
**CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES THAT DISPLAY STEREOTYPES OF HIV/AIDS IN
TWO SELECTED KENYAN NOVELS**

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ABSTRACT

Literature as a socializing agent has reacted differently on the subject of HIV and AIDS ever since its discovery, through the use of various genres from written to performativity works. When this epidemic first appeared in the early 1980s, it brought horror tales to the world and stuck into the minds and hearts of people in the society and writers as well. The researcher analyzed the stereotypes of HIV/AIDS, using the selected texts. The study examined cultural ideologies that display stereotypes of HIV/AIDS using the selected texts. This study was limited to two novels that were selected from the target population using a purposive sampling technique. The two novels are written by Kenyan authors. This is because, the researcher is part of the Kenyan social context and this enabled relation of data analysis and society. The research design used was textual analysis, in analyzing; *I Swear by Apollo* (2002) by Margaret A. Ogola and *The Last Plague* (1997) by Meja Mwangi. From the research analysis, contemporary issues such as corruption, which lead to non-development of the society, greatly affect the societies, which are suffering with the Aids epidemic. In addition, the contemporary social concerns that relate to HIV/AIDS, have been addressed in the two texts. However, there are other social concerns that are prominent in the writings. The characters in the text, struggle to make progress in a society that is competitive. There are contemporary issues such as; Poverty, unemployment, corruption and immorality. There should be a positive representation of HIV/AIDS issues. Therefore, the literary texts that address HIV/AIDS, need to act as tools for reference to society.

Keywords; *Cultural Ideologies, Stereotypes, HIV/AIDS, Novels*

INTRODUCTION

HIV/AIDS has been a medical and at large extent, a social problem throughout the world for a very long time since its discovery in the early 1980s. Literature being a reflection of what is happening in the world, has thereby been forced to adopt HIV/AIDS as a thematic concern in many fictional works. The African continent has been highly affected by this epidemic. The representation of AIDS as a top rampant disease that leads to an unavoidable sorrowful and

painful death, can be found in literary works of writers such as; Larry Kramer (*The Normal Heart* 1985), Derek Jarman (*Chroma*, 1993) or Edmund White (*Farewell Symphony*, 1997). During the year 1996 there was an evident separation from the then common pessimistic representation of HIV and AIDS in works of literature. This separation sought to later contrast intensely with many other positive literary works when operative anti-HIV drugs became hugely accessible. The availability of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), brought positive change not only for HIV infected people, but also in the representation of HIV and AIDS in works of art; novels, poems, drama, short stories, plays, among others. (Greenham, 2013).

From a certain illustration; In *April Fool's Day* (1993) by Bryce Courtenay, it was written by the author as a tribute to the writer's son Damon Courtenay. His son had tragically contracted HIV/AIDS through an infected blood transfusion in a medical setting. The title of the novel denotes to the day of Damon's death, 1st April, 1991 (April Fools' Day). Damon Courtenay was a classic hemophiliac all his life. He asked his father to write a book about himself. His son Damon, would talk much about love; he believed it was very paramount for every individual, to know about love. This is because of the way he saw people depicting a negative attitude towards people with AIDS. He also saw how people with AIDS were treated unfairly. Back then, there was not much information about HIV/AIDS. Therefore, the people infected were greatly discriminated against (Courtenay, 2018).

In both Eastern and Southern Africa, these are the regions where HIV is more rampant. Its populace is around 6.2% of the world's population but more than half of the population of people in the world are living with HIV (19.4 million people). (UNAID, 2017). Many countries in the continent, spend a big percentage of their budget to factor for in the treatment of their infected citizens. An even bigger part is periodically used in creating continuous awareness on this social issue that is in different demographics.

In South Africa, HIV/AIDS has always been a taboo subject and creative works of arts have influenced its representation in the scholarly field. In *AIDS and power: Why there is no political crisis* (2006), Alex de Waal relates HIV/AIDS in African writings, denoting that, arguing that these literary texts can give information concerning the disease. Waal vividly outlines how the novels are concerned with HIV/AIDS. Nevertheless, he does not look at the creativity and structure of the novels, hence leaving out much information on the ability of literary texts. It is the work of the researchers to identify this research gap and hence solve this problem, by coming up with their views on the analytical representation of the epidemic (Grünkemeier, 2013).

Despite many years of the HIV disease, there is still no cure for the epidemic or an effective vaccine; still, there have been various developments in treating HIV and AIDS. Research for HIV vaccines are still been carried out and there is also public awareness, concerning the prevention of its transmission from the mother to the child or transmission of infected blood (Karim, 2016).

It can be realized that authors tend to systematically portray an attitude towards the affected people in the society. There is therefore, need to call upon presentation of literary works that seek to illustrate fair treatment to those affected with HIV. Literature on the other hand, has a social role to play as a counseling and informative tool. The view of this research is to point out that authors in their creation of fictional works thematically dealing with the HIV/AIDS as a theme are sometimes carried away by their creativity in building emotional tragedies to the extent of negative portrayal of HIV/AIDS without un-relieving the gloom that the pandemic has already created in the African social context. Authors of the selected texts; *I*

Swear by Apollo (2002) by Margaret A. Ogola and *The Last Plague* (1997) by Meja Mwangi have all treated HIV/AIDS as part of their thematic concern.

Statement of the Problem

Literature as a socializing agent has reacted differently on the subject of HIV and AIDS ever since its discovery, through use of various genres from written to performative works. When this epidemic first appeared, it brought horror tales to the world and stuck into the minds and hearts of people in the society and writers as well. Even though the belief of HIV/AIDS as a death warrant is being discouraged by both the social and medical trends of the current world, there is still evidence of HIV/AIDS stereotype in novels that talk about HIV and AIDS as a thematic concern. The researcher examined and analyzed the stereotypes of HIV/AIDS, using the selected Kenyan novels.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine cultural ideologies that display stereotypes of HIV/AIDS in the two Kenyan novels

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Reception Theory

Reception Theory emphasizes how audience and artist interaction creates meaning (Elmo 2013). According to Davis, a work of art is an internal thing that exists without the reader (2003). As a consequence of this, a piece of writing comes to life each time a reader interacts with it. The theory helps explain how viewers in different social and economic circumstances understand how HIV/AIDS is presented in novels. Depending on the social setting in which they find themselves, members of an audience will perceive communications in a variety of different ways. Reception Theory plays a crucial role in understanding the reception and interpretation of stereotypes of HIV/AIDS in the selected Kenyan novels. This theory underscores the power of the reader in extracting meaning from a text, indicating that the interpretation of these novels is heavily influenced by the reader's sociocultural background, personal experiences, and existing knowledge about HIV/AIDS. The subjective interpretation of these literary works provides insight into how society perceives and responds to the narratives of HIV/AIDS presented in the novels. The readers' reactions essentially mirror societal views, allowing us to gauge the impact of literary representation on the wider social understanding and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Therefore, Reception Theory enables this study not only to dissect the literary presentation of HIV/AIDS but also to delve into the sociocultural implications of such representation in Kenyan society.

Empirical Literature

In the western countries HIV/AIDS has been viewed in the past, as a homosexual disease and most of the early writings, talking of HIV/AIDS was created by gay and lesbian authors. In Africa, most authors are concerned with presenting different economic, social, and political concerns that have led to the spread of the epidemic. The female authors are mostly concerned with examining those cultural ideologies that can cause the infection of HIV/AIDS (Altman, 2001).

According to Osome (2021), documentaries aim to impact viewers in either a conscious or subliminal way. With this in mind, it is important to note that they may be used to accomplish a goal, which may be social, political, or cultural (Mungai, 2018). According to the theory put out by Diang'a (2013), the content of the video and the manner in which it is presented have a significant impact on the recipient's comprehension of the information that is being sent. She goes on to say that in order to get meaning from the mise-en-scene, a viewer has to pay

particular attention to the many aspects of the performance, including the performance itself, the location, the props, the clothing, and even the lighting. As a result, Osome (2021) argues that there is some form of alliance between documentary activity and social change. Paak (2014) asserts that the shooting of HIV/AIDS has contributed to the formation of a universally accepted visual representation of the disease. Hence, Osome (2021) emphasizes the need of selecting or designing the visuals in any tale in a manner that supports and progresses the narrative, of course with the intention of opening up dialogues without the danger of stigma. These findings provide evidence that the documentary has a position in stimulating the required dialogues about problems of severe concern, such as the visual portrayal of HIV/AIDS that is found in documentary films. As a result, the purpose of this research was to investigate whether or not the visual content of the chosen documentaries did, in fact, match with the meaning that the films were intending to convey as a result of the debates that they prompted.

In *Confessions of an AIDS Victim* (2002), Catherine condemns the society for disregarding the desires of women and as a result giving the men dominating roles over the men. Gender inequality in marriages, is considered as a cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS. For instance, male-controlled society believes, make Catherine in *Confessions* to represent gender as a source of victimization. Being a female means that one is a victim of a male-controlled society and this additionally influences an individual into contracting HIV/AIDS.

Muriugi (2008) analyzes Macharia Mwangi's short tale, "Reversed Dreams" (1996). In this narrative, the author demonstrates how Munga's hopes for a bright future are dashed when he discovers that he has HIV. It gives him chills to think of telling his girlfriend about it. As the book's title, "Reversed Dreams," suggests, Mwangi details the mental anguish endured by victims. But, in order to save these persons the mental anguish that might result from being written about by writers who have no faith in a brighter future, such characters should never be written about.

In *When the Sun Goes Down* (Kamau, 2010) there is an attempt by the author to change the perception of the mind towards the subject of HIV/AIDS. The author uses Maureen as a character to symbolize the end of an era of stigma towards HIV/AIDS victims. Arguably the death of Maureen plays the denotation of a society that is with time adjusting positively against stereotypes on the subject. Steve on the other hand represents hope against the upsetting stigma that comes even from close friends like Kanja. The Characters that survive the story represent a new view against stigma for both the infected and the affected.

METHODOLOGY

This research was based on the textual analysis. It did not need any information from people. The study of information that had been recorded in texts, media, or physical objects was its main focus. The researcher therefore studied the two selected texts; *The Last Plague* (1997) by Meja Mwangi and *I Swear by Apollo* (2002) by Margaret A. Ogola with the aim of looking at how these texts present HIV/AIDS, as a social concern. Textual analysis was used to analyze each objective in the two selected Kenyan novels. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique for identifying the two texts. These texts were used for the research analysis, because the authors have presented HIV/AIDS as their major social concern. The data for research analysis, was collected from both primary and secondary sources of data. The researcher used library research, to get literal tools for interpreting the texts. The primary sources of data collection included; the selected texts to be analyzed and other academic documents. The secondary data came from internet resources; which is a trending source of information and the researcher utilized it fully as a resource in the study. Other sources

included; reports, articles, journals, among others. The researcher applied textual analysis to collect and analyze data. This research primarily used qualitative data, with a focus on textual analysis. The researcher combined the two sets of data and analyzes them simultaneously.

FINDINGS AND PRESENTATION

Synopses of the Selected Texts

The Last Plague

MEJA MWANGI is a prolific Kenyan novelist who has achieved world-wide recognition as a most exciting writer. He was born in 1948 in Nanyuki in central Kenya and was educated at Nanyuki Secondary School and Kenyatta College. *Kill me Quick* (1973) was his first novel and has been very popular. Another subsequent work, *Carcase for Hounds* (1974) won the inaugural Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature. His other works are: *Going Down River Road* (1976) and *Striving for the Wind* (1990), all published in the Peak Library Apart from writing novels, Meja is extensively involved in filmmaking. Meja investigates the puzzling nature of AIDS in this piece; AIDS is an epidemic that is rapidly spreading throughout Africa. As the feared AIDS begins taking the lives of its people one at a time, the entire survival of the hamlet of Crossroads is put in jeopardy. When Broker, Janet's wayward husband, returns to the village sick with AIDS, he capitalizes on the situation and begins selling the condoms. Before to this, the people pay little attention to Janet, who gives out free condoms to the residents. This produces results because people of all ages, including men, women, and children, are interested in learning more about them. The death of Broker, who had been fighting the virus for so long, has everyone wondering whether or not Crossroads will survive.

Swear by Apollo

"Kill a man if you must but never deprive him of hope- for with that you kill him anyway and in a much crueller way."

In the beginning of the 21st century, a nation is fighting a losing battle to extricate itself from the quagmire of ineffectiveness, corruption, and filth that plagued it up to the end of the 20th century. Margaret Ogola weaves around the lives of the grandchildren of Mark and Elizabeth Sigu in this award-winning sequel to *The River and Source*. These lives mirror the trials and aspirations of a people going through a reexamination of their values and attitudes in search of their true human ideated place in a changing world.

The author, pediatrician Dr. Margaret Ogola is married to her husband, also a doctor, Dr. George Ogola. They are parents to five little ones. She held the position of Executive National Secretary of the Commission for Family Life at the Kenya Catholic Secretariat until very recently. At the moment, she holds the position of Country Coordinator for the Hope for African Child Initiative (HACI) in Kenya. Her debut book, "*The River and the Source*," was awarded both the "Jomo Kenyatta Award for Literature" in 1995 and "The Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best First Novel, Africa area" in 1995. Both of these prestigious awards are given out annually. In addition to that, she and her husband George are the authors of the book "Educating in Human Love."

Cultural ideologies that display stereotypes of HIV/AIDS

Cultural ideologies can be viewed as social factors, which are often present in representation of social concerns. From this research analysis, it is evident that there are certain cultural ideologies that display stereotypes of AIDS. These cultural ideologies that form part of people's beliefs, display stereotypical views of HIV/AIDS concerns. The text *The Last Plague* by Meja Mwangi, illustrates the character's stereotypical views of Aids, because of the traditions or customary practices. In Crossroads, women inheritance is a customary

practice that people practice even in spite of the Aids outbreak. Oludhe Macgoye in *Chira*, reviews diverse morals that can account for sexuality in the Luo/Kenyan society during a period when the oral literature accounts of illustrating sexual behaviors, sickness and wellbeing are endangered by emergent issues. Macgoye illustrates the cultural-sexual forces related with HIV/AIDS in Kenya. She appears to propose that sexuality is formed by men and women during their everyday contact with various cultural forces including epidemics, culture, politics and financial forces (Macgoye, 1997).

Janet makes a great effort in ensuring that the people of Crossroads become aware of the epidemic, by condemning the customary practices such as wife inheritance. She gets into a tough conversation with Julia her sister, after her husband inherits his brother's wife. Solomon who is the late brother to Kata Kataa, had died because of Aids and Janet becomes concerned because her sister may get infected. But for characters like Kata, they strongly believe in the traditional practices and assume the infection of the epidemic.

“Julia was always in a hurry whenever she came to visit and Janet suspected she avoided her for the same reason other women did- so as not to hear any truth about herself. Janet forced her into a seat... and gave her a cup of tea from the kettle that resided by the fireplace and was always hot. “About your husband,” Janet went straight to the point. “You cannot let him marry Solomon’s wife.” Julia paused, her cup was halfway to the lips, and asked, “Is that the important thing you want to talk to me about?” “It’s more important than you think, Janet told her. “Solomon died from Aids.” ... “My husband must care for his brother’s family,” she said finally. “You know that too; it’s our custom.” “A very dangerous custom.” Janet told her. “It will have to be stopped” (Mwangi, 2000, p.52).

The negative stereotypical views that the people of Crossroads on HIV/AIDS can mainly be seen as a result of the cultural ideologies, that create the perspectives on people’s thinking. Janet also goes further into persuading Frank to convince Kata not to inherit his brother’s wife. Although characters like Janet make tremendous efforts to prevent in the spreading of HIV/AIDS, they fail to succeed because of the customs that the people of Crossroads uphold. Janet requests Frank to talk with Kata who was now about to inherit his brother’s wife.

“This was not all what Frank had anticipated when she said they had to talk. Wife inheritance was serious business and vital tradition; along with bride price and female circumcision and ear-lobe piercing and scarification and all those other customs that the missionaries had condemned as primitive and tried to kill their education. And, like the missionaries before her, Janet would fail, there was no doubt about it in his mind. The forces she was up against were too many and too deeply entrenched and there was nothing she could do to change them” (Mwangi, 2000, p.61).

Traditional circumcision, is also a dangerous customary practice with the people of Crossroads. During this practice, only one knife is used to circumcise all the initiates. This raises a greater chance of spreading the Aids virus among the young men. Kata who is the circumciser, assumes the effects of this dangerous practice and instead chooses to continue with the practice, in order to earn an income. This raises a concern in the extent that individuals can go, to misuse other people. Both Frank and Janet decide to take a great risk, by interrupting the traditional circumcision ceremony that is been conducted by Kata.

“Women cooked and sang at one end of the compound. The boys were lined up naked, in a highly charged circle of men and the other end; each one of them

supported and braced by two men, both of whom were well fortified with roasted goat and sorghum wine. One of the men held the boy from behind, in a vice-like grip, to stop him flinching, or making any movements that might be construed as a sign of cowardice and disgrace them all. The other man's job was to constantly whisper encouragement to the boy. Those already circumcised stood back, their jaws clenched against the pain and blood oozing down their thighs, and prayed for the ceremony to end quickly so they could go to groan in private. Kata Kataa, his hands awash with their blood, pranced from one boy to the next and, knife flashing, did his job with gleeful ardor" (Mwangi, 2000, p.102).

Meja Mwangi in this text; *The Last Plague*, illustrates to the readers the traditional customs of the social set up. The people of Crossroads are not ready to let go, customs that are harmful. Meja Mwangi condemns the traditions among people in the society, in order to embrace change.

"Taboos and tradition had to go, they had to be eliminated, to make way for meaningful progress. Old beliefs and assumptions were the biggest handicaps in the battle against Aids. People who still believed that they were safe from Aids, because they had many wives, and so-called *safe* partners, and did not *manga-manga*, or consort with prostitutes. But their *safe* partners too had their own *safe* partners, who also had *safe* partners; in an endlessly long chain of *safe* partners that was a recipe for a terrible catastrophe" (Mwangi, 2000, p.314).

In another instance, we are introduced to Broker who was raised up in Crossroads but later left. Although Broker he is HIV positive, he comes back after ten years to Crossroads as a civilized man. He is aware that most people in Crossroads are constantly dying of Aids, because of ignorance and strongly upholding their traditions. Broker informs the people of Crossroads about their ignorance, of been against Janet's education which was a way of saving them from the epidemic. In this instance, the author uses his text to inform the readers of the problem of illiteracy in a society. That there is need to implement education to people. However, it is evident that there is also social economic problem in this society. It is because of poverty that people fail to get educated and also to afford the treatment of the Aids virus. The author uses Broker as an informant to the readers, as he identifies the root cause of the massive infection of the virus in Crossroads. He associates this, with people's ignorance and the upholding of the cultural ideologies.

"He talked of the ignorance that shackled the people to the earth like beast of burden and the illiteracy that made it impossible for the community to understand Aids, and its potential for annihilation. And, of course, there were not just the economic and the literacy factors to consider. There were also the cultural and the social dimensions as well. The many men who foolishly argued that wearing a condom to have sex was like wearing gumboots to bed, or taking a bath while fully dressed, and insisted that there was no joy in it at all. For Janet, in a world of men who prided themselves in being the most virile and the most total men in the world, to face them and tell them they were wrong needed a lot more than mere dedication to duty. Broker talked at length about Janet, what a good and honest person she was and what a tough battle she had to put up against insurmountable odd..." (Mwangi, 2000, p.351&352).

Apart from the traditional beliefs that the people of Crossroads uphold, there are also some religious beliefs that portray ignorance. Mzee Musa who is a converted Muslim, also refuse

to get educated on Aids concerns. This is because he strongly upholds his Islam religion, that condemns the use of condoms and accepts polygamous marriages. Therefore, Mzee Musa fails to get educated on the HIV/AIDS concerns, believing that people become infected by the sickness because of failing to get converted into his religion. This kind of ignorance due to religious beliefs, cause more harm to the people of Crossroads. Social-cultural factors seem to be the cause of the high cases of infection. This raises the social concern, in realization of the causes of social crisis.

“Mzee Musa had taken it upon himself to keep the fire of Islam alive in the dying town. His religion and his faith were the only weapons that Musa could muster against the *majinis*, the evil spirits that roamed the deserted places at night, baying for human blood, and were to him the true cause of the rampant plague. Only true believers would weather out the plague. And since he could not convert the diehard *kafir*s, the reckless heathens of Crossroads, without breaking a few rules. Musa had resigned himself to being the only assured survivor of the present affliction” (Mwangi, 2000, p.48).

Margaret Ogola in *I Swear by Apollo*, has not presented the Aids epidemic as a taboo. But she chooses to embrace the social change (modernization) and presents Aids like any other disease, while opting to create social awareness and representing the positive change in the portrayal of HIV/AIDS concerns.

Conclusions

In the analysis of the selected texts, there are some cultural ideologies which display stereotypes of HIV/AIDS. Wife inheritance is seen as a cultural ideology that is strictly observed. This kind of cultural practice, accelerate the infection of the Aids virus. In addition to the customary practices such as; wife inheritance and traditional way of circumcision, economy and illiteracy can also be viewed as social problems that contribute in the spreading of Aids virus. It is evident that the people in the society, fail to understand the effects of the virus because of illiteracy. This can be proved, when some people start regarding Aids as a serious issue after coming across diagrams that display infected patients. Illiteracy is what causes negative stereotypical views on HIV/AIDS. People are also forced into clinging on customary practices, because of poverty that is caused by limitation in the socio-economy of the country. Selfishness and greediness can evident among characters who practice these customs because of their own selfish gain. It is unfortunate that, people in the society are ignorant of the Aids epidemic, because some people chose to exploit them. Therefore, people are not just ignorant of the HIV/AIDS concern because of their choice but there are some individuals who practice these customs, to accumulate wealth while misusing the social values.

Recommendations

Educational institutions and non-governmental organizations should support the government in providing insight on concerns of HIV/AIDS. The proof of identity of HIV victims, creates a challenge, this is because individuals try to deny the existence of the epidemic. However, people tend to think that, individuals with HIV they are sicker than ordinary situation. Relating HIV/AIDS to wickedness is popular, this is because of spiritual performances and a society of purity. This could be improved by creating institution strategies that permit individuals to have a discussion concerning sexual issues founded on their social rules and views and this will enable a radical change in some of the myths that relate to HIV/AIDS. Informing people on the power of unity is a main approach to making them part of such challenging issues such as stigmatization (Greeff M, 2008). It is through the creation of

awareness and encouragement of HIV/AIDS victims, that the negative stereotypes in society can be eliminated. Authors too, will be forced to eliminate HIV/AIDS negative stereotypes in their works.

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