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Localized Nuances of Linguistic Choices in Film: A Case Study of “Tahidi High” - a Kenyan Television Drama

By

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Abstract

This treatise endeavors to examine the discourse of actors in **Tahidi High** - a Kenyan television drama – in order to demonstrate how use of language contributes to thematic allusions in the television drama. Language is a very critical component of fictional forms. Through the deliberate choice, patterning and arrangement of words, a film maker is able to convey his / her thoughts, feelings, attitude and intentions explicitly or implicitly. A text’s linguistic format is the sum total of all kinds of linguistic choices which according to Emmanuel Ngara (1982) are divisible into two subsets: (a) linguistic proper components and paralinguistic affective devices such as symbolism, myth, allusion and allegory. While, the latter are obviously not analyzable in terms of normal linguistic description, manipulation of linguistic proper constituents may also lead to meanings that transcend the denotative plane. In **Tahidi High**, various levels of communication are palpable. These rise above sheer choice of words to embrace a broader exalting and humanizing sense or the opposite – a diminishing and dehumanizing sense. Cognizant of the fact that to a significant extent teenage language springs from certain socio-cultural influences, this article attempts to interrogate the language that various students speak in the TV drama and the implications accruing there from.

1. Introduction

One of the issues that become apparent during the teenage years is the quest by the youth to be independent of the rest of the society. This sort of delineation takes in part linguistic identification. Teenagers tend to set themselves apart by adopting modes of expression that are distinctly their own. It is even justifiable to say that teenage modes of expression embody a kind of reaction by the youth against the established norms and conduct. The student characters in the television drama speak the way they do because of an inherent desire to have their own identity. In **Tahidi High**, this search for identity partly takes the form of linguistic expression.

Language in **Tahidi High** comes out as a tool of expression of the quest for freedom; a form of protest and a means of affirming identity. The television drama is characterized by language that seems to portray the students’ desire to be free from both parental and institutional demands. Two modes of linguistic expression can be identified in the Television Drama: the use of a Kenyan slang, **Sheng** and the use of a blend of English and Kiswahili with slightly more emphasis on English. **Sheng** as a ‘register’ mostly draws its body of words from Kiswahili and English. However, it is also greatly influenced by other Kenyan languages including Gikuyu, Kamba and Dholuo. Hence, the heavy presence of **Sheng** in **Tahidi High** distinguishes the television drama as Kenyan and enhances the specificity of setting.

Hudson-Ettle & Schmied (1992) compare Kenyan English and standard British English. They observe that there are significant differences between the Kenyan English dialect and the standard British version resulting from the deviation of Kenyans from the British pattern. These deviations are in terms of the expansion of the progressive aspect of the stative verbs, non-count nouns in plural form, use of the definite and indefinite articles and the usage of prepositions. Kachru (1982:46) also lists similar characteristics of grammatical deviation in ‘African varieties of English’.

The evidence of it can be seen in the ‘Kenyanisation’ of English. Notice the italicized words and expressions in the exchange below:

- Jean: What? Listen, if you have your *domes* (personal problems), please don’t involve me.
Ray: Jean-Joyce, *me I have been* thinking, our relationship is hitting the rocks.
Jean: So you are noticing? Huh! (to Mule) hey, is that Mule? You have such a sexy body.
Ray: You see? We are busy talking about You are busy looking at another jamaa.
Jean: Oh! Like I am not supposed to do what you do? Remember over the holidays you were busy *katiyaring* (seducing) Shish. Mule

The discourse above will no doubt be identifiable as distinctly Kenyan subsequent to syntactic deviation, code-mixing and neologisms.

The character who, in the clearest possible manner, exemplifies the use of Sheng in **Tahidi High** is Mule. Having been born and raised in Kibera, a slum area in Nairobi, Mule arrives at Tahidi High, a high cost private school, as a new student on a scholarship. What follows his arrival in the school is a ‘linguistic drama’ that shades light on an assortment of hard truths on the part of all the actors. Coming from a shanty locale, Mule is conditioned to mouthing the ghetto-drawn slang, **Sheng**, which in Kibera is spoken not just by the youth but by nearly every resident. Ignorant of this fact, the new principal, Dr. Mutiso, is appalled:

*In this school we speak English. Queen’s grammatically correct English.
Not this rude language out on the streets*

Whereas Dr. Mutiso’s proclamation may be perceived as part of the execution of his duty as the school’s manager, another issue is apparent in that statement – the haughtiness of educated Kenyans; those who think that not only their education but also ability to mouth the English language as eloquently as the ‘Queen of Britain’, places them on a higher pedestal. Subsequently, they endeavour to dictate a certain linguistic code upon the rest of the population. As if to object to such impositions and indeed prove that it is not possible to shed off his true identity, Mule responds to the principal in even more pronounced **Sheng**. When asking to be given back his necklace, which Dr. Mutiso had confiscated, he says:

*Lakini si unipetu hizo vitu niweke kwa poke?
(Why don’t you give me those things I put in my pocket?)*

This remark may seem to be merely a reaction in a language which one best understands to be used for verbal exchanges. However, from it we can infer a significant pointer to Mule’s state of mind. The utterance can be seen as a form of protest by Mule, representative of other hill-billy teenagers, against a language that confines them within some kind of a strait jacket of strict code of communication. It is not just dissent against Dr. Mutiso, who refers to **Sheng** as “a rude language out there in the streets”; it is a refusal to fit in the confining social specifications of language. To Mule, **Sheng** is a mode of expression that he grew up with. He would neither abandon it nor allow it to be denigrated by the likes of Dr. Mutiso, who to the teenager epitomizes institutional endeavours to rob him of the only medium of communication that he truly identifies with.

On his first reporting to Tahidi High School, Mule is given advice which largely contributes to the mindset that he later assumes in the new school: “*Don’t get mixed up with these rich undisciplined children in this school*”. This caveat might not only have contributed to his attitude towards both the school and fellow students, but to his language use as well.

Being a child from a very humble background, this statement from the school principal may be interpreted as an admonition to Mule that he has a class battle to fight. Subsequently, he uses language as a primary weapon to fight that battle. It ought to be noted that before cautioning the boy, Dr. Mutiso first asks Mule if he smoked bhang. The question of class perceptions emerges here. The well-to-do are forever suspicious and distrustful of the poor, viewing the latter as predisposed to criminal tendencies owing to their neediness. Class pride and feelings of superiority always come in the way of harmonious relations. The unwarranted suspicions combined with the counsel to be wary of the moneyed children in the school engender a rebellious attitude on Mule’s part. Mule becomes both antagonistic and alienated from the very beginning.

The issue of social inequalities becomes more pronounced when Mule finally goes to class. The actualization of Dr. Mutiso’s warning does not help matters much. When Mule tells his new classmates that he is from Kibera, the following exchange ensues:

Kirio: Where do you come from?
Mule: Kibich.
Kirio: What!?
Mule: Kibera mzee!
*Mark: Are you sure you are not lost or something? How does a boy
From Kibera find his way into this school?*
Kirio: Kibera is a name we give to our kernels back home.

It is noticeable in the above discourse that utterances by Kirio and Mark, the ‘rich kids’ that the principal warned Mule about, are in Standard English, the kind that Dr. Mutiso calls “Queens grammatically correct English”. In addition to the two students being overtly surprised that a student from such an impoverished locality as Kibera could find a place in a high cost school, their Standard English sets them apart from Mule, at least at this particular point in the Television Drama. Through their regular and reserved use of the English language, they seem to reflexively show Mule how disparate and superior they are in terms of their social rank.

The affluent students endeavour to utilize language as an instrument of harring, oppressing and subjugating Mule into submission. Just like Dr. Mutiso’s insistent use of impeccable Queen’s English at all contexts bears out his sense of alienation, so does the ‘linguistic pride’ exhibited by the boorish wealthy children express their estrangement. In its Latin origin, the noun “alienation” is derived from the verb “alienaire” which means to make something another’s, to remove, take away. In existentialist philosophy, alienation of modern man consists in the gap between “For-itself” and ‘In itself’ (“pour soi” and “en soi”). A person who as a knowing subject fails to come into a full knowledge of him/herself is therefore alienated. The system of education in any society prepares the people to live in that society. Traditional African societies may not lay claim to any formal schools. However, the informal schooling structures available prepared young men and women for living in such societies. It can therefore be inferred from **Tahidi High** that even after enfranchisement from colonialism, many African nations are for good measure a blue-print reproduction of their ex-colonial mother nations. This being so, it is quite clear that the education system - especially the insistence to ape Western mannerisms in action and speech – can never produce humans who are an integral part of their world; but people who are alienated from their environment and from themselves.

The self-assured individual that Mule is, he demonstrates to the conceited wealthy children that he has a code of communication that he is very comfortable with and proud to be identified with. Consequently, this language use should also be seen as his contribution to the veiled class tussle he finds in the school. In addition, in his response to invectives from the well-to-do students, there is a lucid censure of the high-end socio economic class for what is apparently its loutishness and derision towards humans of low

socio-economic standing. Mule tells Mark and Kirio off, avowing that he would not condone condescension from the rich class of students:

Hebu sareana na mimi. Mimi usiniletee ubabi.
(Leave me alone. I won't take your well-to-do attitude)

It will be noted that while the Sheng word “Ubabi” mainly refers to the wealthy, it is also applied to anyone who displays snobbish mannerisms. Subsequently, derived from a contraction of the word “Babylon” (read a distant or utopian world), the word “ubabi” implies mental and cultural ‘uprootment’. The physical confrontation between Mule and Kirio, which follows the above verbal altercation, is just but a carry-over of the battle that Mule had earlier started using language as his weapon. In addition, the fight can be interpreted to mean the quest for survival by the low class teenager in a stratified society. This quest is also evident in Mule’s hardiness and in his assertive demeanor. Notwithstanding his low economic status, he holds his head high and in several occasions exhibits a petulant disposition that eventually sees him more than fit in Tahidi High School. Later, because of his astuteness, he comes to wield some momentous amount of influence among fellow students. There is little wonder therefore; when within a short time of being in the school, almost every girl in the school aspires to win him over to herself.

Albeit Mule is a brilliant student, at least as proven by the scholarship he wins, he feels that for conversations that take place outside classroom, English is not necessary. He is comfortable speaking **Sheng** because it reminds him of who he is; and he is clearly not ashamed of asserting who he is. One of his classmates, Mary, finds him an intriguing character and sets out to know him more. It is during the dialogue between Mule and Mary that it emerges clearly that he takes **Sheng** as a part of him; an identity that he is not willing to betray.

Mule experiences a kind of a culture shock when he arrives at the school and finds all students speaking refined English. Isolated from the rest of the students, he finds refuge in speaking **Sheng** each time he gets a chance. Mostly, he sits alone during his first few days in Tahidi High School. Having noticed his loneliness, Mary goes to him and offers her hand of friendship. However, a disinclined Mule seizes this opportunity to state to her that he is not comfortable in the company of his fellow students because, unlike him, they pride in mouthing flawless English.

Hapa kila mtu ni mlami, lakini mimi kingoso haijainiingia.
(Here everybody is ‘European’. For me, I have never been comfortable with English.)

Couched in Mule’s reference to those who insist on speaking English even outside class as “Europeans” is a subtle indictment of Kenyans and indeed Africans who relish in ‘apemanship’. Having lost touch with their own world, like half-wits they sneer at their own culture and Africanness. Mule turns down Mary’s request to be taught **Sheng** because to him this language is not something to be learnt just in order to gratify one’s curiosity. Rather, to Mule, **Sheng** is a culture; it is a way of life. He believes that it is impossible for Mary to fully appreciate **Sheng** even if she were taught, especially because having lived all her life in an affluent neighbourhood, she had never spoken the language. Upon this ground, Mary’s offer of friendship to Mule is met with rejection. The *raison d’être* for the rebuff is found in Mule’s reply to a grounds man after Wepukhulu tells him that Mary is interested in him (Mule).

Mimi mamanzi walami sipendangi (I don’t fancy ‘European’ girls - read English speaking / behaving girls)

Mule’s robust and resilient character is more emphatically revealed through his use of **Sheng** than it would otherwise have been expressed in another language. To facilitate this revelation, the television

drama enacts a punishment scene moments after Mule, Kirio and Ray have fought. Together with the hardness he exhibits in this scene is the fact that he is also a levelheaded teenager who is completely in touch with reality concerning his position within the socioeconomic strata.

As it were, no persuasion of any nature can make Mule willfully engage himself in demeanor that may only jeopardize his chances of rising up the social ladder through education. Using his language of preference, he makes it clear to fellow students that he is determined to utilize his time in school to uplift himself socio-economically. Upon being incited by fellow students to boycott punishment, he states bluntly:

*Kama nyinyi ni wa-softi, tieni zii. Mimi sitaki noma zingine na mtu.
Kwa hivyo kila mtu adu kenye anataka
(If you fellows are too weak, you can boycott the punishment. I don't
want to get into more problems. Let everybody do what they feel is
is right for them)*

Later on, other students plan to stage a demonstration in school. Mule promptly rejects all invitation to take part.

Mary: *Why are you such a coward? Unaogopa? (What are you afraid of?)*

Mule: *Nyinyi mnatoka rich families; mimi ni msee wa ghetto. Mukimaliza sijui masomo ya hapa mutapelekwa majuu. Mimi nikimaliza nitaenda tu huko ghetto. Kwa hivyo mimi vile nimepata hii scholarship, roho safi, nyinyi wacheni nisome.*

(You fellows come from rich families; I come from the ghetto. When you complete your studies here, you will be taken abroad; I will go back to the ghetto. Now that I have this scholarship, please, don't interfere with my studies.)

It will be noted from all the utterances illustrated above that Mule has a penchant for repetitive use of the personal pronoun “I” (“mimi”) even where not necessary. Whereas sometimes the use of this pronoun emanates from the unconventionality of **Sheng** as a Slang, in many cases, the oddness of its usage is peculiarly attributable to the speaker. For instance, even in **Sheng** the utterance from the second last illustration “mimi sitaki noma zingine na mtu” would be “Sitaki noma zingine na mtu”. In the last illustration, the phrase “Mimi nikimaliza nitaenda huko ghetto” would be “nikimaliza nitaenda huko ghetto”. The use of “mimi” together with the prefix “si” in “sitaki” and “ni” in “nikimaliza” constitutes a redundancy originating from a fusion of English and Swahili structures. Arising from this periphrasis of a personal pronoun are two possible meanings. Firstly, it may connote an insistence on Mule’s part of being aware of himself, his independence and of being actively in control of his environment. Secondly, it is an intimation of the potency of colonization. One of the obnoxious concomitants of colonization in Africa was that of breaking up the spiritual bond that held the collective together; nurturing individualism in a world that was previously communal in nature. With the introduction of a foreign religion (Christianity) that called attention to personal rather than communal salvation, the embers of individualism were ignited in the African’s heart. This sense of individualism was to be accentuated by the introduction of a capitalistic mode of production. People began interacting with others not as human beings but through the medium of commodities, that is, as sellers and buyers who were completely estranged to each other.

Arising from the second inference therefore is a restrained assertion that the poor too suffer from the hangovers of colonialism. Whether rich or poor, egotism reigns. In this regard, the film maker affirms covertly that the mental confusion that was engendered by colonialism still reigns

like a malignant wound. The need for re-education and regeneration of the African that Chinua Achebe (1975) called attention to still remains.

2. Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to demonstrate that in addition to contributing to verisimilitude with regard to characterization in a film, language use in **Tahidi high** communicates both unequivocally and connotatively. The application of language for dissent, and as part of the struggle to survive in the economically stratified society was examined. Through Mule, the determination for survival and affirmation of identity find their expression through the medium of language. On the other hand, the language used by the rich exemplifies their egotism, impoliteness and estrangement. We therefore noted that non-figurative linguistic elements are also capable of signifying an array of extra-lingual meanings. Various kinds of satires were observed. The butts of the satire are especially, the pride of the affluent and adherence to western mannerisms.

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