

## Chapter 8

# The Bride's Agency

## *East Africa Novelistic and Dramatic Imaginaries*

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This chapter engages with portrayals of the bride in selected novels and drama from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. I argue that the writers of these works exploit the bride's unique situation of transiting from singlehood to marriage, which makes her the center of attention to her society, thus infusing her with power as a platform from which to advocate for cultural as well as moral transformations in various spheres, or, in some cases, disrupt seemingly rigid traditions. According to Michelle Nelson and Cele Otnes (2005, 89), "the wedding is a special ritual—a rite of passage that culturally marks a person's transition from one life stage to another and redefines social and personal identity." It is the bride who features as the protagonist rather than the groom: perhaps because greater responsibilities of motherhood wait to transform her both socially and biologically. To facilitate a better grasp of the bride's power in East African literary works, this chapter reads these representations based on the writers' habitat regions, their choices of genre, and their gender. These three aspects seem to influence the agency attributed to the bride and, importantly, unveil various ideological insights on societal gender perceptions.

The bride features prominently in drama by Ugandan male playwrights Austin Bukenya's *The Bride* (1987) and John Ruganda's *The Burdens* (1972). Focusing on Kenyan female novelists, my chapter engages with portrayals of the bride in Grace Ogot's *The Strange Bride* (1989), Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994), Wanjiku Kabira's *A Letter to Mariama Ba* (2005), and Zainabu Burhani's *Mwisho wa Kosa* (The End of Wrongs) (1987). Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "A Wedding at the Cross" in *Secret Lives and Other Stories* (1975) is also significant in shedding light on how

a bride is imagined by Kenyan male writers with Marxist and postcolonial ideological inclinations. From Tanzania, this essay dwells on representations of the bride by East Africa's leading detective novelist Mohammed Said Abdulla who, in his novels, captures Zanzibar's socio-historical realities with precision (see Mbatiah 2016, 133). The bride features in Abdulla's detective series in *Siri ya Sifuri* ("The Secret of Zero") (1979), in which the bridegroom disappears on the wedding day only to be found murdered; in *Duniani Kuna Watu* ("This World Has Strange People") (1973), where, in a twisted state of affairs, the bride is wedded to her brother; and in *Mwana wa Yungi Hulewa* ("Even the Devil's Offspring Needs Nurture") (1976), where, like in *Duniani Kuna Watu*, a brother and sister are engaged before the bride is murdered. These literary works shed light on various East African cultural perceptions of the bride.

I categorize cultural perceptions on the bride as loosely reflective of Ugandan, Kenyan, and Tanzanian cultures based on the writers' backgrounds. This is because, due to diversified cultural practices embraced by numerous ethnic nations in the region, there is no homogeneous national culture in the countries that make up East Africa. Tony Afejuku (1995, 211) observes (albeit in another context) that a literary work of art is categorized as African "because its sentiments, contents, imageries, metaphors, verbal structures or setting derive from the African local or communal milieu, or because [the writer] writes mainly to mirror conditions of his or her community." This is so despite Ugandan playwright Bukenya's (1987, vi) contestation in his critical introduction to *The Bride*, that his play should not be read as an "anthropological" piece for "'exotic' details than for the creative vigour in" it; rather, that his work is a product "of the imagination . . . based on generally recognisable African realities and concepts, like the attainment of maturity through initiation . . . and the crucial role of parents in the marriage of their children" (1987, v). Indeed, the central role of parents in their children's marriages cuts across the region's cultural matrix. Yet Bukenya's admission that "factual findings are only raw materials for the artist" (1987, vi) can be relied upon as a window to read actual cultural perceptions in the playwright's bearing. Bukenya's compatriot, the playwright Ruganda, depicts the plight of the bride in Ugandan culture even though the setting of his plays is claimed to be an unnamed country in post-independent Africa.

Kenyan female novelists depict the bride in various levels of agency that reflect their ethnic cultural practices: Ogot's bride is drawn from Luo mythology; Ogola's from Luo marriage traditions; Kabira's from Kikuyu marriage traditions; and Burhani's from the Swahili practices of veiling whereby Swahili and Arab women are "covered in black buibuis from head to ankle to reinforce the image of inaccessibility" (Kasfir 2004, 327). In wa Thiong'o's story, the bride is depicted at the heart of cultural conflict whereby

the seemingly rich endorse marriage only when it is a church wedding, thus attempting to invalidate marriages contracted according to traditional Kikuyu customs: wa Thiong'o's portrayal is a case where Christianity is identified not only with the colonialist's mission of erasing African cultural values (see Afejuku 1998, 510) but also a protest against class stratification since the church wedding is seen as a preserve for the social and political elites, especially in the first decade of post-independent Kenya.

Categories such as gender and ideological orientations of the writers coupled with their choices of genre seem indispensable in shaping the agency of the portrayed brides. The works read here demonstrate cases where the bride turns into a site of contest between elderly men, seemingly custodians of rigid cultural practices, and the youth in love with the bride and, consequently, in opposition with the traditions. In Marxist works, the bride seizes the opportunity to unmask social stratification by denouncing a union right at the altar. Some feminist writers depict the bride as lamenting the onset of her imprisonment, the end of her freedom. Further, through magical realism mode, an otherworldly bride rejected by her parents-in-law-to-be emerges as the cause of tremendous change in human affairs when she breaks taboo by working a magical hoe hence ending her people's idyllic life of letting the gods work for them. In the detective novels, despite inheritance and succession conflicts featuring as immediate motives for criminal acts, the social crimes committed appear to have a deeper reach into inhibitive cultural practices against courtship/marriage traceable to the veiling tradition.