

An exploration of the portrayal of the girl-child in Erna Muller's novels *It all goes wrong* and *When you dance with the crocodile*

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the portrayal of the girl-child by Erna Muller in *It all goes wrong* (2014) and *When you dance with the crocodile* (2014). The two novels were selected using purposive sampling as they primarily characterise girl-children as protagonists. The researchers employed the African feminist literary theory as argued by Chukwuma (2006) in this study. The African feminist literary theory was used to study how the girl-child is portrayed in a patriarchal world. Content analysis was used to examine the depiction of the girl-child in the two novels. The study revealed that in both novels the girl-characters make independent decisions and act on them, while other characters such as adults and boys play secondary roles. The study found that Erna Muller portrays the girl-child as innocent, open minded, caring, adventurous, assertive, compassionate and brave. All in all, it can be concluded that Muller uses the two novels to empower the girl-child.

Introduction

Various studies have been carried out in the field of literature where different sectors of society have been analysed. These studies include the portrayal of children in literature. Some of the studies have sought to understand the notion of childhood in literature. According to Georgieva (2010 p. 2), "one of the most important conclusions these studies have drawn is that our notions of childhood have changed." These changes can be reflected in literature through characterisation and other aspects of the text. The characterisation of the girl-child in literature can either reflect the stereotypical views of girls as a weaker sex held by some sectors of society, or can help empower them by portraying them as independent beings, free from prejudices. To illustrate this point, this study explored how Erna Muller, a Namibian writer of children's books, portrays girls in the following novels: *It all goes wrong* (2014) and *When you dance with the crocodile* (2012). According to Pasi (2012, p. 182), "children's literature represents an important resource of understanding the needs, wishes and aspirations of young people." This means that studying how children are depicted provides a gateway to this understanding. In this case, the study seeks to understand how the awareness of the needs, wishes and aspirations of the girl-child can inform the portrayal of the girl-child in Muller's novels. Since literature can be regarded as a mirror in which human existence can be viewed, children's literature in Namibia can be seen as a record of changes in children's social and cultural lives as well as how these changes over the years have impacted upon the children in general and the girl-child in particular. The study has examined Muller's representation of the two girl-characters as protagonists, as well as the other girls depicted in the novels.

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Innocence naivety and the girl-child

In the struggle to overcome various obstacles, Amy is portrayed by Muller initially as an innocent girl in *It all goes wrong*. Amy does not inhibit any thoughts of evil. Her reasons for resisting the relocation to Windhoek are merely based on her unwillingness to leave behind her school, her friend, Lea, and her dog, Coco. Muller depicts Amy as innocent by showing the trusting and unsuspecting part of her character. This portrayal can be linked to how Chitando (2008) considers innocence as part of the notion of childhood in her definition of childhood.

The espousal of innocence in Amy's character can also be seen in her unsuspecting attitude towards the newspaper reports her father reads about the disappearance of girls in Namibia. She does not pay attention because her world is only made up of friendship and loyalty at this moment. She refuses to be drawn into the drill on how to respond to strangers. Muller shows us that in the world of Amy, evil acts such as the kidnapping of children do not feature and that girl-children are seemingly virtuous as they value positive attributes such as friendship only. They do not harbour negative motives.

Like Amy, Helena does not see danger in the adventure she is about to embark on. All she cares about is the girl in the trap. The game is labelled as dangerous, and she somehow understands that the game will transport her through time and space to a different world. However, Helena refuses to see the dangerous part thereof. All she can feel is the urge to help. It also turns out that she does not have a clear strategy on how to execute this plan. She deals with the situation as it comes. Muller brings out this lack of planning and unpreparedness to underscore the element of innocence and naivety in the character of the girl-child, Helena.

In *It all goes wrong*, Muller shows the reader Amy's innocence by portraying her as a trusting and unsuspecting girl. Since Amy is depicted as very close to her father, she trusts him and is dutiful towards him. For instance, she keeps secrets for him as is the case with the message from Morgan. Amy is amused by her father's description of Morgan and believes whatever he tells her about the identity of Morgan. Such a trusting relationship is deemed necessary by Mangena (2011), who maintains that children have a right to enter relationships with adults with trust. Compared to relationships where girls are denied access to education as in the case of Marita in Alumenda's *Marita goes to school* (Chitando, 2008) and the forced circumcision and forced marriage of Taiyo and Resian in Kuret's *Blossoms of the savannahs* (Muriungu & Muriiki, 2013), Amy has the privilege of not being hurt by her father, although he takes advantage of her innocence. Helena on the other hand enjoys a very healthy relationship with her father, who supports her even when she has gone against his warning against playing dangerous computer games.

Moreover, one can see through Muller's portrayal many cases where children's innocence is betrayed by those they trust. Muller's portrayal of Amy's obliviousness towards her father demonstrates the abuse of children's innocence by adults. Although the betrayal of innocence and trust is not physical, it may be likened to what Muponde (2007) refers to when he analyses the suffering that befalls Zhizha and her mother when her father mysteriously dies after raping her sister in *Under the tongue*, by Yvonne Vera (1996). Muller shows the reader how adults, men in particular, take advantage of the innocence and trust of girls. Muller seems to be cautioning society against the tendencies of men to deceive the girl-child. Although these tendencies do not constitute physical harm, they are psychologically detrimental to the well-being of the girl-child.

Although somewhat suspicious, Amy is led on by the ice cream couple due to her innocence. This depiction by Muller underscores Amy's innocence as her concept of strangers

is somehow crowded by the ice cream man's instant closeness to her father and Tanja's role at the van. Amy enjoys the compliments that the ice cream man showers her with. She admits that she enjoys being complimented by somebody other than her parents. It is on this innocence that the ice cream man preys in order to get Amy closer.

Even when Tanja is unreachable on her phone, Muller still portrays Amy as innocent enough not to question the intentions of the ice cream couple. The element where girls are deceived by other characters can also be seen in *The orange thieves* (Dahal, 1969) where Muthoni is deceived by her four friends to pick oranges with her eyes closed while they have theirs open (Muraya & Muriungu, 2014). Upon realising that she has picked raw oranges, Muthoni returns to pick ripe ones and she is captured by the giant who owns the farm. Unlike in *The Orange thieves* Muller uses adults such as the ice cream couple to depict how innocent girls can be taken advantage of by evil-minded adults without them suspecting any harm.

Muller brings out the issue of innocence and trust in *When you dance with the crocodile* by portraying the trust that Helena has in the slave traders when she asks them to help Ruth out of the trap. She comes from a loving and caring family that has made her the centre of attention since the passing of her mother. In her world, it is beyond imagination that people could be trapped in snares like animals. She leads slave traders to where Ruth was trapped, hoping that they would help her in her quest to rescue Ruth. Ironically, the slave traders add her to the number of slaves they have captured so far. Muller portrays Helena in a manner that she does not have any suspicions about the strange men. Instead, she trustingly asks for their help without observing their nature first. She remains oblivious to the men's true nature until Ruth tells her.

Caregiving as an attribute of the girl-child

It is characteristic of girls' depiction in literature to be portrayed as care givers. In *The orange thieves* (Muraya & Muriungu, 2014), Muthoni hides and cares for the little boys that were brought home by the giant. Equally, in *The bundle of firewood* by Kangira (Pasi, 2012) it is evident that Tariro's caring nature compels her to protect the pangolin by all means. She braves the night just to keep the pangolin from her grandmother who wants to kill it. Muller does not fall short in bringing out this characteristic of the girl-child in *It all goes wrong* either.

Muller depicts Amy throughout the novel as caring and concerned about the wellbeing of others. From the onset Amy is presented as a person who cares about others, including her pet, Coco. She insists that they should take Coco on the plane, when her family leaves Cape Town. Amy is seen warning Coco to behave or he may be taken to the SPCA by Lea's father. This is a sign of how caring Amy is. Muller shows that if Amy can care that much for an animal, then she can be more caring as far as human beings are concerned.

Moreover, Muller portrays Amy as caring as it can be seen in Amy's concern over her parents' divorce. Muller presents a worried Amy, who is afraid of the storm. The storm is the motif that Muller uses to refer to the inevitable divorce of Amy's parents. She wishes that it does not happen because she cares about both of her parents. By contrasting Amy's preoccupation with Jacob's indifference, Muller wants to convince the reader that the girl-child is more caring than the boy-child. This is climaxed by the incident in which Muller describes the quarrel between Amy's parents from Amy's point of view. The effect of the resolution by her to separate is devastating for her.

Furthermore, Muller uses the relationship between Amy and her father to demonstrate Amy's caring nature. Amy is always concerned about whether her father is happy about

the relocation to Windhoek. For instance, she is concerned about her father's blank stares into the wall, which she interprets as an expression of his unhappiness with the relocation. Muller uses the description of the emptiness in Amy when her father returns to Cape Town for good to show her caring nature. Interestingly, Muller does not let us into her father's mind so that we can see if he too feels that emptiness. With the absence of this insight, we are led by the author to believe that the girl-child cares more about her father than the way her father cares about her. Moreover, Muller uses Marlee-Chante's confrontation of Amy's father to confirm his lack of care as Marlee-Chante concludes that he does not go out of his way for Amy.

Muller also uses self-blame to illustrate that Amy cared about her parents' marriage. Because Amy wants to see her parents together, she considers herself as the cause of their separation. Self-blame can be seen as an attempt to correct the situation by attributing the cause to oneself and then try to work on changing those aspects of oneself one considers as the cause of the problem. By portraying Amy in this way, Muller demonstrates Amy's determination to solve her parents' problems just because she cares. In the novel, Amy blames her mousy hair and her poor performance in history for her parents' divorce.

Muller goes on to show the reader through her portrayal of Amy's mother's devastation after the separation that Amy is caring. She portrays Amy as the caregiver in the house. She portrays her concern over her mother's condition and her having to literally take care of her younger brother, Jacob in the place of her mother. However, the fact she has to take over an adult's role constitutes what Ngoshi (2010) refers to as the erasure of girlhood in her analysis of the absence of girlhood in selected novels by Zimbabwean writers. Instead of enjoying her girlhood innocence and the playful nature associated with girlhood, Amy is 'graduated' into a semi adult who has to take care of the whole household.

In *When you dance with the crocodile*, the plot also revolves around the urge for the girl-child to care for others. Helena cannot stand seeing another girl hungry, thirsty and trapped for days without any help. She takes it upon herself to provide that help because she cares. There is no relationship of any sort between her and Ruth (the trapped girl). Helena is perfectly comfortable with her life, but she has the burning desire to get out of her comfort zone and face danger just out of care and concern. Her caring nature can be further observed through the displeasure that Helena exhibits when child-captives are punished, starved and kept thirsty. We can also observe Helena's caring nature through her refusal to be released without Ruth and the sacrifice she makes to rescue Maddy.

Open mindedness and independence of thought in the girl-child

Throughout the novel, Amy is presented to the reader as a person who does not jump to conclusions. Muller deliberately withholds all the information that Amy needs to make her judgements until the very end. She is made not to rush into conclusions about people before she has her facts right. In other words, all those that are involved with her, are given a fair chance to prove themselves worthy of her trust.

Muller makes Amy disregard all she was taught about strangers to show the reader how open minded Amy is. She portrays Amy without any prejudices about strangers. Although suspicious, Amy still gives the ice cream couple the benefit of the doubt. Like Tariro in Kangira's *The bundle of firewood* (Pasi, 2012), who chooses to save the pangolin despite her grandmother's superstitious beliefs, Amy disregards the advice of adults with regard to her dealings with strangers. Equally, she refuses to be swayed into postponing her trip to visit her father by the ice cream couple. Her mother also fails to wield her influence on her with regard to her much anticipated visit to Cape Town. Muller also portrays Amy as a person who is able to withhold or release information depending on the need. For

example, she keeps the ice cream flavour tasting a secret from adults both at Long Beach and in Windhoek until the time when such information becomes the missing puzzle in the disappearance of Samantha.

As for the problems in her parents' marriage, Amy is portrayed as determined to get all the facts about the problems on her own. She disregards her mother's opinions about her going to Cape Town. Muller uses the journey to Cape Town as an introspective journey. She makes use of this journey to open up a new world for Amy. It is in this journey that Amy finds evidence to piece up a puzzle in her parents' marriage.

Muller presents Amy as being critical of the information that she gets. For instance, Amy hangs on to the information that her father gave her about Morgan until she verifies it. Nevertheless, Amy still gives her father the benefit of doubt and does not lose any respect for him even when it is revealed that he lied. Equally, when Amy finds out about Morgan, she remains calm. Rather, she probes more about Morgan and her father's relationship. Although Morgan and her father are to blame for her parents' breakup, Amy still finds some positive elements in Morgan. As a girl, she is made to be continuously inquisitive by the author in the novel.

Muller's portrayal of Amy as open minded and as an independent thinker can be traced in her narration of the new found reality in Cape Town. Muller creates a situation where Amy has to revisit her desire to relocate back to Cape Town with her father. She is made to evaluate her friendship with Lea and Coco. Muller presents the reader with a scenario where Amy's expectations are not met by her father, Lea and Coco. According to Amy, she wants to live with her father only, which has become impossible as her father lives with Morgan and Marlee-Chante in Morgan's house. Similarly, Amy observes that Lea has other friends she is now closer to and Coco is more loyal to Lea than he is to her. Based on this observation, Amy decides to move on with her life with her mother and Jacob who have only her.

Muller lets the reader into Helena's mind in terms of her views on the dangers of computer games. Helena is presented to the reader as holding a divergent view from that of her father with regard to this subject. She maintains that games do not pose danger to children and argues that the notion that computer games posed a danger to children is just a creation of the adult mind. She does not see any justification why her father is worried about the dangers of computer games. In a similar way, Helena is portrayed as someone who has a mind of her own on family issues. For instance, she values spending time with her father; therefore, she tells Meme Olivia that her father is very tired and already sleeping when she only wanted to spend time with him. The independent nature of her thoughts has parallels with the portrayal of Marita by Alumenda when she secretly decides to get some education despite her father's refusal (Chitando, 2008). In Alumenda's story, Marita's independence becomes handy when she reads a letter containing sad news to her father, much to the surprise of her father who has denied her education, preferring to send his son to school.

Helena makes a decision to carry out a dangerous mission when she thinks that it was a simple task of getting to the scene, rescue the girl and return to modernity and civilisation. To the contrary, this decision leads her into deeper trouble. When Helena fails to rescue Ruth from her first position, she tries to look for other alternatives. One alternative that presents itself is asking for help from the men she meets around the corner. When the men turn out to be slave traders, Helena does not give up. Although she seems to co-operate with them, she continues to seek other ways to rescue Ruth and herself. She evaluates different possibilities of escaping until she finds one. She is not totally consumed by the unbearable suffering she finds herself in, but she is steadfast and on alert for a possible escape route. Because of Helena's open mindedness, her wrist watch, which is a gift from

her late mother, does not remain a possession of sentimental value only. She sees it as a bargaining power tool when she observes how much the youngest of the slave traders needs it. She uses it as a bait to entice him to release her and Ruth during the night while the older men sleep. She shows her independence in the process where the young man makes a counter offer by excluding Ruth in the deal and threatens her with a knife. Muller emphasises Helena's composure in her dealings with the young slave trader until she attained her goal.

A similar resolve is shown by the author when Helena encounters Zakes. Despite Zakes' attempts to break Helena's spirit, she is determined to find a way to escape. The author depicts Helena as determined to be in opposition with Zakes' motives, even after punishing her and revealing that he is aware of the fact that she devised the escape plan that failed. Helena did not condone violence; therefore, she could not sit and watch Maddy being violated by Zakes. She also analyses Zakes' sudden fondness of Ruth and interprets it as having a potential to lead to the sexual violation of Ruth by Zakes, and she acts promptly to escape in order to avoid this eventuality.

Dependability and reliability in the girl-child

Muller portrays Amy as reliable and dependable. To illustrate this point, Muller entrusts Amy with secrets and a sense of duty towards other characters. She keeps secrets for her father and the ice cream couple. Moreover, she is there when her mother, Jacob and Samantha and Samantha's mother need her.

To show how dependable Amy is, Muller portrays her as her father's confidante. Her father knows that his secrets are safe with her if they agree that they are to be kept secret from her mother. For instance, when Amy finds Morgan's message, her father asks her to keep it a secret lest her mother will be worried. He also requests her not to tell her mother that he said moving to Windhoek was her idea. It is ironic that Amy keeps these "believable lies" as a secret for her father, but this can be interpreted from another angle to imply that the author wants to demonstrate to the reader how trustworthy the girl-child can be.

On the part of the ice cream couple, it is quite clear that Amy keeps her dealings with them strictly confidential. From the time she accepts the rationale of using children to taste ice cream flavours secretly as a way of preventing theft of their recipes, Amy has always respected that. Although she is curious, she does not share this information with any adult until the time it was needed to save her friend, Samantha.

When Amy's parents break up, she helps her mother go through a difficult time. Although affected by the divorce too, she picks herself up to support her mother. She helps with the cleaning up in the house when her mother cannot do it. For instance, she fetches Jacob from his friend, gives him food and puts him to sleep. Muller depicts Amy literally taking care of her mother and Jacob as she gives her mother food immediately after putting Jacob to sleep. Amy is not only physically dependable, but emotionally dependable too. Muller demonstrates this by portraying Amy kissing her mother through the car window to make her feel loved when she drops them at school. This happens during the time she was feeling down. She also engages her in conversations in order to make her feel better and compliments her on her new hairstyle. Muller uses Amy's mother to show the reader that girl-children can provide the necessary support when the need arises.

Amy is portrayed as dependable as she abandons her visit to Cape Town to come and help find Samantha. Samantha's mother and Amy's mother depend on the information that Amy has to find Samantha. The detective cannot arrest the ice cream couple unless Amy identifies them. Like Tambudzai in *Tambudzai anoona nyoka huru* by Alumenda (1999),

who had valuable information to convict the old witch (Kangira, 2009), Amy has valuable information to convict the ice cream couple. There are parallels between the importance of these girls to their immediate community as they hold a solution to a social puzzle involving life and death. Her prompt return to Windhoek demonstrates that Amy is dependable and reliable as she does not forsake her friend Samantha when she needs her most.

In *When you dance with the crocodile* Muller demonstrates how dependable and reliable the girl-child is by entrusting Helena with a responsibility towards others. While using the modalities of a computer game, Muller closes all possible doors for outside help and makes everything to depend on Helena. Throughout the trying times, Helena does not abandon her responsibilities. She refuses to leave without Ruth when she is offered to escape alone in exchange of the wrist watch. Muller also presents a helpless Maddy benefiting from the dependable nature of Helena when she saves her from the suffering that Zakes subjects her to.

It also turns out that Sam (Helena's brother who tries to follow her and ends up in a different place) depends on her. According to the modalities of the computer game, Helena must complete her huddles and then find Sam so that they can wait for the wormhole to transport them back to Windhoek. Only Helena can salvage hers and her brother's return, otherwise her father will lose both his children. By placing so much importance and responsibility on Helena, Muller seems to want to prove to the reader that no responsibility is too big for the girl-child. Subsequently, by making her successful in carrying out the tasks, the author gives assurance that the girl-child can indeed be dependable and reliable.

Assertiveness and the girl-child

Muller portrays Amy as being assertive in many ways. To illustrate the point that Amy is assertive, Muller uses situations to explore ways in which the girl-child can assert herself. Like Ndabaga who stands up to the king in *The tale of Ndabaga* to liberate her father from the palace, on a charge of not having a son (Ruterana, 2012), Amy stands up against views by adults. Amy is portrayed as being assertive with her opposition to relocate to Windhoek, her insistence to visit her father in Cape Town and her preference of her previous school over Marlee-Chante's school.

Muller portrays Amy's expression of her unwillingness to relocate to Cape Town as a sign of her assertiveness. She is depicted fearlessly trying to convince her mother to allow her to remain in Cape Town and visit them during the holiday. Muller portrays Amy as a person who fights for what she believes in. She manages to assert herself on this issue through her proposal of returning when she is twelve as her mother thinks she is too young to remain alone now. She is portrayed confronting her father about the same issue when her father shifts the blame to her mother.

When Amy's mother still thinks of protecting her from finding out about her father's life in Cape Town, Amy asserts herself, by insisting on visiting him. The notion of childhood and protection is put forward by Muponde (2004) as one of the adult views of childhood. Muponde (2004) argues that this view stems out of the belief that children are vulnerable. By assessing the outcome of this visit, it is clear that it is sometimes not necessary to protect children. Muller portrays Amy as someone who feels that it is her right to visit her father even when her mother is opposed to it. Muller portrays her taking advantage of her mother's offer of a birthday wish to ask to be granted permission to visit her father. The author brings Amy's assertiveness to the fore through the way she argues her case against her mother who tries to find excuses for her not to go.

In Cape Town, Muller portrays Amy as being assertive when she rejects her father's proposal to attend Marlee-Chante's school. Amy comes out of her shell to stand up to her father, who is used to having her do things for him. Amy has her reasons for not wanting to attend the new school and proposes that she goes to her old school. Muller shows the reader how upset Amy is about the fact that her father never considers her opinion. Muller also depicts Amy expressing the conditions for her return to Cape Town. For instance, she makes it very clear in the presence of Morgan that she wishes to live and discuss her issues with her father only.

In *When you dance with the crocodile*, assertiveness is depicted through Helena's stance that computer games are not dangerous as opposed to her father's view to the contrary. During their discussion, Helena takes a view that there is no danger in playing computer games and then goes ahead to play a game labelled as dangerous. She later opines that adults see danger lurking when it is not the case. Helena also asserts herself in the face of threats posed by both Luis and Zakes as she strives to free Ruth and Maddy.

Compassion, love and friendship in Muller's girl-child

Pervading the two novels are acts of compassion and love by the two main characters, namely, Amy and Ruth. Both characters show extraordinary compassion and love for other characters. The novels are characterised by deep friendships that compel characters to perform great acts of love. Where Chinodya tells about compulsory compassion in the *Tale of Tamari* (2003), when Tamari is forced by the loss of her parents to fend for her siblings (Ngoshi, 2010), Muller portrays situations in which the girls elect to perform compassionate acts.

Amy, in *It all goes wrong* is portrayed as compassionate as she feels that her life has been disrupted by her family's relocation to Windhoek. She feels for Lucia who, because of her relocation, is left without a friend. She even feels pity for Coco, her dog. We see an act of compassion from Amy when she is worried about Tanja after Tanja has gone to taste the flavours and she is switched off. Her quick return from Cape Town in order to help find Tanja is another act of compassion from Amy. Through the portrayal of friendship between Amy and other characters, the author is showing the reader how important friendship is to the girl-child.

Amy's concept of friendship is deeply rooted. It has its foundation in fidelity, trust, love, duty and compassion. Muller shows the reader how essential friendship is to the girl-child and how much effort a girl-child will spend on building and nurturing friendships. This is done through the portrayal of the friendships that Amy has and how she judges their meaningfulness in her life.

In *When you dance with the crocodile*, Helena is pushed by compassion and love to play the dangerous game. Helena has great love for humanity; therefore, she cannot stand seeing someone suffering. She takes a bold decision to get involved and save Ruth from danger. The act of compassion is depicted through Helena's sense of duty towards Ruth and in some cases this is reciprocal, for Ruth also acted compassionately towards Helena. Initially, Helena plays the game to rescue Ruth, but this turns out not to be a once off mission. During this mission, compassion comes into play as Ruth realises what Helena has come to do for her and Helena realises the contribution that Ruth can make to this mission. Another act can be seen in Helena's understanding of Maddy's condition at the hands of Zakes and her determination to rescue her.

The girl-child as fun-seeking and adventurous

Children love to have fun and at times get carried away. Because of this fact, adults understand childhood as a stage that warrants protection (Muponde, 2004). However, sometimes children refuse to be protected by adults because of their adventurous nature. In Muller's portrayal of the two protagonists in *It all goes wrong* and *When you dance with the crocodile*, it is clear that girls are also fun-loving and adventurous.

In *It all goes wrong*, Amy is portrayed as playful and fun loving. She prefers to spend time playing and when she does not have a playmate she is frustrated. The reader is ushered into her world when she meets Tanja at Long beach. She and Tanja spend the whole day playing on the rock. She wants some more of this and invites Tanja again the following day. Her fun-seeking traits draw her closer to the ice cream couple as she is intrigued to find out more about their mysterious life.

In *When you dance with the crocodile*, Helena expresses her fun and adventurous self through computer games. The reader is made aware of the fact that Helena has been used by her father to determine the suitability of computer games for children. Due to this she is exposed to many dangerous games and she seems to have developed the love for dangerous games. During her conversation with her father, Muller makes the fact that Helena enjoys dangerous computer games clear. She sees no danger in them but fun. However, her choice of the most dangerous game is more of risk taking than adventure, which is a trait that many authors do not bring out in girl-characters. However, in *The bundle of firewood*, Kangira narrates how Tariro braves the night just to save the pangolin (Pasi, 2012). Parallels can be drawn between Kangira and Muller's portrayal of the girl-child as both provide the girl-child with the motive to undertake such dangerous missions. While Tariro's mission is to save the pangolin, Helena's mission is to save Ruth. Moreover, the fact that the girls are made victorious in these undertakings speaks volumes about the ability of the girl-child to overcome adversities.

Education and technology as enablers in Muller's portrayal of the girl-child

While writers such as Alumenda have made a lack of access to education for the girl-child the centre of their novels (Chitando, 2008), Muller uses education and technology as enablers in her portrayal of the girl-child. Both her protagonists have access to education. For Amy, the issue is about the choice of school and not access to education, while Helena boasts of vast knowledge of computer skills as her father has a doctorate in computer science.

In *It all goes wrong* Muller uses education to give Amy a voice. She is made vocal on her choice of school. Amy is made to question the motives to relocate to Windhoek from Cape Town, in part due to the love of her school. When she returns to Cape Town, she clashes with her father over which school she is comfortable going to. Amy also tries to use education as a tool to lure her father back home by improving her results in History and by creating a mask of Morgan as she believes her to be her father's stalker.

In *When you dance with the crocodile*, technology and innovation is made to be the main enabler. Muller fuses in her narration many aspects of computer mediated games. Noteworthy is that the story takes place within a computer game. Helena learns about the girl who needs help in the computer game. She has options to choose the level of difficulty and the place she wants to carry out her mission. Since Helena chooses to play her game in the past, she finds modern technology in the form of a device called the "7h" very useful in the accomplishment of her mission. Among other uses, she finds the 7h handy in illuminating their way in the dark, scaring her detractors and for internet connection.

Heroism and the girl-child in Muller's novels

Muller portrays the girl-child as a heroine in her two novels. While Muraya and Muriungu (2014) mourn the limited and uninteresting presentation of the females in traditional African tales, Muller uses her two novels to celebrate the bravery and heroism of the girl-child. The ways in which Muller portray girls as heroines in the two books will be discussed below.

In *It all goes wrong*, Muller portrays Amy as she faces life-changing obstacles and overcomes them. The enormous nature of these challenges for an eleven-year old are used to elevate her as a heroine. The problems that Amy faces are rather mainly emotional and psychological. Below are ways in which Muller builds the heroic nature of Amy.

The novel opens whilst at the airport in Cape Town, when Amy and her family are leaving for Windhoek. We learn that Amy does not wish to go on this trip. She thinks to herself: "Let there be a problem before we take off. Let there be clanging and smoke. Let the pilot announce, 'Ladies and gentlemen, no more flying. Please return to the lives you have lived before'" (Muller, 2014, p. 1). Muller uses this part to establish in the mind of the reader how displacing for Amy the relocation is. She is not mentally prepared and she is not given reasonable ground to warrant this relocation. Relocation has been portrayed as devastating for the girl-child by Kuret in *Blossoms of the savannah* (2008), where a family has to move after their father's retrenchment. In the village the two girls were subjected to ill-treatment for non-conformity (as they were not circumcised) and forced marriage (Muriungu & Muriiki, 2013). Although not seemingly as harsh as the conditions alluded to by Muriungu and Muriiki, relocation from Cape Town to Windhoek affected Amy in many ways. Among her losses are Lea, her best friend, and Coco, her dog. The relocation threatens Amy's well-being due to loss of friendship. Muller introduces the issue of child-trafficking to foreshadow the possible danger that awaits Amy in Windhoek through the newspaper reports her father is reading on the plane.

Amy can be seen as a heroine because her dealings with the ice cream couple bring about their apprehension. She serves as a catalyst in resolving the mysterious disappearance of girls in Namibia. Muller celebrates Amy's heroism by making her the sole informant in the same way that Kangira accords Tariro heroic status when she braves the night in order to take the pangolin to the game reserve (Pasi, 2012). On another level of analysis, Amy can be seen as a heroine through her ability to uncover deception by her father.

The heroic deeds in *When you dance with the crocodile* include Helena's escape from the slave traders and from Zakes. All these escapes involve other people in the form of Ruth and Maddy. When Helena falls victim to slave traders, she does not give up on her mission to save Ruth. She continues to find a way for her and Ruth to escape. When she finds it, the two of them are able to navigate through a jungle where only very few people have managed without succumbing to hunger and thirst or animals of prey. When they come across Maddy, Helena takes up the challenge to rescue her and she succeeds.

Conclusion

Muller portrays the two protagonists in *It all goes wrong* and *When you dance with the crocodile* as purely innocent and at times naïve, caring, open-minded and independent of thought, dependable and reliable, assertive, compassionate, loving and friendly, fun-seeking and adventurous, aided by education and technology. By portraying the two female characters as heroines in their escapades, Muller is sending a strong message to society: the girl-child is capable of doing things that every normal child can do, regardless of sex. In other words, Muller is saying societal negative stereotypes against girls which have been fuelled by patriarchal societies should be removed to give the girl-child equal chances of advancement with the boy-child. Muller's characterisation of the girl-child in the two novels is a positive testimony of the desired place of the girl-child in society.

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