

Three novels of John Habwe: Social criticism through “new enlightenment”?

Mikhail D. Gromov

United States International University-Africa

John Habwe is one of the most established and prolific writers in modern Kenyan literature in Swahili language, whose writing career now spans for more than two decades ¹. Despite his productivity and fame in the literary and reading circles, Habwe so far seems to have gained a rather timid attention from the critics. His first three novels were reviewed, among others, by Kyallo Wadi Wamitila in his survey of Kenyan novel in the new edition of *Outline of Swahili Literature* (Bertoncini et al., 2009). In that survey Wamitila noticed, along with other traits, Habwe’s tangible inclination towards “Enlightenment-type” didacticism. Thus, before we start the analysis of the texts chosen for this study, it would be advisable to provide a brief outline of the main traits of Enlightenment and its literature.

The period of Enlightenment, which in the European history roughly corresponds to the 18th century AD, is generally characterized by “a range of ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and came to advance ideals like liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government” (Outram 2006:29). Hackett Lewis in his article on Enlightenment states that the mindset of the epoch was marked by such concepts as “common disdain for irrational customs and outworn institutions”, “natural human morality”, “toleration”, “defense of liberty against tyranny”. As the scholar asserts, the Enlightenment thinkers were “intellectuals who analyzed the evils of society and sought reforms in accord with the principles of reason [...] They sought to deliver individuals from restraints so that they could act freely in accordance with their natures”, so as “a free human reason would produce sound moral judgments”. Social theories of the Enlightenment “emphasized natural human rights of political freedom and justice” (Lewis 1992).

According to Josh Rahn, in the period of Enlightenment “intellectuals began to consider the possibility that freedom and democracy were the fundamental rights of all people, not gifts bestowed upon them by beneficent monarchs or governments. Egalitarianism was [...] the promise of fair treatment for all people, regardless of background. Citizens began to see themselves on the same level as their leaders [...] subject to criticism if so deserved”, which frequently led to “harsh criticism of the powers-that-were” (Rahn 2011).

The above-mentioned thematic concerns generally shaped the literature of the Enlightenment age, which was largely turned into an instrument of education for the purpose of spreading the ideas of Enlightenment in the audiences. Because of that, this literature is characterized with a specific system of characters, including the almost indispensable figure of the “raisonneur” (a character who does not actively participate in the described events, but whose function is to propagate the world view of the author through voluminous monologues) direct authorial comments of moralizing and didactic nature (e.g., explaining the characters’ successes or failures and giving advices to the reader),

Since the dawn of modern African writing, African authors demonstrated profound relationship with the principles of Enlightenment in their works, for various reasons – direct influence from the classical Enlightenment texts, especially in Francophone African writing (see,

e.g., Mortimer 1990), or, more frequently, the typological factors – i.e., the striving of the authors to educate their readers about the fundamental human rights and freedoms, at the same time criticizing the present state of these freedoms and rights in many African countries, where they were constantly and harshly abused by oppressive and dehumanizing social order. This enlightening trend was also profound in modern Swahili literature, both in Tanzania and Kenya, in the works of such writers as Naila Harusi, John Ndeti Somba and others (see Bertoncini et al. 2009). In Kenyan Swahili writing of the recent decades, this trend got its “rebirth” in the works of several writers, and the novels of John Habwe appear to occupy one of the first places among them, which we will try to demonstrate in the examination below.

Already in his first novel *Maumbile si huja* (Appearances do not matter, 1995), telling the story of “Said, a farmhand involved in an illicit affair with his employer’s wife, Amina, who feels neglected by her husband, Juma [...], a chauvinistic racist who looks down on anyone who does not have the same light pigmentation as he,” Habwe “examines, albeit in passing, the issue of race in the coastal towns of East Africa. Amina later abandons her husband and marries Said by whom she bears a blind son, vindicating the novella’s title.” (Bertoncini et al., 61)

Maisha kitendawili (Life is a puzzle, 2003) “examines the trials and tribulations besetting a modern young person. At the centre of this story is Farida, an easy-going and astute female character who sails through her university studies by relying on her hard-working male colleagues, whom she however spurns, opting instead for the rich men who hover around the University’s female lodgings. Farida is brought back to her senses by the harsh realities that confront her at the end of her university education, when she is unable to get a job. She ends up living a life of squalor before she is rescued by Juma, the old university friend she had once looked down upon. Farida immerses herself into religion, which serves as her liberating force.” (Bertoncini et al., 61).

The theme of religion is furthered in Habwe’s third novel *Paradiso* (2005), although in that book Habwe offers “a biting indictment of religious hypocrisy and the commercialization of religion”. The novel tells the story of Michael Mango, a young Mombasa dweller, who after his recovery from a dangerous ailment becomes a devoted church person, soon making a preaching career. However, he soon “comes face to face with the religious gangsterism and greed [...] and the adulterous escapades of religious leaders like Musa Bosire” (Bertoncini et al., 62). After the conflict with these leaders Michael founds a new church, the Bethany Bible, and soon himself becomes subjected to all those ills that he previously hated his foes for.

Although, as it was mentioned above, Habwe’s novels have attracted certain attention from the critical realm, the critics have claimed that his novels “do definitely deserve more attention than what has been published on them so far” (Diegner 2014: 344). Having acknowledged his achievements in various aspects of form (“rich in its use of language and realistic descriptions” – Wamitila, “his ‘minimalist’ linguistic style, his formal experimentalism” - Diegner), the critics also point at Habwe’s aspiration to write about topical social issues, at the same time combining in his texts two distinctive artistic methods – social criticism, which is mostly presented through “richness of realistic descriptions” and elements of social satire, and moralistic didacticism, which is brought through moralising dialogues and authorial sentences

(e.g., Wamitila, writing about *Maisha kitendawili*, noticed that the novel bears “some elements of didactic melodrama” – Bertoncini et al., 61).

In the recent decades Habwe produced six more novels – *Cheche za Moto* (Sparks of fire, 2008), *Fumbo la maisha* (Riddle of life, 2009), *Safari ya Lamu* (Journey to Lamu, 2011), *Pamba* (2011), *Pendo la karaha* (Love of abhorrence, 2014), *Kovu moyoni* (Scar in the heart, 2014). In this study we will focus on three latest novels by Habwe – *Pamba* (2011), *Pendo la karaha* (2014) and *Kovu moyoni* (2014), since, in our view, these texts are marked with pronouncedly ‘Habwean’ combination of social documentary, with realistic and impartial depiction of urgent social problems, with certain devices and methods that appear to be rather similar to the classical works of European enlightenment.

Habwe’s novel *Pamba* (titled by the name of the main character) is in fact a long and bitter lament about the miserable state of public universities, represented in the novel by a certain Chiromo Centre (presumably its prototype being the University of Nairobi) and one of its lecturers, a talented mathematician Professor Pamba. Pamba, a locally and foreign-educated scholar, initially gets a profitable position at a prestigious NGO, but resigns from it when he gets an opportunity to head a newly founded centre for mathematical research at Chiromo which “was hoping to change the ways of constructing computer devices in its mathematical calculation. It is the development which was intended to influence the whole world and to bring to the country of Kenya big reputation worldwide” (uliniuia kubadili jinsi ya kujenga mtambo wa kompyuta katika ukokotozi wake wa hesabu. Ni maendeleo ambayo yalinuia kuathiri ulimwengu mzima na kuletea nchi ya Kenya sifa kubwa ulimwenguni - 48). The center works successfully, but the state of the university and its lecturers becomes more and more destitute; even foreign-financed projects, no matter how well done, do not bring desired increments – everything is taken by the state structures. Classes and laboratories do not have equipment, lecturers lack money; Pamba is thrown out of his house in Kileleshwa and cannot pay his old father’s medical bills. But when the teachers decide to defend their rights, the repressive machine strikes, and their efforts go in vain.

Brought to the end of their tether, the teachers decided to organize an all-university strike. The government responded by the insertion of spies into their ranks and by the arrest of ten important members of the teacher’s organization – among them Miheso, the secretary, who disappeared without a trace. The forthcoming strike was joined by the students, who organized their own protest action against the pitiful state of the teachers – and were dispersed and harassed by the police. By the bitter irony of fate Pamba, who was all the way expressing cautiousness towards the actions of his colleagues, was arrested that same evening and accused of inciting the students to join the strike of the dons. Eventually he is released, and now decides to participate in the strike; the strikers are also brutally scattered by the police, Pamba is arrested again, and spends three days in police cells. The strike goes on, with threats to withhold the teachers’ salaries and more sackings – among the sacked ones now is Pamba himself. His further efforts to get employed in private and foreign universities go in vain. In the end, desperate Pamba, who is deprived of his lifetime work and deserted by his family, commits suicide in his Chiromo office.

Habwe’s novel *Pendo la karaha* (Love of abhorrence, 2014) also deals with one of the crying problems of the “global south” – modern slavery, disguised as employment. The novel’s

main character, a young school graduate Kudra, comes from a humble family of Mombasa residents. Her father, a brave policeman, was killed by a local gang of drug dealers, and since his death her mother, a petty vendor, is struggling for the survival of her family. Kudra, like many other girls, is seduced by the advertisements about easy and profitable employment abroad, posed by a local agent. She pays her last money for the arrangements, and soon finds herself employed by a well-off family in Dubai. Employed – but, rather, enslaved, because her masters, the rich businessman Amini and his wife Nayrat, soon inform her that her salary will not be paid until she repays them her air ticket expenses; her passport is withdrawn, and poor Kudra finds herself in the state of a real “*mtumwa wa kisasa*” – a modern slave. She tries to deny this painful reality even to herself, hoping that things will straighten up one day. However, the situation is getting only worse, which pushes Kudra towards decisive actions in search of solution and salvation. After being harassed by Amini, Kudra flees his house with some stolen money – only to find herself as a mistress of another wealthy local dweller named Salim, who later pushes her out of his house in favour of a new flame. Having her last employment at a “*massage parlour*”, whose owner tries to push her into prostitution, Kudra only by chance – or, rather, lucky concurrence of circumstances – manages to return to Kenya.

Parallel to the saga of “*modern slavery*” the novel highlights another burning problem of today’s Africa – drug addiction among the young; using several secondary characters, the author shows devastating effect of drugs over the younger generation. Poverty and the absence of life perspectives push the younger people toward enslavement abroad and drug addition at home – this conclusion, severally proclaimed by different characters in the book, commits Kudra and her mother to seek solution through their own effort: they intend to set up in their native Mombasa a private poultry farm and a hairdressing salon, employing local destitute youth in order to fight poverty together.

Habwe’s striving to address in his books the topical issues of modern Kenyan (and, on a wider scale, African) society is obvious; in fact, compared to the previous novel, *Pamba* appears to have a higher degree of social criticism. However, both in *Pamba* and (to an even higher extent) in *Pendo la karaha* the author uses methods and devices reminiscent of the classical works of Enlightenment. He asserts the power of self-purification and positive example (e.g., Kassim, a drug addict youth in *Pendo la karaha*, after realizing his miserable state comes to his senses, becomes a successful businessman and sponsors the local drug-fighting campaigns), furnishes the text with his own moralising passages, and fluently exploits the figure of *raisonneur* (e.g., mzee Simba in *Pendo la karaha*, who lectures the local youth about the danger of drugs; Belgian philanthropist in *Pamba*, who initially sets the main character on the right track). But the strongest source of moral strength and self-awareness lies within the personalities of the main characters themselves; that is why Habwe constantly engages his heroes in the dialogues with the *nafsi* – their “*inner self*”, who, sharply criticising the character’s current state, thus opens their eyes and commits them to corresponding actions. It was *nafsi* that made the last attempt to push Professor Pamba into changing his life, revealing to him the neglected state of true scientists in Kenya:

“Dunia ina maonevu makubwa sana,” aliwaza Pamba. Alipowaona wale watoto hakuelewa kuzaliwa kwao kulinuiwa nini katika dunia.

“Na wewe?” Mara nafsi yake ilimwuliza.

“Mimi ni mtafiti, bwana,” Pamba alisema hapo kwenye kitanda alichokuwa amekilala.

“Mtafiti wa nini?” Nafsi ilimwuliza tena.

“Mimi ni mtafiti mkubwa wa mambo ya hisabati,” Pamba alisema huku amekazia macho kitabu alichokuwa alikisoma.

Pamba alisikia mcheko mkubwa kutoka kwa nafsi yake.

“Je, dunia inajua?” Nafsi iliuliza kwa ihadi.

“Inajua, nimetuzwa mara kwa mara,” Pamba alijitetea.

“Utatuzwa vipi uwe huwezi kumudu chakula na nyumba ya kukaa ya starehe?” Nafsi ilimwuliza.

Pamba alishangaa hiyo daiolojia ilivyoendelea. Ilimuudhi, ilimkera moyo (Pamba 2011:112-13).

(“The world has a lot of oppression,” thought Pamba. When he saw those children [*of the slums – MG*], he did not understand for what intention were they born into the world.

“And you?” his Nafsi asked him immediately.

“I am a researcher, bwana,” Pamba said from the bed on which he was laying.

“Researcher of what?” Nafsi asked him again.

“I am a big researcher of the matters mathematical,” said Pamba, shifting his eyes to the book he was reading.

Pamba heard a big laughter from his Nafsi.

“And does the world know?” asked Nafsi with contempt.

“It does, I was rewarded from time to time,” Pamba defended himself.

“How were you rewarded if you can not afford food and a decent house to live?” Nafsi asked him.

Pamba was surprised how this dialogue continued. It annoyed him, it troubled his heart). (All the translations from Swahili are mine – MG).

Likewise, *nafsi* opens Kudra’s eyes to her state of enslavement:

“Kwa nini walifanya vile?” Siku zote Kudra alijiuliza alipopata fursa ya kupigia makini maisha yake. Hakupata majibu. Siku moja, Nafsi ilimweleza kimasomaso.

“Huo ndio utumwa, dadangu. Utumwa uliotaka wewe,” Nafsi ilisema.

“Utumwa?” Kudra aliuliza kwa mshangao.

“Eeeh utumwa. *Modern slavery*,” Nafsi ilipambana kumfafanulia kwa Kiingereza.

“Mimi si *slave* lakini. [...] Mimi ni mtu wa uwezo wangu. Nina akili. Nina msimamo. Nina maono.” [...]

“Wewe ni mtumwa. Hii ndiyo sababu wafuta nyumba usilipwe mshahara ukufaa,” Nafsi ilisema na ikacheka kicheko kikubwa cha kitashtiti. [...]

“Nitatoka,” Kudra alisema.

“Kutoka ni vigumu. Kwataka moyo,” Nafsi ilisema.

“Moyo ninao. Nguvu ninazo na mikakati ninayo,” Kudra alisema.

“Why did they do that?” Kudra was always asking herself when she had a chance to look carefully at her life. Shi was not getting the answers. One day, Nafsi pretended to explain it to her.

“This is slavedom, my sister. Slavedom that you yourself wanted,” Nafsi said.

“Slavedom?” Kudra asked with surprise.

“Eeh, slavedom. *Modern slavery*,” Nafsi struggled to elucidate in English.

“But I am not a slave though.[...] I am a person with my ability. I have intellect. I have a stand. I have imagination.” [...]

“You are a slave. That is why you clean houses, not being paid a salary that fits you,” Nafsi said, and laughed a big sarcastic laughter.

“I will get out,” said Kudra.

“Getting out is difficult. It needs a heart,” Nafsi said.

“I have a heart. I have strength and I have plans,” said Kudra).

These dialogues with inner self, which permeate the texture of both novels, vividly remind of moralistic dialogues (including dialogues with self) as one of the most popular literary genres and literary devices of Enlightenment (suffice it to recall the works of Rousseau, Diderot and Crébillon, or, referring to a more popular text, the dialogues with the character’s inner self in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*). Habwe appears to use these dialogues for the same purpose – to provide their characters, confronted by the hostile social forces and abandoned, for different reasons, even by their family members, with the last hope of getting a voice of support – although a very critical one. It did not help in the case of Pamba, whose suffering was too much to defeat; but it mobilized Kudra towards decisive actions.

Unlike the previous novels, the action of Habwe’s novel *Kovu moyoni* (A scar in the heart, 2014) is set in an imaginary African country named Tandika. Tandika hardly bears any features giving it specific resemblance to Kenya (except, maybe, a few Kenyan-sounding names, like Mwita, Kanja or Onyango) – but on the whole it has many traces that makes it a kind of “typical” country of sub-Saharan Africa: it is ruled by a Socialist Party, it is divided into several provinces and regions, it is mostly rural and multi-ethnic. No less typical are the problems that are gnawing the people of Tandika, the most acute problem being that of inter-ethnic tension. The novels tells about the predicament of several families from various parts of the country, who, leaving their ancestral lands, decided to settle in a fertile region of Rama, where they for the time being live in a peaceful neighborhood with the local community of the Sululu. However, the Sululu, incited by scheming politicians, start the campaign of intimidation, aimed at forcing the “newcomers” out of Rama, as the latter, according to the claims imposed by the inciters, are “grabbing” their land (most of which was bought legally by the settlers from other regions). The tension rises rapidly, leading to the emergence of the so-called Youth Army (Jeshi la Vijana), an illegal tribal militia, which, under the pretence of defending the interests of the indigenous community of the Sululu, is terrorizing the people of Rama, forcing them out of their legally acquired plots and torturing and killing those who do not give in to their threats. The Youth Army is well armed, even with modern automatic weapons, supplied through the illegal activities

of their patron politicians, they have a camp in the thick forest in the outskirts of Rama, from where they plan and commit their assaults against the “newcomers”.

The main plot line of the novel revolves around the family of Boke, one of those families who, in search of the greener pastures, bought for themselves land in Rama and for the time being were co-existing peacefully with the local people. But with the rise of the clashes Boke’s life became one long chain of disasters. Her husband Kanja is killed in one of the first raids of the Youth Army; her daughter Eddah is abducted in the same raid and turned into a sex slave in the Youth Army camp; her elder son Mwita is also enslaved in the same camp; the only family member that is spared is Boke’s younger son Mali (full name Mali ya Mungu), who works in the capital city of Dunga. But when Mali, learning about the worsening situation in Rama, comes there to visit his family, he only learns of their further misfortunes. Eddah managed to escape from the Youth Army camp and make her way home – but she is maimed mentally and physically (even her ears are cut off). Mwita, who also escaped from the Youth Army captivity, is faced with even more dreadful fate – he and his several friends are arrested by the government army (that came to Rama to finish the clashes) as suspected Youth Army members and put into prison. The trials of Boke and Eddah are not over – one night the Youth Army breaks into their house (the two women are in the list of the “diehard enemies”, since they refuse to move out), mother and daughter are raped in front of one another, their hut is almost destroyed. Mwita is also faced even more dreadful fate – his case is sent to the court of appeal, but when Mwita, exhausted and desperate about the outcome, refuses to answer the judge’s question, the court, instead of further investigation, “light-heartedly” sentences him to death. Mwita is executed, managing only to leave a letter for his mother at their last meeting in prison. For Boke, already tortured with moral and physical aftermath of the rape (she even develops a fistula), this is the last drop – she loses her mind.

Even more horrible lot falls over other families who settled in Rama, such as the family of chief Ngata (whose wife Milkah has been Boke’s long-time friend). Ngata, a native of the distant region of Raka, after moving to Rama through his hard work and amiable nature was soon unanimously elected by the people of the village as their chief. He is loved and respected by many – but this does not stop the Youth Army from breaking one day into his house. Ngata, after torture and humiliation, is killed; his wife and daughter are raped – but at least their lives are spared, and they hide for several days in savanna, after which manage to find shelter in the houses of their relatives. But their tribulations are not over – Milkah’s sister, in whose house she stays, starts unjustly suspect Milkah of an affair with her husband, and Milkah has to return to Rama, where violence is in the air. Her daughter Nifreda finds refuge in the house of her aunt – but her future is gloomy: her education at the medical school, where she was about to graduate, is now terminated – her father, who was paying fees, is dead; her private life also barely brings any hope – Nifreda doubts that she, as a rape victim, can now find a husband or a partner for life.

Despite a heavy social-critical orientation of the novel, which in fact deals with one of the burning problems of modern Africa – ethnic-based violence, here again we see the “enlightenment-like” approach of the author in terms of the solutions that he offers to the problems haunting his characters. In spite of all the tragic events that befall them, the characters are in the end helped in different ways to restore their lives – helped through the benevolence

and humaneness of people and, to a considerable extent, through the interference of divine forces.

The main and the most suffered character, Boke, is slowly elevated from her pitiful state by the care and empathy poured on her by the two girls, her daughter Eddah and her friend's daughter Nifreda. Eddah helps her mother in the days of need by selling home-made food at the local market (despite the continued threats from the Youth Army supporters), and Nifreda manages to secure medical care for Boke by treating her at the local hospital owned by an NGO. In the end, Boke pays the revenge to her main abuser, the local police inspector Onyango, who was heading the gang of rapists – again through the benevolent support of those members of police force who, against all odds, preserved their humane attitude and duty to the people. Her first attempt to report the attack becomes successful through the help of the policeman Mwongera, “God-fearing person and the soldier who liked to stand on the justice side” (mcha wa Mungu na askari aliyependa kusimama upande wa haki – 82). He hosts Boke at his house and helps her to fill the report form. Several chapters later, Boke comes to the police station where Onyango is serving to trace the culprit, in which she is helped by unnamed, but also benevolent and helpful head of the station. At first he doubts Boke's accusations, but after learning that he is the mother of “that guy who was hanged by mistake” (which was already announced in mass media) sympathizes with her, helps her to identify Onyango and puts him under investigation. Onyango will be prosecuted, but the first punishment comes immediately – Onyango's wife leaves him, shocked that her husband, who had a reputation of a good Christian and exemplary family member, turned out to be a criminal (148). “Boke went home and ate to the full. The sleep, which had not shuffled on her since the hurricane of Rama started, came to her. She dreamed she was in the garden of flowers, enjoying life. Her body felt like resting. That scar in her heart now was inclining to disappear” (Naye Boke alienda nyumbani akala akashiba. Usingizi ambao ulikuwa haujamvaa tangu kimbunga cha Rama kianze ulimjia. Akaota yuko katika vitalu vya maua anafurahia maisha. Mwili wake ulihisi kupumzika. Hilo kovu lake la moyoni sasa lilielekea kutoweka – 148). Justice will prevail, if people see to it – this principle, one of the main in Enlightenment ethics, is eloquently illustrated by Boke's saga.

Eddah and Nifreda, who helped Boke to come back to life, are also rewarded (here it would be advisable to remember that “virtue rewarded” was one of the main moral principles of Enlightenment) through the effort of sympathetic and humane people. Nifreda is employed in the hospital owned by an NGO (thus she managed to help Boke with the cure of her illness), and the NGO also pays for the completion of her medical studies. Her private life is also being revived – as she confesses to Eddah, “I have a man, but I am still assessing him. I mean I want to know whether he is serious or just playing” (Nina mtu lakini bado nampima. Yaani nataka nimjue kama ni mtu *serious* au ni mtu wa kucheza tu – 128). To Eddah's warning that “I know that if you have studied so much and got a degree, men are usually scared” (Ninajua ukisoma hivi na kupata digrii wanaume huwa wanaogopa), Nifreda replies reasonably - “It is not true, it depends on the man and the girl. I do not agree that education changes a person and makes him/her bad” (Si kweli, inategemea mwanamume na huyo msichana. Mimi sijakubali kuwa elimu inabadili mtu hivyo na kumfanya mbaya hivyo – 128), again affirming two basic principles of Enlightenment – truthfulness of feelings (which must be verified by reason) and the importance of education as primary means of human development.

Eddah's own private life becomes, on the other hand, even more secure – at the market, where she sells her *maandazi*, she meets a local policeman Muloto. The two young people fell in love and started living together, planning a marriage. However, their happiness is marred by the fact that Muloto participated (as could be assumed, by the order of his superiors) in several attacks on the “newcomers” in Rama, including the murder of chief Ngata. Muloto himself is now deeply ashamed of this, and even resigns from the police force. On her part, Eddah forgives her lover, hoping that by-gones shall remain by-gones. Muloto's faithfulness and the strength of their love is proved later, when, after his marriage to Eddah, he starts getting intimidating letters from the elders, insisting that he should force out the woman of the “wrong tribe”. Muloto completely refuses to give in, by all his behavior demonstrating his resolute decision: “His Sululu origin did not matter to him. What mattered was their love that was growing with every sunrise [...] The hurricane struck their lives, but their love remained firm. Every trial is like a cement that strengthened their love even more” (Usululu wake haukumtia shughuli. Kilichomhusu ni lile pendo lao lililishamiri kila kulipokucha. [...] Kimbunga kilipiga maisha yao, lakini penzi lao likiwa limebaki imara. Kila masaibu yalipokuja ni kama saruji iliyoshindilia penzi lao hata zaidi – 144-5). Thus, tolerance and compassion – again some of the founding principles of Enlightenment morality – prevail, giving hope to the characters and the readers about the possible positive changes in Rama. It is also notable that while after her trials Eddah was only dreaming of revenge – “killing at least one member of the Youth Army will be satisfying” (31) – her love to Muloto was strong enough even to extinguish her lingering hatred to hid people.

In the issue of her daughter's marriage, Eddah's mother Boke also shares the forgiving attitude of her daughter: “Boke did not believe that her daughter's loved one was mentioned in many attacks there in Siloko. But she agreed that things of yesterday have gone. She was attending to the matters of today. Many things she decided to leave to the Almighty” (Boke hakuamini yule mpenzi wa mwanawe ndiye aliyetajwa katika mashambulizi mengi pale Siloko. Lakini akakubali ya jana yamepita. Alishughulikia ya leo. Mambo mengi aliamua kumwachia Mungu – 114).

The will of the Almighty and His interference generally plays a considerable role in the faith of the characters. For many of them he is the last resort of hope – and sometimes He even directly communicates with them, as in the episode of changing Boke's mind. Thinking about those who had done so much evil to her, she decides not to forgive them. “You must forgive them so that the Lord opens for you the gates of blessing,” a certain voice strongly explained her” (“Lazima uwasamehe ili Maulana naye akufungulie milango ya baraka,” sauti fulani ilimweleza Boke kwa nguvu – 113). Divine force also punishes many of those who participated in the attacks but seem to be going away with it, because of the impunity, that they acquire for different reasons. Jumaa Mambo, one of the most notorious members of the Youth Army, escaped the court trials because people are afraid to evidence against him – but one day he is struck with insanity, provoking a comment from Eddah that “the wrongs will be paid for in this life” (mabaya yatalipwa papa hapa duniani – 127). Even Mwamba, a member of parliament and the head of the ruling party, who was the mastermind behind the clashes, because it helped him in his election campaign, does not escape the punishment. Being completely immune to the

institutions of law because of his high rank, he nevertheless contracts AIDS and dies in a South African clinic.

As in previously discussed novels, talks to one's inner self – *nafsi* – also have their own place in Kovu moyoni, playing the same critical and mobilizing role. It is *nafsi* that finally persuades Boke to go to the police station, despite the remarks of her friend Selah that it can not amount to anything. *Nafsi* also enlightens Boke's son Mali about the advantages of education and warns him against getting involved into dangerous activities while staying in the capital city of Dunga.

On the other hand, in full compliance with the Enlightenment notion of the existing human society as the one preserving “irrational customs and outworn institutions” and thus violating the natural human rights, the social institutions of Tandika are shown in the novel in the negative light. Help and compassion come only from, not owing to but rather despite the social order that prevails in Tandika – and this order is cruel, oppressive, dehumanizing and (as the author implies) requires profound change. The role of government is described in the novel as almost totally negative: the government army, which finally comes to Rama to fight the youth militia, is meant to bring peace, but in fact, although it manages to neutralize the youth militia, in its own turn it brings more harm than healing. Nifreda's timid remark that the army in the long run helped to normalize the life in Rama is met by a harsh reply from Eddah – “why are people's mouths still complaining? Raping still remains. Oppression remains. Bribery remains and is growing. Only time will solve our condition,” said Eddah” (Mbona vinywa vya watu bado vinalalamika? Ubakaji bado ungaliko. Unyang'anyi ungaliko. Rushwa ingaliko na imeshamiri. Wakati ndiyo utakaoamua hali yetu,” Eddah alisema – 133). The army itself is in fact the mirror of the oppressive social order that created it – and people meet it with more fear than hope. In fact, even Nifreda herself earlier doubts the effectiveness of the social institutions. “When Nifreda was in the forest, she remembered the speech of the president of their country Tandika. The president claimed, “Our country is the island of peace.” But why are the eyes of the government fail to see these problems? [...] Why are there rulers? They are paid. They are provided for, but this is our father who paid with his life for fighting disorder. Or is it because of his tribe?” Nifreda was putting to herself a chain of questions” (Nifreda alipokuwa huko msituni alikumbuka hotuba ya rais wa nchi yao ya Tandika. Rais alidai, “Nchi yetu ni kisiwa cha amani.” Lakini kwa nini macho ya serikali yalishindwa kuyaona matatizo haya? [...] Mbona kuna watawala? Wanalipwa. Wanatunzwa ila ni baba yetu aliyelipa kwa maisha yake kwa kupinga hamkani. Ama ni kwa sababu ya kabila lake?” Nifreda alijiuliza mkururo wa maswali) (51-2).

The government in the novel is portrayed also as the symbol of oppression and hypocrisy. At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the cunning politicians like Mwamba are bred at the government permissiveness. Mwamba's funeral is fully paid by the government, his body is transported to the funeral site in the army helicopter, and the president himself makes a speech proclaiming Mwamba the hero of the nation. “When Boke heard the speech of her president she said: “It is a sheer nonsense. It is a lie. They are in the same gang.” (Boke aliposikia hotuba ya rais wake alisema: “Ni upuuzi mtupu. Ni uongo. Wamo katika kikoja kimoja.”) (154). Current social institutions in the country are against the society itself and must be changed – this is the very obvious implication that the portrayal of the government bodies in the novel brings along.

As a conclusion to this study, we may state that the recent decades saw the emergence of a trend in Swahili writing that may be called the “new enlightenment” – a term as conditional as “new realism” in Swahili literature (see Rettová 2016) ³, but it describes in a no less expressive way the very essence of the trend. The writers belonging to it (John Habwe, Ken Walibora, Mwenda Mbatiah and some others) in their works provide, first, a harsh criticism of the powers-that-be, as did their predecessors in the European Enlightenment. By doing so, in the same spirit of Enlightenment (and enlightening) they are intensely protesting against the abuse against the fundamental and “natural” human rights and freedoms.

On the other hand, the authors, as we tried to show using the example of John Habwe, are trying to show that the restoration of these freedoms is achievable on the lower level through empathy, compassion and co-operation between people, allowing them, according to the above-quoted studies, “to deliver individuals from restraints so that they could act freely in accordance with their natures”, so as “a free human reason would produce sound moral judgments”, achieving “fair treatment for all people, regardless of background” and allowing “to see themselves on the same level as their leaders”.

John Habwe and his colleagues in their works call on the readers not to lose faith in human values and human personality even in the most unfavorable circumstances. We may also assume that unlike “new novel” in Swahili ², that is targeting a more sophisticated and highly-educated audience, Habwe’s novels are primarily designed for the more common reader, thus making their “recipes for progress” more accessible, wide-spread and – maybe! – more effective in accomplishing the tasks of tangible social practicality.

Endnotes

¹ Kenyan author and linguistics scholar, born 12 December, 1962 in Vihiga, Western Kenya. Studied for his degrees at the University of Nairobi where he teaches in the Department of Linguistics and Languages. Author of several novels, short stories and children’s stories.

² For some publications on the “new” novel in Swahili see, e.g., Diegner 2005, Gromov 2016.

³ In fact, this realistic portrayal of reality allows us to qualify the “new enlightenment” as a subdivision of “new realism” in contemporary Swahili literature.

References

Bertoncini et al. 2009 - Bertoncini, Elena, Mikhail D. Gromov, Said Ahmed Mohammed Khamis, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila. *Outline of Swahili literature: prose fiction and drama*. Brill: Leiden-Boston.

Diegner 2005 - Diegner, Lutz. “Intertextuality in the contemporary Swahili novel: Euphrase Keziahabi’s *Nagona* and William E.Mkufya’s *Ziraili na Zirani*.” *Swahili Forum* 12: 25-35

Gromov 2016 – Gromov, Mikhail. “Local achievement’ or ‘external influence’? Intertextuality and political satire in the ‘new’ Swahili novel in Kenya.” *Dunia Yao: Utopia/Dystopia in Swahili Fiction*, ed. by Clarissa Vierke and Katharina Greven, Koln: Rudiger Koppe, pp. 57-72

Habwe 2011 – Habwe, John. *Pamba*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.

Habwe 2014 – Habwe, John. *Pendo la karaha*. Nairobi: Jomo Kenyatta Foundation.

Habwe 2014a – Habwe, John. *Kovu moyoni*. Nairobi: Bookmarks Africa.

Lewis 1992 – Lewis, Hackett. The Age of Enlightenment (http://history-world.org/age_of_enlightenment.htm)

Outram 2006 – Outram, Dorinda. *Panorama of the Enlightenment*. New York: Getty Publications.

Mortimer 1990 – Mortimer, Mildred. *Journeys through the French African novel*. L.: John Currey.

Rahn 2011 – Rahn, Josh. The Enlightenment (<http://www.online-literature.com/periods/enlightenment.php>)

Rettová 2016 – Rettová, Alena. “Writing in the Swing?: Neo-Realism in Post-Experimental Swahili Fiction.” *Research in African Literatures* 47: 15-31