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"NARRATING THE NATION": KENYA'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE IN THE NOVELS OF MWENDA MBATIAH

Mikhail Gromov
United States International University – Africa
mgromov@usiu.ac.ke

Abstract: The article analyses the vision of Kenya's recent history, its present and its foreseeable future as presented in several novels by Mwenda Mbatiah, one of the country's leading writers of Swahili expression. In Mbatiah's vision, Kenyan history appears as the "chain of heritage", in which the mistakes and misdeeds of the past, such as the betrayal of the nation's expectations in the early years of independence, have stipulated the emergence of the malfunctioning political and economic system in "Nyayo years", which in its own turn may lead to an even more grim developments in the future. At the same time, the author offers a positive alternative, which he sees in the combined constructive effort of the people, - this, according to him, may even change the existing social structures for the better.

Key words: East African literature, Swahili literature, Swahili novel, Kenyan literature, Kenyan history, Mwenda Mbatiah

1. Introduction

The name of Mwenda Mbatiah (born 1964) became known on Swahili literary scene in the mid-1990s, when *Kiswahili* journal published his article about the works of renowned Tanzanian writer Said Ahmed Mohamed. The article stirred up lively polemics (participated by Mohamed himself and one of the leading Kenyan authors Kyallo Wadi Wamitila), and Mwenda Mbatiah's name got an established position in the ranks of critics and researchers of Swahili literature. Three years later came Mbatiah's debut as a fiction writer with his novel *Upotevu*

(Prodigality, 1999). The publication of this book started the literary career of Mbatiah, which currently includes ten novels, a play, several short stories, a dictionary of literary terms and numerous articles. By profession Mwenda Mbatiah is a literary scholar specializing in Swahili literature. He graduated from the University of Nairobi, and currently holds the position of associate professor in the Department of Kiswahili. In an unpublished interview, given to the author of this article in the year 2004, Mbatiah confessed that the choice of language for his fictional works – and all his novels and stories are written in Swahili – had been to a certain extent stipulated by his profession, but mostly he was attracted by the facilities of Swahili as the language of the widest possible audience across Eastern Africa. As he stressed, "I believe that literature is one of the means to address a wide audience all over Kenya about the burning problems of our society. And I also believe that when we write our texts – especially in Swahili, because it is our national language – we write them for the widest reading public". These same reasons, according to the writer, provided for his choice of a literary form – although Mbatiah is also known for a number of critical articles about the so-called "new", or "experimental" novel in Swahili, in his own works he gives preference to the traditional realistic novel, because, according to him, "the "new" Swahili novel is rather difficult for the understanding of those who do not have a special training in literature, and we do not target a small group of specialists. This new trend is not the best way to communicate with the wide reading public in Kenya, because as a writer I want to speak about certain things in a clear and understandable language. And if for this purpose I choose the means that will only hamper this communication – what to do then?"[1]

2. 1960s: Struggle betrayed

In the same interview Mbatiah mentioned, that his chronologically first novel was completed in the early 1990s, and was initially written in

[1] All translations from Swahili are mine – M.G.

English, but for a number of reasons was published in Swahili version in 2004 under the title *Wimbo mpya* (New song). I will therefore start the analysis of Mbatiah's works from this novel, also because *Wimbo mpya* refers to the founding period of modern Kenyan history – the attainment of independence after several years of the liberation war, especially during the "State of Emergency" and the activities of the Mau Mau movement (1952–1960). This liberation war, although lost by the freedom fighters, many of whom surrendered after the colonial government announced an amnesty, was nevertheless a major impetus towards the country's independence in 1963.

At first sight, *Wimbo mpya* may be considered as yet another link in the long chain of texts devoted to this crucial period of Kenyan history. In fact, the liberation struggle remains one of the "eternal" themes in Kenyan literature, among the writers of both English and Swahili expression. Kyallo Wadi Wamitila in his overview of Kenyan Swahili novel gives *Wimbo mpya* exactly this qualification:

> Mbatiah's second novel, *Wimbo mpya* (New song, 2005) […] falls into the same category as Kareithi's *Kaburi bila msalaba* and Ngare's *Kikulacho ki nguoni mwako*, by focusing on the theme of Kenya's liberation struggles and the Mau Mau, a theme that most critics in Kenya would consider stale. This novel, initially written in English as *The Manacles*, can be seen as a retelling of the Mau Mau story, narrated from the point of view of a Meru (the author's ethnic group). In the sense that it recreates a historical theme, this novel can also be seen in the same light as Sam Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The real story*. It traces the life of one of the Mau Mau leaders, Meja Marete, both during the struggle for independence and after independence. It also examines the betrayal of the nation's aspirations by the greedy politicians who took power. The latter thematic thrust places the novel within a modern postcolonial setting, since greed still remains an issue of concern. Given the key role of the Mau Mau in the country's liberation, we can actually say that in this novel Mbatiah is 'narrating the nation'.
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> *Wimbo mpya* is a stylistically rich novel. The writer has employed mythological motifs, taking the stories about the heroic figures of Kamankuura and Koomenjue from Meru folklore together with oral

forms to create a rich blend. It is also a novel rich in character depth. (Bertoncini et al. 2009: 64–65)

In the above quotation, Wamitila has perfectly outlined the major traits of the novel; his observation about Mbatiah's "narrating the nation" was even chosen by me as the title of this article. I tend to disagree with only one statement by the esteemed critic and author. In my view, *Wimbo mpya* largely "falls out" of the category of "Mau Mau novels" mentioned by Wamitila. Many of these texts really concentrate on the vicissitudes of the armed struggle, its hardships, heroism of the freedom fighters and other related themes. Unlike them, *Wimbo mpya* is mostly set during the first years after independence, 1964 and 1965. In fact, the novel features only one battle scene, in its very first chapter, when Marete's camp is ambushed by the enemy, which leads to the total extermination of his detachment. Disarmed and hungry, Marete hides for some time in his native village, and then runs back to the forest, where he is determined to join another squad of the freedom fighters, and to continue the struggle. He succeeds – but he and his comrades-in-arms stay in the forest much longer than many other fighters did. They are determined to go on with the fight until Kenya becomes free of the colonial yoke – and thus reject the amnesty declared by the colonial government. But even independence does not shatter Marete's determination – according to him, the aims of their struggle were not achieved:

Usiku mrefu wa Hali ya Hatari ulikucha mwezi wa Januari mwaka wa 1960. Miaka mitatu baadaye, Uhuru ulipatikana, taifa jipya likazaliwa. "Hapana! Hatujapata tulichokuwa tukipigania", baadhi ya wapiganiaji uhuru walidai. Walikataa kutoka msituni. "Msipotoka msituni, mtakiona cha mtema kuni," walionywa na serikali mpya ya Mwafrika. Mchezo hatari ya vuta n'kivute baina ya pande hizo mbili ukaendelea.

'The long night of the State of Emergency ended in January, 1960. Three years later, Independence came, a new nation was born. "No! We have not yet got what we fought for!" some of the freedom fighters demanded. They refused to leave the forest. "If you do not leave the forest,

> we'll make it hot for you," they were warned by the new African government. The dangerous game of stalemate on both sides went on.' (Mbatiah 2004: 21)

Marete himself has quite sufficient reasons to disagree with "benefits" of independence. The new government has completely forgotten about his village – they have no school, no health station, no cattle washers, their farming is done by the stone-age means. Marete's own field, which during the years of struggle was snatched from him by the traitor M'Keambati, who collaborated with the colonizers, after independence has not been returned to him. Moreover, he sees how the children of the traitor M'Keambati (who passed away) are using the education that they received from the colonizers to their full advantage – his son Nthambori not only inherited all his father's property, that the latter stole from the villagers, but after independence is given the post of the local judge, which he uses to amass more wealth. M'Keambati's daughter Mariamu is a teacher in the local town's school, and the only one in the village who has a private car.

> *Mipango ya serikali kuinua kiwango cha maisha cha wananchi, kama ilivyoelezwa na mawaziri wake. Ujenzi wa shule na vituo vya afya, utengenezaji wa barabara. Uendelezaji wa kilimo. Katika masikio na akili ya Marete, yote hayo yalisikika kama sauti iliyotoka mbali… huko porini. Sauti ya mwehu aliyepotea njia. Alipolinganisha matendo ya wanakijiji wenzake na hao wakazi wa Nairobi waliotoa ahadi hizo, alitambua mwanya mkubwa wa kimaadili uliokuwepo baina ya pande hizo mbili. Tabaka hilo la wenye mamlaka lilipenda kupiga debe kuhusu uadilifu wake na fadhila kubwa lilizowafanya wananchi. Lakini nani asiyejua kuwa debe tupu ndilo litoalo kelele nyingi? Kwa upande wao, wananchi wa vijijini waliwatendea mema na kuwasaidia wenzao kwa sababu waliamini ndivyo ilivyofaa kufanya, ndivyo kibinadamu. Hawakujisifu wala kujitangaza.*
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> 'The government's plans of lifting the people's living standards, as was explained by its ministers. Building schools, hospitals and roads. Developing agriculture. In Marete's ears and mind it all sounded as a voice from afar… from the wilderness. As voice of a madman who lost his

> way. When he compared the deeds of his fellow villagers and of the dwellers of Nairobi, who gave those promises, he saw a huge moral gap between these sides. That class which had power liked to rattle a bucket about their decency and a big favour that they were doing to the people. But who does not know that only the empty bucket gives the loudest rattle? On their part, the villagers cared about each other, did each other good, and helped each other, because they believed that was the way to do, that was the human way. They did not boast about it.' (Mbatiah 2004: 141–142).

This quotation, in my view, delivers in a concise way one of the main messages of the novel, – that people should try to improve their lives by their own joint effort, without waiting for the "favours" from the authorities, being driven by their sense of unity and their creative endeavour. This is well illustrated by the events described in the larger part of the novel, set, as mentioned above, during the first two years of independence.

Although the novel largely circles around the figure of the former Mau Mau leader Marete, no less important in the book is the character of the schoolteacher Bi Mariamu. Along with Marete, she is the second main positive character and obviously the author's ideal. In fact, she is the full contrary to her brother – if Nthambori fully takes after his father, a colonial yes-man, and treats his co-villagers as "second hand citizens", Mariamu puts all her intellect, energy and possessions to the benefits of the people (even her private car is largely used by other villagers). It is she who initiates the project of building a school in the village, and through her amiable but persuasive nature manages to incorporate into the project the important people in the area – the old man Mwathi, keeper of traditional knowledge and the owner of the village's largest field, which he also uses for the people's benefit; industrious farmers Rogere and Getimbo; former Mau Mau fighter Igweta; and even the catholic priest Mario, an Italian heading the diocese in the local town Tanta. Through their joint effort, and under the leadership of Mariamu, the villagers manage to implement successfully not only the school project, but another important venture –

to set on the right track the life of Marete. The delegation, comprised of the above mentioned villagers, including Mariamu, reaches Marete's camp in the forest and manages to persuade the desperate freedom fighter and his comrades to lay down their arms and join the village life. The logical outcome of Marete's new life is his marriage to Mariamu – a large part of the novel's penultimate chapter is devoted to a moving description of their relations. At the village festival, marking the completion of the school project, Marete finally teaches to the villagers the new song of Kenya – song of fraternity, affection, effort and self-reliance.

Along with articulating the above mentioned message, the author manages to highlight in this novel many other related themes, one of the main ones being the theme of women's empowerment. It is embodied in the novel by a host of female characters, but most of all by that of Mariamu. Possessing all the characteristic female virtues – se is good-looking, humble, respectful, caring, etc. – she at the same time demonstrates really "male" determination, strength, courage and ability of leadership; even her colleagues at school describe her as "the one with male thoughts" (*mwenye mawazo ya kiuanaume*). In traditionally patriarchal rural society (and Kenyan society as a whole) Mariamu makes a real breakthrough – her merits are recognized and appreciated even by the most diehard advocates of patriarchy. An impressive example of that is shown by the character of Getimbo – although an industrious farmer and a caring parent, he, due to the pull of traditional culture, is one of the most diehard adepts of patriarchy in the village, but Mariamu's abilities and virtues make him change his views about the roles of women. Mariamu also sets an example for other village women – the farmers' wives, Marete's daughter Flora, and even her educated friends, schoolteachers Esta and Sara.

Another theme, or it can be said – another message that is tightly related to the previously mentioned ones, is the author's intention to demonstrate that many present-day problems of the Kenyan nation are rooted in its early post-independent history, namely – in the betrayal of masses' interests by the new powers-that-be. This message permeates

the whole text, and is concisely but expressively formulated in one of the dialogues between Marete and Mariamu:

"…hili ni taifa lako, na unawajibika kulijenga", Bi Mariamu aliendelea.

"Nakubali. Nalijenga, nimelijenga na nitalijenga. Lakini wasaliti hawawezi kunifunza uzalendo. Nimepigana vita kulikomboa taifa hili. Vita vimekwisha sasa. Ujenzi wa taifa unahusu kilimo na miradi ya maendeleo. Nafanya yote hayo".

"Jambo jingine", Bi Mariamu aliendelea. "Msamaha umetolewa kwa wapiganaji ambao bado wako msituni. Msamaha huu utaendelea kwa kipindi cha mwaka mmoja kuanzia sasa. Watakaobakia huko baada ya kipindi hicho kupita wataona cha mtema kuni".

"Ninachoona hapo sio msamaha bali ni vitisho. Mbona hao wanaotoa vitisho hawazungumzii madai ya wazalendo hao? Tazama madai yao yalivyo mepesi. Ardhi ya kuwawezesha kujitegemea maishani. Hawadai kufanywa mawaziri".

‘ "… this is your nation, and you must build it", Mrs Mariamu continued.

"I agree. I am building it, I was building it and I will build it. But the traitors cannot teach me patriotism. I fought in the war to make this nation free. Now the war is over. The building of the nation is about farming and development projects. All this I do".

"Another matter", Mrs Mariamu continued. "A pardon was given to those fighters who are still in the forest. This pardon will be valid for a period of one year from now. Those who will remain in the forest after this period expires, will be given a hot plate".

"What I see here is not a pardon but threats. And why those who are giving these threats do not discuss the claims of these patriots? They do not demand much. Just land for supporting themselves. They do not demand becoming ministers". ’ (Mbatiah 2004: 175–176)

Another aim that the author apparently pursues in the novel (and this is also mentioned in Wamitila's review) is to get the reading public all over East Africa acquainted with the culture of the Meru, his native people and one of the communities that took an active part in the Mau Mau movement. The novel presents various aspects of traditional Meru

culture – from its oral texts (the legends of Kamankuura and Koomenjue, narrated by Mwathi) to social structure (Mwathi's comments about the place of women in traditional society) and some cultural practices, among which especially notable are the colourful descriptions of village feasts. In general, *Wimbo mpya* can be considered as a very successful *attempt de plume* of one of the most "history-minded" writers in modern Kenyan literature.

3. "Nyayo years": seeds of anger

In his second (but in fact first published) novel *Upotevu* (Prodigality, 1999) Mbatiah started the theme which may be deemed as one of the central in his oeuvre. *Upotevu* is his first novel about the so-called "Nyayo generation", which received this informal name from "Nyayo philosophy" (sometimes the term "nyayoism" is also used) – social and philosophical doctrine, developed in the 1980s under the supervision of Daniel arap Moi, the second president of Kenya. David Samper gives "Nyayo philosophy" the following characteristics:

> "Nyayo" is a Swahili word for "footsteps", and implies following in ex-president Kenyatta's footsteps by continuing his development projects. "Love, peace and unity", the crux of Nyayoism, is a philosophy which has its (invented) roots in a "universal African spirit - the spirit of the forefathers" (Moi 1986: 19). All nationalisms are imagined, invented, and potentially dangerous, and Moi's nationalist ideology of Nyayo is no exception. In Kenya, Nyayo has become a blanket term covering all other African ideologies including constitutional democracy, Christian socialism, African socialism, anti-tribalism, development, nationalism, and patriotism. Consequently, anyone who opposes Moi's Nyayo philosophy is perceived as a government opponent" (Samper 1997: 34)

In practice, the philosophy of "love, peace and unity" was turned into an ideological basis for turning Kenya into a virtually police state with a well-developed machinery of persecuting the dissidents (Nyayo House, a governmental building in the centre of Nairobi, named after "Nyayo philosophy", in the 1980s and 1990s became notorious for the

torture chambers in its basements). Governmental repressions, along with substantial decline in economy, made Moi's years (1978–2002) the darkest period in Kenya's post-colonial history. Exactly this time became the historical setting of Mwenda Mbatiah's novel.

Kyallo Wadi Wamitila in his overview of Kenyan Swahili novel describes *Upotevu* as follows: "This story is about a young generation trying to find its footing in a society characterized by ineptitude and warped morals […], a society enmeshed in a web of moral turpitude, corruption, unemployment, lethargy, generational conflict and revenge" (Bertoncini et al. 2009: 64). Mbatiah himself in the mentioned interview gave an even more definitive assessment: "I wrote about a generation which was born after independence, namely in the seventies and after. And I am saying that this generation was lost – mainly because of incompetence of leaders, in political and moral sphere. Glancing back at out country's post-independence history, we see that the generation that grew up after independence was faced with an array of problems, generally because there was no clear directions in politics, morals, culture – since the leaders, who came to power after independence, were taking care mostly about their own private interests".

Structure-wise *Upotevu* inclines towards a "centripetal" model, in which the novel's architectonics is limiting the action to a certain period in the life of the main characters. In *Upotevu*, the author highlights a few months in the life of Kemathi, a postgraduate student of Nairobi University. The events that happened to him within that time are not many, the circle of characters is also not too wide – but the author manages to reconstruct with a high degree of accuracy the suffocating atmosphere of the 1980s. With almost a documentary precision Mbatiah renders the *Zeitgeist* – persecution of dissidents, police brutality, rampant corruption, rural and urban poverty. Within a few months Kemathi happens to be taken to the police because of his friendship with a disfavored writer Oki-Ojok; participates in an ignominious brawl between his friend Chabare and the relatives of his girlfriend Flora, who committed suicide (neither of the sides can afford paying for

Flora's funeral); defends his own mother from a village chief, who wants to snatch her house, which she inherited after her husband's death; finally, Kemathi's pregnant wife is taken to hospital. Mbatiah depicts Kemathi's life as a never-ending chain of tribulations, of difficult, and sometimes dangerous situations. Kemathi, a student at literature department, has to spend most of his time looking for odd jobs, to help his friends and relatives, who fall into dire straits, and even to take care of his own security – he does not dare to break his accidental love affair with Maria, a police officer, because it gives him a kind of protection (the authorities are irritated by Kemathi's friendship with Oki-Ojok, and also by Kemathi's own short stories, and Maria several times managed to help him). In a conversation with his friend Kemathi "vocalizes" the author's concept of their age-mates as a "lost generation" that grew up in the atmosphere of lies, fear and poverty. Will the generation of their children share the same plight – this question tortures Kemathi in the final episode of the novel, when he bends over the cradle of his newborn son.

The answer to this question is indirectly given by Mbatiah in his next novel *Vipanya vya maabara* (Laboratory mice, 2007). The novel tells about the "younger brothers" to the characters of the previous book, the "Nyayo generation" of the 1990s. Throughout the book the author seems to counterpose two planes. On the one hand, he tells about the solidarity among the lower strata of Kenyan society, showing that it brings really tangible results. For example, chapter seven tells how the mass protest actions in 1991 contributed to the adoption of the multi-party system in the country: *Harakati za wananchi hazikupotea bure, kwani serikali ililazimika kubadilisha katiba na kuruhusu vyama vya kisiasa kusajiliwa; enzi mpya katika siasa za Kenya ikaanza* 'The people's struggle was not in vain, because the government was forced to change the constitution and allow the registration of political parties; new era in Kenyan politics has begun'(Mbatiah 2007: 94). This solidarity is also reflected by the novel's principal characters, a group of young people from different ethnic groups, who throughout the novel support each other. On the other hand, the author stresses the negative

influence produced over Kenyan society by high-ranking politicians, who use their high social stand to cover their socially harmful, but personally profitable activities. These politicians are symbolized in the novel by the character of Rashidi Hamisi, Kenya's minister of defense (a fictituous figure). Here the author employs an obvious irony: the minister uses the might of the state's defense structures in order to shield his own criminal activities – he is engaged in wide-scale drug trafficking. His criminal engagements are devastating to all the groups in society: while his main clients are youngsters from well-off families, the drug dealers and distributors are recruited among the poor. One of these dealers, a former schoolboy Swaleh, betrays his patron's illegal activities to his friend Bob Kerogo, the novel's main character, and even introduces Bob to the minister. Later, owing to the concurrence of circumstances, Bob happens to witness the minister's attempt to get rid of a dead body of an unknown white woman – late at night and far from town; Bob manages to photograph secretly the crime scene. Further events unfold swiftly – from the newspapers Bob learns that an American senator's daughter, who was doing research in Kenya, was raped and killed, because she happened to disclose the criminal practices of a government minister. Senator, the father of a murdered girl, organizes a private investigation, in which Bob with his testimony plays the decisive role. The minister and his gang are arrested, Bob is given a generous money reward, which he intends to use for public projects. Such "hollywoodish" finale of the novel appears to show, in my view, the mixed feelings of both the author and his characters: on the one hand – the pride for a "little man" and the role that he played in the capture of high-rank criminals, on the other – their regrets that the criminals of such a rank can be captured only through the interference of mightier forces from overseas. The inaptitude (at best) and the overwhelming selfishness (at worst) of the country's leaders, as depicted in Mbatiah's novels, is also stressed as one of the main points in the study of Mbatiah's works by Anne Wangeci Njoroge (2014) (bearing also in mind that detailed critical studies of Mbatiah's works have so far been surprisingly scarce).

4. The present: a time for hope?

The hopes for a better future are vividly expressed in Mbatiah's novel *Msururu wa usaliti* (Chain of betrayal, 2010). The action of the novel is presumably set in the early 2000s, however the author continues his reflections on the fates of the "Nyayo generation". In this novel Mbatiah also raises another topical theme – preservation of the environment. The story of the main character, a young woman named Kage, whose dream is to become an ecologist (for which reason she has to take her studies in England – Kenyan universities do not give such specialization) is tightly interwoven in the novel with the "chain of betrayals" on various levels and spheres – from politics and economy to the family. After receiving in England an ecologist's degree Kage returns to Kenya, where she intends to engage in environment conservation; for this purpose, she has to start an NGO – for it turns out that the governmental structures have no interest in environmental activities. Moreover, it becomes obvious that any ventures aimed at improving the people's living conditions are opposed by the powers-that-be. Kage witnesses how Dr. Makau, who was developing the projects of the medical aids for the poor, was expelled from his hospital; how a talented engineer Upepo was sacked from the army, and the ship-building plant that he designed was used for increasing the income of high army officials. Kage herself gets a piece of land for her eco-nursery only through the support from an illicit land trader and his favourers in the government – moreover, it turns out that this land was illegally grabbed from the city council (land grabbing, as it is commonly known, is one of the burning problems in today's Kenya). On top of all this it is discovered that the past of Kage's family hoards the dark secret of her mother's death.

Kage's mother Makena, a charming and intelligent woman, had devoted her life to her family (her husband Mbogo owes to her his political and business career) and her profession – throughout her life she, a finance manager by training, was helping the people of her native

village, especially women, to organize their own small businesses, in order to become less dependent on the predatory laws of the state. In her age of prime Makena perishes in a car crash – and the rumors that the crash was plotted move Kage towards starting her own investigation. As it turns out, the culprit behind Kage's mum's murder is Makena's husband and Kage's father Mbogo, who used his governmental post for wide-scale illegal trades. Makena, who during Kage's stay abroad had disclosed her husband's crimes, indignantly severes their marriage, hoping that their daughter is a grown-up person, and when she returns, she will understand and approve her mother's decision. After splitting with her husband, Makena decides to start her own career in politics, competing with Mbogo for the seat of their county's MP – and since she enjoys the people's support, her chances to win the forthcoming elections are high. To prevent this, Mbogo decides to remove an unexpected rival, and through his acquaintances in criminal circles organizes the murder of his former wife.

The characters of Kage's parents also seem to bear symbolic meanings in the novel. Makena is apparently an ideal character, who embodies the author's ideas of Kenya's better future – she is educated, intelligent, kind, courageous and sympathetic to people; and all these traits she also passes to her daughter Kage, whom people of the village are calling "Makena's reincarnation". Makena and Kage declare their split with the past – with traditionally inferior position of women, and with dirty political technologies; Makena tries to neutralize the evil influence of her husband by competing with him at the elections, Kage, whose investigation irrefutably proves her father's guilt, does not hesitate to surrender him to the legal authorities, and he gets lifetime sentence (in prison he shortly dies of AIDS).

In view of the above, the character of Mbogo is also highly symbolic, for in the novel he stands for all the unenviable traits of the country's past and present – corruption, abuse of power, "black technologies" in politics, criminality covered by the bodies of state. Mbogo, taking pride in the fact that among his "friends" is even the president of the country (who in the novel is referred to as Mzee – Old

man), is actively assisting the president's plan to undermine the multi-party system in the country through buying off the opposition's candidates. As a gratification for this, he receives from the head of the state "cart-blanche" for the unlimited increase of his profits. Even less attractive appears Mbogo in his family life; for him his marriage to Makena is a means of improving his material state (his father was a landless farmer, while Makena's father was a village chief); after his daughter's birth he uses "the state interests" as the pretext for his trips to Mombasa brothels, and even rapes their housemaid (which becomes the last drop for Makena). Other people's lives matter very little for him – and thus he kills an elderly villager, who gave Mbogo a shelter in a difficult time of his life, to snatch his plot of land; later he cold-bloodedly organizes his wife's murder.

Such species as Mbogo, their patrons and the life conditions that they created must and can be fought against – this message appears to be embodied in the novel by the example of Kage and her friends. Kage successfully developed her environmentalist NGO called JEMA (an abbreviation from Swahili words "Jeshi la Mazingira" – "Environment Army", notably, the word "jema" in Swahili means "kindness, virtue"). This NGO engages not only in the restoration of Kenya's forest (barbarically destroyed in the recent decades), but also dissipates environmental knowledge in the country and even outside.

> *Alianza kupata mialiko ya kwenda kuzungumza na kuhutubu katika shule mbalimbali jijini. […] Wanafunzi wengi walivutiwa naye, wakaanza kufuata mfano wake. Walibuni vilabu vya mazingira ambavyo vilifanya mengi katika maeneo ya shuleni.*
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> 'Kage started to get invitations to present in various schools in the capital. Many students, attracted by her example, started to follow. They started eco-clubs, which conducted a lot of work in schools.' (Mbatiah 2010: 92)
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> *Katika sehemu za mashambani alizotembelea aliendesha kampeni ya kuwahimiza wakulima waoteshe miche […]. Aliendelea kualikwa shuleni na vyuoni kutoa hotuba juu ya mazingira. Hii ilikuwa dalili nzuri iliyomtia moyo. Umashuhuri wake haukuishia nchini bali ulivuka mipaka hadi*

mataifa ya nje. Alialikwa kwenye makongamano makubwa ya kimataifa yaliyojadili maudhui mbalimbali kuhusiana na mazingira. Alitambua jinsi umaarufu ulivyomfaidi katika kazi yake. […] Sasa mashirika ya kutoa ufadhili hayakusita kutoa msaada wa kifedha kila alipotuma maombi.

'In the rural areas that she visited Kage conducted a campaign, which called the villagers to plant and grow trees. She was constantly invited to schools and universities with presentations about nature. It was a good sign that inspired her. Her fame crossed the country's borders to abroad. She was invited to big international conferences that discussed various matters related to the environment. And she understood how her fame assisted her work. Now charity funds did not hesitate to offer financial help any time she asked.' (Mbatiah 2010: 142)

The example of Kage (who also managed to bring to light the illicit land dealer Kipanga and to return the lands that he grabbed under public control) inspires her friends – doctor Makau, engineer Upepo and his girlfriend, Nafula the lawyer. Together with Kage they organize the campaign for free medical aid, open health stations, technical courses and legal aid bureaus for poor families. Their last decisive step is to create a political party, which leads Kage to the seat of their county's MP – that very seat for which her mother was fighting. The novel expectedly ends with a series of marriages between the main characters – their achievements in the public sphere are also awarded in the private one.

The character of Kage (inspired, arguably, by the figure of the Nobel Prize-winning Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai) and those of her friends are created by Mbatiah in order to give an example of constructive development, by which he intends to inspire his readers, – largely, as it may be assumed, the younger audience. The author's address to them is expressively formulated in the novel's last sentence: *Wananchi wakawa wamesema kwa kauli moja – kwamba wamechagua mabadiliko na kuzaliwa upya kwa taifa* 'People unanimously said – that they have chosen changes and new birth of the nation' (Mbatiah 2010: 217). It is also notable, how this idea of change being brought by the efforts of people echoes the same concept in Mbatah's novel *Wimbo mpya*.

5. The future: a vicious circle?

In his novel *Majira ya tufani* (Season of hurricanes, 2012) Mbatiah, however, demonstrates much lesser degree of optimism compared to the previous book. In this novel the author attempts to imagine the near future not only of his country, but of the whole Eastern Africa. The novel is set in the imaginary country of Uketa – "after the unionization acronym that came from the names of three countries became the name for a new one" (*baada ya muungano akronimu iliyotokana na majina ya nchi tatu ikawa jina la nchi mpya – 136*) (i.e. Uganda-Kenya-Tanzania; the capital of this new state is called Nakada – Nairobi-Kampala-Dar). Economic and political situation in the state of Uketa is not a happy one, and is mostly dependent on Uketa's relations with the country named Ukwasini – a mighty Western state, resembling both US and UK.

The novel's main character is Macho, the mayor of the capital city of Nakada. He is a frequent type of a modern politician, rather resembling Mbogo from the previous novel – unscrupulous, corrupt and greedy. The budget of the city and even of the whole country Macho uses as his private fund – which, as in the case of Mbogo, is facilitated by his friendly relations with the country's president, and also with Dan Prince, the ambassador of Ukwasini. Macho is also fond of grabbing the public lands and turning them into his property, and the novel starts with one of such episodes – in the centre of the capital Macho builds a new shopping mall, even named Macho Plaza in his honor. On the eve of the mall's opening Macho receives a letter from one of the local religious communities named Wahasimu. In this letter, Wahasimu remind Macho that the new shopping mall is built on the plot, previously allocated for their temple, and illegally grabbed by Macho. Wahasimu demand compensation – to give them another plot of equal size, otherwise threatening with violent response. Macho ignores the threat, but Wahasimu are determined – they turn the opening of the mall into a bloodbath, throwing a hand grenade at the group of the city officials; Macho's life is spared by a miracle. The feud grows –

Wahasimu kidnap Macho's daughter, threatening to kill her if their demands are ignored again. Macho surrenders – he gives Wahasimu a new plot of land, his daughter is released, and justice seems to prevail. This, however, is only an illusion: it turns out that the papers for the plot given to Wahasimu are fake, and in reality the plot belongs to the police department. The police starts an operation against Wahasimu, Wahasimu are defeated, and their leaders make the last desperate step – the explosion of Ukwasini embassy (this, practically final, episode of the book appears to reproduce rather vividly the events around the explosion of the American embassy in Nairobi in 1998). But even this last step goes in vain – the explosion takes dozens of innocent lives, and Macho, safe and sound, is promoted to a higher post in the government.

> *Serikali ilifanya mabadiliko ili kuweza kukabiliana na tisho la ugaidi ambalo lilikua kila uchao. Wizara mpya ya Usalama wa Ndani ilibuniwa. Tangazo maalumu toka Ikulu lilitolewa kusema kwamba Macho wa Tatu, Meya wa Nakada, Mtemi wa Ulunga, Mkuu wa Maskauti, Moran wa Uketa ameteuliwa kuwa waziri wa wizara hii mpya. Nyota ya Macho ikazidi kung'ara.*
>
> 'The government made changes to fight the terrorism threat, which was growing daily. New ministry of Internal Security was organized. Special announcement from the presidential palace said that Macho the Third, Mayor of Nakada, Chief of Ulunga, Commander of the Scouts, Moran of Uketa was appointed the head of that ministry. Macho's star continued to shine.' (Mbatiah 2012: 201)

The story of Macho, in itself very realistic and typical, although told with satirical overtones, Mbatiah uses as the basis for his reflections about a host of problems facing the East African society. He again speaks about the grabbing of public land, drug addiction among the young, ethnic and religious clashes, poverty – but, discussing all these topical issues, he tries to put across to his audience his main idea – that all these problems are not caused by "natural", "cultural" or other such factors, but result from the conscious actions of the people from the corridors of power, who are interested in maintaining, and,

if necessary, even creating these social ills. At that, the author hints that the roots of this vicious system can be traced down to "Nyayo years". As an example I may quote a rather transparent allegory: the events described in the novel are taking place in the near future – but the episode of the embassy explosion unambiguously refers the reader to the times of Moi. The author lets the readers see that social ailments of the "Nyayo years" are preserved in the present and will remain in the future; at the same time, unlike the previous novel, the author does not give a healing recipe. The only attractive character in the novel, a girl named Penzi, at the end of the book becomes the new wife of Macho, the main negative character (earlier Penzi, at the risk of her life, participated in the salvation of Macho's daughter). Such an outcome suits Penzi perfectly – from the housemaid she becomes the wife of a minister. Here a reader may detect an author's hint at social opportunism of modern Kenyan youngsters, many of whom are mostly preoccupied with personal career growth in the existing system. This is also mentioned directly in Mbatiah's novel *Msururu wa usaliti*:

> *Jambo Kage alilolichukia zaidi katika mwelekeo wa kizazi chake ni uroho wa pesa ambao ulikuwa umeanza kujitokeza. Vijana wengi aliosoma nao waliongozwa na uroho katika mawazo yao. Waliichukulia elimu ya chuo kikuu kama njia ya mkato ya kuukwea mlima wa utajiri. Labda mkabala huu ulitokana na ukweli kwamba wengi wao walitokana na familia za kimaskini huko mashambani. [...] Hawakutofautiana na wanasiasa wengi ambao walitafuta nyadhifa kama ubunge na udiwani kama njia ya kujitajirisha. Badala ya kuwa watumishi wa jamii, waliishia kuwa wanyonyaji wa jamii.*
>
> 'Another trait of her generation, which Kage hated most, was the greed for money. Many young people whom she studied with were led by this greed in their thoughts. They considered the university education as a shortcut to climb the mountain of wealth. Maybe such an attitude came from the fact that many of them hailed from poor rural families. In that, they were not different from many politicians, who were also striving for seats in the parliament or posts in ministries only for self-enrichment. Instead of helping the society, they ended up living at the expense of it.' (Mbatiah 2010: 4–5)

6. Conclusion

In the above text, its author tried to trace Mwenda Mbatiah's vision of Kenyan recent history, its present and its foreseeable future as presented in several of his novels. In Mbatiah's vision, the country's history appears as the "chain of heritage", in which the mistakes and misdeeds of the past, such as the betrayal of the nation's expectations in the early years of independence, have stipulated the emergence of the malfunctioning political and economic system in "Nyayo years", which in its own turn may lead to even more grim developments in the future. At the same time, the author offers a positive alternative, which he sees in the combined constructive effort of the people, this, according to him, may even change the existing social structures for the better

In the interview, mentioned in the introductory part of this article, answering the question about his vision of the future Swahili literature in Kenya, Mwenda Mbatiah said: "I hope that in the nearest years we will see the emergence of many works, which will elevate Swahili literature to the same level as Kenyan writing in English". Indeed, the current development of Swahili literature in Kenya is going even faster, than that of writing in English – and this appears to happen, to a considerable extent, because of the efforts by authors like Mwenda Mbatiah. Thematic concerns highlighted in Mbatiah's novels make one remember the assertion once made by his famous compatriot, a topmost Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o: "No writer of imaginative literature, from the very best to the moderately significant, can really avoid the big issues of the day, for literature to the extent that it is a mirror unto man's nature must reflect social reality or certain aspects of it" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1981: 74). Another famous East African writer, Okot P'Bitek, once said that "art creates the ideas that are changing the life" (Okot p'Bitek 1986: 39). In my opinion, these processes are vividly reflected in the works of Mwenda Mbatiah – which I tried to illustrate in this article.

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