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**ABSTRACT**

Gender relations in Kenya, including Luo, society have gone through profound changes since the country became independent. Consequently, the inferior images of women in postcolonial literary works are undergoing gradual alterations as well. They are moving from the margin to the centre in literary representations and strengthening their positions in gender relations through their feminine power, resistance and empowerment.

The main object of this research has been to explore how women's power appears in contemporary Luo literature as a means of cultural representation. I have studied the origins of their power to see to what extent it stems from modernity, from the influence of the Western ways of thinking, and to what extent women rely on traditional practices and customs preserved and transmitted by generations from pre-colonial times to the present.

The study has been divided into two general sections: the first section comprises a short socio-cultural background and structures and processes in society; the second section incorporates analyses of the literary texts and interpretations. In Chapter three two novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye who is a British-Luo writer, have been analysed: *Coming to Birth* (1986) and *Victoria* (1993). In Chapter four a male Luo author Tobias Odongo Otieno's novel *The Missing Links* (2001) has been examined.

Overall, the findings have indicated that women's power originates from both the traditional, customary resources and the new opportunities of modernity, imported ways of life. In Macgoye's novels a greater emphasis is placed on women's empowerment through education and their personal ability, while in Otieno's novel a woman's power is manifested in domestic spheres via her confrontation with masculine values which generate her assertiveness, resistance and inner rebellion.

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**KEY WORDS:** feminine power, empowerment, resistance, tradition, custom, modernity, Luo



We cannot go forward without culture, without saying what we believe, without communicating with others, without making people think about things. Books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they *are a weapon*. (Mariama Bâ cited in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997a: 148.)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kenya is associated in the old continent with unique wildlife, yet probably not many Europeans are aware of its peoples' socio-economic and socio-cultural plight. If one goes there to a safari adventure hardly thinks of this country as a homeland of 31 million African people comprising about 70 tribal groups each with its own culture. Most of the ethnic groups and individuals are still torn between the old traditional expectations and modernity, the Western ways of life. Especially Kenyan women are confined to strive for their prime necessities and fundamental human rights and justice.

It has become clear that the earlier fascination with Uhuru (independence) and with achieving postcolonial democracy was misplaced. The nation building and modernization were mismanaged due to lack of legitimacy and due to patrimonial autocracy, worsened by favouritism for the leaders' ethnic groups. The expectations of the vast exploited majority, including the "twice colonized" women, who have always been in the forefront of the struggles, have failed to be realized. Nowadays Kenya is not the model of African modernization any more; both its international image and the human conditions have considerably deteriorated since 1980. According to Gibson (2003: 204.), there are hard facts of twenty-first century Africa: in the last 25 years the life expectancy has fallen, the food supply is insufficient, the health care and education system is in crisis. The growing gap between rich and poor indicates the sharp polarization of the society placing an even greater burden on the women's shoulders.

Furthermore, at the Beijing Women's Conference held in 1995, it was reported that 42% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa are beaten regularly, and about 100 million African girls are victims of female genital mutilation, which must not be considered as a culturally or traditionally justified treatment of women, but rather as a problem of human rights violation (Kaplan 2001: 200). The same conditions hold true of Kenyan

society, not to mention the unemployment and the prevalent practice of corruption. What is more, according to a study conducted by the Society for International Development in 2004, Kenya is among the ten most unequal countries in the world. Inequality is manifested in three dimensions of the society: growing divergence in financial resources possessed by people, regional economical differences, and gender relations. As the researchers point out, the causes and effects of inequalities are still out of the focus of the scholars' attention, and generally have low profile in the society at large as well. (SID 2004.)

Women have multiple roles in society, from the nuclear and extended family to public life, and for fulfilling these roles they have to find the way to exercise some power in an oppressive context. Furthermore, my assumption is that colonial legacy, education, globalisation, tourism, feminist movements, and other cultural encounters greatly affect people's traditional value preferences and help strengthen the position of women in their family and in their community as well. The most crucial question in many third world countries, including Kenya, is how to incorporate modernity into the traditional way of life, which is abundant in special customs, rituals and spirituality. In this study modernity is used to describe the influence of Western modern times on Kenyan culture and society. It encompasses both the period of colonization and the time of independence, which entail numerous aspects of modernity, such as individualism, commodification, secularization and hybridization. Here tradition is understood as a collection of preserved values, social practices and customs transmitted from generation to generation from pre-colonial times to the present.

As Morag Bell (1986: 41) argues, some African states attempt to realise certain goals regarded as universal (better living conditions, improved standards of healthcare), yet at the same time leaders try to set them in the context of their own values, which they want to be preserved. During the last four decades, the period of nation building has not resulted in stability, prosperity and a rise in the standard of living in this region of Africa. However, the initial conditions, due to blooming tourism and the relatively favourable climate, were promising. Thus in Kenya politicians and scientists together with people have to continue seeking the optimal ways of development and prosperity.

The aim of this study is to approach gender relations in conjugal families or cohabitations, represented in creative writing, focusing on the potential strength and power of women in Luo society. In my thesis I aim to observe how women's power appears in post-colonial social settings, to be affected by Western and local ways of thinking, and how the position of women is changing in the current socio-economic circumstances. The appearance of women's power is based on the hypothesis that gender relations are subject to moulding in cultural processes because gender is a cultural 'product'; its implication is not universal or constant and not strictly defined biologically. The objective of this study is to examine the gaining of women's power through mimesis in Kenyan literature. The aim of this thesis is to disentangle the way female power is manifested in the heroines' relationships. I aim to find out the origins of their power, whether it is the result of modernization or still springs from the 'natural wisdom' accumulated and transmitted from generation to generation during the last centuries.

In this study power is defined differently from the general sense of domineering and assertive male power; here the feminine definition of power is used, which implies collaborative and nurturing empowerment, influencing both the self and others positively. It seeks win-win relational outcomes and rejects coercive domination over others. One of the most assertive forms of this power is manifested in resistance, implying that women do not accept the reality created by their dominant male counterparts. Here women's power is closely connected with agency. Agency is considered in the sense of a capacity or potency to make decisions and impose those choices in an oppressive structure. In this usage agency is an individual's capacity, her inner drive, a function emerging out of one's personality and behaviour. It adds the moral component in a particular situation. The title of this work, "The Powers of the Weak" is borrowed from Elizabeth Janeway (1913), a recognized American feminist writer who gave this title to her book written about women belonging to minority groups.

In this research a variety of approaches will be addressed to interpreting mimesis and discourses, bringing concepts from feminism and masculinism, theories of power

relations, postcolonial literary criticism and the findings of case studies. This research explores the selected works as ways of representation written by Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye as an Anglo-African author, and by Tobias Odongo Otieno as a Kenyan writer with Luo origins, within the East African postcolonial literary tradition. The work is structurally divided into two general sections; explorations and exegeses. The first section comprises theoretical chapters and the socio-cultural and historical reality of Luo society. The second section deals with the literary texts and their interpretations in conformity with theories and approaches appertaining to the theme. Due to the strong emphasis on the socialized nature of a text this method seems suitable for the analysis of contemporary African fiction, being aware that both writers are closely connected and committed to expressing the social experiences and exigencies of peoples of the country. The disenchanting social reality influences and governs the lives of individuals and communities so strongly that most writers in Kenya feel it their moral duty to be immersed in it.

Nowadays the images of women in life and in literature are undergoing gradual change even in traditional societies. The most common images in world literature are the figure of the mother or grandmother, wife, independent career woman, naive girl or prostitute. While reading novels written by both male and female writers belonging to different ethnic groups I observed that in spite of the disillusioned societal landscape of Kenya, women are strong and determined regardless of their dependent lot. In whatever roles of womanhood they are agile, courageous, endowed with special gifts, ready to take the lion's share of the work for their family and community. In most fictions I have met the similar types of women, all of them portrayed as being ambitious, hard-working, but often frustrated individuals, who always try to find the way to protest against injustice or exert some power to improve their situation. Yet one thing seems to remain constant, as Ferguson, an American social scientist, points out: "Man has been identified by his relationship to the outside world — to nature, to society [...] whereas woman has been defined in relationship to man." (Ferguson 1977: 10.) Simone de Beauvoir (1988: 534) contends that woman is the incidental, the inessential, the Other, while man is the essential, the absolute Subject.



Women's dependence on men is even more emphasized in masculine societies with patrilineal kinship system (both males and females belong to their father's kin group), which is fairly prevalent lineage order in East Africa. In these communities women's power are more challenged, because of their greater dependence on men. Kenya shows a great diversity of ethnic groups, which entails considerable differences in customs and values, and consequently the situation of women as well. It is impossible to examine them all, and thus I am confined to concentrating on one group, namely on the Luo tribe, which is the third largest tribe in Kenya living around Lake Victoria still following the patrilineal kinship arrangement.

This is the reason why my unit of analysis is comprised of two Luo novels, *Coming to Birth* (1986) and *Victoria* (1993), in a prequel to *Murder in Majengo* (1993) [1972] written by Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, who was born in Great Britain, but as the wife of a Luo man, became completely integrated into her husband's kinship and Luo society. Furthermore, I intend to analyse *The Missing Links* (2001) by Tobias Otieno, who is a male Luo author belonging to the younger generation. These authors' creative writings are within the frame of postcolonial literary theory, which mainly deals with the reading and writing of literatures of previously colonized countries. It focuses particularly on literature created by formerly colonized peoples which attempts to articulate their self-definition in the light of modernization, referring to their past and their inevitable otherness. Postcolonial writers seek to encounter their culture's ancient yet transformed heritage, and the new ways of thinking and understanding, at the same time. They also engage in dealing with problems of social order and justice.

The latest concerns of Kenyan writers are disillusionment with 'Uhuru' (independence), which has been the source of the greatest hope and desire for the whole nation. Naturally, this regression affects women as well, and their derogatory position and their struggles for recognition are depicted in numerous other novels as well, such as Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1984), Mwangi's *Striving for the Wind* (1990), Njuguna's *Labyrinth* (2000). In these fictions women are not at the centre of the stories; they are silent and appear as victims of the male-dominated structure.

The plots of the three selected novels take the reader in the post-colonial period from the late 1950's to these days. This was the historical time when the country's independence was gained and the main political and socio-cultural changes took place. Due to the dismantling of traditional social institutions, women were left in an even more vulnerable and ambiguous situation, with new burdens and responsibilities. It was also a challenging time for the artists, who undertook the mission of formulating and conveying messages to people. The two selected writers are members of the same ethnic group, representing both genders and different generations. All the fictions, to different degrees, allow insight into the life of women in both rural and urban circumstances. The authors are dedicated and attached to the country and their own people, endeavouring to encompass the successes and failures of their heroines, their ways of thinking, their confrontations and solutions in the light of the changing society and changing values.

Marjorie Macgoye is a well-known novelist in Africa and highly praised by critics. Her novel titled *Coming to Birth* (1986) won the Sinclair Prize for Fiction in the same year. The novel primarily tells the story of Paulina, a young Luo woman who is sent from her village to Nairobi to live with her husband, Martin. The novel follows her through the next few decades, as her relationship with Martin changes, as her conception of herself changes, and as Kenya gains independence with autocratic political leaders causing turbulent political atmosphere, which leads Paulina's personal tragedy. The heroine's personal life is depicted and her development through struggles is analogous with the birth of independent Kenya. Paulina can be seen in both urban and rural settings as a wife striving for recognition by her new family, as a woman striving for motherhood, as an independent public worker striving for the appreciation of the community. Courage and determination can be traced in her deeds, her development and strength becomes obvious by the end of the novel.

Macgoye's other fiction *Victoria* (1993) is about a strong-minded girl who is a victim of an arranged marriage. She is compelled to leave her family because of her pregnancy out of wedlock, and soon finds herself in a brothel. Due to her strength of character, she can overcome the difficulties and finally starts a successful business in Nairobi, but the

burden of her secret overshadows her whole life. Her Luo origins and conventions cannot fade away even in the big city either.

Tobias Odongo Otieno belongs to the younger generation of Luo writers. He studied literature at the University of Nairobi. Now he teaches at Moi University and writes plays, short stories and poems. *The Missing Links* (2001) is his first novel, in which he reveals the contradiction and tension between urban and rural circumstances. The heroine, as a consequence of her pregnancy has to leave Nairobi without completing her studies, and move to a distant poverty-stricken village. She finds harsh conditions, taboo and superstitions there, and encounters ambiguity concerning her way of thinking and the Luo villagers' assumptions. Moving back to Nairobi does not bring her relief due to her husband's secret mistress and to his polygamous ambitions. In this narration the perception of a changing society is highlighted where the importance of ethnic values and customs merges with the preferences of urban ways of thinking.

In selection of an ethnic group, several important conditions must be taken into consideration. The group should be relatively large and homogeneous in its main dwelling area. The Luo people are the third largest tribe out of seventy with 1.4 million members. They are dominating inhabitants in Western Kenya engaging in cattle-raising, fishing and land cultivation as well. They also have a close connection with cities due to the prevalent practice of migration for work. In this way the effect of modernization is more influential among them than in rigidly traditional tribes like Samburu or Masaai.

On the other hand, it is a great value that they try to keep all those old customs which are beneficial for them. According to Hans-Egil Hauge, a Norwegian anthropologist, who made fieldwork in Luo communities, rural men still consider that polygamy is useful partly because many children provide workforce in agriculture, partly because daughters ensure a good source of income in the form of the bride-price paid by the groom. At the same time, fathers have to provide the cattle as dowry when their son wants to marry. Unlike Samburus, here the man is obliged to build a hut for every wife of his. All children in the extended family refer to one another as sisters or brothers; all wives of their father are called mother. Each wife gets a piece of land to grow plants for

food. Great respect is shown to old people: the head of the family is the oldest male member. The importance of children is salient; a wife who is not able to give birth is regarded as worthless, and rejected as a real family member. If the husband is ill he willingly accepts that his wife may conceive from other man from the family. If any of the sons gets a well-paid job, he is expected to support the rest of the family. Sons inherit from their father and their real mother. Women can inherit cattle from their husband. Christianity is spreading among the people who have received some schooling. (Hauge 1974: 9–19.)

The other source about Luo women, written by Rebeka Njau, a Kikuyu writer, offers a dissenting account of women's place from the prejudicial colonial point of view. She has collected among old people undocumented historical events about famous Luo woman 'fighters' who were leaders of the colonial resistance. She has succeeded in collecting data about the pre-colonial Luo society, where women were allowed to sit with men in the council of elders. Women often expressed their opinion or grievances in songs. Their strength was manifested in common performance. The stories indicate clearly that most traditional societies recognized women's talent and power. (Njau 1984.)

The oral traditions diverge from official historical records. They do not present a powerless woman, whose opinion has been ignored, whose social rights have been neglected. Luo women have not all been (are) in oppression with their place is merely in the kitchen or in the field. It is also justified by a recent research, conducted by a Swedish Scholar, Helen Nyberg (2004), who gives information about the Luo female farmers and their relation to men. She asserts that, among Luo people, pastoralism is regarded as superior to agriculture. Thus most of the work in the fields belongs to the women's responsibility. Although women can be individually entitled to land, they still rely on customary law (usufructary right) accessing land through the lineage of their husband. The condition for this right is the proper fulfilment of their obligations such as bearing children and providing food and labour for the husband. Women's kitchen garden is the basis of their individual economy where they can produce even some surplus to sell. Generally, it is expected from women to produce something extra which

can be traded. Women are often left with the full responsibility for the household and the agricultural production as well because of the men's migration to earn money. (Nyberg 2004: 99–106.)

Nyberg's findings about Luo women's relationship to husband and male relatives show great variety even within one village. The research suggests that women's respective relationship to husband and close male relatives strongly influences their position and decision-making possibilities in the family. Women with strong power are middle-aged and in most cases wives of migrating husbands or wives in polygamous relationships. In other cases men and women cooperate closely in reaching decisions, and there are still families where the decision maker is exclusively the husband concerning the production and the use of income, although the biggest share of the work is the wife's duty. Unlike in many other tribes, here younger widows are allowed to choose; they can either be inherited by other male member of the family or can go back to their natal kinship. (2004: 141–147.)

Nyberg's account of women in Luo society implies that both the impact of modernity and the old tradition might cause changes in women's livelihood. However, it seems that the common and decisive factor is economic necessity. It is also obvious that these villagers are at different stages of their value preferences. The head of the families are forced to migrate in order to get more income for education, taxation and for other expenditures. At the same time, migration means the possibility to bring back new knowledge, new ways of thinking. In polygamous relations each woman gets less from the husband's resources, including land; thus as compensation they are allowed to make independent agricultural or other trading decisions. In this way an old tradition is becoming a source of empowerment.

The free choice of widows as to whether to stay at their husband's clan or go back to their parental house also have some implications connected with their economic plight. In the past children were important resources for a family; therefore they strictly belonged to the husband's lineage. Nowadays children involve many costs, including education, and their presence entails further subdivision of land, what is more, their

future income is uncertain because of the land scarcity and lack of employment opportunities. Accordingly, the old custom is changing in conformity with both the widow's and the lineage's interest; the family of the deceased gain financial advantage if the wife and the children return home, and the widow is not confined to living with another man against her will.

The researches conducted in Luo society underline the fact that these women did not, and do not live in severe oppression; rather they try to build a relationship based on trust with their husbands. (They still prefer the customary land right, which is not registered.) In the past their power was manifested in common activities, cooperation. Today it is continued through women organizations, where they access information and get official help for their activities. Naturally, the increasing education for all children entails more equal possibilities and empowerment for young women, who are the most powerless members of society when uneducated.

Education is highly valued among the Luo, and they are well represented in different professions. There is a new university at Maseno near Kisumu, which provides easy access for those Luos who want to attend university. The Luo believe that each individual needs education from the moment of birth. They assume that all experiences forge attitudes, and determine the conduct of a person. They hope to provide a practical education, and the knowledge of their traditions. They wish to keep the Luo way of life, and to preserve the identity of the tribe. Nevertheless, there still remains a high level of illiteracy, especially among females who are responsible for every aspect of daily routine in the family. (Mama Maria 2007.) There are people among the Luo who, in the past and present, excel in teaching and reflections on the human condition. Luo society is an open one. All individuals are encouraged to express themselves publicly. Their oral tradition is abundant in songs and tales, which are taught to children. It is said that the short story was a well-developed art among the Luo in traditional times. Such stories were often accompanied by music. (Hauge 1974.)

Since this research is based on literary works, it is highly significant that Luo people have a rich literary heritage both written and oral. In Luo culture "wisdom" is highly

appreciated and used. Tales with moral are important part of education. The most famous short-story writer in Kenya today is a Luo woman, Grace Ogot. In her stories she includes traditional themes as well as modern dilemmas. A purely outsider, possibly ethnocentric view and approach would not be sufficient for exploring the behaviour of Luo women from the aspect of their power. One piece of research is not able to give a satisfying answer to the decisive questions these people are facing, namely traditional versus modern, universalism versus cultural particularism, customary versus state law vis-à-vis womanhood and gender relations. For that the deepest and the most comprehensive understanding of the country's socio-cultural plight is indispensable.

Since I have been sensitised, by reading other Kenyan novels, to the chosen segments of the social and geographical sphere, and lacking the possibility to conduct an empirical fieldwork study, I resort to literary text analysis using contemporary Kenyan writers' fictions as a primary source. I undertake this work with the premise that the novel is an elaborate literary form, a complex blend of historical, social and cultural forces that represents the author's attitude towards life, and shapes his or her imaginative use of narrative conventions. Lamarque and Olsen argue that fiction is a social practice, requiring social facts and social context. It is a practice which involves authors and readers, and great focus is placed on the reader's response. (1994: 33–35.) Thus narrative is the form in which we receive reality mediated by the author. Fictional narratives can be seen as imaginary creations and resolutions of real predicaments, tensions and contradictions.

Writers, like other artists, seek signs, structures and styles appropriate for the fictional reconstruction of their experiences, impressions and sense of consciousness enriched by their particular artistic visions. They have the ability to observe, evaluate and express the social phenomena in a way that goes beyond a mere description. As Goldman claims:

The great writer (or artist) is precisely the exceptional individual who succeeds in creating in a given domain, that of the literary ... work, an imaginary, coherent, or almost strictly coherent world, whose structure corresponds to that towards which the whole of the group is tending; (Goldman 1988: 435).

A novel, as a piece of art, affects its readers through mimesis, which is able to describe the relationship between artistic images and reality. The original Platonic idea, stating that mimesis simply mirrors or copies reality, is not sufficient for a contemporary literary analysis. Halliwell (2002: 5) argues that art is defined as a self-contained ‘heterocosm’ that simulates a familiar world, and in effect moulds our ways of thinking within a given frame of cultural reference. According to this concept, the lifelike simulation conveyed by a fiction should be closely connected to the reader’s mind and assumptions.

Thus mimesis is not an accurate reproduction of material reality, but rather inherent or conventional ways of knowing the world. According to Rimmon-Kenan, models of coherence emanate from reality and from literary and cultural conventions. Reality models can be recognized either as natural elements of one’s conception governing his or her perception of the world, or by the given society as cultural codes; generalizations and stereotypes. (Rimmon-Kenan 1994: 124.) Potolsky (2006) also supports the idea that mimesis has its roots not only in objective reality but in culture and custom as well. He claims that “it [mimesis] continues to shape our everyday beliefs about and practical relationships to art and literature” (Potolsky 2006: 3). Thus the dynamics of reading can be seen as a continuous process of construction and transformation of hypotheses aiming to reach a final interpretation, based on the content and form of the narration.

By the same token, using the elements of discourse analysis helps to disclose the implicit meanings of the texts. According to Fairclough (2003), in textual analysis highlighting the following dimensions of the text is advisable: *types of meaning* (action, representation, identification), *identity* and *personality*, *social agents*, *events* and *practices*. The three types of meaning are always co-present in texts. The first meaning can be found in the action itself, the second is appertains to the representation of the world in texts, and the third one refers to peoples’ identity. Identity has two distinct aspects: part of one’s social identity is a matter of the social circumstances into which one is born or socialized at his or her young age. The other part of one’s identity is acquired later by socialization into particular social roles, such as a teacher or mother. If there is a fusion between identity and personality, then one is able to act truly as a social



agent. Social identity and personality take styles as ways of being and is manifested in one's language. The relationship between potential and actual is mediated by social practices. (2003: 212–225). Although these elements of a discourse are highlighted mainly in non-fictional texts, they are applicable to fictional discourse analysis as well, taking into consideration that a novel has social facts and context.

In Chapter 2 the challenges of feminine power will be addressed in Luo society and in East African region, by examining case studies and fieldworks, conducted in the target area. Furthermore some issues of masculinism and feminism will be brought into focus in the light of moulding gender relations and changing perspectives of women's power. It should be noted that this chapter has limitations due to lack of information available vis-a`-vis to the selected ethnic group.

## 2. STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES IN RELATION TO GENDER ISSUES IN POSTCOLONIAL KENYA

Postcolonial theory is built around the concepts of otherness and resistance. The Western idea of the Oriental is based on the Manichean allegory which sees the world as divided into mutually excluding opposites: if the West is ordered, rational, masculine, then the East is chaotic, irrational, feminine. In other words, everything is reduced by colonial discourse to a set of dichotomies, such as black or white, good or evil, etc. The colonized peoples are highly diverse in their human nature and in their tradition as well. As they live in different cultures, they are constructed differently, and they are subject to change in dissenting ways. While these peoples are other to the colonizers, they are also different from one another. They are also other to their own pasts, which can be reclaimed, but never restored. The concept of resistance implies resistance as opposition or subversion. It entails thoughts about human freedom, liberty, individuality, ideas which may not have been part of the man's view before the colonial times. In this theoretical framework otherness will be emphasized, without resorting to dichotomies.

### 2.1 Masculinity versus femininity

Analysing masculinity vs. femininity and struggles for the social equality of women in the light of female power, some questions are encountered: What Western feminist models are applicable to, and acceptable in Kenyan society? Is there cooperation or understanding between Western and Black feminists? Examining the Luo case two additional questions emerge: Firstly, whether there is a generally accepted ideology which is able to define the essential differences between masculinity and femininity in a traditional society in transition; secondly, whether the explanations of gender differences are based on constant, stereotypical arguments or some space is left for variables in compliance with particular ethnic groups and social changes.

The concept of patriarchy implies a fixed state of male oppression over women, rather than a fluid relationship between male and female, which is complex and moulds rapidly at times in relation to the social setting. Adrienne Rich (1976) argues in *Of*

*Woman Born* that patriarchy is the power of the male ancestors: an ideological, social and familial system in which men by direct force or via tradition, laws, customs and education define the females' place within a social group, in this case, in the family. (1976: 57.) Yet there is ample evidence to show that women are able to resist and overcome male dominance in both public and private spheres, and it applies not only to Western but African societies as well. Likewise, issues of class, gender and equality need to be captured by local experiences and dynamics of male dominance, beyond a general overarching description.

According to Hofstede's study of cultural dimensions, East Africa falls in a category of countries with large power distance (autocratic, hierarchical power relations in a society), and with rather feminine values, which implies inequality and tenderness, representing an accepted norm of two dominant parents both of them providing authority and feelings in the family (1991: 87). One might expect that Kenya, as a society with strong tribal traditions which has been under the influence of a fairly masculine colonizing country (Great Britain), should score high in masculinity, but this opposite tendency indicates the complexity and variegation of changes taking place in this post-colonial state concerning the role of women and gender relations.

On the other hand, it is understandable if the fact is taken into consideration that Hofstede's terminology of masculinity or femininity index is not gender specific. Instead it holds for the whole country's value. Thus in a strongly masculine society women should exercise the same assertiveness, and they should take part in public sphere like men. However in Kenya it is not a prevalent practice yet, in domestic spheres women are able to exert their feminine power and assertiveness. One of the obvious contradictions of African masculinity is that black males share their identities partly with black women and partly with white European men (Fanon 1993: 100). In this way Luo masculinity must be considerably distinct from other types of maleness. In addition, men from different ethnic groups or with dissimilar social status might manifest and exercise quite divergent male behaviour. Indeed, there is a huge disparity between the masculinity of a man as dominant, potent, Mercedes-driving manager and of a man as subordinated, survivalist who lacking other means resorts to violence.

According to Walby (1990: 92–93), socialization takes place mainly in childhood, when the family, schooling, media and other institutions through social and social-psychological processes channel the children's gendered subjectivity. In a traditional extended African family and community, children's lives and experiences are substantially determined by rigid customs, rituals and practices strongly connected to power relations (Njuguna 2000:183). As we are social beings, all gender behaviour is shaped by societal structures, and this social framework is already in place when the individual enters society. But through action individuals may in time successfully resist and attempt to re-negotiate the framework. Thus power is a contested entity between genders in both family and public settings. Daily experience shows that many women do not accept being oppressed and do not maintain roles assigned to them. Women may resist masculinity in Luo society if their capacity as agents is recognized by themselves. The individual female agency is a potential for more autonomy and free will; however, this transformation exists in a state of constant tension and struggle with traditional and structural determinants. The household, in spite of its varying forms, constitutes the primary framework within which the basic rules of socialization are set, and it provides the site where gender equality and justice is won or lost. It is the scene where power relations that pertain to the dynamics of gender in the wider society are moulded. Masculinities are based on certain assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of a male member of a household or community. However, the validity of the presuppositions is questioned by changes in context and circumstance especially typical of Luo society.

The significance of women's labour, their performance in a large family, in agriculture and in the whole economy at the regional and national level has always been salient in Kenya and in Luo society as well. Mostly economic pressure, together with new circumstances, compel changes in the gender division of labour, generate even more burdens on women's shoulders, and at the same time promote the empowerment of women, allowing them more active participation in the public sphere, which fosters the moulding of new, more fluid gender identities. Women's income gives them more bargaining power within the household and enables them to leave an unsatisfactory marriage. Creighton and Omary (1995: 26) assert that women's increased autonomy

may lead to greater tensions within the family. This is manifested in a higher level of domestic violence, and conflict over labour obligations and household finances. Consequently, tension between a married couple tends to end up with divorce or by a husband finding and supporting concubines.

Both some Kenyan ethnic traditions and law, including Luo, accept the polygamous family formation, with an authoritative male head as the main provider. Polygamy, by its existence as a tradition, socialized both men and women to believe that a relationship with only one woman has never been part of many Kenyan men's nature. Silberschmidt, conducting research among East-African rural and urban people of Kisii District, argues that nowadays, due to economic pressures and insufficient incomes, most men are in paradoxical situation; they are the acknowledged heads of households but more and more of them cannot meet the normative standard and their wives' expectation with respect to providing. This has a serious impact on their masculine self-esteem and pride. Many of them cannot afford even one marriage because of the bride price, which is still compulsory. That is why some of them resort to a loose cohabitation, feeling that their male roles are seriously undermined. Such unions are often overwhelmed with antagonism and violence doomed to be broken up shifting the responsibility of the family maintenance to the single mother. Thus those Kisii women who are concerned have to take new roles as head of the family losing the respect to their man who fails to be a responsible provider. (Silberschmidt 2001.)

Silberschmidt's comments on Kisii with reference to loose cohabitation and single parenthood have a wider application: in Luo society choosing a mate behind the back of the natal family and ignoring the tradition of investigating the spouse's family background and ancestors, bring up a huge amount of difficulty. Youngsters' cohabitations often provoke the opposition of parents who want to follow the tradition of inquiry into the bride's family background. According to Njuguna, in the past, it was "taboo to ignore this particular custom for the marriage could be fraught with danger" (2000: 177). In Luo people's minds, marriage is not only an alliance of a man and a woman, but a bond between two families as well. In *The Missing Links* (2001) a bride should be accepted and possibly selected by the head of the young man's family, and

she is regarded as suitable if she herself and her family background are 'unspotted'. The reason for cohabitations or abrupt marriages might be an unexpected pregnancy as well. This sudden change of one's everyday life, without being mature for it, has an overwhelming effect on a young couple even in Western societies where individual freedom and free choice in finding one's spouse is not opposed. It is one of the reasons given when the increasing number of disintegrated nuclear families is referred nowadays.

Although Western cultures tend to see arranged marriages as an uncivilized practice, it may have some positive facets: for instance, Westerners concentrate more on the physical aspects of relationships rather than one's inner traits, and are obsessed with beauty, affection, lust, etc. People get married relying on these factors and then get disillusioned within a short while. In contrast, in Luo culture, in the case of arranged marriages diligence, ambition, integrity, humility is brought into focus. These characteristics yield stable ground for a marriage which is conducted for practical reasons, and love may take shape later.

In love marriages, especially if the marriage takes place against the will of the parents, in the case of problems between the partners, the Luo woman often cannot receive help from her kin. A love marriage gives greater individual freedom for a young couple, but also a higher degree of risk, as they are supposed to endure the consequences of a bad choice. If a relationship is bad a woman may be exposed to her husband's abusive treatment. With the present tendency for young people to marry a partner of their own selection, marriage is becoming more of an agreement between two individuals and less an alliance between two extended families. Education and money (earned outside the homestead) make it possible for young Luo men to gain autonomy and bypass the authority of the elders. In this new kind of nuclear family a wife may come under the authority of her husband and is compelled to pass over the protection of her natal family. In this way the western practice of the love marriage, applied in the Luo context, becomes endowed with additional meanings.

On the other hand, men's authority and gender identity can be challenged by economic hardship. According to Silberschmidt, East African rural and urban men's masculinity is greatly affected by their economic status, which tends to deteriorate, pushing them into a subordinate position in terms of financial resources. Thus some women in this area are more and more inclined to measure a man's social value by his material wealth, and this situation urges men to seek compensation in free, more casual sexual behaviour. Today's "sexual networking", in other words extramarital relationships or having a girlfriend, is not a rare phenomenon in the Kenyan context. (Silberschmidt 2001.)

Thus male identity and self-esteem tend to be connected with sexuality and sexual manifestations. The male's hurt pride and the loss of value seem to lead to the proliferation of extramarital relationships, pushing the rightful wives into an even more vulnerable plight. In order to survive with their children, they have to find their way to produce some extra income, which strengthens their position and alleviates their subordination at the same time. This role is not against their traditional image of a strong Luo woman, who produces a surplus for the family, but finding the opportunity for that is more problematic in both rural and urban settings. In villages the scarcity of land and the access to land is the main impediment, while in towns, lack of education or skills are the hindrance of women's own income besides the cultural and familial bonds.

bell hooks argues that men are socialized in the Third World so that they have to accept their exploitation and abuse in the working sphere, and they are taught that the domestic environment restores to them their sense of power, which provides the terrain of relieving tensions that may lead to violence. Women are easy targets because there are no consequences if they exert coercive power at home, equating it with masculinity. Beating wives is culturally approved, whereas it would be punished if a man attacked some other man in a public context. (hooks 2000: 121.) Furthermore, hooks (2000: 123) asserts that black men must break out of this "cycle of violence" by challenging the notion of masculinity that entitles males to exercise power through the use of coercive force. They have to examine the impact of capitalism on their position in their society with respect to the degree to which they feel degraded and alienated in the world of work.

The flaw in the socialization theory is manifested in its inability to deal with the possible alterations in the case of different ethnic groups, cultures and socio-economic changes. In Kenya a tremendous degree of regional variation is witnessed in socio-economic and cultural phenomena. With these changes mostly unstable situations are outcropped (like unemployment, migration of wage earners), considerably influencing gender identity, norms and values. Undoubtedly education, which is not available for everyone equally, has a significant effect on personality formation and value preferences. All these factors make the panorama of gender relations subtler and more divergent from conventional, stereotyped assumptions.

There is another aspect of value changes summarized by Krishnaswamy:

The violent intervention of the West into the East, not to mention colonialism's ideological project of remaking the Other in the image of the Self, inevitably needed and produced culturally hybrid subjects among the colonizers as well as the colonized. (Krishnaswamy 2002: 304.)

Generally, the effect of cultural hybridity (the effect of cultural, racial encounters) is manifested in a temporal confusion or loss of identity of indigenous people, who become driven by anxiety and ambiguity. In this ductile context their social position, their relationship to the in-group they belong to, and their personal experiences serve as decisive factors in how to revive or reconsider their shared assumptions. In the case of an advantageous class position they tend to weigh or accept the Western way of thinking, whereas the propensity for resistance and firm persistence for internalised cultural roots are growing in the case of majority, who are confined to living in oppression and poverty. In Kenya there are some nomadic tribes (Samburu, Masaai) in which the majority of members lead almost the same lifestyle as one hundred years ago, while others try to take advantage of modernization by assimilating the conveniences of the west. In fact, tribal culture is continually changing as a result of mission work, education, outside group encounters and inter-marriages, which blur both cultural assumptions and physiological features. In the most dramatic cases reversal roles can be found between men and women both in the household and the broader society. This phenomenon is explained partly by the legacy of British colonization, which enhanced a hybridity in cultural identity which allows re-interpretations of customs and traditions,



and partly by the economic decline taking place in the country. The recession entails a loss of economic power by males mainly among the working poor with less education.

Summing up, cultural value alterations are taking place slowly and steadily, yet economic possibilities and necessities have greater significance in the process of gender role changes. As Brittan asserts, gender structures are neither permanent nor immune to subversion. A door is opening for a more nuanced and subversive account of power, which is able to recognize the subject as an important actor. (1989: 18). The model of Luo society concerning gender issues suggests that for defining the attributes of masculinity and femininity, a stereotypical way is not sufficient any more, because even within one society there are different kinds of masculinities parallel with different identities. Changing identities generate modification of value assumptions. There is every reason to think that this trend is accelerating due to the universalising effect of globalisation comprising both the export of European/American gender order to the post-colonial world and the growing economic pressure on these societies and individuals.

## 2.2 Feminism versus African womanism

A fundamental belief of the modern feminist movement, as bell hooks, an Afro-American feminist (2000: 5) argues, has been the assertion that all women are oppressed. Yet this oppression evokes different responses or lack of responses among women living in various socio-cultural settings. The obvious connection between African and Western feminism is that both are concerned with gender issues and identify women's position as second-class status and seek to improve that. It seems that global feminism is not conceivable for many reasons: Nfah-Abbeny (1997: 9–11) points out that African women tend to see Western feminism as a form of imperialism that wants to impose and dictate its principles and visions on black women. They also reject feminism with radical, separatist tendencies, claiming that men are part of their struggle, affirming their heterosexuality. Furthermore, they emphasise that African women have to strive for daily survival, like fetching water or accessing education, which is taken for granted in the Western world. Finally, they cannot accept the

contradictory fact that white women are often partners in the oppression of black people (as in South Africa).

Historically European feminism is generally recognized as the legacy of middle class white women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It did not embrace women of colour or white women of lower social classes. Middle class feminists worked for the limited emancipation of well-to-do white women, seeking suffrage and recognition by society. On the other hand, black women first strived for recognition as human beings. Still, the fundamental gender-based oppression remains unchanged for many women from different parts of the world, based on patriarchal ideologies and socialization. Nowadays many women in the West already enjoy the rights that African women are striving for. In addition, there are numerous problems that do not appear to concern white women at all. According to Mama Amina (2002), despite the laws enacted to protect women from rape and gender-based violence, to attain female human rights, they still have to fight against some extreme manifestations of sexual oppression like child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and the disinheriting of widows.

On the other hand, out of historical necessity, Kenya had produced a tradition of women fighters before the emergence of a global feminist agenda. Kenyan women, including Luo, have taken part actively in acts of resistance and nation building since colonial times. Also Kenyan women, as Marina Nzomo (1997: 236) argues, have succeeded well in overcoming their socialization, as they no longer believe that they inferior to men. Most rural women belong to some sort of female organization such as communal or agricultural groups, which provide them with knowledge and information that would otherwise be available only for men. This includes empowering women through access to resources like land, health, education and housing.

According to Gwendolin Mikell (1997: 4), the common ground of Kenyan feminism is shaped by the women's resistance to colonial hegemony, and by its legacy within indigenous cultures. Furthermore, motherhood as a woman's truest occupation is celebrated, and reproductive roles are refused to be subordinated to other roles within the society. However, many women are expected to raise children and to be an

economic contributor at the same time. It is noteworthy that Luo women, besides their mother roles perform a considerably wide range of activities in the world of production. As Nzomo (1997: 242) points out, despite their constraints, women make a significant contribution to economy as farmers, crafts-persons, traders, and educated professionals. In contrast, white feminists are reluctant to bring motherhood into focus because it is often regarded as a hindrance to mobility in the public work sphere and career building. Signe Arnfred argues as well that motherhood and related issues have been almost invisible in Western feminist theories until recently, although being a mother engenders a distinguished responsibility in women's life all over the world. Nowadays parenthood is the preferred notion indicating that the responsibility of child breeding must be equally shared. She also claims that African feminists hold a dissenting opinion regarding motherhood as a theoretically completely relevant point. (Arnfred 2003.) On the other hand, hooks (2000: 134) points out that while waged work obviously helps women to gain a degree of existential autonomy, it does not necessarily grant an emotionally fulfilled life for them. This has led to rethinking the importance of family-life and the positive aspects of motherhood in modern feminist theory as well.

Whatever reasons lie behind the increasing number of households headed by women, one factor seems obvious: in some regions of Kenya this phenomenon is closely linked with poverty and male labour migration (as in Luo rural communities) rather than with feminist ideas or preference of independence. In addition, cultural traditions of male dominance contribute to that family formation. In addition, hooks claims that men are socialized to ignore their responsibility for child raising, and that lack of attention is reinforced by mothers, who assume that motherhood is their sphere of power that would be weakened if men participated in parenting equally (2000:140). White feminists do not share this opinion: they expect men to help with child-care. Adrienne Rich (1976: 43) asserted thirty years ago that patriarchy could not survive without motherhood, which is legitimised only when attached to marriage and wifehood. Yet nowadays this is no longer the case; wifehood is not a prerequisite of motherhood, children are born and raised in or without cohabitation in many societies. This new situation requires responses from both Western and non-Western feminists too.

Many theorists have used the term "patriarchy" in African contexts to refer to the organisation of social life and institutional structures in which men have ultimate control over most aspects of women's lives and actions. For example, men have access to and benefit from women's labour more than the reverse. Male authority and power is located in and exercised through the extended family, a pre-capitalist unit of production, which continues into the present time. (Gordon 1996: 7.) Also, the practice of polygamy is a form of discrimination and injustice against women, at least to a European woman's mind. It is based on men's assumption of women's alleged inferiority. It might have been necessary in the past when procreation was the most important purpose of marriages for the sake of workforce and warfare.

In African communities, like the Luo, where kinship is mainly structured by patrilinear relationship, the female members' different position is strongly emphasized; wives are regarded as outsiders of the lineage with subordinate roles, whereas daughters are insiders with more privileges. Thus the inferior judgment of a wife has no correlation with her gender/sex, but is rather a manifestation of her 'strangeness' in her husband's family. That is why all the property of a couple, including children and land, belongs to the husband's extended family and the property passes from the father to his son or goes back to the father's relatives.

According to Max Gluckman, this type of kinship strengthens the bond between a married couple through the children and the property, yet it causes estrangement in the family at the same time. This strong tie is established by the customary payment of cattle for the bride, entitling the husband to hold two main rights in his woman: firstly, right for her as a wife, and secondly, rights in her as a child bearer. In the patriarchal system, as Gluckman claims, the firm kin relation draws the husband away from his wife and the same progression determines the wife's attitude. (1970: 70–76.) Because of the payment some outsiders or possibly some girls who are concerned, think that a bride is bought by the future husband. In fact, this payment serves as a compensation for the loss of a working hand in the girl's family. Consequently, in an urban environment this payment loses its original function, and therefore some people do not follow this custom

any more. At the same time, economic hardship also plays a significant role in this occurrence.

However the tasks of a mother and housewife are overlapping and intertwined, her treatment in the two roles generates a huge difference; one can gain the highest acknowledgement as mother, yet the same person might suffer from severe disparagement as wife in the same family. Historically, the gender-based division of labour was organised in such a way that women were (and still are) the primary caretakers, and were responsible for the children, the cultivation of land and for meals including fetching water and firewood. Most women thus played central but socially subordinate roles in Luo society. Some claim that this central but inferior role is currently reinforced through the outstanding appreciation of motherhood. Ultimately, Luo women – both now and in the past – play pivotal reproductive and productive roles. Nevertheless, according to Brydon and Chant, women of the Third World have limited employment opportunities in cities compared to men, and have to face marginalization in the labour market. The primary reason for this occurrence is the fact that they are forced by culture and their families to engage mainly in reproductive activities such as domestic chores and child-care (1989: 187).

Interestingly enough, seen through the Western lens of feminism, women's productive work and participation in the public sphere are more appreciated than their reproductive function, whereas in Kenya a woman without children is ridiculed and despised. Nfah-Abbenyi argues that childless women are deliberately positioned as “inappropriate Others” who have no rights within the community and are not recognized as rightful wives in families either (1997b: 105). Thus fertility not only becomes a fundamental determinant of value but a crucial factor of the ontology of womanhood.

Nzomo argues that Kenyan women must seek to employ strategies in order to be heard by male decision-makers and not to be ignored. They can empower themselves through organizations, enhancing gender awareness among women who are reconciled with their disadvantageous lot, and build alliances with men rather than generate hostility to reach legal reform that will improve the status of women. (1997: 250.) On the other hand, as Nnaemeka claims, authentic feminist voices from the black continent have to

face resistance regardless of the opinion they stand for pertaining their culture. If they agree with tradition they are disapproved of as supporters of oppressive and out-fashioned customs; if they support changes they are opposed and blamed by the members of their own society for having been opportunistic. (Nnaemeka 1997: 164.) These conflicting and altering views with respect to tradition and modernity concerning women's place in society indicate the process of amalgamation of values and beliefs. Kenyan and Luo women are still on the way seeking an optimal balance between old and new practices. Since there are debates about women's subordination even in the West, where women have explicitly more opportunities and freedom, this fluidity of standpoints is natural and understandable.

Some white feminists who call for female unity, do not understand the depth of these differing motives. Brydon and Chant argue that the influence of liberal ideologies, including the ideas of white feminists, has often turned gender-aware policy into an inadequate instrument, unable to work in dissenting social relations, which tends to set dangerous and asymmetrical incidents concerning the goals of women in both sphere (1989: 241). Many African feminists are dissatisfied with the European universalist way of thinking, stating that white women do not take into full account the complexities and intersections of race, class and gender. In addition, Western feminism neglects cultural and historical differences, and is unaware of the potential agency of women of other cultures. African women scholars do not agree with European or American feminists' views either. What is more, they accept reluctantly the term 'feminist' in the African environment. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997a: 12) suggests that the term 'womanism', coined by the novelist Alice Walker, does not have a negative connotation in African context and is able to express women's everyday life concerns.

Summing up, African womanism (including Luo) reinforces that this movement is not supposed to be against men. They do not want to neglect their biological roles: motherhood is still considered a manifestation of women's power. They insist on addressing all the aspects of women's condition rather than focusing on sexual issues. The ultimate aim of womanism is to formulate a holistic ideology which encompasses the empowerment of black women in order to reach global justice. Accordingly, African

women continue to resist external suggestions or pressures, to reconsider their roles and reality in conformity with regional and national levels. In this way they can gradually move away from their traditional gender limitations without distorting the cultural frames. All these tendencies can be observed in Luo society as well.

### 2.3 Changing perspectives on power and empowerment

In the social sciences the concept of power implies both enablement and constraint of human actions. The most usual definition suggests that exercising power means influencing other's behaviour in order to reach some goals. In feminist theory, power is equated with male domination and exploitation. Feminists strive for the same power to eliminate male domination and control over women, without being aware that this power would perpetuate even greater oppression for both genders. bell hooks (2000: 84–90) strongly criticizes this standpoint of radical feminists and offers new perspectives of power. She denies that the only way of female liberation is having economic power in the same social structure and value system. This mode of struggle is viable only for middle-class feminists, yet excludes the poor or non-white women. An individual woman cannot gain power and prestige unless she upholds and supports the same domineering system.

hooks states that even the most oppressed women are able to exercise power. One form of power implies the refusal to accept the definition of reality concerning the weak imposed by a powerful agent. This form of personal power is manifested in resistance, and gives strength to the oppressed. hooks also remarks that feminist ideology encourages women to assume that they are powerless and victims. She urges women to clarify that the power of resistance can be a viable mode for demonstrating their strengths, which is a significant step towards their liberation. (hooks 2000: 92, 95.)

Indeed, the long history of white feminism proves that obtaining power similar to males' may lead to material advantages, the possibility of control over the less powerful, yet is not sufficient for ending patriarchal domination. Consequently, struggling for domineering power is not the right aim for any female communities. This

kind of achievement may provide a sense of individual fulfilment, and have little impact on women's status in society at large. Nancy Hartsock (1981, cited in hooks 2000: 90) emphasizes a new conception of power that involves creativity, ambition, strength, and the ability to act for oneself and for others. This kind of power is life-affirming and gives the sense of fulfilment and accomplishment. Significantly, this interpretation of power does not necessitate the domination of others; energy and achievement are understood as satisfying on their own. This kind of power is much more in conformity with assumed female characteristics like affiliation, succoring and nurturance. She argues that feminist movements have to realize the differences between the two kinds of power. Energy, strength and effective interaction need to be as powerful as power requiring domination.

This feminine power, which is the power of the weak, comes in many forms: it involves submissiveness and dependence, ingratiation and manipulation, collaboration and provision, resistance, assertiveness and even creative agency. These forms of potency can be manifested in many spheres of one's life and experience, including gender experiences and roles, determined by socialization, family and society. They are involved in work and careers which enhances autonomy, yet which often requires outer help. Finally, this power may appear when one is ultimately vulnerable and defenceless facing life's exigencies. It is an intrinsic drive which cannot be hindered by gender or social status.

This kind of power not only better fits women's physical, psychological and emotional conformation but contributes to alleviate the 'war-like' situation escalated by radical feminists, stating that "all men are the enemies of all women" (hooks 2000: 34). This sweeping statement evokes the interpretation that all women are victims and all men are oppressors, which is again a serious generalization. The feminist movement could end the war between males and females by transforming relationships so that instead of deepening hostility and arrogance, mutual deference and cooperation is brought into focus in human interactions. Luo women instinctively seek to achieve mutual trust with men, for instance, by preferring to apply customary land rights instead of state laws.



As Marilyn Frye, an American feminist scholar, contends, the structure of power is considerably challenged by “women-only” meetings or activities. The exclusion of men insinuates that women have control over access; hence it fosters the assumption of power. (Frye: 1983: 104.) According to Temma Kaplan grassroots movements of women are concerned with human rights issues, with the survival of their families, ethnic communities, and with the problems of poor and defenceless people. While unveiling the authorities’ immoral deeds, these women assert their moral superiority, their right to be community activists, to seek justice with power deriving from commonsense notions of human need rather than from official laws. (2001: 192–193.) Within a same kinship Luo women share the daily labour, and co-wives often help each other with domestic chores. In villages, where traditions are still followed, during the initiation period girls are taught about their femininity, sexuality, child-care and about relationships with other people.

Empowerment can be seen as closely related to power, and it has several different senses. When one is under a coercive influence, it activates his/her efforts to start a process of empowerment. When someone has an enabled position it refers to the gained capacity to take action. Thus empowerment is in a developed phase, while having power with others offers a possibility to initiate and build up institutions, activate collectives. Empowerment needs outer help and begins with a provision of information which may alter the perceptions of a person, and when the information is translated into new knowledge the empowerment is in process. A kind of cultural translation may take place when women have chances to meet new ideas, new ways of thinking. The interaction between two or more 'national' traditions is affected by the processes of translation whose articulation requires not only shifting theories but the acceptance of ordinary people. Multiple types of translational identities are produced as a "practice of everyday life" for those groups and individuals who find themselves in new environments.

Since the 1970's many postcolonial theorist and critics, for instance, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, have emphasized the negative rather than positive aspects of colonial and neo-colonial processes and have sought to promote the voices of colonized people. As Elleke Boehmer argues, referring to Bhabha's

keynote essays, colonial discourses as well as identities are imbued with “destabilizing ambivalence” (Boehmer 2006: 355). For Bhabha, similarly to Krishnashwamy (2002), the colonizer’s requirement, and the colonized peoples’ aspiration to refashion themselves in the image of the whites, to become similar to the colonizer, results in hybridization. This not perfect sameness and not absolute otherness (mimicry) entails instability and ambivalence within the colonial consciousness and may distort identities. Yet Bhabha goes further, and his other concern, which is closer to the current problems, is how people getting into urban settings translate and hybridize the urban space when they adopt it. His concept is called “third space” and is described as the ground of cultural interaction and a sphere of incorporation or rejection of particular cultural forms. (Boehmer 2006: 355–356.) On the other hand, from a European’s point of view, the merging cultural boundaries, the mingling cultural practices by which people can adapt themselves to the necessities and opportunities is seen as not only oppressive but positive. It can be an enriching and dynamic course of events which unequivocally provides empowerment.

### 3. REPRESENTATION OF A WOMAN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MACGOYE'S *COMING TO BIRTH* (1986) AND *VICTORIA* (1993)

The novel is a perfect medium for revealing to us the changing rainbow of our living relationships[...] The only morality is to have man true to his manhood, woman to her womanhood, and let the relationship form of itself, in all honour. (D. H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel: 1925.)

#### 3.1 Assumptions, ideology, theme

Lawrence's thoughts hold true for Macgoye's novel *Coming to Birth* to great extent. The whole fiction is imbued with uncompromising and unbiased realism, giving space for both the heroine and her husband to try out their own ways in searching for identity and self-definition in a boisterous social and political context. The manliness and womanhood of theirs are fundamentally defined by the internalised Luo traditions, but it becomes problematic when they meet new experiences. Their relationship is full of constraints, contradictions and dilemmas, owing to the changing circumstances, unaccustomed life situations and novel influences.

The peculiarity of this narrative can be attributed to several crucial factors: firstly the writer's special position as an English-Luo individual enables her to perceive the happenings in Kenyan and Luo society with dual insights. Being an insider an outsider at the same time keeps her in critical position. That simultaneous double perception can be taken as a special gift, because it stimulates constructiveness in her creative work. Her 'in-between' state makes her a citizen of the world, and helps moderate parochial attitudes. Secondly, the given historical period and the place where the reader is taken by the plot of the novel are critical in Kenyan history; the years before Uhuru, (the time of Emergency) and the first fifteen years after independence gave hard times for the whole country. Neither Nairobi nor Luo society could provide a feeling of security at that time.

The historical context is important to the novel because it is a story about an ordinary Luo woman, Paulina, seeking her place in the private and public sphere, and a story of moulding a new nation which is coping with new difficulties. The title *Coming to birth* carries at least three meanings: The first can be understood at the story level, implying the actual birth of the long-awaited baby, placing the heroine in a powerful position. The second meaning may refer to the maturation of the female protagonist, acquiring power by her own efforts. This title can also be interpreted as a metaphorical meaning, with allusion to the birth of Kenyan nation, which gives new opportunity to women for changing their plight.

Macgoye's novel comprises the personal view of the interaction between the individual and the nation. The writer interweaves the historical details in her narration so skilfully that it does not disrupt the main thread of the plot at all. Real political events and political leaders appear in the fiction, creating the illusion of reality, and signifying that she is as concerned with the fate of the new nation as her fictional characters' plights. For instance the arrival of the body of Tom Mboya (a popular Luo party leader murdered in Nairobi) in his homeland for burial is a good opportunity to give a detailed account of the burial, the greatest ceremony in Luo society. At the same time, it is the scene of Paulina's son's death. (CTB 79–84).<sup>1</sup>

The main ideological function of Macgoye's novel is to undermine patriarchal political theory by creating space for the female subject. She has succeeded in declassifying the oppressor-victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and subordination are not mutually exclusive, to show that the oppressed are potential agents who can change their lives and affect others' in radical ways. In many respects this complexity is encompassed by the novel as she disconnects powerlessness and inferiority, portraying the heroine as endowed with strength and wisdom. The writer remodels the victim status tactfully, without highlighting the insurgent character of her heroine, and creates a smooth transition from an oppressive situation into a sphere of deliberate decisions and persistent actions. She does not deny the persistent value of a happy marriage, but at the

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth the novel will be referred to as CTB.

same time she overtly suggests that a modern woman has other opportunities for self-realization. Paulina, who finally reaches a long-desired happy marriage with the blessing of a coming baby, is juxtaposed with an alternative character Amina, who is a successful business woman, and has never been married. When they meet after a long time, and they talk about their lives, they can express all the differences in their worldview with one similar sentence, respectively: “We have learned to take what comes and make the best of it, [Paulina] said. To *make* what comes and to *take* the best of it, answered Amina firmly” (CTB 146). It is clearly illustrated that Paulina’s agency is weaker compared with Amina’s grim determination. That is why it is not a clear-cut feminist novel either in Western feminist terms or in an African feminist context. Because of the writer’s unique background with Western experience, strengthened by devotion to the Luo people, she speaks from a special point of view. It is a female novel somewhere in-between, embracing motherhood, subjectivity, silence, agency, and power, observing the traditional forms of realism combining with Kenyan socio-cultural reality, which still imposes a lot of constraints on the heroine.

It is noteworthy that the most significant male writers of Kenya (Ngugi, Mwangi) represent a development in the portrayal of women. In Ngugi’s earlier writings women are repeatedly subordinated to men and female sexuality is identified in negative terms (Stratton 2002: 175). Even though in his later fictions, like *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977), women characters (Wanja and Nyokabi) are rigidly fitted into the stereotypes of mother or whore, their strength, spirit and self-reliance are outstanding features. They often demonstrate a firmer resolution to act and a deeper understanding of proceedings than their male counterparts. (Boehmer 1980: 147.) Yet it must be noted that these female characters are demonstrated as persons closely related to men, rather than as independent protagonists with free wills and choices. Their central position is emphasized in the light of their biological roles; their power pertains mainly to sexuality or as a potential child bearer. In Ngugi’s novels there is no attempt to dismantle the traditional oppressor-victim patterns of relationships, which often serve as an allegory of the relation of colonizer and colonized.

Macgoye seems to be aware of that the new sets of gender relations must emerge from within rather than be imposed from the outside world. Such new relations will refute the pervasive stereotype emanating from the colonial past appertaining to women's plight, and will prove that these roles are subject to change as culture itself is reshaped by new experience and knowledge. She tries to reject the outdated limitations of indigenous patriarchy and gender roles, yet seeks the solutions within a rational cultural framework vis-à-vis Luo ethnicity. What is important is not whether Paulina, the heroine, can survive her implicit insurrection or might be crushed by it, but the fact that she takes courage and chooses to act in conformity with her personal goals. She refuses wifhood because it does not appease her expectations, but strives for motherhood partly because it is required by her cultural heritage and partly because it would give her personal fulfilment and indulgence.

Paulina's inability to give birth and have children effectively banishes her from the confines of traditional woman's life, yet at the same time it opens a new gate in front of her to gain independence and to search for her new self-awareness and identity. As she hardly knows anything about city life and she feels more secure among her own people she goes back to her Luo village. Her inherited ethnic sense of belonging protects her against the ambiguity sensed in Nairobi, and grants her stability and greater self-confidence. In Nairobi "she felt outside the place where custom could help her" (CTB 9). (It is the place which is called "a third space" by Bhabha.) Although in this home environment she steadily gains more and more capacity to have her own choices and power to change her life, this is the milieu which finally casts her out because of her childlessness, unsettled family life, and because she herself feels isolated there. But the strengths with which she is equipped here, enables her not only to survive in Nairobi but possibly to find fulfilment and happiness in her job and family life.

### 3.1.1 Representation of agency in relation to the heroine's power

In conformity with Luo culture the whole novel is interlocked by the compelling force of migration, which entails both constraints and freedom for the heroine. She leaves her native village to live with her husband in Nairobi, and in this way she gains some

physical space around herself, which influences her behaviour, initiates her development, and later leads to an expansion of her mental space. Throughout the novel the inversion of gender roles can be traced, which starts with the 'reversed migration', where the wife migrates from the city to the countryside to take part in planting and harvesting on her new family's farm.

With the inversion of roles Macgoye contributes significantly to the moulding of an African female literary tradition. According to Stratton, inversion is the basis of male/female character portrayal and a necessary stage in the process of resistance in many fictions of African woman writers. It can be observed also in the writings of the other Luo writer, Grace Ogot's works, where her debasement of the male and elevation of the female subject becomes a salient feature of the narration. (Stratton 2002: 174.)

Marjorie Macgoye moves beyond this stage by dismantling the gender hierarchy and by enabling her female protagonist to have room for her own manoeuvre. Yet in Nairobi this 'room' starts with a locked frightening place in a slum as her new home, where she becomes a victim of her husband's brutal violence right on the third day of their common life after a shocking experience of miscarriage and after having been lost in the huge city. Paulina is completely ignorant, defenceless from the rain of blows and is forced to be silent while her husband batters her severely, shouting his own assumptions about his wife's "sins" (CTB 21–22). The discourse presented here starts with the young wife's natural reactions to seeing her husband after her severe afflictions, and continues with extensive preponderance of the man's words. The verisimilitude of this discourse is hardly conceivable without the reader's knowledge of this particular culture. To alleviate the effect of this taut situation, the narrator addresses the reader with the maximum of overtness, showing prior knowledge of the male character's thoughts and acts, and giving explanation to the narratee. (These statements also imply the assumption that the narratee-reader does not share this knowledge.) Hence the authoritative characterization of the husband is indispensable.

The first help is given to Paulina by a European woman police officer, who speaks Luo, takes her home, and visits her next day with food and medicine, assuming that she has

been beaten. This is the initial step of her empowerment and the support of Europeans remains a constant motif in the novel, yet these people are always unspecified persons and remain in the background, comprising merely the elements of setting. The explanation is provided again with reference to Martin's brutal behaviour in the form of a figurative point of view, uttered by the police officer; it is a source of shame to him to have lost his wife, and the greatest grievance is to lose his potential heir. Thus he would rather leave her to die than let other Luos know about the case or ask for help. He would not lose face by checking her story with white people. After the visit of the police officer "Paulina at once felt comforted." (CTB 22–23.)

In her essays on feminist theory, Marilyn Frye makes some noteworthy comments about abusive brutality. She asserts that the man's outrage places the victim in a life-threatening aversive situation, and it provokes the urgency of the victim's counter-action on her own behalf. Most of the time, it is exhausted by the victim's occasional gratitude when she tries to please the oppressor in order to avoid further ill-treatment. (Frye 1983: 62–63.) In Macgoye's novel the young wife is forced to take a similar counter-action when she almost sustains an unjust beating again. The reason is staggering for an outsider's point of view; there is no water and food at home because Paulina has been locked in the house by her husband for the whole day. In an attempt to please her husband she takes courage and goes to the neighbouring family to borrow some charcoal so that she can provide meal for her man, and this is the first domestic decision made by her. This time the brutality is prevented by the neighbouring women's solidarity; they start to make a noise in front of their door when hearing Martin's rage. (CTB 25.) In these initial situations the heroine is seen as completely vulnerable, equipped only with naivety, dependent on others' protection. Yet women together, although they might be in similar predicaments, are able to exercise power, and challenge the husband's violence.

Paulina's space around herself is steadily enlarging; with the help of the European she can join a sewing class, and she is able to learn small tricks of savings from other women. She can even dig some small plot of land to grow vegetables for the household, and produce some extra money by making clothes to order, satisfying her husband



because these activities are expected from an ideal Luo wife. She is open to absorb everything that “one was supposed to learn and to be interested in.” For these reasons Martin stays close to Paulina; he does not send her home to help with harvesting in the first year of their marriage. He seems proud of her; only the missing baby disturbs the harmony. (CTB 26–30.) Macgoye’s portrayal of her heroine, as a person who is eager to study and is willing to be active in her possible roles, refers to the requirements of a modern society, of the Western feminists’ values on the one hand, and establishes a link to Luo society where importance is accorded to education and multiple productive activities, on the other. Also, these presented values are in harmony with Mama Maria’s (2007) account of Luo education and with Nyberg’s (2004) findings referring to Luo women’s productive roles. Undoubtedly, with these new functions Paulina is inaugurated into the world of development and empowerment.

When the second miscarriage happens Martin is gentle with his wife, putting all the blame on the police who break into their room because of some tribal clash. And this time Paulina is voluntarily silent concealing the truth that she has already been sick before the arrival of the police. (CTB 32.) It is noteworthy that there are different silences in this novel, connected to power or helplessness. By the time of Paulina’s first miscarriage she is silent because, according to her custom, it is not right to speak to a man about a pregnancy unless it is visible. By the second time she deliberately wants to make her husband believe that her failure is only caused by fright. This silence is urged by her appearing finesse, knowing that her inability to bear a child, according to Luo tradition, considerably weakens her position in the family; as Nfah-Abbenyi (1997 b) states, she becomes an inappropriate other. In traditional societies, including Luo, the importance and the value attached to motherhood guarantee a source of power for women.

When they confirm their wedding in church, they feel “progressive and important”. Yet the lack of a baby triggers another wife battering, and Paulina is sent home to work on the farm. Her life in the countryside is depicted very succinctly: all we know is that she works hard, observes the taboos carefully and “the atmosphere of the home was serene.” (CTB 33.) The acceleration of the action, produced by devoting a short segment of the

text to a longer period of events and happenings, implies that the heroine is displaced from an environment which would be right to serve her further development. This serenity is not what she desires. Although she is eager to go back to Nairobi and see her husband, “a scent of strangeness hung about the room [...]” (CTB 34.) Living in a Christian conjugal marriage implies the mutual reverence and the exclusion of polygamy and of divorce, which seems to ease the women’s inferior plight. Nevertheless one single act of swearing is not able to dissolve the bonds of the socialization and internalisation of cultural norms and codes. Because of her childlessness, Paulina loses Martin’s appreciation, and she is confined to turning to the taboos, from which she hopes to gain power.

From that moment numerous hints can be traced in the novel suggesting the estrangement of the couple, and indicating Paulina’s strength and evolving independence. For example, Martin borrows money from Paulina; what is more, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the earnings of his wife. Migration between Nairobi and Gem becomes regular for Paulina. Now the countryside environment does not give her anything to think about and does not yield serenity either. She visits the Homecraft School in Kisumu (centre of Luoland) and she decides to attend this school because she likes its neatness and cleanness which she has always longed for, but in Nairobi her husband cannot afford to set up a hospitable home for them. (CTB 35–40.) Both the reversed migration (the wife from the city to home), and the inverted role of a provider (the wife gives money to the husband) indicate the erosion of the binding customs. At the same time, the emerging new opportunities generate the heroine’s drive for obtaining room for improvement.

This decisive choice made by her alone enables her to gain more power and enlarge her mental space as well. The school means a longer period of separation from her husband, denying his access to his wife and cutting off the flow of benefits that can be considered also as a manifestation of female power. On the other hand, her studies and the certificate attained qualify her to get a good job and become a ‘big person’ who is admired and revered by the village people. Again she gets help from a European leader when her appointment as a club teacher provokes objections among her people;

she is blamed for her childlessness, for her young age, for staying away from her husband, and for being a person without influential relations. All these excuses are brushed aside because in the new society they are not considered impediments to her employment. (CTB 44.)

After taking up a job the focus of Paulina's life changes. She is engaged in teaching local women, she becomes occupied with making her home neat and comfortable. She is free from her husband, and unlike Martin, she does not demand any pledge of faithfulness. She becomes a fully independent woman, but she is still reluctant to get a sewing machine, which is counted as a usual present to console the first wife. It suggests that she still has not given up the hope that their fate will be reunited, partly because there is no place for the unmarried according to custom, and partly because the Christian wedding requires monogamy. (CTB 45–46.) Moreover, her attitude to her husband is in compliance with Nzomo's (1997) opinion who argues that women should build alliances with men rather than generate hostility.

Despite her cherished hope in the year of Uhuru (1963), she hears about Martin's new woman, but she "composes herself and keeps on with her duties" (CTB 52). In the same year she is forced to stay in Kisumu accidentally, and lets herself be seduced by a married man, Simon, with an established family. This is her second determining choice in her life, and her hesitation and self-conviction is depicted in details by the writer. Paulina feels detached and sure of herself when she notices her pregnancy by Simon, who visits her regularly. (CTB 53–68). Immediately afterwards she finishes the relationship with him, saying unfalteringly: "It is what I wanted. Go now." (CTB 68.)

For this act she draws power from Luo custom, in which a woman could seek a child wherever it is possible in order to fulfil her duty as a child bearer and gain appreciation. Hague (1974) asserts that in the case of a husband's illness or of other impediments a Luo wife is allowed to conceive by another man. Paulina was offered the same solution earlier on the farm and felt strong revulsion about it at that time. Hence in this resolve there must be some resentfulness towards Martin, and the courage of a sexually liberated modern woman. The same ambiguity is connoted in the writer's narration

when she states that Pauline does not feel commitment but “a kind of inevitable propriety” and “she could not pretend that she could any longer do without it.” (CTB 54.)

Martin’s response to his wife’s unfaithfulness is fully masculine; he beats both the informant and Paulina, who tries to avoid the blows with the finesse of an independent defensible person. The headman of the local community does not interfere in domestic matters, and this can be understood as an unequivocal sign of the changing culture and custom. On the contrary, Paulina can turn to the European supervisor to ask for a transfer to Kisumu, which enables her to break away with her husband’s kinship from where she has been disowned by Martin. Her natal kinship accepts the separation: they are proud of their ‘big’ family member who has her own house and is able to support them from her regular income. (CTB 56–57). In the case of an arranged marriage, when the couple’s relationship is in crisis, the kin of both sides are entitled to interfere and investigate the case. If it is needed the wife’s family take their daughter back and return the bride price. Since Paulina has already been an independent woman, there is no use intervening: thus they simply accept the situation silently.

The death of her son Okeyo changes her life radically. She cannot stay at her home any more and is glad to sink into the “blessed anonymity” of Nairobi, which was so frightening when she arrived there for the first time. She does not mind stepping back in status and doing domestic work at a Luo MP’s family. This time she feels safer in the city, having a satisfying job and a comfortable home. Her outstanding qualities in organizing family matters nominate her as a ‘general factotum’ rather than a servant. She is often taken to meetings and introduced as a woman who has achieved a balanced and contented life without “the blessing of children.” (CTB 110.)

While she is a successful woman Martin suffers from his failures: he is not able to keep any women in his home and is not able to get a child either. His experience with women proves to him that Paulina is the most perfect person in his life. He starts to visit her and almost unawares moves into Paulina’s home. His wife’s power over him lies in her excellent cooking, her modest dressing, her activity in public matters and her attitude

towards him, implying that she does not want to retain him deliberately. His world starts to be focused on his new home, which is more homely than his earlier places and he accepts the fact that it is provided by his wife in spite of the custom. (CTB 100.)

Paulina's life is more and more involved in the public sphere: she takes care of suffering street boys, tries to organize a protest for releasing the only woman MP, who has been arrested. She is called for an interview but refuses it; she wants to do something really important. She has learnt to take what comes and take advantage of it. (CTB 138–146.) And finally she manages to do something important; she conceives a baby by her husband, causing joy and surprise and regaining the long lost positiveness and mutual trustfulness. (CTB 148.)

What is really important in a woman's life is fully determined by her socio-cultural background, her socialization, her personal knowledge and experiences. All these decisive factors of an individual's existence mould her attitude to life, and, armed with self-awareness, she is able to control her fate and influence others to change their behaviour as well. Ultimately, Macgoye's representation of her heroine does not transgress considerably the Luo cultural frames she lives in. Her unconditional commitment to motherhood under the protection of a confirmed marriage is not only in harmony with her society's norm's expectation, but it supplies her with power, sufficiently enough for her life-contentedness, moderating her further ambitions to be a career woman. In this way, cultural and ethnic identity gives evocative power; it is a means of survival with an endless process of transformation.

### 3.1.2 Portrayal of identity and personality relating to feminism, masculinity and ethnicity

The protagonist's full development as a social agent is closely interconnected with her development as an individual Luo woman, and this process is considerably influenced by her ethnic identity, her husband's masculine character and the new approaches concerning women in the moulding new society. Becoming a personality is a matter of being able to articulate her primary concerns, and to balance and prioritise her social

role and place in terms of these. Diana Petkova argues that individual identity is socially and culturally embedded, and that cultural identity, to some extent, overlaps with ethnic identity, which is inherited and is one of the most stable factors defining the cultural characteristics of an individual (2005: 44–45). Ethnic identity ensures the sense of common roots, language and ancestors, which gives the feeling of stability in a community's life. On the other hand, ethnicity such as being a Luo, consists of a wide range of identities deployed across a shifting and complex social fields: migration, pastoralism, agriculture, female-headed homesteads, scarcity of land etc. Communities reform the rules as they go along and progress. Thus the characteristics and cultural norms of an ethnic group are subject to change as well. An individual's self-identity is greatly influenced by his or her ethnic and cultural sense of belonging. The individual identity is directly related to one's behaviour, personality and mental state.

The road from a closed ethnic community to an open nation state in a global economy reflects the process of modernization, urbanization and movement from the particular to the universal. This process of transformation is even more highlighted in the historical era of nation building in Kenya. The progress entails a gradual erosion of some cultural and ethnic features, those of which are regarded by the community as only hobbling the forces of development. During the period of Uhuru and nation building in Kenya the tribal clashes are frequent, indicating the anxiety of the communities. The same progression and anxiety can be observed in the changes in the characters of both Paulina and her husband, who is partly antagonist and partly ally of the protagonist. Naturally, at the level of individual identity, this process is more complex and subtle than at the level of collective identity. Individuals are subject to more inner and outer influences, inspirations and constraints and their personal experience and knowledge have a great impact on their personality and assumptions. The identity formation is more problematic in the case of Paulina, who is at her adolescent age when she is exposed to the changes of traditional values and circumstances. In depicting her personality the writer demonstrates her intercultural competence. In the narration the heroine's perception of the 'new world' in Nairobi is illustrated with great cultural sensitivity. Although the main character is Paulina, her husband is also portrayed as a complex personality rather than a stereotypical one.

The novel begins with the presentation of Martin as a fully-fledged young man who is a well dressed, educated, employed, married city-dweller, and his future is promising. He waits for Paulina, his impressive woman, at the station but she looks ill and exhausted in a faded dress with a huge bundle on her head and a box in her hand. The meeting brings slight disappointment and long silences from both of them, caused probably by mistrust of the arranged marriage. (CTB 1–2.) Martin’s indigenous masculine identity, emanating from his ethnic background does not allow him to help his sick wife with the luggage (in the past, walking in the jungle, the man had to carry a weapon and be ready to defend his family and animals). Paulina, as she is “trained to take orders” does not insist on going to doctor; what is more, she hardly dares tell her husband about her pregnancy. (CTB 9–11.)

The writer’s narration, which is smoothly woven into the dialogues and shifts from her own authorial voice to the demonstration of her heroes’ perceptual points of view, gives clear clues for their characterisation. She informs the reader about the deep background of ethnic identity and a rich sense of otherness that impact on everything that happens. In critical moments her opinion is sharply expressed, using imperatives to capture the readers’ attention, as in the case of wife battering (CTB 22). At the beginning of their common life they are both in the ‘custody’ of their ethnic customs, and Paulina has to suffer mental, physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband, who methodically wants to change her from a young girl into an ideal wife. However, it is not necessary because “she worked prayed, when she could, observed, remembered and held her place.” (CTB 110.) The male subordination is counter-balanced by female solidarity and the Europeans’ supportive attitude. Both kinds of help make her more competent to formulate her goals and find her way to realize them. At the same time she never forgets about the Luo rituals and taboos, although she relies on them less and less. Her father’s funeral is an exception when she considers it an ill portent that her husband does not come home to sleep with her in her natal place to signify his protection and the continuing of the line. (CTB 65.) Accordingly, when the greatest moment of her life comes, she insists on taboos. (CTB 148.) Her first child’s death has made her hyperconscious of sins: she thinks his loss has been a punishment for being born out of

wedlock, which is an indication of a Christian religious assumption. Her identity is not presented as a definite self-determination but rather multiple or even contradictory awareness that is subject to change within specific circumstances. For Paulina, this is the process of cultural translation introduced by Bhabha (1994).

What is excluded from Macgoye's representation may have significance as well. We do not know anything about Paulina's affection or sentiment towards her husband. We do not have any hints about her attitude to her body and sexuality. Unlike many other Kenyan literary heroines, she has never been a victim of rape or marital rape. All these clues may suggest that in Luo culture, marriage is a compulsory institution and emotions are taboo, but respect is desirable. At the beginning of her married life she thinks that being married is a "history of getting used to things", while according to Martin, a wife should be well trained and able to comfort her husband (CTB 6, 77). Thus neither of them puts any emphasis on the emotional aspect of marriage. The dissenting opinions of the couple about married life clearly reflect the subordinate role of a woman as wife. By the same token, the lack of affection in their relationship refers to the practical purpose of marriage, assumed by traditional societies, including Luo. According to these old values (in villages still held), the main purpose of a marriage, as a basic social institution, is to ensure reproduction within a kinship and maintain the continuity of a tribe. Furthermore, women and children in extended families should provide sufficient labour force for production; for feeding the family and having some surplus, if possible.

Paulina's preference for her career and sense of independence is a sore point in the couple's relationship but Martin is able to handle his wife's commitment to her studies and job, knowing that she is Luo woman equipped with Luo ways of thinking, according which a woman is expected to be an active producer and grower as well. Marjorie Macgoye does not glorify and romanticize motherhood as passionately as African male writers do. Paulina's thoughts about her new role is clearly positioned between the Western and African value system: she objectively realizes that being a mother gives delight, yet as she is a single working woman it places a great burden on



her and does not provide the complete fulfilment she has expected. “She wondered if there was any end to this way of life” (CTB 71).

When she returns to Nairobi she is an individualized independent person who is always showing initiative, ambitious, demanding to grow, ready to help and settle things, while her husband is “tired and disillusioned.” (CTB 112). His masculinity is greatly challenged because he is still without an heir; his new pretty girls have expected at least a car before being burdened with a big family, as Silberschmidt (2001) also refers to some women’s expectation in relation with men’s material wealth. Also, he is disappointed because his career, despite his studies, has hardly changed for the better. Thus he has narrow circumstances instead of creature comforts. Moreover, he is not satisfied with the nation’s political proceedings: his ideal Luo party leader is assassinated and Ngugi is arrested. (CTB 112.)

There is ability and power in Paulina’s world, which makes her more successful than her husband. In this respect the novel has a feminist inclination. Although Paulina declares her independence and her right to choose, she still wants to maintain the relationship with her husband, her child’s father. Her courage and determination is woven into her complex character so subtly that it supplements rather than supplants her inherent humanity and never provokes any suspicion in a reader that she is an enemy of her husband. In this sense the writer conveys the holistic view of the feminism highlighted by African women, and which is manifested in alliance with males rather than against them.

According to Nfah-Abbenyi (1997a: 2), African women writers were excluded from a male oriented literary world for a long time because they were impeded by marriage customs, by lack of opportunity for formal education and by ignorant male criticism. Marjorie Macgoye is one of the outstanding women writers who helped to change this situation in Kenya. Together with Grace Ogot, Stella Njuguna and others she has brought Kenyan women’s plight into the focus of her literary theme, generating growing interest toward this topic both among readers and scholars. By placing female characters in the centre of her representation, and by depicting their everyday life and thoughts

through representing their own perception of reality, Macgoye is able to create a new type of Kenyan-Luo women: they are ready to progress by absorbing new experiences and knowledge, and claim not only an equal, but sometimes a dominating position in their families and society. On the other hand, such a woman is inclined to keep her ethnic values and customs to such an extent that it serves her well-being and comforts. Macgoye skilfully illustrates the process of change in her heroine's physical and mental life, owing to her profound knowledge of both cultures and societies (Western and Luo). African readers may encounter in *Coming to Birth* similar experiences in transitional society, while non-African readers may succeed in displacing stereotypical pictures of black women.

From her literary text it can be concluded that Luo women still live in a double bind: they have to perform their traditional roles, but traditional resources are decreasing and they are expected to undertake modern activities for which support is not unbounded. That is why finally her heroine prefers to seek a peaceful family life with her husband while gradually achieving her personal mission and rejecting ambition. Her achievement in transgressing conventional women's roles, and her husband's acceptance of it, signify their preference for modernity. At the same time, their celebration of motherhood, and the author's personal voice expressing sympathy towards her mother heroine at the end of the novel, indicate the importance of traditional values as well.

### 3.2. Delineation of prostitution as an accepted social role in Macgoye's *Victoria*

Writing about women in Africa, Claire Robertson suggests that colonialism facilitated prostitution. She claims that in towns women were excluded from employment, except for being occupied as maidservants. Thus some women, lacking other possibilities, engaged in prostitution in Kenya too. (1995: 44–65). In the introduction to *The Prostitute in African Literature*, Senkoro argues that many writers in African literature have preferred to avoid the issue of prostitution because it provokes universal condemnation, and is imbued with taboos (1982: xi). On the other hand, exceptions can be found in Kenyan literature, which is abundant in portrayal of prostitutes, especially

in male writers' works, such as Ngugi and Meja Mwangi. The trope has been used to illustrate the male-female power relations of domination and subordination. By the same token, it has served as an allegory for expressing the subjugation of their country. Furthermore, they have tended to represent the prostitute either as a miserable and exploited victim or as an agent of moral corruption and contamination in society, a person who brings moral and physical disaster to all concerned. It is noteworthy how Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* (1984) depicts his whore protagonist: although Wanja becomes a successful prostitute who manages some girls in a brothel and takes part in political resistance, she can never transcend prostitution. She is subject to rape and abuse, and her only power is her irresistible charm to satisfy men. Throughout the novel her dominant image is a victim who is the object of men's desire and enslavement.

This pattern of representation of prostitutes is dismantled by Marjorie Macgoye in *Victoria* (1993). Also she breaks away from the radical feminists' standpoint, such as Kathleen Barry's in *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (1995: 21–23), asserting that the inherent immorality of prostitution destroys the dignity of all women. The oversimplification of this issue is erroneous and misleading because the causes of prostitution are enormously diverse. Macgoye suggests that women who become prostitutes are not always inherently immoral or exploited persons, but they are forced by their circumstances to reinvent their survival strategies in an environment where poverty and famine is increasing and customs are still compelling forces. She rejects the oppressing or corrupting notions of prostitution, and her portrayal implies that it can influence women's life positively. Thus this activity can be a productive career, an economically viable enterprise, providing material essentials for women in need. Accordingly, women like Macgoye's protagonist, Victoria, are able to stabilise their existence and to liberate themselves.

Not only the story itself but the narrative devices used by Macgoye show that prostitution in Victoria's life has only been an episode, and she abandons that way of life as soon as she has enough money to open a small shop in Nairobi. Half of the story is unfolded in flashbacks. A retrospective narration informs the reader about those years when the heroine engaged in serving men, and at the same time invites the narratee to

speculate along with the heroine on the issues touched upon in the story. All these reminiscent thoughts are evoked by some actual accidental happenings in her present life, ensuring a smooth transition between present and past. Besides, these coincidences may enhance the suggestion both in the reader's and Victoria's mind that these events from the past have already faded away in her consciousness, making the bad memories obscure. For instance, a storm reminds her the similar stormy night when she became the head of the brothel in Kisumu. Other memories are generated when overhearing a quarrel between a man and a whore in the street. (Vic. 41, 59).<sup>2</sup>

Victoria's recollection is conveyed by an omniscient narrator in the third person. The opening pages of the novel picture her as a relatively well-to-do business woman, who bears the respect of her family and customers. "She glowed with well-being" (Vic. 3). Her actual social position which unequivocally implies power, is juxtaposed with her former situation in the brothel, and the result is opposite to what one might expect: in her memory those years are apprehended as the time of her agency when she "used" men, and refers to her past as "the days of her power" (Vic. 59). Power here means not only the ability to attract men but her skill in extracting money from them. The verb "used" also gives a hint that she does not consider her role inferior to men. Foucault argues that sexuality is an important means of maintaining power over people, also a means of acquiring knowledge of others and oneself (quoted in Horrocks 1997: 97).

There is another aspect of power represented in the novella: Victoria meets influential Luo politicians, who need help and want to take refuge from persecution, and the brothel is suitable for conveying messages, and hiding people. These acts demonstrate that she is conscious of the fate of her people and community and is willing even to take risks to help them. In addition, she is "the eyes and ears of a whole urban district" possessing all important information. (Vic.58.) Yet she experiences the strongest sense of potency when her pregnancy, though out of wedlock, becomes obvious (Vic. 43). Unlike during her first pregnancy, when she is in despair that she brings shame to her old husband and kin by delivering a fair-haired baby, now she anticipates "new powers

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth the novella will be referred to as Vic.

and possibilities”, and starts to live with complete deliberation (Vic. 43.) She decides to pay back her bride price, so her first savings go back to her husband’s family, ensuring her independence. She prefers to remain in the brothel, as “[to] be wanted was a pleasure. To draw from Sara the cash [...] was a delight. Perhaps [...] she was going to be a better malaya [whore] than a wife” (Vic. 24, 28). Her economic power redefines her position in a subordinated gender relation and moves her away from marginalization enabling her to find her final place in the business sphere.

Macgoye subverts the perception of prostitution as a source of evil and tries to show a more human side of it. For that she avoids describing violent scenes or vulgar speech, and uses euphemistic language instead. For instance, referring to the place she calls it a “house of pleasure” (Vic. 65). With references to having sex, instead of mentioning the actions bluntly, she uses expressions like “dealing with a client”, “men came to them” (Vic. 24–25). In her work the nurturing and fostering roles are emphasized. This protective use of language disguises the insulting and dark aspects of this activity, ensuring that the reader has no reason to see Victoria either as a wicked or a victimized person. On the other hand, a male character’s speech in Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Roads* (1976) is blunt and vulgar when he says: “will you screw with me for lunch...” (Mwangi: 2001: 11). Likewise he describes his female characters as being “big-arsed” when they walk around “on sale” (Mwangi 2001: 118). These utterances convey the repulsive side of prostitution, stressing that a female body is a commodity which can be an object of a bargain.

Victoria, as a rebellious woman, regards herself in her arranged marriage as a similar commodity, and she refuses to stay in wedlock as a second wife. In the brothel her personality matures, and her mental and physical well-being improves, since she is always “handsome and quick-witted” and has “a capacity for dealing with people [...] and a good head for organizing” (Vic. 58, 45). Her cognitive and emotional potential is augmented as well: she learns to read and write and picks up some English and Swahili from her clients. Even the touch of feeling of affection gains upon her in a figure of a European man, with whom she goes to live for a while. Later her motherhood

consolidates her status as an accepted leader of the house. These events and happenings enrich her personality, indicating that she is on the right path towards her self-realization, towards her ultimate position in society. Her name Victoria, which is given by a missionary teacher to her, also carries the meaning of her personal triumph over the difficulties imposed on her in her early years. Similarly, according to Mama Maria (2007), in Luo culture a great significance is accorded to the name of a newborn baby. Every name has a special meaning with reference to the time and place or the position of the sun when the baby was delivered. Thus as Luo believe, the name is closely connected to the bearer's personality features. Victoria's original name is Abiero, meaning that she was born together with the placenta. (Kageno Worldwide Inc.: 2007.) According to Hungarian folk belief, it brings luck for the baby in his or her whole life. There is no information available with reference to Luo belief, but supposedly, it has a similar meaning there too. This is also clear evidence for Macgoye's extensive knowledge of her chosen ethnic group. Furthermore, this name might be an allusion to her homeland situated near Lake Victoria, which reminds her of her origins and unfortunate events in her life. (It will be discussed in the next section.)

Macgoye's portrayal of Victoria as a prostitute through continuous flashbacks gives the opportunity for her heroine to evaluate her past and survey her achievements. Her attitude is similar to Paulina's outlook on life in *Coming to Birth*: she takes what comes and tries to make the best of it. Customs and poverty are compelling forces in her life, and once one deviates from the norm imposed by tradition, it is impossible to 'go home again'. (A malaya cannot ever go home.) In her eyes this 'career' she embarked upon, is not a mere means of survival, but a means of power and empowerment, with which she transcends her marginalized position. It is a non-violent but effective way of counterbalancing male domination. This ideology matches the holistic views of feminism, implying that women should preserve their womanliness and not turn against males, as Nzomo (1997) argues as well.

Although Macgoye's representation of a prostitute conveys the impression that her heroine is comfortable with her plight, it can be understood as a criticism of the colonial and post-colonial eras in Luo society. It implies that the road to development and the

way of finding a woman's right place and emancipation in society may lead via prostitution. This role model, however lifelike, cannot be recommended as one to follow. The ageing Victoria remarks at the end of the novel: "The more men, the more you have to depend on yourself [...] One makes oneself a life with what is left" (Vic. 95). This time her utterance sounds more pessimistic than before. These comments of hers unmask so far hidden ambivalences and call upon the reader to ponder over multiple constraints and the viable solutions (that are left) in Luo women's lives.

### 3.2.1 Encounters of past and present in Victoria's life

While Victoria's 'decision' (with no other choice left) to stay in the brothel cuts her off from her people and ethnic identity, her unknown grandson Owiti's unexpected appearance in Nairobi forces her to face the past: "Owiti imposing memories on her" (Vic. 59). Facing the past as a prostitute does not affect her distressingly, as it was only a source of money, but the awareness of having been a failed mother causes her anxiety, and overwhelms her with gloominess. The writer treats her heroine with great sympathy and understanding, and this thread of the events is handled with delay and a gap in the plot. With these devices she holds the reader in suspense, and avoids subjecting her protagonist to a consciousness of guilt, and to a loss of her powerful image. On the other hand, this past-oriented delay seems perfectly natural because Victoria's past is narrated with limited omniscience, focusing merely on her own reminiscences. In this way the possibility is given to the narrator to reject the events, fraught with disturbing circumstances. According to her memories, she left her baby in the mission hospital because she was convinced that she had to escape, and the child would not survive. At the age of seventeen she was "desperately limited in experience" [...] and "had no chance of escaping with [the child]" (Vic. 20).

When a young man turns up in her shop, at the beginning of the actual story-line, neither Victoria nor the reader knows that he is her grandson, the son of her abandoned daughter. From that point until the end of the novel the reader gets vague clues, alluding to the probability of their close relationship. For instance, the boy says on his arrival: "[My]

purpose in coming was not to confuse you but to remind you of things” (Vic.7). Only the boy knows the truth which gradually becomes clear in Victoria’s mind too, but it is revealed for the family in the last moment of her life. Concealing that grievous secret of hers, which could have been a reason for reproaches, she keeps her dignity and carries authority in her shop and family.

She is involved in both setbacks and reassuring encounters with people when she goes back to Gem (the place of her marital family) to take part in her former teacher’s funeral. In the market she comes across a beggar, a “female creature of indeterminate age”, who stares at her fine clothes (Vic. 83). Knowing the custom, she has no doubt that the woman is an outcast, returned from a marriage or she was an unwanted baby. This shocking experience results in her having a twinge of conscience and as redemption she gives her an unusually large amount of money, provoking the others’ envy around her. She feels striking ambivalence: she is a stranger, a rich visitor and a wretched victim of her past who still belongs there. (Vic. 83). The other meeting reminds her of the time spent in the whorehouse and brings her a pleasant surprise. The wife of the exiled politician asks her forgiveness because in the old days she condemned her and the house, not knowing that it was more than a place of pleasure. Later she has realized that Victoria helped her husband and many other Luo people. (Vic. 66). Macgoye highlights her heroine’s power not only through the portrayal of a wealthy woman but also in the way her generous acts entitle her to gain others’ esteem. Generosity and solidarity have a great significance in Luo culture; they help to keep connections even in a big city and help to preserve one’s cultural roots in a multicultural environment.

Despite her strengths and confidence, showed the outside world, her inner thoughts do not let her be relieved from Owiti’s arrival. Towards an incident (a baby is purposely left in her nephew’s taxi) reminds her of her own similar act in the hospital. As a compensation of her former default, she looks after the child with special care and spends a sleepless night with brooding, after having taken the baby to the police station. (Vic. 15–20.) From Owiti’s account she is informed that in her old husband’s homestead there was an orphan girl Damar/Aoko, meaning ‘born outside the homestead’, who got pregnant at her young age out of a wedlock, and died after her childbirth. Thus Owiti



himself grew up as an orphan too, absorbed by the extended family which is an accepted custom in Luo culture. In the face of these details, Victoria, still keeps believing (or pretending) that she helps the boy by offering him a job only because he is Luo, as solidarity among them is natural, and it is “below her dignity” to turn the boy adrift. (Vic. 8).

Although she is ill, to get the final evidence of Owiti’s origins, she travels far to a leprosy hospital to visit Atieno, who was a friend of Damar and looked after Owiti too. Here one sentence is enough from Atieno: “[Damar] was tall and quite *fair*” (my italics) (Vic. 94). Afterwards their dialogue disintegrates because of their dissenting interests. Victoria immediately changes the topic, being bewildered by what she hears and turning her attention to the sick Atieno: “And how are you getting on with your treatment?” And the answer: “They beat her a lot because of getting the baby” (Vic. 94). Atieno continues to talk about Damar’s sufferings, and Victoria responds: “And will you be able to go home soon?” (Vic. 94). These details are so painful for a mother that she refuses to follow Atieno’s thoughts. After that journey she makes a withdrawal of her business and delegates most of the work to James (her nephew) and Owiti/Lucas. Soon she has to go to the hospital, where her life ends in the presence of her family. Here she confesses to having another grandson Owiti, and includes him her last will, which moves him to tears. (Vic. 107.) Victoria’s illustrated way of conversation gives another proof of her strong character and power to self-control. She does not allow herself to plunge into self-pity; she immediately shifts her attention to the other person who needs consolation and encouragement. Knowing that she has an adult grandson provides her with a sense of positiveness, as according to Hauge (1974), in Luo society it is a son’s or grandson’s duty to take care of the old parents.

It is noteworthy how the heroine’s name changes throughout the novel, indicating her sense of belonging and the judgements of other people. In Nairobi she is known as Victoria. This name was given to her by a priest in the mission hospital before Damar’s birth. From that moment “Abiero was dead” (Vic. 19). She feels herself an independent self-providing woman. In the brothel she has to realize that her old self is gone for ever together with her lost home: “Abiero’s surviving spirit was laid. Victoria took charge”

(Vic. 27). This name is attributed to a modern person; a ‘product’ of a nation state where an individual’s ethnic identity is tarnished. Moreover, its literal meaning denotes forcefulness. At first Owiti addresses her as ‘Nyar-Kano’, referring to her place of birth. This is the most neutral name because one’s origin is incontrovertible. She introduces herself as ‘Min Akinyi’, stressing that she is a mother. This form conveys the most powerful status in Luo society, and the woman Victoria prefers to use that. Owiti is the person who stimulates her to build the bridge between her new life and her roots, instead of estrangement. Before her death, when she declares her testament, she deliberately calls herself Abiero again, refusing the priest’s suggestion. She dies with a vision of her homeland. (Vic. 107.) Finally Abiero wins over Victoria; finally Abiero wins back her old identity, and she can go home.

### 3.2.2 Agency versus compelling forces

Victoria’s youth is fraught with customary obligations and accidental events followed by their unavoidable effects. At this stage of her life her agency is not manifested in the story; she is subject to others’ will and her ignorance leaves her adrift. Her father arranges her marriage to an old man as a co-wife because in their home there is poverty and famine. There is no other choice since the young men are far away “in search of work”. (Vic. 10.) These severe circumstances are told by the narrator, this time excluding the protagonist’s point of view. Here there is no place for emotion, as her parents are guided by custom and their common sense and wisdom as well. Accordingly, her new life is unhappy; she is unable to conceive a baby and starts an affair with a young man who is not Luo. The pregnancy sets her a trap because her co-wives know that the father of the baby cannot be Ochiambo, the old husband. On the other hand, she does not want to stay in that marriage, so she leaves the homestead before her labour begins. At that point the pressure imposed on her concurs with her vague decision. Out of fear of the unknown, and because they want her to study she escapes from the mission too. These are her only impulsive, misguided decisions. Up to the time of her failed motherhood Victoria’s life is made up of unfortunate sequences of cause and effect. A real turning-point comes into her life when she stays at the brothel, and makes decisions with deliberation. Her first aim is to get a handbag, a petticoat and “inexplicitly at the back of her mind, a baby...” (Vic.

27). Due to her strength and ambition, her initial expectations are considerably exceeded. In the retrospective narration her chances and possibilities are surveyed and found limited, yet finally she considers herself “lucky” and “brave”, as now she is “an important person with a shop of her own...” (Vic. 18).

Later, when she becomes head of the house, she reaches a form of female autonomy and full agency, which she continues practicing as a business woman and as head of her family, comprising James her nephew, whose family is away in their village, Joyce, a young servant whose schooling is paid for by her, and Owiti whose status is ambiguous till the end of the novel, yet he gets a decent wage and accommodation from her. Even in the huge city of Nairobi she finds a way to serve not only her family but the whole Luo community as well. Naturally, she gives financial aid to her natal kinship in Kano; pays school fees and provides food in needy times. In this way she takes the role of a male family member whose duty is to support his extended family if he gets a well-paid job. (Hauge 1977). She helps people to get ‘clean’ documents for taking up a job and she tries to enable her former teacher (now a politician), who is in exile for political reasons, to be reconnected to his family. She visits the leprosy hospital (although she was taught to be afraid of that illness), and lends a helping hand and gives encouragement to one of her former family members. (Vic. 66, 95.) She is a woman who is never tired to serve others and finds fulfilment in supplying benefits. She instinctively comprehends her daily challenges and mobilises her inner strength to cope with them within the scope of possibilities defined by her womanliness in a Kenyan context.

### 3.2.3 Elements of tradition and modernity in Kenyan society through Victoria’s eyes

One of the most important characteristics of Kenyan/Luo experience is the fact that this country, similarly to other African societies, exists in a state of flux between modernity and tradition. In this context, traditional practices are not quite extinct still and modern ways are not quite established yet. It is a great dilemma which Kenyan people with their different ethnic identities have to face: should they follow the uni-linear mode of modernization imposed on them by the West, or should they find their own unique ways of further development, applicable in a Kenyan context? Evidently Kenyan leaders prefer

to opt for the latter. But defining what to absorb from the west and what to preserve from tradition, and how to alter internalized values and customs, is impossible by leaders, by laws and regulations. Cultural and behavioural transformations cannot take place without the acceptance of peoples, and cannot happen overnight.

Marjorie Macgoye has the privilege of being a member of both a traditional society and a new nation, being moulded in the postcolonial period in Kenya. In addition, her roots are in the West, which enables her to have a special insight into this issue. In this novel, modernity and its impact on an individual's life are mediated by the perceptions of her protagonist, who has experiences and memories from her childhood in the 1930's up to her death (the 1980's) in Kenyan society. According to Macgoye's representation, tradition and modernity are not necessarily binary opposites. They can coexist in one's everyday life. One can lead a life absorbing new knowledge and preserving old traditions at the same time. Once one can be a victim of modernity, but other time, possibly, advantage is gained by practicing old customs. A favourable balance or a preponderance of one of the elements can be approved or rejected in accordance with the achievements of the individuals and communities. Being in Bhabha's third space, one is exposed to cultural interactions, which might result in ambivalence, according to Boehmer (2006), yet it might entail empowerment as well. In the case of Victoria and her family, both occurrences can be observed. For instance, Victoria cannot be married to a young Luo man because most of them migrate to earn money (Vic 10). But for her nephew, migration is still advantageous because he can provide more for his two wives and their children if they remain in their homeland (Vic. 13).

There is a remarkable difference between colonial innovations, introduced by the West, and postcolonial modern times, as illustrated in the narration. For the young Victoria almost everything that she encounters looks strange while searching for her new ways of life. She can hardly understand that a woman in her fifties is not married and has no child. She finds it hard to believe that those men who speak different languages belong to the same country. She admires inventions such as watches, telephones and electricity. (Vic. 24–25). Evidently, being a town prostitute does not constitute Luo cultural practice either; this is the result of the introduction of a cash economy, replacing the interchange

of goods. That is why, when the first man comes to her, she is astonished and sees it as a kind of mistake. Her cultural 'conditioning' helps her to overcome her reluctance; as she has been married, she is taught to submit dutifully. (Vic. 24).

There is abundant evidence that the young Victoria finds the old customs more detrimental to her life than the prospects promised by the new ways. The retrospective narration informs the reader how intolerable her married life is (although she is sent there in the hope of a better life). In polygamy sources livelihood are more limited, and she has to rely on the small plot of land provided by her husband; carrying water and wood exhausts her too. The ageing Victoria regards the possibility of living in Gem again as real and acceptable since the circumstances have considerably improved because the drudgery of rural life has been lightened. (Vic. 83). The young Victoria is almost taken back to her native village before the tribunal of elders by her brothers because she does not want to go back to her husband and cannot name a new husband who is willing to pay a full bride price. (Vic. 29).

Nether her subordinate role in marriage nor her parental family's oppressive intrusion is acceptable to her, and thus lacking other possibilities, she prefers to live in the whorehouse. Macgoye tacitly underlines the importance of independence by the young Victoria's refusal to go back to her kin. On the other hand, by presenting the old Victoria's turn of mind, she is careful not to blame the sacred institution of marriage, which may not be inherently problematic, yet seems so in the given circumstances (too old a man, poor harvests). As a youngster, Victoria resists and rebels against the yoke of tradition, but in her last years she feels an emotional void in her life, despite her economic success.

In Nairobi Victoria is satisfied to see that "the line between men and women is getting rubbed out" (Vic. 15). Her daughter, Lois is happily married to a detective inspector with two sons and has got a high school education. Lois is a modern woman; she does not recognize her husband's first wife as a co-wife, and according to her, these days "marriage is for good and all" (Vic. 9). She modelled her life-style from "the fashionable monthlies with a good deal of success" (Vic. 89). Due to her education, she can carry her

points and manage her life better than her mother did in her youth. She makes some suggestions about increasing sales in the shop, and arranges her mother's medical treatment in the hospital. In spite of Lois's education, Victoria thinks that her daughter does not have the ability to radiate feminine power. It implies that for an ideal woman a good education should go together with womanliness. In the name of modernity a woman must not let fade away her biologically grounded nature. Modernity has brought new values, which "respect the skills that make money more than those that make comfort" (Vic. 62). It indicates that the influence of the Western ideas urges some women of the younger generation to take over masculine values.

In her last years Victoria is portrayed as a woman who tries to find balance in her life; the importance of money-making decreases, and her family is preferred. She wants to find her way back to her European lover and to God by reading the Bible and spending more time with saved people. She also reads books about Luo history and customs with great interest. Her origins and spirituality become central in her life. By the end of her life, possessing a life-time's experience, she is spiritually calm enough to guard her culture and roots, one of the sources of life force that stabilizes one's identity, as Petkova (2005) argues. In the light of her experience, tradition and modernity should promote and complement each other. Both can be a source of power in a woman's life. Despite her fault, committed as an ignorant youngster, her achievements and agency can be approved and celebrated in dealing with contextual realities evident in Kenyan society. In Macgoye's portrayal she becomes a model of the heroic and truly liberated woman, who pays a high price for that liberation.

#### 4. PORTRAYAL OF “IN-BETWEENNESS” AND RESISTANCE IN *THE MISSING LINKS*

Tobias Otieno’s conveys his perception of world of modernity and tradition, of urban and rural circumstances, existing side by side with women who try to resist the still oppressive patriarchy and masculine domination. The way these women are represented by the author, striving for the optimal solutions of decisive questions in their lives within a given cultural frames, is a reminder of Homi Bhabha’s epitome of newness and cultural translation:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with "newness" that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space that, innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (Bhabha 1994: 7).

Like in Bhabha’s third space, there is ongoing revision and renewal of cultural practices, norms, values and identities enunciated by the writer’s representation throughout the novel.

##### 4.1 Ideology and theme: Gender relations in transition

Women are central in the explorations and interpretations of narratives dealing with family relations in contemporary Kenyan literature. Gender relations have gone through profound changes in the last three decades. A number of scholars have pointed out that ‘public’ anxieties concerning social change tend to be focused on women and sexuality (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, Goddard 2000, Silberschmidt 2001, Stokes 1994). The current social changes, resulting from modernity erode the men’s traditional sense of authority as Silberschmidt (2001) and Nyberg (2004) in their fieldwork (presented in Chapter 2) have found. At the same time, they try to find new channels for the manifestation of their masculinity. Also, there is a widespread public concern that modernization has entailed moral decay in general, and especially has increased the number of teenage pregnancies and immoral sexual liaisons. For these occurrences often Western influences (including the sexual revolution of 1960’s) are blamed.

The novel tells the story of a young woman Nyakure, who falls in love with a Luo man, and has to terminate her studies because of her unexpected pregnancy. At the beginning of their 'common life' she stays at her mother-in-law's homestead in a remote Luo village, where she feels that she is displaced and despised by the local people. Besides her loneliness, taboos, superstitions, harsh conditions and her son's illness make her daily life difficult there. Finally, when the couple live in cohabitation in Nairobi, their expectations with respect to their common life appear to be different: several years later, Obanjo the 'husband' misses a passionate lover in his life, so he starts a secret relationship with a former prostitute, and later takes her as a second wife. In the city Nyakure has an inner drive to progress, and wants to keep her family's integrity, but she is completely dependent on her husband, who has different ambitions. She wants to maintain her position as a wife and mother, but she tries to control and resist (as hooks suggests) the "definition of reality", created by Obanjo. It seems that Nyakure's difficulties are mainly caused by Obanjo's masculine values, but under the surface her problems are more intricate: she has "missing links" (as the title says) in her life, which prevent her from reaching wholeness and happiness. In fact, they both stand on an unstable ground (in a third space) from where they should choose the right direction to find the link between their traditional practices and the new, untried ways of life. They attempt to draw from both their ethnic and imported norms and values, but this 'mixture' is not in harmony with their mutual needs. Consequently, their cultural translation leads to ambiguity and distortion of identities as both Boehmer's (2006) and Krisnashwamy (2002) refer to hybrid individuals.

The writer addresses the conflicts that arise when modernization clashes with traditions in troubled times and places in the history of expanding capitalism. The main characters' in-betweenness, manifested in the effect of Western influences and of local traditions, and the female protagonist's dislocation have a great impact on her individual identity. The writer unfolds a story where a young couple's marriage plunges into a juncture because the values of modern times and traditionalism are deployed mistakenly. The story itself is focalised mainly on female perspectives, yet the male hero's thoughts and emotions are also unfolded. Evidently, modernity opens up new options for Kenyan women, but at the same time it creates fissures between those new models and old ones. Otieno juxtaposes a



positive female character and an archetypal woman figure who is clearly meant to be perceived as immoral. The woman's awareness of the central role sexuality plays in her life may give a woman strong power and provides a means of resistance, yet this power can be manipulative and destructive as well.

The plot of Otieno's fiction takes place in the 1970's when the world tendency with respect to family formation was approaching the pluralistic family type. According to Ang'awa, in that pluralism there is no demand for an ideal family: the traditional nuclear family in an urban setting is only one alternative among others, including cohabitation, single parents, re-marriage, gay and lesbian couples (Ang'awa (2007)). In Kenya the movement from rural areas to big towns generated the disintegration of the stable institution of extended families. In Luo society it was an even more prevalent tendency because of their traditional custom of migration. Among the Luo people polygamy is still an accepted and legal form of family life, but in urban circumstances it is more problematic because a traditional homestead cannot be established there. It is the fundamental reason for the crisis of the couple's cohabitation in Otieno's novel. Still, structures of the old times and traditional village values provide a moral model for how family issues should be arranged and how gender relations should be settled. For many young people, the village and the family living in a village is the place of socialization, as Walby (1990) and Njuguna (2000) argue. Nonetheless, the traditional notions of marriage, family and kinship in a modern urbanized environment are subject to either evolution into more viable forms or to complete abandonment. These changes in the status and mentality of a Kenyan woman whose value remodelling is in process, are mediated and affirmed in the narration. For instance, Nyakure's position in her relationship is unstable because she is not married 'properly', and lacking income, she is not independent either. She feels that her status and standard of living is threatened by another woman. These problems would not emerge in a traditional Luo homestead, but she definitely prefers to live in the city, and despite her mother-in-law's suggestion, she does not visit the village to take care of her hut.

#### 4.2 Breaking boundaries: 'marriage' in a new manner

In a transitional period of society, youngsters encountering novelty and seeking modern lifestyles are inclined to engage in relationships based on love. Otieno, belonging to the younger generation of writers, also challenges the institution of the traditional arranged marriage and places his heroine in a love relationship. Nyakure/Christine, as a high school student, enjoys individual freedom in the city and initiates a date with a Luo boy studying in Nairobi too. At the beginning of their relationship she takes the lead confidently, while the boy, Obanjo, is afraid of being turned aside. Her active role in developing the romance is emphasized (Otieno 2001: 15). Nyakure's untimely pregnancy gives her life a new direction.

Early pregnancies are prevailing elements of postcolonial Kenyan novels, yet the causes differ. In Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1984) Wanja is seduced, being almost a child; in Njuguna's *Labyrinth* (2000) Waringa is raped by her teacher; in Macgoye's *Murder in Majengo* (1993) Victoria's daughter, Lois, wants material benefits from her rich partner. Nyakure's pregnancy, for the first time, is a result of her flattering power, their mutual affection and desire. In most cases, the girls' unexpected motherhood changes their lives considerably; it terminates their studies and hinders their future plans. In a modern society without education, their prospects for finding their satisfying roles besides family obligations are limited. Nyakure gains some power as a mother in a family tie, but loses her chance to be empowered as an individual woman. She would need a proper education, but her untimely motherhood prevents it. Therefore she cannot contribute to the family's income and cannot gain real autonomy in her nuclear family. Being a mother in an urban setting is no longer a sufficient condition to stabilise one's existence and position in marriage.

Both extended and polygamous families in urban settings also differ from the rural because they cannot constitute a coherent production unit. In cities polygamous cohabitation means that resources are put together and the head of the household controls and distributes them. Generally, the same income has to be divided into more parts, which endangers the family's former standard of living. Nyakure perceives this problem in a similar way: “[w]hy, for heaven's sake, be a polygamist if you are incapable of keeping

two wives?" (TML 157).<sup>3</sup> An orphaned young relative from the husband's family who needs support (a foster child), like Akeyo in Otieno's fiction, usually lives with them and helps with the household chores. In towns, there is less workload to share and conflicts and rivalry between women are more likely to occur. Consequently, women's disapproval of polygamy is more likely in urban settings, as in this novel.

The relationship of Obanjo and Nyakure is encumbered with multiple difficulties. They start with a secret and passionate engagement, and then continue living separately because of Obanjo's studies. During her pregnancy Nyakura is confined to staying at her mother-in-law's in a village where the conditions are extremely hard. Later Obanjo is able to establish a location in the city and they move together. Meanwhile their relationship is overwhelmed with mistrust because of Obanjo's lover. The husband, driven by passion, decides to bring home the woman as a second wife. The rivalry and hatred reaches its escalation in violence between the couple, and later the co-wives. Finally Nyakure, the first wife, has to leave the house. Thus de facto the couple ends up with divorce. Moreover, the second wife, obtaining Obanjo's property with a trick, disappears from his life unexpectedly.

Otieno puts a different slant on women's position in gender relations from that of Macgoye's. In this story there is no 'happy end'; nobody can win except for Linda, the second wife, who appears to be a criminal. Nyakure's effort to overcome the hardships of her marriage remains fruitless, although she is ready to accept compromises. Obanjo is not successful either, and is also punished because of his maltreating and betraying her wife. His tragedy is exposed as an anticipated nemesis for his lust and gullibility. Unlike Macgoye's, Otieno's message is not optimistic; his major concern is the displacement of half-educated women who do not already fit into rural settings, but cannot accommodate themselves to the completely new conditions of city life either. The same inner conflicts are manifested in the husband's behaviour: when he is not satisfied with his modern marriage he resorts to customary ways of living and tries to draw on it. At first Nyakure admits that taking a second wife is "perfectly within his [Obanjo's] rights" (TML 100).

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<sup>3</sup> Henceforth the novel will be referred to as TML.

She just wants to have a say in it, as other first wives in her village do. Obanjo refuses that because the purpose of his second marriage is not the same as in the village (to have more children and more working hands). His intrinsic argument for the second woman is that he wants more sensual pleasures. As he formulates it to himself, Nyakure is “cold and frigid” but Linda is “warm and responsive” (TML 135). Accordingly, the polygamous cohabitation in urban settings has another additional meaning.

The writer leaves the question open, whether they are able to live together again or not. Both of them are seriously wounded while they are trying to establish their contented life in a modern manner. In their case, mixing modern and traditional values leads to a disaster. First of all, their marriage is not valid either in the customary sense or legally, not to mention the church’s point of view. Nyakure feels uneasiness about it. She often broods about their unstable cohabitation; “No bride price, no marriage certificate, no witness of any kind of ceremony” (TML 130). In Luo culture, priority is not given to a civil wedding. A marriage has to be valid in the eyes of the kin and local community, with the bride price paid. In urban areas people prefer cohabitation, (as Silberschmidt (2001) claims in her fieldwork), without formal marriage procedure. By the same token Nyakure can be regarded as a modern woman with respect to her cohabitation, yet inwardly it causes her anxiety; following the tradition and being properly married, would provide her greater confidence, especially when she should accept a co-wife. Thus their relationship under the surface is fraught with contradictions and encompasses the unknown and untried realities of city life.

#### 4.3 A woman of many worlds

For Otieno, a process of cultural translation does not mean a radical reorganization of women’s traditional roles or a complete change of their identities. For him, it implies a process of rethinking, a conscious evaluation of their current plight, enabling them to establish a sense of self-esteem, which is essential for them to define where to belong and what to reject. For his heroine, Nyakure, it involves realizing her dissatisfaction with her life as a woman and her realizing the lack of others’ recognition of her worth. Yet the whole novel is intertwined with her uncertainty and unanswered questions about what is

missing in her life. Although her agency is developing steadily while she is speculating on strategies, her occasional resistance to her husband's masculine subordinating ambitions is proved insufficient to gain her an emancipated position in the family.

The writer does not follow his heroine's fate till she can find her true self and her sense of belonging may take a more definite shape. For preference, the process of quest, the procedure of 'processing' her experiences (the translation of culture) is focused on. Her life is represented in a state of turmoil with her evolving identity. She knows better what to refuse than what to embrace: she definitely hates her husband's remote village because she cannot attain the recognition of the villagers as a stranger (she is not a Luo), and finds herself an 'outcast'. She is educated but only half-educated, and therefore her cognitive knowledge is not enough to refute the taboos and superstitions, which prevail over the villagers' everyday lives and attitudes. In her young age she becomes a woman of many worlds but none of them is really hers. She was born in a Bantu family but torn from her parents very early because of her studies. Her time in the city as a student does not last long because of her pregnancy. Her troublesome life among the Luo people is far from providing the sense of belonging. Her only hope is the city with its new challenges and opportunities. She would like to belong there. She would like to forget about "cockroaches" and "the back-biting from the disagreeable Odendo people" (TML 69). The more she wishes to settle down in Nairobi and have a "constant money supply" (TML 69).

Nyakure provides an example of Homi Bhabha's 'unhomed' postcolonial woman. This term refers to both social and psychological dislocation. It is not the same as homelessness, because in a physical sense she lives in a village called Odendo, yet figuratively she occupies an intermediary space. In Bhabha's usage it is called the 'third space', which makes it difficult for a subject to know where she belongs socially and culturally. The protagonist's first displacement in the village is depicted as a subject who is culturally marginal to the majority of others in geographical proximity. Her feeling of dislocation is enhanced by illustrating her physical environment as a repulsive setting; she has to live in her mother-in-law's kitchen, which is full of "ants, cockroaches, rats, chickens cats, [...]" (TML 21). Her hopeless combat with these animals is pictured in

detail and reaches its climax in a story about a villager who has been eaten by cockroaches. (TML 21–22). Her experience and knowledge is not enough for surviving in a tough environment without relying on the people whom she considers ignorant and hostile. She tries to resist the restrictive customary rules, but she is forced to follow them when she stays at her mother-in-law's homestead. She does not believe in and even ridicules the taboos, yet finally she has to resort to them when her son's life is at stake, and the medical treatment appears to be useless. Accordingly, all her former assumptions are refuted, and she is rootless on the quicksand of her gloom.

What she can embrace is more like wishes and dreams; she longs for city life to live in abundance with her loving husband and nuclear family, taking up a job, and meeting new people. She hopes life will be there a “paradise on earth” (TML: 69). Indeed, during her studies and Obanjo's courtship in the city she is portrayed as a girl in the right place. She feels self-assurance and power to act and speak freely with Obanjo. In contrast, when finally her city life comes true, she finds herself being confined in the kitchen with daily household chores, and instead of new friends soon she has to get acquainted with her husband's new lover, Linda. What is more, instead of affluence she has to face extremity due to her husband's supporting the other woman too.

From the first moment of her unbearable village life she has romantic dreams about her new lifestyle. All the difficulties she has endured so far because she loves Obanjo and has believed that city life can fulfil her expectations. This hope has kept her alive from day to day. But in Nairobi the series of disappointments make her recognize the huge gap between her desires and reality, which leads her to a state of psychological unhomeliness as well. Her displacement is manifested by her recognition that she is not secure in her new home either, and her fate is exposed to others' will; her happiness is “shaped by other people, like Obanjo and Linda” (TML 142). Yet at the same time her strength for defending her family life is accumulating.

In both the village and the city she often broods over her life troubled by “missing links”. She wants to reveal the causes of her misfortunes and find the path which leads to the wholeness of her life and links her up with the sense of fulfilment and happiness. When

her son Odak is seriously ill in Odendo village, she tries to find the way back to God by remembering her priest's teachings. She gets confused because she finds a discrepancy between the sermons and her down-to-earth experiences. The priest used to say that God and Jesus is the only missing link in people's lives. Nyakure cannot accept it any more because she notices that Odendo people do not need God, and instead of going to church they have to work eternally in the gold mines, which is the only way to make some money for their rudimentary necessities. Thus God may be a missing link in Rome but not in the case of wretched Odendo people. The writer formulates Nyakure's thoughts with strong sarcasm with respect to the priest, who "emerges from his brand new Subaru, bought with a foreign donation, having over-eaten [...] exhorts the poverty stricken congregation, [...] on the uselessness of money" (TML 49). It is a universal truth that human beings' basic necessity is manifested in their physical well-beings such as having food and shelter. Lacking these physical conditions, people are prone to be unresponsive to the spiritual sphere of life. The preacher's suggestions are neither convincing nor empowering for Nyakure, as she notices the difference between his preaching and practice. The priest fails to recognize that these people (including Nyakure) have to struggle for things which are taken for granted in the West, as Nfah-Abbenyi (1991) also points out. The teachings of the church in Kenyan rural settings provide another example for a faulty application of European ways of thinking. In this case, creating possibility for them to improve their quality of life would be more welcomed and empowering.

Accordingly, one of the missing links of the title is money: "I'm [Nyakure] happy when I have money. Without money I degenerate into worry, solitude and sadness" (TML 48). Money can prevent the sufferings that come with poverty like illness and hunger. While sickness can not be totally obliterated by money, it can be considerably relieved by it. Money can provide a powerful diversion away all the troubles by permitting distraction from the anxieties that assail the needy people. It is perfectly acceptable to want to make more money, provided it is not used for evil purposes. Having money, one can obtain a sense of security; having money with awareness is a form of energy and empowerment that support one's well-being. Money is a means of survival for Nyakure and her child in both the village and the city; with money she wishes to fulfil her purpose in a larger and

better way for the benefit of her family. For Nyakure, lacking money means missing empowerment.

The heroine's other missing link might be love. However, she is uncertain about how love is expressed. Being far from her husband, and his absence from her daily life, makes her confused: "I was in love, I love... like Obanjo. Obanjo loves...adores me. [original gaps]" (TML 48). Her passionate kindling as a student changes into a sober liking, as she is more devoted to her child. At the same time, her supposition about Obanjo's feelings is expressed with a stronger verb (*adore*). Probably it is because she has more memories of Obanjo than current experience, and also she would like to be adored. Later, in the city when Linda appears in their lives, she has to realize that she has lost her trust in her husband and he has lost his love for her (TML 218). As the crisis in her life is deepening her soul-searching inner journeys are more often portrayed by first person narration. These internal monologues efficiently complete the focalized narration which conveys the sense of impressions but not formulated into the protagonist's words. For instance, Nyakure's ruminative thoughts about her missing links are interspersed with disturbing sounds and noise from the outer world, which generate more anxiety (TML 46–49). The regular shifts from focalized and omniscient narration to first person monologues of the main character give a rounded picture of her changing experiences and of her continually reconstructed inner life.

Observing the preponderance of Nyakure's silence in the story, one might reach a misleading interpretation that she is only a stereotypical embodiment of a typical mother and housewife in Kenya, who is devoted to motherhood and obsessed merely with familial issues. Obviously, her physical space in the city is confined to her home and one neighbour's, and her activity is limited to looking after her son and doing housework. She would have an ambition to work but as Brydon and Chant (1989) points out, urban women are often forced by their husband or culture to stay at home. In Nyakure's case, her unfinished education and her second pregnancy are additional impediments to her working career. Living in a closed micro-world and lacking the sense of fulfilment activates her need to be immersed in her mental sphere contemplating her fate.



Settling in Nairobi and having a united family give her happiness temporarily. She can admit that she has a much better life than in the village. She feels that they belong to the lower middle class, seeing and comparing the wretched people's life in slums. Yet soon her happiness is spoilt by gossip informing her about Obanjo and Linda's secret relationship. Lacking certainty about the truth and for the sake of the peace and harmony of the house, she remains purposely quiet, and adopts a "wait-and-see attitude" (TML 101). In this case Nyakure's attitude to polygamy is influenced by both traditional and imported values; at first she fails to notice that her husband wants a particular woman who has charmed him, but later she is convinced of Obanjo's betrayal and realizes that his behaviour is abusive. She remembers her father's teaching: "watch the world with the eyes of an eagle, do not bury your head in the sand like the ostrich" (TML 33). Drawing power on the old wisdom, she now wants "to act with the cunning and swiftness of the leopard" as well (TML 132).

Nyakure's anger and worry about her marriage is intensified by powerfully depicted dreams she sees during the first night which she spends alone in the city (Obanjo is with his mistress). Mediated through dreams, her domestic space becomes a site for an intricate invasion. The dreams are not only the result of her unbearable anxiety, but all of them come as direct messages from her mind and subconscious obsessed with her unhappiness. Each of these dreams anticipates a determinant event in her family life: her son's severe accident, Akeyo's injury when the kitchen catches fire and her sudden violence against Obanjo. (TML 143–144.) Some elements of dreams completely coincide with the future tragedies. The descriptions of dreams are interwoven with moments of reality; the border between her dream and being awake is obscured. The dream itself wakes her up, not only literally, but it makes her alert and mobilises her inner strength to act. She realizes that everyone is hurt. Only Linda remains intact in the dreams, and thus all her problems are caused by this woman. With the help of her dreams she obtains subconscious empowerment to refuse the reality around her which is controlled by Obanjo and Linda. Being able to reject the oppressive reality is the first step for a woman's liberation, according to hooks (2000).

In one of her dreams she gets hurt in a fire, which is the symbol of living force and love. In another dream of hers she causes injury to Obanjo and kills Linda's baby. Her suppressed passion is channelled into destructive power in the dream. Ultimately, this dream and her hurt feelings trigger her decision to act: "[...] there is a limit to being abused, and I have reached my limit. I feel like thunder and lightning today [...]" (TML 147). Her thoughts, emphatically narrated in the first person singular, reveal her certainty about Obanjo's unfaithfulness and her readiness to break the silence and ask firmly for an explanation from her husband. She wants to follow the same strategy as Hartsock suggests (cited in hooks 2000): energy, strength, and effective interaction should be as powerful as power requiring domination. Yet defining her position in an assertive tone seems unsuccessful; due to Obanjo's frustration and exhaustion caused by extra hard work, he does not show willingness, during their conversation, to solve the problem in Nyakure's favour. As hooks (2000) points out, men's frustration at the workplace often leads to their inability to be collaborative in family matters.

When Obanjo admits the truth about his lover's pregnancy, and Nyakure is informed that a remarkable portion of his wage has been spent on Linda's expenses, leaving her family without any money for the rest of the month, her assertiveness turns into aggression. She starts battering her husband fiercely and they end up with her being severely wounded, which needs hospital treatment. (TML 153). The next battle takes place when Linda moves to live with them as a co-wife with her small baby whose, father may be Obanjo or her other lover. Nyakure agrees on Linda's moving, partly because she does not want extra expenses for rent as she has already got Odak's little sister too. Obviously, Obanjo favours Linda: she embodies everything he admires, and he is completely blinded by love. The atmosphere of cohabitation is filled with constant tension and hatred. In a rural environment, as Nyberg (2004) points out, polygamy gives women more freedom and separateness, but in urban settings it is no longer the case. When Linda destroys Nyakure's garden (one of the sources of her pride), it is the last straw for Nyakure and makes her turn to hostility again. (TML 294.)

With these new challenges Nyakure's inner life is continually reconstructed in the light of her daily experiences, and her individual identity as a long chain of images is slowly

taking shape. She is determined to defend her family life and home, as she is committed to both her motherhood and wifeness, in accordance with the concept of womanism introduced by Nfah-Abbenyi (1997a). When her collaborative and nurturing power fails to preserve her family life, she resorts to violence, which is an unaccustomed way of expressing women's power and is doomed to failure. However, when Obanjo wants to send her to Odendo she does not obey his husband. She decides to go home to her natal village instead of her mother-in-law's. She takes with her not only her little daughter but Obanjo's orphan niece, Akeyo too, who is her important helper. Odak, her son joins them later when his holiday starts. In this way she breaks away with the old custom, which declares that a child should belong to the father's family. Like Luo widows, she can choose to go home to her natal family as Nyberg (2004) refers to it in her fieldwork. Also, her choice can be understood that she, as a modern woman, opts for raising her children alone, forming a family with a single parent. On the other hand, immediately after Obanjo's personal 'tragedy', she is informed by their neighbour and asked to come back.

By the end of the novel Nyakure's priorities are becoming crystallized. Obanjo's mixing and matching cultural norms to his own needs enhance her awareness of her preferences as well. Being a woman, her lot is defined in relationship to her man (as Ferguson 1997 argues), yet her otherness does not prevent her from attempting to protect her family life, which is her most important preference. She does not want to separate, but rather she wants to build a stronger alliance with Obanjo and have decent life with a progressing social position. In this respect her second otherness (as a postcolonial individual) introduced by Bhabha (1994) and Krishnashwamy (2002) strives for obtaining sameness. But both Obanjo and Nyakure are exposed to cultural interactions in the city (in a third space), and their identities are imbued with "destabilizing ambivalence", as Boehmer (2006) points out.

#### 4.4 A man's desire and a woman's expectation

As Silberschmidt (2001) posits, the main reason for debates and even antagonism between the genders in marriage in East Africa is the husband's insufficient provision for the family. Recent economic hardship places a burden on both the men's and women's

shoulders and modifies the original division of labour between them. Women's increasing participation in production gives them more autonomy in the family as well. Furthermore, education, urban lifestyle and the influence of Western individualism make them more assertive in formulating their expectations. They do not necessarily accept the reality and facts, put forward by their husband; as hooks (2000) argues they can find a way of resistance and the possibility to use feminine power. At the same time men's masculine authority and pride might be wounded, which leads them to find 'consolation' in casual relationships.

Otieno's novel sheds light on this problem from the male's point of view as well. Obanjo the husband is a complex, sometimes self-contradictory male character; he encapsulates both the embodiments of old authoritative power and a new personality with liberal views. It is a special in-between position called mimicry by Bhabha cited in Boehmer (2006). For instance, he does not allow his wife to work (authority), but he allows himself to indulge in a secret relationship (liberalism). He does not want formal marriage (rejects the tradition), but he is not willing to visit his wife's parents without the present which is customary in Luo society (insists on tradition) (TML 141).

It is noteworthy that at first it is Obanjo's *desire* for an imaginary woman which obsesses his mind and flushes him with treacherous feelings, without knowing any special person as an 'object' of his lust. He realizes that his love for Nyakure has faded away and it has been only juvenile passion. Their marriage is a matter of necessity rather than love. Although Nyakure is loving and faithful, he wants somebody whom he can love passionately. It is ironic that he wants to select the best woman, and finally he is caught and seduced by the worst one. (TML 103–104.) His contemplations and hesitation between Nyakure and Linda are presented in detail by focalized narration. To reach a satisfactory explanation for his adultery, he starts his reasoning by developing an aversion towards his wife. He thinks that he cannot control Nyakure because she is sober and carries herself "with a measure of superiority", while Linda has wild temper and is able to show her true emotions (TML 135). He remembers his repeated failure to buy a car, for which Nyakure never has been sore at him overtly, but he always feels her bitterness. He remembers Nyakure's overwhelming nurturing womanliness, her constant and predictable

responses to his mistakes, and he sees it as not a genuine reaction of hers. He is tired of her feminine nurturing power, when she tries to be collaborative, understanding and encouraging for the sake of their harmony: “[...] she consoled him for his failure in a very understanding manner and urged him to try again” (TML 97). Indeed, the verb “urged” has the connotation of assertiveness and of a vague claim. Obanjo regards it as Nyakure’s superiority with which she treats him as a child. Also he considers her patience constrained, and her indisputable love makes him feel resentment. (TML 135.) Obviously, it would be an easier decision for him if Nyakure had no integrity, if he could solve this dilemma in a traditional way, namely, taking Linda home as a second wife. Yet he knows that he can hardly obtain Nyakure’s consent in the case of a former prostitute. Thus he prefers to act according to Linda’s wish, and keeps his affair in secret.

Nyakure’s expectations in her married life are partly the results of her socialization and partly of her moulding hybrid identity. Except for her two children, her expectations hardly come true. Her greatest grievance is that they are not married properly. She would consent to both traditional and Christian confirmation of their relationship. As a traditionally socialized girl, she could accept polygamy on special conditions: the woman must be respectable. Moreover, Obanjo should be able to support the second woman without any disadvantageous effect on her and her children’s standard of living. (TML 100.) Debates about a man’s provision are common sources of tension and antagonism between husbands and wives in rural and urban East Africa (Silberschmidt 2001).

Seeing around herself the process of development, she wants to reach a sense of achievement in her personal life too. Having experienced economic hardship in the village, she tends to take materialist values as a first priority. She is preoccupied with money worries and wishes to grow in the sense of material essentials, ensuring her family’s better life. She longs for a television and a car; with these she could see themselves as belonging to the real middle-class. (TML 97.) She would like Obanjo to buy land somewhere and build a modern house for the family. As the narrator says: “that was the kind of life she was made for, not crumbling huts and well-kept, absolutely secret mistresses” (TML 131). Also she would like to contribute to the family’s better life with

her employment and ensure her autonomy at the same time: “[She] wished she was employed too. She would not have too many problems to worry about” (TML 157).

In her intimate relationship with Obanjo she tries to preserve her self-respect and stands on her dignity. She does not allow Obanjo to see her as an unfeeling object which is always accessible. After coming home from the hospital and having recovered from the wounds caused by Obanjo, she flatly refuses to please her husband’s sexual desire. Her peculiar ironic smile signals her deliberate strategy. It is very insulting for Obanjo and makes him suffer. Again he thinks that Nyakure as always, wants “things to go her way” (TML 220). Apparently, during her married life, Nyakure is steadily moving away from her pleasing and nurturing self strengthened by her socialization, towards a more assertive, and possibly, a rebellious self. By manifesting assertive power she wants to protect her vulnerability and her position as a first wife. She does not want to separate from Obanjo, but she wants him to behave himself properly, so that they cannot be ridiculed (TML 170).

Evaluating Nyakure’s expectations in her marriage from a married European woman’s point of view, it can be stated that her expectations as a modern Kenyan woman outweigh her anticipations as a wife leading a traditional way of life. Although she cannot deny polygamy, she is strongly against it when she feels that her standard of living is threatened by it, and the woman’s integrity is questionable. Yet she fails to realize that polygamy is humiliating for her as a first wife, and serves as a cutting down on a male’s infidelity. She despises adultery, an attitude which may emanate from the teaching of the Catholic Church, nonetheless she is critical of some other aspects of it. Her demand for a better life and her consciousness in money matters may be generated by her past experiences, when she suffered from poverty. On the other hand, it may be a ‘side effect’ of a city life, which is imbued with competitiveness between individuals. She is aware of their social status and desire to reach upward social mobility. She wants to deserve and keep others’ recognition. Her clear preference for urban life, her high achievement motivation, her desire to create a positive change with her behavioural flexibility, (from pleasing to assertiveness) with which she takes risks in her life, indicate that she is on the way to find her true self, and to succeed in using her feminine power effectively.

The other woman, Linda also wants to deploy her feminine power, but her way is a typical example of a temptress. Her desire to overcome, to compete, to be more powerful, to have more possessions might originate from her youth fraught with distressing experiences. Now her only obsession is her private interest. She appears in Obanjo's life as a fatal woman who represents the most direct attack on his family life. She is a cunning character who uses all her sexual attractiveness to seduce her 'prey'. In order to achieve her hidden goals (she wants to squeeze money from him), she lies about her desire for romantic love without marriage. Stating that marriage for her is associated with unhappiness and the absence of sexual desire, she justifies Obanjo's feelings about his own marriage. (TML 105–107.) Her unique power is manifested by her willingness and ability to express herself in sexual terms. Her body, her clothing, her voice, her perfume (stolen), her words and motions create a highly charged sexual image. Her sexual emancipation and her initiative make Obanjo amazed and provoke his irresistible desire for her. She uses sex as a weapon and a tool for controlling her man.

The decisive happenings of Obanjo's betrayal, leading to his tragedy, are depicted in lively and tense dialogues which are controlled by the woman entirely. He has no power and will to resist the temptation or carry his points in the relationship. Their first intimate meeting is presented in the form of a flashback, but this memory itself overcomes his senses and mind again. He gets completely under the influence of Linda's manipulative sexual power. (TML 108.) Obanjo's case with Linda provides an example of the vulnerability of strict masculinism and male assertiveness when, instead of feminine passivity and dependence, they are confronted with agency.

Linda's character is a mixture of an extraordinary village girl, the daughter of a magician, and a victim of the city who, lacking other possibilities, has been forced into prostitution in her youth. Both of her experiences have taught her to fight in spirit and use others' weaknesses and gullibility. Unlike the archetypal fatal women, she wants to be married and have a family, as it is the most important thing in Kenyan women's lives. Her aim is to collect money by obtaining Obanjo's property and start a new life with her devotee. This image of a woman is reminiscent of Ngugi's and Wangi's representations of women, indicating that women's power is manifested in their fatal charm. By the same token, it is

different from them because Linda is not abused. On the contrary, she “epitomized everything he [Obanjo] admired” (TML 268). In this case Linda abuses Obanjo by emptying his home while he is away at work, and eloping with her lover to Mombasa. This act of emptying provides a metaphorical meaning, as Obanjo’s life becomes as empty as his house, having nobody left in his life. Moreover, his masculine identity is seriously hurt.

#### 4.5 Other voices in the novel

There are two other characters who have a determining role in Obanjo and Nyakure’s lives: Obanjo’s mother Agul, and his friend and neighbour Nyaga. Both of them try to prevent Obanjo’s wrong decision. Her mother pleads custom: first he should make his marriage with Nyakure legal, by paying the bride price to her parents. Then the second wife must be introduced in his natal home and let the parents judge her. The bride should “have respectable parents to account for her good upbringing” (TML 276). Agul, as a superstitious woman, sees a bad omen in Linda’s ancestors and warns her son that she will ruin his family. Obanjo ignores his mother’s words. (TML 277). Subsequently, Nyakure and Agul become allies against Obanjo, although they manifest conflicting ways of thinking in other issues of life. Agul wants her son to do things according to the traditional norms which entails the protection of a first wife. In this way Agul’s requirements, based on tradition, provide empowerment to Nyakure.

Nyaga, the friend, having returned from church, wants to convince Obanjo also that he has obligations in marriage. He believes that love entails respect and resisting some outside marriage emotions. He admits that he also has desires for other women but he can tame his “male ego”. He insists that if one’s first love is fading it will happen to the following one as well. (TML 188). His attempts to dissuade his friend from taking a second wife are grounded in the teachings of Christianity and conjugal morality. He suggests that marriage should be monogamous, indissoluble and consensual. It is based on mutual trust and respect. Marriage means accepting the weaknesses of the other and resisting temptations and emotions coming from outside.



The writer's voice is mediated cautiously and also it has a cautionary purport. The fact that he places his woman character, who attempts to install herself as a full subject within a changing but still male dominant structure and culture, in the centre of his narration is significant on its own. The novel's power arises from its articulation of Nyakure's confrontation with masculine values and sexuality, coupled with her own secret dialogue of self and soul. According to Otieno's representation, her inner rebellion and rage are more important than her conflicts with Obanjo and his mistress. Although her attempts are doomed to failure, her husband has to endure more severe losses, failing to keep his family and property. With this ending the writer's ethical positioning favours his heroine, yet does not allow her to achieve real empowerment and liberation. Both Nyakure's in-between identity and Obanjo's double standard affirm the clashing cultures and norms' insurgent and interstitial existence. When cultural values are negotiated, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative but rather conflicting or even antagonistic.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Women in both postcolonial reality and literary works are often rendered weak and powerless by a variety of concurring causes like inherent inferiority, lack of education, unfavourable customary practices and exclusion from the public sphere. In this study the purpose has been to find out in the selected Luo narratives how and to what extent these impediments can be overcome by feminine power and empowerment; how the protagonists are able to oppose and resist their traditionally prescribed gender roles and places in a male-dominated patriarchal system, and how their inner drive results in assertiveness and agency. The origin of women's power has also been examined from the aspects of tradition and modernity. Throughout it has been asserted that women's place and power in gender relation is negotiated by the writers in the light of otherness (woman) and of the possible dichotomy between tradition and modernity.

The ways to exert power and resistance in both literature and real life are ambiguous: they hold a different essence for different individuals, leading into different actions and strategies each of which is developed in a given socio-cultural context and discourse. Yet all these imaginative writings are related to the transformative possibilities and complexities of women's plight. The selected novels are striving grounds in which expectations rooted in indigenous tradition, and expectations evoked by modernity, struggle with each other. The writers avoid the postcolonial literary convention of idealizing marriage and motherhood but they do not want to reject them either. Paulina in Magoye's novel makes every effort to become a mother although she is successful in the public sphere. The life of the other heroine of Macgoye, Victoria is filled with guilty consciousness because she failed as a mother in her youth. She is recognized as head of the brothel when she is a mother again. Women can still draw power from motherhood as the most important role of a woman, but it is not a sufficient source of power for them any more. Nyakure in Otieno's novel has to leave her home although she is the mother of two children. Thus these women refuse the role of a mother as the *only* life career for them.

Each woman protagonist declines to internalize and accept the subordinate position allocated to women by both the indigenous and the Western forms of patriarchy. They refuse to conform to the passive subservient duty expected of them, in the process challenging traditional assumptions about a wife's proper role. Macgoye's heroines establish themselves firmly in the public sphere, and break with a Luo tradition of regarding themselves exclusively in relation to their status as wives and mothers. With their gradual development towards the awareness of their predicament, and with their inner drive to push themselves forward, they are able to install themselves as a full subject in society. They both leave their husbands to become independent in search of a modern lifestyle, and they earn not only their own costs of living but others' recognition as well. Otieno's protagonist engages herself only in the domestic sphere, but she resists and rebels against her husband's abusive treatment.

Macgoye excels in her attempt to underscore the importance of her heroines' quest for liberation and emancipation with the help of their feminine empowerment. Yet at the same time she advocates the necessity of the conventional roles of a woman as well. Paulina in *Coming to Birth* develops from a shy powerless country girl into a confident self-assured woman. Interestingly enough, the first impulse for her development is given by her husband's maltreatment. Her dissatisfaction with her marriage and the home provided by her husband urges her to seek new possibilities to improve her life. Her feminine power is manifested in her deliberate silence if it is needed, her collaborative and not explicitly insurgent attitude to her husband (she does not want to be her husband's enemy), and her ability to make a comfortable home. Her initiative and ambitious personality enable her to organize family and public matters. The greater part of her power emerges from her modern urban lifestyle, but when she is in the village, she tends to observe the taboos and draws on some old practices as well. In the case of crisis the homeland is the place to gain strength for the further battles of life. At the beginning of her city life her empowerment takes place among her fellow women in the slum where she can learn the tricks of survival. Later, with the help of Europeans, she is able to study and obtain a qualification as a village club-teacher, with which she gets a job and independence. Yet finally she opts for going back to the city where her empowerment continues at a Luo MP's family. This job provides her fulfilment

because she can use her nurturing power and her ambition for agency, as she is more and more involved in public issues as well. At the same time her returning to the city gives her husband an opportunity to take steps for continuing their confirmed married life with a baby coming to birth. Thus, due to her feminine power and her husband's changed attitude, Paulina gains her right place with a sense of fulfilment in her family too.

In the case of Macgoye's *Victoria*, feminine power is manifested in the heroine's compulsively chosen 'career' as a prostitute, and later as a business woman. She excels in dealing with clients not only in a generally accepted way but providing her special attention as a caretaker and helper. Her agency is demonstrated when she manages the whorehouse and meanwhile secretly helps Luo politicians who are prosecuted. In Nairobi, lacking a husband, she becomes the provider and head of her family. Her empowerment is based on accumulating material wealth with which she is able to transcend her marginalization and position herself in society and family as a respected individual. In her youth, being a rebellious character, she refuses the traditional customary practices, yet in her older age she realizes the importance of one's roots and ethnic identity and relies on it.

In *The Missing Links* by Otieno, an example is given of how a female's power evokes to reach its climax in rebellious resistance to a man's abusive treatment and how her strategy changes in accordance with the man's responses. In the case of Nyakure, her understanding and collaborative attitude towards her partner is proved not sufficient because it is interpreted as dullness and superiority. Her assertiveness appears to be untimely when Obanjo is tired and frustrated. The man's negative responses and behaviour provoke her aggression and violence, which is a serious mistake of hers. Although her education is not completed, her empowerment is not entirely void. Her ability to face her plight and seek better solutions for her family by postulating conditions and expectations to her man is a significant step for her in the path which might lead to her emancipation. In spite of the limited room for her own manoeuvre, the city opens her eye to notice the development around her and generates her urge to improve and grow. On the other hand, when she is in the deepest crisis, she derives

strength from remembering her parents' teachings. Furthermore, a traditional marriage would provide her and her children with more security than a loose cohabitation.

Overall, the major findings of this study have been that the postcolonial society represented is a hybrid place where various traditions and imported values encounter one another with diverse results and with different impacts on women's plight. Cultural pluralism, knowledge and experience create a new self, but not in any full fashion of agency. The new self that is created emerges through an engagement in new discourses and through becoming open to the new possibilities (take what comes and make the best of it). This process is neither entirely controlled by an agent nor fully proscribed. As a first step, women should realize and become aware of their subordinate position in the gender relation. Utilizing all the manifestations of feminine power is a significant stepping stone to better their lot. This kind of power must not be against male counterparts, but rather it should seek the possibility to form alliance with them and to strive for gaining mutual benefit from it. Feminine power can be used effectively in domestic discourse, in daily conversations, which is the 'wrestling ground' of a man and woman. As gender is a result of socialization and of cultural assumptions, its characteristics cannot be rigid and unchangeable; as values are subject to change the same is true of the expected gender behaviour, except for some biologically determined features. There are dynamic and fluid relationships between the cultural categories of gender and between individual women and men. In order to dissolve gender antagonism, the ideal improvement would be to develop gender relations, in harmony with holistic views, towards the interaction of two equal human beings regardless of their sex.

Both in the novels and the case studies there have been examples of how Luo women are able to preserve or import the right values and practices, the most suitable ones for their purposes. It can be a viable solution for all of them, and they should try and continue manifesting power and resistance if they feel that the male dominance is oppressive. There is another aspect of a hybrid culture, namely a misuse of mixed values, represented mainly in Otieno's novel. Being in a 'third space' and manifesting not quite sameness and not fully otherness may result in a moral confusion and an

explosive climax, leaving an uneasy and unresolved state of affairs. Not every old customary practice, for instance polygamy, can be 'transplanted' into urban circumstances successfully; the imported family form of cohabitation should not be necessarily translated into sexual networking. Female assertiveness must not turn to aggression and violence. These misplaced practices are the greatest impediments to the improvement of gender asymmetry.

Finally, the most important factors of women's power are empowerment with outer help and education. Both are closely connected, and without them remarkable change in women's marginalization is not imaginable. Only through education can they take part in the public sphere and the labour market, alleviating their economic dependence on men. Without proper education women like Victoria can reach economic independence in a way which is not an overall accepted practice and exemplary role model in society. Women's earnings would provide not only financial independence for them but more autonomy as well, not to mention its beneficial impact on the whole family. They should find the right balance between the family commitments and labour duties, taking into consideration that a woman's fundamental and most important role is still motherhood, and a man's main responsibility in a family is provision, as Luo tradition defines it. Traditional values should be discerned but are not worth abandoning. They are like a mother tongue: in a taut situation one is likely to resort to them. Both tradition and modernity can yield a source of power for women. Implementing the benefits of education and drawing on traditional practices and wisdom, women might be able to gain their worthy position not only in fiction but in Luo families as well.

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