

Comparing images of exploitation in the cities of Nairobi and Tokyo:

Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* and
Takako Nakamoto's *The Female Bell-Cricket**

Frances CAUSER

This paper juxtaposes two very different works of fiction. *Going Down River Road* is a novel written by a Kenyan man in 1976, and *The Female Bell-Cricket* is a short story written by a Japanese woman in 1929. The two works are continents and decades apart but what they have in common is their striking depiction of the main female character as callous and exploitative. I would like to argue that these unusual women are products of their urban environments, women of two great twentieth century cities at a particular stage of social development away from a culturally conservative past; and also that the influences of the modern city are another and greater link between fictions of Africa and Asia, which will make my attempt at comparison more meaningful.

Meja Mwangi's novel is set in Nairobi, and deals mainly with the life of a hard working, hard playing construction worker named Ben. Ben and his workmates are building Development House, a vast skyscraper whose construction affords Mwangi metaphors for the development of Nairobi itself. Ben is living with Wini and her small son, who is unrelated to Ben, and rather oddly named Baby. Wini is a catch for Ben: as a secretary her income and social status are higher than his, and she is also very attractive. She does however have a dubious past as a prostitute. Ben loves and has been hoping to marry Wini but she unexpectedly abandons him and her son for her white boss. He's emotionally hurt by her betrayal and inconvenienced by be-

ing left to look after the child.

Takako Nakamoto's short story is set in Tokyo. Tomoko is rejected by a higher socially ranked boyfriend when he becomes engaged to a girl of his own station, moves in with and lives off Miki, a poverty-stricken young man. He yearns after her; in return she behaves like a parasite, even depriving him of food and endangering his life.

What has made these two women act in such an inhumane way? Mwangi is critical of the detrimental influence of the city on all his characters. Nakamoto has scant time to develop this theme, but her details of city life and the date of her story, published just after the social ferment of the Taishô era (1912-1926), make it plausible that Tomoko is one of the new breed of urban women, simultaneously discovering new potential in her environment, and being harmed by that environment. David Harvey remarks that

increasing urbanization makes this the primary level [my emphasis] at which individuals experience, live out and react to the changes going on around them. ... It is out of the complexities and perplexities of this experience that we build elementary understandings of the meaning of space and time; of social power and its legitimations; of forms of domination and social interaction. (230)

Considering the powerful influence of urbanization in the two cities in question, Tokyo has a long history as a great metropolis, attracting successive waves of migrants. According to Edward Seidensticker, by the early nineteenth century, its million plus inhabitants made it the largest city in the world (13). So Tokyo's urbanization was not a new phenomenon, but Nakamoto was writing at a time of rapid population increase, following the great Kantô earthquake of 1923. Nairobi's growth has also been rapid. In 1948 its population was 120,000; by 1976 it had more than quintupled to 736,000. Cities of

rapid growth, full of migrants; in addition to these factors Mwangi gives a cynical portrait of a city where hopes for development after independence in 1963 soured.

Both authors evoke their cities vividly, though their usual emphasis is on the city as a sordid and spiritually crushing place. Nakamoto's story opens with a dark, cold, rainy Tokyo, with Tomoko on the last streetcar¹⁾ of the day, which is "filled with the smell of sour alcohol" (135). She is returning to her house, "shabby as a small paper box, desolate and trembling in the gusty wind" (136). In a typical scene Mwangi's hero Ben walks

into an alleyway, past a heap of excrement, Ben wonders who squats here and when. They emerge in a dark back street that smells of dust though it is wet. This leads into another lane that in turn vomits them into River Road. The place is crowded with its usual mass of haunted, hungry faces, poverty-hypnotised faces, hateful faces, and the fragrant stink of unwashed bodies and burst sewers. (57)

Mwangi's characters are trapped by poverty, and are put under such pressure by crowded conditions and the frenetic pace of life that they become at best indifferent to others' predicaments, at worst hostile. In another novel, *Kill Me Quick*, Mwangi describes Nairobi as "heartless" (3). Mwangi narrates how city dwellers' selfish behavior adds to human suffering, but also condemns the processes of capitalism which compel people to work and live and behave as they do.

The story of Nakamoto's is not explicitly anti-capitalist, although her translator Yukiko Tanaka records that most of her other works fit into Japan's early twentieth century proletarian literature, that she was imprisoned and brutally treated for her membership of the Communist Party, and that she was an activist to improve conditions for textile workers (131-2), textiles being a newly important and expanding industry for Japan.

Themes that both authors bring out against the background of urbanization and capitalism are money, the struggle for survival and the isolation of the individual. The main characters are obsessed with money as a matter of physical survival. This can become so urgent that cash considerations replace the bonds of love, loyalty and compassion. Another consequence of material poverty is spiritual poverty; the two authors indicate how their characters' humanity is driven down to the basic, animal level, thus denying them access to the spiritual, intellectual, sublime and transcendent.

Both works thus present a predominantly unedifying picture of humanity: men and women alike exploit and are exploited, so that if one is not strong or alert enough to exploit first, one will be exploited. An early representation of the urban jungle trope is adumbrated by Friedrich Nietzsche where "savage egoisms" (181) flourish and compete so unrestrainedly that they are in danger of destroying themselves as well as those around them. This atmosphere is replicated in Nakamoto's Tokyo, whose inhabitants are like "cryptogamous plants" (138), and Mwangi's Nairobi, dizzyingly full of hustling, whoring, fighting, despairing, in short, a maelstrom of a city. The struggle for survival dooms love; it becomes no more than a brief and casual coupling. Affection entails loss and suffering. Even the love between mother and child proves fragile.

These breaking of bonds coupled with the vastness of the city and its tumultuous possibilities²⁾ lead to the isolation of the individual. City dwellers are members of unstable communities, communities which seem to compel little sense of obligation toward other members. There is a parallel between Nakamoto and Mwangi's fictions and Karl Marx's well known vision of modernity: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away All that is solid melts into air ..." (476). Mwangi recounts Wini's own melting away into the city, after telling Baby she is just going to buy him some sweets. Ben searches for her but she is untraceable as amazingly neither he nor Baby

know her full name. Her sudden elusiveness and anonymity demonstrate how the city is full of rootless people, with unpredictable relationships and futures.

So far the picture of city life has been negative, but there are mitigating hints in both tales as to the positive potential for women in modern cities and employment. Nakamoto was writing at a time of ongoing change in the labor market, where, from the beginning of Japan's 'industrial revolution' in the late nineteenth century, women had formed a large and increasing proportion of manual workers. Women were then gaining an economic and social independence, which although limited, had previously been completely lacking. Thus new patterns of assertive female sexuality could arise. In Mwangi's novel it is obvious that in contrast to rural restrictiveness the city is liberating, and women like Wini seize the opportunity to reject traditional constraints and embrace the unfamiliar.

This new female assertiveness contributes to the general state of flux in social relations, but conspicuously affects patterns of exploitation and dominance in male-female relationships. Reversals of previously accepted gender roles occur. Wini's higher income means that she, not Ben, is the family breadwinner, consequently wielding the psychological power accompanying economic power. Outside home Ben feels free to take the initiative or behave aggressively, but domestically Wini is dominant. She acts, and Ben is left with the passive role of reaction. This culminates in her walking out, when she takes on the callous and irresponsible role which is more usually associated with male figures. This is all the more shocking as she has been a devoted mother and loving partner, so that her betrayal was utterly unforeseen by the others. As a consequence, Ben, however reluctantly, is forced to take on the nurturing role usually associated with the feminine/maternal, and surprises the reader with the unexpected tenderness he shows Baby.

There is a similar pattern of dominance and exploitation in Tomoko and Miki's relationship. When Tomoko finds a refuge with Miki

she proceeds to exploit him relentlessly:

Tomoko grew plump as the days went by and her skin became silky. Miki, on the other hand, became pale and skinny. He had only a few books left; his violin had been exchanged long ago for rice and charcoal. His cloak had flown away like a butterfly, transformed into a piece of steak, into hot chicken with rice, into colorful salads. (137)

This is a flash of humor amidst escalating cruelty, as she forces him to beg for advances on his meager wages, and take on hours of extra work. As their situation becomes ever more desperate and his health deteriorates Tomoko merely gorges food while Miki goes without for her sake. Admittedly Miki is portrayed as an increasingly derisory figure, but Nakamoto also intends us to be appalled by Tomoko's heartlessness. Nakamoto uses a series of animal images to show Tomoko as predator and Miki as victim in the urban jungle, for example, Tomoko imagines herself a "wild bear" (142) and Miki is, tellingly, "poor and gentle as a doe" (136). Human-animal comparisons are commonplace, but when Nakamoto describes Tomoko's dispassionate observation of Miki's decline, "thinking that she would one day kill and eat this man, just as the female bell-cricket devours her mate" (138), the repellent and horrific combination of the insect/cannibal metaphor emphasizes the callous and subhuman nature of Tomoko's behavior.

The impression that Wini and Tomoko are abusing their positions of dominance, however, is in fact misleading. One reason for this may be the close link between women and sexuality. Sexuality often socially degrades women or places them in a vulnerable position; the opposite being true for men. Sherry Ortner states, "The secondary status of women in society is one of the true universals, a pan-cultural fact", and argues that women are devalued because of their association with nature (as opposed to the association of men with

human society). Women's closeness to nature is a consequence of their sexual and reproductive characteristics (67).

These points are of course debatable, but in their context it is striking how often Mwangi and Nakamoto write disparagingly of women. The pejorative animal imagery of *The Female Bell-Cricket* is applied predominantly to Tomoko. Miki is appealingly portrayed as a sensitive and hardworking man of letters and a musician, whereas Tomoko is idle. When Miki is too ill to work her less than impressive way of earning money is to prostitute herself. The majority of female characters in Mwangi's novels are prostitutes, and described in contemptuous terms. Women's human fallibility is shown as vice, whereas male fallibility is shown as weakness, so that the reader is frequently manipulated to feel disgust toward female characters and sympathize with male ones.

At one point love promised to be redemptive for Ben. He acknowledges that he would be "mere refuse" (41) without his love for Wini and Baby to inspire and cultivate his better self. However, he has always been uneasy about Wini's past as a prostitute, and, daydreaming about her, he laments "Why is it the greenest healthiest grass grows over the septic tank!" (93) A powerful image yoking women and nature, women's superficial beauty and inner corruption, and the danger of defilement for men approaching women. The imagery of bestiality applied to Tomoko undermines her humanity, and that of the sewer for Wini undermines her virtue and dignity. In both cases the reader's sympathies are alienated.

This occurs because of the particular slices of life that the authors have chosen to show. The reader must deduce – it's not clearly stated – that Wini became a prostitute for the best of reasons, to support Baby. Wini became pregnant at the age of 14, and was consequently immediately abandoned by her boyfriend. The 'other' story of male betrayal of Wini, and of Wini as a very young, loving single mother trying to act responsibly in adverse conditions with only herself to rely on, is simply not told. Nor is the prior story of male be-

trayal of Tomoko, which inflicted the terrible psychic wounds upon her which make it impossible for her to love Miki.

Sexuality is indeed a means for women to control men, although it is a precarious strategy. As Tomoko comments, "men are all kind and gentle until they get what they want from a woman" (137). Wini's attractiveness also turns to her own disadvantage. Economic and sexual realities conspire against women, as Wini explains to Ben just before she takes the secretarial exams which are to ensure she never has to return to prostitution to survive:

'And then the ordeal of hunting for a job. It is murder; everybody wants to lay you before they fail you on the interview.'

Ben laughed. [my emphasis]

'And when they do it to you first time,' she went on, 'they will always want to lay you. First the messenger and his brother, the director, personnel manager, every bastard. It gets to be blackmail. You either comply or forfeit your job.' (74)

In due course Wini's boss does seduce her, and although rumor has it that she has left the office to marry him, the cynical reader will wonder whether the boss will really marry her, or use and drop her as other men have done before him. The novel begins with a man being financially and emotionally dependent on Wini, and ends with her in a position of financial and emotional dependence on another man. Tomoko loses and wins emotional dominance, but seems incapable of supporting herself financially, and must rely on living off men. It is likely that when Miki dies she will find herself another patron or lapse into the perils of full-time prostitution. It is notable how women progress from one man to another, implying that they are always subject to some combination of economic and financial dependence on men. If this proposition is valid, then any female 'dominance' is a partial or hollow triumph.

Patterns of dominance that I found in other examples of Kenyan

and Japanese fiction contemporary with Mwangi and Nakamoto varied greatly.³⁾ In comparison with dominant men, dominant women were usually conspicuous in a negative way. However, examples of male pre-eminence were more numerous, and the figure of the dominant woman often proved a fallacy, her true circumstances involving some kind of dependence on men. The characters of strong women tended to be communicated equivocally to the reader, as if the authors wished to both express admiration for women's developing initiative and signal their uneasiness about women's new roles.

It became evident that a move from a rural to an urban environment, or the experience of significant changes in a city resulting from increasing 'development' or 'modernization', affects relations between the sexes, and alters the balance of power, in sometimes unexpected ways. From this wider perspective, Mwangi and Nakamoto's deliberate depiction of extraordinary women brings us to the question of whether the authors are unconsciously reflecting what is happening in society, or consciously trying to shape it.

Male anxiety over the new kind of autonomous urban woman comes across very clearly in Mwangi's novel. A plausible reason can be found in Hanna Papanek's work on women and development. She states that

In societies that are changing very rapidly, ambiguous signals are presented to women. Fears are often translated into attempts to prevent changes in their roles. They become the repository of "traditional" values imputed to them by men in order to reduce the stresses men face. Resistance to women's greater participation in economic and political life may be felt especially strongly among groups most exposed to rapid change and ambivalent about it. (15)

Mwangi's novel shows how the more society 'modernizes' the more people are prone to feel cast adrift, or resort to inhumane behavior.

Under these circumstances they need and seek comfort, and when this is withheld by women, its traditional providers, the effect is particularly traumatic, and accounts for the tendency to censure women. Women act as individuals, but cannot escape the consequences of being seen as national symbols.

In the 1970s Christine Obbo investigated African women's attempts to gain economic independence, moving into cities and becoming small entrepreneurs, such as market traders and distillers of liquor, then progressing to white collar jobs as nurses, secretaries and teachers. They took small but increasing steps beyond the domestic sphere and into urban space. Obbo found that there were contradictory reactions to them; they were "seen both as unwelcome competitors in the job market and as a wasted resource, as the upholders of traditional ways of life and those most vulnerable to Western influence" (7). Men insecure about their partner or resenting women seen as rivals in employment transferred their sense of frustration to women as a whole. The men with working and hence economically independent partners resented the loss of control over their womenfolk, but often, quite incompatibly, were keen to benefit from a partner who was a financial asset. Ben's fictional situation clearly reflects this discrepancy. Obbo also found a general East African tendency to brand all urban women as immoral. Men were anxious about losing sexual as well as economic control of their women.

Obbo comments on how East African men felt that any challenge to male supremacy was considered bad for African society. Mwangi's novel does not go this far. It demonstrates new social realities, and psychological acceptance lagging well behind those realities. Mwangi's female characters are caught between the demands of their menfolk and their environment, and men's contradictory attitudes toward women mean that the situation is not resolvable for either side. There is some evidence of a misogynistic attitude in Mwangi's novel which makes his depiction of women less than convincing and suggests that he is a writer who had not yet come to

terms with the new generations of African women.

Tomoko is a more ambiguous being than Wini: she simultaneously reflects Nakamoto's exultancy in the 'new woman' with the confusion, hesitancy and difficulty involved in rejecting the past model of Japanese womanhood. I believe that Nakamoto was not only interested in changing social conditions and women's response to them, but also wrote this story as a contribution to shaping the contemporaneous debate on topics such as what it was to be a man or a woman, and consequently what the role of the family should be. These 'new' topics were being publicly debated in the relatively liberal Taishō era as they could not have been in the authoritarianism of the preceding Meiji era (1868-1912).

Moreover, as Yukiko Tanaka points out, from a literary point of view Nakamoto's story was in the forefront of what was happening in Japan, deploying the prosaic style and startling imagery used by Neo-Sensualist authors such as Riichi Yokomitsu and Yasunari Kawabata, to convey the principles of modernism introduced in the 1920s (13).

Tomoko is a character designed to shock Nakamoto's readers: the complete antithesis of *ryōsai kenbo*, the 'good wife, wise mother' ideal which women were constantly exhorted to live up to by government proclamations and educational doctrine in the Meiji era. Kathleen Uno recounts how in Japan's male-dominated society *ryōsai kenbo*, designed to keep women firmly in their place in the home, proved to be extraordinarily tenacious, and traces persist even now (296-303). Before *ryōsai kenbo* Confucianism stipulated that women should be domestic, private and submissive, and devote themselves to men's wishes. Sharon Sievers describes how *danson jōhi*, the practice of respecting men and despising women, was another instrument of the oppression of women that was denounced, but not routed by Tomoko Kishida, an advocate of equal rights, in 1884 (38).

In Japan, as in Africa, when rapid social change causes men to perceive a threat to their status, their fears are often expressed

through a concern with controlling women's morality and sexual behavior. From the beginnings of Japanese women's questioning of their obedience to male authority, by, for example, campaigning against the concubine system still prevalent in the Meiji era, they were bitterly opposed by men. Japanese feminists became prominent in 1911, with the founding of the literary magazine *Seitô* (Bluestocking). In its first issue Raichô Hiratsuka wrote what came to be seen as a feminist manifesto, declaring resoundingly, "In the beginning woman was the sun ..." (qtd. in Sievers 163). Hiratsuka refers to women's glorious mythical past, when the sun goddess ruled over Japan, and was the origin of Japan's rulers, many, in early eras, being empresses rather than emperors. In contrast to these strong women, Hiratsuka saw modern women as feeble creatures, mere dependents of men, and sought to encourage women to be positive and creative, and take the responsibility for their own lives. In *Chûô Kôron*, another literary periodical, Hiratsuka celebrated and invoked the new woman:

The new woman: I am a new woman.

I seek, I strive each day to be that truly new woman I want to be....

The new woman curses yesterday

The new woman is not satisfied with the life of the kind of woman who is made ignorant, made a slave, made a piece of meat by male selfishness...

The new woman does not merely destroy the old morality and laws constructed out of male selfishness, but day by day attempts to create a new kingdom, where a new religion, a new morality, and new laws are carried out, based on the spiritual values and the surpassing brilliance of the sun.

The new woman is not simply covetous of power for its own sake. She seeks power to complete her mission, to be able to endure the exertion and agony of learning about and cultivating issues

now unknown to her ... (qtd. in Sievers 176)

Hiratsuka was doing her best to overcome ignorance and educate women as to their potential. She also challenged forms of male oppression, in particular marriage. Under the law of the time, a married woman was legally incompetent, had no rights over her own children, nor property, and was punished for adultery, although her husband was not. Sievers describes how Hiratsuka provoked male disapproval by her opinion that sexual fulfillment could be found only in relationships based on love, (which was not a priority in marriage at that time) and by her condemnation of men who exploited their wives sexually in loveless marriages, or harmed women by forcing successive pregnancies on them (179-180).

The sensation caused by Hiratsuka meant that no woman writer could be unaffected by her. If *The Female Bell-Cricket* is seen in this light it becomes Nakamoto's exploration of innovatory possibilities for male-female relationships and female sexuality. It can also be read as a satire on marriage; as men exploited their wives mercilessly in the past, so can the modern woman – rejecting marriage – prey on her partner in 1929.

There is an important difference between Hiratsuka's and Nakamoto's vision of the New Woman. The former is associated with the sun whereas Tomoko is an ominous, not a bright, figure. Tomoko rebelled against society, and won sexual freedom, but without gaining happiness. She escaped the traditional and limiting roles of wife and mother, but her new role seems to offer no *raison d'être*. However, there is also a parallel between Tomoko and Hiratsuka, the real life New Woman, whom Sievers reports as undergoing public censure as "an indulgent and irresponsible young Japanese woman, who used her overdeveloped sexuality to undermine the family and to manipulate others for her own selfish ends" (175).

Nakamoto's portrait of Tomoko is not wholly unfavorable; before the predator woman takes over she has a refreshing curiosity and

zest for life. However, she seems to embody the negative aspects of the New Woman. It is not clear what Nakamoto's ultimate aims were in this representation, but she certainly deflates the overoptimistic pretensions of Hiratsuka's sunny New Woman. Nakamoto shows that women are certainly not solely to blame for the exploit-or-be-exploited modern predicament, but neither is she so facile as to shift blame on to men. She seems rather to be hinting that the dawn of a new age is not automatic, and that if men and women are to have a brave new society that they will actually be happy to live in, then they had better look to themselves more rigorously to create it.

Raymond Williams suggests that "the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future" (297). The bleakness of the urban vision presented by both Mwangi and Nakamoto implies a literary warning to the majority of readers who are city dwellers.

Notes

- * This paper was originally presented at the International Comparative Literature Association Congress in Pretoria, South Africa, on 18 August, 2000.
- 1) It is highly significant that Tomoko is first encountered traveling in a streetcar. Streetcars, introduced in 1903, were associated with modernity and Westernness. Other Japanese authors also made telling use of the streetcar: Kafū Nagai, and Sōseki Natsume, whose hero rides a streetcar at a critical point in his life in the novel *And Then* (256-257). For Tomoko the crucial moment on the streetcar is the sudden revelation of her sexual desire, an avowal unusually explicit for the time *The Female Bell-Cricket* was written.
- 2) Modern cities of course offer immense positive potential for their inhabitants. Harvey describes the city as "the high point of human achievement" (229), and Marshall Berman claims living in a modern city "is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world ..." (15). Mwangi and Nakamoto usually emphasize the negative aspects of Nairobi and Tokyo, but allow glimpses of the wonders of their cities, which makes it all the harder when those wonders are categorically denied to their characters.

- 3) Fumiko Hayashi's *Diary of a Vagabond* (1927) shows how a provincial woman wins independence in adverse conditions in Tokyo, but finds it hard to shake off the habit of obedience to men. Junichirô Tanizaki's novel *Naomi* (1924) shows how the seeming dominance of a spirited woman is in fact only tolerated within the limits of her partner's sexual fantasies. Ngûgî wa Thiong'o's "Minutes of Glory" shows how a naïve country girl's life fails because of her inability to become streetwise in the city. Grace Ogot's "The Middle Door" (1976) shows how education confers strength on women so that female wit can triumph over male brute force.

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