

# MANIFESTATION OF COMMON MAN LANGUAGE IN EPIC POEMS: A CASE STUDY OF UTENDI WA SIRI LI ASRARI

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**Abstract:** The usage of common man language (*Skaz*) in Swahili epic poems has been dealt with scantily or coincidentally. This paper tries to show this type of language usage in *Utendi wa Siri li Asrari* (Epic poem of secret of secrets) so as to understand the meaning intended by the composer. *Skaz* language is oriented towards everyday speech of the common folk and the narrator does not possess intellectual sophistication. Also, it has to be double voiced so as to include many other actors in the narration. Our data samples will include the type of narration, syntactic constructs, and lexicon utilized in the poem. The data is solely collected from the text and using descriptive analysis we shall shed light on the *Skaz*. We conclude that the *Skaz* is evident in the poem and by contextualizing the words we get to understand their meaning.

**Keywords:** *Skaz*, Swahili, Siri li Asrari, literature, epic.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*Utendi wa Siri li Asrari* (Epic poem of secret of secrets) was composed in the mid 17 Century. It is one of the earliest poems known in Swahili literature. The poem talks of an expedition by Prophet Muhammad towards liberating the oppressed people against a tyrant, Andharuni, living in the outskirts of Medina, an Islamic holy site in Saudi Arabia.

This paper shall try to highlight a typical ‘common man’ language utilized by the composer, Mwanamwarabu binti Bwanalemba. The writer also known as Mwanalemba, utilizes the common people’s language to put forth her argument for the Muslim believers to put their trust in Allah in whatever circumstance they may fall into. We shall demonstrate the oral intonation, the syntactic construction of oral speech, and the corresponding lexicon utilized in the poem so as to bring to the surface the common man language.

Treatises written on this epic poem have focused on the thematic aspect (Mutiso, 1996, 2003; Knappert, 1979) and some have touched on the linguistic forms utilized by the composer (Wesah, 2005). This paper will shed light on the linguistic stylization by focusing on the language of *Skaz*. *Skaz* is a type of language in the verbal art where the writer uses everyday language used in the social spaces. The language is characterized by a narration where the focus is on the storyteller rather than on the story. The language that s/he uses and the extra linguistic features utilized make the story sound differently on the ears of the listener. In addition, *Skaz* does also take into account the double voicedness of the language used (Schmid, 2013: para 4; Bakhtin, 1984:191). The orientation towards everyday usage of language manifests the ‘other’ voice in the narration which the writer/storyteller comes with in the story (Bakhtin, 1984:192). By being a common people’s language, *Skaz* is also characterized by restricted intellectual horizons (Schmid, 2013). The language of the common people is not so much sophisticated that makes comprehension by the listener easy. The syntactic constructions and the lexicon used is tied with everyday usage. Common man’s language used in this paper shall mean the language of the less intellectual persons in the society.

## II. SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The poem starts with salutations to Allah and the Prophet which is characteristic of this poetic genre. Then goes into the background of the expedition where the oppressed Muslims forward their grievances to Prophet Muhammad asking for help. The Prophet acts on the complaints and sends a contingent of soldiers to fight the tyrant, Andharuni. The Muslim soldiers are overwhelmed by Andharuni and a message is sent to the Prophet to come to Muslim's rescue. The Prophet then reaches out to the Muslim soldiers and is astounded by the power of Andharuni. The Prophet prays to Allah for mercy and help and it is revealed to him that Andharuni has paranormal powers vested in a talisman which he inherited from his ancestors. Allah makes the Prophet get the talisman concealed in Andharuni's helmet through a bird and the Prophet reads the power message in the talisman and the powers are transferred to the Prophet. The Prophet then subdues Andharuni and his soldiers. After that, the main object of the poem is outlined up till the end of the poem. The secret of secrets is revealed 'partially' in this section. The most powerful name of Allah is the secret but is, however, not revealed. Lastly, there is the ending section which is characterized by the composer stating her family's lineage and the date of finishing to write this poem. The aforementioned sections of the poem is the standard template of epic poems composed in the classical works of Swahili literature.

## III. PRESENCE OF SKAZ IN THE POEM

Just as mentioned above, the common man's language can be seen by the type of utterances articulated and the lexicon used; in this poem these characteristics are also observed. In the first section during the poetess' salutations to Allah, the Prophet, the Companions of the Prophet, then she takes a chance to give greetings to the members of the Prophet's family. Mwanalemba uses the word *Sayyidna* in the following stanza:

15. Na sayyidna Fatima	And his Lordship Fatima
Humsalia daima	I pray for always
Baba wakwe, muadhama	Your father, the praised one
Sala'ami muombezi.	May Allah's blessings be with him, the intercessor.

(My translation)

In the first verse the poetess uses the word *sayyidna* which means 'our Lordship' (masculine) to refer to Fatima who is the Prophet's daughter. The correct lexicon should have been *sayyidatuna* 'Her Lordship'. This type of usage is found in everyday usage because of being fond of praising the Prophet and other masculine companions of the Prophet that is why the common usage slipped into the poetess mouth. It could be argued that, may be, it was because of meter constraints that she had to reduce the word, but word attraction because of meter is indicated by an apostrophe just as in verse four of this stanza.

Andharuni, the second main character in this poem, is characterized as bad in attributes and not worthy of ruling the believing people. The words used to portray Andharuni are so 'harsh' that cannot be utilized in a religious composition like this poem. She says:

18. Hakuna ulimwenguni	There is none in the world
Mezjaliwa imani	Who has belief
Asosalia amini	Who does not pray for the Prophet
Ila washurabu shizi.	Except the wine drinkers.

112. Wakaona wabasiri	They saw explicitly
Na wangwa bora wa nari	The hot battle ground
Wa hoyo mbwa kafiri	Of that kafir, dog
Andharuni mtozi.	Andharuni the lowest.

114. Na ungiwe mwenye dhambi	And the many this sinner
Hoyo mbwa asili mbi	This dog with bad lineage
Waliyokita mawimbi	Staged on waves
Yalo bora mafumizi.	With good ebbs.

240. Lana ya Mola Jabari	The curse of God
I kolikoe kafiri	Is with this kafir
Nda milele na umuri	Forever and ever
Haimwepuki mtwazi.	And will not evade him, the lowest.

(My translation)

The use of slur words like ‘washurabu shizi’ (wine drinkers/drunks), ‘mbwa’ (dog), ‘kafiri’ (bad non believer), ‘asili mbi’ (bad lineage), and ‘mtwazi’ (lowest of the low) shows the intensity of despise and anger the poetess had over the people like Andharuni. Throughout the poem Andharuni represented the oppressor of innocent, non harmful, law abiding believing citizens. Contextualizing this poem, it was completed during the final years of the Portuguese occupation of east Africa before being driven out by the invading Mazrui Arab soldiers. The ‘harsh’ less euphemistic usage could have been triggered by the continued occupation of Pate and the other Swahili city states by the Portuguese.

There are quite a number of occasions in *Utendi wa Siri li Asrari* where the poetess uses a construction ‘kala sheikh’ (the learned sheikh said) or ‘kala mwenye kurawi’ (the storyteller/reporter said) verses 108 and 315 respectively, which show that there are some words in the poem that are not from the poetess but from an outside source. The poetess says:

108. Kala shekhe mtukufu	The honorable learned has said
Unenee msanifu	The best sayer
Mwenye radhi ya Latwifu	Who has the pleasure of God
Na Mtume muongozi.	And the Prophet, the Leader.

315. Kala shekhe metamka	The learned has said
Mwenye kurawi hakika	Who says authoritatively
Mtume aliondoka	The Prophet went
Akatawadha muyuzi.	To take ablution, the knower.

(My translation)

The polyphony of the narration makes it have dialogic tendencies. But in the language of everyday usage or of the common man’s language who does not possess authority on knowledge, quoting an authority gives his/her words legitimacy. In addition, quoting an authority does also show that the words have already been spoken by someone else, therefore, words are an echo of the other thus in dialogue with the surrounding context.

Boasting language is also peculiar to common man language contrary to academic circles where pride language is restricted. In outlining the troops’ ‘line ups’, the poetess mentions by name the main commanders of the Prophet’s army. In total eleven commanders are mentioned in successive stanzas showing the readiness and the eventual triumph of the Prophet’s army. The other side of the unbelievers is not mentioned and their preparedness is not heard of. This is a method of war propaganda where the ‘good’ are given prominence and that victory is within sight due to the composition of the believers army. Artistically, the boasting language foregrounds the writers intention of showing that ‘good’ will always triumph. But to their astonishment, the Muslim soldiers were overrun by Andharuni, thus, confirming the poetess’ actual intention that only Allah brings triumph and not the best commanders in the army.

During an encounter in the battlefield a scene is brought by the composer petering Andharuni, the transgressor’s leader, and Ali, a cousin of the Prophet and an accomplished fighter. In this encounter the two prominent fighters dialogue while fighting. Andharuni starts the conversation in the midst of fighting by enquiring Ali’s name. Andharuni says:

234. Andharuni dhalimu	Andharuni the oppressor
Kamuuliza imamu	Asked the leader
‘neleza yako isimu’	‘Tell me your name’
Witwa iye mtupizi?	What is your name O! Archer?

237. Mimi ndimi shekhe Ali I am sheikh Ali  
 Mkwewe tumwa Rasuli Son-in-law of the Prophet  
 Nijuwa ewe juhali Know me you fool  
 Mjinga uso maizi. Foolish is who knows nothing.

238. Na kunia langu jua my nickname know it  
 Ni Haidari mzawa Is Haidari (lion) borne  
 Shujaa nisio tuwa Brave does not fear  
 Nidhilio wanwa shizi. I despise drunkards. (My translation)

This scene was brought as an anisochronis to slow down the speed of actions happening in the battlefield. Apart from that, the conversation between the two commanders shows the attitudes of both of them. Andharuni wants to know the challenger because initially he had boasted as being the only best fighter. When he got his match he wanted to know the challenger. On the other hand, Ali answers boastingly while despising Andharuni. He describes Andharuni as drunkard and that he, Ali, is *the* lion and no other can claim that tag. This type of language where one character of the same calibre as the other despises his colleague is intended by the poetess to give dominance to the 'good' virtue that she has been stressing all along in the poem. In folklore despising language exists while in academic instances this type of language is viewed as arrogance.

After overriding Andharuni with his troops, the Prophet went to see his beloved friend Abubakar who was not in the battle due to sickness. When he sees his friend in the state he is, the Prophet exclaims emphatically:

371. Akatamka amini The Prophet said  
 Kamwambia dalihini He told him there and then  
 'Abubakari u nani? 'Abubakar what is wrong?  
 Labuda huwezi? May be you are very sick?

372. Mbona umekonda mno Why are you so thin  
 Walau huna maneno Is there something troubling you  
 Na la watu tangamano In the congregation  
 Hukuwamo, mtambuizi. You were not there, tell me. (My translation)

The Prophet is surprised to see his beloved friend Abubakar in that state. He has grown thin and his health seems deteriorating. Then he enquires if there is something or someone who is troubling Abubakar. Prophet Muhammad has just come from the battlefield where he was the commander in chief of the Muslim army. His status among the people is of the highest rank. But when he sees his colleague and dear friend, he comes down the rank ladder and asks questions like a person with no authority in society. By lowering his status in front of his friend, the Prophet breaks all boundaries between leader – follower and reduces the proximity of their interaction. This way the Prophet is opening up to Abubakar so that he may also open up; that is why he asks him if he has something or someone troubling him. The informality of the conversation makes the interlocutors ask intimate questions that need frank answers, thus this type of context is mostly found in the everyday life of language users.

From time to time, the Prophet receives revelations from Allah through the angel Gabriel (Jibril) if he is in dire need of help or guidance. The angel Gabriel is sent with the message and delivers it to the Prophet. When they meet and the conversation between the two is initiated the angel starts by greeting the Prophet in a more formal way. This formality shows the difference in rank of the two servants of Allah. But the action of greeting in the first instance reflects a cultural trait that conversations in the society begin with greetings. For example:

163. Katamka Jiburili And Gabriel said  
 Akamwambia rasuli Telling the Prophet  
 Hakika Mola Jalali Allah the Exalted  
 Akusalimu azizi. Greets you the beloved. (My translation)

When the Prophet was surprised at Andharuni's powers he sought help from Allah. When the answer was to be delivered by angel Gabriel first he greeted the Prophet. This routine starting conversation or message delivery by greeting is also repeated in stanza 205, 321, and 323. In everyday practice, especially in Swahili society, normal conversations have to start with greetings then continues with the message delivery.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to shed light on the language of the common man as manifested in the Swahili epic poem *Utendi wa Siri li Asrari*. By taking the common man's language (*Skaz*) as expressed by Eichenbaum and modified by Bakhtin, we have been able to show that the narration of the storyteller is geared towards everyday speech of the interlocutors. We highlighted on the boasting, despising, greeting, emphatic languages found in the poem. We saw how these language stylizations induce the poetess' intention and goal. Furthermore, we showed that there is double voicedness or polyphony as stipulated by Bakhtin in the *Skaz*. We showed that the poetess alludes to authoritative personae when expressing herself. The syntactic constructs of the words does shed light that it is not only the language of the poetess that is present in the poem but there is also language from outside. The allusion helps in securing the words of the poetess that they are legitimate. We did also show that there are words that have been used by the poetess clumsily portraying the intellectual standard of the writer. The use of slur words and incorrect grammatical words shows that the poetess did not take into account the intellect required in such a religious poem but wanted to present her views by using the language of the common man. From our analysis of the poem we were able to show that this poem clearly exhibits traits of *Skaz* and that we have been able to understand the words used and their intended meaning.

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