

**MASHIDA'S COOKING POT:
A CREATIVE EXPLORATION OF WOMEN ISSUES IN KENYA**

BY

CHRISTOPHER OKEMWA

REG. NUMBER: C50/7731/06

University of NAIROBI Library



0532263 1

**A PROJECT PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER
OF ARTS (LITERATURE) IN THE UNIVERSITY OF
NAIROBI**

2008

DECLARATION

This project paper is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university.

Candidate




Date 24/11/2008

CHRISTOPHER OKEMWA

This project paper has been submitted with our approval as university supervisors.

First Supervisor



Date 24/11/2008

MR. WABENDE KIMINGICHI

Second Supervisor



Date 26/11/2008

DR. JOSEPH MULEKA

DEDICATION

To my wife, Damiana,
who advocates for women's rights,

and to my two sons, Eng' and Risa
whom we nurture to grow and support projects
that empower women and girls.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude goes to all those who encouraged me to undertake this project paper and actually took their time to read it and provide criticism. I am indebted to my supervisors, Mr. Wabende Kimingichi and Dr. Joseph Muleka, whose invaluable support, critical advice and patience guided me through the writing of the project paper.

I cannot forget the verbal encouragement I received from Professor Hellen Mwanzi whose PhD Thesis also gave me the background material for the short story form.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgment.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Objectives	3
Hypotheses.....	4
Justification.....	4
Theoretical Framework.....	5
Literature Review	7
Methodology.....	12
Chapter Breakdown.....	13
Scope and Limitations.....	14
CHAPTER TWO:	15
Nyamoita, the Brave Girl.....	15
The Beautiful Red Bag	23
CHAPTER THREE	36
Let it Live	36
Matilda's Changing Fortunes.....	44
CHAPTER FOUR	51
The Village Queen.....	51
Mashida's Cooking Pot.....	60
CONCLUSION	68
WORKS CITED	71
APPENDIX I	74
APPENDIX II	75
APPENDIX III	76

ABSTRACT

This creative work comprises six short stories, which capture the experiences of women in Kenya today. The plight of women is focused in these short stories. The stories demonstrate how cultural and traditional beliefs contribute to the hindrance of women's progress. Practices such as female circumcision and early marriage are some of the main hindrances to women's progress.

The struggle of women to liberate themselves is also featured by this creative work. Access to education by the women is indicated as one avenue through which women are able to liberate themselves. This creative work, therefore, shows that education has the power to liberate them.

The achievement of women is also celebrated by this creative work. The stories indicate that participation in politics and acquisition of leadership positions in the society are some of the achievements of women in Kenya today.

Stories in this project are arranged in a logical sequence. This sequence depicts women liberation movement. The stories are arranged in such a way that they indicate the women's growth and self-realization. They start by highlighting their plight; then they move to illustrate their struggle to liberate themselves from these problems, before finally capturing their achievements and the need to celebrate the achievements.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Literature is derived from the society. It is from the society's events and activities that we get materials for literature. Chinua Achebe, in Morning Yet on Creation Day, puts it clearly when he says that

...every literature must seek the things that belong unto its place, must in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people. (7)

According to Achebe Literature captures life of a particular place and does not exist in a vacuum. It must reflect the realities of a society in which it is created. In other words, Achebe is suggesting that there is no art-for art's-sake. Literature is created to serve a certain purpose. It must be pragmatic and serve some function. It must be accountable to someone and should justify itself to the society. In the preface to Writers in Politics, Ngugi says:

A Writer after all comes from a particular class and race and nation. He himself is a product of an actual social process—eating, drinking, learning, loving, hating (v)

Ngugi is putting emphasis on the fact that Literature has its roots in the society. The writer having come from the society is a participant in the society's events and activities and it is from these events and activities that he/she derives his/her literature materials. Kofi Awoonor, the Ghanaian poet, novelist and essayist states:

An African writer must be a person who has some kind of conception of the society in which he is living and the way he wants the society to go. (Per, 24)

The writer, according to Awoonor, is a person who can capture his/her society--its values, norms and beliefs. The writing of these short stories, therefore, springs from the conviction that the society, its events and activities—and in which women are participants--- will be captured.

Statement of the problem

Literature captures the events of a society in which it is produced. It contains the activities, events and experiences that happen in that society. Writers therefore, through their creative work, capture the thinking of the people, their activities and interaction.

Writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Grace Ogot and Leonard Kibera and Sam Kahiga, have written about women in the Kenyan society, in their short stories—Secret Lives, Land

Without Thunder and Potent Ash respectively. They have captured the events and experiences of women in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Change has, however, taken place in the society since then. Of recent we have had an increased number of women participating in politics and some acquiring leadership positions in the society. We also have had more women activists who are advocating for women rights. Also more girls now access education and join institutions of higher learning than before. A number of women MP has also increased of recent times. This change that has taken place in the society has affected experiences of women and the way people perceive them. These new experiences and new perceptions of women need to be captured in fresh short stories.

Objectives

The primary objectives of writing these short stories are:

1. To capture, through creative writing, the plight of women in Kenya, which is a male-dominant society.
2. To creatively explore women's economic, social and political struggle to liberate themselves.
3. To celebrate the achievements of women in Kenya today through creative writing.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses guiding this project are that:

1. A writer is a product of society and therefore capable, through his/her creative writing, of reflecting the reality that prevails in that society.
2. A writer employs literary techniques to change attitudes towards set values through influencing the imagination and feelings of the people in the society.
3. A writer speaks for the marginalized groups in the society, in this case women, and celebrates their achievements and success with them.

Justification

This creative work is important as it captures the plight, struggle and achievements of women in Kenya today. There is scarcity of stories in the shelves that capture women's experiences in the present time. Most of the existing anthologies of short stories capture the experiences of Kenyan women during the period before and soon after Kenya's independence. Since then, other issues have emerged in relation to women that need to be captured. This creative work attempts to capture these new issues and experiences of women in Kenyan today.

Creative work, through its literary techniques, works on the emotions of readers and is

capable of influencing and changing the minds of the people. Creative work is deemed suitable in capturing these new experiences of women. The contracted form of the short story which focuses on one character throughout makes it easy to understand and accord the reader a quick grasp of the issues raised therein. Being short in length it encourages reading besides according the reader easiness to unravel its concerns with immediacy and ease.

Theoretical Framework

This creative work is guided by both Sociological literary approach and Feminist Theory. Sociological literary theory argues that literature is a product of society. It is a product of society in the fact that its raw materials are drawn from the society. It is also a product of society because the artists, or writers, who create this literature come from the society. Sociological literary theory also states that literature is a force in the society in the sense that it seeks to influence the society. By influencing the imagination and feeling of the people literature in a way leads the society towards certain goals and set values.

The proponents of this theory are, among others, John Rockwell (1978), A. Lukacs (1963), Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972). John Rockwell says that Literature is the key to the understanding of the nature of society because it uses language and language carries the culture of a people. No human being exists without language and no human society exists without some form of literature. It is from the assumption that Literature is a carrier for a people's culture that this creative work has derived its raw material from the society.

Sociological theory is important since this creative work draws material from the society for its stories. The events, activities and experiences of women, as shown in the stories, are derived from the society. Female circumcision and early marriage are captured by the stories as some of the cultural practices that demean women in the society. The stories also illustrate their hard work and struggle to liberate themselves, with an intention of encouraging women in similar situations to work hard and keep struggling to liberate themselves. The stories also capture their achievements, with an aim of showing their success.

Besides sociological literary theory this creative work employs Feminist theory. Feminism is an organized movement which promotes equality for men and women in the political, economic and social spheres. It is concerned with the issue of gender difference, advocate equality for women, and campaign for women's rights and interests. There are various strands of feminism: Radical feminism, radical-Libertarian feminism, Radical-Cultural feminism, Liberal feminism, Socialist feminism and Cultural feminism among others.

This creative work is guided by Liberal feminism. The main view of liberal feminists is that all people are created equal by God and deserve equal rights. The theory believes that oppression exists because of the way in which men and women are socialized, and that this socialization perpetrates patriarchy which aims to keep men in power positions. Liberal feminists believe that women have the same mental capacity as their male

counterparts and should be given equal opportunities in political, economic and social spheres. According to this theory all men and woman are equal and therefore deserves equal rights.

The theory is important since this creative work, through its stories, capture women who are hard working and struggle to liberate themselves from male dominance, hence succeeding to acquire political and social positions in the society, formerly preserved for men. It is in this view that this creative work, through its stories, presents women characters who are bright and who win prizes and awards in academic circles.

Literature Review

Our literature review assumes two dimensions. It first considers works that relate Literature and society; it then looks at criticism on creative writing.

Literature is a product of society. It is a mirror that reflects the activities that go on in the society in which it is produced. Literature tells of the people's social, political and economic life at a particular time in history. It is therefore a record of people's activities over a period of time.

The theme of Women and female genital mutilation has been covered in the short story, "Against the Pleasure Principle," by Saida Hagi-Dirie Herzie. In this story the girl Rahma

and her sister, who come from the Somali community, undergo female circumcision. Other characters like Hawa and Dahabo, in the story also underwent the initiation. In the story Rahma regrets having undergone the initiation and swears that none of her daughters will be circumcised in future. This story is set in Somali community at a period when there is no awareness of women rights and therefore women cannot protest against the practice. I draw a parallel to this with my story, "Nyamoita, the Brave Girl," which is set in the present time when many communities in Africa are aware of women's rights, including the effect of female circumcision. Female circumcision has also been banned by many authorities and the girls are aware of the ban and have knowledge of their rights. It is in this view that the main character in "Nyamoita, the Brave Girl" refuses to be circumcised.

Unwanted Pregnancies that come about as a result of love-making is illustrated in many stories. The theme on love has been tackled in "Breaking Loose," a story by Moyez Vassanji in Half a Day and Other Stories. In this story an African professor, Daniel Akoto, befriends an Indian girl, Yasmin, but he is rejected by her parents. Their love does not develop into intimacy, or result into marriage or unwanted pregnancy. This is because in those days family ties were strong. Girls did not engage in love affairs or think about marriage without the knowledge or consent of their parents. Unlike those days, girls these days tend to be independent and make their own decisions concerning love and marriage. The story in this project, "Let it Live" is set in the present time when girls hardly seek the consent of their parents. This freedom and independence of the girls have led many to premarital pregnancies. Unlike Yasmin in "Breaking Loose" who informs her parents about her man friend, Linda, in "Let it Live," does not inform or involve her parents about

er boyfriend. She instead goes ahead to involve in activities that lead to her becoming pregnant.

Women and leadership has also been the concern in literary discourse for years. In “The Old White Witch”, a story in Land Without Thunder, nurse Adhiambo is a leader in charge of nurses when they go on strike. This project will feature a story “The Village Queen” in which a woman is the leader, in fact the chief of the community. Unlike Adhiambo in “The Old Witch” who leads only women nurses the woman chief in this project story, leads a society of both men and woman.

Politics has been an all-time theme and has graced many anthologies in the past and in the present. We see politics in the story “Something in Common” in Potent Ash by Leonard Libera and Sam kahiga. The story is about two parliamentarians vying for the Mangori East Constituency seat. Both of them are proved to have impractical ideas for the constituency. We also see politics in “On the Market Day,” a story by Kyalo Mativo in Half a Day and Other Stories. This story highlights politics in Ngangani. The previous member of parliament of Ngangani, during the term of his office, abused the privilege people bestowed on him, and instead of representing them, “he represented himself, his family and his close circle of friends.” (109).

In both of the above stories, the characters are men. Set in the period immediately after independence in Kenya, it is understandable that the stories only feature men participating in political activities. This is because during that period women were not active in politics.

Not many of them had acquired education, either. It was a period when women were pushed back to household chores and any of them who showed interest in male-dominated activities like politics was viewed as wayward. The story for this project is set in the present time when more women have acquired education and many most of them are now participating in politics. Unlike in the two stories, "Something in Common" and "On the Market Day," the story of this project, "Mashida's Cooking Pot," has a woman as the main character.

Having discussed various works that relate Literature to society, I now wish to look at criticisms on creative writing. Criticisms have been raised by several texts concerning the role of creative writers and their creative works.

Poe in Elements of Fiction: Introduction to the Short Story, advises that a short story should be compressed and economical the way a poem is, and free from digression and irrelevancies, and marked by its intensity. He says:

A short story is a brief imaginative narrative, unfolding a single chief character. It contains a plot, the details of which are so compressed and details of the whole treatment so organized as to produce a single impression.(Current-Garcia et al, 61)

Taylor, in Understanding Elements of Literature seems to concur with Poe in defining a short story. He, for instance, explains it as a single, complete episode and making up in

compression and intensity for what it lacks in scope and breath of vision (32).

Although brevity need to be observed as a demand of the short story, Hellen Mwanzi gives caution. In her PhD Thesis she advises writers not to compress so much to the extent of making the stories fake(21).

Other than brevity or compression as a demand of a short story, a story should be worth telling. Stewart in his editorial comment in Introduction to Short Stories From Australia says:

The story should be intrinsically worth telling...if it is dull or repellent, if it is merely about the miseries of this or that set of social or domestic conditions, not rising to some intriguing human drama, then it may be of some psychological or sociological interest but it is not really a story (ix)

The stories in this study are guided by the critical observations and assertions voiced by the various scholars cited above. The stories other than bringing out social events and activities in our society develop conflicts between characters and within individual characters. These conflicts result into tension and suspense that create some drama that excites and thrills, and are of interest to the reader. The stories contain, beneath their surface meanings, extended meanings and interpretations, with the help of symbolism, irony, and allusions. The stories are thus, worth telling.

Methodology

This project has been developed from the recent experiences of women in the community. Informal interviews were held with various women: one circumcised woman, one university female student and one woman parliamentarian. The informal interview was most appropriate as it provided a natural conversational situation, in which the interviewees provided information freely without being tense. The interviewees, as selected above, were suited to shed light on pertinent questions concerning women experiences: The circumcised woman, having undergone the initiation, had enough experience of, and knowledge of, the adverse effects of female genital mutilation. The university female student, having interacted with male students on campus was in a better position to shed light on how learned women are treated by and viewed by male students. The woman parliamentarian, by her age and position, was liable and suited in discussing the struggle and achievement of women in our society today, and also how society views women leaders.

This informal interview employed questions that were not written down. Different interviewees responded to different questions: The circumcised woman responded to questionnaire in Appendix I, the female student to the questionnaire in appendix II, while the woman parliamentarian to questionnaire in appendix III.

After collecting materials from the interviewees I chose the themes for my stories. I chose

six themes: Women and Female Genital Mutilation, Women and Forced Marriage, Women and Education, Women and Leadership and Women and Politics. I then chose my main characters—women—and developed traits and features for them that were suitable and effective in advancing the themes of the stories. Finally I built up plots for each story taking into consideration the characters and the themes being tackled by each story.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter one is an introduction. The stories appear in three chapters: two, three and four with chapter five as a conclusion.

Chapter two contains stories that highlight women's plight. The stories show that women's progress is hindered by cultural practices and traditional beliefs, such as FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) and early or forced marriages. The first story is "Nyamoita, the Brave Girl" and the second one is "The Beautiful Red Bag."

Chapter three contains stories that highlight the struggle of women to succeed and liberate themselves. It shows that for women to liberate themselves they must access education. This chapter features two stories, "Let it Live," and "Matilda's Changing Fortunes."

Chapter four has stories that celebrate women's success and achievements. The stories showcase women who, through their economic, political and social struggles, are making achievements in the society. The two stories, "The Village Queen" and "Mashida's Cooking Pot" tackle two themes: Politics and Leadership.

Scope and Limitations

This study presents six short stories that are a creative exploration of women issues in Kenya today. The stories present problems of women and their struggle to liberate themselves; they also highlight their achievements. The stories are confined within the following themes: FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), Early marriage, Early unwanted pregnancies, Education, Politics and Leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

Nyamoita, the Brave Girl

That night Nyamoita didn't sleep a wink. She kept turning over and over in her creaking bamboo bed trying to avoid a petrifying thought that raced up and down her mind like a speeded-up movie reel. She tried to shrug it off, but the more she did so, the more the thought became persistently palpable, sticking itself on her mind like thick glue, gnawing into her head like a malignant tumor.

She flung away her blanket, slipped off the bed and stood on the earthen floor, barefooted, trembling. With nervous fingers, she lit the tin lamp on the small table and the shadow of her nude body threw itself out, stretching on the clay wall beside her, like an ogre. She knew it was only a matter of minutes before that hour came. Her heart palpitated and she shook with terror.

She was ten, the age at which she had to face the razor blade according to the tradition of her community, the *Abagusii*. She had been aware of this event that now lay before her, and from which she had no power to escape, since she was seven. Big girls and women in the village discussed it extensively and each time she heard the topic she became jittery and frightened.

"Nyamoita," they will say, "you are yet to face the ogre that will make you a really

woman." By ogre the women meant circumcision.

"You will be expected to be tough," another will add.

"If you scream when the ogre is eating you," another will frighten her, "you will not be married. You will remain a curse to our community."

Now the time had come and she had to brave it, face it with courage and preen herself on it later. She brought herself down to her bed and cuddled her little body in remorse. Suddenly all hell broke loose. Noise!! Noise! Noise! Noise gathered at a distance. Beats of drumming filled the air. Ululations! Shouts of defiance! The combination grew louder and huge and became a bombshell that quaked the floor beneath her feet, shook her bed and swayed the walls of her hut. Her small frame of body rocked and shattered. Tears flowed down her cheeks, uncontrollably.

The women were now outside her hut. They shouted her out. She quickly opened the door, naked, shaking like a leaf in the wind. Peering quickly into the pool of darkness she could make out hundreds of human beings: old women, young, newly married wives and mature girls. Cuddled and shivering among them were her age mates.

She had hardly stepped outside the door when she was hit by a freezing splash of water. "That is to make you ready for the ogre," a figure in the dark carrying a pail shouted. "The ogre eats you well only when numb."

Nyamoita and the other girls were led down to the river like goats being taken to a

slaughterhouse. They crossed a one-plank bridge in a single file and then followed a narrow path up a gentle hill. They reached a market road that encircled the village of Bogiakumu, separating it from Bonyando, the neighbouring village. The women sang and danced along, yelling, chanting and shouting obscene words and expressions at the girls:

Mware ebisagane, nkoba more abakungu,

Mware ebing'werere nkoba more abaiseke,

Mware mokabaisia, nkoba more mokabanura.

You are girls; soon you are to be women,

You are babies, but you are to be made ladies,

You are wives of lads; you'll be made wives of men.

"This is the same road we followed thirty years ago," one woman said mockingly, "when we were going to face the ogre."

"I trekked on this same road, this same time, forty years ago," another one added.

"This night reminds me of that night twenty-five years ago," the third one said mockingly.

"I was ten, stupid and innocent." The women burst into laughter.

Nyamoita was listening to the women's conversation. She thought about that big ogre who was going to swallow each of them and take them to the sea. She was filled with terror. After a long trek they were now in a dark forest, in a chilly mist-filled valley surrounded by small green hills on both sides. Frogs could be heard croaking and dogs barking from a

distance. Cocks crew from the villages on the hillside, heralding the new day. Farmers yelling at their oxen could be heard from farms below the dark hills.

In the glade, the girls were lined up like roasted fish for sale. In a prone position, the ground beneath was freezing and sticky. A woman came along with *rise*, a poisonous plant, and, with it, splashed cold water on their bodies. Their skins itched and pained and made them wriggle in anguish. No girl was supposed to scratch her back to ease the pain. If anyone was seen moving her hand, she risked being beaten to unconsciousness by the woman. It was a taboo. You were expected to be tough, hard and enduring.

Then a song and dance erupted from among the women, more intense this time. The song filled the forest and rent the air above, spreading over the village of Bogiakumu, informing everyone that the ceremony had began and was actually underway and therefore no man or boy of whatever race, household or creed should graze his cows, work or linger nearby the *egesarero*, the initiation valley, or else, as the women put it in innuendoes, one risked "seeing the invisible," "feeling the intangible" and "hearing the inaudible."

As Nyamoita stretched out on her belly she could hear cries and screams coming from the other end of the line of girls. "Stop screaming and look up!" a voice shouted. "Stupid girl, allow the ogre to eat you!" another voice added. "Let go the ogre! Let go the ogre!" more voices screamed in unison. The exercise had begun, no doubt. Every girl had to be eaten by the ogre and pour blood and appease the ancestral spirits and pay back debts owed, as the belief was, to the ants. It was time for the girls to become nubile, shaped into women,

ready to be married and bear children. It was time to shed off the garment of childhood and put on the garment of maturity.

Cheers for the brave ones and jeers for the cowards filled the air, intermingling with the song, producing a concoction of noise that sounded eerie and unearthly upon Nyamoita's ears. It would be a matter of minutes before her turn came. Her numb fingers clutched at the undergrowths beside her head and she shut her eyes tight in fear. Her tiny body quivered and shook. Tears flowed freely and moistened the bare earth below. Her body became stiff, gripped with terror and horror. She held her breath and her heart almost stopped beating. She saw death coming and wanted to lose all hope.

She contemplated running away and escape from this anguish, which she had been taught at school to be having adverse effects and inflicted upon the victim an unnecessary pain. She thought of a lump on her organ, like one she had seen on other circumcised girls, and a possibility of bleeding to death as some of the effects of this practice. Running away from this place was one and only option available. She would spring up onto her feet as quickly as thunder, she thought, and in a split second disappear out of the place. Run very fast. Run into the thick forest and vanish. The old women, infirm and frail, could be sure not to find their way through the dense woods. She would speed up past the forest, wriggle through the jungle, crawl and creep under the fences, fly over the hedgerows and push down the palisades. She would be safe. She would never regret it a bit.

But then, where was she to run to? What will people say, especially her mother who has

been consoling her all along? Rumours will do the rounds in the village. Everyone will talk about it. Her age mates will laugh, laugh and laugh, laugh and beat their thighs, laugh till tears and mucus will flow. Her name will be on everyone's lips. The children in the village and the grandchildren to be born will all be told this story about Nyamoita, the cowardly village girl. It will be a story for all generations to come. Her parents will be the scorn of the village. They will be mocked and derided at village social gatherings. They will be referred to as parents of *egesagane* and beer pots and milk gourds will be withdrawn from them in contempt. Meat plates and porridge mugs will quickly be grabbed and hidden under the tables; away from their eyes. They will be viewed as unclean and unfit to share in the village functions. The father will curse the day he married Nyamoita's mother. The mother on the other hand will wish she never bore the pain at Nyamoita's birth.

No, she won't afford to let everyone down. Nyamoita was not going to run away. She will stay and endure the anguish. She will brave it for the sake of her parents, her friends and the village as a whole.

The girl, third from her could be heard writhing and grappling with the women. She could be heard kicking, biting, and tearing into their clothes. "Sit up right!" a nervous murmur came. "Hold her hands! Her hands women!" someone shouted. "Grab her legs! Her legs women!" another anxious voice burst forth. A fierce struggle ensued. Nyamoita listened to every word, sound and voice and, for a moment, she thought she was dreaming. She held her breath and stiffened her fingers on the ground, so tightly that she heard them

snub. She was now sure to be engulfed, to be swallowed into the underworld. The ground beneath her shook and swayed, crushed and crumbled and she seemed to fall through into the hollowness, screaming and shouting for help. No one came to her aid. No God was around. Neither was her mother. Ghostly drums seemed to beat in her head, clogging her ears and for a brief moment she was shut off from the world, from reality.

Suddenly the girl next to her burst into a scream, a sharp scream that rent the air in the dark forest and brought the women's song and dance into a sudden halt. Nyamoita froze with horror. Sweat trickled down her nape, and she could feel it accumulating at the tip of her chin. There was one choice for her. She decided to do one thing. She was determined. She will never regret...

"Stop her! Stop her! She has gone! Run! Women run! It is a shame! Curse! Curse upon her! Curse upon us women! Curse upon the village of Bogiakumu! ..."

These are the words Nyamoita heard behind her as she jumped over the fence and crawled under another, speeded through the forest and came to the wide road leading to the chief's camp that was situated nearby. She ran along the road, her heart pounding in her like a hammer. She reached the gate of the Chief's camp. The policemen on night duty were surprised to see a young girl clutching at and pushing the gate. "This must be another case of a girl escaping from circumcision rite," one policeman quickly commented to the other, as both moved towards the grille gate. "Oh God, too many cases these days!" the other sadly replied. The two policemen opened the gate for the little girl. Nyamoita was panting

and was out of breath as she explained to the two men what had happened. They had heard it before from so many other girls and there was no need of demanding the details from her. She was immediately taken to the other girls who were living in the compound in what Nyamoita heard was the rescuing center for the girls who had escaped from forced circumcision

The Beautiful Red Bag

It was evening and the sun had buried its flame in the horizon. Sarange hurried home from school. The day had been a happy one. It was the end of the term and she had topped her standard six class in the end of the year exam. At the closing ceremony, she was called to the front of the school and everyone was asked to clap for her. Her class teacher awarded her a beautiful red bag. The children and teachers clapped and cheered her as she unzipped the bag, revealing more prizes in it. There was a brown geometrical set, a ruler and a notebook. Her class teacher promised to buy for her a new school uniform the following year when she joined standard seven. She was delighted and she came home bubbling with joy and pride. She would pass her KCPE exam when she joined standard eight, she thought. She will then join Alliance Girls and later join the University of Nairobi. She would attain her degree in medicine and become a doctor, she mused. She was determined to excel. She was going to work harder than she had done before in order to realize her dreams.

She came through the gate that stood on the fence encircling their homestead. As she walked across the vast compound, she felt a warm sensation of joy sweeping down her back. Her father was going to be surprised to see her beautiful red bag and the rest of the prizes. Her mother would be overwhelmed with bliss and ecstasy. The entire village was going to hear about her success and will share in her happiness. Her friends at home who went to other schools will feel jealous of her prizes. She was simply going to be the talk of the village for a couple of weeks to come.

As she crossed the bare ground outside the main house, she was startled by a deep voice that was her father's: "Sarange come back here!" he shouted. "This here is your visitor." Sarange quickly looked to her left and saw, standing at the cowshed beside the house, her father. Beside him was a burly, pot-bellied old man whose beards were ragged and bushy, and whose forehead was long, wrinkled and exceeded onto his balding head, giving him a fierce cast of expression that would strike fear into anybody. Sarange stood still, transfixed, shocked at the unusual approach of her father. "Come on and greet him. Be quick!" Sarange found herself scurrying towards them, confused, filled with suspicion and foreboding. When she reached the two men, her father asked her to shake the visitor's hand which she did with a bow of her body. "Go into the house now and prepare yourself thoroughly. You are going out on a long journey."

Without comprehending the meaning of her father's words, Sarange turned to go. She could not have questioned. He was not the sort of man you could ask questions. His word was the gospel and was final. He loathed women who stood before him asking questions, or demanding clarifications. His lips trembled with rage before such women and would most likely be tempted to drive sense into them. Sarange left the two men and squirmed into the house. She then took the geometrical set and note book out of her new beautiful red bag and carried them in her hand. The prizes were to catch her mother's attention. She found her mother seated at the fireplace, her head cupped in her palms. "Mummy, look, my red bag," Sarange spoke with pride, as she moved closer to her mother. Her mother didn't move. Sarange realized that she was sobbing. She stood still, peering at her with

astonishment and bewilderment. She could not comprehend all that was happening. Her father talked of a long journey—what journey was it? And now, her mother crying at the fireplace—what had happened to her? Questions perturbed her mind. She was almost in tears herself.

“Go to your hut and dress up, Sarange,” her mother said, raised her head from her lap and wiped tears from her eyes. “You are going on a journey.”

“What do you mean, Mother?”

“You are going to another place.”

“Another school, mother?”

“Be it school or not, you are going away?”

“What do you mean, mother?”

“A journey, to which I, your mother, have no power to say no.”

“To grandma, mother?”

“To grandma, or not to grandma. It is a journey. ”

“But mother— ”

“Go prepare yourself. Don’t ask questions. You are now a grown up and should understand all that is happening.”

“But mother—”

“Don’t waste time. Go and prepare yourself. You know your father very well. He will blow up his tops if he finds you here. It is not my wish that this should happen.”

Sarange put back her prizes into her bag, disappointed, and went out. She entered her hut,

filled with uneasiness and uncertainty. She put on her Sunday red skirt and a white striped blouse. She put on her blue pair of socks and her black school shoes. She then packed in an old polythene paper her pullover, one extra dress, a pair of slippers and two underpants. Her new beautiful red schoolbag was to carry only her prizes, she thought. The prizes will come in handy in case her parents were taking her to a new school. She had heard of boarding schools where children were taken to learn and where they were supplied with food and given accommodation. These schools were like homes. It would be exciting if she was taken to one of such schools. She would then show her prizes to other pupils and prove to them of her prowess in class. She would also take the opportunity to concentrate on her studies.

It was coming to night fall and more men had joined her father and the old grey-bearded visitor at the cowshed. It had grown into a small crowd of men and women who were talking in subdued voices, with a mixture of happiness and anxiety written all over their faces. Sarange watched them through the wooden window of the main hut and wondered why they were all there or what they were up to. Apprehension and dread grew bigger and bigger in her, but was, from time to time, tampered with and broken by the exhilarating thought of her beautiful red bag and the immense pride that it brought into her heart.

It was now dark and the birds had long quietened in their nests. Cows and goats had been penned in their enclosure and little hustles and bustles of activities went on in the neighbourhood. Sarange, carrying a small bundle of clothes in polythene on one shoulder and the beautiful red bag containing her prizes, on the other, was escorted out of her

father's compound by people who were largely strangers. Quiet among this company were her mother and father. There were also her aunt and few village women whom she was familiar with.

They walked through a forest that had a thick canopy of foliage above their heads that spread wide and far like a roof of the house. Sarange felt awkward walking among the silent crowd. She walked close to her mother, clutching at her skirt and feeling her waist belt. "Are we about to arrive, mummy?" she whispered up at her mother. Her mother kept quiet. "Is it a school mummy?" Her mother kept quiet. "Shall we go to our grandma's place?" Her mother nudged her. She gave up asking questions. The path now narrowed, leading into thick undergrowths that were covered with dew. Sarange's shoes were wet and she realized she had become numb on the toes and ankles and was starting to shiver.

The procession came down a small valley, paved with rocks on either side. This led them to a swelling river. "What a beautiful river to swim in!" Sarange thought to herself. They crossed a wide bridge made from thick timbers and oak trees. Sarange held the wooden handrails and felt a pleasant sensation that the night brought in her heart. On the other side of the river Sarange noticed scattered bushes and tall grass covered in the moonlit night, through which they walked in silence. She looked up at the sky and saw the half moon whose light was lighting the vast field they were walking in.

They had walked for one hour when the procession suddenly stopped. Sarange breathed a sigh of relief. The old grey-bearded, pot-bellied man pushed forward and led them into a

gate made of old corrugated iron sheets. They entered in a single file. They were now in a huge compound that was lit by the moonlight. Sarange realized that the compound was filled with murmuring, which grew into audible conversations and which finally burst into ululations, song and dance. Sarange became aware of the many people in the compound, who must have been waiting for them. She also noticed that every one took interest in her and shook her hand with a gesture of familiarity. Sarange listened to their song and she heard her name mentioned. They called out her name, adorning it with praise and admiration. She was puzzled. She did not understand why. How did they know her name? Who told them that she had won prizes? She listened to the words of the song, but utterly failed to make head or tail of them.

“Sarange, the beautiful one!” the soloist sang.

“Sarange, the mother of this village!” the others answered in a chorus.

“Sarange, the lost one, now found!” the soloist said, high-pitchedly.

“Sarange, the mother of this village!”

“Sarange, the God-send!”

“Sarange the mother of this village!”

This song brought reminiscences of closing day ceremony when children and teachers sung her a song of compliment and congratulation: “Good girl, Good girl! Try again! Try again! Another time!” They had sang praises in honour of her name as she received her prizes, as she shook the hands of her teachers and as she, during her small speech to the school, spoke one point after another. Like those pupils and teachers at her school, these people, too, were happy for her. They showed intimacy and curiosity in her. But why were they happy, she wondered. Why were they dancing? Her name.... well, her name, what was it

for?...why her name and not someone else's?... Her parents..... so silent....so mysteriously quiet.....no one tempted to explain anything. Is there a school here?.....No. This had nothing to do with school. It was just an occasion of some sort—a village wedding, an ordinary village gathering, or just a stop-over to some destinations. But what meaning had it?....Sarange was puzzled.

She was shown a hut that stood on the left, at the far end corner of the compound. Sarange, in the procession, entered in this hut that was dimly lit with a can lamp. She saw beer in pots, milk in guards and honey in plates. They all sat down in lower stools and drunk. Sarange was given honey and milk to feed on. It had been a good journey and an exciting visit, Sarange thought, as she ate the honey and then joined in the songs sung by the old women in the hut.

“Sarange, the God-send!” the soloist started.

“The mother of this village!” the women replied.

“Sarange, the lost one. Now found!”

“The mother of this village!” they chorused.

“Sarange, the beautiful one!”

“The mother of this village!”

As the song went on, Sarange noticed the movement in and out of the hut. Women and men came in, drunk and left, while others reclined their bodies against the clay wall of the hut. When it was midnight, Sarange realized that she was alone among the strangers. Her people had long gone back to their home during the night. The strangers also left shortly

afterwards and she was left with the old grey-bearded, pot-bellied man. She was filled with distrust and dubiety. Then shortly....

“This is your house, Sarange,” the old man’s voice came.

Sarange suddenly realized the trick. She had been duped. It dawned on her that this was going to be her husband. She was going to be his wife. She had heard such arrangements happening to other girls of her age before and she never, at any one time, thought that this could happen to her. She realized she had been trapped and had no way out of it. She knew it was the end of the road for her. She froze on the three-legged stool on which she sat. Her heart palpitated and pound in her like a roll of drums. She felt tense and nervous. She clutched her beautiful red bag as a way of consolation. She took out her geometrical set and opened it, examining the protractor, the set square and the rubber. She recalled the ceremony on the closing day with all its merriment: Her teachers... her classmates.... Will she ever be in school again? No. Her new beautiful red bag?---it will never see the school in which it was given. Her classmates and teachers will never see her again. Where will the class teacher take the school uniform he promised to buy for her the following year? Her dream of becoming a doctor.... would it ever be realized? No. She would be a house wife, and no one will ever know that she one time topped her class. The train of her thoughts stung her eyes and tears beaded in her eyeballs.

The dim light of the can-lamp drew a long shadow on the clay wall opposite. Sarange looked up. The old man carried his pot-bellied body across towards her. “I said this is your

house, Sarange. Feel welcome," the man said, smoothed his long ragged beard and nodded his balding head. "This now is your house to live in, to keep and to cherish."

Sarange wanted to tell him off, but she couldn't speak. She took in a deep breath, and let the air out nervously. It was fear. She held back her tears by burying her head on her lap. Without further communication the old man paced up and down the house putting things in place. He tried to take away Sarange's polythene luggage and the beautiful red bag, but Sarange held onto them tightly and refused to let them go. He gave up and went into the bedroom where he spent few minutes before coming out. When he finally emerged, the man tried to make advances to Sarange, but was met with a rude shock. Sarange coiled her little body on the stool and refused to move. The man gave up and sat on a chair near the table.

"This is your house, Sarange, live in it and be happy." Sarange shook her shoulders in protest. Tears choked her. "You are now my wife, remember; and I am here to take care of you." Sarange blew her nose and wiped her tears. "I paid dowry for you three years ago, you hear?" Sarange kept quiet. Tears coursed down her tender cheeks. "I will make you happy, Sarange."

The man stood up, came towards Sarange for the second time. He shook up her thin fragile shoulders. She shrugged him off, pushing away his wrinkled clammy hands.

"Come on," the man spoke in deep voice, grabbed her thin wrist and lifted her up. She was filled with dread.

"Stop holding me like that," Sarange barked in anger, wringing her wrist from him.

“You are not a child anymore, you hear?” he thundered. “You are a wife, understand?”

“Me? Your wife?” She pushed him off.

He came down upon her with renewed energy. He grabbed Sarange’s torso. When he tried to drag her to the bedroom, she elbowed him on the belly and the man jerked back, and Sarange took the opportunity and freed herself and, with her beautiful red bag, quickly darted out through the open door and disappeared into the dark night. The man followed behind in hot pursuit and caught up with her outside at the banana plantation. As he pushed her in, bubbling with rage and fury, he grabbed away her beautiful red bag and the prizes in them and hurled it violently upon her youthful tender face. It hit her forehead and dropped to the floor and the prizes slipped out, scattering on the dusty floor.

“My bag! Oh! Oh! Oh my bag!” she cried loudly, beads of tears rolling down her cheeks, as she collected the scattered items putting them back into her red bag. She stood up, heaving and gasping for air, mucus and tears streaming down her cheeks.

“If you continue behaving like this, I am going to beat sense into this little head,” he warned in acid tones. Sarange, clutching onto her red bag, sat down on the three-legged stool and, at one time, seemed to resign to her fate. When the old man had calmed down, Sarange suddenly came onto her feet and, with all the energy her legs could summon, flew out of the house again; but before she could thrust into the darkness and disappear, the old man’s vein-lined enormous hands grabbed her, carried her on his shoulder and brought her once again into the house. He wrung the red bag from her hands and flogged her small head with it once again. The strap of the bag tore off and the piece fell on the floor. “My

bag! My bag is torn! Torn!” Sarange screamed hysterically as if her own life had been torn. She picked the piece of strap from the floor and clasped it tightly in her hand, like someone holding her piece of life.

The man, heaving with fury, took her by the scrap of her neck. “Little girl!” he shouted, anger shading his voice. He slapped her on the face, a slap that saw her reel down onto the bumpy floor. Dizzy and confused, she crawled on her belly and took cover under the table. The old man bent down and picked her by the skirt. “Stupid! Is this the way you are going to behave as a wife?” he spoke with fury, dragging her out. Sarange was screaming, but no body came to her help. The man’s elderly wives could not be expected to come to her rescue as this was the same experience they had to undergo before they fully became wives. The neighbours, too, could not intervene since wife-beating was the norm in the village.

As he dragged her little body on the earthen floor, Sarange suddenly remembered her only weapon she could bring into use to avert the violence meted out upon her. She had learnt it from her late grandmother during sessions she held with Sarange in which she taught her the common taboos of her people: Sarange struggled to come on to her feet, and when she managed, she swung back one step, then quickly gathered the hem of her skirt and pulled it up to her waist, baring her haunches and unveiling her pants. The man froze on the spot. He stared at Sarange’s tender legs and thighs and was struck with shock. As if that was not enough for the old man’s eyes, Sarange pulled down her pant, exposing her pudenda and pubic hair. She held the pants tightly in her hand. He stared at her, not believing his eyes.

What was she up to, the man wondered. Had she given in and now wanted him for the night? Looking at the figure before him, the man's muscles twitched. His flesh became tense and hard. He bit his lips, drooled on the mouth and saliva escaped at the corner of his mouth. While the man was dazed with shock and lust, Sarange suddenly jumped forward and landed before him, raised the pant above her head and—God forbid!-- lashed him with it. It was all over.... The man was finished....The act was irreversible. The man stood, transfixed like a ghost. He stood there as if he had been struck by lightning. It was taboo for a woman to beat a man with her own pant. The man stood, dump founded. He then suddenly burst out into a scream like an animal in terrible pain.

“Curse!..... Curse!.....Curse!..... Curse!.....Curse!.....”

He shouted, shouted and shouted, shouted until the word rattled off the walls like stone-shot. He knew it was all over. Sarange was not going to be his wife according to tradition. He had lost a wife. He wished he had taken much caution. He screamed so loudly that his first and second wives who had been quietly following the proceedings from a save distance at the windows of their huts, came running in. Neighbours, too, who were eavesdropping from far away behind the fences and from their huts, ran in and thronged outside the hut. Taboo had been committed. Beating a man with a pant was abominable. Sarange was going to be the first women to commit such an offence, at least in the recent times. It was abominable and unacceptable. It was going to cost seven bulls and seven white hens to avert the bad omen likely to be caused by Sarange's action. The seven bulls and the seven hens would be slaughtered at Sarange's home, after which the marriage will

be terminated. The animals' blood would be sprinkled on the ground outside Sarange's hut to appease the ancestral spirits so as to cleanse her abominable act. The heads, limbs, skins and entrails would be thrown in the forest to appease the gods of fertility and this would avert the calamity likely to befall the old man for the curse contracted from the woman's pant. The man had lost a wife he had, over the years, patiently waited for. Having paid dowry for her three years earlier while she was in standard three, the man was sure to own her as a wife. He now could not believe having lost her.

The village people who congregated in the homestead were tongue-tied. They bent their heads low and kept mum. It was gloomy and grave. Sarange watched them, examined their faces and felt like laughing out a loud. She knew she had escaped it. "Well done! Well done! Try again! Try again! Good girl!" she whispered the song to herself. She clutched her beautiful red bag and the prizes and held them closely to her side. She kept the piece of strap that broke from the bag, so carefully as if she was keeping her own life. She was bubbling with happiness; her heart vibrated with blithe and excitement. When the slaughtering of the goats and hens are done, she thought, she will be free to go to school the following year.

CHAPTER THREE

Let it Live

Linda sat on the bench waiting to get in. There were five patients to go before her turn came. She had not experienced her monthly period for three months now and she was worried. She wanted to be sure she was not pregnant. She was disturbed and had not slept a wink the previous nights. She was only in form three, and had one more year to go before she completed her secondary school. If she was pregnant it would be the end of the road for her. She will drop out of school and will never realize her dreams.

One more patient was called in. There were now four more remaining, three men and one pregnant woman whom she sat next to. The pregnant woman looked weak and emaciated. Her lips were dry and her eyes were sunken. Behind Linda was a long queue of about twenty patients, women and men. Linda looked around and noticed that some of the women were pregnant and some had recently given birth and had their little ones with them. The woman next to Linda was playing with her small handsome baby boy. The kid kept smiling at Linda, waving and grabbing at her dress and tousling her hair.

The pregnant woman in front of her suddenly started groaning in pain. She attracted people's attention and they all looked in her direction. She leant against the wall, with her limbs straggling on the bench. Shortly she started foaming at the corner of her mouth, and leant her body on Linda. Shocked, Linda held her up and looked around for help. The

nurses on duty noticed, rushed out and quickly took her away. Pregnancy was a painful experience, Linda thought. The image of the pregnant woman remained in her mind and got fixed there. If Linda's test results were positive, she didn't know what she would do. She would probably never let the pregnancy mature, but take chloroquin tablets and have the little nestling intoxicated, its wings and limbs stunted and its breath stifled. The little thing will never see the light of day. She will be a fresh girl again, free of stigma and admonition of parents, teachers and friends. She would walk around freely as though nothing had happened, and this would give her chance to redesign her life. She then would be more cautious, more thoughtful and prudent.

Another patient was called in. There were now three to go in before Linda. The little boy behind her pulled at her hair. Linda turned and felt her pony-tail between her fingers, and smiled at the boy.

"He is naughty. Sorry," his mother apologized to Linda.

"Never mind," Linda said, smiling in the woman's direction.

"Are you a parent?" the woman asked in a friendly tone.

"No, not yet," answered Linda. "Why are you asking?"

"Someone who is not a parent will find it irritating."

"I know," Linda said and smiled, blushing. "But with me, I do understand." She waved her fingers at the child. "Ti-ti-ti-ti," she teased him. The child grabbed one of her fingers and pulled it into his small mouth. He clawed it between his teeth for a little while. Linda felt embarrassed, but she put on a smiling face to show everything was alright. She looked

at the boy and thought he was handsome. What a handsome boy! She exclaimed to herself. Children are God's gift, she thought, and they are a blessing to mankind.

The child released her finger, still smiling at her as if he knew the effect it had on Linda. The mother of the boy laughed. "I told you he is naughty. So naughty," she said and pinched the child's cheeks.

"Never mind," said Linda. "One day I will also have one like him," she said and the words weighed heavily upon her own mind. I will be happy to become a mother, she thought to herself. "How old is he?"

"Two, going three."

"To have a child is a blessing," Linda said.

"A big blessing. Plan and have one soon," the woman said and laughed to herself. "It is a blessing to see your own image," she laughed again, threw the boy into the air and held him down onto her lap. Linda was absorbed in deep thought. The woman's words sunk into her mind and lodged there. A blessing... it is a blessing...to see your own image, your image...image...image....

"Sure?" Linda said absentmindedly. Unconsciously, she passed her hand under her belly and pressed hard on the little swelling that was developing there. Another patient was called in. There were two remaining before Linda's turn came.

"I gave birth to this boy before I was married," the woman went on, smiling. "His

biological father denied responsibility.”

“Really?” Linda wondered. “You didn’t think of aborting?”

“Oh no!” the woman cried. “Why should I kill an innocent child?”

“So did you get married later?”

“Of course, I am now married. Not to his biological father.”

“You mean his father never came back to you?”

“He did, but it was too late. I was already married. In any case I wouldn’t have accepted him back after he walked out on me.”

“Oh, happy to hear that you could not abort.”

“You don’t abort, you let it live. God has reasons why He lets things happen.”

“Oh yes,” Linda nodded her head, steeped in the conversation. She looked at the woman and the child and marveled. She was not going to be the first one, she thought, there were many in the world. Her parents will understand. She will narrate the whole incident to her mother and she was sure she would empathize with her. She will then inform her father of her situation. The school principal was also a very understanding lady. In the past she had assisted many girls at her school who fell in a similar trap. She allowed them continue with classes while they breastfed their children at their homes. Some who could not return to her school because of stigma, she made arrangements for them to transfer to other schools where they completed their secondary education. She was motherly and full of empathy.

The patient in front of her was called in. Linda was now the next one on the queue. She held her breath. She had given a sample of her urine in the laboratory and the result had

been forwarded to the doctor in this room she was going. What might be the results? Positive or negative? She wondered. Agony twisted in her. Premonition and death both dragged at her like a ball and chain. Did life bear any meaning? Why do we live and suffer such torments and pain? Is life of any purpose? She examined her future, the future she had worked so hard for, and she saw it being covered in darkness.

Suppose she was pregnant, she asked herself again. Her mind went blank. And the blank space was slowly filled up by images of her father: old unkempt man, with tattered trousers, shirt and shoes. labouring so hard in the farm to see her go to school. What will happen when he learnt about her condition? Will he overcome the shock of the terrible news?.... No! not at all. Maybe her decision to “let live” and get the blessings the woman with the child delightedly spoke of will bring her problems. Giving birth will be suicidal. It stained a woman forever and, with the kid around and growing, one never recovers from such disgrace. The best thing is to flush it out once you know it is there. No one will know you ever did it. You will be a free woman once again.....

Then her well-formed train of thoughts gradually got blurred, became amorphous and indistinct and then, suddenly, as if from a distant world, a voice gently called upon her: “Mother! Mother! Spare me! Spare me mother!” The voice whimpered upon her mind repeatedly, consistently, and persistently, until she, the mother, turned inside into herself and saw, in her mind’s eye, her own child dying, and as life exuded out of it, it pleaded for a chance to live; it moaned and cursed., so much that Linda suddenly turned, as if startled from a deep sleep, to look behind her--accidentally she caught the hand of the little boy

who was out again for his mischief. "I Love you my boy," she said in a moaning voice-- and actually moaned.

Her name came floating through the narrow door, startling her from her train of thoughts. She stood up, shivering, bewildered and confused. She tottered through the narrow opening and entered the semi-dark room. At the far end corner, seated before a table, in a white overall, was the doctor. She trundled across the small room like someone carrying a heavy load on her head. She sat down and her mind went blank. He turned round to pick a sample of urine from the table behind him, and Linda felt it was a hundred years before he turned round again to place it on the table. Her heart beat rapidly in her. She took in a deep breath and let it out noisily.

The doctor placed the bottle on the table and examined the result attached to it. He took centuries to read through the few lines on the piece of paper. Linda moved, fidgeted, scratched her hands, twirled her thumbs, adjusting her thin body on the chair; the doctor's eyes were distracted and looked up, catching her legs swinging. She was embarrassed and almost broke down in tears. The doctor then took in a deep breath and an expression of pity formed on his face. Linda watched all this and resigned to her fate.

"Which school do you go?" he asked at long last.

"St, Teresa's Girls," she found the words.

"Which form are you in now?" he asked, with a voice of concern.

"Three," she said and wanted to scream. She wanted to stop him from asking any more questions. He turned round again, this time searching for nothing. He looked disturbed. He

turned to face her.

“Why do you take a pregnancy test?” he asked.

“I haven’t experienced my monthly period for three months now,” she choked on the words.

“Have you been under some medication of recent?”

“No.”

“Been distressed, or disturbed in some way?”

“Well...” Linda started, then stopped. She did not understand why he asked her as to whether she had been depressed or not. She surveyed the room and got lost, then: “I failed my exams and my parents are furious,” she said, blushed and scratched her nose.

“Ooooh...Ok!. Ok!. Ok!..” he spoke to himself, and then wrote something down on the piece of paper. “Your pregnancy test...,” he started, then stopped. Linda’s intestines coiled into one big lump inside her stomach. She saw in her mind’s eye her father and mother, her school principal, her classmates, friends.....“your pregnancy test came out--” the doctor continued, interrupting Linda’s train of thoughts. “Negative!”

“Negative?” the word echoed in her mind.

“You are not pregnant, Linda!” he said, line of happiness filling his dark face. “As you have told me you have been distressed of recent because you failed your exams. At times stress can interfere with one’s monthly periods. Your case has been caused by stress. Ok?”

An intense light came down upon Linda and filled the dark hollows of her heart. She was a live again, happy and smiling. She left the room bubbling with bliss, happy that she was not pregnant. That was a close shave, she thought. Suppose the result was positive, what

could she have done, she wondered, swearing inside her heart never again to engage in premarital sex. Tom, that Tom, always demanding sex from her...never minding whether her days were safe or not...dragging her to bed anytime she visited...This Tom... This Tom.... will one day put her in trouble... Where are you Tom? ..you agent of Satan... a devil... a hole into which I will one day fall and never be rescued. The earlier I give him the boot the better for my life.

She walked across the car park and went along the flower garden. She clutched her belly and it was all empty, nothing growing inside it. She looked up and thanked God. She reached the bus stop and immediately boarded a bus and left for home, determined to live a life of celibacy, at least while in school.

Matilda's Changing Fortunes

The graduation ceremony was conducted outside on the college's vast field. The graduands, clad in grey suits and red neck-ties, sat on chairs arranged in rows, with their guardians next to them. Matilda sat on the front row, her aunt on her left and Allan on her right hand side. The little baby nestled comfortably on her lap. Matilda looked behind her and she saw a sea of people. So many had turned up to attend their graduation ceremony. The principal, the tutors and various guests sat on the podium. The master of ceremony's voice flooded on the air: "Testing! Testing!" The ceremony began.

After prayer and the national anthem, the Master of Ceremony introduced the tutors and the guests. Then she started calling names of graduands, one by one, and requesting them to go to the podium where each one was crowned with a wreath of flowers and issued with a certificate.

After ten students were called, Matilda knew her turn was soon coming. She bent her head to look at her baby. "Suckle quickly," she whispered down at him. "Don't you know today is a great day for your mother to be recognized as a teacher?" she thought. The baby started suckling ravenously. "Tik, tik tik tik" she teased him, pinching his cheeks and caressing his smooth hair.

As the boy suckled, she adjusted her suit and necktie and, bending down, pulled her socks up. She took in a deep breath and let it out with relief. At last the day had come! The day

she had waited for for a long time. The two years had been bumpy, challenging and full of difficult times. She looked onto her right and met with Allan's eyes. He sat there quietly, sheepishly, quite unlike the old Allan she knew. Matilda wanted to shout, "shame!" on his face, but instead murmured the word inside her heart. She felt a lump building in her throat and forcing tears to ooze in her eyes. This Allan, she thought...a devil... A devil, yes a devil. ... She felt like screaming at him, tear his clothes and, with her teeth, tear him into shreds. Allan was one person who had contributed immensely to her misery during her college life. She operated from her uncle's home during her college course, having been taken there after her parents died in a road accident. She recalled that one evening when she urgently went to see Allan at his house. She started on this light note: "Allan, do you love me?"

"Of course. Why?" he asked with suspicion.

"You do? That is all I want to know," she said in a voice loaded with irony

"Yes, I do."

"You know," she started, paced up and down the room, and when she brought her self down on a chair, she told Allan: "You know I am pregnant, Allan. I am carrying your baby."

"What?" This was a bomb that shook the chair on which he sat. He looked at Matilda, confused. "What do you mean, Matilda?"

"That is what I mean. Is it wrong to carry your baby?" she asked.

"How sure can I be it is my baby. It can be somebody's."

"Somebody's? Is that what you have to say?"

"Yes. It can be somebody's," he spoke with anger. "Furthermore, why did you decide to

conceive?"

"But it is you who did it," she cried out. "I had warned you Allan, but you never heeded to my pleas. I had warned you, didn't I?"

It is true she had warned him. That was three months earlier when she had come to visit him as a girlfriend and a wife-to-be, and she happened to spend a night in his house. He had clasped her hand in his, and sweetly talked her into the bedroom, half-dragging her along. She had put up a gentle struggle against him, scratching his hand and wringing his fingers. When her struggles weakened, his hands, in a swift movement, unlaced her bodice and bared her full breasts to his ferocious gaze. He laid her softly upon the bed and maneuvered her until the flame leaped down deep within her body. She sighed and let him softly enter into the secrets of her body...

Matilda's train of thoughts was interrupted. Her name had been called. "Matilda!" her aunt startled her, "your name! your name Matilda! go! go!" She jumped up, and hurriedly perched the baby on her aunt's lap. Suddenly the baby burst into a scream. She grabbed him and threw him in Allan's lap, but the baby clung back onto Matilda's coat, so tightly that she could not detach him from her. She grabbed him up onto her bosom and hurried off with him to the podium. She shook the hands of the guests and went to the master of ceremony who gave her the flowers and the certificate. Immediately the baby grabbed the flower and pulled the leaves off it, sending the guests and students into fits of laughter. Matilda smiled sheepishly, squirming and covered her face as she walked towards her seat.

“He likes no one,” her aunt spoke as a matter-of-factly way.

“He is used to staying with his mother,” Allan laboured to explain the obvious, “that is why he is not used to being handled by other people.”

Matilda sat looking at her certificate. At long last she had graduated. She was going to be a teacher and will get her monthly salary. Her poverty, misery and what not, had come to an end. She had entered a working class. She would be able to take care of her baby, bring it up well and see it grow to become a successful man. She will begin a part-time degree course at the University of Nairobi, attending classes during school holidays. With a job nothing was going to stop her; the sky was the limit. She unbuttoned her blouse and breastfed her baby. “Little baby! Ti-ti-ti” she teased him. He was a lovely baby, handsome and full of life. His future was bright, she thought. She recalled the night when she came from Allan’s house after he rejected her. She had gone back to her uncle’s house where she lived in the city and went straight to bed. She had wanted to terminate the pregnancy and smash the life of the little nestling in her stomach. She had tried with malariaquine; but that failed. She took the kitchen knife and wanted to end all her miseries; but that also failed. Lastly she decided to let the little baby live. Now he was growing up, and soon was to become a big man, get his education in big institutions, then become a Member of Parliament, a lawyer, a doctor, an engineer.....

The baby finished suckling and Matilda buttoned her blouse. “My boy sleep now,” She said.

“Will he sleep with this noise and commotion?” her aunt asked after overhearing Matilda talk to the child. Allan bent his head forward and, as he strained to look her direction, he exhibited boredom and regret.

The ceremony came to an end. The graduands, tutors and guests stood up for the last prayer. After the prayer Matilda, aunt and Allan started getting out of the college field. Along the way Matilda took a photo with her wreath and certificate. She also took one with her baby and aunt. Allan hanged around, chagrined. When they were at the gate Allan opened up a conversation.

“It is great for you to graduate, Matilda.”

“No doubt about that.”

“You are going to be a teacher and you will earn a lot of money.”

“The money will be for me and my baby,” she said and clasped her baby closely to her bosom, kissing him on the lips, neck and face.

Matilda knew she was being rude to him. He deserves it, she thought. He rejected me when I needed him most... I had suffered immense stress due to that rejection. Had it not been for the college principal who understood my plight and allowed me to take courses as a day scholar, my education could have been jeopardized and I could not have come this far. Had he accepted me, I could have moved in to stay with him. Instead of comfort and happiness, he brought misery to my life.... I hate him! I hate him! Devil... devil ...devil...devil....

"Matilda, why are you so sad," her aunt interrupted her thoughts.

"I am not sad, aunt," she spoke, somehow squirmed, then held her baby high up on her head. "Baby, baby, sweet baby..."

"You truly look sad," Allan added.

"How can I be sad when I am with my son?" she told Allan, then curled her lower lip in contempt.

"Do you think you can get time to talk to me some time next week?"

"Time? No time. I am busy," she spoke firmly, bitterness in her voice.

"Can I then have your number?" he almost pleaded. "Maybe I can call to find out when you are free."

"No. I am not free. I will never be free."

"Ok? Maybe I can make a surprise visit to your place one of these days."

"No. Don't dare come to my uncle's home. You are not allowed."

"As a friend, of course."

"No. You are not a friend."

"To see my baby," Allan insisted.

"Which baby?" Matilda's voice rose.

"This one."

"This one?" she asked with fury, veins forming on her temples. "But I thought you had said it belonged to somebody else, didn't you Allan?"

"Calm down, Matilda," her aunt spoke as she moved closer to her, holding her shoulder.

"You said you were not the father. You rejected the boy even before he was born," she shouted at him, attracting everyone who was passing by. People stopped to look. "You

rejected him.” The baby whimpered and touched his mother’s head. Matilda looked down at him. “Baby, peace! Peace, baby!” she smiled at the baby. “All I have is you baby, baby peace, peace baby.”

When they reached the bus stage, her aunt bid Allan bye. “Bye, Aunt,” Allan responded. Matilda also said bye to him, and spat contemptuously beside him. She clasped her baby close to her chest and left. As she walked, she turned the baby’s head away from Allan’s direction. “Baby, don’t look at someone who hates you, someone who rejected you.” Allan looked on and felt humiliated.

Matilda left Allan standing there, spellbound, stunned and crushed. He deserves it, she thought. By the time they arrived home, Matilda had managed to remove the devilish image of Allan out of her head. It was a great day for her and she didn’t want to tamper it with her past. She looked forward to her teaching job, raising her son and joining the University of Nairobi for a part time degree course.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Village Queen

“It is all a waste of time,” Mzee Ndege said contemptuously. “It is strange for a woman.”

“Well, everything is worth trying,” Mama Bokoko said to him as she packed her certificates and testimonials into her bag. “I recall when I was growing up I always had this feeling of becoming a leader. Even children at school called me ‘Madam’”

“A woman?” Mzee Ndege spoke with scorn. “It is hard, really hard, unimaginable, unheard of.”

“Why is it unimaginable?”

“It won’t happen. It won’t work.”

“But some are in parliament these days??

“That is parliament. Not in the village of Bogiakumu”

“Some have become councilors as well.”

“Well, the village of Bogiakumu thinks differently. It is not ready for a woman chief.”

“The people have no power to choose whom they want. It is done through interview”

“Interview, or written test, a woman will not pass any of them.”

“Why will she not pass any? She is capable, just like any other man.”

“Anyway, we shall wait and see,” he spoke with a tone of scorn.

Mama Bokoko finished packing her certificates and other documents into her bag. She went into the bedroom and put on her dark blue suit and her black shoes. She carried her

umbrella and went out into the veranda of their hut. Roselyne and Timothy came running in. "Mummy, mummy!" Roselyne called, "people have assembled in the village field." "A vehicle has come mummy," Timothy added.

Mama Bokoko adjusted her belt and straightened her flowing dress and waved at her husband and children to bid them bye. Mzee Ndege, who was working at the cowshed, raised his spade up to the air as a sign of good luck. He stood, akimbo, looking at his wife go through the wooden gate, down to the road.

Mama Bokoko arrived at the village field and found, to her amazement, hundreds of people had assembled there, eager to know their new chief. People, having heard that Mama Bokoko was on the list of contenders, jeered her as she passed one group after another. Men looked at her and smiled to themselves with contempt. "The Queen, the Queen of Bogiakumu!" they whispered among themselves. Her name did not feature in the men's debate as to who was going to be their new chief. They mentioned names of male teachers, officers from public works and popular village elders, as possible winners!

"What of Mama Bokoko?" one man in the men's group intended to provoke them. This was followed with a prolonged bout of laughter. They laughed and slapped their hands together. Some laughed and threw their *migeke* hats into the air in utter contempt.

"A woman! My friend, why are you trying to disgust us this morning?"

“A woman? It goes without saying. It will never happen. Not at Bogiakumu,” another added.

“Mama Bokoko-- for all the people?” another wondered, sneered and then beat the air with his *mugeke* hat in contempt.

In another group of men who gathered in the middle of the field, they anxiously explained why they wished a teacher candidate to become their new chief. They spoke in favour of this teacher and were sure he was going to win. When Mama Bokoko joined them briefly on her way into the hall where the interview was to be conducted, they went mum, and looked around suspiciously. They greeted her without a word. “What do you think about today’s interview?” she broke their silence, then laughed sheepishly to herself. No one laughed with her. They only looked around suspiciously, exchanging gestures and facial expressions and some covering their mouths ready to burst into laughter

“It is quite alright,” one of the man replied at last, a tone of irony in his voice.

“Are we women able to make it?” she asked in a matter-of-factly way.

“It is time for women,” one man shouted mockingly, and laughed a loud.

“Cheer up men. I know you support a woman for this leadership position,” she spoke, adjusted her bag on her shoulder and walked away, blushing. She knew the men of her village never saw anything good in women. They thought women were incapable of leading the village and so, in this contest, she was not counted as one of the candidates.

Only nine men were being spoken of. Poor old Mama Bokoko was not seen as one of the candidates contesting for the position of chief. Mama Bokoko felt humiliated. Her husband had advised her accordingly, but she had defied him and refused to give up from

attending the interview. Now she realized how difficult it was to even become the top nine best candidates.

As she entered the hall for the interview, she felt crushed, subdued and degraded. She greeted all the men candidates on the bench, feigning a smile. She then sat on the bench and tried to discuss with the man candidate next to her about the interview. The man gave her a cold shoulder, and each time turned away from her to respond to the conversation of other men candidates. She felt humiliated and degraded. She wondered how she was going to make it.

Noise from outside the hall spilled into the hall. People were anxious to know their new chief. Young and old had gathered in the vast field, discussing, debating and betting on who their new chief was going to be. The majority were sure one of the teacher candidates was going to clinch the position since the predecessor was also formerly a teacher. Others favoured the officers from the public works who were also contesting.

The officers from the provincial headquarters, who were to conduct the interview, came out from the inner room in the hall and surveyed the ten candidates and asked if all the candidates were present. They then told them that the interview was going to begin shortly. They went back into the inner room and locked the door behind them. Meanwhile intense noise could be heard coming from the field outside. People were tired waiting for the interview to take place and the new chief to be announced. They had discussed, debated and betted enough, and were now waiting to confirm their guesses.

Shortly, one officer came out to the hall, looked around and announced the commencement of the interview. “Gwaro!” he called. That was going to be the first candidate to be interviewed. He went in, leaving others fidgeting, filling the vast hall with the warmth of their sighs. The noise outside was growing. Mama Bokoko listened and felt a cold jitter going down her back. Her husband must have come and joined other men outside in the vast field, she thought. What was he speaking to them? What were the men telling him? Were they telling him she had brought disgrace to him and to the family? She was going to be the talk of the year once the interview came to an end, she thought. She will be viewed as a woman who “fights” men. The village will see her as a woman who equates herself with men—something unacceptable and immoral in Bogiakumu and the villages beyond. She should not have attended the interview, she regretted, leave alone applying for the post. She became nervous, confused and felt like crying.

The first candidate came out sweating on the nape and neck. “Petero!” another was called in. Petero, a teacher at the village school, jumped up as if a pin came below his bottoms and suddenly pricked him. Gwaro walked out shaking his head, an indication that the interview was not an easy one. The second candidate came out sooner than expected. He gestured to other men, claspng his fingers into a fist, to indicate that the interview was “hard.”

The last one to be called in was Mama Bokoko. She went in with the feeling that she had nothing to lose. Being a woman, no one will feel she failed even if she is not chosen. She

sat on a bench, looking at the two officers who sat opposite her with big files before them. They were friendly and smiled at her before they started asking her questions. The first question came: "How will you feel if you are chosen as the new chief of this location?"

"I will be very happy, sir," she said and smiled. "I am capable, and ready to lead." Are these the questions they were going to ask her? She wondered. Then she was going to pass all of them.

"Mama Bokoko, would you please sing for us the last stanza of our national anthem in English?" National anthem? This is what she had sung during her primary school days and as a head girl of Itierio high school during her secondary school days. During those days she stood before other students at parade and conducted the song every Friday morning. She also sung it during public ceremonies when, as the school head girl, she was invited to give a speech on behalf of the school. No doubt then that the song was as familiar as the palm of her hands.

"Yes, I can sing the national anthem," she said. "Now let us all stand up," she continued, as she rose to her feet. The two officers looked at her for a while, but did not stand up, then finally told her to sit down. "You have got that right," one of them said, and smiled. "People forget that they should stand up whenever they sing our country's national anthem." Mama Bokoko sat down and was surprised that she had passed her first question so easily.

Other tough questions followed. She was asked to name the first woman president in

Africa, the first woman to hold a cabinet post in Kenya and finally she was asked to explain what she could do to bridge gender imbalance in the society if she was chosen a new chief of Bogiakumu. She answered all questions explicitly and with a lot of ease. She was surprised to learn that the interview was over and she had not got stuck in answering any of the questions she was asked.

She left the small room, and went out exhaling deeply. The field outside was packed to capacity. People were mobbing the male candidates who they thought were going to triumph in the interview. Some men started singing and praising their favourite candidates, referring to them as the new chiefs. One of the male candidates was seen addressing a small crowd at the gate to the venue. He had won, he said, and was the new chief. They clapped their hands and cheered him up as he mentioned one development issue after another that he will deal with when he starts working as a chief.

Mama Bokoko walked amid the small scattered crowds like a shadow. No one seemed to notice her. She felt lonely and dejected. No one gave her their attention. She looked around for her husband, but learnt that he had not come to witness the interview and the installation of the new chief. Her two children, Roselyne and Timothy, had also not turned up. People looked in her direction and smiled in contempt. "A woman!" they could be heard saying. "She should engage her mind in something better." "She thinks she could compete with men—shame!" "What a shame!" They spoke endlessly, spitting and shaking their heads. Mama Bokoko ignored their mocking eyes and went round the field looking for a friendly group to talk to.

The two provincial officers emerged from the hall. Carrying their files, they stood at the door. The result was ready. People scampered towards the hall, shouting the names of their best candidates. Mama Bokoko walked bravely towards the hall, with little fear of what people were going to say about her. She will leave the place and go home without iota of qualms. She will speak, smile and interact as usual. People were going to talk for a while, but that would come to an end someday and everyone will go about their business as usual. After all, is it not said that successful people are those who try the impossible, those who cross the river when the storm rages and hope to reach the other shore? She had not done wrong trying to capture the vacant position of chief, she thought.

Mama Bokoko stood in the crowd as the charged crowd surged forward and backwards. The officers moved forward and one of them raised his hand up to indicate that people should keep quiet before they start speaking. Sure enough the noise subsided. One of the two officers opened his file. "Without wasting time, let me announce the result of today's interview," he started. "We had ten candidates: Nine men and one woman." People cheered--or were they jeering--at the one only woman who contested against men.

"Here are the best three candidates. Let me start with second runners up. Gwaro!" People clapped their hands, and his supporters booed. "Runners up candidate--and this one almost won had he scored well in current issues--Darius Onsongo!" The crowd booed. Among those who booed were his supporters as it dawned on them that he was not going to be their new chief. The officer looked down on his file and composed himself before he

could read the name of the new chief.

“Petero! Petero! Petero!” a section of the crowd shouted.

“John Ndere! John Ndere! Ndere!” another section added.

“Charles Kegero! Charles Kegero!”

“Reuben Makario! Reuben Makario!”

“Evans Migiro! Evans Migiro!” People continued shouting the names of the candidates whose names had not been mentioned in the third and second positions.

“This then is the new chief of Bogiakumu Village...” the officer said and then raised his eyes to survey the anxious crowd.

“Petero!” people interrupted him.

“John Ndere!” another section tried to over do the other

“Charles kegero!”.....

“The new chief is Mama Bokoko!” the officer read. What did he say?Mama Bokoko?... Silence!... Silence!... Silence descended upon the crowd. People stood still as if thunder had struck them en masse. They looked at one another, tongue-tied, unable to comprehend, unable to belief their ears. The first woman chief in the village! It was as unbelievable as it was historical. It seemed stranger than fiction. Mama Bokoko was seen sobbing and wiping her eyes as she walked amid the silence. She went to the front and sat on the three-legged stood that had been prepared and placed next to the officers. Then, as if from a deep sleep, the people burst into howling of excitement as the gray garland came down on the neat braids of the first woman chief. “Queen! Queen! Queen!” they shouted. “Queen of Bogiakumu Village!”

Mashida's Cooking Pot

Kombozi Samantha drove slowly past the decrepit narrow ligneous bridge and then, swiftly, went up the hill. She curved at the corner and was now moving gently under the eave of the hill, past clay-painted dilapidated huts and begrimed avocado-selling kiosks.

She was traveling to the venue of the campaign rally. Five years ago she had travelled to this same venue to attend a similar rally, but things didn't turn out well for her. She had arrived at the venue only to be welcomed by boos and jeers. "A woman, no! A woman, no!" The people had shouted at her as she delivered her speech. Bewildered, confused and humiliated, she hang back the microphone and sat down. She left the venue before the end of the meeting amid "Woman, no! Woman, no! Women for the kitchen!" They shouted and humiliated her as she drove through the gate, disappearing down the road.

Now as she drove along she thought about her speech. What was she going to tell the people? How effective was her speech going to be? She examined it in her mind, adorning it, adding humour and spice, making it credible and convincing.

"My people...."she will begin. "I do know... I know..." No, she was not going to stammer or allow nervousness take control over her. She was going to be articulate and speak with confidence. After all she had done very well in the last five years. She had become popular and more respected than the incumbent Member of -

Parliament. The minister had failed to build the village bridge, one of the things he promised to do; Kombozi Samantha sacrificed her time and money and put up the bridge. She had also initiated a project for the youth in the constituency that saw a big multipurpose hall erected in the village. She had helped form women self help groups around the constituency which to date are vibrant and whose members owe it to her. She had climbed up the ladder of popularity in the last five years.

She was now crossing Keniongo forest. The patches of light that came filtering through the thick canopy above her cast an illuminating feeling upon her mind. She felt herself great, a saviour, a queen of Mashida village. If she was elected this time round, she was not going to be like the incumbent MP. She will not make any pledge that she knew she would not fulfill. She will always be honest and straightforward to her people. Honesty, truthfulness and hard work were going to be her hallmark.

She crossed a bridge and climbed up a gentle hill. She was now facing Mashida village, her village, the village that rejected her five years ago because she is a woman. Would they accept her now, she wondered. Have the people changed their attitude, their way of thinking? What is it that she would say to them to prevent them from seeing her as a woman but as a capable leader of Mashida village?

She looked outside the window of her car and recalled five years ago. The people had called the incumbent, "A bull! The bull of Mashida village!" and dismissed

her as “a weak chicken that could only lay eggs” and could not deliver her pledges. They then carried his burly body shoulder-high for a very long distance, through the market, along the village main road, down Nzaria hill and up the river. They ululated for him and beat drums and stomped the dust-draped road until the view was hazy. And when they arrived back to the village shrine, he was crowned as Mashida’s spokesman. He was wrapped in a goatskin and was given a shield and a spear in a ceremony that was attended by Kombozi Samantha and the village elders. He then aimed his spear at the people, shaking it, sending them into laughter and applause. Then later he was given milk in a big gourd to drink, the rest of which he spilled on the ground for the ancestors. No doubt, Msaliti was the darling of Mashida people. Kombozi Samantha recalls how he was mobbed wherever he went, and how the people jeered her and loathed her like the plaque. Will they be any different now? She felt nervous. She was filled with fear of meeting her people, the people who rejected her and refused to vote for her. Now as she drove she felt entirely detached from herself, from the world around and from everything that existed. She was tense. She fidgeted with the steering and almost lost control of her car.

Kombozi Samantha turned the corner and was on the apex of the steep, grass-covered Nzaria hill, overlooking the sprawled Mashida village. Her village. The village of her people. It was a matter of minutes before she would step on its soil, stand before the eyes of the people who rejected her; people who spat on her face and told her that she belonged to the kitchen. People who told her to shut up and

stop competing with men. People who hurled insults at her wherever she went and, at times, splashed cold water on her face and made fun of her. It was taboo, they said, for a woman to go to war against a man. It was unheard of, foreign and indecent. Rejected and dejected, she stepped down for the incumbent.

What were they going to tell her now that she had put up a village bridge, formed women self help groups around the constituency and secured few casual jobs for the youths in the last five years? Were they going to shout her down again? Her hands felt feeble on the steering at the thought of so many eyes: The eyes of her people, the people who rejected her. Her intestines froze into one thick lump and seemed to roll inside her like a little nymph. She felt blood draining from her face, leaving her white and pale. It was fear. She felt like her car was running inside a jungle of crawling ants and snakes that bit and scratched upon her senses, making her seem to lose control over it.

The noise of the people at Mashida village ground could be heard so many miles away. A babel of noise. A mixture of song, defiant shouts, cheers and jeers. So many had turned up to elect their leader. She knew her rival, the incumbent MP, had arrived at the venue and was already mobilizing the people against her. They will shout at her, she thought. "A woman" they will say, "belongs to the kitchen!" But she was used with that one now. She had to gather courage. As a leader of the people she had to be strong-hearted, confident and tough. She must summon hope and see things in the positive way.

Kombozi Samantha pricked up her ears as she drove: a tone of defiance in the song. They were singing a war song. Not a song of peace that she thought they should be singing. It was a defiant war song. It was a war against whom? Since the incumbent was already at the venue why were they singing a war song and not a song of peace, Samantha wondered....

Kombozi Samantha's car, a white Toyota corolla, with an aerial wire at its rear dangling in the air, appeared from behind a small thicket at the gate of the school compound, climbed gently up a mound of soil at the edge of the field. On top of the mound, it skidded its tyres and, with a sudden move, climbed down the mound, settled on the green grass, then suddenly shot forward into the middle of the field. The car was immediately surrounded and mobbed by the people who shouted, "Kombozi Samantha! Kombozi Samantha!" The songs intensified as she slipped out of her car. "Msaliti, go home! Msaliti go home!" they sang and danced, uncontrollably, livid with excitement. People were scattered all over the field while at the podium Msaliti, the incumbent, was giving a speech which no one was listening to.

Kombozi Samantha walked amid noise and excited crowd and reached the podium. Noise increased as she sat down. People jeered the incumbent MP as they shouted, "Kombozi Samantha! Kombozi Samantha!" The incumbent stopped talking. He felt embarrassed. He turned round and sat down.

Samantha was filled with a mixture of excitement and confusion as the people shouted her name. She swept her eyes over the sea of heads that dotted the fields before her. She was shaken. The field was packed to capacity. She rose to the rostrum and saluted the people

"Minto!"

"Eeeeeeee!" the people cried back.

"Ng'aki bwakire?"

"Mbuyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Our people have a say."

"Yes! Toboa! Toboa! Toboa!"

"That when a male dog has had enough bones and meat, it forgets to bark". People cheered wildly and drowned the woman's speech. "When *ribera* tree stops bearing fruits, it is usually cut, discarded, or used as firewood." At this point, wild clapping rent the air. "We in Mashida have many problems, more than we can count. All we want is one thing: Change!" people ululated. "We want honest, transparent, and accountable leadership." Shouts of "Kombozi Samantha!" filled the air.

"We want leadership that empowers the people!" she continued. "Mashida people need to be empowered." The words enraptured the crowd. Young men jumped to the dais and carried Kombozi Samantha shoulder-high, climbed with her down the steps of the dais and broke into a wild song and dance. They danced around the field. People dispersed and followed them, waving and singing along with them.

Perched on the shoulders of two strong men, the woman aspirant waved and yelled, "Unity! Unity among the people of Mashida! Unity people! Unity people!" as she received acknowledgments from every section of the crowd. The drummer ran after them and beat his drum to add flavour and rhythm to the wild song. A group of women followed behind shouting "Our flower! The flower of Mashida! The daffodil! The rose! The sunflower!"

Running across the field was one woman who was carrying a stick which she wielded and scooped in the air, imitating the action of a cooking stick. She jumped up as she ran, shouting, "Our cooking pot! Mashida's cooking pot! The cooking pot of Mashida!" Surely, the woman leader was going to be a cooking pot for the community. She was going to be a source of satisfaction. As a leader she will be expected to feed the people of Mashida with both the physical and spiritual food. Like a cooking pot she will be the *sufuria*, from which everyone will scoop her or his dishful share of the village milk or honey or, as the villagers put it, "the national cake." The incumbent had reneged on his pledges and therefore had left them hungry. Definitely he was a bad cooking pot--cold and broken. "Mashida's cooking pot! Our cooking pot!" the woman continued to shout, as she made a scooping and stirring gesture in the air with her long, round stick.

Msaliti, the incumbent sat at the podium, crest-fallen. His friends and family members sat by his side, dumb-founded, confused and bewildered.

The people danced and sang, and seemed to have realized they were entirely wrong about a woman leader. Five years ago they had pushed her into the kitchen, but now they want to get her out and give her the mandate to lead the people of Mashida to great heights of development and success. They were determined to give her a chance to organize, mobilize and inspire its youth and children to reach higher education levels, to improve the health care of the people by building health institutions and improve food production.

Msaliti entered into his car. Hardly had he started the engine when a huge crowd surrounded his car with placards, some of which read: "WE NEED HONEST AND HARD WORKING LEADERS!", "WE NEED A DEDICATED MP FOR MASHIDA!" and "TRY A WOMAN MP!" Embarrassed, Msaliti speeded forward, flew down the field, through the gate and disappeared down the road.

Conclusion

This creative work uses informal interviews as part of its methodology. From these interviews the work gathers that women continue to suffer under male-dominated society. A circumcised woman sheds light on the short and long term effects the initiation rite has on women, including trauma and lower sexual urge. They are circumcised at a young age without their consent. The creative work, through stories, illustrates that women are capable of stopping this outdated heinous practice by simply refusing to be circumcised.

The project also shows that early forced marriage is another problem women encounter in the society today. Young girls are drawn from school and are forced into marriage without their consent. Most of them are married off to old people who are the age of their fathers. The project gives direction to girls who find themselves faced with such a problem: to be defiant, brave and stand up for their rights.

The struggle of women to liberate themselves has also been illustrated by this creative work. An interview with a university female student shows that the struggle by women to acquire education can stop gender imbalance in the society. Women who are educated and have their own income are less likely to be abused by men as compared to those who never went to school. Education puts girls in school for many years, a period in which they could be married off. The study notes that education is the main key to success for women. The study identifies early pregnancy as a hindrance to girls' education. Through its stories the study illustrates that girls drop out of school mainly to due to early unwanted

pregnancies, which shatter their dreams of ever succeeding in their lives. However, the project stories show that all is not lost. Those who have dropped out of school can arrange with their parents and the school authorities to go back to school after giving birth. This will enable them acquire education which will qualify them for jobs, and as a result they will get income that will make them stable financially, thereby become independent of men.

The interview with a woman parliamentarian shows that women are starting to acquire leadership positions in the society unlike in the old days. The project gathers that the society has started to realize women's potential and their ability to lead the society. In some of its stories, the project celebrates the achievement made by women in our society.

This study also demonstrates that a creative writer is capable of capturing the events, activities and experiences of a society. The study shows that creative work is suitable in capturing the plight, the struggle and the achievements of the less privileged in the society-- in this case women and girls.

The writing of these short stories has affected me as a writer. The creative process has opened a window for me into the world of women. The writing has instilled in me empathy for women and girls when they are in problems. I have learnt what it feels like to be pregnant for a girl and the joy that comes upon her when she discovers that she is not. The story on forced marriage has opened an insight into the pain the small girls face when forced to marry old people and has influenced me to join in the girl child projects in the

future.

As a writer I have felt one with the women in their struggle to liberate themselves from male dominance. In the writing of these, I have learnt, felt, seen and heard; I am humbled; I will listen to them, treat them fairly and give them a voice. I have learnt that their struggle is the society's struggle. Creating these stories has also made me realize the immense achievement of women that I took for granted before. I now can bear witness that they are achievers, and are capable of achieving more if given chance.

In conclusion, this project has explored six women issues in our society: Women and FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), Women and Early marriage, Women and Unwanted Pregnancies, Women and Education, Women and Politics and, lastly, Women and Leadership. More other important women issues have not been covered by this project and will necessitate future research to be carried on them. The study recommends that more research can be done in the following issues: Women and AIDS, Women and Crime, Women and Family, Women and Superstitions, Women and Development and Women and Technology.

Since this project has exploited the use of short story form, researches done later may opt to make use of other genres, particularly novel, or novella form. Other researches can also employ the genre of poetry and play.

WORKS CITED

Achebe, Chinua. Morning Yet on Creation Day. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975.

Calder, Angus. Zhuka 3. Journal of East African Creative Writing. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, April, 1969.

Carpenter, J. & Neumeier, P. Elements of Fiction: Introduction to the Short Story. U.S.A Brown Company Publishers, 1974.

Current-Garcia, E. & Patrick, W.R. What is the Short Story? Illinois: Scott Fores and Company, 1961.

Gamble, Sarah. The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post-feminism. London, New York: Routledge,

Kibera L. & Kahiga S. Potent Ash. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968.

Lohafer, S. & Clarey, J.E. (eds.) Short Story Theory At Crossroads. U.S.A.: Louisiana University Press, 1989.

Mahfouz, N. & Seruma, E. et al. Half a Day and Other Stories. Nairobi: Macmillan

Kenya Publishers Ltd, 2004.

Muthoni, Garland. Tracking the Scent of My Mother. Nairobi: No Boundaries Ltd,
2007.

Mwanzi, Helen. Notes on Leonard Kibera and Sam Kahiga's Potent Ash. Nairobi:
Heinemann Educational Books, 1985

Mwanzi, Helen. "The Style of the Short Story in Kenya." (Unpublished). PhD Thesis.
Nairobi: university of Nairobi, 1995.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. Writers in Politics. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd,
1981.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. Secret lives. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.

O'Banion, J.D. RE- Orienting Rhetoric: The Dialect of list and story. U.S.A:
Pennsylvania state University, 1992.

Ogot, Grace. Land Without Thunder. Nairobi: east African Publishing House, 1968

Per Wastberg. (ed.). The writer in modern Africa. New York: The Scandinavian Institute
of African studies, 1968 .

Stewart, D (ed.). Stories from Australia. Melbourne: Angus & Roverston Ltd., 1967

Scholes, R & Kellog, R. The Nature of Narrative. London: Oxford University Press,
1968.

Taylor, R. Understanding Elements of Literature. London: Macmillan Press, 1981.

APPENDIX I

Questionnaire

1. How are women perceived in the society where you live?
2. Do you think women need better treatment than they are getting presently?
3. Suppose you were educated, do you think the society, especially your husband and other men, will treat you differently?
4. Do you support female circumcision? If so why? If not, why? What do you view to be its benefits? Its negative effects? Do you think female circumcision contributes to the gender imbalance in the society?
5. If you were given a second chance, will you undergo circumcision?
6. Are you going, or have you circumcised your daughters?
7. What will you say about forced early marriage?
8. Do you think education helps the girls? Do you support that all girls access education?
9. What can be done to have every girl in our society have a chance of going to school?
10. To what extent do cultural stereotypes contribute to gender inequality in our society?

APPENDIX II

Questionnaire

1. How do male students view the educated female students at the university?
2. Suppose you were not educated do you think the society, especially men, could treat you differently, worse?
3. How can education be used to remove some of the gender inequalities that exist?
4. Why do you think even the educated females continue being plagued by unwanted pregnancies that slow down their progress?
5. Do you think if family education is introduced in primary schools, can that alone save many girls from dropping out of school due to early unwanted pregnancies?
5. Do you know about RTS (Return To School) policy for school girl dropouts? What can be done to have girls in primary and secondary schools go back to school once they have given birth?
6. Do you support the introduction of contraceptives to primary and secondary school girls as a way of preventing them dropping out of school due to early unwanted pregnancies?
7. Do you support the acquisition of education by the women as the key to their success and attainment of equality to men?
8. What can be done to have all girls access education?
9. How do literature texts promote/reduce gender inequalities?
10. Do cultural practices, such as female circumcision and early forced marriages, contribute to gender inequalities that exist in our society today?

APPENDIX III

Questionnaire

1. What are the hurdles you, as a woman leader, have gone over to finally become a woman parliamentarian?
2. Do you support education as the main key to women success and achievements?
3. Why do you think it is taking too long to have equal number of both women and men in parliament?
4. What are some of the hindrances facing women leaders from discharging their duties effectively?
5. Can women do as well as men in leadership positions if given a chance?
6. To what extent do cultural stereotypes affect women performance and achievement?
7. To what extent do you think cultural practices such as female circumcision and early forced marriage have contributed to gender inequalities in our society?
8. Should we continue to circumcise women, being our culture, or do we stop it and loose out on our culture? How can the society be made to shed off cultural practices that are harmful to women and only practice those with a benefit?
9. As one of the few women leaders in the society, what contributions are you making, or are you supposed to make, in ending gender inequalities?
10. When you won the election, has the society where you come from changed their attitudes towards women? Are the men now viewing women as potential, capable and equal with them?