a person who still values her life in trying to connect meaningfully with her children and with her niece.

That she still values her life and is propelled by the urge to live her last moments meaningfully is seen in her relentless effort to get the last word about her money from Mama Baby. She hopes to get her money once she is discharged from hospital; she desires to be given one more moment in her life to be good to her niece around whom she finds meaning in her end time. Her altruism enables her to shine above the doom threatened by AIDS so that when she dies, her AIDS deceased body is not condemned but she is eulogized as one who had a generous heart and who gave away everything. Though her generosity is evident even in her good health, it is apparent that her diseased corporeality does intensify rather than blunt it, further attesting to the transformative aspects of her illness. The writer allows her to die at home in the company of family and not in the depersonalizing hospital ward, reasserting agency to her and enabling her to live her last moments more meaningfully.

In the same text, it is noteworthy that though Yamo's condition deteriorates and he has his one foot in the grave, the writer has him die in the hands of his mistress, Mama Baby, which reads as an artistic killing that disturbs and destabilizes the apocalyptic trajectory of AIDS and also gives a brief moment of his interior

renewal, for before he meets his comeuppance in the hands of the ruthless Mama Baby, he has so regenerated that he considers passing over his estate to his wife whom he had abandoned long ago, he was contemplating to instruct his attorney about the conveyance of the estate to her. This altruistic gesture, though belated, mitigates his villainy and enables him to secure continuity and connectedness.

Contrary to expectations and in an affirmation of meaningful relationships in the era of AIDS, Daisy in *The Mysterious Killer* decides to stick to Maiyo fully aware that he is suffering from AIDS. A personification of genuine friendship in the hour of need, Daisy is cast as the heroine of the text who strengthens Maiyo and helps him out of the quandary. Hers is a statement against stigmatization of AIDS sufferers and it can safely be inferred that the enduring love between him and Daisy, who has stood by him throughout his AIDS ordeal, will culminate in happy matrimony.

Like Broker in *The Last Plague*, Cecilia Odo in Situma's *The Mysterious Killer* returns to her birth place of Gulu from Busaki to pay her final visit, propelled by a yearning for warm meaningful relationship with family and community which is absent in the cold indifference of Busaki city. Her decision to go home was arrived at after a reflective life review. After pondering upon her condition and what it portends, she decides to establish her own family and home with her girlhood crush, Nuom, with whose child she suspects to be heavy. Though her thoughts of a settled future cushioned by her family do not mean that she will not die of AIDS, the mere fact of harbouring them boost her spirit and gives her serenity to accept what she cannot change.

Her rapprochement with Nuom give her security of sorts since it affords her the opportunity to die at home and in the company of family, friends and relatives and not in the depersonalized hospital bureaucracy. She cherishes her reunion with Nuom and the romantic rebirth it engenders, fond moments that distant her impending death, for as Bernice Sigel opines "to be immortal one must love" (cited in Weenolsen, 1996, p. xvi).

She finds fulfillment in supporting him and in raising their children together and it is an affirmation of life in mortality that she will be survived by her children, Yohana and the girl named Halesi, which means seed. Dying at Nuom's home is also an occasion for Cecilia to shower her children with love when they visit her with their grandmother. She wants to be happy and reciprocates in love in those moments that last for a while. Her narrative of dying is that of emotional legacy as she struggles to leave a will of love and good memories to the people in her life.

Faced with his own mortality, the larger than life Yamo in the same novel is also able to appreciate the need for connectedness and more meaningful relationship quite apart from the ephemeral liaisons with commercial sex workers that define his epicurean lifestyle in Busaki. In his last moments in the text, he makes a desperate attempt to reconcile with his wife and bequeath her his estate, a noble venture that is thwarted by the selfish trumpet, Mama Baby. What redeems him as a character is that his last thoughts in the novel are altruistic. The novel indicates that altruism and the ability to let the past go through making peace with it offers life affirming options for persons living with HIV. Yamo is cushioned from existential isolation by his affluence and his immersion into hedonistic lifestyle, which seems to be part of nostalgia for secure relationship. It is as if he craves a good life when it lasts, until the epiphany of his deteriorating condition transforms him to altruism. His physical death signifies the death of hedonism and materialist ideals and is a gesture towards spiritual regeneration and meaning which, as de Certeau insists, materializes at the margin:

Meaning is the consequence of a limit and an effect of margins. The boarder we materialize such meaning is what makes meaning possible. We perceive and conceive and construct and learn on this frontier. The margin or frontier is where something is divided from something else. That something can be anything, but the margin makes it what it is. (cited in Terdiman, 2001, p.399)

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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