

Billy Karanja Kahora

The Persistence of Form in Capturing Mrs. Karoki and Putting Her to Bed (Figuratively): Billy Kahora's Experience of Writing The Applications, a Novel in Progress.

“The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates... the actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.” (Philip Roth; Writing American Fiction).

I came across the above statement four years ago as I was doing an MFA and telling myself that I was working on my novel – at least as far as sitting down at my desk to write words on a page about a reality/ies that had happened in my immediate past and trying to shape that into a story. In truth I was replaying the same event in my head and had been doing that for a few years. I had taken a single instance or maybe a series of instances and molded/imagined/remembered it/them into some kind of story/narrative/sociology/drunken reverie that was ongoing and felt to me at the time just as it does now would go on and on for awhile. These part imaginings, memories, projections revolved around a woman that I will now call Mrs. Karoki after the main character of the novel that I am working on, who “cracked” during my late teens.

Mrs. Karoki was a woman my family knew very well; I had played with her kids, her husband was more than a passing acquaintance to my Dad. And before her ‘crack’ she was very good friends with my mum. We lived in what had started off as a middle class “estate” (that’s what we call our suburbs in Kenya) that had slowly degenerated into a lower class neighborhood that would ultimately threaten to become a slum. This was a reflection of Kenya’s fortunes in the world.

Starting in the mid-1990s, the country was going through a serious economic downturn; the middle-class was in general decline just as their houses were in this particular space, white mansionettes with orange brick rooftops graying and browning.

On the national scene, corruption had become rife and the winners in an emerging dystopia were small-time crooks, white-collar thieves, crooked policemen and politicians. The bribe became the foremost currency of transaction in contemporary life. Many middle-class families poured their values down the drain and joined the orgy, and if they could, they found a space from which they could help plunder the country’s coffers. Of course, many families could not get onto the program; the fathers seemed to age and retire early, defeated. Their wives took up “business,” retailing clothes, starting makeshift catering businesses, setting up hair dressing shacks and even selling vegetables, things they had once turned their noses at. Their kids, who they couldn’t afford to send to college, hung around the streets and got drunk. Those who could left for the West and South Africa. Shiny-faced nuclear families became matriarchal depression zones, with

the long-suffering, hard-working pious mother as the new family head, taking care of a drunkard no-good husband wallowing in self-pity with kids in all the throes of all sorts of chemical abuse. Material success became disassociated with education and hard work. College professors became night-operating car importers, taking advantage of the duty free perks given to them. Application of self became meaningless.

The Karoki family was better off than most and could have easily afforded to move to a 'leafier' suburb—Mr. Karoki had some strong ethnic connections and an animal intelligence that was suited to the time. He and his family could have fled. Mrs. Karoki, we would later find out, had been struck by cerebral malaria, but by the time it was discovered it had already eaten into her brain and was manifesting itself in many strange ways. So, within a few years this once immaculately dressed woman, quiet and beautiful, had become a harridan who walked the estate pavements day and night talking to herself. She had become hostile and abusive if approached, and only some of her children could calm her. It was a sad sight to see her become what is described as paranoid and delusional. She developed conspiracy theories that her husband wanted to kill her.

But then something happened and it seemed that with the everyday pressures, there were more and more Mrs. Karokis, each speaking their language, some even singing their own songs and dancing their own dances. On T.V, radio—the things my uncles and aunts told me became one wild Karokian episode. And soon Mrs. Karoki did not even seem to be as mad as she had started out to be because the place had itself become completely mad – which means normal in its own madness.

I never really got to know what really happened to her or the immediate space because I escaped, at least physically, to South Africa. Mentally, she and that Buru Buru of my childhood never left my consciousness. I had continued reading and looking at Kenya from South Africa and by the time I'd completed my journalism undergraduate degree I had decided to become a writer.

I followed all the political and socio-economic fortunes of Kenya from a safe distance and in 2003, just as I was struggling with a graduate media studies program in South Africa, Kenya declared itself a new place and got rid of its madnesses and its 24 year-old despotic regime. I wrote a short story called "The Applications" to declare my own sense of the end of Karokiness and sent it to a new magazine called Kwani that loved and published it. But it was never quite enough. Mrs. Karoki, who I re-imagined as having gone 'insane' to survive, had stopped applying herself in a place she could not stand. She had gone sane because the world had gone raving mad. She had chosen to apply herself differently in what she saw as a new world of non-application or rather dysfunctional application.

Even before I created Mrs. Karoki, I had been reading the novel in one form or the other all my life. First in an escapist, sweaty-palms gripping way that teleported me from my world, Mrs. Karoki's world, but later in what I would describe readings that were discerning, to help me think, analyze and evaluate my world, Mrs. Karoki's world. Some novels helped, the so-called realistic and social ones, especially. Many put me into a dizzying Po-Mo stupor and by the time I reached my undergraduate Lit studies, I could hold forth on political oppression, madness, economic failure in both abstract and Karokian ways, and these had become obsessions.

At Edinburgh University, I signed up for an esoteric course called Insanity and Literature. Secondary texts for the course included R.D Laing. I only managed to read Doris Lessing's *Brief Descent Into Hell* – I could not finish *The Golden Notebook*, which was on the primary reading list of this course that would help me get a handle on how to frame madness within a literary space, essential to the novel I was now working on. I did, however, make a few breakthroughs. I inadvertently picked up *The Corrections* and this was a book that had something in it that made me understand how the Karoki family could somehow come to life on the page through a certain suburban prism. I also saw the movie *The Hours* and understood that an existential stillness posed by what one does with their “hours” is more powerful than the most carefully recorded rantings of an insane woman. Of course, this is a kind of cherry picking and over-determinism of the frames that I could pick from these two examples. I use these examples to illustrate a point to an American audience as there are many other non-American books that I also read and films that I also watched that fed and inspired what I was writing then and now, and which continue to add to the ‘frame’ in which I could paint the plight of Mrs. Karoki and Kenya. And so I realized that I not only needed to summon all the elements that are required of a novel that posits a social realistic stance, but I needed to also frame these within several lenses. I forced myself to understand three different but intertwined elemental forms of the novel: social realism, madness and the family saga. These became my forms. I was on my way and I eventually started sitting down to write words.

It was and is not easy. Whenever I harken back to my Karoki world it is still full of that damn new Kenyan language, Sheng, an interface between English and Swahili; the realities of the Kenyan world have to be captured in this new language's glory. Irritatingly, high school rugby keeps on coming up – Mrs. Karoki's son is obsessed with it and I have constantly had to re-imagine how to narrate a rugby match in full flight. There are whole drunken lives that live in inebriated realities that need to be captured and retold. And there is the most difficult one of all – Mrs. Karoki's continuous cerebral malarial babble-register. So, how to combine these stupefying realities into the pages of a book?

I now see all these things as the contents that fill in the forms that I have mentioned. Realism in the novels I have read and liked dwells on heavy and detailed description, alternative points of view. Family sagas I like run into detailed histories, arcs that trundle along, blow up, enter middling stretches – and Hours pass by. Insanity is paled against normative contexts and reliefs in the Great Novels of Madness. These are just some of the forms that persist to coax Mrs. Karoki's world onto the page for me as a writer. And when this happens, when these forms that I have appropriated from many places persist to ‘capture’ Mrs. Karoki, the novel will end. And so will Mrs. Karoki in my head. But the forms are shape-shifters and when I think I have made them do my bidding they release Mrs. Karoki out again ... and so on it goes ...