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An old gem republished for modern readers

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

There are novels which arrive dressed properly, bow politely to the reader, wipe their shoes at the door of literature, and speak in civilised tones about "the human condition." Then there is *Agony in Her Voice*, which arrives barefoot, sweating through its collar, muttering scripture, spying on schoolgirls, and plotting romantic conquest with the moral composure of a hungry goat near a young cassava garden.

I must immediately congratulate Peter Katuliiba for producing a novel so magnificently uncomfortable that I occasionally feel the need to hide it from onlookers. Rarely has obsession been presented with such theatrical dignity. The book reads as though a provincial schoolmaster swallowed equal portions of Shakespeare, lust, Catholic guilt, and cheap beer, then attempted to digest them all while sitting on a hot *sigiri*.

Fearless storytelling

Agony in Her Voice is not a polite novel. It is not a neat novel. The book is deeply uncomfortable, unintentionally hilarious in places, brilliantly observant in others, and powered by the kind of fearless storytelling that modern publishing houses would probably approach wearing latex gloves. Reading this book eerily reminds one of the first time one encountered the writings of Nikolai Gogol. You get the sense that the Katuliiba, like Gogol, is a rabid sadist. He enjoys throwing his head back and laughing at human absurdity without any pity whatsoever.

Protagonist

At the centre of this ridiculous tale stands Julio Kinyua, deputy headmaster, intellectual, moral custodian, romantic strategist, and perhaps the sweatiest human being in African literature. The man perspires with evangelical commitment. His nose alone deserves its own chapter, possibly its own passport. This is one of

the many aspects that reminds you of Gogol. Whenever emotion strikes him, desire, fear, embarrassment, ambition, confusion, hunger, theological uncertainty, the nose erupts like a missionary waterfall. Kinyua, in his 50s, falls head-over-heels in love with his teenage student, and his life unravels hilariously.

Now, lesser writers would present Kinyua merely as a villain. Katuliiba, however, understands the first law of human absurdity: every ridiculous man believes himself profound. Kinyua does not think he is a predator. No! He imagines himself tragic. Noble. Romantic. A mature lion among childish boys.

In his pursuit of a forbidden love interest, he manipulates sermons, recruits schoolchildren as spies, cancels school holidays, then he considers poisoning a rival with tainted banknotes. All this ridiculousness to try and separate a schoolgirl from her boyfriend and manipulate her to love him back. Then, exhausted from these moral labors, he settles down to mark essays on *The Merchant of Venice*. One almost rises from the chair to applaud.

Structure

The structure of the novel deserves serious praise. Katuliiba understands escalation.

Each chapter tightens the screws of madness a little further. At first Kinyua merely watches Kainda. Then he advises her. Then he manipulates her emotions. Then he mobilises religion, administration, school policy, and espionage against Mbatau, the teenage boyfriend to his love interest.

The rivalry between Kinyua and Mbatau is one of the great comic wars of modern fiction. Mbatau strolls through the novel with the lazy confidence unique to handsome young men who have never paid rent on time. He can't be bothered. He can't lose because he doesn't even know or care that he's competing. On the other hand, Kinyua is orchestrating strategic operations worthy of collapsing an empire, yet he cannot win on any level. Mbatau is essentially



Title: *Agony in her Voice*

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saying, "Pole pole, my friend," while ordering another beer. And herein lies the novel's genius; everybody is ridiculous, yet nobody knows it.

The priests speak about morality like men attempting to stop rain with umbrellas made of Bible pages. The teachers behave like colonial detectives investigating romance. The students float through the chaos half innocent, half opportunistic. Even the holy institution itself appears held together by gossip, sexual panic, and tea. Especially tea. One feels throughout the novel that if somebody removed tea from the staffroom, civilisation itself would collapse by Thursday afternoon.

Style

Stylistically, Katuliiba writes with alarming confidence. There is no decorative dancing. No euphemisms. No modern literary acrobatics. The prose marches straight ahead carrying a machete. Dialogue arrives clean and sharp. Characters reveal themselves through humiliation rather than explanation, always the mark of a serious comic writer.

And yet the book is dark. Dark in the way old churches are dark; full of echoes, secrets, and things sweating quietly in corners. Beneath the absurdity sits a merciless portrait of power. Adults claim to protect youth while feeding hungrily upon innocence. Religion becomes theater. Education becomes surveillance. Masculinity becomes performance. Everybody speaks of morality while privately negotiating with desire like corrupt politicians dividing stolen cattle.

And illusion is the true subject of the novel. Kinyua believes he is still youthful yet he's in his 50s and rapidly balding. The priests believe sermons can regulate desire. The school believes discipline can defeat biology. Mbatau believes pleasure has no consequences. Everybody is wrong. By the end, the reader begins to understand that *Agony in Her Voice* is not merely about lust. It is about the terrifying comedy of self-deception.

Human beings constructing grand moral cathedrals atop foundations made entirely of panic.

Humor

One must also praise the novel's accidental humor, which is abundant enough to require medical supervision. Kinyua trying to seduce a teenager while worrying about his sweaty nose, philosophising about love immediately after contemplating homicide and interpreting basic politeness as romantic destiny. And yet, somehow, one pities him. That is the final trick the novel performs.

Against all reasonable judgment, this sweating, manipulative, delusional, Shakespeare-quoting old disaster of a man becomes painfully human. Beneath the vanity sits terror: terror of aging, irrelevance, loneliness, failure, humiliation. He chases youth because he feels death breathing down his neck.

Agony in Her Voice is chaotic, morally dangerous, psychologically sharp, unintentionally hysterical, and utterly unforgettable. Very Gogolian in its unbridled silliness. You smile from beginning to end. It is the sort of novel respectable critics pretend to dislike before secretly recommending it to friends after midnight. It is the sort of novel that young secondary school readers will definitely recommend to each other.



oops!

Eat first and talk fast: Tales from Abu-Road

BY STELLA RIUNGA

Living in a culture that is not your own can lead to interesting, funny, and at times, downright embarrassing moments. I will share a few with you here today.

there, hosted by different host families each month. One day, their host, an American, called him and his colleague aside and shared that they were expecting guests for dinner on a certain day. Now, because of the guests, they were asked to make

The meanness! Yes, I know food is expensive there but would feeding two extra people have driven them into bankruptcy? Goodness!

Here in Abu-Road you cannot take food for granted. If you are invited anywhere, eat first

a dessert as the meeting was past (dinnertime) but because the two were absent she would not serve it. I was baffled. So why tell us then? What was the purpose?

Food aside, everything here is done by appointment. Only death happens randomly and

us is that they were operating on a strict two-hour window of time, calculated to be sufficient for lunch and conversation. At hour 1.75 they started getting restless. They had to start leaving for their next appointment and that is how we found ourselves