



# Finding the Zone: Billy Kahora Takes Charge

By A. K. Kaiza



There is a driven, will-to poignance in the posturing of the friends Chiri and Juli, which captures a trenchant motif threading the writing of Kenyan writer, Billy Kahora, as seen in the recently released *The Cape Cod Bicycle War*, bringing works published over 15 years in one book.

A bathetic self-dramatisation whose more pathetic disposition conceals a desperate desire for a steadfast life, Chiri and Juli are that seeming paradox of African middle - why the self-inflicted misery when you really have everything?

The motif is immediate, and everlasting, and defines Chiri and Juli as it does the other characters created by Billy Kahora, who was a longtime editor of the literary collective, *Kwani?*. Take the statement by Juli:

“Even in Bibilia, Old Testament, wheat was God’s crop”.

Is the seeming grandness of this statement egged on by the place he says it in, the expansive, majestic landscapes of the Great Rift Valley, just gone past a laga where they had a glancing, violent run-in with a young, uncircumcised Maasai herdsboy? The Rift Valley can seem, and has been said to be, where God lives. Except Chiri (Eddie Muchiri Kambo) and Juli (Julius Rotiken Sayianka) are impressively, but irredeemably, given over to the profane. Their invocation of the Almighty must not be seen as anything other than a manner of speaking.

So is it money, the knowledge that this crop of heaven, and the Narok variety no less, when well-tended, can give two harvests in a year? If so, why would they go on a drinking binge which may well scuttle the entire enterprise? Not by any stretch of terminology are these characters saints. But they are not sinners either, at least, not for heavily indictable sins.

Even if all of the above were true, we the readers aren't going to judge these characters that extremely. It is that kind of life then, pushing things too far because the worst isn't going to come for them, after all, and even if it did, mummy and all the network of class and tribe will catch them when they fall. It is the summation of upper middle class cloud cuckoo land.

Chiri and Juli are after all, full of life, which in the long history of literature (and literature's affinity for zestful sinners is well-established) is the closest you can come to saintliness. We follow in either direction (saintliness and devilry) only so far as metaphor allows. It is imperative we take it as given: A crop of the gods it is, two young men going out to sow it and this means we must start off by thinking their's an ecumenical quest. And if there is a pile of dosh at the end of this, then is it any the less an evangelical affair to grow rich?

These questions and the twists therein serve a higher purpose; they may not make Juli and Chiri better humans, but they make them thoroughly enjoyable literary characters. Literature, with its sometimes contrary-wise moral alignment to everyday life, ought to come with the caveat to not try this at home.

Which is a tortuous way of saying that we have in our hands here, a book at the heart of which is satire. It is there in the life of Jemimah Kariuki; cynicism – satire's evil twin – at full stretch is what holds together the life of Kandle Kabogo Karoki (arguably one of the more impressive literary creatures to come out of Kenya) in the story about Nairobi as the fallen city, *Zoning*; in the life of Khalid Ibrahim Hussein, in *The Unconverted*, an examination of religion and ethnicity, it darkens considerably; in the life of Alan Muigai, strutter extraordinaire in *Shiko*, the cynicism masticates, getting too edgy. And in the coming of age, campus fiction story, *Motherless*, it is the cynicism of others that presses into and threatens to scupper the life of Maish Boi.

Is this thread, the satire and the baked-in cynicism running through this compendium, what is possible in the public and private life of Kenya as Billy Kahora sees it? His writing, as we have seen it in *Kwani?* and in other places – and the stories here have also variously come from other publications – has surveyed these psychological realms. In his writing, things press at people. From youth, they are forced to navigate a world extensively sullied by bad faith and bad form; growing up, they are acquiring various degrees of deformity. At the fullness of life, there they are, bonkers already, or going bonkers, ex-ministers, retired professors. Their children are running away from the family name ('Maish Boi' is actually Joseph Mungai, son of disgraced ex-Moi minister), drinking themselves to bits, talking politics "through jigging chins and stomachs," the old men "with heaving man tits from goat meat and forty years of independence".

Even for an uncompromising vision of a country, this is bare-knuckled stuff. What else, this vision has seemed to say, can emerge of such a history but lives lived in cynical disregard for decorum?

If there was decorum, no one here seems to know what it was. So keen are they on the business of taking and avoiding being taken advantage of, that you give up hoping for some good in anyone and marvel at the nerve of it.

The etymology of such a world view, when you have mined the writing of Billy Kahora, is that a shit-storm of some magnitude happened at some point just as the characters were being born. Hence, this supposed turbulence, which cleared the land of whatever moral rectitude had been standing,

and which broke the embankments of propriety that had kept the life above board, happened to their fathers' generation. It is in Billy Kahora's writing, inherited infraction.

Whether or not this mining unearths an accurate account, the conclusion is not news to the characters that his work. To varying degrees, they are people who have already accepted that the best you can expect from the world is a messed up life that at least should not leave you too finished to not like your favourite whisky.

With the exception of a Maimouna Munyakei (who is not fictional and an aberration in this collection), Fr. Kamau and Komora Kijana Wito, Billy Kahora's characters are hustlers because they must avoid being hustled. In literary terms, this would be something like incurable realism.

In the fifteen years he has been published short story writer, the code has been there, holding on steadily: accept that yours is a corrupt nation, that promises will be broken; they will come to take from you; your best friends, including your own family, will take from you. Fathers can't be relied on, they are impotent. If your mother is a strong woman, you are lucky. Only mothers can really love you, although even they have a habit of turning up drowned and bloated down river.

Billy Kahora brings technical nous and organisation to his prose. That, in alliance with his grasp of the ins and outs of a certain Kenya, which I will dare call middle-Kenya, is what works for his writing. Combined with the writing chops, the knowledge of the language by which the sense of contemporary Kenya is passed along, the Kiswahili predilection for wisdom peppering his writing, there arises a vital sense of groundedness. There is the vocabulary of the drinkscape (booze flows through the writing in quantity enough his prose could be designated a distillery). There is the near-casual psychological violence committed on almost every page. It is a tough place, Nairobi. There is the practiced awareness of how far to push things, and none excels at this more than Kandle Karoki in *Zoning*, who has become a master at working a few weeks in a year and not getting sacked for it.

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Billy Kahora's technical approach to writing works at several levels. His stories show consistency in this regard. First, he posits a big picture, like a painter priming a canvas to decide whether to work from light to darkness, or darkness to light, before making tentative, thematic daubs. He starts to work at sketching out the elements that will later receive fuller treatment.

Take *The Red Door*, the story where Chiri and Juli appear (shortlisted for and published in the 2013 Caine Prize collection). It is a complex story told as character study. But it is also plot-heavy, bucolically-trained to the cultural nuances outside of Nairobi. It gets its Sheng working. It is the story of inter-ethnic, Kenyan settlement, in the crowded, fought-over Rift Valley. There is the sheer magnitude of detail, like a Richard Onyango painting, an ambitious piece of work.

So how to hold it all together? One way, effectively, is symbolism. Wheat and a combine harvester get collared as the effective glue. We clue in on this early on. At some point, it reads less like a short story than long-prose with the late-stage introduction of Eastleigh and a wily Somali trader-kind, and a peerless satirical treatment of money-worship.

The Mirrors in *Treadmill Love*, a subtly heartbreaking story, introduce spine to the story as narrative aid and mental unguent to Kung'u who needs soft, mental cushioning. Buruburu, aka the country, got to him, in that Francis Imbuga *obiter dictum*, "when the madness of an entire nation disturbs a

solitary mind, it is not enough to call the man mad”.

In *We are Here Because We are Here*, the war between the Indian Ocean and the Tsana River, by which the Indian ocean tsunami threatens to wash away African hinterland, only for the Tsana (Tana) river to push back, this application of symbol as plot device is transparently on show, at the expense of the consummate complexity that drives other stories. But as a symbol, the struggle between the ocean and the river is tantalising. Are we talking here about African history, of the colonialising, mercantile, force, the trade winds blow onto its coast, and the seemingly weak, yet resilient force with which the continent has always pushed back?

The bicycles in the title story are the more overt symbols offering us a ride through the story.

And the lived-in knowledge of middle-Kenya? This is the fraught element in Billy Kahora's writing. Given the depth of ethnic feeling in Kenya, a Kenyan writer can never escape the charge of ethnicity. The *divide et impera* mechanism built into the nation's DNA to make British exploitation of the country more effective might never go away. The country in Billy Kahora's writing is only Kenyan by extension. He could more accurately be described as chronicler of middle class Kikuyu life. On the one hand, a writer needs to at least be grounded in a particular cultural context if only for locus. But on the other hand, it is also perilous to assume there exist elemental differences between "tribes". The challenge of writing, is to find out how there not, rather than looking for how, there are differences. We therefore squirm through the presentation of otherness in *We are Here Because we Are Here* and in *Commission*. Really? You cannot help but ask. Is there such a thing as difference, and should we assume others speaking in childish voices because they are from another ethnic background, and hence less "normal" "us"? If I were the editor, I would have left out the two stories for further development. And more than that, I can see how this fact might make some uncomfortable accountability on the part of Mr. Kahora as a Kenyan writer.

But where it is concentrated, in middle class Kikuyu life, Billy Kahora is in his true element. The prose where he is not looking for the others' voice goes with few glitches. Perhaps the most ambitious story Billy Kahora has thus far written is *The Gorilla's Apprentice*. There is something of *The Tin Drum* about *The Gorilla's Apprentice*. A heartbreaking rendering of dystopia, without the sentimentality that often mars such attempts, it may well be one of the most effective stories written of the post election violence of 2001/08. The narrative, *prima facie*, is of a dying gorilla, and of a boy's (Jimmy) desire to speak to him, which brings him close to the darkly mysterious Professor Charles Semambo. But we become aware that the shouts, fires and smoke through which the story strives to move forward, but which our narrator does not pull to the foreground, is of the most serious Kenyan crisis since the Mau Mau uprising. Like with Gunther Grass' book, the innocence and curiosity masks unhinging darkness, amplifying it.

There is the author's cold distance from his subjects. Bright-eyed hopes are best taken with caution. In the tight universe of his writing, there exists a place, not quite a sin bin, not really a hell, in which characters with too much hope in life are sent to fester in. Kandle Karoki has found that place, the Zone. He got over it. Now he prowls through Nairobi like he owns the place. In literature, there are characters you will be eternally grateful meeting. Think May Kasahara in *Wind-Up Bird Chronicles*, Count Kaburagi in Yukio Mishima's *Forbidden Colours*. Anti-heroes brighten up literature. Kandle aspires to that status. He leads a fallen life. He is not trying to get up. Why should he when fallen looks so good on him? He wears this status with such suave, commanding steadiness you must do a second take to be reassured the author is not pulling our legs and this is an actual, handsome devil. Literature can never have enough of handsome devils. Kandle lied to his manager at the bank. He has not shown up for work in forever. He took out a loan to service his time in the Zone. They know he has lied. He knows they know. They have cornered him. But Kandle was born a human corner. He knows his Nairobi too well to believe that anyone can be upright.

Billy Kahora is a writer of the impact of an age in Kenyan history. In his writings, you piece together the etymology and see that at soul, the stories begin in the first decade of Kenya's independence. This is when the underlying psycho-social background of the characters and their stories stir. There was a promise made, however implicitly, that independence would bring a better world. Young men and women – the fathers and mothers of the characters Billy Kahora writes about – threw their lot at this promise; the awakening moment of black self-determination, the scholarship to Makerere, the elevation to a British university, that degree, that coveted job back home and then, the beginning of mortgages and property. The beginning, also, of a very rapid unraveling. It is against this national-domestic backdrop that our characters are born.

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Billy Kahora condenses this history into the founding of an estate. Buruburu as synecdoche set to represent the country, as the Promised Land in which mortgages and social security would flow like milk and honey. (In a way you feel, that if *that* is what they thought independence amounted to, then they really deserved the whacking after all. But that is another matter). Buruburu, ground zero for the characters created by Billy Kahora. The lives in these stories start in the sprawling Nairobi estate sold, post-independence, as a glorious opening to the good life. Buruburu more than fell. It decayed, translating, once putrefaction was underway, into the ashen dystopia it became, a refuse heap for ill-conceived dreams.

The independence generation that bought into the promise of Buruburu quickly reached the conclusion that with Moi in power, the best option was to send their children away. The well-off send their progeny to British and American universities. The non-winners – but by no means poor Kenyan families – send theirs to South Africa, to Rhodes, to Cape Town. It is where we start to meet them in Billy Kahora's writing.

As to why there are mostly no fathers in his work, or if present, then barely alive, the grasping Professor Mundia in *Motherless*, a story set in the university town of the Eastern Cape, Grahamstown South Africa, offers some explanation: “Because of what Moi did to the country,” he says. “Moi destroyed the possibilities that were open to my generation”. But was it that straightforward? Or was the idea of independence grossly oversimplified? Did they expect that the exploitative structures of colonialism would painless stretch into independence? There were other players beside Moi, for it takes many hands to ruin a nation. He may be a victim of a regime, but Professor Mundia is not altogether a pleasant figure. As a professor, he wields his office with unbecoming power, a corruptor of young souls.

While the trajectory of Billy Kahora's writing is a forensic aperçu into middle Kenya, it is also a continuation of a long-running African narrative, the encounter with empire, coming back to the continent uneasy, dislocated, falling to corruption. As with the 1960s generation of literary characters, here, return is the moment of disillusionment. As well-told in the story *Shiko*, and glancingly in *The Red Door*, the second generation knows they are going to have to learn to game the system in order to survive. Those who fail at it envy those that succeed at it. A trusting man is a dead man walking. *World Pawa* presents the fallen life as a semi-comical, tragic entreaty, in *Zoning* as macabre vitality.

*The Cape Cod Bicycle War* is published by Huza Press

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