

H for The Hangman's Game by Karen King-Aribisala

Born in Guyana, Karen King-Aribisala is based in Nigeria, working as a Professor of English at the University of Lagos. She is the author of fiction set in her country of residence, including two volumes of short stories, *Our Wife & Other Stories* (1990) and *Bitter Leafing Woman* (2017), and a novel entitled *Kicking Tongues* (1998), a lively transposition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to a Nigerian background, published in the Heinemann African Writers Series. Her second novel, *The Hangman's Game* (2007), published by Peepal Tree Press, was awarded the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (Africa Region). Regardless of the continent with which this award was associated, *The Hangman's Game* is unquestionably a Caribbean text too, one that reflects its well-travelled author's unique diasporic identity essentially shaped by both Nigeria and the West Indies.

The Hangman's Game makes the reader travel in both time and space: it consists of two alternating, apparently distinct narrative strands, corresponding to separate sections and printed in different fonts. The first takes us to Demerara, which later was to be part of British Guiana, at the time of the 1823 slave rebellion, and the second is set in Nigeria in the 1990s, under Sani Abacha's dictatorship. However, the two plots constantly intertwine via the novel's narrator, a nameless Guyanese-born scholar and writer who travels to Nigeria to understand "the reasons behind our ancestral enslavement" and "discover at first hand why hands exchanged silver for the likes of me" (HG, 9). She eventually settles there after marrying a local academic, who is also a lay preacher, and after the execution by hanging of a fellow Nigerian writer, reminiscent of Ken Saro-Wiwa, she decides to complete the novel that she had begun in Guyana about the Demerara slave rebellion and which she titles *Three Blind Mice*. Intriguingly, the seven characters from this novel within a novel, several of whom are based on historical figures of Guyanese history, have their anonymous equivalent in the author's daily life, which explains why she feels threatened by her protagonists, thinking that they want her spiritual death by "hanging [her] with a rope of [her] own making" (7).

This double storyline makes for a self-reflexive, well-crafted, culturally and generically hybrid novel that has been described as an “amazing tapestry” by Niyi Osundare. Its 191 pages provide a great deal of food for thought to anyone with an interest in active reading. Among the many issues it raises, *The Hangman’s Game* demands that we ponder the interaction between fact and fiction; it interrogates the links between past and present, explores the meanders of the creative imagination, and examines the violence created by the compulsive human need to control others, whether under slavery or in a dictatorship, while offering Christian faith as a way of escaping the downsides of the human condition.

The passages of the novel set in the Caribbean are compelling for giving us an insight into the individual dramas at the heart of the 1823 rebellion. They describe a world that is certainly divided along racial lines but even more so in terms of gender. One of the main characters in the Guyanese narrative is the white Englishwoman Mary, the wife of John Smithers, modelled on Reverend John Smith, who was tried for leading the rebellion and sentenced to death by hanging. Mary, with whom the black narrator identifies in many respects, not least because of their common status as foreigners in the country where they live, is perceived by most as a weak, innocuous person, who is said to be “mad as a hatter” (HG, 162). However, one realizes as the plot unfolds that Mary was behind the slave revolt together with Rosita, her mixed-race servant, also the common-law wife of slave leader Quamina, and Auntie Lou, a slave who is intimate with the Governor of the colony. In addition to pointing to the strange intimacy between masters and slaves that has often been ignored by official history, this storyline highlights the subdued yet effective agency of women who courageously work to change the world, while their idealist male partners are blinded by their respective ambitions -- a woman-centered world vision redolent of George Lamming’s *Natives of My Person* (1971). However, this feminist subtext is occasionally challenged by the novel itself, especially in the Nigerian narrative, where women are also shown to be capable of cruelty, whether physical or psychological.

Much could be said about the form in *The Hangman’s Game*. King-Aribisala is known for her dexterous use of puns and other word plays, and this novel is not an exception to this remarkable ability to handle words, symbolized in the hangman’s game of the title, which

also punctuates the novel. One of its most striking formal features, however, is its intertextual use of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. These texts inform the feminist subtext of the novel in the sense that they are often regarded as harmless narratives meant for children, while they have been shown to possess a strong philosophical potential that goes well beyond the domestic sphere. The enigmatic nursery rhyme 'Three Blind Mice' is clearly referenced through the title of the novel within the novel and humorously indexes men's sightlessness and the (sometimes destructive) agency of women, who are metaphorically able to cut men's tails, their sexual organs, but also their tales, which are often equated with official history and compose the literary canon. Other famous traditional tales for children find their way into the text, among them the story of Rapunzel, which is evoked when Mary and the narrator arrange for their love rival's opulent hair to be cut off (Joseph-Vilain). Unravelling such pervasive intertextuality may look like a daunting task, but it is certainly the best way of uncovering the multiple layers of meaning in this intriguingly rich novel.

References

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