

# IDENTITY, SELF-REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTS IN KUKI GALLMANN'S *I DREAMED OF AFRICA*

**Alida Poeti**

## **Sommario**

*Attraverso una lettura critica del testo autobiografico della Gallmann, si verifica come lei, in veste di autore, narratore e protagonista, ricostruisca ed interpreti la sua vita e le sventure accadutele sullo sfondo di un'Africa mitica, ricreata in base ai luoghi comuni che facevano parte dei suoi sogni giovanili. Si pone la domanda di quanto ci sia di autentico e quanto di idealizzato in queste memorie romanzate sul tema dell'affermazione dell'individuo sulle avversità. Si conclude che la risposta sta nella natura stessa del genere prescelto.*

'If we believe the first people stood erect at the edge of the Great Rift Valley, then in some ways, Africa is our home. For me there was an immediate feeling of recognition, a memory card in my genes.' (Kuki Gallmann)

Kuki Gallmann's autobiographical story has the essential qualities of a fable. An initial need prompts a journey towards a new life fraught with obstacles and tragedy. Action is required to overcome more loss and pain, until fulfilment is achieved from the ensuing final situation.

The journey in this case leads the protagonist to Africa, the spiritual home she has always yearned for, and that she recreates as it exists in her dreams. In spite of the price Africa exacts from her, Kuki's Africa has very little to do with the 'real' Africa where poverty is a constant and degradation, oppression, disease and corruption are rife. However, Kuki emerges as a heroic child of this continent, prepared to pay the price the land demands for the privilege of partaking in what it has to offer. This article aims to show how Kuki Gallmann as author, narrator and protagonist presents a coherent, unitary vision of herself and Africa. It will deal with the subjective construction of the 'I' and with how 'Africa' emerges as a cultural construct.

In his work *Design and Truth in Autobiography*<sup>1</sup>, Roy Pascal deals with one of the most problematic aspects of the genre – that of veracity. If one accepts that no individual can be completely coherent to a unitary self, one must question the impression of overall unity that is created in Kuki Gallmann's *I Dreamed of Africa*<sup>2</sup>. One must ask furthermore whether it is in fact an autobiography, a biographical novel or a memoir? Pascal reminds the reader that although similar in nature, a memoir and an autobiography are essentially different:

There is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without biographical information; both are based on personal experience, chronological, and reflective. But there is a great difference in the direction of the author's attention. In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence of others. [...] If [the author] puts himself in the centre he falls into

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<sup>1</sup> R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> K. Gallmann, *I Dreamed of Africa*, London, Penguin Books, 1990 (all page references refer to this edition).

rank vanity; it is as an observer that he can give unity to his experiences, not as an actor. (Pascal, 1960:5)

Kuki Gallmann's work, which purports to be a memoir, reads more like a novel with a first person narrator. The text does not sufficiently focus on others to be a memoir, but it attracts the reader because of Gallmann's skilful storytelling ability. However, it does not satisfy the more discerning reader of autobiography, as it fails to be introspective.

I had a story to tell. If you have the patience to read it to the end, you will understand why I wrote it, although it meant exposing an intimate and deep part of my life to a large number of people, mostly unknown to me. (Acknowledgements, xiii)

Although there seems to be a certain autobiographical imperative, a need to write, and the narrator's actions are always in the forefront, the author does not claim to want to tell *her* story but *a* story. Is it then the tragic story of her husband Paolo and son Emanuele, or the exemplary story of the founding of the Gallmann Memorial Foundation, or the inspiring story of a woman who heroically fights for what she believes in, as much as to keep alive a cherished dream? If it is taken to be the story of a wife and mother, forced to make herself vulnerable in order to celebrate the memory of a beloved husband and son, it will evoke sympathy. If it is read as the story of a shrewd conservationist and fundraiser, highlighting her achievements, it might evoke more admiration than sympathy. Nevertheless, the text's sentimentality, superficiality and lack of political awareness are annoying and could dispose negatively towards the author. Moreover, in spite of what she claims, the aim of the book is never quite clear<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Susan Granger, Gallmann explained that she had written her memoir "to exorcise her ghosts", and one would be inclined to agree, were it not for the centrality of the 'I'. (See S. Granger, "Discovering the Real, Remarkable Kuki Gallmann", <http://www.susangranger.com/discovering.htm>.)

The role the reader chooses to assume is significant in the appreciation of this text and depends largely on the type of response or the degree of identification with the subject that it evokes. Thus, any criticism of Gallmann may be considered insensitive by sympathetic readers who assume the role of confidant. For such readers her story is a source of sorrow, her determination to succeed as a conservationist an inspiration, and her inclination to help others, an example of altruism. For those who take on the role of objective judge, she is neither selfless nor are her actions completely disinterested.

### **Centrality of the ‘I’**

If one were to depict Gallmann’s position in the text in relation to others diagrammatically, she would be positioned in the centre of a circle, with the people around her forming a ring. Her actions always impact on those around her in a significant way. She in fact is accustomed to being the centre of attention:

I was a pampered little girl. [...] As a baby and then a toddler, the only child in the household, I had everyone’s attention and time. In those days of fear, I must have represented for them the hope for the future. In a world of doting adults, surrounded by their love and kindness, I grew up with great self-confidence. (3)

The metaphor of the protagonist within the circle, projecting herself as “the hope for the future” recurs throughout. In the closing scene she describes how she has become central to the lives of the Pokot<sup>4</sup> and how the warriors of this tribe come “in sign of friendship” (308) to thank her and pay her homage:

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<sup>4</sup> The Pokot are a very small and minor tribe who inhabit part of the land owned by the Gallmanns.

*'Therra gnow-gnow, Mama Kuki'*, [t]hey sang [along with] their haunting songs [as] they approached spiralling in a single row, endlessly circling round and round. [...] Before we knew it the warriors stopped around us in an almost perfect circle. Sveva [Kuki's young daughter] and I waited in the middle. [...] Our European origin, my position as guardian of this land, gave us, I suppose, the status of men. (308-309)

She recalls how, a few years previously, these same Pokot tribesmen "had come to kill our rhino" (308). Now Gallmann feels she has achieved her goal and has been fully accepted by 'her' people. Her position is recognised and her views on conservation are accepted. She is the dynamic force behind change in Africa<sup>5</sup>; she is the one they call *Miauera*, the one who works, who does things.

The narrator presents herself as a multi-faceted woman, while all other characters remain one-dimensional. She is at once the victim of hostile circumstances involved in a life-changing accident which cripples her; a daughter with a mind of her own; a supportive wife and brave mother; the African landscape's solution to its conservation dilemmas; the matriarch who has come to care for Africa's "primitive" people and wildlife, and the writer who is destined to draw all of these roles together with the power of her pen. In the course of the narrative she emerges as "the hope for the future" of conservation in Africa.

The centrality of the 'I' and the character's single-mindedness create the impression that Kuki Gallmann exists as a unified, coherent 'I', as someone who knew all along that she had a mission in life. Autobiographers often come to the conclusion that they can never fully

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<sup>5</sup> She narrates how she was instrumental in organizing for "twelve tons" of ivory ("worth three million dollars") to be burnt, after her friend Richard Leakey was appointed, by the President Daniel Arap Moi, Director of the Wildlife Department, in order to stop the slaughter of elephants and put an end to trade in ivory (298-99).

know themselves and much less their motives. They struggle to find consistency and admit that where they perceive weaknesses in their character, they may seek to conceal or deny them, effectively creating new visions of themselves through the power of the word. This is exactly what Gallmann does: she constructs a persona for herself that has clarity of vision, firmness of purpose and can justify her actions and creed.

Justification plays a central role in *I Dreamed of Africa*. The strong, determined Kuki seems to have few weaknesses, yet, under the surface the reader perceives a sense of the author's insecurity, a knowing that her actions are largely motivated by a degree of self-interest. The Kuki whom we first meet after the accident on the outskirts of Venice needs Africa more than the continent needs her. Her life in Italy had become empty, dull and tedious – all she had to show for it was a failed marriage and single-parenthood in the shadow of a successful, dominant mother. Though she does not say it, the accident had led to a deterioration of her sense of self. For a short while, Kuki hovered on the brink of self-pity until destiny<sup>6</sup> calls. She must either take her future in hand and direct its course, or fall into a much feared trap of mediocrity. Since she had always perceived herself as a determined achiever, she cannot shrink from fulfilling her dreams and destiny:

My father had the gift of making me believe, and of believing himself, that there was always a new adventure, something waiting to be discovered, if we can only find the time to look for it, and the courage to jump. His drive and his energetic attitude to life galvanized me, making me perceive that there were no limits to what one could achieve. I was keen to explore, eager to follow in his footsteps. (5)

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<sup>6</sup> Like Karen Blixen, Kuki Gallmann believed that one must accept one's fate, that tragedy offers the opportunity for immortality and helps find one's identity through adversity and pain.

The young girl, who at the age of twelve had written in a school essay that one day she would go to Africa (9), at thirty-three was determined that Africa must become the setting for the fulfillment of those dreams.

### **The dream versus the reality**

The title of this work is a telling one, for the word “dreamed” is deeply instrumental in constructing the myth of Africa it portrays. The young Kuki’s first perception of Africa is not created by first hand experience; it is shaped by her readings and father’s stories and accounts of his experiences in North Africa. It is through this initial exposure to verbal representations that Africa comes alive for her and stirs her imagination. Her beloved father had a long standing “love affair with the Sahara” and “the nomad tribes of the desert” (8), yet her vision of Africa derives from a myriad of other romanticized sources. She speaks of her

fantasies of a hot land of unending horizons, herds of animals in the savannah, and a farm in the Highlands [...], riding in the early morning through hills and plains, camping out at night on a riverbank ... where dark-skinned people lived who spoke strange languages I could understand, and were still close to nature and knew its secrets ... dusty red tracks in the thick bush, ancient lakes with flamingos, lions roaring in the vast darkness and snorting buffalo ... sunsets of gold and fire, with silhouetted giraffe, drums in the night... (8)

While this idyllic description has some truth, it gives a distorted impression of the reality of Africa and is hardly the basis on which a single mother would base her decision to move to Kenya. Yet Kuki

admits that the clue to why she decided to come to Africa lay in these childhood fantasies (7).

The woman who comes to live in Kenya discovers that Africa can also be a land of great hardship, that the animals are no longer as abundant as before and that some of “the dark-skinned people” could be hostile. However, she glosses over these aspects and is prepared to ignore them, because for her living in Africa is preferable to staying in Italy where she lacks the means to distinguish herself as an individual or match the stature of her explorer father and academically renowned mother.

Paolo Gallmann, an ex-colonial who becomes her second husband, does not only offer her love and companionship, but the chance to move to her African fantasy world:

The key to my future was Paolo. [...] He began to represent the link with a different world, the hope of change and of a new life. [...] Paolo evoked for me images of unbounded freedom, of wild open horizons and red sunsets, of green highlands teeming with wild animals. [...] The dream of my childhood revived through his vivid stories. (7)

Though they come as ranchers wanting to raise cattle, Africa becomes for this couple an exclusive space of escapism, a haven of wealth and adventure, an empty canvas on which they are at liberty to paint their destiny. Initially they have little thought for the welfare of the inhabitants of the land or for its survival. Paramount to their move to Kenya, is Kuki and Paolo's emotional survival after the loss they have both suffered, she of her independence, he of his first wife.

We both needed in order to heal our deeper wounds, and to forge ahead, to look forward to a completely different existence, where shadows of the past would



not hover, where memories would not haunt us, and where we could discover again the sense of life. We both instinctively knew that this could only happen in a place where we could start again from the beginning. Somewhere far away, somewhere where everything was still practically unknown. (17)

The Gallmanns' coming to Africa heralds a new beginning, free of urban constrictions and social impositions, but, within a few short years, the hazardous African roads claim Paolo's life.<sup>7</sup> Kuki is left alone in the wilderness with her fourteen year old son and a baby on the way, but is not deterred from remaining in her chosen homeland and finding a meaning for her life.

#### **Neo-colonial view of Africa**

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<sup>7</sup> "It was a lorry which suddenly crossed into his lane [...] on the Mombasa road. [...] Trapped between the dashboard and contorted seat, his face crushed against the steering-wheel, in the tremendous impact his neck snapped and broke. Paolo was dead. [...] Did he see who stole his money, frantic hands fumbling through his pockets, tearing away his watch, robbing his defenseless body of all they could [...] like a swarm of hungry careless safari ants?" (119) Three years later, her son dies bitten by a poisonous snake while he was milking it.

The view of an Africa “where everything was still practically unknown” (17) harks back to a similar remark recorded by the renowned psychiatrist Carl Jung during his first visit to Kenya in 1925<sup>8</sup>. His attitude appears to fall in line with Gallmann’s and that of many other Europeans who justified their desire to journey to Africa in terms of returning to one’s origins and the source of human life:

I was enchanted by this sight – it was a picture of something utterly alien and outside my experience, but on the other hand a most intense *sentiment du déjà vu*. I had the feeling that I had already experienced this moment and had always known this world which was separated from me only by distance in time. It was as if I were this moment returning to the land of my youth, and as if I knew that dark-skinned man who had been waiting for me for five thousand years. [...] I knew only that this world had been mine for countless millennia. (Jung, 1961:284)

How strongly this parallels Gallmann’s declaration:

I was overcome by the beauty and amplitude of the land, but even more by the uncanny feeling of *déjà vu*. The profile of the hills seemed inexplicably familiar, as if I had already been there. I felt as if I had walked before down those gorges and known the hidden paths. It was more than I could have dreamed, yet it was, at the same time, exactly what I had dreamed. (57)

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<sup>8</sup> See: C.G. Jung., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London, Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1961.

Jung's reflections become even more relevant in relation to the Gallmann work as he expounds on what he believes to be the significance of his experience:

This was the stillness of the eternal beginning, the world as it had always been, in the state of non-being; for until then no-one had been present to know that it was this world. I walked away from my companions until I had put them out of sight, and savoured the feeling of being entirely alone. There I was now, the first human being to recognize that this was the world, but who did not know that in this moment *he had first really created it*. (Jung, 1961:284, my emphasis)

This passage not only undermines and blots out the existence and perception of the indigenous people, it also regards the western eye to be the only reliable source of knowledge. Although the African people have walked these paths for millennia, western man's coming seems to legitimise this land's existence. Before that it existed as if in a state of limbo until the white man fortuitously discovered it, claimed it and defined it. In the space of approximately 50 years between Jung's arrival in Kenya and that of Gallmann, ideologically nothing seems to have changed. Gallmann's coming to the continent carries echoes of the colonial paradigm: Africa is there to be enjoyed by Western man along with all its bounty and therefore needs to be preserved in its pristine primordial state:

... thick impenetrable bush, [...] luxuriant untouched cedar forest [...]. Blue hills and groves of acacia; open savannah dotted with trees; unending views of craters and volcanoes made purple and pink by the heat and the distance [...]. Africa was there below us in all its unsolved mystery. 'Yes', – I turned to Paolo – 'I

think we have arrived'. Here in Laikipia our African story could begin. (57)

She pays homage to the British colonial explorer who over eighty years before had 'discovered' Laikipia, the area where they acquire Ol Ari Nyiro, a ranch comprising of '400 square kilometres' (or almost 100,000 acres) of land:

It was here that, at the end of the last century, Lord Delamere, a young English aristocrat and a gallant explorer, had emerged after trekking for months through the dusty and thorny savannah of Ethiopia and Somalia. The place, teeming with wildlife, green with pastures, rolling hills, rivers and springs, appeared as a mirage to a weary traveller. Its potential as agricultural land was not lost on Delamere. Back in England, he obtained a concession to farm it, and this was the beginning of the celebrated White Highlands of British colonial East Africa. (55)

The neo-colonial mindset in *I Dreamed of Africa* is inadvertently juxtaposed with the legitimate claim and love for his land of a local chief. He is a knowledgeable man who has travelled extensively and has been exposed to a number of cultures. For him there is no sense in wanting to belong anywhere else other than where his roots are:

[...] he told us he had been at sea for many years, working in freighters, and had visited many harbours in Europe, and the Middle and Far East. He spoke a little of many languages. He had seen more than any of his fellow villagers could hope to in a lifetime, until he became blind. I asked him if he ever missed the wider horizons and freedom of the cosmopolitan contacts to which he had been accustomed. [...] 'I have all this', he said solemnly. 'This is my home and these are my

children. What else should I want? I have seen the world, travelled to strange countries. Now that my eyes are blind and I can see no longer, I can still remember; and where could I remember better than here, sitting under this tree, in the village where I was born?' (50-51)

He might legitimately have asked who gave her, "a child of Italy" (3), the right to lord it over his land and claim it as her birthright. Had he had access to her books he could have thought much along the same lines as what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o said of Karen Blixen's autobiographical text:

*Out of Africa* is one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa, precisely because this Danish writer was obviously gifted with words and dreams. The racism in the book is catching, because it is persuasively put forward as love. (Thiong'o, 1993:133)<sup>9</sup>

Gallmann's attitude to the people of the land is equally patronising, her inadvertent racism equally subtle and her portrayal of Kenya, first as a hunter's Paradise, then as an unspoilt Eden that must at all costs be preserved, equally misleading.

### **The great white mother and the hunter**

Kuki re-shapes her existence to accommodate her African surroundings, while managing to retain her Eurocentric visions of Africa. She needed to embrace Africa and assume the nurturing and ministering role played by other affluent European women before her,

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<sup>9</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Her Cook, her Dog, Karen Blixen's Africa" in *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, London: James Currey, 1993:132-135.

because of her estrangement from Italy and her former life, which she recalls almost with nostalgia in the prologue:

The world of crowds and Europe is far and alien. Does Venice really exist, and [does] the evening fog from sleepy canals drift over the ancient palaces? Do the swallows still dart to their nests under the eaves of my grandfather's abandoned home in Veneto? (xvii)

On leaving Italy, the Gallmanns not only leave their past behind, they look forward to creating an empire of their own. The vocabulary and metaphors employed by Kuki seem to allude to sovereignty over the territory and its people. Kuki declares that she and Paolo were not coming to Africa "to seek our fortune"; they were choosing "a way of life" that would allow for "a glorious and joyous adventure" (35). They arrived in Kenya in the early 1970s when

[i]t was the time of big-game hunting, before the pressure of poaching and the destruction of the environment had made this sport anachronistic and, eventually, forbidden; still the time of the famous white hunters, of the grand camping safaris not very different from the ones celebrated by Hemingway. (35-36)

While Paolo was alive she condoned his "fatal love of risk" (56) and his passion for hunting. She even narrates how she participated in an exhilarating hunting safari:

I remember every detail of that first buffalo hunt. It was my first encounter with that unknown side of Africa: tracking for hours in the sun, [...] in total silence, careful not to step on twigs, ears alert to any noise, the hot smell of aromatic sage, dung and resin in

my nostrils, mouth dry, heart pounding, eyes darting around to check any shadow, following the agile little African tracker, trying to repeat every movement he made ... looking for a drop of blood on a tread of grass, the dogs running ahead, nose on the spoor, panting [...]. The noise [of the guns] shattered the lazy midday insects and silenced the cicadas and the birds. [...] The buffalo had dropped dead a few feet from us. It lay black and massive, a darkening pool of oozing blood soaking the stubby grass. The dogs cautiously snuffing it. Bluebottle flies were already buzzing around the foaming mouth, the round bullet holes, the open opaque eyes, searching moisture. [...] I learnt that day that one cannot be certain that a buffalo is dead until he fails to react to a stone in the eye. This one did not move, and we approached. (60-61)

The episode regarding the first elephant bull that Paolo shoots is, however, so abhorrent to Kuki that she is at first repulsed. Despite this initial reaction, she later finds justification for the act: “In the dark of the night, just before sleep, I remembered that an elephant had killed his brother” (65). She thinks that Paolo may have needed to even the score, then she goes on to offer a further excuse for her husband’s seemingly callous behaviour:

*Had he known* what we now know about elephants, their sensitivity and their gentleness, their family patterns and loyalty, and most of all their uncanny intelligence, *I have no doubt* that Paolo would never have gone for that elephant. But he was a hunter and those were different days. (62, my emphasis).

According to Kuki, Paolo acted out of ignorance, but what inclines him and others of his privileged class to hunt is the distinct feeling of ownership. Africa and its animals become possessions. Kuki initially

does not see any similarity between the hunter for pleasure and trophies and the poacher who hunt animals for monetary gain. A poacher is by Kuki's definition a dark-skinned barbarian who cannot love an animal because he lacks knowledge about it. Paolo too seemingly lacks knowledge, but he is described as a skilled huntsman acting out of consideration for the land that requires the culling of surplus older animals:

Although [...] I could not share his passion for hunting, I always respected – and sometimes admired – Paolo's way of doing it. His was the ancient and refined wisdom of the warrior. Paolo was not a killer. He was a hunter in the best sense of the word, and *I have no doubt* that his passion for hunting would have logically evolved one day into pure conservationism. (56)

Kuki's desire to excuse her husband and her indulgent attitude to her husband's recreational hunting are not in keeping with the militant conservationist she purports to be, but they illustrate that intimate relationships are stronger than ideological convictions.

She initially describes the Africans of Kenya the same way as they are depicted in her friend Mirella Ricciardi's photographic essay, *Vanishing Africa*: "a people still living in the past, and their traditional culture" (22). Further on she adds:

now in the times we call modern [...] life has changed for the worse for the free pastoral African people. They have been given seeds of alien plants to sow in the virgin forests and of alien beliefs to confuse the innocence of their minds. [...] Their culture endangered, their minds filled with notions and rules they do not need and cannot understand, the new generation is forgetting what allowed their immediate



ancestors to survive and thrive in unspoilt surroundings. (163-164)

She does not say that the white man is largely responsible for having changed the landscape and for dispossessing the Africans of the land that once sustained them. She does not see the human faces of those whose misery, poverty and degradation have long been exploited. According to her way of reasoning, progress coming to the black man means altering the status quo which permits Europeans to view indigenous people as part of the fauna and part of the natural animal landscape.

Although the author asserts that her family sets out to assimilate African values and traditions, for which she professes extreme respect, their lifestyle remains distinctly European and somewhat exploitative:

As everywhere in Africa there were people in abundance to help us, but they had to be trained [...] Instinctively I knew how to teach the staff, and people willing to help were easy to find, but what was needed to reach the standards I had set was eagerness, intelligence and a capacity to learn a totally foreign approach to cooking and housekeeping. (75-76)

Kuki appears as teacher and virtual tamer of the noble savage, employing the likes of Simon because he is prepared to adapt to western concepts of civilization: "I can teach you. If you want to learn, you can learn anything." Simon, the son of a chief, was eager to learn thus he became the Gallman's cook (76).

In this newfound role, Kuki is able to grow, but not to outgrow her colonial mindset:

I considered the future of Africa with its growing population of people, children of today in whose hands the destiny of Kenya will soon lie. Children brought

up on the outskirts of towns, where nothing wild had been left, their minds confused and polluted by alien religions, by poverty and lack of worthy goals. These children had never seen and been taught to appreciate the beauty of their country. The average urban African has never seen an elephant; how could *these people* make a policy which would enable them to protect the environment and at the same time ensure their survival? Was all the wilderness destined to disappear through lack of knowledge and planning? I certainly could not change everything, but *I could not tolerate the thought of this happening to Ol Ari Nyiro*. The only solution was education. (251, my emphasis)

Adjacent game ranches and farms had reverted back to the local population and, if she could help it, this was not going to happen to her estate. It is the need to safeguard 'her' land and 'her' animals that draws her to the sphere of conservation and environmental education<sup>10</sup>.

She has a credible love for Kenya's wildlife, but she also uses it to guarantee her future on the land and gain the respect of the local community and of government officials whose politics she does not question. However, she gives the impression that the fate of wild animals hinges on her magnanimity:

I wanted to protect it because of Paolo, because of Emanuele and because of my own self-respect. Because all around us I could see what would happen if I let go. Across the hill of Engelesha, Colobus farm was being chopped up into small *shambas* where wildlife had no place. [...] The idea of selling that beauty for money not only appeared to me ugly and

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<sup>10</sup> The Gallmann Memorial Foundation runs a Biodiversity Centre for the study of management and conservation strategies as well as the Laikipia Wilderness Education Centre where more than 1,000 principally African children a year come to observe and learn about wildlife.

pointlessly greedy. It would be an act of cowardice which would show that the privilege of being there was wasted on me. More than anything, I wanted to prove that I deserved my guardianship. [...] I had to be actively involved in protecting it. Special privileges come at a price and this was my inheritance [...] I learnt to talk business and to cope with those alien things which are balance sheets and legal or financial language. Mostly, I learnt to take decisions which could affect many people and have far-reaching results without relying on Paolo's judgement and experienced help. [...] However much it cost, I was determined to succeed. (146-148).

One has sympathy for Kuki's plight and admiration for her courage to take on this daunting task single-handedly, but this is also a shrewd move to retain her possessions in Africa and, indirectly, a death wish for African aspirations. She does not recognise local people's need and desire to own land and provide for themselves on a sustainable basis. She does not balance the needs and aspirations of indigenous people with the need for conservation, but rather wants to maintain unchanged "the magic of the landscape of Africa" (228) and preserve for those who can appreciate them the sights, the sounds and the scents of this Garden of Eden<sup>11</sup>.

The deaths of Paolo and Emanuele were a source of trauma for the author, yet despite this, in the spirit of a true heroine, she chooses to give meaning to their deaths by persevering and preserving what they loved:

The challenges were enormous and more difficult than  
I had ever imagined, solitude was beginning to

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<sup>11</sup> In subsequent years Kuki Gallmann also established the luxurious Mukutan Retreat (a luxurious game lodge) for discerning visitors to Kenya.

become a burden to me, and my friends and my small child could not really fill it. These were the toughest years of my life, but as I had decided to stay and make a success of it, I cried my tears unseen in the night, and during the day I got on with the job. (152)

Kuki, strengthened by her misfortunes<sup>12</sup>, decides to stay in Africa where she can make a difference<sup>13</sup> and continue to enjoy recognition in a society where she has the freedom and the means to reconstruct herself almost as a *messianic* entity.

### **Constructing the ‘I’**

The theme of birth and re-birth is significant in light of the fact that the persona Kuki shapes for herself is re-made several times over:-

Once you return to the surface you are as new, you have grown and left down there your old self like a discarded and useless cocoon and you have discovered that you can fly. In Ema's death I had found the key to solve the riddle. Only in changing my attitude to it, and in giving my life a new purpose, could I balance the waste and make sense. (229)

In trying to present herself as a woman of admirable exploits, Kuki nevertheless unveils a deeply insecure individual behind the mask. She

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<sup>12</sup> “While we do not choose our tragedies, our losses or our defeats, it is up to us to make a choice to get over them.” (Gallmann in an interview with Mick Brown, ‘Bury my heart in Kenya’, <http://www.suntimes.co.za/1999/04/18/lifestyle/life04.htm>).

<sup>13</sup> When asked why she chose to remain in Africa after the death of her husband and son, Gallmann replied: “Perché è un luogo dove uno può fare una differenza. Lo scopo di ognuno di noi è di trovare un posto del genere e io l’ho trovato in Africa.” (<http://www.dapone.com/culture3.htm>).

finds her identity by assuming a mask which is an expression of her deepest longings. It enables her to view life from a distance and see how everything fits into a pattern. While writing of her loss, Kuki sees the symbolism behind the events of her life.

Pascal writes of those who engage in writing an autobiography:

Even if what they tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it is always true evidence of their personality. (1960: 1)

Some theorists argue that autobiographers write not to tell us about themselves but to conceal certain truths. Gallmann's unrelenting inclination towards giving justifications places their authenticity in doubt. The start of the book is encouragingly 'honest' as it tells about the young, impressionable child and crippled woman's motives for embarking on this journey. But it starts perpetuating myths once life in Africa begins. Gallmann projects herself as a figure that is a tribute to the endurance of the human spirit. She claims Africa demanded its price, but fails to see that her demands could have had unintentional results, or that her consuming thirst for recognition may ultimately have determined the course of events. After her double loss, her desire for affirmation takes the form of a new cause. Despite her sufferings, her stubborn belief that she can find inner peace and growth in Africa alternates between being sublime and selfish<sup>14</sup>. In the book she never falters, never questions her motives.

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<sup>14</sup> This opinion is shared by F. L. Carr, the film critic, who goes on to say: "The search for peace costs her family dearly [...] her tenacity and determination [imply] that these qualities lead to personal development. However, we question the toll her 'growth' takes on those around." (<http://popmatters.com/film/reviews/i/i-dreamed-of-africa.html>)

Kuki Gallmann is a woman who has actually achieved a great deal by sheer force of will, devotion to the memory of her loved ones, respect for wild animals and the ability to cultivate useful contacts. But the ‘I’ she constructs for herself is too lyrical, too philosophical, too self-assured to ring true. The book never satisfactorily explains why Kuki finds it necessary to uproot herself and her seven year old son. She must have had compelling reasons, but it is left up to the reader to deduce them. This wealthy, educated woman leaves a comfortable, pampered, city life for life on the fringes of civilization, yet in the book she never deals with problems of adaptation. She has a seemingly ideal second marriage, a wonderful relationship with her son, and two successful intimate relationships after Paolo’s death. Apart from the sentimental expression of sorrow through the poems and songs she quotes, she never seems to experience any inner tension or existential turmoil. In the course of her writing, therefore, she conceals more than she reveals. It is the prerogative of the autobiographer to be selective, but one wonders who the real person behind the name is and what she is really like?<sup>15</sup> One may also ask, why does she choose to conceal her original identity? She tells her readers how she acquired her nickname<sup>16</sup>, but never who her parents are, only what they do<sup>17</sup>. She recounts that, before coming to Africa, she burnt her diaries ‘as if on a ceremonial pyre’. (30) This suggests that she wanted to discard part of

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<sup>15</sup> Two different sources identify her as either Emma Boccazzi, born and raised in Treviso (according to Nicoletta Antonello, a missionary worker in Kenya, <http://www.saintmartin-kenya.org/Sognavo.htm>) or Maria Boccazzi, who lived in the Veneto region (as per an anonymous film critic who researched some curious facts about the film version of *I Dreamed of Africa*, [web.tiscali.it/contux/sognandoafrica](http://web.tiscali.it/contux/sognandoafrica)).

<sup>16</sup> “I owe my nickname of ‘Cookie’” to an Englishman, a prisoner of war, “whose real name was Roworth”, and who came home from war one day with her father (5).

<sup>17</sup> Kuki’s father is a doctor and traveler who explored the Sahara desert, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan, had a passion for archeology and became the author of a number of well known books. Various sources confirm that he is Cino Boccazzi. Her mother is never identified, but Kuki tells us she is a university lecturer, an art historian and museum curator.

her identity and prior history. She seemingly exists without a traceable, chronological past, as she reveals only aspects that are in keeping with her future she aspired to.

What more could I wish for? They had come to greet me in my home in the heart of Africa. I had become a figure in their life, as they had in mine. These wild Pokot warriors stood among my flower-beds, under the trees I had planted and seen growing, to honour me, a girl of Veneto, whose name they knew, accepting me as one of them. My childhood visions were realized beyond hope. (309)

### **Conclusion**

*I Dreamed of Africa* is a hauntingly vivid reminiscence of the Africa that once was, or may have been, and of the successful realisation of the self, which perhaps is better received when read as fiction rather than autobiography. It is too laden with myth to convey a sense of the reality of that period (1970-1990) in Africa's history. The myth begins with the belief that one can present an objective picture of the self in its totality and an unbiased picture of Africa without confronting past colonial wounds, contemporary mismanaged and current economic forces.

As an autobiographer Kuki Gallmann proves that one experiences or has knowledge of oneself and others only subjectively, as Roland Barthes would attest<sup>18</sup>. The self in the text transcends its materiality and becomes an emblem of the person she wants to be or be seen as. It

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<sup>18</sup> See R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, (translated by Richard Howard, London, Macmillan, 1977): "... we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is *never the last word*: the more 'sincere' I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed that they could submit themselves to but one law: *authenticity*." (120)

becomes a metaphor of the real as well as an interpretation of the living person<sup>19</sup>. In the words of Leigh Gilmore, the self that writes represents the real “through the claims of contiguity”<sup>20</sup>, thus the writing ‘I’ and the written ‘I’ come to stand for each other in the perception of others. The reader who identifies the subject of *I Dreamed of Africa* with the living Kuki Gallman realises that (s)he knows more about the person behind the pen from what she unconsciously reveals than from what she consciously discloses. Any form of autobiography is a monument to the self it constructs and who constructs it, as a result of the ‘natural’ impulse one has to give order to things. It is “essentially a way of knowing” (Olney, 1972:31) and of legitimising one’s actions and choices. As the self is the shaping agent of representation, “autobiography is merely and magnificently the literary reflection of the realized self” (Gilmore, 1994:74). In this way *I Dreamed of Africa*, written from the heart, and grounded in real life, is a beautiful and successful reinvention of the self designed to inspire its readers.

(University of the Witwatersrand)

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<sup>19</sup> J. Olney, *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1972.

<sup>20</sup> L. Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women Self-representation*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1994:67.