



Invoking Memories of Legendary African Women: A Reading of Rocha Chimera's Trilogy *Siri Sirini*

-Wafula Yenjela¹

Abstract

This article examines how legendary representations enable reinterpretation of the histories of women in Africa. It shows that ascribing heroic and revolutionary qualities to re-membered African women seeks to significantly transform societal gender perceptions of women as victims of history. Through a critical reading of Rocha Chimera's trilogy *Siri Sirini* (2013), I attempt to show that legendary representations transcend victimhood by envisioning women as capable of confronting injustices in a quest to establish a new order where human dignity for all can be realised. I also indicate that the power of interpretation of histories enshrined in literary texts is vital because this power usually embodies particular political investments with, in this case, regard to gender relations. The article concludes that legendary representations reinterpret, rewrite, and reinvent women's histories and significantly transform readers' worldviews in regard to gender relations.

Key words: Gender, Swahili women, Siri Sirini, patriarchy, hypermasculinity.

Introduction

Invocation of memories of legendary African women in the contemporary times contributes to the shaping of societal perceptions in regard to gender. This is because, as I show in this article, such memories revisited in fiction disrupt patriarchal stereotypes that challenge women empowerment in areas of leadership, politics, and material culture. Since "[m]emory can be imagined as a platform for our deepest emotional and spiritual communion with inherited pasts" (Yenjela, 117), this communion with our pasts goes a long way in challenging us to rethink our contemporary understandings of one another. In this article, I focus on how invocation and strategic redeployment of interpretation of legendary memory cultivates moral grounds for remedying gender imbalances. Bearing in mind that "heroism ascribes agency" (Omuteche, 114-115), the invocation of the memories of legendary African women is in itself a strategy of giving agency to women because it asserts their transformative capabilities in African histories.

In a way, legends can be powerful ideological vehicles for mobilising society to believe in a particular cause. In most cases, legends are about martyrs of a particular community or nation. As Njogu and Chimera indicate, "mighani ni hadithi zinazohusu ushujaa [na] wahusika wake wakuu huwa ni mashujaa wa kitaifa, na hustahiwa sana (156), "legends are narratives of heroism [whose] main characters are national heroes, and they are highly revered." A society's reverence for legends mostly stems from memories of its special people's struggles against a common enemy/evil in which the legendary hero pays dearly the ultimate price for the larger public's deliverance. This richly endows legends with emotional currency, making the legendary character more memorable

¹ Doctoral Student, Department of English, Stellenbosch University, Western Cape | South Africa

compared to characters in genres such as myths and tricksters. Therefore, through fostering reverence for the legendary African women invoked in the *Siri Sirini* trilogy, the author puts women on a high pedestal in societal conception hence suggesting transformation of public opinion on gender relations.

However, given its deployment of fancy in representation of phenomena, one wonders at the contribution of literary works to the shaping and reshaping of societal perceptions. But Maria Pia Lara, in her discussion of the role of women's fiction in unveiling their claims to their cultural spaces, notes "the huge impact that literary works can have on public opinion". (92) Omuteche, in another context, compendiously remarks that:

as an artifact of knowledge of a community, literature occupies a metaphorical position in society. Its operationalization is denotative, attaining meaning in relation to the authorial perspectives and artistic strategies, besides the interpretive perspectives the reader deploys. (109).

With these views in mind, it is apparent that Chimera in *Siri Sirini* attempts to aggressively confront discriminating societal gender perceptions by re-presenting women's memories, especially by constructing them as legends, and in a manner that encompasses the existential sensibilities of both men and women.

In this article, I embrace memory as a powerhouse which drives aspirations for the restoration of human dignity, especially that of the marginalised groups in the society. According to Assman & Czaplicka, "cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (126), is central to human beings' negotiation of their existence. Assman and Czaplicka also indicate that cultural memory

preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. [It] works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. (130).

Here, Assman and Czaplicka indicate the significance of memory to society: it is a site from which societal perceptions and decisions are founded and revised. Invocation of memory presupposes the need to assert a particular practice which may be perceived to be deviating from the norm in the present time and space. But of much value is the power to reshape society embedded in invocation of memory, which is a driving force of literary artists such as Rocha Chimera whose trilogy I analyse in this article.

Rocha Chimera is a veteran teacher of Kiswahili, having taught at Egerton University where he was also the Chair of the Department of Linguistics, Languages and Literature. He is currently a professor at Pwani University in Kilifi, coastal Kenya. Apart from *Siri Sirini*, he has also authored a Kiswahili novel *Nyongo Mkalia Ini* (1995), "Gall on the Liver", and academic works such as *Kiswahili: Past, Present and Future Horizons* (1998) and the 2000 Noma Award winning *Ufundishaji wa Fasihi: Nadharia na Mbinu* (1999), "Teaching (Kiswahili) Literature: Theory and Style" co-authored with Kimani Njogu. *Siri Sirini* trilogy is his most ambitious creative work, and the longest Kiswahili creative work so far, as he remarked while alluding to Achebe's gecko that climbed the tallest *iroko* tree and clapped for itself, in a conference on African Literatures hosted at Pwani University between 10th and 13th Dec 2014. The trilogy consists of *Siri Sirini 1: Mfungwa na Mshairi* (pp.458), "A Secret within the Secret: a Poet and a Prisoner"; *Siri*

Sirini 2: Mpiga Mbizi Kilindini (pp. 322), "A Secret within the Secret: a Diver in Deep Waters"; and *Siri Sirini 3: Mtihani wa Mwanamke* (pp. 423), "A Secret within the Secret: a Woman's Test". For the purpose of this article, I focus mainly on *Siri Sirini 1* and *Siri Sirini 3* from which I can extract memories of legendary African women.

The *Siri Sirini* trilogy is based on the most celebrated Swahili legend, Fumo Liyongo. The original version of the legend appeared in oral narratives, and then as an epic poem *Takhmisa ya Liyongo*, "The Epic of Liyongo," by Sayyid Abdalla. Abdalla poetically narrates the military and revolutionary exploits of the Swahili tragic legend, a hyper-masculine poet Fumo Liyongoin the Swahili ancient city-state of Shanga. The legend is premised on Liyongo's power struggle with his cousin, an oppressive King Daudi Mringwari. The power struggle is heralded by the claim that Swahili culture privileges a king's nephew as heir of the throne. Therefore, when Liyongo discovers this, he attempts to dethrone the king's son, and this marks the beginning of his tragic end. Yet Chimera's trilogy inserts in the legend contemporary issues affecting Kenya - assassinations of political dissidents, police brutality even in mosques, sycophancy of the political elites, detention of subversive artists, suppression of the powerless. The trilogy also pays special attention to women's active contribution to the Swahili histories. Furthermore, through mass protests, the citizens of Shanga consistently protest state injustices.

In *Siri Sirini 1* the legend begins with Liyongo's detention, jail-break, and escape to neighbouring Ozi. Despite Liyongo's treasonous attempts against the city-state of Shanga, the dehumanising conditions he is subjected to in detention appeal to the sympathies of the reader, and underscore the devastating prison histories in many African countries. Liyongo's treasonous attempts are inspired by the citizens' discontent with the corrupt and oppressive leadership of Shanga. They, therefore, see Liyongo as their deliverer owing to his commitment to other people, especially the less fortunate. Because of this, the people of Shanga invoke and flaunt to Liyongo the idea of the Swahili tradition of a nephew being a preferable heir to the throne. *Siri Sirini 2* exposes the assassination and persecution of Liyongo's supporters in Shanga. The most chilling assassination is that of Mfawidhi, a highly educated man and minister for foreign affairs. It also shows Liyongo's marriage to Abanoye in his exile and military service as a renegade to Ozi. There are also several failed attempts to assassinate Liyongo in exile through infiltrating the Ozi army which he commands. *Siri Sirini 3* presents Liyongo's return to Shanga, his assassination by Prince Ngwari whom he trusted so much that he revealed to him the secret of how he can be killed. Liyongo's assassination triggers a military revolution led by Abanoye and strongly supported by the Ozi warriors and Shanga insurgents. At the end of the war, an egalitarian society is attained.

Notable in the rewriting of this legend is the creation of a hyper-masculine woman who accomplishes the revolution that Liyongo leaves unfinished due to his assassination. By so doing, Chimera rewrites the Swahili oral histories in a way envisioned by the Kenyan feminist Wanjira Muthoni who urges gender committed writers to "create new stories either through retelling old narratives or through the creation of new stories following traditional oral narrative structures" (58). Muthoni's motivation to this view is her realization that most Kenyan oral narratives negatively portray women who violate the patriarchal script. Yet Chimera goes beyond rewriting the oral narratives: he invokes and facilitates the reinterpretation of memories of revolutionary African women such as

Queen Hatshepsut, one of the ancient pharaohs of ancient Egypt; the Queen of Sheba², the royal leader of Ethiopia and founder of the Menelik Kingdom; Mwana Kupona, a legendary Swahili poet renowned for *Utendiwa Mwana Kupona*, "The Epic of Mwana Kupona". Above all, because legends are invented by given societies (Njogu & Chimera, 161), Chimera invents a hyper-masculine woman who evolves from victimhood to militarily confront structures that undervalue her humanity.

Siri Sirini shows that through a united front where men and women who believe in a society that prioritizes human dignity for all, gendered injustices can be overcome. The trilogy presents an alternative approach to the gender terrain of the Kenyan society because it draws from cultural memory and demonstrates that revolutionary men and women can actively engage in transforming the society politically and socially. In my reading of the trilogy, Chimera confronts gender injustices in a way suggesting that a quest for a societal new order where woman's dignity alongside man's dignity is paramount should not degenerate into uncritical wholesome condemnation of the male sex. "This is because African women and men face the challenges of daily life together and their unity is their strength" (Morrell & Ouzgane, 6). This standpoint, which embraces men, marriage, and African traditions in its attempt to conscientize the public on the inhumanity enshrined in patriarchy, is more persuasive to me compared to radical views that seem inadvertently alienating³.

Specifically, I focus on the invoked memories of the following African revolutionary women: Mwana Kupona from the Swahili people of Lamu, Kenya; the Queen of Sheba from the ancient Ethiopian Empire; Queen Hatshepsut from Egypt of the antiquity. The trilogy also invents Abanoye, a legend from the Wagalla pastoral community in Kenya. The memories of these women narrated in the trilogy challenge the reader to ruminate on the active roles played by women in the histories of Africa. The representations of women encountered here attempt to correct the image of ambitious women in history because

History has shown that a woman who pushes the envelope of ambition is not just maligned in the history books as a conniving, scheming seductress whose foolhardy and emotional desires brought down the good men around her, but also celebrated in infamous detail as proof that females should never be in charge. (Cooney, 2).

An empathetic gaze into the memories of Queen Hatshepsut, the Queen of Sheba, and Mwana Kupona, show that re-interpretation of historical African women and those that they embody enhances a better conception of humanity. Further, a portrayal of the imaginable possible, such as the case of Abanoye significantly chart new ways of embracing one another.

Mwana Kupona (1810-1860 AD)

Mwana Kupona binti Mshamu lived between 1810 and 1860 AD in Lamu at coastal Kenya. She was the wife of Bwana Mataka, and inserted herself in Swahili history when

² Also called Makedda (Welch, 310), Bilqis (Clapp, 34), or Magda (Le Roux & van Vorst).

³ In most gender projects, "men have been overlooked, taken for granted, or treated as a unified, homogenous category" (Morrell & Ouzgane, 7). Susan Arndt in discussing the negative publicity that feminism faces in Africa observes that "feminism is often equated with radical feminism and with hatred of men, penis envy, non-acceptance of African traditions, a fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood, a favouring of lesbian love, and an endeavour to invert the power relationships of the genders" (710).

in 1858 she wrote *UtendiwaMwanaKupona* specifically for her seventeen-year-old daughter, Mwana Hashima binti Mataka. Mazrui positions Mwana Kupona among the contemporary Kiswahili pioneer poets when Kiswahili was transiting from the Arabic to Roman script (17). Of the Swahili *tenzi*⁴ of its time - such as Sayyid Abdalla's *TakhmissayaLiyongo*, Abdalla Mazrui's *Al-Akida*, and Abubakar Mwengo's *UtenziwaKatirifu*, "Epic of Katirifu" - Mwana Kupona's poem is the most celebrated. This epic poem which is rich in historical allusions, appeals to women in general to serve their husbands with utmost obedience, but warns them never to yield to anything that is contrary to God's will for a woman. Chimera revisits the poem in *Siri Sirini*, and attempts to show how the poet subtly concealed revolutionary sentiments in poetry as she expressed her displeasure with a heavily guarded patriarchal system. This evokes memories of Mwana Kupona and constructs her as a legend among East African women for her contribution to literary thought.

In the trilogy, the historical Mwana Kupona is renamed Mwanakupona. She writes her *Utendiwa Mwana Kupona* at a critical time when she is about to wed, and well aware that her father, Liyongo, is in detention. It is Mwanamanga⁵, her mother, to whom she gives the poem and pleads with her to recite it on the wedding day. To this particular society, the wedding day is highly prized:

Aliyesema arusi ni kilele cha sherehe za mwanadamu hakukosea!
Angalisibu zaidi kama angaliongeza kuwa katika ukuu, arusi haiwezi
kulinganishwa na sherehe nyingine yoyote; hiyo imepea, ya sawa nayo
haina...!(Chimera,*Siri* 1, 2013: 119).

{Whoever said that a wedding is the peak of all the celebrations in the life of a human being never erred! He would have done even much better had he added that in greatness, a wedding cannot be compared to any other celebration; for it is so greatly elevated, no other happiness can equal it...!}
(my translation from Kiswahili, & others that follow).

These sentiments resonate with Shaaban Robert's in *Utubora Mkulima* (1952), "Utubora the Farmer." It is in the context of the Swahili culture imagined in the trilogy, whereby communal drumming and dances are performed as artists recite their poems on a wedding day, that Mwanakupona writes her epic poem. This she does from the precincts of a learning institution in Lamu where she had met her fiancé who is already married to one wife.

Chimera invokes the memories of Mwana Kupona through the politics of interpretation which enhance her monumentalization as a revolutionary African woman. Politics of interpretation

has to do with the kind of authority the interpreter claims vis-`a-vis the established political authorities of the society of which he is a member, on the one side, and vis-`a-vis other interpreters in his own field of study or investigation, on the other, as the basis of whatever rights he conceives himself to possess and whatever duties he feels himself obligated to discharge in his status as a professional seeker of truth.(White, 58)

⁴ Mazrui states that *tenzi* is "an extended narrative poem of defined meter and rhyme that often assumes an epical form and function [and that MwanaKupona's tenzi's] accomplishments can be attributed as much to its tone and humor as to the flow of its language"(16-17).

⁵ Her real name is Zahra, but she is called Mwanamanga which means Oman-born-wife. Her nickname is Mwananinga which denotes her beautiful voice, like a cooing dove, when singing/reciting poems.

Through several characters in the trilogy, Chimera dedicates his energy to re-interpret Mwanakupona's epic poem in order to invest it with deeper meanings that speak to the vision of human dignity regardless of gender. Mwanakupona's poem extensively endorses patriarchy in the manner in which it appeals to the addressee to serve her husband-to-be with unquestionable obedience and humility. Though seemingly written in innocence, but, as revisited in the trilogy and in the actual poem, the interpretations of a few lines demolishes the entire castle of patriarchy that is apparently neatly built according to and even beyond societal expectations. For instance, when Mwanamanga presents the poem to Mwanaziza, her mother-in-law and Liyongo's mother, the latter is at first shocked at the theme that her grand-daughter exalts. But as she reads, the subversive aspects concealed in the poem dawn on her. She interprets it as follows:

Kulingana na utenzi huu, huyu hapa mfuasi mtiifu wa mumewe,
asiyekosea, anayefuata apendavyo mume, asiyepinga atakavyo mume,
'*isipokuwaiwapo mume anamwelekeza kukiukamata kwaya Mwenyezi Mungu.*' (Siri 1: 143, my emphasis)

{According to this tenzi, we have here an obedient follower of her husband, one who doesn't err, one who pleases her husband indeed, one who never challenges whatever her husband desires, 'except when that husband attempts to lead her against the will of God.'}

This interpretation reveals the power of fiction in navigating through jealously guarded frontiers of patriarchy. Mwanaziza sees that in just one line of the poem, Mwanakupona unleashes a lethal arsenal against any form of oppression against the imagined unborn daughter, who symbolizes future generations of women after the poet's era (1810-1860 AD).

This poem becomes a platform upon which oppression and abuse are challenged on the basis of the subversive line in the poem - it is against the will of the Almighty God. God's will in regard to gender varies from one religion to another, but in most cases the Almighty God is presented as *just*. Mwanananga is quick to point out that husbands who attempt to lead women against God's will are many. In her interpretation, husband can also mean particular leaders in society. For instance, King Daudi Mringwari of Shanga uses his leadership position to oppress people. She states that

Sikumoja Mwanakupona atakujatambua kwamba hata kuwatenganisha watoto na baba yao kwa mabavu, tena bila mbawazi, nikinyume cha matakwaya Mwenyezi Mungu (Siri 1: 143).

{One day Mwanakupona will come to realize that forceful separation of a father and his children, in fact without a tinge of shame, is against the will of the Almighty God.}

This is a cry against patriarchal injustices committed against families. Mringwari who comes out as a dictator is seen as a husband of Shanga, a patriarch. He has deposed and indefinitely detained Liyongo, the military commander of Shanga, for alleged ambitions to overthrow his (Mringwari's) reign. Mwanamanga sees Liyongo's detention as an act against God's will because it has separated her husband from her and her children. But Mwanaziza also points out earlier in the trilogy that King Mringwari's wickedness includes "kukamata wanawake kwa mabavu, magendo, mirungura, kunyakua na kupora biashara za wenyewe wafanya biashara wasiokuwa na uwezo wa kitawala..." (Siri 1: 59), {"serial raping of women, smuggling, bribery, grabbing and looting powerless people's

businesses...”} Definitely, these are things that are against God’s will. This interpretation expands the poem’s boundaries from familial to national spaces, thereby pointing to Mwana Kupona’s great legacy in challenging social injustices.

Dhabina, who is the Minister of Education in Shanga, and a key advisor to King Mringwari, also sees how subversive one line of a largely patriarchal poem can be. He is a staunch custodian of patriarchy and feels threatened by the poem and strongly advises the king to censor it. In his words, Dhabina shows where the danger in the poem lies:

Sasahapo...Bintiya Mwana kupona, katika ushairi huu, anapewa ushauri mzuri wa kumtii mumewe na kumtendea kila lililojema... Sawahapo; hakuna lililoharibika! Walakini, twaambiwa mishororo michache baadaye, asila ni binti huyo asiroje, wala asijidanganye, ama tuseme asijaribu hata kuwaza kufanya lenyeuwezekano wa kumwudhi Mwenyezi M’ngu! (*Siri Sirini 1: 226*).

{Now there...Mwanakupona’s daughter, in this poem, is given great advice to obey her husband and do him good... Up to that point it’s fine; nothing the matter! However, we are told a few lines later, in her submission to her husband, never should that daughter imagine, nor be deceived, or should we say she should never even attempt to dream about doing, for the sake of her husband, anything that displeases God Almighty!}

In Dhabina’s argument, the provision in the poem that allows a wife, in her submission to her husband, not to do anything that is against God’s design as indicated in Mwanakupona’s poem is a recipe for a revolution. Carefully knitted in a family set-up, the author metaphorically presents a schizophrenic state which heavily suppresses dissent from artists.

In the trilogy, the power enshrined in interpretation of works of art is fore grounded. For instance, Kibwana Mwengo Bashee, one of the revolutionists and ally of Liyongo states that Mwanakupona’s poem “ni chombo chema cha kuchochelea vinga vya ukombozi kwa vile umetungwa na mwana wa mwanamapinduzi” (*Siri Sirini 1: 242*), {“is a vital weapon to stir the embers of redemption because it is composed by the daughter of a revolutionist.”} As seen in Kibwana’s observations, Mwanakupona’s poem is revolutionary just by virtue of the poet being the offspring of a key revolutionist in Shanga. This is what motivates Kibwana and other dissidents to secretly distribute copies of the poem to the disgruntled citizens of Shanga. In a sense, this relation between Liyongo and Mwanakupona becomes an alliance formed against oppression, which inspires transformation in the Swahili city-state.

There’s also a secret in who is interpreting society to society. It is because of interpretation that the education system proves to be a very significant target in shaping perceptions that affect the commonality of humanity. Mwanaziza expresses her optimism in Mwanakupona’s poem, saying that women’s liberation is a possibility as long as they succeed “kuubatilisha mfumo wa sasa wa kijamii kwa kuubadilisha mfumo mzima wa elimu” (*Siri 1: 145*), {“to reform the current patriarchal system of the society by reforming the entire education system.”} According to Mwanaziza and other women activists, if this poem is taught to children, and the subversive interpretation insisted, then with time every oppressive system against women and against men as well, will be strongly challenged. Despite the opposition against this endeavour, King Mringwari is eventually persuaded to allow the poem to be used as a major text in the education

offered to young people in *madrassa*. This points to Mwana Kupona's triumph against suppression, and thus she emerges as a legend among the Swahili.

The Queen of Sheba (10th Century BC)

In this part, I analyse the portrayal of the Queen of Sheba in the trilogy and attempt to show how different interpretations of her life are reflective of gender perceptions in contemporary Kenya, as well as many parts of Africa. Despite different interpretations of the Queen of Sheba's life, it is notable that she thrived because the society in which she was nurtured valued women and men equally. According to Galbraith Welch, "[t]he importance in which Ethiopians held women shows their loyalty to a fundamental tradition which features a woman and in the supreme reverence they have chosen to pay to the Virgin Mary" (Welch, 309-310).

Siri Sirini invokes the memories of the Queen of Sheba in *Siri Sirini: Mfungwa na Mshairi*, the first book of the trilogy. In his attempt to unearth the 'secret' in Mwanakupona's poem and its 'threats' to the entire society of Shanga, Dhabina claims that Mwanakupona is capable of causing a revolution that may vanquish men's privilege to power. He intimates that the poet intentionally avoids mentioning specifically the things prohibited by God, and claims there are so many things that God is against. At this point, he invokes the Queen of Sheba's historical revolution in order to affirm his anxieties. In this case, the Queen of Sheba's revolution against patriarchy becomes a trope on which Dhabina imperiously interprets Mwanakupona's poem. Yet, in a way, the allusion to the Queen of Sheba legitimates women's claim to governance. This is because the Queen of Sheba's histories become the embodiment of a woman's ability to reign over an empire such as that of ancient Ethiopia.

In *Siri* 1, Dhabina warns that

[m]wanamke atakujadai haki ya kuwa Malkia hapa! Sio Malkia, mke wa mfalme, kama Mtukuzwa Mwana li basi wetu hapa, bali Malkia ambaye Mamlaka yake niya moja kwa moja, kama ya mfalme! [...]. Hebu waulize Wahabeshi! Au hujasikia maisha ni mwako watu wakimtajataja Malkia wa Sheba? (*Siri* 1: 229).

{a woman shall one day claim the right to be Queen here! I don't mean queen, the wife of a king, like our Glorified Mwanalibasi here, but Queen with direct powers, like that of a king! [...]. Ask the Ethiopians! Or haven't you in your lives heard people mentioning the Queen of Sheba?}

The allusion to the Queen of Sheba at a time when the rulers of Shanga have censored Mwanakupona's poem is very significant. Dhabina brilliantly sees *Utendiwa Mwanakupona* as an arsenal that will eventually demolish the foundations of patriarchy through legitimating women's leadership in the Swahili society as the case with the Queen of Sheba. His masculine anxiety is seen in his discovery of the gender revolutionary force enveloped in a few surreptitious lines, lines concealed in a largely patriarchal poem.

Dhabina's panoptic vigilance against women occupying top positions of leadership shows how jealously the pillars of patriarchy are guarded. This panoptic gaze attempts to normalize and institutionalize the marginalization of women. As Ruth Odhiambo and Maurice Oduor suggest, "[i]f , as it has been argued, law reflects predominant social values, then in a patriarchal society, where man is supreme, law will often re-imprint

inherent gender imbalances and reinforce women's exclusion from the mainstream society"(1). Therefore, the invocation of the memories of the Queen of Sheba in the trilogy seems to me a quest to identify with contemporary aspirations for correction of gender injustices. This is enhanced through stirring, in the imagined reader, a rethinking of discriminatory gender perceptions; perceptions which, with time, inform institutional laws.

In invoking the Queen of Sheba's memories, the politics of interpretation still manifest in regard to gender perceptions. According to Dhabina, the Queen of Sheba

Alijiona juu sana ya wanaume wote Uhabeshi nzima hata akaondokea kuwadharau... wote kabisa! Akawadharau kupindukia! Kiasi cha kwamba alipotaka kuolewa, hakuona mwanamume kufu yake, yaani aliyestahili kumuoa, hapo Uhabeshi! (*Siri* 1: 229-230).

{elevated herself above all Ethiopian men and despised them all! She despised them completely! To the point that when she wanted to get married, she didn't see any suitable man for her in the entire Ethiopian Empire!}

In Dhabina's patronising view, the Queen of Sheba's choice to travel to foreign lands, and her acquisition of a suitor hailed in his time as the wisest man in the world, is something that should be condemned. However, the novelist looks upon Dhabina's views satirically.

The novel rewrites the memories of this legendary African woman by questioning the motives embedded in the negative representations of the 'facts' of her life. Niekerk in "Liberating Her-Story from History" intones that

[r]ewriting history takes one back to the two basic facets of history: the so-called facts as far as it is possible to exhume them, and the various representations of those facts in historic documentation.(137).

As seen above, Dhabina's representations of the memories of the Queen of Sheba provide a good case of rewriting 'her-story'. Through satire, the novel offers alternative representations of the Queen of Sheba's memories. For instance, it foregrounds memories of the foundations of the Menelik Kingdom; one founded on the actions of a woman who possesses a strong willpower; a woman endowed with transformative intellect; a woman with the urge for discovery.

The Queen of Sheba, though despised by Dhabina in the novel, comes out as a very strong woman. According to Dhabina, the Queen of Sheba:

[a]lisafiri safari ndefu wee hadikokolo, mbalihuko Filistina! Akaenda jirahisisha kwa Mfalme wa huko siku hizo, Nabii Suleiman bin Daudi. Akarudi nyumbani naujauzito haramu wa nje ya ndoa, bilahataaibu! Akajizalia mwanawe wa kiume ambaye hakutambuliwa na babake; akamwita Menelik. Huyo ndiye aliyeanzisha ukoo wa utawala wa Uhabeshi wenye mizizi yake Filistina, ambao ndio ulio kouongozi ni hadi wa leo! (*Siri* 1: 230).

{travelled on a very long journey, far away up to Philistine! She made herself easily agreeable to the King of those days, Prophet Solomon son of David. She shamelessly returned with a *haram* pregnancy, a pregnancy conceived out of wedlock! She delivered her son who was not even acknowledged by his father; she called him Menelik. He is the one who is

the founder of the Menelik Kingdom in Ethiopia with its roots in Philistine. That is the leadership which is in power to this date!}

Kathleen Sheldon indicates that the Queen of Sheba “travelled to Jerusalem to learn from Solomon, and returned to Ethiopia to have his child, Menelik I [and thereafter,] she abdicated in Menelik’s favour when he was 22”(142).

An easy understanding of the Queen of Sheba’s ‘learning’ from Solomon which results into pregnancy and child birth seems Sheldon’s hilarious way of sneaking through patriarchal societies’ devalued understandings of a concubine, a mistress. But Solomon, who in Biblical representation “had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11: 3), is constructed as wise and great independent from his jumbled sexual life. Here, we encounter heightened conflicting gender representations: the Queen of Sheba and Prophet Solomon, as represented in the novel, engage in the same consummation of their desires but emerge with acutely opposite images of their persons. Dhabina indicates above that the queen got a *haram* pregnancy, and to make matters worse, Solomon didn’t even acknowledge the *haram* child. Somehow, the child was not admitted into humanity twice. The queen therefore carries the blame for the abomination of bringing forth a *haram* child. Eventually, Dhabina paints a picture of an abominable queen who should never be emulated. At this point, one easily agrees with the view that to “reconstruct history is to question the foundation of our knowledge of the past, and more than that, to question the structure of our thinking - a structure which has been presented as a truth...” (Niekerk, 137).

Through an aggressively chauvinistic Dhabina, Chimera provides an opportunity to interrogate Manichean perceptions of rather complex human relations. For instance, Dhabina provides a linear interpretation of the Queen of Sheba’s relation with Solomon, and somehow presents it as a vice. But several scholars have attempted to represent the relationship in much broader ways. For instance, in *Magda Queen of Sheba*⁶, the Queen of Sheba is persuaded to seek for Solomon⁷ after hearing of his wisdom from her Merchant in Chief called Tamrin. Tamrin travels to Israel during the construction of the temple to sell to Solomon “red gold such as the Arabs use, and precious woods and marble” (Le Roux et al, 30) and resides in Solomon’s courts for several months before returning to Ethiopia. In this account, Magda appoints trustworthy officers and servants to be in charge of the kingdom in her absence, after which she persuades her people to allow her embark on a journey in quest for wisdom:

“Let my voice be heard by all of you, my people. I am going in quest for Wisdom and Learning. My spirit impels me to go and find them out where they are to be had [for] Learning is better than treasures of silver and gold, better than all that has been created upon earth...” (Le Roux et al, 34).

This account somehow challenges Dhabina’s interpretation of the Queen of Sheba’s mission to Jerusalem. Magda, in *Magda the Queen of Sheba*, is constructed as a legend and fits in various morphemes imagined by Vladimir Propp’s “Morphology of the Folktale”⁸.

⁶Extracted from an ancient royal Abyssinian manuscript “The Glory of Kings” and translated from Gheze into French by Hugues le Roux, then from French into English by Mrs John van Vorst.

⁷The Biblical account is in 1Kings 10:1-3, 13.

⁸Magda fits in the following morphemes: absenting herself from home (journey from Ethiopia to Jerusalem), led to object of search (wisdom), violating an interdiction (going against Solomon’s words, submitting to Solomon’s deception and getting pregnant), heroic return (to Ethiopia)(Propp, 1968).

In *Siri* 1, Dhabina claims that the Queen's sexual relationship with Solomon was an act of that made her cheap. Dhabina also describes the Queen's son from her relationship with Solomon as *haram*⁹ because he is born out of wedlock, and was never acknowledged by his father. This brings to light problematic set thresholds of that which is human in a patriarchal society. But in *Magda the Queen of Sheba*, the circumstances under which the queen is impregnated by Solomon seem to underscore the frailty of humanity, even of those regarded as the greatest amongst us. In Propp's structure of the hero's journey in a folktale, the queen's sexual act would be the stage of "the violation of an interdiction [as well as] the success of a deceit" (Propp, 16).

Magda falls victim to a shrewd and scheming king. After a memorable banquet in her honour, Solomon maliciously persuades her to sleep on a bed next to his in the palace. But she pleads with him: "Swear to me by your God, [...] that you will not use of your strength against me? If in any way whatever I transgress from the law of my country, I shall be plunged into sorrow, into sickness and suffering..." (Le Roux, 54). The law that she refers to is narrated as follows when she abdicates for her son: "For such hitherto had been the law of Ethiopia: a woman might reign there provided she keep her virginity," (68). This law is violated when Solomon maliciously gives Magda "food which creates thirst. She was tormented by this thirst" (56) yet he had made her vow not to touch anything in the palace that night as a counter to the oath she had made him swear. She asks Solomon when he grabs her as she takes water thinking he was asleep: "Is it breaking my vow to drink a little water?" (58) to which he replies, "And what more precious treasure than water have you known under the sun?" (58).

Nicholas Clapp also presents the Queen of Sheba as a composite character, one who is even larger than life. His account shows that the Queen of Sheba's relationship with Solomon cannot be simplified in the manner Dhabina does in the trilogy. Clapp states that

[i]f one combs the Bible, it may fairly be said that the identity of the queen of Sheba becomes more rather than less a mystery-and nowhere more than in the Song of Songs, where it is just possible that she is the inspiration for the ravishing, free-spirited "loveliest of women". [...] She introduces herself: 'I am black but beautiful, / daughters of Jerusalem'. This suggests a woman from far-away Arabia or Africa arriving at Solomon's court and confronting his legions of wives and concubines. (23, 24).

Here, the Queen of Sheba is raised to a high pedestal of human achievement. Cast in this positive light, her legendary existence as an African woman is in itself a monument that should unsettle unjustifiable gender perceptions.

Queen Hatshepsut (1508 BCE-1458 BCE)

Siri Sirini also invokes the memories of Queen Hatshepsut¹⁰ and other queens such as Cleopatra. Hatshepsut "is a woman of antiquity [...], the first woman to exercise longterm rule over Egypt as a king [...] for almost twenty-two years" (Cooney, 1). But one thing that is puzzling, at least to contemporary times, about Hatshepsut is her marriage

⁹ *Mwana haramu* can be translated as "illegitimate child", one born out of wedlock. But *haramu* is derived from Arabic *haram*, together with the weight it carries in Islamic epistemology.

¹⁰ Africa is constructed "as biology, as image, as space, as memory, that is, African identities as mapped in racial, representational, geographical, or historical terms" (Zezeza, 14). Also, by its fall following the "conquest by Alexander of Macedon, ancient Egypt was home to Black Africans, brown Libyans, Arabs, Phoenicians, Turks, and white Greeks, Romans and Macedonians" (Odhiambo, 185).

to her brother. "Her bloodline was impeccable: daughter of the king, sister of the king, wife of the king" (Cooney, 5). However, Cooney shows, using other examples, that incest was permissible in ancient Egyptian royal families.

In *Siri Sirini* 1, King Mringwari sends a delegation to Egypt which communes in these memories of ancient Egypt. In the delegation, there is Sheikh Shahamey, the Prime Minister; Prince Suleiman Ngwari, the king's only son; Mfawidhi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Kidhabi, the king's advisor and propagandist. This particular delegation is led by Mfawidhi who studied in Egypt and lived there for some time before returning to Shanga. At the king's garden in Cairo, the Shanga delegation encounters monuments that embody histories of Egypt. The narrator describes:

Sanamu hizo, kwa kuziangalia tu, zilieleza mapisi yote ya Misri kongwe. Baadhi ya sanamu zilizokuwamo ni kama vile za mafarao Ramesisi wa kwanza na wa pili, Amen Hotep, mkewe Malkia Nefrititi, Tutankhamon, Malkia Hatshepsut na hata watawala wa zama za majuzijuzi kama vile Khalikizanda Mtukukuzwa na Malkia Kliopatra. (*Siri* 1: 274).

{Those monuments, just by beholding them, narrated all the historical epochs of ancient Egypt. Some of the monuments there included those of pharaohs Ramesses I & II, Amen Hotep, his wife Queen Nefertiti, Tutankhamon, Queen Hatshepsut and even recent rulers like Alexander the Great and Queen Cleopatra.}

These monuments are significant here because they are history in themselves. Remarkably, in the monumentalization which Mfawidhi and his compatriots encounter in Egypt, queens, male and female pharaohs are equally represented. Through monuments, Hatshepsut's memories are captured in their stability - in an imposing solid form.

It is from the monuments that scholars attempt to construct Hatshepsut's reign in ancient Egypt. In an explication of Senenmut's monuments, Hatshepsut's favoured courtier, Peter Dorman indicates that "[t]he major monuments of Senenmut are invariably inscribed with the names of Hatshepsut, and they display the full gamut of her titles as both queen and king" (18). He further indicates that

The motives for her accession, the extent of her power, the nature of her political support, the legacy of her rule, and the reasons for her proscription are all themes that derive from the monumental and chronological data that must form the basis of any evaluation of her reign. (Dorman, 1).

Kara Cooney gives more details that may help understand Hatshepsut's proscription: "Hatshepsut was a rare human being, a woman able to see beyond machine and set forces in motion to shape her own destiny. She effected the ultimate change to make herself king" (Cooney, 4). These views show the extent to which Hatshepsut remains a mystery even to Egyptologists, historians, and archaeologists.

Chimera revisits the memories of Hatshepsut in *Siri Sirini* 1 so as to demonstrate women's valid aspirations to leadership. The very journey from Shanga to Egypt, as represented in the narrative, can be read as a symbolic pilgrimage. Ancient Egypt is cast here as the source of human civilisation, the cradle of humankind. The delegates travel there so that they can return to the beginnings, that is, learn from memory and, among other things, change their perceptions about gender representations in governance. It

seems narrated histories would not have convinced some of the Shanga delegates on the historical veracity of female pharaohs. Therefore, the monuments which are carved in a way to convey memory to unlimited generations serve as concrete evidence¹¹.

Through memory, Chimera carves Queen Hatshepsut as an embodiment of women who significantly contributed in the world's pioneer economy. He strategically invokes Hatshepsut in relation to the ancient Indian Ocean World (IOW) trade which was the pioneer of global capital. As Gwyn Campell observes,

the IOW encompasses the entire region from Africa east of the Cape-to-Cairo axis, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, to Australia, Eastern Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and Korea. [It is this region that] was the core of the first global economy. (173).

Mfawidhi in his speech to his Egyptian hosts revisits the Indian Ocean trade memories of Egypt's connectivity with Shanga. He says,

Uhusiano katika maeneo haya mawili una mapisi marefu, tena marefu sana. Nijuavyo mimi, uhusiano huo adhimu ulianza enzi ya utawala wa Malkia Hatshepsuti, uliokuwa baina ya miaka 1490 hadi 1469 kabla ya Nabii Issa kuzaliwa. Malkia huyo alianzisha biashara iliyofana sana zama hizo baina ya Misri na Barazinji...(Siri 1, 280).

{The connectivity between these two regions reaches deep into memory. What I know is that this rare connectivity began during the reign of Queen Hatshepsut which was from 1490 to 1460 BC. In that era, the queen initiated trade which really flourished between Egypt and Barazinji (the Swahili Coast)...}

Here, *Siri Sirini* 1 foregrounds an African woman – Hatshepsut - as a central actor in the heart of the Indian Ocean Africa trade during the first global economy. In this case, she emerges as a legend for her great yet little-known achievements.

Revolutionary Abanoye: The Invention of a Legend

In this section, I discuss the invented memory of a female legend from the Wagalla community of Kenya. Unlike the memories of the poet Mwana Kupona, the Queen of Sheba, and Queen Hatshepsut, whose historical veracity can be ascertained, Abanoye is only but a fictional legend. Nevertheless, female military commanders are not new to African histories. As Gilbraith Welch observes:

[o]ne is struck by the readiness of African public opinion to carry along legends and history in which a woman is shown as the supreme commander over male soldiers. [...] The woman soldier was a familiar fact in Africa [and her] acceptance again indicates that Africa had a point of view of her own about women, as in so many matters. (309).

Siri Sirini invents a female legend who accomplishes a mission left unfinished by a tragic male legend. Abanoye, Fumo Liyongo's second wife whom he marries in neighbouring Ozi among the Wagalla during his exile, circumstantially evolves into a hyper-masculine individual in order to contribute to the restoration of social justice to her society.

In Kenya's oral history, few female legends were invented mostly during colonialism. For instance, there's Mekatilili wa Menza who led the Giriama uprising between 1913-1914.

¹¹Most of Hatshepsut's "monuments were destroyed" (Cooney, xi) probably after her proscription.

Her monument is installed in the coastal Malindi town with inscriptions indicating her active role in mobilizing the Giriama people's resistance against colonialism. The other known legend is Wangu wa Makeri who was the first female chief of the Kikuyu people during the colonial era. But Wangu wa Makeri's memory is reviled, especially by the men-folk, because of her alleged brutality against men under her heavily matriarchal reign. Nonetheless, the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai who narrates her story in *Unbowed* (2008) stands out as a global legend for her politico-environmental activism during President Daniel Moi's dictatorial regime.

The invented legendary memory of Abanoye in *Siri Sirini* trilogy is significant, especially considering the matrix of Kenyan women's sacrifices and struggles vis-à-vis their representations. In *Siri Sirini* 3, the represented magnitude of Abanoye's involvement in actual combat on the battlefield distinguish her as a legend. My aim in this line of thought is not to hastily endorse military interventions in societal conflicts, but to read Abanoye's heroism carved in the revolution as a voice that speaks to cultural ethos of heroism in regard to women. For instance, in "The Concept of Heroism in Samburu Moran Ethos," Peter Wasamba indicates that:

[t]he Samburu *moran* ethos celebrates exceptional degrees of courage, strength, perseverance, self sacrifice and agility exhibited by warriors. These heroic qualities exalt *moranism* above any other institution in the society. [...] The term *moran* is used by Maasai and Samburu to refer to young men who have graduated from boyhood into warrior-hood after circumcision, and whose prime duty is to protect the society from external aggression. (149, 145-146).

Understood from these strongly-held attitudes, the transference of hyper-masculinity to Abanoye exalts her position in her society. According to Patrice Diquinzio, masculinity is highly valued and this inclination enables "patriarchal ideologies [to] justify preventing women from developing all of their human potentials and excluding women from socially valued activities by appeal to gender differences" (3). In light of this view, Abanoye's military involvement in the revolution that deposes an oppressive king subverts societal perceptions of sex and gender differences and capabilities. The transformation to a holistic gender perception in society is enacted in the trilogy through the genre of legend.

Chimera employs the troubled memories of Abanoye, the daughter of the chief of Ozi, in order to show her motivations to violently confront oppressive structures in her society. She reveals her injured life to Liyongo when he expresses an interest in marrying her. Her confession that she was raped by five men is shocking to Liyongo. Abanoye narrates that she was raped

[n]a wanaume watano, rijali waliotutumka na kujawa na afya [...] watano ndugu yangu...Wapiganaji kutoka mbari nyingine iliyokuwa haiishi kupambana na mbari yetu. Walinibaka, wanaume hao, sio kwa sababu ya tamaa yao ya ujanadume, bali mintarafu ya kumwudhi baba yangu tu, na kumwonya kuwa asipoacha kukinzana na wao, basi mengi maovu yatafuatia. Walinibaka mimi, ili wamvunje moyo baba; ajione yeye si mwanaume kitu"(Siri 1: 318).

{[b]y five men who were healthy, masculine and full of virility [...] five men my brother... warriors from another clan that was forever at war with our

clan. They raped me, those men, not because of their youthful sexual desires, but purposely to hurt my father, to warn him that if he doesn't cease fighting with them, then more evil will follow. They raped me, so as to break my father's heart; for him to see himself as a useless man.}

This revelation shows how women's lives are trivialised by some culturally entrenched practices. In times of war, an invading group may reduce their enemy's women to objects that can be raped, trampled upon, or destroyed, as a crude way of persuading their opponent to surrender, or as an expression of triumph over their enemy. But for this article, this injustice that Abanoye encounters transforms her worldview: she has to fight for her life.

Through Abanoye's misfortune, *Siri Sirini* attempts to persuade the perceived reader to identify with Abanoye's radical conviction to fight for her survival. After being raped and impregnated in the ordeal, the stigmatization common to rape victims haunts her. She tells Liyongo that her former husband, with whom they had a daughter, always nagged her on the issue, claiming that "mimi ndiye niliyewasababisha wanaume hao kunibaka [...] na kutiwa dosari ya aushi!" (Siri 1, 320), "I provoked those men to rape me [...] and defile my body for the rest of my life". He divorces her on account that she is unclean for having been raped. Her encounter with rape also disabuses us of the idea that rape victims may have been complicit, or done something that led to their fates. Here, the trilogy accumulates Abanoye's imagined pain and suffering and uses them as evidence to warrant liberation cause.

But what makes Abanoye stand out as a hyper-masculine individual is her radical transition from victimhood to taking charge of her destiny by killing the rapists who ruined her life. She tells Liyongo "*wale afriti walionibaka [...] niliwaangamiza. [...] niliwauwa, mmoja mmoja mpaka nikahakikisha wote wamefariki dunia walioinjisi, maaluni hao!*" (Siri 1: 402), "those malicious men who raped me [...] I destroyed them. [...] I killed them one by one until I ensured all of them have died and left the world which they defiled, the outcasts!" Abanoye destroys the men who ruin her life; she does not condemn all men for the evils of particular individuals in the society. This is evident in her healthy relationship with Liyongo who genuinely upholds the dignity of all human beings regardless of gender. Her vengeful actions are portrayed metaphorically as a quest for social justice. She also indicates that the rapists defiled the world by raping her. This hyperbole enables the understanding of how grave rape is to the victim and to the rest of society.

Abanoye's unique ability to foresee the future, a characteristic of legends, is noted when she says she will need military ability to confront injustices against her and her society in general. Long before Liyongo's assassination and the revolution, she requests him to offer her military training:

Nataka unifundishe kupigana nikitumia silaha ili niwe na uwezo wakujitetea mimi mwenyewe binafsi, na aidha kutetea yeyote aliyemwendani wangu: baba, watoto wangu, wewe mume wangu, na kadhalika. (Siri 1, 402-402).

{I request that you train me how to fight using weapons so as I may be able to protect myself, and also to protect anyone that I love: my father, my children, you my husband, and so on.}

Abonaye's request is granted, and Liyongo trains her into an expert in military combat. But it is the cruel assassination of Liyongo that triggers the revolution that transforms Abanoye into a legend. During the revolution against the dictatorial and oppressive King Daudi Mringwari's reign, the general commander is Abanoye. Her ferocity on the battlefield is noted by both the insurgents and the defenders. The narrator shows,

Upande wa Waozi, mtu mmoja bayana alitambulika pande zote mbili kwa ukali wake. [...] Ilionekana kama kwamba yuko kila mahali, mguu wake mwepesi ukimpeleka kasi ya simba marara, mara huku, mara kule. [...] wote wenye kumbonekeza walijikuta wakistaajabia uwezo wa mpiganaji huyo. (*Siri 3: 273*).

{On the side of the Ozi fighters, one person was conspicuously noted by both sides for her fierceness in battle. [...] It was as if she was everywhere, her speed like that of a wounded lion, she was here, there, all over. [...] all who saw her marvelled at the fierceness of that warrior.}

In depicting Abanoye as the general commander of the revolution, and an effective one for that matter, Chimera invents memories that seek to reinforce women's contributions to their societies' histories. Abanoye's exemplary performance in the battle distinguishes her as a legend, especially considering the moral cause of the revolution. This invention significantly positions a woman at the heart of such defining moments of people's histories. It further affirms women's entitlement to society's histories and resources since they fought for them.

Abanoye wages the war not only physically, but also with her very soul. She personally immerses herself in the battle, something which is noticeable to Prince Ngwari who is one of her opponents and the actual assassin of Liyongo. Ngwari, in the midst of the battle before he is killed, reflects on the anger that Abanoye has invested in the war:

Akamwangalia tena, akaona jinsi mwanamke huyo alivyojawa hasira. Akili yake ikamwambia hayo aliyokuwa akiyaona yalikuwa siyo tena ya mapambano baina ya Ozi na Shanga, bali ni ya mtu mwenye hasira za kibinafsi dhidi yake. Wazo hilo likamkumbusha alivyomtendea Liyongo. Akapata hisi kuwa Abanoye anataka kulipiza kisasi kwa sababu ya kuuliwa mumewe...(*Siri 3: 278-279*).

{He looked at her again, and saw how furious that woman was. His mind told him that what he was seeing was no longer a war between Ozi and Shanga, but a war waged by a vengeful person. That idea reminded him what he did to Liyongo. He realized that Abanoye wanted to revenge the assassination of her husband}.

In this portrayal of a female legend, Chimera shows that Abanoye engages in a war that has directly affected her life. She is not fighting for fame like Prince Ngwari who aspires to make a name as great as that of Alexander the Great. Her war is supported by revolutionists from Shanga because it is a war against injustice. At the end of the trilogy, when the revolution is successful, she demands neither power nor wealth, but an egalitarian governance. This distinguishes her as a selfless legend, one who is not driven by vanity but by compassion for fellow human beings.

Conclusion

Siri Sirini presents many ways of revisiting our humanity, especially regarding gender relations in contemporary Kenya. By foregrounding memories of legendary African

women, the author seeks to affirm the dignity of women in contemporary Kenya, and Africa by extension. The memories revisited in the trilogy somehow envisage redress on the demeaning image of women enabled by patriarchal discourses that relentlessly portray women as victims, and also as not deserving to be in influential positions. In this article, I have attempted to show that through literary texts that revisit memories of legendary women to rewrite history, the transformation of damaging gender perceptions in the Kenyan society is enabled. The memories of legendary African women invoked in the trilogy place women on the same pedestal with men. For instance, the memories of the Queen of Sheba and Queen Hatshepsut challenge the contemporary society on the capabilities of women in governance. At the same time, the memories of Mwana Kupona foreground the literary contribution of a woman with a vision for social justice. Her desire for an ideal existence between married couples is also reflexive of the larger society's harmonious existence. The invocation of these memories is a pilgrimage into humanity's imagined possible golden past, the cradle of humanity where equality is thought to be paramount.

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