

Thinking around Genre: The Moral Narrative and Femininity in Kenyan Popular Media

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In this article, I revisit a familiar narrative format of the moral narrative that I argue is used to narrate stories of (especially) women in the public sphere in Kenya. Reading a range of media texts, I trace a pattern of representation that I identify as contained within a recognizable genre of the moral narrative and use this genre to identify a structure of narrative of issues around gender and sexuality in Kenya. The examples are drawn from a popular radio drama program as well as from popular press reports of wayward women. The article also engages counter-narratives created by women such Vera Sidika and Huddah Monroe who, by publicly displaying their near-naked bodies in public platforms, create room for a counter-reading of discourses of gender and sexuality in the Kenyan public imaginary. This article will push the boundaries for reading popular cultural forms caught within generic constraints and reflect on the value counter-readings have in complicating readings of gender and sexuality in Kenya more generally.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, popular culture, morality, genre, moral narrative

The Popular Genre in Africa

To think about the popular genre in Africa is to acknowledge the possibility of disrupted readings as well as fluidity made possible by the constant innovation of forms, rearrangements of orders and ideas, and the sheer inventiveness of those who produce, circulate, and consume the popular forms. Existing scholarship on popular genres, whether on West African popular fiction;¹ audiences in Africa;² or East African fiction and music³ demonstrates the growing need to understand the interconnections among popular genres and their processes of production, circulation, and consumption. Reading genre in several of the African contexts requires a rereading of the idea of boundaries, for genre in this sense allows for meanings to weave in and out of texts in

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1 Stephanie Newell, ed., *Writing African Women: Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 1–2.

2 Karin Barber, “Popular Arts in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 30.3 (1987): 1–78.

3 Joyce Nyairo. “‘Reading the Referents’: (Inter)Textuality in Contemporary Kenyan Popular Music,” unpublished thesis (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2004), xi.

ways that signal their interwovenness with everyday life in Africa. Yet, as Barber⁴ and others remind us, genre does refer to a “kind” or type of text that orients the reader toward the text, and the producer of the text toward the kind of text the reader is expected to identify with. Genres work within shared conventions. As Barber further observes, “knowing what genre a work belongs to is not simply a matter of identity and expectations; it is a matter of being attuned to a host of conventions and expectations based on familiarity with other exemplars of the genre.”⁵ If one broadens the meaning of genre beyond the “canonical” literary texts to include a broader terrain of media and popular culture, then it becomes possible to understand how genres can be both bound within conventions that are familiar, as well as how they can remain porous in order to allow for new meanings to be forged and expand their flexible boundaries.⁶

Genre, as Daniel Chandler⁷ reminds us, is impossible to define precisely because of the differing theoretical and practical purposes to which it is applied, in many ways echoing Jane Feuer’s argument that “a genre is . . . an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world.”⁸ Yet genre remains useful in surfacing formulaic or thematic groupings that make it possible to identify patterns of narration. It is the repetition of themes through familiar narrative structures that most attracts theorists to the idea of genre. In this article, genre is used to identify a familiar pattern in the narration of women’s everyday lives in the media in Kenya. Rather than read genre as an easily recognizable format, it is excavated through the comparison of a narrative format that exists implicitly and explicitly across media formats. This format is arguably the most consistently used in narrating the lives of women in the media, with a specific emphasis on femininity as a unifying theme.

The narrative format identified here is that of the “moral narrative,” which consistently structures the way narratives of femininity emerge in differing media formats. The idea of the moral narrative stems from the broader genre of the morality tale, which has its roots in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. The morality tale portrays struggle between good and evil and offers a lesson in the end. The genre is often linked to children’s narratives of a particular period in European history. Although the morality tale provide a sense of how the genre works, the “moral narrative” is used to signal the contemporaneous function of the morality tale in the context of modes of telling such as Edutainment television in several developing countries⁹ and how it can be used across media forms to transmit specific messages. In this case, “narrative” as opposed to “morality tale” invokes a looseness of genre that is far more theoretically useful in its application to reading a disparate corpus of texts.

Specific bodies of scholarship have attempted to theorize the interconnectivity of narratives that share similar storylines and formats or demonstrate the ways in which

4 Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Person and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 34.

5 *Ibid.*, 34.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Daniel Chandler, *An Introduction to Genre Theory*, http://www.aber.ac.za/media/documents/intgenre/chandler_genre_theory.pdf, accessed April 13, 2017.

8 Jane Feuer, “Genre Study and Television,” *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Robert C Allen (London: Routledge, 1992): 138–59.

9 Arvind Singhal, Michael Cody, Everett Rogers, and Miguel Sabido, *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): 3–20.

the media and communication worlds are increasingly converging.¹⁰ Jennifer Jones and Brenda Weber¹¹ argue that the expansion of the mediascape makes it possible to study phenomena across a range of media platforms through the manner in which they form traceable narratives, what they refer to as “transmediated continuity.” “Transmediated continuity” refers to the “intensification of stories across diverse media platforms such as the internet, tabloids, and social media.”¹² They here refer to the convergent cultures emerging particularly in the era of digital media. Traditional media converge in unique ways with other media platforms to make any kind of fixed identification of technological sites impossible. As Jones and Weber argue, television, for instance, “no longer references a square box in a living room but now refers to a host of mediated screens—from phones to tablets to computers to flat screens—and programming is becoming more dispersed across network, cable, and online modes such as Netflix.”¹³ Addressing a similar phenomenon, Marsha Kinder¹⁴ writes on “transmedia intertextuality” to refer to the “expanding supersystem of entertainment” forging “relations across different narrative media.” Similarly, Henry Jenkins¹⁵ speaks of transmedia storytelling “which has come to indicate the technique of creating a connected narrative experience across multiple platforms and formats in a complex form distinct from traditional sequels or adaptations.”¹⁶ Although each of these authors addresses slightly different experiences with narrative continuity, what is emerging strongly is the possibility of reading narrative across platforms. Jones and Weber explain this replicability of narrative that:

Creates a “now-ness” in which ideas circulated at one moment continue to have relevance in another, blending with new forms in new times to structure an eternal present. In so doing, transmediated continuity often recrafts a notion of what existed before.¹⁷

The moral narrative is a continuous and persistent narrative that remains relevant across platforms and across time, can be identified as fitting within a particular genre, and contains a recognizable structure. At the same time, applying a post-structuralist reading allows one to read beyond these patterns and to explore different interpretations and ways of reading.

The Moral Narrative in the Media

A moral narrative, according to Mark Tappan and Lyn Brown¹⁸ is a genre whose main purpose is to procure moral education and moral development. It explores

10 Jennifer Lynn Jones and Brenda R. Weber, “Reality Moms, Real Monsters: Transmediated Continuity, Reality Celebrity, and the Female Grotesque,” *Camera Obscura* 88, 30.1 (2015): 11–39.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).

15 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

16 Jones and Weber, “Reality Mums, Real Monsters,” 13.

17 *Ibid.*, 14–15.

18 Mark Tappan and Lyn Brown, “Stories Told and Lessons Learned: Toward a Narrative Approach to Moral Development and Moral Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59.2 (1989): 182–206.

conflict and offers resolutions, inevitably reflecting a society's moral values. Embedded in the moral narrative are three ideas: narrative in relation to the everyday life experiences, narrative in relation to moral conflict, and narrative in terms of lessons that can be learned from it.¹⁹ Within the genre, conflict and resolution are demonstrated in dramatic and highly visible ways, with the purpose of highlighting the lessons that ought to be learned. The idea of lessons is therefore important, for, as Jeffrey Turner²⁰ argues, this is a key element of the moral narrative and is what allows for moral self-understanding.

The moral narrative and its connection to moral lessons in everyday life are central to understanding how popular arts in Africa function. Media forms of radio drama, tabloid newspaper articles, and online or digital modes of (self-)representation as popular art reflect various cultural values belonging to those who produce, circulate, and consume them. Popular culture in Africa, following Winfried Fluck,²¹ Karin Barber,²² Johannes Fabian,²³ and others, emphasizes the "active production of meanings, and consequently, an expression of genuine cultural attitudes and values" by "a large segment of the population."²⁴ This, as Fluck argues, can be read against another idea of the popular as mass culture. Unlike the suggestion that the popular insinuates active production of culture by "the people," the popular as mass culture centralizes culture industries that impose dominant ideas on seemingly passive recipients.²⁵

It is therefore a challenge to explore texts produced by media institutions and read them as popular culture. Radio drama is, for instance, produced mainly for the state or commercial radio stations in Kenya. Similarly, print newspapers and digital platforms are owned by large conglomerates whose main aim is to earn profit. Popular forms such as radio drama, tabloid newspaper articles, and particular modes of digital cultures, however, fit theoretically within the frame of popular culture as circulating among potentially active recipients precisely because of their engagement with everyday cultures that are familiar and ordinary. George Ogola's usefully read popular fictional media is popular because of its ability to draw on informal and ordinary narratives that critique the Kenyan polity.²⁶ My reading of the popular here is likewise influenced by scholars of popular literary cultures such as Stephanie Newell²⁷ and Joyce Nyairo²⁸ who, although reading different modes of popular culture, namely popular fiction and music respectively, emphasize the need

19 Ibid.

20 Jeffrey Turner, "To Tell a Good Tale: Kierkegaardian Reflections on Moral Narrative and Moral Truth," *Man and World* 24.2 (1991): 181–98.

21 Winfried Fluck, "Popular Culture as a Mode of Socialization: A Theory about the Social Functions of Popular Cultural Forms," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 21.3 (1987): 31–46.

22 Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa," 1–78.

23 Johannes Fabian, "Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures," *Africa* 48.4 (1978): 315–34.

24 Fluck, "Popular Culture as a Mode of Socialization," 31, 32.

25 Ibid.

26 George Ogola, *Popular Media in Kenyan History: Fiction and Newspapers as Political Actors* (New York: Springer International, 2017).

27 Stephanie Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: "Thrilling Discoveries in Conjugal Life" and Other Tales* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

28 Nyairo, "Reading the Referents," xi.

to understand the interaction between producers of popular forms and content and their contexts of production that engage with everyday realities that are familiar to potential readers and audiences. Newell,²⁹ for instance, argues for a closer look at the Ghanaian context in which local publications circulate and how these intertwine with the lives of both booksellers (often also the publishers of the books) and readers/buyers of the books. Similarly, in a different context in Kenya, Nyairo demonstrates the importance of popular music texts whose interaction with context enables an understanding of how these forms mediate everyday realities in Kenya.³⁰

The nuanced readings of moral narratives as popular allow for a richer engagement with the contexts of production given the centrality of mediums such as radio in the lives of ordinary people on the African continent;³¹ the popularity of tabloid newspapers;³² and the possibilities for agency presented through the upsurge of digital cultures in the expansion of the public sphere.³³ Indeed, Bodil Frederiksen³⁴ highlights the importance of popular media in the lives of young men and women in Kenya who appropriate popular cultural modes to engage with everyday life and attain a semblance of equality in a society that is still highly unequal and conservative. In her analysis, Frederiksen discusses how popular narratives offer young people an opportunity to negotiate real-life situations in spite of limited economic and social opportunities. The moral narrative can, within the context set out previously, be read as a popular genre. It is a ubiquitous form that permeates several African forms of narration, whether popular music, art, or performance. It circulates narratives that are familiar and reflective of ordinary life. As art, it circulates modes of entertainment that require an uptake of lessons dramatized within it.

Yet, to explore it as a form means to explore its melodramatic nature. Peter Brooks³⁵ highlights as its key characteristics elements of “excess,” “heightened dramatization,” “extravagance,” and “intensity of the moral claim impinging on their characters’ consciousness.” Narratives of everyday life are elevated to “heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation.”³⁶ In other words, melodrama brings with it exaggeration, sensationalism, and oversimplification through linear plotlines and stereotyping of characters, all of which become critical in the attempt to read the texts selected as examples in this paper.

29 Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction*, 5.

30 Nyairo, “Reading the Referents,” xii.

31 Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, eds., *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition* (Oxford: James Currey; Westport, CN: Praeger, 2000). See also Liz Gunner, Dina Ligaga, and Dumisani Moyo, eds., *Radio in Africa: Publics, Cultures, Communities* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011).

32 Herman Wasserman, *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

33 Dina Ligaga, “‘Virtual Expressions’: Alternative Online Spaces and the Staging of Kenyan Popular Cultures,” *Research in African Literatures* 43.4 (2012): 1–16.

34 Bodil Frederiksen, “Popular Culture, Gender Relations and the Democratization of Everyday Life in Kenya,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26.2 (2000): 209–22.

35 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), ix.

36 *Ibid.*

Figures of Femininity in the Moral Narrative

The identification of a familiar narrative pattern is useful in identifying the problematic representations of femininity in the media. Problematic, because, as Drucilla Cornell³⁷ argues, they represent “fantasies of femininity” in which “the symbolic constructions we know as Woman are inseparable from the way in which fantasies of femininity are unconsciously ‘colored’ and imagined within the constraints of gender hierarchy and the norms of so-called heterosexuality.”³⁸ What is constructed as feminine is in fact restrictive in its containment within particular ways of narrating women’s lives. For Cornell, it is imperative to have a clearer understanding of such narratives, if we are to understand the “material oppression of women.”³⁹ Within differing media institutions, the feminine figure differs. In radio theater, it presents in stark binaries: either as the proper woman or the wayward woman. In tabloid newspaper, the purpose shifts toward the negative and the women are represented as wayward. In social media, self-representation destabilizes the figure. What connects all these narratives is the manner in which they oscillate between the binaries of good and bad, with the intended moral lesson proffered implicitly or explicitly in the end.

The Proper Woman

The figure of the proper woman exists within the context of radio drama in Kenya to demonstrate a desire for a well-behaved, tacit, and demure woman who understands her role in society. Looking at plays produced for the state broadcaster, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC)⁴⁰ within a program called *Radio Theatre*, this emergent pattern of representing femininity is not lost.⁴¹ A typical example of a moral narrative would be a play like “Whatever it Takes,” aired in 2004 on the *Radio Theatre* show. It follows the story of Benson Mutia, a rich man who falls in love with a simple primary school teacher, Joy Mbote. Joy soon realizes that his generous donation toward a rural project she is running is a way for Benson to gain her attention and begin a romantic relationship with her. She rejects him, with tragic consequences.

37 Drucilla Cornell, “What Is Ethical Feminism?” *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, book written by Drucilla Cornell, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, and Nancy Fraser (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 75.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 76.

40 I start with radio drama for several reasons, prime among these the idea that radio has existed in Kenya for close to a century and that it has been under the control of both colonial and postcolonial governments in this period. Unlike newspaper print media, radio was a state-controlled medium in Kenya until recently, and as such, any program that was produced within it was influenced by the state’s agenda. In other words, the state used radio as a way of manipulating information and controlling what was circulated as entertainment. Kenyaradio, introduced in 1928 for English-speaking white settlers.

41 In a radio drama program produced for the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), called *Radio Theatre*, the moral narrative is used. This is one of the longest running radio drama programs in the English language in Kenya; it features one-act plays that run for about thirty minutes every week. The plays are aired mostly on Sunday evenings. According to one of its most renowned former producers, Nzau Kalulu, it was first aired in 1982. Although there are indications that it could have aired much earlier than this date. Program line-ups from as early as 1954, for instance, show the existence of a radio drama program that was similar in structure to *Radio Theatre*. There is also a Kiswahili language program aired for KBC called *Mchezo wa Wiki* (Play of the Week), which also aired from the late 1970s. Although there is little evidence to connect these various “versions,” I nonetheless read *Radio Theatre* as an umbrella title for radio drama programs that dwelt in and circulated themes of everyday life in Kenya.

A hitman hired by Benson to kill Joy's husband ends up killing Joy as well. The play's structure is straightforward. The narrative flows from little action to tension (romantic), to conflict (rejection, murder), to a dramatic conclusion filled with regret on Benson's part. The moral narrative captures the two main characters, Benson and Joy, as villainous and virtuous, allowing for specific lessons to embed both within and at the end of the play. Joy is presented as a caring, beautiful, gentle, and courteous woman. She is loyal to her husband and will not be tempted, in spite of receiving a tour of Benson's home (and by extension a sense of how much he is worth in terms of material wealth). He writes her a check for a large amount of money without thinking twice about it. Yet Joy chooses not to have an affair with him. She is the ultimate desirable proper woman because of her allegiance to marriage and family.

In scholarship on women and nationalism, the argument is often made that women serve the role of creating and sustaining community (nation) without necessarily being taken seriously as actors in the struggle for nationalism.⁴² This mother figure archetype fits with the grand narrative of heterosexuality. As various scholars have pointed out, though, this archetype can be challenged, especially because of the way it relegates women into particular gender roles. At the heart of such myths about femininity therefore is the need to control female subjectivities and their participation in the colonial and postcolonial project. If the colonial project emphasized the need to civilize Africans, then the problem of unregulated female sexuality required taming. Rooted in a Western perception of femininity and morality of late-nineteenth-century England, such myths were necessary for the creation of new moral orders in emerging colonial and postcolonial modernities. The Victorian age was associated with laws and policies that controlled sexuality through discourses of social decorum and respectability.⁴³ The circulation of ideologies of domesticity with clearly demarcated gender roles featured centrally in the process of new class definitions. In other words, respectable women who behaved in ways recognized as "civilized" also belonged to the middle-class community.⁴⁴ Notably, the gendered definitions of morality influenced how femininity and sexuality were articulated in public discourse. Nead argues, for instance, that:

In the nineteenth century gender was a primary category of regulation of sexuality; the male sexual urge was understood to be active, aggressive and spontaneous whilst the female sexuality was defined in relation to the male and was believed to be weak, passive and responsive.⁴⁵

Where male sexual behavior was condoned and celebrated as a sign of masculinity, female sexual activities were pathologized as deviant. This "double standard" regulated especially middle-class women by emphasizing "bourgeois ideologies of home and marriage."⁴⁶ The result of such regulations was the emergence of clear

42 Anne McClintock, " 'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Women and Nationalism in South Africa," *Transition* 51(1991): 104–23.

43 Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988): 6.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

46 *Ibid.*, 6.

references to female sexuality as either “respectable” or “fallen”; or through the virgin/whore dichotomy. Such Manichean identifiers were produced and reinforced through different public platforms “to create moral boundaries and prevent any possibilities of confusion.”⁴⁷ New regimes of truth around sexuality and class were forged.⁴⁸ One such platform is the moral narrative that usefully circulated particular kinds of women over others. Such moral narratives were reinforced using traditional, religious, and scientific claims.

In Africa, myths of femininity were constructed through specific colonial discourses that emphasized a Victorian moral logic through religion, education, and specific consumption practices.⁴⁹ Although early colonial and missionary writing on the African woman focused on her apparent sexual wantonness,⁵⁰ the woman who emerged at the height of the colonial period in Kenya was much more attuned to the social and moral orders of the time.⁵¹ What is important in the scholarship on the African woman at the time is the way that she dealt with the changes brought about through colonialism. African womanhood emerged as a site of contestation, “where issues of modernization, tradition, change and personal independence were fought.”⁵² During this period of rapid social change, the African woman was seen to abandon “traditional” obligations, roles, and spaces and to adopt new roles that were seen as threatening to existing social orders.⁵³ Modernity and movement were particularly disruptive of existing gender norms. The ideal African woman for both the colonial and the postcolonial states was the one who stayed in the rural spaces performing gender normative roles. The African woman as mother, for instance, developed during a period of social anxiety. It reproduced paternalistic logic on the role of womanhood.⁵⁴ In her review of literature on motherhood in African literature and culture Remi Akujobi⁵⁵ concedes that the “maternal ideals ... entrenched and valorized in all cultures ... present a woman’s central purpose to be her reproductive function and so motherhood and mothering become intertwined with issues of a woman’s identity,”⁵⁶ generating the female archetypes of virgin, Venus, and mother earth. From such myths, the African woman as mother became appropriated much later in narratives of nationhood, for instance, in which these women were selfless, cradle-rockers, nurturers, and goddesses.⁵⁷

It is this ethos that is adopted in another play, “3 Times a Lady,” which enacts the narrative of Tabitha, a young woman engaged to be married to James, a qualified but

47 Ibid.

48 Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

49 Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996). See also Kenda Mutongi, *Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

50 Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011).

51 Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900–50* (Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Maria Cutrufelli, *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression* (London: Zed Press, 1983).

55 Remi Akujobi, “Motherhood in African Literature and Culture,” *CLC Web: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.1 (2011): 2.

56 Ibid., 4.

57 Ibid., 3.

jobless doctor. James finally gets news that he has been accepted to work as a doctor for a nongovernmental organization based outside of Kenya. He has little time to say his good-byes and leaves shortly after receiving the news. With their marriage on hold, Tabitha is left wondering what to do with herself, especially because James has not been in touch with her since leaving. She, however, continues to live with James's mother as though already married to him, while waiting patiently for him to return. After five years of waiting, however, Tabitha decides to start seeing Mbolu, a teacher who works at the same school as she does. She is, of course, heartbroken that James has gone missing and spends the bulk of the three episodes during which the show is aired mourning that loss. The tension is created in both her indecision about whether to marry a new man, Mbolu, and her anxiety about her age (she is by this time thirty years old), which form the bulk of the content for the episodes. Eventually, she is celebrated as being a lady thrice over, for being patient and trusting of her absent fiancé. Mbolu emerges as a villain when it is unveiled that he was actually a married father of five.

The kind of construction common in *Radio Theatre* demonstrates an unstated desire to project a "national" feminine figure, a role model intended for young women to imitate. Yet, as I argue, the very nature of moral narrative in these particular examples refuses the same easy reading it seems to suggest, for within the play, the struggles and anxieties of all the characters, whether eventually constructed as villains or heroes, mark important opportunities for learning. Joy Mbote, for instance, even though she does eventually turn Benson down, momentarily entertains the possibility of a relationship with Benson. This can be witnessed both at the moment she agrees to allow him to sit at her table at the restaurant where they meet and to buy her drinks. This leads to him very generously writing her a check for 1 million Kenyan shillings. She even goes on further to accompany him to his house, even though she is unaccompanied by her husband. Considering that at the start of the play, Benson is a stranger to her, this moment of anxiety disrupts the linear narrative that could be presented through the moral narrative. In much the same way, Tabitha, in "3 Times a Lady," is restless and anxious a few weeks after she fails to hear from James. Worry over his safety quickly becomes a moment of psychological stress. She at first entertains the fact that James could have abandoned her for another woman, a thought she dismisses after reasoning that he could not have had the heart to abandon his own mother, too. Her anxiety comes down to her own eligibility as a woman after the age of thirty and her questioning the wisdom of keeping her virginity for so long. These moments of anxiety pepper the entire three episodes even though she continues to wait and hope. It is these anxieties that eventually allow one of her suitors, Mbolu, to break her resolve. She agrees to marry him just so that she does not remain single forever.

I want to argue that how the moral narrative is enacted in radio drama allows for a much more nuanced reading of women in which emotions and anxieties begin to emerge, disrupting the existing framework of reading. The proper woman is proper not because she is perfect, but because she is constructed as such.

The Rogue Woman

Contrary to the character of Joy, Tabitha, and other similarly typed women in radio drama is the rogue woman. This is a woman who is framed differently, as

wayward, problematic, and undesirable—a rule breaker. In African historical discourse, the rogue woman traveled to urban spaces and embraced modernity and was painted as the antithesis of the ideal woman. Christine Obbo's⁵⁸ work, for instance, shows how the economically independent young woman who was unmarried but sexually active presented as a social threat that needed to be disciplined. The woman in such a case was considered a distraction to men, a threat to the family unit, and generally a disruption to colonial and postcolonial orders.⁵⁹ Such women quickly entered into circulation in the newspaper press and popular culture as “good-time girls” or “modern girls.”⁶⁰ The “modern girl” was identified by her “explicit eroticism” and use of specific commodities, “wearing provocative fashions and pursuing romantic love.”⁶¹ It was generally accepted that her independence meant that she was also promiscuous, dressed inappropriately to lure unsuspecting men, and brought unwarranted competition for men at the workplace.⁶² She was blamed not only for creating “male confusion and conflict over what the contemporary roles of women should be, but for dilemmas produced by adjusting to rapid social change.”⁶³ She was the bearer of sexual diseases and the cause of broken marriages. Popular cultural narratives carried warnings of such “good-time girls,” whom young men were advised to stay away from.⁶⁴

African girls and women who traveled to colonial cities became sources of “public spectacle.”⁶⁵ Calls for laws banning certain kinds of female dresses considered to be “injurious to public morale” were made constantly.⁶⁶ In the media, reports “condemning the exhibition of the female body, and maintaining that it should be a private thing, especially if a woman was attached to a particular man” were circulated.⁶⁷ Such reports and public discussions encouraged the violent abuse of women's bodies in public spaces, if the woman was deemed to be dressed indecently. Women become the moral bearers of culture with a concerted effort to “reverse or hinder possible changes in the power and authority relations between men and women.”⁶⁸ Tabitha Kanogo has argued that women were subjected to unwarranted public surveillance and sanction, such as the forceful removal of an “undocumented and unaccompanied rural woman” from a city-bound vehicle;⁶⁹ the abduction of girls from school for “compulsory” clitoridectomy (genital excision); and other forms of public performances that ensured women remained within the constraints of colonial and African traditional practice.⁷⁰

58 Christine Obbo, *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

59 Ibid.

60 Tani Barlow, Madeleine Yue Dong, Uta Poige, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, “The Modern Girl Around the World: A Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings,” *Gender & History* 17.2 (2005): 245–94.

61 Barlow et al., “Modern Girl,” 245.

62 Obbo, “African Women,” 88.

63 Ibid., 11.

64 Emmanuel Obiechina, *Onitsha Market Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1972).

65 Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900–50*, 3.

66 Obbo, “African Women,” 11.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 15.

69 Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya, 1900–50*, 3.

70 Ibid.

Rogue femininity was therefore just as constructed as proper femininity. Kenda Mutongi,⁷¹ Tabitha Kanogo,⁷² and Christine Obbo⁷³ demonstrate that African womanhood was never as linear as is often captured and reproduced in the media. The African woman negotiated the spaces and economic situations within which she found herself to create a sense of independence and agency. In order to understand this complexity, I turn to scholarship on modern femininities, for instance, which draw attention to new cultures of femininity that allow for much more sustained discussions on sexuality, agency, labor, and intimacy.⁷⁴ This body of scholarship reads femininity as transgressive, enabling a critical engagement with what these femininities represent beyond stereotypical moral frameworks of reading. The rogue femininities that I read are those that are identified as “wayward,” not conforming to acceptable femininities. I am interested in how they circulate publicly and how they defy the rules of normative gender and sexuality discourse. I want to capture the subtle acts of defiance that characterize this “evil” woman. I also hope to capture a similar subtlety in the transgressive performances of women who self-represent on digital media platforms. Rogue femininity also makes it possible to critically engage the constructions of “proper” women within the context of hegemonic gender ideologies.

Tabloid newspaper articles on women’s scandalous lives present an opportunity for exploring how the moral narrative typifies the rogue woman as the following example shows. On February 18, 2015, a story broke revealing that a twenty-seven-year-old woman had been arrested for failing to pay a hotel bill. Two leading newspapers in Kenya, *The Standard Newspaper* and *The Daily Nation*, reported that Laura Oyier had been arrested and charged with obtaining credit under false pretenses. Ordinarily, this would have been just another news story. The fact that this incident happened to a woman staying at one of Kenya’s five-star hotels, and that the unpaid bill came to almost \$2,300, however, lent the story its spectacular element.⁷⁵ Questions about whether this had been a transactional sexual relationship that had gone bad came up consistently. In the initial reports circulating in Kenyan online tabloids such as *Ghafa!* and *Mpasho*, there was curiosity about the identity of the unknown man from mostly male commentators. One online commentator said:

Good lesson for ladies. They always imagine men are there for them to milk. Enjoy your own money, not that you want “kuji enjoy” [to enjoy yourself] yet you cannot even afford the lowest [*cheapest*] meal from such a hotel from your own pocket. Some of these ladies need to style up.⁷⁶

Such narratives of transactional sex such as that intimated in the aforementioned media form part of a larger body of moral narratives that are used to narrate

71 Mutongi, “Worries of the Heart,” 139.

72 Kanogo, “African Womanhood,” 6.

73 Obbo, “African Women,” 88.

74 Rachel Spronk, *Ambiguous Pleasures: Sexuality and Middle Class Self-Perception in Nairobi* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

75 <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/thecounties/article/2000152118/woman-charged-over-failure-to-settle-sh229-505-bill-at-intercontinental-hotel-on-valentine-s-day>.

76 Ibid. Text edited for clarity.

femininity in Kenya. The need to “teach lessons” through particular female archetypes emphasizes a common trend of reporting. This process is always already gendered. For instance, media reports will often focus on narratives of rogue femininities that need to be highlighted as “examples” of cautionary tales, making the female body a site of symbolic disciplining. Another example is the story of a photograph of a policewoman dressed in a short, tight police skirt that made its way into social media after a photojournalist took it at an event.⁷⁷ The photograph went viral, becoming a source of contention as different commentators’ voices collided online over whether the dress was inappropriate for the profession of a police officer. Following the “buzz” the photograph had created, the police woman was soon called in for discipline by her superiors. Subsequently, she was issued a new police uniform that was deemed more appropriate. She was also demoted at work over an issue unrelated to the dress code debacle, but which remained suspiciously vague. Further, she was threatened with a possible transfer to a remote part of Kenya. In other words, there was a concerted effort to erase the police woman’s presence from the public space because her transgression of an unspoken dress code both within her profession, as well as in the Kenyan public, had made her hyper-visible. The photograph of her in a tight skirt that accentuated her buttocks was read as obscene and spectacular. What was so fascinating about this image that caused it to create such a stir? Why did the police woman remain a “running narrative” in the media, with her eventually admitting that the tight skirt saga was the lowest moment in her life? An increase in cases of women being publicly undressed for not dressing appropriately has been reported in the media. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf,⁷⁸ looking at the call for legal impositions on women’s dress in Nigeria, has argued that dress remains one of the most political sources of contention with women’s bodies in the public arena. Such impositions, she argues, are made ostensibly to protect women from sexual intimidation. In fact, these impositions are part of a larger culture of policing women’s bodies as a response to debates about moral decay in many contemporary African societies.

Two things stand out from these examples. The first is that women’s bodies are significant symbolic sites for the generation of discourses on morality and sexuality. Secondly, that for such stories to circulate, they need to operate within the melodramatic, spectacular, and scandalous text. The emerging pattern of representation here emphasizes the need to discipline the female body in public, as well as a form of issuing “lessons” to those who commit such public sins and to those inevitably reading about them. Such narratives are reassuring to a dominant heteronormative society.

Yet, to want to completely maroon, such discourses of morality within specific typologies can be challenged as I show in the last examples used in this article. I read the public personas of two young women, Vera Sidika, a video “vixen,” model, and business woman, and Huddah Monroe, a onetime *Big Brother Africa* participant, model, and businesswoman as well.

77 <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000110474/police-woman-reprimanded-for-her-dressing> for the full story, accessed May 3, 2016.

78 Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “Nudity and Morality: Legislating Women’s Bodies and Dress in Nigeria,” *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 15.1 (2009): 53–68.

I choose Sidika and Monroe deliberately because they represent a current trend emerging in Kenya due to the rise of digital media. Both women are usually referred to as *socialites*, a term that has gained currency in contemporary media culture to refer to young women who are able to make money from becoming famous. The Cambridge dictionary defines a socialite as someone of high social status who is famous for going to a lot of parties and social events.⁷⁹ Historically, socialites have tended to have wealth to sustain the expensive lifestyles they lead. Famous socialites who have entered into the media sphere in recent years include Kim Kardashian, an American reality television star, and Paris Hilton, heir to the Hilton Hotel empire. In Africa, the meaning of *socialite* depends on a different understanding of class. Women such as Sidika and Monroe have used their fame to make money. Sidika became a popular sensation after a music video in which she appeared circulated widely on the Internet showing off her slim waist and large behind.⁸⁰ Her fame also grew after she publicly admitted to lightening her skin in order to become more attractive. Huddah Monroe grew in popularity after featuring briefly in the *Big Brother Africa* reality show. During this time, videos of her naked body during shower hour were leaked and are now available online. She also consistently makes tabloid headlines because of her outspokenness about her sexuality and the circulation of her naked or barely dressed body, mainly through social media. Although I have argued in a different publication that these women exemplify post-feminist cultures, I insist that their presence and visibility must also be read as agentic. Looking especially at their self-presentations on social media platforms, specifically Instagram, I argue that the bold and consistent self-promotion on these platforms defy the logic of the moral narrative. Where people have previously used the rogue woman typology to categorize women like Sidika as wicked and undesirable, and therefore marginalized, both she and Monroe remain defiant in their persistent presence in public platforms.

Vera Sidika, whose handle on Instagram is @queenvebosset, had more than three hundred thousand followers in 2016 while Monroe had close to seven hundred thousand. The two women have posted about one thousand photographs, most of which are what have come to be known as selfies. Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym⁸¹ define *selfies* as “self-generated digital photographic portraiture spread primarily through social media.”

The bulk of Sidika’s selfies mainly show off her wealth and, ostensibly, her class. Photographs of her holding expensive gadgets, on a plane in a first-class cabin, posing with champagne or standing next to an expensive car model, all demonstrate a need for her to demonstrate a specific kind of life. It is possible to argue that social media have made possible new forms of labor for women like Sidika, who use their bodies to make money. In fact, she is often called a “slut” by commentators who are offended by her inability to be ashamed of using a public platform to self-advertise. Yet I see her deliberate use of this platform as worthy of noting, particularly in the way she projects herself as a role model, a teacher, to those

79 <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/socialite>, accessed April 23, 2016.

80 Even though this video was banned from airing on television due to what was being termed explicit material, it found its way around the Internet.

81 Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym, “Selfies Introduction: What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1601.

who admire her. In one post, for instance, she warns on the dangers of social media. She writes:

Don't let Instagram fool you. There are people with only 5–10 likes who have plenty of friends. People with 1,000+ likes who are lonely! Couples who look so happy together, yet are miserable as Hell. People who don't post pictures of themselves and their significant other, but are in a beautiful loving relationship. ... Appearances are just that. ... You have to be real with yourself before you can be real with anyone else.⁸²

This caption is a common aspect of Sidika's self-presentation. She considers hers to be an example of a rags-to-riches story. Not only do I see Sidika as defiant of her designation as a rogue woman, but she actually assigns herself the role of adviser.

Both Monroe and Sidika definitely see themselves as role models to young people. The captions to most of their photographs are advice to young people to never let go of their dreams. For instance, Monroe has a photograph of herself as a little child. In the photograph, a young woman is carrying her, and although we are not told who the young woman is, one could assume it is her mother. The child in the photo is hiding her face. She is dressed a large white, patterned sweater, a small skirt, and warm comfortable trousers. She has on an old pair of dirty sneakers with no socks. In the backdrop, there are two walls belonging to two different houses. The houses are clearly close together, giving the impression that this is a low-income area. The caption to the photograph reads:

There's so many days we had no food to eat. Life was never easy, losing your father, having a violent step father, having step family that never liked you, you Slave for them as they watch you suffer and shit. I'm very proud of where I came from and thank God that I don't look like where I came from. If you are in a bad situation, hang in there, one day you will see the light at the end of the tunnel. May God bless my momma and always put a smile on her face for all the suffering she been through to raise me and my step brothers!⁸³

Although the moral narrative in the Kenyan context would easily categorize these two women's lives as rogue, wayward, and therefore undesirable, the fact that they have a platform that allows them to reconstruct such stories makes it possible to see how alternative narratives of women can be generated. The idea of self-representation becomes a useful way of understanding how counter-narratives of moral texts work.

Conclusion

In this article, I have broadly discussed the genre of the moral narrative and how it is used to represent narratives of women in Kenya. Using different examples, I show

82 Vera Sidika, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BAe2u1DA2-P/?taken-by=queenveebosset&hl=en>, accessed May 18, 2016.

83 Huddah Monroe, <https://www.instagram.com/p/9taSOkyvXH/?taken-by=huddahthebosschick&hl=en>, accessed May 18, 2016.

how this mode shifts depending on the medium in which it circulates. Although radio drama reflects the much more conservative outlook of the state (heteronormative public), the example of digital media representations challenges the same public. I show, however, that it is important to see how even within the more rigid platforms, the moral narrative as a genre can become porous, especially if one pays attention to how the narrative unravels.