



*Full Length Research Paper*

# The African woman in *Coming to Birth*: a critical analysis of Kenya's liberation as depicted by the woman's liberation in society

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the 20th century and, after some inertia, again in recent years, there has been a rising concern about women, and their liberation all over the world. A few women have risen to political leadership, amidst the challenges in patriarchal Africa. This paper entails an examination of Marjorie Macgoye's portrayal of the Kenyan woman in *Coming to Birth*, set in colonial and postcolonial Kenya. Through Paulina, the main character's life, Macgoye tells the story of a woman who gradually matures into a wise decision maker and leader in the society, alongside the history of Kenya from when she fights for her independence from the white man until she acquires it, and rules herself despite serious woes and challenges amongst her local leaders.

**Key Words:** African Woman, Coming To Birth, Kenya, Liberation, Society.

## INTRODUCTION

The novel *Coming to Birth* is a fiction based on the actual events in colonial and postcolonial Kenya that took place between 1956 and 1978. Macgoye uses the actual names of political leaders, for instance Jomo Kenyatta, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, Tom Mboya and Chelagat Mutai, and actual dates for the major political events, for example 12<sup>th</sup> December 1963, which was Kenya's Independence Day, in her story. Therefore to enhance the understanding of my discussion of this novel, it is essential to give a brief description of Kenya's political history.

Kenya officially 'changed from Protectorate to Colony status in 1920' (Ochieng' 66). In *A History Of Kenya*, Ochieng' explains that Kenya remained under British rule without resistance until the 1940s when 'the political battle was to be fought between the Colonial Office and the African Nationalists'. In the subsequent pages, Ochieng' explains that the Kenya African Union (KAU) was formed in 1942 under the leadership of James Gichuru. 'KAU was the mouthpiece of African nationalist expression' that contradicted any 'racist procurements made by the settlers'. Francis Khamisi, the Secretary

General of KAU, 'in response to a statement made in 1946 by the President of the European Electors' Union that the Europeans intended to make European power "the predominating factor in the whole of East Africa," said 'that Kenya was "a Black Man's Country" and that the Africans "must see to it that it remains so forever"'. Mzee Jomo Kenyatta was elected as President of KAU on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1947 (128-31).

In 1952, Ochieng' further explains in *A History Of Kenya*, the Central Committee formally started 'Mau Mau' Movement, 'under the chairmanship of Eliud Mutonyi and Isaac Gathanju as secretary'. This movement recruited 'young people, frustrated by the slowness of change' who were bound by oath against the British....Only people of proven sincerity, honesty and courage were admitted into this movement. They made secret plans for armed rebellion'. They hid in the forest and recruited more fighters from 'among the Kamba, Maasai, Luo and Meru' to fight for Kenya's National Sovereignty. A state of Emergency was declared from October 1952 to December 1959 as a result of the Mau Mau rebellion, '[as] early as April 1953, the Director of Military

Operations in Kenya, Major-General Hind had stated that the campaign to defeat Mau Mau and to win the good will of the Africans could not be won by military measures alone and that a political solution was inevitable'. During this period there was a rapid increase in the admission of Africans and Asians into the Kenya Legislative Council on a representative basis, hence in 1954, all the three races including the European, Africans and Asians were represented. Thousands of Kenyans were also detained in camps. In 1955, the Report of the East African Royal Commission 'called for the breakdown of the colour bar, the de-racialisation of the Kenya Highlands, increased educational and training facilities for the Africans and an increase in the number of Africans in administrative and managerial positions'. Many Kenyans were detained, including Jomo Kenyatta and several leaders of KAU. 'In October 1956, the last Mau Mau resistance came to an end with the capture of Dedan Kimathi [another freedom fighter and a leader of the Mau Mau movement]' (Ochieng' 132-8).

The efforts of the Mau Mau rebellion bore fruit, Ochieng' states in *A History Of Kenya*: 'Professor Ogot suggests, "the shock of Mau Mau had created the right atmosphere in that the Imperial power was now willing to talk with the African leaders"' hence '[t]he first direct elections for African members to the Legislative Council were held in March 1957. Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's release followed in August 1961 and became the First Prime Minister of Kenya on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 1963, as the President of Kenya African National Union (KANU). 'On 12 December 1963, Kenya became an Independent African State'. In 1964, Kenya finally attained sovereignty, with Mzee Jomo Kenyatta becoming the first President of The Republic of Kenya, 'the head of the government, the state and the ruling party'. Jaramogi Oginga Odinga was his Vice-President. However, in 1966, Vice-President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, also an elder in the Luo community, split with President Kenyatta to form the Kenya People's Union (KPU), an opposition to President Kenyatta's capitalist way of ruling. 'For their efforts, Kenyatta banned their party and threw the KPU leaders into detention in 1969'. Tom Mboya, a brilliant and eloquent politician 'was gunned down in broad daylight in a Nairobi street, paving the way for smooth and personal rule for Kenyatta. With the banning of the KPU Kenya once again took a one-party path, being ruled from four strategic points by the itinerant president; Gatundu, Nairobi, Nakuru and Mombasa'. Soon after, another political leader called J.M Kariuki, who did not support KANU's rule as according to him, it constituted "A small but powerful group of greedy, self-seeking elite in the form of politicians, civil servants and businessmen [who had] steadily but surely monopolized the fruits of independence to the exclusion of the majority of people"' was 'found murdered on Ngong Hills in March 1975'. His death, as stated in "*The Weekly Review* of 24 March 1975...[was meant to] 'instill in the minds of the public the

fear of dissidence, the fear to criticize, the fear to stand out and take an unconventional public stance. For Kariuki was a dissident, the most celebrated of all dissidents in Kenya since independence'. Several other critical MPs including 'George Anyona, J.M. Seroney, Flomena Chelagat and Martin Shikuku were detained or imprisoned on criminal charges' between 1975 and 1977'. After the death of President Jomo Kenyatta in August, 1978, his Vice President, Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi became the second President of the Republic of Kenya. He released all the detainees (Ochieng' 139-54).

As published on the Kenyan Embassy in Japan's website: [http://www.kenyarep-jp.com/kenya/history\\_e.html](http://www.kenyarep-jp.com/kenya/history_e.html), the National Assembly and the constitution officially declared Kenya a one party state in June 1982. In September 1983, the first Parliamentary elections under a single party were held, and the second one in 1988. In December 1991, however, the one party section of the constitution was annulled by the Parliament, leading to the formation of several new parties in early 1992. In December 1992, several parties participated in the elections as multiparty democracy had been restored, which President Moi won. In 1997, he won again and ruled for his last term, after which President Mwai Kibaki won the 2002 elections under the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), served a full term of ten years. President Uhuru Kenyatta won the 2013 elections under the Jubilee Coalition and is the current President of the Republic of Kenya.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

### The Woman as portrayed in *Coming to Birth*

#### The woman as the man's property

Paulina Akeyo, the protagonist of *Coming to Birth* is married off to Martin Were in the traditional African way at a tender age of sixteen: 'She was sixteen and he had taken her at the Easter holiday, his father allowing two cattle and one he had bought from his savings, together with a food-safe for his mother-in-law and a watch for Paulina's father. They had made no objection to his marrying her then, on the promise of five more cows to follow' (Macgoye 2). This took place in 1956, colonial Kenya. The man was given the woman on condition that he had enough to pay to the woman's family, not considering the age of the girl. Paulina, in this case still had a flat chest, and Martin, her twenty three year old husband even laughed at her when she asked him for a brassiere. In addition, Rachael, Martin's neighbour in Nairobi was surprised to see Paulina because in her opinion, Paulina was too young to be married, she asks: 'Sixteen? Yes, they are in a hurry to get you settled these days. And pregnant?' (Macgoye 8). These questions voice the concern from a fellow woman, that a girl so young

could be married off by her parents, in exchange for cows, without having fully grown to womanhood. The woman, according to Paulina's parents' patriarchal mindset, was the man's property, and lacked the capability to make personal decisions.

The man was culturally allowed to beat his wife whenever he thought he should. A few days after arriving in Nairobi, Paulina experienced a miscarriage and was taken to the Pumwani, the nearest hospital. As soon as she showed signs of improvement, she was discharged and asked to go home alone. A curfew was in place and she had to hurry to reach home. Unfortunately, being new in the Capital City, she got lost, and even arrested for knocking on people's doors to ask if they knew her husband's place. Despite the pain she underwent, when she was finally brought back home by Ahoya, a catholic nun, Martin beat and insulted her mercilessly, without listening to her nor caring about her health status:

*'Oh, I am so glad you are here,' cried Paulina. I was so frightened, but they wouldn't let me stay in the hospital. I walked and walked.' The key was in the padlock. As the door opened he gave her a hard push over towards the bed so that she fell on the floor, grazing her knees and knocking her forehead on the wooden frame.*

*'Slut! Whore! Is that what you came to Nairobi for?'*.....

*His hand slapped across her check and again across her shoulders.....*

*Two nights. Where did you spend two nights?'*....

*He kicked her buttocks (Macgoye 23).*

Martin locked Paulina in the house and left with the keys. Her screams did not help as '...in Pumwani people are accustomed to such screaming' (Macgoye: 23). Later in the day, Ahoya came back and her reaction was a confirmation of what she had expected. She said: 'Well, he does love you. I could see it in his face as he caught sight of you. But I thought also he would beat you, for it is a shame on him to have you lost, though you did not mean it so....' Ahoya continues to explain to Paulina how important it was to be beaten by her husband:

*'...Every wife 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 know 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 person to ever beat you. So don't start to wish backwards. You*

*praise God that He has given you a husband to love you just as I have been able to do without one' (Macgoye: 24).*

On arrival in the evening, Martin was still enraged at neither finding food nor water in the house, forgetting that he had locked a wounded Paulina in the house, without any food. He says: 'Carry my own key, fetch my own water, cook my own food! What the devil am I married for?' (Macgoye: 25). This serves as a clear indicator that a married woman, in the patriarchal world was required to serve her husband selflessly, regardless of her physical condition and health status.

It is evident that the woman in colonial Kenya was to accept the beating from her husband, and even appreciate it, for it was a token of love, a show of the superiority and ownership in the home. The same was the case for Kenya, as she had to take full instructions unquestioningly from her colonial master, Britain. The woman, just like the 'colonized' is trained to take orders from her husband. In the night, Martin called Paulina to bed and his consolation to her was: "Don't worry. If you're a good girl we'll get another baby next year" (Macgoye 26). This violence worried Paulina, she had no tribunals to report to in Nairobi and was afraid of dying in one 'of his beatings here where there was no tribunal to appeal to'. "Good girl" meant her following the orders from her husband and master, just like the Kenyan freedom fighters who were tortured to subdue.

The woman was to be seen by the men, but not to be heard. Her opinion and accounts were not sought for in the colonial times. Martin's high position as a man in the patriarchal society did not allow him to confirm the truth in Paulina's account of where she spent the two nights, since that would have made him appear lower in status to the woman, '[h]e could not, of course, bear to lose face by checking her story with Susanna or Ahoya' (Macgoye: 27).

Martin beat Paulina over small issues that could easily be sorted out without violence. After their church wedding, Paulina thought she was pregnant for she missed her period for two months but did not tell Martin. However, on the third month she started bleeding, when Martin '...found her in tears because of it he beat her and told her she was imagining things'(Macgoye 32) and later sent her home, where her mother-in-law was pleased with her for her obedience and hard work. It would have been more logical for Martin to console Paulina over the issue of conception, but owing to his predetermined powerful position in patriarchal Kenya, he would not stoop that low, hence the decision to send her back home. As Awua-Boateng, citing Armstrong puts it, '[t]his violence is examined in the light of female subjectivity... Andrew H. Armstrong expresses that sometimes it is as if the female body has been marked as "a thing to be violently 'written' on and as a site of amputation and disablement"'(11).

Wife inheritance was a customary practice among the Luo people of Kenya, a practice that took place when a woman's husband died. The woman would be inherited by the immediate brother of the deceased, for she had to be put under the control of a man. She would only escape this if she had grown-up sons to represent the home, like Paulina's mother, who was not inherited because she had grown-up sons (Macgoye: 64).

### The woman as a decision maker

Paulina, weighed down by the beatings decided to go back home to start a fresh life: 'So in March 1960, with the Kenya African National Union newly formed and politicians beginning to show their teeth, she set off for home to see the harvest and from there in August she joined the Homecraft Training School in Kisumu....And by the time training started the name of Jomo Kenyatta was loudly in the air and his picture – which she had never seen before- on the front pages of newspapers' (Macgoye: 41).

The hope Paulina had for a new life coincided with the hope Kenya had for attaining independence, despite the detention of a lot of people including Kenyatta, who eventually became the official leader of Kenya African National Union (KANU), and the first president of Kenya. Paulina was still married to Martin Were, just like Kenya was still under the rule of the British, with its future leader in detention. She joined the Homecraft School in Kisumu at the age of twenty four, and was the youngest woman in her class. The other women '...cold shouldered her because she had no child and very little education. The European praised her – which made it worse – because she was not leaving any baby behind and was eager to improve her home. The others lectured her in private. There was nothing wrong with their homes. They needed no improving. The object of the course was to get a job as a club leader so as to teach other women and make money' (Macgoye: 41).

Soon she was done with her classes and had good results, leading to her appointment as a club leader at the nearest center to her husband's home, amidst oppositions:

*Naturally there were strong objections from the committees to her appointment, but the European leader brushed these aside. To appoint a slip of a girl? One who was not sidetracked by old-fashioned ways and was still full of enthusiasm. A childless woman? All the more time she would have to apply herself to the work. A young woman away from her husband? But all the women were away from their husbands. That was Luo custom, the European explained, and they preferred it so. The wife was then like a single woman, occupied and earning*

*money. (A fat lot she knew about it.) A person without influential relations? Of course. That was to be the mark of the new society' (Macgoye 45).*

Paulina is an example of a hopeful woman, an epitome of change in a patriarchal society, the women that Moyana, quoted by Awua-Boateng describes thus: "[t]hose 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"<sup>14</sup>(90). Paulina is a woman determined to surpass all the forms of oppression members of the feminine gender face in the patriarchal Kenyan society, so as to enable them be self-reliant and have an identity.

Her efforts, with time bore fruit, just as Kenya's struggle for freedom was coming to an end, with the election of the first Kenyan President, Jomo Kenyatta: 'All this time the vision of "Uhuru" (Independence) was growing larger and larger. Delegations came and went to London for complicated talks. There were black ministers. There was going to be a black prime minister....Kenyatta was first moved, then freed, then elected'. Paulina had also attained her freedom from Martin, '...she had become free, in a sense, of Martin, and she had changed. She provided for herself, lived by herself. Although she had obligations to him she neither hungered for him nor expected him from day to day. She made decisions for herself of course, what to buy, what train to travel on: whether there were more momentous decisions-resolutely she closed her mind to them and considered how to teach the women about changes her supervisors said were coming' (Macgoye 46-7).

However, the newly attained freedom was an open door to a new form of slavery, both for the country and the woman. The newly elected Kenyan leaders would soon turn to dictatorship, assassinating and detaining any political figures that would pose a threat to their reign in power, for instance Tom Mboya, Martin Shikuku, Argwings Kodhek and Robert Ouko, an act that even Martin finds worrying as '...he had hoped and prayed for freedom - no, not for freedom, *Uhuru*, which everyone knew in Swahili but for *loch*, self-government, something he understood. Whether or not there had been what people meant by *Uhuru*, for six years there had undoubtedly been *loch*. And was this what it had come to, the striking down of the best and brightest?' (Macgoye: 77). The men continued to treat the women as members of 'the other'. Paulina failed to understand this change: 'People once looked up to were changing and moving, but the country and the country people did not seem to change much and she could not make out what was the advantage of being free' (Macgoye: 46).

Paulina's mother had been married for thirty years, 'seventeen of them in which she reigned supreme, her father-in-law and his wives now dead, her husband constantly away, the decision hers to plant, to harvest, to store, to sell (only once he had renewed the house in that

time and arranged about the dowry cattle), she had momentarily become the household head, a person to be consulted and deferred to' (Macgoye: 64). By being able to make such crucial decisions in the absence of the man, Paulina's mother portrays the high level of intelligence a Kenyan woman, and by extension, an African woman has, which can be exposed when she is given the chance.

### The woman as a mother

The first identity of a true African woman is the ability to give birth. An infertile woman would have to face rejection and ridicule from the society. Paulina had suffered several miscarriages since she was sixteen when Martin married her, probably due to a not fully developed reproductive system. In spite of this, whenever she went home with Martin, her in-laws were not very pleased with her; her mother-in-law was in fact disappointed in her. Many of her friends 'came to see her with babies in their arms' (Macgoye: 33), this made her eager to be off and away from home to the Homecraft School.

By the time Paulina moved back to Nairobi, Martin had started seeing another woman called Fatima secretly. Paulina's childlessness became Fatima's point of laughter whenever she came visiting Martin:

*'So you have come,' said a teasing voice in beautiful coastal Swahili such as one used to taunt an ignorant country wife.*

*'I have come but I think I do not know you,' said Paulina plainly and turned to the charcoal stove.*

*'Oh you have come, and you are the wife of the house?' continued the voice.*

*'Yes, I am Mrs. Were, announced Paulina, glorying in the foreign name that had once sounded so odd.*

*'Oh yes, Mrs. Were,' tinkled the voice, 'and you are the mother of who?' and with a peal of laughter she was gone, the ravishing face, ... (Macgoye 34).*

Eight months went by without a sign of pregnancy, therefore Paulina, due to Martin's change of behaviour and attitude that showed he was ashamed of her, opted to go back home to look after the farm.. However, Fatima did not give him a child either and so:

*In April 1961 he went home on leave and expended all his affection on Paulina, who had done so well, but although she wrote to him whenever someone was travelling to Nairobi there was no hint of a pregnancy. In August 1961 she visited him and he went home again in Christmas and the next April, but to no effect. In*

*May 1962 he came back to Nairobi to find the house dirty and rent and charcoal owing so he kicked Aduogi out... the thought nagged him – he had no dependents other than the sisters wanting school fees (Macgoye: 47-8).*

Martin then sought Fauzia, Fatima's younger sister who was '...a young, clean girl who might give him a child. He was nearly thirty. It was his right to have a child and he was not going to pay dowry again without being sure' (Macgoye 48). In traditional Africa, it was an obligation of the woman to bring forth children to the earth, failure to which the man would be allowed to remarry. Martin had paid bride price for Paulina, and he was not willing to pay dowry twice without ensuring that the second woman would bear him children, so in November, 1962, when Fauzia's aunt made a formal visit to seek his commitment to Fauzia, Martin was very careful not to commit himself:

*Martin reluctantly handed over two pounds in an envelope and asserted that in his custom dowry could not bring good fortune unless the former marriage was first terminated by the infidelity or sterility of the wife or the agreement of all parties. Of course, he added, his mother, brothers and his unfortunately bewitched wife all willed his happiness, and the greatest sign of God's blessing was the gift of children, which could convince the whole family that he had found favour before the Lord. He had every intention of taking formal steps when his brothers and his former wife could see for themselves that love could override all barriers of tribe and creed (Macgoye: 49).*

Paulina learnt of Martin's life with other women, when he went silent on both her and his family. His sisters advised Paulina to get pregnant by another man for her husband no longer minded her, but she stood firm, and unlike Martin, who removed his wedding ring from his finger to avoid raising eyebrows, she only twisted the ring but never removed it from her finger. She had the freedom, but Amina, her long term friend told her that 'With freedom or without freedom, with a job or without a job...you are not going to get a baby that way' (Macgoye 60), a piece of advice that expressed the necessity of a man in Paulina's life, even as she was slowly gaining her personal independence.

Paulina's childlessness gave her more time to study and become self-reliant. With the support of the European supervisors who praised her for her childlessness while at school, she channeled her energy towards achieving good grades in the Homecraft School and making a change in her current society. Correspondingly, Maja-Pearce advances this argument

thus 'Women use pregnancy or childrearing as escape from faltering careers and props for faltering marriages. Fear of public humiliation can drive women to retreat to a private realm, like a cocoon-like security and more control over their destinies...' (Awua-Boateng: 88).

A young female politician called Chelagat was arrested for questioning the detention of a fellow male politician called Shikuku. Chelagat was sentenced to thirty months imprisonment, '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 posed the awkward statements and the defiant questions' (Macgoye: 111). But her childlessness and marital status made other members of the society comfortable with her imprisonment, they said: 'If the girl has no children to leave behind, no husband to misbehave while she is away, what is the loss?' (Macgoye: 113).

Paulina made use of her newly acquired freedom and secretly slept with another married man, Simon, desperate to get a child and fit into the society for 'she was a married woman denied a married woman's rights and respect, in custom she should seek a child where she could. She had the right'. Infidelity, in her view, was less shameful than being barren: 'And she knew that there would be shame but not, for a barren woman, the public evidence of shame, and she bridled at his comfort and cast her eyes down and ceased to resist'. On discovery, Martin, who had been committing adultery with numerous women, and was cohabiting with a Swahili woman in Nairobi, felt a bruise of his ego hence travelled home without notice and beat Paulina badly. No one listened to Paulina's reasons, therefore when Martin publicly denounced her, her Homecraft Club was closed down, forcing her to relocate to Kisumu, the nearest town. However, she continued seeing Simon until she got pregnant for him. Paulina even felt more independent than before. This was in 1965, the second year of Kenya's freedom and newness, and she was 24 years old. She therefore was thankful to Simon for her pregnancy, and released him to avoid quarrels saying: 'A child of mine does not have to look to a father who will not stand up for him. Go now', a statement that relieved Simon, who was already skeptical about the situation. She named the boy Martin, after her husband (Macgoye: 54-69). The patriarchal Kenyan society was accommodative of errant men, but dissociated itself from unfaithful women who often committed adultery as a result of pressure from the same society.

Unfortunately, little Martin died from a gunshot during protests against President Kenyatta in Kisumu, and Paulina relocated to Nairobi, where Martin reunited with her. At the end of the novel, Martin's attitude towards Paulina changed when he learnt of her pregnancy for him. Kenya at that time was also getting back on her feet,

even though it would take time for her postcolonial woes to be resolved, just like Paulina's pregnancy would take time to mature. She would eventually take her place as a married woman in the society that only recognized wives by their ability to bear children.

### The woman as an academic

Education is one of the liberators for a Kenyan woman in the postcolonial era. The woman, through education acquires a social standing, and a state of independence. Paulina (the protagonist) did not get the chance to go past standard two due to poverty, and she was married off at the tender age of sixteen, in exchange for wealth for her parents. Her consent was not sought for, for in her society, what the man decided was final. But when she got to the age of twenty four, she joined a Homecraft school to learn how to knit, speak English and how to become independent through business. On completion, she acquired good grades and was made a team leader to impact knowledge on her fellow women in the village.

Soon after, she felt accomplished and liberated, thence she began doing her own business and earning her own income, even afforded a better home than what Martin offered her back in Nairobi. Her mother and siblings accorded her more respect, and they equally stopped questioning her actions, for instance when her mother heard that she had been sleeping with another man, Simon, she did not quarrel Paulina, which would not be the case had Paulina not acquired an identity for herself.

Paulina's academic status led to her acquisition of an official house and a decent salary in 1965, the beginning of the second year of freedom for Kenya:

*So for a young woman of twenty-four to move alone to an official house, for her to gather women together and issue programmes to them and buy in stores and collect fees, this also was an acceptable part of the newness. She herself accepted it. Month by month her days grew more full and her home more pleasant-decent is what she would have said- as her regular salary and income from sewing and crochet came in. She had to buy food as she dared not send home to Gem, but at first she did not have many visitors except just for tea, so she could manage on about twelve shillings fifty a week. She soon started a garden but would not expect much from the poor and waterlogged soil. She could not get enough firewood either and often had to buy charcoal (Macgoye: 59).*

This is a sharp contrast to when she first arrived in Nairobi to live with Martin in Pumwani slums, where she was afraid of using charcoal to cook for it was too

expensive. This development is in agreement with Lindholm-Csanyi's acknowledgement of the major changes in gender relations in Kenya's postcolonial literature, as cited by Awua-Boateng', who acknowledges major changes in gender relations in Kenya's postcolonial literature thus:

*Consequently, the inferior images of women in postcolonial literary works are undergoing gradual alterations as well. They are moving from the margin to the center in literary representations and strengthening their positions in gender relations through their feminine power, resistance and empowerment. . . I have studied the origins of their power to see to what extent it stems from modernity, from the influence of Western ways of thinking, and to what extent women rely on traditional practices and customs preserved and transmitted by generations and from pre-colonial times to the present. . . Overall, the findings have indicated that women's power originates from... the traditional customary resources, and the new opportunities of modernity, imported ways of life. In Macgoye's novels a greater emphasis is placed on women's empowerment through education and their personal ability (26-7).*

Education has also elevated Paulina to the status of a man in the society. When her father died, all the burial expenses were left for her because she was working. Traditionally, this was the duty of the eldest son, but Paulina, due to her elevated status, had the duty bestowed upon her: 'As soon as it could decently be done, Paulina's brother summoned her and sent her about the purchase of tea and sugar for the crowd from her own money...'. She tells her mother: "...you must see me as a man who has to go back to work. I have no one else to support me". Paulina had secured her identity as an independent woman, who flouted tradition by not sleeping with her husband at her ancestral home when her father died without having to face the consequences, 'Her mother said nothing but looked at her reproachfully, for when a woman's father dies her husband must come and sleep with her at home, when the mourners disperse, to signify his protection and the continuing of the line' (Macgoye 64-6).

### **The woman as the male's dependent**

In the patriarchal society, the woman does not have an identity alone. Her social life entirely depends on the man. A single woman has no value in the patriarchal world, a state that drove women into marriage without their consent. Paulina, for example, is married off at age sixteen when she is still very naive. At age 22, other girls

her age visit her with children in their arms. Alone, a woman is viewed as an incomplete entity, defenseless, inferior and without a sense of direction. Chelagat Mutai, a woman MP is detained for questioning, alongside the detention of Mr. Seroney, the Deputy Speaker, and Mr. Shikuku. Being single only worked to her disadvantage for nobody cared to defend her from torture and humiliation. Paulina followed the case, but could only empathize with Miss Mutai, "Paulina focused all her indignation on the Mutai case, all the complaints of woman in a man's world which she dared not relate to her own commonplace experiences'. Paulina's suggestion of signing petitions and striking for the mitigation of Miss Mutai's sentence angered her husband, Martin who dismissed the whole idea. She sought the opinion of her employer, Mrs. M, whose husband was also a politician. Mrs. M bought the idea, but her efforts to get leading women in different professions, tribes and communities to sign the petition did not yield any fruits, instead she got answers like: "Well, of course I would sign if I thought there was any possible chance of succeeding, but since there isn't, why stick your neck out?"; "But of course she *prefers* being a martyr. She would just hate it if anyone else had a hand in getting her freed. I simply couldn't *face* her you know."; "I think it's an absolutely marvelous idea and of course you should do it, but me, I've taken far too many risks already: my husband would never allow me to put my name to it."; "And with so few women in leading positions, wouldn't it be wrong to put a career at risk just for a gesture...?"(Macgoye 110-13).

These negative responses express the position of the single Kenyan woman as the 'other' in postcolonial Kenya. The other women would not fight for each other's rights fearlessly, based on the 'obvious' negative results they would achieve. They would rather have Miss Mutai tortured than risk losing their own husbands and careers (which were very limited) yet without the help of the leading women, the petition would not be successful. These responses from educated women in the society were an indicator of a double colonized mindset of the postcolonial Kenyan woman in a patriarchal world, which was in support of the men's furiousness towards Miss Mutai's case. When Mrs. M tried to seek help from her politician husband, '[h]e was furious. The Constitution, he pronounced sententiously, was not made for individuals. One person could sink or swim without making it right to put the rest in danger. He intended to keep his head and his seat and his chance of helping people in his constituency, and his wife would be well advised to be a bit more active in collecting funds for a self-help secondary school,' an advice to which 'Mrs M. repressed an impulse to answer that there were more secondary schools already than they could find fit pupils or teachers for... '(Macgoye 112-13). With all their efforts thwarted, nothing could be done to save Miss Mutai, a well-schooled, intelligent woman, because she was not only a

woman, but also a single woman, hence not worth fighting for and defenseless.

The male politicians' arrests and deaths, on the contrary, caused a stir in Nairobi, Kisumu and other parts of the country. When Tom Mboya, an elite politician was shot dead in 1969, people were shoed out of a showground in Kisumu, while in Nairobi, roads were blocked, and there was a stampede as people marched to the mortuary, wailing and shouting. Nancy, Martin's girlfriend dared not to speak to Martin when such events occurred. She wondered why he reacted so harshly yet 'people died on the radio or in the newspapers everyday' (Macgoye 73). She failed to understand why one death made all the difference. Arwings Kodhek's (another male politician) death also saw crowds of people travelling to Gem to bury him, and a stir in Kisumu town (Macgoye 72). The male politicians were accorded maximum attention, which was never given to the unmarried and childless female politicians, the likes of Chelagat Mutai.

Macgoye has tried to redefine the woman, giving her a social identity without attaching her to a man. This she had done majorly through Paulina, the main character, and in a minor way through Paulina's mother, Rhoda and Amina. After being disowned by her husband, Martin on account of childlessness and infidelity, Paulina pulls herself together and rebuilds her life. She gets pregnant by a married man, Simon, gives birth to Okeyo and ably raises him alone, without ever having the illusion 'that anyone was going to help her maintain Okeyo' (Macgoye: 73). When Martin took her to his rural home and took so long to visit her, she secretly started sleeping with Simon with neither liking nor commitment, she only wanted a child and when she finally got pregnant she felt contented with the fruits of her labour. When Martin suddenly came home and disowned her after a thorough beating, she packed her belongings and moved to Kisumu where she got employed by the owners of the Homecraft School. She forgot about Martin and focused on her new life with her son. At twenty four, her achievements were compared to those of a 'big man' from whom people expected to get bus fares and blankets: 'The facts of separation were accepted without comment (since after all not everyone can be a teacher and have a house to herself)...' (Macgoye: 59).

At the unfortunate death of Okeyo, her son, during the demonstrations in Kisumu, Paulina underwent the mourning period without the consolation of a man. Later she relocated to Nairobi to work as a housekeeper at Mr. and Mrs. M's house, where she was given a small room at the servants' quarters to put up. She did not know how Martin found out where she lived, 'but on the second Sunday Martin appeared at the little house, neat, polite and distant, like someone sent with a message' (Macgoye: 87). He even expressed a formal regret for the death of Okeyo, Paulina's son. He was amazed at Paulina's emotional and intellectual growth, and was very humble, a total contrast to his behavior towards her

during their first stay in Nairobi. Despite men banging her door at night, Paulina remained firm as Okeyo's death left her 'hyperconscious' (Macgoye: 88). When Martin's mother died in 1971, Martin excluded Paulina from the funeral proceedings, an action that she took positively, as she had not fulfilled the duties of a daughter in law since Martin disowned her.

Martin started discussing politics with Paulina, a topic he previously only discussed with fellow men. Eventually, he moved all his belongings to Paulina's house, but despite the respect Paulina accorded Martin, she made her own decisions and her life did not rely on his presence and orders, and when necessary, took her stand against Martin's since '[i]t was no longer obvious that decisions had been made for her' (Macgoye: 114). Paulina stopped a fight among street urchins in Nairobi, and took them for lunch, something Martin growled at, saying it was 'Damn silly', but she did not retort. Pictures of her haranguing the little boys appeared on the Sunday Newspaper with the headline: 'Discipline by kindness'. Martin and Mr. M. were so furious about her act of charity, but Mrs. M was overjoyed, and Paulina felt both proud of herself and her justly acquired authority in the society. She stood for the less fortunate, and explained to an enraged Mr. M that the children did not lack self-respect, but 'other people's respect...therefore they [found] it hard to respect grown-up people themselves' (Macgoye 139).

Paulina also confidently told Mr. M, a high profile politician that it was her business who she bought tea for, and who she gave a name to, which she could never have done a few years back when she was still naive and uneducated. The same could be said about the treatment accorded to women in postcolonial patriarchal Kenya. Instead of being beaten and ordered by the men, they should be treated kindly, like fellow human beings with intelligence in order for them to give their all to the society for its growth and betterment. Battering women only made them more passive and objectified, which led to minimal productivity from the women in the patriarchal Kenyan society. With time, Martin embraced the changes in Paulina's life and entrusted her with sensitive issues like withdrawing his money on his behalf from his bank account, which was quite new to Paulina (Macgoye: 120, 140).

*Amina, Paulina's former neighbor, was never married, but she adopted a deserted girl child called Joyce, whom she single handedly raised amidst criticism from the patriarchal society. However, Macgoye shows the positive response of fellow women towards Amina, which indicates a change of perception by the women towards single women: 'She had got big ideas since taking in the colored child but the rest of the women were not too hard on her for that. They agreed that Pumwani was not a good place to*



*bring a girl up in and that Amina had done well for herself' (Macgoye 88). In March 1978, postcolonial Kenya, Amina had acquired enough money to buy a shop, furnish her apartment house and enter a partnership in a small private nursing home. She wanted to deal purely with women, for she had developed contempt for male skills. Joyce was well educated and had secured a job as a secretary grade two (Macgoye: 145).*

Paulina's mother also took up the duties of a man in her home when her husband got a job far off from home. She managed the homestead, made crucial decisions and even discussed dowry at times, a duty that traditionally, in the African society is purely meant for the men. When her husband died, she only had to continue with the lifestyle she was used to in his absence (Macgoye: 64).

Rhoda, Paulina's former classmate up to standard two (when Paulina dropped out) had plodded on with her education, moved to a boarding school had become a young teacher who could afford to travel from Nairobi to Kisumu for shopping on Saturdays when Paulina was at the Homecraft School. She then moved to work as a cashier, got married to a senior teacher who later got employed by the Ministry, had five children whom she lived with and schooled, as her husband was hardly at home (Macgoye: 121-23).

Through empowering these women, MacGoye disproves the place of the Kenyan woman as the man's dependent, clearly suggesting that a woman can stand up on her own, develop herself and her children without relying on and drawing her entire strength from a man. Based on these examples, a Kenyan and African Woman must not always be pegged on a man to achieve success, because she has all it takes to have an identity in the society.

### **Paulina's life struggles versus Kenya's struggle for Independence**

Paulina experiences several miscarriages before finally conceiving by another man, loses the child later on and finally conceives Martin's child. Her troubled marital life is a reflection of the troubled Kenya both in the hands of the British colonialists and the first government of an Independent Kenya.

Her first miscarriage occurs when she moves with her husband Martin to Nairobi, at the tender age of sixteen, in 1956, when Kenya experienced a state of emergency, a curfew and an 'Operation Anvil'. This was the beginning of her journey as a married woman, despite her tender age. The journey on the train was quite rough, and being her first time to travel a long distance alone, and to get pregnant, the mayhem during the journey, and the

climate change in Nairobi did not work well towards sustaining her three month old pregnancy. She was rushed to hospital after the miscarriage, and was released two days later, only to be sent home before Martin could pick her. Being new in Nairobi, she got lost and ended up moving from door to door asking for Martin's house, which led to her arrest on accusations of behaving suspiciously 'at a time when a search for escaped prisoners had created a tense security situation' (Macgoye 1,19). The cop's explanation for Paulina's arrest shows the struggle in Kenya during the colonial times.

The Kenyans did not have any form of freedom and a curfew was also in place. Political leaders like Tom Mboya and Argwings Kodhek led political parties in Nairobi, but it still felt like 'Kenya would be free of British rule in twenty years' (Macgoye: 1). There was no hope for independence still. Paulina's marriage was also at its worst, as Martin mercilessly beat her when finally she is brought back home by a Nun called Ahoya, locked her up in their little room without food and water, and left with the keys. Just like the limited movement of Kenyans by the colonialists during the curfew, Paulina's movement was also limited by her husband, Martin, who was her 'colonial master'. Martin kept close to Paulina after the beating 'because he still desired her', just like the British colonialists still kept a close watch over Kenyans despite mistreating them because they had a lot to benefit from the hard labour they subjected the Kenyans to. Her neighbours could not save her from the beatings for they were used to the screams and wife battery, just like Kenyans had accepted the colonial rule, even though a few politicians still fought back. After a few months, Paulina learnt how to survive as a wife in Nairobi, from observing how her fellow women conducted their lives around her. She learnt how to use the little money Martin gave her sparingly, and how to hide her bottle of oil so that the visiting neighbours would not ask for some of it (Macgoye: 20-28).

Paulina's second miscarriage occurred during the police raid in their house in Pumwani. The police pushed her out of the way, ransacked the house and left without hurting her. She had experienced pains before the policemen raided the house, but did not mention that to Martin, who blamed the miscarriage on the police and treated her tenderly, 'swallowed his resentment and ran to the mission house himself...' to get Bibi Tett, but unfortunately nothing could be done to save the child (Macgoye 32). Paulina knew how angry Martin would have been if he found out that the miscarriage was not caused by the three policemen's raid, hence she let the raid be her scapegoat for the sake of peace in her marriage. The 'outsider' therefore saved the day by solving a family problem which ought to have been solved by the family itself. The British colonialists, like the police, took it upon themselves to solve Kenyan problems, instead of letting Kenyans govern themselves

and solve their own problems. An Emergency was in effect at that time, though Paulina kept forgetting that it was. The colonialists used force to run the country, launching a manhunt for the rebelling communities namely Kikuyu, Embu and Meru (KEM KEM) (Macgoye 31). This made the Kenyans who were hopeful for colonial freedom to lose hope, despite being so close to achieving it. Paulina's second miscarriage also increased her misfortunes because Martin really wanted to have children to take care of, like his friends and neighbours.

Paulina's hope rekindled after she missed her monthly periods for two months after they confirmed their wedding in church in November 1957, but on the third month when she started bleeding again, her hopes shattered and she found herself crying, only for Martin to beat her for 'imagining things' and sending her home to his mother in February 1958 for six months, during which he started seeing another Swahili woman called Fatima.

Kenya, on the other hand, was still under colonial rule, with little hopes of gaining independence. In August when she went back to Nairobi, Paulina had grown both physically and emotionally, and her long-disused brassiere had become tighter. 'She had finished growing now. Her breasts were firm and her eyes knowing'. Paulina was back to own her home again, amidst jeers by Fatima who made fun of Paulina's childlessness. Martin hardly showed her off, and did not escort her to the train when she travelled back to her Mother in Law's home in April 1959 (Macgoye: 32-35).

During her stay at home, Paulina made enquiries about the Homecraft School in Kisumu and expressed her interest to join it. Macgoye, through the omniscient narrator explains Paulina's yearning for freedom when she constantly reminded herself of the 'sunny Id-El-Fitr of 1957 where the air blazed with freedom', and people just knew the tide without being told by anyone (Macgoye 36). When she moved back to Nairobi in August 1959, Martin had moved to an even smaller house in Kariokor, a pointer of his loss of focus in life as Paulina gained more focus. The coloniser was losing ground as the colonised advanced towards freedom. Kenya was also gradually acquiring more freedom from the colonial masters as time went by.

The year of independence, 1963 finally arrived, but as the omniscient narrator puts it: 'The new year, the great year of Independence, dragged on' (Macgoye 51). This description expresses lack of excitement as would have been expected. The first celebration of Internal Independence took place in June 1963, and the full Independence celebration took place in December 1963. Paulina took the members of her club to Nairobi for both celebrations, but in her, something died: 'But between the two trips something had died in her: word had come for certain that Martin was living with a Coast woman and he did not write at all any longer and send anything to his mother...her heart sank and she twisted the ring on her finger' (Macgoye: 52). Paulina's marriage

was falling apart, but from another perspective, she was gaining personal independence as Kenya was gaining her Internal Independence. However, the bleak future of Paulina's marriage served as an indicator of the future disintegration of an Independent Kenya in the hands of Kenyans themselves. Paulina felt the 'death' of her marriage, but could not rescue it due to her inability to bear Martin a child. Kenya was also about to face the 'death' of the unity of her people which existed when they all fought against the British Colonisers, but was difficult to maintain owing to the politicians' greed for power to rule the new Independent and Sovereign State of Kenya.

A week after Independence Day, Paulina met Simon, an old, married friend with whom she had an extramarital affair. Despite Martin's unexpected visit and disowning of Paulina, she continued with the affair and eventually got pregnant and bore a boy called Martin Okeyo in 1967. Okeyo, unfortunately got shot and died prematurely in 1969 during a visit by the first President of Kenya (Jomo Kenyatta) to Kisumu as he struggled to see the President who had come 'for the purpose of opening of the new hospital, and some of the hope she had had in those young days were coming back again'. The sudden, unexpected death of Okeyo shattered all the renewed hopes Paulina had (Macgoye: 69-82). The Independent Nation was experiencing Neo-Colonialism; the new leaders had turned into dictators who killed innocent Kenyans in order to acquire more authority.

All the promises made during Independence Day were broken, forcing Kenyans to rethink their decisions. Two Intelligent and vibrant politicians who spoke for the common man (the Other), namely Argwings Kodhek and Tom Mboya were assassinated in January and July 1969 respectively (Macgoye: 72-3). Their deaths were a pointer of lack of freedom for Kenyans in Post-independent Kenya. Martin had also broken the marriage vows she made to Paulina, as he kept moving in with one woman after another without getting the children he was so desperate for. Eventually he moved in with his male friend, who with time became overly dependent on Martin, forcing him to move out again. Martin's life became retrogressive, as Paulina's life became more progressive. She had acquired a job, and given birth to a son, dismissing all the claims of her inability to bear a child. The death of her son, however, was her turning point. Going back to the drawing board, she decided to go back to Nairobi, where she had found a job as a housekeeper.

Even though this new job was lower in status than her old job as a teacher, she decided to start her life afresh. This change worked for the better for it caused the reunion with Martin, her husband, whose dead hopes also rekindled: 'Martin came home at the end of the month with a copy of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*-he who had almost stopped buying books and was sceptical even of newspapers- and sat down solidly to read it...' (Macgoye 144). The novel ends on a hopeful note when Paulina

announces her three month old pregnancy to an excited Martin in March 1978, at the age of thirty eight, more than twenty years after they got married. She tells him: 'And though I hardly dare to hope, I must give you also this hope, after giving you disappointments so many years' (Macgoye 147). This hope by extension, is a hope for a better Kenya both politically and for the Kenyan woman in the patriarchal world. My reading of Martin's change and willingness to sell his shop and give up his work travels for Paulina's sake, is a final acceptance of the value of the Kenyan woman in patriarchal Kenya by the by the Kenyan men who had previously been adamant to appreciate the woman as a result of their socially predetermined superiority.

## CONCLUSION

Macgoye's portrayal of the Kenyan society is not that of utmost excitement, but more of a moment for refocusing and meditation of the future life. This she does through paralleling Kenya's independence with Paulina's (the main character) life which had taken a new turn after her marriage shattered and her husband decided to cohabit with another woman in Nairobi while she lived in Kisumu. MacGoye, however, brings out the vulnerability of the Kenyan woman in postcolonial Kenya through wife battery and recounts several incidences where Paulina was seriously battered by her husband, Martin, over easily solved issues. The Kenyan woman in these postcolonial patriarchal political settings experienced the double colonization, the first time by the British colonialists, and the second time by the Kenyan man in postcolonial Kenya. To begin with, the Kenyan woman in *Coming to Birth* has been presented as having been colonized in the mind, and therefore having embraced patriarchy, therefore having placed the African man on a pedestal, a position socially higher than her. Macgoye in *Coming To Birth* portrays the Kenyan woman in colonial and early postcolonial Kenya as submissive even when she should be aggressive to save one of her own. Miss Chelagat's sentence was not mitigated because other well educated and influential women declined to sign the petition without permission from their husbands, and dismissed Paulina and Mrs. M's effort as a failure. Macgoye thus presents the Kenyan Woman, in this case as one who cannot think for herself, and always has to follow the opinion of the Kenyan man. She has accepted her status as second to the Kenyan man even after being schooled, an opinion that in my view is not geared towards the moulding of the already distorted image of the Kenyan woman. Paulina was married off to Martin at the tender age of sixteen in exchange for a few heads of cattle. It was her father's decision, which her mother had no choice but to support for it came from the "Head" of the family. The Kenyan woman is portrayed as an independent decision maker. Paulina decided to: go to

the Homecraft School to study even though she was twenty four and had been forced by circumstances to drop out of school at standard two; conceive a baby with Simon, a married man when her husband neglected her for not bearing him a child for several years; drop her job as a group leader and move back to Nairobi to be a housekeeper after the death of her son; feed the street boys against Martin and Mr. M's will and eventually to take Martin back as her husband when he moved in with her while in Nairobi. By Macgoye empowering the Kenyan women characters to stand up for themselves in various ways, she is in my view, motivating the twenty first century Kenyan and African woman to stand up for herself as it is possible for them to take a stand regardless of the challenges and resistance from the predominantly patriarchal African society. The African woman is made hopeful for a better future both for herself and her country: Paulina is hopeful for a child. To add on her efforts of fighting for the freedom of the Kenyan Woman in postcolonial patriarchal Africa, Macgoye has also incorporated the support of the males towards this course. Martin, Paulina's husband, started off as a violent husband to Paulina, but as the novel progressed, he learnt to respect Paulina and even moved into Paulina's house a changed man, provided her with a shoulder to lean on after a long day. As a result of this reunion, their marriage was restored and Paulina conceived his child after more than twenty years of marriage without a child of their own. The novel ends on a hopeful note. In my view, the strategic inclusion of male characters in the life of the major female character's life by Macgoye serves as a challenge to the males in postcolonial patriarchal Kenya and Africa to support both the Kenyan and African woman in her efforts to establish her identity in the society instead of objectifying her. By working together, the African society will be able to forge ahead into a better society, for the African woman will be able to explore her full potential in the world outside the cocoon of domesticity in which the patriarchal society has in the past and currently placed her.

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