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The Future of East African Kiswahili orature in the digital age: a case study of WhatsApp Narrative

Abstract: According to Afroline report (see, <http://www.afroline.org/?p=16226>), the use of mobile phones in Africa is on the rise. By the end of 2011 there were more than 500 million mobile phone subscribers in Africa. East Africa is one of the leading regions in Africa, not only in mobile phone usage, but also in the way people are interacting through various social media. Google, for example, is witnessing growth in the use of internet through cell phones social media connection, where it is reported that four out of every ten Google search requests come from a mobile phone. Through digital devices, users create and share narratives, chats, and send stories and various texts including pictographs. Such an increase in the use of digital devices including TV and mobile phones on the one hand, and the intensification of interaction through social media on the other have implications on the meaning and structure of narratives, and on Kiswahili orature in general. Given this trend, we can only predict what the future of Kiswahili oral literature could be. Kiswahili, the language that connects East Africans together, has a long tradition of orature. With the advent of digital devices, and the unprecedented rate of East African users of such devices, what will the future of Kiswahili orature in East Africa be? Using intertextuality theory, the paper addresses these questions by focusing on Kiswahili oral literature as captured through WhatsApp messenger, an instantaneous messaging application for smartphones.

Keywords: Kiswahili, orature, narrative, WhatsApp

Introduction

What is Kiswahili orature? And why have we chosen to study WhatsApp messenger among all social media applications that instantly send and receive messages? To capture the meaning as contextualized in this article, I propose that we begin by examining the general concept of Kiswahili literature. Kiswahili literature – (that includes oral and written) is one of the leading African literatures in an African language, and it is widely read in and outside of East Africa. Julien Eileen (1995) says:

Indeed, verbal artistic traditions, literary as well as oral, are ancient in Africa. Centuries before European colonialism and the introduction of European languages, there were bards and storytellers, scribes, poets, and writers in languages such as Kiswahili and Amharic. Many of those traditions adapt and live on in various guises today (1995: 295).

Eileen's above assertion is very important in this introductory part. It captures both the history and some types of Kiswahili orature. Eileen talks about 'centuries before colonialism' when referring to the dating of Swahili writing civilization. Scholars have attempted to date this civilization from different perspectives. A. Zhukov (2004) for example, dates the beginnings of Swahili written literature in the eleventh century. However, its oral genres might have existed earlier, probably during the time of convergence and divergence of the Swahili people (Massamba 2007). In her presentation, Linda Rideout (2010) shows through archeological evidence, that a town located 15 km north of Mombasa existed since 4th Century BC. The town called Mtwapa was one of the earliest settlements of the Swahili people. It is not far fetched then that Zhukov dates the written culture to the 11th Century. Indeed, Felix Chami's new archeological discovery dates the existence of Swahili culture to even earlier, during the Stone Age. He says:

"One important discovery for me was to show that Swahili culture evolved from the culture of the stone age and early iron age all the way up to modern times. This means that the

Swahili culture we recognize today was not made by foreigners coming here – it was actually made by Africans themselves." (Kowalczyk 2015).

Talking about Kiswahili language and culture, one is tempted to know who these Swahili people are. In this article however, I do not intend to delve into the controversies of who is Swahili and who is not; neither do I intend to examine the language aspect of Swahili literature. Such topics have been examined by scholars such as Topan (1968), Mazrui and Shariff (1994) and Khamis (2000) to mention but a few. I subscribe to Mulokozi, one of the distinguished literary scholars in the region. He writes the following concerning Swahili literature in East Africa:

“.... for in East African diversity there is also East African unity. To each work of poetry or art, to each book of fiction or play, one always identifies a common denominator which characterizes that work as being East African. It is this common denominator which makes it possible to speak of "Swahili Literature" [...] without giving rise to confusing ambiguities” (Mugyabuso Mulokozi 1974, unpublished article).

While some ethnic communities in East Africa have some written literature of their own, Swahili literature today has become the common denominator among all communities. It is in this literature that people of East Africa voice their experience and their concern over a number of issues both within the East African geographical boundaries and beyond. Another prominent scholar, Said Ahmed Khamis Mohammed talks of this “voice” as heterogeneity, looking at it from a ‘supra-ethnic and cosmopolitan milieu of East Africa’ (2000: 11). It is this “East African voice” that I intend to follow in discussing changes in Kiswahili narratives through the WhatsApp story, that might have implications on the existing theories of African Oral narratives.

This East African voice is discussed from a slightly different perspective in Makokha’s work (2011) where they talk of East Africa’s “oral traditions” that weave neatly the challenges and understanding

of the East African people over their environment. What I am following in this article is Kiswahili orature as reflected in WhatsApp communication. I fully agree with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1984) "thesis" in using African language when examining African literature and culture. In his view, Ngugi says:

The language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding our attention and a problem calling for a resolution (1984: 4).

This paper therefore, looks at African orature as an oral narration told in an African language, be it fictional or factual, but one that presents issues that evolve around the lives of the Swahili people. The narration's 'common denominator' in East Africa, to borrow Mulokozi's usage, has to be the Kiswahili language. With the development in science and technology, East Africans have witnessed the Kiswahili language's rapid development into a digital world. Communication through smart phones in particular, have included all that could be shared between individuals and groups. Some literary genres have also been swayed in the digital world, and digitized to match the contemporary popularity of chats and stories.

Recently, studies on cyberspace related works have attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Starting from the 1990s, scholars have ventured to study digital communication from legal perspectives, i.e. E. Volokh (1995), G.D. Post (1996), J.D. Goldstone (1998) and E.J. Cohen (2007) to mention a few. Digital studies have also included information, communication theory and technology (R.T. Craig 1999; J. Camp and Y.T. Chien 2000; Z. Papacharissi 2002; and G. Shaffer (2014). Other cyberspace studies have also included socio-cultural and developmental issues (H. Buchstein, 1997; M. de Bruijn 2014 and I. Gagliardon 2014). Some have specifically studied the digital works on fiction (D.M Koss and E.T. Raymond 2010; and J.M. Dagal 2012). They all agree on one thing: that cyberspace communication has some interesting arguments worthy of academic discussion.

In this article, the Kiswahili orature we are examining is those artistic messages shared through WhatsApp which have consistently used Kiswahili language to communicate an oral narrative. We have chosen WhatsApp because it is the most popular messaging application globally. To grasp its popularity, let us briefly see what Nadeem Unuth writes about it. In February 2017, WhatsApp had more than half a billion users worldwide (Unuth 2017), followed by China's WeChat. Other messaging applications include Viber, Kik and LINE. With improving communication from SMS only, to voice note clips and video calls, WhatsApp is chosen by many users as an easy and friendly application. For more details on its popularity one can see Unuth's observations at <https://www.lifewire.com/reasons-why-WhatsApp-is-popular-3426372>. Following this introductory part, the article has three main objectives for discussion.

Objectives

1. To examine WhatsApp narratives shared among members of selected groups
2. To assess the characteristics of WhatsApp narratives
3. To re-examine the current main-stream meaning of narratives

The meaning of narratives

Several scholars have given the meaning of narratives from different perspectives. In brief, what they say is that a narrative is a story. It is the told or written experience of an individual or a people's lives. Michael Bamberg says: "When narrators tell a story, they give narrative form to experience. They position characters in space and time and, in a broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened—or what is imagined to have happened." (Bamberg 2012: 77). In other words, narrators – as a single source – give a story to the audience. This means, there is a narrator somewhere giving his experience, and out there, there are people listening to the narrator's creative experience. Relating narrative to orature, Okumba Miruka says that narrative "is basically a prose account of people, events, places etc. that may be factual or fictional. The accounts are principally handed down from person to person and generation to genera-

tion through word of mouth...” (Okumba Miruka 2011: 134). Like Bamberg, Miruka looks at a narrative as a unidirectional genre. The same view was given by Teresa Ukrainetz (2006) quoting Labov and later Moffet, saying: “Narrative is the verbal recapitulation of past experiences (Labov 1972: 361) or the telling of "what happened" (Moffett 1968: 121). The experiences reported may be real, imaginary, or somewhere in between.” (Ukrainetz 2006: 196). In all the afore-quoted sources, it seems the concept of experience is vital in a narrative. Expanding this view from a psychoanalytic framework, Lichtenberg et. al. say: “Narratives are the means by which experience, as it is lived, is felt, noted, and encoded. Narratives give development a sense of temporality, continuity, permutation, and cohesion. Each narrative not only gives representation to experience but also has the potential of deepening the meaning through metaphoric linkage” (Lichtenberg et. al. 2017: 2-5). Even when it is fictional, the base line is that the author is able to present his or her fictional narrative that is developed from his or her experience. In other words, what a narrator gives comes from his/her world.

There is one commonality in all of these definitions. There are no multiple sources of a narrative. It seems that a narrative goes from one person (or source) to the other, from one generation to the next. Looking at it from a verbal point of view, Wanjala Simiyu says, oral narrative is an art of which its main pillar of creation, presentation and spread are voice and action (2013: 5). These narratives are shaped by “reality and imagination” (Wallace 1986: 46 -52): the reality of the world people live in, and the imagination of a narrator. This is the way narratives have been looked at and defined. Scholars went further to give narrative a structure as the framework upon which all narratives are to fit into.

As a point of departure, Barthes and Duisit give us two elements worth contemplating in this article. They talk of a narrative as “a random assemblage of events”; and that we should look for a structure of narrative from narratives themselves (p. 238). An interesting question is that, if one could establish a narrative structure at all, will that structure be the same for digital narratives and for non-digital or “classical” narratives. In other words, is there a common structure to

all narratives regardless of the mode of delivery? Even when Barthes and Duisit propose a theory of the structure of narratives (p. 241), is this proposition suitable for the digital narratives of modern times? According to an online dictionary, a narrative structure is defined as “the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to a reader, listener, or viewer. Briefly, a narrative is either divided into three segments, meaning: set up, conflict and resolution¹ or five sections including the exposition, the rising action, the climax, the falling action and finally the resolution². Be it “set up” or “exposition”, in the first step there is one source of a narrative. Do digital narratives have a similar structure? This question will be discussed in this article while observing the complex nature of the digital narrative components. That said, the analysis of digital narratives requires a theory that will portray this complexity. The following section presents the theory that guides this article.

Intertextuality theory of narratives

In this article, I use the intertextuality theory in analyzing digital narratives. According to Tracy Lemaster (2012) “intertextuality is the reference to or application of a literary, media, or social ‘text’ within another literary, media, or social ‘text’.” In analyzing ‘texts’ in the WhatsApp communication, I will focus on the texts that draw attention and increase the memorization of the narrative. Adolphe Haberer looks at intertextuality as “the memory of Literature” (2007: 54), which avails a multidimensional look, at a “text” being projected. Under this theory no text exists on its own. It is always connected to other texts. In other words, the meaning of a given text can be fully understood if one looks into its relationship with other texts that are either referenced or recalled. Haberer also looks at a text as “a network that spreads and sprawls, has no origin, no end, and no hierarchical organization (2007: 57). Looking with an intertextuality view, the digital narratives have the elements of what Tisha Turk calls “transformative narratives” (2011: 295). Such narratives have a mul-

¹ www.definitions.net/definition/narrative%20structure

² study.com/lesson/structure-in-literature-definition-examples.html.

multiple array of elements. Turk says: an author may fill in the outlines of a tale with greater detail; move the story to a different setting; tell it from a different point of view or focalize it through a different character (Turk 2011: 295). In Turk's transformative narratives, a reader contributes to the meaning of the text by adding some information based on experience. In other words, readers "collaborate in the construction of the narrative" as one reads.

Turk says: "part of the transformative narrative's meaning lies outside the text, in the space between text and intertext. The more we know about the overlaps and gaps between the texts, the more complicated the project of assembly becomes, and the more clever we feel for managing it" (Turk 2011: 296). In the digital narratives, a reader does not remain a "passive" interpreter of a narrative, but he/she becomes the narrator. In fact, in the digital narratives, the meaning goes beyond text and inter-text, to include a series of different texts that come from readers. These readers become narrators and contribute a lot to the development of a narrative.

As one posts an initial text to social media be it through mobile phones, or computer, he/she becomes the first narrator of the story. But before he/she owns it, immediately other people join in the reading while at the same time either commenting or modifying the narrative. They post texts in different shapes and types, give comments onto the initial text and onto the subsequent texts, sometimes making the texts an endless narrative with one coherent story. In so doing, these readers are at the same time narrators giving the initial narrative more meaning, and the creativity becomes endless as the narrative enlarges and spreads. Before turning to see an example of modern digital narratives, let us suggest a modern narrative structure and discuss the way it differs from the classical one.

Modern narratives

Modern narratives are complex. They involve a multilayered text structure in which a story is multidirectional, unlike the classical ones where a text is unidirectional. Following the intertextuality theory of narratives, I take "text" in this article to mean any representation, or combination thereof. Texts could be words, sounds, moving

pictures or icons that are used to build and sustain a story. A modern narrative is capable of combining all these elements through digitalized technique. Unlike the non-digital ones, modern narratives are multidirectional in the sense that there is no single source of narration. As said earlier, listeners of the narrative are at the same time the creators of the same narration.

The characteristics of a modern narrative could be looked at as not being the same as the classical ones. Some traits of modern narratives include the following: the story in a modern narrative could become a live event. Such an event happening at the time of narration has the potential of being modified. Besides, digital narratives are modern because they outlive time and space. They not only give a chance for events to be sentient, but also they create a space where words and voice make a “visual” appearance. Another characteristic of a modern narrative is that its audience is necessarily active because of its ability and opportunity to contribute to the narration. In the digital narrative it is possible for the narrator to project vividly what will happen in the future. This is done by using words, sounds, moving pictures or icons that the audience is able to see (although they have not yet happened). In such a projection, the narrator or series of narrators, have the chance to use present or past scenarios – be they words, sounds, moving pictures or icons – in the narration. It is a unique characteristic, where the narrator, while in present time and space, can link the past or to the future.

Following this argument, let us turn to look at the modern narratives as experienced in WhatsApp and shared among members of a group through smartphones.

An example of the WhatsApp narrative

This is a narrative about a bus trip from one city to the other. It has several elements intertwined to form a coherent story. These elements are taken as texts that overlap to give meaning to the entire narrative. These texts for example, are words, icons and pictures, each of which stands for an idea being narrated. There are sounds given by some of the icons to represent the sound of the concept that is narrated. In the narrative, besides the icon that represents a con-

cept, for instance thunder, the sound of thunder itself is also presented. There are texts appearing as pictures of a bus, trees and people. When the narrator talks of heavy rains, then an umbrella is used to create imagery. Two interesting representation texts are worth mentioning. One is the sound text of thunder. As one reads the narrative, one sees not only the texts in pictures but also he/she hears the texts in sounds. If the reader has never heard about thunder, this text symbolizes the event a loud catchy way. We will come back to this in the analysis using the intertextuality theory. The second remarkable imagery is the sound of a moving bus. Here, two texts are juxtaposed to make the narrative interesting. As the narrative on a bus trip develops, one not only moves with a moving bus, but also he/she travels with the theme that is being developed. The narrator tries to add an image to every word that could be conceptualized through imagery.

Narrative One, part one



In the second and third parts of the same narrative, the narrator continues in the first person, while changing between the second and third persons. At times the narrator becomes the focalizer while different texts are juxtaposed. It is interesting to note here that the au-

thor himself/herself becomes the “text” like what Daniel Jacobsen Sivinski (2010) says concerning the interpretation of a novel.

Narrative One, part two

leo ni siku yake ya kufa 🚶, tena kufa kwa radi ⚡ .
Ili tusife wote, nataka kila abiria 🚶🚶🚶
ashuke akaguse mti 🌴🚶🚶🌴 ili
anayepigwa na radi, apigwe wengine
wasife kwa ajili yake. "
Abiria wakitetemeka 🙌🙌🙌, wakaanza
kushuka 🚶🚶🚶 mmoja mmoja.
Unaenda 🌴🚶 unagusa mti ,
kisha unarudi 🚶🚶 kwenye basi. Abiria
wote pamoja na dereva mmoja mmoja,
wakaenda, wakagusa mti 🌴🚶 na kurudi
🚶🚶 bila dhara lolote!
Akawa kabaki abiria mmoja tu 🙌, ambaye
alikuwa hajagusa mti.
Abiria wote kwa macho 🙄🙄🙄🙄 ya hasira
😡😡😡 wakamwambia akaguse mti.
Akawa anaogopa 🚶🙌🙌 kufa. Akagoma.

The narrative’s structure could be divided into three parts. At the beginning a reader is told that this is a story. It is an educational story “*hadithi ya kufundisha*”. Like other narratives it indicates the time and space: one day “*siku moja*.” Immediately a reader knows that what he/she is about to read, is an event that has already happened. However, from the use of different texts, the narrative changes from a recorded event into an incident that is happening as it is being narrated. These changes bring the reader into the “main story”. The narrative is not just about travelling in a bus, it sets to tell what happened (or rather what is happening) during the journey.

Narrative One, part three

Wakamlazimisha kwa nguvu 🏋️ sana na kumtoa nje 🌴 🚶. Yule abiria akiwa amefumba macho 🤪, akaenda akagusa mti 🌴 🚶.

👤 Hamadi bin Vuul
Radi kali sana ⚡⚡⚡⚡⚡ ikalipiga basi 🚍, abiria na wote waliokuwamo, wakafa palepale 😞😞😞.

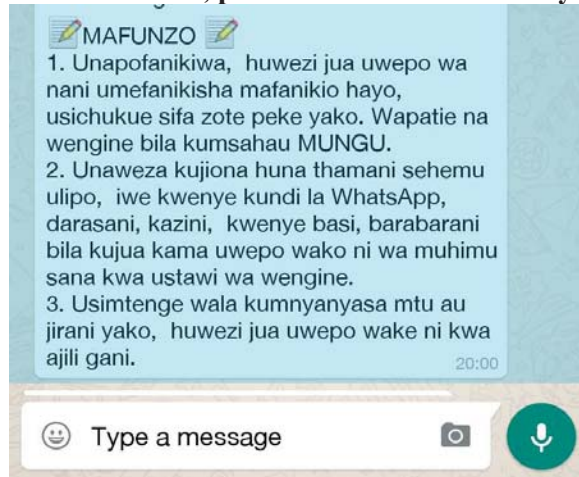
Kumbe uwepo wake ndio ulikuwa unazuia abiria wengine wasidhurike na radi.

📖 MAFUNZO 📖

1. Unapofanikiwa, huwezi jua uwepo wa nani umefanikisha mafanikio hayo, usichukue sifa zote peke yako. Wapatie na wengine bila kumsahau MUNGU.
2. Unaweza kujiona huna thamani sehemu ulipo, iwe kwenye kundi la WhatsApp, darasani, kazini, kwenye basi, barabarani bila kujua kama uwepo wako ni wa muhimu sana kwa ustawi wa wengine.

In the second and third parts, a reader gets the main story. It is a story about several people travelling in a bus on a stormy rainy day. During the travel, the rain increases and so does the storm. Soon lightning strikes, and thunder sounds again. Passengers are terrified while the bus driver becomes suspicious of a bad omen. The driver believes that there is a passenger whose destiny is to die from lightning. As that passenger remains in the bus, he/she puts all other passengers at risk. Thus the bus driver stops the bus and orders each passenger to come out of the bus, and go touch a tree outside. The passenger who puts others at risk will die alone as he/she touches the tree. All passengers except one obey and step out of the bus. One after the other, they come out until one passenger remains. Other passengers are mad at him and order him to get out. They force him out and demand that he goes to touch the tree. Closing his eyes, the passenger goes and touches the tree. At that very moment lightning strikes and kills all of the people in the bus except for him. This narrative ends in tragedy as only one passenger survives.

Narrative One, part four: moral of the story



Apparently he was exactly the opposite of what they thought of him – he was their shield. At the end of this structure: i.e. introduction, main body, and the end, the narrative gives the moral part of the story. Although it is not part of the main narrative, it forms a part of the story in WhatsApp and other digital communication devices. In mostly oral narratives, the moral of the story is given after the main story has ended. It is not considered part of the story, but is an essential part that opens up a discussion that gives meaning to the narrative.

Discussion

This narrative portrays texts that are interrelated. We see events and actors which depend on each other to create one coherent story. Texts that make up events are of different types, but are also related. For example, rain is related to lightning, which in turn is related to a tree. All these are connected to bring a sense of the travelers inside of the bus. Looking at this interrelatedness, we find one important scenario. The digital narrative makes it possible for a story to become a live

event. Let us see this argument in details.

The story in cyberspace becomes an event. This is common to all narratives. An occurrence happens at a specific time and in a specific space either to usher the beginning of something or to join together to become part of a chain of incidents. The interesting part with digital works is that there is room for events to be live. In other words, an event could happen at the time of narration. Put differently, such digital works challenge the question of time and space. Outside of digital communication, the written narratives do not offer this possibility. Written narration cannot make live incidents. Likewise, in oral narratives it is not possible to have sentient events. The closest possible way to make a “conscious” event is imitation. Through imitation, oral narratives attempt to bring to life incidents of the past or incidents which could happen in the future. The cyberspace narratives however, make things happen at the very time of narration, while providing room for past or future occurrences.

The ability to link the past and the future into the present narrative is a unique experience with digital communication. This possibility is associated with other characteristics of the digital works which we now turn to discuss. This relates to interdependence of digital texts. There is, as it were, a symbiotic relationship between words, images, drawings and other paralinguistic marks. In the narrative that we have seen, the narrator uses images of trees, a bus, people and icons representing rain and thunder to make the whole story even more meaningful. The possibility of having sounds and movements of a bus, rain and lightning make the events relate to one another in an interesting way. Indeed they constitute multi visual and multi audio possibilities coming together in one narrative.

In oral narrative, a voice is all that matters, while words cannot make a physical appearance. An experienced and good orator would know how and when to change his/her voice to suit his audience’s expectation of what is being narrated. The tone, the stress and physical gestures would add meaning to the narrative. With digital works, these qualities are combined. The texts that would normally be only oral are made possible in creative digital works. Moreover, digital communication enjoys the “magic” of the written words and the

“mystic” of spoken ones in a combined creativity.

This combined creativity is perhaps what makes digital narratives more powerful. The audience which is normally passive in the written narrative is very active in digital creativity. In the written narrative, there is no communication. Whatever the audience does, cannot affect or influence the author, neither can it impact the narrative. This is different with digital narratives, where there is ongoing communication. The audience makes its contribution by adding written text, oral text or symbolically by adding an icon, a picture or a symbol. The narrative becomes communal. Ultimately, after a series of additions and modifications, the digital narrative changes from individual ownership to becoming a collective creativity. In this way, the digital narrative is similar to oral narratives which become public property after a certain period.

If one compares oral narratives to digital narratives you find out that there are some similarities and some differences. We have just seen the similarity when it comes to ownership. Let us now see some differences: the activity level of an audience in an oral narrative cannot be equated to an active audience in a digital narrative. In the latter, as said earlier, there is room for combining different types of texts towards forming a more complex textual narrative. This possibility cannot occur in the ordinary oral narrative. The activity level of the audience in the oral narrative is there to make the narrative a lively interesting story. The audience may slightly change the form of the narrative, but cannot change its content. It could thus be said to be an external influence. The audience of the digital narrative however, is different.

The level of activity of the audience for the digital narrative may change the form and influence the contents as well. The audience is both the listener and active producer of the narrative. It has an internal influence because of its characteristics of being able to shape the narrative, change its cause through modifications and additions. This said, we should go back and revisit not only the meaning of narrative, but also its structure.

Conclusion

Creative digital works challenge us to rethink the meaning and structure of some literary genres. Some “traditional” or “classical” meanings of a given genre fail to fully represent the ‘same’ genre which is now provided through cyberspace. For example, can we identify a plot in a digital narrative? Do digital narratives have the same plot as ordinary oral or written narratives? The telling of the story does not necessarily follow the “traditional” or conventional way. It may be chronological, but not always. Further, this could mean that either digital creativity gives us a completely new genre, or it poses challenges to literary critics and theorists and encourages them to widen their frameworks so that the given meaning accommodates the old and new characteristics of a given genre. In any case, such narratives call for further study into literary works provided through cyberspace.

In the narrative above, members of a WhatsApp group had a chance to add texts of different types to the main narrative. They had a chance to comment or ask questions by sending sounds through voice notes, icons or pictures. These texts in turn add value to the main narrative. In doing so, members of the group became not only an active audience but also joined to form a complex narrative as narrators.

In the end, they all own the narrative. It becomes public, not owned by one narrator, and yet not public in the sense of classical narratives. So here we can talk of a digital narrative style. Basically the classical narrative explores two question words: the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the narrative. In the digital era, there is a third question – ‘who’ comes in, and it matters. This means that the digital narrative offers a possible third part – the audience – to contribute to the narrative. In other words, whereas in the classical sense there is one narrator giving the story, in the digital it opens up to multi-narrators. The moral of the story touches them as they all have “lived” it and become the “builders” of the story.

We have seen that the creative messages and literary genres sent through WhatsApp are digitalized. Readers are challenged to rethink the structure and meanings of these genres. For example, in

WhatsApp, people share sayings, proverbs, lullabies, folktales, poetry in general, riddles etc. What is interesting in these digitalized genres is that one find visual technology drawings, facial expressions and illustrations in WhatsApp making communication easier and more meaningful. Indeed cyberspace creativity is worth studying as it unveils some interesting features never experienced in the ordinary literary oral or written genres.

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