Albinism as a Literary Trope in Goro Kamau's Ghosts and Fortune Hunters

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Abstract
Debates on the centrality of literature to the modern man have been steadily gaining momentum in literary circles. Writers have also been accused of their disinterest stance in issues that hound the 21st century society. This paper examines albinism as both a literary motif of exposing and indicting other myriad problems affecting modern society and a symbol of resistance in Goro Kamau's *Ghost and Fortune Hunters*. The paper argues that since Kamau gives the narrative of albinos' predicament, he opens other layers of social, political and economic issues affecting the ordinary person in the society, most of which are a product of modernity. The problems range from poverty, corruption, crime, abuse of the law, only to mention a few. Indirectly, the author indicts modern society for marginalising the albinos simply because of their skin colour. By critiquing modern society, the author becomes a conscious examiner of his community. This argument is primarily located within the ideological lenses of postcolonial theory and supplemented by the reader-response theory. Using these theories, this paper examined albinism as a trope for highlighting and condemning issues like poverty, corruption, crime, and abuse of law. The paper obtained its primary data for analysis and presentation from a close reading of the selected text. This study will immensely contribute to literary criticism of children and adult literature as well as literature, politics, and social justice, among other related disciplines.

Keywords: Albinism, fortune, ghosts, hunters, marginalisation, unmasking

Introduction: Postcolonial Reading of Human Experience in the Modern World

> What he, like his mother, did not know was that the sun was not the only enemy he had, nor indeed, the most vicious [...] (Kamau, 2016, p. 3).

The argument fronted and pursued in this paper is that writers of creative works, though relying strongly on the power of imagination, consciously lay bare the ills plaguing modern society to point out a universal socially acceptable right direction. The aim of the paper is not merely to rescue or seemingly save writers from the perennial blame of their disinterested stance on matters of societal growth and morality, but rather an examination of modernity and its interplay with theory; how modernity is critiqued within postcolonialism and how a writer holds the bastion upon which this critique is advanced. Equally, the reader's reading and interpretation of a text using the reader-response theory closes the gaps unconsciously left out in the text by the writer and thus gives some reasonable criticism. Essentially, good literary criticism is more than just reading and interpreting a piece of literature. It contains a curiosity about human experience and an eagerness to achieve understanding, offered by an author.

The author goes beyond the Platonic 'imitation' to see, hear, and feel the pureness of thought in writing. Writing becomes an enlightening experience that penetrates through historical debris, searching through the deep recesses of humanity to get to the hidden thoughts underneath the consciousness. To realise this core function of literature, a theory is always used as an excavation tool. In this paper, we examine Kamau's (2017) *Ghost and the Fortune Hunters* (hereafter *Ghost*) through the prism of postcolonial and reader-response theories.

Essentially, postcolonialism implies both a situation coming after colonialism and a situation in the heritage or aftermath of colonialism: both an ongoing liberation and ongoing oppression. Like feminism, postcolonialism aims to give voice to an oppressed group by understanding and critiquing oppressing structures and articulating and encouraging liberation and revolution. In this case, the group has lived under the imperialist domination of western colonial powers. On the other hand, reader-response theory assumes a text written has some gaps left out by the writer and requires the reader to fill in to come up with a coherent interpretation of the text. Wolfgang (1978) concurs with this view and argues that '[R]ather, the text produces certain "blanks" or "gaps" that the reader must attempt to complete: the reader "is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said"' (p. 24). This theory gives a leeway to the reader to appropriate his literary and world experience in appreciating the text.

Fish (1980, as cited in Bernett and Royle, 2004, p. 13) observes that 'every reader reads according to the conventions of his or her "interpretive community". Arguably, the individual's criticism of the text leaning on this theory, will in most part, be determined by the conventions of reading that he or she [critic]has been educated into within a particular socio-historical context'. Further, Holland (1980) observes that 'interpretation [for our case the text] is a function of identity' and indeed 'all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolise and finally to replicate ourselves' (pp. 123-124) within the writer's experiences and our interpretation. Reader response is central and becomes a coordinating tool for other theories in the overall reading, understanding, interpretation, and appreciation of any text.

Concerning the world, literature is an imitation of the ideal world, the world of thought. It is the human being that thinks; thus, literature will go further and be shaped as the experience of humanity improves. In discussing reading literature, Diane Elam says that something always remains in literature; 'a residual, a leftover from the past demanding to be thought as a question for the future' (Widdowson, 1999, p. 30).

Locating this paper within the postcolonial and reader-response theories, albinism, especially the protagonist of the text under examination in this paper, becomes a body of contestations. The main character is nicknamed 'ghost', a tag that invisibilises him, giving the visual illusion of fulfilling the aims of the civilising mission if one perceives the 'whiteness' of the albino to be the same as that of the coloniser. However, as a marker of differentiation, the 'whiteness' in the main character's body, the location of his 'whiteness' on the body that is supposed to be 'black' implies denigration. For Charles Martin, this figure 'embodies the desire of the coloniser to strip away the traditions and culture of the colonised people and to replace them with a duplicate "whitened" citizen' (Martin, 2002, p. 6). The identification of the external whiteness of Kaboci's body in this way perversely fulfils Fanon's conclusion in *Black Skin White Masks*, the hate-love-envy triad that characterises whiteness. This troubling whiteness of the albino unbalances the very foundations of racial identification, undermining the constructed differences upon which the colonial system relied.

The contradiction of the ideal and repulsion discernible within this understanding of 'whiteness' in the text under study shows that albinism in literature needs more scrutiny. This contradiction is in agreement with Blankenberg's warning that to interpret albino skin purely in terms of the values ascribed to it by the society 'would mean contextualising the albino within a racialised society, where the connotations of blackness include "savage", evil and bad;

and those of whiteness include good, purity and civilised' (Blankenberg, 2000, p. 9). The white attributes are elevated and erroneously and become coveted. This might as well inform the origin of the nickname 'ghost'.

As shown in the course of this paper, in *Ghost*, Kamau critiques the evils that permeate the (post) modern society. He does this within the theoretical lens of postcolonial theory, which by its very basic form, explores the social, political and economic consequences of colonisation, and the continuation of colonial legacies (seen through the jaundiced understanding of whiteness), especially in the postcolonial period. The theory also locates modern society within hybridity. The paper unearths the extraordinary search for money, in *Ghost*, as a benign criticism of modern society; the consequences were massive that the colonised world continues to address them by using other avenues, rewriting its history and literature. Arguably,

> Postcolonial theory examines the origins, effects, and both immediate and long-term political, cultural, and social results of Europe (as well as America's) colonialisation of different cultures and regions of the world through the study of various literary texts which depict, sometimes celebrate, and critique and disparage the act of colonialisation (Barry, 2002, p. 27).

Postcolonial theory continues to address the later effects of neocolonialism as explored in the postcolonial literary texts by writers from the former colonial world. Precisely:

> Postcolonial theory questions and examines the expansionist imperialism of colonialising nations and cultures and the set of political, social, and cultural values (some of which are still in place) which support imperialism, with special attention given to the complicated relations that occur between the party who colonialised and the party which colonialised […] Postcolonial theory attempts, furthermore, to recoup the lost histories of the colonialised subjects and reveal the ways in which colonialisation empires have shifted and erased the identities of the colonialised subjects (Barry, 2002, p. 27)

By extension, the postcolonial theory is used by some literary writers from former colonies to put records straight regarding the coloniser and the colonised encounter while showing the way forward for the latter. Therefore, this paper examines albinism as a mark of marginalisation and a quarry of fortune hunters in Kamau's *Ghost*. To buttress the argument and anchor it in a compelling reading, understanding, interpretation and appreciation of the text, the reader-response theory will supplement the postcolonial theory.

Albinism as a Motif of Unmasking Other Layers of Issues in the Text

Kamau's *Ghost* is a novel that principally addresses albinism as a disability that invisibilises. In this invisibilisation, albinos are denigrated as sub-humans and as magical items. Criminals like Gitene and Kibet see money in them and not disability. The 'whiteness' in their pigment is of value for human only when satiating their selfish appetites for money. Albinos' welfare is wished away. Although this albinism would have been one dimension, the novel is a multifaceted text that discusses crime, alcoholism, poverty, women marginalization, poor leadership, and tribalism.

Another thing is that poverty is explored in slums which have a ghost-like atmosphere. Kaboci can only do assignments using street lights because they have no power in the house. There is also the issue of contrasting judicial systems in Kenya and Tanzania. The Tanzania

system is fast compared to Kenya, where criminals like Kibet, Gitene and Machage would have been subjected to a protracted process, thus delaying justice.

Albinism is an inherited condition with a relatively high prevalence in populations throughout sub-Saharan Africa. People with oculocutaneous albinism have little or no pigment in their hair, skin and eyes; thus, they are visually impaired and susceptible to the damaging effect of the sun on their skin (Baker, 2008). Aside from the health implications of oculocutaneous albinism, there are also significant sociocultural risks. The impacts of albinism are severe in areas that associate albinism with legend and folklore, leading to stigmatisation and discrimination. In regions of Africa, those with albinism may be assaulted and sometimes killed for their body parts and for use in witchcraft-related rites or to make 'lucky' charms.

The depiction of albinism in literature, especially the portrayal of people with albinism in film and fiction, has been asserted by albinism organisations and others to be largely negative and has raised concerns that it reinforces, or even engenders societal prejudice and discrimination against such people. There is evidence to show that social processes and practices severely affect children with albinism and as such, they face significant 'barriers to being', most seriously, their right to life and protection and the right to freedom from discrimination. The last decade has seen increased attention to the treatment of people with albinism in several African countries, particularly the peril they find themselves in due to stigma and superstition.

As a way of countering these misconceptions, there has been educative activism from legal, medical, and religious perspectives. Lipenga and Ngwira (2018) drawing upon a different discourse; literary representation, argue that in selected African novels, the authors employ a variety of strategies that counter harmful stereotypes about albinism, and in the process act as literary interventions that enable an appreciation of the person behind the skin condition. Drawing from insights in Literary Disability Studies, their discussion examines the representation of albinism in four African novels, and highlights the way albinism is presented as a bodily condition that intersects with other experiences on the continent, including indigenous epistemologies, gender, sexuality and family relationships.

According to Baker (2010), the visible difference of people with albinism in sub-Saharan Africa has appealed to writers and film-makers. Still, almost all have struggled to describe this figure as they grapple with the inadequacy of the language of race, colour and disability. With few exceptions, their attempts to explain the albino body in terms of existing categories as 'white', 'disabled' or 'different', have been founded on speculation and stereotype. Thus, the negativity surrounding albinism in much of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa pervades fictional writing about people with the condition, resulting in part from how bodily difference and deviance are presented as integral to shaping their identity. The negativity surrounding the albino operates as a form of negation, an attempt to push this figure to the bounds of society which as Kamau's *Ghost* demonstrates, functions to reinforce the difference of the albino as other to protect and confirm the normality of the self. The need to explain the prevalence of beliefs and stereotypes that continue to shape perceptions of people with albinism and attempts to classify and control is reflected in the themes of deviance, marginality and exclusion integral to Kamau's fiction. Kamau's *Ghost* portrays the fear surrounding the albino figure, which often results from ignorance of the genetic origins of albinism, apprehension about the unknown, and the notion of the potential threat posed by the albino body.

Both parents reject Kaboci, the protagonist in the *Ghost*, due to albinism, which greatly affected him psychologically. The delivery of the child did not help to alleviate the pain and disillusionment in parents. Kibet, the father, outrightly rejected the child and accused the mother [wife] 'for cheating on him with a Whiteman'(Kamau, 2017, p.8). Even after the doctor explained about the albino child, Kaboci's father was not contented. He turned to his mother and retorted, '[A]nd told me[wife] that they don't get such children in his family! He said the

child was cursed, that I should go and sort out the matter with the family' (Kamau, p.18). Equally, Kaboci's mother secretly shelved the doctor's explanation and thought her child was cursed; 'Somehow, I thought the child was a punishment for defying our elders' (Kamau, p.19). Note that after the Molo clashes, Kibet was advised by his people to discontinue as a husband to Kaboci's mother. However, he defied them and fled with her to Nakuru town.

In the *Ghost*, Kaboci lives with albinism. Nicknamed 'Ghost' by his classmates, he is kidnapped by 'fortune hunters' as he goes to school. The thugs hope to get rich by selling the boy to witch doctors in Tanzania. Fortunately, their plan goes burst, and they are arrested and swiftly jailed by Tanzanian authorities (Wafula, 2016, p. 12).The high premium put on albinos is total absurdity. The idea of selling Kaboci was at an advanced stage. The coffin to transport him to Tanzania as a dead person had been ordered by Gitene and Kibet. They will soon seal the deal. Gitene boastfully tells Kibet, '[S]o far so good […]. He gave Kibet a high five and went on, 'By the end of next week, if all goes well, you'll have crossed the bridge. From poverty to wealth, just like that!'(Kamau, 2017, p. 57). Kibet would want to dispose of his son quickly. He tells Gitene, '[T]hat boy, he really turned my life upside down, I tell you!'. He says further, 'I thought the boy a curse. And I think I was right too' (Kamau, p. 57). Even further, Kibet had selfishly thought that if Kaboci was got rid of, he would have a reunion with Miriam. Kibet observes to Gitene, '[W]hat I hope is that Miriam and I can get back together once the boy is out of the way. She was my first love, after all. My teenage flame if you like […]' which I need to rekindle. The intended sale of Kaboci is illustratively motivated by poverty and affinity to material lie. Simply, the urge to get rich quickly.

Arguably, Kenya, as a postcolonial state, has received its fair share of troubling social evils. Most of these revelations are dramatised in literary texts. Kamau's *Ghost* shows how stereotypes can prompt conflict; how they can be a shield from other pressing concerns. Good African popular writing often functions (as this text does) to address serious social issues which need to be brought out of the rather isolated scholarly circuits of sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies and the like, and such texts can be seen as contributions to public debate uncompromised by discernible political affiliations or pompous officialese. Kamau's *Ghost* picks one direction that this unsettling and worrying search for wealth has taken. The absurd selling of people suffering from Albinism! Mr Tiampati, the proprietor of a Kiosk, indicts this practice after reading the article on Kidnapping and killing of albinos. He concludes that the African leadership was insensitive to this horror. He reflects and concludes:

> Africa's greatest curse is leadership having eye sightless than that of a fly, a leadership that saw no further than its immediate crave for power and wealth and the greater majority of the people still mired in poverty, ignorance and disease. It was hardly any wonder that such things happened (Kamau, 2017, p. 40).

Therefore, the intended sale of Kaboci is casual because the end product of it is to enable people to get rich. As Fridah, Kaboci's aunt observes, young people, especially in Nairobi are in a hurry to get rich. 'YOLO- that's is their motto these days' YOLO means 'YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE'[…] 'They say get rich as soon as yesterday or die trying'(Kamau, 2017, p. 92). This attitude is widespread in other parts of the country and no wonder, Njomo, the bully, resolves that he would not die like his poor drunkard father. 'One day, he would get rich or die trying […] '(Kamau, p.90) and indeed it came to pass when he joined the notorious gang-WASP.

Ghost is a novel of great psychological depth and insight: a clear departure from our writers' fascination with adventure for the sake of it as if that's all young readers can handle. Astutely, Kamau weaves his story through the rough terrain of the protagonist's birth and his rejection by his father because of being an albino; his eventual academic prowess, and his

father's botched attempt to sell him to a witch in Tanzania, to be hacked to death**.** Indeed, using the psychology of the mind, the reader can follow the narrative, especially to understand what motivates the characters' actions. Kaboci's rejection and the stigma made him make a resolution and remain resilient to make a difference in his condemned life, '[A]nd every morning on his way to school; he vowed that things will not always be so hard. Just wait until I am through with the school-and watch this space'(Kamau, 2017, p. 6). Essentially, Kaboci's resolution made him excel in school. He dreamed of becoming a medical doctor and empower his mother; he thought his albinism brought her misery.

Conversely, Njomo's traumatic upbringing by a poor and drunkard father and the environmental conditioning to crime catapulted him to join the terror WASP gang enroute to quick riches and to prove to the world that what matters in life is good living regardless of the crude means to success. Since Njomo had unfinished business with his father before the latter died, it may have psychologically affected him. Njomo wanted to take a shortcut to riches. Precisely, to be like some of his celebrities in the movies he had watched that are moneyed and surrounded by beauties [women].

Although Kamau has been writing for a long time, it was with the short story 'When the Sun Goes Down' (in School Anthology) that he came to the literary world's attention. In *Ghost*, he bravely speaks truth to the political corruption and indifference that makes such crimes possible. Few scholars have tackled the debate on the plight of Albinos in East Africa. The novel ventures into a subject that has been given a wide berth by leaders, scholars and writers alike, a subject always spoken of in whispers. Obviously, in writing this novel, the writer did his research on the lucrative business of selling albinos for mundane practices. Kamau writes that albinos are usually hacked to death like the way 'ravenous hyenas or wild dogs run down a prey. Biting off chunks of meat as the victim runs howling in agony in a desperate bid to save life'. Machage, one of the abductors of Kaboci underlines '[T]hat's exactly how the witchdoctors do it'; to get body parts for their trade. Machage continues to say, '[T]hey have hordes of albino hunters who run down a victim. They claim that the adrenal rush that is triggered when the unfortunate victim tries to save his life is what brings out the potency in the charm!' (Kamau, 2017, p.126) given to people, especially politicians, to outdo their rivals.

Kamau's assault on this evil trade is three-pronged. The novel discredits the belief that albinism is a curse from God. The author boldly advances the idea that albinism is not a curse but a *congenital disorder that affects about one in 20,000 people worldwide. Those who discriminate against people suffering from albinism are depicted as not only unfeeling but exceptionally evil. Kamau's work denounces this belief not only as retrogressive but also dehumanising. Kibet, Kaboci's father rejects his son and wife because of this retarded culture. Even the doctor's clear explanations do not liberate his senseless self. Kaboci's mother almost bows to this nerve-wrenching belief, but she forges ahead and gives her son the love and support that he requires. However, occasionally when down-with usual women's gossips, she revisits her first reaction to Kaboci's birthday. One time, Kaboci overheard his rejection by his mother when he was born. This creates some kind of psychological torture; hence, his overreaction to the slightest provocation.*

Tied to this belief that albinism is a curse from God is the cruelty of human nature. An image of Kaboci with 'his bleached skin, making him stick out like a flag post wherever he went, with the wide-brimmed hat with those ridiculous straps that his mother insisted he tie under his jaws' (Kamau, 2017, p. 22) with other learners like Njomo and his ilk calling him a Ghost, is a tragic sight. The description falls heavily on our sympathetic selves, and one feels like running and embracing the young boy, hiding him from the cruelty of the world. In one of these low moments, Kaboci's mother advises him:

> It's unfortunate that some people can be so cruel, but you must learn to forgive them because it's only that they don't know what they're doing, how they make you feel...Yes, you'll sometimes feel depressed and that's okay. What you should never do is to allow sadness to dominate your life because it is when that happens that you might be moved to do something terrible (Kamau, p. 22).

Indeed, at one point, the boy attempts suicide. The text is about humaneness if there is such a term. People should be fair to others regardless of any shortcomings they have or disability, the case of Ghost boy, poverty and many others. There should be justice for all. Why sell an innocent child like Kaboci? Kibet, the father, is vindictive, and he wants to get rid of the boy and come back to Miriam. Not because of love but to punish her further by infecting her with HIV/AIDS.

The final thing that inhibits people with albinism, Kamau's *Ghost and the Fortune Hunters* intone, is witchcraft. This forms the gist of the novel's thesis. Coldly, Kamau lays bare the lingering fear that in East Africa, particularly in Tanzania, some people believe that charms made from albino body parts have magical powers and could bring great fortune and power to those who could afford them. The figures are shocking. According to UN figures, at least 75 Albinos, including children, have been killed in Tanzania since the year 2000; many hacked to death. According to a Red Cross report, witchdoctors will pay as much as $75 000 for a full set of albino body parts (Kamau, 2017: p. 40). These figures should worry us. The selling of Albinos to the witchdoctors and the cruel way in which they are killed is the height of dehumanization and objectivising them. Therefore, Kamau's novel is a severe indictment of a society that claims to be ethical and religious. It condemns this distressing treatment of some members of the community, the senseless killings of Albinos.

Ghost is a novel about disability and an albino's dreams for a bright future, about the problems and aspirations of young people and crime and punishment. The way Kaboci manages to escape from his captors even before they are arrested gives the reader hope that despite challenges, Kaboci will ultimately realise his lofty life's dreams. At the novel's closure, the battle between Mother Rabbit and the Black Snake about to eat the small rabbits is symbolic. Mother Rabbit rescues her children from the intrusive Black Snake by delivering the final blow, which kills it. Eventually, the children are rescued the same way Kaboci is swiftly and timely rescued by the Tanzanian police and the court that passes deserving judgment on the abductors. However, in as much as Kamau gives the narrative of albinos' predicament, he opens other layers of social, political and economic issues affecting the ordinary person in the society. The issues range from poverty, corruption, crime, abuse of the law, only to mention but a few.

Albinism as a Literary Trope in Ghost

This paper argues that Kamau's *Ghost* uses albinism as a literary trope to expose other myriad layers in our societies. In addition, albinism has been examined as a trope for highlighting and condemning issues like poverty, corruption, crime, and abuse of law, which impede the progress of the common man. Some of these layers are corruption, greed, and stigmatisation. Kaboci, the novel's main protagonist, is used to advance the kind of stigmatisation levelled against an 'albino identity'. The symbolic trope of albinism is manifest in the association of the wearing 'his wide-brimmed hat […] which made him look like a clown' (Kamau, 2017, pp. 1-2). In the first part of the novella *Ghost*, Kaboci has been forced to learn that his bleached skin (making him stick out like a flag post) is not normal and that he should hide it from 'the enemy in the sky' (Kamau, pp.1-2). At the same time, the figure of Kaboci occupies a liminal

space on the boundaries of society, physical acceptability and race; the chromatic ambiguity of the albino body permits certain freedom.

The stigma associated with albinism brings other issues in post-modern society, especially in the East African region. One of such issues is the cruelty of human beings who pride themselves on normativity. The trope of albinism attacks the body and presents it as dead. For instance, Kaboci's mother says: 'it's unfortunate that some people can be so cruel', she had said, 'but you must learn to forgive them because it's only that they don't know what they're doing, how they make you feel…' (Kamau, 2017, p.22). In another instance, some men jump towards Kaboci for an embrace of luck: 'hey, man. Give me a hug-for luck!' (Kamau, p. 23). Thus, the albino body reveals the very threat of the indefinable or the marginal to be bound up in the potential loss of distinction between self and other, a notion central to Kristeva's theory of the abject (Kristeva, 1980, p. 64). For Kristeva, the abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example used by Kristeva to demonstrate what causes such a reaction is that of the corpse, which traumatically reminds us of our materiality (Kristeva, 1980, p. 65). Kristeva's reference to the corpse is significant here, given the close and often-explicit association made between the albino body and the cadaver.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a postcolonial reading of albinism in East Africa. It has examined albinism as both a literary motif of exposing and indicting other myriad problems affecting modern society and a symbol of resistance in Goro Kamau's *Ghost and Fortune Hunters*. This argument was bolstered by data that showed that Kamau protagonist, Kaboci, was invisibilised by the markedness that dehumanised him. Additionally, as the paper has shown, although the author gives the narrative of albinos' predicament, he opens other layers of social, political and economic issues affecting the ordinary person in the society, most of which are a product of modernity. Like most modern families, Kaboci is raised by a single mother; there is poverty, corruption, crime, and abuse of the law, affecting contemporary society. The paper has shown that Kamau's creation of a protagonist with albinism, and the inhumane treatment this protagonist goes through in the hands of a modern father, modern classmates, and neighbours demands consideration of how the modern world of *Ghost* is structured. Kaboci's albinism makes him a figure straddling on terrible terrains full of greed and betrayal. The recurrent definition of the albino in terms of continued adherence to binary oppositions reinforced under colonialism, which the body of the black African albino at once emphasises and undermines, reveals that choices between black and white and the values attached to them continue to hold currency in East Africa. Indirectly, the author indicts modern society for marginalising the albinos simply because of their skin colour. By critiquing modern society, the author becomes a conscious examiner of his community.

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