

## SYNOPSIS OF BLOSSOMS OF THE SAVANNAH

Henry Ole Kulet is quite a prolific author and writes in English, often in his novels depicting the Maasai culture, the frame also for this narrative. In this text, Kulet addresses the tricky topic of the practice referred to either as female genital cutting or as female genital mutilation (abbreviated FGC or FGM), depending on one's attitude – neutral or severely disapproving – towards this ritual, which is still practised in many parts of the continent, even in countries like Kenya where it has been formally outlawed. I chose this novel for discussion because it is an example of what one might term “good popular writing” in contrast with trashy and sensationalist pot-boilers at the low end of popular writing, while not exactly falling within the category of high literature. Good African popular writing often functions (as this text does) to address serious social issues which need to be brought out of the rather isolated scholarly circuits of sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies and the like, and such texts can be seen as contributions to public debate uncompromised by discernible political affiliations or pompous officialese. Blossoms of the Savannah is also interesting because it addresses a topic more usually taken up by women than (as here) by a man and a father, and often perceived as a cause “Western feminists” are vociferous about, while lacking the kind of local, insider's knowledge that an author like Ole Kulet manifests. The tricky and (in societies that enshrine the practice of cutting the female genitalia during adolescent initiation) hugely controversial topic of FGC/FGM is handled in an impressively direct, yet culturally sensitive, way in this novel, and is recognised as closely intertwined with a society's gender ideology and parental and marital practices. The narrative is gripping, while the novelist manages to educate the non-Maasai reader about the complexities of this proudly and loyally maintained African culture. Central to the text is a family of Maasai – a father, mother and two daughters in their late teens – who, after many years in the bustling town centre of Nakuru in the Midwest of Kenya, have to relocate to their ancestral area because the father and family breadwinner has been retrenched from his job as commercial manager of a large company providing agricultural supplies. Parsimei Ole Kaelo, the father, has prepared for the change by having a new home and a large shop (supplying agricultural equipment and materials) built in the Nasila area. The novel opens with him organising the movers who are packing their furniture into the lorries that will transport the family's belongings to the new home. Parsimei's irascible temperament is immediately evident as he yells at the workers while observed from the upstairs flat window by his elder and favourite daughter, Taiyo. She and her younger sister, Resian, are the savannah blossoms of the novel's title, but this image should not be taken as indicating that these two young women (both in their late teens) are content to be mere decorative presences; they have indeed something of the hardiness of wild flowers, although Taiyo has a more submissive bent than the rebellious Resian. We are made to understand that Taiyo's attitude towards her father is the product of his delight in and approval of his elder daughter, making her generally very loyal towards him, although as the text opens she is angry with him for having forbidden her to go to a music festival, attendance at which was a reward for her talent (music and dancing) and which might have led to getting her a professional foothold in that sphere. Resian is generally the butt of her father's temper; she invariably arouses his ire, and his unpleasant, constantly reiterated scoldings have turned her into a glum and somewhat cynical person, though she has an iron will and is often unwisely outspoken. Nevertheless, Parsimei rules his household with a strong hand and refuses to be questioned; his wife, Mama Milanoi, is generally

discreet and compliant, softening her husband's harshness with her grace. One way of reading the novel is to see it as a probing study of the dynamics of the patriarchal family in a contemporary African society – an even-handed account of the power currents and tensions in such a family. What neither of the two girls realises – it is a point that will only gradually reveal itself to them in its full starkness – is that their father (and, if in a less vehement way, also their mother) expects them to immerse themselves in the traditional rural and strongly tribal culture of Nasila; to marry into good local families with all that that would entail, and to forget about their dreams of further study that would equip one of them for a career in the music industry and the other as a veterinarian. At this point, however, they have to assist in the move and only Tayio (whom Resian constantly reminds to request their father's permission) could raise the topic with their unpredictable father. One early account gives the reader a vivid sense of the kind of man Parsimei is:

He had a contentious mind that seemed to question every aspect of his life. Although he was blessed with a shrewd brain and a pugnacious obstinacy that had stood him in good stead in his struggle to rise through the ranks, from a clerk to the coveted position of Commercial Manager of the Agribix, Ltd, he still saw only the greater successes of others. ... Since childhood he had been aware ... that no-one really liked him. That, too, did not bother him since in his mind, to pursue the easy and worthless admiration of others was a sign of weakness of character. (6)

Nevertheless, Parsimei ole Kaelo is determined to make up the ground he has lost within the Nasila culture, where the role of family head has (during his three decades of absence in the city) been filled in for him by his younger brother, Simiren, a prosperous cattle trader who surrenders his position to his returning brother without any qualms. Simiren has a large polygamous household of four wives and sixteen children – with two more on the way. This is the kind of family structure favoured by the clan, though Parsimei had never wanted to take additional wives. What Simiren does immediately foresee, though, is that the local community will strongly disapprove of the fact that Parsimei's two young adult daughters have not yet been “circumcised”. For there is an anti-FGM crusader in their area, a female veterinary surgeon nastily nicknamed entangoroi (wasp), who makes it her business to speak out against the practice and who has set up a rescue centre and school for girls that she has rescued from situations where they were or were about to be cut. She is the manager in charge of a huge estate and sheep farm; a woman of great personal force.

Something else that the sisters are unaware of is that their father, in setting up his business in the rural area, had entered into an unholy alliance with a hugely wealthy thug named Oloisudori Lokinyaa – a man known for his ruthless, murderous practices and extortionist “talent”. Parsimei learns from a clan elder that this connection, by means of which he hopes to obtain hugely lucrative government contracts, was an unwise move that is likely to cost him dearly. But it is too late to extract himself at this stage from his “business arrangement” with this dangerous criminal. While the girls are from the beginning aware that in Nasila, for a young woman to be “uncircumcised” is considered unseemly, the point is brought home to them in an extremely unpleasant manner when, on taking their first walk around their uncle's area, they are accosted by a brutal local man who, with an unmistakable air of menace, sneers at them for being intoye nemengalana – women with intact genitalia. At the magnificent homecoming feast held by Parsimei for his family and clanspeople, the leading elder makes a speech in which he, too, though in a veiled and dignified manner, indicates that he and their people expect the Kaelo daughters to be initiated by means of the usual cutting ceremony.

At this gathering, Tayio had been instantly and irrevocably smitten by a strikingly vital and good-looking moran (young man), the music teacher at the local primary school. He introduces himself to her as Joseph Parmuat, but although they are not related by blood, she is almost immediately warned by her uncle that there can be no erotic relations between them because Joseph is a member of a “related” clan with whom they are forbidden to intermarry. Nevertheless, he will be allowed to instruct the sisters in the intricacies of the local culture, and for the time being Tayio is satisfied with this arrangement. She senses that Joseph is in no way indifferent to her attractions.

Immediately after the welcoming feast Parsimei orders his wife to do what she has been dreading ever since they decided to return to the ancestral area: she must prepare their daughters to undergo the cutting ritual in order to turn them into desirable wives for local men. But her entire upbringing has socialised her into wifely submission even on this point, and after a feeble attempt at protesting on behalf of her daughters, she subsides and promises to comply with the instruction.

Their father takes it upon himself, in his usual pompous manner, to tell the sisters that he himself has engaged Joseph’s services to teach them clan lore. While Tayio has her own private reasons for being pleased with this plan, Resian senses the darker implications: that they can soon expect to be forced to undergo the “circumcision” rite. She bursts out in the privacy of their shared bedroom:

“[A] male in the name of a clan brother is sought to ... teach us the ‘a b c d’ of a good Nasilian wife so that we shall please our future husbands. No, I refuse to be taught. I will either be taught at the university what is universally beneficial to mankind or be taught nothing!” (73). The pressure on Milanoi mounts when Resian indignantly and (under the circumstances) unwisely expresses her fierce feelings about women’s equal rights being disregarded in the local culture – in the presence and in contradiction of her uncle’s eldest wife, the aunt who is the female family head.

The older woman immediately (and angrily) “diagnoses” Resian as being in need of the “cure” of genital cutting to rid her of her rebellious attitude: “To hide a boil ... under the armpit is unwise, for sooner or later it will burst and emit a foul smell,” she tells Milanoi. “It is time to circumcise your daughters and get rid of olkunyeni [glossed as “stupidity, folly or madness”]. It is that simple” (78).

In a particularly interesting (and revealing!) section of the narrative, Joseph Parmuat, the sisters’ Maasai cultural instructor, answers their questions regarding the origins of the female genital cutting practice by narrating an aspect of early Maa communal history. During a time, many generations ago, when their people were conquered and humiliated by a stronger sub-clan, Joseph says, the women of the clan felt shamed at their inability to resist the invaders’ sexually suggestive and provocative approach to them. The women then got together, he says, and decided that the surest way to subdue their own sexual urges (to enable them to resist the male outsiders’ advances) was voluntarily to undergo this ritual. Ever since then, Joseph tells the sisters, the Maa women have upheld the practice as women’s way of maintaining their honour. This is no mere legend, he says, but a “true story” (87). Nevertheless the sisters assure Joseph that they intend joining the emakererei (the veterinarian who campaigns against FGM in their community) in fighting this (in their view) outdated practice.

Resian engages her mother in a discussion about the above, arguing fiercely that although it may be true that women initiated the practice of genital cutting, it is men who are forcing them to maintain it when there is no longer a need for it.

The conversation is interrupted by a knock on the door. The unexpected visitor is an aggressive, clearly wealthy man who ogles Resian in a repulsive manner, claiming to be her father’s valued

friend. He insists on waiting in their living room, even though told by Resian that her father is out, even lightly touching her breast as he pushes past her. This swaggering bully is Oloisudori Lonkinyaa, the man who is her father's secret business partner and funder. His invasive, brutal manner causes Resian to describe him (to her sister and Joseph) as a "monster". Although initially thinking her melodramatic, Joseph echoes Resian's term when he hears the man's name, saying: "He is a monster in the true sense of the word" (100), such is Oloisudori's reputation for thuggery and high-stakes criminality.

Unbeknown to the sisters, Oloisudori had (unexpectedly fascinated by Resian) bluntly told their father that he is interested in Resian, "as if he was talking of a sheep or a goat", and added that he had "a friend who will also be interested in your other daughter", concluding "simply" that he would like to "relieve" Parsimei of his daughters (110)!

Oloisudori had intended to blackmail Parsimei financially, but his "interest" in Resian made him change his demand (in exchange for upholding the business agreement) to the "payment in kind" of an additional wife (he already has half a dozen).

As he lies angrily reflecting that night, Parsimei's feelings are not (as one might have thought) dominated by fury at the threat to their family and outraged protective feelings concerning his daughter. Instead, he resentfully, if cynically, reflects that "Success was attainment, fortune and prosperity; it was triumph and it gave one happiness ... [no] matter how it was obtained ... [since] the end product justified the means, however horrible" (109). In other words, he himself subscribes to, or at least accepts, a rotten system of values that at the moment has him in a weak position but from within which he can - if at his daughter's expense - possibly attain a position of greater power if he plays along. This is how he rationalises it: "For him to save his business, to save his home and to save his daughter Tayio, he had agreed, she [Resian] had to go" (112).

Although Milanoi is here described as "inconsolable", she puts up no more than a feeble attempt at resistance (as Resian's mother). She does seek the advice of her brother-in-law's wives, only to be told that she and her husband cannot have it both ways: the two of them, in not having had their daughters initiated into the clan, cannot now expect the clan to protect their daughters.

Isolated from her sister in her intense feelings for Joseph, Tayio engineers a private meeting with him and manages to get him to confess that he, too, despite the clan's ban on erotic relations between them, is passionately attracted to her. Yet once she leaves him, Joseph thinks better of the commitment he apparently made. The Maa culture is too important to his whole life and being and he could not bear being shamed by and excluded from the clan by choosing a union with Tayio above all his links with the Nasila community.

Shortly after this, the sisters are attacked in the forest by two local vagabonds. They are considered "fair game" by these men because of their "uncircumcised" state and narrowly escape being raped - they are saved when a strange man who has been sponging off their family and spending his days in their home (the Maa culture requires acceptance of any of the clanspeople who happen to visit) comes to their aid. He rushes at the assailants and beats up both of them, thus saving the sisters. Seriously shaken, their parents decide (secretly hoping that this will soften the daughters' resistance to Maa cultural practices) to send them to live in their uncle's home for a while in order to experience life in a traditional family. Here they do, indeed, learn to respect the orderly, affectionate and pleasantly busy life led by the co-wives and their children, where sharing, familial duties and the cheerful unselfishness of the Maa family ethos inspires their admiration. They also learn that their youngest aunt (with whom they are quartered) actually knows and grew up in the

same village as the ardent anti-FGC campaigner, the emakererei .

While the daughters are away, their furious father has summoned the clansmen to hunt down and punish the attempted rapists. They find them and beat them within an inch of their lives, but cannot kill them since the two offenders have sought forgiveness and protection from the clan elders. They are to pay damages for the assault. Startlingly, one of the assailants turns out to be the sisters' cousin by blood - Milanoi's sister's son - and her prioritising of clan loyalty above her daughters' feelings is again manifest when she is relieved to hear her husband return the three heifers that the young brute had been fined. He may never come near their homestead, but the two near-victims are understandably incensed at the ameliorative rather than punitive justice system of the Maa, which appears to make light of their ordeal. However, the sisters notice that Nasila men are now generally much friendlier and more courteous towards them. Even so, the next threat to their peace of mind soon arrives; Oloisudori is coming to visit with three friends and has specifically asked that Resian serve them. Her father orders her to do this, even though she tells him how much she dislikes the man and how he intimidates her. In his typical incensed manner he rebukes her angrily for daring to try and avoid his demand.

(A small footnote is in order here: Ole Kulet (the author) does slip in the information that in traditional Maa culture, unmarried young women and girls are not exposed to the gazes of visiting adult men, even if from the same family and clan. What the writer is doing, therefore, is to draw a distinction between Maa culture proper and the conduct of Parsimei.)

The visitors arrive - four equally swaggering, opulently dressed and ostentatiously wealthy men, and Oloisudori presents the family with what the reader soon (correctly) suspects to be dowry gifts: extremely expensive items of cloth and jewellery and a briefcase that we know is bulging with money for Parsimei. His friends clearly approve of Oloisudori's taste in young women and the men sail off in their shiny vehicles at the end of the afternoon, having emptied numerous bottles of expensive spirits.

Soon afterwards Parsimei and Milanoi are invited to visit Oloisudori in turn at his establishment (or one of them - his third wife's home). The purpose of this arranged visit is blatant: to allow the couple to be awed by the enormous wealth of their imminent son-in-law; the home is opulently furnished, guarded by a small army of security personnel and immaculately well run. Oloisudori also takes them to the home that he has had built for Resian, to which she is soon to be brought as his wife. The visitors are in fact now totally won over (or seduced) by these glorious possessions of Oloisudori's. In fact, a diabolical plan is hatched, mainly by the two men (again here with only feeble and unspoken resistance from the mother) to ensnare Resian into marriage to her ruthless suitor (who also intends having her "circumcised" at this home soon after her kidnapping). Possibly the most shocking and ugliest of Parsimei's pronouncements (enjoyed, evidently, also by his wife and, of course, their host) occurs when he, feeling cuddled and pampered by Oloisudori's riches and power, indicates (by analogy) his belief that once married, Resian will soon get used to and be pleased with her new circumstances:

The three of them, Oloisudori, Ole Kaelo and his wife, roared with rich laughter when Ole Kaelo equated the scenario to that of a goat's kid that stubbornly refused to suckle after it was born. Its owner would tuck it between his knees and forcefully open its mouth and tuck its mother's teat into it. He would then squeeze out the milk into the kid's mouth. The taste of the milk would make it suckle and removal of the teat from its mouth would be a struggle. (192)

To equate a kid's suckling with violent abduction and forced marriage, coupled with clitoridectomy, is grotesque and exposes the level of rot to which their association with Oloisudori and their adulation of his wealth have brought the Ole Kaelo couple. Ole Kaelo does experience some gnawing at his tardy conscience in the knowledge that he is "about to hand over his daughter to a gangster" (194), just as his wife wishes that Resian could be brought to accept the impending marriage and cutting ceremony uncoerced, but their severely skewed value system is all too evident by now.

The sisters have by now realised something of what is afoot (they have no idea about the abduction plan, but they do realise that their father has essentially already "sold" Resian to Oloisudori and will make no move to respect her resistance to such a relationship. They decide to return the man's luxurious gifts under the guise of a gift from the two of them to him when he next visits. Resian will also stand up to him, she decides, and firmly inform him that she has no intention of marrying him. She does so, in extreme trepidation, only to be mocked with the information that Oloisudori already has "ownership" of her, since her father has accepted her bride price from him, and that resistance is futile.

Resian runs all the way to her father's shop, but Parsimei confirms the "validity" of Oloisudori's claim upon her. Hysterical with the shock of such a betrayal, Resian screams at her father, not caring who hears how basely he has acted. Near suicidal with despair and horror, she runs wildly into the forest. Again at this crisis moment Resian and Tayio's saviour from the rapists, the distantly related kinsman Olarinkoi, appears on the scene, offering to help her get away. Oloisudori's men are already hunting for her. Olarinkoi finds her a night's shelter with an old woman in the nearby town, and early the next morning comes with a truck and its driver to pick her up. The old woman gives Resian a blanket and a cloth; with these she is able to shelter herself against the dust, wind and insects that assail her on the vehicle's open back. Supposedly Olarinkoi is taking Resian to the emakererei, who would give her shelter as a refugee from FGM, but that evening, when it is already dark, the truck driver drops them off at a rickety hut. Olarinkoi offloads some supplies and instructs Resian roughly to cook a meal. He then goes off somewhere, leaving the bemused, still traumatised young woman alone and bewildered. Exhausted, she falls asleep on the makeshift bed.

Hours later, a very drunk Olarinkoi returns, informing Resian that he will make her his wife after she is "circumcised" and that she has no chance of escaping over the huge, wild-animal-infested terrain surrounding them. He then attempts to rape Resian. Profoundly shocked, Resian resists the attack by getting Olarinkoi's thumb into her mouth and biting down so relentlessly that she all but severs the digit. He retaliates by heavily hitting her on her side and on her head. Many hours later she half revives to find that her nose has bled; she is naked and badly hurt and lapses again into unconsciousness.

Days later, Resian realises that an old woman has been gently feeding and nursing her. She finds out that the old woman was engaged to help heal her after genital cutting, as Olarinkoi and his witch-like mother (a powerful local diviner) had intended, but that now she is too ill for such an ordeal and first needs to regain her strength. Resian actually meets Olarinkoi's elderly mother, finding her quite terrifying and nasty, but she is determined to continue defending herself. She wins the affection of the kindly old nurse, whom she tearfully thanks and honours for her maternal care of a desperate young woman who had been a stranger to her - addressing the old woman (whose name is Naburu) as her yeyio-ai-nanyorr [beloved mother, 253], in unspoken contrast with her own mother Milanoi, who had so shamefully failed to defend and protect her.

When a sheepish Olarinkoi returns later to “visit” Resian he explains his and his mother’s plan to her that, once “circumcised”, he and Resian would move as a couple to Tanzania to escape being hunted down by Oloisudori. But Resian bitterly denounces him. “You, stupid Olarinkoi, you are worse than Oloisudori,” she tells him acidly as she trembles with anger. “But the two of you have one thing in common: warped minds” (249).

After he leaves, Resian appeals to Naburu to help her get away from the clutches of the mother and son. This she manages, walking miles through the bush to persuade one of the vet’s truck drivers to take a detour and pick them up – and only just in time, for Olarinkoi and others come in pursuit of them.

Hours of driving later, they arrive at the huge sheep farm where the emakererei is in charge. A woman of great authority and competence, she graciously receives Resian and her nurse; assigns Resian a home of her own and offers her employment on the sheep ranch. She will also assist Resian, she undertakes, in her attempt to fulfil her dream of studying at the Egerton University and qualifying as a vet.

After only a few days, however, Resian is subjected to another dreadful shock when it turns out that a young woman whom the emakererei’s people went to rescue after enforced “circumcision” is her own sister Taiyo, kidnapped by Oloisudori’s men when it seemed that Resian had escaped his clutches. Taiyo is terribly ill and emotionally traumatised and Resian scarcely less so, but now the sisters have been reunited in a safer space than their parental home proved to be.

When Oloisudori and his henchmen turn up at the farm some weeks later (having found out where the sisters are), demanding that one or both of the sisters be given up to him, the thugs are solidly rebuffed, badly beaten up by the hundreds of local workers and ignominiously chased off the farm, while their powerful and hugely expensive vehicles are set on fire.

Not long afterwards, the news comes that both sisters (and we have been given the information that they qualify for university entrance, having obtained excellent school-leaving marks) have been awarded bursaries to allow them to study at the university. Their loyalty to the emakererei and commitment to the anti-FGM cause is unshakeable.

Henry Ole Kulet has written a topical, thought-provoking text; its swashbuckling elements and thrilling plot seem to indicate that it could easily be turned into an engrossing television series. It is admirable that a male writer with loyalty and connection to the Maasai and their ancient culture has produced so open-eyed and even-handed an account which addresses the controversial issue of female genital cutting outspokenly but with understanding of the power struggles and supposedly opposed forces of social change and tradition at work in this matter. Making it, as he has, a familial issue and concentrating on the parental failures so blatantly evident on both the paternal and the maternal sides in the Ole Kaelo household gives the text especial relevance and moral power.

Ole Kulet evinces profound admiration of most aspects of Maa lifestyle and tradition, and the fact that he writes this novel from an insider’s perspective strengthens the validity of his balanced representation of a fraught issue and a valuable African culture. The text has a number of editing flaws, but these fortunately do not impede the powerful current of the narrative.