

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE MARINE AND THE BEAUTY?<sup>1</sup>

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Instead of discussing an outstanding literary work by a well-known Swahili writer, this time I would like to present a second- or third-rate book by a renownless author (at least to my knowledge), Gilbert Gicaru Githere.<sup>2</sup> Its title is *Mwana Maji na Mrembo* (The Marine and the beauty). It was published in 1990 by an otherwise unknown publishing house, *Merengo Publishers*, and printed in Hawaii. I have chosen this book because, in spite of its many flaws, it has some interesting features: The whole novel is written almost as a film script; descriptions of actions and landscapes are film-like, and the characters are seen as if they were on the screen. The problem is that this narrative technique does not work, so I want to analyse what is wrong with it.

The novel is set in the 1980s in the USA and in Africa and its plot has two lines which converge in the last part of the book. The action takes place alternately in California and in Kenya, changing back and forth between the two settings, both apparently well known to the author. He describes two families, one belonging to the American middle-class, the other to the poor Kikuyu peasant class with a father plagued by his alcohol addiction. While the young white American student Gordon becomes a happy-go-lucky marine, the young unmarried mother Wanjiru from a Kenyan family becomes a miserable prostitute. The destinies of the two families meet when Gordon brutally kills Wanjiru in an outburst of rage, but he is set free by biased white judges.

The back cover of the book presents us both the author and the novel.

Gilbert Gicaru Githere is a Kikuyu writer and film-maker. He took his BA Degree in economics, geography and history at the University of Nairobi in 1973 and later studied film-making. He produced several films, one of them being the prize-winner *Tender Ones*. He also wrote two other books, *The Broken Calabash* and *Mwili Unaniuma* ("My body is painning me").<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> G. G. Githere is known as a Kenyan film-maker, based at Hawaii. He is included in the list of African Film Makers compiled by the University of Pennsylvania's African Studies Center, with the films *African American Show*, *From Unknown*, and *Kill Me Quick*. These television films were made in the 1980s ([http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Audio\\_Visual/African\\_Film\\_10050.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Audio_Visual/African_Film_10050.html); personal communication by Uta Reuster-Jahn).

<sup>3</sup> The problem with such back-cover information as this, is that you never know whether the titles mentioned there have been actually published, are in press, or have been just written and might never be published.

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The plot is summarized as follows:

Wanjiru Muiruri tries to change her life. At first she goes to work on a coffee plantation, but the wages there are not enough for living. Wanjiru, who has a child born when she was in Standard VII, realizes that she must resolve her problems in some other way. She decides to try her luck in Mombasa and eventually becomes a prostitute.

In her street-walking Wanjiru meets Gordon, a US marine who arrived in Mombasa on a warship. In the course of their love affair, Wanjiru is found dead in a poor hotel room.

A film is being made from this book.

The plot of the novel is less straightforward and not completely clear. The novel is composed of forty brief chapters, most of them containing only one scene. I think it is useful to give an outline of the topics of each chapter:

(1) Edith Morgan is engaged in needle-working, together with other women. (2) Her husband, referred to only as Morgan, is at a barber's shop. (3) A group of young women work hard at a coffee plantation in Kenya. Among them is Wanjiru. (4) Two men are cutting grass; one of them is Wanjiru's father Muiruri. (5) Christmas time; the Morgans are driving through Roseflower, the small Californian town where they live. (6) After a Catholic mass, Gordon asks the priest to bless the farewell party he is organizing before joining up with the marines. (7) The evening meal of the Morgans. The dining room is full of sacred images. In the same chapter Gordon's parents are presented in an analepsis that summarizes their past lives. (8) A long chapter with two scenes situated in Kikuyuland. The first shows Wanjiru and her parents at lunch. From their conversation we learn that the father drinks heavily and has a violent temper. Afterwards we see Wanjiru with other girls at a dress-making school; she confides to her friends her plan to leave for Mombasa. (9) Morgan has a nightmare reminding him the war in Vietnam. During the breakfast he and his wife talk about their financial problems. Their kitchen is described in detail. The scene shifts to a supermarket where Edith is shopping and exchanging family news with a friend. We get a detailed description of the available goods. (10) Gordon and his girlfriend Mary are in the country, fishing; there is a cinematographic description of landscape. Mary approves of Gordon's becoming a marine. (11) Wanjiru's father Muiruri is shown at his poorly paid job of selling roasted meat. Then his past is narrated: he had been a bright student and an important government officer, but was ruined by alcoholism. (12) Wanjiru's mother and grandmother are tending their crops planted on the border of a road. They regret that Muiruri sold their fertile field to obtain money for drink. (13) Morgan is in his richly appointed office with a visitor. The narrator tells us about Morgan's childhood. Immediately after, Gordon appears on the street on a skate board. For an entire page the narrator dwells upon Gordon's skating. In a slummy road Gordon furtively meets someone, probably a drug peddler.

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(14) A cold July day in Mombasa. Wanjiru and her fellow prostitutes are queueing at a food shop and talking about their customers. (15) A beautiful villa in colonial style on the Mombasa coast. Two new characters (white settlers) are introduced: the judge Ronny and his wife. Ronny is haunted by his black defendants and victims (people he sentenced to death or killed in the Mau Mau war). (16) A ship is expected to call at Mombasa, and Wanjiru has a new dress made for the occasion. (17) During his farewell party Gordon, under the influence of drugs, offends his girlfriend Mary. (18) Gordon is now a cadet at the Military College. The marines are talking about their long-awaited voyage to Kenya. There is an ominous allusion to Gordon's character:

*Kwa kawaida Gordon ni kijana ambaye akiwa hajakunywa huwa mtu mwenye furaha sana. Maneno yake huwa ni ya kufurahisha. Lakini pombe ikisha mwingia, huwa mtu asiyewezekana kabisa. Mara kwa mara huwa mtu mwenye fujo sana. (p.83)*

Usually, when he is sober, Gordon is a cheerful young man. He is a pleasant talker. But once he is under the influence of liquor, he cannot control himself. Sometimes he makes a lot of trouble.

(19) Wanjiru and other prostitutes meet white soldiers in a dancing hall. (20) At the railway station Wanjiru receives her mother Mumbi who has arrived from the hinterland with a three-year old child. It is Wanjiru's daughter whom we meet for the first time. The child is sick, but Wanjiru has no money for medical treatment, nor can she house the visitors at her place. The narrator describes the past glory of Mombasa station. (21) In the meantime Gordon arrives at Mogadishu.

(22) 'White shoes are walking in green grass. White clean shoes and white clean trousers.' The judge Ronny is playing golf with his colleague Seyen Birkun, a black Kenyan. A narrative flashback tells us about Seyen's poor childhood. Nevertheless, he made a successful career and after Independence he has become Ronny's superior. Seyen, too, has sudden outbursts of unexplicable fear, as he confesses to his friend, a waiter (who, in his turn, is terrified by strange noises!). (23) Gordon and his friend Steve are in the Tsavo National Park; they are approaching Mombasa. Steve has been bitten by a monkey. (24) Edith narrates to her friend Nancy about a trip to Hawaii she made with her husband. A letter arrives, informing the Morgans that Gordon has killed an African woman. (25) Mumbi, her old mother and Wanjiru's daughter Chiku are working in their kitchen garden. A chief's assistant brings a letter informing them that Wanjiru has been killed. (26) Ronny goes out to buy an ice-cream for his grandson and a newspaper, where he reads about the murder. Both he and Ronny junior take sides with the white killer. In the following scene Ronny is in a restaurant with his friend Eric (a new character introduced to the reader, who participated with Ronny in the Mau Mau war). They discuss Gordon's case, which Ronny has been appointed to judge. In the same chapter we see the Morgans flying to Mombasa. (27) Under very difficult conditions Mumbi and Chiku are travelling by train to Mombasa.

(28) A criminal trial. Gordon is seated close to his defence attorney. He pleads not guilty. On the wall a lizard is stalking a fly. The public prosecutor calls his first witness, a receptionist in a

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hotel of doubtful reputation. He tells how he saw Gordon, blind drunk, entering a hotel room with Wanjiru, and how on the next morning he found the woman in the same room brutally killed. (33 sic!) Mumbi and Chiku are walking towards Wanjiru's house. Five years had passed since their last visit to Mombasa as the child is now eight years old. Another scene shows the judge Ronny playing golf with Gordon's defence attorney. (34) At the trial, a man witnesses having seen Gordon at dead of night leaving the hotel with bloodstained clothes. (35) At home, Ronny tells his wife that Gordon reminds him their deceased son. (36) The prosecutor buys Mumbi and Chiku something to eat. (37) At the trial, two witnesses for the defence provide Gordon with an alibi. (38) Mumbi and Chiku are on the beach, (39) Morgan and his wife are in a safari lodge. (40) The trial is at the end. There is a sharp contrast between the two lawyers: the prosecutor has a shabby appearance, whereas the defence attorney is very smart. After their final harangues, the greater part of the jury votes not guilty and Gordon is absolved.

As we can see, the way in which the story is organized is quite unusual for a Swahili narrative. The plot consists of a number of loosely linked episodes in which neither chronological sequences nor causal relationships are prominent. The author rather draws parallels and contrasts between characters, situations and events such that the novel does have coherence even if it has a loosely contrived plot.

Sometimes the plot moves backwards in time; these analepses are always narrated, not dramatized. The plot also includes many gaps and omissions. We might wonder whether the author's intention was to leave these ellipses unmarked but, actually, the reader's attention *is* drawn to some salient gaps by the text (such as the uncompleted episodes of Morgan on the brink of ruin, and of Wanjiru's sick child brought to Mombasa by her grandmother). These are two potential sources of suspense, but both episodes are left open and so lose their dramatic force.

The greatest flaw however, is that the central event, the crime, is neither dramatized nor explained nor justified. Actually this crucial scene is not even recounted by the narrator, but only narrated incompletely by some witnesses during Gordon's trial.

Githere's writing of this novel is comparable to the making of a film. Instead of a narrator, in his text we often perceive rather a film director, who has chosen how we shall see the reality he is presenting to us. Most of the actions are introduced by the verbs *-onekana* "come into view, appear, become visible" and *-sikika* "be audible". Besides, the story moves forward mostly through dialogues, as in theatre.

Consider how, in chapter 7, the evening meal at the Morgans' is described (or rather shown). It seems that the camera opens with a long shot on the family sitting at the table. In the following scene it focusses on Gordon's mother with a medium shot; there is space for her hand gesture. A close-up follows, a picture of the dish in great detail so that it fills the screen; then the camera switches on Gordon (mid-shot again).

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*Mama ampa [Gordon] bakuli la tamba lililokuwa karibu naye. Halafu ampitishia bakuli jingine lililokuwa limejaa vibonge vya nyama ya kusaga. Mchuzi mwekundu wa nyanya waonekana kwenye bakuli. Vile vile vipande vidogo vya mafuta vinaelea elea juu ya mchuzi. Baada ya kutia tamba kiasi ndani ya sahani yake, Gordon amwagia tamba, mchuzi wa nyanya na nyama. (p.19)*

Mother offers the plate of spaghetti that was near her [to Gordon]. Then she passes him another plate full of meatballs. A red tomato sauce can be seen in the plate. Small specks of fat float on the sauce. Having helped himself to some spaghetti, Gordon dishes up some tomato sauce and meatballs to go with it.

On the other hand, Githere's *literary* devices include his few narratorial comments and the analepses that are never 'enacted', unlike the episodes situated in the fictional present.

We may illustrate his "mixed" technique by the opening of the novel:

*Kundi la akina mama limechukua dakika chache kunywa chai ya saa nne. Mmoja wa akina mama hawa anashona kitambaa cha meza chenye marembo mengi ya kupendeza. Mmoja wa michoro ya sindano wapendeza sana. Umeigiza nyumba za kale za kifalme za Ulaya. Kwa sasa mama anashona mfanano wa farasi akiwa ameinua miguu ya mbele juu. Farasi mwenyewe amepanua kinywa. Utadhani anapiga mayowe au anaongea ukiangalia mdomo wake kwenye mshono. Mafikira yote ya Edith yako kwenye sindano. Ni vigumu kubahatisha umri wa Edith Morgan. Kwani huonekana mchanga. Ukweli ni kwamba mama huyu amekwisha timiza miaka arobaini na miwili. Lakini kwa umbile utadhani ana miaka thelathini. Mavazi ndiyo humuongezua miaka. Kama si hivyo, angeonekana kuwa mchanga hata zaidi. Kwa kawaida huwa na nywele fupi. Umbile lake ni lile la mama wa nyumbani. Mpaka wa leo Edith ana watoto wawili. Mmoja wa kiume na mwingine wa kike. Kwa umri watoto hawa wamefuatana vizuri kabisa. Yule wa kiume ambaye ni kifunguamimba ana umri wa miaka kumi na tisa na msichana anaemfuata mvulana ana miaka kumi na nane. Gordon amemaliza shule na tayari yuwajitayarisha kujiunga na Jeshi la Wanamaji la Amerikani. Cathy, dada yake bado yuko shuleni katika chuo kikuu cha Kalifornia. (p.1)*

A group of women has paused for a few minutes, to drink afternoon tea. One of the women is embroidering a table-cloth with many pretty decorations. One of the embroideries is very colourful. It represents an old European castle. Just now the woman is embroidering a horse with raised fore legs. The horse's mouth is wide open. If you look at its mouth on the embroidery, you would think it is shouting or speaking. Edith is concentrating on her needle-work. It is difficult to guess how old Edith Morgan is, for she looks very young. Actually she is now forty two years old. But she looks thirty. Her dress makes her look older, otherwise she would appear still younger. Usually her hair is cut short. Her appearance is that of a housewife. Until now Edith has two children. A boy and a girl. They are almost of the same age. The firstborn son is nineteen years old and the daughter is eighteen. Gordon has finished studying and is preparing himself to join up with the marines. His sister Cathy is at a college in California. (p.1)

This passage begins in a cinematographic manner: We are watching a group of women, and there are rapid cuts from one camera angle to another, before the camera rests on Edith. From that moment on, however, we are in the realm of written narrative. For how would a filmed version of

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this scene convey that Edith is forty two years old, that *usually* her hair is cut short, or how would it give us the information about her children? Another evident intrusion of the overt narrator into the scene is the addressing of the reader (*'If you look ..., you would think ...'*).

A similar technique, i.e. the focusing of the camera from a wide panoramic 'grand-angle' to a 'zoom' on a character, is often used by the author. Consider another passage which shows us Wanjiru in Mombasa.

*Ni masaa ya asubuhi, Mombasa. Kuna baridi ya kutosha. Julai ya mwaka huu ina baridi kama vile bara. Wakaaji wa Mombasa wanaota moto. Usiku wanajifunika mabulangeti. Ungesema watu hutembea kifua kitupu wakati wa joto hapa Mombasa watu wangesema unawatania. Matani boi wanarusha masanduku ya mikate kwenye baraza za wale walioagizia mikate. Wenye maduka waonekana kufungua milango na kuingiza masanduku yaliyojaa mikate ndani. Malori mengine yasikika kwa mbali. Nayo pia wanagawa mali. Gari la maziwa laonekana likitawanya pakiti za maziwa kwa wenye maduka wanunuaji. Vichwa vyatoka na kuangalia nje na kurusha mkono na kuchukua maziwa yao. Baiskeli zee yaonekana ikipelekwa na mzee, anayegawanya magazeti. Mchana umeanza kuingia kwa mbali. Makelele yameanza kusikika. Watu wameanza kuamka. Mama wa kioski amefungua. Dada wanne wanaonekana kati ya wanunuaji. Mama amekalia kiti cha chini karibu na jiko. Kwenye sinia zilizo karibu naye mahamri na kaimati zaonekana. Kwenye sanduku la mbao karibu naye imo mikate ya bofulo imefunikwa karatasi inayoonya. Safuria iliyo karibu na mama huyu imejaa, mbaazi. Buli la chai liko kwenye jiko. Jiko lile jingine, kahawa inapata moto. (...)* (pp.62-3)

It is early morning in Mombasa. The weather is rather cold. This year July is as cold on the coast as in the hinterland. The inhabitants of Mombasa warm themselves at fires. At night they cover themselves with blankets. If you said that in the hot season people walk bare-chested here in Mombasa, one would say that you are joking. Delivery boys are throwing cartons of bread on the verandahs of those who had ordered them. Shopkeepers appear, opening the doors and carrying inside these cartons full of bread. Other vans can be heard from afar. They, too, are delivering goods. A milk van comes into view, distributing boxes of milk to the customers. A few heads appear, peeping out, then some hands stretch out and take the milk. An old bicycle appears, ridden by an old man delivering newspapers. A new day has started. Noises slowly increase. People begin to wake up. The kiosk (with a woman owner) has opened. Among her customers four young women can be seen. The kiosk-owner is seated on a low chair near the stove. On a tray nearby there are buns and muffins in full view. A wooden box close by contains loaves of bread wrapped in paper. A cooking-pot full of peas is close to the woman. A teapot is on the cooker. Coffee is boiling on another cooker.

This is a rather clumsy static description. A large part of the verbs are copulas or stative verbs, and several dynamic (activity) verbs are put in dependent clauses (infinitives, gerunds, or relatives), following a main verb of perception (*-onekana* or *-sikika*).

Such scenes, meant for the cinema, are out of place in a novel. But this work *is* a novel. It cannot be a film script as there are some important narratorial explanations concerning the characters.

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The author often gives us information obliquely, as in the following example:

*Kwenye uso wa mashini ya kuonyesha mbio za gari, ilionekana kwamba Steve alikuwa akikimbia maili thamanini kwa saa moja. (p.122)*

From the speedometer of the car it appeared that Steve was driving at a speed of 80 miles per hour.

The author dissipates his efforts in futile dialogues, in trifling and useless details (e.g. a peasant does not exchange greetings with Muiruri: why?) Sometimes he introduces into the conversation important topics (such as the importance of nuclear energy, the bad economic situation of the USA, pollution, AIDS, etc.), which are, however, meaningless in this novel.

Githere knows the US society and its problems well. Nevertheless, his white characters are stereotyped, all negative, as in a typical *roman à thèse*. The black characters are also flat. In fact, all the characters lack depth and motivation. The author seems to be unaware of the fact that the novelist has a far greater range of choices open to him or her than does the film director. Besides the possibility of choosing a narrator and a narratee, a novelist can control the extent to which a reader empathizes with a character by means of the manipulation of narrative distance. But we never have access to the consciousness of Githere's characters, the focalization remains external.

The author makes use of the present tense, a technique which gives an added sense of immediacy to the narrative. The strange thing is that although the narrative is, both spatially and temporally, for a great part 'here and now', the reader does not enter into the character's experiences. The narrator is uninvolved dramatically in the action, and so is the reader.

The language deserves a separate comment. It is peculiar, with many features of colloquial Kenyan Kiswahili, like *keki hino*, *yuwatafuna*, *yuwajitayarisha*; adverbial *uzuri*, *urahisi* (Standard Swahili 'keki hii, anatafuna, anajitayarisha, vizuri, kwa urahisi'). There is a frequent use of the diminutive class 12 (*kapira keupe* 'golf ball', *katela ka mbao* 'skate board', *katoto kagonjwa* 'sick baby', etc.)

The author distinguishes carefully between the language of different characters. Thus the white settler speaks in broken Kiswahili with Africans and in a correct Kiswahili (which stands for English) with white people. On the other hand, Wanjiru and her friends use a language full of slang<sup>4</sup> and English loanwords; there are even cases of code-switching:

*"Mikate hii na maziwa haya yote ni freshi. (...)"*

*"Basi nipe bofulo nzima hapo na milki moja. Itakuwa haumach?" (p.65)*

*"This bread and this milk, all is fresh. (...)"*

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. *kuendesha katiba* 'have sexual intercourse'

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“Then give me a whole loaf and one milk. How much it’ll be?”

“*Amenivuruga the whole nite.*” “He troubled me the whole night.” (p.64)

Many critical remarks could be made about the language used by Githere’s narrator. In fact, there are many errors (not only misprints) - morphological, syntactical and lexical. For instance,

- *rangi yeupe* (for *nyeupe*, p.91),
- an awkward use of *ambaye* for ‘as if’ (or ‘like s.o. who’):

*Ronny aonekana ambaye ameanza kuingiwa na wasiwasi.* (p.115)

Ronny looks like someone who has begun to worry / as if he began to worry.

*Gordon aonekana ambaye anateleza.* (p.57)

Gordon looks as if he were sliding.

- confusion between *-uliza* and *-omba*, both translating the English ‘ask’.

“*Hasante keti chini,*” *Jaji amwuliza kuketi chini.* (p.143)

“Thank you, sit down,” the judge asks him to sit down. (The tag clause is redundant.)

What is basically wrong with Githere’s technique, besides the clumsiness, redundancy and other flaws mentioned above? There is an important theoretical point to be made here.

The novel is a *narrative*, a ‘telling’ rather than an ‘enacting’, and this distinguishes it in an important sense from the drama or a film. Of course novels can contain very dramatic scenes, and often the reader may forget that what he learns of character and event is not direct, as in the theatre or the cinema, but mediated through a particular telling, a narrative source. But even if the telling is such that we can visualize what is described - and that is often the mark of an accomplished narrative - we still see what is pointed out to us by a narrator or a narrative voice. In a filmed version of a novel the different members of the cinema audience can choose to concentrate upon different aspects of what unfolds before them; the reader of the novel, in contrast, ‘sees’ what the narrator chooses that he or she shall see.

Drama typically ‘tells’ less and ‘shows’ more than narrative. It is often assumed that a film or dramatization of a novel can include more than the original, but the loss of a directing and organizing narrative source very often means that although such filmed or dramatized versions can be visually rich and dramatically immediate, they lack much of the verbal and artistic richness of their originals (cf. Hawthorn 1992: 3-4).

As Jeremy Hawthorn (1992: 4) puts it, “The novelist can often choose to inform the reader of just what he or she wants - no more and no less. But dramatic displays cannot be finetuned in quite this way, and are, inevitably, rich in peripheral information.” Another revealing quotation from the same author is the following: “The use of the present tense gives the scene more



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dramatic force: we feel that we are actually watching a character as he is doing something, *although without losing a sense of the guiding presence of the narrator*” (Hawthorn 1992: 61, present author’s italics).

Thus, I repeat, a filmed version is rich in peripheral information, while the novelist may - and usually does - choose to restrict the information given to the reader about the setting in which scenes take place. And this is precisely what is awkward in Githere’s text: *it is rich in peripheral information*, unnecessary in a narrative text, whereas it lacks much of the verbal organization and the guiding presence of a narrative source.

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