



For Women Who Are Difficult To Love

By Ngwatilo Mawiyoo



This 'Brazen: Reflections' series was born out of a desire to continue the conversations springing out of the 'Too Early For Birds: Brazen' theatre performance in Nairobi in July 2018. TEFB-Brazen was a mix of straight-up scripted theatre, narration, poetry, music and dance that featured the little-known stories of six fearless women in Kenya's history - freedom fighters like Field Marshall Muthoni wa Kirima, Mekatilili wa Menza and Wangu wa Makeri; democracy activists Philomena Chelagat Mutai and Zarina Patel and even one iconoclastic yet nameless woman warrior who brought down Lwanda Magere, the legendary 'Man of Stone' in Kenyan folklore. The story of each hero was narrated by a corresponding mirror character on stage. The 'Brazen: Reflections' series seeks to explore the idea of brazenness, what it means in our daily lives, whom the idea of brazenness privileges or erases, and the place that brazenness has in imagining freedom.

Watching TEFB - Brazen, I was drawn most to the story of Wangu wa Makeri (c. 1856-1915) a Kikuyu chief, known as a headman, during the British Colonial period in Kenya. She was the only female Kikuyu headman during the period, rising to power by flexing her relationship with the man who had the power to appoint her to the position, Paramount Chief Karuri. Wangu had to resign following a scandal in which she engaged in a Kibata dance, reserved for male warriors.

In the show's rendering of Wangu, told by Lillian the sex worker (her mirror character on stage)

Wangu wa Makeri privileges sensuality, and the power the moment of intimacy can give a woman, that she can use and wield for herself. Hers was one of the stories in *Brazen* that challenged me the most; I've wrestled with Lilian and her Wangu, trying to unpack what they stirred in me.

Given that wife-sharing among men of the same age set was the norm in 1901, Wangu wa Makeri's relationship with Paramount Chief Karuri was morally and socially acceptable at the time. Nonetheless, Wangu, already a mother of six, appears to have cast quite the spell over Karuri, for he returns often to her. In Lilian's telling, Wangu is fantastic in bed, and Karuri is not merely keen on his own sexual satisfaction, but is also desperate to know that he is also satisfying Wangu.

It's already the narrative of my dreams, that even powerful men of old could be invested in the satisfaction of the women they had by right. It suggests a narrative in which women got as much value from wife-sharing as men. Perhaps spouse sharing is the correct term?

Wangu The Boss Bitch

A pivotal moment in Wangu's career happens in the afterglow of hers and Karuri's lovemaking, as they discuss her husband's disinterest in an open chieftain seat. Wangu, disgusted with her husband's lack of ambition, stakes her claim, convincing Karuri to make her the first female chief of the Kikuyu in the colonial era.

She becomes a "boss bitch," inclusive of Rihanna's *Bitch better have my Money* on loudspeaker. Fully capable of cruelty, Wangu raises taxes on a whim, and makes men who dare test her literal footstool. She is no *Mutumia* - her lips are absolutely not sealed, she is not 'soft' in the way we in the present might expect of women. She takes what she will, demands her respect, and never asks politely.

A few weeks ago, Serena Williams lost the US Open final to Naomi Osaka. Everyone had an opinion about Williams' behavior. One camp, which arguably includes the umpire of the match, seemed to suggest Williams should have been a gentle docile creature on the court, offering perfect slender smiles in even the most trying of circumstances. She received a \$17,000 fine.



Read also: [The Brazen Edition](#)

Lilian paints Wangu wa Makeri's fall from power in similar terms, as tied to inequalities around the rules of what was permissible for women as opposed to men. As a chief, Wangu forced her subjects and fellow chiefs to treat her with the respect her office demanded. Lillian's defense of Wangu could easily apply to Serena: "*She did exactly what she needed to do to be heard.*"

Wangu served as chief until a meeting in 1909. A dance was arranged ahead of the meeting: the Kibata dance was a crowd puller used to bring the people together. The dance was reserved for (male) warriors, inclusive of chiefs, but Wangu got up to dance. Just like that she overstepped the freedom and power the men were willing to allow her. Some say her skirt rose up and exposed her as she danced, but perhaps it was sabotage, that a man deliberately cut the strings of her skirt, exposing her. Later, in stellar betrayal, Karuri confronted Wangu to answer the charge of dancing naked. She chose to resign her position.

The Most Powerful Part of Sex

Karuri's betrayal may seem even more stark given Lilian's suggestion that Wangu's power came not

only from what she achieved for herself but how she also nurtured Karuri, even “made him:”

LILIAN: “...the most important thing is the conversation. I can’t imagine how many women, lying there before and after the fact, have made men. Made them. I mean giving them business advice, being the shoulder to cry on, worked out every little issue that allows them to go out there and ‘BE MEN’. [Wangu] was smart, tough and unapologetic. That woman made him and he recognized it.”

This idea is reminiscent of a similar thought by Sue Maisha, who some may remember from her blog [Nairobi Nights](#) active in 2011 and 2012. Sue was “the Kenyan prostitute building a brand.” Her *Nairobi Nights* was compelling for its generosity in narrating Sue’s inner life, and the more instructive parts of the drama she experienced at work. Hers wasn’t the third person NGO summary or pulpit judgement, it was Sabina Joy, grimy mattresses, petty theft and Kanjo as blight and shield.

Sue felt that men return to sex workers not because of the sex itself, but because of mental, emotional and, she argued, spiritual issues they needed to work out:

“Men come to us possessed by stress, frustrations, mid-life crisis, career stagnation, work challenges and we exorcise them in a more pleasurable way which doesn’t involve sitting on a pew for hours listening to a man or woman blaming your spiritual afflictions on your refusal to give tithes.”

I’m in a monogamous relationship with a man, so of course I’m paying attention to this bit with at least a small measure of discomfort. The way I see it, I can either reject Lilian’s and Sue’s message outright, or figure out how to up my bedroom game?

Creating Space

Fundamentally Lilian’s character creates a space where women can unearth themselves as sexual beings. In that space Beatrice reveals her Songs of Solomon-inspired wet dreams, Nakagwa, exasperated, confesses her constant state of sexual arousal in her heavy also flatulent moment of pregnancy. Sharing her very private distress, she discovers (no doubt along with some audience members) that it’s totally normal, even learns something new about her anatomy, which restores a little bit more agency in this moment where that tiny life seems to be taking over her body. Lilian’s is a space where women can discover, understand, agree and disagree about different aspects of their sexuality based on their individual and shared experiences as women. Sometimes it is for their own benefit, sometimes it is instructive in their relationships with men.

To the authors’ credit, the physical space Lilian speaks into: that is, those present in Cucu’s living room are religiously, racially and socio-economically diverse. They represent multiple generations, and go beyond heteronormative perspectives. It’s not often that I have such deep conversations with as wide an array of people.

I would certainly hope and expect that theatre audiences who watch *Brazen* mirror and exceed the diversity we witness on stage. Experiencing this public performance together with others indeed extended Lilian’s open space to me as an audience member. It’s what enables me to speak now.

Yet it’s a thought I find both terrifying and exciting: could I watch Lilian’s *Brazen* with my mother, my aunties, their church friends (to say nothing of their male counterparts)? Could we talk about it (honestly) after? Would I be the one to invite them? I’m not sure.

*You are terrifying
and strange and beautiful*

something not everyone knows how to love.

- Warsan Shire "For Women Who Are Difficult To Love."

A Hero?

"NAKAGWA: You could also see Wangu as a betrayer. She was a headman in the 1900's. She betrayed her own people, oppressing them for the sake of the British...This woman wasn't a hero. Was she? Like, where does she fall?"

Like many in the audience, some of the women on stage struggled to figure out a way to read Wangu. Should we see her as a sex-positive woman, a headman (and betrayer of her own), as a victim betrayed by the very man with whom she had been most intimate?

Was she Icarus who flew too close to the sun? One would have to believe that she, like Icarus, had only *built* a set of wings, that she did not possess an innate ability to fly.

But can we read Wangu as a hero? In recent years television has taken an interest in more morally ambiguous characters. Centering these types of characters - think *Breaking Bad's* Walter White, or more recently *Killing Eve's* Villanelle - has demanded that the story unearth their motivation, perhaps root for them, at the very least we're unable to look away.

Cucu offers a Solomonic answer: "Everyone deserves to live a life as complex as your own. Betrayal is just a matter of perspective."

In the recently ended season of *The Americans* [Spoiler Alert!], a show about parents trying to raise a family while being Russian spies, a daughter confronts her mother about sleeping with men in the course of her spy work. Here's a little bit from the end of that explosive scene:

PAIGE:

How many times? How many men? Were you doing this when I was a baby? You're a whore! Does Dad know he married a whore?

MOM:

Stop it.

PAIGE:

Why? You want to know the truth? The truth is that moment you told me who you really are I should have done what Henry did, get as far away from you as possible.

MOM:

That's enough. It doesn't mean anything to me. I wasn't brought up like you were. I had to fight. Always. For everything. People were killed, they died, all around me. If I had to give everything so that my country would survive, so that it would never happen again, I would do it gladly. We were proud to do whatever we could. Sex? [scoffs] What was sex? Nobody cared. Including your father.

It's a crucial conversation that reveals the psychic distance between mother and child. One the mother created in choosing to protect her child from anything to do with the life she lived.

In my limited experience, a conversation between mother and daughter about sex is necessarily going to be fraught before anyone imagines any concrete reason for a gulf. The conversation would be fraught largely because it's already weighed down by so much silence, which isn't particular to my mother and I.

*Where are those songs
my mother and yours
always sang
fitting rhythms
to the whole
vast span of life?*

- Micere Mugo "Where Are Those Songs"

I've internalized a version of the place of women in Kenya from reading and re-reading Wambui Mwangi's "[Silence is a Woman](#)" layered with Yvonne Owuor's Kenya as depicted in her novel, *Dust*: "Kenya has three official languages: English, Kiswahili and Silence." More truthfully, it's internalized from living in Kenya much of my life. Although it was absolutely not the intention of these texts, I may have managed to use them to build the very thing they protest, to normalize silence in my life, and with it judgement fear. While scrolling through Instagram I see that Huddah Monroe has pivoted from socialite to business woman with a cosmetics line. I spot a lovely shade, then I catch myself wanting to ask along with Nakagwa - is she a hero? *Everyone deserves to live a life as complex as my own.*

Perhaps because *Brazen* is a live show, because it never enacts women performing silence (those who remember Bosi will nod furiously here), it creates space for chatter and song, flooding many cavernous silences. In *Brazen* women speak about important ideas and frivolous things, we use our bodies for pleasure and work, we create safety in each other's presence, we [do not have to be good](#). It's instructive and demonstrative, something I need to practice.

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