

# Institutions Impacting on YA Genre Traction in Kenya

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**Abstract:** This paper, which is part of a larger research entitled “Young Adult Fiction in Kenya: A Genre Struggling to Be Born”, examines how different stakeholders in the book industry have united deliberately or inferentially to bring to life Young adult literature (YAL) in Kenya. The research springs from the assumption that young adult literature in Kenya is a peripherised genre and that little attention is paid to the groups that cooperated, particularly in production of relevant texts for YAL. Guided by Critical Genre Analysis’s theory’s concepts on genre formation, I interrogate how the different actor’s contribution help in building the corpus of intertextuality material that form the young adult (YA) genre in the country. We understand in depth the material aspects of genre formation by interrogating the politics of the extratextual material features as objects of power and as abstract ideas influencing the shaping of genre. This is as realized in how institutions support in production, marketing, sellability and consumability of young adult literature. In this paper I argue that institutions impact greatly in the formation of any genre and therefore such cooperation need be encouraged and supported if the young adult genre is to flourish in the country.

**Keywords:** Books, Extratextual, Fiction, Genre, Institutions, Paratextuation, Traction, Young Adult.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is extracted from an unpublished PhD research thesis entitled “Young Adult Fiction in Kenya: A Genre Struggling to Be Born” that was carried out in the University of the Witwatersrand by Jane Wakarindi in 2018.

“Kanya gatune ni mwamukaniro”- a good turn deserves another

The above Kikuyu proverb, “kanya gatune” (a red gourd) may refer to an unusual situation, most likely a disaster. When such occurs, the solution is sought by the community standing together to confront it. They cooperate to solve the problem. The proverb is used to call people to unite for a common goal. The proverb’s wisdom similarly speaks to this section’s objective which is to address the findings of the different institutions that have, united or singly contributed to shape the YAF genre in Kenya.

Genre formation presupposes not only the textual elements but the contribution of external forces that collaborate to ensure the genre takes shape. In the language of genre studies, we could argue the institutions form members of a community that come together within their institutions and in collaboration with other institutions (multinstitutionality) pull with a common goal and performance to evince the YA genre in Kenya.

Bhatia (2008) laments the genre research emphasis on linguistic resources and reliance on formal properties of language with “very little emphasis on text-external considerations, that is, interdiscursivity and other socio-pragmatic factors” (319). This research recognizes that within their limits and bounds, the different institutions operate as motivation builders by providing extratextual material logistics and efforts directed to enhance the young adult fiction (YAF) genre in Kenya (financing writing, awarding writers, marketing and purchasing of some of the texts). In examining the institutions’ participation in promoting the genre, we understand in depth the material aspects of genre formation by interrogating the politics of the extratextual material features as objects of power and as abstract ideas influencing the shaping of genre. These textual-physically absent measures and features are cardinal to genre realisation without whose participation, at least in the Kenyan scene, the YA genre would not have been realized.

I call the institutional zone “paratextuation”, a term that would be in line with the assertion by Bhatia (2008) that the external resources (including institutions) play an “important role in socio-pragmatics [and socio-economic logistics of the genre]” (17). By the logistics of the genre I draw reference as to how the institutions contribute to the production, marketing, sellability and / or consumability of the genre either singly and or in unity with the other institutions and bodies interested in the project (genre formation). The institutions may participate inversely by not/supporting the venture either through awarding (prizing) or censoring, performances that influence the direction of the genre at any given time. In the Critical Genre Analysis theory, Bhatia (2012) argues for the necessity to investigate “actions of the members of corporations, institutions and professional organisations” (23). The findings from the different institutions: the Library, NBDCK, the publishers, and their operations to display the genre reveal just how crucial the YAF genre, particularly in Kenya, is dependent on the institutions for its survival, at least currently. Bhatia (2008) further advocates for “paratextuation” examination arguing that understanding of the genre “must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it [institution] is used [geared] to accomplish” (696). It is fundamental to examine how the said institutions niche their share in evincing the YA genre in Kenya.

## II. THE NAIROBI INTERNATIONAL BOOK FAIR

The Book Fair is an event that is held at Sarit Center towards the end of every year in Kenya. I attended the fair with the intention of finding out how YA books are displayed by different book players as well as what these stakeholders knew about YA fiction that had won awards in both JKPL and Burt awards. I spoke with different exhibitors and observed various aspects in relation to fiction that had won awards in the YA category as I discuss below.

Notably, where I had expected a more vibrant display and pointers to the YAF texts that had won prizes at different publishers’ stands, this was not the case. Literature books were often overshadowed by the more pronounced display of school books and materials ranging from preschool reading charts to the syllabus compliant books. My anticipation was that the book fair, an event expected to attract readers and writers of all cadres, would have featured at least some YAF, especially those that had won prizes.

Some personnel manning the stands lacked information and were not knowledgeable about the workings of the publishing houses they represented. A case in point is where I approached an exhibitor on whether they publish YAF but he was oblivious of any detail about the publishing house that had assigned him duties on the stand. On noticing my surprise at his total ignorance he quickly said “I am just an intern in the company and I know nothing about books”. I lightheartedly told him that he should learn as much as possible about books before leaving the publishing house. I also listened to the stand competition awarding judges whereby they commented that people placed in charge of a stand and lacking adequate information impacted badly on the publishing house they represented. The judges also argued that the impression created would not leave a positive lasting appeal on visitors to the book fair and that such visitors would be wary of depositing their manuscripts with such houses.

What also became obvious was that the book fair in Kenya mainly targets students and their teachers, or as Kenya Publishing Association (KPA) chairperson Waweru noted that schools are a “very significant stakeholder in the book fair” (Waweru, recorded speech). It is during the season that most publishers expect to strike deals with learning institutions for orders to supply books (mainly school texts). However, a teachers’ strike that had halted all programs in schools affected Book Fair in 2015. As a result the turn up of student (YA) population at the fair was therefore minimal. Observably, many of those attending the fair were mainly elderly people, most of whom were either professionals or were looking for subsidized price rates on school materials for their children.

I asked one of the exhibitors who had been displaying early childhood material over the last three years, whether YA attended in the past. He reported that in the past book fairs it was possible to notice several YA in uniforms and in the company of their school teachers. I deduced that the personal and individualized pull to books and reading was evidently low.

## III. THE NATIONAL BOOK COUNCIL OF KENYA (NBDCK)

### A. Organisation

The other contributor in the placing on the surface YA genre is the National Book Council of Kenya (NBDCK) is not a government organization and is currently being funded by the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE). I visited the NBDCK at a time of great challenge as the personnel were struggling to move offices. I was informed they do not have permanent offices and the organisation operates at the mercy of landlords who may have no idea of the

sensitivity of handling books. They moved to another place but again they had to vacate the rooms because they were too small and uncondusive for book storage. In the period of this research, the council offices had been relocated to the third apartment, in a span of one month, where they had rented a one-storey three-bedroom apartment in residential quarters. This they have converted to an office where the YA books that have won prizes in Burt awards remain in cartons awaiting distribution. An NBDCK officer informed me that the corporation had made requests a number of times to the government to consider giving them a government place where they could operate from but that request has not yet been honoured. The information received indicates that the council had suggested they be allocated some space in the national library so they could also work closely with the Kenya Library but again this plea is yet to be heeded.

### **B. Challenges NBDCK Faces**

Staff in the NBDCK expressed their disappointment in the fact that the government does not support the council. For their operations, the book council has always depended on foreign aid and therefore their obligation and loyalty is to the donors. A newspaper article, "Kenyan writers and readers are guilty of idolizing the West" on *Sunday Nation*, John Mwazemba observes that due to lack of writer's support by the government, "all the major prizes [in Kenya] are donor funded [decrying lack of government's involvement]. (We should therefore not be surprised if they wish to advance a certain agenda)" (14). The council may not pay much attention to government policies since they view the government as having betrayed them. Nonetheless, the council expresses optimism for the YA genre especially if the government begins to participate. They are positive that the genre has a bright future if the right support is granted.

It is unfortunate that NBDCK should be facing such hurdles as they try to enrich the reading habits of the YA in the country. As a result, the YA genre continues to be peripherised in Kenya. Observably, it has taken the initiative of foreigners to identify the gap; there is a need for quality fiction for the Kenyan YA, yet as Indangasi observes, wealthy Kenyans have not been forthcoming with support. The lack of concern for the reading interests of the YA is worrying since the country is not supporting the idea of imparting the right values to the YA, yet substantive values are normally encapsulated in books.

By "right values", which I perceive to be ethical nodes in writing, I argue that YA texts contain vital lifelong skills for young adults. Captured in the texts are narratives, characters and settings that empower young adult to be self-driven in solving their problems, promote young adult characters capable of making informed decisions particularly when faced with the ever evolving technological advancement, reinforce proactive rather than emotive reactions (a stereotype young adults are often accused of), and advance national socio-cultural goals that support harmonious coexistence among diverse human beings.

## **IV. KENYA NATIONAL LIBRARY (KNLS)**

### **A. Background**

Libraries play a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions and understandings of books. One critical way in which this happens is through how libraries organize and display books. There are two main sections in the Kenyan library: national library where material and books in this section cannot be borrowed but can only be read within the library premises; and the public library, where the public can borrow in reference to terms and conditions set for them. It is in the second section that books are placed in two main sections; Junior and Adult. The Junior section has books for the 0-15 age range while other books rated above this age are shelved on the adult section. A visit to the national public library headquarters in Upper Hill, Nairobi, revealed that currently there is no YA section in the main public library. The implication is that if a reader wanted to read books written for YA they would either have to wade through the many titles in the adult section or search in the Junior section considering YA has been seen in some quarters to include those from the age of 12-18 (for the Burt Award category) all the way to 25 and 35. The argument behind the lumping of YA titles amorphously in both the junior and adult section is said to emanate from lack of space. However, a glimmer of hope was signaled when the librarians reported that a new larger building is being built [has now been operationalized] and that they would move to the new premises early in 2016. According to Kaituma Bonaya, "a newer library has been built where operations will shift to. With a large space particularly for the junior library, the YA section shall be created like we have in our sister library at Nakuru. Materials for YA shall be identified, processed and put to the disposal of YA. Efforts shall be made through marketing to reach the YA category users" (Bonaya, interview). In this particular question of making the YA books accessible to the public, KNLS was the most positive, amongst the institutions I studied.

A visit to the Nakuru library confirmed that they have a YA section. The books available are series that have been donated by the Book Aid International and the American Embassy according to a librarian at the centre (Nakuru interview).

However, the librarian cited several challenges they face in trying to satisfy the YA reading demand. She reported that available titles do not meet the “diverse needs of the teens, teens are very selective and some are very fast readers, as a result they exhaust the existing series (which are sometimes not complete) hence the readers get disappointed” (Nakuru interview). Another senior librarian in Nakuru revealed that the library’s YA section would require a larger space if the various YA reading needs are to be met. She notes that the sizes of the titles posed a challenge when placing them on the shelves because “some are too small with very few pages. This makes it difficult to fix the magnetic tapes. Others are bigger in size thus forcing us to have parallel arrangements” (Nakuru senior librarian).

The report from the Nakuru library, like in all other libraries I visited, neither Burt Award nor JKPL winning YA titles existed and the librarians said they too did not know about the awards. It should be noted that these are bodies that have come up with award winning projects to award the best manuscripts that are well written and targets YA interests. [these YAF awarding bodies will be tackled in another paper that is coming up for publication.] However, the librarians expressed the need to be involved in the YA book venture since as one of them said it is “important as we deal with the teens [but] important first to be enlightened on the awards.” (Nakuru interview)

The determination to put measures in place to ensure that YA received YAF texts was overwhelming. For the librarians the will and readiness were discernible from their responses. But, how efficient the accessibility of the YAF winners is going to be mainly rests with the KPA and the NBDCK. As can be seen the library has even started setting up YA sections as is evidenced in Nakuru library and as I observed in Buru Buru library in Nairobi. As reflected in the words of the respondent in the latter library, there should be “encouragement on creating [a] section for this type of customer. Some branches has [have] active sections” (Bonaya, interview). There is a focused promise that there are plans to create these sections also in the libraries where they do not exist. But how well this is going to serve the interests of the YA depends on whether writers and publishers are willing to respect the National Depository section of the library where each published text is supposed to be registered after having received an ISBN number. In turn, the librarians would know what has been published for the YA and then be able to make orders for the same in the library. At the moment, even where the YA section exists (at Buru Buru and Nakuru) YAF award winning texts were lacking on the shelves. It would be worthwhile for the NBDCK in particular to honour one of its objectives on the Burt Award, “to increase the stock of English readers in established school libraries and other libraries” (CODE Kenya). I presume KNLS fits not only within the “other libraries” but that KNLS being a more open, public and central reading space should be given prime locus for stocking the YAF texts. The focus would ensure that the YAF texts reach a wider YA readers than happens when they are directed to designated schools where only a small target group benefits.

I established from the interview with Bonaya that there are readers who frequent the library and ask for particular titles on YA but that most of the time the titles are not available. Bonaya rightly observed, “Young adults are the forgotten lot of user community. Mostly, the library reaches out to young ones, that is, junior readers” (Bonaya, interview). It was therefore not a surprise that I did not find a single YAF text that had won a prize in the JKPL and Burt awards in the YA section of the library. The other reason is that publishers and writers are lax in depositing books in the library. This then puts off readers who may have benefited from the subsidized access charges for books in the library compared with purchasing the title in bookshops. The library services are ‘free’ but the users have to pay some little charges that are in turn used to buy more books for the library as the library management does not just rely on the rarely deposited texts.

## **B. Researches Documents in KNLS**

If YA as a genre is to grow, it is important that research in this area is carried out. However, if such research is done, it is difficult to access. Bonaya indicated “I have never seen those ones [research on YA fiction]. The ones around are those done by librarians and even those are very few. People leave them in the institutions where they study”. This poses a challenge to the librarians since they have no avenue to reach documents produced in different study institutions in the country in order to understand the trend of research outcomes on YAF or any other category. The other notable problem is that the research depository section in the library does not exist, “there is no such section in the library” reported the same librarian. Lack of this kind of section in the library does not augur well if research material continues to be locked up in the university archives and libraries where they are only accessible to a limited clientele as opposed to the public library. This means the recommendations made by researchers are never implemented and any research in YAF has little wider publicity.

## **C. Marketing the Library**

These activities are organized by the regional libraries within their area. The country boasts of sixty such regional libraries. Besides, the activities are also supported by the NBDCK through finances, which provides books and facilitate transport

and movement of personnel. Most librarians are not even aware that YA titles exist, leave alone taking them to the regional centres, as I established during the research. The observation was further reinforced by the fact that I could not find a single winner title in the YA section in any of the libraries I visited. On asking Bonaya whether they stocked YAF that had won prizes; she interjected with some humour in her tone, “What are those? I also don’t know. Kwani? Sent us some books . . . I don’t know now which had won what!” (Bonaya, interview) The general trend is that the books being traded are school books and general fiction, mainly the imported or donated books from other parts of the world. The locally published YAF is not given preference.

#### **D. Financing the KNLS**

I gathered that donors are the major contributors and financiers of the KNLS and that the government is not really involved in supporting books supplied to the library. The librarians write funding proposals to parastatals, local institutions and foreign embassies for support. For instance the Safaricom Kenya, one of the largest mobile phone companies in the country has supported the library in supplying books to Garissa County. The other body that supports the KNLS is the Book Aid International which in conjunction with the NBDCK donates books to schools. Asked whether the library advises the donor on the books to supply, the response was that most books donated especially by Book Aid are for tertiary level but:

When it comes to this section, the teenage section, I think this section is neglected, the teenage section. It is unlike those two other sections of the library: the Junior section, we have very good books, so many locals, so many Kenyan writers . . . . But here . . . . Apart from those I have not seen any good local book [for the YA] . . . they may not be very relevant too. Maybe that is why they don’t borrow any other than those ones that there are (Bonaya, interview).

The quote reinforces how deeply marginalized the YA genre is in Kenya. It opens a window through which we can view the serious challenges the stakeholders have to address before the YA genre can claim command of the Kenyan literary space. In order to supplement the donated texts KNLS purchases some books mainly on recommendations pegged on demand of a book by the library users. But then the information I gathered is that the librarians rarely buy books for the YA section because they are much more expensive compared to children’s titles that are reportedly “very very cheap. They are very small and some are really tiny and can go for a hundred. You can buy several. What we normally get over the years is always the same, it goes down. It does not increase . . . but when the book fund is given, there is always a cut. Book fund goes schweh!” said Bonaya (ibid).

So, there lies the predicament the librarians find themselves in when they try to balance the funds they get with the actual need on the ground. Although they are trained, the librarians are often not able to deliver their services efficiently due to the fact that the government limits the library resources or has no budgetary provision for the national library. And titles in the YA category continue to be left out because what becomes manifest is that concentration is mainly on general fiction books and school reading materials.

#### **E. Reading for Leisure**

Even though Kenyans are reputed to be poor readers, the report gathered in this paper is that there are those who frequent the libraries for leisure reading. It was reported that often adults go to the library to read the local daily newspaper, an option cheaper than if they had to buy a paper which costs Ksh 60. The library requires they just pay Ksh 20 to read all local papers, magazines and Christian materials for motivation. College students do their research, especially on medicine and law in the library. Students from the capital city high schools use the library over the weekends and during the holidays since they get a conducive environment for study. The KNLS can be seen as a rescue centre as was witnessed during the 2015 national teachers strike that lasted one month. “Students flooded the library corridors, especially the candidates [those about to sit national examinations] as they tried to do their private studies,” said the officer. Asked whether the high school students, a majority that fall under the YA category, ever inquire about YA texts, the librarian reported that this had not been the case. The problem could be that not many YA know the category exists. The other reason could be that titles for YA, as observed above, are not even stocked in the libraries. And yet if the library were to have the YA titles stocked in the library YA section, YA may access and read them more readily.

### **V. A NEW DIRECTION TO BOOST THE YAF GENRE**

During the research it was discovered that the publishing industry is bracing for the new challenge of the internet and the digital book. There has been set up in the country the ministry of ICT to expedite the digital platform for both writers and publishers in a bid to revolutionize the book and to make available necessary content for the nation. According to the ICT ministry Managing Director, Engineer Peter Kyalo, (while launching the digital book), during the Book fair opening

ceremony at Sarit Center, the ministry is mandated to partner with (KPA) and come up with a business model. In this the ICT ministry's role is that of "regulation, quality assurance and control" of the smooth running of the model. He reiterates that this venture will ensure "we have a smart society, where people can exploit their talents and identify opportunities and be able to run away with those opportunities." In other words, the ministry creates a forum that could be exploited to the YA advantage. The idea that runs behind this thread is the proclamation "we need to build total capacity in our youth." The idea is noble since if the YA texts are also to be available in digital book form, the YA will be able to read whatever fiction they like from the comfort of wherever they may be. In the same vein, Anyang Nyong'o observes that we must "sustain writing, publishing and libraries." The progress underlines one very crucial indicator for the writers and publishers, that the "written word is just too strong" to be erased. The difference is that it will now appear in an even more accessible form to YA in their smartphones and laptops (Nyong'o, recorded speech).

Conrad Onyango in a *People Daily* newspaper article "Printing costs drive book publishers to e-publishing" supports Mwazemba that "disruption is normal for any industry, but after some time, opportunities become more than threats." (25) The digital platform might, after all, offer an alternative way of writing and adopting already existing YAF texts to soft copies for ease of accessibility by the YA as well as cut printing costs that are now threatening to cripple the publishing industry in Kenya. However, with the current situation of poor connectivity in many parts of the country, the physical book will still be an indispensable requirement that cannot be disregarded as yet. Again before the YA digital book manages to command the market, the physical book will still be useful. The strength of this vision goes beyond the current moment, though. For that matter, authors, publishers, critics and scholars of YAF must embrace the twin challenges in order to change the wanting face of the genre of YA literature in the country. Such an approach would improve a trait Kabaji observes of contemporary scholars who "tend to be oblivious of existence of contemporary Kenyan writers [who] suffer at the hands of critics who are trapped in the past." (5)

## VI. CONCLUSION

This chapter interrogated how KPA, NBDCK and the library as institutions, support production processes of YAF, right from manuscript selection, texts publishing, marketing and placement of books for YA accessibility. One thing that emerges is a dread by speakers from the different book institutions that there currently exists no Kenyan writer who measures to the level of the renowned Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. I view this as a recognition for the urgent need to nurture writers to produce quality books for YA in Kenya. Not having definite channels of communication between the library and the publishers lead to librarians' failure to keep abreast of information on the variety of YAF books published in Kenya. There are more foreign classics that have been donated to the libraries than there are local titles in the Kenyan public library fiction shelves. The scenario is further complicated by limited funds from the government to purchase YA books.

As a result, the library stocks what is readily available regardless of its relevance to the YA concerns. But, while agreeing that the library has been left out so far in managing YA books, it's also argued that the library, as an institution with trained personnel has a duty to guide reading habits of the public, by providing what is new and relevant for the YA at all times. This can be improved further by creating YA sections in every library to ensure that YA access their books with ease. The library emerges as an integral institution whose participation must be encouraged and supported for a successful campaign to launch the YA genre in the country. We have also noted the significance of the Book Fair that is organized by KPA each year as a forum in which books are publicized and marketed.

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