

# The East African Short Story

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AT THE RECENT CONFERENCE of African writers of English expression, held at the University College of Makerere, Kampala, organised by the Mbari Centre, Ibadan, and sponsored by the Congress of Cultural Freedom, the East African short story was discussed in a paper read by this writer.

At critic's time for the short story, Mr. Donatus Nwoga, in his paper, posed the question: has there been a sufficient realisation of the difference between the anecdote and the short story proper, i.e. the difference between merely a short narration of events and a well-composed and centrally visualised story?

This was the precise point which I found pertinent in the study of the short story in East Africa. There is a strong anecdotal quality in the short stories of J. T. Ngugi, John Kariara and John Nagenda, the three writers whose work I selected for consideration.

Except for Kenya, where the rise of mau mau and the subsequent state of emergency, had imposed—temporarily—South-African-type strains in human relationships, East Africa has relatively lived under a mild political climate. Social criticism is not a feature in this writing, the canvas is too large and the stories move at a leisurely pace. The vitality, the urgency, the violence, of the South African short story is lacking.

I do not wish to be understood to mean that vitality, urgency and violence are necessarily a feature of the short story; O. Henry's 'Gift of the Magi'; De Maupassant's 'The Necklace' and Katherine Mansfield's 'The Tea Party', contain none of these elements listed, but they form the body of the world's best short stories.

I have a well-entrenched psychosis against rules and regulations, my immediate impulse is to rebel against them and will invariably break them; but in mitigation I wish to plead that it is more fun to be acquainted with the rules before rebelling against the constrictions imposed by the rules; it is usually the restrictions—not the rules—which are cumbersome. The short story is a strict and precise art form—incidentally, also the most exacting. It relates a single incident in a human experience to underline a point; the incident is seen through the eyes of single character, told from a single viewpoint.

In the story, 'The Return', by J. T. Ngugi, the hero (Kamau) returns after five years from a detention camp during the mau mau emergency, to find that the only life he had known had drifted away; that he had been presumed dead, his wife had remarried and his village had been destroyed. At that moment of crisis the hero's

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reaction is unsatisfactory, it lacks emotional motivation; the dialogue is used—not to heighten the drama—but to explain events.

'The Wind', also by Ngugi, suffers because the writer halts the action of the story and explains things; too many situations are explained rather than shown. And although both stories are told from a single viewpoint, the characters are handicapped in the playing out of their fate; the motivations do not arise from the psychology of the characters, but from the narrational manipulations of the writer.

AT THIS POINT I WISH to discuss the function of motive in the short story, with particular reference to the East African stories. The short story, like the play, should begin at that moment of crisis in the life of a character, that historical moment at which the character will have to make a move. The magnitude of the issue at stake, the nature of his personality, the force or forces posed against him, will provide the motivation. In real life people may act irrationally, but in fiction—in art—every act must be motivated. We, the readers, want to know why. Is the situation plausible?

And although character development is reduced to a minimum in the short story, orchestration of characters is essential, the unity of opposites rigid.

In the short story the narration of events contains an obvious limitation, committing the story to a loose thematic line. John Nagenda, has told in his 'And This, at Last', an anecdote and not a short story proper. There is no motivation, nothing is at stake and the orchestration of characters is loose. The anecdote is told in a monologue by one of the three characters at various points of the narration; the viewpoint bounces about. We are not shown why and how important it is for the young reporter to be granted an interview by the eccentric old man. The interview is granted as an act of accident, not because of the young reporter's action. The hand of the artist is missing.

'The Initiation', by John Kariara, contains the seed of a powerful short story had it been artistically developed. The character is caught between a private and a public morality. The hero (Mirashi) sends his son to an initiation school in the full realisation that the boy is not strong enough to withstand the ceremony, but because custom demands it and the elders insist upon it. The boy's wounds fail to respond to treatment; pride prevents the father of the boy from asking for help, without which the boy will die.

The death of the boy introduces a new thematic structure; the boy's father seeks for another way of life, he turns to Christianity but the disillusionment which leads him to this is not explored. This dramatic twist in thematic structure suggests a break with tribal life, but the reader is not persuaded into an acceptance of the dramatic possibility; the great experience. The story contains two main themes and too many situations. The undercurrent of human experience has not been artistically realised.

The East African short story is still young, and will develop—with experience—from the anecdote to the short story proper; at present, it is an embryonic body of literature perhaps not deserving the critical analysis given here. ●