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Reconstructing Kenyan Women's Image in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in Partial Fulfilment for the Degree of Master of Arts

Johannesburg, February 2008

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Violet Nasambu Barasa

…….

(Name of Candidate)

…….

(Signature of Candidate)

……day of……., 2008

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I dedicate this work to Joseph Otieno Wasonga for being the man you are in my life. To my younger sister Phyllis N. Barasa for accepting to take care of my child while I was away undertaking my studies.

To my parents Paul and Lucy Barasa, you are the best gifts ever in my life and to my son Martin Cyril Omondi (TT), you gave me the motivation to work hard.

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I also thank my parents Paul and Lucy Barasa. You showed me the importance of education. Daddy, thank you for believing in me that a girl also can. I also thank my siblings for their moral support and encouragements, George, Domie, Jamo, Phyllis, Aggie, Lydiah, Martin, Chris, Mercy, James, Christine, Augustine, Charles and Diana.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Macgoye, in her novel *Coming to Birth*, articulates the place of women characters in the Kenyan society from colonial to postcolonial periods. It investigates how Macgoye explores Kenya's postcolonial socio-political dynamics and their influences in the construction of individual women's identities. The study relies on feminist articulations to help us capture the contestation between patriarchal dominance and women agency as presented in *Coming to Birth.* I argue that, through the utilisation of political changes and events, Macgoye demonstrates the capacity of African women and Kenyan women in particular to break from the fetters of social-cultural structures to achieve self-realisation as free agents.

The study begins with a review of Macgoye's writings and a general literature survey on feminist debates that are relevant in articulating women's experiences in Africa and Kenya in particular. By focusing on the theme of politics, the research proceeds to demonstrate how socio-political changes influence the formation of identities and choices of individuals in the society as exemplified by the protagonist, Paulina. Given the centrality of women's agency in *Coming to Birth*, the work proceeds to explore strategies that women employ for their individual emancipation within a society dominated by patriarchal dictates. I do this by focusing on marriage and motherhood and how women interrogate the construction of these institutions. The work then explores other key elements pertinent to women emancipation used in *Coming to Birth*, namely, Christianity, education, rural/urban dynamics and traditional practices. Finally, friendship is discussed as a site that enables women to transcend social structures imposed on them by society.

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