

WANJIRA and her HITLERS

Peter Amuka

InterCEN  Books

Published by

Intercen Books Publishing Company
Off Bungoma-Mumias Road, Bungoma
P.O. Box 909 -50200, Bungoma KENYA
Email: info.intercenbooks@gmail.com
Website: www.intercenbooks.com
Telephone: +254785174184

Copyright © Peter Amuka, 2021

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

First published 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Intercen Books Publishing Company.

ISBN: 978-9914-9857-1-9

Cover Design Robert Mutugi
Illustrations: Abel Murumba

Printed by

Capvim International Limited
P. O. Box 3673 – 00200
Nairobi

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AMAS, or Academic Mobility of African Scholars, funded my fellowship at Addis Ababa University between February and August 2020. During this period, I wrote some essays on Kenyan nationalism and nationhood. *Wanjira and her Hitlers* is a spinoff of those essays. I am very grateful to Professor Anne Nangulu and the late Professor Omar Egesa through **AMAS** for facilitating my sojourn in Ethiopia.

I am equally indebted to Mrs. Lucy W. Kihanya for her patience in typing this story many times and for Barack Wandera as my diligent editor.

Many members of Kakamega Book Club encouraged me to revise the story and share it with more readers. I thank them all for their support and faith.

~ Peter Amuka

1

Wanjira reminded me, as we travelled from Kericho to Eldoret, that I was always late for her 3rd year 9 am Monday lecture at Mountain View University and that I consistently excused myself by blaming all men on earth.

She loved the past. Almost always made it preface the present and future. Or just mixed the past, present and future in a manner that made it look like no conversation made sense without their mingling. Only the superstitious, scared of being haunted by dead beings and events, feared the past. To her, I wasn't one of those "religious cowards" as she called them.

I feared reminders of things, issues, old wounds around me and her, that at times caused purposeless pain or weren't worth rekindling. I detested being haunted and intimidated by the invisible dead beings and pasts as happens in all religions and belief systems. Still, I had failed to convince Wanjira that she should let the past rest in peace in its grave. That's why I quietly declined to comment on the reminder it was her constant habit to treat me to every time we met.

In fact, assuming that my silence and non-response mattered to her was too much to expect. She would eventually say whatever she wanted despite my objections.

"Mwalimu, you look uninterested in the reminder of your dislike for men. It must be the accident that has

affected you this much. Let me play a tape from my phone, even if only to tickle you. I attempted a sing song rhythm but may be only the content matters because my singing is horrible.”

She held the phone very close to my left ear and pressed the loud speaker:

Turning your back on the past
Doesn't kill the past.
Take a look at the seat
You have just vacated
You will find the seat doing
all of the following:
Gazing at you
Smiling at you
Beckoning you back
Saying there's nothing
wrong with me
Asking you to sit back
in the invisible profile
of your backside
Telling you that your past
is the permanent seat you vacated
Repeatedly saying that
your past sits in the present
that seats the future
and that the past and present
aren't mere dirt
on your backside
to be discarded

and flicked away
like a troublesome
intrusive fly.
Thus every present
is the future
perched on the shoulders of the past
Turning your back on the past
Doesn't devalue it.



Every passenger seemed to be listening to what sounded like recited and dramatised poetry. It was typically Wanjira's character to want everybody around her to hear her thoughts and respond.

"You always recited this whenever you wanted to evoke the omnipresence of history, the past, in all areas of knowledge," she added, seemingly very impressed by her singing. "And yet you always somehow feared and shied away from the historical," she observed with a cheeky toothy smile. "Why, why, the phobia, for the past?" she asked for a reply that never came.

I, however, wanted a smooth, easy, restful journey without unnecessary decoding of how the past, present and future were sitting on or in one another. Already so comfortably seated in a vehicle that was rolling sturdily on earth and seemingly knew where I was headed, my head needed a break from solving classroom puzzles. I felt I had done enough of this in her undergraduate classes, where some of her questions, interrogations, comments, answers and opinions were more cryptic than the verse she had just played.

Apparently dissatisfied by the silent response, she replayed the tape. This time, the passengers were not as attentive despite the loudness. I too feigned disinterest and looked away from her ever-searching eyes.

The more I turned my neck leftwards, the more I felt her expectant gaze scorching the right and back of my neck.

To my left was seated an unknown woman who immediately averted her face and took to fiddling with her phone, ostensibly mistaking me for staring.

When the replay ended, I turned to Wanjira across the aisle. I met eyes loaded with burning pleas for affirmation of her rendering of a conflation of sequences of time I was fond of but couldn't remember I repeated so often habitually. This mixing of the past, the present and the future as if they were one and the same thing, was her pet subject and not mine. I looked away and maintained a neutral silence.

With a tone of voice announcing that even if I didn't react, I had twice heard her attempt at poesy, she unleashed more about the reminder and the histories I wanted to avoid.

"Mwalimu, I know you know that there wasn't a single lecture you gave my class without injecting some history, some past spiced with many presents and plentiful futures. You infected me with love for literature and history in which the coming, the present and the past kept coming and going on at the same time."

I remained silent in obvious fear of the mental pain of resolving inscrutables I didn't like out of class.

She proceeded all the same. "Every instance you presented your defence of lateness, you used nearly the same words. It all sounded very much like material from a script you crafted and committed to memory. The class

christened it ‘Mwalimu’s Anthem’ and enjoyed how you sang it with lots of passion. After every class, they would marvel at how much your past had refused to leave your present alone and was always perched on your tongue.”

That, however, didn’t matter to her. Her determination and spirit to pursue her thoughts often talked loudly to any interlocutor’s silence. “Let me put it the way you did and please don’t mind that I am not a good singer. The class was unanimous that you were singing a song you must have composed and rehearsed over the years in the same course you taught other classes before us and which was routinely and always scheduled at 9 am on Mondays.”

This is what Wanjira said I used to “sing” in class at the beginning of those delayed Monday lectures:

Men don’t know how to live as safely long
as women live in my Ondiri Village
If they knew
not so many widows
would be wallowing
in bachelorhood
in Ondiri.
My father died somewhere
twenty-one years ago.
Twenty-one years later
my mother lives on
like many other mothers.
Most routinely

I must travel
some two hundred kilometres
every Friday
to make her happy
some three days
a week.
All my weekends' only three days
are hers
When leaving every Monday dawn
I must not wake her up
for goodbye.
The first and last time I did that
some two decades ago
she resisted my departure
wailed painfully like a hungry
baby being abandoned
by her mother.
Poet-playwright Willie Shakespeare
sings that old age
is very much
like a second childhood
and he is very right
because I have become
my mother's mother.
That's why the first and only
Monday I most
reluctantly forced my way out
and left her swimming and trembling
in tearful disappointment
my own tears spurted

a whole two hundred kilometres
back to campus
because she was the last girl
on earth
I could stand hurting.
Hurting her that once
that first and
and only Monday morning
hurt me tenfold.
Thereafter I resolved
to be escaping stealthily
rather than openly.
It was much better
she felt the pain
of my departure
in my absence
than in my presence
because I can't stand
the crying of a ninety-year-old.
Now you know why I am compelled
to arrive late.
My mother
my abandoned mother
abandoned by a man
who deflated himself
by indulging in self-destructive
aggression against mama's body.
He bounced hard
and detonated his bombs
of anger against

her helpless and hapless body.

Like a taut football
hitting to hurt and break
rocks
but ending up deflating
flattening himself into
nothing.

He wilfully
drained himself
of energy and life
finally crumbling into
premature death.

Wife beating is
husband killing
as happened with my father.
Sorry ladies and gentlemen
for coming this late
the root cause is my father
who chose to die early
by battering his body
against the world
and my mother's frame
as if it was a battlefield
where a loser
and winner
had to emerge
even as he lost.

Men,
husbands
are warriors

and the woman's body
is their theatre
of war.

I had expected it. I always did. Whenever we met, she cited parts or all of it, in the middle, at the end, at the beginning, anywhere, in all conversations, whatever the length.

Today, the reminder came when we were about quarter way through our road journey from Kericho to Eldoret.

It had become an anthem about me, for me, in my presence or absence whenever my students gossiped about me. But above all else, I always recited it, sometimes unconsciously or semiconsciously, according to Wanjira, at every beginning of my 9 o'clock lecture.

2

I first met Wanjira in Kericho that Friday morning. She was teaching in a high school there while I was in the process of starting a constituent college of Mountain View University nearby after twenty-five years of continuous teaching.

I stopped by the zebra crossing to beg motorists to let me pass.

After waving imploringly for near eternity, I did what Kenyan pedestrians must always do: I forced my way across the first lane. The car stopped on emergency brakes and missed bumping into me by a whisker. A thoroughly incensed and inconvenienced driver hurled obscenities at me and swore angrily, “you are shit man”.

On the second lane the lady at the steering wheel had long stopped as I soaked insults from her immediate neighbour. She waved me on with a milk-white-toothed smile.

The Volkswagen beetle on the third lane was driven by a near coal-black man with massive biceps. The menacing size and sight of those upper limbs was exaggerated by the white over-tight sleeveless t-shirt. After jamming on the brakes to spare my life, he angrily popped out of the car with a barrage of insults that ended with a heavy blob of spit that I felt as it landed on my forehead.

Motorists on the westbound lanes replayed more or less what I had just experienced from their east-headed counterparts. Yet fate seemed to have saved the worst for the third and last.

The sports utility Toyota, with a national government registration number plate and another sign to show it was carrying a judicial officer, stopped violently and touched my left hip. I didn't feel pain but was slightly destabilised. Before I could recover my normal balance, the uniformed male police driver jumped up to my left cheek and unleashed a teeth-rattling slap on it. I staggered across and out of the road with blood dripping between my lips.

Perhaps as memorable as the brush with death and thunderous slap were the driver's words: "you are unusually tall with a very small useless brain. Even if I had crushed you, Jesus wouldn't have welcomed you in heaven with that Mount Kenya tall stupidity. You can't walk on the road as if it belongs to your mother. Kenya will be a very safe country the day we keep pedestrians away from motorways or just smash all of them into smithereens."

When I believed I had recovered full consciousness and stability and was moving in the right direction, I stumbled yet again. And that's why Wanjira had to connect with me.

If I hadn't slipped and fallen into the muddy patch opposite the shuttle bus station, she wouldn't have

noticed me. Or rather, I wouldn't have allowed her to notice me.

Passersby and onlookers whistled and shouted "pole mzee" as I struggled to get up and attracted her attention.

Her shrill voice rang high above everybody else's when she shouted, "Mwalimu, what happened to you? Are you alright? Unwell?" She unleashed many more questions in rapid succession without pausing for answers.

I managed to lift myself out of the shallow hole unsupported but emerged a massive muddy mess from my state of the art blue jacket, white long-sleeved shirt and a black tie to navy blue trousers to the black leather shoes, all the way to the clods of mud I felt on my scalp and face.

Wanjira hurriedly fished face and bath towels from her travelling bag.

The half-lit public bathroom wasn't labelled but its acrid stench attracted joyful flies that guided me to its location.

Wanjira handed me a towel near the entrance and stood back at a safe distance.

The sink was very close to the small urinal section. Two very tall, obese men were squeezing against one another as their jets of urine thundered against a wall

whose brown paint had seemingly been flaking off for years without replacement.

As often happens to most men, the urge to join the urinating duo was inspired by their action but there was no standing space and I accordingly restrained my load.

I held my breath against the heavy pungent smell of old and fresh human dung and urine. I soaked the towel in Kericho's typically ice-cold water and then wiped my face and clothes. Then I gurgled and spat water many times to remove the blood clotting on the palates and in between my teeth. I looked for a mirror to evaluate the level of thoroughness on the face, but there was none.

On walking out of the bathroom, somebody held my jacket from behind and pulled me back roughly.



“Eish mzee wewe lipa,” he shouted in Kiswahili for all to hear that I had not paid for “services rendered in the toilet.”

“Which service?” I shouted angrily, almost rolling up my shirtsleeves for a fight.

I was about to hold his collar, strangle and remind him that I had wiped myself on my own, urinated without his support and inhaled the rotten aroma of human waste he had not disposed of when Wanjira rudely brushed me aside and paid the undeserved “service fee.” She knew

the toilet was a public utility but repeated that earning money for doing nothing was “big business and a massive multimillion shilling department in our national culture and game of stealing in broad daylight.”

She was set and ready to dry me up with a clean white towel when I stepped out. I thought I should do it myself but she insisted on doing it because I looked “traumatized and agitated.”

Even as I assumed I was holding the towel firmly enough like a man, she wrenched it from my hands and started a repeat cleaning job.

“I am your only mirror here. I see on and in you what you can’t see. You can’t see all of yourself on your own. No one does. Come on, Mwalimu, be flexible enough to turn around so that I tidy you up the way you do your mother every weekend, she muttered, half commanding half soothing.

I almost cried to stop her from going on about my mother. Luckily she didn’t say more. Instead, I did her bidding and remained flexible on the wooden bench. She washed and wiped spots I had missed. Then the drying. She made me turn around many times like a baby being cleaned up in a trough of water. Her arms were unusually strong and turned me effortlessly. The reckless abandon in public and the daring enthusiasm with which the swinging happened was surprising from a girl I had taught just the other day.

Though with a blush, let me confess that Wanjira made me feel very young, much younger than my half a century of life. She wiped and massaged everywhere because she claimed I hadn't done it well enough. It didn't matter to her that a crowd was watching her insert both hands under my clothing so many times. The girl was so focused you would have thought it was only her and me at the transport station.

"I think that's good enough, dear," I remarked when her hands reached my hips.

"Not yet, Mwalimu, you are my patient and I know what I am doing," she cut back in a very sharp, serious tone.

Alright, let her do her thing, I told myself. I felt I was being put through what must have been the way my mother treated me in babyhood. Or maybe this was a little more. Wanjira's unashamedly repeated deep massages on the legs, thighs, arms, neck, face, almost the whole body sent me into a world where I found myself hanging and dangling between sleep and wakefulness. It was an unspeakable experience I didn't want to stop.

"Don't move as yet, please," she begged when I tried to get up.

Her strong shrill voice temporarily shook me out of my dream world.

“And finally, your gums. They are grimy with blood clots I must remove. I am cleaning them the way my mother did whenever I wasn’t able to brush my teeth properly.”

“But you don’t have a toothbrush. Nor did I carry any,” I pleaded.

“I know what to do dear Mwalimu.”

On that order, I kept the peace, relaxed, felt and followed the drama.

First, she sipped water from a Keringet bottle and retained it in her open mouth.

Then she commanded, the water still floating in her mouth: “open your mouth wide, please.”

She sprayed the water between my teeth and on my palates. She forked out her tongue and rolled it all over inside my mouth. Finally, and breathing very heavily, she let her tongue lick all my teeth and the gaps between them.

When it was over and she sighed loudly, I was jolted out of the joy of a little boy’s dream world. I half-heard her remark, “this is the way my mother did it to me when I was a little girl.”

As the mixture of childish reverie and reminiscence finally faded away, I felt embarrassed by the way I had treated her many times before. Here was a

woman, much less than half my age, who had the will and power to convert me into a baby by the mere use of her hands in less than thirty minutes. There is, for me, no experience close to being mothered, nothing akin to being treated like a baby in a mother's tender, loving hands and Wanjira made me feel it deeply in my body, all over. "If this is what babyhood is, then I wish I hadn't outgrown it. Growing up is a mere running away from the painful joy of deep baby comfort," I told myself.

Very many times, over the last few years, she had shouted "Mwalimu" along Kericho and Eldoret streets. Still, I either ignored or evaded her or ran away.

On the rare occasions, she managed to trap me, I lied that there were numerous "Mwalimu" in town and beyond and that I, therefore, had no way of confirming or assuming I was the one being addressed.

At which explanation, she habitually snapped: "but I was the most talkative in the four courses you taught my class. You surely can't mistake my voice for somebody else's. After nearly every lecture, I walked and talked to you all the way to your office for further interrogation. I even told you that my classmates believed we were romancing and that the discussions were mere cover."

What else did I do whenever she cornered me and opened so much of the past? I pulled out my phone and pretended a message had come from a university under construction nearby. Then I rushed away under the pretext that the call was urgent and boarded a matatu to

that campus. All the same, the mobile phone remains, to date, the most versatile tool for getting away with lies.

My reasons for avoiding her are too many to exhaust here. A number of things she often said tended to embarrass me.

She would, for example, inquire, loudly and gleefully whether I was still bathing my mother every weekend. The way heads turned to look at me and even giggle mischievously was so unmanning that I felt like begging the earth beneath my feet to swallow me up. That's why I declined to inform her that I had long transferred my mother from the countryside home to my Eldoret house. I didn't want the whole world to know, through her, that I was a wonderful and special son doing for my mother what, according to her, my long-dead father couldn't.

On certain occasions, she talked about men so loudly and negatively that some people stopped to listen and comment as I conversed with her. I bolted from her more than once when she likened most male lecturers at the university to dogs and narrated their obsession with seducing female students. Whenever I felt a narrative was inching towards the vulgar like this one, I hurried away before its conclusion. The details are too graphic to retell here. Wanjira often stripped her male teachers stark naked, from primary school to university; most of the time, we met, however, brief the conversations.

As fate would have it, here, I was being nursed by a person I had branded and dismissed as a nuisance.

She refused to let me mention or apologise for the shameful past of keeping her company at bay. I was, in fact, relieved to read between the lines that she was unaware of my past evasive behaviour.

“Mwalimu, you never tire of blaming yourself and virtually every other man on earth, including your late father. Your character is unblemished and beyond all compare. You stand out tall and special at the university and beyond for the tender loving care you lavish on your mother and your students,” she observed, looking me straight in the eye. I felt shy and humbled.

Being the principal of an upcoming university nearby, I ought to pay the fare to Eldoret for the two of us. After all, my salary was many times higher than her high school teacher’s yet she couldn’t let me. The firm refusal was conveyed with a broad smile. “High time daddy Mwalimu got rewarded in however small a way by his academic babies.”

She took charge of organizing my travel all the way and booked two aisle seats, directly opposite one another, for the two of us. I had feared this kind of closeness would come to be since the elaborate body cleaning exercise. I dreaded the prospects of being trapped in a position or location where this young, vivacious lady would enjoy and exploit all the time and

space to dig into my and her past and present as if that would add any value to our lives.

If the few minutes we had interacted on the occasions we bumped into one another immediately after her graduation were anything to go by, then today I required urgent conversion to stoicism to survive the near four-hour ride with her.