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*Women's Identities in the
Kenyan Landscape
The Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to show how the Kenyan writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye portrays female characters in four of her major novels written between 1986 and 2005. The works under analysis are, chronologically, her most famous fictional works *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* and her latest novels *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev*, the latter being a peculiarity in the novelist's oeuvre because of the theme it deals with. This dissertation investigates in particular how Macgoye's female characters' identities are fashioned from different perspectives and how the women's choices and reactions to historical, cultural, personal changes and challenges shape their identities in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. On the one hand, in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* the focus is on native-born Kenyan women, Paulina and Wairimu, who are the protagonists of the novels and struggle to be the agents of their lives by carving a place and a role for themselves in Kenyan society, in an epoch of fast social change. On the other, *Homing In* presents two main female protagonists, Ellen and Martha, who are respectively of British and Kenyan origins, and mainly explores the extent to which the European character strives to find a sense of belonging to her adoptive country and to adapt and shape her identity to the Kenyan reality. In the same vein, *A Farm Called Kishinev* portrays female characters who are forced to adapt themselves to their new 'home', being it the adoptive country for the Jewish women of the Wilder family or the Jewish culture for the native-born Kenyan women. In this case, however, the focus is on how the novelist explores women's identities in a novel that presents women as minor characters and that has hardly ever been analysed from this point of view by other critical studies.

Key concepts that will be interrogated include identity, emancipation, personal growth, belonging, home.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first chapter gives a general overview of Kenyan literature in English and investigate the unique position Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye occupies in the literary scene of her adoptive country. After a first section tracing the history of modern Kenyan literature and emphasising its major protagonists, its trends and the themes

discussed, the chapter narrows down to the role played by Kenyan women novelists. Particular attention is devoted to the social difficulties they encountered in making their voices heard and their interest in dealing with women issues and problems. In this context, Macgoye's position and contribution to the Kenyan literary realm are investigated, by focusing on her personal and professional experiences as a transplanted writer of fiction and non-fiction works who moved to Kenya in 1954 and became completely integrated into the Luo community of her husband.

Chapter two analyses how Macgoye's female protagonists are portrayed in her two novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, by showing how the black Paulina and Wairimu bring Kenyan women's roles and authority into question by challenging customary practices and refashioning their identities in a changing society. After an introduction of the works, the chapter is divided into different sections, each of them dealing with a particular sphere of emancipation, strategies and opportunities the main protagonists decide to take advantage of in order to take control of their lives. By stepping out of their predestined lots and looking for different chances leading to self-definition, ranging from mobility and education to economic independence and political activism, Macgoye's female protagonists gradually find their place in society.

The representations of the female characters of the novels *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev* are investigated in the third chapter, which focuses on how the writer deals with the experiences of the transplanted British protagonist Ellen and Angela and the Jewish minor characters Sarah and Rachel, by emphasising how the women differently try to resolve their common dilemma: find a place of belonging where to feel at 'home'. However, the characters' status as inhabitants of a 'limbo' in Kenya makes it difficult for them to successfully fashion their identities in the country's society and the chapter finally introduces the indigenous characters of the novels, respectively the Kikuyu Martha and the Nandi Sophie, as possible sources of identities for the non-native protagonists.

The choice of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and her novels among the other writers in the realm of Kenyan literature stems from my interest for the author's unique experience, from both a personal and artistic point of view. Regardless of her British origins and her educational career achieved in her motherland, Macgoye has profoundly embraced Kenya and its culture as a source of identity for herself and as the setting and the essence of her fiction and non-fiction works, thus portraying Kenyan ordinary people's lives so intimately, in a way that complicates the distinction between insider and outsider.

The great attention given to writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who is considered the father of modern Kenyan literature, has often overshadowed the deep contribution of other Kenyan writers, female authors above all. Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's case has been even more controversial because of her status as an European author writing about Kenya from an insider perspective. That has made it difficult for critics to categorize and handle her output, as it could be completely associated neither to the group of the indigenous writers because of Macgoye's origins nor to the authors belonging to the so-called "expatriate literature" writing about their experience as settlers in Kenya, for a European audience and from an outsider point of view. Consequently, as I have realized during my research, Macgoye has initially been excluded from scholarly studies, interviews and projects handling Kenyan women's writing, in spite of the profound commitment to her chosen society shown by the author in her oeuvre.¹ The writer's works, in fact, reveal a deep understanding of her adoptive society, her willingness to be integrated and her particular concern for the most vulnerable of her society, especially women. The "microhistories" Macgoye presents in her novels, being both the life experiences of native-born protagonists or European characters living in Kenya, try to communicate the different perspectives from which the history of a country can be recounted, without surrender to bias and a unique point of view. At the same time, they are a means through which the writer can communicate and made the reader ponder on issues of particular interest to her society.

¹ The same has been also noticed by Mike Kuria who for the first time brought together Kenyan women writers, including Macgoye, to discuss gender in their country. M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya.

As a consequence, this dissertation attempts to highlight Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's contribution to the literary world of Kenya. In the novels under analysis the reader contemporaneously witnesses the fashioning of the main and minor characters' identities, in their search of self-definition and sense of belonging, the troubled evolution of the Kenyan society, its complex transition from being a British colony to being a self-governed country and the experiences of white settlers and persecuted Jews, which are portrayed in humane terms. The choice of the novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* is justified by the fact that their female protagonists epitomize the indigenous Kenyan woman struggling for self-fulfilment and emancipation in a male-oriented society in transition from a traditional to a modern lifestyle and shaping her identity from both an individual and social point of view. The texts *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev* extend the aim of the study since these novels also introduce women characters who try to forge their identities in the Kenyan landscape, but their starting points are rather different since they are mainly outsiders of the country, or native women torn between their ethnic identity and the one required by the chosen community, the Jewish community in *A Farm Called Kishinev*.

Chapter 1

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's Oeuvre in the Kenyan Literary Landscape

The Kenyan writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye occupies a unique space in the realm of the literature of her adoptive country, a field at length dominated by its most prominent novelist and non-fiction writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Macgoye's contribution to Kenyan literature has gradually gained literary recognition in her country and abroad in the last years and in order to better understand the impact of her writing it is worth introducing the literary scene she has worked and is living in.

1.1 Kenyan Literature: A Brief Introduction

In order to free itself from the legacy of English colonialism, in the twentieth century, Eastern Africa has tried to delineate its own identity through culture, in particular literature. Intellectuals and writers have played a pivotal role in the process of cultural decolonization and the making of new nations which, deprived of their past and independence, had to regain integrity and to shape their identity. Culture, literature, poetry have been regarded as revolutionary weapons, ideological tools through which African people could finally raise their voices and define themselves. Thus, as Ngwaba makes clear in his essay "The English Novel and the African Novel in English", African literature has represented an exercise of cultural rehabilitation and of critical self-examination.¹

1962 marked the symbolic beginning of modern East African literature, with the first *Conference of African Writers of English Expression*, held at Makerere University, located in Kampala, Uganda.² However, despite some common features, each country has then followed its own path and developed its own distinctive literature.

¹ S. O. Asein and A. O. Ashaolu (1985) *Studies in the African Novel*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, p. 13.

² F. Marengo (1996) *Storia della civiltà letteraria inglese*. Torino: UTET, vol. III. 944-965.

As far as Kenya is concerned, having achieved independence in 1963, after sixty-eight years of British colonialism, this country has owed so much to its writers, who have given it an identity, by linking its past, present and future in their literary works. From Kenyan literature's birth to our days a large number of genres and subjects have been covered by contemporary Kenyan writers. It is worth underlying that different sources of influence have met together to give life to the dynamic and lively nature of today's Kenyan literature: the traditional oral literature rich in folk-tales, chants, theatre plays expressed in Luo, Akamba, Kikuyu, the tradition of Arabic and Swahili literature and poetry dating back to the XVII century and the great impact of English literature.³

Literature in English started in the first half of the XX century when Kenyan authors who had received a Western education and did not want to break their link with their roots started writing about Kenya in English.

The beginning of this kind of literature has a pronounced political dimension⁴ and is characterized by the "*life stories*", midway between the autobiography and the ethnological sage: Parmenas Githendu Mockerie's *An African Speaks for His People* (1934), Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), Muga Gicaru's *Land of Sunshine* (1958).⁵ The authors' personal experiences are strongly connected to the history of their people and country. As a matter of fact, the crucial purpose of these "*collective autobiographies*", as Saracino defines these works, is to divulge Kenyan people's history, which otherwise was doomed to be forgotten.⁶ They are designed to give Kenyan people a voice, write their own national history and explain African culture to the foreign reader.⁷

³ C. Brambilla (1994) *Letterature dell' Africa*. Milano: Editoriale Jaca Book S.p.A., pp. 159-164.

⁴ According to Lombardo, who borrows from the Kenyan critic Wanjala, the very first writers were the politicians who wrote letters addressed to local magazines and petitions addressed to the colonial government. In A. Lombardo (1995) *Le orme di Prospero: le nuove letterature di lingua inglese: Africa, Caraibi, Canada*. Roma: NIS.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁶ M. A. Saracino (2008) *L'Africa e i suoi racconti: dagli sguardi coloniali alle letterature anglofone*. Roma: Aracne, p. 117.

⁷ As claimed by Kenyatta himself, *Facing Mount Kenya*, which describes the social customs of the Gikuyu tribe, was an attempt to follow the changes that Kenyan society was undertaking and to put on paper the extraordinary heritage handed down orally from one generation to the other, which otherwise was in danger of disappearing. In M. A. Saracino (2008) *L'Africa e i suoi racconti: dagli sguardi coloniali alle letterature anglofone*. Roma: Aracne, p. 120.

At the same time, autobiographical books by authors like Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen were also published. Their writings, however, such as Blixen's *Out of Africa* (1937) and Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959), should be classified as English colonial literature, as they focus on the authors' experiences as European settlers living in colonial Kenya and belong to diverse literary traditions.

After the first output, the 1960s-1970s can be considered as the golden age and the birth of a more authentic literature of Kenya, particularly the years 1964-65, which were marked by the publication of young Kenyan writers' collected works and the writings of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (*Weep not, Child*, and *The River Between*), East Africa's leading writer and the founder of Kenyan literature.

The setting up of African and European publishing houses and important literary magazines (*East African Journal*, *Zuka*, *Dana*) in Nairobi, the support given by Makerere University and Nairobi University, the growth of literary programmes, had a strong impact on the development of Kenyan literature. Moreover, the rich creativity of the period seemed also to be influenced by the uncertain historical background preceding the achievement of political independence.

Through their works, Kenyan writers convey their need to reflect upon the past, in order to understand the complexity of the present and the uncertainty of the future, and tell the history of their country in their own words, as the authors of the "life stories" did in the 1930s.⁸

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep not Child*, published in 1964, was the first novel written by an Eastern African author. The novel, set in the 1950s during Kenyan struggle for *Uhuru*, national independence, together with *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), encapsulates all the crucial themes covered by Kenyan writers in that period: the efforts for the creation of a new nation, the colonial violence, the attachment to the native land, the

⁸ As Gikandi puts it, "it is in the area where literature meets history that the [East African] novel has proved itself most adept as a social document, an avenue of exploring political and related developments". In G. D. Killam (1984) *The Writing of East and Central Africa*. London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann, p. 232.

focus on the qualities of the leader, the role of the intellectual in a changing society.

To a larger extent, the literary production of the time is sombre and characterized by social and political commitment bringing to a high moral tone. Writers demonstrate the social commitment of the arts and the importance of linking cultural and artistic expression to historical issues. Novels, poems, short stories, are inspired by the political conflicts, the tragic experience of the Emergency (1952-1960) and the Mau Mau Movement, formed in the 1940s. In *A Grain of Wheat* all the characters are connected, directly or indirectly, to the Mau Mau Rebellion and live during the Emergency in a desolate climate of treason and suspicion, *Mau Mau Detainee* (1963) by Josiah Mwangi Kariuki is based on the imprisoned rebels' experiences, Charity Wanjiku Waciuma's *Daughter of Mumbi* (1969), Meja Mwangi's *Taste of Death* (1975), all deal with the forest fighters.

Another common subject is that of the "cultural clash", the conflict between African and Western civilizations, which displaced people from their roots, their communities and identities. Kenyan authors' deal with the problems of how their society has come to terms with the changes introduced by colonialism. These narratives are usually set in the rural world and the village and the issue of the land expropriated by the colonial regime is one of the pivotal themes. A high value is put on the pre-colonial rural world and the life of the community, with a recurring appeal to the founding myths and emphasis on the destruction and the influences that colonization has brought. As Bardolph reminds us, the majority of these narratives are concerned with the reality of a whole community or, when they introduce individuals, the latter are inserted in a larger context that includes several generations.⁹ Moreover, these narratives are often permeated by moral and metaphysical issues that, together with fictional or historical events, convey a vital extract of Kenyan reality.

The issue of the "culture clash" also leads Kenyan writers to reflect over the role of the intellectual elite, who has often received a Western education. The

⁹ In G. D. Killam (1984) *The Writing of East and Central Africa*. London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann.

African writer has tended to see himself as a guide, an educator, the one who has the task to express the values of the repressed and silenced and to record the struggles and crises of his society. Since Africa has been portrayed as a uniform country by colonial authors, African and Kenyan novels in our case have begun to communicate a more authentic image of the African people.

In the 1980s the disappointment following the hopes for the achieved independence affected the literature of Kenya. Moreover, president Jomo Kenyatta's death in 1978 marked a sudden decline in the quantity of works published by Kenyan writers, due to a scarcity of publishing outlets and to censorship and self-censorship because of political and ideological considerations.¹⁰ The works published in these years are often an attack against the new government, which employs forms of new colonialism, an analysis of the socio-economic reality and a tool to express the writers' doubts and distress for the future (Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* (1989), Sam Githinji's *Struggling for Survival* (1983)).

Many genres are employed and different features characterize the literary works of the period. In particular, on the one hand, established themes handled by the first generation of writers continue to be deeply investigated, while on the other, at the same time new and more creative subjects are explored: the return to an idyllic past and the translation of ancient myths (in the works of Grace Ogot, Mugo Gatheru), the urban city as the setting of the novels (in Meja Mwangi, Leonard Kibera), a new style based on a colloquial and journalistic language rich in dialogues and focused on individual characters rather than on the community (by writers like Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye).¹¹

The village scene is increasingly substituted by the urban setting and the individual begins to acquire new emphasis and importance. The birth of the urban novel is the consequence of the city's growth in importance and of the fact that the urban space encloses and epitomizes the social contrasts and

¹⁰ During the late Kenyatta's presidency and the government of Daniel arap Moi, writers and artists (Ngugi wa Thiongo, Micere Mugo, etc.) were often exiled or incarcerated because of their political opinions directly or indirectly expressed in their works, which were regularly banned.

¹¹ C. Brambilla (1994) *Letterature dell' Africa*. Milano: Editoriale Jaca Book S.p.A., pp. 159-164.

the difficulties of modern society. Moreover, Kurtz suggests, "the novel as a form lends itself quite easily to the hybridity that characterizes the postcolonial city and consequently makes a useful literary vehicle for exploring urbanization."¹²

Leonard Kibera's *Voices in the Dark* (1970) marked this new trend in the literature of the country, being the first novel entirely set in the city, where Nairobi is "the symbolic *sine qua non* - the essence of postcolonial society, or the crucial part that stands for the social whole."¹³ The city and the life in the urban setting thus becomes a new topic fully developed by Kenyan authors, since the metropolitan area provides a wide new range of symbols and characters to investigate. Among the numerous examples there are Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Murder in Marengo* (1972) which portrays the urban Luo society in postcolonial Kenya, Mike Mwaura's *The Renegade* (1972), Mwangi Ruheni's *What a life!* (1972) and *Going Down River Road* (1976), etc.

Contemporaneously, another successful front is that of the "popular literature", with Charles Mangua's *Son of a Woman* (1971) as typical example, a picaresque novel that, in spite of its comical appearance, is permeated with pessimism. This trend includes crime novels, adventures, romances and entertaining works dealing with the description of a new middle urban class and the modern Kenyan life-style. These are lighter books, epistolary novels, which lack the commitment of the novels from the first generation of writers and discuss the moods, pleasures and values of a changing society and underline the vitality of the literature of Kenya.

In its last aspect, besides the chronological and thematic literary currents outlined so far, one of the most peculiar and essential features of Kenyan literature is its recurring reference to the oral tradition. Kenyan writers easily adapt oral discourses to prose fiction and oral expressive modes are used to enhance this effect: proverbs, riddles, ejaculations, songs. Kiswahili or Gikuyu terms and expressions, when referring to everyday life, agriculture, rituals, give vitality to the texts.

¹² J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

On the one hand, this strong relationship with the oral discourse helps the author bridge the gap between the African reader and the writer, by reminding the reader of the context of the oral performance, so deep-rooted into the African culture. On the other, it stimulates the foreign reader's curiosity to try to understand and get closer to a dynamic, and often so different, culture.

1.2 Literature by Kenyan Women Writers

The flowering of an important tradition of literature by Kenyan women writers has strongly marked the literary scenery of the country, even if with a delayed recognition compared to the attention given to the literary works by male writers. Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's British origins might make it difficult to compare the writer with her female Kenyan colleagues, mainly because of their different background experiences and educational career opportunities. However, both Kenyan women writers and Macgoye have investigated themes related to Kenya's tradition and current events and they have been particularly concerned with issues hardly ever handled in the Kenyan literary scene before their contribution.

The impact of women writers' literature is recent: female authors of African origin have begun to assert themselves from the end of the 1960s, since previously a series of historical and sociological causes limited their opportunities to take up a literary career.¹⁴

As writing originates from education, in particular African literature written in European languages, it is worth underlying that women in Africa have not been provided with the same educational opportunities given to their male counterparts. Women's access to formal education, university in particular, was strongly obstructed by African family systems, social and patriarchal values and beliefs, as well as by financial resources and the time at women's disposal. As a matter of fact, women traditionally had less free time than men to devote to occupations like writing, since they had to manage the burdensome tasks linked to childbearing, the caring of their children and men,

¹⁴ See E. D. Jones (1987) *Women in African Literature Today*. London: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 1 and G. Chukukere (1995) *Gender Voices and Choices: Redefining Women in Contemporary African Fiction*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth dimension publishers, p. 9.

cooking, garden and farm work. An additional obstacle was the social status conferred to the African writer, who was considered as the spokesperson of his people, a kind of "prophet", and his commitment gave him a public role. Such a public position was barely accorded to women in African societies, and thus their status as writers underrated.

These are among the main reasons explaining why male writers have initially dominated the literary scene. They have "blazed the literary trail", Gloria Chukukere observes, and women have often been forced not to deviate from this route and "to respond to this literary tradition".¹⁵

Nonetheless, in spite of all the difficulties preventing women from writing, as Juliana Makuchi and Nfah-Abbenyi argue, the works of the women who did write were often overlooked. Not only Kenyan female writers' works, but African women authors at large have often suffered lack of interest, underestimation and inadequate critical research. J. Makuchi and N. Abbey, themselves borrowing from the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, recognise the heavy impact of gender discrimination inside the literary scene and the book industry, apparent in "the blatant exclusionary practises and lack of attention from the world of (predominantly male) critics, both African and non-African".¹⁶

In addition to African women writers' scarce presence in the largely male-authored world of literature, women and issues of particular interest to women have often, even though not always, been misrepresented or even neglected in men writers' works. What have been often underlined is male writers' inability to reveal women's feelings and points of view through their female protagonists and that female characters portrayed in fictional works by male authors have not usually been presented in their psychological complexity and totality, but reduced to a series of pre-conceived stereotypes. On the one hand there is the idealization of the African woman, depicted as an eternal nurturer, a mother symbol of Mother Africa and fecundity or a docile wife devoted to her husband and the home, ready to sacrifice her needs for the family well-being. On the other hand, female characters are depicted as

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶ J. Makuchi and A. Abbenyi (1997) *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 3-4.

sensual and provocative lovers, even as prostitutes or morally corrupt women in the urban city. These are images of silent women, who were not the agents of their destinies but observers who passively followed the lot written for them. As Florence Stratton claims:

Whether she [the female character] is elevated to the status of a goddess or reduced to the level of a prostitute, the designation is degrading, for he [the male writer] does the naming, whereas her experience as a woman is trivialized and distorted. Metaphorically, she is of the highest importance; practically she is nothing. She has no autonomy, no status as a character, for her person and her story are shaped to meet the requirements of his vision.¹⁷

In the works of men writers, female characters are thus often represented as types, as flat characters only shaped to fit with the storyline and the adventures of the male protagonists, or as icons of social problems or degradation.

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, which correspond to the golden age of Kenyan literature, only a small number of women writers' fiction works made their appearance in the Kenyan literary community and were published. Kenyan literature by women writers began in particular in 1966 with the publication of Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*, the first novel by a Kenyan woman writer to arouse foreign interest. Ogot is the first Anglophone female author to be published, her short stories appear in 1962 and 1964 for the first time, then followed by fictional works like *The Scar* (1965) and *Ripples in the Pool* (1975) by Rebeka Njau, Kenya's first woman playwright, Miriam Were's *The Eighth Wife* (1972), Micere Mugo's *Daughter of My People, Sing!* (1976). Later, the 1980s see a blossoming of works by women writers in Kenya and in the entire African continent. These are the years coinciding with the publication of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's leading novels, *Coming to Birth* (1986) and *The Present Moment* (1987), Muthoni Likimani's novels and the historical work *Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*

¹⁷ F. Stratton (1994) *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. New York: Routledge, p. 10.

(1985), and later on with the works of Margaret Ogola, whose novel *The River and the Source* was rewarded the 1995 Jomo Kenyatta prize for literature.

As J. Roger Kurtz stresses, the protagonist of Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*, Nyapol is the first well-rounded female character in Kenyan literature embodying concerns of particular appeal to women, an "anomaly" among Kenyan fictional works' characters appeared during the flowering period of the 1970s.¹⁸ Effectively, works by Kenyan men writers, such as David Maillu, Thomas Akare, as far as gender issues are concerned are often in support of the maintenance of women's traditional roles. Urbanization is frequently represented as a source of degradation and confusion in contrast to the serenity and the integrity of the rural and traditional reality, leading women to be corrupted by modernity. Women in some cases are represented as incomplete beings if they are without the presence of a male partner, or they are doomed to fail if they try to achieve their own independence.

It should be highlighted that the representation of female characters by male writers does not always reduce them to examples of corruption and failure, lack of dependence and authority. Some male authors have made an attempt to portray active and positive female characters. As an example Ngugi wa Thiong'o, first among everyone, depicts the leading female character of his novel *Petals of Blood* (1977), Wanja, as a brave and determined woman and in spite of the heroine's weaknesses, the writer emphasises the worthy side of her nature. The same can be said about the novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982), which portrays Warringa, an "heroine of toil" and a dynamic woman able to overcome her tragic life experiences.¹⁹ Nonetheless, as J. Roger Kurtz explains further, the female characters portrayed by these writers are types and symbols anyway. They are not complex individuals fully developed in all their facets and "even if they are positive tropes, they are tropes nonetheless".²⁰

¹⁸ J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 134.

¹⁹ E. D. Jones (1987) *Women in African Literature Today*. London: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 131.

²⁰ J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 146.

Works and novels by women writers in Kenya have been an attempt to go beyond literature by male authors reducing female characters to stereotypes and, to a larger extent, they have acted as a weapon to challenge male authority and "to reinscribe women into authorship and citizenship".²¹

Women writing in Kenya represents women's criticism of a number of discriminating forces stemming from customary traditions, colonial and then postcolonial practices and it thus can be regarded as a form of contestation and resistance. Kenyan women's life stories, both private and socio-historical experiences, gain a new depth, being depicted and retold from a new and more authentic perspective. As Eldred Durosimi Jones points out, in wider terms referring to the African female writer, her commitment is to rectify misrepresentations and misconceptions about women, in exactly the same way as the African writer's role in the 1950s was that of adjusting the European writer's misleading depictions about African people.²²

Women writing and commitment in the world of literature have marked their hesitant entry in the public realm, in order to highlight gender discrimination and give the female point of view on women issues. As a matter of fact, women writers can genuinely deal with gender in Kenya, by drawing the attention on the more controversial issues and discussing them from an unbiased and inner point of view.

Women's crucial involvement in the struggle for national independence has been mainly unnoticed, as have been the life stories and experiences of ordinary women, as affirmed by the Kenyan writer Margaret Ogola:

I wanted to tell the story of women because it is rarely ever told.

Women are busy as mothers, keeping houses and with children so they do not have time to tell their own stories. [...]

When you listen to people talk about their mothers, then you realise that these are the unsung heroines that make things move. [...]

Women have a story to be told and they have an angle from which only a woman can tell the story.²³

²¹ Ibid., p. 146.

²² E. D. Jones (1987) *Women in African Literature Today*. London: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 2.

²³ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, pp. 123-147.

The African woman is supposed to be the narrator and the custodian of history, since her knowledge is passed down to her sons and daughters, and the latter will then in turn act as mediators in "the process of remembering and transmission".²⁴ This ritual of recalling and recounting is traditionally ascribed to women in oral cultures as one of their crucial roles to keep the culture of their community alive, thus giving them some authority. Thus, this empowering tradition is claimed by women writers because, as Juliana Makuchi and Nfah-Abbenyi stress "if this custodianship is empowering to women in oral cultures, then the act of writing, the act of accepting the task of the spokesperson, becomes a subversive act that is empowering not only for the writers, but also for the community (of women) for and about whom they write".²⁵

Even if women have traditionally been the narrators of history, the subjects and heroes of that history have often been men, as women's contribution have been often omitted. Above all, no insight has ever been given to the essential role played by women during the Kenyan struggle for independence before the publication of Muthoni Likimani's *Passbook Number F.47927: Women and Mau Mau in Kenya*.²⁶ With female writers' commitment thus both women's personal lives and roles in the history of their country have begun to emerge through their creative and non-fiction works.

As men novelists before and after them, women authors have investigated historical and present concerns of particular interest to their society and denounced the problems that have hindered the development of their country. They have dealt with the tradition/modernity dichotomy, the clash of cultures, the development of urbanization, the colonial violence and the postcolonial disillusionment, the historical and political turmoil. What they

²⁴ J. Makuchi and A. Abbenyi (1997) *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁶ According to the novelist, interviewed by A. James: "We read about men in detention, but nobody said there was also a gang of women guerrillas fighting, carrying guns, hiding and feeding the Mau Mau. Even the prostitutes incited the white soldiers and got their guns after getting their men to beat them. These women made their own contribution, and they were reliable spies. Yet nobody talks about them". In A. James (1990) *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*. London: J. Currey, Portsmouth, Heinmann, p. 60.

have added to these crucial themes are new perspectives and a female point of view, and new insights into new spheres of social and gendered life.

As Adeola James stresses, the position of women and the conditions under which they are living in a particular society are one of the starting points in order to scrutinize that society and judge its development. As a result, it is crucial to put high value on the social issues raised by women authors in their works, "instead of the general disregard or head-nodding that is [or was] usually the case".²⁷ As the author goes on, women have investigated and criticized the problems affecting their country at the same level as their male counterparts, while also intimately dealing with tradition and modernity, feelings and individuals' concerns, but there is no a "recognized female equivalent of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka or Ngugi wa Thiongo'o".²⁸

According to Marie Kruger, the fact that Kenyan society expects women to conform and behave in a determined manner often leads women to choose "a pervasive form of self-censorship" keeping them from admitting their writing inclinations and abilities and declaring writing as their "legitimate profession".²⁹ Women who indeed wrote and decided to try to publish their works had to face barriers due to society's narrow-mindedness, as the experience of, respectively, the Kenyan writer Rebeka Njau and Asenath Odaga make clear:

If we become courageous enough to come out and write on social or political issues, our voices will be heard. But I think women are afraid, also they are overburdened with a lot of work. [...] And you look odd if you say you are going to wake up in the night to write, you don't look like a woman. [...]

A journalist friend who read my book [Ripples in the Pool] told another journalist friend, 'That woman, she is a woman and a half'. When I asked what it meant to be a woman and a half, I was told, 'just to be able to write like that, you are more or less like a man'.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁹ M. Krueger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 6.

When I first started publishing people thought that, being a woman, I couldn't write and that it was my husband who wrote the books and put my name on them. I had to make people realize that I was the one who wrote the books.³⁰

Nonetheless, in spite of the women writers' abilities and determination, as far as Kenya is concerned new opportunities for women writers and a new consciousness have also been possible following the United Nations Decade for Women and the initiatives of a number of organizations aimed at highlights women's issues, even through the literary world. The meetings of the United Nations Decade for Women, with the last ten-day gathering celebrated in Nairobi in July 1985, have been an opportunity for women of different nationalities to gather and express their concerns and a source of different experiences, cultural exchanges, dialogues, and discussions that have provided a beginning for wider attention on questions as modernity and women identities and contribution to their developing societies.³¹

Organizations such as the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development, launched in 1996 and the Kenyan chapter of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) collaborate in order to emphasize the disadvantaged position of women in their society and to fight for their emancipation in the educational, political, cultural fields. Kenyan gender and literary organizations also, through their studies and publications, focus on the connection "between narrative and cultural identity" and emphasize the role of creative writing "as a tool for social change".³² Among them we can mention the Kenyan Oral Literature Association (KOLA), FEMART-Kenya, the association of Kenyan women writers and Kwani Trust, a literary network aimed at promoting the local literature and involving a large number of women writers, including Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye.

³⁰ A. James (1990) *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk*. London: J. Currey, Portsmouth, Heinmann, pp. 107, 124.

³¹ The Decade for Women was established in 1975 with the first conference held in Mexico City. The aims of the project have been: "the eradication of underdevelopment, the quest for peace, and the pursuit of equality for women in all forms of political, economic, and social life", thus arising women's consciousness even in their country's literary scene. In N. Çagatay, C. Grown and A. Santiago (1986) 'The Nairobi Women's Conference: Toward a Global Feminism?', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 401.

³² M. Krueger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New york: Palgrave, Macmillan, pp. 4-5.

1.3 Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye: A Kenyan Writer *Sui Generis*

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye was born in Southampton, England, on 21st October 1928, as the only child of Richard and Phyllis King. She was educated at Eastleigh County High School and in 1948 she obtained her master's degree at the Royal Holloway College of London where she studied literature and wrote a thesis entitled "Biographical Criticism of Carlyle in the British Periodicals of his Time". She worked in the book trade and in 1954 she came to Kenya, after having obtained her M.A. in English at the University of London in 1953.

She was sent to Nairobi where she worked as a lay missionary for the Church Missionary Society Bookshop. While living in African areas in Nairobi, the author met the clinical officer Daniel G. W. Oludhe Macgoye, a member of the Luo community coming from Western Kenya. They married in 1960 and had four children. They lived in Kisumu where Macgoye worked part time as an English teacher and then in 1971 they moved to Tanzania where she was employed as manager of the University of Dar es Salaam bookstore. In 1975 they finally returned to Kenya, where Macgoye took up the position of manager of the S.J. Moore bookstore in Nairobi. She later worked as a publisher's representative and from 1983 onwards she has mixed her career as a fiction and non-fiction writer with that of the free-lance editor.

Macgoye's writing career began in 1935 with the publication of her first poem in the London Mirror and from that starting point her work has ranged from poetry and fiction to non-fiction works and periodical pieces. Macgoye's publications include five novels, chronologically *Murder in Majengo/Victoria* (1972), *Coming to Birth* (1986), *The Present Moment* (1987), *Homing in* (1994), *A Farm Called Kishinev* (2005), two short stories, *Street Life* (1987) and *Chira* (1997), two non-fiction books *The Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making* (1986) and *Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal View* (1996), books for children, *The Black Hand Gang* books and *Growing up at Lina School* (1970), two collections of poems entitled *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems* (1977) and *Make it Sing an Other Poems* (1998).

As many critics have stressed, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye occupies an uncommon and peculiar position in the world of Kenyan literature.³³ Her personal experience is unique, and consequently her works and her career do not fit any pre-conceived categories, being herself a woman going against classifications.

She is a white writer of British origins who has been living in Kenya since 1954, except for a lapse of time in Tanzania from 1971 to 1975. She has become a citizen of the country when it achieved independence in 1963. At one level, the colour of her complexion, her English background and status as a non native-born, "exclude" her from the group of the black women writers of Kenyan origins. At another level, however, in spite of her being a white naturalized person, Macgoye does not belong to the community of white Kenyan of European origins either.

Since her arrival in Kenya, she has lived and worked among the local people, learned their national language Kiswahili and Dholuo and completely plunged into her Luo husband's culture. She has always observed the new reality surrounding her with interest and curiosity and an unbiased eye, trying to understand it and be accepted at the same time. She has mingled with local people bringing with her no prejudices and refusing the privileges guaranteed to white people in colonial Kenya. As a matter of fact, when she arrived in Nairobi as a lay missionary, she did not accept to stay in the mission compound positioned in an elite quarter. The reality she wanted to witness and experience was that of the ordinary people, so she decided to move to Pumwani, a slum area inhabited by African people, and then to Ngara, Nairobi, where the author presently lives in a rented apartment, in "a zone from which most Europeans have moved over the years".³⁴ In this wise, Petra Bittner explains, Macgoye has made "the opposite journey in geographical terms" compared with the other British colonial and post-colonial migrants. Her arrival in Kenya in the 1950s coincided with the reduction of the number of British people moving to the colonies and then, with the advent of Kenya's

³³ See J. R. Kurtz's Afterword in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, pp. 151-178; V. Kibera's Afterword in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *The Present Moment*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, pp. 157-180; P. Ikoya (2011) *Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and the Quest for Freedom: A Study of Coming to Birth, Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, pp. 2-4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

freedom, the writer did not follow the decision of a great number of her, previous, fellow countrymen to return to Great Britain, but she chose to be naturalized instead.³⁵

She has always maintained a humble lifestyle, different from that of the European people, settlers or their descendants, or the African elite and more related to that of the majority of ordinary African people.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye has become perfectly integrated into the Luo community and internalized the culture, the customs and the language of her adopted land, to such an extent that people of the Luo community call the writer “‘Min Gem’ that is ‘wife of Gem’”, following the Luo practise to name the women belonging to the community after their home area.³⁶ Macgoye considers herself a Luo as well:

I consider myself a Kenyan. Obviously my British heritage, like any other natural heritage is still there. [...] I certainly do not see myself as a Kenyan white, I mean I do not think that there is a community of Kenyan white although there are a few people, not necessarily citizens, who make an agglomeration but they do not actually make community. So, yes, I see myself as a Kenyan and the sub-category is bound to be Luo.³⁷

Her works of fiction are all set in Kenya, feature Kenyan characters, mainly African even if with some exceptions, and focus on Kenyan issues and history. The same can be said about Macgoye’s non-fiction books dealing with the history of the country and its moral issues. Nonetheless, these are not the main features characterizing Macgoye’s work and making her position as a writer so unique in the realm of Kenyan literature. As a matter of fact, also white writers belonging to the category of the so-called “English colonial literature” or “expatriate literature”, the already mentioned Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen for example, have set their works in Kenya and often described native people and their costumes. What is worth noticing, however, is the

³⁵ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*. Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, pp. 44-45.

³⁶ P. Ikoya (2011) *Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and the Quest for Freedom: A Study of Coming to Birth, Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, p. 2.

³⁷ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 53.

different point of view and consciousness adopted by writers like Huxley and Blixen on the one hand, and Macgoye on the other. "Expatriate literature" features an outsider's point of view, an European, and sometimes biased, consciousness. The writers describe their experiences as insiders of a settler community, but outsiders of the indigenous one. Conversely, Macgoye's point of view is extremely different: regardless of her British heritage and white complexion, the position she occupies is that of the insider. She writes with a Kenyan consciousness and a Kenyan perspective, showing a deep knowledge of the culture and the indigenous system of thought. "She is a true daughter of the soil as many Kenyans would say".³⁸

Macgoye's most famous novel *Coming to Birth* well represents the writer position as an insider, as some of her biographical elements mingle with Paulina's, the African main character, experiences and the fictional spaces inhabited by the protagonists are described through Macgoye's lens, from her own real knowledge of the African quarters and the indigenous people.

Macgoye arrived in Kenya in 1954, two years earlier with respect to her character Paulina in 1956. They both epitomize the experience of a young woman adapting to a new home: Paulina as a "Nyar Gem", a "daughter of Gem" moving to her husband's house in Pumwani and Macgoye as a "Nyarloka", "the one who has crossed over or is born overseas", the woman from abroad who tries to be integrated in her adopted motherland.³⁹

It is in the slum area of Pumwani that Macgoye begins her experience in Kenya and Paulina takes her first steps into the urban environment. The novel's detailed descriptions of the urban scene and the sensations and emotions felt by Paulina in this new reality stem from the author's everyday life in the area and her own feelings and realities witnessed on her arrival to the country. In order to stress the link between her own experience and that of her protagonist, the author gives herself a first brief portrayal in the novel. She appears as the short lady "with glasses and a bicycle" living in the mission house, the assistant of Ahoya, the woman who gives Paulina accommodation after having got lost in Nairobi (30-31). The bicycle mentioned in the text was

³⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

³⁹ J. R. Kurtz (2002) 'Crossing over: Identity and Change in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's "Song of Nyarloka"', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 101.

the real vehicle used daily by the writer to reach the Church Missionary Society Bookshop in Church House.

Later in the book Macgoye appears again in Kisumu, during the 1963 Independence Day celebrations. Paulina, while participating to the festivities, detects "the little white girl" she has known in Pumwani, accompanied by her black husband and her two children. Even if the family does not recognise Paulina, they politely greet her in Luo (52). As Kurtz reminds us, in 1963 the author actually was already married and had two children: Phyllis Ahoya and George Ng'ong'a. Her family then grew further with the birth of two more children, Francis Ochieng' and Lawrence Thomas King Odera.⁴⁰

Both Pumwani and Kisumu represent two crucial locations in Paulina's life: the first is where the young bride begins her urban adventure, the second symbolises the start of her life as an independent woman since it is in Kisumu that she enrolls in the Homecraft Training School. Both the settings are described through Paulina's eyes, that is through Macgoye's eyes, since the author's own biographical experience is intertwined with the fictional story of her character.

According to J. Roger Kurtz, Macgoye's peculiar life can be explained by referring to three major elements that have affected her choices and inclinations: her growth in a working-class family, the opportunities given her by formal education and her Christian faith also used to the benefit of society.⁴¹

The writer's parents both belonged to the working class. Macgoye's father, Richard Thomas King, was deprived of the opportunity of finishing his school career and obliged to begin to work at twelve years old. He was then employed as a clerk in a shipyard. Her mother Phyllis could complete her studies and temporarily worked as a teacher and later she began to host paying lodgers in their house. Both Macgoye's parents were also believers and practicing Christians, a faith they passed down to their daughter.

Her modest background, her childhood negatively affected by the Great Depression and the two World Wars, her strong faith can thus explain her

⁴⁰ Afterword by J. R. Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.154.

empathy with the ordinary and humble people of her society. Her faith, in particular is not something to exercise privately, but to share through the missionary work.

In the same vein, in spite of Macgoye's successful studies and writing career, she has never considered herself as belonging to an educated elite and her writings are not addressed to an exclusive group of intellectuals and specialists:

What I keep trying to say is that you do not write a novel to be studied in an institution and you do not write it for people to write theses about [...]. It is for people to read on the Matatus [Kenyan buses], offices, students in byways. But everything we do is taken at such a serious level, you see...⁴²

Regardless of her humility, Macgoye did mark the literature of Kenya, thanks to her works well appreciated and used as part of the school curricula and to her active role in the literary community of her country. She is presently praised by critics as the "mother of Kenyan literature" and a "national treasure" and her popularity is increasing, even if since the beginning of her writing career for more than thirty years her personality and output have been highly recognized within her adoptive country, but rather ignored outside Kenya.⁴³ With the publication of *Coming to Birth*, her best-known work, in 1986, Macgoye became the first African woman writer who won the eminent and British-based Sinclair Prize and in 1995 the novel *Homing In* was awarded the second place in the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for Literature.

As Petra Bittner argues:

Macgoye's case is of special literary interest because of her commitment to the Kenyan national cause and her contribution to Kenyan national literature. Very few other white post-colonial writers in Africa who were not also born and raised in an African country (as

⁴² M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 57.

⁴³ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*. Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 45.

e.g. Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer) have given voice to native issues with the same dedication and insight.⁴⁴

The author in fact, through all her fiction and non-fiction writing, has been interested in bringing to the fore themes and issues affecting the ever-evolving Kenyan society, with a special consideration for the experiences of ordinary and marginalized people and for the position and reaction of women vis-à-vis modernity and social changes and opportunities.

As Kurtz illustrates:

Taken as a group, the richest collection of female characters in all Kenyan literature is to be found in the novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye. Although they are deeply evocative of broader issues of nationalism and national development, Macgoye's female characters are never made to carry the entire burden of that representation. Women in Macgoye's work can serve as symbols of nationhood, but they are also much more. These women—Lois Akinyi (*Murder in Majengo*, 1972), Paulina (*Coming to Birth*, 1986), Wairimu, Rahel and Sophia (*The Present Moment*, 1987), and the eponymous Victoria (1993, in a prequel to *Murder in Majengo*)—are the most complex and compelling in contemporary Kenyan writing.⁴⁵

Besides Macgoye's reluctance to be categorised as a Kenyan woman writer, and to the use of the term "feminist" with regard to her most famous novels⁴⁶, her choice of a wide range of female characters for her works link the author to the other Kenyan women writers strongly aware of their responsibility in making women's voices heard in their society:

Of course I know more about women than I know about men, therefore a lot of my perceptions start there. Because I am a woman, a mother and a granny. It seems to me natural [...] that to be

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 46.

⁴⁵ J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 152.

⁴⁶ On this topic see Macgoye's interview with Mike Kuria in M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, pp. 51-67.

preoccupied particularly with women's issues is something that is a woman's responsibility.⁴⁷

In her novels, Macgoye stresses how some historical and political events have particularly affected women, with a particular interest devoted to women's reactions and the emancipating opportunities these changes have given them. At the same time the author highlights social injustices and exploitative practises against women in colonial times and the incompetence of the postcolonial country to provide for the needs of its female citizens.

However, the issue of women's role in society and their emancipation is only one of the crucial themes developed in Macgoye's oeuvre. The author is also strongly involved in dealing with the birth of the Kenyan nation, the struggle for freedom, both national and individual, the changing of customs and the journey towards modernity, social and political injustices. Above all, Macgoye's works try to shed some light on the complex issue of identity, in a ever-changing society where identities are not more fixed and predictable, but always "re-constructed, re-invented and re-interpreted" according to the changing of social structures.⁴⁸ Not only personal and interior identity is discussed in Macgoye's novels, but national identity as well since through its troubled journey towards independence Kenya has tried with difficulty to shape a new national identity by erasing, or at least weakening, harsh divisions and conflicts due to people's belonging to different tribes and cultural groups.

In this regard, in order to understand how the construction of identity is discussed in Macgoye's major novels it is worth highlighting the writer's focused use of two literary genres, the bildungsroman and the national literature, respectively focused on the definition of personal identity and agency and of a collective identity. As Petra Bittner stresses, Macgoye "marries the highly individual-oriented bildungsroman (with its promise of individual agency and growth) to the more community-oriented political-

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴⁸ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*. Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 28.

historical narrative”, transplanting a traditional literary genre originated in Europe in the eighteenth-century to the African context.⁴⁹

The novel of development presents the growth of a young protagonist from the early stages of adolescence to adulthood, through different stages of apprenticeship aimed at the achievement of the protagonist’s maturity and self-definition. The protagonist’s identity has to be created, and not inherited, through a series of experiences allowing him/her to reach a level of autonomy and independence, away from home and the legacy of tradition. Thus, mobility and the exploration of unknown geographical and social spaces play a pivotal role in the novel of development, as well as in Macgoye’s major novels. Another feature of this literary genre is its depiction of common occurrences, every day lives and events, realistic portrayals of people and realities.

Macgoye’s novels partly follow these features, but at the same time their complete adhesion is not possible because the bildungsroman’s structure is too centred on the individual. Its focus on the growth and development of one single person in fact clashes with a post-colonial context oriented to the re-establishment of a collective, rather than individual, identity. In the ex-colonies, in the harsh attempt to construct a national identity, the growth of the individual is not investigated on its own, since the development of the new-born nation, the community’s identification to the new reality and the shaping of a national consciousness are the real goals of the narrations.

By occupying herself a unique position between two cultures, Macgoye’s novels thus are placed between two different literary traditions as they trace an individualistic storyline typical of the novel of development of European origins, contemporaneously answering to the aims of the African national literature. The development of the individual goes hand in hand with that of the community and the nation: “individual and social development is invested with political meaning, while national progress is expressed in human terms”.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*. Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Chapter 2

Redefining Kenyan Women's Identities and Roles: *Coming to Birth and The Present Moment*

2.1 Introduction

Voices from the Bottom

Macgoye's novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* focus on the humble lives of working-class women constantly struggling to face the challenges of negotiating a changing world and free themselves from the unfavourable position they occupy in a patriarchal and troubled society.

Macgoye's works are generally based on the lives of the marginalized and forsaken of her society in their struggle for survival. What the author is interested in are the stories, the experiences, "the secrets of those little people – what there were afraid of, what they were mean over, what they wasted", that is the story of her people, not that of "big people" always portrayed as "braver, stronger, fiercer, cleverer, even wickeder, than anyone we knew."¹

Macgoye's female protagonists have been given a voice, through which they are able to acquire the position of speaking subjects, to narrate their stories in their own words, from their own perspectives.² As J. Roger Kurtz puts it referring to *Coming to Birth*, the novel "depicts very real concerns, and it has the distinction of being one of the first Kenyan novels to present these concerns from a woman's perspective."³

¹ M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *The Present Moment*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 88.

² L. Odiemo-Munara 'Women Engagement with Power and Authority in Writing East Africa.' CODESRIA (2010), Gdnet.org, p. 6, dated viewed 07 July 2013
http://www.gdnet.org/~research_papers/Women%20engagement%20with%20power%20and%20authority%20in%20re-writing%20East%20Africa

³ Afterword by J. R. Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 152.

The women's voices raise in particular in *The Present Moment*, where the voices of humble women contemporaneously epitomize the voices of those who have always been silenced and excluded: "I consider *The Present Moment* my most important work because it is more subtle", Macgoye stresses, "it may be more difficult to read, but it captures the struggles of ordinary women".⁴

In the two novels under analysis, the author portrays Kenyan life through the experiences of Paulina and of seven destitute and old ladies who relate their life stories made of sacrifices, traumas, tragic recollections and loneliness. The hardness of women's life emerge in *The Present Moment* from an intricate web of personal and historical recollections, quiet dialogues and passionate discussions, exchanges of views and advices between the women, the other people visiting the Refuge and the girls, nurses and trainees, belonging to different generations and having experienced the changes set in motion in their country. The novel's narrative structure based upon women's conversations can suggest the author's aim at creating a fictional text that distances itself from novels written by male writers, by plunging it completely into women's world, their minds and souls. Women's dialogues and talks, the memories of their past lives might also be read as a means through which they express their subjectivity, renegotiate and recreate their identities, by arising as autonomous beings.

As a matter of fact, the stories are not recounted by an omniscient narrator prevailing on all the characters, but by the voices of all the humble protagonists with their peculiar cadences of speech and varieties. The same can be said about *Coming to Birth*, where Paulina's consciousness, except for the very first pages of the book, controls the entire novel. In this novel as well Macgoye rejects the use of an external narration, by the adoption of dialogues and narrative techniques used to allow the reader to enter the protagonist's mind and follow her thoughts and emotions. The use of the free indirect discourse for example is extensively used in the novel to present parts of the text as indirectly coming from a character's perspective, to shift

⁴ M. Oludhe Macgoye interviewed by the Daily Nation, 'A day with the matriarch of creative writing'. 19 Oct 2002

<http://www.nation.co.ke/News/A+day+with+the+matriarch+of+creative+writing/-/1056/1537422/-/nmad9e/-/index.html>

from one character's consciousness to another, to insert a narrative voice that belongs neither to the omniscient narrator nor to one of the protagonists, but to a shared and national consciousness.

Thus, Macgoye's female characters are presented as completely developed individuals in their own right, making the reader aware of the protagonists' psychological complexity and self analysis. They distance themselves from the typical female characters often represented by male writers, who resemble symbolic caricatures or stereotypes rather than rounded and complex protagonists.

Synopsis of the Novels

Coming to Birth, published in 1986, features the life of a young Luo girl, Paulina Akello, who in 1956 moves to Nairobi to join her husband Martin Were. Paulina's first days in the urban environment underline her naiveté and are marked by political unrest due to the declaration of the state of Emergency and the threat of the fight for freedom. Paulina is pregnant and during her first night in Nairobi she falls sick and suffers a miscarriage. From then onward she experiences a series of misadventures, also due to her immaturity and ignorance: she gets lost in Nairobi for two days and nights after having been discharged from hospital, she is hardly beaten from her husband, she experiences a second miscarriage as a result of a violent harassment committed by colonial agents in her house and then a third miscarriage. Martin, as a consequence, sends Paulina to his rural family homestead to help with the harvest and when she returns to Nairobi she is more mature. With her new confidence she decides to join the Home Craft School in Kisumu for vocational skills, which gives her some economic independence. In the meantime her marriage with Martin is gradually disintegrating. As her husband dates other women in Nairobi, Paulina starts a relationship with Simon. Paulina and Martin separate and her relationship with Simon leads to the birth of their son Okeyo. However, the tragic death of the young Okeyo comes only three years after, during President Jomo Kenyatta's visit to Kisumu hospital in 1969. Disillusioned, Paulina moves to Nairobi where she begins to work as a domestic for an European family, the Okelos, and then for the family of the politician Mr M., leading her to gradually grow in independence and personal

involvement in social and political concerns. The rapprochement between Paulina and Martin at the end of the story results in a new pregnancy closing the book with “a very great hope” (150).

The Present Moment, published in 1987, is set in 1983 in the Refuge, a Christian-run shelter in Eastleigh hosting old and homeless women, under the care of the Matron and young nurses. The seven major protagonists of the novel, the Kikuyu Wairimu, Bessie and Priscilla, the Seychelloise Mama Chungu, the Luhya Nekesa, the Luo Rahel and the Swahili Sophia, piece together their life histories begun in different periods and places, but all reunited in that “present moment”. The women’s private stories, experiences and reminiscences emerge together with the intricate and detailed reconstruction of colonial and postcolonial Kenyan history. The life stories of the seven women structure the novel’s narrative, a puzzle mixing historical facts and figures with personal experiences and recollections.

The oldest and most daring of the novel’s characters is Wairimu, whose story represents the cornerstone of the narrative. Wairimu, “a feminist born ahead of her time”, appears to have made the decision to become the agent for change in her life.⁵ Enchanted by Waitito’s stories about Nairobi and a new world made of “dreams” and opportunities, she chooses to reject the traditional roles imposed on women by custom -wife, mother, elder’s wife, grandmother- and to become a wage earner, firstly in the coffee plantations and then in Nairobi (54). Her desires do not concern marriage and children, but knowledge of the world, learning and the opportunity of being free. Increasingly distant from her previous rural life, during her independent life Wairimu experiments sexual freedom, education and political activism, by joining the Harry Thuku’s protests and the Mau Mau movement.

On different levels, all the old women characters’ decisions and actions indicate their intentions to take control of their lives and to direct them in the manner they want. Rahel decides to rise up against custom, by rejecting to be “inherited” after her soldier husband’s death, Mama Chungu, humiliated and furious because of her lover’s rough behaviour, joins the Mau Mau movement

⁵ Afterword by Valerie Kibera, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *The Present Moment*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 171.

as a message carrier, thus sabotaging the man's work in the security forces, Sophia rebels against her Swahili-Islamic family, by marrying the African Christian man she loves. Nevertheless, what all the women have in common are precarious lives and hard experiences. Bessie has witnessed the death of her son, a deserter shot dead in front of her mother by soldiers, Priscilla has seen with her own eyes the killing of the European family she worked for by members of the Mau Mau movement, Sophia has accidentally set fire to the house, resulting in the death of her relatives, Nekesa has lived as a prostitute in Uganda, Mama Chungu after a series of exhausting jobs, has been obliged to beg in the streets.

History and Memory

In both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, the characters' individual narratives are set against a specific historical scenery, that is the twentieth century history of Kenya. History, nonetheless, does not help as a mere framework made of crucial dates and events concerning historical figures, but all the main characters' stories are merged with the colonial and national story of the country. Besides women's strong will and determination, it is also history that plays a pivotal role as far as women's emancipation is concerned, by setting changes that help them acquire some sort of autonomy and self-improvement.

Historical events and changes shape and transform the novels' characters, by designing for them new opportunities and modern spaces where to prove themselves. However, Kenyan history is also the origin of the novels' protagonists' strives, pains and endurance.

The novel *Coming to Birth* covers twenty-two years of Paulina's life and Kenyan history, from 1956 to 1978, while in *The Present Moment* the historical scope is of almost eighty years, starting with the adolescence of the oldest character Wairimu, born in 1905, and ending in 1987. While *Coming to Birth* focuses on the period shortly preceding Kenyan independence, the Emergency, the political independence of 1963 and the following disillusionment and political unrest till the Jomo Kenyatta era, *The Present Moment's* historical span is more ambitious going from the early installation of

British colonialism and the advent of the two World Wars to the turbulence of the post-independence era.

Thus, Macgoye's novels focus on how history influences and modifies ordinary people's lives and, at the same time, highlighting the fact that people should not be passive but try to affect history in turn, even if it is unattainable to transcend historical events completely. People, therefore, even if under forces that are beyond their dominion, should attempt to make the most of their lives, by benefitting from their restricted means and resources.

In *Coming to Birth*, the novel's plot proceeds chronologically and the historical backdrop advances as Paulina's story moves forward, thus creating a strong link between the protagonist's life and Kenyan national history. On the contrary, the structure of *The Present Moment* presents the reader with a multilayered time, due to the complexity of the shifts from the present time of the Refuge to the past of the women's lives and Kenyan history becoming alive through their recollections and memories, which in turn intersect, start, stop and then start again. Present and past are mixed up in the novel, since the pages of the book try to mirror the old women's minds where the sounds of a personal and communal past keep on reverberating in the present (10), as the past is something "we cannot get away from" (34).

Memory is a leitmotif characterizing the novel, directly or indirectly, from the very beginning till the end. It is actively expressed through the old inmates' articulated recollections, it can be silenced (thinking for example of Mama Chungu, who appears as if "she had no memory at all" (34)), or it can just be unconsciously and incidentally unearthed since:

Memories, of course, need not speak in loud voices. They may gibber at a tantalising distance like a bat in the rafters, or swoop upon you like a moth, soundless but soiling you with a residue of filmy substance. They are the more terrifying if they wake you up, unaware of where you are, or weave about from real places to the fantasy of story-books or the falsity of postmarked letters. (34-35)

Symbolic Imagery: 'Change' and 'Birth'

The key word representing both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* is 'change'. The word change refers to the gradual or radical modification of the female characters' behaviours and personalities, their individual improvement, their departure from the rural to the urban setting, from a situation of dependence from their families or husbands to the achievement of economic and personal independence.

With respect to individual improvement, change is conceived of in the shape of the journey motif. It is a physical journey from the traditional village to the coffee plantations or the modern city, from a dramatic life in the city to a serene old age spent in the Refuge, and a gradual and inner journey leading to emancipation, empowerment or even regression, in the case of male characters as Paulina's husband in *Coming to Birth* for example.

In its first meaning the journey motif takes shape in particular in the village/city, tradition/modernity dichotomy. As at one level the city provides a chaotic and unsafe reality for women, at another level it disrupts customary social structures, so that the journey towards the urban environment means the displacement towards a new space where women can try to achieve personal emancipation, mainly if they can find employment and in order not to be dependent from men. In its second meaning, from one point of view change can be regarded as a source of suffering since it represents an estrangement from tradition and the community life, the ruin of relationships and family units. Despite these negative outcomes, change is also to be perceived as a motivation to reinforcement and growth, an opportunity to choose for oneself.

Nonetheless, change is a leitmotif including not only characters' individual transformation, but also the gradual alteration of Kenya from a country ruled by British colonialism to an independent country with its own national government, the social changes in the work field and the educational field, the developments in gender relations.

To the idea of change we can associate that of 'birth', as change can be so extreme to cause the coming into existence of something or someone completely different from what it was before, in a kind of 'rebirth'.

Macgoye's novel's title *Coming to Birth* implies births on various levels. The most direct allusion is to literal birth of children, strongly desired by Paulina and her husband. After a series of miscarriages and the death of Okeyo, the only son Paulina has conceived with another man, the title alludes to the hope for the birth of a new child that closes the story. By opening the novel with the title's reference to birth and by closing it with the same allusion, Macgoye opens and closes a symbolic circle containing other metaphorical births giving meaning to the novel.

In the background, but actively affecting the plot and the characters' actions, there is the coming to birth of Kenya as a nation, beginning in the political and social unrest of the 1950s, "the gestation and labor period leading to the birth of the new nation in December 1963".⁶ It implies all the difficulties related to the birth of a new being, that is hope, trepidation, joy, but also pain and sometimes difficulties and disillusionment. The parallel foreground story is that of Paulina and her coming to birth as "a new woman", "an example of successful woman without children and men" (110). She is born again, coming out from her cocoon made of fear, naivety, impotence and insecurity. This gradual process affecting both Paulina and Kenya concerns women's position in Kenyan society as well. Through Paulina's own experience and the narrative voice's comments the reader can witness the gradual "coming to birth" of women on different levels. They emerge as autonomous beings and improve their social roles, by entering different fields, politics, jobs, that were previously male domains.

A rich imagery of pregnancy and childbirth characterizes the entire novel *Coming to Birth*, nevertheless, the same gradual process of transformation and following rebirth can be also applied to *The Present Moment*. In this novel Kenya arises as an independent nation after years of colonial rule and struggle for freedom. In the same way, the old women in the Refuge, after having lived of privations, suffering, loneliness and poverty, "revive" in their old age thanks to the solidarity and affection they find in their new community. Female solidarity develops among the old ladies and a new

⁶ Afterword by J. R. Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 152.

network of links, which does not include their relatives who have abandoned them but gives new affections and security to the women. The Refuge is their lifeline, where they are looked after by younger nurses, community health workers and the Matron, who often scold them as if they were children. Their biographies and their emotions, moreover, by degrees come to birth through their voices and tales, giving new shapes to their identities.

What Are Women to Do?

Gender issues in Kenya are thus rather complicated. If traditional culture is profoundly patriarchal, if the anticolonial struggle was predicated on the validity of traditional values, and if the postindependence city is dominated by men, what is a daughter of Nyapoli to do?⁷

This argument is borne out by J. Roger Kurtz in his analysis on Kenyan novels focusing on women and women's issue and their peculiar relationship with the city. The author refers to Nyapoli, the female protagonist of Grace Ogot's novel *The Promised Land* (1966), being the first complex female protagonist in Kenyan literature, then followed by other autonomous and strong female characters as Macgoye's Paulina and Wairimu, "Nyapoli's daughters".

In traditional culture women are expected to act within the framework of their conventional roles of wives and mothers, in a patriarchal society confining them to defined spaces on the basis of the reproductive sexuality of their bodies and their role in the domesticity of familial life. During the troubled years of the strife for national freedom, women's connection with the traditional ways of life tended to be reinforced. As a matter of fact, while the colonial regime and the missionaries discredited customary practices and values strongly rooted in Kenyan pre-colonial society, such as polygamy, male and female circumcision, women were elected as the depositories of society's cultural foundations, in contrast with colonial impositions. Women were thus isolated in the traditional reality of the pre-colonial and premodern society,

⁷ J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 137.

symbolizing a conservative identity in opposition to colonialism and modernism.

If traditional society and the struggle for *Uhuru* have both secluded women in the symbolic sphere of country life and tradition, the post independence society, epitomized in particular in the modernity of the urban milieu, is not ready to welcome them either. The modern city is dominated by men, so that women's entry into modernity is seen as their appropriation of masculine attributes and their degrading and ruinous departure from their rural and traditional lives to moral decay and social decadence.

Kurtz, adopting Kenyan critic Abdul Jan Mohammed's terminology, classifies Kenyan novels into two categories: the hegemonic and the counter-hegemonic category. The texts belonging to the first category are in favour of the political, social and cultural existing condition, while those of the second category want it to be questioned. This classification might also be applied as far as gender issues are concerned, on the basis of how they are covered in Kenyan novels. In this case, on the one hand, texts following hegemonic impulses are usually written by male writers and support the maintenance of a patriarchal society, relegating women to their customary roles. On the other hand, counter-hegemonic works, usually authored by female writers, are in favour of the crossing and challenging of borders limiting women to their restricted gender roles.⁸

Macgoye's novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* stand as good examples of counter-hegemonic texts, where women's confinement into traditional and delimited social spheres are strongly questioned. The writer's literary representations explore the complex issue of what it means to be a woman in the twentieth-century changing society and provide insights into the ways traditional gender roles can be challenged and even defeated.

In both texts female characters move from the margins of society to the centre and through their resistance and improvement they are able to reinforce their roles and status in gender relations. Women's emancipation mainly stem from the changes brought about and the bonds weakened by modernisation, the new opportunities introduced by education and the work

⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

world which can lead to monetary stability, and from women personal potentialities and willpower to choose for themselves. The writer Macgoye thus undermines socio-cultural structures that can obstruct women's progress, thus depicting her characters rising up against inequality, against their traditional place on the lowest rung of the social ladder, and dramatizing the injustices against women.

2.2 Female Characters' Spheres of Emancipation

What Macgoye wants to communicate in her novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* is her female main characters' ability to fashion their identities and emancipate themselves. Even if from different perspectives, the protagonists understand the social boundaries and the obstacles built around them and consequently they try to go beyond those limits and reach self-fulfilment. Through a thematic analysis of the texts, this chapter aims at exploring how Macgoye's female characters, Paulina in *Coming to Birth* and Wairimu in *The Present Moment*, create new social spaces for themselves or successfully occupy spaces that were previously denied to them.

Following the tradition of the novel of development, the characters' development and apprenticeship starts with their journey, from the village homes to the urban environment, which opens up new windows of opportunities for the novels' protagonists. Through their approach to education, their attainment of economic independence and their growing political awareness, the women portrayed in these novels then have the chance to emerge as independent individuals and speaking subjects who discover, enhance and take advantage of their potential for happiness and personal satisfaction, rather than blindly accepting their roles and fitting into a cliché tradition.

2.2.1 Female Mobility: the Journey from Tradition to Modernity

Mobility can be regarded as one of the first spheres widening the horizons, perspectives and opportunities of Kenyan women. Travel was one agent of change and, as Tabitha Kanogo highlights, "it opened a Pandora's box" to girls

and women who earlier did not have the opportunity to exit from the village borders, except for specific reasons.⁹

In pre-colonial Kenya, women only travelled on rare circumstances such as marriages, trade and visits to kinsmen. Those travels were carefully planned and controlled by relatives or accompanied by written or verbal permission declaring the legitimacy of the journeys. As a consequence, women's autonomous and unjustified departure from their rural world, and to the city in particular, was judged as an obvious route to ruin, and often associated with prostitution.

In *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, the reader witnesses the main characters' departure from their rural home: Paulina travels by train from Western Kenya to Nairobi to join her husband Martin, Wairimu firstly reaches the coffee plantations and then, by travelling on a wheeled transport, a lorry, and then by train, she arrives in Nairobi. Both Paulina's and Wairimu's travels mark the beginning of their symbolic journeys towards independence and fulfilment, but the reason of their departure is extremely different.

On the one hand Paulina begins her journey toward the urban space by following custom, on the other Wairimu challenges tradition and freely decides to move, following her personal inclinations.

In conformity with custom, after the payment of dowry, becoming members of their husbands' families upon marriage, wives have to leave their own homes and families in order to reach the husband's home. Paulina's experience stands as an example of traditional marriage:

He [Martin] 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. He had built a square house for her in Gem – square was more fashionable than round – and bought her a pair of rubber shoes. (2)

⁹ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 7.

Paulina's family approval to the marriage follows the payment of dowry, which traditionally consists in the livestock, goods, money that the suitor pays to the bride's family. With the payment of the bride wealth and the following marriage, the custody of the wife passes from the father to the husband, thus underlining the woman's position of dependence:

A woman is practically a chattel, she never comes to age and although she is transferred from the custody of her father or guardian to some other man on payment of the so-called marriage price she still remains a chattel.¹⁰

As the writer Wanjiku Kabira stresses, dowry was and is a "power relations game" legitimising male authority and consequently the lower status of women, who from one perspective can be seen as if they were sold and acquired as chattels.¹¹ Nonetheless, bride price should not only be considered as a negative practice, since from a wider perspective it consisted in a firm contract involving family members and tribes and a long negotiation allowing both families to know each other and exchanging gifts.¹²

In Kenyan patriarchal and traditional society, young girls are always pushed and prepared to get married and leave their home. By moving to her husband's home, the wife becomes a newcomer, a visitor in a new space where she does not belong to the clan and has no roots. By underlining Paulina's age, sixteen years, the author also wants to interrogate another customary practice among Kenyan people, that is arranged marriages. Paulina's neighbour Rachel interrogates the young girl:

'You are younger than I expected. Did you travel by yourself?'

'Yes,' said Paulina, astonished now at her own achievement. 'I am sixteen.'

'Sixteen? Yes, they are in a hurry to get you settled these days.' (7-8)

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 32.

¹² Ibid., pp. 144-145.

In this exchanges girls were given to suitors by their families at very young ages and they were often deprived of their right of choice, since parents chose their daughters' husbands on their behalf. The girls' desires and will were thus not taken into consideration, even if the consequences of their parents' choices directly affected girls' own lives.

Very different from Paulina's experience is that of Wairimu, the young protagonist of *The Present Moment* who voluntary decides to leave her village and plunge into a new world, the coffee plantations and then Nairobi. Wairimu firstly chooses to work on different white-owned plantations, picking coffee beans. As she stresses relating her experiences:

To go to the coffee was also a new thing. It was one way of choosing for yourself. Otherwise for girls there was almost no choice. Boys might choose school or be marshalled into school, and as a consequence they might be chosen for one kind of work or another – in the time of the Great War, recently ended, many boys and men had been forced to go either to work or to fight - but for girls there were very few school places and as yet little choice: when you came home again there was still the marriage to be arranged. (17)

This passage underlines the fact that marriage was the only alternative for women until the possibility of going to the coffee came. Wairimu is escaping from this narrow horizon and from the marriage her parents are arranging for her with a man who is "healthy and good-looking enough" but not loved by their daughter (17).

The novel introduces the reader to the young Wairimu and her symbolic meeting with the young man Waitito on the village path. Waitito, encircled by "a halo of sunlight", with "his knowledge of the world and other ways and women" (2) epitomizes a turning point, a revelation in Wairimu's life:

That had been the start of it all, of her going away, because after this revelation of what he shared with her she could not face either the shameful disclosure of the wedding day or the cloying sameness of all the days that would follow. The forest was no longer thick enough to hide divergence. She had to go away. (3)

Wairimu is fascinated by this "fairy-tale" figure who, through his stories and experiences, introduces the young girl to this tempting new world and its promises. The horizon of knowledge and power that Waitito presents to Wairimu arouses the girl's curiosity, her eagerness to know and learn. Nevertheless, the man abandons the girl with her new dreams and hopes: he has let her touch a magic world and then he has left her behind. It is up to her now to leave her rural village and undertake this journey alone, as she actually does. Wairimu slips away with her friend Lois "one misty morning" and after three hours of walking they are employed on the coffee plantation (18).

Hence, Wairimu has chosen for herself, has decided to leave the village to avoid the wedding day her parents were arranging for her and to work on the plantation to be independent and free like a man: "At the end of the month you got some money, and so you were like a man and could do a lot of choosing for yourself". To be economically independent and to learn to expand one's experience allow a woman to be "as a chooser and a doer", to have a role in the decision making in the home (18).

All the same, the protagonist's ambition to emancipate and free herself from custom and tradition is so intense that even the independence that working on the coffee plantation can assure her is not enough, "she would have to go to Nairobi" (19). Wairimu decides not to return home, but to continue her journey towards the big city. At this point the author underlines the fact that "if she [Wairimu] asked to be signed off she would be questioned about her plans and perhaps laughed at", thus stressing the fact that, according to custom, women were not expected to travel, especially alone, and women's desire to be independent was considered as a folly, as something to be laughed at. Consequently, Wairimu slips away on a cool and crisp morning, "almost as excited as she had been when leaving home that first time", deciding not to go home first lest her parents would detain her (20).

Instead of walking alone for three days to reach Nairobi, Wairimu is accompanied by a local lorry charged with the transport of the coffee to the city where it has to be worked over. Just arrived in Nairobi, the young girl announces her attainment and ambitious projects to the historical figure

Harry Thuku, whom she meets by chance: "I came alone, sir, to see the city and find work" (23).¹³ At this time the reaction previously dreaded by Wairimu arrives, since some men listening to her plans denigrate the young girl, by laughing at her. In this case, Thuku's role is that of the guardian angel, who protects Wairimu from derision and helps her clarify the blurred dream she has found herself in. He appreciates her bravery, but he is well aware of the difficulties she will face as an alone woman in Nairobi. The Kiambu people Thuku addresses Wairimu to, Samson and Nduta, are sceptical because her situation as a single and alone woman is against their custom. Nevertheless "the world was changing" and, Macgoye stresses, Wairimu "too was part of a new world" and in the end the couple decide to let her work in their tea room as a waitress and a kitchen hand, in return for board and lodging, and some money at the end of the month (24). Their main concern is to make clear how hard life in Nairobi is for a girl like Wairimu, how tradition and custom are far away from the modern city and women are in a few number and so vulnerable:

They supposed she must know what Nairobi was like and how men were bound to pester her. That was her own affair but they did not want any trouble in the tea shop. Outside, they had no way to protect her, *women being as few as they were and all the old rules set aside.* [emphasis added] (24)

2.2.2 The Big City: Nairobi

Macgoye's exploration of Nairobi presents the city as both a chaotic and dangerous male domain and an eye opener for women's emancipation. In the first page of *The Present Moment* Macgoye introduces Nairobi as the city where men "conduct some mysterious business with rupees and skins" while at home, in the rural space, girls fetch water completely excluded from that reality (1), but as both *Coming to Birth's* and *The Present Moment's* plots develop, life in the country is more and more associate with domesticity and the city with higher education, career and women's independence.

¹³ The role of the political activist Harry Thuku and his struggle against social injustices will be developed in the subchapter 'Political Awareness and Women's Activism' of this dissertation, pp. 73-96.

Nairobi has undergone different changes and processes that have transformed the city from a depot, to an administrative centre during the British colonialism, to the capital of an independent country and the most important city connecting East Africa with the rest of the world. In spite of its changes of role and functions, Nairobi has always been characterized by a strong male presence. As Kurtz underlines, "the male to female ratio among the African population was nine to one" and this was partly due to the immigration restrictions before World War II, since African workers were denied the possibility of bringing their families to Nairobi. Nevertheless, "even after restrictions were lifted, males continued to outnumber females".¹⁴

What it is worth underlying is that, even though Nairobi can be regarded as a reality of male-led dominance, it nevertheless can offer a wide range of opportunities to women to forge their identities and their personal emancipation. This is possible because the city is a complex reality that shakes the traditional social patterns, allowing women to free themselves from patriarchal tradition, in particular if they can undertake an educational path or be employed. Nairobi is a conflicting space, where indigenous traditions are undermined and struggle with modernity, where modern values can supplant traditional ones leading either to individual improvement or downfall. Nairobi, portrayed from different points of view in Kenyan literature, epitomizes the country's modern and complex reality:

Nairobi has many faces, depending on whose version of the city one reads. Nairobi is a playground for the new generation of African entrepreneurs (Maillu, Ruheni); it is where that same generation becomes embroiled in conflicts and power struggles that sometimes get out of control (Ndissio-Otieno); Nairobi is a melting pot for a new post-ethnic Kenyan paradise (Danwood); Nairobi is the ultimate coming-of-age initiation rite (dae Mude); Nairobi is the site of betrayal and disillusionment (Githinji); Nairobi is a place that will make you take your own life (Wambakha); Nairobi is a dark and oppressive place (Kibera); on the other hand, Nairobi is where the lights burn bright and where a fast-thinking person can make a

¹⁴ J. R. Kurtz (1998) *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel*. Oxford: James Currey; Trenton: Africa World Press, p. 135.

fortune (Mangua, Kiriamiti); Nairobi is where flawed individuals struggle to make the best of their limited resources and knowledge (Macgoye).¹⁵

Nairobi is a city of prosperity and poverty, opportunities and risks, a physical and symbolic space rich of contrasts, as Ellen, the protagonist of Macgoye's novel *Homing In*, perceives when arriving in the city with her husband Jack:

Contrasts – without the sun-glasses – were sharper than she was used to – brilliant flowers, barefoot porters, hennaed hands, glittering saris, brown wrinkled European faces, family grocers nestling among the three – or four-storey office buildings.¹⁶

In *Coming to Birth*, Paulina moves to Nairobi in 1956 to join her husband Martin Were. The young protagonist has travelled alone from her rural village, "her first time on a train", in a physical and metaphorical journey from the traditional village life to the urban reality (2). At Paulina's arrival, the city, the borderland, overwhelms her as she exits from the train station with Martin:

People thronged together. Ahead of them lay a street of tall buildings and rushing traffic. She supposed it was normal for big cities to be like this, but still had difficulty in keeping up with Martin, as she wanted to leap away from the kerb each time a car came close and felt, being new and strange, that she must be the one to give way whenever she came to face with someone hurrying in the opposite direction. (3)

Paulina's first experience with urbanization is confusing and shocking. When she arrives on the morning train in Nairobi she feels as a stranger, unfamiliar with the endless roads and the interminable crowds (13), disoriented at the view of "a big arched gate with strange writing on it and figures carved and gaily painted", which is simply an Indian cemetery, but that is perceived by Paulina as a bad omen. She observes the houses with fear, because they are

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 156-157.

¹⁶ M. Oludhe Macgoye (1994) *Homing In*. Nairobi: East African Education Publishers, p. 25.

so close together and so dirty, she is frightened of the bars and the prostitutes and she feels "outside the place where custom could help her" (9). After having been discharged from the hospital because of her first miscarriage, Paulina's naiveté emerges. She is left alone at the door of the hospital and she decides to come back home by herself, without waiting for Martin:

She had been in Kisumu several times and found her way round without knowing the names of places and had hardly noticed that Kisumu had grown bigger since she first visited it. How could she understand that Nairobi was a city or imagine that it would take a day to walk across from edge to edge and be impossible to remember all one had seen on the way? (11)

Because of her naivety and unfamiliarity with urbanization, Paulina easily gets lost. By inhabiting two very different worlds, walking through crisscrossed roads, the young girl does not recognise any landmark in the urban environment, but the railway. Ironically, for a girl coming from the country, a symbol of modernity as the railway is "the one thing she was sure of", besides the sky that, "thank God is the same everywhere" (12-13).

As far as *The Present Moment* is concerned, Wairimu as well is bewildered by the bustling Nairobi: there are people coming from everywhere, roads wider than she had ever seen. The girl's first encounter with the city is compared to a dream, a blurred vision without boundaries, where she can only count on herself. The young girl does not know how to buy some food "from these strange buildings filled with men", she cannot understand what people are saying (22). Wairimu's lack of knowledge about the modern city and her belonging to the rural world is stressed in the following passage:

She was fascinated by the streets, where ox-carts still mingled with the motor cars and at night big lights (just as the turn-boy had told her at Ruiru) shone from poles along the wayside. In shop windows there were white people standing and sitting to display the clothes – it took her some time to realise they were not alive – and some of the buildings were higher than the tallest tree. (24)

What the author suggests is that colonial Nairobi represents a foreign space, unknown to women like Paulina and Wairimu coming from a rural reality and bringing a specific cultural baggage. Macgoye portrays her characters in a space of cultural diversity, a miscellaneous ethnic space where different cultural traditions fuse together, opposed to the homogeneous reality from which Paulina and Wairimu come from. Different lifestyles and cultures meet in Nairobi and Wairimu and Paulina gradually learn to identify “the different kinds of people”, the arrogant Somali, the black Luos, Uganda people, Arabs and the Europeans living in the middle of town, where they work “instead of being hidden away in kitchens and workshops like the other races” (25). In particular, both Paulina and Wairimu are struck by the kind of lives women conduct in the city:

She [Paulina] learned, too, that not all Nairobi women were like herself. Not all of them had husbands, to start with, or they had husbands who were away, they claimed, because of the Emergency. But even those who had husbands often received visitors at odd hours – for the men without women far outnumbered the women without men – or sometimes went trading at the market without telling their husbands what they earned. They bought clothes or cigarettes or perfumes, for they said in Majengo a woman could not keep her man against all the professional competition if she did not use means to keep herself beautiful. (28)

Wairimu also relates her impressions and what she has learned about women’s urban life, but she focuses on European women:

Many of them were not married at all, she was told, but served in shops (European shops, of course) or wrote things in offices, earned their own money, bought dresses or cooking pans or groceries for themselves (you could see the parcels being carried out by shop attendants to a waiting vehicle), some even drove their own cars. Indeed there was a lot to think about. (25)

Paulina and Wairimu both stress in the first place the fact that Nairobi is inhabited by a great number of single women, living without husbands and

children. From these women's experiences there is a lot to learn in terms of women's emancipation and independence, since in pre-colonial Kenya and in the rural communities, a "social stigma" was associated to spinsterhood.¹⁷ Unmarried girls were not considered worthy of respect, even in their own homes. One reason was that a single girl was not a resource for her own family, because her father did not receive any dowry in exchange for his daughter. Hence, the unmarried girl was regarded as a failure and a burden.

Modernity and the possibility of facing a wider way of life into the urban space, allow women to take control of their life and choose for themselves, without being always exposed to public disdain. Married women in Nairobi, Paulina observes, are not submitted women who cannot leave their house, or act or take any decision without their husbands' approval. On the contrary, they are women who earn their own money at the market, without informing their partner about the amount they gather, and spend it for themselves: for the care of their own body, their beauty and appearance. These can be regarded as small steps towards women's emancipation: women are free to be independent, earn their own money "like men", without depending from their husbands or families, and above all, they have the freedom to think about their own needs.

Women's lives in Nairobi, however, do not fit Paulina's expectations and her first personal encounter with a single woman reveals her belonging to the rural milieu and her mindset still linked to the patriarchal and traditional society:

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 how a woman who, though not very young, was still marriageable could make such a choice. *In custom there was no place for the unmarried.* [emphasis added] (16)

¹⁷ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 52.

Paulina meets the midwife Drusilla when she is hosted by Susanna and Peter, after having been discharged from King George Hospital and found wandering in the streets. Paulina's difficulty in understanding Drusilla's chosen spinsterhood is strongly connected to her own and her rural society's prejudices and traditional values. The young girl has not experienced all the opportunities modern life can offer to women yet, and for this reason she is not able to understand how women can opt for decisions that are against customary practices.

What should be noted is that in traditional Kenyan society, marriage had a pivotal role, "was part of a cultural process". It was the keystone to assure cordial relations between the families, to guarantee the head of household an economic income and women a deserving future. Besides marriage, romantic and sexual relations in general were of public knowledge and affected the interests and the status of entire families and clans.¹⁸ Consequently, girls who remained unmarried (rarely for choice) represented a social shame to their families and the same happened to divorced women to such an extent that, as Kanogo relates, at death they were denied a proper burial near the other relatives and were buried at the periphery of the family's estate.

Talking with Mike Kuria about marriage and customary practices, Kenyan writer Grace Ogot explains that marriage traditionally is a girl's destiny since birth. Whilst a boy has a burial place already determined in the allotment where he will then build his house, a girl's burial place is not determined because it depends on her marriage: her burial place is at her husband's home, she has not any place at her father's homestead.¹⁹ Moreover, in Ogot's novel *The Promised Land*, the narrator informs the reader that "once a woman was married she swore to stay with her husband's people for better or for worse, and no one would have her back at home".²⁰

With respect to Wairimu, in contrast to Paulina's initial opinion, she considers European women's conduct in the city as an example for African women: "Indeed there was a lot to think about" (25). They are women who can

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 51-55.

¹⁹ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 75.

²⁰ G. Ogot (1990) *The Promised Land*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, p. 11.

completely rely on themselves, they have a job, a house and often a car. European women's independence, in a way, symbolise what Wairimu has always dreamed for herself.

2.2.3 Tradition against Modernity

Macgoye's female heroines are attempting to make the transition from the traditional life in the country to modern life in the cities. Their approach to modernity, however, is in contrast with life in the community and their relatives' values, which have been based solely on their traditions and customary practices. Parents, in particular, do not easily grasp the extent of their daughters' desire for emancipation, thus creating a gap between their traditional world and that of their daughters. The novels' protagonists' satisfying participation in both the village and the urban milieu is not possible, since their departure had excluded them from the community's life and their aim at entering the modern and urban society had denied their rights in the village.

In *The Present Moment* Wairimu's parents, and her family in general, with their incomprehension and disappointment at their daughter's choices, exemplify traditional Kenyan values. When Wairimu returns home in the late 1926, she is welcomed by her younger sister Kanini holding their brother's child by the hand. The girl is afraid to embrace her older sister, as she thought that she was lost for ever. Her first questions and comments underline her attachment to custom and reinforce the values of traditional Kenyan society, that is marriage and motherhood: "Where have you been? Are you married? Do you have children? You must be quite old now. Father says I need no longer wait for you to be married first" (58). Wairimu underlines the fact that Kanini is a child, maybe not old enough to be married, thus referring to the customary practice of getting married at childhood, often because of arranged marriages. Kanini's plans for her future are so different from Wairimu's, but so linked to the traditional rural practices, while she piercingly affirms "I do not think I shall get to your age without becoming a mother" (59).

Wairimu's mother's reaction to her daughter provisional return is, on the contrary, of joy, even if with a little reserve, and her father wants to know everything about the places she visited, the works she did, the people she met. Initially neither of them refer to marriage: it is such a crucial subject that it must be handled seriously, when the younger girls have already retired to their quarters, in a room dimly lighted by the firelight where Wairimu feels entrapped and "back in the world before the dream, for though there had been other dark nights and low fires since, they had not enclosed me like this" (60). With the little hope that his daughter has probably returned to her family to finally follow her (expected) destiny, Wairimu's father abruptly begins the discussion:

"Have you come back for us to find you a husband on the ridge?" my father asked, embarrassed, staring into the fire. This was not the way these matters had ever been discussed.

` "That was not in my mind, father."

` "The time, you see, is past," he went on gravely. "It would be difficult. And I hear that out there people make their own marriages." [...]

"Is no one offering me dowry? Do they take you so cheap? I do not think you have had a child. Or can you live alone like a man?"

` "I can if I must, father. I had to go away to find this out. I was young – I am sorry if it hurt you more than I thought. I should have been away from you in any case as soon as you had got me married."
(60)

Wairimu's father does not comprehend how a woman can manage to live alone like a man. Moreover, Wairimu's status as a daughter has not provided the expected income to her family: her father has received no bride wealth and, at the same time, her practical help in the family homestead has been denied. Wairimu, nevertheless, is so fully convinced of her choices and reasons, that she even compares her intentional escape to the coffee plantation and Nairobi as a single and independent woman to the traditional and expected absence of a married daughter.

To express their opinion further, Wairimu's parents severely stress their incapability of understanding their daughter's ambitions and points of view and the impossibility for them to keep her at home:

` "I do not understand all this," said my father heavily. "But it is better that you go back. Your brother was able to go and return and build a life here, but for a young woman there is still not that kind of freedom."

` "I will send a present for Nduta who helped you in Nairobi," said my mother, acquiescing. "There is no way to keep a grown-up daughter like you at home, Wairimu. But I am glad you came to see us. Please stay a bit longer to greet old friends." (61)

Even if Wairimu has gone to Nairobi, worked and earned her own money, lived alone "like a man", she is not welcomed by her parents as they would have treated a son with the same life experiences. If men's freedom is guaranteed, this is still not available for women, "for a young woman there is still not that kind of freedom". Wairimu cannot act like her brother, who has gone away from the village and then returned to build his own house and start a family. A woman is not free to change her mind or follow her desire to come back after having experimented a new and modern world. As Kanogo explains, the cases of escaped women and girls in particular were the most upsetting to the rural community, since the women experienced alien places and realities, connected to the colonial power (docks, urban environments, settler farms) and, according to the community's opinion, they were thus badly influenced and led to moral ruin.²¹ Mature daughters, moreover, could not live with their parents without being a source of shame for them, as Wairimu's mother makes clear in the extract, "there is no way to keep a grown-up daughter like you at home, Wairimu." Then the old woman addresses her daughter as if she was addressing an acquaintance or a friend coming for a courtesy visit, "I am glad you came to see us": Wairimu's parents are suffering because of her behaviour, their adherence to their culture is in conflict with her aspiration for freedom and self-fulfilment and consequently there is no more space for her inside their home.

²¹ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 6.

In spite of her family's reaction, the protagonist does not appear torn or confused, she does not feel remorse about her decisions and the cross-cultural conflict inside her is resolved. She is proud of herself, but the rural milieu is too narrow to her because she is aware of being judged and not understood. Her identity is questioned since she is "neither child nor woman in other people's eyes", she is an adult daughter without her own family, she is not a wife and a mother so an incomplete woman to the community members' eyes (62). However, Wairimu was conscious of her people's incomprehension even before her going back home. Scared and shocked by the events happened during the Harry Thuku riots, Wairimu wants to abandon Nairobi, but she is also afraid to return home because, as she says to Nduta:

'I am afraid to go home. I am no longer a girl in their eyes. They would taunt me, and – and –'

She did not want to say that she thought she was barren. By now she had enough experience to suspect it. Enough, anyway, to know that even with a child she could not settle back to life within the ridge. That would neither expel her fear nor satisfy even the narrowest part of her dream. She had chosen and so she was destined to go on choosing.

'Not home. Perhaps back to the coffee.' (50)

To a woman like Wairimu, even the joy of motherhood would not be enough to fulfil her dream and to bring her back to the narrow reality of life within the ridge. Her initial decision of choosing for herself has definitively estranged her from her family and her rural community. She has been the 'architect' of her own destiny and she has to continue to choose for herself.

As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of the novel, Wairimu's personal choices, her rejection of all the prescribed roles related to womanhood, marriage and maternity, have revealed her desire for emancipation and shown how distant the protagonist of *The Present Moment* is from the image of the traditional Kenyan woman:

'As I picked, I thought and thought, and I realised that this was the gift Waitito had given me in return for what he took from me. He had opened a door through which one could see picture after picture,

more lively and colourful than the black, dead pictures which get on to each side of a page on a newspaper, and try oneself out on each, accepting or rejecting. Before there had been pictures – Wairimu, girl – Wairimu, bride – Wairimu, mother – Wairimu, elder’s wife – Wairimu, grandmother – but nothing to choose between them, only to be chosen. And if one was not chosen to have a child then the pictures became very few indeed. (54)

What Wairimu wants to underline is that before the advent of modernity women were merely considered on the basis of their capability of being good wives and because of their reproductive ability. Women’s natural domain was the home, since femininity was characterized by marriage, domesticity and child bearing. Female identities were achieved only through birth and nurturing and women were crucial in their role of wives and mothers because in order to maintain the husband’s patrilineage women’s fertility was essential.²²

The pictures Wairimu refers to are those of an uneducated woman whose life would have been forged only by society’s customary practices and cultures, according to which marriage and fertility defined a woman’s identity.

Wairimu, on the contrary, refuses to confine herself and being confined only in terms of the domestic and reproductive spheres. She is attempting to make the transition from conventional to modern life. What the girl associates with the traditional and narrow notion of womanhood are “black and dead pictures”, conflicting with “the lively and colourful” pictures brought about by modernity and women’s emancipation. Wairimu’s will is not that of simply shrivelling up as wife, mother and grandmother, but she alienates herself from her family and society, she struggles in order to free herself from the burden of tradition and find her place in a ever-changing world. She makes an individualistic choice, by creating a gap between herself and her family and community. As a matter of fact, in African tradition every member represents the soul of the community. Consequently, every inhabitant strictly belongs to the community and has to perpetuate the status quo and assure the continuity of the family and the clan.

²² J. Makuchi and A. Abbenyi (1997) *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 41.

The heroine of *The Present Moment* wants to follow her own dream, a dream that does not concern dowry or babies. Wairimu's ideal is centred on her quest for individualism and self-fulfilment and it represents female struggle for freedom from patriarchal oppression. Being celibacy viewed as socially shameful, even as an offence against the community, the intentional refusal of the bonds of marriage and childbearing seemed to be a bold and risk-taking achievement allowing the individual, the woman, to finally emerge as an autonomous being, speaking for herself, relying on her own values, rejecting to conform to her social and stereotyped roles.

In Macgoye's novel *Coming to Birth*, the conflict between tradition and modernity is more subtle because Paulina leaves her village community as the result of her marriage: she follows the custom and she moves to her husband's home. Nonetheless, when she returns to her rural home for her father's funeral, her social status as a working woman and her conflicting relationship with her husband create some friction with her family and relatives.

Paulina's unsatisfactory marriage with Martin has obliged her to live alone and go on independently, as a single woman. This status being against custom and tradition, she has not revealed the negative development of her marriage to her family. In fact, soon at her arrival to her family home, she has perpetually to answer to questions about her husband and to bear her mother's disapproving look. Paulina and Martin in fact have gone against custom since "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" (65).

The protagonist's family members both disapprove her new ways of life as a single and childless woman and are not prepared to consider her as an independent woman who has to return to her house with tasks to undertake and deadlines to respect. Paulina in fact has to reiterate her status as a working woman in the city by words, "you must see me as a man who has to go back to work. I have no one else to support me, and I have given customary time", and by financially providing for the mourners, regardless of her brother's presence (66). In spite of her family's incomprehension, it is Paulina herself who, returning to the village, realizes her great change and emancipation that prevent her from fully appreciating the traditional rituals of

the funeral, which on the contrary turns into an exhausting and draining experience.

Paulina's detachment from her natal village and traditional life is again emphasised later in the novel when the protagonist, having lost her job as a house-servant for the Okeyo family, contemplates but soon understands the impossibility for her to return to live in the rural village (95). This decision, in fact, would be like trample on her achieved independence and would mean to go backward to customary village life. When Paulina's next employer Mrs. M complains about her excess load of working appointments and tasks and exhausted asks "Oh Lord, why don't we go back to the village?" Paulina boldly answers "Because you would be brewing the beer and carrying the man's chair for him if you did"(128).

2.2.4 Kenyan Women's Entry into Formal Education

Throughout her entire work, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye puts high value on education and stresses the pivotal role of learning in every person's path toward self-development. The heroines of *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* belong to different generations and through their experiences and those of the other female characters in the novels the reader can trace the development of women education in Kenya, which can be seen as a post independence achievement. It is worth noticing that before 1963, the year of Kenya's national freedom, both men and women were largely deprived of the opportunity of entering formal education: "the 1969 population census reveal[ed] that 80% of women as compared to 66% of men had not had any formal education."²³

Kenyan formal education began during the colonial period, was mostly provided by missionaries and it represented an opportunity for vocational training and job acquisition. With respect to women's issues, it also became "an instrument of social mobility and cultural shift", with a twofold aspect.²⁴

²³ F. A. Karani (1987) 'The Situation and Roles of Women in Kenya: An Overview', *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Knowing the Other: A Look at Education Internationally, p. 423.

²⁴ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 3

Education in fact was considered as both a barrier and a strength. On one level it was regarded as a barrier by the traditional society since, through education based on Western models, the traditional values of the self intrinsically linked to the community risk being deeply weakened. On the other level, education became a strength when it brought economic independence, allowing women to live without their husbands' or families' financial support.

Women's education should be considered both as an individual and a collective strength and improvement. Women, in fact, through education acquire the skills and the knowledge necessary to take care of themselves and to better survive in an increasingly competitive environment. At the same time, their individual improvement positively influences the general development of the society. Educated wives and mothers bring improvement to their homestead, resulting in an increase of the living standards of the family and of the quality of children's education, as it is expressed by Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira, one of the leading gender activists in Kenya, when interviewed by Mike Kuria:

the more resources that reach women the more resources reach the family. [...] So if you are thinking about human development, not economic development, the more the resources are accessible to the women the higher the likelihood of improving the livelihood of both men and women as well as the children.²⁵

As it has been stressed before, Kenyan women's traditional roles were those of wife, mother, housekeeper and food provider. The kind of education girls received was traditional education, which was based on practical activities concerning cooking, fetching water, collecting firewood, cultivating, sowing, looking after children and the family members.

During the colonial era a scarce portion of women could receive formal instruction. On the contrary, a larger number of boys had access to classroom education provided by the Government and the mission groups, where students were taught to read and write in the vernacular or Kiswahili, Kenyan national language. With respect to women, initially and in a limited number, adult classes were introduced by the mission groups and schools for girls were then

²⁵ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 21.

gradually started in order to direct the students towards basic literacy and practical activities like sewing or family care.

Traditional society associated intellectual advancement to men's nature and needs, while believing the same unnecessary for women. Education was thus viewed as something diverting women from their gendered roles. Elders were largely adverse to the idea of their daughters going to school, especially because educated women were thought to abandon their traditional roots and values. Girls who undertook the educational path were negatively considered by their parents or the elders as "something else", someone who did not belong to the community anymore, and often the girls who were educated at the mission became "muthungu", a white person, in their parents' eyes.²⁶ Another common prejudice was the thought that educated women risked taking to prostitution, since they left their rural community and often moved to unknown places where they had only to count on themselves.

As women's role was that of wives and mothers, they were not expected to match marriage and motherhood with education and career. In particular, school at a young age was seen as an obstacle to girls' future plans. Girls' fathers believed that their daughters' education was a loss rather than an enrichment. This was due to the fact that a girl's destiny was to get married, so at the end only the fiancé would benefit from the money and the sacrifices spent on the girl's education. As a consequence, as women's education was regarded as purposeless, it could often not be taken into consideration or even suspended to boys' advantage, because when parents had to face limited resources or possibilities they tended to foster boys.

As far as *The Present Moment* is concerned, Wairimu's experience shows how formal education is so distant from the life of a girl born in 1905 Kenya and living in the rural area. She is introduced as a circumcised girl fetching water, a task she has been undertaking since she was very little.

Girls had scarce access to school while for boys it was a more available choice: "they might choose school or be marshalled into school" (17). Moreover, even

²⁶ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 206.

if a very small number of girls could be introduced into formal education, their educational experience was also circumscribed to only a few years because when the girls "came home again there was still the marriage to be arranged" (17). Thus, women's formal instruction was not aimed at improving their social role or at a future career: their domain was still that of the home.

Wairimu, nevertheless, being a quick-witted girl, is conscious that the key to reach fulfilment and to improve her own role in colonial Kenya is to gain knowledge, as she judges learning and education as essential weapons to fight for women's freedom and emancipation. She takes advantage from every opportunity available to learn and improve herself, by cluttering her experience with different kinds of learning: as a listener she grasps pieces of information and useful knowledge from her brother's and her first lover's experiences and about what is happening in her country, as an observer she learns from other women's ability to deal with everyday life in the urban environment and from European women's free-standing lives. In the city, in order to serve into the tea room, Wairimu needs to "learn numbers in Swahili and the names of the main foodstuffs" (24). By stressing the girl's illiteracy, the reader is informed of the fact that she has not received any previous education, as Wairimu herself then reveals when, during her temporary way back home, she is asked by two nuns if she had been educated somewhere: "I had never been to school but had worked near Nairobi and learned Swahili" (57). Yet, she is a gifted learner, "she revelled in her own ability to learn" (24). In fact, it is through listening and practising throughout her entire life, "talking with the ayahs and the house servants and the clerks of other tribes" (55), that Wairimu finally manages to master the language.

It is worth underlying that in place of formal education, Wairimu has benefitted from another kind of instruction: the driver James, who has shared house with her for a long time preceding 1926, has taught her to read a little. It is a great achievement for the girl and a precious gift from the part of the man, at least in Wairimu's opinion. He has neither met the girl's family to arrange their union nor paid any dowry to have her and cohabit with her, or better, Wairimu has decided to choose how to live, without being obstructed by traditions linked to marriage and dowry. When explaining her relationship with James to her parents and the fact that it has begun and finished without their approval and

the respect of customary practices, Wairimu underlines the importance of what herself has obtained from this experience:

` "He got you so cheap, then."

` "Not very cheap, father. He taught me to read. That is not a little thing. He taught me how to live in a cement house and keep it clean. That is also something people pay money for their daughters to learn. And how to wash and iron heavy clothes for men. I could earn a lot of money if I went to work in an European house, knowing these things. But I prefer to be more free. I will go back to the coffee. And since the dowry of learning has been paid to me rather than to you, from time to time I will send you money out of what I have learned through my brother in Nyeri." (61)

The "dowry of learning" is what Wairimu is proud of, not the traditional bride price consisting of material items such as money and cattle. It is a dowry that her father cannot see, touch or evaluate, something that has not enriched his estate or homestead, but Wairimu's present and future life.

Learning, knowing and understanding are Wairimu's first purpose in life. Above all she desires to know Swahili to wide her horizon, to reach a more vast world, not to be entrapped into her small world, the Kikuyu world. Secondly, she wants to understand Nairobi, that is modernity, in order "to go home with power – that meant with presents and knowledge, like a boy" (54). As this last sentence makes clear, knowledge is linked to manliness in Wairimu's mind, and her desire to reach knowledge hides her wish to reach equality.

Learning and experience help Wairimu wide her horizon and distance herself from tradition and custom. Thanks to her experience outside the village she has understood that to be a woman does not necessary mean "to be bent against the painful forehead-strap, with a little hump down on your spine and danger in bearing children because of it" (55). The activities carried out daily in the village are crucial, as fire, food and water are indispensable to survive, but women's life cannot consist only of "the daily tramp of water, digging and shelling, peeling and digging again, bent under firewood" (55). What Wairimu is referring to is women's burdens in the rural world which, according to Florida A. Karani, modernization has often intensified:

Traditionally, the men trained the boys and undertook other family chores such as caring for livestock, clearing the land, and bringing meat or fish home from hunting or fishing trips. In the modern economy, men take salaried jobs outside the home, thus shifting a greater share of the household chores to women. Traditionally mothers, grandmothers, and other women within the clan worked together and shared responsibilities, but modernization has encouraged the emergence of the nuclear family where these responsibilities largely rest on the mother in the household.²⁷

Women's role inside and outside the homestead is multifaceted: they have a productive role in agriculture, from hoeing to harvesting, as they are the provider of food for the family and they often grow crops or other products also for the market, they run a henhouse and keep poultry, they deal with the basic needs of everyday life, from food preparation, which employ a great section of women's daily work due to the use of primitive methods, to childcare.

Rahel as well, in *The Present Moment*, talking about the Kikuyu people, besides underling their endurance, malice and rapid calculation is struck by "the terrible bent backs of their burned women", to such an extent that "she wanted to shout at them to hold their heads up" (14). In the same vein in Macgoye's novel *Homing In*, Ellen mentally sketches a picture of the Kikuyu women which finally dwells on "the strap of the *ciondo* [which] had bitten into their foreheads and, the *bossa Kikiyu* (Sister O'Brien explained), a protuberance low on the constantly bent back, [which] made childbirth hard for them. They lifted loads no man on the farm could equal" (86-87). The author stresses the physical strength of the Kikuyu women, but especially their bodies, their backs, disfigured by hard work. To illustrate this concept further, the hardness of women's lives in Kenya is stressed in the following passage of *The Present Moment*:

²⁷ F. A. Karani (1987) 'The Situation and Roles of Women in Kenya: An Overview', *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Knowing the Other: A Look at Education Internationally, p. 430.

'I [the Vicar] don't think any of these ladies grew up in the expectation – I don't say not in the hope – of a calm course of life in which your husband was always nice to you, your children mostly stayed alive, you were surprised if there was nothing palatable to eat and were sure that your daughters-in-law would look after you in old age. We had the picture of that kind of life, but it wasn't one to take for granted. [...]

'To be eighty years old in Africa is to be tough. Particularly for a woman, because she has learned from childhood to look after others rather than to be looked after.'

'In Europe and America,' chipped in the Matron, 'women live longer than men because they are exposed to less hardship. But in our pastoral areas, men live longer, because the women's work is so much harder.' (37-38)

This future prospect is what the young Wairimu wants to avoid for herself. She strongly believes in women's respect and self-respect that should also be applied to women's bodies, which have to be safeguarded, "my body, too, can be respected" she affirms (55). Wairimu has experienced life in the coffee plantations and in the urban environment, in Nairobi, where she has observed women in their daily activities and she has noted how different they are from the image of the hard labouring women she used to live with in the village. They are women of different nationalities, Indian women, Arab women, black and white women, fine Somali women from whom she learned "a new concept of elegance" (25) all standing straight without a life routine made of fetching water, cooking, working on your piece of ground.

With respect to *Coming to Birth*, the reader is informed early in the novel that Paulina has had the opportunity to access formal education. She has attended two years of primary school and some home craft meetings. Like Wairimu, Paulina wants to improve her skills, she has a strong desire for continuing to learn, despite having been denied this chance by being married off so young.

It is when she reaches the urban environment that Paulina has to face the scarce level of her knowledge. If her knowledge and what she has learnt at school was sufficient in her previous daily life in the rural world, the same

cannot be said about her new life in Nairobi. Far from her Luo community, she is now obliged to socialize with people of different tribes who share one common language that is Swahili. Paulina's knowledge of the language, however, does not allow her to express herself easily. The first conversation she has in Nairobi is with her neighbour Rachel, and it is a comfortable situation for Paulina since Rachel belongs to the Luo tribe too, so Paulina can feel less distant from home, "I am happy to have a Luo neighbour, [...] I thought I should be all alone" (7). Then the young protagonist becomes gradually conscious of her ignorance when at night the "noises were unfamiliar – dogs snarling, women screeching in a language one did not know" (9) or, when hospitalized because of her first miscarriage, "she could not understand much that was said" (10). Again the author goes on stressing Paulina's lack of comprehension when she gets lost after being dismissed from the hospital and she cannot understand people's indications, "a couple of men tried to speak to her but they were answered only by a frightened stare" (12) or worse the suspicious questions of the woman in the uniform of the Prisons Department, when Paulina is mocked because of her accent or she is unable to make herself understood, "most people did not understand her and all shrugged her away" (18).

As the reader can understand, Paulina's abilities at her arrival in Nairobi are too scarce to suppose her future achievements. She does not manage to orient herself in the big city, she has no political awareness, she does not understand and talk Swahili properly, she does not know how to run the small room she and Martin are living in and, the author highlights:

In Nairobi Paulina thought herself a woman but she might well have been a standard eight schoolgirl of middling ability – she did not even know that there were already two schools in the country where African girls might be educated beyond that unimagined height. She was not slow to learn, considering how little time had been allowed her for learning up till now. She soon began to get used to it. (26)

By referring to Kenyan school system, the above passage implies that, with respect to the level of knowledge and learning, Paulina can be compared to a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl, as primary education starts at the age of six with

the first class called Standard one and finishes with the last class known as Standard eight. Paulina, on the contrary, considers herself as a woman, maybe because of her married status, but then she gradually understands how her life can be fulfilled through knowledge and independence. As the extract underlines, Paulina, like Wairimu in *The Present Moment*, is not slow to learn but ready to absorb as much as she can when she has the opportunity.

Once informed about the Emergency, the curfew, and the dangers for a woman going alone into a country bus or being on her own on the streets after curfew, Paulina quickly learns to organize her daily activities trying to keep strictly to time, buying from day to day the necessary food and trying to take advantage of the narrow room at her disposal. Moreover, by degrees she begins to know Swahili, thanks both to her efforts and practice and the encouragement of Ahoya and Martin:

And then there was Ahoya encouraging her to attend Luo meetings in the little church of St John, with those other women who did not understand the Sunday Swahili services very well, and to look forward to joining the sewing class when she could afford the simple materials.

Little by little she was coming to know Swahili. Martin encouraged her and bought her a New Testament which she could compare with the Luo *Muma* word by word, though her reading was so slow that she still could not think of keeping up with the book in church. (27-28)

Besides other people's suggestions and help, Paulina learns from experience, by observing women's behaviours and listening and practising the language. Like Wairimu, the protagonist of *Coming to Birth* becomes more and more fluent through practice with her neighbours. She observes how they manage their housekeeping and learns from the other women how to act cleverly in the city: "not to waste twenty cents on salad oil for cooking, [...] not to rush to the market straight after payday", to follow Nairobi people's habit of cooking meat once a week and of using toilet paper and soap for dish-washing and to raise some vegetables independently (28).

In general, with the advent of national dependence and modernity, new opportunities have come to light to enhance women's emancipation, as the field of formal education can show. As highlighted by Karani in 'The Situation and roles of Women in Kenya: An Overview', the 1969 population census showed that 80 percent of women had not accessed formal education, while in 1979 the percentage decreased to 57.4.²⁸ In fact, one of Government's highest aim, from independence onward, has been the development of the educational system, from primary education to secondary and higher education, and from this policy women have also benefited. As Karani explains further with respect to primary education, in 1963, 34 percent of enrolment was constituted by girls, while in 1984 girls accounted 50.1 percent, demonstrating that "female enrolment ratios at the primary school level have moved toward parity with boys".²⁹ This has also been made possible by the gradual abolition of school fees in primary education because, as it has already been stressed before, in case of limited resources boys' education was often favoured to the detriment of girls'. Moreover, girls' participation in formal education has gradually increased, varying from region to region, after an hesitant start during the colonial period, even as far as high school is concerned.

While recording in her novels the historical and political changes affecting Kenya from the colonial era towards our days, Macgoye reveals how life and opportunities have changed for women belonging to different generations.

Girls' access to formal education is described by Ellen, the protagonist of *Homing In*, as "a new world peeping through a scalloped shell-edge waiting to be opened", with girls coming "in all shapes and sizes of body, mind and background, [...] instinctively aware of the value of money, and the chance to escape total domination" (72).

In *The Present Moment*, the lives of the old ladies cohabiting in the Refuge and the few opportunities they had are strongly opposed to those of the young nurses and the community health workers in training. The latter belong to a new generation of Kenyan women who, as Kibera illustrates, "take for granted

²⁸ F. A. Karani (1987) 'The Situation and Roles of Women in Kenya: An Overview', *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Knowing the Other: A Look at Education Internationally, p. 424.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

opportunities for which Wairimu's generation had to struggle."³⁰ Nearly all the old women in the novel complain about lives made of sacrifices and lack of options and the freedom of choice. Nekesa, pushed by the circumstances to become a prostitute, explains to the young Judy, who unfortunately is following the same path, how barren was the range of possibilities she and the other old women had when they were younger. What she stresses is in particular the lack of formal education and training they grew up with, which excluded them from the possibility of acquiring skills and knowledge necessary to improve themselves and be competitive in the world of work. In contrast, Nekesa goes on, nowadays girls can choose between a wider range of jobs. Her words remind the reader of Wairimu's statements about girls' lack of choice, "for girls there were very few school places, [...] the girl had no alternative to marriage until the coffee came" (17). And again the author introduces Priscilla, a domestic servant, born in the settled area where her father worked as a cook in a European family, as a girl "educated as far as girls could be educated in her time" (75).

Nonetheless, through the seven women's experiences and their conversations with the young nurses and the other female workers, the reader witnesses the evolution of women's access to formal education and the gradual expansion of job opportunities for women. Rahel, for example, summarises some of the changes Kenyan society has witnessed, by reiterating that things have improved, but slowly:

Somehow in these twenty years we've got more dresses than we ever expected then, and shoes. *Children of people we know are going to the university.* You go on a country bus without picking up any bugs – that's something, I suppose – *there are better jobs for women* and all those good houses filled with our own black people. Yes, things have got better, but slowly. [emphasis added] (41)

The university world has opened its doors to Kenyan students, even if fewer women than men enrol on university courses, due to the amount of fees, the

³⁰ Afterword by Valerie Kibera, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *The Present Moment*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 169.

demands made on them to help in household tasks, premature pregnancies, etc. Job opportunities for women have improved and Macgoye makes the example of domestic service through the words of Mr John, who works in an European household and explains to Wairimu that this job has shift from being a prestigious work for men to an available opportunity to black women and a valiant alternative to agricultural work. Moreover, through the words of Sophia's son-in-law Wau, the reader is informed that not only the number of educated girls has gradually increased, but that they can even choose between more types of career "not restricted to teaching and nursing" and that companies are beginning to employ Asian girls as typists instead of men "and the days were coming when African women would go into business too" (106).

During Wairimu's adolescence her only choice to avoid the prospect of an entire life dedicated to marriage and motherhood was to go working on the coffee plantations, while in her old age, considering the progresses women had achieved, she "decided, if she were young now she would not be a nurse. She would be a journalist" (88).

2.2.5 Adult Education: Personal Fulfilment and Weapon towards Independence

Paulina's and Wairimu's successful approaches to education in their status as adult, and in Paulina's case married, women challenge a traditional society that builds obstacles around women in order to prevent them from complete independence and freedom. The protagonists' accomplishments want to demonstrate that when women can face equal opportunities as men, they can attain a high level of performance and success.

Once returned to her first place of work at the coffee plantation, after her mother's death, Wairimu is described as a woman without particular problems and responsibilities, earning six shillings for a thirty-day ticket, while men earned eight. Hers is a life of dull food, but she has always enough to eat, of dreary work spaced out by the company of a dull man, when classes come to break up the routine:

But then came a new interest, classes. She [Wairimu] had learned to read a bit at Kabete but there was not much to read. [...] Sometimes she would make a pretext to go to the office and look at the notices on the wall, a calendar, a list of prices, just to make sure her skills were not slipping, though the words did not mean much to her. There were also words written on trucks and machines – people’s names, places, *left, danger, no smoking* – and on packets of tea or tins of condensed milk. But when the school came, life became more interesting, and more ambitious people came to ask for work on the plantation. (93)

Wairimu has learned to read a little with the help of James when they shared house in Kabete, but the opportunities and the available materials to read are scarce for her. She has got the Harry Thuku pamphlet in Swahili, a small book written in Kikuyu containing scripture quotations, a newspaper in English that she cannot understand. Due to the scarcity of opportunities available to Wairimu to practise her reading skills, she tries to treasure every possibility to read: notices, list of prices, words written on boxes. However, it is the advent of school on the coffee farm where she is employed that can finally begin to satisfy her insatiable thirst for knowledge.

Wairimu and some of the other workers want so strongly to learn that they are willing to work harder to cover the wages of the schoolmaster, a white missionary, and help with the building of a two-roomed house for the teacher and a mud house for the church. The day school is dedicated to children’s education, while the evening classes are for adults hoping to learn to read.

What the author underlines is that the adult classes are attended by a large number of men and boys, but a small group of women. Wairimu has been immediately ready to join the school and she “had to wait for a while until the first women had caught up with her, but she started straight away to attend the Sunday services in Kikuyu” (94). In order to assimilate better she buys little paper editions of the separate gospels. The new knowledge she finds among those pages and “the absorbing puzzle of working the words out” is an amazing satisfaction and source of happiness for her, to such an extent that she accepts to embrace the Christian faith and is baptised Mary (95). Yet, what leads her to adopt this alien faith is the opportunity it offers her to extend her

knowledge and improve her reading abilities, more than the religious teachings and precepts.

Wairimu, in fact, does not appear deeply moved and convinced by the moral or theological teachings, but she deeply appreciates the abilities she has learnt from the study of the gospels.

In *Coming to Birth*, despite her achievements, Paulina finds herself in a situation where she is dependent from her husband for everything, since she has no economic income. However, her situation of complete dependence does not last long as she profits from her ability of crocheting, which she has learnt in Martin's family's home in Gem. By practising hard she manages to convince her husband to buy her the necessary materials and she manages to make crochet items admired and requested by other people. As a consequence Paulina is able to bring a feminine touch to the dark and airless room they live in and above all to sell her items, earning thirty or forty shillings each month. Ironically, it is just women's traditional activity of crocheting that allows her to take her first step towards self-realization. Her crochet work in fact prospers, to such an extent that Paulina begins to think of moving into a brick house and that Martin, on two occasions, borrows money from her savings.

In spite of the abandonment of formal education because of her early engagement with Martin, Paulina's perseverance and successful initiatives give her another opportunity, that of applying to the European-run classes at the Home Craft Training School in Kisumu³¹:

On her way back to Nairobi she stopped in Kisumu to visit a neighbour who had gone to take a course in the Homecraft School. Paulina loved it – the neatness, the cleanness of the little rooms, the ovens, the embroidered cloths, the strictness of timekeeping for

³¹ Leah Muya, Programmes Manager at the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization, has stressed the implications of early marriages with respect to girls' education: "girls are denied their right to equal opportunities in education. Because of the [circumcision] ritual they are either married off or socialised to feel that they are mature women and hence are unable to reason with their teachers which means most of them drop out of school because of that. [...]. When the girls get pregnant they will be thrown out of school." In M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 105.

married women inside the tall fence (like a boarding school, as she imagined it, so safe, so orderly, so free of painful choice). How she would love to go there and keep her home clean and well-provided. She enthused to the teachers about it and they said she was welcome to apply next time. (36)

Paulina's strong desire and insistence on attending the Home Craft School is supported by her husband, who writes letters, finds reference for her and helps her improving her reading and writing abilities. In 1960 Paulina finally joins the training school, where she is the youngest woman in the class. According to Kanogo, in a changing society where often women were still not likely to combine the role of wife with that of worker, practical knowledge of Home Craft, which could include 'Child Welfare', 'Cooking', 'Housewifery', gave girls the notions allowing them to "face life from the deepest, as well as the utterly practical point of view."³² Narrowing it down to Paulina's experience, Macgoye marks her inclination for practical and manual work. Crocheting, cooking, gardening are activities that "create" or "mend" concrete things, giving personal satisfaction, in contrast with "destructive" work or intellectual work, based only on words and thoughts:

She liked doing things with her hands and enjoyed seeing good work done by others. Perhaps women's work was like that – the word for creation was 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. (129)

To create something tangible is Paulina's desire, but the Home Craft class's object too, as Paulina discovers, is tempting: to be employed as a club leader charged with the task of teaching other women. What the course teaches women is to produce an income, to make money through the sale of embroidered tablecloths and homemade cakes. By attending the classes, the heterogeneous group of married women begin to relinquish their dependence

³² T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p. 205.

upon their husbands and to distance themselves from a daily routine, often related to their gendered roles. Some of them, the author remarks, feel free from the demands of husbands and the responsibility of parenting, while others have escaped the cohabitation with an annoying mother-in-law or pestering neighbours.

Paulina is coldly welcomed by the other members of the Home Craft class, except for the European, because she is a childless wife and has very little education, but her course results being good, she is successfully appointed club leader at the centre near Martin's house. Paulina's appointment is strongly contested by the members of the committee but supported by the European leader:

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. (44)

What the committees contest is Paulina's unconventional social status. She is a married woman who has left her husband and her house in order to concentrate on her studies at the Home Craft School. More important, she is a childless woman. Paulina appears as a modern woman, not diverted by outmoded and customary ways and opinions, enthusiastic about beginning a challenging task. Paulina's contested weaknesses clashing with tradition and custom are, on the contrary, Paulina's strengths in the eyes of the European leader. Without the responsibilities related to the care of a husband and children, Paulina in her role of club leader will be "like a single woman, occupied and earning money" (44), completely integrated in the new society. Thus, Paulina's steadfastness and self will to improve herself at the Home Craft College in her social condition as an adult and married woman allow her to become free from Martin. Her professional success gives her personal freedom and economic independence: "And yet she had become free, in a sense, of Martin, and she had changed. She provided for herself, lived by herself" (46).

2.2.6 Political Awareness and Women's Activism

In order to understand the metropolitan space, a basic political and civil awareness is necessary. In *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, both Paulina and Wairimu confront themselves to Nairobi at an early age, but in different historical periods and with a different political consciousness. Despite their initial and, in Paulina's case, uncertain approaches, both the novels' protagonists take their first steps into the political arena to protest and raise their voices against injustices and policies unfavourable to women. Wairimu's experience begins with her encounter with Harry Thuku, "the Chief of Women", and reaches its high point with her activism in the "Land and Freedom" army, while Paulina feels the need to react against the unfair treatment of the female Member of Parliament Chelagat Mutai and against a society leaving a large part of its population in a condition of destitution.

Paulina's first experience with urbanization is accompanied by a very limited political awareness. The first chapter relating the young girl's difficulties in Nairobi covers the troubled 1956 and 1957, the years of the Emergency. As far as Wairimu is concerned, on the contrary, the author does not explicitly inform the reader about the year of the young girl's arrival in Nairobi. Nevertheless, Wairimu asserts "I was there at the Harry Thuku riots. [...] Thuku had been arrested with some other people and we thought, somehow, that we could get him out" (45). The political activist Harry Thuku was arrested in 1922, when the young girl "was still a kid, not yet eighteen" so it can be easily inferred that Wairimu goes to Nairobi in the 1920s (48).

In 1956, Macgoye reminds the reader of in *Coming to Birth*, the Emergency is "an accepted fact" (it was not officially removed until 1960), with "guards patrolling, looking, perhaps hoping, for trouble", barbed wire, curfew, passes and public notices denying entry to "KEM" (Kikuyu, Embu and Meru), an acronym that "was becoming a kind of entity" (27). In 1952, a State of Emergency was declared by the colonial administration, because of the spread of violent attacks against the Europeans and the African loyalists, who supported the continuation of British rule. The State of Emergency implied heightened security measures taken in particular to oppose the outbreak of

the Mau Mau rebellion, the struggle for independence movement.³³ Those security measures were addressed to the Kikuyu, the Embu and Meru communities and included curfew and pass laws to restrict their movements and their association. In addition, entire sections of Nairobi (the "African locations") were isolated with barbed wire and in other areas thousand of Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru were forced to abandon their houses and their jobs and to relocate to other rural areas, in villages delimited by barbed wire and watched by armed loyalists. It was the so-called "Operation Anvil", which opened housing and working opportunities for the components of other ethnic tribes, especially the Luo and Luya.

In this troubled and dangerous reality the author introduces Paulina's husband's situation as on the upgrade: the beginning of the State of Emergency and the following Operation Anvil have brought positive opportunities in the twenty-three-year-old boy's life. Martin belongs to the Luo community and works as a salesman in a small stationery shop, where he has substituted a Kikuyu man who has abandoned his job soon after the struggle for independence began. Besides, Martin lives in a room in Pumwani, previously rent by a tenant then "swept" due to the measures taken during "Operation Anvil".

Even if political insecurity and changes are strongly affecting Paulina's country, the city where she is going to live and her own husband's life, the young girl owns scarce political awareness. During her first day in Nairobi, Paulina receives a visit from her Luo neighbour Rachel Atieno and during their first conversation Paulina's ignorance emerges:

'He [Martin] said he would take me out in the evening to meet people. I suppose in a town there are lights.'

'Lights? Yes, plenty. But plenty of barbed wire too.'

'Barbed wire? What for?'

³³ After the government arrested two hundred African political leaders in the urban area, including Jomo Kenyatta, and after the abolition of the only party of African national unity (KAU), the Mau Mau Movement (also known as the "Land and Freedom" Army and the Forest Fighters Movement) developed in the country. Thousand activists bonded themselves with an oath of communion and hid in the forests of Mount Kenya, where the movement organised their hit-and-run guerrilla tactics.

'Well, for emergency. Surely you know, child, that there is fighting going on. And though there is not a curfew for us' – she stopped to explain what a curfew was: the day would come for Paulina to remember that talk and how innocent she had been – 'there are times and places the Kikuyu cannot go without a special pass, and guards to see they don't. So you see a woman on her own must be . . . careful. Now you know what kind of district this is?'
Paulina didn't. (8)

As this excerpt makes clear, Paulina does not know about the Emergency and, as Rachel grasps, she does not know the meaning of the word curfew and all its implications either. Continuing with the conversation, Rachel explains to Paulina the reality of the district they are living in, the bars, the prostitutes, making Paulina shudder and think that, despite the dangerousness of this reality, Martin has considered himself so lucky to move to that quarter "because of something called 'Anvil' which happened when he was newly working in the town" (8). Colonial government's security policies and strategies to control the outbreak of revolts are almost unknown to Paulina. The operation that allowed the government to deracinate thousands of people from their own houses and jobs, and even to arrest men and women and deport them to detention camps, is mentioned by Paulina with inaccuracy and ignorance as "something called 'Anvil'", as if referring to something Martin has implied only to explain her how he got his new room and the new job.

As Joseph R. Slaughter stresses, the space of the city is unfamiliar to the cultural baggage of the newcomer hailing from the village. A specific political and urban knowledge is necessary as the subject should locate himself or herself in connection to "the state and its administrative circulation of ethnicity and race, or, alternatively, when one knows the implication of difference between up and down, West and East" in order to understand the spatial reality of the city and its related meanings.³⁴ While Paulina is trying to come back home from King George Hospital after her first miscarriage, she

³⁴ J. R. Slaughter (2004) 'Master Plans: Designing (National) Allegories of Urban Space and Metropolitan Subjects for Postcolonial Kenya', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 36.

gets lost, but remembering of having listened that the labouring quarter is always situated downward she can proceed along the right direction:

In any case she took the downward slope and so saved herself what might have been days of wandering amid the scanty picturesque population of the old European quarter. Perhaps simply she remembered from Kisumu and from the conversation of many house servants on home leave that the official quarter is always up and the labouring down. To call them west and east would only be confusing but it still applied. (12)

Paulina's knowledge of the "implication of difference between up and down" stems from her memories and the conversation she has heard, not from her civic consciousness. Another example of Paulina's very limited political awareness occurs later in the novel, when Paulina finds her way among the current of men walking in the streets of Nairobi. She recognises a great number of Kikuyu people moving to a ghetto called Bahati, "Good Luck", but as the author underlines, "then she still did not know what that meant" (13).

While in *Coming to Birth* Paulina does not know the reason and the meaning of the State of Emergency, the barbed wire, the KEM notices she sees in Nairobi, in *The Present Moment* Wairimu immediately recognises the political activist Harry Thuku when she meets him in Nairobi, even if she had not seen him before:

Thuku! She had not seen him before but she knew he had been to Nyeri and they had all sung songs in praise of him because *he had protested against the women's road work and was going to free the people from forced labour and European taxes*. This was seeing life indeed, and *she felt an urgent need to participate*, to make herself also known. She was about seventeen years old and she too was part of a new world. So she began to sing one of the praise songs, swaying in time with the music. [emphasis added] (23)

From the above passage it is clear that Wairimu does not conform herself to a passive role, but she feels "an urgent need to participate", to be part of the

world and of the changes it is undertaking. The young woman's knowledge of the world is narrow and limited, nevertheless she is covetous to discover and, unlike Paulina, she is at least aware of what is going on around her. She knows about Thuku's protests against compulsory labour and women's road work and, being herself a woman, she support his activities.

The Kikuyu Harry Thuku was one of the founders and the secretary of the East African Association, an activist in support of Kenyan people's rights and the spokesperson of their grievances. Thuku's political fights were against the government's increasing of the hut taxes, the so-called *kipande*, the reduction of the African wages, the oppression perpetrated by the tribal police and, more crucial for our analysis, Thuku's protest centred on women and children's forced labour and maltreatment. Thuku's activities aimed at freeing Kenyan people, women in particular, from oppression and this explains women's strong support for him.³⁵

The historical episode Macgoye refers to in the extract quoted above is the women's communal work project Harry Thuku stopped in Nyeri in 1922, before his arrest on 14 March 1922 due to his meetings and speeches challenging colonial rule. Since forced labour had been stopped by Winston Churchill in 1921, the activist Thuku asked a tribal policeman to dismiss the young girls and women who were illegally obliged to cut reeds in a large pond near the road.

In Audrey Wipper's essay "Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy", the following quotation from Thuku's autobiography highlights the issue of women's forced labour and Thuku's concerns:

It was at the Leader, from about 1915, that I first began to think seriously about some of our troubles as Africans- especially this question of forced labour. Before then only men had been made to work, but at about that time women and girls too were compelled to go out to work. This was what happened: a settler who wanted labour for

³⁵ A. Wipper (1989) 'Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 3.

his farm would write to the D.C. [district commissioner] saying he required thirty young men, women or girls for work on his farm. The D.C. sent a letter to a chief or headman to supply such and such a number, and the chief in turn had his tribal retainers to carry out this business. They would simply go to the people's houses-very often where there were beautiful women and daughters-and point out which were to come to work. Sometimes they had to work a distance from home, and the number of girls who got pregnant in this way was very great.³⁶

Fathers and elders in the villages were forced to send their young daughters and the women of their homes to the European estates. Men who expressed their disagreement were fined or even detained at the government prison, and the female members of the family taken anyway. The demand for labour was very high from both the European settlers who needed workers for their coffee plantations and farms and the government who necessitated of workers for the building and the maintenance of roads. As Wipper makes clear, the work in the coffee plantations was one of the less paid jobs in Kenya and for this reason native men were not inclined to work on the coffee estates. As a consequence, women and children became the target of the settlers who needed extra workers in order to harvest their crops, even if women did not agree to go working on the coffee estates because of the large amount of work they had to carry out at home and at their own farms.

Women were the real victims of this policy and the ones who suffered abuses, as they were sexually exploited too. Women were underpaid, they were given hard tasks to carry out, exposed to violence, beaten, exploited and assaulted by other male workers. The impact of this policy was so deep that Wipper, himself quoting from Cora Ann Presley, concludes: "from 1913 through 1923 physical outrages and intimidation connected with coffee production reached a level only surpassed by the anti-Kikuyu violence under the 'emergency' situation during the 'Mau Mau' rebellion in the 1950s."³⁷

In *The Present Moment*, Macgoye introduces the young protagonist Wairimu as voluntarily convinced to go working on the coffee estates. Wairimu

³⁶ Ibid., p. 302.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 310.

chooses for herself, she is not forced to leave her home and go picking and harvesting coffee. The second time as well, after her decision to leave Nairobi and her participation to her mother's funeral, Wairimu spontaneously returns to her first place of work. She does not find the previous master, but the work conditions are still fair enough according to Wairimu. Nonetheless, while reporting Wairimu's positive experience on the coffee plantation, the author mentions the abuses perpetrated in other farms and suffered by other girls and women:

Some farms still did not give the blanket in advance of payment, though the law required it, and *some had the reputation of forcing girls to work against their will*. Strictly females were not to be sent, unless they wished it, too far from home to walk back to sleep there. Of course farmers always denied using force, though many of them could not deny requesting government to use it, but it was sometimes made worth the while of chiefs and headmen to do so, and a man who complained of the treatment of his womenfolk could find himself punished. [emphasis added] (92)

What Macgoye is making reference to is the practice of female compulsory labour mentioned before, the ways used to recruit female workers, the key role played by chiefs and headmen who sent their native servants to carry out this recruitment among the villages and the male inhabitants' powerlessness to protect their women. The chiefs in particular, because of the role they played in the recruitment of female labourers, were strongly detested by women. One of the songs women sang during the protest against Thuku's detention, and the same song Wairimu wants to teach Bessie in the Refuge, shows how women ridiculed chiefs:

Filipu aromakoguo
Nio matwarithirie munene wa Nyacing'a
Nyacing'a ituire Kahawa-ini.' (114)

Philipo [or one of the other Kikuyu chiefs] let him be cursed.
It is they who have caused to be taken away the chief [Thuku]

of the girls who live in the coffee [a reference to the coercion of girls and women to work on coffee farms].³⁸

The previous passage from *The Present Moment* also refers to the “Native Women’s Protection Act”, introduced in 1923, in an attempt to contain the abuses women could suffer on their way to and from the coffee plantations. According to the new law, plantation owners were to give single women the opportunity to spend the night in proper dormitories inside the estate. If the owners did not provide proper accommodation, they could not hire female workers living more than three miles away from the estate.

In order to stress the injustice of these practices further, Macgoye introduces the reader to the abuses Wairimu’s room-mate Waja has experienced when working on another plantation. The young Wanja has been locked in a hut, together with other girls, and they have all suffered sexual exploitation. As a result, she has become pregnant and this pregnancy and the child has been a source of shame and spinsterhood, since “with a baby it is difficult, of course, to protest your virtue” (93). As a matter of fact, virginity before marriage was crucial, it was the woman’s accomplishment and it symbolized the integrity of the woman herself and of the family group.

In view of all the mistreatments against women, Harry Thuku was admired as the one who fought for women’s rights and he was entitled the “Chief of Women”. Praise songs were sung by ordinary women and men to celebrate him and his fights for freedom, the same songs Wairimu refers to in *The Present Moment* (21-23). Thuku’s strong interest, respect and admiration for women’s matters were reciprocated by women’s loyal support for him, from their praise of his efforts to their attempt to rescue him from prison. “I was there at the Harry Thuku riots” Wairimu explains talking to her inmates in the Refuge more than sixty years later, “we heard that there was a big meeting and everyone was going, so of course I had to join in too” (45).

Harry Thuku, after having been arrested on 14 March 1922, was detained in the Nairobi police station and native people, mainly Kikuyu, grouped together

³⁸ A. Wipper (1989) ‘Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 3., p. 305.

to ask for his freedom. A general strike was announced the day after Thuku's arrest by the Eastern African Association, resulting in a gathering of thousands of Kenyans protesting and praying for the political activist's release from prison. The crowd, however, early scattered after their leaders' order to go home. Even though Wairimu was supposed to work at the tea room, she took part in the strike because "most of the men were going to the police lines so I went too" (46-47). The day after, on Thursday, a bigger crowd gathered in front of the Nairobi police station. Wairimu recalls that most of the demonstrators were men, with the exception of a big group of women that she soon joined.

In the meanwhile a group of six African men were sent to speak to Bowring, the Colonial Secretary, who assured them about Thuku's right to have a proper hearing by the government and requested them to disperse the demonstrators. When they returned to the crowd and asked them to go home, the six members of the deputation were accused of being bribed. Nonetheless, some men began to stand up in order to leave, but they were stopped by the group of women. Quoting from the accounts given by some officials, Wipper informs the reader about the crucial role played by women during the demonstration:

A large party of native women had arrived, probably 150 When the deputation of six eventually arrived from the Secretariat two of the members went amongst the crowd and called on them to disperse; after some considerable talking there was a tendency on the part of the crowd to disperse, but the women present shouted to the men in aggravating tones which made them apparently change their minds, and they pressured up to the gates and corrugated iron walls round the lines.³⁹

The large party of women reported by the Acting Commissioner J. C. Bentley is the group of Kenyan women Wairimu joins during the protest in the novel. Women's behaviour defies both men and colonial authorities. They accuse men of cowardice, urging the fight against the government's impositions and Thuku's detention. To describe women's behaviour further, Wipper quotes the

³⁹ Ibid., p. 314.

detailed account of the Kikuyu political activist Job Muchuchu, who focuses on the role of the female demonstrator Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru:

They accused the delegation of having been bribed, and the women in particular became very excited. Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru [...] leapt to her feet, pulled her dress right up over her shoulders and shouted to the men: 'You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's get him.' Hundreds of women trilled their ngemi [a high-pitched cry] in approbation and from that moment on trouble was probably inevitable. Mary and the others pushed on until the bayonets of the rifles were pricking at their throats, and then the firing started. Mary was one of the first to die.⁴⁰

Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, "the bravest of all" in Wairimu's recall (48), with her courageous gesture and bold statement stands as an example of women's rejection of male authority. She challenges male protesters and reacts against their submission to colonial authorities, to such an extent that she is commemorated in the song "Kanyegenuri", praising her act of courage and women's behaviour on the occasion of the protest. It is the same song Wairimu begins to sing years after the 1922 riots, in 1950, when she sees Harry Thuku again (109). Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru is praised in Macgoye's poem "Harry Thuku" as well, in the collection *Make it Sing and Other Poems*, together with the other humble women who sang for their hero:

More than ten thousand

stayed for two days there, standing near the Norfolk,
sullen and stubborn for me. Mary Nyanjiru
it was who led the shouting. She was one
of twenty-five who died. [...]

I had my time. The ladies sang for me
in mountain farms. The shoeless, the illiterate
gathered to wish me Godspeed.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 315.

⁴¹ M. Oludhe Macgoye (1998) *Make it Sing and Other Poems*. Nairobi: East African Education Publishers, pp. 61-67.

Wairimu follows her desire to take part to the political turmoil in Nairobi, but she also accepts the risks of this participation. When the shooting starts, minutes seem ages to the young Wairimu, who amongst the confusion is so scared and has to witness the death of other people, twenty-one men and four women who have been killed by armed police. This is such an unnatural experience for a Kikuyu girl coming from the country where, according to custom, dying people were taken into the forest to avoid the sight of their last breath. This experience is also necessary to Wairimu to learn something about power, as herself admits when acknowledging that the action of a great crowd is useless against authority's power. Harry Thuku in fact was transferred to the coast and detained without trial "for years and years and his name was hardly mentioned...." (49).

Wairimu's first experience of political activism is an opportunity for her to actively participate to the political events of her country, but it catapults her into a nightmare, where the city haze has turned black and smoky.

However, what emerges from the official accounts of the 1922 riots quoted by Wipper and from the narration of the same episode by the heroine of *The Present Moment* is women's unity and courageous reactions against men and the government, in this case the police. The Thuku disturbances represent an episode in Kenyan history where women have taken the lead, raised their voices and actively participated in order to support the first Kenyan politician who has fought to free women from exploitation.

Being concerned with women's rights and interested in letting the world know about the abuses women had suffered in Kenyan colonial and postcolonial history, Macgoye often mentions historical episodes linked to the mistreatment of women, even if she does not handle them exhaustively in her fictional narratives. An example can be found in Macgoye's novel *Homing In*, where the author refers to "The Revolt of Women" of 1947 and 1948 when a large number of Kikuyu women gathered in the District Commissioner's office in Fort Hall to protest against the imposition on women to dig terraces in order to follow the government's soil conservation project:

Two thousand Kikuyu women came to the DC's office in Fort Hall to complain about terracing. Ellen thought it was magnificent. Why should they be sent out to work when they ought to be looking after their homes and babies? And gardens: she conceded that much. [...] "That's a revolution, all right," said Jack. "It won't make the D. C. change his mind but it will give their husbands a thing or two to think about."

She dared to mention it in class.

"It is the influence of Mr. Gandhi," someone said. "You see, the women helped to free India."⁴²

Like the 1922 riots, "The Revolt of Women" also stands as an example of women's union and firmness: their shared decision not to participate to the work any longer resulted in the interruption of the project and the protection of women's rights. It was a "revolution" since women had definitely decided not to surrender any more. As Ellen, the main character of the novel *Homing In*, highlights women were already overburdened by their time-consuming domestic tasks, the care of children, their roles as traders and farmers. The obligation for them to work on government's schemes and on European plantations was very burdensome, as women's time and energies were devoted to those projects and taken away from their own tasks at home and the work in their own farms. Thus, women were forced to bear a huge amount of government-imposed encumbrances. They were among the most vulnerable members of Kenyan colonial society, excluded from the administration and exploited by the government, in particular the local government made of chiefs and tribal police who often used their power to trample on women's rights.⁴³

Another important issue to deal with is *The Present Moment's* protagonist's involvement in the "Land and Freedom" rebellion. Wairimu's involvement in the Mau Mau movement gradually begins with her active participation to the political life of her country. After her presence at the riots of 1922, she participates to the meeting announced by Jomo Kenyatta at

⁴² M. Oludhe Macgoye (1994) *Homing In*. Nairobi: East African Education Publishers, p. 86.

⁴³ A. Wipper (1989) 'Kikuyu Women and the Harry Thuku Disturbances: Some Uniformities of Female Militancy', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 59, No. 3., p. 322.

Ruringa Stadium in 1947, after his return from England.⁴⁴ Since the 1920s, the protagonist of *The Present Moment* is strongly aware of the importance of protesting against oppression and in support of people's rights, and the reader witnesses the development of her national sentiment and her active involvement: "of course I went. After what I had seen as a girl, I felt I had a right to be present at any political event" (97). After Kenyatta's speech at Ruringa Stadium, Wairimu admits that she is "under the spell" and devoted to Kenyatta and his cause. That day marked the beginning of the Mau Mau movement since, as Wairimu highlights, the leaders' oaths were taken on that occasion and "little by little news of an association and of an oath were being whispered about" (97). On another occasion, the strike in Kisumu in 1947, Wairimu reaffirms her desire to play an active part on her country's political life and to be always informed about the recent developments: "I went because I hated to miss anything new, not because I wanted to draw attention to myself" (107).

Yet, the novel's protagonist's direct involvement in the forest fighters' rebellion begins in 1949:

Very cautiously the foreman approached me, and *in 1949 I became a full member of the chama – no need to go into that – and a recruiter.* I was not, in those sour days, thinking about the rainbow and the golden haze. But, as they say, one thing leads to another. [emphasis added] (107)

Wairimu in *The Present Moment* embodies Kenyan women's contribution to the Mau Mau rebellion. As underlined by Cora Ann Presley in the essay "The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change", women's participation to this uprising has been often forgotten in the studies dealing with the forest fighters, even if women's support was crucial to the organization of the

⁴⁴ In June 1947 Jomo Kenyatta became the president of the Kenya African Union. His political plans were totally nationalist in scope and he travelled around Kenya to campaign for national freedom. Because of his support for Kenyan independence, Kenyatta was implicated as one of the leader of the Mau Mau rebellion and arrested in 1952. He was then released in 1961.

movement's activities.⁴⁵ Women's contribution to the rebellion centred in particular on what the government called the "passive wing", that is the popular support of the non-fighting forces. Their participation had many aspects, their main role being the arrangement of the supply lines, indispensable to provide the fighters hidden in the forests with food, weapons, medicine and information. Another women's function was the recruitment of new members and the maintenance of the lines of transit from the urban and rural areas to the forest, used by the new recruits in order to reach the guerrilla army. Moreover, women often took part to the oath ceremonies, often as officiants.

When declaring her entry into the movement, Wairimu does not mention the words Mau Mau, but she talks about the *chama*, a group of people, and about her role as a recruiter. Then, while delving into the recalling of her experience, she underlines the other tasks she had to undertake as a member of the movement: "I was to pass messages and sometimes hide travellers right where I was in the coffee, not to draw attention to myself" (112).

What emerges from Wairimu's activism in the Mau Mau movement is the fact that women mainly acted in the backstage. Nonetheless, their roles were essential and even if the majority of them did not serve as combat troops their participation put their lives in danger.⁴⁶ British authorities in fact became aware of women's crucial role in the movement and treated them as a force to control and stop. Wairimu, being well aware of the dangerousness of her activities, underlines her cautious behaviour aimed at not arousing suspicion. She is very careful not to miss church and to be never late for work (112).

Wairimu's subversive activism allows her to have an active role in such a pivotal and dangerous cause, that is the fight for independence and freedom. It was a necessary struggle, and she felt the urgency to take part in it, even if it

⁴⁵ C. A. Presley (1988) 'The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol.22, No. 3, Special Issue: Current Research on African Women (1988), pp. 502-527.

⁴⁶ According to Presley, 34.147 women were jailed in the period from 1952 to 1958 for the breach of the Emergency laws (504).

left her in great deprivation and with gloomy memories, "the silent garrotte and the evening roadblock" (45):

The years of risk and caution, the sweat that trickled when another woman bled from the lashes, the cough that terrified when there was most need of silence, the curfew darkness where each cry for help might be a trap. (113)

In spite of having been among the many who "stood firm, through fire, suspicion, deep double meanings and a web of trust", with the advent of national independence Wairimu finds herself isolated and in a state of precariousness. When a new Kikuyu purchaser takes over the coffee estate previously owned by an European master, the protagonist and the other workers rejoice, seeing it as an achievement of their struggles, but they are early turned away as, Wairimu claims, "new clansmen brought in: they said we were too political, bargaining, counting hours. Fighting for land and freedom we had not grudged the hours, or money either" (113). Wairimu appears disillusioned when she affirms further, "but so it was. At seventy one does not expect consideration" (113), thus confirming Lennox Odiemo-Munara's affirmation that "post-colonial Kenya denies them [women] spaces to celebrate their contribution in its formation".⁴⁷ Rather than giving her consideration and satisfaction for her contribution to the making of the new nation, Wairimu witnesses the destruction of her little tea kiosk, "kicked to pieces by uniformed men doing their duty to build the nation" (114).

The explanations for women's willingness to participate to the struggle for freedom stem from women's lack of opportunities in Kenyan colonial society and their resentment towards government's policies negatively affecting women's rights and interests. Women had less access to education, British schools and institutions and scarce job opportunities in the settler economy and the colonial administration. Deprived of the opportunities given to their male counterparts, women were at the same time affected by colonial law assessed

⁴⁷ L. Odiemo-Munara 'Women Engagement with Power and Authority in Writing East Africa.' CODESRIA (2010), Gdnet.org, dated viewed 07 July 2013
http://www.gdnet.org/~research_papers/Women%20engagement%20with%20power%20and%20authority%20in%20re-writing%20East%20Africa

against them. Women suffered the loss of their own farmed land, alienated by colonial government with the 1902 "Crown Land Act", they were taken on extensively as workers, often as forced labourers, in the coffee plantations. Thus, women's exclusion from education and politics and the unfair laws affecting them induced them to support the nationalist cause. As Presley notes, "Kikuyu women joined the nationalist associations to improve their economic status, to gain access to the political process, to further their education, and to abet the return of alienated land".⁴⁸

Women's political activism suggests their desire to emancipate themselves and enter social spaces that previously were "no go zone" for them. Women's involvement in political issues, their protests and active participation to political riots, were no part of colonial society's mindset, to such an extent that, as Presley has observed, "women's activism w[as] dismissed as being instigated by others", such as male protesters or other political associations.⁴⁹

Thus, female political activism meant women's approach to modernity and equal opportunities and their departure from traditional boundaries. In particular, women's participation to the Mau Mau rebellion implied women's violation of customary practices. According to the Kikuyu custom for example, women were prevented from joining any political association and taking any kind of oath since, as Jomo Kenyatta explains, "women were not considered fit mentally and bodily to stand the ordeal which involved not only the individual going through it but the whole family group".⁵⁰ Conversely, women's membership of the movement followed the taking of the oath. The latter was an achievement for women since they gained recognition, equality with men and they were trusted with roles and responsibilities previously belonging to a reality of male-led dominance.

Regarding the other novel under investigation, *Coming to Birth*, Paulina's experience with politics begins with her involvement in a politician's family. In

⁴⁸ C. A. Presley (1988) 'The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol.22, No. 3, Special Issue: Current Research on African Women (1988), p. 508.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 506-507.

⁵⁰ J. Kenyatta (1985) *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu*. London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann, p. 225.

spite of her initial unawareness and uncertainty, Paulina finally becomes politically conscious, even though her activism is not nearly so radical as Wairimu's.

At the end of 1975, after having worked for the Okelo family, Paulina is employed by one of the sitting Members of Parliament, Mr M., whose family has just moved to a new house in Nairobi. Paulina plays the role of the "general factotum" in their house, providing for the children and the guests' needs, overseeing the cook, undertaking the household tasks. Paulina's interest in politics arouses when she begins to work in the politician's household. Her everyday life spent with Mr M. and his family and guests allows her to become politically aware and to intersect her personal life with the political affairs of her country.

On the occasion of the 1975 elections she is personally involved for the first time in her life, as she lives in the house of a family intimately concerned with national politics. Before, the narrative voice underlines, Paulina has never voted, even when she had a card, "she hadn't thought like that about elections", the election of 1969 was even considered as "meaningless" by her (97).

Conversely, during her working period in Mr M.'s house, as J. R. Slaughter has stressed, Paulina "allies with Mrs M [a women's organizer] and assumes her full civil subjectivity as a part of the Kenyan body politic".⁵¹ What Slaughter refers to is Paulina's and Mrs M.'s activism in order to protest against the imprisonment of the MP Philomena Chelagat Mutai. In October, the reader is told, two Members of Parliament, Jean-Marie Seroney and Martin Shikuku were arrested and detained without trial. Despite this event:

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 to violence in the previous year and sentenced to thirty months' imprisonment.* [emphasis added] (109)

⁵¹ J. R. Slaughter (2004) 'Master Plans: Designing (National) Allegories of Urban Space and Metropolitan Subjects for Postcolonial Kenya', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 37.

Philomena Chelagat Mutai was one of the first female Members of Parliament of the new independent nation, an “uncelebrated heroine” as Nyokabi Kamau highlights.⁵² Her detention was the result of her denounce against the government’s corruption and its policy consisting of silencing all the radical voices. As the extract makes clear, she is the only one who raises her voice to question the unfair detention of her fellow members and to find the disguised reasons of their imprisonment. In that way, she challenges the independent regime, by striving against social injustices.

While introducing the MP Chelagat Mutai, Macgoye stresses the minimal representation of women in Kenyan political affairs. Politics appears in fact as a male dominated arena where a woman like Chelagat, the only female Member of Parliament, is “a rare bird”.

Despite women’s crucial participation in the nationalist movement to overthrow the colonial government, forms of gender discrimination endured in the independent country. The new leadership led by Jomo Kenyatta was mostly male and the conviction that women could not perform as good leaders was strongly widespread even among key leaders in the government. On the whole, Kamau explains, “women representation in parliamentary leadership has been minimal, standing at 9.8 per cent at its peak in the 10th parliament”, this resulting from a political structure that restricted and impeded the potential for women ability to direct and guide the country.⁵³ Furthermore, in the first years of Kenya’s independence, the majority of senior positions left by the British settlers were occupied by young men who had access to formal education during the colonial period, thus excluding women from the field of politics and the performance of key roles.

Even though gender discriminations were enhanced during the colonial period, they were already well-established in Kenyan patriarchal and traditional society. Kamau notes, himself borrowing from Okiya Omtatah Okoiti, that customary practices such as the belief in the uselessness of educating

⁵² The first elected female Member of Parliament was Grace Oyango, followed by Julia Ojiambo, Phoebe Asiyio and Grace Ogot. In N. Mutai (2010) *Women and Political Leadership in Kenya: Ten Case Studies*. Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Foundation, p. 20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

daughters, female circumcision, dowry collection, arranged and forced marriages can be regarded as “some of the ills that impede the quest for women’s leadership in Kenya”, together with women’s exclusion from the public and social spheres, due to the traditional confinement of women into the private and domestic realm and, conversely, men’s freedom to occupy both of them.⁵⁴ Other reasons preventing women from having access to the political milieu are the scarcity of resources, in particular time and economic resources, women’s lack of negotiation skills and professional training, the lack of media visibility, as issues of particular concern to women are not considered as newsworthy by the media.

In this wise, women who take the risk of breaking from the norm and manage to be successful in the political arena have definitely achieved “liberation”, as Kenyan writer Grace Ogot observes:

A division that occurs in the mind of an African woman, especially in Kenya, is politics. Those who are going into politics are carrying a very big burden because actually they have broken from the norm. And they have moved forward to an extent that they are now fighting for positions in councils, parliamentary and presidential elections. That is in itself liberation.⁵⁵

Coming back to the novel *Coming to Birth*, besides alluding to women’s scarce participation in Kenyan politics, Macgoye emphasises how Chelagat Mutai’s mistreatments and suffering is relevant to the main character Paulina, and to herself as well, as women. As a matter of fact, the Member of Parliament’s personal experience arouses Paulina’s and the author’s solidarity toward their fellow women:

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. (110)

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁵ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 93.

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 [...]. (111)

The unfair treatment of the “Kalenjin girl” appears as humiliating and symbolic of all the discriminations against women. Paulina feels the need to react, to approach the political field, to try to give her contribution and transgress the boundaries imposed on her because of her status of woman and wife. Paulina feels the urgency to do something, to the point that she finds the confidence to defend her opinion and go against her husband’s point of view on the Mutai case. Martin, in fact, appears as disillusioned and passive:

‘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 . . .’ [...]

‘I know you can’t do anything. Anything at all. Only government can do it.’

‘But we are the government. Mrs M. says . . .’

‘If you are the government, you get Mr M. to queue up to put his cross on a bit of paper with your symbol on it: fig-leaf or something, or a militant crochet-hook. I don’t see . . .’

‘We put them there and we help them to act.’

‘Paulina, will you be silent, for I see myself that there is nothing for us but “can’t” [...]. (111)

Paulina’s acquired political consciousness pushes her to cross over into the sphere of the political activist. She asserts her rights by remarking that every citizen is “the government” and must actively react against injustices with every means at his or her disposal: letters, rallies, petitions, strikes. Martin, on the contrary, is fully convinced that only the government can act in their society and, with his sentences midway between anger and irony, he even discredits his wife. The connection he makes between Paulina’s activism and the symbols he ironically proposes for her “candidacy” is clearly aimed at dismissing her as a woman who should not interfere in political, and consequently male, affairs. Martin’s mention of the crochet-hook in particular,

can be read as his will to close Paulina into the domestic sphere imposed on her because of her gender. Crochet is a woman's activity par excellence, traditionally connected to the image of the good wife and mother making crochet items in her home. Thus, being the crochet-hook linked to the idea of domesticity and docile womanhood, the oxymoron used by Martin, the "militant crochet-hook", combines an adjective referring to authority and action with a noun connected to meekness and the home, ironically depicting Paulina as a woman who should think of her female affairs rather than intruding in political activism.

On this occasion, Martin's reaction is similar to that of Rahel's husband in *The Present Moment*. The man, just returned from the war in Somaliland and Burma, answers bothered to his first and second wife's questions about what he has experienced and witnessed, the different people he has met: "You wouldn't understand. It is better for you not to know. These are not women's matters", and then to a female neighbourhood he teased says "keep your small concerns for small minds and do not bring your tittle-tattle here to me" (12-13).

Paulina, nevertheless, does not accept "can't" as an answer and for the first time in her life she "set[s] up her will against Martin's" (113-114). Together with Mrs M., Paulina thinks it is important for women to collect themselves and raise their voices to protest against Chelagat Mutai's incarceration, since "even if it failed, women might become politically conscious by making the attempt" (112). Wanting to present a women's petition to the government, Mrs M. asks some leading women belonging to different tribes and professional fields to participate and sign the petition, but all she manages to collect are refusals. Consequently, since the educated women are not willing to help them, Paulina proposes to go straight to the people of her and Mrs M.'s locations, but the latter reiterates their need of the leading women's help. Paulina, Mrs M. claims, has no status in Gem since to the old women living there she is only "a childless woman whom they admired for a little while when to read and sew – and still stay at home – was a distinction", and the Mutai's case and the people's rights she wanted to protect are so far away from the old ladies' reality in Gem. These old women, Mrs M. explains further, would not be emotionally moved by the mistreatment of one single woman since:

And to these old ladies, what is so terrible? They have seen women going to prison for illegal brewing and men for tax offences and failing to build latrines, and the people come out much the same, not very much damaged. If the girl has no children to leave behind, no husband to misbehave while she is away, what is the loss? She will dig as other people dig and eat as other people eat. (113)

The old women living in the villages have often witnessed several cases of women and men arrested, fined and imprisoned for having transgressed laws such as the 1921 law forbidding beer-brewing by Africans, a law depriving women of a high income, the increased "Hut and Poll Tax", etc. Chelagat Mutai's situation is not so different from other women's experiences, from the lives of women who have suffered harassment, have been imprisoned and obliged to do hard work, with the difference that they had nobody to protest for their sake and rights. Thus, discouraged by the leading women and their husbands and by the fruitless idea of involving the old ladies in the rural areas, Paulina and Mrs M. have to let their idea for the petition rest.

It is worth noticing that, on the one hand, Paulina's encounter with politics reveals itself to be unsuccessful since her and Mrs M.'s efforts are not rewarded and the petition is never signed and presented to the government. On the other, this experience creates an occasion for Paulina to take her first steps into the public sphere and demonstrate that women as well, when given the chance, can be active citizen campaigning for their own and other people's rights.

In relation to this latter issue, another example that we find in the novel *Coming to Birth* is Paulina's encounter with poverty, a social plight characterizing post-independent Kenya in spite of the promises given to citizens by the new government leaders to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, in order to safeguard the fundamental rights of the people belonging to all the social classes.

While wandering into the poorest areas of Nairobi, Paulina bumps into three little boys fighting for a handful of coins. When she tries to stop the fighting, a crowd begins to collect around them and the children begin to explain their reasons: they are hungry, they have to pick up casual work to rake some money together to buy some food, they are homeless or live with parents who

are absent or addicted to alcohol. The street boys, skinny and shabby, then follow Paulina into a snack bar where she offers them something to eat. She thus discovers their degrading life conditions: they have to look after themselves, have left school, have experienced violence and at present they live in shanties among moisture and rats, having to understand "how to stay alive", how to find the eating places where good food is thrown away at closing time, how to bear humiliation and deprivation (136).

When Paulina takes leave from the little boys, she hurries off to handle all her tasks before returning to Mr M.'s house, "feeling she had learned something that both clarified and complicated things"(138). Martin's initial reaction to the incident is again of exasperation, as it was when they discussed the case of Chelagat Mutai, "'Damn silly,' he growled. 'You can't do anything. Show sympathy and they're only after what they can get out of you'", and then of fury at the sight of the little article and the picture dedicated to the episode in the Sunday paper, praising Paulina for her "practical lesson in charity that many of us only talk about" (138).

On the contrary, Mrs M. is proud of Paulina's behaviour and suggests her the usefulness of giving lectures on responsible parenthood, while Mr M. observes:

'I know you feel sorry for these children but palliatives don't help much.'

'And what is there except palliatives?' demanded Mrs M. 'The kids would be dead before you could alter the system to provide residential care for all of them. What you can give them right away is a crumb of self-respect.'

'Not necessarily charitable care. Just jobs and homes for their fathers.'

'*Only* jobs and homes – and a ticket to the moon each! [...]'

'I don't think it's self-respect they're lacking in,' said Paulina. 'It's other people's respect. And therefore they find it hard to respect grown-up people themselves.'

Mr M. stared at her and nodded agreement.

'*All the same, Paulina, you must think before you act.*'

'*I reckon I've had a lot of time for thinking – years and years for it,*' said Paulina, slowly and deliberately. 'And these kids have more thinking-time than is good for them, too. It's my business who I buy

a cup of tea for, and who I give my name to, if it comes to that.
(139) [emphasis added]

What emerges from this excerpt, which relates a discussion between Mr and Mrs M. and Paulina about the problem of the vagrant children, is the government's inadequacy to deal with poverty, job opportunities and homeless children. Paulina and each citizen cannot act on behalf of the government, but on her opinion everyone can help vagrant children and poor people by giving them a bit respect. What is important is not to neglect them and not to look the other way, but to act depending upon each person's resources and means. Strongly convinced of her opinion, Paulina replies her employer boldly: she has spent too much time passively thinking, often about her personal concerns, and now she is free to reasoning and acting for herself.

The story is given media coverage and the news, representing the modernity of Nairobi and the independent nation, according to Slaughter is "counterweighed in the novel by the agricultural seasons and the time of custom, establishing a potential conflict between the civic citizen and the customary subject of the nation". Paulina, being the protagonist of a news item, differentiates herself from the rural community by becoming "individuated, differentiated enough to become a newsworthy object."⁵⁶ Thus, Paulina has finally "come to birth", by becoming an independent person, a civic citizen and a "new woman" (139).

2.2.7 Fashioning a New Identity

In the novels under analysis, both Wairimu and Paulina's experiences, choices and reactions to historical and political events bring to the construction of well-rounded individuals and civic identities. It is in the novel *Coming to Birth*, however, that the growth and the development of the female protagonist is more emphasized, as the novel traces chronologically the steps taken by Paulina towards her new and independent identity, according to the patterns of the bildungsroman. Paulina's development, also, is even more dramatic as

⁵⁶ J. R. Slaughter (2004) 'Master Plans: Designing (National) Allegories of Urban Space and Metropolitan Subjects for Postcolonial Kenya', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 46.

compared with Martin's growth. From his status as an independent and self-confident young man, Paulina's husband withdraws in a world negatively characterized by disillusion and passivity, while Paulina, from her condition as a subdued wife blossoms into a successful career woman and citizen.

Paulina's husband Martin Were is introduced in the very first page of the novel as a twenty-three-year-old man with the all world before him. He is educated, attends evening classes in English and book-keeping, is employed as a salesman in a stationery shop and he has a room in Punwani. As an employed and married man "he had already become a person in the judgement of the [Luo] community he belonged to" (1).

At Nairobi train station, on the contrary, coming to sight with the rearguard of the young brides after the experienced Nairobi wives and the men, Paulina appears as a thin and pale girl, with deep shadows under her eyes. She looks as an immature and afraid girl, shy and disoriented. She feels sick both because of her physical status as a pregnant girl and as a consequence of her unsuitableness to the new reality: the metropolitan environment, the dark and airless room, the stinking latrine blocks. When the young girl gets lost, after two days of wandering and two nights spent with strangers and inside a prison cell, she finally rejoins with Martin to be welcome with slaps and insults. After the beating and the quarrel, Paulina "discoloured with bruises" is left bleeding and sobbing and locked inside the room, lying on the bed that has become "her prison" (23). The white woman Ahoya, who has helped Paulina giving her accommodation after her experience in the police station, goes to visit Paulina to comfort her. Ahoya underlines Martin's love for Paulina, but she also exonerates his beating since it was a shame to him to have his wife lost and wandering alone. And she explains further:

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. [...] *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 ever to beat you. [emphasis added] (24)

In his research on the condition of women in Kenya, Christian Morrison argues that according to customary marriage the husband has the right to punish his wife by beating her, if the wife has committed adultery or simply if she has not discharged her duties of wife. Moreover, he continues, the beating of women on the part of men is a very frequent practice, largely accepted by society.⁵⁷ In *Coming to Birth*, Ahoya seems to follow the same school of thought: both women and men can have problems in Nairobi, but only men are expected to react violently against their wives. According to Ahoya, Paulina should be relieved because she is not married "in the old way", so she can at least avoid being symbolically beaten by her husband in front of the guests. Her intervention seems to legitimise female mistreatment and it highlights Paulina's status as a submitted and powerless wife.

The marriage between Paulina and Martin, in fact, initially epitomises the customary relationship between the husband and his consort. Martin has got Paulina after the payment of dowry, he is the one who works, pays the rent and all that is necessary. He has the control on his own and on Paulina's life, since their relationship is not between equals. As Wanjiku Kabira observes, men start their own family after having being raised "to be a man and to look down on women", while at the same time women in Kenyan society have been brought up being aware of the fact that their status is low in the relationships between husband and wife.⁵⁸ As a matter of fact, in the novel is the discouraged Paulina who cannot greet an acquaintance of her because "Martin would not let her stop to talk" (3), who thinks that "being married was, it seemed, a whole history of getting used to things" (6), and who is assaulted by her husband, in spite of her explanations, on more than one occasion. Paulina's main traditional role as wife, that is providing Martin with a child, is not achieved, so increasing Martin's resentment and disappointment towards her on the occasion of the first beating, "can't even keep a baby for me. Can't even be sure it was mine, can I?" (22). The other female tasks related to the

⁵⁷ C. Morrison (2004) 'La Condition des Femmes en Inde, Kenya, Soudan et Tunisie', pp. 24-27, dated viewed 10 August 2013

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⁵⁸ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, p. 37.

domestic milieu are not accomplished either when Martin returns home after work the same day:

'Lying in bed till now?' he roared. 'And no food ready!'

'There is no water and no charcoal,' she replied meekly.

'No . . . You employ me as a bloody coolie to bring you water?' he shouted. 'Don't you know where the water is?'

'But you had the key, Martin. I couldn't get out.'

'Carry my own key, fetch my own water, cook my own food! What the devil am married for? [...]

You don't get out of my eye-range again, that's all.'

'As you say, Martin,' she replied gently and dodged out to get the water. (25)

In traditional Kenyan society wifely submission is promoted and, as it is inferred in the above extract, a woman's role is to be submissive and to serve the husband, who is the head of the house. Regardless of Paulina's sickness due to her first miscarriage and the blows received and of her inability to exit from the room, Martin burst out in anger when he sees that she has neither cooked nor fetched water. Martin roars at her wife, while she meekly and gently answers to him in submission to his authority. In Martin's point of view, which summarises customary society's perspective, a wife's duty is to remain in the house and arrange for what is necessary to satisfy the husband's everyday needs, while he is at work. Moreover, Paulina belongs to him, she is not free to "get out of [his] eye-range". She is expected to wait for him inside the room he has chosen for her, making sure that everything is in order and ready at his return, since in that at least "she had one advantage over many Nairobi wives in that Martin came home every evening and never slept out" (26).

Despite the above, Paulina's depiction as the shy and awkward girl and the passive and silenced wife begins to change at the beginning of chapter two, when she returns from a six-month stay in Martin's homestead. Her husband comes again to meet her off at Nairobi station, two years after her first arrival in 1956, but the person he sees this time is a woman who has finished growing, with firm breasts, knowing eyes and bringing a lot of food

and good expertly handled. This time, also, Martin soon returns to work, letting her walk home by herself and organize "her woman's business" (33). The six-month period of separation marks the beginning of the crisis in Paulina and Martin's marriage. When Paulina comes back home she perceives a strange scent of coconut oil and the reader is informed that Martin habitually comes home late and that he rarely goes out or quarrels with her wife. Regardless of Paulina's profit earned with her crochet work and her maturity, she continues to be dependent on Martin, "she never went anywhere he could not keep her in his sight" (35).

Chapter three introduces Martin as a man of twenty-six years old, not very much changed and grown up, "but a trifle smarter, a little more self-confident" (37). He has moved to a new house away from Majengo in order to please Paulina, who has insisted on moving to a brick house, larger and easier to keep in order. The new house, however, "a red-brick box with only a tiny back window" does not satisfy Paulina's expectations (39). She feels dejected and disappointed but in spite of everything, she manages to go on crocheting and earning some money, "despite the dust and smells from ordure and market refuse" (40), and even to enrol in the Homecraft Training School in Kisumu and be appointed club leader at the centre near her husband's home.

With the passing of years and seasons the relationship between Martin and Paulina gradually becomes detached and their encounters more and more sporadic. Martin, in fact, is now sharing a room with a friend. During his rare visits to Paulina he talks a lot about meetings and conferences, but he hardly mentions his personal life and projects. In the same vein, Paulina travels to Nairobi to visit Martin only once a year during school recess, but as the narrative voice stresses "she was more like a visitor than a wife" (45).

At the evidence of no pregnancy Martin does not beat Paulina, but he threatens her that he would punish her in case of infidelity. Conversely, Paulina does not ask him to promise his faithfulness in return. As a matter of fact, we are in a society where the traditional rule of female premarital virginity was and is extremely respected and revered, whereas young men can pass over rules

and have premarital sexual intercourses.⁵⁹ A society where, according to customary marriage, polygamy is permitted and the first wife's approval not always required.⁶⁰ There is no use in asking her man to be faithful, Paulina realizes, above all if he does not manage to have a child from her, but the threat of another women in their marriage discourages her: "she wanted to ask Martin to help her buy a sewing-machine but hesitated because in some places, she heard, this was the gift given to sweeten the first wife for the arrival of the second" (46). According to both Wanjiku Kabira and Grace Ogot polygamy is oppressive to women and a cultural tradition serving the interests of men, where the man holds the power to decide how much love he is giving to each of the wives.⁶¹

With the absence of his wife, daily activities and tasks in the home are all to be undertaken by Martin, in addition to the hours spent at work and his studies on marketing or salesmanship. Martin in fact has improved his professional life, thus earning enough money to manage to live alone. In spite of his pastimes and interests in political affairs, it is still "a dull sort of life, trudging home to wash and make tea and perhaps sew on a few buttons before it got too dark" (48). For this reason and in the hope of finally managing to have a child from another woman, considering "his unfortunately bewitched wife's" inability to give him this precious gift, he begins dating other young women, firstly Fatima and then her sister Fauzia, who soon spends the nights in his house. "He was nearly thirty. It was his right to have a child" even if "he had no serious thought of taking this butterfly creature home" but to keep the child and let the girl goes on with her life (48-49).

However, even if Martin seems not to have a great consideration for the young women he dates, something dies inside Paulina when the year of

⁵⁹ C. M. Shaw (1995) *Colonial Inscriptions: Race, Sex, and Class in Kenya*. Minneapolis, London: Univeristy of Minnesota press, p. 73.

⁶⁰ C. Morrison (2004) 'La Condition des Femmes en Inde, Kenya, Soudan et Tunisie', p. 24, dated viewed 10 August 2013

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⁶¹ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, pp. 29, 80.

national independence comes and she is now certain about her husband's relationship with Fauzia, but she goes on with her life and duties with dignity.

Paulina suffers because of her unsatisfactory marriage but, at the same time, her distance from Martin gives her a certain kind of freedom:

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 [...]. (46)

Thus, Paulina has reached full maturity and independence and there is a great difference between the mute child-bride of the first chapters, unable to express herself and completely subdued to her husband and the mature woman who chooses for herself. Being a wife "denied a married woman's rights and respect" (54), as Simon reminds her, Paulina even decides to start a relationship with the man, as her own husband is living with other women in Nairobi. In terms of Paulina and her husband's inability to have a child, Macgoye explains that custom was not too much adverse to the practice of trying to conceive a child out of wedlock, and this is exactly what Paulina has in mind (35). Initially disgusted by this option, Paulina now wants to take the reins of her life, find happiness and well-being where she can find it and satisfy her needs just in the same way as her husband has done before her: "her hunger was now so great that she could forget the other people as soon as she had taken her place on the bed that was so generously provided for her benefit" (55).

However, Martin's discovering of his wife's infidelity and "provocation intolerable to any man" results in a new violence and assault against Paulina (56). Despite her fear, the woman does not surrender to Martin's threat as happened in the previous occasions. This time she decides to act:

She reported to her supervisor's office in Kisumu that her husband had assaulted her because he was taking another wife, accused her of infidelity and tried to set the club members against her. *She had tried to bear an unsatisfactory marriage for eight years. Now she could*

bear no more. She would like a transfer to Kisumu where she could live in a municipal house and educated opinion would defend her. *She was legally married and could not accept a polygamous arrangement.* [emphasis added] (57)

With her relocation to an official house in 1965, alone and with a regular salary, Paulina's life thus becomes that of an independent woman with no marital ties and anyone else to support her. It is after nearly two years that Paulina begins her new pregnancy and feeling "more alert, more detached, more sure of herself" than she has never been before, she dismisses the father of her son, Simon, and waits alone for the birth of the baby Martin Okeyo. Paulina's baby initially brings happiness and completeness to her life, but after the passing of two years her joy changes into acceptance since the child does not fill her life, "a Luo baby was meant to widen the social circle, not to constitute it", and she feels upset and disillusioned with her life, "she wondered if there was any end to this way of life" (71). Simultaneously, Martin's account of his life reveals the same feeling of helplessness and disappointment:

Martin's face was thinner than it had been when he was a young man [...]. His hairline was receding slightly. He was thirty-six, three years younger than Tom had been, and what had he achieved? [...] He did not see himself as maturing but as deprived of the chance of maturity, a childless man who could not keep a wife, whose house at home was shamed and whose house in town could never be home. (78)

Martin's frustration stems from both personal and political failures. Financially, from the year of Kenyan independence onwards he has been in a poorer condition than he was at the beginning of the story, while his wife is inversely more independent. His marital life and his love affairs are disintegrating, as Fauzia as well has left him alone all of the sudden. Martin is experiencing what J Roger Kurtz defines as "a midlife crisis, growing but not maturing", a crisis corresponding to that of independent Kenya.⁶²

⁶² Afterword by J. Roger Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 165.

We are in the 1970s and, after the hopes for national freedom which was supposed to guarantee a real betterment of people's life conditions, the country has to face economic stagnation, political mismanagement and corruption and a series of politicians' imprisonments, mysterious incidents, assassinations. In particular are the murder of Tom Mboya and the show trial of his alleged assassin that extremely shock Martin and negatively struck his expectations. Tom Mboya, the most outstanding Luo politician, was shot in broad daylight in Nairobi in July 1969 and his assassination generated riots from ordinary people who sincerely admired him for his honesty and considered him as a great hope for the future of their troubled government. Tom Mboya is presented as a politician not in search of personal power and wealth, which was a plague upon the new government, but interested in the real freedom of his country: not political sovereignty in itself, but a freedom ensuring the right of expression in the different fields of his society and accompanied by economic and political improvement, affecting all the different ethnic groups.⁶³ He is praised by Macgoye in her poem "For Tom", in the poetry collection *Make it Sing and Other Poems*, and in *Coming to Birth* as well where the author defines the politician as one among "the best and the brightest" who have been struck down.

Martin's elation of freedom has turned into cynicism and dashed hopes, now intensified by the death of his esteemed political leader:

He had adjusted from a vision of freedom in which the figure of a mythical leader, released from prison, hovered distant and glorious like the queen, to an actual country in which shops and houses changed hands, the wage structure remained very much the same, and the man you addressed as 'sir' haggled just as before over discounts and overtime. (78)

As Martin's aspirations are killed by political crisis and corruption, Paulina's hopes are torn to pieces by the death of her only son Martin Okeyo in a larger metaphor in which Martin's destroyed illusions and Paulina's killed son stand for the death of Kenya's starting trust in a fair and limpid political life.

⁶³ P. Ikoya (2011) *Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and the Quest for Freedom: A Study of Coming to Birth, Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, p. 45.

As a matter of fact is not a chance that the young Martin Okeyo is shot dead during a governmental function. The occasion is Kenyatta's visit to Kisumu in 1969 to inaugurate the opening of the new hospital, when schoolchildren were asked to stand at the side of the road to welcome the president. The result of the gathering was a troubled atmosphere, with tear gas and bullets shot to the people and the children, causing the death of some of them.

Akeyo's sudden death at the age of three puts Paulina's into despair. His status as a little child born out of wedlock deprives him of a proper burial plot and painfully Paulina considers his tragic death as a punishment for her decision to conceive with another man. Her son "would go to the earth, like herself, unperpetuated and unfulfilled": with this statement Macgoye summarizes Paulina's dissatisfaction and frustration, which can be liken to Martin's (84).

"As the chapter ends", Kurtz points out, "Paulina, like her country, feels that her life has reached a dead end", nonetheless, the protagonist again makes an effort to carry on and moves to Nairobi to be employed as a domestic in the house of Mr Okelo, a bank official.⁶⁴ It is an opportunity for Paulina to try to forget the recent and tragic past and start a new phase of her life in the room built for her in the Okelos' garden where she feels at home at once. Her relocation to Nairobi coincides with Paulina and Martin gradual rapprochement, beginning with their regained capacity of expressing themselves after years of loneliness and silence. Paulina is able to express her sorrow and the numbness following the death of her son, "the hardly believable acceptance of death, the terrible silences" (87). Suffering have isolated both Paulina and Martin from themselves and from social life. However, it is Martin who is hesitant to respond both physically and psychologically to his difficult situation. He appears physically shrunken, he "had lost weight, his cheeks were hollow, his eyes deep and staring" and emotionally reluctant to actively react, as his resigned answer of passivity summaries: "'We can't do anything,' he kept saying, 'we can't do anything'"(87).

After this first encounter, and after the passing of some years, Paulina moves to work for the politician Mr M.. Martin frequently drops in Paulina's "house",

⁶⁴ Afterword by J. Roger Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 166.

initially to ask her to look after some of his items while away on a selling safari and then gradually staying when he wishes and moving all his possessions to her room. However:

As she [...] cooked her best, dressed modestly in new fashions, kept up with current events and showed an innocent familiarity with town life, [...] Martin the more withdrew. He refused to speak Swahili outside the work situation, impugned the motives of almost everybody in business or politics [...]. His world was shrunk to 'home' and everything outside suffered disparaging comparison [...]. He did not go regularly to church any more. (100)

And again later in the novel, the author underlines Paulina's maturity and improvement in contrast to her husband's regression: "she was the one demanding to grow, to get out, to do things, and he was tired and disillusioned" (112).

Paulina's and Martin's contrasting growths reach their culmination when Paulina shows her achieved political and civic consciousness and her willingness to actively fight against social injustices. As we have previously underlined, on the occasion of the female MP Chelagat Mutai's detention it is Paulina's willpower that emerges, in contrast with Martin's disillusionment and apathy, "there is nothing for us but "can't"" (111), as happens with the protagonist's encounter with the homeless children.

Martin's personal crisis is mainly due to the disintegration of the roles assigned to men according to Luo custom and of the traditional hegemonic masculinity. Both female and male roles are challenged in the novel, and both Paulina and Martin have to forge their new identities: they come to birth as a new woman and a new man distant from the traditional position of the powerful man and the subjugated woman.

As J. Roger Kurtz highlights in its analysis of *Coming to Birth*:

The story, as Macgoye herself emphasizes, is about the growth of a woman's consciousness, and in this respect the contrast in the trajectories of Martin's and Paulina's lives is striking: *Coming to Birth*

relates the empowerment of Paulina, who ends up a “new woman”, and the concurrent diminution of Martin’s status as a man. At the end of the story, their roles are dramatically reversed.⁶⁵

Martin’s life experience shows his abrupt departure from Luo traditions. Firstly, Martin is initially deprived of his status of father, a right and a source of fulfilment according to tradition. Upon marriage in fact, the husband has the role to create his own new familial nucleus, since “the organic nature of communities resolved around house holds, which in turn were constructed around conjugal units. The marriage conferred him authority, due to his status as the head of the home and the potential leader of a clan.⁶⁶ This explains Martin’s family disappointment at his status as a childless man and Martin’s feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. Moreover, he has to bear his wife’s relationship with another man, a loss of dignity to him, and the birth of a son outside wedlock, thus diverting the problem from Paulina’s alleged bareness to his own probable impotence, considering his inability to conceive with his mistresses as well.

Furthermore, while Paulina learns new skills allowing her to acquire a new position in society and to earn her own money, Martin loses his exclusively breadwinner role. The role of the male provider and head of the household is a position imposed by tradition and by male need of self-realization. While Kenyan women can choose whether to work or not, since they have a lot of other activities to undertake to fulfil themselves, “men have no choice but to work in order to realise themselves”, being this a psychological need as Margaret Ogola points out in her interview with Mike Kuria.⁶⁷ Martin, the author informs the reader, is sometimes forced to borrow some money from his wife and, thanks to her own income, Paulina is even able to leave her husband on the occasion of his mistreatments and to provide completely for herself.

⁶⁵ Afterword by J. Roger Kurtz, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *Coming to Birth*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, p. 170.

⁶⁶ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, p.25.

⁶⁷ M. Kuria (2003) *Talking Gender: Conversations with Kenyan Women Writers*. Nairobi: PJ – Kenya, pp. 140-141.

It is at the end of the novel that the inverse developments of the protagonists more clearly arise. They are reunited, but in oppose terms with respect to their original union. Paulina's world and perspectives have expanded, she has turned herself into a confident and independent woman, while Martin's ambitions have faded, thus detaching himself from the confident and politically active man he was at the opening of the novel. The end of the novel shows the disruption of custom, according to which only Luo men could build houses for their families: it is Martin who moves to Paulina's house, as the cynical husband of an independent woman who is no more inclined to live on others' conditions.

2.2.8 New Concepts of 'Home'

The concept of 'home' runs through Macgoye's novels, in this case *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, to underline personal developments concerning the fictional characters and, to a larger degree, to refer to the changes brought about by modernity and new ways of life, giving to the word 'home' new meanings. Through a new sense of belonging the characters shape their identities, more and more removed from tradition and the society they inhabited before.

For the Luo culture, 'home' means the union of a husband, a wife, a child and often some relatives on the (ancestral) land. As underlined by Mike Kuria, who himself borrows from Okoth Okombo:

[H]ere we have the crucial distinction between home as an English word and its dholuo correlate *dala* or (*pacho*). For the definition of *dala* must of necessity contain an indication of how it comes into being. Since establishing *dala* is a ritual that involves at the very minimum the man who is to be the head of the home, his eldest son, his wife, and his own father (or an appropriate representative from his *anyuola* [minimal lineage]), it cannot be a personal affair. That is, a man cannot just feel that the building in which he lives is his *dala*. Thus no matter how much one feels at home in a given *ot* ("house") one cannot just declare it *dala* ("home") without the appropriate

ritual, which is reducible to such essentials as may be prescribed by the consulted elder or elders'.⁶⁸

In *Coming to Birth*, Martin is described as a Luo boy in his essence and, as a consequence, his concept of 'home' is linked to tradition and the values of his community, as described in the above extract. He continues to refer to 'home' as to his natal area, among his clan, "to which he would return in plenty and comfort after making his mark on the big world" in the urban environment, since whatever house he can afford in the city it cannot be called 'home' in its traditional, and for him, essential sense (51). As a matter of fact, he describes himself as a man "whose house at home was shamed [because of his conflicting relationship with his wife and his status as a childless husband] and whose house in town could never be home" (78).

As pointed out by Tabitha Kanogo, the concept of 'home' began to lose its traditional connotation in Kenya with the advent of colonialism and urbanization, thus becoming a variable concept, especially for women:

Home was no longer confined to one's natal or contemporary marital area. Home was a place that individual desired and appropriated. It was a state of mind that women could create and imagine, independent of wider kinship groups.⁶⁹

Thus, 'home' is no longer linked to the original homestead, mainly in the rural area, or to the community made of people belonging to the same tribe. Nor is it, as far as women are concerned, connected to the husband's home among the people of his clan. With the crossing of physical, psychological and cultural frontiers, also the meaning of 'home' has changed, by distancing itself from customary prescriptions and becoming more linked to individual inclinations.

Paulina epitomizes a modern and emancipated woman who manages to well adapt herself to new circumstances and realities. From the early beginning of the story, Paulina as a young wife has to settle down in a new home, that is

⁶⁸ M. Kuria (2009) 'Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye: A White Woman's Afrocentric Approach to Gender Politics in Africa', *Journal of Humanities (JH)*, Volume 1, p. 75.

⁶⁹ T. Kanogo (2005) *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya 1900-50*. Oxford: James Currey; Nairobi: EAEP; Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 29-30.

not the marital homestead in his husband's natal area but the small room in a noisy quarter of Nairobi. Despite her initial hostile relationship with the city, she then successfully manages to feel at ease in the urban milieu and to experiment the possibility of feeling a sense of belonging to the city, "she enjoyed she could actually live in Nairobi instead of treating it as a place of refuge" (97).

As Martin underlines talking to his wife during one of his visit "I did not think," he said, 'when I first brought you to Nairobi, that there would ever be a time you would feel safer here than at home.'" And Paulina, while working for the Okelos, answers "I can make a home here now that I am alone," she said practically. 'I like the people. There is plenty to do'" (87). At the end of the novel, Paulina has finally found a sense of belonging, feeling more at home in Nairobi than in her natal home and, secure in her new identity and hopeful relationship with Martin:

She was at home now. And at home, though news comes to you of meetings and proclamations, of trials and conflict and achievement, home does not change for that, Nairobi does not change for that, whisper, whisper, whisper, the hum of traffic and the undertones of bargaining, the quick breath of pushing carts and the slow breath of sleep, the unbroken round of terms, of seasons, of fashions, of celebrations. There is always something to do, always something to talk about, if you gave yourself time to learn, always something to depend on too and live by. (144)

This altered sense of 'home' is also emphasised by Valerie Kibera in her analysis of Macgoye's *The Present Moment*.⁷⁰ As the life experiences of Wairimu, Rahel and Paulina highlight, mobility is one of the major causes of change, obliging the characters to find a new sense of belonging far away from their natal and traditional home.

However, it is the Refuge that symbolises a new concept of 'home' in this novel. In this changing and modern society, this charitable institution hosting homeless and destitute women substitutes the care of the community and the family. The latter, being as a kind of safe microcosm, in traditional society

⁷⁰ Afterword by Valerie Kibera, in M. Oludhe Macgoye (2000) *The Present Moment*. New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, pp. 172-173.

provided for every member from birth to death. As Kibera explains further, the new reality of the Refuge stems from the fact that the traditional communities of "filiation" have gradually made space to a new society characterized by "affiliation", thus allowing people to freely decide to join together with both relatives and people who do not belong at all to their family or community.

Furthermore, the small community of the Refuge can be seen as a sort of microcosm representing Kenya's collective memory and mirroring, to a larger extent, the rich variety and heterogeneity of Kenyan society, a polyglot country inhabited by people characterized by a wide range of cultures, lifestyles and beliefs. Macgoye's choice of the characters, all belonging to different tribes and different cultural backgrounds, it is then owed to the author's approach to life praising cultural hybridism and diversity.

In this context, Paulina and Martin's couple, as they reunite at the end of the book, does not represent their multiethnic modern society, since they both belong to the Luo tribe, but it symbolises a new entity able to well adapt to the new national identity. The period between 1973 and 1975 was characterized by public turmoil since a stable national unity was still to become a reality, mainly due to tribalism. Martin reacts to political and national events with a marked ethnic orientation, as his reaction to Tom Mboya's death demonstrates, while Paulina's response to the events is modern, active and responsible, as she settles down to the national climate. Thus, as Petra Bittern underlines, "Martin and his wife's shared identity as a couple is one that unites a clearly defined ethnic self with a modern personality". Their union epitomises a new concept of 'home' combining a firm ethnic individual with a Kenyan national identity.⁷¹

⁷¹ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*. Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 92.

Chapter 3

Female Characters Longing for Identity: *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev*

3.1 Introduction

Macgoye's novels *Homing In* (1994) and *A Farm Called Kishinev* (2005), the author's last novel, follow chronologically *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* and they occupy a unique position in Macgoye's fiction work.

Above all, both *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev* feature European main characters, respectively the British settlers Ellen and Jack Smith and the Jewish Wilder family, an exception for Macgoye's oeuvre mainly dealing with black protagonists. The setting of the two novels is also very different from the author's previous works since the urban environment or the African villages do not dominate the scene, but they are only referred to. The stories in fact develop in the settlements on the Kenyan plains. Nakuru, the Rift Valley farming community of British settlers, provides the setting for *Homing In*, while Uasin Gishu, in the Rift Valley as well, is the area where the storyline of *A Farm Called Kishinev* progresses. Unusual in Macgoye's corpus of novels is the reference to countries and realities outside Kenya, since Kenya and its history generally dominate the writer's work. Nonetheless, wide space is devoted to Ellen Smith's recollections and descriptions of her life in her homeland, England, and the first chapters of *A Farm Called Kishinev* scrutinise in details the 1903 British proposal of Uasin Gishu to the Zionist Congress as a National Home for persecuted Jews.

Both novels are set in "the White Highlands", a term used to refer to Kenyan agriculture lands designated to European settlers by the colonial government.

In *A Farm Called Kishinev*, which begins with the 1905 Zionist Commissioners survey on the land, the latter is described as "empty, empty, empty" (3), without any trace of human or living entity, an impression already reported by Sir Harry Johnston in 1901, as W. T. W. Morgan refers to:

Here we have a territory (now that the Uganda Railway is built) admirably suited for a white man's country, and I can say this, with no thought of injustice to any native race, for the country in question is either utterly uninhabited for miles and miles or at most its inhabitants are wandering hunters who have no settled home, or whose fixed habitation is the lands outside the healthy area.¹

Kenya is introduced in the novel as a formless and void country, an available land offered to the Zionist Congress as a refuge from the increasing anti-Semitic violence in Europe and as an opportunity to establish a Jewish National Home in Kenya. Even if from a minor prospective, Ellen and Jack Smith in *Homing In* also move to Kenya in order to find a refuge from the outbreak of Second World War. Going "away from the main theatre of war" (63), the female protagonist thinks to have also taken leave of history, the "supporting history" of her British birth land (15).

Aiming at escaping persecution and finding a place to call 'home' in the case of the Wilder family and at evading the dangers of war and increasing their social status as far as the Smiths are concerned, the protagonists nevertheless find themselves entrapped in a sort of 'limbo'. The Jewish family belongs neither to the British ruling class and the settlers' community nor to the native populations, mainly the Nandi. Their Jewishness makes it hard for them to fit in one group or the other, since in the Kenyan colony as well "Jewishness signifies "an undesirable difference" in physical appearance, religious practice, and political interests, and is subject to interminable disputes over "what degree of civilization counted as 'white'" (47).²

The Smith family occupies an intermediate position between the colonial ruling class and the indigenous population, an uncomfortable position preventing them from completely belong to either and shaken by Kenya's achievement of self government, which obliged the settlers' community "to rethink their standpoint", by fashioning a new identity in the evolving country or migrating.³

¹ W. T. W. Morgan (1963) 'The 'White Highlands' of Kenya', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 129, No. 2 (Jun.), p. 140.

² M. Kruger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 111.

³ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 118.

The choice of characters of European origins as protagonists of the novels, in particular British settlers in *Homing In*, does not lead Macgoye to openly focus on the colonial discourse. As Petra Bittner underlines, the author works “implicitly rather than explicitly to convey that era’s worldview”, her main concern being the effects that historical developments have had on the present of her adoptive country. History is used to communicate a “consciousness of the past” that is needed to a fuller comprehension of the present.⁴ At the same time, Kenya’s birth as a nation, its struggle for independence and resulting problems emerge since, even if it is not as examined and experienced personally as it was in Macgoye’s previous novels, Kenyan history directly or indirectly affects the lives of every character. Moreover, because of the peculiar theme of *A Farm Called Kishinev*, “Macgoye is unquestionably the first East African novelist to address it”⁵, the history of the Jewish people mixes in this novel with that of Kenyan people. It is a history of persecutions, deaths, changes (of names, countries, homes, since “Jews are [...]rather much given to going away” (74)), of memories, (“Jews were the people of remembrance” (73)).

Synopsis of the Novels

The novel *Homing In* is set in 1980 Kenya and traces the story of Ellen Smith, an elderly woman of British origins, and her black servant Martha Kimani. Due to her physical and mental precarious status, the white old woman lives her last years with her mind completely oriented to her past: it is through a web of recollections and flashbacks that the lives of the two women emerge to the surface. Ellen, a schoolteacher living in London, moves to Nakuru in the 1940s with her husband Jack Smith. The arrival to the farm is the beginning of Ellen searching for identity in the new environment, helped by her entrance in Kenyan school system as a teacher first of native boys and then girls. Jack’s conscription to fight in the Second World War coincides with the birth of their first child Nigel followed by Angela’s. Ellen’s visit to London after the end of the

⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

⁵ E. Mwangi (2006) ‘A First for Macgoye As She Pens Jewish Life in Kenya’, *The Daily Nation (Kenya)*, dated view 10/11/2013 <http://allafrica.com/stories/200608070750.html>

conflict reveals her remoteness from her former home, but her return to Kenya is followed by the outbreak of the country's struggle for independence and her husband's death, allegedly caused by the Mau Mau movement.

The period is also marked by Martha's entry into Mrs Smith's house as a substitute of the former servant Kirui. After a life of endurance, the death of her husband, the loss of her son Stephen, Martha is employed and her salary allows her to enrol her daughter Lilian on high school. Left alone in their old days by their sons and daughters migrated mainly in order to find better opportunities, the two women establish a unique relationship that connects them on human terms.

A Farm Called Kishinev suggests what may have happened if the British offer of the Kenyan territory of Uasin Gishu to the Zionist Congress would have been accepted. The story is told by Benjamin Wilder, who chronologically reports the facts from different perspectives. He initially recounts the historical details of the British proposal of Uasin Gishu as a National Home for Jews victims of persecution in East Europe and his grandfather Isaac's arrival in Kenya. The establishment of the farm called Kishinev is then followed by Isaac's marriage with the Jewish Sarah Goldman and the birth of the little Jacob, Max, Dora and Rachel. The latter's life experiences are then brought to the fore, in particular that of Jacob, Benjamin's father, who becomes the master of the farm and marries the Nandi Sophie, a woman of mixed origins who gives birth to Benjamin, Isaac and Leo. Benjamin's story occupies the last part of the book, following in his father's footsteps in the marriage of the Nandi girl Hannah. Benjamin and his children's, Miriam and Esau, experiences are set in the 1980s and the novel ends with the narrator's conjectures about how things might have evolved differently if the project of the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Kenya had taken place.

3.2 Different Ways of Adapting and Belonging

The novels *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev* present a rich tapestry of female characters. In the complex contexts stressed before, the female protagonists of *Homing In* and the minor characters of *A Farm Called Kishinev* have to adapt themselves to a new reality, being it the adoptive country or the

culture of the Jewish community. Macgoye, as it was for her previous novels, focuses on “ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances” and is concerned with how women of different origins, races, life experiences struggle with and try to resolve a common essential issue: find a place of belonging where to feel at ‘home’.⁶

“The search of the location in which the self is “at home””, Rosemary George highlights, “is one of the primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English”. This aim, she explains further, can then get “obscured or transcended” while the story progresses, but the author never completely leaves it behind.⁷ This theme is central in the entire Macgoye’s work, even if in the two novels under investigation it is more stressed, the protagonists being in search for home also in a geographical sense. As far as *A Farm Called Kishinev* is concerned, the longing for home is even shared by an entire community, the Jewish people searching for a “National Home”, persecuted and obliged to wander.

In both novels “the configuration of settler and native, citizen and stranger, continues to shift”, together with Kenya’s status, progressing from being a British colony to an independent country.⁸ In *Homing In* the focus is on the experience of the white colonists Ellen and Jack Smith: their status of settlers in a British colony is profoundly brought into question with the advent of Kenyan independence. If Ellen at least tries to become a citizen of the multi-ethnic new country, even if she never formally applies to Kenyan citizenship, and finally identifies with her native companion Martha, her husband keeps himself at distance from any opportunity of assimilation, does not accept change and remains a stranger. At the same time, Martha Kimani’s position, the black co-protagonist of the novel, shifts from that of the colonial subject to that of the free citizen of an independent country.

⁶ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 11.

⁷ R. M. George (1996), *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocation and Twentieth-century Fiction*, Berkeley [etc.] : University of California press, p. 3.

⁸ M. Kruger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 102.

As far as *A Farm Called Kishinev* is concerned, the initial position of Isaac and Sarah Wilder as inhabitants of “an enclave within a colony” (110) makes it difficult for them to turn themselves to another culture and to search to be assimilated to the adopted country. They are neither British settlers nor natives and the centre of their identities is their Jewishness, as it is for Rachel and Rosa Levine. In this context, the position of the black women of the novel, Sophie above all, is the most vulnerable since her identity shifts from that of being a native in a colonial country to a stranger in the Jewish community: in her experience “the Jewish National Home turns into a space of enclosure that traps rather than protects, an agent of patriarchal authority and forced assimilation that leaves her without social support” and without a ‘home’ where to belong.⁹

The colony does not represent the “natural” geographic home for the ruling class and the colonists, but only “a politically assigned one”. The colonial subject, inversely, has not the colonizer’s political authority, but as far as the concept of home is concerned, his/her position is even privileged, since he/she belongs to a geographical and cultural “natural” home.¹⁰

Nonetheless, as stressed by Bittner, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye “insists that no social identity is innate, so that, in theory, diverse people can come together as members of a state” and try to find a sense of belonging in a foreign country, even if very different from their mother country, as the author’s own biographical experience highlights.¹¹

In this wise, what the reader can infer from this two late novels, as we will see in the last part of this chapter, is the author’s suggestion of a possible solution for this complex issue. The adopted country should be experienced without prejudices and its people’s heritage, culture, habits seen as a treasure to better understand the new reality and as a source of identity for the newcomer. This is shown through Ellen Smith’s symbolic identification with her African caregiver Martha and through the Nandi Sophie’s experience.

⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰ C. Maloney, ‘The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction by Rosemary Marangoly George’, Review, *MELUS*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Asian American Literature (Winter, 1999), p. 189.

¹¹ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 169.

3.2.1 Searching for Home: Staying or Going Away

In both *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev*, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye traces the life experiences of different women of European origins who challenge their belonging to Kenya, successfully or unsuccessfully adapting and shaping their identities to the Kenyan reality. If Ellen Smith struggles to understand her role in her adoptive country and to remain till the end of her life, other characters like Sarah Wilder do not even try to be integrated to the indigenous reality or even decide to leave, as Rachel Wilder or Angela Smith.

Through the re-examination of Ellen's life experience, *Homing In* chronologically portrays the protagonist's past, from her adolescence spent in Great Britain to the last years of her life in Kenya. Particular attention is devoted to Ellen's relocation to Kenya and her process of adapting to the new reality. What the writer is concerned with is the main character's attempt to find a sense of belonging to her adoptive motherland, as Kurtz underlines:

In the end, as the title suggests, *Homing In* is about finding an identity and a sense of belonging, whether it is for a former English schoolteacher like Ellen in a former colony, or for the children of Kenyans like Martha in a British setting. A logical continuation of Macgoye's previous works, *Homing In* is an investigation- through story- of what has gone contributed to the "present moment" of Kenyan history.¹²

Ellen's departure from Great Britain follows her encounter with her husband-to-be Jack Smith. Because of his status as an unemployed man in the 1930s, Jack has decided to follow his uncle, a veteran of the First World War, to Kenya's central farmland, where the man has obtained a section of land as a compensation for his military service. In Kenya Jack has started a partnership with his uncle, helping with the various tasks of the farm and "taking a half share of the profits" (13). It is during a short return to his homeland, due to

¹² J. R. Kurtz (1995) 'Homing In by Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye', Review, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 69, No. 4, Focus on Luisa Valenzuela (Autumn, 1995), p. 854.

his mother's precarious health, that Jack meets Ellen and asks her to come back to Kenya with him:

"I can't stay," Jack said suddenly. "There's no job for me here and all my money has gone into the farm. [...] There will be a war here and no end of a mess. Could you make a new start with me? You'd be somebody *out there*, degree and all that. The girls there grow hard and hefty. I promise you none of them ever took my fancy."
[emphasis added] (14)

Jack highlights Ellen's education and degree, she is a public school teacher, which will help her carve out an impressive space for herself in the new society, where skills and qualifications are needed since, according to the settlers' opinion "you were building up a country and making a better life for people" (17). Ellen's mother shares Jack opinion as well, "you'll be somebody", but she is also worried about the climate, the crocodiles and the jungles, while Ellen's sister Beatrice sees Ellen's departure as an opportunity for her to live a more comfortable life and to go "to see a bit of life. Palm trees, lions, war dances, goings-on in the planter's club" (17).

Through Jack's description of everyday life in the White Highlands, Ellen begins to shape a picture of Kenya, which in spite of Jack's cheerful sentences, is not idealized but close to reality:

Pioneers going deaf from too much quinine among the worthless coffee trees. Veterinary officers ploughing through to mud. Leopards, ticks, locusts, jiggers, public schoolboys writing down hearty, cliché-ridden speeches to be read on Empire Day, while native police sweated in their jumpers and tarbooshes. Black people all around, respectful but not very far on the road to uplift, breathing a risk of typhoid and sleeping sickness. (19)

Regardless of the negative elements of Kenyan life that Ellen and Jack might experience, the prospect of the imminent war and danger is seen by the British characters as something they could only suffer in Great Britain. With the threat of the Second World War, the departure to Kenya, a British colony, is regarded as an escape from a dangerous country to "a safe heaven", "an extension of

Great Britain without any geopolitical significance of its own as the expression 'out there' suggests".¹³ The narrator in fact underlines how Ellen's mother urges the couple to leave the country "as though only Europe could have a war" (20), being Europe and Great Britain a continent and a country supported by history. During Ellen's last days in London in fact, the young woman herself admits that "she would miss all this supportive history" (15) and the couple's departure is considered as their "taking leave of history" (19).

After the wedding, Ellen and Jack move to Kenya and, as Bittner claims, at their arrival to the colony, the novel's female protagonist "experiences the country according to the fairy-tale notions that had been related to her"¹⁴, since Macgoye underlines that the couple's "arrival in Mombasa had come close to her picture-book anticipation of Africa" (22-23). Ellen appears curious to discover the new reality, by watching the landscape, the waving children, the enchanting African night from the train windows and the morning "colour creep[ing] into the sky and enlighten[ing] the endless, indistinguishable scrubland" from the train corridor (23-24).

Once arrived in Nairobi, Ellen can finally see Nairobi as it really is, after having heard the other people's impressions of the city, Jack's above all: "it was just like outer London really, so long as you kept your sun-glasses on" (25). Ellen also draws some parallels between Nairobi and London, "just as at home, some had cars, some used buses, some pushed barrows, and at home, too, you were cut off in an undefined way from the stall-holders or the office cleaners" (26). However, the protagonist is aware of the impossibility of describing Kenya and East Africa only as an "extension" of her mother country when she ponders that "East Africa must have a history but it had not yet been brought to their notice" (19).

Ellen and Jack's arrival at the farm in the middle of the night is welcomed by Jack's uncle and the servant Kirui, who try to show Ellen their helpfulness and joy. Ellen, however, appears "pale and shaky", she feels disoriented and weak, frightened by the rutted and rough tracks and the worn sitting-room, "would they believe the tears were simply due to exhaustion?" (29), and her

¹³ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 123-124.

experience reminds the reader of Paulina's first arrival in the Pumwani room in *Coming to Birth*. Nonetheless,

Jack gave her a hand to the bathroom – roomy, old-fashioned, basin, fitted bath, flush toilet with a chain: goodness knows where the water came from, but she had been prepared for a zinc tub and a box seat. The twin beds were made up, towels laid out, windows fastened, boiled water in a bottle for cleaning teeth. Jack's arm firmly round her as she lay in a stupor. Home. (29)

As the extract underlines, in spite of some inconveniences, some aspects of the new house positively affect the newcomer. In fact, Ellen is able to comfortably sleep in a orderly bedroom till morning, with her husband's warmth, in what she defines "home".

From that morning onward, it begins for Ellen a process of learning how to live in the farm and to adapt to her adopted motherland. The farm reveals itself a "foreign ground" for Ellen, as it was for Jack when he first settled down since he previously thought that "milk was made in bottle and grass was something to play cricket on" (30). It is difficult for her to recognise the different kinds of cereals or cows, to fully understand conversations about "acres and yields and prices". Nonetheless, she tries to learn to drive over the uneven lane, to discover the food prices in order to arrange the menu, to bake on the wood stove. In particular, she puts high value on her ability of speaking Swahili and understanding the Kikuyu language used by the majority of the indigenous workers of the farm. She has treasured every opportunity to learn, she has memorised the words she has heard on the boat that has brought her to Kenya, she has listened to the missionaries' Swahili lessons, studied the rhythm of the Kikuyu language. Despite her efforts, having worked as a teacher in Great Britain, she is now oppressed by ignorance in this new reality where her skills are not adequate enough to fully understand the world around her. Ellen even hastens to buy a Swahili dictionary, in order to enhance her skills, provoking derision from her husband since she is "supposed to be the clever one" (32).

A year after, Ellen does not feel completely at ease in the new reality and the house she shares with Jack and Uncle still cannot be considered her "home": "she still felt like a visitor there" (33). She perceives her life at the farm as a suspended and flat life, far from the core of experiences and the essence of the country, from the buses and lorries heading towards Kisumu, Nairobi or Mombasa, the telephone lines, "lamplight and crude water arrangements she had foreseen: it was this never-ending gritty distance of things that she could not get used to, not having libraries, corner grocers, or near neighbours" (35). Ellen feels isolated, on the one hand from the company of the other settlers and from cultural and social activities and, on the other, from "a secret life" going on around her, an indigenous voice that she can hardly hear.

As a matter of fact she is occupying a specific position in society, where her efforts at promoting relationships with the native people, above all the farm servants and workers, are negatively judged and impeded. Contrary to Ellen, the other settlers, embodied by Jack, do not feel the need to learn the local language in order to socialize and "expected her to code instructions, not to converse" (31), and to stand aloof, as Jack's behaviour shows when he freezes Ellen with a look the first time she offers the servant Njoroge some tea. Ellen also becomes gradually aware of society's disparities, in particular related to education, and the need of more opportunities for native people, but the other white settlers try to dissuade her that the best thing to do is to leave the situation as it is:

"You don't want to encourage that kind of caper," the other farmers said. "If you get them all legally married, two by two, there won't be enough women to work in season: they are cheaper than men. And if you start schools, the children will go away to the towns to be clerks. *Better leave them as they are.*" [emphasis added] (36)

White farmers and the settlers Ellen meets are concerned with their own economic and social interests. In order to safeguard them, the settlers' major goal is to maintain the status quo and "realizing that they are politically vulnerable in their intermediate position, it is essential for them that the power

balance remains intact".¹⁵ Natives are exploited for economic purposes, as it is clear from the reference to black women's cheaper wages in the extract, and their potential education and professional development is seen as a threat to the current settlers' privileged position.

Thus, Ellen is not expected by her settler community to know the natives and establish any connection to them. Moreover, the prospect of a teaching career in Kenya for Ellen is regarded as a prestigious opportunity for her but, since the natives are eager to learn, on condition that she "don't get them on too far, educating them to take our jobs and our land. They are getting a stranglehold over us already. . ." (36).

Despite her initial reluctance, Ellen decides to accept the proposal of a teaching career in Kenya, and through this experience she again understands her unfamiliarity with the farm life, her non-belonging to the house that should be her "home":

Ellen felt more at home in the classroom than on the farm. Railings, corridors, registers, ladies' staff-room, where the three of them were strictly segregated from the male teachers unless there was a meeting, were all familiar. Mrs. Mistri, the Parsee, beautifully groomed, speaking elegant English, could have been any of her former colleagues transfigured by marriage. (47-48)

Ellen delights in her work, growing fond of her male students, who "sorted themselves out into individuals before her eyes" and her role as a teacher is a source of fulfilment and identity, more than her social role as white settler in the White Highland, where she is not able to find her place (48).

In this phase it seems clear that the protagonist, in spite of her belonging to the white settlers' community, does not approve of the economic aspects of colonialism and the other settlers' lack of interest for the "secret life" going on around them. Nevertheless, Bittner explains, even if Ellen does not share some precepts of the colonial system, in the classroom she strongly refers to the British educational model, as "the classroom for her functions as a space

¹⁵ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 124.

where she can still the cultural ideals of the motherland, fostering intellectual growth albeit according to imperial guidelines."¹⁶

Thus, Ellen's identity at this point of the novel is still connected to her life in Great Britain: in the classroom she feels at home because it reminds her of the daily routine in her motherland, to the point of applying the same educational model she used with her British students and ideally seeing her former colleagues mirrored in the new ones.

Her entrance into Kenyan educational system, however, coincides with her gradual detachment from her husband Jack. Her tasks as a teacher, marking or preparation at home, are often used by Ellen as an excuse to avoid accompanying her husband to spend some evenings on the neighbouring farms. Jack shows no interest for the indigenous people and the country, his continuous concern is only for the farm business. When the native people begin to make their voices heard and to demand their rights, Jack begins to drink excessively and to lose his interest for his wife as well, his guidance in Great Britain where he needed support: "here he had no such need and his hold on her slipped away. He thought her self-sufficient, as though her questions were for information, not a cry for help" (50).

Their distance increases with Jack's conscription to fight the Italians in Somalia after the outbreak of the Second World War, a conflict that threatens the settlers' vision of Kenya as a "safe heaven" untouched by the tragic events happening in Europe. When Jack leaves, Ellen is left to take control of the farm, together with Uncle, of her own life and that of the baby she is expecting, Nigel. Even if she worries about her husband, Ellen perceives the war as something "far away", "East Africa would never be like that", until her own brother Stanley is found dead during the battle of Dunkirk in France (56).

Ellen gives birth to her son Nigel without her husband or any relatives around her, missing the support of her mother, but she manages quite well to deal with the newborn and the farm, taking Uncle's place in the management after his death: "everything was under control" (60). Jack's short leave in 1942 results in Ellen's second pregnancy, followed by the birth of Angela and an ill-fated year of drought, a very difficult circumstance for the farm and for the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

farm workers above all. The latter's ration of maize meal in fact is legally reduced from two pounds to one and a half a day and their female consorts are not required for the seasonal harvesting and weeding. Now charged with the payment of the farm workers' wages and the handling of money:

Ellen came to see how little their wages were, observing in the town shops her pupils sprang from how long it would take a labourer to save up for a lamp, a blanket, or a hoe. To cut rations as well was more than she could bear. [...] She managed to keep up the two pounds a day and Njoroge discreetly let her know that the men, for all that they were still suffering, were grateful. (67)

Left with the responsibility of the farm, the routine of the daily life, Ellen better understands the life of the workers, the ordinary people and she reveals herself well-disposed towards them and willing to help as far as she can. Since she is not able to be detached from the workers' problems, Ellen is then relieved to give back to her husband "the unbearable problems of the farm" at his return and to restart her work as a teacher in the school that has now opened its doors to girls (72).

After the end of the Second World War, Ellen expresses her desire to go to visit their relatives in London. Her first reason is to introduce the children to their grandparents, but another profound need harbours inside her, that is the necessity of understanding the changes happened inside her and her shaken sense of belonging to her motherland and the Kenyan country:

Really, there was more to it than that, though she did not know how to make Jack see it. Mrs Smith inhabited the same body as Miss Mountford, still wore some of her old clothes, recited in her head the same recollected poetry, but there the conjunction ceased. All her new experience, incarnate in the robust, masterful children, was remote from her family. (88)

The life Ellen is experiencing in Kenya is estranging her from her family life in England, because of the geographical distance between them and the great difference of the realities they are living in. "Mrs Smith" defines her "current"

identity as a teacher and the wife of a white settler in colonial Kenya, while "Miss Mountford" refers to the unmarried teacher living in London with her family. Ellen, aware of the weak connection between the two, sees in her temporary return to London the opportunity of strengthening the link between the past and the present.

At their arrival, however, what Ellen finds is a country different from the one she had left and then remembered and imagined for more than ten years. London is devastated by the war and the tragic experience of the conflict is still lingering on: some bomb sites remain desolate, many things are still rationed, "the sunshine seemed not as bright as it had once been", the school is gradually raising from destruction (92). From the perspective of the inhabitants of a destroyed country, it is Ellen's situation, not the opposite, to be satisfactory. They understand that Kenya cannot be regarded as "a land of milk and honey", maybe it can be a country "outside history", but to "live in a home intact, to have fresh fruit and meat every day (even in the midst of other people wizened by drought)" and the opportunity of taking advantage from one's skills is considered as a great achievement (93-94).

In the same vein, Ellen herself begins to examine her situation from a new perspective. Having being far away from her family and previous society during such a shocking period, she has not shared with them crucial and tragic events, "she was a stranger in Britain, schooled in austerity of a kind but not initiated with the rest into wartime experience" (95). As a consequence she has been excluded from the collective trauma her society had suffered and she no longer identifies with her former home. After a few weeks in England, Ellen is not sad to take leave from "so tedious a reflection of another life, chilly, grudging of service" (94). Moreover, not even the sight of the symbols of history, the great monuments and pictures, has given her the source of identification she was looking for. From Kenya, Ellen has continuously looked at her motherland as a guide, an eminent country strongly tied down to its history. Now on the contrary, England's recent history has shown the country's vulnerability and above all, as Bittner makes clear:

The nature of history has been altered in Ellen's mind: History is no longer perceived as something that is exclusive to Great Britain. As she realizes, it is made and experienced in every part of the globe. That insight alerts the protagonist to the specific character of her two worlds, a distinction she had not made thus far.¹⁷

Ellen's new consciousness is accompanied, on her taking leave from her former country, by a revelation and what is now a certainty and not a doubt anymore: "this was Mrs. Smith going home" (94). It is that simple sentence that communicates the protagonist's individual change and her new acquired sense of belonging. "Mrs Smith" represents Ellen's new identity: "Miss Mountford", linked to Ellen's life in England, cannot represent her identity, by now shaped and influenced by a different and peculiar physical, cultural and social reality. Returning to Kenya, in addition, she feels "more at home than before", after having understood her strangeness in Great Britain (95).

Ellen's return to the Smith farm, however, coincides with the outbreak of the Mau Mau uprising. Consequently, the protagonist senses evasiveness on the part of the native workers and an air of resentment around her, an uncomfortable situation that makes Ellen think about her position in Kenyan society:

Ellen understood that she also was cut off from African life. There was a slow growth of understanding but no epiphany. She had never been invited to house in the African part of the town. Once or twice she had watched Sunday dances among the Wakamba on the big farms, with whistles blowing and seemingly inexhaustible figures leaping up and down. But the other staff held aloof. (97)

Ellen's sympathy and humanity towards the native people and her desire to manage to take part to the "African life", is once again stressed on this occasion. Regardless of the complexity of the situation of her own community, whose privileged position is going to be brought heavily into question, Ellen demonstrates an understanding attitude, compared to the other settlers'

¹⁷ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 129.

reactions towards the changes shaking their status quo, her husband's above all. Her main concern is her even more emphasized exclusion from the cornerstone of Kenyan life.

Since Ellen has tried to find a sense of belonging and to understand the country she and her husband have moved to, she manages to accept the changes that Kenya society is undergoing. Conversely, her husband, who has never been concerned with Kenya and its people but has always been entrapped in his own interests, negatively reacts to the alteration of the settler community's status. He is aware of the fact that their social position is worsening and the fruitful days on the farm are going to end. Unable to alter his point of view and widen his perspective, the only solution he finds is to turn to alcohol. After a tractor accident Jack has in 1956 (an accident allegedly organized by the Mau Mau), the man becomes "moody and reckless", outraged by "the multiplicity of African political associations" now legally and locally allowed and the lack of support and protection for British immigrants on the part of their motherland (114). Jack is not even able to continue his work on the farm, because of his physical and psychological condition and he decides to move to Kitale in order to establish an animal feed business with one of his old army friends.

It is in Kitale that Jack will be buried in 1963, the year of Kenya's independence, in a country he has never accepted as his 'home', where he has found no place in the evolving society, thus leaving no great sign of himself neither in Great Britain, having spent forty years away from this country, nor in Kenya, having excluded himself from African life, and in the farm-house where "he had faded away almost as much as Uncle" (148).

As far as Ellen is concerned, her efforts to create a link between herself and the indigenous society differentiate her position with regard to Jack's, nonetheless her identity and mindset reveal the fact that the protagonist is still influenced by her background experience and perspectives, or simply too ignorant about the pivotal developments undergoing at the heart of Kenyan society. This is particularly evident on the occasion of the advent of *Uhuru* and the Mau Mau movement struggling for it. As the writer affirms, "Kenya as a whole was beyond her imagination" (99), and in fact Ellen's understanding of

the indigenous movement for the country's political freedom is limited, due to the government's initial concealment of the uprising and Ellen's position as belonging to the settlers' community and outsider of the "restlessness" around her. Ellen defines the Mau Mau guerrilla and its attacks against African loyalists, colonialists and settlers as a "minor, close-at-hand conflict", thus underplaying the crucial role the movement had in threatening the colonizers and settlers' current situation and leading Kenya toward independence (102). The female protagonist does not want to believe, not even think about the Mau Mau's possible involvement in her husband's death. The country's freedom is said by Ellen to have "crept up", as something arrived unexpectedly (130). Bittner stresses the fact that the vision of Kenyan national freedom coming "as a surprise" can be shared only by people belonging neither to the power elite nor to the indigenous people, that is by people inhabiting a 'limbo' as Ellen in Kenyan society. In this wise, Bittner continues, "while the individual can try to keep an open mind, she can easily be defeated by the systematic denial of history cultivated by people in a diaspora".¹⁸

Ellen's searching for her identity, however, continues more profoundly after Jack's death and Kenya's achieved self-government, as now her connection to Kenyan society and environment depends entirely on her. At this point of her life, the protagonist is aware of the fact that her British background, her education in particular, and her relationship with Jack, a business-minded and conservative settler, have affected her life in Kenya. After Jack's death, Ellen hastens "the dismemberment of the farm" and the sale of the fields around the house and the yard, the land that has symbolized the settlers' authority (148). The employment of her black servant Martha, the strong relationship they establish and Ellen's gradual immersion in the life of her female Kenyan students ("little by little, you got glimpse of their life outside the school"), let the protagonist understand some aspects of Kenyan people's life, especially women (149). That emerges on the occasion of Lily Beach's research on the condition of women in Kenyan society. The woman, Ellen's pupil when she taught in Great Britain, has become a Member of Parliament and an activist

¹⁸ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 134.

concerned with the rights of the disadvantaged. Her project is to visit Ellen in Kenya in order to stress women's rights in Kenya, as she already does in Great Britain. Ellen, nonetheless, now understands that Kenya and Great Britain are two completely different realities that cannot be compared. Kenyan social difficulties, in this case related to women's issues, are specific to its own reality and history and Ellen highlights that: "probably most Kenyan women are preoccupied with bread, not butter, without a thought of jam. Girls' education had forged ahead, but there isn't much time to speculate on sexual equality, let alone fantasy" (164).

Even if not immersed into the indigenous life, Ellen is receptive to the problems women had and have to struggle with daily in Kenya, difficulties that often prevent them from thinking about sexism or equal rights. Ellen explains in particular "how black and brown girls had to struggle for their education" (168) and, with the intervention of some of the interviewed girls, Macgoye stresses problems related to shortage of money, family conflicts, the disillusion of the post-independence era, which has not improved the lives of the most vulnerable inside society. To explain it through Martha's words:

Njogu had died because of the fighting, even if not in it. They had expected a new heaven and a new earth, but in fact most people went on doing the same job in the same place, treading perhaps more firmly. Those who had dragged their feet or toadied before were those who could not face the new society. (178)

At this point of the story, unlike Ellen, her daughter Angela and her son Nigel seriously think about leaving Kenya, mainly in order to have a wider range of professional opportunities. At her daughter's doubts about their uncertain position in Kenyan society now that *Uhuru* is becoming a reality and at her proposal of thinking about the possibility of going away, Ellen thinks:

Leave? To go where? If they had thought of going away (she used the plural notionally) it would have been when the children were still at school and could have looked for free training in UK. Now that the grandparents were dead [...] where would she go? Do you look for a new teaching job at fifty? Or land on your sisters?

Ellen was certain where she belonged. [emphasis added] (150)

Ellen does not ponder anymore about the possibility of going back to Great Britain because of different reasons. Practically she is concerned about her job and she does not contemplate the idea of weighing on her sisters. Then, her major link to her former land, her parents, who reminded Ellen of her own life in England, are now dead, metaphorically breaking Ellen's connection to Great Britain. However, Ellen's main reason is that she has realized where she belongs and she refuses to leave Kenya. As she explains to Lily, "we don't actually feel that we live in the back of beyond – everywhere is dead centre for somebody", thus denying the colonial prejudice of Great Britain's superiority and position of cultural and historical centre of the empire and rehabilitating the status of her adoptive country. Later in the novel, the protagonist laments her son Nigel's insistence in trying to convince her to move, to follow him and his wife-to-be in Australia or Angela in Great Britain. Ellen does not want to be sent away "like a post parcel" and she firmly asserts: "This is my home. What makes them think they can push me out of it?" (180).

Ellen's real belonging to Kenya however is brought into question till the end of the novel. Ellen, the author stresses, "had never bothered her head about taking citizenship" in Kenya and at the same time she had not renewed her stamps in England (165). She is eager to belong to her chosen home, but she has not taken a further step in order to become a citizen of the new country. In addition, Ellen's refusal to move to Nairobi or the urban environment representing the heart of Kenyan modern life excludes her to a deeper integration, as she decides to continue to live in the settlers' area par excellence, the White Highlands.

As far as the novel *A Farm Called Kishinev* is concerned Sarah Goldman, a kindergarten teacher, enters Uasin Gishu by bullock cart for the first time as a married woman, the wife of Isaac Wilder, like Ellen in *Homing In*. They also share the same impressions, the impact of a different environment for them who both come from London: she "wished she had brought her bicycle from London. Everything seemed so big, so unconnected" (49). Nonetheless, their approach towards the country is greatly different.

Despite her new life in an unknown and very different country, Sarah appears initially at ease in her new status as a married woman, with a house of her

own and food at their disposal. The birth of the first son Jacob, moreover, is seen by the young woman as a way "to establish her identity", then followed by the births of Max, Rachel and Dora (49). Sarah is described as a simple and meek woman, she has never asked to visit the farm, her future home, in advance, and she has then devoted herself to the domestic matters.

The Jewish woman does not resent "her apprentice period of seclusion" (51) and tries to turn the house into a comfortable cocoon for the couple and above all for the children: "little by little the farm shaped itself around Sarah. Comforts crept in that the stark hungers of bachelor days had not envisaged" (53). Curtains, varnished furniture, desserts, a flourished garden, all contribute to the renovation of the house and the wellbeing of the children. The latter, the reader is informed, grow up with the Bible stories and the celebration of the Sabbath, even if instructions are given them in English rather than Yiddish.

Unlike Ellen Smith, Sarah does not appear barely inclined to understand the country she has moved to, to seize the culture and the habits of the indigenous people, in this case the Nandi. Her relationships with the servants are respectful, "she did not raise her voice to the servants", but limited to that which is strictly necessary (51). The little Afrikaans she knows is "necessary for civility", unlike Ellen she is not eager to learn the local languages in order to better understand the reality outside the Jewish community. What her sons Max and Jacob learn from the Nandi children is a taboo in their house, which has to be only oriented towards their own culture. Benjamin Wilder explains:

From their Nandi age-mates they learned many things which were no longer subjects of conversation in my own time. [...] Jacob, being older, was sometimes allowed to help his friends drive their cattle to the salt-lick at fortnightly intervals. He learned that boys and girls could assume each others' style of dress at initiation time, though he was never allowed to see them. *But he could not discuss these things with his mother or persuade his father that grass wet with dew was most fattening for cattle.* [emphasis added] (58)

Sarah's earlier life in England is hardly ever mentioned in the novel, as "she did not much like to be questioned about the old life" (50). The only references

are the loss of her mother happened before her departure and the death of her younger brother during the Great War. She also tries to establish a link with Europe, writing to her grandmother in Poland, her aunt in Moldavia and to her husband's mother and sister, but the connection to what "sounds now like the memory of another world" turns out to be very fragile, being made of "wisps of letters in spiky handwriting you could hardly make out" (49), until they stop coming at all.

Sarah is said to have weakened during a year and to have "slid away" from the farm, after a life in Kenya entirely devoted to the care of the house and the children (62). She has shaped the farm according to her own style and the family life in the farm has completely absorbed her, without any notice to the reality and the life going on around it.

Ellen Smith in *Homing In* tries to search for a new identity in Kenya and symbolically she does clarify it. Conversely, Sarah Wilder does not even cast any doubt on her identity. In her case the Jewish community represents her "space of belonging" in Kenya that nonetheless "turn[s] into a site of enclosure".¹⁹ Her husband's intentions when establishing their home in Uasin Gishu were not to create a "ghetto": "We took the offered territory and made our own allocations within it. We did not entirely exclude the Nandi or the other Europeans – we did not want to create another ghetto for ourselves – so long as they conformed to our rules" (114). Nonetheless, even if Isaac and Sarah do not want to conflict with the indigenous people or the European settlers, they are not even willing to an open confrontation and understanding. As Marie Kruger claims, "the acceptance of Jewish sovereignty is the sine qua non for any attempt at inclusion".²⁰

If Ellen Smith has decided to remain in Kenya and Sarah Wilder to settle down even with her mind turned towards their Jewish culture, there are other minor female characters in the two novels under analysis who decide to move away from Kenya and try to find their home in other countries, in Great Britain or Poland. Angela and Lilian in *Homing In* both relocate to England and in *A*

¹⁹ M. Kruger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

Farm Called Kishinev, it is the young Rachel who takes the harsh decision to come back to her family's homeland, Poland, in the midst of Jewish persecution. The reasons at the base of their decisions, however, are completely different. On the one hand, Angela leaves Kenya in order to pursue her ambitions, on the other, Rachel longs for finding her family's roots and a motherland where to fashion her identity.

Near the end of her school career, Angela Smith appears restless, "bored at home and preoccupied with clothes" (136). Before the nursing interview there is an opportunity for her to go to England for a few months to begin a secretarial course and Angela is overjoyed. She is then accepted at the European Hospital as a nurse. Angela is well aware of the changes happening in Kenyan society and that with the country's achievement of independence the position of her family will be very vulnerable: "we shall be swamped or go away" (150). In spite of her mother's refusal of leaving Kenya, Angela is sturdy in her decision to move to England once she has qualified. Since she does not feel to belong to Kenyan society, she only perceives *Uhuru* as an unfavourable event for "them", the white settler community. Like her brother Nigel, she is worried about the fact that jobs once reserved to white people "will all be africanized in the next couple of years" (154): "she didn't mind nursing black babies but being bossed around by a black doctor was another thing entirely" (151). The privileged position Angela's community used to occupy in Kenya cannot be assured anymore and her inflexible decision to leave the country underlines her non-involvement to the current reality. The young woman, however, does not choose to move to England in order to find her family's roots or because she feels the need to understand where she really belongs, far from that. What drives her is ambition, the prospect of a prosperous live in a swinging city like London, "the shabby post-war London that was now considered glamorous" (169) from where people can leave on continental holidays. Lily Beach's example is what Angela has in mind, "there had even been a magazine article about her and she was always on English Tv", or at least her desire is to go away from a too limited and outmoded reality:

The England she remembered at six years old was strange and stuffy but, according to the newspapers, swinging London was going places. You did not get housemaids, of course, but there must always be orderlies to do the rough work in the wards, and delicatessen if you did not feel like cooking for yourself in your flat. They surely wouldn't expect you to live in a nurses' home, not in London. (Her mind did not dwell on provincial towns, let alone the countryside. She had had enough of *that*, for goodness sake.) (152)

Angela finally leaves Kenya to England where she marries with the Englishman Tim and where, with her mother's words, she seems "to grow by stages like a butterfly" (159), immersed in what she has before dreamed of, a reality so different from that of her mother in Kenya, Ellen who "could not half make out Angela's letters – TV dinners, hypermarkets, polystyrene, motorways, Chinese takeaways, breakfast nooks, dining alcoves, sandwich courses [...]" (165).

On the other hand, Rachel Wilder, in Macgoye's novel *A Farm Called Kishinev*, symbolises "the collective experience of persecution" of the Wilder family and the Jewish community.²¹ Her departure from Kenya foresees her fatal death, nonetheless, because of her visceral need to find her Jewish roots and her "home" in Poland she cannot be stopped. From her teenage years, Rachel is unfit for the Kenyan reality she was born in:

Rachel was the bookish one, and what could they do with her? There were no secondary classes in Eldoret. The fees in Kenya High at Nairobi were beyond them. She was not qualified for the Froebel teacher training course at Turi, the highest the country offered. You could not see her as a telephone operator or junior clerk. (62)

The opportunities the country offers her do not correspond to her needs and inclinations. As a matter of fact, her wish is "to cultivate tradition" (61), to focus her life on the Jewish culture, in which she sees the source of her identity. The Jewish community of Kishinev is not her 'home', Kenya is not imbued with the tradition of her people and as a consequence she does not

²¹ M. Kruger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 111.

even try to belong to the country, she prefers to live "in a dreamland" (68), until the time comes to depart from it. She does leave Kishinev in 1938, directed to Poland, the country "her grandfather had left in 1899 [...]. It had no national government, though faith and language gave a kind of identity" (66):

But Rachel – Rachel who had charmed out of her father tales of the old days, pored over the sepia photographs and unintelligible letters from her grandmother [...] – Rachel did not belong to Africa. She had already left us. Rachel, off whose tongue tripped the true history of Kishinev, wheeled out of her father the fare to Poland, [...] and set up to find her roots, as we should now say. (66)

At 20, the young girl sets up armed only with outmoded dresses and a very limited knowledge of German and Yiddish. Initial signs on Rachel's part, a postcard, a sombre message, a letter, reassure her parents, but then silence falls down on them. What is left of her in Kishinev is the photograph of a girl "with dark hair and sad eyes, dressed in a simple blouse and skirt" locked inside a drawer (74) and the sad memory of her unknown fate, "even a person can be called by a number. Probably that is what happened to your Aunt Rachel" (75). Kruger explains, Rachel symbolises "enduring grief and ensures that the farm called Kishinev not only serves as a site of memory for the 1903 pogrom but also resonates with the atrocities of the Holocaust".²²

In this wise, another female character, Rosa Levine, evokes the tragedies of the Holocaust, even though her journey goes in the opposite direction: from the dangers of Eastern Europe she moves to Kenya to seek refuge. In the new country she shuns society and lives very quietly in Eldoret, teaching French, the violin and singing to private students. To Isaac Wilder's proposal of a friendly relationship after the death of his wife, the middle-aged Rosa Levine answers that her lot is to be solitary because:

You have lived most of my lifetime here. You read of camps, interrogations, restrictions. You do not know, you cannot know, the humiliations, the intrusions... I have not been able to tell even my own sister what I suffered. And when I came to know that your Rachel – I was a newcomer then, did not know about your family – I

²² Ibid., 111.

wept bitter tears, Isaac, that I had not been able to prevent her from going. (70)

3.2.2 The Native: A Source of Identity

In the novel *Homing In* Ellen Smith's recollections tracing her life are interspersed with Martha Kimani's thoughts. Through the black character Macgoye gives a face and a voice to the "secret life" Ellen refers to and provides a source of identity for her white protagonist: Ellen "after a lifetime of looking to England and, in particular, to her mother for assurance, identifies Martha as a new source of identity in post-independence years".²³ What the writer implicitly and symbolically suggests is that in order to fully belong to the country, the newcomer should not avoid the "other", the native, on the contrary the better choice should be that of embracing the local culture and trying to understand the indigenous life. In the novel *A Farm Called Kishinev* also, the reader could read the Nandi Sophie's and her mother's stories in the same prospective: if known and understood, their Nandi cultural baggage could have established a connection between the uprooted Wilder family and Kenyan society.

Homing In reports an immigrant's life, that of the English woman Ellen, intertwined by the life experiences of her black caregiver Martha. The novel can be considered as a peculiar bildungsroman in Macgoye's work since it chronicles the regression of its white main protagonist. Ellen Smith, in fact, from her status as an independent mature woman and teacher regresses to a condition of complete dependence, both physical and psychological. It is only through her servant Martha that Ellen manages to physically survive and, in turn, it is due to Ellen if the black woman can survive from a financial point of view, in a unique relationship in which their identities are remoulded and their positions reversed.

Martha has been well-experienced with the housework since her childhood, spending her early days "mouselike in kitchens" observing her father working

²³ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 119.

as a servant for an European family in Nakuru while her mother took care of their home, doing the gardening and fetching water "on her bent back" (21). Martha has had the chance to enter formal education and to complete standard four, unlike her mother before her since, as we have seen in the previous chapter, education for black girls was a slow and difficult achievement in Kenyan society.

Unlike her mother characterized by her "*bossa Kikuyu*", a protuberance disfiguring Kikuyu women's backs due to their constantly bent position (87), Martha's experience with the world of education gives her "prissy ways and a straight back", thus underling again the changes that Kenyan society has in store for young girls.

Through Martha, and Paulina and Wairimu before her, Macgoye highlights women's reactions to the changes of their society and their entry into modernity. A reminiscence of the circumcision day is the pretext for the writer to underline the value a new generation of women, epitomized by Martha, puts on the traditional practise, in contrast with their mothers' traditional believes:

She could no really remember the pain now, only it seemed absurd that when life had so much necessary pain in it you should inflict some extra just for the hell of it. [...] Martha herself, suddenly the focus of attention, had seen no reason to protest when her mother had insisted on the circumcision, perhaps thinking she was upholding some female power in the land by doing so. The event had bound her to some of the other girls and some of the old ladies, but it was no longer big enough to bind her to village and community. Her mother was behind the times. What could have bound her was the freedom oath. (52)

In a society focused on national and political freedom, the traditional bond with communities and ethnic groups begins to lose importance since the goal is the belonging to a new nationhood, which will shape colonized identities into citizens. This concept explains Martha's reference to "the freedom oath", the oath bonding together the Mau Mau fighters struggling for Kenyan independence. The new ritual, not the traditional one, would give Martha the key to have access to a new and promising society. However, Martha does

“drink” her oath seven years after her wedding, but she decides not to involve herself beyond in order not to put her husband Njogu’s work at risk (52).²⁴

Martha has experienced difficult times in her life, especially during the “famine days” of the war, when she had to provide for her own children and the deprived children of her community, with what her husband brought her at the end of the month, “but she had managed. Later, in her widowhood, she had still managed, and even today, now that she was alone”, without the presence of her daughter and sons and the proximity of her relatives (70). Martha has lost her husband at twenty-seven years, after the birth of three children and two miscarriages. “It was not the time for asking questions” and rumours said that her husband, a driver, had been kidnapped from his truck and sent to the forest, to prevent him from revealing to the authorities “where the iron pipes and the battery had gone to” (86). What the author refers to is the secret military arm organized in the forests of Mount Kenya by the Mau Mau fighters, thus implying the latter illicit provision of useful tools. Moreover, Martha has to suffer the government’s politics of “villagization”, a campaign that during the State of Emergency obliged a large number of Kikuyu people to leave their houses and relocate to guarded villages surrounded by barbed wire. She had to take care of her children and their lessons, to dig and go on without the help of her husband, her mother who had recently died and her father, who had retired to the coast with his European employers. She has then been employed in the hospital laundry, but her wage was not enough to allow her daughter Lilian enrol on high school, a “miracle of miracles” for a girl (125). Following the advice of one of the white sisters at the hospital, Martha has resigned from her job and has been introduced to Ellen Smith who at that time needed help in the house in order to substitute the old servant Kirui.

As a consequence, Ellen has found a precious help and done a “good thing [...] for Kenyan womanhood”, while Martha has found “a place where she was needed”, where she has a little garden to take advantage of and any rent to pay (125-127).

²⁴ The verb “drink” can refer to the oath ritual consisting in drinking blood in order to bond the new initiates during the Mau Mau ceremony. In C. A. Presley, (1988) ‘The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol.22, No. 3, Special Issue: Current Research on African Women (1988), p. 505.

Martha's hard life and endurance is rewarded by the status she achieves in Ellen Smith's house and the strong friendship the two women establish. In the first chapters of the novel, Ellen is described as a disabled old woman, with deteriorating physical and cognitive abilities. Ellen is also gradually losing her ability to speak and lives in her reminiscences, detached from her present reality. Martha becomes more than a servant for her employer, as she takes care of the white woman in a very intimate way, as if she was nursing a child. The undertaking of her tasks is not a duty anymore, since Martha finds herself at home with Ellen: "it was not work, really, just what had to be done. Everything around her was familiar" (21).

At the same time, Ellen very positively judges her maid and companion:

Martha was a treasure. [...] She was grateful to Martha but also proud, for Martha knowing decent Swahili and quite a lot of English, had grown to meet her employer's needs – in fact more so than Mrs. Smith knew, for the private language to which Martha responded was hardly English any more. The cracked sounds could hardly obey the precision of Ellen's thoughts, even when these were not submerged in the pictures that rolled around in her head. (3)

As the above extract underlines, the two women sustain each other from different points of view, but it is Martha who, because of her employer's condition, is the only person able to understand Ellen's utterances and to translate them in order to link the woman to the world outside her house: "Mrs Smith expressed her pleasure in an intelligible mumble. Mrs. Banerjee greeted Martha [...]. She would be needed as interpreter" (44).

As Bittner highlights, the intimate relationship between Martha and Ellen started before the latter's physical and mental regression, resulting in what Macgoye defines "home language" (173), a code consisting in "a combination of English and indigenous words and structures, over time resulting in Martha's ability to interpret Ellen's utterances, which with progressive dementia lost all resemblance to human speech."²⁵

²⁵ P. Bittner (2009) *Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*, Frankfurt am Main [etc]: Peter Lang, p. 121.

In this last phase of Ellen's life, the white protagonist is completely disconnected from her present reality and lives in her past. She depends on Martha as maid and interpreter and a connection to the outside world, to such an extent that Ellen even identifies with her black companion. In Martha and her daughter Lilian, Ellen sees "reflections of herself and Angela", Ellen's daughter died in a tragic car accident, and later in the novel Lilian is "mixed up in her mind with Angela" (128, 187). Ellen has never understood Angela's death, happened after her stroke and, till her own death, she has waited with hope for a visit from her daughter and husband. Martha in fact admits to Mrs. Banerjee that sometimes she has to read Ellen Lilian's letters, as if they were Angela's.

Ellen's identification with Martha becomes so exhaustive, that her assimilation of Martha's identity prevents Ellen from physically recognising her maid and remembering her name, "the skinny old Kikuyu woman – she recognized her somewhere from long ago but the name escaped her – was trying to prise her mouth open so as to force down the castor oil mixed with orange juice [...]" (185). In this wise, Bittner stresses the following in her analysis of *Homing In*:

Crossing the boundaries of racial difference with the mirroring of black and white women and the choice of a black Other as mother, Macgoye transgresses the limits of politicized color by creating a reciprocal world of mothers and daughters of different races. By presenting the termination of racial stereotyping as a by-product of the natural process of aging Macgoye expresses the belief in a normalization of relations between these two groups with the passage of time.²⁶

Ellen's identification with Martha rehabilitates the troubled relationship between settlers and indigenous people, for long characterized by prejudices, stereotypes and an unbalanced distribution of power and authority²⁷, by recommending a fully comprehension of the "other" as a key to successfully fashion one's identity in an adoptive country.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

²⁷ By stressing Ellen's dependence in the last phase of her life, Bittner emphasises, Macgoye even reverses a prejudice "about black identity fundamental to colonial writing, one that saw all natives as infantile", p. 120.

In the novel *A Farm Called Kishinev*, Benjamin's mother, the Nandi Sophie, in spite of being a native of Kenya and thus belonging to the country, tries continuously to refashion her identity in order to belong first to the colonial Christian community and then to the Jewish culture of her husband Jacob, also called Jack. Her Nandi name being Chemalel, and her surname for school purposes Brown, Sophie is the child of a Nandi mother and a white settler father, the son of a farmer who will give Sophie a shelter and an education. The farmer thus lessens "the simultaneous stigma of social illegitimacy and racial hybridity", by giving Sophie the opportunity of a worthy life, while her mother retreats to a solitary life, which forecasts Sophie's own experience. The woman, in fact, finds herself in a "white man's country", a world "painfully confined by the demands of race" where she cannot find her place.²⁸ Her marriage with Jacob Wilder underlines the politics of race in operation in Kenyan society in the 1930s. Their wedding cannot be celebrated neither in the Catholic Church nor in the Synagogue and their honeymoon in Mombasa begins with a second-class train journey they must spend separated because of the segregation "by sex as well as colour" (65). At their return their neighbours show their disapproval for Jack's choice of a coloured wife: they greet her coldly, rumouring about her first miscarriage and talking to Isaac Wilder, Macgoye suggests, they would have liked to say "'Don't let that coloured bitch be boss in your house" or "your Jack is a disappointment to you"' (67).

Sophie's conversion to her husband's religion has excluded her from both her Nandi mother's culture and the Christian community of the other women in church. At the same time she is cut off from the Jewish community as well, being it considered a "white" community in colonial Kenya and Sophie a "person of colour" (76). She cannot participate to official functions, she is cut out from "school speech day and agricultural shows".

Her son Benjamin reports the last phase of her life, underlying Sophie's failure to integrate to the Jewish or the Christian community. Her husband and the

²⁸ M. Kruger (2011) *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, p. 114.

priest, epitomising the two communities, have “nothing to say one another” and only few people mourn her death:

It was my mother who faded and faded, fussing over our clothes, brooding over her needlework, taking iron tonics and worm tablets, staying away from school speech days and agricultural shows. [...] Near the end she asked for a priest to pour oil over her and we buried her in a new plot on the farm with hardly any mourners. (78)

What Benjamin stresses even more markedly during his account of his mother and grandmother’s lives is the Nandi heritage the women shared, but failed to hand down to him and his family. Reporting his childhood experiences, Benjamin remembers his mother telling the children the stories her own mother had told her when she was young and cooking the vegetables her mother used to prepare. However, he admits “that was all” (71). Sophie, a girl of mixed origin, removed from the full comprehension of the heritage and culture of her Nandi community, has not made “a real link” between her sons and the native life and culture. At the same time, their grandmother, the depository of that ethnic heritage, has not been involved enough in order for her grandchildren to assimilate the essence of their adoptive country’s life, the natives’ “secret life” Ellen refers to in *Homing In*.

The visits to the grandmother are only occasional for Benjamin and his brothers and during these superficial visits the distance between the Jewish boys and the Nandi woman is stressed by the fact that the grandsons “did not know the right questions to ask” (114). Sophie does not know the right questions to ask either in order to rehabilitate a link between her new family and her roots, her own identity being too vulnerable she has been “too fragile to anchor the house” (84).

As Benjamin underlines, “we knew we were missing something without knowing what it was. No-one ever suggested that we should sleep over at grannie’s and she did not visit us at the farm” (72). A deeper relationship with their grandmother would have been the key to understand the soul of the country they were living in and shape their identity in a more comprehensive way, in order not to be secluded in their chosen ‘limbo’. Sophie’s death and the later decease of the grandmother cause the adult Benjamin to ponder about

the Nandi's tradition and heritage that could have help his family feel a sense of belonging to Kenya:

Our grannie did not live long after that. Our father used to call in and take her some money and would bring back some green maize for us or a bundle of vegetables. But our mother had been too tired or bemused to make a real link for us. *Only after I grew up did I begin to ponder over the traditional stories she had told us in the early years that could have illuminated the emptiness my grandfather sensed at Kishinev [...]. [emphasis added] (78-79)*

Conclusion

This study has focused on the fashioning of women's identities in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's four novels published between 1986 and 2005. In her earlier novels *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, the writer shows how African female characters can be portrayed as well-rounded individuals, acquire psychological complexity and the status of speaking subjects, thus challenging the traditional depictions of womanhood, the stereotypical tropes in male-authored works and moving beyond the biased portrayals of the Western world. Their life experiences mix in the novels with the history of Kenya, which is the leitmotif of the entire Macgoye's oeuvre.

Paulina's and Wairimu's separation from their communities is both a physical and psychological journey, an experience of self-discovery that reminds the reader of the formula of the bildungsroman and of ideological development turning the main characters into modern individuals and citizens of independent Kenya. Their departure from their rural homes marks the beginning of their personal fulfilment and brings their identities into question, like Ellen's and the Wilder family's geographical and ideological journey in *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev*.

All the characters of the novels under analysis have to face change, redefine their positions in society and fashion or alter their identities in order to satisfy inner and social needs. According to Macgoye, personal and political change is essential and she shows the consequences that these changes can have on ordinary people. In this regard, the novelist offers a wide overview of examples by introducing different types of residents, indigenous characters who voluntarily or not loosen their link to tradition in order to find their place in modern society or to be accepted in a new culture, migrants who remain total strangers to Kenya or try to identify with it and adapt their identities to the new reality.

Political progress plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' identities and sense of self, nonetheless, obliged to confront changing and complex realities, the novels' female characters present diverse ways of reacting and searching for their identities. Paulina and Wairimu move towards the urban milieu where they are hardly put to the test because of the troublesome political situation of

Kenya. It is thanks to their personal determination and their taking advantage of the opportunities that modernity has in store for women that they manage to carve a space for themselves in their patriarchal society. Unlike the Kenyan women of the previous generations, Paulina and Wairimu understand that education, economic independence and political awareness are the key towards female emancipation and self-fulfilment. Their needs in the urban environment are in opposition with those of their families in the rural communities, as the latter are not people's unique social spaces anymore. As a consequence, their identities are no more inherited and obliged to cover preconceived and traditional roles, but created and re-fashioned by considering both individual and collective needs and realities. The narration of the main protagonists' experiences in fact, link the public and the private sphere, thus underlining the weight of both individuality and political and historical change in the fashioning of people's identities. It is in the cosmopolitan centres that Paulina and Wairimu succeed in realizing their potential and in understanding that the individuals they have become are the outcome of both personal choices and challenges and historical changes.

In Macgoye's works modernity can be regarded as the agent setting in motion changes allowing women to free themselves from predestined roles, mainly linked to the reproductive sexuality of their bodies and the domesticity of familial life. At the same time, however, the writer is well aware of the various facets of progress and the controversial aspects brought about by modernity and an often misleading political freedom. Macgoye, in fact, denounces injustices against women perpetrated both in colonial and postcolonial Kenya and the fact that, in spite of the increase of opportunities, equality and leadership are still largely negated to women in a large number of fields, as the case of Philomena Chelagat Mutai makes clear in *Coming to Birth* for example. In the same vein, the writer's works reveal the disillusionment toward the post-colonial Kenyan government, which has substituted an European elite with an African one who has often carried on unfair policies all the same, to the detriment of the most vulnerable of society. In the modern Kenya presented by Macgoye the promises of the improvement of life conditions for all Kenyan citizens have not been kept. Economic stagnation and mismanagement have characterized the years following political freedom

and poverty is still a social plight since the government's policies have aimed more at safeguarding the interests of the few rather than at reducing the gap between the rich and the poor, a harsh reality epitomized by the vagrant children Paulina meets in Nairobi and the lives of the destitute old women in the Refuge. Modern Kenya has been also characterized by power struggles, coups d'état, disappearances and assassinations of political leaders and activists that have turned the promise and the euphoria of independence and national unity into a chaotic reality of ethnic tensions, corruption and disillusionment. Political freedom, moreover, has not been accompanied by ideological freedom and freedom of expression since the new regime, in particular during President Daniel arap Moi's era, has strongly repressed political dissidents and intellectuals and writers have often been silenced, even imprisoned or exiled, because of their opinions opposing the status quo.

The disappointment of the postcolonial period is portrayed in Macgoye's works through the life experiences of her protagonists who in different way represent some facets of this complex reality. After independence Wairimu comes back to a coffee farm now owned by a Kikuyu: what she finds is less respect for workers' rights and hard work conditions. She is then obliged to search for protection at the Refuge because her tea kiosk has been destroyed by municipal police. Paulina's son is murdered during a public celebration by soldiers of the new free nation, Martin's aspirations are also symbolically killed by the assassination of the Luo leader Tom Mboya. In *Homing In* it is Martha who summarises this disillusionment by stressing the fact that a new expected "heaven" and "earth" have not come and ordinary people's life has to go on day by day.

Running through all the novels under investigation, new concepts of 'home' emerge from Macgoye's narrations. With the crossing of physical and cultural borders, the traditional meaning of 'home' has changed, losing its customary connotations and becoming more linked to individual inclinations. In *Coming to Birth* Paulina becomes a mature woman and a self-conscious citizen of her country. She experiences a sense of belonging to the city and, in contrast to customary practices, she is the one who provides a house for herself and her husband. The 'home' of the couple is not the husband's

original homestead or the marital house anymore, but where they feel a sense of belonging.

In the same vein, *The Present Moment* portrays a resolute woman searching for personal and economical independence, able to insert herself into the political sphere of her country, to the point of taking part to the Mau Mau movement. By refusing marriage and maternity and taking leave from her community, Wairimu is even more compelled than Paulina to search for new supporting relationships and a place to call 'home'. Away from her original community she feels free, but it is in the Refuge that she finds a new family and a sense of belonging. With the solidarity of the other women and their sharing of experiences, the author depicts a microcosm symbolising at the same time Kenya's collective memory and the heterogeneity of the new independent nation where people can decide to join together to people of other origins and belonging to different tribes.

The notion of home is even more stressed in the novels *Homing In* and *A Farm Called Kishinev*, which trace the stories of European families longing for a new home and identity in Kenya. Narrowing down to the female characters of the novels, the study has brought to the fore different approaches and ways of relating to a foreign country and culture. On the one hand, the women of the Wilder family are not predisposed to embrace, or at least know, the indigenous culture. Characters like Sarah Wilder epitomize an attitude of indifference towards the 'other'. She tries to isolate herself and her family into the domesticity of their house, in order to preserve their Jewish traditions, rituals and values. 'Home' for Sarah is her family and everyday rituals, without giving any notice to the outside reality.

Rachel's attitude is similar, since the girl lives in her own world linked to her family's past and tradition, incapable of thinking about Kenya as a possible adoptive motherland. However, the girl's visceral need to search for her family's roots and the tradition of the Jewish culture, drives her to depart from Kenya to reach uncertainty and persecution in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, Ellen Smith represents the white settler who gradually begins to loosen her connection to her English motherland and to strengthen that to the indigenous life, to the extent of finding in the native, her maid and companion Martha, a source of identity. Ellen never becomes completely

integrated into Kenyan society and never applies for citizenship, nonetheless she symbolically finds her specific post-independence identity thanks to her identification with Martha. As the novel indicates, through Ellen and Martha's relationship Macgoye suggests how social roles and identities can shift and change. From her independent and privileged position as a British settler in colonial Kenya, Ellen becomes incapable of taking care of herself and her social status is heavily brought into question with the advent of the country's self-government. Moreover, the two women's relationship symbolically demolishes physical and ideological obstacles between people of European origins and the natives. They find home in each other, but the person who needs physical and psychological care this time is the former settler, not the "infantile" black native, thus dismantling prejudices often stressed in colonial writing. Macgoye implicitly suggests that, in order to feel at home in a new country, the better approach should be that of being ready to discover and embrace the local culture and the indigenous' habits and system of thought. The union with the natives should be the key to reach the heart of the adoptive country and to be integrated into the new society, as the writer's own personal experience can demonstrate.

In order to stress the same further, the experience of the minor character Sophie in *A Farm Called Kishinev* stands as a good example of how the distancing from the heritage of the local society can lead to disintegration. Being divided between the Nandi, the Jewish and the Catholic culture, Sophie cannot find a balanced identity and consequently she cannot act as a mediator for her family and connect them to the indigenous culture. In turn, the person who would have given them the key to discover the tradition of the country, Sophie's grandmother, is almost excluded from their lives.

Personal identities, Macgoye suggests in her novels, are not fixed but always shifting. At the same time, no social identity is preconceived and consequently people of different origins can become members of a state, on condition that diversity is regarded as a treasure and not as an obstacle.

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