



Understanding Characterization: The Young Adult Character in the Prose Fiction of Selected Ugandan Female Authors.

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Abstract— This article explores the details of characterisation, particularly that of the young adult character in the prose fiction of selected Ugandan female authors, through a thorough reading of Barbara Kimenye, Mary Karoro Okurut and Glaydah Namukasa's novels and short stories. This study positions the texts within the broader literary analytical realm of the fundamental analytical framework of characterisation. Drawing from the archetypal critical theory and young adult studies, the work locates young adult protagonists as they navigate life's complexities, expectations, and their own personal perceptions about family, peers at school, teachers, and other people in their lives. Different characters are studied from their different settings accorded to them by the different writers; the schools, street environments, and later a university setting, all of which offer adolescents spaces to discover who they are. They rebel, they bond, they conflict, and they grow even as they negotiate their spaces in a world that is dominated by adults. The study highlights the physique of characters, their actions, their reactions and narrative voice, which reflect their agency and their search for identity. This analysis of characterisation of the young adult in female-authored prose fictional works stresses the role of Ugandan literature in increasing worldwide understanding of the young adult character in prose fiction.

Keywords— Characters and Characterisation, the young adult character, Archetypal Criticism.

Characterisation is a sum of choices and decisions that a writer makes to describe and portray the physical appearance, actions, thoughts, reactions, responses, speech and the general personalities of the people or things (that are made to execute human undertakings) in the fictional world; a world that authors create. It is the analysis of people who live and act in the fictional world created by the author, a world that, sometimes, resembles the real one. The fictional world is a world with people that evoke feelings in readers and that makes the readers identify with characters at times, a world that makes readers judge or rationalise about characters.

According to E.M. Forster (Forster "Aspects of the Novel 1927" 54-56). Characters are "actors in the story [who] pretend to be human beings". They are creations by the

author who is human and who uses "word-masses" to assign them identities (i.e. Name, attitudes, physical appearance, sex, actions and reactions, speech, etc.). The creation by the author is a result of her/his utilisation of actual raw materials, which Forster refers to as "evidence" plus or minus the author's imagination, that which the reader finds in a novel. "Evidence" refers to actual, identifiable human beings in the real world that the author uses to help her/him create characters. Characters that are "Human beings with two sides, appropriate to history and fiction". This means that a character is a person in the story who has human characteristics that are modified and are sometimes embellished or understated by the author for purposes of making her/him fit in a specified role.



The calling of characters ‘people’ based on the assumed intimate affinity that the novelist shares with actual human beings may be appropriate if the novelist writes about human beings of the same disposition as her/himself. The practice where adult novelists create, say, young adult characters (YACs), connotes the view that the YACs created are constructed according to the novelist’s assumed knowledge of the psychology of the young adult; an assumption that is questionable and may end up misrepresenting the character.

Apart from the two sides mentioned above of fiction and reality, the characters, according to Merico (2014), go through four stages of life, namely **childhood, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age**. Stages which, according to Riley (1976), have specific attributes and expected behaviour according to specific social contexts. In Uganda, for instance, when one considers the aspect of responsibility, a young adult is not expected to have any family responsibility, such as caring for other people or being answerable for her/his actions. S/he is expected to stay in school for a specified time, where s/he is dependent on parents or guardians. They are expected to lead a carefree life, giving adults a hard time because of their assumed unruly and untameable conduct. Young adults do not have either economic independence or any other form of independence (emotional and mental). Their autonomy is reduced or controlled by their caregivers. A young adult, because of her/his increased level of adolescence and limited level of maturity, is not relied on as a role model. These assumptions about young adults influence authors during the process of characterisation in their creative works.

Most authors aim to make their characters life-like. They make them behave like normal human beings, they make them think and reason, feel and react, and communicate with fellow characters and readers. They use characters to perform particular roles since the fictional world, like the real one, has conflicts and arguments, emotions and feelings, attitudes and processes which the characters have to face and resolve. The characters are born, they eat, they sleep; they love, they fall sick, and they die.

Authors base their characterisation on actual life situations, which Forster (*Aspects of the Novel*) refers to as “Evidence”. This means, as already pointed out, those actions and modes of behaviour which are similar to those of real human beings and can be easily related to. Authors can choose to depict characters accurately, exaggerate them, minimise them or portray them as unique or even extraordinary. They know the lives which their characters will lead since they create them, and by using their

authority as creators, they determine their fate. I refer to this power by the authors as **authorial autonomy**.

Characterisation helps readers relate to events in the texts. It provides credible moments and presents situations that readers can easily relate to. Readers are also helped to identify with characters when their actions and motivations are exposed. This exposure of the characters and the almost real representation make the stories worth reading and compelling. Imagine a country without citizens or a home without family members. Characters form the population of the places in fiction; in homes, schools, institutions and other places that make the texts real. Through characterisation, readers are enabled to understand the feelings, personalities and complexities of the characters. Characterisation also enhances the vividness of the lives of the characters, plus their credibility. The information that is provided by the writer, together with the readers’ imagination and interpretation, sums up who the character is. Characters are understood in many ways.

Physical Description

Authors can do direct characterisation by describing the physique, demeanour and general character outlook. When they do this, they create mental pictures in the readers’ minds. The physical description of the character helps to introduce characters and also makes an impression on the reader. In *Beauty Queen* by Kimenye, for example, the readers are at first given a general impression of Adela as a very beautiful young girl. Later on, her physical appearance is described even further to reveal the magnitude of her beauty;

Ujeni stared at her younger sister as if seeing her for the first time, trying to detect that special quality that Joe Banda insisted was there. And what did she see? She saw a young girl, tall for her age, with slender, tapering limbs and a graceful length of neck. The delicate facial structure (p. 45) ... a gloriously perfect creature in a gown of velvet splendour made her catch her breath (p. 74) ...the slenderness of her waist [made her exclaim] You are something special! (p 84).

The above description of Adela justifies her winning position in the contests and leaves a picture of a lovely young girl in the reader’s mind, a girl with a special quality that her ‘manufacturers’ are ready to exploit to the full.

Mary Karoro Okurut also uses physical descriptions of her characters to directly characterise Hero (the protagonist in *Child of a Delegate*). When she goes to Nile University, the students size her up, award her marks

based on her physical appearance and eventually give her a nickname, 'Poverty'. According to them;

[Hero's] head looks like that of the king of ants, and the few hairs that are there look like those on the buttocks of a baboon... [the face is] murram...[the eyes] look like those of a wild cat... [the nose] is too big, covering three-quarters of the face. Looks like it sucks in all the oxygen around, and we shall be left with nothing! We shall suffocate when she is around... [The kisser] looks as if it knows its job to perfection... [The neck] is almost non-existent. Looks squashed...the breasts look succulent... the stomach is flat and good. [The buttocks are] an absolute scandal. Looks like starved reeds. They even have potholes...There is something of the peasant in her. She has a peasant and local look. I think it's the boobs. Oversized boobs give a woman a peasant look. (Okurut, 1997, pp. 27-29).

The above description of Hero leaves a pitiful picture of a wide-faced, ugly-looking girl with a short, thick neck, thin legs, small buttocks and big breasts. The description must be exaggerated by the students to make Hero feel small, but apart from being funny and revealing the cruel taunts of rich students, it brings out the prejudice that students from high-placed families have of the not-so-privileged lot. Apart from physical appearance, characters are also revealed through the actions they perform in the stories.

Action

There is a common adage that "actions speak louder than words". The actions of characters in fiction reveal, among other things, character traits. The actions also help in character analysis. They enrich the readers' understanding of the characters and the plot. In Kimenye's Moses series, the character of Moses, the protagonist, is revealed mainly through his actions. In the first novel in the series, *Moses* Moses' character as a no-nonsense person, a boy ready to defend himself and conquer the world, is revealed through his actions when he puts King Kong, the most feared and revered boy in Mukibi's Educational Institute for the Sons of African Gentlemen, down:

Several boys had stayed in the room, expecting to see some fun, and now they began to laugh. King Kong, because he was not getting the best of it with me, turned his attention to the trembling Four Eyes... "I will get you later," King Kong whispered threateningly, as we sat down at our desks again...I was making up my bed. In the end, I was ready to close King Kong's mouth with a good old thump. However, instead of fighting him, I retaliated with this:

"Old King Kong had a terrible pong
a terrible pong had he.

He smelled so high,
that folks passing by
thought he wasn't sanitary..."

Of course, that did it. He was at me before I finished the last word of my cool little rhyme. We were both scuffling on the floor of the narrow passage between the beds... (pp. 14-15).

The quotation shows that apart from being a newcomer, Moses is ready to save himself from bullying and cannot be intimidated.

Another example of action as a way of revealing character traits is when, in *Voice of a Dream* (Namukasa, 2006), Nanfuka is confronted with village rumours about the possibility of her never going back to school and becoming a house girl. She responds to her sister Kizza:

God, anger isn't easy to control. 'I didn't ask you to tell me anything.' Kizza shouts, 'Hey, that's how God has paid you, despising us because you study in the city. Now go back and study in the city and become a nurse!'

Nanfuka lunges at Kizza, slapping her face twice.

'Shame upon you.' Kizza draws back.
'No wonder you are going to be a house girl.'

Nanfuka pounces on her, and they fall to the ground.

'Let me hit sense into this dense head,' she says, bashing Kizza's head with her fists. Kizza grabs Nanfuka's hand and bites the index finger. Nanfuka jumps up screaming, Cannibal!'

'House girl!' Kizza struggles to get up.

Nanfuka presses her finger. She shouldn't have acted like that, but Kizza provoked her beyond control. She reaches for her carrying pad, struggles to lift the bundle of firewood onto her head, and then walks away.

'House girl!'

Nanfuka hurries on, silent. (p. 42).

The actions above reveal the magnitude of Nanfuka's suffering and her explosiveness when fighting for her dream. Her final silence proves that she, as the caretaker, is ready to swallow her pride and keep silent to pacify the situation. Her silence here is a loud kind of silence, an action that connotes a great effort to control rage. In the

quotation above, we see Nanfuka portrayed as a frustrated young girl being mocked by not only envious villagers but even her siblings. Her hot temper gets the better of her, and she fights with her sister, but then her sense of responsibility and awareness that she is now the 'adult caretaker' restrains her from further provocations and placates her foul mood.

Characterisation by Character Reaction

Other than action or together with action, the reaction is another way that authors use to reveal the traits of the people in the story. Reactions are multi-dimensional. Characters may react physically, they may react emotionally or psychologically to different events and situations. When a character's reaction takes place after an expression or an action, it enhances the insight of the reader into the story's context. Most characters react according to human expectations, for instance, they get angry when abused and happy when praised. However, when characters react contrary to human expectations, readers are either shocked or surprised at their uniqueness. Credibility in novels is achieved when an action incites a reaction. The absence of reaction after an action makes readers wonder and if the trend continues, the story becomes unbelievable. Character reaction gives the reader a sense of direction and guides her/him into understanding the character better, and when the reaction is responded to by another character, the reader can get meaning out of it.

Characters react to events and situations through their dialogue or what they keep silent about, or through their actions or what they refrain from doing; what they feel and what they think. What is said by a character can be carefully thought out and said to influence or convince other characters, or it can be forced out of the character by other characters that have power over them or involuntarily come out due to an emotional outburst. Examples of character reactions that give revelation to character traits are such as that of Nanfuka (the protagonist in *Voice of a Dream* (2006), when her auntie Naka brings home a suitor to marry her off to take control of her father's property:

'You...are...welcome,' Nanfuka says.

'So this is my Nanfuka,' the visitor says, his voice hoarse.

'And these are my siblings, sir,' Nanfuka says. If this huge man is going to marry her, then he should know she has brothers and sisters. She glances at Aunt Naka's face: it has already transformed, eyes narrowed, lips bunched and nose flaring. The venom in her eyes is even more pronounced now that she is angry... Tears well up in Nanfuka's eyes. It's disheartening to see her

siblings hustled out, unwanted. Is this an illusion or reality?

... 'As you already know, sir, this is your bride-to-be.' Aunt Naka smiles, then turns to Nanfuka. 'This is your husband-to-be.'

Silence falls. In a moment, it's cut through by Kato's scream from outside.

'I hate such noises! The visitor complains.' 'Nanfuka I don't need such interruptions.'

... 'It's not that!' Nanfuka says. I have a right to decide. I am not getting married!' She turns to go out.

Aunt Naka hurries to snatch Nanfuka's hand. Nanfuka fights her way out of the grip. She stands still, fighting back Aunt Naka's venomous stare with a scowl.

'Let me teach you manners, you daft girl.' Aunt Naka brandishes her hand to slap Nanfuka, but Nanfuka ducks away... (pp. 61-62).

The dramatic encounter above is a revelation of not only Nanfuka's character but also that of Aunt Naka. Nanfuka's response to the suitor's possessive statement by introducing her siblings has underlying spite. Her reaction is that of 'take it or leave it' where 'it' means Nanfuka with all her responsibilities. Her frustration and love for her siblings is read in the tears that well up in her eyes. The silence that falls when the suitor is introduced as Nanfuka's husband-to-be is a silence that is pregnant with tension, rage and suspense; reactions from Aunt Naka, Nanfuka and the suitor respectively. The drama that ensues thereafter demonstrates the conflict between Nanfuka and her Aunt Naka and it helps to demonstrate Nanfuka's assertive nature and her resolve not to succumb to her aunt's dictates. Aunt Naka on the other hand is shown to be dictatorial and insensitive to her nieces' and nephews' feelings. She takes advantage of her being an adult to suppress the young ones.

Characterisation by Character Thoughts

Other than physical appearance, actions and reactions, a revelation of a character's thoughts is another way that a reader can understand a character. The revelation of character thoughts is mainly done through protagonists, although some authors reveal thoughts of other characters, especially when narration is participatory. In some stories, though, character thoughts are not revealed at all. The disclosure of characters' inner thoughts enhances the readers' deeper understanding of the characters.

In *Moses* (Kimenye, 1968), the first book in the Moses series, for instance, the revelation of Moses' thoughts gives the reader insight into the character of Moses, the protagonist, by laying a foundation of his life and the setting from which he is operating. His feelings, his history, and his perceptions about himself and his guardians are all laid bare for the reader to be able to understand his behaviour. All comes out clearly when the author exposes his thoughts thus:

From there, I started thinking about my past. I know that at the age of fifteen, you are not supposed to have one, and yet I seemed to have very little else: I had no money of my own, no parents, no brothers or sisters. Yes, it was quite true to say that a past was all I could claim to have in the world. And what a past! Honestly, I couldn't help being impressed when I looked back on all the things I had done in only fifteen years of life. What other boy, I wondered, could boast of having been expelled from six different Uganda schools? ...It was not likely that another school would accept me. In a way, I was glad because it meant that I would be free to take a job. In my judgment, I was perfectly capable of doing something exciting and interesting. Say, for instance, piloting a jet aircraft. And I was only too willing to be Africa's first man in space because heights have never worried me. I was climbing trees before I was five years old (pp. 1-2).

The reference above brings out Moses as a teenager who is not only unruly and transgressive but one who is also proud of his behaviour. His misguided pride exposes his naivety and myopic imagination that he can be a pilot without qualifications. His narrow-mindedness and desire for freedom also come out and emphasise the ingenuousness that is associated with his age. When later his thoughts about his guardians are revealed, the reader is accorded ground to analyse the age/ parent/child conflict:

As things were, even a reformatory would be better than staying much longer in my uncle's house. I was tired of always being shouted at and regarded as a criminal or, even worse, continually being told how grateful I should be... Can you blame me, then, if I spent the rest of the evening trying to strategise how I could escape from them forever? When I was free, I would earn my living so that I would be completely independent (p. 5).

The great desire for independence and freedom from "[feeling] like a prisoner in solitary confinement... [Feeling] like a condemned man..." (pp. 5-6), free from

the guardians' dictates, is once again exposed through Moses' thoughts.

Characterisation through Dialogue/ Speech:

Apart from character thoughts, character traits can also be revealed through characters' dialogue. What a person says, what s/he is silent about and how s/h says what s/he says, shows what kind of person s/he is. Semino and Culpeper (253), quoting Mead (1990) point out the link between people and fictional characters thus: "we recognise, understand and appreciate fictional characters insofar as their appearances, action, and speech reflect or refer to those of persons in real life". Just like the personalities of real human beings can be deciphered from their speech, so can characters be interpreted from what they say and how they say it. A good example is in Namukasa's short story "The Pact" (pp. 145-154);

"Tino," she called my name and hesitated, staring at me as if what she wanted to say was written in my eyes. "I saw Daudi talking to your sister last week. I knew they were up to something bad. That's why I gave you that letter instead of giving it to Daudi. I have heard bad things about Daudi."

Before we talk of Daudi, I have something to say to you."

She remained silent.

I did something very bad, Rachel. I am here to ask for your forgiveness."

The bewildered look on her face disappeared, and instead, her eyes narrowed in confusion.

Direct and Indirect Characterisation:

On the one hand, direct characterisation is a method of characterisation where the author gives readers information about characters. The information is mainly given through the narrator, the characters themselves or other characters talking about or describing a character. For this kind of characterisation, the authors explicitly bring out the character traits of particular characters, sometimes through the narrator's description, for instance, the description of Nanfuka in *Voice of a Dream*.

"Tonight the clever, hot-tempered Nanfuka would be his" (Namukasa, 2006, p. 2). Later, Sendi, reminiscing about Nanfuka, elaborates the description thus: "Everywhere he looks seems to be painted with Nanfuka's picture. Nanfuka, fuming; eyes narrowing, lips tightening, nose flaring. Nanfuka, smiling: eyes sparkling,

dimples forming. His sense of smell is haunted by the cocoa butter perfume Nanfuka applied that ‘incomplete night’. It’s a fragrance that beats the scent of roses in the flower garden at home (*ibid.*, pp.17-18).

The descriptions are a clear description of who Nanfuka is: a clever, hot-tempered girl who has attracted the attention of Sendi.

On the other hand, indirect characterisation is another way of interpreting characters. Here, the readers infer from other things that the authors use to give their characters life. Authors mainly use actions, reactions, thoughts and speech, and the readers make intelligent conclusions by deducing from what the characters do, say, think or how they react to situations and events in the stories. One good example is in *Voice of a Dream*, which reveals Sendi’s desire to be a better person when he realises he is in love with Nanfuka:

Inside the class, three of his crew members are hovering over something. Their panic, as he enters, tells him it is the nude picture magazine Moses brought in the morning. ‘See you tomorrow, guys,’...Sendi hurries out, studiously ignoring the voice. [At home], he grabs the nude picture magazines from the drawer. ‘Where should I hide these damn magazines?’...He collects his dirty jeans and folds them one by one into a pile. He yanks off the blanket, makes his bed and slumps back...He is no longer a cowboy. The cowboy ‘Ettiene is a corpse that only Nanfuka can resurrect... [When the father asks], ‘Ma said you left the boarding section. Why? ...We don’t own the school, Sendi. I am just one of the school proprietors. You can’t just walk in and out.’ [He shockingly answers], ‘I understand Pa’ ...I’ll go back to the boarding section next term.’ (pp. 20-23)

All the actions, speech and reactions displayed by Sendi above expose a change of behaviour and a development of his character. He no longer wants to participate in pornography; he is more studious and wants to be on his father’s good side. He is disgusted with his disorganised life and is ready to abandon his weird cowboy behaviour. This behaviour and attitude change is revealed indirectly through his actions and reactions.

Types of Characters

Just like people in the real world are different, so are characters in the fictitious world. There are flat and round characters, there are static and dynamic as well as stock characters, heroes and anti-heroes, not to mention major, minor, protagonists, antagonists, foils and symbolic characters.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, we can say that characterisation is a useful method of understanding a story because it offers readers a similarity to the real world. It exposes character traits, is a source of entertainment, and helps authors develop characters. Characterisation helps in author effectiveness as far as developing their plots is concerned, not to mention augmenting readers' understanding of characters, their roles and consequently the author's concerns. When characters surprise or shock us, their complex nature is revealed. Characterisation also helps in uncovering authors' stylistic choices and the degree of their literary excellence, their investment in their stories and their devotion to their creations. Through character psychological and physical descriptions, character thoughts, dialogue, actions and reactions, readers can understand them and relate with them and to real life. It is through characterisation that readers can, as Atticus Finch states, “...understand [the characters by] considering things from their point of view [and]...until [they] (the readers) climb into [their] skin[s] and walk around in [them]”, can they understand the characters. The intimacy between the reader and the character in a work of fiction is born out of characterisation and out of the reader’s great desire to understand the ‘people’ that move and act in the story. Characterisation is therefore not only a stylistic device but also a plot developer and a theme revealer.

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