

**Innovations in Kenyan Children's Literature:  
An Analysis of Selected Biographical Narratives  
for Children and Young Adults**

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## Introduction

- This essay is based on a project of biographies written for young readers, which was started in Kenya at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by the *Sasa Sema* Publications.
- The project is about famous historical and hero figures from the African continent like politicians, entrepreneurs, a photojournalist, freedom fighters and other prominent personalities.
- My paper picks the strand of biographies that deal with politics of decolonization in Kenya and examines three biographies from the series by looking at how stories of these personalities are used to narrate the history of decolonization to the Kenyan children.



## Introduction – cont'd

- I argue that making such stories available for children is an important occurrence in the history of African children's literature because such biographies help children to understand the makers of African history.
- The authors of these biographies claim the desire to reinvent Kenyan history, not through a historical project but through a literary intervention for the sake of young readers.
- This literary intervention is realized through the use of a variety of literary styles, e.g. The fantastic, imagery, humour, exaggeration, illustrations and description; styles that help to illuminate these characters' lives and the themes in the stories.



# Introduction – cont'd

- The discussion in this paper is limited to three texts from the series:
  - *Bildad Kaggia: Voice of the People* (2001), by Evan Mwangi,
  - *Jomo Kenyatta: Father of Harambee* (2002), by Egara Kabaji,
  - *Jaramogi Oginga Odinga: People's Revolutionary* (2004) by Ezekiel Alembi.

## Introduction – cont'd

- ➔ The history of colonial invasion is not a new area of scholarship in Kenya because there has been extensive research done in this field, both in history and in literature. However, the point I emphasize in this paper is that the recuperation of this history through children's literature is novel in Kenyan literary studies, otherwise referred to as innovations or new directions in this paper .



# Theory and Methodology

## Postcolonial theory

- Post colonialism concerns itself with the state of the colonized subject before the beginning of colonial rule, the colonial process and the overflowing effects of colonialism in the colonized territories after achievement of political independence. Reference is made to postcolonial theorists like Gilbert & Tompkins (1996), Fanon (1991), Hall (2001) and others.

## Method

- Close textual reading is employed and different spaces are examined to reveal Kenyan history to the readers.

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- The three narratives utilize specific spaces in presenting the stories of the three personalities. According to Sklodowska (1997) space is the most frequently subordinated aspect of the narrative technique, and underestimated in critical thought but it can be used “to bring into focus – both at the level of argument and structure – such crucial aspects of human experience as representations of nation and nationality, gender distinctions and designs of power” (114).
  - In this essay, space is interrogated in terms of **how it portrays designs of colonial power** and how it is used by the three writers to **narrate the history of Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle** to the young readers.
  - The discussion therefore recognizes space as a construct of history and as a backdrop for imagination, which is very crucial to this discussion.

# Strands of Narration

- **1. Colonial Invasion** – Africans understood the ills of colonialism through three spaces:
  - **a. The settler farm**
    - Land alienation introduced squatters
    - The settler farm was a real physical space of oppression for the Africans
  - **b. The school and the church**
    - Western education in Kenya, and Africa in general, is tied to the history of missionary activities in the continent.
  - **c. The prison space** – was a space for taming dissents and was characterized by Poor conditions



## Strands of Narration – Cont'd

### ➤ 2. Reaction to Colonial rule:

- Resistance seen in all the three characters as boys and as adults e.g.
  - Refusal of Christian baptism names,
  - Formation of political parties and trade unions,
  - Expressing complaints through established African newspapers,
  - Violent fighting through the Mau Mau.

## Strands of Narration – Cont'd

- 3. **Independence period** is presented as a period of celebration.
- 4. **Post-independence disillusionment**
  - The problematic of unfulfilled dreams
  - Stratified society which is betrayal of nationalism, mostly visible in Kaggia's biography.
  - Nepotism and ethnic politics.



## Important Literary Aspects Employed:

- The use of dialogue/conversation as a narrative technique –is a strategic style events accessible to the readers.
- Vivid descriptions.
- The heroic motif.
- Selective amnesia in the narrative technique.
- The trope of the courageous and persistent nationalist.
- Young narrator whom the readers identify with.
- Rebellious characters from when they are young.



## Summary:

- Colonialism disturbed the peaceful coexistent in the African traditional set up.
  - The school space in colonial Kenya seems to have been a demoralizing place for the Africans but it certainly helped in strategizing on defeating the colonialists.
  - The fight for freedom from colonialist was an effort from varied tribes and groups.
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## Conclusion

- The politics of colonial and post-independence governments in Africa is inscribed in children's literature – giving a new direction to this literature.
  - Inclusion of the above issues in children's books shows that the fight against colonialism in Africa in general, and in Kenya in particular, is also an important narrative to the growing minds of children.
  - Biographies are therefore a useful channel through which history is compressed into children's books. This ensures easier access to Kenya's past by children.
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## Conclusion – Cont'd

- The fact that the recuperation of Kenya's history of liberation is done through fictionalized narration, points to literature as competing with other discourses, and sometimes supplementing these other discourses and forms of knowledge to "write" Kenya's historiography. Rewriting Kenya's history as literature is also important because it allows history to entangle with other discourses.
- The biographies also make a statement that literature written for children can go beyond basic moralizing to speak to issues relating to history and politics. The supposition here is that while remaining deeply concerned with issues of moral behaviour, these texts do not do so through abstract ethical concepts but through identifiable personalities who have left marks on the sands of time (Aseka, 2001).



**Thank you**

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