

## ANGEL OF JUSTICE OR DEVIL OF CRIME? FEMALE AGENCY IN THE KENYAN WOMEN'S ADVENTURE NOVEL

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The question of female agency has been one of the key issues in modern gender-related discourse, in all its spheres, directions and trends. In “Well-being, agency and freedom” Amartya Sen generally defines agency as referring to “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important (203).” Emma Samman and Maria Emma Santos in their article “Agency and empowerment: A review of concepts, indicators and empirical evidence” define agency as “an actor’s or group’s ability to make purposeful choices.” (3) They explain further that agency is “strongly determined by people’s individual assets (such as land, housing, livestock, savings) and capabilities of all types: human (such as good health and education), social (such as social belonging, a sense of identity, leadership relations) and psychological (self-esteem, self-confidence, the ability to imagine and aspire to a better future), and by people’s collective assets and capabilities, such as voice, organization, representation and identity”. (3)

Thus, a female agency, as a theoretical concept, apparently refers to the capability of women, as a social group, to make purposeful choices in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important. The question of this capability remains vital in the African context, where female agency as a social category has been on the rise only through the recent period, mainly during the post-colonial times, being historically suppressed throughout the African continent by the traditionally male-dominated mentality. Hillary Adhiambo Tonney in her MA thesis on Grace Ogot gives the following definition of female agency, and, specifically, female agency in the African context: “Female agency therefore becomes the capability allowed women to exercise their freedom in pursuit of liberally chosen and desirable ambitions in life. Feminists are opposed to the African traditions that have been known to historically limit women within an unfavourable social structure and its characteristic male power system.” (57)

This “historical limitation of women within an unfavourable social structure and its characteristic male power system” is not an unknown phenomenon in Kenya, where, in fact, female agency in the above-mentioned sense also may be regarded as a rather recent achievement. Julia Ojiambo in her introduction to the recently published “Changing the mainstream: celebrating women’s resilience” – arguably the first fundamental collection on women’s contribution to the Kenyan nation – wrote: “Throughout the history of Kenya, Kenyan women have fought many battles to ensure that they will occupy their rightful place in their country. Kenya’s *his(s)*story books told ‘*his* story’ often excluding women’s participation – *her* story.” The scholar claims that “(f)emale subalternity is visible in this context because while the story is told of the popular struggle against dominant structures, institutions and ideologies, this popular struggle excluded the experiences and contribution of women”, for women were subjected to the “dominant narrative which promotes public and private distinction, relegating women to the private space and privileging the public space (for males – AR)” (xv).

Creative writing, as an important aspect of public space, in Kenyan context has also been long dominated by male authors. J. Roger Kurtz in his seminal work on Kenyan novel openly speaks of “first generation of male-dominated writing” (146), also stating that women writers “were relatively scarce during the first generation of writers and even during the booming period of the 1970s [...] – they have multiplied during the post-Kenyatta years. In fact, their appearance may be classified as one of the most significant recent developments in the Kenyan novel” (134).

However significant, both quantity- and quality-wise, are the developments in Kenyan women’s writing, there is one genre that has been exclusively male-dominated until the most recent decades – that is, the adventure fiction. Kenyan adventure fiction in English came to life in the 1970s and almost immediately became one of the main trends in Kenyan popular literature. Adventure fiction published between 1977 and 1989 by major figures in Kenyan literature includes contributions by Meja Mwangi, Mwangi Ruheni, David Maillu and some other established authors. From the very beginning, Kenyan writers tried to weave their adventure stories into the context of contemporary Kenyan society; thus the social-critical aspect has always been present in Kenyan adventure fiction to a very high extent, making it one of the society’s most precise, although perhaps a bit tendentious representations.

One of the aspects of the country’s social reality that was perhaps involuntarily yet prominently and precisely reflected in Kenyan adventure novels of the 1970s and 1980s was the

fact that in Kenya at that time male dominance was practiced on all levels and in all aspects of the society's life. This male orientation in all the fields of societal being was reflected in various ways in most of the works of Kenyan novelists of that period. In fact, if one looks at Kenyan adventure novels published between the 1960s and 1980s, one will notice that not only were the authors exclusively male, but the novels generally followed the well-known formula 'brave male police inspector/ private detective/ security agent successfully completes his mission'. In some of these novels, the brave male investigator was at most helped by a devoted female secretary or assistant.

However, in the 1990s and especially 2000s there were significant changes both in Kenyan society and, correspondingly, in Kenyan fiction. It can be said that one of the tangible social tendencies in present-day Kenya is the one towards emancipation and empowerment of the female gender. Correspondingly, this period witnessed what can be called an "outburst" of women's writing in Kenya. Even the quantitative increase of women writers in this period speaks for itself – more than a dozen of new names appeared (which is roughly equal to the number of women writers that emerged in Kenya between the 1960s and 1980s), and new works of already established authors saw the light of the day. All these writers have drastically transformed the very image of woman in Kenyan literature, changing it from a downtrodden of the society to the image of a socially empowered and committed woman, competing with the "stronger sex" in various fields – from business to politics.

Marie Krüger, in her study that analyses texts by Kenyan women writers written mainly in 1990s, states that in modern Kenyan novel "female portraiture ... transcends a one-dimensional representation and instead delineates female figures as dynamic and complex characters. Often they are moved to the narrative center and become the central protagonists... [Kenyan women narratives] redefine and discuss the familiar stereotypes of "idealized mother" versus "corrupt whore" in different narrative contexts [...] Although social expectations seem to define them exclusively as "wives", "mothers" and "widows", women appear in a variety of social and political roles... This critique of established gender roles motivates the women's endeavour to transgress and expand their possibilities, so as to accommodate role expectations to their individual desires and needs... The critique of established gender roles, the reconceptualization of binary oppositions, and the intertwining of private and public lives within a multilayered and complex fictional reality, are recurrent features that define female characterization in the novels and short stories" (Krüger 1998:59-61)

The above-outlined paradigm of evolving from the ones who ‘should and often do stick to their men’ to ‘social beings in their own right’ is also quite applicable to Kenyan adventure fiction. In many novels, especially by women writers, females start not only to take more and more part in the action, but more frequently than not assume the leading roles, giving their male colleagues at best equal or even secondary parts.

The pioneering author in this sense seems to be Monica Genya with her debut novel *Links of a Chain* (1996). The events described in the novel are ignited by a stunning (although purely fantastic) geological discovery - huge resources of oil are incidentally found in Kenya; as the author puts it, “in fact, two-thirds of the country was sitting on one giant oil-well” (Genya 1996: 32). A group of vicious-minded Kenyans – among them high-rank politicians and specialists – backed by a French electronic magnate and an American oil tycoon, naming themselves the Knights of the Round Table and hiding behind the names borrowed from the Arthurian legend, plan a coup-d’état in order to divide the country into nine ‘United States of Kenya’. Each of the states will be ruled solely by one of the ‘Knights’. In order to destabilise the situation in the country, they have assassinated several prominent politicians, and are planning to murder the first female vice-president of Kenya, Mrs Janet Musyoka. Their plans incidentally leak to the top-secret investigation department in the country – Bureau of Investigational Operations (B.I.O.) – but the plotters manage to kill the B.I.O.’s head officials. The only survivor, partly owing to luck, partly to her high professional qualities, is Susan Juma, one of B.I.O.’s top agents, who manages to untangle the plot and eliminate its participants.

It looks like that the figure of the female investigator working for the top-secret government agency was introduced in this novel for the first time in Kenyan fiction. Moreover, it seems that the aim of the author was not to create a kind of ‘James Bond in a skirt’. Definitely, Susan Juma, the agent, possesses some of the necessary combat qualities – she is a first-class shooter, she can fly a plane and even drive a tractor – but apart from all this, the writer apparently intended to create a kind of female role model, the character admirable for her courage and strength and likeable first of all for her human and, moreover, female traits. She works for her country out of patriotic devotion and not for money (as it is indicated in one of the chapters, “B.I.O. agents were not paid a fortune” – page 61), she is devoted to her friends, faithful, and after all very feminine – in the hardest moments of her life she lets out very genuine tears. That is how Susan describes herself:

“I fear drinking most of all because it makes you lose control. I dislike men who cheat on their wives and people who don’t have any loyalty except to money and power. My dream is to find happiness and my ambition is to achieve my dream. I like peanut-butter sandwiches, listening to classical music and you”, she ended with a small smile in his direction. (page 237) (emphasis mine - AR).

Yes, Susan’s life as a woman is not thinkable without *his* presence – and ‘he’ definitely appears on the pages of the novel in the shape of Chain, the second main character, former agent of B.I.O., presently – infallible private detective. It is he who helps Susan Juma to complete the mission, it is he who comes to her rescue in the most dangerous situations, and it is he whom Susan eventually falls in love with – and the feeling is mutual, for the novel ends up with Chain’s awkward, but because of that even more charming marriage proposal.

It actually seems that in this novel Monica Genya in fact reversed the above-mentioned scheme – in her book a brave and likeable female investigator completes the mission with the help of a no less brave and likeable male colleague. The question comes – was it possible to do without this male character at all? Does Susan Juma not have all the necessary faculties to independently complete the mission? Apparently she does, but that was yet another task of the author – to create the image of an ideal life partner. Chain apparently meets all the possible demands – he is brave, courageous, tender, caring, genuinely appreciative of the female gender, but with all that he looks much more artificial, much more ‘James-Bondish’ compared to the life-like and sympathetic character of Susan Juma. Susan’s happiness, which she is striving to achieve, in accordance to the author’s perception, is after all the happiness of a woman that lies in marriage – and thus she tries to show the readers how the ideal marriage, based on mutual love, respect and common interests, should look like.

A different type of female investigator is drawn in Wanjiku wa Ngugi’s debut novel *The Fall of Saints* (2015). In this novel the author with commendable writing prowess (her literary talent may well have been passed genetically – she is the junior daughter to Ngugi wa Thiong’o) depicts a young woman who had passed the reverse way – from seemingly blissful marriage to the nightmares of being a victim of the criminal plot, headed by her husband. Mugure, a young Kenyan woman educated and living in the United States, is happily married to an American lawyer named Zack; the only shadow that is marring their joy is Mugure’s childlessness. Zack’s seemingly successful initiative to adopt an orphaned child from his wife’s native Kenya

somehow arouses Mugure's suspicions. Soon, Mugure's bright and inquisitive mind leads her to an international criminal cartel, specialising in killing babies and selling their body parts for transplantation; and her husband proves to be the cartel's boss. Mugure's life, as well as lives of many other people, is in danger. However, through her painstaking effort, and with the help of two brave male detectives – one African-American, one Kenyan – Mugure manages to put the criminals into the hands of the law and pay personal revenge on Zack by shooting him at the escape attempt.

At first glance, Mugure, the novel's main character, is rather different from Susan Juma from Monica Genya's book. First, Mugure is not a professional detective – the investigation she undertakes is pressed upon her by the concurrence of circumstances. Second, her perspective in life is also different, – while Susan is going to contract a long-awaited marriage with Chain, Mugure, who also manages to arrange in passing the marital life of her friends, herself intends to dedicate her life to the upbringing of her son, feeling “fed-up” with the joys of wifehood.

However, a closer comparison between Susan and Mugure reveal tangible similarities in their characters. First, both young women are determined to solve the deadly riddle they are faced with through their own effort, without waiting for the law structures to come to their support; they accept the assistance from their male colleague as welcomed, but not decisive. Second, both are aware that they live in the evil world, and usually the first victims of this evil are women (and, by extension, innocent children) – and in fighting this evil women are to rely mostly on themselves. For this purpose, Susan chooses a traditionally “male” career of the police officer; Mugure also equips herself for the fight: she takes lessons of a martial art called Krav Maga and later – a course in sniper shooting; both skills in the end enable her to finalise the matter and to pay her last revenge.

And third, the two young women are ready to fight evil in general – not only that evil which endangers their lives or rights, but any evil that threatens other people, regardless of the gender, ethnicity, age or race, in any form this evil may take – be it a syndicate of political schemers or a murderous international cartel. This humanistic pathos also brings the two women together, as representatives of a new type of female character.

It would be difficult to say whether the two authors were specifically or mainly addressing a female audience. It more seems that they were intending to present their reading

public with the new image of the Kenyan woman – as it was said above, socially empowered and committed, capable of doing even such a difficult ‘male’ job as criminal investigation and struggle against criminality. It bears the distinctive message to the female audience that ‘yes you can’, or: ‘this is the kind of personality you should develop’. At the same time, the heroines of the above-mentioned novels are not militant ‘Grace-Jones-style’ feminists – they are not only preserving, but cherishing their womanly qualities, seeking solace and happiness in marriage, in male company and support. They are not trying to compete with males or out-play them; they just want to be equal – and, being, after all, the literary characters, to set the example of the respected members and citizens of the society that the authors envision in their texts, the society based on the principles of equality and freedom.

It must be said, however, that Kenyan adventure novels by women authors nurture not only this ideal image of a female warrior that fights evil. Contrary to that, certain female writers create in their texts female characters that may be regarded as embodiments of evil – to such an extent that they outplay in their evil games their male partners or counterparts, also highly experienced in mordant activities.

In her novel *Of Goats and Poisoned Oranges* (2014) the author, Ciku Kimeria, creates the image of the main character, Wambui Njogu, an experienced schemer, who largely harvests on the examples from the outside world. She has been surrounded by evil-doers of both genders from her early years – starting from her own father; as she confesses, “My father was the first born son of a chief, and therefore a chief himself. During the struggle for independence, he had sided with the *mzungu*. This was the way we had our wealth and increase it significantly, with the additional land that we got from *mzungu* for our loyalty. Perhaps my father did not always sleep easy, once after 1963 we were branded traitors, but money sure can buy enough security” (15). Her mother is her father’s good match – as she confessed to her daughter in her old age: “Do you know why my co-wives loathe me? They know that I was your father’s favourite, but the real reason they loathe me is because they do not believe you and your sisters are his actual children. Deep in his heart, your father knew that he could not possibly have fathered children at that old age. But he also loved me and respected me for giving him that illusion” (135). Her mother’s example inspired Wambui in her own marriage – having discovered that her husband Njogu is sterile, she cold-bloodedly sleeps with their servant, later posing his child as Njogu’s. During her life she harmed a lot of other people around her – her niece Wandia, whom she pressed into having an abortion, her son King’ori, who flees his parents’ house (as he confesses

to his father before going away for good, “Now you are saying I am unstable? It is only because I have grown up in this shitty unstable home. Don’t you think you two had messed me up enough growing up” – 104). The longest sufferer, however, is her own husband Njogu; himself an accomplished crook (as he confesses, “where there was money to make, I was there making it” – 26), he however faces from his wife the degree of malice he had never seen before. Even their house-help lady recalls that “his wife was very cruel to him when she was alive. She always treated him the way she treated the rest of us servants” (130).

The peak of Njogu’s miseries – and Wambui’s villainies – comes when Wambui discovers Njogu’s love affair with Nyambura, his secretary. Wambui sees that as a perfect occasion to blackmail her husband: “If I so much as hear you have seen her again, I am going to go to the cops with the documents I have from that 1988 land deal... to put you in jail for life” (86). But she does not limit herself with threats – she thinks of stopping his love affair for good by eliminating her rival Nyambura. As Njogu confesses: “I think the devil got into Wambui that day. She started saying, “We need to get rid of her! I cannot let her come out in public with this. We are going to eliminate her.” At 2 am she came and found me asleep on the coach. She switched on the lights and said we had to talk. She had hatched an elaborate plan to get rid of Nyambura. She laid out the plan and a cold chill ran down my spine. She planned to fake her death and to frame Nyambura for it. Her last words this evening were, “You will follow through with this plan. You are the one who got us into this mess and you will help getting us out” (87).

Wambui’s devilish plan works well – she goes into hiding in Dubai under fake identity, but before that stuffs her blood-stained clothes into Nyambura’s closet. “Though my body was never found, she was sentenced to life imprisonment in Langata Women’s Prison” (4). In prison, Nyambura loses her mind.

Evil deeds are avenged in this or that way – this thought seems to be perpetuated by the author, when she finally makes her “exemplary woman villain” to meet her quits. When Wambui secretly returns to Kenya to start life anew under her fake image of Peris Wanjiru, she meets unexpected fierce resistance in the face of her husband. During their last and fatal meeting, he shouts at her: “King’ori, the boy I brought up as my own flesh and blood, hates me. I have no relations with my family. You chased them away during our early years of marriage and I sat and watched them go! The woman I love is in jail for life! You have even destroyed the memory of what she and I had. Now I will always have to wonder who fathered Njogu Jr. too! I am bound to

you by binds of blackmail! I have no friends. This Peris Wanjiru does not exist. If you die today, who will look for you? You are already dead!” (143-4). At this final outburst, Njogu strangles Wambui to death – thus putting an end to her life and his long-time torture. It is notable that Njogu, a crook himself, is nevertheless spared by the author from punishment – apparently the suffering that he got from the evil mind and actions of Wambui far supercedes his own misdeeds.

The image of far more successful woman evil doer is created by Moraa Gitaa, an already reputable writer, in her novel *Hila* (2014). The novel tells a story of “Hila, a beautiful casino worker”, who, judging by her profession and her name (which in Swahili means “trickery, machination”), may well be suspected to be the villainous figure in the story. But contrary to that, Hila is rather a victim – she is in fact a young single mother, who works for a meager salary of a cashier in a Mombasa casino, desperately struggling to make ends meet. Her boyfriend and occasional “sponsor”, a petty crook called Njoroo, one day offers her to participate in “something real” – an organized bank robbery, which, if successful, will end her poverty for good. The plan proves to be effective – the gang, consisting of six people, manages to steal sixty million shillings and get away with it. This, however, does not bring Hila the enormous riches that she was dreaming of; she is awarded, according to her understanding, in a higher manner – a young bank teller Richard, who also partook in the plan, becomes her prospective husband. The money, however, is taken by a character who, as it turns out, masterminds the plan – Mwendee, a woman taxi driver.

In the first chapters of the novel Mwendee is given a rather humble attention – in fact, she is only a “getaway driver” of the gang, whose only role is to drive the gang away after the successful robbery. However, as the action unfolds, Mwendee proves to be the grim figure behind the ploy – even more grim as she turns out to be the real winner of this baleful game. “She was a robber par excellence. The taxi business was a front to prove she was a taxpayer like the average law-abiding Kenyan. Nobody had been able to prove that she was anything else. Word had it that Mwendee was semi-illiterate. But literate or not, she was quite rich and lived in a mansion” (122).

After the successful robbery, the stolen money are put into an old rusty fridge and buried in a palm grove in the outskirts of Mombasa. The gang, however, is discovered by two police officers, Kipng’etich and Mulwa. Mwendee, learning that, shows her true character of a cold-blooded, calculating and manipulative vermin. She gives Mulwa an “indecent proposal”, as she

openly called it: “Once we get rid of Njoroo and Mwisho, and we have Danson the bank manager, Richard the teller and Hila on our side, we have ten million each, tax-free. This includes your boss Kipng’etich ‘cause he has to be in on this too” (124-5). Mwendee’s plan works perfectly – the two policemen are rather easily bought over (Kipng’etich, initially hesitant, was talked into it by his much less scrupulous subordinate), Njoroo and his pal Mwisho are killed in a police ambush, and Mwendee in the end lays her hands on the larger part of the money, as presented in the spectacular last episode of the novel:

“Once the loot was unearthed and found to be intact, four sacks worth forty million were put into the trunk of Mwendee’s car for her to share with Danson, Hila and Richard. [...] They drove out into the main road and stopped at Danson’s parked car. He loaded his sack into the trunk of his car and drove off quickly [...] Mulwa and Kipng’etich earlier put their two sacks worth twenty million into the trunk of Mulwa’s car and drove off into the humid coastal night [...].

At Mwendee’s, a strange scene unfolded before Hila’s and Richard’s eyes. Mwendee ordered two of her employees to off-load all the sacks from her car and take them into her bedroom. She followed them upstairs and then came down, with an A4 envelope which she handed to Richard. In her other hand she held a shiny compact silver pistol.

“There is one million shillings in there for the two of you to share. It is all you deserve. You’ve done nothing to earn ten million apiece. I want you to get out of my house, and I don’t want to ever see you two again. And I hope you do not get any fresh ideas” [...]

Hila looked like she wanted to protest, but could only open and shut her mouth like a fish out of the nearby Indian Ocean. Richard’s sharp look signaled to her to keep quiet. He couldn’t remove his eyes off the pistol in Mwendee’s hand. She could do anything, even murder. Her emotionless eyes seemed not to see them at all. They were cold and blank.

“It’s okay, Mwendee. We two never bought into this whole idea in the first place and were only coerced into it. Rest assured you won’t get any trouble from us,” Richard said. “We’ll never contact you again. Please extend that same courtesy to us.”

He took Hila’s hand and guided her towards the front door. In a couple of minutes, they were out in the driveway and into Richard’s car.

Mwendee smiled at their retreating figures. She let out a cold, mirthless chuckle. She had outwitted even Mulwa and Kipng'etich. She was getting better and better" (156-8).

In four novels discussed above, the authors seem to portrait four different main woman characters with one aim – to project their visions of female agency. However different, if not even opposed, these characters could be – in fact, the mentioned texts portray two brave females successfully defending the law and two other no less bravely and no less successfully breaking it – the authors seem to pursue the same purpose of, first, demonstrating their ability “to beat men in their own game” on both sides of the barricade. Secondly, from their opposed viewpoints the characters demonstrate “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important”, their “ability to make purposeful choices”, and, to no lesser extent, the determination of their choice by individual assets, human, social and psychological capabilities (as stated in the works quoted in the introductory part of this paper). The fact that these choices lead these women characters to the opposing camps stresses, in my view, the universal and dialectic character of female agency – the characters’ individual assets, human, social and psychological capabilities dictate them which side to choose. And, finally, the choices these women make seem to be especially notable in the modern African context. On the continent where for centuries “traditions that have been known to historically limit women within an unfavourable social structure and its characteristic male power system”, the appearance of such characters as drawn in the discussed novel seems to be “a sign of the times”. Now African woman demonstrates her own capability “to exercise their freedom in pursuit of liberally chosen and desirable ambitions in life” – and these ambitions, as seen above, in terms of their social dimension may be marked with both positive and negative signs.

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