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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SPEAKING TO THE SOUL THROUGH THE HEART: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO SWAHILI POETRY

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Abstract

In poetry, culture and history, the concept of the heart, the soul and the mind play a pivotal place in the body of the human being. René Descartes (1596-1650) philosophy, cogito, ergo sum is noted by philosophers as the first principle of his theory of knowledge and concept of self. As illustrated by researchers who employed Descartes philosophical thinking, “the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.” The heart is considered as the source of emotions, passion and wisdom. It is the center of action. The soul, heart, mind and spirit are correlated or rather coordinated with the physical body. All these arguments complement the dualism philosophy of Descartes theory. This paper investigates the concepts of self-identity, self-consciousness, self-discovery, and self assurance as presented in two Swahili Poetry: *Al-Inkishafi* by Said Abdalla bin Ali bin Nassir (1720-1820) and “*Moyo Iwa na Subira*” by Abdilatif Abdalla (1973). The interwoven poetic artistic device of the soul-heart, mind and body connect the poets with their holistic being in a self-examination, evaluation, revelation and assurance amid the environmental and social challenges of their time.

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Introduction:-

In poetry, culture and history, the concept of the heart, the soul and the mind play a pivotal place in the body of the being. The heart for instance is considered as the source of emotions, passion and wisdom. People used to feel that they experienced the feeling or sensation of love and other emotional states in the area of the heart (Salem, 2007). According to Bradsaw (2009), Pascal famously declared that “the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know.” This is to say that reason apart from the heart is somehow radically incomplete. Pascal understood reason primarily in terms of its opposition to authority and tradition, as a faculty for inferring truth that is responsible solely to the deliverances of individual sensation and reflection. Pascal identifies the heart as the organ of religious faith. In his world view the heart stands out as an immediate intuitive perception. In general he associates the heart with feeling, intuition and emotions. All these arguments complement dualism philosophy of Descartes.

In reference to René Descartes (1596-1650) philosophy, cogito, ergo sum is the first principle of Descartes’ theory of knowledge. He holds that no rational person will doubt his or her own existence as a conscious, thinking entity. Thus, in addition to being the first principle of his epistemology, cogito ergo, sum is also the keystone of Descartes’ concept of self. It is therefore imperative that having a self-identity and self-consciousness is part of our being. Knowledge of the self opens up reasoning to understand our being and by extension others. This paper examines

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Descartes' dualism on understanding the soul, heart mind and body as parts that form the humanbeing; they are mutually dependent on one another. Berecz (1976) notes that dualistic view sees man as composed of mind and body-the mental and the physical (in ancient anthropological terms, "soul and body" or "spirit and body"). It implies that mental events are correlated or rather coordinated with physical events, or that the mind influences the body. Various theological and philosophical writers describe man by using terminologies such as "body and mind," or "body and soul," or even "body, mind, and soul." However as we will realize in this discussion, mind, heart and soul all refer to one individual, the poet. It is precisely this kind of interactional or correlation dualism that motivates me to philosophically investigate the relations between the heart, soul and the mind as artistically interwoven in the Swahili Poetry. Analyzing poetry is as complex as Descartes theory of dualism. The art and language of poetry is a more nuanced form of writing that results from a higher level of imagination and creativity that emerges from the poet's heart. Poetry is one invention in which the human being reveals his/her inner feelings, stress and aspirations. Poetry may be expressed in a monologue/ soliloquy or even in a dialogic form. The beauty and philosophy of poetry lies in the fact that every reader or analyst navigates their own way of interpreting the meaning, significance and relevance of what has been expressed in the poetic complex language. As expressed by de Vere Allen (1977:8); a great poem should provoke in the mind a range of associations. The poetic language engages both the poet and the analyst. The selected words and stylistic devices used to present the poem entail a process by which the inner soul and emotions of the poet are reached thus facilitating healing and overcoming of grief or stress in the individual. In cases of a soliloquy as shall be observed in *Al-Inkishafi* by Said Abdalla bin Ali bin Nassir and "**Moyo Iwa na Subira**" by Abdilatif Abdalla; the poet can only embrace his heart as close as to his soul as a therapeutic process of soul searching and or healing. The two poets employ soliloquy as stylistic thought process to engage with the inner self to discover self-identity.

Cornell (2022) further complicates Descartes' philosophy by stating that according to the philosopher, one must at least be a thinking thing, for to think that one is not a thinking thing would be self-defeating. He questions, "what about thinking? Following this line of thought, the mind or intellect or understanding and reason must all be utilized in order to get meaning out of poetry. Poetry is a literary genre that employs a variety of figures of speech; metaphors, irony, paradox, simile, personification which elicit emotive meaning. These are interwoven with form; rhyme, rhythm, meter, lyrics to create an aesthetic texture of the poem. Understanding poetry in itself is a philosophical venture. The fact that the poetic language evokes an emotive response is an element of thought for any scholarly investigation. For instance, the concept of the heart, soul and mind invite deeper thinking and reasoning to be able to get close to the anticipated pragmatic meaning of the poet. Furthermore, sacred poetry of all religious traditions as will be observed in *Al-Inkishafi* invokes faith and divine intervention. This is a metaphysical context and content that requires a philosophical approach.

As an art, poetry is taken as an invention of the human psyche. It speaks to the emotions and feelings of both the poet and the audience. The more intense the metaphoric language, the more imaginative the poetry becomes. This then compels the reader and the poetic analyst to pay keen attention and become conscious on how to acquire the text's meaning out of the complex strings of the words and intonation. Poetic reason evokes the thinking and reasoning of both the writer, the analyst and the audience. As you think deep into the language of poetry you explore the deepest mysteries of the life of the poet and his/her intended audience as shall be illustrated by selected stanzas from the Swahili poetry in question

The Socio-Political Background of *Al-Inkishafi* and *Sauti Ya Dhiki*

Al-Inkishafi (Said Abdalla Bin Ali Bin Nasir 1720-1820) was translated as *Catechism of the Soul* by James de Vere Allen (1977) and *Soul's Awakening* by William Hichens (1939). As noted by Retrova (2020), according to Mulokozi (1999), *Al-Inkishafi* was composed around 1800; while Hichens (1939) suggests 1810-1820.

According to Allen (pg 14) *Inkishafi* is derived from the Arabic root *Kashaf* which means "uncovering" or revelation through a personal experience and direct vision of God; after ascending through spiritual struggles and uncovering the heart (Britanica web dictionary). In line with Descartes philosophy, the epic of *Al-In-kishafi* will be taken as self-examination or revelation. Historical background of the themes explored in this text allude to the ruins of Pate which was once a great civilization city in the Kenyan Coastal region. Pate Sultanate as noted by Retrova (ibid) had once flourished culturally and commercially. However, by time this epic was composed at the end of the seventeenth century, the town had totally collapsed and its greatness and beauty reduced to ashes. As observed by the poet in stanza 49 below:

(stanza 49) Nyumba zao mbake ziwele tame;
makinda ya popo iyu wengeme;

(Stanza 50)...sasa walaliye wana wa nyuni,
bumu hukoroma kati nyumbani;

(Stanza 52): Nyumba kati zao huvuma mende,
kumbi za msana hulia ngende

A visit to the city could only be met by crickets and cockroaches (mende), hatchlings (wana wa nyuni), bats (popo) and owls (bumu) which symbolizes and metaphorizes the loneliness and desertedness of the once upon a time city of pride. Owl symbolizes a bad omen in most of the African culture. The great palace and court rooms which housed great thinkers, philosophers and rulers as shown in stanza 59: *Wapi...na Mashekhe mema wake Sarambe*; stanza 61 *Kwali na Mabwana na mawaziri: wenda na makundi ya askari* have all vanished. The Poet calls upon his heart/soul to realize that the pleasures of this world are vanity. The writer internalized the theme of death as an equalizer and hence invites his soul to an in-depth discourse. Besides containing moral teachings, *Al-Inkishafi* also embodies Islamic principles and creeds that are the pillars of Said Abdalla Bin Nasir epic landscape. Nasir's sacred poetry is a strategy of directing the heart to speak and concentrate to the Islamic faith so as to connect the writer and the reader to the divine. The mono-dialogue stylistic device of the mind engaging the heart-soul (moyo) is one of the most captivating artistic devices in this epic.

Sauti ya Dhiki composed by Abdilatif Abdalla (1973) was Translated as *Voice of Agony* by Ken Walibora (2024). Abdilatif composed these poems while in prison during a time when he was incarcerated for sedition as a result of his political activism. This contextual understanding will enable us comprehend the underlying tone expressed by the writer. In particular I will attempt to analyze the poem "**Moyo Iwa na Subira**" (Be Patient, My Heart). As observed elsewhere, Esther Mirembe and Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire (2020 (Editors)) in writing an introduction to *No Roses from My Mouth* by Stella Nyanzi (2020) make reference to Caludia Jones poetry. This poetry was written by an activist who uses the space of incarceration and the time of detention to reflect on the conditions of being incarcerated itself, the political conditions of the state, and on the nature of the human condition. The attitudes of these prisoners vary from defiance to despair, there are many comparisons with the outside world and justified anxiety for what is going on there, and, above all, a will to survive by recording their experiences in literary form (Macmillin: 2013)

Al-Inkishafi: The Soul, Heart, Mind and Body

Cornell (ibid) notes that the mind (or, the soul), which is understood to be a non-physical substance, is a thinking, non-extended thing. The body, understood to be a physical substance, is an extended, non-thinking thing. The human being, was composed of two distinct substances: the mind and the body. In philosophical and religious anthropology, the nature of man, his multi-composition is discussed in detail. Efforts are made to reveal the essence of man, his evolution, ages, meaning of life, death and immortality. Despite this intense investigation, the problem of the whole person remains (integrity, wholeness of the person) as expressed by Rybakov (2021) of which I refer to as a holistic being. Accordingly the heart which itself is same time a spiritual, mental and bodily organ, or, in other words, the focus of the spirit, soul and body is the center of human action. In his or her dualism nature, the imagery of poetry is a complexity: that man can be simultaneously described as a rational being, a moral agent, and a living biological organism. The concept of the heart occupies a major place in poetry and at times synonymously referred to as the soul or mind.

McDowell (2008) says that every religious person, even an atheist, always looks for spirituality in her/his daily life whether consciously or not. Poetry is the echo of a pure inner voice. Everyone has a desire for peace and understanding. Through poetry, people gain peace and understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them. Poetry is the language of devotion in prayer, chant, and song. Reading and writing poetry creates clarity, deepens and expands spiritual inquiry, and cultivates wisdom, compassion, self-confidence, patience, and love. Through a poetic religious lense, Said Abdalla Bin Ali Bin Nasir had the following discourse with his heart – his Soul:

Stanza 6:	de Vere Allen Translation
Kimakwe kwisa kuzikamili Himdi na sala kuziratili Niyaridhishe yangu maqali Ambayo moyoni niqusudiye	So can I say “Amen”, for thus I’ve made My invocation and due Prayer to God Now do I turn to what my soul must hear , To what my inmost heart would have me speak

According to de Vere Allen (1977:14), the Swahili Bible refers to soul as Moyo. He further notes that soul in the Christian cosmology is generally regarded not only as the immortal element in man but as the component least susceptible to worldly temptations in antithesis to the body or flesh. Soul in Koran is something capable of good and evil and to the Swahili Muslim, as observed in this stanza; soul -moyo is likely to be led astray by enticements of this world. From the onset in reference to stanza 6 quoted above, the writer sets the tone and the mood on the purpose of why he has to write this epic. Basing from the historical setting, the writer is taking his earliest opportunity to speak to his soul-moyo. Remember both the writer and the soul is intertwined in the same body, hence displaying an internal dual conflict. The writer emphasizes that soul-moyo **must hear what my inmost heart would speak**. He goes ahead to emphasize in stanza 28 *Nisikie sana nikwambiapo* (“Listen carefully when I talk to you). Philosophically our thinking minds are exposed to the dramatic discourse between the soul and the heart. The dualism penetrates into communicating the poet’s deepest fears, desires, and vulnerabilities.

The human heart possesses qualities of fragility and fortitude. For centuries it was believed that the heart was our center of gravity as noted by Rybakov (Ibid). Noted elsewhere in a web post, the heart is the location of our intelligence; the place where all our choices were made, hopes created, and emotions experienced. It was also the repository for all our negative feelings, and where bitterness and disappointments could be found. The writer of this post negates this position to say that the heart is not a logical organ, but it is also not where choices are made, where hopes are created, nor where emotions are experienced. That is what we now know all takes place in the mind, **even though each of those experiences, as ever, are felt keenly in the heart**. This bolded phrase is part of what this presentation is grappling with. Is it the heart or the mind? Nasir advances his soul-heart –mind discourse as quoted below:

Stanza 8 (page 27)	Jame de Vere Allen Translation (page 53)
Tatunga kifungu kwa kukisafi Nikipange lulu kulla tarafi Na ina nikite Inkishafi Kiza chadhunubu kinepukiye	This is my purpose, this is my hearts design, To string perls in a necklace, verse on verse, The great, pure pearles of Wisdom in the midst, Small pearls of Thought a pendant down behind The clasp I’ll make by polishing my words, Arrange each gem in order where it fits. The poem I’ll call “Catechism of the Soul”

As already explained before, according to Allen (pg 14) Inkishafi – kashaf means “uncovering”, or revelation; in this context and content **Tatunga kifungu kwa kukisafi: Na ina nikite Inkishafi**; the poet from the onset is creating a precious thing, decorating it with aesthetic pearls. This is an artistic poetic language to appeal to the eye. However most important is the pragmatic meaning of Inkishafi- self revelation or examination. A crosscheck of the words in stanza 8 above alludes to the purposes of the poet who does not mince his words. We envisage a journey into the 79 stanzas (James de Vere Allen Version) and 77 stanzas (Inkisiri ya Muhamad wa Mlamali Version) of the poem where the heart, the mind, the spirit and the soul will cooperate in seeking a peaceful end as envisioned in the metaphysical world depicted in the presentations of the thematic issues in the poem.

The poet further pleads with his heart not to be deceived by the properties of the world but to focus so that in the end inherit the pleasantries in heaven.

Stanza 11 and 12 (page 29)	De Vere Allen Translation (page 54)
Moyo wangu, nini huzundukani! Likughurielo, hela, ni n’ni? Hunelezi nami kalibaini, liwapo na sura nisikataye?	Why O my Soul, why are you so disturbed? Behold what is it that leads you thus astray? Pray tell me, let me comprehend; perchance A Holy verse I will find to counter it

Moyo wangu nini huitabiri! Twambe u mwelevu wa kukhitari Huyui dunia ina ghururi? Ndia za tatasi huzandamaye?	My Soul, will you not heed your destiny? The choice is yours, the future is in your hands. Know you not this world is vanity? Why follow then the tumult of its ways?
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The two verses have also been translated by Retrova (ibid) as below

My heart, why do you not wake up?
What is it that deceives you?
Tell me so that I can also understand it
Is it so compelling that I also cannot refuse it?
My heart, why can you not look ahead?
You are intelligent enough to discriminate
Do you not know that the world has deceitful ways?
How can you then follow its entangled paths?

It seems like the writer is becoming impatient with his soul -heart-moyo. The heart has not come to realization about the deceitfulness of the world, thus the writer is pleading with it to wake up. The heart is made conscious of the vanity of the pleasures of the world by this allusion: *Huyui dunia ina ghururi*? Ghururi as transliterated by Mulamali (1980:16) means *pumbao* (deceitful). The heart seems to be following bad ways. As envisioned into the subsequent stanzas, these ways may lead the heart to hell (jahanamu) ref stanza 72.

Vanity of the world is further metaphorically presented stanza 56 where the rich, the most powerful rulers were all consumed by death. Their riches were not spared either.

Stanza 56	Retrova Translation
Sasa, moyo, pako tauza nawe, Nelezato sana, nami nelewe, Wawapi wazazi wakuzaawe? Nambia walipo, kawamkiye.	Now, my heart, I will ask you, Explain it well to me so that I also know, Where are the ancestors that gave birth to you? Tell me where they are so that I can greet them

Rhetoric questions asked by the poet to the heart escalates the poet's fears and tribulations in this discourse. We recall stanzas 49, 50 and 52 above where a current visit to the City of Pate would plunder one into a big shock. The palace and court rooms are no longer in existence; hence the occupants of the city as alluded to in stanza 56 all died-perished. There is totally no sign of livelihood in this place. This is a metaphoric thought process cautioning the heart once more to be aware of the earthly property. The heart -soul should think and be prepared to the realities of the judgment day reflected instanza 68 **Tafakari siku ya kwima kondo**. As per Mulamali (page 60) transliteration *kondo* refers to the day of war, to be uncovered in public, day of reckoning, the day when the self will be revealed. If the heart is not careful then it's spirit may face the shame. As Retrova (ibid) notes: for both Descartes and Sayyid Abdallah, it is the experience of historical change and of impermanence of the outside world that prompts them to search for stability in one-self and in one's capacity for transcendence.

Soothing The Heart: Moyo Iwa Na Subira (Be Patient, My Heart) By Abdilatif Abdala

Cornell raises more philosophical questions as he delves into the thinking of Descartes: If the body is an extended substance, but the mind is a non-extended substance, how can the body possibly act on the mind and vice-versa? How could they possibly connect? He further notes that these questions were raised by Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia in her correspondence with Descartes. In 1643, she wrote, "given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect bodily spirits in order to bring about voluntary actions?" Given the situation in which Abdilatif Abdalla found himself in prison, a lonely place where he had no freedom of choice or speech, he found solace in *Sauti ya Dhiki* where he raised his voice of agony connecting his heart, body and mind. In "**Moyo Iwa na Subira**". The writer embraces his heart soothing it by saying:

Stanza 1 (page 48), 7 and 9 (page 49)	My translation
Usiliye Moyo wangu, siliye moyo nyamaza Usijitiye matungu, siliye tajiumiza Huno ndiwo ulimwengu, muna yasiyopendeza Kwa hivyo moyo nyamaza, zidi kuwa na subira	Do not cry my heart, do not cry keep calm Do not be stressed, for you will hurt yourself This is the true world, with unpleasanties Therefore my heart be calm, continue being patient

Dunia ni mdawari, hilo moyo lifahamu Na kuyapata mazuri, pasi mabaya vigumu Kwa hivyo moyo subiri, tungu igeuze tamu Usijiwe kwa hamu, zidi kuwa na subira	The world is global, you should know this my heart To succeed, you must go through hardships Therefore be patient my heart, turn bitterness into sweetness Do not be quick at killing yourself, continue being patient
Hebu tupa jito lako, ukuangaliye nyuma Kutazama utokako, moyo kwangaliye vyema Utokako na wendako, kupi kwenye nyingi pima? Usianguke simama, zidi kuwa na subira	Turn your eye, and look back, Where you are coming from, my heart take keen Where you are coming from and where you are going, which one is distant Do not fall, stand up, continue being patient

Johnson and Chernoff (2002) illustrate that poetry is a uniquely concentrated form of creative writing and communication. Thus it is used as a window in Prison experience. In prison poetry, the inmate “opens up a vein,” and “tells it like it is”. In the case of *Sauti ya Dhiki*’s (The Voice of Agony) setting in prison amplifies the voice of the political prisoner silenced by ostracism and prejudice. Through personification, the poet encourages his heart “...**tungu igeuze tamu** (turn bitterness into sweetness). That the prevailing circumstances of hardships, tears and agony be turned into a positive paradigm: a blessing in disguise. The poet who himself is the prisoner gives his heart the analogy of the world: *Huno ndiwo ulimwengu, muna yasiyopendeza* ie to say that this are the realities of the world. The heart must come to the realization that for it (him) to accomplish (their) mission (heart, mind and body): *Na kuyapata mazuri, pasi mabaya vigumu* they have to face the challenges with courage; fear will only retract the good fight.

Dewi (2021) expounds that contemplative works are unique in expressing people’s experiences. Poetry opens complex dimensions of human freedom and intimate relationships with the Creator. The works of Abdilatif Abdalla though written in the mid 70’s have an important place in the education curriculum, not only in Kenya but also, researched abroad in African studies. The history of Kenyan politics is unraveled as we traverse through the experiences of the writer. The poem has a total of 14 stanzas. However I have purposely selected these three stanza’s to illustrate that given the circumstances under which the writer found himself, he needed to console and motivate himself so that he could continue fighting for freedom even when in prison. Amid betrayal and an emotive struggle of careful alternative choices made behind the bars, Abdilatif Abdalla gives us a ray of hope as he vows to continue to fight for freedom; *Usianguke simama, zidi kuwa na subira* (Do not fall, stand up, continue being patient). This is an imagery of patriotism to his cause. He has not been cowed or discouraged by imprisonment, but instead he envisions standing up and sojourning on. The voice of agony is felt when he captures the essence of his emotions, struggles and a visionary of triumph in the end; that through all that he is going through there will come an end, where he will win the war. The duality interaction between the metaphorical heart (inner-self) and mind (self) gives the poet a strong will of the weak-strong body and confidence in pursuing personal peace and harmony to social justice. The monologue is a dialogue not only with the self but also with the people whom he feels are going through political and social oppression. The poem is a strategy that connects him to the world so that he can understand how it feels.

Johnson and Chernoff (ibid) note that poetry by contemporary prisoners, may tell us quite a bit about the prison and what it feels like to live behind prison walls. All human beings live with a degree of vigilance, tension, and suppressed emotion. However the Prison’s environment is worse and may aggravate the situation more. This is because there is no freedom in prison, it is a confinement. It exerts pressure and mental disorder to the prisoners. But whom can the prisoner confide this to? This is the reason as to why Abdilatif Abdalla made a careful and deliberate selection of talking to himself and giving himself self assurance. Remember he had suffered betrayal before as expressed through one of the poems *Mja si Mwema* (pg 34); for these obvious reasons and for the fact that he is confined; he has the only option to talk- soothe his heart-mind to carry out the mission of liberating the oppressed. The human heart is considered as the focus of the entire bodily and spiritual life of a person, as the most essential organ and the nearest seat of all forces, directions, movements, desires, feelings and thoughts of a person with all their directions as noted by Rybakov (ibid). To accomplish the mission, the body, heart, soul and mind must be united. The heart must be patient because the body and mind depends on it as the center of action.

Conclusion:-

In summary I would like to note that a philosophical investigation of the two Swahili Poetry illustrated in this paper raises more fundamental question as to the differences between the heart, soul, mind and body. Personification, metaphors and allusions used by the poets present these body aspects as living organs, coordinated and

interconnected. They all work as one entity of the same body, justifying why the poets engage a holistic approach of the self. That all this parts as envisaged in *Al-Inkishafi* and “*Moyo Iwa na Subira*” form the whole body. In making reference, to these body parts, the poets found a means to release their suppressed emotions. They connected with the body, soul-heart and mind creating a strong bond for self re-examination, evaluation and revelation. As Said Abdalla bin Ali bin Nasir struggled with streamlining his thoughts to focus to the permanence and transcendence in the world after, Abdilatif abdalla equally struggled to harmonize and streamline his thoughts towards a goal. To accomplish the war that he had already started, he needed to have a self examination of how much strength and willingness the heart had as a center of gravity to the mind and body. Would he finally triumph in the end; the unity of the heart-mind – body was crucial at this trial moment. Instead of agonizing, he had to turn the prison space into a productive positive environment where his anger, emotions and bitterness were turned into sweetness.

Swahili Poetry contextualizes moments of the two poets. The soliloquy/monologue strategies employed in both pieces encourages the poets to slow down and reflect inwardly as they reconnect to the self -audience. They empower and re-energize themselves. The strategy is a form of self-care to reclaim their voices, emotions, self worth and strength. The parallelism of the soliloquy strategy vexes the paths taken by the two. For Said Abdalla Ali Bin Nasir, the self-consciousness prepares him psychologically for the transcendent world, while for Abdilatif Abdalla's composure prepares him psychologically to face the physical world in an energized form.

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