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Reconstructing Kenyan women's image in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's Coming to Birth

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Foregrounded Female Figure

This research seeks to examine how Macgoye reconstructs women's image in *Coming to Birth*. My thesis is that, through the utilisation of political changes and events within which the text is set, the author attempts to empower women in the Kenyan society. I, therefore, examine the woman in the text as a person with capacity to "emancipate [herself] from socio-economic ties to men" (Muriungi, 2003:1). The central concern of this study is how Macgoye employs Kenya's postcolonial social changes to provide an alternative in exploring the influence they have in the construction of individual women's identities in a changing postcolonial society.

The study further examines how Macgoye privileges the female figure by infusing her with energy and potential to break free from socio-cultural structures that confine women to unfulfilling and unsatisfying life of reliance on men. In my analysis I shall attempt to demonstrate that Macgoye aims to rectify the distorted women's image within the Kenyan society as demonstrated in the text under study.

In the title of the research, I have used the term 'reconstructing' consciously to demonstrate that the construction of individual's identity in the society is a process that is still in progress and a process that will still be since identity is not a permanent category of an individual but it is something that keeps on changing with time while taking different dimensions. Therefore, the identities that we have discussed in

Coming to Birth are not permanent constructions but there is a possibility for their change over time. Macgoye's writing against Kenyan and African male writing tradition that has stereotypically presented women is a significant literary intervention for women in African literary scholarship. I hope that my research will enrich other studies on women and gender and more specifically women agency within the African society.

1.2 A Brief History of the Author

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye was born on October 21, 1928 in Southampton, England as the only child of Richard and Phyllis King. As a child, she grew up in an extended family comprising her parents and grandparents. She had her early schooling in England and obtained her master's degree from Royal Holloway College in London in 1948. She moved to Kenya in 1954 as a lay missionary bookseller for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), "the mission arm of the Anglican Church" (Kurtz, 2005: 4). The year (1954) was a volatile period in Kenyan history as the colonial administration was being forced to relinquish power to Kenyan people. While working in Kenya, Macgoye met Doctor Daniel G. W. Macgoye Oludhe in the late 1950s and married him in 1960 leading to her integration into her husband's Luo community in particular and Kenyan society in general. She was later naturalised as a Kenyan citizen after their marriage. Macgoye has worked both in Kenya and Tanzania including teaching creative writing in Egerton University in Kenya.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is one of the most creative women writers in Kenya who has written extensively while managing different literary genres. She started her literary career as a poet and the initial reception of her poetry in Kenya was criticised

as being too political. She has published volumes of poetry, fiction, children's books and non-fiction works. Some of the works she has published include *Coming to Birth* (1986), which is the text under this study and currently a literature set book in the Kenya secondary school curriculum. This text is also an award winner of the Sinclair Prize for Fiction in 1986. *Homing In* (1994) won second place in the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature in 1995.

The Present Moment (1987) is set in Nairobi and features old women who meet in a home for old people. The women are drawn together from different regions of the country and have different experiences in the society. *Chira* (1997) deals with the AIDS scourge in Kenya and people's view about AIDS pandemic. *Street Life* (1987) deals with the plight of street children especially the physically handicapped in the society. The proceeds from this book were dedicated to charities dealing with destitute people in Kenya. *A Farm Called Kishinev* (2005) which is her most recent novel explores the feeling of the period around 1905, when the British colonial government set aside a farm called Kishinev in Rift Valley province of Kenya to resettle the Holocaust victims. Lastly, the children's stories she has written include *The Black Hand Gang* series. Macgoye's *Song of Nyarloka and other poems* (1977) is about the experience of a young woman adapting to a matrimonial home. The poems attempt to show the struggles that Nyarloka goes through in trying to cope with the new environment and new expectations as a married person. Germane to my study is the struggle that the main character engages with to cope with her changing marital status. In this study, I explore women's experience in relation to social changes and how women try to adjust to new environments presented to them.

Kurtz argues that the poem, *Song of Nyarloka and other poems* "embodies the hybrid, syncretic crossings and mixtures that constitute its subject matter" (Kurtz, 2002: 102). The hybrid mixtures include foreign and alien influences that the character (Nyarloka) has to accommodate to co-exist with others in the new community that she is part of. The accommodation of new lifestyles creates new images for both men and women in the society. Kurtz's analysis shall profit the study in opening ways to explore hybrid mixtures exhibited by characters in *Coming to Birth* and their interaction with others in the new environment. Kurtz's argument also shall help me examine how Paulina's "crossing over" from the village to an urban centre affects her development as a woman in the society. This shall be discussed in the fourth chapter of this research.

The Present Moment (1987) is a story of seven Kenyan women developed alongside the turbulent period of Kenyan national history. These women meet at the old-age home for the homeless in Eastleigh section of Nairobi city. The women are divided along lines of ethnicity, language, class, and religion as a result of their diverse backgrounds of origin in Kenya. It is while at the old age home that these women are able to unearth their personal histories that turn out to connect them as women in the Kenyan society. For instance they talk about stories of their struggles for self-determination, of conflict, violence, and loss, but also of survival. At the same time, Macgoye explores the past and present history of the nation and the struggles the country has gone through. What is imperative to this study is the story about women and their struggles in a male dominated society. Though we meet these women in their old age, they take us back into the past by revealing their hidden struggles that have redefined their status in the society. *The Present Moment* shall therefore tender insights in examining the struggles that the protagonist in the text under study engages

in for self-determination. This material is, therefore, germane in discussing the second chapter of the research.

All her novels and poems are written and set in Kenya and draw on her Kenyan experiences "[exploring] Kenyan history and dynamics of Kenyan patrimony" (Kurtz, 2005: 5). The present study shall only review a few of her published creative writings pertinent to the research.

1.3 Synopsis of the Text

The study focuses on Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* published in 1986. The text is a story about Paulina Akello a young Luo[1] girl who has been married off to Martin Were. The events in the text begin in early 1950s when Kenya is in its final stages of attaining independence from the British colonial administration. In the year 1952, a state of emergency was declared over Kenya by Governor Baring on behalf of the British government[2] as one of the ways to suppress Kenyans' unrelenting demand for independence. The book opens by presenting Paulina (the protagonist) as a naïve sixteen-year-old village girl who has travelled unaccompanied from Nyanza, in the western part of Kenya, to Nairobi by train to join her husband Martin Were.

On her arrival in Nairobi, she is picked up by Martin at the Railway Station and taken to Pumwani slums where Martin has a room. The room became available because of Operation Anvil that moved Kikuyus away to protected villages hence creating an opportunity for people from other tribes like Martin to get rooms. On arrival in

[1] Luo (also called Jo-luo) are an ethnic group in western part of Kenya, Eastern Uganda and northern Tanzania. They live in the basin, which surrounds the Winam Gulf of Lake Victoria. They speak the dholuo language though with a variety of dialects. They are believed to have originated in Southern Sudan. The Kenyan Luo migrated into present day Western Kenya via the present-day Uganda and the Kenyan Luo are identical in many ways with the Acholi of Uganda.

[2] See Ngugi, (1983)

Pumwani, Rachel, her neighbour informs her about the emergency and "Operation Anvil" which is underway as part of the colonial administration's strategy to overcome the Mau Mau uprising and informal gatherings especially for KEM an acronym for Kikuyu, Embu and Meru communities. People from these communities had formed guerrilla groups to revolt against the colonialists and to demand their land that had been appropriated to whites to be given back to the natives.

At the time when Paulina arrives in Nairobi, the KEM people were allegedly notorious for distributing leaflets that called on people to rebel against the colonial administration. In Nairobi, Paulina knows little about politics but she is lucky enough since Rachel, briefs her about the happenings in the city. Paulina experiences a miscarriage on her first night in Nairobi, but because of the curfew, she is taken to hospital in the morning where she learns that it is too late to save the baby. Due to scarcity of resources at the hospital, Paulina is hastily discharged before Martin comes back to pick her up. She leaves the hospital alone thinking that she will be able to trace her way back home unaccompanied as she always did in the village. However, it turns out that Paulina gets lost on the way and it takes her two days to locate Martin's house after having been locked up at the police cell. She spends her first night after being lost in Susana's house and while here Drusilla, a midwife and single lady, who has decided to work for God, examines her and informs her that she is out of danger.

Through the help of Ahoya, a missionary white lady, who gives Paulina accommodation after being rescued from police cell, Paulina is able to locate Martin's house though Martin is angry and beats her up for walking aimlessly in the city. Paulina conceives the second time but she has a second miscarriage as a result of violent police intrusion into her house in Pumwani. This time Martin blames the

police for causing Paulina's miscarriage. When Paulina miscarries for the third time, Martin beats her up and accuses her of "imagining things" that she is pregnant. After the third miscarriage, Martin sends her to his rural home. She stays there until the harvest is gathered where after ensuring everything had been stored, she returns to Nairobi this time with more confidence than her first journey. She notices some smell of coconut oil in the house but does not ask Martin about it. She is surprised because coconut oil is used by women and not men. On her second return to Nairobi, Paulina calls on her friend who has joined the Home Craft College and demonstrates the desire to join the college in future so that she can keep her house neat and earn some money like her friend. She later enrols in Home Craft College in Kisumu for vocational skills when she returns back from Nairobi.

It is while at the Home Craft College that she starts a relationship with Simon since Martin has been absent because he is having illicit relationships with other women back in Nairobi. Martin learns about Paulina's relationship with Simon, comes home and beats her up resulting in their separation. Paulina conceives with Simon leading to the birth of Okeyo who, unfortunately, is shot dead at the age of three by policemen when President Jomo Kenyatta goes to open a hospital in Kisumu in 1969. This is immediately after Tom Mboya, a leading politician from the region, had been assassinated in Nairobi. The death of her son compels Paulina to relocate to Nairobi as a domestic worker first in Okello's household and later to Mr. M's, a politician's family. It is while Paulina is in Nairobi that Martin starts making appearances at her house and later moves in with her thus saving the marriage from collapsing. When the narrative ends, Paulina is expectant again with Martin's child like at the beginning of the narrative.

We are, therefore, left in anticipation that her pregnancy will come to birth in the same way Kenya is to come to birth as a mature independent country. In summary, Macgoye's fiction exploits the relationship between public and private life in a post-colonial society as seen in the way individual characters try to cope with the changing times. The narrative parallels the materialisation of a new type of Kenyan woman in the embodiment of Paulina with the emergence of a new nation as it traces the female protagonist's development between 1956 and 1978 against the backdrop of the nation's development.

The book is divided into seven chapters and each of the chapters explores Paulina's development from a naïve girl to a mature and independent woman cognisant of her rights. Macgoye's narrative interrogates the existing socio-cultural structures in the Kenyan society. This is seen in her deliberate departure from what marks the difference between her and other Kenyan writers,[3] in that she endows her female characters with prominence in the text. This prominence with which Macgoye empowers her female characters makes it necessary for me to examine how and why she engages with women's experiences and issues in Kenyan literature.

1.4 Rationale

My choice of Macgoye among other Kenyan women writers is justified by two reasons. First an overview of African literary scholarship in East Africa reveals that most readings and critical attention has often focused on writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Grace Ogot and Okot p'Bitek among others. Such literary scholarship has tended to ignore the contribution of Macgoye to East African literature, which was

[3] Some of the Kenyan writers that have put the female figure at the periphery of the plot include among others David mailu. Meja Mwangi, Charles Mangua and John Kiriamiti.

once referred to as a literary desert by Taban Lo Liyong.[4] In relation to the above observation, it is evident that Macgoye is one of the writers "forgotten" in Africa but well read in her own country. Kurtz confirms this by pointing out that his initial ignorance of Macgoye as a writer was a reflection of the outside critical establishment, which seemed to have overlooked Macgoye and her enormous contribution to African literary scholarship.

Secondly, and in relation to the above observation, there is a limited attention given to women writers in African literary scholarship. Commenting on limited critical attention given to women writers in literary scholarship, Aidoo opines that African female writers "are just receiving the writer's version of the general neglect and disregard that women in the larger society receive" (cited in Adeola, 1990: 8). Aidoo speaks of the double oppression African women writers suffer, and highlights the critical disregard of literary works by women. Carolyn Kumah (2000) points out that lack of inclusion of women writers is not without its socio-historical roots. According to Kumah, the marginalisation of African women's literature may clearly be linked to the gender specific repercussions of European colonisation. Although regional and cultural specificities affected the degree of demotion, the position of African women was significantly compromised by the imposition of colonial institutions. On the same issue of African women's literary exclusion, Lloyd Brown observes that "women writers of Africa are the other voices; the unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in this field" (Brown, 1981: 3). He further points out that this 'male-oriented' and exclusivist criticism has determined what constitutes African literature. Accordingly,

[4] Ezekiel, Alembi. Singing and Dancing the Rhythm of Life: Oral Poetry in the Abanyole community Of Kenya. Available at: http://cc.joensuu.fi/~loristi/1_03/ale103.html

he observes that “critics and anthologists have treated the African subject as an exclusively male product” (Brown, 1981: 5).

This inadequate critical consideration for women writers and Macgoye in particular, within the African literary scholarship justifies my study. This study, therefore attempts to appraise Macgoye’s significant contribution to gender discourses in African literary scholarship. The choice of the text *Coming to Birth* among other published works by Macgoye is justified by the fact that Macgoye gives her female characters central roles in the plot of the text. This is important since it offers me space to examine the protagonist’s quest for self-determination in that I am able to look at strategies that the protagonist employs in liberating herself from structures that limit her agency.

1.5 Literature Review

In this section, a review of related literature on the research has been done by first looking at the body of literature done on Macgoye’s works; secondly I will look at other literature relevant to my study. This shall help me to gain insight into what other people have done in the field.

In his analysis, Mboya argues that Macgoye “relegates history to the background which in turn gives her space to focus on and develop Paulina’s story” (2003: 35) in *Coming to Birth*. However, I point out that in Macgoye’s work, history is not relegated to the background as Mboya claims. A reading of the text indicates that Paulina’s story and the country’s history interweave each other and that they are developed alongside each other, which negate Mboya’s views. My observation,

therefore, demonstrates that there is no way Paulina's story can be developed without the country's history being mentioned since the historical events and changes, for instance assassinations, detentions and killings, trigger change in Paulina's life. This information shall help me explore Paulina's story in relation to Kenya's history and how the latter influence Paulina's growth toward self-realisation.

Regarding literature and politics, Chinweizu argues that "literature and politics influence each other and African writers can not avoid commitment to their own societies at the periods of their writing". He further observes that,

> The function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assumes a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings and not to preoccupy himself with his puny ego. Because in Africa we recognise that art is in the public domain, a sense of social commitment is mandatory upon the artist. (Chinweizu, 1980: 252)

Chinweizu's observation demonstrates the need of a writer to situate herself or himself within a specific social context within which he writes from. In this regard, the social realities within which the writer writes determine the outcome of his writings. In engaging with the social issues of the day, writers will be dealing with the politics of the day.

Macgoye foregrounds certain aspects of Kenyan political events in *Coming to Birth* that are relevant in helping her develop Paulina's and the country's story. The text explores the struggle for independence in the colonial period by citizens and later the

betrayal of the common people in the post-independence period. By examining the depiction of political material in the text, I argue that the acquisition of new characters' identities may be understood in terms of the political shifts and conditions that give rise to them.

This study borrows from the above argument and moves a step further to examine how political developments in turn influence creation of new individual identities. Politics, therefore, offers a framework within which I explore different meanings in *Coming to Birth* and further provide a space to explore the socio-political changes in Kenya in relation to the development and empowerment of women characters in the text. It is worth noting that the political period depicted in Macgoye's text is one before and after independence "fraught with fears and frustrations, and disillusionment with Uhuru" (Ogude, 1999: 11).

In an essay "Master Plans: Designing National Allegories of Urban Space and Metropolitan Subjects for Postcolonial Kenya", Slaughter (2004) examines *Coming to Birth* in terms of how individual characters situate themselves in the urban and political spaces and their definition of these spaces in relation to their participation in them. Slaughter appreciates Macgoye's exploration of Nairobi as a political space that enlightens people to negotiate the urban space. Slaughter's argument suggests that the definition of individuals within the city marks their political space and their participation in such spaces. Slaughter looks at individuals in the text in terms of negotiating the political space, and we draw on this insight to argue that it is the political spaces and developments that initiate new definitions for individual characters in the society. My analysis of women's images is closely linked to political

developments in acknowledging the influence politics has on characters in their inexorable attempt to realise their potential not only in politics, but also in life generally.

Slaughter further argues that the city and the nation stand as "constant compulsions on the individual to move into them" (Slaughter, 2004: 34). This idea forms part of the subject of the study in order to interrogate how Paulina's movement into the urban space influences her growth. This is premised on the assumption that, the change Paulina negotiates is not "registered in the city space but through the conversion of the self to accommodate the changes" (Slaughter, 2004: 35) she encounters in life. The city serves to provide a fertile ground for growth of new images for the reason that it disrupts traditional social patterns. The city becomes a site where women create some measure of personal empowerment that has often dictated people's lives.

Accordingly, Slaughter points out that the "urban space is conceived as fostering a comprehension of the nation and political developments" (Slaughter, 2004: 45). This argument can be interpreted as individual's understanding of political developments. Carroll (2001) in a review observes that, *Coming to Birth* is an intricately woven novel which "emphasizes issues involved in overcoming the constraints of a patriarchal society, and the ways in which ordinary people like Paulina are affected by history" (Carroll, 2001: 55). Carroll's argument is relevant to the study since my concern is with how women overcome patriarchal structures limiting them from self empowerment. I, therefore, use her argument to explore patriarchal structures and ways through which women liberate themselves by exploring spheres that

traditionally restricted their efforts. This shall be carried out in chapter four of my research.

In *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*, Newell observes that, "gender images and ideologies constantly shift to account for their changing status. This has led to emergence of new perspectives which interrogate, reformulate and [analyse] inherited, popular codes" (Stephanie Newell, 1997:1). Newell looks at the impact of social changes on society and how the society in turn responds to the changes. Newell's argument looks at how images are re-written in literature by pointing out that gender images are not static as they change with time. Her argument offers a rich site for this research in examining how gender images are constructed and reconstructed in the society to cater for the changing times, particularly in our present text under study. This information is particularly useful in the discussion of chapter three and chapter four.

On the stereotypical depiction of female characters in literary texts, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in an essay entitled "The Female Writer and her Commitment" points out that an "African woman writer has three responsibilities, namely, to tell about being a woman, describe reality from a woman's point of view and lastly a Third world woman" (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987: 15). Molara Ogundipe-Leslie believes that by telling women's experiences from a personal point of view, a true reflection of women's experiences will be handled and addressed in relation to issues that women grapple with in the society. In this case, the responsibilities mentioned above help the female writer to rectify the distorted image of African women as depicted in some literary works. Since most stereotypical portrayals of women have been dominant in

male authored texts, Ogundipe's views shall help me understand how Macgoye has departed from stereotypical portrayal of women by creating complex and multidimensional characters in Kenyan society.

1.6 Feminist Theory in African Literature and Theoretical Framework

Feminism originated in eighteenth century England as a social movement that "promoted equality between the sexes and as a system of thought that challenged mainstream science" (Harding, 1991).[5] Feminist movement developed as a response to the inequity against and relegation of women in society. Attempts made to subjugate women created consciousness in women to search for their own emancipation. Gayatri C. Spîvak holds that, "feminism is female access to individualism" (Spîvak, 1994: 270). In this case, feminism sets out to transform the relations between women and men, so that women can have more chances to explore their potentials by competing with others in the society.[6] According to Oyeronke Oyewumi "feminism is primarily concerned with the liberation of women" (Oyewumi, 2003: 2).

Despite the contestation that has occurred since its inception, feminism has spread to other parts of the world and has been critiqued from different "perspectives, and in particular as part of the [colonisation] of knowledge in the Third World aided by the methods of social anthropology" (Parpart Jane, 1996). Different ideological positions have since been advanced in terms of feminist applicability to different geographical locations leading to it being shaped and interpreted differently in different disciplines like philosophy, theology, psychology and anthropology among others. This situation

[5] Also see Hooks (1984) on the origin of feminism movement around the world.

[6] For more insight see Sarah Anyang Agbor, (2006)

has also been witnessed in literature, which has sought to interpret and reconstruct feminist theory in order to accommodate the diversity of writers, histories and geographical locations among other things around the world.

Although the general body of feminist theory has been instrumental in creating awareness of female authored texts and in addressing women's experiences across the world, the application of Western feminist theories to "Third world" women's experiences has been questioned and contested. One of the reasons for this contestation is the depiction of feminist theory as a Western phenomenon and that issues relevant to feminist goals are assumed to be universally applicable regardless of regional locations within which they occur. The assumption that women's experiences are uniform around the world has led to debates regarding feminist applicability to other geographical locations other than Western women's experiences. For instance, the reception of feminist theory in African contexts as seen in African literature has been varied and a contested one.

This discrepancy originates from the multiplicity of African experiences that feminist theory as a wholesale and universal 'blanket' cannot accommodate. A variety of "African perspectives have since emerged to challenge the biases of Western feminism to other contexts other than the Western women's experiences" (Cornwall, 2005: 3). This has led to the desire for alternative concepts and constructs that would project African realities in its 'totality' without comparing it to Western feminist advocacy. Some African writers and critics like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Busia, Mohanty, and Nnaemeka among others have underscored the need for feminist relevance in articulating the uniqueness of various writings and experiences in Africa.

According to Obioma the "feminist spirit that pervades Africa is so complex and diffused that it is intractable" (Obioma Nnaemeka, 2005: 32) to apply it to all localities in the same way on the continent. Obioma Nnaemeka hastens to add that, the dilemma experienced by feminists to name the feminist spirit in Africa rests in its failure to define African feminism on its own without comparing it to Western articulations and goals. Accordingly, Mohanty (1991) underscores the importance of discussing the lives of women within specific contexts. She believes that feminists need to examine the particularities of the structures that exist rather than applying "universal" experiences to all situations regardless of different regions occupied by women. Mohanty, therefore, demonstrates the need to address women's oppression in terms of particularity while discouraging the study of women's experiences as a constituted group. Mohanty's argument is beneficial to this study in articulating the feminist articulations that apply to women's images in Kenya premised on the assumption that women experience oppression differently even though they may be in the same geographical region. By analysing women's experiences within specific contexts, African scholars will be able to find a suitable resolution to women's experiences within regions which will prevent generalisations of women's oppression as homogeneous.

The response to this dilemma by African scholars and writers has seen some scholars calling for the revision of feminist theory rather than accepting or dismissing Western feminist advocacies. Some of the key scholars and writers who have advanced feminist articulations around African continent include Awa Thiam, Nawal el Sadawi, Patricia McFadden, Amina Mama, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Filomena Chioma

Steady, Abena Busia and Ifi Amadiume. Some of these scholars have advanced arguments that underscore the need to interpret African feminism in terms of its plural form as "feminisms" because African women's experiences are not homogenous. Apart from adopting the word feminisms, the negative connotations attached to African feminists as corrupted women aping Western ideas has led some critics and scholars in Africa to seek for terms that will articulate African experiences by showing the necessity of feminist ideology in Africa.

In other words, African discourses on feminism have in part dealt with theorizing and creating alternative concepts that can truly be used to address African women's experiences. For instance, Ogunyemi and Alice Walker have advanced the concept of African Womanism[7] which is an effort by African, African-American and Caribbean writers to distinguish the particular context and struggles of women in these cultures as different experiences from Western European notions of hegemony in feminism articulations. On her part, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie advocates for STIWANISM an acronym for Social Transformation including Women in Africa. Ogundipe believes approaching women's experiences as a social transformation will free people from comparing African women's experiences with Western feminisms. Egejuru seems to confirm Molara Ogundipe-Leslie approach by pointing out the need for "African women to assert their notion of feminism, not as a monolithic concept borrowed from the West, but as a redefined concept that is articulated to their particular concerns" (Egejuru, 1997: 19). Nnaemeka advocates negofeminism which means feminism of negotiation. This search for a 'proper' terminology to address African experiences

[7] Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, eds., *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World P, 1986) 11-12.

demonstrates the predicament of feminist scholars in addressing feminist ideas to varied experiences around the continent.

Apart from searching for a proper terminology, some African women scholars and critics advocating feminist goals are reluctant to be labelled feminists as a result of the overtones of Westernisation. Such a conception of feminism would be understood as elitist and alienated from the daily nuances of 'ordinary' African women. For instance Buchi Emecheta is comfortable to be referred to as a feminist but prefers this label as long as it is with a small 'f', to differentiate herself from mainstream Western feminists (Petersen, 1988: 175). In the same vein, African women who "named themselves 'feminists' were looked upon as 'disloyal' by both women and men whose perception of feminism had been shaped and oriented through nationalist ideology and old notions of authenticity and difference".[8]

The arguments advanced above are attempts by scholars to construct a feminism that is sympathetic to particular contexts around the world. The desire for proper terminology rests in the argument that, patriarchy does not always oppress and suppress women in similar ways as advocated in Western articulations of universalism. The divisions in Africa with respect to feminist articulations reflect complexities which include among other issues debates on "ethnicity, language, ideology, colonial legacies, race, age, marital status, class, religion, literacy levels, geo-political and geographical differences along various other lines" (Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, 2000: 9).

[8] Patricia McFadden available at: http://www.nai.uu.se/publications/news/archives/002mcfadden/

The initial goal of feminism was to address themes like discrimination, stereotyping, sexual objectification and patriarchy in light of women's oppression (Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1977; Lerman, 1982). However, contemporary feminist theory in Africa has shifted its stance from the initial goal of making women equals of men to address other issues like "violence against women, women's health, reproductive politics, population control" (Mohanty et al, 1997: xv), AIDS pandemic and women's response to these oppression and new social realities in the society. This is because women's oppression presents itself differently and should, therefore, accommodate different experiences for feminism to articulate the above mentioned themes in their attempt to reach women in Africa.

In this study, I embrace African feminist framework in dealing with African women's writing. I, therefore, follow on Filomena Steady's articulations of African feminism as a humanistic discourse. Steady's humanistic approach emphasises the inclusive and complementary thrust of "African patterns of feminism" since

> For women, the male is not "the other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unity by itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features. Sexual differences and similarities, as well as sex roles, enhance sexual autonomy and cooperation between women and men, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation. Within the metaphysical realm, both male and female principles encompass life and operate jointly to maintain cosmological balance. (Steady, 1987: 8)

Steady underscores the need to examine issues of race, sex, class and culture "to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism" (Steady, 1987: 4). She projects the significance of humanism as the base for African feminism. This approach to African women's writing ensures liberation of women's oppression as inclusive of other forms of oppression in the society. On the same notion of complementarily, Joyce Ladner concisely articulates the dynamics of the relationship between African men and women and does not view men as enemies of women in the society. In her text *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, she observes that, "black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the society which subjugate black men, women and children" (Ladner, 1972: 277-278). Phanuel Egejuru and Ketu Katrak in their book *Womanbeing and African Literature* point out that "[w]omen's issues constitute important aspects of working towards a most just and humane future for African society" (Egejuru and Katrak, 1997: 9). My analysis of Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* will be an accommodative feminist approach in an attempt to include society in the fight against women's oppression.

This approach to feminism shall help in articulating negotiations that women make to counter gendered situations while at the same time recognising the oppressive structures, which they can challenge and subvert in pursuit of self-realisation. The study embraces Steady's notion of feminism based on gender complementarities. African feminism need to address gender issues as they occur and relate them to their own African lived experiences and its immediate surroundings. Apart from Steady's African feminist approach, the study also shall adopt Nana Wilson Tagoe (1997) Africanised version of gynocriticism. I refer to it as Africanised gynocriticism because this approach of analysing women's writings was the brainchild of Elaine

Showalter, who coined it to describe literary criticism based on a feminine perspective.

Tagoe points out that within gynocriticism, there are four models of difference, which include biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural. Tagoe hastens to add that, the emphasis laid on each model depends on feminine priorities within cultures under which it is applied. Within the four models, Tagoe advocates for the "women's culture model" which she argues has the capacity to break a monolithic concept of feminism by presenting women's writing as different from the point of view of gender and specific cultural contexts under which they are produced. I, therefore, embrace Tagoe's cultural model approach in analysing women's fiction since these writings are informed by the cultural contexts within which they are written and Macgoye presents her material in *Coming to Birth* from the point of view of an insider within the Luo cultural environment.

I also find the cultural women's model significant because, as Tagoe points out, it does not remove the female from the general culture shared by men, but presents a woman-centred approach within which the wider social, political, economic and cultural world can be analysed. What is evident from Tagoe's model is the fact that it influences the writer's selection of themes, characters, strategies employed by different writers to advance their social vision. The dimension embraced in this work holds that a blend of Steady's African feminism approach and Tagoe's Cultural model of African gynocriticism is suitable in analysing Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*. This selective application of feminist theories helps us to contextualise the research

problem within its immediate setting (Kenya). This in turn guides me in situating the study within the broader body of African literature.

My analysis, therefore, interprets feminism in *Coming to Birth* as closely related to social circumstances of their production. According to Ikonne, there is a sense in which every "literary production is a response to a definite historical and socio-cultural condition" (Ikonne, 1991: 1). I, therefore, examine Women's identities in *Coming to Birth* as a response to socio-cultural and political conditions within the society at the period of its production.

I argue that, the above feminist approaches are suitable in analysing women's oppression and experiences within the Kenyan context. This study, therefore, shall employ the above feminist strands of analysing women's fiction in African literature as my analytical tools. My theoretical framework is dictated by the text's very nature that calls for a feminist approach in the analysis of the narrative therein. I shall carry out the study while aware of the plurality inherent in African feminist constructs.

1.7 Methodology

The study relies on a close textual reading of the primary text which will be informed by political and social changes in the postcolonial Kenyan state. This approach will be carried out to unveil and demonstrate how Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* engages with women subjectivities and subversion in the society. This will be based on the hypothesis that Macgoye's text attempts to address women's agency over a considerable period of time starting from colonial to postcolonial period while situating them in specific socio-cultural contexts that oblige them to acquire new

identities. I, therefore, explore strategies women employ that justify the notion of social and political change in order to illustrate a shift in the characterization of women in as much as their image is concerned. I shall do this through a thematic analysis of the text.

The theme of tradition shall be significant in tracing patriarchal structures that have often limited women's expression. This will be done with knowledge that it is the patriarchal social structures that thwart women's empowerment. I explore the theme of tradition to understand how women have subverted patriarchal social structures in an attempt to liberate themselves. We attempt to demonstrate how women interrogate the institution of marriage and its operation. This is carried out with knowledge that marriage is part and parcel of traditional practices. The thesis here is that Macgoye uses marriage implicitly to "criticise the society in which wifely submission is promoted" (Newell, 2000: 145). The research attempts to show that Macgoye uses romance as a site for women's empowerment which is a departure from romance as a site for emotional appeal or 'therapy' for women. It must, however, be noted that Macgoye's portrayal of marriage is ambiguous and there are times in the novel in which she endorses the institution.

The political theme helps us understand how individual characters have negotiated changing social set ups and the strategies they employ to survive in a patriarchal structured society. Closely related to politics, I will also analyse the style of juxtaposition to draw parallels between the emerging country and the emerging woman. I will further look at the theme of religion. My interest in this theme is to explore the contradiction inherent in religion as a liberator for women. One of the

questions is how religion empowers women and how is this possible since religious teachings advance women's submission. Lastly, I will analyse the theme of education as one of the avenues that offers women independence in the society. The analysis of themes and the style of juxtaposition mentioned above advance my argument that women's images are fluid and a process that takes place with time. I also argue that these themes are significant since each has a social significance in the empowerment of women resulting from political and historical moments. The themes provide a site to study spaces occupied by women in the society and how they interrelate in the spaces. I further argue that this approach shall validate the notion of reconstructing women's image as alluded to in the title of my thesis.

The study is divided into six chapters, the current chapter deals with general introduction, a brief history of the author, the synopsis of the primary text under study, literature review and methodology. The chapter further sets out a theoretical framework grounded within African Feminism in an effort to cater for feminist articulations in diverse socio-cultural locales. In this chapter we have also discussed briefly feminist politics and contestations in African literary scholarship. The chapter concludes with a section on chapter breakdown and the contents of each of the chapters.

The literature review indicated that the theme of politics and fiction is an important concern of this thesis. Chapter two of this research takes this concern forward and investigates juxtaposition and the theme of politics in an attempt to show how political events and changes influence the choices that the main character makes in life. In this chapter we argue that political events and changes influence the individual

private stories and life experiences that intersect with the nation's development. I, therefore, examine Paulina's development and how her story is entangled with Kenya's politics.

In chapter three, I shall focus on the strategies that women employ in subverting patriarchal structures that call on women's submission and subordination. The chapter will, thus, explore themes of marriage and motherhood. The discussion of these themes is aimed at demonstrating how women challenge the construction of marriage and motherhood in the society as a way to emancipate themselves. In this regard, I analyse Paulina and Amina as characters who plunge tradition into question. Chapter four takes off from chapter three to examine women's agency in the text. To carry out this, I will examine Christianity, education, rural/urban dynamics and traditional practices. These themes will be insightful to demonstrate how women are actors or rather subjects of their own emancipation. Chapter five examines how female friendship helps women to break free from structures that limit their freedom and independence, thus allowing them opportunity to transcend social inhibitions. In the final chapter, I briefly assess the issues raised in the foregoing chapters and demonstrated how the struggle to bring women to the foreground is engendered. I also summarise the arguments that I have pursued throughout the study.

Chapter 2

Kenya Coming to Birth: Herstory and Politics in Kenya

2.1 Introduction

The chapter seeks to demonstrate how Paulina's life is influenced by Kenya's political events and changes as presented in the text. These include the end of colonial dominance, Kenyan independence, the assassinations that emerge immediately after independence and people's attempt to adjust to these changes. Accordingly, I will analyse the theme of politics and the style of juxtaposition. For the purpose of this study, the working definition for juxtaposition will be the arrangement of two or more ideas, characters, actions and narrative moment side by side for the purpose of comparison, contrast and character development.

The argument in this chapter is that, the unfolding political events in the text initiate different responses in the life of the protagonist as will be demonstrated in the discussion. I, thus, examine the extent to which Paulina's story intersects with the country's politics and how this intersection influences the choices that Paulina makes. This approach is informed by the text's narrative where the author interweaves Paulina's story and the country's political developments. The following aspects of the novel will be analysed: Paulina's miscarriages, Mboya's and J.M Kariuki's assassinations, the Kisumu massacre where Paulina's son is shot, madaraka day celebrations and Chelagat Mutai's detention. In this chapter, we will make a leap beyond the text in an attempt to examine political material about Kenya to authenticate political events and figures that Macgoye alludes to in *Coming to Birth.*

This will help me gain insight into how Macgoye has employed politics to develop an individual's personal struggle in the society.

The chapter is subdivided into four sections. The first subsection deals with the relationship between politics and literature. Within politics, we look at the treatment of the social reality of the society and how it influences literature. The second section looks at the political theme and individual characters' responses to the political events as presented in the text. This subsection is further divided into three sections: (1) Kenya's political struggles and Paulina's miscarriages, (2) Operation Anvil and political detentions and (3) the Kisumu Massacre and political assassinations.

2.2 Politics and African Literary Scholarship

Politics as a theme has extensively been handled in most African literature as is evident in literary works both in colonial and postcolonial periods. A survey of African literature creates an impression that most literary works on the continent are political because the writers explore the politics of the day in their works. According to Ngugi,

> A writer's subject matter is history, [that is] the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production and hence the changing power relations consequent on mutable modes of production is a whole territory of a writers literary concern. Therefore politics is part and parcel of this literary territory. (Ngugi, 1981: 72)

Ngugi's argument implies that a writer's raw material is the social conditions available at the time of a literary production. Ngugi therefore sees literature as a discipline that has often given the society "sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development" (Ngugi, 1981: 72). Ngugi's observation echoes Chinweizu (1980) who argues that literature and politics influence each other and African writers can not avoid commitment to their own societies at the periods of their writing.

Some African writers who have actively dealt with the theme of politics in African literature include Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Sembene Ousmane, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Alex La Guma, Peter Abrahams, Sony Labou Tansi, Okey Ndibe and playwrights like John Ruganda, Francis Imbuga among others. Although these novelists and playwrights have explored historical developments in African post-colonial states, they have often used history to achieve different social visions like addressing citizens' disillusionment in the regime, corruption, oppression among other social ills in the society. Their concern is with the 'wellbeing' of the nation. Macgoye departs from this to explore women's struggles and emancipation in the society through the use of a country's political events and changes.

In his analysis of a political novel, Gikandi argues that such a work is

> Concerned with the inner workings of the body politics, its characters experience the impact of political forces in the wildest possible sense, the author seeks to create a totality of social, economic and political experience,

> and his characters address themselves to the life and experience in both the actual world and that of the novel. (Gikandi, 1987: 243)

In this regard, politics provides raw material from which fiction writing emanates. Gikandi continues to observe that,

> The political novelist seeks a medium which can express his/ [her] point of view without resorting to mere [sloganising], the challenge is to create a fictional world which is an accurate depiction of the real world in the course of which the authorial vision will emerge as a logical development of the interaction of characters and their situations (Gikandi, 1987: 135).

Gikandi's argument is appropriate in analysing Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* since she depicts political material as they occur in 'reality'. For instance, the political figures and events, like Tom Mboya, J.M Kariuki, detentions, Kisumu massacre, which she alludes to in the text, did exist and happened in Kenyan history. Thus, hers is not just fiction but also a documentation of factual political material. Though Macgoye may not qualify to be classified as a political writer with regard to her thematic concerns and her social vision which is anchored on a feminist standpoint, Gikandi's description could be appropriately applied owing to her depiction of women and their take in the political arena in most of her works.

Literary scholarship in the Kenyan context reveals the depth to which the political theme has been advanced in fiction. This is well captured in Ngugi's works such as *A Grain of Wheat*. Though women writers, like Grace Ogot, Margaret Ogola and

Muthoni Likimani have made significant contribution to Kenyan literature, most of women's work does not deal with politics extensively like the works of male writers. Since most of women's writings are reacting to negative male portrayals of women, their apparent insufficient treatment of politics could be interpreted as women's desire to focus their energy on correcting the stereotypical portrayal of women in literary works. However, in this chapter I seek to demonstrate how politics influences individual characters' choices and how this choices impacts on societal construction of the characters identities.

In the text under study, Macgoye attempts to portray the social reality of the Kenyan society. She confirms this by pointing out that "[w]riters and artists have to be sensitive in a deliberate way to the public and personal issues of their time" (Macgoye, 1996: iv). Macgoye's views confirms Chinua Achebe's and Wole Soyinka's conviction that "writers, [are] sensitive points of their communities, […] teachers whose duty was to be that of a visionary, a warning voice and a builder of the future" (Per Wastberg, p. 18 in K.H.Petersen, 1986). Soyinka and Achebe view the artist as the mouthpiece of the society.

Achebe's conviction is well captured in A *Man of the people*. In the text, Achebe like a prophet predicts the down fall of the dictatorial regime in power through a coup. His ability to predict the future of the Nigerian state is informed by the social realities at the time of his writing. Like a prophet he has a vision for the future of his society which indeed was actualised when the Nigerian Government was ousted through a coup immediately after the publication of his text. The study, therefore, follow Achebe's and Soyinka's sentiments in interrogating how Macgoye uses political

events and the individual story to show that the country and the woman are yet to be born as they struggle to realise this independence.

2.3 Politics and Individual Character's Responses

In chapter one, I pointed out that Macgoye does not situate Paulina as an active participant in politics, however we argue that political events both in colonial and post-colonial Kenya influence Paulina's choices in life. An analysis of the text demonstrates that the only woman actively involved in politics is Chelagat Mutai who is later imprisoned. As she is the sole women MP, parliament becomes a male dominated space. A reading of the text indicates that for every political event that takes place in the society, Paulina's life takes a different direction which is geared toward her liberation. I will attempt to demonstrate this argument in the subsections below.

2.3.1 *Kenya's Political Struggle and Paulina's Miscarriages*

Coming to Birth juxtaposes the emergence of a new type of Kenyan woman in the embodiment of Paulina with the emergence of a new nation from colonial domination. Macgoye develops the two stories at the same time while showing the intersection of the two at different periods in time. For instance, when Paulina first arrives in Nairobi, there is an emergency and political insecurity. This is the time people are demanding freedom from the colonial government. When Kenya gains its independence, we see it is still incapable of taking charge of its political affairs. It is still in its infancy in handling its political affairs. Independence therefore is something new that the country has to adjust to with time just like Paulina's marital status is new and she has to make adjustments to live up to the expectations of a married woman.

The political confusion in the city, thus, can be read as Paulina's confusion in her attempts to settle down. This political confusion in chapter one parallels Paulina's shocking plunge into the city and her resultant miscarriage there after. On her second day in Nairobi, Paulina gets lost after being discharged from King George's hospital which is the present day Kenyatta National Hospital. She starts tracing her way back from the hospital which leads her to the railway station and to other estates in Nairobi like Kaloleni and Makongeni; she ends up locked at the police station for allegedly walking around aimlessly and distributing propaganda leaflets. It is from this police station through Ahoya's help that she is able to locate Martin's room in Pumwani.

I interpret this journey as Paulina's attempt to situate herself in the city by getting acquainted with the city lifestyle and the politics of the day. Through this journey she encounters other people and learns a lot about life in the city and marriage. It is the advice that she gets from Ahoya, the lady who gave her accommodation after being rescued from the police cell, that Paulina is able to accept the challenges of marriage. By the end of the chapter, the emergency is easing and Paulina seems to be learning the requirements of the city lifestyle and its politics.

Throughout Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*, political upheavals are closely linked with what happens in the protagonist's life. For instance, an intersection of Paulina's private life with the country's politics occurs when the police violently encroach into Martin's house in Pumwani. The police intrusion into Martin's house acts as a catalyst for Paulina's second miscarriage. In this way, the personal space and privacy is violated and interfered with by the government machinery. The brutality and violence vested in the police force is championed by colonial masters to protect their

interests in the colony regardless of the subjects' welfare. The force with which police employ to get way into Paulina's house is excessive.

This can be read as the tendency of those in power to silence and instil fear in the ruled so that the latter can not challenge the source of this power. We interpret this episode as an attempt by political leaders which can be linked to patriarchal structure to kill efforts made by women to assert themselves. The foetus Paulina carries at the time of this intrusion is the only source of hope for the oppressed in the society. For most women around the world, children are always the source of their empowerment because children give them hope for the future. However, the fact that a 'new life' is not given an opportunity to come to term is a pointer to the country's inability to come to maturity and be independent and also as a strategy used by the colonialist to cling to power and manipulate the colonised.

Regarding police intrusion in Paulina's house, the narrative voice informs us that Paulina was in pain even before the police forcefully entered the house. I interpret the incident as an effort on the writer's part to depict colonialists as always meddling in the private affairs of the colonised countries. They are not left to find solutions to their own problems like Paulina's pain. Probably, if it were not for the police, she would have saved the pregnancy by seeking medical attention. However, the incident elicits a number of questions. Could it have been possible for Paulina to miscarry even without the intrusion of the police? Is it because of the police that the miscarriage occurred? Or is it just by coincidence, could Paulina's young age also be a contributing factor to her inability to carry pregnancy to term? Following this incident, we argue that Macgoye demonstrates how politics, whether directly or

indirectly, influences the private lives of individuals in the society regardless of an individual's participation in it and her position in the society.

Paulina's disintegrating marriage can also be a pointer to the future disintegration of the new nation. In chapter three of the text, during the Madaraka[9] day celebrations, the celebrations offer something new to Paulina's personal experience. The narrator puts it this way that "the new year, the great year of independence, dragged on" (Macgoye, 1986: 51). The narrative voice further tells us that even as the new nation comes into being, "something had died in [Paulina]" (Macgoye, 1986: 52). What is it that has died in Paulina? Is it her naivety or her marriage? I argue that both her naivety and marriage are dying. Her naivety is giving way to self realisation as compared to Martin who, in the same chapter, we are told "is still in essence a Luo boy" (Macgoye, 1986: 51). It is also the dying of her marriage because we are told Martin has distanced himself and no longer came home or sends any money and above all he was staying with a lady from the coast whom people knew as his second wife. Paulina knew about the alleged marriage but dared not confront Martin. Paulina feels that since she had not been able to conceive a child, she has no good reason to confront Martin about his infidelity. Therefore, Paulina had lost hope of saving the marriage since she can not conceive a child.

The inscription of Madaraka mood in Paulina's personal life demonstrates the intersection of politics and Paulina's development. Kurtz writes that "the actual moment of Kenyan independence is surprisingly anticlimactic as Macgoye turns the focus of chapter three which covers 1963 through 1968 away from political events

[9] Madaraka is a Swahili term which literary means 'internal self-government and it is a public holiday which is celebrated on first June of every year in Kenya.

and onto Paulina's inward, personal development" (Kurtz, 2005: 118). It is only at the celebration that we are told about the inner death of Paulina. This marks a point of reality in Paulina's life and a step towards personal growth. For her, independence means coming to terms with Martin's infidelity. It is within this period in history that Macgoye demonstrates the significant growth of Paulina's worldview while Martin's life is retrogressive. He has not developed despite being married which is captured well in his habit of sharing rooms with other people to subsidise his expenditure. By contrast, Paulina's life is developing, especially her financial status.

This revelation about Martin's life in the context of independence celebrations suggests Paulina's need to move on with life towards her own independence. This makes her put a lot of efforts into her studies to gain independence through financial stability which can only be realised through her education. The absence of Martin at the Madaraka celebrations is an indication that independence for Paulina is more of a prospect and a certainty than it is for Martin. Paulina has in reality shown that her life is geared toward independence since at these celebrations, Paulina is no longer as innocent and naïve as when she arrived in Nairobi for the first time. Though she feels something had died in her, her independence is promised through the actions she undertakes in life.

2.3.2 *The Influence of Operation Anvil and Chelagat Mutai's Detention on Paulina's Development*

The 'Operation Anvil' is a very important political aspect that influences Paulina's life. This exercise by colonial government forced many Kikuyus from Pumwani into centralised and controlled areas where they were put into close supervision (Macgoye,

1986: 8). As a result, the operation made available housing opportunities for members of other communities like Paulina's husband who is from the Luo community. Macgoye writes that Martin "had a job as a salesman in a small stationery shop from which a Kikuyu had dropped three years before, soon after the fighting started. He had a room in Pumwani from which a tenant had been 'swept' in 'Operation Anvil' and which has been occupied by one Luo worker or another" (Macgoye, 1986: 1). Since Martin obtains a room, he invites Paulina to join him in the city.

The journey that Paulina embarks on from her rural place to Nairobi to join her husband unaccompanied can be interpreted as her first pursuit for self-realisation. It is a journey full of lessons. Martin confirms Paulina's process of learning by pointing out that "he could not see Paulina [coming out from the train] but was confident that in days to come she would be one of the first to emerge, stouter and more impressive then, masterful of chattels and babies, a woman in her own right" (Macgoye, 1986: 2). This is exactly what happens when Paulina comes to Nairobi for the second time as we are informed that

> Her breasts were firm and her eyes knowing and that her goods were expertly handled and she had brought a lot of food: so much that he had to give a man two shillings to carry the sacks on a handcart. She had been crocheting industriously even on the train - like a Kikuyu, people said - and this time he did not have to walk home with her, but returned to the shop while she organised her woman's business. (Macgoye, 1986: 33)

This is a pointer at Paulina's desire to grow beyond a woman's boundaries and become, in Martin's words, a woman in her own right. These journeys, which were made possible through Operation Anvil, influence her desire to be productive. This productivity is captured well in her crocheting which is aimed at earning an extra shilling on top of what Martin was earning.

Macgoye also captures the social reality of the time from a woman's point of view, that is, from the marginalised position in the society. For instance after Mr. M has won his parliamentary seat; delegation after delegation comes asking for different things from their member of parliament. It is at this point that Paulina observes the insincerity of political leaders. Mr. M says he is in church while he is actually sleeping. It is from this marginalised position that a woman's story is able to offer statements on the national history in terms of politics and its performance. By evoking women's views, Macgoye appropriates feminist reading in her interpretation of Kenyan history. She gives us an interpretation of Kenya's history as a gendered space. For instance, the ending of the novel suggests that Kenya's post-colonial leadership has been a failure under male leadership and it is perhaps time to embrace a female leadership. According to Paulina,

> Perhaps women's work was like that - the word for creation is the same one you used practically for knitting, or pottery. Men's work was so often destructive - clearing spaces, breaking things down to pulp, making decisions - and how often did the decisions amount to anything tangible? Words in the air, pious intentions, rules about what not to do.

> She was glad that a lot of her work lay in making and mending things. (Macgoye, 1986: 129)

This observation from Paulina's point of view is important in that it depicts men as destructive not only to property but also to individual characters' desire to move out of societal confines and restrictions since the system is full of 'rules of what not to do' which leads to total subjugation. Through Paulina's observation, she realises that a woman can be a better leader as compared to men since women's work lay in mending and making things. This revelation is availed through Paulina's encounter with politics. Above all, the minimal representation of women in politics is a case that Macgoye takes issue with. Macgoye presents Kenyan politics as one area that is heavily dominated by men. In the entire cabinet, there is only one female Member of Parliament and the narrative voice informs us that she was "a rare bird" (Macgoye, 1986: 110).

In an effort to demonstrate the intersection between Paulina's personal life with politics, Macgoye deliberately puts her to work for M's family which we are told is a politician's household. Mr. M's family is indefinable because we can not classify him into a specific tribe in Kenya since we are only given his initial M. Paulina's proximity with a politician's household helps her to become politically conscious. It opens her personal and closed world to the world of politics. This is demonstrated in her fruitless effort to rally women to protest against the detention of Chelagat Mutai who is arrested for challenging the detention of her fellow politicians. Kurtz argues that by putting Paulina to work for a member of parliament, Macgoye creates an occasion to attach a human face and story to Kenyan politics. By placing Paulina

within the M family, we are able to identify the flaws in politicians resulting from pressures from the family and clan or societal expectations.

In *Coming to Birth,* Chelagat Mutai is the first and the only woman to be named a member of parliament in the new government. Chelagat Mutai was the first woman MP in independent Kenya who was imprisoned for challenging the Kenyatta government about corruption and the government's tendency to silence those who were radical. She fled into exile to Tanzania in the early 1980s after her life was threatened.[10] She is the only female character who engages and struggles in the field of politics that is heavily dominated by men. Her vision as a woman is not realised because she is imprisoned for daring the government of its ill dealings with people opposed to the governments handling of national affairs. When her fellow members are detained, everybody is silent apart form her. We are told that,

> Only one person asked a lot of questions about the new detention and that was a single woman MP, a rare bird indeed. Her questions were not fully answered, though rumours buzzed about, and fresh news overtook them as the months passed. Then all of a sudden the girl -Chelagat Mutai was her name - was accused of inciting a crowd the previous year and sentenced to thirty months imprisonment. (Macgoye, 1986:109)

Chelagat is represented as a woman struggling against the barriers set by the society in order to liberate people. She is the only MP who has voice to question social injustices carried out and perpetrated by the postcolonial regimes in Africa and

[10] For more insight about Chelagat see Miller (1984), Guy (1981), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981).

specifically the Kenyan society. She does not keep quiet like her fellow MPs but takes the government to task by seeking to unveil the motives behind the detentions. By putting her in prison, the government is silencing her powerful voice that was out to speak for the oppressed and the rest of the society at large. The woman in this case is able to interrogate the over determined social structures in the society that had initially pegged her down and made her invisible. Macgoye thus counters both colonial and African male representation of women as passive and a historical, as well as providing a critique to colonialism and African patriarchy.

In this case, Macgoye undermines patriarchal ideology by means of reversal of initial terms in relation to sexual allocation of roles and responsibilities. She casts men in the role of colonial collaborators and portrays women as being foremost in offering resistance to this kind of domination. By using Chelagat Mutai, the writer designates women as subjects of African nationalism and foregrounds their defiant action in her narrative (Stratton, 1994: 63). The presence of a woman MP is a victory against sexism and a proof that women can actively contribute to the "establishment of sexual egalitarianism by demonstrating to the male elite that women too can be of great service to the state" (Ibid, 75).

Chelagat Mutai's detention drives Paulina to a new level of political action which leads to the first time in her married life that she sets up her will against Martin's. Through Paulina's stream of consciousness, we are told

> But Chelagat, a strapping young woman and single, was within her comprehension, cut off from friends and constituents, humiliated in the cell,

> sent out to dig, kept from the news of other sufferers which she had been demanding before anyone remembered the incitements said to have occurred so many months back, when she had not yet addressed the press conference or post the awkward statements and the defiant questions.
>
> "We must do something," Paulina howled at Martin.
>
> "Don't shout at me. I'm not the High Court of Appeal. What do you think we can do?"
>
> "Write to our MPs, make processions, sign petitions, strike…." (Macgoye, 1986: 111)

The detention of Chelagat therefore makes Paulina assert her rights by pointing out that she is 'the government' (Macgoye, 1986: 111) and ought to do something about what has happened to Chelagat. She is politically conscious of the ill dealings evident in the government that she feels can not go unchallenged. However, Paulina's political activism is not nurtured. Martin and Mr. M discourage her in her quest to gather women and demonstrate against the government's action. Macgoye hastens to inform us that, Martin has been disillusioned and does not want anything to do with action because his life has not changed at all since he got married to Paulina and that "their time together was limited, their conversation desultory, but always she [Paulina] was the one demanding to grow, to get out, to do things, and he was tired" (Macgoye, 1986: 112). It is then as a result of the political silencing of Chelagat by the government of the day that Paulina desires to grow and do things which are to benefit the society at large.

2.3.3 *The Kisumu Massacre and Political Assassinations*

The period immediately after independence is also characterised by disillusionment in the lives of people. This disillusionment is candidly captured in Paulina's life when her son is killed prematurely in Kisumu Killings in 1969. We wonder what happened to the promises of independence and freedom when Paulina's son is killed just because he wanted to see and probably greet his president. This political massacre is very important in Paulina's quest for development since it requires her to adjust and make a lot of changes and decisions in her life. When Paulina's child is killed, she is forced to move back to Nairobi. This journey marks a very important aspect in her life as it is a quest for personal growth. Though Paulina had previously asserted that the child was what she needed in life as it marked her growth as a fulfilled woman, the fact that the child is no more makes her embark on the journey that could probably make her life fulfilled again.

The Kisumu massacre in the text plays a key role in Paulina's life bearing in mind that it is a real political event that occurred in 1969. This was the time when the then President of independent Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, was going to officially open a hospital in Kisumu. Paulina informs us that "the Mzee had long promised to come to Kisumu. This time he had come for the purpose of opening a new hospital, and some of the hopes that she had had in those young days in Nairobi was coming back again. After all this time the future was for everyone, and her child had been born in a country that stood up for itself" (Macgoye, 1986: 82). The hope that Paulina talks about is the desire of being free in her own country rather than being controlled by colonialists. This is why Paulina is consoled that her son is born a Kenyan with a future therefore a free person which turns out to be ironical since Paulina's hope for

the future is not realised because Okeyo's life is cut short. I also argue that, the freedom Paulina talks about is the freedom of women in the society. The fact that she has a child born out of wedlock is a pointer to the search of freedom outside the marriage institution. Okeyo's death becomes a pointer to bigger political issues happening in the country at the time. These political issues include among other events such as assassinations, detentions and corruption aimed at silencing the few people critical of the regime.

Politics, therefore, initiates the main character's mobility which is characterised with political, social and economic changes and awareness. Rinkanya argues that individual women characters' lives are always "changed by the powers of history" and goes on to say that the "women were not only able to overcome the trials and tribulations of this change, but exactly through the change they received new opportunities of altering their fates"[11] which is seen in Paulina's relocation to Nairobi as a domestic worker because she did not find happiness in Kisumu anymore as before.

This journey back to Nairobi proves her desire to be fulfilled because it is while in Nairobi that she reunites with Martin. When the novel ends, she is again expectant, like at the beginning of the narrative, with Martin's child something that will give her what she "has so much wanted in life, [a child]" (Macgoye, 1986: 68). The Kisumu political massacre therefore saves Paulina's marriage. Since, as will be seen in chapter five, Macgoye advocates safeguarding marriage at all costs. The killing of Paulina's

[11] See Rinkanya, Alina. *Kenyan Women's Literature in the Last Two Decades of the Twentieth Century*. Available at: http://www.egerton.ac.ke/Regerton/about_people/dvcre/press/journal/?ref=Alina%20Rinkaya.htm

son is important in saving the marriage since it is as a result of Okeyo's death that Paulina is able to reunite with Martin. Apart from this, it is in Nairobi that Paulina finds a sense of belonging as she says that she is more at home in Nairobi than in her rural home (Macgoye 1986:106).

In the years following Kenya's independence, political assassinations became a factor in Kenyan public life. Many politicians radical to the regime were silenced under suspicious and dubious circumstances. This happened through detentions or assassinations of key political figures.[12] For instance in 1965, "Pio Gama Pinto the only Mau Mau Asian detainee was assassinated" (Arnold, 1981: 78). In 1969, Tom Mboya then the "the Minister for Finance and Planning was shot in broad daylight in down town Nairobi. This led to protests and violence in major towns in Kenya" (Miller, 1984: 45, Macgoye, 1986: 73). People demanded to know who killed him and this led to the arrest of Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, who Macgoye alludes to in *Coming to Birth* (Macgoye, 1986: 88). In 1975, J. M. Kariuki was picked up from a Nairobi hotel by "senior police officers and was later found murdered by unidentified assassins" (Macgoye, 1986: 106). The government made cover-ups in J.M. Kariuki's murder[13] which Paulina refers to us "Whisper, whisper, whisper. They said police officers had been transferred from here to there" (Macgoye, 1986: 106). These assassinations are very important in determining the choices of characters in the text.

The word whisper here is used to imply the culture of silence that people have accepted in the society since no one is ready to challenge the government for the

12 For more insights into political assassinations in Kenya See Sayer Geoff (1998), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981), Macgoye Oludhe (1986), Kurtz Roger (2005).

13 See Miller, Norman (1984), Guy, Arnold (1981), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981).

simple reason that they will be silenced. As much as these political incidents were distant from Paulina's social life, the events affected her like any other person. She says that "J.M.'s death had crystallised a feeling of belonging, so that though she herself had dared to go up and take the hand of the widow when she visited the house and pour out what phrases of consolation she could manage in Swahili…" (Macgoye, 1986: 111). Paulina feels a sense of belonging because of what she has in common with J.M.'s wife in that both Paulina and the widow have lost people they adored in life through the government's arm.

J.M.'s assassination, therefore, awakens in Paulina a sense of identity with others in the society who had felt the ill-fated hand of the government in their personal lives. Through this assassination, Macgoye suggests the necessity for people to see what is happening in the society as a problem to all but not as an individual's problem. Through identifying with others, individuals become more productive since they can stand and challenge the system together. According to Macgoye "politics exists [in the society] to foster the productive life of individual, extended and national families" (Macgoye, 1996: 48). The fact that Paulina is able to realise her hidden self confirms Macgoye's argument of being productive.

The narrative in *Coming to Birth* also indicates that politics occurs in Paulina's life indirectly. For instance, when Mboya is assassinated, Nancy, the woman who was living with Martin at the time packs and leaves Martin. This is the last woman that Martin was staying with. When Paulina moves back to Nairobi after the death of her son, she reconciles with Martin since he was not keeping any woman. Tom Mboya's assassination therefore indirectly or rather unconsciously presents an opportunity for

Martin and Paulina to revive their marriage. Another reason for Martin to join Paulina is that he was not developing at all as compared to Paulina's life. Since he married Paulina his life had remained the same (Macgoye, 1986: 111). Martin's experience indicates that despite Kenya attaining independence, his hope that life would change for the better has not materialised. This suggests that Martin's life has not changed while Paulina's life is one that has been affected positively by the social realities of the time.

In Ogola's *The River and the Source*, the author deals with the political domain from a family's point of view just like Macgoye in *Coming to Birth*. Oloo Sigu, one of the characters in the text and husband to Elizabeth, engages in extra marital affairs which Elizabeth is aware of. But like Paulina in *Coming to Birth*, she decides to keep quiet. What is interesting here is that the two women, Paulina and Elizabeth, decide to keep quiet and this turns out to be the best way to deal with their errant husbands because they eventually come back to their senses and reform for the better. This implies that the new families, Paulina's and Elizabeth's, are yet to learn about their marriage through experience just like Kenya as a country is yet to learn with experience. The narrator in *The River and the Source* informs us about the composition of the cabinet and what she thinks about their performance that "the cabinet consisted of young, quite well educated Africans whose enthusiasm covered a multitude of sins especially lack of experience, *but they would learn on the job with time*" (Ogola, 1994: 161),[emphasis mine].

This excerpt demonstrates that experience through knowledge acquisition is achieved with time. It is not then surprising that the two families shall learn with time of what

is expected of them. This becomes problematic because Macgoye seems to be falling back and propagating female stereotypes that have dominated African literary scholarship. Like most African writers, she champions the notion of women being reluctant to challenge the status quo by spurning deviant behaviours in the society like male promiscuity. In this way, women accept their oppression as normal. The fact that women accept what men do regardless of its implication is killing the feminist spirit that endeavours to liberate them.

Inherent in the excerpt above can be said that Kenya is yet to come to birth as is evident in its constant struggle for stability. I, therefore, draw a parallel between Kenya, which has to learn from experience, and the two young families that are to learn with experience. We further draw similarity between the nation and the two men based on the fact that Kenya just like Paulina's and Elizabeth's husband has been unfaithful to its electorate. The best way forward for the country is to reconcile with the people and work towards the country's maturity in terms of politics and the government's performance in general.

In Macgoye's *Homing In*, the author explores at length the events of the colonial history of East Africa. The changes in the political climate allow Ellen Smith and Martha Kimani, the women characters in the text, to replace their mistress-servant relationship with one of mutual friendship. It is the change of political organization that initiates change in Ellen's and Martha's lives to see each other first as human beings then as women experiencing the same problems. Macgoye at this point exploits feminist articulations that advocate for feminism as humanistic undertaking

as we noted in the first chapter. The two women in the text find solidarity first as human beings but not in terms of race and class.

The women thus deconstruct class and racial structures that initially defined them as servant and mistress in an attempt to share their struggles and sufferings as women. Macgoye thus demonstrates that politics strongly influences the social changes in the society which touch on different aspects of life whether it is in form of race, class among other things.

2.4 Conclusion

The political realities in Kenya have not fully engaged with the strategies that initiate change in women holistically. This demonstrates that change in all spheres, ranging from cultural, political, social and economical has not been made available to women. This can be said to be emanating from the view that the public space and particularly the political space is constructed and dominated by men which erases the contribution of women in politics. Chukukere (1995) argues that women's involvement in political affairs is something that can be traced both in colonial and postcolonial periods where women suffered a lot since they were not recognised. It becomes significant therefore that women writers should write about politics from the female point of view in order to empower women in the society as depicted in most African literary works. For instance, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of Savannah* and *A Man of the People*, Imbuga's *Aminata*, and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* among others have tried to interrogate women's agency and liberation in African societies they deal with.

It is in the light of the significance of women in politics that I have underlined in this chapter the relevance of the country's politics in developing Paulina's personal story.

It is through the nation's politics that the writer grapples with women's struggles to come to terms with the changing socio-political situation. Through the protagonist, Macgoye makes statements about the contribution of women to politics through what they experience in the society. Though women are not active participants in politics as depicted in the text whereby the country is having only one female Member of Parliament (Macgoye, 1986: 111- 112)[14] at the time, Paulina's struggles to empower herself makes important contribution to the country's political and economic development. For instance, politically, she rallies women to demonstrate against the unjust imprisonment of the only woman Member of Parliament; economically, she contributes to Martin's income in the house among other things. Macgoye, therefore, demonstrates that when society is influenced by political changes, both women's and men's identities will be constructed around the current changes. Discussion of this chapter thus helps us to discuss the next chapter where we make an attempt to demonstrate how Macgoye redefines women's images within the Kenyan society.

[14] See Ngugi (1983).

Chapter 3

(Re)defining Women's Image

3.1 Introduction

> One does not stand in one spot to watch a masquerade. As with dancing masquerade, vantage points shift and one must shift with them for maximization of benefits. (Nnaemeka, 1997: 5)

In this chapter I focus on individual female characters in *Coming to Birth* to demonstrate the strategies women use to emancipate themselves. I will examine how women characters struggle to redefine themselves in relation to patriarchal dictates in the Kenyan society. I argue that patriarchy inscribes stereotypes on females in the society and that this limit women's potential in life. I use the term stereotype in the study to refer to the generalised perceptions of personality types and how they influence the nature of interaction of individuals in the society.

For instance, the character traits of men and women are considered predictable from the contexts in which they occur. In the face of danger, for instance, a man and a woman are expected to (re)act differently. The man is expected to fight back while the woman will scream and flee. Another example is that, the kitchen is a woman's domain; therefore, no man should cook or interfere with its operation, especially in the African context. This demonstrates that stereotypes are not innate but are socio-culturally constructed on the basis of generalised assumptions that have been used and accepted by the society. However, with time, stereotypes often become an identity that marks individuals as distinct from other groups in the society. In this study, I use

the term stereotype to refer to what is considered female in the society and how women try to transcend this limitation inscribed to them as depicted in *Coming to Birth*. I will analyse Paulina and Amina in order to demonstrate how they have made choices aimed at their emancipation.

In the main, the chapter engages with how Macgoye [re]creates the female figure and how women question traditional and cultural practices by subverting the construction of femininity in the society which eventually gives them freedom and choice in their lives. Choice for women, according to Brown (2001), is the good for self empowerment which should be understood as rebellion and resistance aimed at seizing upon a capacity for liberation.

The chapter is divided into two subsections. The first subsection gives a brief overview of the presentation of women in African literary works. This section helps in demonstrating how Macgoye departs from this tendency in an attempt to redefine women's image in the society. The second subsection deals with marriage and motherhood. This section looks at how marriage and motherhood are constructed by society to limit women's choices and to ensure women's subjugation. It looks at how women subvert the construction of marriage and motherhood by patriarchy in their attempt to liberate themselves from social cultural structures that confine them.

3.2 Construction of Women in African Literature: A Brief Overview

Writers like Wole Soyinka, Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o are some outstanding male African writers who have presented multidimensional, resourceful, determined and flexible women who, according to Durosimi, when necessary, "break

through the barriers imposed by tradition to take their stand by men" (Durosimi et al, 1987: 2). In most of the texts, they are women who help men accomplish their goals thus being very instrumental in men's lives. However, it is worth noting that the role given to women characters in some of the male authored texts is not an independent role but that of helping the main character, in this case a man, to accomplish his task.

For instance, in most of Ngugi's literary works written about colonialism and Kenyan people's struggle to attain independence, women characters only help Mau Mau fighters by supplying them with arms, food and informing them of what is happening in villages. However, we do not see women arming themselves to fight against the oppressor by joining the guerrilla fighters in the forest. This is a pointer to female subordination in the society where their importance is to offer support to men. Though the above writers give women characters some positive portrayal the very women are presented as people stripped bare of all that make them central and relevant in traditional African socio-political domain.

In examining the large spectrum of African literature right from the colonial period to date, one realises that it has basically tried to come to grips with primary problems emanating from colonialism, struggle for independence and from postcolonial disillusionment especially from African states. However, the representation of female characters has been scantily dealt with as a serious problem requiring redress. Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* attempts to rectify this anomaly through the manipulation of the main character in relation to other characters in the text. The author gives women characters central roles in her text to offer us insights into understanding women's lived struggles and experiences.

Macgoye traces the female figure right from the ashes of colonialism to the postcolonial period and shows how the female figure has been constructed and deconstructed over this period of time. She juxtaposes the emerging nation and the emerging woman, as seen in the previous chapter, which shows that, in the same way the nation has to be reconstructed from the colonial powers, the woman has to be reconstructed from patriarchal social order that has dictated her life and eventually distorted her image and potential for a long period of time.

For example, the dichotomies of women's power and definitions of mother/motherhood and woman/womanhood in the traditional and modern periods are some of the ideas mirrored in *Coming to Birth*. A reading of the text also raises questions such as: if the traditional woman is traditional, what makes her so? Do women have any power in African society? If so, under what circumstances? What are the defining parameters of femaleness and maleness, strength and weakness? Have these parameters remained the same over time? What makes a woman traditional? Does she reside in the traditional milieu?

This is because in African countries today there has been a tendency of people drawing a dichotomising line between modernity and tradition. However, it is worth noting that the two, modernity and tradition can not be neatly separated since we have occasions where aspects in the two spaces are fused leading to a hybridised culture. This affects not only the practices, values, principles and behaviours that humans manifest, but also the geographical spaces they occupy. These are some of the key issues that Macgoye seems to interrogate in her text in relation to the woman's

position in the society. It is in answering the questions raised above that Macgoye avails space for women's emancipation.

3.3 Marriage and Motherhood

Marriage is a fundamental institution in African societies within which female exploitation resulting from male dominance resides. This underscores the assumption that women's exploitation often continues into marriage as a result of the socialization process that regulate women's upbringing and individual interaction. A woman is socialised to believe that she must be submissive and her work is to serve men in her life be it a father, a brother, a son or a husband. Ogundipe-Leslie argues that marriage has been one of the oppressive structures for African women. According to Ogundipe, marriage as oppressive is a process that takes different forms. First, the "woman loses status by being married because in the indigenous systems, which are still at the base of the society, the woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights within her birth lineages. Within marriage, she becomes a possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family except, in some groups, through what accrues to her through children" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994: 75).

This observation is evident in *Coming to Birth* when Martin notices that Paulina has not prepared his food and he wonders why he got married. Martin burst out in anger asking Paulina whether she wants him to "carry my own key, fetch my own water, [and] cook my own food! What the devil am I married for?" (Macgoye, 1986: 25). What this implies is that a woman is married to serve the man and ensure that the man is well taken care of regardless of her own wellbeing. This outburst occurs when Martin beats up Paulina badly, locks her in the house and leaves with the key. Here

Paulina is incapacitated and can not do much but still Martin expects her to have prepared food for him when he returns in the evening. Paulina is forced to prepare food for Martin despite her hurting body.

Martin's violent beating of Paulina elevates his self-esteem as it gives him a sense of control of his household. Martin locking Paulina inside the house can be interpreted as patriarchal walls created around women to curtail their liberation. Through this action, Paulina can not access the outside world since her movement is contained within the house. As it is depicted in the fifth chapter, I argue that Paulina's journey that led to her being lost and eventually the beating that we mention here is actually a search for self-realisation. Therefore, when Martin locks her up, he is creating a barrier for Paulina's emancipation.

From Martin's outburst, it becomes Paulina's primary duty to take responsibility of her husband's welfare and ensure that everything is in order for him. This is typical exploitation of Paulina's services since she is not considered equal to Martin but a 'machine' supposed to offer its services to the master. Apart from this incident, Paulina has to be productive and that is why she is sent to her husband's rural home to till land while Martin remains in the city. We are told that "she stayed there for six months, till the harvest was gathered in and her mother-in-law reported favourably on her hard work and obedience" (Macgoye, 1986: 32).

It becomes a woman's responsibility to feed her household through her hard work in the fields since the society expects her to have plenty. It is worth noting that the restriction of women to remain in the rural place while their husbands worked in the

cities has a history that can be traced to the colonial period in Africa into the postcolonial era. According to Obbo, "retaining women in the village served as a control measure against influx of 'loose' women or prostitutes in towns" (Obbo, 1980: 26-30) thus women had to be restricted to the rural to prevent them from prostitution which was considered as immoral. Restricting women to their rural places is a hindrance to women's emancipation since women are not exposed to other opportunities outside the homes.

The writer presents Paulina as a passive and voiceless person entrapped in the selfish male ego of the society. I use the term voiceless in this study to refer to women's lack of assertiveness in expressing what is good for them hence making them passive and submissive to what men do to them. Paulina's marriage at such a young age depicts patriarchal forces at work where childhood is assassinated by the society in which they are born. According to Emmanuel Obiechina (1997) patriarchy has often been portrayed as a blight that prevents women from attaining full personal development and social power. In the present study we use patriarchy as an oppressive system particularly in the context and setting of the text while aware that patriarchy does not oppress women uniformly in the world since it has variants. The oppressive nature of patriarchy is evident in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*. For instance, Paulina finds herself controlled by patriarchal rules and regulations. She is not asked about marriage but because the deal was settled and accepted by her father, she is married off to Martin.

Macgoye interrogates arranged marriages where parents marry off their daughters at very young ages. She demonstrates this by giving us Paulina's age, sixteen-years-old.

One may wonder why Macgoye has to let us know Paulina's age. Is it not enough for her to just tell us that Paulina was married off? However, I argue that by revealing Paulina's age to the reader, Macgoye is in effect ridiculing the insensitive traditional practices that allow child marriages to satisfy their interest in getting wealth without considering the implications on the lives of those who find themselves trapped like Paulina. Macgoye seems to be cautioning against such traditional practices indirectly for the society to avoid such situations in future. This is because arranged marriages denies a woman choice as to when and by whom the various parts of her body should be allowed to be emotionally felt. In this manner, a woman's body becomes a joyless commodity to be used by men.

The fact that Paulina is a girl justifies her as a source of wealth to her biological family since she is married off and in return the family gets dowry. For many young girls like Paulina control of their lives is in the hands of their parents who choose husbands for them irrespective of the suitor's age. The girls' wishes and desires are rarely taken into consideration given their young age and above all the view that women are not supposed to make important decisions. Due to ignorance or poverty, parents marry off their daughters for the meagre bride price in exchange of their daughter. For instance, in September 2004 in Kenya, *The Eastandard Newspaper* carried a story that nine year-old Esther Kaiseiyie was to be married off in April, 2004 to a 65-year-old suitor who had booked her soon after birth. [15]

In Paulina's case, her father had asked for two cattle, a watch and a food-safe for her mother (Macgoye, 1986: 2) as dowry and he accepted Martin to have her for a wife on

[15] See the article "to vow or not to vow: When Weddings Fail at the altar". available at: http://www.eastandard.net/archives/index.php?mnu=details&id=195&catid=59&PHPSESSID=9067b3cebc4fffc78d1009d413437c3b

condition that he will bring five more cows. This action strengthens the claim that a daughter is like a bank and it is a right that her father should be able to draw on her from time to time in terms of material gains. Traditionally, dowry entailed the delivery of livestock by a suitor to the father of his bride in exchange for a woman's reproductive and productive labour since the woman first has to be able to bear children and also be able to feed her family by working hard especially in the fields.

Macgoye interrogates the idea of women's exclusion in important decisions which directly involve women's own lives. In the society explored in *Coming to Birth*, women are expected to be passive observers in matters pertaining to their betrothal and one is expected to accept the outcome of such decisions without question which is the case with Paulina since she is not consulted about her consent to marry Martin. The only information we get is that, she got married because her father told her to do so as they had struck a bargain with Martin. This lack of consultation amongst the parties involved underscores the dichotomy between public and private spaces which highlight African patriarchal constructed spaces based on gender differences.

Since marriage is considered an important issue, it then becomes a man's sphere to decide what is good for the woman without her contribution on the final outcome. The dichotomy of the public and private spaces is aimed at silencing women to accept the status quo that perpetuate their subjugation. The fact that Paulina is not given an opportunity to contribute as far as her marriage is concerned is, in effect, silencing her. Women's voices were mostly suppressed and only projected in the private domain while men operated in centre ground where they could be seen and felt. Since

Paulina moves from the control of her father to being controlled by her husband, there is no hope of being independent as a person.

Unlike Paulina in *Coming to Birth*, Gathoni in Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) is presented as having a voice to question the dictates of the society that privileges the boy child especially in relation to their education. Gathoni, like Paulina in *Coming to Birth*, strives against all odds to attain freedom and emancipation from the 'walls' created by her family which, I argue, is the embodiment of the oppressive Kenyan society against women. Unlike Paulina, Gathoni has a say as far as her marriage is concerned. Though it appears a futile attempt, she registers her message of self-realisation in the minds of those around her especially her 'greedy' mother. In a war of words with her mother (Wangeci) as to why Gathoni can not get a husband who will procure her a spring bed, Gathoni retaliates by posing "Is that why you refused to send me to school, so that I may remain your slave picking tea and coffee so that you can pay your son's school fees?" (Wa Thiong'o 1982: 233) To demonstrate her rebellion, Gathoni ignores the proposal to marry and when the topic is revisited again by her mother, she tells her mother plainly that "I shall marry when I want, nobody will force me into it" instead of when her parents want her to marry**.**

It is very ironic that a mother is expected to protect her children against uncalled for suffering but in Gathoni's case, Wangeci is yearning to see her married off so that she can get dowry according to Gathoni's allegations in order to pay fees for her sons. Obioma points out that, women in African society become "victims of multiple oppressions that are internally generated by oppressive customs and practices and externally induced by an equally oppressive, unegalitarian world order" (Obioma, 1997: 21). In Gathoni's case, her oppression is internally generated from her own

family. It seems her mother is in a hurry to dispose of her to any willing man the same way Rachel observes in *Coming to Birth* that "they are in a hurry to settle you these days" (Macgoye, 1986: 8).

Like Macgoye and Ngugi, Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1994) interrogates reluctance of parents to take girls to school by preparing them for marriage. Through Adaku, we learn that in the Igbo society, it was customary for girls to be forced into early marriages so that the bride price could be used in sending boys to school. This is illustrated in the novel where Adaku, the widow inherited by Nnaife declares that when the twins (Nnu Ego's daughters) will reach the age of puberty, they will be forced into marriage so that the bride price obtained will be used in paying fees for their brothers. With respect to this, it becomes evident that girls were socialized to be mothers and wives and this was considered important. This is not different from the way Paulina is socialised. Paulina believes that every woman of "marriageable age should get married because there was no space for single women" (Macgoye, 1986: 16). She therefore initially accepts her status as wife since that is what she is supposed to be anyway.

However, this marriage proves a barrier in Paulina's quest for empowerment. Once she realises that the marriage can no longer offer her fulfilment, she decides to leave. It is only when she is single that she gains independence as a result of her education. This argument demonstrates that marriage is an inhibitor to women's emancipation since within the marriage institution, society dictates people's lives hence choices for women are minimal. This is exactly what happens with Amina. She is not married, which makes her very assertive and economically independent. We are told she is a

landlady of the houses that Martin is renting. We argue that she has attained this status because of her single marital status. It is this character of Amina that influences Paulina's later life as will be seen in the next chapter.

In a patriarchal society, children are highly valued for the marriage to be considered complete, and inability to conceive and carry the pregnancy to term, irrespective of the woman's industriousness is a 'scar' that one has to live with. Why a scar? This is because barrenness is something that one is constantly reminded of by the society. In this respect, women are perpetually seen by men as productive and admirable only to the extent that they can bear and nurture children, otherwise they are mistreated by their men. Because she can not conceive a child, Paulina is betrayed by her husband who keeps women back in Nairobi while she is kept in the rural area. F. K. Buah in *A History of Ghana* emphasises the importance of motherhood in African societies, though from a patriarchal point of view. According to him, a successful marriage should have children, in the event that the marriage is not blessed with children, it must be considered a failure which may result in divorce. In most African societies the woman who cannot have children, 'the barren woman' is seen as evil. Instead, the woman who has many children acquires a higher status and is considered blessed and a source of pride in the family.

However, the irony in Paulina's inability to conceive a child which is a source of her constant frustration and an embarrassment to Martin turns out to be a journey toward freedom and growth of the self. She rebuffs sexual advances by Martin and his clansmen which gives her a space to concentrate on her studies at the Home Craft College. She only conceives with Simon after she has gotten a job in the same

programme to teach other women. In this case, Paulina's child is born out of wedlock. Paulina justifies her unfaithfulness to Martin by pointing out that "she was a married woman denied a married woman's rights and respect in custom she could seek a child where she could" (Macgoye, 1986: 54). We are left to wonder why Paulina is able to conceive with Simon yet she has failed to do the same with Martin after the last miscarriage. This suggests that one can only be fulfilled in a place with freedom. In Simon's and Paulina's relationship, there is no obligation that ties the two and it is a relationship that can be stopped at will. This confirms our argument that marriage is a barrier to women's development therefore there is no way Paulina can get a child in such an environment that limits her freedom. When Paulina finally has the child, the child gives her the urge to work harder and be independent rather than rely on her husband.

In *Coming to Birth*, Macgoye suggests a redefinition of motherhood as not only a mark of fertility and life, but also as a source of feminist power in the society. Perhaps, Paulina's inability to give Martin a child is an interrogation of the assumption that every woman should be a mother. Macgoye's text suggests that this belief is an oppressive measure aimed at disciplining those who cannot bear children by being looked at as outcasts. This is seen severally in the text when Paulina broods a lot about her inability to conceive. However, the assumption of motherhood as a source of joy for women is negated in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. Emecheta disputes the assumption that motherhood is equivalent to female self-fulfilment. The persona of Nnu Ego, who labours all her life to raise several children, finds them deserting her at the end when she most needs their help. Here, Emecheta

satirises the belief that childbirth brings joy to the mother and defines her self-fulfilment and position within her household and society.

One would want to argue that Paulina's lack of motherhood hurts her most. This makes her withdrawn and broody. Paulina is aware that motherhood gives a woman power, privileges and entitlements as observed by Martin who says that so far he does not have a 'home' because one only talks about a home if it has children. Indeed, the author makes a strong claim about one dimension of women's power over men in society, the creation of homes, and by extension villages and nations. As long as Paulina does not bear Martin a child, Martin will forever remain homeless, shuttling between filthy slums and a denied social definition and identity in the society. Martin can only have a home if he has children especially boys. And because Paulina is unable to bear children, Martin has to live with this situation since even the extra marital affairs he has with other women are not blessed with a child. Through the depiction of Paulina's inability to get children, Macgoye interrogates the predicament of barren women who feel children are necessary to the fulfilment of their joy in marriage.

Children are desirable for the simple reason that they ensure continuity of the human race, an ideology that Paulina confirms by remarking that, "a Luo baby was meant to widen the social circle, not to constitute it" (Macgoye, 1986: 71). However the value accorded to children has been violated by patriarchy, to define and confine women in most societies around the world. For instance, Paulina's hard work and obedience is not appreciated because she does not have children.

Therefore, a woman's importance and stability in her husband's home is judged by the degree of her fertility, especially to bear sons. If she is childless, she is considered a "failure in her primary duty of a mother and often suffers considerably as a result" (Chukukere, 1995: 15). Paulina's refusal to be confined within the institution of marriage once it cannot offer her the supposed security and comfort is a very significant step toward liberating herself and women in general. She breaks tradition by showing defiance and strong will, she resists being tied down to her matrimonial home where she is supposed to be 'her place' in the society. Paulina is able to retrieve and regain control over her body and sexuality when she decides to leave Martin.

At this point, Paulina makes a deliberate choice for independence and freedom. The narrative voice informs us that after the fight; "Paulina packed up her belongings without comment, gave her mother-in-law ten shillings so as to achieve a reasonably dignified exit, and piled up her furniture by the wayside to wait for the bus" (Macgoye, 1986: 58). Rather than remain in a loveless marriage, as the traditional woman would have done, she opts out of her marriage. She cannot continue in this mentally exhausting state. Despite the fact that Martin Were is her husband chosen by her father, and the traditional demands of staying with the husband for better, for worse, Paulina demonstrates her sense of self and autonomy to make sound decisions.

Having made this bold step, Paulina starts to challenge traditional practices thereby liberating herself for the sake of her own happiness. Marriage as an institution put in place as a form of superiority and subordination is a point in question for Macgoye. This is a relationship that renders women passive and has faithfully been championed to enslave women further by putting them in their 'proper place'. The idea that

women have to remain in their matrimonial homes regardless of the abuses therein is a pointer at decisions made by men to exercise their patriarchal powers on women.

In most African communities, motherhood has always been seen as a vital power base for women. This is because it is considered to "guarantee women companionship and protection, which they definitely do not expect from their husbands" (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2000). In *Coming to Birth*, Macgoye suggests a rejection of the devaluing of women who are non-biological parents in the persona of Amina. Through Amina, a Muslim single lady and an influential land lady in Nairobi, Macgoye interrogates the notion of motherhood. The narrative voice tells us that her sexuality is kept discreetly. Though she does not have a child of her own, she decides to adopt Joyce, the child born by Rachel's house girl. Amina's decision to adopt a child deconstructs the notion of motherhood that is a requirement of every woman in African society as seen in the socialisation process of the girl child. This shows that a woman does not have to be a biological mother to bring up a child. What Amina does is a rejection of wifehood which implies rejecting being controlled by men in the society but embraces motherhood. Nnaemeka points out that "motherhood should be viewed as both a patriarchal institution that is retained by men to control women and as an experience" (Nnaemeka, 1997: 5), since it does not avail spaces for women's emancipation in the society.

Since Amina is not married, her action is in essence a strategy to avoid being controlled. She finds fulfilment in nurturing a child who is not hers. Thus, Amina's refusal to have a child of her own is a rejection of being controlled by men in her society. This is because a woman's body and sexuality which are commoditised by

society are key issues often exploited by men to exercise their power over women. Since Amina does not allow her body and sexuality to be used for the gratification of men, she interrogates tradition. This is because sexual desire itself is shaped by structures of power and subordination. In this case, Amina contests the exploitation of women's bodies as "reproductive receptacles or as instruments of sexual pleasure for men" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 151). In this way, Amina refuses to conform to socio-cultural stereotypes by claiming ownership of her body which transcends social limitations.[16] She converts marginalisation and confinement into a space that offers salvation.

Through Amina's action, the author redefines motherhood as not only a mark of fertility and life, but also as a source of women's power in the society. This is because in most African societies, motherhood is an institution that imposes a limitation on the woman's social choices as compared to her male counterparts or to those who are single. Motherhood, hereby, emerges as a source of ultimate power where women are supposed to exercise absolute control if they have to transcend social inhibitions designed to curtail the choices they make. In this case, motherhood becomes a revered space for women which no man can violate for his own gratification. It is also important to appreciate the fact that, both motherhood and fatherhood are constructed entities in the society where each of the two has its own designated expectations. A reading of the text gives indication of the author's projection of fatherhood as a constructed space which gives man more power over woman.

[16] See Brinda, J. Mehta (2000).

Glissant links the idea of the "reconstitution of the body with that of reclaiming or controlling the passage of subjectivity leading to the ultimate liberation of the body" (Glissant, 1989: 79). The passage of subjectivity is, accordingly, embodied in women's sexuality and bodies. In this case, the body becomes a fundamental part of how the individual negotiates her way through reality. The search for the self is predicated by a desire in the characters to convert marginalisation and confinement into the need for action. Amina's decision to adopt a child rather than have her own assures her control over her body which can be interpreted as an attempt to dismantle the continuation of women's subjugation.

Through Amina, Macgoye interrogates what motherhood is. The author projects motherhood as a call beyond the idea of being a biological mother to that of being able to nurture. Macgoye, in this regard, offers an alternative to motherhood that has the capacity to reform the society by nurturing children rejected by the same society. Through this set up, women can find fulfilment away from marriage. Apart from the above observation, Macgoye at this point introduces Western practices into the African society in that adoption was unheard of in the African family setup. We interpret this as authorial moralising and above all, her Christian teachings at work since Christianity encourages childless couples to adopt children.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at romance, marriage and motherhood as structures that women subvert in order to liberate themselves by avoiding being tied down according to patriarchal expectations. Marriage and motherhood in the African society, according to Macgoye's work, are institutions that were put in place to subjugate

women. Macgoye, accordingly, interrogates societal expectations of women in such institutions and contrasts it with others that are ‘free’. This chapter has, therefore, engaged with how women redefine these institutions in order to empower themselves.

Macgoye uses stereotypes imposed on women as wives and mothers to reveal the plight of women who do not actually ‘fit’ into their societies, and also to interrogate the kind of society which creates such roles for women. This is realised through artistic construction of women characters who find it hard to live within the constraints of such limited roles. This discussion ushers us in the next chapter where we discuss women’s agency in the text as one of the ways that women embrace to show that they can be active agents or subjects of their own decisions as far as their lives are concerned.

Chapter 4

Women's Agency in *Coming to Birth*

4.1 Introduction

> Those women who struggle without giving up hope, herald the impending change...: change in attitude for both men and women as they evaluate and re-evaluate their social roles.... (Moyana, 1996: 25-26)

This chapter explores how female characters in *Coming to Birth* struggle to get spaces through which to exercise agency. We will focus on the following characters Paulina, Ahoya and Drusilla. In this chapter, I wish to argue that, women in the text challenge patriarchal structures that have restricted their emancipation in the society. The chapter engages with how women question traditional patriarchal structures by disturbing and subverting cultural practices forced on them on the basis of their sex. The chapter will, therefore, explore methods employed by characters to challenge structures that dictate their lives.

The chapter is divided into four sections that together build up to demonstrate women as active agents of their lives. The first subsection deals with Christianity. In this section, we first look at Christianity in general, its teachings and missionary work in women's lives especially in Africa. We narrow it down to Macgoye's text and explore how Christianity has availed space for women's emancipation through subversion of societal requirements of every woman in the society. The second subsection deals with education. Here we look at how education helps women to attain independence

through financial stability. The last subsection explores the urban-rural dynamics and traditional practices. In this section we try to show how the urban setting avails women space for emancipation. We also look at the traditional practices that are compromised resulting from individual characters' contact with town life and how this in turn empower women's agency.

4.2 Christianity as a Space for Women's Liberation

In patriarchal cultures Christianity often works to advance male chauvinism. It is worth noting that many a time religion has not been considered as an engendered domain. What is interesting to the study is that women's devotional practices avails a site of gender contestation within the Kenyan society as seen in *Coming to Birth.* Religion, it appears, forms part of the causes of gender disparity in the society. Religious teachings clearly spell out the domain for women and the domain for men hence women should work toward upholding these distinct spheres as God's plan of things. Ndeda writes that "despite the church being populated by women, they still play a marginal role in power structures of the church" (Ndeda, 2005: 68).

However in *Coming to Birth*, the author portrays religion as one of the spaces where women find freedom and choice on what they want in life. Macgoye portrays religion as a space that liberates women when read against Christian teachings that herself is part of is a point in question. Macgoye fails to give us a clear picture of what really takes place in religious bodies. In tracing the religious teachings right from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the *Bible* is very categorical in its advocacy of women's submissiveness to their husbands and the society at large. Then how does Christianity liberate women when women are not treated equally in the church? Are

women truly free to have a choice in the church? This is open to debate since women are treated differently from one denomination to the other. For instance Muslim women have their own way of articulating their freedom and their Christian counterparts also have their methods for articulating the same.

What is clear is that the inequality trend in the church was and is still advocated in most denominations in the contemporary society. Early missionary women advocated women's subordination to their husbands and taught African women vocational skills that confined them to the homes. For instance, in their study of missionary work in central Africa, Comaroff and Comaroff point out that

> [T]he accomplishment of a missionary in Central Africa, namely, the husband to be a jack-of-all-trades without doors and the wife to be a maid-of-all-work within. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 48)

In effect, the confinement of women within the constructed private domestic and the men in the public domains was an important aspect of Christian evangelism in Africa which as a result advanced patriarchal dictates. This thrust shaped subsequent events in the development of rules, rights, obligations and accomplishments by gender in colonial and post-colonial societies. Macgoye as a missionary herself in Africa raises gaps and silences in *Coming to Birth*. Is it possible for her to have gone against her missionary call by telling women to remain single yet religion and especially the Anglican church, which Macgoye was working for, reveres the family and the marriage institution?

Despite the above, it is argued that the advent of Christianity in Africa was responsible for upsetting the traditional African ways of life.[17] For instance, Taiwo (1984) points out that Christianity was aimed at influencing the community's beliefs and attitudes where some African beliefs were seen as primitive and backward. Thus, the early converts rejected most of the African practices because they were serving a new God as compared to the oracles in the caves and the spirits of the ancestors. Christianity opened up spaces for outcasts in the society to have a belonging and be accepted in the religious community. This situation is well captured in Chinua's *Things Fall Apart* where outcasts in the Omuofia society were welcomed by the missionaries. However, it could as well be argued that, Christianity in some cases advanced notions of subjugation of some social situations in as much as it opened up new avenues for others in the same society.

It is evident that *Biblical* teachings of common good for all did little to liberate women given its advocacy of wives to acknowledge their husbands as lords and heads in their life. If men are heads, then women are not supposed to think but thinking should be done for them by men in their lives. At the same time, the same religious teachings opened up opportunities that destabilized patriarchal requirements of women in the society. In *Coming to Birth*, the Christian teachings alter the social, economic and cultural behaviour patterns as was initially expected of women in the society. One of the aspects that Christianity introduces as presented in *Coming to Birth* is the issue of spinsterhood. In the text, we meet women who opt to remain single because they want to work for the good lord. A good example is Drusilla, the

[17] Ochieng' (ed), (1990: 148-149)

lady who examines Paulina when she is discharged from hospital during her first miscarriage. The narrative voice informs us that

> Then someone brought Drusilla, a saved sister who was a midwife and had felt the call of God to remain single and work at her profession, helping and witnessing to other women. Paulina found it hard to understand a woman who, though not very young, was still marriageable could make such a choice. In custom, there was no place for the unmarried. (Macgoye, 1986: 16)

Through Christianity, the traditional value and worldview of women to marry is challenged. This is captured in Paulina's incomprehebility of such practices since custom did not have space for them (Macgoye, 1986: 16). What this implies is that women are socialised into sustaining the very structures which oppress them throughout their lifecycle. Through spinsterhood, Macgoye interrogates traditional practices that value women to get married, by giving them power of choice as far as marriage is concerned. Macgoye contests the social stigma associated with spinsterhood by presenting women who chose not to enter into marriage as it is expected of them. By defying the dictates of patriarchy which socialise women to be wives in their lifetime, Ahoya and Drusilla regain control over their bodies and sexuality.

I argue that, it is through the women's sexuality that women are placed at the periphery of important matters in society and it is only by claiming their sexuality that they can liberate themselves as Ahoya and Drusilla do in Macgoye's text. This

demonstrates that sexuality like identity is not a static site of oppression of women but women have to challenge its construction for their own emancipation. For these women, the changing socio-political times bring them mixed fortunes that they could otherwise not access in the society.

Paulina cannot comprehend this lifestyle because as a person and a woman in this case, she has been socialized to believe that every woman must get married and that is where they belong in the society. Since custom does not offer space for such choices, then Christianity proves to be a fruitful site for such individuals. Though, traditionally, "respectability of such women was massively reduced by their unmarried status" (Kanogo, 2005: 52), Macgoye shows that Christianity provided space for women to have choices in life. Macgoye, accordingly, gives a woman power over her body and as such a right to chose what she feels is good for her.

Ahoya and Drusilla have adopted solutions in their lives, by violating conventional norms to intractable problems created by the patriarchal society. Tabitha Kanogo observes that "women's construction of the self as they accessed new normative and special options in colonial Kenya became important markers of women's agency" (Kanogo, 2005: 2). In this case, Ahoya's and Drusilla's choice to claim their sexuality demonstrate women's agency toward their emancipation. According to Reynolds (2003**),** a woman's sexuality is what defines her as a woman and defines her position in the society. Sexuality, in this respect, demarcates a woman's dos and don'ts. This projects sexuality as a complex issue that needs to be addressed if there is any hope of empowering women. It is worth noting that sexuality is something to enjoy and celebrate, but also something that is fragile, susceptible and loaded with

complications that have to be handled with a lot of care if indeed the society wants to address the issue of women's subjugation.

Macgoye employs spinsterhood to give voice and immediacy to issues dealing with women's experiences in the society. This demonstrates that marriage and other domestic arrangements were put in place by the society to define women's lives. The fact that Ahoya and Drusilla subvert this definition demonstrate women's agency that requires some courage. These women explicitly redefine their social status thereby plunging the traditional practices into question. By denouncing victimhood and oppression of patriarchy, these single women have, in the words of Nnaemeka, "chosen to act and not be crushed or silenced" (Nnaemeka, 1997: 4).

4.3 Education as a Source of Women's Economic Power

In most societies across the world, education has been advocated as one of the ways for a society's development. However, introduction of Western education in Africa was done on a discriminatory basis where girls were not educated to the same level as boys. This practice confined women to homes and reduced them to subordinate roles in the home. This initial societal stance has been contested by pointing out that ability to access basic education in the society offers some form of independence for a girl to make her own choices which is pivoted on her ability to take a position and make personal decisions which helps her to stand up for herself. The ability to make this choice leads to biological, psychological and sociological rupture aimed at one's own emancipation as depicted in Paulina's unrelenting desire to access education despite having been denied this chance by being married off.

Paulina's determination and self will to go to Home Craft College in her status as a married woman is a challenge to a society that give boys priority to education over girls. What Paulina accomplishes eventually demonstrates that women can equally be successful. If women and men are provided with equal opportunities and both are allowed to compete fairly, there is nothing inherent in women that should lower the level of performance and success. The obstacles built around women in patriarchal inclined societies are mere beliefs depicting women as the weaker sex, both physically and intellectually.

Carol Boyce Davies points out that "[a] character's ability to define herself is shaped both by her understanding of the boundaries by which society circumscribes her and by her ability to transcend those boundaries and attain self-actualisation while remaining nonetheless within her society" (Boyce, 1993: 336). Paulina therefore stands as a good example of such a woman, who creates new spaces for herself in her community without threatening the basis of Kenyan society based on her knowledge of what hinders her emancipation. In creating a new awareness about womanhood, Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* moulds a new woman capable of righting what is wrong. This confirms Stegeman's argument that

> The new woman represents a model of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than her kinship relations, where she has a responsibility to realise her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role, where…she must reason about her own values rather than fit into a stereotype tradition. (Stegeman, 1974: 82)

Stegeman's remark is an attack on the institutionalisation of male dominance and patriarchal interests that are detrimental to women's emancipation. Macgoye, therefore, underscores the need for individual women to break loose from the chains limiting them and seek change in the system in which they live.

The earnings that Paulina is paid at the Home Craft College are generated into developing her house and in the upkeep of her mother-in-law. The writer thus portrays the woman as someone able to handle financial issues better that men as portrayed through Martin who is always without money and sharing rooms with relatives despite being married and employed. He is always retrogressing while Paulina's financial stability matures with time. This is a challenge to women to access education at all levels of their age and status as exemplified by Paulina. For women to emancipate themselves, they should "renegotiate these beliefs and equip themselves with knowledge for effective resistance and participation in societal transformation" (Obioma, 1997: 21) which is captured by Paulina's determination to access education regardless of her status as a married woman.

Paulina's economic success offers her an inner stability that results from her ability to be self sufficient and be able to support her extended family as well as herself. By negotiating economic parity with the male, women in the embodiment of Paulina demonstrate their capacity for independent action. Paulina's economic stability leads to a personal reconstruction of the dispersed female self leading to her physical beauty. For instance, we are told that at the Home Craft College, "women found her happier and thought she was beginning to enjoy the fruits of her labours" (Macgoye,

1986: 62). Money therefore offers Paulina happiness that was deficient when she was reliant on Martin.

4.4 Rural/Urban Spaces and Traditional Practices

The rural and urban spaces are depicted as gendered as seen in most African literary works. The rural is considered a place for women while the city is a space for men. This is a notion that was propagated by the colonialist to ensure upholding of morality. This is because most men considered women who went to town as immoral and for this reason, all women were supposed to remain in rural places as their men sought employment in urban centers. This led to women's subordination since they were forced to rely on their men financially. Stratton argues that the urban-rural dichotomy contributed to the process of "women's economic marginalisation by relegating them to the rural economy, which in practice meant subsistence farming" (Stratton, 1994: 16). The division of the two spaces puts the woman in a dilemma because if she chooses to go to town, she will be "labeled a prostitute or singled out as a case of national indiscipline" (Stratton, 1994: 17) and if she remains in the village as a housewife, she is economically marginalised.

In the first chapter of the text, Macgoye presents Paulina as a very naïve rural girl who finds life in the big city completely different from the rural life she was used to. She is startled with almost everything that she encounters in the city. For instance, she is surprised to find out that in the city, people are individualistic and pass each other without greetings and she is the only one giving way for them to pass on the streets. The narrative voice tells us that, Paulina "felt that she must be the one to give way whenever she came face to face with someone hurrying in the same direction"

(Macgoye, 1986: 3). Macgoye thus depicts the city as a chaotic place in comparison with the rural area where people are orderly. However, I argue that these events that Paulina experience on her arrival in the city marks the beginning of her growth.

Therefore, for Paulina to be integrated and assimilated into the urban lifestyle, she has to adjust and behave like people in the chaotic city. For Paulina, this leads to a clash of dictates since she has carried her cultural practices and baggage to the city where she finds some of these practices not of substance. Since the urban setting is considered modern and the rural traditional, Paulina has to subvert some of the traditional dictates in order to survive in town since tradition can no longer hold. For instance, when Paulina is in intense pain prior to her first miscarriage, she is reluctant to tell Martin because it was against custom to tell her husband that she is expectant instead she should let the pregnancy show itself. However, she is forced to tell Martin because of the pain (Macgoye, 1986: 9).

The belief that women should stay in the rural areas and cultivate crops for their families is just meant to restrict women from being exposed to the outside world out of their homes. Paulina in a flashback tells us that her father used to work in Mombasa on a sisal farm and she had never been there, nor had her mother, and she had very little idea of what his work was (Macgoye, 1986: 61). Macgoye interrogates these restrictions of women remaining in the rural while their husbands are away in urban areas working by allowing women to migrate and venture in towns. The younger generation through Paulina, Rachel, and Amina among others are able to stay in urban centres and it is through venturing the urban space that they are able to learn and redefine themselves. Rachel sells Mandazi to supplement the husband's money;

Amina is a landlady while Paulina begins her journey to financial independence, first by crocheting and then her eventual admission to the Home Craft College. They, therefore, prove that the urban space is resourceful for women's emancipation and an avenue toward economic power.

In the cities, women are able to learn how to negotiate their life and how to survive in the changing socio-cultural, political and economic times. As her country moves toward independence, Paulina manages to achieve a kind of independence as well since she accepts a job which requires her to stay away from home thus growing beyond the traditional circle where a woman is supposed to stay in the home. In this case, the urban space comes out as a place that offers women a chance to prove their potentiality and independence. Macgoye also demonstrates that, despite the city presenting challenges to its inhabitants, it is also a place where women can as Amina in the text puts it "take what comes and make the best out of it" (Macgoye, 1986: 146). It is because of Paulina's encounter with the city that she decides to go to the college. The city therefore becomes an eye opener for women's empowerment, a social order absent in the rural setup where women are supposed to be submissive and always restricted to the home.

The traditional practices and beliefs among the Luo community is also a site for contestation. It is a fact that most of the societies around the world have cultural practices that have to be respected. However, Macgoye in an effort to recreate the female figure, contests traditional practices by showing that not everything in cultural practices and beliefs should be followed blindly. The society, according to her, should only take what is good from tradition and leave out what is detrimental for its own

advancement. For instance, when Paulina's father dies, "no one expected her mother to tear her clothes off in farewell to the body of her husband, as used to be the custom (Macgoye, 1986: 85).

Tradition can be described in the words of Ojo-Ade (cited by Esonwanne in Nnaemeka 1997: 82) as the "established order of the past and the exigencies of the present". Much of tradition, as presented in Macgoye's text, represents specifically the abuses, exploitation, and oppression of women in Kenyan society. We also need to note that tradition is not uniform in Africa, and unfortunately, many people in or outside Africa see tradition as something rigid and static. Tradition is not static nor is it fixed. It is constantly changing, though not all aspects of tradition are mutant. It varies also from one African community to another. The traditional structures that subordinate women are advanced through processes gender socialisation which connects infidelity and heroism to males and associates the traditional roles of wife and mother to females. The ensuing gender asymmetry conceived, internalised and borne out of this need not be over emphasised since it speaks a lot about how people behave in the society in relation to their gender.

The society takes advantage of the biological differences of the sexes to validate the establishment of gender categories that in turn have been the bases of ingrained gender bias. According to Odhiambo, "female members in societies that have a tradition of patriarchal dominance always find themselves burdened with several restrictions, prescriptions, limitations and other such encumbrances solely on the basis of gender" (Odhiambo, 2001: 45). For instance, given Paulina's social status as a childless woman in the society, she has to accept Martin's infidelity since it is

perceived to be normal. This is something decided for her and nothing can be done about it. The same custom allows women to have extra marital relations in case the marriage is not fulfilling like Paulina's case. Like Martin, Paulina takes advantage of traditional prescription of seeking sexual fulfilment outside marriage by engaging in extra marital affair with Simon. However, I argue that this practice should be discouraged for the establishment of happy and decent families. Macgoye at this point is sympathetic to some practices which seems normal in the society.

It is worth noting that, Paulina decides to have this relationship with Simon when Martin's absence and long stay in the city becomes prolonged. We are told that "she was a married woman denied a married woman's rights and respects, in custom she should seek a child where she could. She had the right therefore *to have another man to fulfil her sexual desires"* (Macgoye, 1986: 54, emphasis added). Infidelity on the woman's part is, hereby, portrayed as a way of confronting male domination. Paulina negotiates sex out of necessity which is aimed at filling the gap created by her husband who is having illicit relationships with other women back in Nairobi, while she is neglected back at home. This is a good example of female subordination as a result of tradition and culture which Macgoye depicts as acceptable.

On learning about Paulina's infidelity, Martin does not blame himself for creating Paulina but comes back home, beats her up and denounces her as his wife. Martin thus is 'disciplining' Paulina to bring her back to the prescribed expectations of women in the society. The act of violence against women then denotes and emphasises the submissive and inferior role carved for the African woman in the society. Martin disregards the fact that, he too is keeping a mistress back in the city

and this leads to their separation. The author satirises the social set up of the Kenyan society that privileges men to indulge in wayward behaviours while for women it is abominable. Paulina's behaviour is aimed at restoring order in the society by showing that what the two, Martin and Paulina, indulge in is bad and should not only be blamed on the woman but is a challenge for the society to change their outlook and reconstruct its structures. When Martin beats Paulina, he is just exercising the power that patriarchy has bestowed to him so that he can control Paulina's life. The woman's sexuality and body is thus controlled by men who use it to gratify themselves as seen in Martin's action.

By refusing to comply with her husbands expectations as a married woman, Paulina subverts an age-old tradition that silences women's feelings about their own bodies. She seeks to create a space within which African women can protest the subjugation of their bodies by men who see women's bodies and sexuality as a right that belongs to them for consumption. Paulina, therefore, represents women's unrelenting quest for justice that goes right to the core of male egocentrism that is the fallacy of male superiority and female subordination. She is fighting to eliminate the root cause of women's oppression.

4.5 Conclusion

The chapter has attempted to analyse Macgoye's portrayal of women in terms of reconstructing and empowering their agency as a way of initiating change. Accordingly it has made an attempt to show that women are capable of initiating change by breaking the silence and patriarchal structures put in place to make them docile. In the course of our discussion we explored the different ways individual

women characters employ to liberate themselves from societal structures that limit their emancipation. It emerged that it is only through women's own initiative that they can put an end to patriarchal structures that subjugate them as seen in women character's consciousness to action.

The fact that Macgoye gives her women characters power to transcend the social barriers created by the society is a bold step towards the acknowledgement of the woman in the society as a creator of history. I argue that mechanisms that empower women as individuals and as economic, political and social actors must be put into place for the development of the society. Developing an understanding of the cultural norms that support women's empowerment would be a building block in fighting the existing obstacles in the way of women which will lead to women's liberation.

Chapter 5

Friendship as a Site for Women's Development

5.1 Introduction

> Women's friendships and women's circles are not temporary alliances when the Feminine Principle of nurturing, sustaining, and supporting each other bonds women into a circle of sisters. It is the sister archetype in women that makes it possible for women to identify with each other across national, racial, and religious boundaries.[18]

The aim of this chapter is to examine how friendships help women to break away from structures that limit their emancipation. I intend to demonstrate how friendship enables women to transcend social structures imposed on them by society because of their gender. I argue that, women can have fruitful relationship amongst themselves whether married or unmarried and that these relationships help the women they relate with to face the challenges of the world outside the homes in an attempt to emancipate themselves. To realise the above, I will focus my discussion on the following female characters and how they relate with Paulina: Rachel, Ahoya, Amina and Mrs. M. I analyse these women in relation to how their interaction inform Paulina's choices and actions in her later life.

[18] Jean Shinoda Bolen, M.D in "The Invisible Power of Women's Circle: *The Millionth Circle"* Available at: http://www.peacexpeace.org/resources/library/papers/shinodabolen.asp

5.2 Female Friendship in *Coming to Birth*

There is evidence of friendship in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* whereby the older women help young women like Paulina to survive and adjust to new environments. To discuss friendship, I will rely on the conversations that characters have with each other to gain insights into the characters actions that depict their efforts of moulding one another. The importance of women's friendships cannot be underrated in most societies around the world bearing in mind what some of these relationships achieve.

In this study I do not romanticise friendship as a space that renders positive outcomes and which is always empowering, but as a space where one can be appreciated, advised, criticised or informed about life in general and how the individual makes use of this advice to empower herself. I, therefore, look at friendship in relation to how it emancipates women and how it avails space for women to criticise society. Women's friendships and women's advice have often served to protect others from very destructive social circumstances ranging from an abusive husband, cheating husbands, or domestic abuse. Many a times in the society, women in trouble often turn to their girl friends, their women best friends, or any woman friend for refuge and woman's advice. Through female communication and female connection, women empower each other and enrich the well-being of all in the society.

Examining friendship among Americans, Reohr Janet (1991) points out that with friendship, "there are no social sanctions for [it]. There is no education for it…" (Reohr, 1991: 13). This implies that friendship relies on mutual understanding of those involved in its formation. However, this observation also presents friendship as an unstable relationship that can end any time deemed fit for those involved in it. In

analysing *Coming to Birth*, it is evident that female relationships are grounded on mutual understanding and biological identification of being women. Graham Allan stresses the importance of friendship by arguing that "not only do our friends help to provide us with our sense of identity but they also confirm our social worth" (Allan, 1989: 1). Allan further points out that, "friendship is not just a matter of free choice and selection but that availability of friends is a consequence of people's location within a social structure" (Allan, 1989: 10). This means that people form friendships within specific situations that the parties find themselves in and one that they can easily identify with. My discussion of friendship in this chapter, therefore, follows from Allan's and Reohr's arguments in an attempt to establish the relevance of such relations to women's emancipation.

This approach is informed by the fact that most women in the African society are positioned within a specific social structure that informs each of their actions and requirements both by the family and the society. The positions women occupy rouses the desire for identity and solidarity that need to be shared and be empowered at all levels. In her treatment of friendship, Macgoye employs friendship as an important space that can help women to take action of their lives. I argue that Macgoye presents friendship in *Coming to Birth* as a vital component for women in helping their fellow women adjust to the challenges presented to them by society. It is worth noting that the formation of friendship results from different factors, what Allan refers to as locations. People befriend each other because of education, being neighbours, drinking together, or working together among other factors. It then emerges that friendship becomes viable mainly because of the common interests that inform those that are friends.

A reading of *Coming to Birth* presents female friendship as a relationship that a woman actively constructs without being imposed on. This is because in most societies, a woman is free to make a woman friend, but a husband is imposed on her. This is of course the case with Paulina in the text in that she readily makes friendship with women but a husband had to be chosen for her by her father. Through friendships, Macgoye suggests that support and acceptance of other women is essential in that through women's teachings and identification as women, they aid and support each other both psychologically and materially.

The first female relationship we encounter in the text is between Paulina and Rachel. On Paulina's arrival to Pumwani, Rachel, the next door neighbour and a woman from the same tribe as Paulina, welcomed her by giving her tea and *mandazi* and advised her to rest since she (Paulina) was expectant and tired from the long journey. The narrative voice informs us that Rachel Atieno brought her food and confirmed that they are going to be neighbours (Macgoye, 1986: 7). She also warned Paulina against lighting "the charcoal in the house without opening the window. It can send you into a faint" (Macgoye, 1986: 7). This is the first advice that orients Paulina to town life. Since there is no firewood in the city, it is imperative to know how to use the charcoal stove which Martin did not explain to her. Rachel's vital information helps Paulina to realise the dangers of using charcoal in a poorly ventilated house. Macgoye uses Rachel to demonstrate the importance of hospitality, a habit that is highly valued in most African societies and the Luo community in particular. Through Rachel, Paulina is given psychological support from the very beginning of her encounter with city life and also about her married life. In the course of the dialogue, Rachel's conversation digresses to touch on a lot of other issues like her husband and children. Rachel's

speech indicates that the "texture of women's relationship contain within them elements of compassion, sympathy and identification" (Obarch et al, 1987: 16). Women's speech does not only touch on issues at the period of encounter but extends to other issues that women have in common with each other. This pattern of women's speech allows them some identity in which they open up to each other. This boosts each other's confidence and help to smooth out the difficult emotional details of daily life because they can easily identify with each other's life experiences.

In *Coming to Birth*, women's relationships form a foundation on which Paulina's actions stem from in relation to the information availed to her through friends and how this information influences her growth. Because of common identity as women, Rachel, for instance, openly talks about her pregnancy something that Paulina is reluctant to talk about. She casually informs Paulina that she is five months pregnant by projecting pregnancy as something normal. According to Obarch, "sharing is part and parcel of women's relating" (Obarch, 1987: 16). It is this talk that probably influences Paulina to talk about her threatened pregnancy with Martin prior to her first miscarriage though traditionally, one was not supposed to let the husband know but leave pregnancy to show by itself.[19]

In Rachel's and Paulina's dialogue thoughts and feelings about work, children, husbands, cooking, and politics suffuse their speech. The politics of the day is highlighted when Rachel informs Paulina that there is "emergency and a lot of barbed wire" (Macgoye, 1986: 8) so that Paulina should be careful with her movements in the city since there are places where women are not supposed to go alone. This

[19] See Macgoye 1986

information updates Paulina on the developments of politics in the country. This information positions Paulina in a specific geographical location that will not allow her to trespass the laid down rules. I interpret this restriction of space as a test of Paulina's ability to explore the spaces available to her in an attempt to empower herself and in so doing interrogates the social structures that limit her quest for self realisation.

Paulina learns a lot from the interaction she has with other Pumwani women who have stayed in town longer than herself. These women advise her on how to spend her shopping money when given by Martin and like other women; she starts saving from her housekeeping money. She is also advised not to rush to the market on pay day but wait till the price has gone down for her to do her shopping. Paulina says that at "first Martin gave her money every two or three days and told her what to buy, but she was learning from the older women what to do - not to waste twenty cents on salad oil for cooking, which ended up sticking on the sides of a long bottle, but to keep a bottle in store and use it sparingly, only taking care to put it away so that she will not be forced to lend" (Macgoye, 1986: 28).

The knowledge to economise has, therefore, been planted in Paulina to become an effective manager of her household which is evident in her later life. This is evident in her ability to save enough money to buy thread to make tablecloths for herself and orders from her neighbours which help her earn an extra shilling adding on what Martin brings home. The earnings from her crochet work is used in the house hence supplementing Martin's income. Because of her economic resourcefulness, Martin is undecided whether to send her home or retain her in town. Paulina's financial ability

and assistance in the house deconstructs the notion that a man has to provide in the house. This assumption is highly articulated in most African societies where men are assumed to be providers in their households whether they are able to do so or not.

When women move to urban centres, though not always the case, they subvert the commonly held belief that men have to provide. The deconstruction of such beliefs is made possible because women in urban centres are far from cultural dictates that require them to be economically low and wait for the man to save the situation. This argument is confirmed by Rachel's suggestion that in "town there is light but also barbed wire too" (Macgoye, 1986: 8). I interpret the terms light and barbed wire as having been used symbolically. In the context of the text, 'light' implies Paulina's exposure to ways of emancipating herself from traditional cultural practices that had obscured her vision, it is the urge to see what she had failed to get access to while in the rural social set-up. I interpret 'barbed wire' as the obstacles that stand in the way of a woman in her quest for liberation which could be traditional practices and beliefs that prescribe to women what they are supposed to do and not to do. Paulina enters the town with her traditional and cultural practices baggage. This implies that her entry into town does not mean erasure of traditional dictates. So as much as there is light, the remnants of tradition that Paulina still holds on stands in her way in an attempt to emancipate herself.

When Paulina starts helping Martin financially, she is moving toward her independence in that she does not have to look up to Martin to provide. For instance, Rachel tells Paulina that in "Nairobi you are never alone. There is a lot to do and to see" (Macgoye, 1986: 7). Paulina has, in this regard, found something to do to earn

some money. However, Rachel's sentiments also point at the dislocation of individuals from familiar environments which provide alternatives to counter the roles designed for women. The new things that women find themselves doing result from the new demands in urban set ups which in the words of Rachel, they have seen and are doing.

Friendship seems to flow in the whole text as we see women helping each other in making their lives productive and at the same time attain a measure of independence from men. Rachel informs Paulina that she "makes Mandazi and sells them at the corner shop so as to help herself a bit, and informs Paulina that she will settle down too" (Macgoye, 1986: 8). By helping herself a 'bit', she is moving away from the husband's handouts to her own independence. We therefore anticipate that once Paulina settles in the city and is acquainted with the dynamics inherent in the city space, she will be able to make some money to help herself with like Rachel.

The town, accordingly, exposes women to "new economic realities in which productivity and prosperity are anchored and measured in terms of how much money one can make" (Muriungi, 2003: 75) to support themselves. In Macgoye's *Coming to Birth,* friendship becomes a project of emancipation geared toward moulding women to be independent. Paulina manages to establish herself financially because of Rachel's advice. Sharing of ideas and fears, in this case, ensures individual empowerment both economically and socially. For instance, because of the interaction in the city, Paulina's second visit to Nairobi is marked with confidence. She is awakening to her personal development as a result of her contact with other people in

her life. Rachel's orientation opens Paulina's eyes to different aspects of life in general and also boosts her confidence.

Macgoye further uses Rachel to satirise the patriarchal society and its practices. This is captured well in her observation regarding Paulina's marriage that "they are in a hurry to settle you these days" (Macgoye, 1986: 8). 'They', in this case, refers to decision markers in the society who are men. Rachel's observation about patriarchy could be interpreted as Macgoye's way of ridiculing a society that is determined to destroy childhood by marrying off minors for their own material gains. Rachel's concern, therefore, is a suggestion that women must help each other to overcome the patriarchal ties in which they have lived for along time. Women should go beyond what they see to embrace action in order to stop the injustices done to them.

Through Ahoya, the white missionary lady who gives Paulina accommodation after being rescued from the police station and later takes her to Martin, Macgoye demonstrates how women are concerned about the welfare and tribulations of their fellow women. After Paulina is beaten by Martin for getting lost in the city, it is Ahoya who becomes Paulina's mentor as far as her marriage is concerned. Though Ahoya is not married, she is widely experienced in marital affairs than Paulina herself.

When Paulina broods over Martin's violent beatings, Ahoya advises her not to regret but "praise God that He has given you a husband to love you just as I have been able to do without one," Paulina is surprised about Ahoya's revelation that the latter is not married by pointing out that "you too, like Drusilla, you are not married and yet you

seem to understand much" (Macgoye, 1986: 24). Though not married, Ahoya makes her realise that Martin does not hate her but loves her and that wife beating is normal among married people since

> Every woman who comes to Nairobi from the country has problems. Do not think it is the end of the world. Every young man has problems too. Probably all his friends and workmates have been telling him he is too young to marry and now he begins to wonder how he will manage. Don't you think that if you had been married in the old way your husband would have given you a token beating while the guests were still there? They say that is so that if you are widowed and inherited you will not be able to say that your new husband was the first one to ever beat you. (Macgoye, 1986: 24)

In this case, Ahoya assures Paulina of a settled life with her husband and that she should not take it far by doubting her husband's love. Through Ahoya, Macgoye demonstrates the sacredness of the marriage institution that ought not to be tampered with. What this implies is that third parties should help to keep a marriage in place rather than contributing to its destruction. This is exactly what Ahoya does by not tampering with the central romance, instead she promotes it. Through Ahoya's advice Macgoye seems to be moralising marriage and I argue that this could be informed by her missionary point of view and Christian upbringing. In her non-fictional work, *Moral issues in Kenya: A personal View* (1996), Macgoye candidly writes that if marriage is threatened, the parties involved must understand the situation and try to retain the marriage bond. This is exactly what Ahoya does by telling Paulina that

Martin loves her as she "could see it in his face as he got sight of you" (Macgoye, 1986: 23). The ending of the narrative indicates Macgoye's desired solution to save a threatened marriage. She saves the marriage from collapsing by resolving the conflict as we see Paulina and Martin happily (re)married. What remains is then for Martin and Paulina to make their marriage stay.

However, this moral approach to marriage makes Macgoye fall back on the assumption that wife beating is in essence an act that demonstrates the husband's love for the wife. This advocacy is one aimed at oppressing women and one which makes them docile while clinging to violent marital relationships in the hope that they are loved. Though Macgoye seeks to restore marriage, violence should not be accepted as a normal case within the marriage institution. Ahoya's advice to Paulina demonstrates that Macgoye duplicates women's worldviews which have appropriated patriarchal views thereby becoming its implement in advancing patriarchal ideologies. Ahoya, in this regard, serves as an instrument of patriarchy that calls on women's submissiveness. According to Nfah-Abbenyi, "women identities and subjectivities is not only shaped by male control but by women as well who take part in the oppression of other women and, consequently, in the contextual inscription of these identities" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 150) and their total acceptance of the status quo.

It seems there is confusion in what Macgoye wants her readers to believe in the presentation of marriage and Ahoya as its saviour. Ahoya herself has rejected or rather deviated from patriarchal beliefs that require a woman to be married by remaining single yet she is bound to act by its rules that call for women's endurance. The question arising as a result of Macgoye's use of Ahoya is why she uses a white

missionary lady as a saviour of the marriage instead of, say, a black woman. Is this aimed to show that women across the world experience same problems and seek solidarity in each other? However, I wish to argue that, by Macgoye using Ahoya, she wants to introduce the Christian perspective in Paulina's marriage which is later captured when it is solemnised in the church.

Apart from saving the marriage, Ahoya's relationship is very vital to Paulina's personal growth. For instance Ahoya encouraged Paulina to attend Luo meetings at St. John with other women who did not understand the Sunday Swahili service very well so that she can learn Swahili language and "look forward to joining a sewing class if she could afford the simple material required" (Macgoye, 1986: 27). After attending these meetings, Paulina started to speak Swahili something she could not do at the time she first arrived in Nairobi. In Kenya, Swahili is the national language spoken by all communities which makes it a necessity for Paulina to learn for her daily interactions. Rorty (1991) emphasises the importance of language in the society by arguing that language "is a tool used to satisfy a variety of wants: food, an understanding of the origin of the universe, an enhanced sense of human solidarity, and perhaps even a personal identity attained by developing one's own private, autonomous philosophical language" (Rorty, 1991: 92). For Rorty, it is impossible to find a starting point for our discourse that lies beyond our temporal context and to rise above human communities in the event that we do not have a common language as our medium of communication.

Language, therefore, allows individuals to "build a sense of community in acknowledging our inheritance from and our conversation with fellow human beings

as our only source of guidance" (Rorty, 1991: 94). In this case Macgoye uses Ahoya to lead Paulina to realise the importance of language in a new environment and how the new language will be used as a tool in negotiating change and as a tool for guidance. Through Ahoya, we also identify a sense of community in that Paulina is encouraged to join other Luo women in order to learn Swahili. Luo is a community that Paulina originates from. In a country like Kenya where ethnic identity is of paramount importance, Macgoye stresses the importance of identity as one of the ways through which one gets a good atmosphere to learn. In this way, women construct a community that enable them to actualise their dreams in a more material fashion. The process of identification forms part of the learning process. By learning together with other Luo women, Macgoye advocates a belonging of every individual in the society. Swahili becomes a suitable tool that Paulina can use to structure public dialogue and a language through which she can take action of her own personal development.

For Paulina, Swahili becomes the language of "possibility, critique, the language of action, and the language of transition" (Herbert, 2004: 38). As a language of possibility, Swahili enables her to identify her visions of what might be possible in a changing society particularly the Kenyan society. Swahili, therefore, is a means that Paulina can use in exploring possible ways toward her emancipation. It is also a language that will also criticise her actions in the event that she deviates from the norm. The search for empowerment through language is also seen in chapter five of the text where we are told that Paulina "could speak English fluently and even listen to English radio" (Macgoye, 1986: 109). English is the official language in the present Kenyan state. Paulina learning both Kiswahili and English languages points at her

growth towards the public space. The English language exposes her to the world outside Kenya and to official spaces that once locked away women. She can now engage in official matters of her society without any communication barrier. For instance, she is able to update herself on political issues in the country because of her ability to speak languages used in the public space. In most countries around the world that were colonised, the language of the coloniser has often been used as a language of administration, education, prestige, business and class which is mostly used by the elite in the society. The fact that Paulina has learned the official language puts her in a situation where she can easily communicate with a cross section of people in the society whether on official or social matters hence giving her power to interact.

Another close friendship we encounter in the text is that between Mrs. M and Paulina. This relationship transcends servant-mistress demarcation and places the two women as companions and people sharing same identity as women. I interpret this relationship as an orientation toward self-confidence aimed at Paulina's personal growth and appreciation. In this relationship, Paulina and Mrs. M are able to share with each other freely. Mrs. M even takes her to women's meetings in which she is the chairperson. We are told that Mrs. M uses her as an example to other women who have gone through difficulties by pointing out that she is a childless but happy woman. We are informed that Mrs. M appreciated the qualities in her 'general factotum' which had been attained without proper education. Macgoye writes that Mrs. M

> [T]ook Paulina to meetings where women's place in the society was discussed [and] pointed her out as a person who has achieved a balanced and contented life without the blessing of children, stressed her great usefulness to society though she was not competing directly in any man's field of achievement. (Macgoye, 1986: 110)

These meetings exposed Paulina to the public space that she had missed in her lifestyle. The meetings therefore help Paulina to accept herself and her situation as a childless person in the society. It is in these meetings that Paulina is able to recover her lost confidence from the time her child was killed. It is the exposure to women's meetings that enlighten Paulina about her rights as a woman. For example, through the knowledge she gets, she is able to tell that Chelagat Mutai's (a Member of Parliament) rights have been violated and Paulina seeks to rally women to protest against such treatment on fellow women.

Contrary to Martin who declines to help Paulina in rallying women, Mrs. M encourages her and assures her of her help. In this way, Mrs. M empowers Paulina. Men at this point are presented as barriers to women's search for emancipation. Macgoye stresses the importance of female friendship as one that is geared towards women's emancipation satirising male hostility toward women's agency. Men in the embodiment of Mr. M and Martin are more concerned with protecting their positions and wealth and less with the pain others go through in the society especially women. When Mrs. M approaches her husband about their plan of rallying women to force the government release Chelagat, he is infuriated and tells her plainly that "one person could sink or swim without making it right to put others in danger. He intended to

keep his head and his seat and his chance of helping people in his constituency" (Macgoye, 1986: 113). For Mr. M, Chelagat's life is not important so long as his personal ambitions are not tampered with. The last relationship we discuss here is Amina's and Paulina's friendship. Through this relationship, Macgoye suggests the importance of support networks. These networks are important for the simple reason that the urban environment lacks the dictates of socially based traditional 'community' where each individual can identify and find belonging easily. Though a spinster who has adopted a child, Amina proves vast in knowledge when talking with Paulina. In their interaction, Macgoye contrasts the two women to demonstrate ways in which women's emancipation can be hindered in the society. For instance, Amina is presented as a liberated woman with great esteem resulting from her economic stability while Paulina is portrayed as a woman whose marital space has restricted her freedom and productivity.

Through this relationship, Paulina opens and shares with Amina her past relationship with Simon and her child that was shot dead during the Kisumu killings. With respect to this conversation, Macgoye interrogates the intricacies of marriage and sex especially in relation to traditional teachings that prohibited talking about sex since it was considered a taboo. It is through this conversation that Amina advises Paulina to "make what comes and to take the best of it" (Macgoye, 1986: 146). Amina's advice to Paulina suggests that women should make use of every available opportunity to emancipate themselves. By making the best out of everything presented to one is the only way of countering cultural practices that hinder such opportunities.

5.3 Conclusion

The chapter has tried to show how Macgoye employs friendship as a site where psychological and emotional development of an individual can be taken care of hence providing spaces for survival because of shared needs and fears. Paulina benefits a lot from the relationships she forms as they help her move toward her emancipation. In the introduction of the chapter, I have tried to show that women form relationships as a response to the situation and circumstances in which they find themselves and their constant desire to transcend such situations.

The chapter has also attempted to demonstrate that Macgoye uses friendship to suggest the possibility of women's emancipation through formation of women friends. In most societies, marriage has often been looked at as an institution that offers an enduring relationship for women. However, Macgoye deconstructs this assumption in the representation of Paulina's marriage. Paulina's marriage is depicted as an inhibitor to her quest for self-realisation. Her women friends therefore become more resourceful in shaping her life than her husband. What suffices in the reading of the text is that one does not need to be married to be successful as exemplified by Amina's command of economic power. Therefore, it is the desire for independence which is availed through friendship amongst women that individual women can emancipate themselves.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The study has engaged with Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and the question of women's emancipation. In the preceding chapters we have discussed different strategies and modes that Macgoye employs in her text to demonstrate women's struggle for empowerment and emancipation. What is significant in the text is individual women's persistent struggles to realise their hidden potentials within the constructed social structures.

In chapter one, I sought to demonstrate the diversity of feminist approaches and the changes that feminist theory has gone through since its initial goals in an attempt to contextualise African women's concerns and of particular the Kenyan women's concerns as presented in *Coming to Birth*. In trying to situate our study within a feminist framework, it emerged that universal application of feminist theory to African women's experiences will not yield well in addressing women's experiences in different geographical regions and even within the same regions.

Therefore, there was need for us to contextualise feminist theory within specific geographical, historical and cultural dimensions which was informed by women's diverse experiences in different parts of the world. In order to situate the research within the feminist theoretical constructs, we embraced Filomena Steady's and Nana Tagoe-Wilson's approach in addressing women's experiences in the Kenyan context as presented in *Coming to Birth*. Apart from Steady's and Tagoe's approach, our study is further informed by the articulations of other feminist scholars like Chandra

Mohanty, Carol Boyce Davies, and Ogundipe Leslie among others whose ideas we found relevant to the study.

The study has been concerned with different ways employed by Macgoye in developing a feminist discourse in her text. In the second chapter we attempted to demonstrate how the political theme influences the choices made by the protagonist. Our hope was that by approaching the chapter from a political angle we would position Paulina within the Kenyan socio-political context. It is in this light that we argued that Paulina's life is heavily influenced by political events and changes of Kenya ranging from assassinations, detentions to police brutality. In the second chapter, we first looked at the political theme and African literature in an attempt to contextualise the chapter. We followed up the analysis of this chapter by looking at the individual character, Paulina Akelo, and the politics of the country at the time and demonstrated how politics is interwoven with Paulina's personal story.

The third chapter dealt with how women characters in the text challenge and subvert the constructed stereotypes used by society to define and confine women. In this chapter, we attempted to demonstrate that women employ different methods to overcome negative depictions of their persona which include rejection of their matrimonial homes as in the case of Paulina. She leaves her matrimonial home after being beaten by Martin. Given that this is a traditional patriarchal set-up one would expect Paulina to endure Martin's violence but this is not the case for her. The fourth chapter focused on women's agency in the text. In this chapter, I tried to show strategies that women employ that show that they are active agents of their own lives.

One of the aspects that ensure women's emancipation is success in education which leads to monetary stability and personal remembering. Paulina's vocational training at the Home Craft College and her later absorption into the programme to teach other women is a good example captured in this research. She becomes economically independent and she starts helping her extended Family members. In the study, I attempted to show that economic emancipation broadens the scope of women's decision making and independence. For instance, when Paulina is beaten and denounced by Martin, she does not sit back and wait for Martin in her marital home but decides to leave because economically she is stable and can provide for herself. Economic power therefore becomes a requirement for women in a society where they are marginalised.

On women's education in Africa, Abena Dolphyne states that women's education has always lagged behind that of men in most African societies and she points out that this emanates from traditional dictates that considers a woman's role in the society as one that ensures continuity of her lineage which does not require education. This assumption was informed by the idea that a woman was supposed to be provided for by her husband so it was a waste of resources to take her to school when her needs could be well taken care of by the husband (Dolphyne 1991: 29). However, in *Coming to Birth,* Macgoye deconstructs this belief by suggesting the importance of girl child education as a way of women's emancipation and advancement which is beneficial to the entire society. For instance, when Paulina's father dies, she is the one always providing for the mourners with her own money despite the presence of her brother who is expected by tradition to provide for his father's funeral expenses (Macgoye, 1986: 63). Through Paulina, Macgoye demonstrates reversal of roles in the

contemporary society by showing that with financial stability, women can take responsibilities of issues that were otherwise considered male's domain. Such reversal of roles is also captured when Martin expects Paulina to pay fees for his sisters despite the fact that Martin himself was working and above all it was his responsibility and not Paulina's.

Another important aspect geared towards women's emancipation is the ability to act as agents of their own lives. The individual women's ability to take charge of their actions and stand by the outcome is very important in a society that is out to confine and control them. For instance, Paulina's ability to assert her rights when Mr. M cautions her against buying food for the street children is a step towards liberty. She candidly points out to Mr. M that "it is my right whom I buy a cup of tea and whom I give my name" (Macgoye, 1986: 139). According to Nancy Hartsock (1987) when marginalised others begin to demand the right to name themselves, they are in effect demanding the right to act as subjects rather than objects of history. In Paulina's case she is demanding her own agency. Apart from the above mentioned we also have motherhood and subversion of tradition as spaces that offer women emancipation. By taking agency of their lives, women challenge structures that hinder their personal growth and development.

The study also looked at spinsterhood as a space for women's emancipation. Characters such as Amina, Ahoya and Drusilla remain single because of different reasons. For Ahoya and Drusilla it is because of their calling to witness to the good lord. But for Amina, we are not given any reason as to why she is single though we are told that her sexual liaison was discreet. We interpret their option to remain single

not as a rejection of motherhood but as a personal choice to control sexuality and destiny. Glissant links the idea of the "reconstitution of the body with that of reclaiming or controlling the passage of subjectivity leading to the ultimate liberation of the body" (Glissant, 1989: 79). The passage of subjectivity is therefore embodied in women's sexuality and bodies. In this case, the body becomes a fundamental part of how the individual negotiates her way through reality. This serves as a point of inspiration to restore social detachment which is a requirement to the pursuit for self. These women, Amina, Ahoya and Drusilla, embrace motherhood through different ways. For instance, Amina adopts Joyce, a child born by Rachel's house girl, and becomes a mother figure in her life. Drusilla on her part is a mid-wife helping women to bring forth life. Ahoya is a missionary who becomes Paulina's mentor in her marriage. Through Ahoya, Amina and Drusilla, we see the mothering aspect as a motivation of their actions.

In the fifth chapter, I looked at friendship to establish how it influences the live of the main character. I demonstrated that the advice and support that Paulina gets from Ahoya, Rachel, Amina and Mrs. M, shape her worldview and empower her to take charge of her situation. In this chapter, the study demonstrated that women's migration to towns provide new spaces which enable them to break away from most of the traditional structures and practices to forge new emancipatory opportunities and spaces. The urban dynamics create room for new ways of living thus liberating women from patriarchal control that has characterised women's daily lives.

This liberation for women is attained through women's economic independence. It also emerged that women's freedom is limited especially as seen in the lives of

married women like Rachel and Paulina since they are required to live according to societal expectations. The emergency of spinsterhood and single parenthood evident in the city as presented in the text is in essence an interrogation of patriarchal rules and regulations that curtail women's agency by excluding such women on the basis of being outside marriage circles that dictate women's behaviour.

While analysing our study, we also drew examples from other African writers in an attempt to show that besides Macgoye's vision of liberating women, we have others who have also dealt with the same vision. For instance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Adaku rebels from an unfulfilling marriage and seeks her emancipation through economic power made possible through her encounter with the city. She is able to educate her daughters from the earnings she gets contrary to Igbo's expectations of marrying off daughters in order to use the dowry paid to educate boys. Ngugi's play *I Will Marry when I Want* advocates girl child education and interrogates the society about marrying off their daughters in order to take boys to school. We also looked at Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* in an attempt to draw a parallel between women's suffering in young marriages and political maturity in post-colonial African states. In this text, Elizabeth's family like Paulina's family is threatened by the infidelity of their husbands. I interpreted this as families still in the making and felt that this parallel the country's political maturity which was still in the making.

In our analysis of *Coming to Birth*, it emerged that Macgoye's missionary and Christian background inform her writing. This is especially captured well in marriage and family institutions of her fictional characters in the text. Macgoye suggests the

importance of marriage by offering solutions to tensions that arise in marriage. For instance, throughout the text, Macgoye is very sympathetic to Paulina's marriage. The first time the marriage is threatened, Macgoye uses Ahoya, a missionary lady, to pacify the tensions. At the end of the text, Macgoye saves an otherwise collapsing marriage by making Martin move back to his wife. Martin's action to join his wife is in itself a subversion of societal dictates in that in most African societies, it is the woman after separation who is supposed to go back to her husband and not the other way round. This could be interpreted as Macgoye's own influence of Christian teachings where in the *Bible* it is written that a man shall leave his parents and join his wife not the African way where a woman leaves her people to join her husband.

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